

## Upazila Parishad elections: A new challenge

It is expected that honest and capable candidates shall be elected to the *Upazila Parishads* to eliminate corruption and nepotism, and to uphold justice and establish rule of law at the grassroots level.

DHIRAJ KUMAR NATH

**A**FTER 20 years, the stage is now set for holding the *Upazila Parishad* elections for the third time thanks to the prime minister-elect, who supported holding of the elections on the due date in spite of some reservations initially.

The elections will be held on January 22 in 481 *Upazila Parishads*, in which 3,316 persons are contesting for the post of chairman, 2,879 for vice-chairman, and 1,936 women as vice-chairpersons. 14 candidates have already been elected uncontested, of which 9 are women as vice-chairpersons.

This time election is going to be held under the supervision of a most popular elected government, and the nation is eager to see a free, fair and impartial election at the grassroots level also.

The first election for the *Upazila Parishads* was held in 1985 and the second in 1988. In 1985, about 200 chairmen who owed allegiance to the autocratic government were elected. This prompted the feeling that the *upazila* election was a means for serious politicisation of local level institutions. Even the second election held in 1988 could not satisfy the political parties and the public about its fairness and impartiality.

This was the reason why, in 1991, the Local Government (*Upazila Parishads* and *Upazila Parishads* Reorganisation)

Ordinance of 1982 was repealed on the basis of the recommendations of a committee headed by Barrister Nazmul Huda.

Obviously, this decision to make the *Upazila Parishad* system a non-functional one with the existing set-up and manpower in situ was a wrong decision. The action was termed by many as "throwing the baby with the bath water."

However, the Parliamentary Standing Committee, in April 2005, strongly recommended the continuation of *Upazila Parishad* as the focal point of local level administration to address the issues of the rural development, poverty alleviation, law and order, etc. The present caretaker government constituted a committee headed by Mr. A.K.M. Shawkat Ali, adviser to the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and Food and Disaster Management.

Under his capable leadership, the committee suggested some major changes for structural reformations and recommended the abolition of the *Gram Sarkar*. The adviser of the Local Govt., RD and Cooperatives, Mr. Anwarul Iqbal, deserves commendations for his initiatives to translate those suggestions into reality. The nation is now eager to see vibrant *Upazila Parishads* with honest dedicated and educated persons at the helm of affairs at the *upazila* level.

A non-government organisation has already raised allegations that a good number of MP-elects have criminal

backgrounds with cases pending against them. The people do not want to see this type of people at the *upazila* level. In fact, local government representatives, if not honest and dedicated, might make progress more difficult and create impediments in the transformation of Bangladesh into a corruption-free nation.

Secondly, there should not be any violence or breach of the rules of conduct during the *upazila* elections time. In the Parliament election, there was maximum vigilance by the law enforcing agencies, including the army. This trend should also be continued in the *upazila* elections.

Thirdly, there should not be any confusion about the *Upazila Parishad* being the focal point of rural development, and also a major catalyst of development activities. Decentralisation of power will be needed to ensure food production, maintenance of health, family planning, education, rural electrification infrastructures and distribution of fertilizers, management of *khas* land etc.

Fulfilling the promise of the newly elected government to bring the prices of foodstuffs within the reach of the people and eliminate corruption at the grassroots level obviously depends on the activities of the local level government institutions. *Upazila Parishads*, performing with dedication and integrity, might help in more production of rice provided fallow land, unused ditches, ponds and *haors* are brought under intensive cultivation with high yielding varieties of seeds, drip irrigation and scientific use of bio-fertiliser etc.

The landless and marginal farmers could be effectively utilised with the distribution of *khas* lands and renovation in the system of share-cropping appropriate to the localities, and with



Only local government can reach him.

cooperatives farming and marketing.

The *Upazila Parishads* can supervise the performance of sectors like poultry, fisheries, livestock, social forestry, horticulture, milk production, and involve cooperatives societies in marketing of agricultural produce. This is consistent with the promises of the political party in power. Strengthening of *Upazila Parishads* shall promote poverty reduction, employment generation and empowerment of women.

Fourthly, it is expected that honest and capable candidates shall be elected to the *Upazila Parishads* to eliminate corruption and nepotism, and to uphold justice and establish rule of law at the grassroots level. Local government representatives can identify the criminals and terrorists in their localities provided they are authorised to prosecute with the devolution of power.

The Charter of Change, or Vision 2021, to turn Bangladesh into a respectable

nation with the transformation of political culture by establishing a society free from corruption shall be difficult unless a strong, honest and dedicated *Upazila Parishad* system is developed to support the programs of the central government.

Therefore, the elections for the *Upazila Parishads* are most critical and important for the present government as well as for the nation.

Dhiraj Kumar Nath is a former advisor to the caretaker government.

## Once we were heroes

As a member of the EPR, he fought in many districts as a platoon commander. He was noted for his courage, and the initiative he took for saving the lives of his Bengali comrades (he lost only three of his men in the nine months of war) and for rescuing many Bengali women from the hands of the Pakistani army.

