

Disqualification facing parliamentary nominees

It was parties' responsibility to vet candidates

ONE cannot but be amazed at the large number of parliamentary candidates facing disqualification at the general elections later this month owing to their defaulting on bank loans and non-clearance of utility bills. These individuals belong to all the major parties, namely, the Awami League, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, the Jatiya Party and the Jamaat-e-Islami. What boggles the mind even more is that despite the government's having thrice relaxed the RPO in respect of a repayment or rescheduling of loan repayment and clearing utility bills, these parties went ahead with nominating such a large number of candidates -- 130 to be precise -- for the Jatiya Sangsad elections. It is common wisdom that given the nature of parliament as the focal point of all politics and as the symbolism of morality, the political parties will nominate for it candidates of impeccable reputation. That they did not do so, that indeed they pressurised the authorities thrice to have the relevant provisions amended, is one more reminder of why politics has been taking a beating in this country.

In Bangladesh today, there is great expectation of a change coming into our political culture with the objective of ensuring that politics goes back to its universally acknowledged objective. And that is the promotion of public welfare through a judicious application of the powers of the state. In these past two years, people have looked forward to a fresh new beginning, one that they expected the parties to initiate. That being the expectation, it should have been for the parties to demonstrate a sense of responsibility by being extra careful about the individuals they were nominating for the Jatiya Sangsad polls. A foolproof vetting system ought to have been there and intending nominees should have been subjected to rigorous scrutiny by the party nominating bodies. It is not enough for the parties to suggest that it was the candidates who withheld information on their loans and the like. It is in the larger public interest that all candidates for office have a clean record, that indeed nothing will crop up to show them and their organisations in a bad light. Add to that the Chief Election Commissioner's reported comment to the effect that a number of influential loan defaulters are back in the polls race following stay orders from the court. That creates a discrepancy in that while these defaulters contest the polls, those who could not approach the court are having to stay away. However, the Bangladesh Bank is moving to have the stay orders set aside.

The need today is for a new, enlightened political culture in the country. That means the political parties, if they mean to maintain or gain public support, must eschew their old propensity of condoning or looking away from the tainted credentials of some of their members. It is an outrage to have as lawmakers individuals who themselves have a track record of disrespecting the law.

UN climate summit

Bangladesh needs cheer in material terms

AT the UN climate change summit at Poznan, Poland, Bangladesh has come in for two positive references against an otherwise grim prediction of how much she is likely to be at the receiving end of the adversities of climate change.

The first word of appreciation came from Sven Harmeling, senior adviser to international NGO GermanWatch. While placing Bangladesh as the riskiest on the global climate index, he regarded our 'Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan' as a model for many other countries deserving support of international community.

The second round of praise has come for our farmer resilience and improvisation to adapt to a changing scenario. The farmers are raising their vegetable beds, increasing retention of soil moisture through innovative treatment and enhancing organic content of the soil. While the farmers alter their cropping patterns, researchers have arrived at a hybrid variety of seedling that would keep above high water levels.

Surely, we can take heart from such encouraging comments but not rest our oars on such laurels. We have a long way to go in putting in place short, medium and long term preparedness strategies to face up to the stupendous and multifaceted challenges of adaptation. We are looking up to the UN for pooling the scientific and material resources of the advanced countries in a coordinated thrust towards alleviating climate change related plights of the LDCs which are certainly not of their own making.

Food security is of central importance to countries likely to be severely affected by climate change. With a predictable drop in their food output, such countries will be faced with food price vulnerability. The poor people spend anything between 50 and 80 per cent of their income on food. Subsidy will be a big need there coupled with bolstering household incomes. We will need massive investment in agriculture, especially of the type that is adaptive. The burden of coping with climate change effects will largely fall on women, so focused attention ought to be paid to their uplift.

Bangladesh is increasingly becoming the focal point of attention in terms of mitigation strategies for coping with the known and unknown facets of the climate change that has set in quite a few years ago. In light of this emerging reality, we endorse our delegation's proposal at Poznan for the setting up of International Climate Change Adaptation Centre in Bangladesh.

