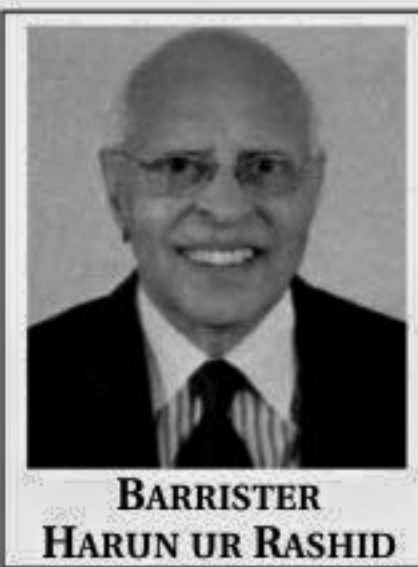


BOTTOM LINE

# Manmohan's incredible remarks



BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

**D**R Manmohan Singh, prime minister of India is an erudite person, having earned degrees from both Oxford and Cambridge. He is by nature a taciturn person and generally keeps his speech to the script. He is respected by world leaders for his prescription on the state of global economy because of his long innings in economical field. There is some predictability in his conduct and especially in his capacity as prime minister of India since 2004.

On June 29, during an interaction with editors of five newspapers, he mentioned his plan to visit Dhaka without announcing any time frame. When his attention was drawn to India's neighbours, the prime minister reportedly said: "Well, neighbourhood worries me a great deal, quite frankly".

When the subject matter of Bangladesh came up, he said that Bangladesh government has gone out of its way to help his country in apprehending anti-India insurgents operating from inside Bangladesh for a long time and "that is why we have been generous in dealing with Bangladesh."

Thereafter, he has departed from his predictable measured words when he came up with the statement "We must reckon that at least 25% per cent of the population swear by the Jamiat-ul-Islami and they are very anti-Indian and there are in the clutches, many times of the ISI... So the political landscape in Bangladesh can change anytime..... So a very uncertain neighbourhood."

South Asian region is a tension-torn region since the partition of British India in 1947 and

no one can deny the fact. Furthermore the Kashmir territorial dispute between India and Pakistan has led to many adverse intended and unintended impacts on the region. In addition to that, the war in Afghanistan and the instable political situation in Nepal make the region volatile and India must be worried. To that extent, Prime Minister Dr. Singh appears to be right.

But what is surprising is the fact of his statement relating to Bangladesh. His statement on popular support of Jamat ul Islami in Bangladesh (JIB) was not only incorrect but also startling. It is assumed he must have been advised of by relevant Indian government agencies on the percentage of popular support of Jamat ul-Islami in Bangladesh.

Let us look at the elections since 1991 because the elections are the best criteria to judge the popular vote of each party in Bangladesh. There had been four parliamentary elections participated by all parties in the country: elections in 1991, 1996, 2001 and 2008.

The following percentage of votes of each party (Bangladesh Nationalist Party- BNP, Awami League Party-ALP and Jamat-ul Islami Bangladesh-JIB) is revealed from various sources:

1991 Election: BNP: 30.81% ALP: 30.08% JIB: 1.22%	1996 Election: ALP: 37.54% BNP: 30.60% JIB: 8.61%
2001 Election: BNP: 40.97% ALP: 40.13% JIB: 4.28%	Election 2008: ALP: 49% BNP: 33.2% JIB: 4.6%

All the above quoted figures show that nowhere the popular support of Jamat ul

Islami in Bangladesh is 25% as indicated by prime minister of India.

The highest popular vote JIB received was in 8.61% in 1996 and the lowest 1.22% in 1991. Otherwise, on average, the popular support of JIB hovers below 5% (from 4.28% to 4.6%).

*Whatever may be fallout from the statement, we welcome the forthcoming visit of Indian prime minister to Bangladesh and hope that the controversy raised out of his reported statement should not be allowed to cloud the political environment.*

The above tiny percentage of support of people for JIB in Bangladesh where 88% are Muslims indicates that majority of people do not support use of religion for political purposes. This attribute is embedded in Bengali culture and history, although in Bangladesh people of various faiths are deeply religious and

For Bangladesh people, the question is: who provided the grossly incorrect figure (25% of support to JIB) to the prime minister and why? Or did he misquote the figure?

There are other surprising elements about the statement of Prime Minister Dr. Singh on



Bangladesh and some of them deserve mention below:

First, ordinarily a prime minister does not adversely comment on internal affairs of a neighbouring country, especially when a visit to that country is forthcoming. His statement that political landscape in Bangladesh can change "at any time" is extremely damaging as it contributes to destabilising political situation in the country.

Second, it is reported that the External Affairs Minister of India SM Krishna is scheduled to visit Bangladesh on 6th July to prepare the visit of India's prime minister to Dhaka sometime in September and such statement emanating from India's prime minister on Bangladesh does not contribute to the healthy environment of bilateral relations.

