

Political parties should offer a realistic vision

They are yet to tune into the surge of new voters

WITHOUT our knowing it, or in any way being conscious of it, a strikingly radical metamorphosis has taken place in the composition and make-up of the electorate. Roughly speaking, there are 32 per cent first-time voters making for a total of 2.3 crore. The number of women voters exceed by more than 12 lakh that of their male counterpart. First- and second-time voters comprise more than 50 per cent of the electorate. Those who have become voters after the birth of Bangladesh constitute more than 50 per cent of the electoral roll.

The political parties on their campaign trails do not appear to have given any consideration to the changed electoral landscape splendidly featured by a surge of young voters. Whereas the AL, to some extent, has been cognisant of, and somewhat responsive to, the new complexion in the electoral demography, the BNP has been less so. On the whole, the parties' campaigning style is manifestly stuck in the old mold. They offer no vision, or an apology for it at best, before the younger generation constituting at least 50 per cent of the voters of whom again 32 per cent are being voters for the first time with, needless to say, a chest full of hopes and dreams for a better future.

Running along this manifestly old style campaigning is the promises galore being spewed out right, left and centre through the party manifestoes and public utterances of the leaders of major political parties. From bridges, culverts and roads through academic and professional institutions to reclaiming canals and dredging silted rivers, you name it and that is in their lists of commitments. As though promises alone will win votes making a short shrift of the voters having wizened by experience. As if there is a hidden treasure from which ample resource will flow to bank-roll all kinds of commitments, regardless of their feasibility. Have they done the homework to assess the internal capabilities -- institutional, monetary, social and technical -- to back up their promises into realisation? That is the vision they have been found wanting in projecting; only a bundle of promises hardly mean anything.

Little wonder, representative reactions from 32 per cent of the first-time voters point to a mood of skepticism among them, and lest their pessimism take hold of their minds, the contending political parties must present a concrete vision of what they plan to achieve within five years and how.

Plot allotment application hiccup

Those found guilty of inserting fake TINs must be weeded out

THE Rajdhani Unnayan Karttripakkha (Rajuk) will cancel its plot allotments in Gazipur and Uttara for individuals found to have submitted fake tax identification numbers (TINs). That is an appreciable decision and we are happy to note that the organisation will be assisted by the National Board of Revenue in the job of identifying people submitting fake TINs. Given a context where individuals have been supplying false TINs in a number of vital areas, it makes plain good sense to launch a campaign toward bringing the guilty to book. Where the cancellation of plots is concerned, however, the question here is one of why the TINs must be looked into after a decision on the allotments has already been made. The logical move here would be for the NBR to go for a verification of all TINs submitted by applicants before Rajuk makes its final decisions on the matter.

The NBR has already decided to go into the job of checking all applications relating to the plots. And the applications, we understand, have run into very large numbers, with many more expected between now and mid-January, the deadline for submission of such applications. Checking them meticulously is a task that simply has to be done if in the final analysis plot allotments are not to end up being questionable affairs. We have also been informed that a rather large number of fake TINs have already been detected. It only hints at the degree of the problem that the NBR and Rajuk may have on their hands. We suggest, therefore, that all decisions on allotments be made once the NBR authorities have conclusively looked into the applications. If that is not done, if indeed Rajuk is compelled to cancel allotments after false TINs are detected, it will prove not only embarrassing for the body but also lead to complications in the entire allotment process.

Last but not least, it must be noted that middle-income families have in large numbers applied for the plots. It says a lot about the housing situation in the capital that so many thousands of people have sought plots under the altogether 8,000-plus plot Purbachal project in Gazipur and the third phase of the Uttara project in Dhaka. It is, therefore, important that the process of allotment be handled with absolute transparency. Any attempt to influence the decisions on allotments should be put down decisively. No controversy should mar the process.

Voting out the corrupt

Since the drive against corruption and the campaign for clean politics have gone awry, it is now the voters turn to finally bring about the change that the nation hopes for, expects, and desperately needs.

A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

THE state of emergency is now over, and street rallies and processions seem to highlight the country's enthusiasm and excitement for the upcoming elections. However, the list of nominees of the major political parties, particularly of the BNP, highlights the prominence of individuals of dubious character in Bangladeshi politics. Additionally, the higher judiciary has allowed some candidates who had been convicted in criminal cases to contest the upcoming elections.

The political parties were urged not to nominate individuals who are markedly corrupt and have explicit criminal connections. The trend manifested by the parties in nomination, however, clearly suggests that qualitative change in politics is still a far cry. One will have to wait for the day when voters, instead of showing unflinching and blind support to a particular political party, consider the integrity and competency of a candidate while casting votes.

