

DHAKA TUESDAY FEBRUARY 24, 2009

Amended RPO

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the major parties kept away, prompting the EC to scrap the process for registration on that occasion.

This time, the EC's firm stance on registration system compelled the parties to accept it. Resultantly, the EC could successfully keep the name-only parties away from taking part in the December 29 parliamentary election, thereby enabling it to conduct the national election in a more disciplined way.

Fourteen political parties participated in the country's first parliamentary election held in 1973, but the number rose to 96 in the parliamentary election in 2001. In the second parliamentary election, held under military rule in 1979, the number of political parties climbed dramatically to 29 while the third parliamentary election in 1986, which was boycotted by BNP-led alliance, saw 28 parties taking part in it.

Boycotted by the major opposition parties -- AL, Jamaat-e-Islami, left alliance, and others -- political parties participating in the sixth parliamentary elections held on February 15, 1996 totalled 43. The number stood at 81 in 1996 election.

But only 39 political parties got registration with the EC for being qualified to contest the December 29 parliamentary election. Of them, 38 con-



Awami League registration

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tested the polls. But as many as 25 parties performed badly in the election, prompting the EC to bring further amendment to the electoral laws to deregister the parties for very poor performance in the elections.

Apart from political parties' registration system, loan and utility service bill defaulters will not be entitled to get undue favour, something they enjoyed in the past to contest the parliamentary elections, as the new electoral provisions imposed restrictions on them. The new laws do not allow them to contest the election by rescheduling the defaulting loans just before filing nomination papers. An individual will be disqualified from contesting the polls if he becomes defaulters in rescheduling the loan six months before filing application seeking candidacy in the polls.

Some more changes in the country's

electoral culture were noticed during the latest parliamentary election, also polls to upazila parishads, four city corporations and nine municipalities. Almost all the candidates and political parties contesting the December election more or less abided by the electoral code of conduct in carrying out their electoral campaign.

They did not put up posters nor drew graffiti on the walls of establishments belonging to the government and individuals in the cities, thanks to the strict code of conduct. What was the scene in previous elections? One may easily imagine it. Every wall of the establishments was full of posters and writings. Owners of the buildings were helpless in preserving the beauty of their establishments. This time, they got relief.

Candidates were seen extra cautious in carrying out their electoral campaign.

They feared losing candidacies as the EC has been empowered to cancel them on grounds of gross electoral irregularities.

But it does not mean none of the candidates exceeded the ceiling of election expenditure fixed by the EC on the basis of the number of voters in their constituencies and none of them violated the electoral rules. Of course, some sporadic incidents of violation of electoral rules took place in the latest election. But the violation was not noticed on a large scale as had happened in previous elections.

In a bid to strengthen the EC, the immediate past caretaker government freed the EC Secretariat from the control of the Prime Minister's Office, by promulgating an ordinance. Now, the EC Secretariat has become independent to carry out its decisions.

The present EC seems to be more confident compared to the predecessors in upholding the dignity of the commission by discharging their constitutional duties neutrally. For the first time in the contemporary history, the EC filed a case against a cabinet minister for violating the electoral code of conduct during the latest upazila parishad election. No matter what the outcome of the case, it is the bold stance of the EC that dared file the case against a minister that matters. Apart from this, the EC also warned mayors, and a number of ruling party lawmakers of violation of electoral code of conduct during the upazila parishad elections. It also warned the immediate past speaker, Jamiruddin Sircar, for violation of electoral code of conduct in the December 29 parliamentary election since he misused his office in his electoral campaign.

The EC's bold stance encouraged people to keep confidence in it again. The erstwhile EC led by Justice M Aziz completely destroyed the integrity of the constitutional body. The then BNP-led government and later Iajuddin Ahmed-led caretaker government did not care to protect the image of the EC as they made controversial moves driven by partisan interests.

The present EC has been able to come out of the sordid past. It has

brought unprecedented reforms in the electoral roll that was a centre of maximum controversy in the past. None could raise allegation of casting fake vote in the latest elections to parliament and upazila parishads

But we can't still say everything has been achieved. The EC will have many things to do to improve the political culture and the government will have to extend all out cooperation to the EC with an open mind to bring an end to the nasty legacy of our political culture. Future of the country's democratic process largely depends on the EC and behaviour of the political parties. If the election administration is strengthened enough to conduct the polls freely and independently, and political parties come out of the hang-ups of the past culture of mistrust that gave birth to the caretaker government system, then the wind of change might ultimately blow and place democracy on a sounder footing.

Given the initiatives taken in last around two years, we can say it's just a beginning to bring the desired changes and by and large, a good one at that. Now, the government, the EC and political parties will have to build on this to improve upon the standard set by the last parliamentary elections.

Shakhawat is a senior reporter of The Daily Star

Regulatory reform

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lifecycle of a law or regulation, the process of its creation will largely determine its ultimate effectiveness, and that is where RIA helps most. RIA's potential benefits in Bangladesh are significant, and need to be integrated within a broader regulatory strategy framework, and recognised by the government, the business community, and the broader civil society.

The RRC supports adoption of RIA in Bangladesh. RIA has been around for 35 years, pioneered in the OECD countries. It has been a successful tool in Serbia, Tanzania, Teipei, Indonesia, USA, UK, and most of the OECD countries, assisting policy-makers to make an intelligent prior assessment of the likelihood of net socio-economic gain for the country from introduction of a particular new regulation.

The South Korean experience provides us with an example of the benefits from adopting RIA within a broader reform strategy, with institutional capacity building, political will, and broad popular support. Korea reduced

The recent global financial turmoil may lend legitimacy to another wave of re-regulation worldwide, but we need to be careful so that we are not consumed by this wave. The governing dynamics of regulatory reform in Bangladesh will be unique to our specific circumstances. RRC will lead the way and has got the wheels in motion. The private sector has to play its part in terms of pursuing ethical business practices and regulatory compliance. And we must embrace this journey individually and collectively.

the number of regulations from approx. 11,000 down to 5,000 and adopted the RIA approach including mandatory public consultation and disclosure practices. Their Regulatory Reform Committee in Korea is a permanent body with decision-making authority and ¼ private sector membership, and supported by a Regulatory Reform Office (RRO) under the Prime Ministers' Office.

A pilot project could be seen as a practical method to test RIA in Bangladesh on concrete examples in the regulatory system, with the aim of broadening and generalising its use subsequently. The Ministry of law, Justice, and Parliamentary Affairs needs to enhance its capacity for RIA assessment, and become geared toward a social cost-benefit mindset regarding regulation.

A forward-looking policy and regulatory framework is required in Bangladesh. By adopting RIA, we will have taken an essential step toward a rational decision-making framework for regulation that uses empirical data and analytical techniques to quantify potential impact on social and economic costs and benefits, and which is inclusive in terms of greater participation from civil society members and

relevant stakeholders.

With the political uncertainty now in hibernation, and with the RRC having gained some traction, the basic groundwork is now prepared for a take-off stage in terms of accelerated regulatory reform and investment climate improvement in Bangladesh. Now it is all about graduating to the next level of economic development through better strategy, regulation, and governance.

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