

Imperatives for malpractice-free election

STRAIGHT LINE

The Election Commission has, undoubtedly, a pivotal role in the conduction of a fair and orderly election with the help and support of field level administrative officials along with enforcement functionaries including the Armed Forces personnel. The cooperation and proper performance of the support organizations can be ensured by a tough and demonstrably efficient Election Commission. Unfortunately, in the past this has not been possible due to structural deficiencies and personality factors.

MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

AS the nation prepares for the upcoming general election of 29th December 2008, poll atmospheres, till now, have experienced tolerable heat. The question is, will we be able to keep such heat within manageable proportion and if electoral malpractices would remain restricted to a bearable minimum? Already two major alliances have accused each other of breach of electoral conduct. One hopes that the 29 December election sets some standard worth emulating, particularly when the reconstituted Election Commission has embarked upon a commendable process aimed at ensuring a fair and free poll.

Most elections in independent Bangladesh have experienced various kinds of malpractices. The worrying part, however, is that over the years the nature and intensity of the irregularities and illegalities have assumed such a fearful dimension that there are justifiable premonitions about the holding of an acceptable and credible national poll. Admittedly, there are causes for concern as the viability of a democratic polity affecting the quality of life of the citizens across our political divide is at stake.

Looking back one may find that small level forgery, forcible closure of voting through muscle flexing by bullies of the parties, voting by impersonation in some constituencies were resorted to by a section of the political parties, particu-

larly in the sensitive or remote areas of the country. By and large these did not attract serious attention as it most often did not significantly affect the national polls. The situation, however, changed ominously as extra-constitutional rule descended on the body politic and the period between 1982 to 1988 saw some of the worst electoral malpractices that were legally punishable and morally reprehensible, to say the least.

Sadly for the nation, the public services of the country that included subordinate magistracy and the enforcement apparatus, amongst others, played a pathetically energized and ignominious role in the shameful stage managed election at the behest of a malevolent autocrat. Expressions like 'Media Coup' became known for the first time in our part of the world where despite the economic adversity the general population and the election managers could be proud of tolerably healthy electoral practices.

The fall of autocratic regime in December 1990 raised hopes about fair election but unfortunately the democratic aspirations got a rude jolt at the irregularities of the now lamented 'Magura bye-election' and the least participated February 1996 national polls. Continuous agitation and 'harta's' by the then opposition parties shortened the tenure of the government that followed the February 1996 election and the concept of a non-partisan and neutral caretaker government was accorded the constitutional recognition. However, this

arrangement has not been fully successful in assuaging the fears of a biased and rigged election.

It is pertinent to note that the caretaker government only oversees the national election while subsequent elections like bye-elections for parliament and other elections to the local bodies are held during the incumbency of an increasingly overbearing and interfering party government. The experience of Dhaka-10 (Previous) bye election in the not-too-distant past for a parliamentary seat did not bode well for a fair election scenario.

Against the above backdrop it may be worthwhile to dwell on the electoral malpractices that had characterized our polls in the hope that demonstrable countervailing measures are taken in time. Some of the malpractices are listed below:

Corrupting the election environment

- Resorting to vote purchase by open disbursement of cash and kind like mobile phone, bicycles, clothes etc to the vulnerable section of the voting population.
- Restraining the actual voters from voting by means of intimidation/threats and resorting to inspired fray/altercation. This technique is used to scare away the weaker section of the population, particularly the religious minorities.
- Scaring and driving away the voters by motivated use of the law enforcement personnel in the form of unnecessary preemptive arrest, torture and conse-

quent spreading of fear.

Vote forgery

- Forcibly taking control of some voting centres for a definite time for applying pressure to vote for partisan candidate.
- Printing of excess ballot papers and its illegal distribution.
- Excessive false vote casting resulting in more votes cast than the approved number of a particular centre.
- Massive vote-rigging in areas which are inaccessible communication wise.

Vote counting

- Ulterior arrangement and provision of excess ballot papers/boxes in collaboration with election officials.
- Rigging the counting process by resorting to removal of some ballot boxes, interfering and changing the tabulation, changing/altering the cancelled votes, changing the votes in favour of particular candidate.
- Causing disappearance of ballot boxes during their movement from polling centre to the District headquarters.

Deliberate disturbance at polling centre for facilitating forgery:

- Fixing dummy candidate and consequent appointment of fictitious agents with a view to undermining the opponent.
- Appointing partisan observers to exert unhealthy influence and commit forgery.

