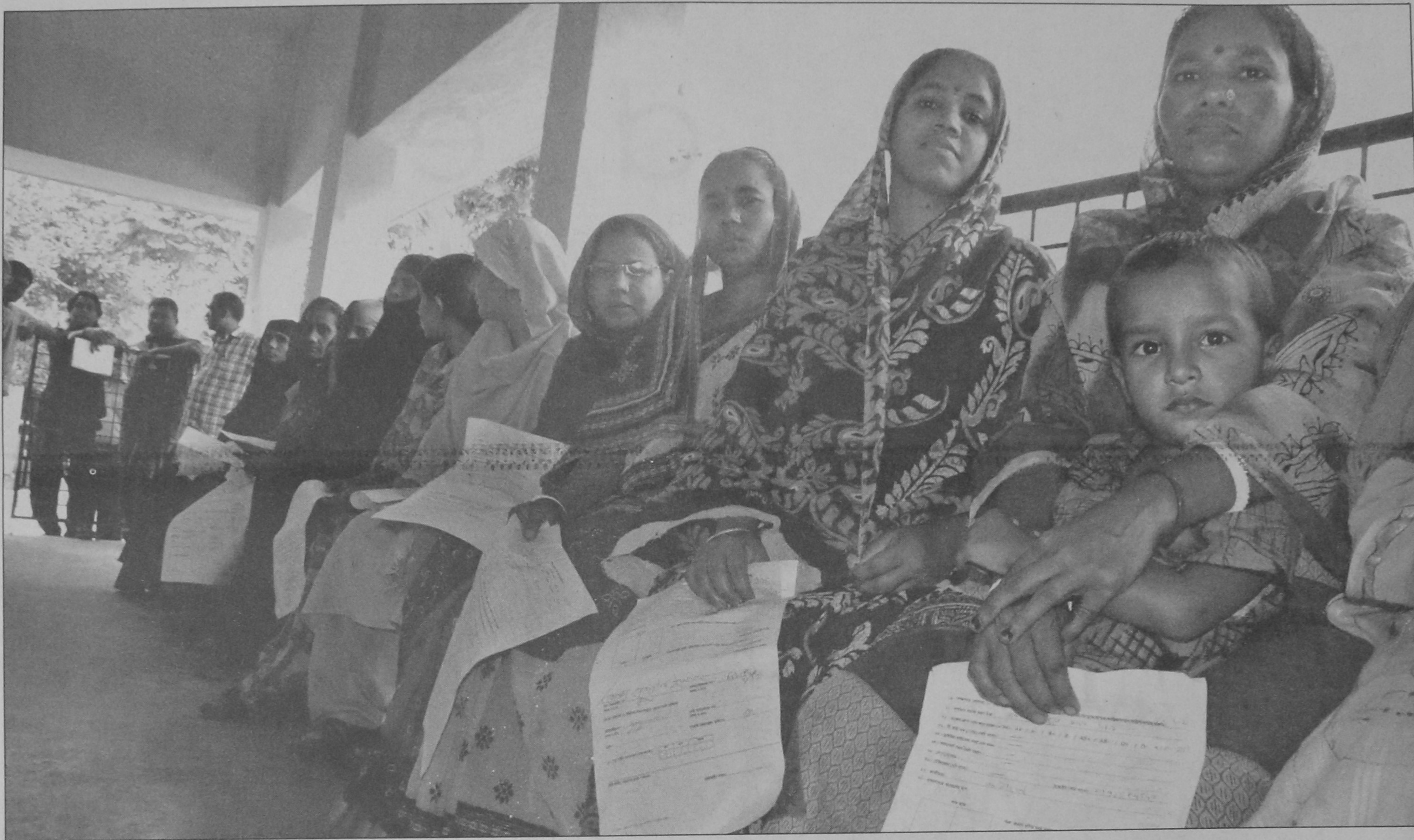


Preparation for election: Where do we stand?



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THE year-2008 is expected to be a year of ballots and also a year for the caretaker government and as well as the Election Commission (EC) to write an encouraging chapter in the history through realising their pledges to restore truly democratic rule in the country.

With the active support of the armed forces both the interim administration and the EC have been preparing for holding the stalled ninth parliamentary election and also polls to different local government bodies due this year.

But in the prevailing dubious political scenario, uncertainties over the polls still exist in public mind. They wonder, whether everything will go smoothly.

Sensible government plans and responsible behaviour of political parties are expected in the coming days for restoring democracy to the country by ensuring a credible parliamentary election which will allay the apprehension of a return to pre-1/11 situation.

So, fresh initiatives for reviving the political process shattered last year due to restrictions on political activities and massive crackdown on "corrupt" political bigwigs seem to be required to ensure holding of the parliamentary polls as per the government's electoral

roadmap.

Political analysts observed that the interim government should review the tactics, if any, it used for bringing reforms in the political parties since the method failed to bring positive results in the political climate. Moreover, major political parties have been weakened as institutions, which is not conducive to the strengthening of democracy.

