



How feasible is proportional representation?

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DEMOCRACY is not a monochromatic institution. It has many shades and colours. The underlying principle is that the rulers or the supreme governing body should be elected by the owner-members of the country or the organisations. The process of election is not uniquely defined; it differs across countries and organisations. In this paper we will discuss about election of the chief executive of the country, the president or the prime minister and the apex law making body, the parliament, the congress, the diet or the дума, whatever be it. For national elections we also take it for granted that each person has one vote, unlike corporate democracy where share holder's voting entitlement depends on the number of shares held by him.

Mathematical logic postulates that the candidate who wins the highest number of votes should be declared winner in the election. Nobody can question the validity of this axiomatic formula. This appears so



compelling and convincing at once. Reality is, however, different. Electoral archives are replete with instances where the winner chief executive or his/her ruling party

did not pull the highest number of total votes cast. They were declared elected on the basis of an accepted formula which defies mathematical logic. In case of presidential

elections in the USA the candidate who wins the highest number of electoral college as distinct from the total votes cast by the citizens of the country is declared the president. This has a strong semblance to unequivocally despised "basic democracy" system introduced by president Ayub Khan in Pakistan. In case of Westminster type of parliamentary democracy that we follow in Bangladesh, the country is divided into a number of constituencies, say 300 and one member of parliament (MP) is elected from each constituency. The MPs in turn elect the Prime Minister, the chief executive in the parliamentary system of democracy, leaving aside other intricate subtleties of the process. The aggregate votes pulled by the MPs who voted for the prime minister is not counted. It might so happen, as it did in reality on many occasions, that the aggregate votes pulled by the supporters were much less than those pulled by his or her opponents in the parliaments. The country therefore may be governed by a chief executive who represents minority of citizens, an anathema to the concept of democratic polity.

It is relatively simple to suggest a way out for the presidential system of government. A country may opt for direct voting for the presidential candidate as Bangladesh did when it had a presidential system of government. There is not much controversy about this undiluted form of direct election in a unitary system of government. There may be practical reasons for distorting the formula in a federal system of government, the principal one being the overriding need for national integrity. The USA had passed through an excruciating civil war that threatened to disintegrate the country. It was necessary to design a mathematically irrational format in order to contain the centrifugal forces unleashed on the eve of and during the civil war. Logic, oftener than not, is dominated by compelling

national needs. Ensuring acceptable territorial representation is crucial in a federal system of administration, the country can survive only by reconciling divergent demands of the territorial groups. In the absence of any such compelling circumstances, the country should straightforwardly choose direct election based on aggregate vote counting. In order to ensure absolute majority for the elected president some countries conduct second round of election where only two front runner candidates contest for the top job of the country.

Such a simple solution may not work for the parliamentary system of government. Territorial representation in parliament is considered a sine qua non in this system. The weight of the reasoning is value loaded. Proponents of the constituency based elections contend that satisfactory territorial representation is necessary for balanced welfare and development of the country. It ensures inclusiveness and national compact necessary for sustained development. MPs are not only law makers, they are also elected representatives of their areas to the highest forum of the country. They are expected to vent the grievances and demands of their constituents, people of the locality, in the parliament. Extrapolation of this argument leads one to believe that parliament is not only a lawmaking body, it is also a forum for facilitating and overseeing the activities of the executive government. In the absence of constituency based elections parliament will cease to be a representative body for the whole nation. This will be a major inadequacy for the highest democratic institution of the country.

Constituency based elections are, however, afflicted with many limitations and weaknesses. It is argued that the system promotes criminalisation in politics. It can also lead to mathematically untenable results: party securing lower votes in

nation wide aggregate computation may form government because it has majority in the parliament which means it has more elected MPs than any other party. It is also possible for a minority party to form government by cobbling a coalition with other parties: a scenario running counter to the philosophy of democratic dispensation. Election in each constituency is fought between candidates who are physically present there with phalanx of their supporters to organise the campaign. Big show downs, parade of muscle flexing workers, trading of violence, use of money and unethical influence to establish one's supremacy in the polling stations and electoral hierarchies vitiate the whole environment so much that the system is reduced to an outlandish parody of its own self. Corrupt and undesirable persons come out victorious to turn the parliament into a den of substandard homo sapiens. The government produced by such a parliament is usually its miniature replica. It is corrupt, inefficient and anti people in character. It does not deliver people's welfare. The self seeking MPs and their cronies eat into the vitals of national economy and destroy the fabrics of a welfare society. The country is brought to the brink in an incredibly short time.

In the name of territorial representations the MPs, particularly those from the ruling party turn the constituency as their fiefdom. They become informal chief executives of their locality. They stymie the formation of local government and the growth of healthy leadership in the constituencies. Proponents of territorial representation who consider territorial representation as a desideratum for constituting the parliament find it embarrassing to face the question as to how the 7th parliament in Bangladesh could work without the representative from Bholal constituency all through its tenure. This incident has significantly undermined the case for constitu-

ency based elections.

One way out of the problem would be parliamentary democracy with proportional representation. In this system all parties will select their candidates to fill up all or part of the seats in the parliament and submit the list prepared according to preference in a sealed envelope to the election commission who will keep it in a safe vault. Elections will be held taking the whole country as a single constituency. Articulated in its simplest form, parliamentary seats will be distributed among the parties in proportion to the votes pulled by them. For example, if there are 300 seats and a party has pulled 40% of the total votes cast it will be awarded 120 parliamentary seats and the first 120 persons from its list will be declared MPs for the ensuing parliament. The same formula will be followed for other parties. There has to be a minimum number of votes, say 10%, that a party has to secure to reach the entitlement threshold. Seats will be divided amongst the parties which have reached the entitlement threshold so that the party or the coalition of parties commanding the majority will form the government. Some academics have suggested sophisticated but slightly complicated formula of seat distribution to accomplish mathematical perfection. Parliament in this scheme will primarily be a law making body; local development issues will be taken care of by the elected local bodies with necessary resources and authority.

It is expected that while preparing the list of probable MPs parties will have regards to regional balance and territorial needs. This will do away with personal presence of the candidates in the constituencies and use of money and muscle in elections. Experts and professionals of high standing will have scope to be MPs and to put their valuable inputs in law making and deliberation on important national issues.

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