

Wrong signal on upazila

The Awami League manifesto spoke about "effecting a radical change of the political system" by empowering local government to play a critical role in development programs and establishing "self-reliant local self-government institutions at the upazila and zila levels." These are inspiring promises to the people, which must be kept.

MANZOOR AHMED

GRD Minister Syed Ashrafur Islam got it wrong when he said on Thursday, after a meeting with members of the Local Government Commission, that lawmakers should be given a role in the Upazila Council in order to allow them to "adopt and implement projects according to their promises" to their constituencies. Let's hope this is not the considered position of the ruling alliance and the cabinet.

The minister also sent the wrong signal when, responding to questions about the violence and irregularities in upazila polling, he said these were "scattered incidences" and these happened because the campaigning was not under political party banners.

Regardless of the election rules, the parties were active, and the candidates were mostly identified as supported by parties, with the elected ones being over-

whelmingly from the Awami League. Are violence and misconduct acceptable and excusable if these are "scattered," whatever this means?

The contrast between the upazila polls and the festive and peaceful parliamentary election could hardly be missed. Is this explained by the way the events were managed by a caretaker regime and a political government? One hopes not.

Development projects -- roads, bridges, irrigation schemes and schools -- are not personal gifts or favours from either the parliament member or the upazila chairman. These are financed by taxpayer money, and their planning and implementation should be decided collectively by public representatives specifically elected for this purpose. The upazila council consisting of the chair, vice-chairs and the members (by law, the chairs of the union councils) is the legally designated collective body for this task.

Members of the national parliament

have the supremely important job of making laws and ensuring the provision of resources to fulfill the intents and purposes of the laws and decisions of the parliament.

The principle of separation of powers and functions of the legislative, executive and judicial branches of the government has come to be recognised as a fundamental tenet of checks and balances in the democratic polity. This is more explicitly provided for in the American constitution than any other, but the spirit and intent is reflected in democratic constitutions worldwide including ours.

In real life, absolute separation of the three branches is not possible, because they have to work together; but the principle still needs to be upheld by refraining from deliberate undermining of the separation by mixing up the roles and functions.

"Pork barrel" projects, allocation of funds for projects in a legislator's constituency tagged to financial appropriation bills, not justified by economic criteria or larger public interest, is not uncommon in US. This, however, is denounced as the ugly side of democratic politics and not something to be emulated.

The Local Government Commission chair, Mr. Muhammad Faizur Razzak, reportedly asked the LGRD minister not to follow the Indian example of doling out lump sum allocations of Rs. two crores to

each parliament member for projects in respective constituencies. This is an example of the ultimate "pork barrel" or a slush fund, handing over public money to individuals to be spent without sufficient transparency, accountability, and scrutiny of a public body.

There are good lessons that one can learn from the efforts in India to strengthen the Panchayat Raj, including the 73rd constitutional amendment of 1992, which enhanced the authority and role of the local bodies and gave them a substantial share of centrally collected public revenue. The MP Local Area Development Fund Scheme, as the slush fund is known formally, is not one of these lessons.

In fact, the legality of the MP fund in India is under review by a Supreme Court constitution bench. Started in 1993-94, the fund has used up a staggering sum of Rs. 90,000 crores to date.

It began with a grant of Rs. five lakhs to each lawmaker per year; this was raised to Rs one crore in the very next year; raised again to two crores in 1997-98; and a proposal is underway to raise it to Rs. five crores. MPs apparently find it easy and tempting to keep increasing the discretionary fund under their control.

The last BNP-Jamaat political regime followed the practice, somewhat informally, of making special allocations to parliament members; in this case only to



SHAFIQ ALAM/DRIK NEWS

What have UZ elections shown?

their own party loyalists. In the previous political regime led by Awami League, Parliament members as designated advisers to the Upazila body, often influenced unduly fund allocations and project decision-making at the local level.

Citizens sent a message through the parliamentary election on December 29 against the environment of corruption and chicanery created by slush funds, personal influence peddling and lack of accountability of public officials.

The Awami League manifesto spoke about "effecting a radical change of the political system" by empowering local government to play a critical role in development programs and establishing "self-reliant local self-government institutions at the upazila and zila levels." These are inspiring promises to the people, which must be kept.

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Women to the fore

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MAMUNUR RASHID

THE recent election, held after preparation of more than two years, deserves our attention, particularly from the perspective of restoring democracy and political stability, which is our most precious goal or concern.

Yet, different people are scrutinising the election from different angles, which is a healthy practice. I would like to draw your attention to the issue of participation, especially from the perspective of women.

According to primary estimates, as

high as 87.17% votes were cast in this election. Women and new voters particularly caught the attention of most of us, and they chose candidates who are progressive and secular, and have a positive vision for development. That was one of the decisive factors in the elections.