Analysing the Election

Evidence of post-ballot count manipulation?

S. AHAMED and J. RAHMAN

USING publicly available election data, we have been analysing the results of past three elections, with the first analysis already published on December 4.¹

Since the publication of that piece, we have been repeatedly asked two questions: why analyse the results of the past elections when they are part of history, and why has no one done this analysis until now when the data have been there for anyone to use?

As it happens, after discovering the data, it is these same questions that have prompted us to publish this analysis just before the next election. Analysis of past irregularities is important because they will help with a better election process in the future. Unfortunately, this analysis can be done only after a significant period of time following an election, because it takes a long time for the polling centre level election data to become available in the public domain. By the time the data become available, the newly elected government is already settled in, and analysts become apathetic to analyse the anomalies of past election data when such analysis runs the risk of destabilising the incumbent government. This may be one reason why no one has highlighted this before.

Ideally, the Election Commission should put the election data online as they become available so that they can be scrutinised before the new government takes office. We hope that this is something the commission will look into during the coming election. In the meantime, it is still important to highlight past anomalies so that they are not repeated. What is a better time for this than during the lead up to the next election, when everyone is paying attention?

There may be another reason why political parties do not come forward with factual data to challenge the final election

Polling centre won by:	4-Party	AL	JP	Others	Total
Centres with more than 100% voter turnout	69	35	2	5	111
Centres with 95% - 100% voter turnout	88	86	5	10	189

Table 1: Polling centres with incredibly high voter turnout in 2001



Vote count manipulation cheats the voters.

result (even as the losing side almost always reject the result as rigged) -- to some extent, all parties benefit from these irregularities.

Let's focus on the particular irregularity of incredibly high voter turnout. Officially, the number of supplied ballot papers cannot exceed the number of registered voter in any given polling centre. Therefore, a more than 100 per cent voter turnout can only indicate a post-ballot count manipulation. While in theory, the turnout can reach up to 100 per cent, in practice a voter turnout significantly higher than the national average can be viewed with suspicion. In practice,

a turnout of over 95 per cent is very likely to reflect irregularities.

Let's now look at who benefited from these anomalies in 2001. In that election, there were 111 centres with over 100 per cent turnout (in some cases there were over 200 per cent turnout). Of these, the BNP-led Four-Party Alliance won 69 against the Awami League's 35. In addition, in 189 centres, the turnout was between 95 and 100 per cent, with the centres shared by all major parties. As shown in Table 1, while the Alliance candidates benefited the most, the League was hardly without blemish.

Since excess ballot is not possible, high

turnout in practice points to a post-ballot count manipulation. While the centre level inflated results cannot be traced in final results due to lower turnover in other polling centres, this irregularity puts the reliability of the ballot counting process in doubt. If it is possible to change the results of one polling centre after the ballot count, it puts a question on the whole system.

To the extent that the irregularities reflect post-count manipulation, the ultimate responsibility accrues to either the presiding officer or the returning officer. At the polling centre level, the ground reality has often been that the electoral officer is intimidated by the polling agents of both formal party nominees as well those of independent dummy candidates.² Recent electoral changes have sought to make such intimidation harder. Analysing the post-election data will tell whether they have been successful. But if this can be changed at the hands of the returning officers, the scenario can become more complex. A candidate can manipulate the results of most centres to win, and still can share the blame by making the opponent win in few insignificant centres.

While incredibly high voter turnout is a sign of electoral fraud, appallingly low turnout may also point to irregularities. In the context of alleged deprivation of minority groups from casting their votes, our analysis shows very low voter turnout in many minority areas including the Chittagong Hill Tracts. We will discuss this in the next part of our analysis.

¹Available here: <http://www.thedailystar.net/story.php?id=65987>.

²A discussion on the electoral changes when they were first announced is available here: <http://unheardvoice.net/blog/2007/05/26/reforms-to-electoral-laws/#more-10>.

