

Behind the deficits of electoral candidates



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

MANY would like to believe that Bangladesh polity is in a reform mode and there are hopes for positive change through the next election. However, disappointments have been expressed in high quarters about the unavailability of desired candidates in the local bodies election slated for next week. The disappointments are unfortunate but not totally unexpected. We have to admit that cronyism has been a hallmark of our political culture and mode of governance. No wonder, therefore, such cronyism has brought problems of delinquency and incompetence to the fore.

As against institutional development our ruling classes believed in a patron-client relationship. A whole network of patronage is built around jobs, admissions, urban plots, connections for electricity, telephone or gas and for dispensation of development funds. As such a belief has been created to the effect that political power is needed for acquiring wealth, fair or foul. In the process, the distinction between public property and private gain is totally blurred.

Coming to the issue of honest candidates for election we have to examine if our legal system has made life too easy for criminals and too difficult for law-abiding citizens. Some would say that the banality of evil was disturbingly manifest in our experience with democracy since at least 1991. The quality of our public life became reached the nadir. Politics became

Presently, our society is characterized by significant elite-mass gap. A small segment of society influences the decision making, allocation and distribution of resources. The elections of 1991, 1996 and 2001 may have restored the supremacy of political leadership but in the meantime immense damage has been caused in our political culture by the combined onslaught of corruption, criminalization and commercialization of politics of the country.

tattered and tainted with crime.

Honest candidates in electoral politics are rare because our politicians have been occupied in maintaining a system which is poisoned by collective bad faith and polluted by individual avarice. Very few have ventured to give the moral leadership which the people have yearned and are waiting for.

Elections and their corruptions and the subsequent injustices and the power and tyranny of wealth coupled with the inefficiency of administration made living distressingly unbearable. Our fragile institutions and economic stagnation further complicated the scenario. Consequently, ignorance, incompetence and dishonesty have not been disqualifications for high public office, either in the ministerial ranks or elsewhere.

There have been unsettling moves to take dispute resolution beyond the purview of the courts by empowering extra-governmental quarters. In the process we devalued judiciary and other important institutions of the State. People subscribing to the philosophy of the ruling party occupied exalted posts thereby acquiring the authority to decide the fate of unsuspecting millions.

Political activities, partly on account of historical factors, have assumed a dominant agitational character. Over the years, since after liberation and more particularly during the anti-autocracy movement in the eighties, leading to the fall of the military dictatorship regime in December 1990, political protests demanded crude physical

courage from the field level activists of the political movement. As the dictatorial regime primarily depended on brute power and looked towards non-political quarters for its sustenance, it did not bother about the excessive use of force by the state apparatus. It had no qualms in utilizing dangerous goons to intimidate and if necessary liquidate political party workers and leaders. A section of the law enforcement personnel sadly turned out to be a willing partner in such patently illegal acts.

All in all, the political scenario became so desperate and menacing that only the very physically brave and intensely committed workers could dare to take to the streets to face the insensitive actions of a despotic government nearly bordering on megalomania.

It is a sad commentary on our political reality that howsoever eloquent we may be on the subject of freedom of speech, assembly and movement, we can be the worst of autocrats when under a clear democratic dispensation the government of the day would not allow assembly and protest gatherings of opposition political party to venture beyond the immediate confines of party office. The untenable scenario is that the government would not issue prohibitory orders restricting or banning assembly of persons, but would transmit verbal order to embarrassed law enforcement personnel to virtually quarantine the opposition elements in a limited space.

In an exasperating situation as

above, there is a desperate and frantic bid to defy the authority and such defiance requires lot of raw physical courage in addition to hardship and endurance. Clearly, such functions can be effectively performed by those who have a greater gift of the brawn. These may sound funny but are field realities with which the political operatives of the opposition have grappled. Breaking the ban or being able to defy the quarantine is considered a very important achievement. The goons are no small players in this game. One has to be in the thick of the happenings to feel the pulse of the men, matter, and movements.

Concerned Bangladeshi citizens will sincerely hope and pray that indeed politics truly becomes difficult so that increasing number of brats and the non-entities do not occupy the centre-stage of our political horizon. Such concerned citizens and the well-meaning folks of our country earnestly desire that politics become the art of wise and patriotic people and is effectively salvaged from the clutches of the insensitive.

There is no denying that in spite of our adopting a lofty constitution, we do not have the ability to keep it. Equally true is the fact that while we are the proud inheritors of a rich and vibrant culture we do not have the wisdom to cherish it. The compounding tragedy is that our resilient people have to suffer and endure in patience without the perception of their innate potentials.