Mismanagement and administrative manipulation

- Providing incorrect voters list to a candidate and using another at the polling centre.
- Appointment of partisan election officials and arranging excess ballots or presenting/stuffing the ballot boxes in collusion with such partisan personnel.
- To stall voting on the pretext of minor problem and conveniently commencing later in the absence of agents of opposing candidate.
- Canceling the entire voting process of a centre after counting and preliminary announcement of results.
- Misleading the Election Commission by transmitting the lead of the losing candi-

date.

Some suggestions

- For future election vote casting through electronic system can be introduced at least in the urban areas along the lines practiced in neighbouring India.
- All candidates should be provided with the list of concerned presiding, polling officers and their assistants at least 15 days prior to the election. Any objection by the candidates in this regard should be sorted at the same time. Similarly, the list of polling centres should be distributed and publicized at the same time.
- The counting of ballots shall be held in presence of all agents and unnecessary gathering/assembly of persons during such counting must not be allowed.
- The maximum number of ballots per polling booth may be limited to 350. Votes cast in excess of this number will result in the cancellation of the election at such booth or centre.
- Election may be staggered over a period of one week. On each day such election may be held at a maximum of 9000 centres. Accordingly, distribution of election officials and law enforcement personnel may be worked out.
- The counting of votes may be held on the last day of election. The ballot boxes of earlier held polling may be kept at designated secure places. The counting of last day's poll may be done at the concerned polling centre.
- The Armed Forces personnel may be utilized in guarding the aforementioned ballot boxes at designated places.
- There should be a definite policy for appointing presiding and polling officers and their assistants. All political parties should be able to concur on this policy. All election officials may be drawn from government if election is held over a week. This will minimize bias and friction.

Election observers

Some preventive measures like the following may be taken to forestall untoward happenings.

- In respect of election observation group and related matters there can be a steer-

ing committee in each district along with an all-party observer team for each constituency.

- National level election observation organizations have to be registered at least six months prior to the election and this should be widely publicized for the benefit of public information. Their functions and responsibilities should be fixed.

- Information about foreign observer groups may be declared at least one month prior to the election. They may be sent to violence-prone and far-off polling centres.
- Identity papers/cards for the observers should be issued by the Election Commission. This should be done 15 days prior to the election date.

Ballot paper printing and vote cancellation

- In order to avoid complication or dispute the opinion of all political parties may be sought in this regard. Specifically, comments may be solicited from proposed all party observation team.
- The laws or rules regarding cancellation of votes cast should be definite and clear. Similar measure should be taken in matters of acceptance/rejection of nomination papers.

The Election Commission has, undoubtedly, a pivotal role in the conduction of a fair and orderly election with the help and support of field level administrative officials along with enforcement functionaries including the Armed Forces personnel. The cooperation and proper performance of the support organizations can be ensured by a tough and demonstrably efficient Election Commission. Unfortunately, in the past this has not been possible due to structural deficiencies and personality factors. Within the existing provisions the Election Commission can still stand tall and make all concerned realize that in matters pertaining to a credible poll they are in charge and everything shall be under their watch.

Muhammad Nurul Huda is a columnist for The Daily Star.

At least war is out of way

BETWEEN THE LINES

Nobody has accused the Pakistan government for the attack on Mumbai. But it has not been able to insulate its territory which the terrorists continue to use as the launching pad as well as their refuge. All know that the army in Pakistan has a decisive role and that the ISI is a state within state.

KULDIP NAYAR

IT is a shame that only 13 out of 760 MPs were present to pay tribute to the watch and ward personnel who were shot dead on December 13 in the 2001 attack on the Indian Parliament. I was then a member of the Rajya Sabha. The house had finished the question hour and some members had called it a day. I was one of them.

But before I could leave, I heard shots and shouts to stay inside. We were roughly 500 members who took refuge in the Central Hall of Parliament. Outside the hall were the tall statues of Jawaharlal Nehru and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad. I recalled how much the two had sacrificed, not only for the country's independence but also for India's ethos of democracy and pluralism. The terrorists from across the border wanted to harm

those values.

There was hardly any MP who did not suspect Pakistan's hand. Subsequently, it was proved that the Lakshar-e-Toiba (LeT) was at the back of the attack. If President Asif Ali Zardari's statements were to be interpreted the ISI was behind the LeT before he took over. Again, the attack on Mumbai where nearly 200 people killed was by the LeT and its offshoot Jammat-e-Dawa.

Then our reaction was in the shape of stationing troops on the borders for almost one year. This time, anger was deeper and wider. Yet the government showed restraint. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's only request to Zardari was to send the ISI chief. The latter agreed to do so, but could not apparently convince the army. We also know the limit to which the elected rulers in Pakistan can go. On the other hand, they have their domestic opinion to

placate. But why is Islamabad reluctant to take action against terrorists who have been identified living in Pakistan? Whatever it has done so far against the terrorists, it is not on India's request but on Washington's word. And whatever it does will be under international pressure.