TAZREENA SAJJAD

**I**T is upto you, my Bengali and *adivasi* brothers and sisters, to save our country. It is your turn now." These were the words of *adivasi* Bir Bikram U.K. Ching speaking at a function in his honour. It was organised by Shuddhoi Muktojodho, a private initiative created by Lt Col (Retd) Sajjad Ali Zahir, Bir Pratik, to honour the contributions of the *adivasi* community in the liberation of Bangladesh.

U.K. Ching's journey from near obscurity to recognition is one that should give the nation pause. There is little information about his contributions in the war and hardly any documentation about this gallant hero in official records.

In the March 11, 2004, National Gazette, which claims to be the final list of all freedom fighters, Nayek Subedar Bir Bikram U.K. Ching, serial number 175 under the gallantry award section, is listed as deceased. It was through the efforts of Sajjad Ali Zahir and the support

of the BDR that Mr. Ching was found to be alive, and willing to come to the city to attend an event in his honour thirty-seven years after receiving the medal for valour.

The discussants were Major General C.R. Dutta (Bir Uttam), Major General K.M. Safiullah (Bir Uttam), Lt. Col. Abu Osman Chowdhury, writer Selina Akhter, Professor Mesbah Kamal. The event was attended by people from all walks of life and members of the different *adivasi* communities.

The most striking and powerful moment of the event was the recognition of eleven other *adivasi* muktojodhas from Shakhipur and Gazipur, men who till today have not found their places in the history books of our liberation -- Lakkhan Chandra Barman, Parimal Chandra Kotch, Chandra Mohon Barman, Sona Toch Burman, Nipen Barman, Lakhyi Kanto Kotch, Ajit Chandra Barman, Jotin Chandra Kotch, Suresh Chandra Barman, Rabindra Chandra Barman

and Jotindro Chandro Barman.

U.K. Ching's experience in the frontlines is a testament to his valour and his indomitable spirit in the quest for freedom. Now around seventy-five years old, he is still a feisty man with a sparkling sense of humour, which was manifest in the war stories he related. As a member of the EPR, he fought in many districts as a platoon commander.

He was noted for his courage, and the initiative he took for saving the lives of his Bengali comrades (he lost only three of his men in the nine months of war) and for rescuing many Bengali women from the hands of the Pakistani army.



We also fought for Bangladesh.

For his courage, he was awarded one of the highest gallantry awards Bangladesh had to offer; for his ethnic identity, he is still waiting for recognition in the Constitution that became possible only through the sacrifices he and countless others made to create a new nation.

The event was organised to not only thank U.K. Ching for his contributions in the independence of the country, but also to serve as a reminder to its people that the freedom we enjoy is one that was brought about by not only Bengalis, but also non-Bengalis who did not hesitate to give up their homes, families, livelihoods, and in some cases their lives.

Muktijodhas have asked for very little; their demand has always been that the country be built on the values of freedom, dignity and equality, which they fought for. Yet thirty-seven years into independence, the nation has failed its children and the very ideals it was created for.

Successive governments have yet to recognise the role of non-Bengalis in the liberation struggle and have failed to protect, preserve and respect the rights of *adivasi* communities who are part and package of the diversity of this nation. They are still denied their right to land, language, and culture. They are denied their space in the Bangladeshi constitution, thereby being dismissed as people of no-consequence.

It is a shame for Bengalis who fought so hard for their language, their right to autonomy, their culture and their freedom with the assistance of the *adivasi* communities, that they have failed the very people with whom they continue to share the water, air and land of this country. Till our *adivasi* brothers and sisters, neighbours and friends get their rightful position in this country, the struggle for liberation is not over.

A medal means very little if there is little understanding of its true value. Recognition is tainted if it is limited to honouring the contributions of only those of a particular ethnic group, however it is defined -- by the colour of one's skin, one's language, one's culture. Freedom loses its meaning if one enjoys it at the expense of another.

U.K. Ching, and men and women like him who gave it their all for independence, did not ask for a medal nor for recognition. They fought along with their Bengali brothers and sisters because it was what they believed they should do during a time of severe crisis. In return, they did not expect the country they fought for to fail them again and again, such that today even their grandchildren continue to be forgotten, their land is grabbed through illegal settlements, and their resistance is silenced by violence and intimidation.

Recognising the dire circumstances in which U.K. Ching and his family now live in, Dr. Zafarullah of Gonoshastho Hospital and Dr. Hasan of Al Biruni Hospital have come forward offering free medical treatment; others have pledged to assist them in any way possible. Yet, such private initiatives cannot replace the role and responsibility of a national government that, in sheer callousness, listed a living hero as being dead.

The heroes of '71 expected more from the country they helped create; at the least, they did not expect to be forgotten. In the case of the *adivasi*, their contribution in the independence of this country has yet to be recognised, as is their right as equal citizens of this land. They are still waiting for the country to embrace them as its own. They should not have to wait anymore.

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## Fixing Uncle Sam's image problem

All this suggests that the first step to fixing America's image problem will be for Washington to acknowledge that, despite its power, the United States is not invulnerable. If it's going to thrive in today's interconnected world, it needs new habits of cooperation based on a healthy respect for the interests of everyone else.

