

Elections to corporations and municipalities

A step forward in democratisation of society

THE elections to the four city corporations and nine municipalities should give the country reasons for optimism. The manner in which the elections were conducted leave us with little doubt about the fairness and transparency of the entire process. A general atmosphere of peace prevailed during the voting; and with no sign of any interference or manipulation or intimidation noticed anywhere, there is reason to believe that a restoration of democracy could finally be turning out to be an attainable goal. The turnout of voters, especially where women's participation is concerned, has been significant.

It is to be noted, insofar as the question of new leadership is concerned, that these elections have thrown up new faces, particularly at the mayoral level. That is proof, if proof were needed, that the country may finally be ready for change, for new leadership to replace the one that has so long been in charge, not always to everyone's satisfaction. Overall, the city and municipal elections have reflected the cardinal principle of Bangladesh's people still holding abiding faith in democracy and in the power of elections to strengthen and sustain that democracy. But even as we express our satisfaction at the elections and the results emerging from them, we realise the need for everyone to avoid lapsing into complacency about the future. More than anything else, the elections are also a reminder of the lessons that we need to learn as we pursue the bigger goal of a return to democratic parliamentary politics.

One of those lessons concerns the confusion over the electoral roll and voter ID. In a number of instances, voters were unable to distinguish the difference between the two. That is a pointer to the fact that such an essential point was not instilled in the minds of voters. The Election Commission has therefore something to do here, through drilling in all the information about these subtleties into voters' minds. That is important. The lessons learnt at these elections will help the EC to avoid pitfalls in the future. It must be noted that the city and municipal elections were, relatively speaking, a small exercise compared to the far bigger one of the general elections. The number of candidates and voters at the general elections as also the totality of polling booths will be on a bigger scale than those at the elections just concluded. Which makes it necessary for the EC to gear itself into action for the general elections from here on.

That said, we cannot but register our sense of satisfaction at the way the Election Commission, for all the constraints it was up against, conducted the polls. The elections were a test case for it and it has come through pretty well.

Preparedness against earthquake

We need to get something on the ground

TWO images about the latest tremor in Mymensingh and Dhaka have jolted us into a sort of apprehension of what could have happened if the intensity of the earthquake were higher on the Richter scale. First, as it is, damages were inflicted at Dhauraura and Haluaghat in Mymensingh, Durgapur in Netrakona and Nallitabari in Sherpur. Secondly, panicked students of Dhaka University jumped out of their dormitories, many of them hurting themselves and landing in hospitals.

Experts are apprehensive that a large tract of Bangladesh being vulnerable to earthquake because of the unstable tectonic plates it is sitting on or is adjacent to and since no major earthquake visited the region in the last 100 years, we might be in for a major seismic catastrophe.

How prepared are we? Earthquake-prone countries in the world have known the hard way that the onslaught of an earthquake cannot be predicted, far less its course. Yet, depending on tested best practices in quick public reflexes, fortified housing and civil defence preparedness, the overall loss of life and property can be substantially minimised.

A seminar organised by Bangladesh Paribesh Adolon on Monday stressed the need for measures to strictly enforce the Bangladesh National Building Code (BNBC). There cannot be any second opinion on this. But what about the scores of buildings and structures, many of them high-rise, that abound in the city without in-built safeguards against earthquake? True, even in regard to new constructions, we do not have the supervisory or enforcement capabilities in place to ensure that they are erected in compliance with the building code. That aspect cannot be overlooked. But the big issue is to make sure that the buildings that are already on the ground are surveyed, their vulnerabilities assessed and their risk rating recorded so that these can be reinforced with suitable shock absorbing materials within a timeframe.

Simultaneous with the two-pronged strategy for strengthening the existing buildings and ensuring earthquake-sensitive new construction activities, awareness should be built among the public about the do's and don'ts within a civil defence skill development programme.

This long, patient wait for democratic revival

GROUND REALITIES

Or is it a hint of the people of this land being inseparably linked to democratic politics, even if democracy has always taken a battering at the hands of bad men and women? We wait, with fingers crossed, to arrive at the answers. And we wait too for a bigger goal to be attained -- a restoration of secular democracy and everything that it symbolises.



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

IT is time we got serious about elections. With the rest of the world going about life, going through it in the way everyone should, it is surely not right that we should be falling behind. In these long months since the end of the BNP-Jamaat government in this country, elections have thrown up governments and brought in new administrations around the world.

