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UPAZILA SYSTEM

A beneficiary or casualty of political processes?

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THE concept of upazila dates back to the report of Committee for Administrative Reorganisation / Reform (1982) when the country was under a martial law government led by the General HM Ershad who later ruled the country till he was overthrown in 1990. This paper attempts to analyse the course of events surrounding the advent of the upazila 1983, its abolition in 1991 under the elected government led by Begum Khaleda Zia and its subsequent revival under the caretaker government (CTG) popularly dubbed as non-elected government, 2007-2008. It is a strange coincidence that revival of upazila as much as its birth is associated with non-elected government of different hue and color. There are commonalities and differences, however, associated with the attempts to have elected local government, its abolition and subsequent revival. This brings into sharp focus the relationship between the national political process and the local government in Bangladesh.

The author had the unique opportunity of watching with interest as well as curiosity this relationship both as an insider and as an outsider i.e. within and outside the government. In 1982, the author, as a deputy secretary to government, was selected to be the Member-Secretary of the Committee for Administrative Reorganisation/Reform. In 2007, as a retired secretary to government the author was entrusted with responsibility of being the chairman of the Committee for strengthening the local government system and make it more dynamic. As chairman of this Committee, and as member secretary of the committee of 1982, with support from the members of these committees draft report was adopted without any substantive change. Both the reports related to the entire local government system and not just upazila.

National political process and upazila in comparative perspective between 1984 and 2007-9

As already stated, upazila concept was sought to be implemented at a time when the country was under non-elected government. In 1984, the political parties grouped into two alliances were demanding election to the parliament. To this end, the combined opposition parties represented by the two alliances, were more interested in an immediate withdrawal of martial law and consequent return of the military to the barracks and election to parliament. These demands were not new. Looking back at the historical experiences of martial law, one can find identical demands in 1959-60, 1969-70 and in 1976-77. It was not surprising, therefore, that the same demands would be voiced in more or less same political context. The political approach of the martial law government of 1958 and the government of 1982 was similar. Both the governments were more interested in creating a representative local government at the bottom. In case of Ayub Khan, it was a restricted form and is known as the Basic Democracies system, which enabled elected structure at the bottom to form an electoral college for voting for parliament members and an elected President. Thus it was that the common men and women in the then Pakistan were disenfranchised and replaced by only 80,000 voters equally divided between the eastern and western Pakistan.

Not surprisingly, therefore, all the political parties in 1983-84 looked upon with deep suspicion the announcement for holding upazila election on March 24, 1984. This served only to intensify movement against Ershad regime spearheaded by the two political alliances. Hartal was organised in March, 1984. The next programme of opposition was from March 2 to March 24. The political alliances gave a call to withdraw nomi-



nation papers. This call met with some success as reported by media during the first half of the March, 1984. This was followed by an appeal by the alliances to boycott the polls.

The choice of political alternatives: The referendum

The government yielded to the demand, announced postponement of the polls and declared that the elections to the parliament would be held on December 8, 1984. Thus it was that the initial attempts to hold the upazila polls ended in failure. However, Ershad opted for referendum in line with what Ziaur Rahman had done to give legitimacy for his stay in to power. Having won the vote of confidence of the people, the date for election of upazila was fixed on May 16 and May 20. Incidents of violence were reported from various places and prior to the election, martial law administrators throughout the country were revived. This emboldened the local leaders and the party loyalists to take part in the election. The total number of such loyalists from Awami League (AL) who filed nomination papers was reported to be 254 and that of Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) 223. Some of these included former Ministers, one State Minister and a Deputy Minister. However, in course of election there was sporadic violence.

Level of participation and political profile of candidates

By all accounts, the upazila election was well contested in that the average number of candidates for Chairmanship varied between 4 and 7 and the turnout of voters was 54.17 percent. There was larger participation by the Chairmen and members of union parishads. As many as 74 former members of parliament contested the election and 24 were elected.