In India, except a few warmongers, there is a realization that there is no option to peace. Defence Minister A.K. Antony has publicly stated that there will be no war. Some television channels which queued the pitch in India have been ticked off. The Rajya Sabha committee has issued guidelines to indicate what should not be covered: "The repeated display in the media of human corpses in case of... incidents of bomb blasts, arson etc., which causes negative psychological impact on the viewers. News channels in many foreign countries do not telecast the footage of dead bodies."

In the media itself, there is serious

discussion whether all it did was within the limits of objective journalism. I wish the same examination takes place in Pakistan. Some time later, editors of television channels and newspapers of the two countries can sit across the table and debate the matter threadbare. The responsibility on the media is the most in a democratic country.

The first story that the terrorist arrested belonged to Faridkot in Okara district of Pakistan's Punjab was broken by a British weekly paper, The Observer. Dawn took the investigation further. Subsequently, some Pakistani channels beamed interviews with the Faridkot villagers. Why couldn't this be done before The Observer's story? New Delhi has identified some of the dead terrorists and published their pictures. The Pakistan media should have pursued the story.

It is also time for the politicians of the two countries to introspect their conduct. Even if they do not talk about war, their speeches and the body language is far from friendly. They run with the hare and hunt with the hound. Why are they stoking fires of hatred when people on both sides are surcharged? Whether there is a campaign in Pakistan or not to watch India movies is yet to be known. But the halls which are showing Indian films are practically empty. On this side, Minister of Sports and Youth Affairs says that the cricket series with Pakistan cannot take

place after what happened in Mumbai. Thus the recrimination between the two countries goes on.

France and Germany fought for hundreds of years. Today they are the best of friends. Qaide-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah gave me this example when I asked him before partition that Hindus and Muslims would jump at each other's throat once the British left. He said we would be the best of friends.

I have no doubt that one day this would come about. The assassinated Benazir Bhutto told me at London a few months before returning to Pakistan that she would have "a borderless subcontinent." President Zardari has tried to go towards the same direction, but has been hit on his knuckles. Manmohan Singh has said many a time that the destiny has thrown India and Pakistan together and they cannot but be good neighbours.

I admire the courage and commitment of people, however small in number, lighting candles at Karachi or taking out a procession at Lahore in memory of those who died in the Mumbai attack. This is the time when India needs understanding. This is also the occasion when faith in good relations between India and Pakistan is tested.

Pakistan should understand India's anger. Those who attacked Mumbai might be the Al-Qaida and the Taliban who are playing havoc in Pakistan as well.

But these are the organizations which are helping, training and arming them. Why have such extremists remained beyond the pale of law? Even when some of them were "detained" after the attack on India's Parliament, they were practically free to preach and spread poison. India suspects that those arrested after the Mumbai carnage would have the front door of their house shut while the back door is open.

Nobody has accused the Pakistan government for the attack on Mumbai. But it has not been able to insulate its territory which the terrorists continue to use as the launching pad as well as their refuge. All know that the army in Pakistan has a decisive role and that the ISI is a state within state.

Unfortunately, some of the speeches in the Rajya Sabha were exactly on the lines of statements made in the US Congress after 9/11. President Bush attacked Iraq and Afghanistan and played havoc to the liberal values and traditions of America. It has taken all these years for the nation to assert itself through the election of Senator Barack Obama to the office of President... Civil societies in both the countries should take note of it. As K. Chopin said in his book, The Awakening, "The bird that would soar above the level of plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings."

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

Bangladesh among countries most hit by climate change

TAREQUL ISLAM MUNNA

THE Global Climate Risk Index looks at the cost of natural disasters in the light of a country's economy and population in order to get a clear view of its vulnerability.

In absolute terms, extreme weather events inflict a higher bill when they hit rich countries, explained Sven Harmeling of Germanwatch, a German group that compiled the barometer.

This, for instance, was the case with Hurricane Katrina, which inflicted costs of 215 billion dollars when it slammed into the US Gulf Coast in 2005, making it the most expensive storm in history.

But, in relation to the size of a nation's economy, developing countries are hit much harder, Harmeling said.

In 2007, the top five countries that suffered most from extreme events were Bangladesh, North Korea, Nicaragua, Oman and Pakistan.

Oman, which had ranked a distant 116th on the 2006 index, featured high in the 2007 lineup because of Cyclone Gonu, an exceptional tropical storm that according to preliminary official estimates

inflicted damages of around 3.9 billion dollars.

Over a decade, from 1998-2007, the five worst-hit countries were Honduras, Bangladesh, Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic and Haiti, Germanwatch estimated.

Calculations are based on a basket of factors.