The arrogance and irresponsibility

of the executive organ and the politicians can be tamed and chastened by an upright judiciary wherein we must have people who have the courage never to submit or yield. They should have the capability to effectively pronounce on all spheres of public life. On a more specific reference, our judiciary must firmly ensure the observance of our electoral laws so that the doubtful elements--both financially and criminal records wise--find it difficult to venture into public life.

In order to make politics difficult for the bad hats, can we demand that no political party should be recognized by the Election Commission unless the party is willing to maintain audited accounts of all its receipts and expenditure? This demand can be accommodated by the addition of a section to the existing law on Representation.

How about prescribing some minimum educational qualifications for those who seek election to parliament? One cannot fail to be struck by the grim irony of our situation where the one job for which one needs no training or qualification whatsoever is the job of legislating and governing a sizable democracy. To steer the lives and destinies of more than 140 million people our politicians are not required to have any education or equipment at all. It is clearly anomalous that we insist on high qualifications for those who administer or help in administering the law, but none for those who make it except that they are

elected. Surely, the law-giver requires intellectual equipment, the capacity to take a balanced view of things and to act independently.

We need to have a merit-based administrative system to ensure pragmatic and balanced behaviour of the politicians. There is a belief that for politicians it would be easier to control officers with average merit rather than meritorious officers. Pliable officers with a low morale cannot put a brake on the unbridled ambitions of the arrogant half-wits masquerading as politicians. The services need to be protected from the high-handed actions of the political executives and their pernicious political links have to be severed.

Assuming that Bangladesh is passing through the supposedly illiberal phase of democratization, it is presumed that political instability that goes with the period of transition has security implications for the country. The sources of such instability are negative politics, lawlessness, misgovernance, patronizing violence, keeping armed cadre in student/labour fronts, boycotting parliament amongst others. The reasonably free and fair election in the year-2008 still remains open to question in terms of both input and output. The questionable input for our election has been money including substantial amount of black money. Such money militates against the democratic spirit and impacts negatively on the quality of elected representatives.

Discerning observers would agree that in recent times, middle class professionals with credentials and with roots to the people have been squeezed out of the political market to yield place to rich businessmen, industrialists or individuals with questionable means of income. The security ramifications of this phenomenon is that elected legislators having the backing of black money amassed through smuggling of narcotics or illegal arms can put the country at the

mercy of few powerful dons, pulling strings from behind. In Bangladesh, fingers are already pointed at such elements. In the context of the violent trend in politics such accusations can not be summarily ruled out. Therefore, the election system, vitiated by money-and-politics nexus and a literally non-performing parliament are factors sufficient to make politics volatile and unstable with serious long-range ramifications.

Criminalized and vandalized politics is another indicator with alarming fall-out. Violence and politics have become almost synonymous. The emergence of political bully boys would not have been possible without patronization by political parties. Violence has had serious negative impact on the political culture of the country.

Our intolerant political conduct is reflective of an immature political culture and politics is viewed as a game in which winner takes all in a zero-sum format. Political parties are found to contest elections as if they are fighting wars. Political divide and rivalry often degenerate into personal enmity, thus infusing an unhealthy element of acrimony that leads to violence. The party in power is mostly intolerant, arrogant and even feudalistic in attitude. The opposition mostly opposes the government for the sake of opposition and are in politics as if with the undertaking to bring down the government. Such a scenario has been described as "crisis of governance".

We have to admit that our ethno-linguistic and religious homogeneity factor has not succeeded to bring the dynamics of socio-political relations within a manageable limit. Presently, our society is characterized by significant elite-mass gap. A small segment of society influences the decision making, allocation and distribution of resources. The failure of democratic experimentation in the initial years of independence led to a succession of military and quasi-military rule by a coalition of the

higher echelon of the military and civil bureaucracy. Political leaders joined later to complete the "coalition of convenience". The first two groups remained dominant.

The elections of 1991, 1996 and 2001 may have restored the supremacy of political leadership but in the meantime immense damage has been caused in our political culture by the combined onslaught of corruption, criminalization and commercialization of politics of the country. The penetration of business interests in politics made possible through a policy of distribution of political patronage and bureaucratic support continued on a wider scale and the emerging business class not only attempted to control politics through donation to party coffers, they displayed a greater readiness to join politics themselves. We now have politicians and parliamentarians who have business interests. This commercialization of politics has become the safest and convenient vehicle of achievements.