The Thais have had their election, with Thaksin Shinawatra's friends coming into office. The Pakistanis have had some sort of a government take over after an election campaign that claimed the life of Benazir Bhutto. In the United States, a good number of people expect Barack Obama to be the man to beat John McCain in November. Gordon Brown has been losing those local elections, prompting questions about when he will leave office or when he might call elections. India came dangerously close to a snap election last week and was saved only by a miracle in the Lok Sabha.

So there we are. The world has moved on, like everything else in life. Only we, perpetually preparing

for credible elections, are yet in the dark about our future. Oh, yes, of course, we will have elections one of these days. But what does disturb our sensibilities is this nagging query of what kind of elections we will have. More pointedly, the whole question revolves around the credibility as well as acceptability of the elections that will be upon us. Add to that this irritating bit about the voters' list. Not every eligible voter has been accommodated on the list. And of those that have, there are many who complain that their images on their voter IDs do not match the way they look. If you find it hard to agree with them, you simply have to judge for yourself. And once you do that, you will spot the problem. Perfectly normal faces appear flat or bloated or oblong on many of those photographs.

What happens when the man or woman with the face on the ID and with another on his or her shoulder makes it to the polling station, only to be told that the face and the image are strangers to each other? It may well be that the voter with the two faces will come away without casting his or her vote. So much for human patience. Having waited so

expectantly to exercise your right to vote in choosing a good, decent, moral government since the last elected, not so morality-driven administration made its way out of power, you could stumble into the discovery that you cannot vote after all because of good technology getting to be sloppily applied.

And that is not the only hurdle before you. With a state of emergency in force, the instrument which at present serves as the sole legal basis for this caretaker government, you are not quite sure in what manner, legal as well as political, the general elections you so look forward to will be conducted. To be sure, there are people who will point to the Legal Framework Order that Pakistan's Yahya Khan put in place as he prepared the country for elections back in 1970. But that obviously cannot serve as a precedent here, for Bangladesh is not under martial law. That is a good thing, for martial law has always been far from our thoughts (even if there have been the worrying episodes of military rule taking hold of our lives in the mid-1970s and early 1980s).

But what we have at this point is

neither political government nor, in the strictest sense of the meaning, a constitutionally-ordained caretaker administration (the latter point becomes significant if you remember that the caretaker arrangement is expected not to go beyond a prescribed 90-day limit). Now, therefore, when you hear all those politicians raising the demand for a withdrawal of the emergency before the elections, you certainly tend to agree with them; or at least most of you do. But consider this: assuming the emergency is withdrawn, fully and absolutely, before you trek down to the polling station, what basis in law will this administration have as it presides over the elections?

That is an impediment, as sure as it is disturbing. But, then again, how do you expect the political parties to campaign openly and effectively with the emergency in place, even if certain of its provisions are set aside or suspended? An emergency is an extraordinary situation that does not allow a free expression of views or a free movement of people. And politics being the natural preoccupation of liberally inclined or politically conscious people, it is but

natural to imagine that it needs to find space for itself, that it requires an atmosphere that allows it to breathe freely without anything breathing down its neck.

That freedom is not what a restrictive measure like the emergency has room for, despite anything that apologists for such systems might come up with. And so you are, we all are, on the horns of a dilemma. Excuse the use of the cliché, but in conditions that nearly brim over with clichés -- caretaker government, need for transparency, crusade against corruption, good governance, et al -- you cannot really expect ingenuity to sharpen your understanding of the ambience you are part of.

Your worries do not end there. Even as you mull over the elections, over the probable results, over the deals that have been made and even now may be in the process of being made, you note with what alacrity a number of politicians have been or are being freed. Only months ago, we were made to believe that none of those put away by the government could expect to step out of incarceration on bail any time soon.

Nizami, Mannan Bhuiyan and Saifur Rahman (the last mentioned went away to Singapore and is now back), along with a host of others, now breathe in freedom. Sheikh Hasina is away, out of the country, while Khaleda Zia, her "uncompromising leadership" intact, to herself and her followers, waits for her elder son to be freed before she is willing to contemplate the possibility of her own liberty. The younger child is away in Bangkok. His brother could

just be sniffing freedom round the corner.

