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# Way forward



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growth must be accompanied by distributive justice, it cannot be at the cost of undermining the lives and livelihoods of women workers.

Of course, we realise, that the Parliament represents a diverse range of members including former military rulers, businessmen and even persons charged with corruption. But why should their opinions gain precedence over the voices of women, who have suffered from policies that adversely impacted on food security, on economic growth and distributive justice, on law and order, on security, and the impunity of violators. In the case of women of Adibashi, Dalit and religious minorities, the State needs to formulate affirmative action to ensure their security and confidence building. The Human Rights Commission has finally taken shape, but its mandate is too limited to play an effective role in contending with rights violations and challenging impunity of the perpetrators.

Elections to the Ninth Parliament have brought several surprises from women. The turnout of 75 percent women voters was the highest of all elections held since Independence. Women's participation was visible in party campaigns, in talk shows and street campaigns. Even though political parties disagreed with the Election Commission's recommendation to nominate 40 percent women in their list of candidates, an unusually high number of 58 women contested in 62 constituencies. Nineteen elected women members have proved that they can win against male contestants so parties need no longer shy from nominating them. A few of them have no doubt come in as proxies for wayward male relatives, who were convicted or faced charges of corruption. Some have received nominations as political favours, but there are others who have been active in their political parties or in trade unions.

Will they be able to overcome party dictates and form a pro-active caucus in Parliament to promote laws and policies that will be gender sensitive, and incorporate women's concerns whether it is in agriculture, food security or maintaining rule of law? The Parliamentary standing committees would no doubt include women representatives; but the proceedings could gain from formal consultations with women rights activists or professionals. The AL had backed the demand for direct elections to reserved seats in Parliament, therefore with its two-thirds majority it could opt for a constitutional

amendment to discard the humiliating system of selection by parties. Were the government to fail to do so in the first session, there would still be an addition of 45 members, some of whom may form a critical pressure group within each party.

Added to this, under the new election rules 68 women will be elected as upazilla vice-chairpersons on 22 January, and currently thousands are serving their term as elected Union Parishad members. Their participation in shalish could be pivotal to fair dispute resolution. We have seen enough of corporal punishments and social boycotts of women, or even an illegal hilla marriage pronounced by fatwas. An appeal against a High Court judgment that banned such fatwas should now be dealt with swiftly by the Supreme Court. There is no justification for the government to waver on the excuse of religious sentiment, because the primary duty of the state is to protect a citizen from violence.

Women in local governments must not shy away from their responsibilities for supervising safety net programmes or other development schemes in all fairness and honesty and making sure that such schemes are not used for personal or political patronage. The Right to Information can be a powerful instrument for women constituents to challenge their omission from the distribution system.

Seeing women move into positions of power or influence is a good image maker, but it will take the empowerment of ordinary women to move the slogan of change to a visible demonstration of change. Activists who have supported women's struggles at the grass roots know that there is an ongoing need to challenge the inequality and injustice of state structures, of community hierarchies and family values that subordinate women. Collectively and separately, women have resisted the denial of their rights through the system of justice, they have gained a little from legislation, and have been in the forefront against domination by regressive forces in the community. We cannot afford to retreat even in the interest of political compromise, that has allowed institutions to become authoritarian, to put women's concerns on the back burner. The women's movements must remain firm in their goal of promoting values of democracy, justice and human rights.

Hameeda Hossain is co-chair of South Asians for Human Rights.

# Merit preference

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positions are not also based on merit; prime minister's preference is the only basis for selecting persons for these positions. Same is the case for most of the commissions except a few commissions formed recently where the chairperson and members are selected through search committees. Government cannot go beyond the panel prepared by the search committee. Prime minister's discretion is also limited in case of selecting vice chancellors of four universities where government has to select the person from the panel elected by the senate. VCs of all other public universities may be selected by the prime minister unilaterally. In all these cases merit has in effect no place in the selection process. Merit does not play any role in the appointment of persons through lateral entry to senior positions of the government and autonomous

bodies. Though they are appointed under the umbrella of president's quota, prime minister has the prerogative to nominate them for these positions. Prime minister has also the prerogative to select about a dozen persons for appointment of Bangladesh ambassadors to different countries. There are many other positions where prime minister's preference is the only criterion for selection.

Merit preference plays the most important role in selecting candidates for appointment to almost all the gazetted posts and a few non gazetted posts in the executive government. Recruitments to these posts are made through open competitions. Appointees are recruited mostly for the base posts and they are expected to reach the highest positions in the professional ladders through promotion to predetermined echelons. Here also variables other than merit crowd the

system. Forces are at work to undermine the importance of merit in the recruitment process. The pressure is so much perceptible that one would be justified to say that we are as if committed to mediocrity.

Merit may not be the appropriate criterion for selection of persons to run various organisations of the country. Not all meritorious persons always excel as the heads of the organisations in the public or private sector. However, there is no gainsaying the fact that dull people too have very slim chance of doing well in senior positions in these organisations. Qualities other than merit may be relevant in some public offices. It is true that in professional jobs where sophisticated analytical tools have to be applied, merit can be ignored only at the perils of the organisations. Substandard non meritorious persons in high positions not only fail to deliver, they send the morale of

the organizations plummeting. Professionals and workers get frustrated and gradually alienation syndrome sets in the environment. Soon the organizations become dysfunctional and fail to justify their existence.

If merit is systematically undermined in the recruitment process then meritorious people will not associate themselves with the state organs. They will find out their niche somewhere else in the world. There will be brain drain at an alarming rate. Our infrastructure, our environment, our production, quality of our management and service delivery will suffer because of merit deficiency. Merit may not be the critical element for success at the micro level, but it is the most essential element for success or high performance at the macro level.

Merit has been undermined in the recruitment for all the three

organs of the state. The recruitment rules, the career prospect and the incentive structure have militated against induction of meritorious people in the service of the republic. As a result some organisations are inflicted with terrible merit deficiency and their performance level has been pushed to the brink. There have been attempts to reinstate merit in some units belonging to executive branch of the government. Unfortunately the moves have been thwarted by the special interest groups within the structure. The nation has to cogitate about the appropriate place of merit in its governance regime. It may decide to work for a high level of performance supported by meritorious people or it may enjoy the low level of performance with cringing lemons. The choice will determine the outcome.

The writer is Chairman, Bangladesh Public Service Commission.