One-quarter of the weighting is derived from the death toll from a disaster; one-quarter on deaths per population; one-sixth on absolute economic losses; and two-sixths on losses as a proportion to GDP.

The data is derived from a long-term database compiled by the German reinsurance giant Munich Re.

Sudden, destructive weather events -- storms, floods and heatwaves -- are included in the data, but not droughts or sea-level rise, which are longer-term events and far harder to evaluate, said Harmeling.

"This index reveals that in most cases, developing countries are relatively more affected by extreme events than wealthy countries if you look in economic terms in relation to a country's GDP, and also in terms of the death toll in relation to the population," Harmeling told AFP.

Harmeling said that the

index chiefly aimed to give a pointer about a country's vulnerability to climate change.

Single weather events cannot by themselves be attributed to the effects of global warming, which is a long-term, complex affair, he said.

On the other hand, scientists in the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) have warned that climate change this year is likely to make extreme weather events more frequent and possibly more intense.

"We cannot say that such and such an event in Bangladesh this year is a conse-

quence of climate change. What we can say is that assuming that extreme weather events will occur more often under climate change, it points to a future risk for countries due to climate change," said Harmeling.

The presentation was made on the sidelines of the December 1-12 meeting of UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which aims at advancing towards a new pact to reduce carbon emissions and channeling help to exposed countries.

Tarekul Islam Munna, a conservator, is working on behalf of World Wildlife Fund (WWF), e-mail: munna_tareq@yahoo.com



Cyclone Sidr devastation in Bangladesh.

FROM MICROCREDIT TO SMALL ENTREPRENEUR LOAN

Confident of future

MANIK CHOWDHURY

MOST of the southern districts of the country were devastated by Sidr in November last year. One year on after the devastating cyclone many of the surviving victims have overcome the impact with this or that help or support and their perseverance. In this resilient people's pursuit to recovery, microcredit, already a proven tool of poverty alleviation, has played a successful supportive role. One year on many have already recovered, many are still recovering, and many are even advancing further after recovery. Here is a case study.

Resident of Amtala Road under Barguna Sadar upazila Faruk Sikder and his wife Parvin Akter own eight cows. Everyday they milch most of them (cows) for a considerable quantity of milk, sell it and earn profit, with which they meet the cattle rearing and household expenses, repay regular loan installments, and save whatever remained.

A few years back Faruk Sikder took Taka 80,000 small entrepreneur loan from ASA Barguna-1 and started this cow rearing project. In a couple of years they started to see profit and after another year, to dream of a prosperous future. But that was perhaps not ordained to continue

uninterrupted. Devastating cyclone Sidr razed Barguna and other coastal districts to the peril of the inhabitants. Although Faruk Sikder's establishment was not blown or washed away like many others, but it also sustained considerable damage.

However, the people of these areas are very resilient and industrious. One year on from Sidr many have already overcome the destruction and many are in the process of recovering. Faruk Sikder and wife Parvin Akter are among them. And it may be mentioned here that in consideration of Sidr devastation, ASA suspended its loan recovery installations in the affected areas and offered fresh loans to the members to help them continue their occupation and overcome the impact. Later on the repayment installments were also relaxed to the convenience of the loanee. This enabled many of the members to improve, even extend where possible their work and trade, replenish the damaged homestead, continue children's education as well as repay installments at their convenience.

Like many others, Faruk Sikder and Parvin Akter also have been able to pick up the severed thread of their dream. They have rebuilt their damaged house, set up sanitary slab latrine, their eldest son is reading in class VII, the five-year-old youngest is one in the waiting for schooling.



Faruk Sikder and Parvin Akter are desirous of giving their children higher education. And all this with the income from their cow rearing.

In fact, the enterprise began with Parvin Akter a decade ago, when she became a member of ASA Barguna-1 and took a microcredit of Tk 3000/- . Initially she opened a grocer's shop. Through regular payment of installments she repaid the earlier loan every year and took enhanced credit to improve and expand the business. In the process when she repaid enhanced credit amount of Tk 24000/- she was graduated by ASA for small entrepreneur loan. And at this point her husband Faruk Sikder, who was always

with his wife in the enterprise, came to shoulder the enhanced responsibility. And with Tk 80,000/- small entrepreneur's loan they took up more profitable cow rearing project abandoning grocery.

Now the value of their assets including the cattle stands at about taka eight lakh. After paying regular installments against loan, they can save about Tk 50,000/- yearly. They dream of becoming totally self-reliant reducing the burden of loan soon. Yes, first microcredit, then small entrepreneur's loan have not only helped them overcome the devastating Sidr impact but also made them so confident of a bright future.

Manik Chowdhury is a freelance writer.