Third, the purported link between Inter

Service Intelligence (ISI) of Pakistan and Jamat ul Islami in Bangladesh as stated by the prime minister is at least a diplomatic faux pas. Pakistan will not take it easily and the apparent diplomatic effort to repair relations with Pakistan at the intended Foreign Minister's level talks in New Delhi some time this month seems to be indented by ventilating air of suspicion of the activities of Pakistan's spy agencies in a third country.

Obviously the above consequences are not something related to "space-science" and are evident to the Indian side and therefore the question is why did the Indian agencies use their prime minister to make these comments on Bangladesh and put it on in the government website until 2nd July?

Speculations are rife in Bangladesh as to their motivations. Some say it is a signal to Bangladesh government that in whatever matters they are engaged in politically with their opponents, they may prove to be counter-productive. Another view is that prime minister is not a politically savvy person and his comments were "off the record" for the editors but some how they had been inadvertently made public. Another analysis is that the prime minister's statement demonstrates ignorance of Indian governmental agencies on Bangladesh.

Whatever may be fallout from the statement, we welcome the forthcoming visit of Indian prime minister to Bangladesh and hope that the controversy raised out of his reported statement should not be allowed to cloud the political environment in which certain key bilateral issues need to be resolved for the mutual benefit of the people of two nations.

The writer is former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

# UP Elections: Then what?

DR. BADIUL ALAM MAJUMDAR

**E**LECTIONS of nearly 4,500 Union Parishads (UPs) are now in the process of being completed. An important question that must be asked at this time is: after elections, what next? Answering this question will require a clear understanding of the purpose and potential roles of local government institutions (LGIs), especially UPs.

LGIs have four potential roles: remedying democratic deficits, delivering services, promoting economic development, and achieving good governance.

Winston Churchill once said that democracy is the worst form of government except for every other form we have tried. Similarly, representative democracy, as is practiced today, is not the most ideal system because it has many 'deficits'. Such deficits include, among others: lack of effective citizen participation, lack transparency and accountability of elected representatives, and lack of inclusiveness of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups. A strong local government system, especially at the grassroots level, which is the conduit for establishing grassroots democracy, can effectively remedy many of these deficits. In fact, without elected local bodies, democratic governance itself is incomplete.

Grassroots democracy, often viewed as 'poor man's democracy', can truly deepen and in the process 'democratise' democracy. That is why Article 59 of our Constitution mandates the rule of elected representatives through a parallel and autonomous system of local government at each administrative unit. Thus, the effective functioning of UPs will help promote participatory democracy, which is by far superior to its representative alternative.

LGIs, especially UPs, are effectively government at the doorsteps of the people. In addition to promoting meaningful citizen participation, they can also ensure effective delivery of services to which people are entitled. Unfortunately, our UPs have very little resources or manpower to be able to deliver the range of services people need and want. Thus, if we are to make the service delivery function of UPs effective, the government must transfer more resources to UPs, including human resources, especially those responsible for providing health, education and agricultural services at the grassroots.

Local government bodies also have constitutionally mandated development functions to perform. Again, they lack adequate resources to make much of a difference in this area. Nevertheless, the LG representatives are local leaders and, by using their catalytic leadership, they can carry out popular campaigns against many social ills and help solve problems like dowry, child marriage, school attendance, good sanitation practices, nutrition awareness, environmental degradation and so on with little or no money at all. Thus, they can truly turn development into a movement.

It must be noted that most problems people face are local and they must also be solved locally.

According to the subsidiarity principle, problems that cannot be solved at the lowest level of LGI, should be solved at the higher level up, and then at the next higher level, and so on. In such a scheme, UPs become the most important local body for delivering services and promoting economic development. Thus, creating a truly hunger and poverty free Bangladesh will require important policy changes to devolve more power, authority and resources to LGIs, especially to the UPs, and to help them function effectively.

Good governance, especially promoting transparency and downward accountability, can only be effectively achieved by starting at the lowest level of LGIs, namely the UPs. In fact, a social movement to achieve transparency and accountability can be fomented from the grassroots up. Thus, UPs are also critically important LGIs for promoting good governance.

The functioning of Ward Sabhas which hold village assemblies at the Ward level at least twice a year as provided in the latest UP Act, can effectively address the service delivery, economic development and good governance role of UPs. In fact, the provision of Ward Sabhas, first included in the UP Ordinance promulgated during the last Caretaker government, represents an institutional innovation precisely to address these issues through people's participation, including participation of disadvantaged and vulnerable groups. Thus, one of the most important priorities of newly elected UP bodies should be to make Ward Sabhas functional and effective.

It may be noted that Ward Sabhas have three functions to perform: local level planning including carrying out campaigns, the practice of transparency and accountability, and the selection of beneficiaries of various government schemes according to certain pre-determined criteria, such as landlessness, widowhood and so on. It may further be noted that our prime minister in one of her books published in 1995 emphasised the need for holding such village assemblies for poverty eradication and ensuring the participation of the poor in them.