The muchanticipated parliamentary election of December 29 will probably not fulfill the ardent hope of the masses. In order for the people to be happy and for the country to progress, the criminals and the corrupt individuals need to be voted out from the political landscape.

The forthcoming election is potentially the most crucial one in our checkered political history, as it may actually allow the people to play a meaningful role in shaping the country's future after being tainted by corruption and inefficiency for decades.

Nonetheless, the appointment of the next governing body may become meaningless if we fail to play our role properly.

The paramount need for all of us today is to get together in the kind of unity we forged over three decades back to assert our self-esteem as a nation. We now need to steer the country clear of the politics of plundering.

The people of Bangladesh need enlightened leadership. They have had criminals and plunderers as rulers for too long. The voters should give their verdict judiciously in order to end the culture of hartals and conflicts and promote the entry of competent people in national politics. The time has arrived to discard destructive politics and pave the path for the nation to come level with the rest of the civilised world.

Very few people will disagree with the assertion that we need extremely dynamic leadership in order to get out of the quagmire we are now in. The qualitative change in leadership, a demand very close to everybody's heart, will remain a far cry if we miss this opportunity to cleanse politics.

It is expected that the voters will show sensitivity and responsibility while casting their valuable votes and will evaluate the candidates in terms of their competence and honesty and not by their party symbols. If this does not happen, the individuals tainted by allegations of crime and corruption will again crowd the national parliament, the august house of the nation.

The dream of a corruption- and con-

frontation-free political trend for a sound growth of pluralism in society can only materialise if we can check the infiltration of the parliament by persons of dubious character. The framing of laws is not an easy task, and clean and competent men and women only should be given the responsibility to perform this particular task for the nation.

Many young voters are eager to exercise their voting rights. The young voters, who are energetic and enthusiastic and who do not have ancient biases against any political party, can bring about a dramatic change in the political scenario by voting out corruption and crime.

BNP and AL have made scores of pledges including the curbing of corruption and the

establishment of good governance. The lesson that the people have learnt over the years, however, is that the parties shy away from implementing their election pledges once in power and that they show no remorse for their past mistakes.

The people of Bangladesh would not be in such a sorry state if the four-party alliance had performed properly during their last tenure in power. Hence, the credibility of the parties must be carefully taken into account, and the people must not be deceived by empty pledges.

Since the drive against corruption and the campaign for clean politics have gone awry, it is now the voters turn to finally bring about the change that the nation hopes for, expects, and desperately needs.

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ART WORK BY SUBHO SAHA ANWAY

None of the above

The hard truth is that the No-Vote alone may not make a big difference in terms of our election outcomes, unless it is part of a long-term issue-based campaign. The negative effects of ad hoc, uncoordinated casting of no-votes may outweigh the positive effects.

MRIDUL CHOWDHURY

LIKE many, I am divided on the No-Vote option. On the one hand, this is possibly our only way to send a strong message to the party bigwigs to nominate better candidates; on the other, there is a risk of critical votes getting wasted, since it is next to impossible that the number of no-votes will reach the threshold needed for a re-election in the constituency.

And if we assume that there is a fair possibility that perhaps a majority of the people who will cast a no-vote may be more progressive-minded who think beyond party lines, then it is fair to say that the votes that would have gone to the relatively more progressive end will go uncoun- ted.

Both arguments are valid and strong. So how should we go about evaluating the No-Vote option?

In my humble opinion, these are the issues that we have to ask ourselves when deciding on the No-Vote option:

- The No-Vote can be potentially effective if it is part of a well-organised campaign that will send a clear message to the parties why their candidates fall short of people's expectations and what they should do differently next time. If it is not part of an organised campaign, the number of no-votes cast may be small and it will not have the intended outcomes -- the parties will not learn anything and the valuable votes may just go to waste.
- A well-organised No-Vote campaign has to be based on a specific issue or a charge that disqualifies the candidates in the constituency for becoming law-makers. One example of an organised No-Vote is taking place in Dinajpur-6 where protesters feel that the rights of indigenous people have been trampled upon by both major parties.
- Some frustrated voters (especially the younger ones) may be inclined to look at the candidates from the major parties and if they don't like what they see, they may decide to cast a no-vote as a protest. In this, there is the danger that they will not explore the possibility of looking into options of independent candidates or from smaller parties. The voters should do the due diligence in finding out about all candidates before deciding on a

no-vote.

