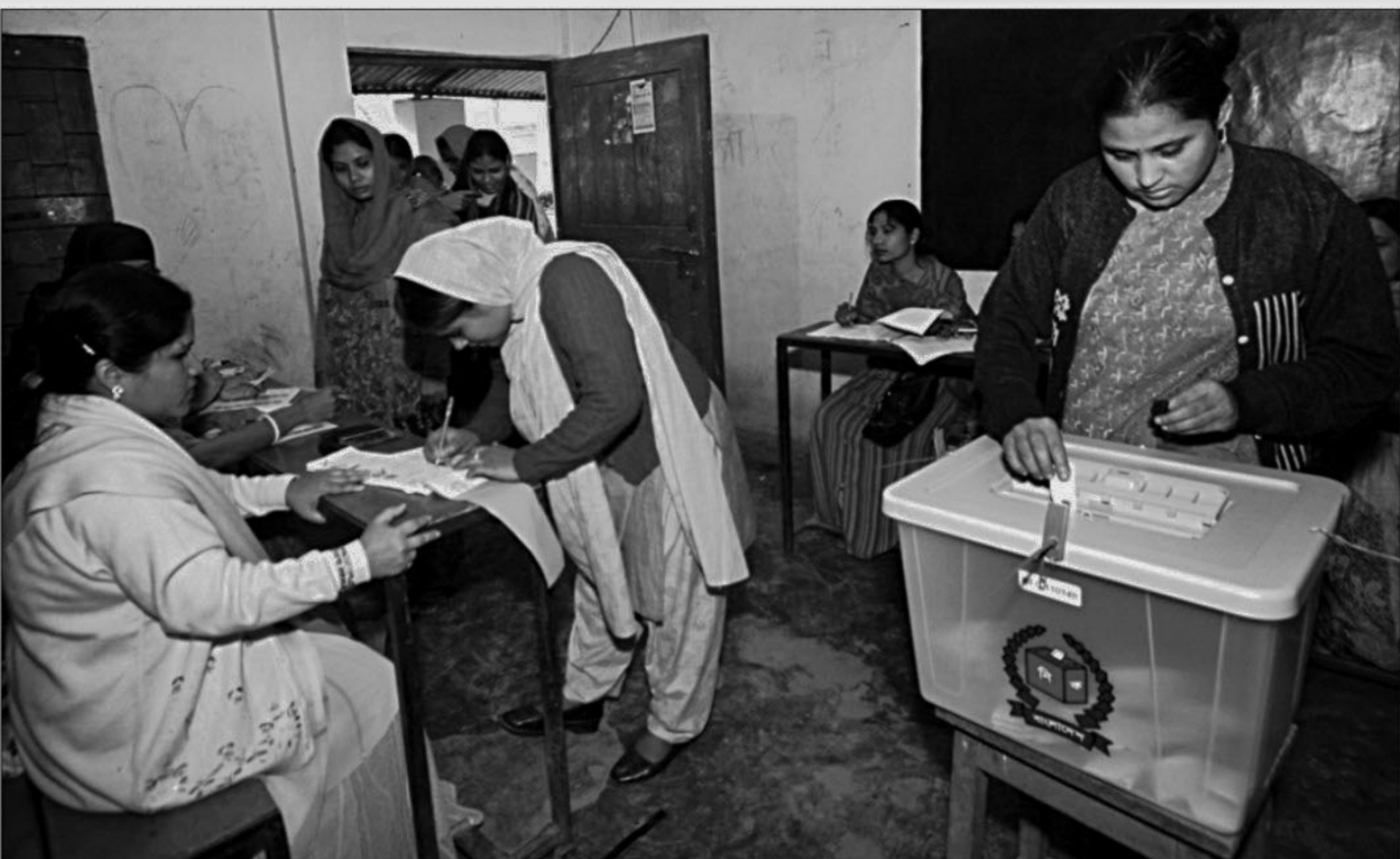


Good governance is a social contract



Democracy is not election only.

We should remember that the government of the day is ultimately accountable for all its actions. The failure of the government to contain violent crimes and provide security to the citizens can be treated as a breach of its social contract with the people to bring peace in the society.

