

## ENIGMATTERS

## Population census

*Accuracy will determine the way forward*

THE fifth population census has found the country's population to be at 14.23 crore, with a slightly improved annual growth rate of 1.34 percent. The sex ratio gap has improved by 5.73 percent and stands at 100.3 males against 100 females. This, along with a decline in population in some areas, has been attributed to migration. Increased rural-to-urban migration, which has intensified the strain on urban resources and facilities, is a trend which needs to be addressed, however.

The preliminary results of the census -- subject to a five to seven percent increase following verification and adjustment -- come amidst some confusion following the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)'s 2010 world population report in which Bangladesh's population was put at 16.44 crore, which has now been revised. A census is said to be the most accurate means of determining a nation's population, which will in turn be crucial in shaping national policy and development activities, food production and economic indicators such as Gross Domestic Product and per capita income, among others. It is thus vital that the census has been conducted and will be finalised to utmost accuracy.

Following this, a clear approach towards population control and strengthening of relevant bodies such as the Directorate General of Family Planning which is severely understaffed; effective implementation of policies -- including awareness-raising campaigns; and proper monitoring mechanisms will be essential in determining the success of population control programmes.

Despite the fact that Bangladesh is the third most populated country in South Asia, following India and Pakistan, a 1.8 crore population growth in 10 years is not significantly high in terms of incremental growth. Increased literacy, social awareness and perhaps urban influence, have contributed to the relatively less alarming growth in population. These trends must be kept up, however, and, with renewed vigour in our population control and family planning programmes akin to that of the 1980s and 1990s, we can hope to see more stimulating results over the years. We hope the government will take the opportunity of the recent census to further develop its population policy based on a clearer vision and effective approach towards bringing the country's spiralling population under control.

## A brick falls, a youth dies

*Criminal neglect of public safety*

THE death of a young man, a college-going student, as a result of a brick falling on him from an under-construction building the other day reflects the impunity with which basic rules relating to construction are still being flouted. This is not the first time that people have died in such tragic manner. Workers employed in construction work have fallen over the edge and have lost lives. All too often, the owners of high-rise structures do not care to take measures to ensure that their workers remain safe as they go about their work. At the same time, as the death of this young man at Panthapath has shown yet once again, measures to ensure the safety of people in the neighbourhood through putting up screens or nets on and around under-construction buildings are simply absent.

The time has come for serious action. The authorities responsible for approving building plans must also ensure that owners, architects and engineers reassure them that in the course of the construction all safety measures, both for workers and people in the neighbourhood, are in place. In modern times, it is the general rule that when buildings are refurbished or new buildings go up, strong scaffolding and a fencing off of the place are there. We think it is now important that such a system be introduced in Bangladesh. The indifference with which construction materials --- bricks, mortar, cement --- are piled up on public pavements and roads must not be tolerated any more.

Our prayers and sympathies go out to the family of the young man who has died. We expect thorough, swift and exemplary action to be taken against those who are directly or indirectly responsible for the tragedy. Let this sordid story be a spur to action on the part

# Quest for sensible politics



MOHAMMAD ALI SATTAR

IN the most conventional way political tongue-lashing, character assassination and talking out of context go on with greater intensity than anytime in the past. The utterances of top leaders (the PM and the opposition leader included) are instances of poor political legacy. Diatribes have been a common practice among all political parties across the globe.

But somewhere in this age-old practice choice of words is of crucial importance. For the comments and remarks made by political leaders are open to scrutiny by the public. All that they say reaches the common man and the critics have a way of interpreting them. If one had to comment on our political diatribes, it could safely be said that these are conspicuously lacking in tact.

Let's recall some of the comments made by the leaders of the government party and the opposition recently.

Home Minister Sahara Khatun was heard saying that Zainul Abidin incident with the police was treated partially by the media. She meant the TV had shown only the police atrocity on the opposition chief whip. What was the other side of the story or image of the event? Have we missed out on any bit of the high voltage action?

Begum Khaleda Zia seemed highly charged-up on the occasion of the token hunger strike observed

by followers of Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) in the city last Wednesday to protest the scrapping of the caretaker government system and assault on the its chief whip Zainul Abidin Farroque.