The interface between the political feuds and intense power struggle, on the one hand, and violence of different intensities, on the other is provided by the underworld to which the political leaders of various shades are connected in a shady way. According to credible reports nearly 300 godfathers control criminal and terrorist activities across the country. The godfathers belonging to major political parties are actually mid and high level leaders of such parties.

Bangladesh polity has failed to forge national cohesion on fundamental values. Inadequate nation building and state building process is the cause. Lack of mutual trust and prevalence of hostile political attitude have resulted into weak political institutions and weak national capacity to resolve national issues. The process needs to be reversed.

Muhammad Nurul Huda is a columnist of The Daily Star.

Private tuition and teachers' status

PROF. QAZI FARUQUE AHMED

PRIVATE tuition by institution teachers is much discussed a topic in our country. It got new momentum after government issued a circular prohibiting private tuition and coaching on 4 March this year. Though most people do not differentiate between teachers' private tuition and 'teaching' in coaching centres, the two are not the same. My write-up is particularly on private tuition by teachers, reasons behind it, teachers' views, the vicious circle centering it and some suggested ways out.

Who are private tutors?

Teachers of all subjects are not in the demand list as private tutors in our country. Again all private tutors are also not teachers of schools and colleges. University and College students, whose guardians cannot afford to maintain their educational expenses, are also seen working as private tutors. In Dhaka city, female students are also found in this practice. A section of unemployed educated youths also are engaged in private tuition. There is quite a good demand for private tutors in English, Mathematics and Science subjects in divisional and district headquarters. In Dhaka city a section of guardians send their wards to private tutors for almost all the subjects. The rich among them try to bring private tutors at their own residences. But teachers who do not agree to teach at private residences, open students' batches and start teaching privately at their own residences. Over enthusiastic guardians also rush their children/wards there for "better tuition." Income of private tutors in the large cities like Dhaka, Chittagong, and Khulna are quite

considerable often three to four times more than the salaries they draw from respective schools and colleges.

Reasons

'Education Watch' observed in its report published in 2007: "Cost of private tutors was the single largest item of household expenditure. Forty-three percent of government primary school students and 85 percent of government-assisted secondary school students had private tutors. Household costs for education and dependence on private tutoring clearly aggravated educational inequity. Household spending on education per child of the lowest socio-economic quintile at both primary and secondary levels was less than half of the spending of the topmost quintile."

According to international labour law and as per provision of International Labour Organization (ILO), the salary of a worker or professional should be such that he or she is not to engage in any additional or part time job/profession. It is obvious that this point was not duly considered by the authorities and national policy makers in Bangladesh. As a natural consequence, instances of exit of meritorious persons from teaching has become a very common feature.

The chief reasons which encourage a student to receive tuition privately and the causes, which influence guardians to invest towards it are:

- (i) Student's failure to cope with the teacher in the classroom.
- (ii) Failure to understand or grasp certain content or topic.
- (iii) Student's absence in the classroom.
- (iv) Teacher's failure to present the subject matter or part of a syllabus in an interesting and attractive manner and with aptness.

"Teaching is no more a 'noble mission'. It has evolved as a different type of profession. Where not only syllabus curriculum and good education matter, the keen desire for better living at par with people in other professions with the same qualification, is also very much there. Their better halves along with all the members of the teachers' families are eager to see the teachers treated equally in terms of salary, dress, dignity, social status and national esteem."

(v) Too much stress on public examinations and over enthusiasm of both the guardians and some students for extraordinary accomplishments/results.

Teachers' views

When much is said about private tuition, it might evoke some amount of curiosity as to the views of the teachers on it. The Headmaster of Chandina Kutumbopur High School at Chandina Upazilla of Comilla district wrote in a national daily on 17th March this year: "Government issued a circular on 4th March prohibiting private tuition and coaching by teachers. Definitely I could term this as a very good gesture if the very word 'Non Government' was not attached with 'teachers'. This has created quite a lot of controversies among the teachers who are at present engaged in virtual struggle for minimum subsistence with only 100 taka monthly housing allowance, 250 taka medical facilities. A teacher who does not receive more than 7000 to 8000 taka even after rendering services for 25/30 years, prohibition of private tuition is nothing but a joke to him. I would like to know whether government school and college teachers along with the university teachers, do reside in a different planet! Let the government first ensure full medical allowances, 40 percent house rent and regular yearly increments

including three time-scales. At the same time, let this prohibitory order is applied to government school, college and university teachers as well and government, non-government medical practitioners and engineers alongwith all the employees of the republic. Only then this order can be binding on the non government teachers". (Daily Ittefaq)