In the past few months, it was noticed that the political parties wanted to sit in dialogues with the caretaker government over political reforms, but the government did not respond. Finally, the chief adviser to the caretaker government in an address to the nation on January 12 announced that his government decided to open talks with political parties and initiate steps soon in this regard. But it is not still clear when and how the talks will be started and what will be the agenda for the talks.

Political analysts believe the caretaker government still have chances to check deterioration of public confidence in it through measures to mitigate their sufferings caused mainly for skyrocketing prices of essentials and some controversial initiatives in political and economic affairs.

The government's courageous efforts on curbing cor-

ruption are expected to bring outcomes that will have positive impact on country's politics and economy, the latter experiencing recession since last year.

But it is not still clear whether the government will finally take any steps to prevent war criminals from the elections like its vigorous drive against corrupt politicians.

Demand for trial of war criminals and barring them from election is gaining momentum with people's support deserving government's actions to resolve the issue to make the parliamentary polls credible.

Many also fear that the parliamentary polls might be delayed as the caretaker government has yet to achieve its desired outcome from the political arena.

Chief Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed in his address to the nation on January 12, however announced that the caretaker government is thinking of withdrawing the restrictions on indoor politics countrywide and will consider lifting the state of emergency gradually.

Political activities will have to be allowed on large scale either by relaxing or lifting the state of emergency in the five divisional headquarters for holding the long due polls to the city corporations in April-May as the EC has already planned.

Moreover the political parties intended to contest the next parliamentary polls are expected to bring reforms within the parties to ensure democratic practices within them to get registration with the EC in next June through meeting the proposed criteria.

So, it is expected that the political parties will be allowed to resume political activities across the country to hold their national council for reforms according to the EC's electoral roadmap announced on July 16.

Preparations for ballots

Chief Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed in his maiden address to the nation over radio and television on January 21, 2006 pledged to transfer power to an elected government at earliest through holding a free, fair and credible election after reconstituting the EC.

The military backed government has launched crackdown on corrupt politicians and businessmen from February 4 last year and detained a large number of political bigwigs including for two prime ministers Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina.

The detained political leaders, those will be convicted, will not be allowed to contest the next parliamentary election as the caretaker regime has already formulated rules to

prevent corrupt from contesting the polls. But the trial of the detained leaders must be transparent otherwise controversies might make the efforts failure.

On the same day February 4, 2006 of launching the crackdown on corrupts, the caretaker government reconstituted the EC following the resignation of the erstwhile CEC MA Aziz and four other election commissioners who created enormous controversy over holding the ninth parliamentary polls, scheduled on January 22.

The current EC led by ATM Shamsul Huda at the beginning started working to bring reform in the electoral laws and rules for holding a free and fair election.

Amid growing demands for a timeframe for holding the stalled election, the EC on April 5 announced that holding of any election would not be possible in the next 18 months since that was the minimum required time for preparing a voter list with photographs and for completing the electoral reforms.

Following the EC's timeframe, Chief Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed on April 12 in an address to the nation said the ninth parliamentary elections would be held before the end of 2008 as the present caretaker government is committed to handing over power to an

elected government.

The EC in June successfully implemented a pilot project in Sripur municipality area under Gazipur district examining the feasibility of preparing the voter list with photographs. It started preparing the voter list with photographs across the country with the wholehearted support from the armed forces.

The EC is now expecting to complete the preparation of the electoral rolls with photographs in next July, three months before of its deadline to complete the task. The EC will go for the parliamentary polls once the task for preparing the voter list is done.

Year of ballots

Boosted up by the field level experiences in Sripur for preparing the voter list with photographs, the EC on July 15 came up with a comprehensive plan for holding the next election stipulating that a voter list with photographs will be ready by October 2008 and the parliamentary poll will definitely be held by December of the same year.

For the time begin, the announcement of the election roadmap apparently dispelled the doubts about the parliamentary election, setting 2008 as an election year for the country.

In its roadmap, the EC announced that it will start holding elections to different

local government bodies from January in the areas where the voter list will be ready.

According to roadmap, long due polls to five city corporations -- Dhaka, Rajshahi, Khulna, Barisal and Sylhet and some municipalities -- are supposed to begin from January, 2008.

The EC has, however, now said it is planning to hold the polls to city corporations in between April and May.

In its roadmap, the EC announced to begin holding polls to union parishads would begin from January and continue till December.

Over 4,000 union parishads' tenure will expire between January and March next year. As per election laws, elections to these local government bodies should be held within 180 days before the expiry of their tenure. So, the EC can hold polls to the union parishads. The EC has however now said it may not hold polls to union parishads to avoid difficulties to hold the parliamentary polls.

The EC announced in its roadmap that it will hold the over long due polls to 483 upazila parishads in between next November to December. Now the government however wants to hold the polls to upazila parishads simultaneously with the ninth parliamentary elections.

According to the EC's

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