ABDUL QUADER

IN Bangladesh, many politicians, intellectuals and analysts often claim that democracy was restored with the general elections in December 2008, which saw the Awami League come to power. Is "democracy" just holding of elections, or the way a government behaves?

In the early 1970s, a cartoon in an Indian national daily depicted the demand of some political parties in West Bengal for holding mid-term elections in the state. The caption of the cartoon said: "Elections for democracy and more elections for more democracy," implying that elections were not the only solution for political stability.

Power-hungry and self-serving politicians will invoke the term "democracy" time and again in the name of the people, arguing that elections are the panacea for all the problems in the country. However, general election is simply the first step of democratic governance in a country-- it is no more than this.

What really matter are the way public policies are developed and designed, and the credible and pragmatic actions taken by the elected government to implement these policies.

Let us take the example of the law and order situation in Bangladesh. Why have violence and criminal activities been increasing day by day in the country, engulfing educational institutions down to industrial sites -- not to speak of everyday hijacking, extortion, mugging and killing? Who are involved in these criminal activities and who patronise the criminals and why? How do the criminals get away without punishment? Who provides shelter to them?

Foreign governments have also observed that the law and order situation in Bangladesh has deteriorated since the grand alliance led by Awami League came to power. The Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, in its travel advice relating to Bangladesh, states: "Criminal violence and armed robbery are common in Bangladesh. There has been an increase in reported criminal activity since the beginning of 2009, including in Gulshan and

Banani in Dhaka, where resident Westerners have been victims of armed robbery."

Similarly, the State Department of the United States (US) has expressed negative views on the security and crime situations in Bangladesh. Its country specific information about Bangladesh says: "Urban crime can be organised or opportunistic, conducted by individuals or groups, and commonly encompasses fraud, theft (larceny, pick-pocketing, and snatch-and-grab), robbery (armed and unarmed), carjacking, rape, assault, and burglary (home and auto). Incidence of crime and levels of violence are higher in low-income residential and congested commercial areas, but are on the rise in wealthier areas as well."

The US State Department's 2009 Human Right Report on Bangladesh published in March this year considers that "there was a slight increase in the number of extra-judicial killings by security forces; there remained cases of serious abuse, including extra-judicial killings, custodial deaths, arbitrary arrest and detention, and harassment of journalists. With the return of an elected government, reports of politically motivated violence increased 3.3%."

The report also says: "Violence against religious and ethnic minorities still occurred, although many government and civil society leaders stated these acts had political or economic motivations and could not be attributed only to religious belief or affiliation."

In any case, the fact of the matter is that violent activities in educational institutions and

industrial sites (especially in garment factories), tender rigging in contracts for development projects, rapes, killings, eve teasing, armed robbery, extortions and muggings have increased to an alarming level. We do not see government actions for curbing the incidence of violence and other serious crimes.

The key issue here is the alleged involvement of members of the ruling party and its associated student and labour organisations in many criminal activities. This is evident from the frequent warnings by Home Minister Sahara Khatun, who says that corruption and terrorism will be uprooted from the society.

It has become habitual for her to say: "No matter which party the criminals or terrorists belong to, nobody will be spared." She has been harping on the same tune for the last year and a half, but nothing has happened in terms of reduction of crimes in the country.

Even Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has expressed her determination many times to effectively deal with the deteriorating law and order situation, especially violence in educational institutions, that involves her party's student wing.

However, all the avowed missionary zeal and determination of the government appear to have turned into simple chaapabazi (lip service) as the government has virtually failed to control its own party cadres that are wreaking havoc in the country.

Police are supposed to maintain security and law and order. However, the members of the police force are generally constrained to take action against the criminals affiliated with the ruling party -- be it Awami League or BNP. Just a couple of weeks before the general elections in 2009, the Inspector General of Police (IGP) Noor Mohammad was of the view that since the independence of Bangladesh, the police forces have been used as a political tool by the parties in power.

The essence of the IGP's view is that while police corruption exists, a major problem is that in many cases the police cannot work independently according to the law of the land. Individual politicians use them to serve their own narrow interest, to gain and exercise undue power and authority in local areas and to make money.

Another problem lies with the way the judiciary is perceived to have been working at the present time. Observers and analysts consider that many criminal cases are not being dealt with in an appropriate manner, where the known and convicted criminals get bail.