S. Ahamed and J. Rahman are members of Drishtipat Writers' Collective. They can be reached at dpwriters@drishtipat.org.

Nomination game

BY THE NUMBERS

The much-anticipated parliamentary election of December 29 is now sure to take place, but in all likelihood it will not fulfill the ardent aspiration of mass people unless chances of politics going back to the square one is reduced through voting out the corrupt and criminal from the political landscape.

A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

ALL the registered politics parties have announced the names of their nominees to contest in the ninth parliamentary polls slated for December 29. But one gets a sinking feeling scanning through the list of nominees of the major political parties, particularly of BNP, as it has nominated large number of individuals who were so long in jail on the charges of crime and corruption under the Emergency Power Rules and released on bail.

Both the major parties, BNP and AL, ran up against so many problems including demonstrations, desertions and scattered clashes among the supporters while nominating candidates that it tends to indicate that the nomination process of the parties was not participatory and transparent.

There are allegations that though the parties sought grass-root level opinions in deciding who to give nomination to, not much heed was paid to their opinion. Many who aspired to be BNP candidates alleged that a coterie of senior leaders was involved in the nomination trade and that explains why so many individuals of poor character are on the party ticket.

The people feel better as the returning officers have cancelled nomination papers of dozens of political bigwigs of the two major electoral alliances filed for the ninth parliamentary polls. At least 12 BNP candidates were declared unfit to contest the polls while six candidates of AL lost their candidatures due to non-payment of outstanding loan or bills and for conviction in corruption cases.

The army-led joint forces carried out drives against the corrupt politicians and captured at least 112 high profile politicians and businessmen including several former ministers and lawmakers of the major political parties after 1/11. It was really a commendable development for purging the polluted politics, bringing the top-most corrupt politicians to justice, who were hitherto believed, to be immune from the normal law of the land.

The political parties were urged not to nominate individuals who are corrupt and have explicit criminal connections. But the trends manifested by the parties in nomination clearly suggest that qualitative change in politics is still a far cry.

Sadly, the political parties in the country hardly represent the people's beliefs, views and opinions. They do not even bring about the democratic polity for us giving a real reflection of the people's will. This is exactly

why the electoral reforms were very crucial in determining the future course of politics in the country.

The High Court on November 30 upheld the constitutional provision for disqualifying a person from contesting parliamentary polls if he/she is sentenced to not less than a two-year term under the EPR. Some 75 political bigwigs of different parties are likely to be disqualified for contesting in the ninth parliamentary polls because of this HC's verdict.

The HC observed that rule 11(5) of the EPR "is effective subject to the provisions embodied in Article 66(2) (D) of the constitution." The EPR provision disqualifies a convict under its rule from contesting the parliamentary polls if his/her appeal against the conviction remains pending with the appellate court. Responsibility now lies upon the caretaker government to include this HC verdict in the Representation of the People Order Ordinance as its provision.

The much-anticipated parliamentary election of December 29 is now sure to take place, but in all likelihood it will not fulfill the ardent aspiration of mass people unless chances of politics going back to the square one is reduced through voting out the corrupt and criminal from the political landscape.

The CTG reportedly prepared a list of 140 politicians who were convicted in the special courts for corruption or facing trial on the charge of corruption and said to be pursuing to get assurance from the political parties concerned so that the listed leaders are not given party tickets for contesting in the forthcoming elections. But the initiative has become a futile exercise.

The people of Bangladesh are now really craving for the enlightened leadership of the people with wisdom, honesty, and ability. Their hearts almost bleed to see the looters and plunderers of national wealth pontificate on honesty and integrity. Indeed, the nation is greatly frustrated as the major political parties have nominated these sorts of people to occupy the body of utmost honour and dignity.

One can take this opportunity to remind the political parties of their sacred responsibility towards ridding the political arena of the country from the grip of the corrupt and criminals. Both the BNP and AL have paid plenty after the political changeover on 1/11 because of having the corrupt and criminally associated individuals in their respective parties.

A.N.M. Nurul Haque is a Daily Star columnist.