- In constituencies where there is a candidate from a major party, who is either an alleged war criminal or an alleged corrupt politician widely believed to have plundered and exploited, then it may be pragmatic to cast a vote for some other party. Since now almost all the top-brass politicians charged and held for corruption in the last two years are back in the playing-field, the responsibilities on the shoulders of voters have increased tremendously to make the right choice. In these cases, no-votes without an organised issue-based campaign may not have a positive impact and worse yet, it may even favour the candidate of questionable repute, thus defeating the entire purpose of the voter's no-vote to begin with.
- Another point to take into consideration is that for this election, there is not a lot of time to organise the No-Vote campaign. However, the No-Vote may be a more effective means of protest in the next election when there will be enough time to get organized and send a meaningful message to the parties that may actually make some difference.

One of the flaws of democratic elections, that we have to live with, is that it gives us choices that we may not be happy with and worse yet, it sometimes produces outcomes that are ironically not necessarily a reflection of what majority of the people actually want. Even one of the most widely hailed democracies in the world, such as the US, produced someone like Bush as the president in 2000 despite the fact that Al Gore got more total number of votes than Bush did nationwide.

The hard truth is that the No-Vote alone may not make a big difference in terms of our election outcomes, unless it is part of a long-term issue-based campaign. The negative effects of ad hoc, uncoordinated casting of no-votes may outweigh the possible positive effects. That is why, in this election, it would be very important to weigh our options and the consequences of our votes and, more importantly, our no-votes before we go to the election booths.

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Running the numbers

Of course, the unfortunate reality has been that all parties are to various extents guilty of trying to subvert the process, and thus none really has the credibility to challenge wrong doings by the other side. It is about time that this changes.

S. AHAMED AND J. RAHMAN

SINCE the publication of our pieces analysing the polling centre level data from the last three elections in these pages on December 4, 7, 8, and 14, the irregularities discussed here have been reported in highly circulated Bangla dailies (see N. Morshed's piece in Prothom Alo on December 15 for example). In this piece, we reiterate our reasons for publishing our results now, and make some specific recommendations for some key stakeholders.

Let's start with our reasons. Our intention is not to start a debate about the legitimacy of the 2001 or 1996 elections. Rather, our analysis is aimed at helping with a better election process in the future. Unfortunately, analysis of this kind 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 analysis of past anomalies runs the risk of destabilising the political situation. However, in the lead up to the next election, when everyone is paying attention, highlighting past anomalies have the maximum chance of resulting in stakeholders taking concrete actions to minimise the likelihood of a repetition of these irregularities. That is why we have published our result now.

Let's now think of some concrete actions key stakeholders could take to avoid these irregularities.

Firstly, it is vital to have timely and accurate polling centre data so that the most blatant of manipulations can become apparent right away. The Election Commission should put the centre level data online as they become available so that they can be scrutinised immediately. And the national electronic and print media should use these polling centre data to project winners in each constituency.

If the EC fails to make this data available, then it is all the more important that organisations such as the NDI continue gathering and publishing these data so that similar analysis can be conducted after this election. In a political culture where the losing side invariably cries foul play, there is no substitute for timely and accurate data to assess the quality of the election process.

Secondly, it is important to have a free

flow information between the polling centres, candidates' campaign headquarters, and the capital. Events such as those in Parkumarkhali HS polling centre of the then Bagerhat-4 constituency -- where miscreants went on a rampage in the 2001 election to prevent the minority voters from taking part -- need to be reported in real time.

Here the print and electronic media can obviously play a crucial role. However, aware citizens can also help us avoid these abominations. In these days of mobile phones with cameras, one does not need to be an accredited journalist to report on blatant intimidation and violations of our most fundamental political right. Of course, for the citizen journalist to tell their stories, we need to have a functioning mobile network. In this context, reports of shutting down mobile networks on the election day is highly disconcerting.

Thirdly, the Election Commission should look into reforming the vote counting process to minimise the risk of post ballot count manipulation. Such manipulation can happen at the polling centre level, where polling of both formal party nominees as well those of independent dummy candidates often intimidate the electoral officer. Recent electoral changes have sought to make such intimidation harder.

Analysing the post-election data will tell whether they have been successful. It is, however, harder to detect manipulation at the returning officer level. One way to check against RO-level fraud is by allowing the political parties' agents in the EC to do a random check of polling centre level count against that from the RO.

Fourthly, and perhaps most importantly, it is the political parties that must mobilise against these manipulations. During the election campaign and on the day, party workers should work with the community to ensure that voters can register their opinion. And on during the vote count and later, it is in their interest to draw attention to blatant frauds.

Of course, the unfortunate reality has been that all parties are to various extents guilty of trying to subvert the process, and thus none really has the credibility to challenge wrong doings by the other side. It is about time that this changes.

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