Are the judgements in some cases determined by non-legal factors, including political motivation, influence or pressure?

We should remember that the government of the day is ultimately accountable for all its actions. The failure of the government to contain violent crimes and provide security to the citizens can be treated as a breach of its social contract with the people to bring peace in the society.

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Food procurement and price



Build up a buffer stock.

Unless government food grain stock is maintained at a satisfactory level, which must not be below 10 lakh tonnes at any time, programs under public food distribution system may not be successfully implemented, which will affect food security of the poor and the vulnerable.

M.ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

FOR the first time in recent years, the government is facing problems in meeting the *boro* rice procurement target. The drive, which started in May and will end next month, has so far succeeded in procuring about one-fourth of the targeted quantity. This goes against *boro* rice procurement behaviour in the past years, when the successive governments were criticised for not going for big procurement drives for the benefit of the growers.

The government's failure to correctly fix the procurement price at the beginning of the drive and negotiate with the rice-millers, who supply rice to the government under contracts, may be considered the most important cause for the

poor response to this year's *boro* procurement program.

In April, the government decided to buy 11 lakh tonnes of *boro* rice and 1.5 lakh tonnes of paddy at Tk.25 and Tk.17 per kg, respectively, this year. This is equivalent to 12 lakh tonnes in the form of rice.

Newspaper reports show that immediately after the government's decision fixing the procurement price of *boro* rice and paddy, the rice-millers' association came out with a statement opposing the fixing of rice price at Tk.25 per kg and requested the government to raise it to Tk.27.50 a kg -- keeping the price of paddy at Tk.17 a kg. They told the government that it would not be possible for them to supply rice if their demand was not met. But the government

then did not pay any heed to their demand.

The government, however, could sign contracts with the rice-millers for supply of only 5 lakh tonnes of rice against the procurement target of 12 lakh tonnes. Of the 5 lakh tonnes, the millers supplied 2.63 lakh tonnes till June and denied supply of the rest, saying that the price of rice in the market was higher than the government administered price of Tk.25 a kg. Finding no other way, the government decided on July 1 to buy the remaining 2.37 lakh tonnes of rice at enhanced price of Tk.28 a kg. The enhanced price became effective from July 1.

The rice-millers announced on July 9 that they would stop supplying rice to the government from July 11 if they were not provided with an incentive of Tk.3 a kg on what had already been supplied before the government's announcement of the incentive.

On July 11, the rice-millers withdrew their decision to stop supplying rice to the government after the authorities decided to take legal action against them for not delivering as per the signed contracts. Senior leaders of the rice-millers' association have reportedly been called to a meeting with the government officials in Dhaka to resolve the crisis. Anyway, an uneasy calm is prevailing.

If the government had entered into a sincere negotiation with the millers in early May, the procurement of the targeted 12 lakh tonnes might have been possible at a rate below the demanded rate or, at the most, at Tk.27.50 a kg. This would have also saved a significant amount of public money because the rate now is Tk.28 a kg.

The rice-millers and traders are no less responsible for the failure in achieving the *boro* procurement target. Informed sources say that, taking advantage of the situation, rice-millers and traders captured the market to purchase huge quantities of rice for hoarding, anticipating windfall profit in the coming months of September-November when the price of rice generally remains high.

Granting of hassle-free loans by the commercial banks to the rice-millers and traders to purchase rice for storage helped them execute their evil design. This is substantiated by the decision of the Inter-Ministerial Committee on Product Price, taken at its meeting on June 21, which suggested that Bangladesh Bank should take necessary steps to stop providing loans to the unscrupulous rice-millers and traders who

were hoarding rice and contributing to its price hike.

Last but not the least, *boro*, the highest rice-producing crop in the country, failed to achieve its production target this year. According to a report of Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), *boro* output this year stands at 174 lakh tonnes against the agriculture ministry's projection of 187 lakh tonnes. This is even lower than the last year's production of 178 lakh tonnes. This has sent a wrong signal to the market and contributed to the increase of rice price.

One of the objectives of internal rice procurement is to build up a comfortable food security stock for implementing targeted food distribution programs as well as intervening in the market through open market operations to help stabilise rice price when it shows upward trend.