The present UP elections offer a unique opportunity to promote democracy that is truly participatory, accountable and inclusive and also to promote broad-based economic development. Nearly 60,000 newly-elected grassroots leaders, many of whom are young and highly educated, can be empowered to spearhead such an effort. This will obviously require policymakers and other stakeholders to think 'outside the box' and undertake innovative capacity-building initiatives immediately after elections.

The proposed capacity-building efforts must have twin objectives: enhancing the capacity of UP representatives as well their communities. Most of the newly-elected representatives are political activists who have been elected for the first time. They have never had the opportunity to run anything, and the challenge is to turn them, especially the UP chairs, into executives and help them run UPs in a professional manner, adhering to basic management and accounting principles. This will require hands-on training of the UP bodies and close follow-ups. I will also require developing appropriate accounting software and training the functionaries to use them. Furthermore, training must also enhance their leadership skills so that they can become true change agents while making them aware of the relevant statutes.

The modern strategic planning methodology may be used to help UP representatives carry out their responsibilities to improve the lives of the people of their unions. They may be helped to identify five-year strategic goals and then to develop yearly work-plans to achieve those goals.

One important goal, for example, could be the effective functioning of Ward Sabhas. Another strategic goal could be to develop a five-year development plan for the UPs, especially focusing on achieving certain MDG goals. Yet another strategic goal could be to prepare participatory budgets on a yearly basis. One attractiveness of such a methodology is that it will create ownership of the plan by the elected representatives.

Capacity building of the community also must be a focus in order to enhance the capability of the community members, including women and other disadvantaged groups, so that they can effectively participate in the affairs of the UPs and also hold the elected leaders to account. For example, women bear most of the responsibilities for family wellbeing, yet are currently denied information, resources and voice in decision-making. Thus, broad-based participation will first of all require raising the consciousness of the ordinary people, including the disadvantaged groups, to empower themselves with the realisation that they are citizens with certain rights and responsibilities. This will also require creating champions within the community who will be able to animate and mobilize others for participation in Ward Sabhas and other affairs of the UPs. It is needless to say that, without the necessary capacity building of the community, UPs will not be able to reach their potential and bring about measurable improvements in the quality of lives of their constituents.

The writer is Secretary, SHUJAN.

# Conference call friends are here



Nury Vittachi

**M**Y FRIEND LIFT LURKER was trying to think of new business ideas. "What about selling advertising space on the sides of coffins?" he said. "They could carry, say, a slogan for Facebook: 'Follow my status updates.'"

Yeah, right, I said. Dead people don't do a lot of status updates. This was almost as bad as his previous idea: audio-books for the hearing impaired in which "the reader screams at the top of her voice."

He may sound a bit wacko ("bit" in the ironic sense of "immensely") but he occasionally comes up with a good idea.

One emerged last week in the comments column after he was stuck for two hours on a conference call. (The use of conference calls is growing at high speed worldwide.)

Instead of the usual mix of accents and sexes, everyone on the call was Indian and male: Kumar in Bangladesh, Sanjiv in London, Ramesh in Hong Kong and so on.

Confusion reigned as all the voices blurred into one.

"I'm thinking we should increase price 15%. I agree. So do I. I don't. Me neither. Who doesn't? Me. Is that Ramesh? Is who Ramesh? You. Me? Or him? I'm Sanjiv. Who disagreed? Me. Who are you? Who is who? Are you asking me? Or me? Or me? Or me?" Etc, etc. Nightmare.

It gave Liftie the brilliant idea of linking voice analysis software to his phone.

After each person speaks, the "intelligent teleconference assistant" or ITA would whisper in the caller's ear: "That was Kumar."

You could even add a lie-detector program, he said, so the computer would say: "That was Kumar and the b@#\$^ was lying."

I really loved this concept and mentioned it to a mainland Chinese investment banker who is permanently on conference calls to Shanghai and New Delhi.

She hated the idea.

"Once I told someone during a conference call that his idea stank," she said. "It turned out to be the chairman of the client company. I spent the rest of the time talking in a squeaky voice to disguise myself."

But she came up with amendment.

At the beginning of a conference call, each caller is given the option to choose a signature tune, which plays quietly underneath their utterances.

You can select one to match your personality. Arrogant male: "James Bond Theme."

Servile Bootlicker: "I Wanna Kiss You All Over."

Massive egotist: "Me Myself and I."

I liked this idea too. Indeed, one could even make a list of music tracks which sent subliminal messages to the other people on the conference call.

If you want a pay rise: "Money (That's What I Want)" by the Flying Lizards.

If you're attracted to your workmate: "Hello I Love You" by The Doors.

If you're desperate for a positive response: "Please Please Me" by the Beatles.

If you are going to share some illegal insider information: "I Heard It Through the Grapevine" by Marvin Gaye.

And what if you're the boss, and you are going to say no to all the costly requests from your staff? Your theme would be: "Be Thankful For What You Got" by Massive Attack.

And if they don't get the message, switch to a track from the Sound of Music: "So Long, Farewell."

Any other suggestions, before Liftie and I take this to the phone companies?

To know more, visit our columnist at: <http://mrjam.typepad.com>