While addressing the rally she termed the amended (15th) constitution an AL manifesto and said once in power her government would bin the constitution. Coming from the two times prime minister this went down as demeaning of the constitution.

Suranjit Sengupta did not waste time to react acridly. He termed the remarks as seditious and called

only behoove her position but also shocking to those who heard it. The prime minister should have known that such statements could only lead to hardening of position on the other side, when the matters she refers to are being dealt with under the law of the land.

State minister for law says, according to preliminary investigation report, Tarique Rahman has been found involved in the August 21 grenade attack. Since that is how it is, why make premature statement about it?

Away in New York, the opposition Chief Whip Zainul Abidin Farroque

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upon the opposition leader to apologise to the nation for her comments on the constitution.

Dr. Kamal Hossain had a soft reaction to give. He thought no one had the right to say or do so.

The prime minister said, the opposition leader and her party did not need constitution as they were accustomed to grabbing state power. Both sides are not only being vitriolic but also impolitic.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina surprised many by labeling Khaleda Zia as mother of "thieves." She also reportedly observed that Khaleda Zia could only teach her sons to "steal." These utterances do not

said, cops in Bangladesh are getting desperate and nobody is safe in their hands.

The leaders may beat each other in mud-slinging, character assassination or making out of context statements, but to the people they stand in low esteem. These have turned into pastimes as the real problems facing the country and the people take the back seat.

What do we make of all this falling standards of politics? One thing is pretty much clear, that the people feel that their aspirations are being dealt a severe blow.

What has gone wrong with our politics or our leaders? Increasingly

## BARE FACTS

# Where to strengthen EC



M ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

WHILE delivering her winding-up speech in the budget session on July 7, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina told the parliament that her government

would further strengthen the Election Commission (EC). Earlier, while addressing a press conference on May 31, she said that a stronger EC would ensure fair polls under the proposed electronic voting.

There have been continuous demands from civil society leaders, media, jurists and others to strengthen EC for holding free and fair elections. Political parties, particularly AL and BNP, agree with the demand for strengthening the EC.

In December 2006, in a meeting organised by the Nagorik Forum, the then AL General-Secretary Abdul Jalil and BNP General-Secretary Abdul Mannan Bhuiya agreed with a set of civil society's recommendations which included, inter alia, strengthening the EC.

Very recently, civil society leaders and editors of national daily newspapers participating in the talks with the special parliamentary committee on constitutional amendments firmly stressed the need for strengthening the EC.

Similarly, political parties, civil society leaders, editors and senior journalists and others who have so far responded to the EC's request to attend meetings in the EC Secretariat for giving their opinion on the draft amendments to Representation of People Order (RPO) and some other issues, have all reportedly stressed the need for strengthening the EC for holding general elections peacefully, fairly and impartially.

But, what is really meant by strengthening the EC? Does it mean giving more power to the EC for con-

ducting national and local level elections? Does it mean giving financial autonomy to the EC? Does it mean sanctioning more manpower for the EC? Strengthening the EC includes all these measures and something more.

The EC sent formal proposals to the special parliamentary committee on constitutional amendments. The proposals said that provision should be made in the constitution to (i) remove the court's jurisdiction of reviewing EC's actions taken during the holding of parliamentary polls; and (ii) make it mandatory for a caretaker government (now defunct) to consult the EC before taking any steps regarding the elections.

In recent years, some measures have been taken for strengthening the EC. These include, among others,

in connection with an election, introducing voting machine in parliamentary elections, raising the ceiling of election expenses of a contesting candidate from Tk.15 lakh to Tk.25 lakh, and trial of persons for corrupt practices.

While recognising the need for further strengthening the EC, the question arises whether strengthening the EC will ensure holding of free and fair general elections because of the following factors.

The constitution provides for enactment of a law to regulate the appointment of election commissioners including the chief election commissioner (CEC). But no such law has been enacted so far. In the absence of a law to regulate the appointments of the CEC and election commissioners,

they are losing touch with the people and the country is suffering. Today, they seem to be the most frustrated lot. Lack of leadership and loss of ideologies are the main reasons for their frustration. Today we question their policies and their patriotism. They visibly flail for answers to any valid questions, politics or otherwise. They must connect with the desperate anxieties of voters to see normalcy return to politics. They must get out of the habit of exceeding each other in the use of vitriol.