There is a section of intellectuals and local government activists who devoutly argue in favour of keeping the local political leaders out of the influence of political parties. Reality is other-

wise. It is that the national political parties, far from being divorced from local political parties, have a strong link with the same. This reality is grounded in the fact that the national political parties depend heavily on local leaders for organising political campaign to win the confidence of the voters, both in rural and urban areas. They do not openly nominate the candidates for the locally elected councils. The law does not specifically provide for the same. This does not deter the political parties from silently allowing their own party men to contest local elections.

Some evidence of this has already been cited earlier i.e. participation of some ministers and members of parliament in the upazila pools of 1984. More evidence is available in the statistical data of party affiliations of elected chairmen of 460 upazila which were created in 1984. These data were widely published in the print media. Janadal, the new political party created by Ershad later rechristened as Jatiyo Party, won 207 seats of chairman making for 45 percent of the total. This was followed by AL 53 seats or 11.52 percent, BNP 35 or 7.39 percent while the independent candidates bagged 124 seats or 26.96 percent (The Daily Ittefaq, June 13, 1985)

Upazila election 2009

In 2006, the new CTG took oath of office to hold a free, fair and credible election. The election to the parliament came more than two years later because of circumstances which are widely known. The violent turn of political events eventually led to imposition of emergency and on January, 2007 and complete restructuring of the CTG and in 2008, there was further restructuring.

Election Commission (EC) was also reconstituted. No date for national election was announced because of the need for electoral, local government reform and drive against corruption. However, political violence traditionally instrumented by hartals and mass protests did not eventuate because of

restrictions imposed under emergency laws. As the political demand for election to parliament continued to be voiced, the CTG and the EC had to declare that parliamentary election would be held on December 18 and upazila on 24 and 28 of the same month. Earlier, elections to all but one city corporation were held peacefully.

At the other end, the four-party alliance headed by BNP had been consistently clamouring for holding local level elections after the parliamentary election. AL treaded on a softer line. At the end parliamentary election was held on December 29 resulting in a landslide victory for the 14-party alliance with more than a two-thirds majority. Upazila election was held on January 22, 2009.

Linkage between local govt elections and national political process in 2009

Immediately after the announcements of the date and revised dates for holding upazila election, the local level leaders, mostly members of the major political parties, vied with one another to get involved in promoting their candidates for the polls. In many districts, there were multiple candidates for the same position. The AL leader, now Prime Minister, took cognisance of the phenomenon and sent written instructions first in January 2009 urging the grassroots level party members to select single candidate. Her request went unheeded resulting in stricter written instructions again specifying January 17 to be the terminal date for finalising the process of single candidate. Warning was given that non-compliance with the directive would entail disciplinary action as laid down in the party's constitution (Samakal, January 15, 2009). Till January 20, more than 40 local level leaders were expelled by AL as reported by the media.

Alliance-based single candidate

The other interesting aspect of upazila polls, as reported by the media, is the

change in strategy in political participation. The parliamentary election was alliance-based i.e. each of the two major alliances mutually agreed on single candidate from amongst parties forming the alliance. In contrast, the upazila polls were fought on party-based "nomination" which was not entirely controlled (Prathom Alo, January 5 and 17). This is substantiated by the numerous expulsion orders issued with more getting under way and the fact that there was a call from AL leader to put up single candidate for each set. One more substantive aspect relates to the fact that a much larger interest in upazila elections -- both at the centre and at the local level -- was clearly visible. This is certainly a sharp departure from past tradition in which direct intervention from the party at central level was not necessary. Worse still, there were allegations that at least two ministers and two MPs of the present government had influenced poll results in their respective constituencies in flagrant violation of electoral laws. EC is understood to have taken a strong stand against them.

What has been the ultimate results of party-backed local government election at the upazila level. Figures published by the media as on January 24, indicate that AL bagged 317 posts of Chairmen, BNP 78, Jamat 23 and others 37 (Samakal, 24 January). Election related violence led to the death of at least three persons with more than 150 having been injured. The election results show that it is more or less consistent with the election of 1985 with the difference that in 2009, the result is overwhelmingly in favour of the ruling party, on a scale much bigger than that of 1985. The question that remains unanswered is whether the local government elections can be totally divorced from political parties as some civil society members argue.

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