Mr. Satish Chandra Sarker, a teacher from Kaliakoir of Gazipur district too expressed his opinion on private tuition in another national daily on the same date: "This is no denying the fact that private tuition by teachers is a hindrance to teachers' normal duties. I am engaged in teaching for the last 20 years. I take classes in six subjects everyday. I am to pay 4000 taka per month as house rent to my landlord and spend taka 3000 for milk for my child. It is impossible to depend solely on the salary I receive from my institution for survival. So private tuition is not a hobby for me, nor a ladder to get rich. Private tuition is prohibited in our neighbouring West Bengal. Every teacher there signs an undertaking prior to appointment, pledging not to indulge in private tuition. The reason is simple: the salary of a secondary teacher in West Bengal is minimum 15000/- Rupees in Indian currency. If our teachers are also provided with the guarantee of subsistence and a modest living along with the members of his/her family, private tuition will be a

matter of the past here also. But mere promulgation of an order or issuance of a circular or instruction from the authority at the top, can in no way create a favourable and congenial situation for that. Rather it will simply create panic and tension". (Daily Samakal)

Vicious circle

Instances of deceptions and deceits are also not very few in the practice of private tuition. Students from distant areas of the country flock to the capital city everyday for educational purposes. A substantial number of their guardians fail to bear their educational expenses in Dhaka City, which is highly expensive. So they look for various ways to earn their own tuition fees and manage the living cost in the city. Naturally private tuition becomes the most convenient source. 'Tuition Media' with different attractive names capitalize this situation. These 'media' often deceive the guardians introducing the college students as students from BUET and teachers of English medium schools and colleges. They also issue false identity cards for the purpose.

On the other hand, a section of people who claim themselves opposed to private tuition publicly, are also found to indulge in the spread of private tuition by sending their sons and daughters/wards to private tutors' residence or to bringing the teachers to their residence! Again, government teachers

and different professionals with good salaries and job security are also found engaged in such part-time occupation. It becomes difficult sometimes to say as to which one is their part-time job and which one is full-time. Some government physicians too engage in private practice not only in their own chamber, but also in government hospitals. Some engineers make private consultancy while remaining in government job. Renowned teachers of public universities are also found to spend more time in private universities to earn a fat amount. Question of ethics and morality are not considered that much in these cases as is done in regard to non-government teachers who engage themselves in private tuition mostly due to financial constraints.

The practice must be discouraged

No matter whether in vogue in our country or other countries, private tuition does not deserve support or recommendation on any ground. Simultaneously, it must be admitted that its rampant expansion in our country is the resultant effect of the malaise and inconsistencies in our education and examination system. Failure to consider human development in its proper perspective, huge wastage of financial and human resources along with failure to update the latest ideas and knowledge about education by our

policy makers and administrators contribute to this to a large extent. But its tragic consequence, no matter who is liable or responsible, must not be allowed to continue any more. An end to it is the need of the hour for a country like Bangladesh where millions of people suffer from illiteracy and malnutrition, three crore of educated young men and women languish in unemployment.

Suggestions

Since private tuition is not consistent with the professional honour of a teacher, I would like to place the following suggestions for active consideration of the government, guardians, teachers and all concerned with education:

- Recruitment of meritorious persons as teachers through transparent process.
- Provision of attractive salary and ensuring social status to the teachers, in conformity with the recommendations made by ILO and UNESCO.
- Teachers' salary should (a) Compare favourably with salaries paid in other occupation requiring similar or equivalent qualifications; (b) Teachers should be provided with the means to ensure a reasonable standard of living for themselves and their families as well as to invest in further education thus enhancing their professional qualifications.
- To ensure teachers' accountability joint efforts of teachers' representatives/organizations and the government should be there.
- Continuous development of innovative and attractive method of teaching.
- Introduction of institution-based assessment system, reform of the existing examination system doing away with the prevailing public examination phase wise and in a planned manner.

Surprise visits (by a team of academicians and educationists and guardians) in each and every institution to observe and monitor the performance of teachers in the classroom.

- Regular training for teachers to improve his/her teaching quality in the subjects and areas concerned.
- Incentive to teachers so that they feel encouraged to engage in research and further study on education.