Lack of confidence in political leadership and impatience has seeped into all spheres of the society. The judiciary has to step in for settling practically all disputes. This is an ominous sign for socio-political system showing up a crack in the middle.

The law enforcing members have also shown the intolerance that has crept in their lives as well. They run out of "good sense" only at the slightest provocation.

The traffic system is totally broken down. Drivers are killing people at their will, most of the time the law is a silent onlooker. Impunity encourages the offenders to commit murders.

Traders are fleecing money from the hapless consumers. The syndicated members are so strong that the government sometime admits its limitations to control the culprits. And the girl students are no safer with their teachers.

People look up to the leaders for constructive leadership, not one of leading them to disaster.

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*Unless the next EC is composed of neutral and competent persons, neutral civil servants are made ROs, AROs, etc., and the government is highly committed to holding free and fair parliamentary elections, empowerment of the EC may not bring the desired results.*

empowering the EC to cancel the registration of a political party failing to submit statement giving details of the expenses incurred in the election and to cancel candidature of a candidate on certain grounds after proper investigation. Following the EC's proposal, the recently passed fifteenth amendment to the constitution has provided that in case of any election dispute, courts must hear the EC's view before issuing any order.

The EC has drafted amendments to the RPO and is seeking opinions of the political parties, civil society leaders, senior journalists and others. The proposed amendments include, inter alia, inclusion of defence services in the definition of "law enforcing agencies," giving power to the EC to suspend any officer performing any duty

their appointments have been at the pleasure of government. Successive governments have generally appointed persons loyal to them as CEC and election commissioners to serve their cause, particularly to influence the general elections to the Parliament.

The immediate past AL government appointed one secretary, who was a staunch supporter of AL, as election commissioner. We have seen how election commissioners were appointed on political considerations during the time of the immediate past BNP government as well as during the caretaker government (CTG) of President Iajuddin Ahmed, who assumed the charge of the chief adviser to the CTG.

The tenure of the incumbent CEC

and the two election commissioners appointed during the CTG of Fakhruddin Ahmed expires early next year. If the present government can't enact a law detailing the procedure for appointment of neutral and competent persons as CEC and commissioners with the support of the main opposition BNP, a repetition of the 2006 situation on appointment of CEC and election commissioners can't be ruled out. Unless neutral and competent persons are appointed as CEC and election commissioners, strengthening the EC will have hardly any impact on holding of free and fair parliamentary elections.

During the last twenty-year rule of BNP and AL, the bureaucracy was highly politicised. Most of the civil servants are divided along party lines. It will be a challenge to hold free and fair parliamentary elections with the politicised civil servants working as returning officers (RO), assistant returning officers (ARO), etc. Holding of free, fair and impartial parliamentary elections during the CTGs became possible primarily due to the strong commitment of the CTGs for holding elections fairly and impartially and absence of government pressure on the civil servants charged with the responsibility for conducting elections.

Reports of election observers show that even during the time of the CTGs, influence of black money and muscle power on elections could not be substantially checked. Although the EC was empowered to cancel the candidature of contesting candidates for resorting to malpractices, it could hardly do anything.

To conclude, unless the next EC is composed of neutral and competent persons, neutral civil servants are made ROs, AROs, etc., and the government is highly committed to holding free and fair parliamentary elections, empowerment of the EC may not bring the desired results.

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## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

July 19

- 711**  
Umayyad conquest of Hispania: Battle of Guadalete Umayyad forces under Tariq ibn Ziyad defeat the Visigoths led by King Roderic.
- 1870**  
Franco-Prussian War: France declares war on Prussia.
- 1916**  
World War I: Battle of Fromelles British and Australian troops attack German trenches in a prelude to the Battle of the Somme.
- 1979**  
The Sandinista rebels overthrow the government of the Somoza family in Nicaragua.
- 1997**  
IRA declares ceasefire. The IRA makes a surprise announcement of a ceasefire in Northern Ireland - the second in three years.