KISHORE MAHBUBANIZ

**S**INCE 2000, the United States' standing has deteriorated in all parts of the world, and anti-Americanism has grown intense. The 2008 Pew Global Attitudes survey reveals that in the past eight years, favourable views of the United States fell from 78% to 30% in Germany, 50% to 22% in Argentina and 75% to 37% in Indonesia. Yet, as bad as this looks, America's image problem can still be healed -- if the next administration correctly diagnoses the problem.

Many Americans want to believe things will automatically get better when George W. Bush leaves office. There is a kernel of truth in this. The Bush administration has been amazingly incompetent in the Middle East, Afghanistan, Pakistan and, lately, Georgia. Yet the same administration has also improved America's

relations with China and India, suggesting that not all of America's PR problems can be blamed on the 43rd president.

The discord actually dates from the end of the Cold War, when Washington thoughtlessly disengaged from the world. After whipping up the Islamist mujahedin into a frenzy to defeat the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980s, the United States walked away from them once the communists were defeated -- without thinking about the consequences. This oversight led directly to 9/11. Other allies like Pakistan were also dropped, and today Pakistan is a nuclear-armed -- and deeply troubled -- state.

In the 1990s, democracy promotion replaced anticommunism as Washington's overriding policy focus. Americans cheered relentlessly when the drunken Boris Yeltsin was elected in 1991. The Russian people suffered under

his rule -- but Americans seemed not to notice or care.

Now Americans seem puzzled by the deep resentment Russians feel toward them. Yet Georgia was only the straw that broke the camel's back -- not the cause of the current rift between Washington and Moscow.

Underlying all these events has been a central source: Washington's failure to think strategically. The solution, therefore, would be for the next president to revive old-fashioned strategic policymaking. This isn't a call for cynical realpolitik; the United States need not abandon its ideals. But it will have a better chance of realising them if it takes a more prudent and strategic approach to world affairs.

In practice, this means recognising that the United States can't do everything. Like any normal nation, it must prioritise. And it should view the world as a single geopolitical chessboard. This means that if Washington wants to improve its standing in, for example, Indonesia -- the world's most populous Muslim nation -- it must work to address the Arab-Israeli conflict. Such linkages count.

That said, the United States is still the world's strongest country. That means it has plenty of cards to play. As well as formidable hard power, Washington

retains significant soft power -- the ability to attract, not compel. Foreign elites still dream of sending their kids to U.S. universities (indeed, all three of my children are happy to study there).

More broadly, the American Dream continues to excite the imagination of young people everywhere. Were such assets deployed more intelligently, Washington could work wonders.

That's especially so because Americans can't get everything they want through threats or force alone. Take the Islamic world, with some 1.2 billion inhabitants. Nowhere is the U.S. image problem worse. Again, the problem stems from poor policies, especially toward the Palestinian territories.

During the cold war, Washington tried to maintain an evenhanded policy in the region. But since the Berlin Wall fell, Americans have dropped this evenhandedness in favour of a strong pro-Israel bias.

American neo-cons are right to say that solving the Arab-Israeli conflict wouldn't magically resolve all of America's image problems. But it would get rid of the main source of poison. Indeed, the United States, Israel and the Palestinians would all profit from a quick move toward a two-state solution. Compromise is critical; America is no longer as mighty as it once was, and it has to learn to be pragmatic.

A similar pragmatism should apply to India and China. Washington should work to ensure their emergence as modern, rules-based countries -- and not try to stand in their way. China's rise is unstoppable, as is India's. Best, therefore, to manage their ascendance intelligently. Fortunately, America and China (and India) have many common interests. Global warming, energy shortages, financial crises and health epidemics affect Americans, Chinese and Indians alike, and require cooperation to address.

This brings us to another key point: the need for multilateralism. The Bush administration got things badly wrong by acting as if US security could be enhanced by demolishing or ignoring key agreements, like the Kyoto accords or the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty. Yet this radical unilateralism only endangered the United States, by undermining the strong global consensus that restrains regimes like North Korea.

While Americans like to show off their toughness by mocking multilateralism, strategic thinking shows that the United States is well served by strengthening, not undermining, international cooperation. Fortunately, the economic meltdown may have finally changed Americans' views on this question. The crisis showed how vulnerable the United States is and how, to avert a broader depression, US

policymakers must coordinate their response with officials in places like London, Beijing, Singapore and Tokyo.

During the Asian financial crisis of 1997, American leaders were able to comfortably dish out prescriptions without worrying about America's own vulnerabilities. Not today: Fed chairman Ben Bernanke and Treasury Secretary Hank Paulson have needed international cooperation to stem the contagion.

All this suggests that the first step to fixing America's image problem will be for Washington to acknowledge that, despite its power, the United States is not invulnerable. If it's going to thrive in today's interconnected world, it needs new habits of cooperation based on a healthy respect for the interests of everyone else.

Much of the world remains well disposed to the United States. But America needs to reciprocate this goodwill by listening carefully to voices from around the globe and trying to work with them. A little pragmatism in place of post-cold-war hubris will go a long way, enhancing U.S. security and creating a better world in the process.

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