The total number of voters was 81,058,698, of which 41,236,149 were women, and around 33% were voting for the first time. This is looked at positively by many.

The parties, especially the AL, complied with the directive of the Election Commission for better representation of women in the parliament. The AL nomi-

nated 17 women in 19 seats -- 15 of them won. Three women from the BNP and one from Jatiya Party also got elected, making a total of 19 directly elected women MPs.

Higher turnout of women voters was due to initiatives by the caretaker government to prevent electoral violence, irregularities and religious influence, combined with tight security and massive awareness and campaign.

Another reason is that the electoral process was women-friendly as more women worked as election officials and also as observers and media activists. Even observers from abroad were surprised to see such high turnout of women.

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Some of the winning women candidates were reserved seat members in the last parliament. They capitalised on their

past experience to contest in the open seats. Women have proved that, if there is no influence of money and muscle, they are also capable of competing in national level elections.

Overall, there is an indication that the culture of suppressing women on the pretext of religion, culture and family values has ended. Everyone is hopeful that if the current pace continues, then the target set by the EC of at least 33% women's representation will be met well before 2020.

Women's participation as election officials was also remarkable. Three of the 67 returning officers were women (4.5%). Out of the 587 assistant returning officers 34 were women, which is 5.8%. A good number of women worked as presiding officers and assistant presiding officers, too.

The political parties nominated a huge number of women as polling agents. Overall election environment was women-friendly. There were separate polling centers for women. Apart from

that, special initiatives were taken for physically challenged and elderly persons so that they could cast their votes without difficulty.

Another notable achievement for women was the fact that in a number of areas they were able to cast their votes for the first time. Surat union of Jhenidah, four unions of Madaripur, Gopalganj and Noakhali, and Rupasha union of Faridganj, witnessed women voting for the first time.

Religious misconceptions or men's influence were the main reasons behind women's voting restrictions in these areas. Stranded Pakistanis also exercised their voting rights for the first time, and women's presence was also remarkable.

In the Chittagong Hill Tracts, women's participation was spectacular. Cooperation by local administrations, election officials, and different NGOs was a key to ensuring a free and fair atmosphere for women.

Women's improved participation has

been recognised by all quarters. Different national dailies published reports of incidents in which women collectively protested attempts by influential political leaders and activists to unduly influence the voting process.

Previously, women were used to cast fake votes. But that did not happen in this election. Women of the minority communities were able to cast their votes freely too thanks to the tight security.

Some women could not vote as their names were not in the voting lists, though they had national ID cards. In some places, women had to wait for a long time to find their names or voter numbers. Some also reported problems regarding folding or sealing the ballot papers in the correct manner. This is one area that needs more campaign in the future.

Morning shows the day. We believe the change visible everywhere should be sustained in the coming days.

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Black without being black

Whether or not this era undergoes the typically predictable souring, right now the capital is still aglow with an unbridled optimism for the future.

ADNAN MORSHED

AS I had lunch with family and friends at Art and Soul Restaurant, it appeared to be a microcosm of pre-inauguration Washington, throbbing with excitement on the eve of Barack Obama's swearing-in as the 44th president of the United States.

The restaurant was filled with jubilant out-of-town inauguration attendees, and blacks seemed to outnumber all others in the inauguration-themed dining area. The restaurant, owned by the media queen Oprah Winfrey's former chef Art Smith, was the command center for star-studded inauguration parties across town. Almost everybody had an Obama-themed artifact

on them, ranging from buttons to hats to purses and earrings.

Now zoom out from Art and Soul to the capital city. It presented the same scene of euphoria, reminiscent of ancient Roman grandeur before the coronation of an emperor. Ordinary folks tired of Bush doctrines, security officials, vendors, news crews, young political worker bees, idealists, lefties, Hollywood stars, and a new generation of power brokers, descended into the federal city. Streets were colonised by a sprawling cottage industry of Obama collectibles. Everybody appeared eager to buy a piece of history.

The Sunday concert on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, featuring Bruce Springsteen, Shakira, Beyonce, Bono,

Denzel Washington, Jamie Foxx, and Tom Hanks, was just one of many inauguration events that galvanised the city. Amidst all this political frolicking, Obama figured as a larger-than-life messenger of hope, change, and destiny.

Yet, the question of race in American politics hovered over this landscape of charged festivities. No doubt, America is at a crossroads of racial historiography as trans-racial camaraderie spreads magic across the capital and beyond.

As recently as 2007, African-Americans almost never thought that a black American president was a realistic option during their lifetime. So they generally supported the white guy who came closest in their imagination to fulfilling the black dreams of equal citizenship.

African-Americans embraced Abraham Lincoln, John F. Kennedy, and Bill Clinton as black sympathisers, but they also understood that these presidents were not blacks who had experienced the psychological trauma of slavery or its genera-

tional agonies that keep lingering on among blacks. These great presidents were well-meaning outsiders who empathised with their cause, yet not their ilk.