Change of values

In 1980 I attended an international teachers' conference in Colombo, Sri Lanka, sponsored by World Confederation of Organisations of the Teaching Profession (WCOTP). The statement made during a course there by the Indonesian Teachers' Association President Mr. Rindo still reminds me of the point in the changing values in teaching. Rindo said: "Teaching is no more a 'noble mission'. It has evolved as a different type of profession. Where not only syllabus curriculum and good education matter, the keen desire for better living at par with people in other professions with the same qualification, is also very much there. Their better halves along with all the members of the teachers' families are eager to see the teachers treated equally in terms of salary, dress, dignity, social status and national esteem. They would not like to see the teacher lag behind even by an inch". Our policy makers and those at the helm of affairs in education must take note of it and act accordingly.

Prof. Qazi Faruque Ahmed is President, Bangladesh College Teachers' Association (BCTA). E-mail: principalqahmed@yahoo.com.

Obama speech inspires the world

MOHAMMAD AMJAD HOSSAIN

PEOPLE of the world, look at Berlin, where a wall came down, and a continent came together, and history proved that there is no challenge too great for a world that stands as one. The fall of the Berlin Wall brought new hope, but that very closeness has given rise to new dangers, dangers that cannot be contained within the borders of a country or by the distance of an ocean".

These were the words of Senator Barack Obama, Democratic presumptive presidential candidate, that evoked wide scale interests in Europe and the United States. He delivered his extraordinary eloquent speech at victory column of Berlin's Tiergarten Park in front of more than two hundred thousand

Germans on July 24. It was a defining moment for Senator Obama. It was the emotional high point of a trip that demonstrated that Obama has stamina for the fall campaign and star power to draw a big, enthusiastic crowd in a foreign land. This is for the first time a presidential candidate has spoken outside of his country during presidential campaign session.

Obama had originally decided to speak in front of the iconic Brandenburg Gate where US President John F. Kennedy was photographed and expressed his solidarity with the people of the divided Berlin: ich bin ein Berliner (I am Berliner) during his trip in 1963 after the Berlin wall had been built in 1961. The Gate was also the site of a speech in 1987 by another US President Ronald Reagan who urged Soviet leader Michael

Although he received criticism from his opponent and Republican Party, but Edward Haley, a specialist in politics and international relations at Claremont McKenna College in California holds different opinion. He said: "The tour of world capitals and hot spots represented a test that was necessary to pass..."

Gorbachev to tear down the wall and end the cold war.

Senator Obama said that people of all nations must stand together to face challenges of the 21st century from terrorists to global warming to genocide. We cannot afford to be divided. This was directed against the incumbent President George W. Bush whose image in Europe is at the lowest level.

The presence of more than two hundred thousand Germans, which stretched almost a mile from the Sieges Saut, an ornate victory column commemorating German victory in 19th century

wars, to the Brandenburg Gate, the symbol of divided Berlin during the cold war, makes a contrast story to what was observed during Bush's visit in 2005. Senator Obama has assured European that the United States would become a better partner, but called on European countries to uphold their responsibilities. The walls between races, tribes, natives and immigrants, Christians and Muslims and Jews cannot stand. These now are the walls we must tear down reflecting the terminology of Ronald Reagan.

His speech was broadcast live from Germany while in the United



Obama in Berlin

States all important TV channel like CNN, MNSBC and Fox News gave full coverage to the speech. Mainstream newspapers in the United States also gave front-page coverage.

His meeting with French President Nicolas Sarkozy in Paris and British Prime Minister Gordon Brown were productive. It may be noted that Senator Obama made a point to meet with the leaders of the opposition political parties in Europe to know their mind on global issues. In Paris, he was almost given the status of President when he jointly addressed the press with the French President who described him as his friend. This is unusual indeed in international parlance.

Although he received criticism from his opponent and Republican Party, but Edward Haley, a special-

ist in politics and international relations at Claremont McKenna College in California holds different opinion. He said: "The tour of world capitals and hot spots represented a test that was necessary to pass. It looks as if he's done far better than just passing. He's aced this tour. If there was any doubt of his stature on the world stage, I think he's more than answered that. He hasn't put a foot wrong in any of these places".

Senator Obama's rise from Illinois Senate to pinnacle of glory after a speech at the Democratic National Convention four years back is unprecedented. He was received respectfully by the world leaders from Afghanistan to Tel Aviv to Great Britain during his first visit as Senator from 20 to 26 July.

Mohammad Amjad Hossain, a former Bangladesh diplomat, writes from Virginia.