There is the Truth Commission out there, a big question mark looming over all this campaign against corruption in the country. If all those businessmen detained on charges of corruption can step out into the sunshine after confessing to their sins and promising to behave in future, what happens to rule of law and good governance? And if businessmen can be free, should politicians not be given a similar opportunity to reinvent themselves? That said, there is that contortion in your stomach, that queasiness in it, which happens to be there because of your feeling that all the bad men you had thought would not come back into your life end up doing precisely that -- come back to wreak new havoc in your life and mine. And then, you ask, what will have been the point of all this sound and fury about getting the country moving again?

But, wait a while. Consider the corporation and municipal elections. They have turned out well. Is that a sign of something even better up ahead, at the promised general elections? Or is it a hint of the people of this land being inseparably linked to democratic politics, even if democracy has always taken a battering at the hands of bad men and women? We wait, with fingers crossed, to arrive at the answers. And we wait too for a bigger goal to be attained -- a restoration of secular democracy and everything that it symbolises.

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Rahul Gandhi in Bangladesh

BOTTOM LINE

Rahul, as a politician, is mindful that the 21st century will be quite unlike the 20th century. New forces are emerging to shape the political and economic contours of global powers. The geo-political scene around South Asia is changing. Economic globalisation has made it imperative for Bangladesh and India to form a mature partnership on economic, social and political issues. India needs Bangladesh as much as Bangladesh needs India in the current regional and global environment.



HARUN UR RASHID

INDO-Bangladesh relations are so pervasive and multi-dimensional that they exist independent of governments and policies. The arrival of Rahul Gandhi in Bangladesh on August 1, for a five-day visit to get first-hand knowledge of the activities of Brac in various sectors, and micro-finance projects of Grameen Bank, is a testimony to this fact.

Brac's activities include micro-finance, women's empowerment, community health, education, legal and human rights protection, and rural programs. The 38-year-old leader will also visit some projects of Grameen Bank, whose founder, and Nobel laureate, Mohammed Yunus had met him in Delhi last year.

By visiting Brac projects, Rahul will join a long list of high-profile personalities including former US president Bill Clinton, former British prime minister Tony Blair and Microsoft founder Bill Gates.

Rahul will be able to witness the projects of these two pioneer organisations and will form an idea how they involved grassroots poor people to address three issues of development, namely, opportunity, empowerment and personal security. Empowerment creates innova-

tion, creativity and improvisation.

Brief profile Rahul, a popular male name in India, has a variety of meanings. The earliest meaning found in the Upanishads is "conqueror of all miseries." Later, use of the word is attributed to the Buddha, who named his son Rahul as he felt that family ties could be an obstacle in the path to renunciation and nirvana. Rahul means "moon" in Sanskrit.

Although, to informed people, he does not need any introduction, Rahul Gandhi is a 38 year old (born June 19, 1970) Indian politician and member of the parliament of India, representing the Amethi, Uttar Pradesh, constituency. Many people look up to him as a future prime minister, if the Congress Party holds power at the centre.

He is the son of Congress President Sonia Gandhi and former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi. He was only 14 when his grandmother, Indira Gandhi, was assassinated in 1984.

Rahul completed a four-year BA course in economics at Harvard University, but transferred due to security reasons to Rollins College in Florida where he completed a BA in 1994. He received an M. Phil in Development Economics after attending Trinity College,

Cambridge.

In 2004, he contested the Lok Sabha elections, standing in his father's constituency of Amethi. His uncle Sanjay had also held the seat. The seat had been held by his mother until she transferred to the neighbouring seat of Rae Bareilly.

In his first interview with foreign media, he portrayed himself as a unit of the country and condemned "divisive" politics in India, saying that he would try to reduce caste and religious tensions. His candidacy was greeted with excitement by locals, who have a long-standing affinity with the family's presence in the area.

Years later, some of his remarks became controversial -- for example, Rahul Gandhi counted the 1971 break-up of Pakistan among his family's "achievements." This statement invited criticism from several political parties in India as well as from notable people in Pakistan, including the Pakistan Foreign Office. He said if anyone from the Gandhi-Nehru family had been active in politics then, the Babri Masjid would not have fallen in 1992.

Possible implications of his visit for Bangladesh

Observers note that since April last year, the relationship between

India and Bangladesh has been productive. Among the achievements were the start of the Maitri Express between Kolkata and Dhaka in April 2007 and the visit of the chief of army staff of Bangladesh, Lt. Gen. Moeen U. Ahmed. Furthermore, External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee had visited Bangladesh twice in the last year. General Dipak Kapoor, the chief of the Indian army, just completed his visit to Bangladesh from July 28 to 31.

