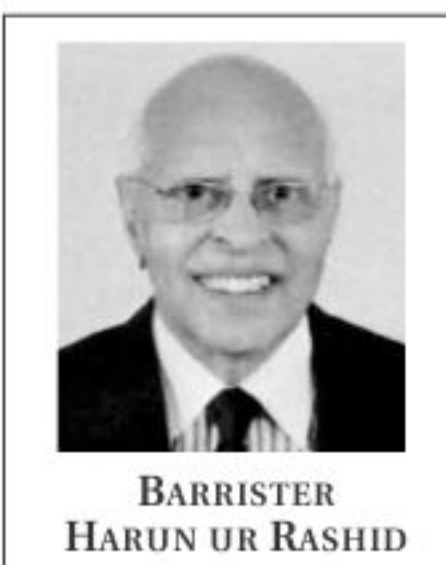


BOTTOM LINE

Parliamentary election: A few issues



BANGLADESH elects 300 members of Parliament from single member constituencies for a term of five years using the first-past-the post voting system in which the candidate receiving most votes is elected from a constituency. The current Ninth Parliament held its first session on January

25, 2009 (elections were held on December 29, 2008). In all parliamentary forms of government, the dissolution of existing parliament is the first signal of a new parliamentary election. In Australia, New Zealand, Canada and Britain, parliament is dissolved first before the new parliamentary election. The government goes into "caretaker mode" and no policy decisions are taken without consulting the opposition in parliament. In India, the same practice is followed. The elections to the Lok Sabha (directly elected Lower House of parliament) are held after dissolution of the parliament. The prerogative of announcing the dates and conducting the elections, however, belongs to the Election Commission. Bangladesh is out of step with other parliamentary democracies because the next parliamentary election is to be held without dissolution of the parliament. The constitution provides that parliament does not need to be dissolved before the next parliamentary election. It states that a general election of the members of parliament shall be held "by reason of the expiration of the term within the 90 days preceding such dissolution" (Article 123 (3a)). This provision was adopted by parliament on June 30, 2011 as the Fifteenth Amendment of the Constitution. The provision is not only unique but also creates practical difficulties on the ground. Some of them are as follows: First, since the parliament is not dissolved, the MPs will hold office and receive salaries and other privileges, although during that period they will not sit as members of parliament as there will not be any session of parliament. However, by virtue of being a MP, he/she will continue to have influence on the people and officials within the constituency. Therefore, such a situation will not create a level-playing field for other contestants for the seat of MP. The scenario will be unequal among contestants and is not in keeping with the tradition and norms of parliamentary democracy. The inequality among contestants may also contravene Article 19 read with Article 27 of the Constitution, which affirms equality of all citizens as one of the fundamental rights. Second, an MP is disqualified from contesting the election because he holds an office of profit (Article 66 of the Constitution). The provision exempts the president, prime minister, speaker, deputy speaker, minister, prime minister, speaker, deputy speaker, minister, minister of state or deputy minister from holding an office of profit -- but not an MP. Third, it is reported that both major parties are likely

is the procedural guarantee of a fair and free process and the need for the Election Commission to establish public confidence in the election process and election administration. One can very strongly argue that Article 66 of the Constitution is in conflict with Article 123 (3). Accordingly, it is suggested that the Election Commission may point out to the government that without dissolution of the parliament, MPs will be disqualified to contest the election under Article 66 of the Constitution. And unless it is rectified, the validity of the election of MPs will be challenged, which will be first disposed of by the Election Commission and subsequently before the higher judiciary. To contest a parliamentary election requires a lot of money, one sign of which is the presence of significant proportion of business people/industrialists in the parliament over the years, rather than that of professional class. Furthermore, the influence of "black money" and "muscle power" during election campaign has a damaging effect on electoral results. TIB, on many occasions, has shown how the two factors distort election outcomes. The politics of confrontation between the ruling party and the opposition party in the parliament, including the boycotting of sessions of the parliament, has become the "culture of politics," with detrimental effect. It has retarded the development of healthy democratic polity in the country. It is important for them to demonstrate tolerance and respect for each other to ensure an environment conducive to holding the next parliamentary election. By and large, Bangladesh is linguistically and ethnically a homogenous country and this is a great inherent strength for