Terrorism in Mumbai

GOING DEEPER

One hopes that democracy in Pakistan will be given a chance to survive, and civilian control over the military will be ensured. Any increase in Indo-Pak tension will be a victory for the extremists. All concerned must exercise utmost restraint or South Asia will indeed prove to be the most dangerous place in the world.

KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

THE mindless massacre in Mumbai defies any explanation that would be acceptable to reason. Under any law of war, India would have the right to get its pound of flesh only if such an action had not been so costly to all parties concerned. According to the US National Counter-Terrorism Center, in 2007 India had the second largest number of casualties, after Iraq, from terrorism.

Bruce Riedel, an advisor to Obama on South Asian affairs, described India as a target of the jihadist movement. One takes note of Fared Zakaria's piece in Newsweek that the initial response of local Indian authorities was incompetent. Besides, he finds weakness of modern India being reflected through a dynamic, efficient and responsive private sector as opposed to a governmental sector plagued by patronage, corruption and incompetence.

India also has a Muslim minority problem. Muslims feel disadvantaged and under-represented at all levels, making their youth vulnerable to fundamentalism and radicalism. Despite one of the suspect's reported remark demanding a return of Muslim land, apparently referring to Kashmir, specialists find departure in the Mumbai attacks from the past assaults waged over Kashmir.

Despite Indian suspicion of Pakistani involvement, specialists consider it premature to reach "any hard and fast conclusions on who may be responsible for the attacks, but what we are seeing is reminiscent of past terrorist operations of Lashkar-e-Toiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed." The British think that the attacks were inspired by Islamic extremist ideology, and Indian involvement, if any, would be through the Students' Islamic Movement of India.

Obama asked specifically if India could take action against terrorist camps in Pakistan as he had advocated bombing of al-Qaeda training camps there during the election campaign, and said that every sovereign nation had the right to protect itself. "My administration," Obama added "will remain steadfast in support of India's effort to catch the perpetrators and bring them to justice. I expect the world community to feel the same way... We cannot tolerate a world in which innocents are being killed by extremists based on twisted ideology."

Pakistan Prime Minister Gilani telephoned the Indian PM and strongly condemned the acts of terrorism in Mumbai. He reminded the Indian PM that Pakistan itself was a victim of terrorism. Singh told Gilani that preliminary reports pointed towards Karachi as the base of the operations and requested that the Director General of Pakistan's military intelligence -- ISI -- be sent to Delhi. He also demanded that twenty suspected terrorists be handed over to India.

Zardari, in a telephone call to Sonia Gandhi, strongly condemned the attacks and called for elimination of "militancy and extremism in all its forms," and for India's cooperation. Foreign Minister Qureshi asked for both countries to be "calm, composed and supportive of each other," and to avoid knee-jerk reactions.

Perhaps Indian allegations about Pakistani involvement resulted from the sensational disclosure of the lone terrorist caught about the terrorists' training in marine warfare conducted by Lashkar-e-Toiba. He also revealed that all other terrorists were Pakistani nationals.

He said that the group set out on November 21 from Karachi and was supplied with arms and ammunition by a Pakistani vessel. On way they commandeered an Indian vessel and reached Mumbai on November 26.

President Bush called the attack an attack on "human dignity." Condoleezza Rice has been in constant touch with Pranab Mukherji and Zardari since the attack. US media by and large reflected the Indian allegation of the terrorists' links with Lashkar-e-Toiba, and reported in detail the story narrated by the captured terrorist. NYT reports of US officials' fear that the Bush administration may not be able to hold back Indian military response as it had done after the attack on the Indian Parliament -- and the bombing of the Indian embassy at Kabul -- because the provocation in this case was greater than anything in the past.

One hopes that democracy in Pakistan will be given a chance to survive, and civilian control over the military will be ensured. Any increase in Indo-Pak tension will be a victory for the extremists. All concerned must exercise utmost restraint or South Asia will indeed prove to be the most dangerous place in the world.

Kazi Anwarul Masud is a former Secretary and Ambassador.