Rahul, as a politician, is mindful that the 21st century will be quite unlike the 20th century. New forces are emerging to shape the political and economic contours of global powers.

The geo-political scene around South Asia is changing. Economic globalisation has made it imperative for Bangladesh and India to form a mature partnership on economic, social and political issues. India needs Bangladesh as much as Bangladesh needs India in the current regional and global environment.

Rahul must be aware of the pending bilateral issues that have stood in the way in forging an ideal relationship between Bangladesh and India. It is normal that neighbouring countries will have issues between them, but what is impera-

tive is resolving them peacefully and within a time-bound framework.

There is a perception in Bangladesh that India is more conscious of its position as a regional power than of her responsibilities to her neighbours, including Bangladesh. What is missing in Indo-Bangladesh relations appears to be mutual trust and confidence on each other.

Let me cite a few examples:

Observers believe that border fencing by India across 4,025 kilometres of Bangladesh border is very unhelpful to bilateral relations. It shows arrogance of India's power and its insensitivity to the sentiments of the people of Bangladesh.

Although India claims that some of the undesirable activities along the border have temporarily been halted, the human cost is incalculable. It is reported that since January until July 23 of this year, BSF killed 78 Bangladeshis including two BDR jawans.

Furthermore, the damage caused is immeasurable, and in the long run no fenced border can achieve the purpose for which it has been erected.

Second, deficit of trade (about \$2 billion in formal trade) is another problem between the two countries. India is not seen as amenable to Bangladesh's request. India's insistence on a large percentage of value addition to Bangladeshi products makes some of the attractive offers for export to India meaningless.

For India, the economic cost is negligible if rules of origin are reduced because of its larger diversified economy. India's GDP is the second largest among 147 developing countries. It is the seventh

largest exporter of food grains in the world.

If the economy of Bangladesh improves, it is better for India primarily for two reasons. The Bangladesh middle class will provide a good market for India and secondly, both countries can gradually integrate their economies into each other's in these days of economic globalisation.

Observers acknowledge that Bangladesh has been unusually guarded against giving facilities or concessions to India because it is highly sensitive to the possibility of yielding more to India than it perceives necessary under the existing political environment.

The Bangladesh government knows that it should carry people with it in giving facilities to India provided India resolves some bilateral issues directly affecting Bangladeshis, such as water sharing and fixing riverine boundaries.

Observers believe that confidence-building measures must receive top priority in putting bilateral relations on the right track, and it must first come from India, the biggest neighbour with large endowed resources.

The bilateral irritants need to be resolved through meaningful dialogue. Both countries need to make the same political, bureaucratic, intellectual, educational, cultural and media effort to highlight each other's positive features. Often some media in both countries highlight negative images.

Let there be fresh thinking, fresh vision and fresh agenda, similar to the freshness of Rahul in politics, to forge new relations between the two countries.

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Imperative to form a new government in Nepal



DILARA CHOUDHURY

NEWLY elected President Rambaron Jaday of Nepal invited the Maoist CPNM to demonstrate its majority in the Constituent Assembly (CA) within a week and, thereby, form the next government. Election to the CA was held in April, so why the delay in forming a new government? The answer lies in the result.

It was a surprise when the Maoists staged a stunning victory by becoming the single largest party in the 601 member CA. The Maoists won one-third of the seats, with the Nepali Congress (NC) and the Communist Party of Nepal-United Marxists-Leninists (CPN-ML) trailing behind. Although the Maoists did not get

PANORAMA

Another critical issue, which may arise in the absence of a new government, is the polarised politics. So far, despite the pitfalls, the possibility of working through a consensus process to draft the new constitution has not been vitiated by the polarisation of politics, but this may not last for long.

the majority to form the next government, they are set to do so by forming a coalition. They will play a major role in drafting a new constitution, which will demonstrate new Nepal's commitments to multi-party pluralism, representative government, fundamental freedoms and human rights.

So the invitation to the Maoists seems to be a logical step. Already three months of the two-year period set to draft the constitution have been wasted. But, whether or not the Maoists would be able to form the government is still a matter of speculation because of the currents and cross-currents of Nepali political dynamics. In this context, what are the prospects of the formation of a Maoists-led government in Nepal, and why is it so imperative for Nepal to have a new government?