The food and disaster management minister recently disclosed that the government has a security stock of "nearly six lakh tonnes of grains." This cannot be considered as a satisfactory stock of food grains (rice and wheat) at this point of time. Food grain stock normally reaches the maximum level in July-August every year. Back in 2002, when the writer was food secretary, the government food grain stock in August of that year stood at 11.64 lakh tonnes.

Unless government food grain stock is maintained at a satisfactory level, which must not be below 10 lakh tonnes at any time, programs under public food distribution system may not be successfully implemented, which will affect food security of the poor and the vulnerable.

The low level of food grain stock in government warehouses has influenced the rice market. Available information suggests that in the past two weeks or so, the prices of different varieties of rice increased by Tk.3 to Tk.4 a kg. Market watchers are predicting a further rise. While the rising price causes sufferings to the poor, it brings profit to the rice-millers and traders who have hoarded rice.

The minister for food and disaster management recently said that "import of plenty of rice and wheat is in the pipeline to replenish the government warehouses," and added that "the price of rice will come down soon with the start of open market sales." The earlier this is done, the better it will be for the common people.

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Achieving revised vision 2021

Whatever the errors and omissions committed during the last 18 months there is no need for frustration. At the initial stage things always move slowly because of the time needed to overcome the initial difficulties and hurdles.

A.B.M.S. ZAHUR

ABOUT a year back, AL declared its revised Vision 2021. So far, we have not seen much progress in implementation of the commitments included in the said declaration. It appears that it would be worthwhile for AL to look back, particularly because of its debacle in the recent Chittagong City Corporation election in which the AL-supported candidate for mayoral office lost to the BNP-backed candidate by 95,542 votes.

Among the major commitments made in the declaration are:

- The right to speak, think, express opinions, organise meetings and movements, and to practice respective religions;
- Ensuring free flow of information through newspapers, radio, T.V., internet and other electronic media, and securing protection of media workers against any harassment; and
- Resisting ill-motivated attempts to violate the constitution and deny the fundamental rights of citizens.

But, during the last eleven months we have seen that the government's actions have been somewhat different from the commitments made in the declaration. We are really intrigued by this phenomenon.

Among other important commitments in the declaration are:

- All-out war against corruption and establishment of good governance, whose pre-conditions are (i) curbing corruption; (ii) ensuring lawful administration and justice; and (iii) ensuring democracy in all areas of state and social life, people's participation in state administration, and an accountable, professional and efficient public administration.

It has further been declared that:

- There will be no discrimination between the common people and the members of parliament;
- Educational institutions will be free from politicisation. Teachers, officers and staff will be appointed on merit, suitability and experience. No discrimination will be made because of political difference. There will be a separate public service commission for teachers who will be imparted training, and adequate measures will be taken for their respectable living.

Needless to say, AL's failure to fulfill the commitments will cost them dearly at the next polls, which is very critical for AL for its onward march to reach vision 2021. During the last one and a half years we have not been able to find enough discipline in the party, improvement in the law and order situation, speedy implementation of projects, control of corruption in administration and strengthening of local government.

As per reports in different newspapers, discrimination between common people and the members of parliament has increased. There is a rumour that members of parliament may be given power to differ with the decisions of the government. This approach is regarded by some analysts as being harmful for the administration.

Truly speaking, AL is just not a political party. Through this party we achieved independence and through this party we expect to set up a strong base for democracy. If it makes any attempt to encourage any anti-democratic practices like gagging the media, harassing the opposition or setting up one-party rule, it would be a great blunder and extremely damaging for progress of democracy in Bangladesh.

Out of the sixty months of the present tenure there remain another 42 months to rectify mistakes and gear up the rate of progress. Achieving its goals is certainly difficult, but not impossible if the party is organised properly, the students' wing is brought under control, its supporting bodies become more disciplined, and the existing differences in the party are smoothened.

The urgent need for AL appears to be:

- Bringing discipline in the party;
- Building a balanced administrative set-up with matching of experience and youth; and
- Extending friendship to the opposition to obtain their cooperation for achievement of the goals.

Whatever the errors and omissions committed during the last 18 months there is no need for frustration. At the initial stage things always move slowly because of the time needed to overcome the initial difficulties and hurdles.

A.B.M.S. Zahur is a former Joint Secretary.



Turning vision into reality.