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From our archives

Feasibility of proportional representation in Bangladesh

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DEMOCRACY is not a monochromatic institution. It has many shades and colours. The underlying principle is that the rulers or the supreme governing body should be elected by the owner-members of the country or the

organisations. The process of election is not uniquely defined; it differs across countries and organisations. In this paper we will discuss about election of the chief executive of the country, the president or the prime minister and the apex law making body, the parliament, the congress, the diet or the duma,

whatever be it. For national elections we also take it for granted that each person has one vote, unlike corporate democracy where share holder's voting entitlement depends on the number of shares held by him.

Mathematical logic postulates that the candidate who wins the highest

number of votes should be declared winner in the election. Nobody can question the validity of this axiomatic formula. This appears so compelling and convincing at once. Reality is, however, different. Electoral archives are replete with instances where the winner chief executive or his/her rul-

ing party did not pull the highest number of total votes cast. They were declared elected on the basis of an accepted formula which defies mathematical logic. In case of presidential elections in the USA the candidate who wins the highest number of electoral college as distinct from the total votes cast by the citizens of the country is declared the president. This has a strong semblance to unequivocally despised "basic democracy" system introduced by president Ayub Khan in Pakistan. In case of Westminster type of parliamentary democracy that we follow in Bangladesh, the country is divided into a number of constituencies, say 300 and one member of parliament (MP) is elected from each constituency. The MPs in turn elect the Prime Minister, the chief executive in the parliamentary system of democracy, leaving aside other intricate subtleties of the process. The aggregate votes pulled by the MPs who voted for the prime minister is not counted. It might so happen, as it did in reality on many occasions, that the aggregate votes pulled by the supporters were much less than those pulled by his or her opponents in the parliaments. The country therefore may be governed by a chief executive who represents minority of citizens, an anathema to the concept of democratic polity.

It is relatively simple to suggest a way out for the presidential system of government. A country may opt for direct voting for the presidential candidate as Bangladesh did when it had a presidential system of government. There is not much controversy about this undiluted form of direct election in a unitary system of government. There may be practical reasons for distorting the formula in a federal system of government, the principal one being the

CONTINUED ON PAGE 62



STAR ARCHIVE

Politics of confrontation

FROM PAGE 56

0.33. The available data strongly suggest that historical deficiency of social capital is still a factor in the life in Bangladesh.

If political instability of Bangladesh is attributed to lack of social capital, there is no quick fix for this malady. On the other hand, political instability will further erode existing social capital. This problem will have to be addressed over long run through building of grassroots institutions like people's organisations and old values of agrarian societies are still dominant owing to cultural lag. The veneration for political dynasties in countries like Bangladesh is not likely to disappear as long as the old values of agrarian societies persist.

Inadequacies of the Constitution

The proponents of this hypothesis maintain that though inadequacies of constitutions do not trigger political instability; they contribute to its perpetuation. There are several features of Bangladesh Constitution which generate political confrontation. First, "the first-past-the-post electoral system" which ensures the victory of a candidate who gets at least one more vote than the runner up in a particular constituency may lead to a situation where a party with minority votes nationally may form a majority in the Parliament. The relationship between the percentage of votes received and the percentage of seats won in the Parliament in last three elections in Bangladesh may be seen in table-3.

Table-3 shows that in parliamentary elections of Bangladesh, there is no clear relationship of votes received and seats won. In 1996, Awami league won 48.6 per cent seats on the basis of 37.46

The political leaders must realize that democracy means much more than an elected government. Democracy in the classical sense connotes liberal democracy which is concerned less with accumulation of power and more with the limitation of power. The strengths of Athenian democracy which were identified by Pericles 2438 years ago in his famous Funeral Speech honoring the Athenian Martyrs should be the guiding principles of democratic leaders throughout the world: "We give our obedience to those whom we put in possession of authority, and we obey the laws themselves, especially those which are for the protection of the oppressed, and those unwritten laws which it is an acknowledged shame to break" (Thucydides, 145).

votes (about 32 seats more than what they would have got under proportional representation). In 2001, the proportion of votes received by Awami League increased from 37.46 per cent to 40.03 per cent while the proportion of seats fell from 48.6 percent in 1996 to 20.6 per cent in 2001. In 2001, Awami League got 59 seats less than what they would have received under proportional representation. There is, however, no inconsistency in these results. They may be unjust but are inevitable results of plurality rule. It is also discriminatory against small parties who may be denied of any seat on the basis plurality rule though they would be entitled to seats under proportional representation system. Obviously, the introduction of proportional representation would reduce political confrontation by making coalition with other parties inevitable. However, proportional representation may make the government weak. Another solution could be to

elect 50 per cent seats through proportional votes received by each party nationally and the other 50 per cent on the first past the post rule in each constituency.

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A major limitation of the Constitution in Bangladesh is that the office of the Prime Minister is enormously powerful and is comparable to the autocratic emperors like Pharaohs in Egypt, Bourbons in France, Romanovs in Russia, and Moguls

in India. There is virtually no restraint on the power of the Chief Executive in

Bangladesh. Political confrontation in Bangladesh may be considerably reduced by curtailing the power of the Prime Minister and enhancing the powers of judiciary, local government, legislators, ministers, political parties, and the Head of the State. This is also essential for restoring democracy within political parties. Bangladesh needs what Anthony Giddens describes as "democratization of democracy". The existing constitutional framework is not conducive to such changes. A Constitution Commission should be formed at the earliest to formulate proposals for making the government more representative and responsive.

Patron client relationship

According to Stanley A. Kochanek, the driving force in the economy of Bangladesh is the distribution of spoils by the ruling party to its clients. Much of the spoils arise from rent-seeking in a resource poor country. Viewed in this perspective, political confrontation in Bangladesh is nothing but a scramble over scarce resources among the competing parties. If this line of analysis is correct, there are two remedies for reducing unhealthy competition in Bangladesh politics. First, the agencies for curbing corruption should be strengthened. The restrictions on illegal patronization would reduce the intensity of political confrontation. Secondly, Bangladesh Constitution provides a winner-take-all situation. As a result, the longer term implies a higher payoff for the winner. The stakes of elections could be lessened by making the tenure of the government shorter. There will be fewer agitations if the term of the Parliament is reduced to three years from five years. However, such reforms are not costless. Apart from increasing expenditure on

CONTINUED ON PAGE 63