However, any peaceful transformation from an armed-conflict situation to constitutional politics has always been fraught with difficulties. The task is even harder when vested interests groups foresee the ushering of a new political order that would challenge the status quo, and try their best to dilute such endeavour if not prevent it altogether. The post-conflict scenario, a mixture of both hope and despair, in Nepal is no exception to it.

One cannot but appreciate the historic transformation of Maoist militarised politics into a "peaceful revolution," and its willingness to work through constitutional politics in order to change the structure and nature of the Nepali state. Their decision, after 10 years of armed struggle, to join the Seven Party

Alliance (SPA) movement against the king and subsequent decision to join the peace process, has been commendable.

The role of Prime Minister Koirala in this regard has also been historic. The peace process has been murky, but all parties concerned agreed to deal with fundamental issues like unitary vs. federal, Hindu state vs. secularism, proportional representation vs. first past the post system and monarchys vs. republic.

As a matter of fact, a number of consensus agreements have made everybody hopeful. In 2005, a consensus agreement on realising "full democracy" was the beginning of rapprochement between the Maoists and the SPA. It was followed by a comprehensive peace agreement in 2006, an interim constitu-

tion in 2007, election to CA in April 2008, and abolition of monarchy in May 2008. The period between each historic development was full of leaks, breaks and de tours, but each time the conflicting issues were resolved and desired compromise was reached.

The election to the CA, which was postponed twice, seems to be culmination of all endeavours, especially because it is a fully representative body with 34% Janajatis, 33% women, 20% Madheshis, 9% dalits, and 3% Muslims. But since the Maoist's victory the old guard, who have stakes in the status quo, seem to be working against the formation of a Maoists-led government.

The first contentious issue was the office of the president. The Maoists were obliged to accept the electoral mandate that rules out Pushpa Kamol Dahal, the Maoists leader, from occupying the offices of both head of government and head of state, but they were not willing to accept Koirala as the president.

Next were the rules of functioning of the CA, including the proposed passing of no-confidence with one-third instead of two-thirds majority. The Maoists were suspicious on both

counts. In the case of Koirala's proposed presidency, they apprehended that it would give rise to a parallel centre of power, and the rules regarding the no-confidence motion caused suspicion with regard to the future of any Maoist-led government.

They refused to even try to form the government without conditions. After a period of murky politicking, a solution was found. It was decided that the CA would elect the persons to the offices of president, speaker etc., and it would also change the rules of functioning of the CA. Subsequently, Rambaron Jaday, an SPA candidate was elected as the president. But passing of the Fifth Amendment has been stalled for nearly two weeks by the Madhesh-based political parties, who are demanding an "autonomous" Madhesh province.

From the above scenario, it is evident that there are difficulties in forming a new government. The unfortunate fact is that the whole situation has evolved not because of any foreign meddling but because of the roles played by the internal actors. In the meantime, the country is slowly and steadily slipping into lawlessness and anarchy. Various

interest groups are resorting to violence and demonstration to express their grievances, and that has become part of daily routine in Katmandu.

There are media reports about the Maoist Young Communist League's (YCL) continuing coercion and highland behaviour. They need to be made accountable through a democratic order, but the task can only be tackled by a mandated government. In the absence of such a government, one can only condemn such behaviour of the YCL.

Another area is reforms in the security sector. Nepal faces the twin problems of dealing with both the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the Royal Nepalese Army (RNA). First is the question of professionalisation of some 19,600 PLA and their integration into the mainstream army. Second is the question of "downsizing" the RNA.

The first issue can be addressed through the passing of the Fifth Amendment, which provides the modus vivendi to integrate the PLA with the professional army. But the process has been stalled due to the delay in passing the said amendment in the absence of a new government.

As far as the second issue is con-

cerned, it is common knowledge that democratic civil-military relations become operational only when a democratic government is in place. Another critical issue, which may arise in the absence of a new government, is the polarised politics. So far, despite the pitfalls, the possibility of working through a consensus process to draft the new constitution has not been vitiated by the polarisation of politics, but this may not last for long.

CPNM has agreed to form the government, with the condition that the president would not allow the vested forces to destabilise the new government within two years of its formation. The Maoists want such reassurance in the context of the prevailing political gridlock. They have held talks with the CPN-ML and claim that they the gap that developed during the presidential election has been closed, and there is a consensus between the two. The well-wishers of Nepal only can hope that the new government is formed without any further delay.

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