But with Obama on centre stage, it is no longer about projecting hopes on a foil that blacks could never fully trust or claim as their own. Thus, a sense of vindication has recently permeated the collective mind of black America that blacks too can realise their dreams without the moral buttressing of a white saviour like Lincoln. One of their own can also reach the pinnacle of the American government. This has proved to be a hugely empowering feeling.

Yet, this is not how Obama himself saw things. Like a master politician bent on impressing the whole country, he simultaneously mitigated and bypassed the quintessential black anxiety of social inequality. With his great eloquence, Obama encouraged blacks to see in him the fulfillment of their dreams without asserting his own blackness the way such

black leaders as Al Sharpton or Jesse Jackson would.

The ingenuity in Obama's journey to the presidency was not in his post-racial politics -- as many politicians have argued -- but rather in what I would call his "aracial" campaign that envisaged blacks as worthy citizens like any other ethnic group. Obama comforted the black wound, even while casting himself as a colour-neutral American who just happened to be black. This was the brilliance of Obama's "aracial" politics.

At the beginning of Obama's presidential bid, distrust brewed among the black establishment with the whispered allegation that he was an inauthentic black with his mixed-race ancestry and lack of slavery history. But Obama gradually solidified his self-image, not as a black messiah but as a mythical American character that endures against all odds and embraces the classic American work ethic as a vehicle for personal fulfillment.

With this self-positioning, Obama

could command the trust of black America without having to act black. With a magisterial view of the land, Obama focused on earning the trust of an across-the-board America -- white, black, brown, yellow, and the myriad amalgamation of these colours -- without being seen as safeguarding the interest of one group. Obama projected himself as an American unifier, vowing to renew the promise of the republic.

This struck a vastly popular chord. A true cross-section of the American population poured into the capital city as Washington hosted the largest gathering in its history to witness the momentous beginning of the Barack Obama era. Whether or not this era undergoes the typically predictable souring, right now the capital is still aglow with an unbridled optimism for the future.

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Obama is the ultimate example of globalisation



SECURITY guards at the airport just made me take off my belt. Huh? How could my belt be a threat? Did I really look like I could subdue 300 people on a jumbo jet using

only a 30-inch strap designed to stop my trousers falling down?

Instead of being irritated, I decided to interpret this as a compliment, which made me feel much better. (Yes,

men are sad creatures.)

It's been an odd week. I had lunch the other day in a restaurant that had previously always banned me. My earlier crime? Refusing to wear a tie. I've disliked ties ever since someone told me ties were a type of noose: same knot, same level of tension, same ability to kill. (Why are ties not banned on aircraft?)

The opening up of fancy restaurants to the tie-less is due to globalisation. It is no longer possible to exclude people like me on the grounds of our not wearing Western clothes.

The world's ultimate example of globalisation was surely an incident which took place a few days ago: the ascent of Barack Obama to the most powerful seat in the world.

Get this. He is a Chicago man, born in Hawaii, with an African father, an Indonesian stepfather, and a mother from English-Irish stock with Native American elements. His first name is Swahili for "blessed one," his second is Arabic for "good-looking" and his third is a town in Japan. His family members speak French, Cantonese,

Bahasa Indonesian, and German.

His favourite possession is a BlackBerry, a Canada-assembled phone made from Chinese and Indian components. His favourite dishes are Italian (shrimp linguini) and Mexican (chilli) and the foods he misses from his childhood are bakso (Indonesian meatball soup) and rambutan (a Malaysian fruit).

He and his family dress in clothes from J Crew, a firm which buys Italian cashmere, Czech glass buttons and British wool and ships them to Asia for assembly

into American clothes. His not-very-secret vice is Marlboro, a British cigarette made with American tobacco and sold in boxes bearing a Latin motto. His favourite reading matter is Harry Potter (Scottish), Spider-Man (American) and The Bible (Middle Eastern).

His inauguration takes the title of The World's Most Globalised Event from the death of Princess Diana, defined thus: An English princess with an Egyptian boyfriend crashes in a French tunnel in a German car with a Dutch engine driven by a Belgian drunk on

Scottish whisky. She was followed by Italian Paparazzi on Japanese motorcycles and was treated by an American doctor using Brazilian medicines.

In the meantime, you may be reading this syndicated article in a newspaper: a British publishing format using German movable type printed on paper, a Chinese invention. Or you may be reading this on a computer, a machine designed in the west and assembled in the east, using Taiwanese chips, Korean monitors and Chinese casings, assembled by

Bangladeshi and Sri Lankan workers in Singaporean plants, and transported to you on ships manned by Filipino and Indian sailors, hijacked en route by Somali pirates and rescued by US gunships.

The miracle of globalisation means this column will be read by people from the Caribbean to Colombo to China. Even though it is written by a man in an airport whose trousers just fell down.

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