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STAR ARCHIVE

unity among the people. However, the civil society, including the professional class, has over the years become so divided along party lines that it is very difficult to ascertain an objective assessment of an event in the country. It cannot be denied that there is pressure from within and outside to hold free, credible and inclusive parliamentary elections. The major political parties will hopefully come to an understanding in holding an inclusive parliamentary election to fulfill the wishes and aspirations of the people of the country. I am confident that our political leaders will not, and must not, fail the people. After all, the constitution asserts that all powers belong to the people (Article 7). The writer is former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

William Carey and Bengal Renaissance

MARTIN ADHIKARY

AUGUST 17 this year is the 251st birth anniversary of Dr. William Carey. Carey made lasting and seminal contributions to the 19th century Bengal Renaissance. He came to British India as a missionary in 1793 and lived here. He knew the people of India, their religious, social, and economic condition, as no other Englishman before him had done, and he loved, lived and worked with people in Bengal till his death on 9th June, 1834. All through his 41 years in Bengal he worked relentlessly for the spread of modern education; translation of not only the Bible into many languages, but also Indian classics into Bangla; and development of Bangla prose. He wrote usable Bangla grammar, worked to reform many social ills and transformed the lives of millions. No wonder Rabindranath Tagore called Carey "the father of modern Bengal." The great work that he did with his colleagues - Europeans or Indians - in places like Madnabati, Sada Mahol in Dinajpur district and in Khidirpur, Calcutta, and Serampore in West Bengal, earned him recognition as a reformer par excellence. Many people remember him even today for his reforming activities that led to the

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abolition of, among many others, the horrible practice of burning of widows. Carey's greatest contributions include the development of Bengali prose. In his voluminous research work, *History of Bengali Literature in the Nineteenth Century* (1800-1825), Dr. Sushil Kumar De remarked: "To Carey belongs the credit of having raised the language from its debased condition of an unsettled dialect to the characters of a regular and permanent form of speech, capable as in the past, of becoming the refined and comprehensive vehicle of a great literature in the future." It was Carey and his colleagues who made effective use of the printing press in India, with seminal impact on the people of that time. Carey's printing of the Gospel according to Matthew was the first prose literature in Bangla language. He authored popular Bangla grammar books and dictionaries, translated Indian classical books from Sanskrit into Bangla so that the man on the street could read them. As a professor of Bangla and Sanskrit of Fort William College in Calcutta, Carey was able to work for the evolution of Bangla prose in a far more authoritative manner than before. In these ways he paved the way for Bengal Renaissance. Carey and his colleagues established primary schools for women and the *dalits*, and opened asylums for people affected by leprosy. Carey came to India at a time when the ordinary people's life was so much ridden with the curse of many oppressive and bizarre practices in the name of religion, like *Satidaha* and burning of people affected by leprosy, infanticide, etc. Only in Bengal, on average 700 to 800 hundred widows were burnt on their husbands' funeral pyres annually. Governor General Lord Wellesley took the first step on February 5, 1805 to stop the practice of burning widows. Carey was the first to move the authorities. While the governors-general and their colleagues passed away, Carey and his associates did not cease to agitate in India and also to stir up, in England, people like William Wilberforce to abolish slavery till victory was gained. It was a Sunday, December 5, 1829. Carey was preparing for the Sunday prayer. Unexpectedly the doorbell rang. The message that the caller brought him was of utmost importance and was from no less a person than Governor General Lord William Bentinck, who asked Carey to translate the Edict abolishing *sati* throughout the British Dominions. Carey was so overwhelmed with joy that, "like a schoolboy who has just been told he has won a coveted prize, Carey sprang from his chair, threw off the black jacket he wore when studying, and sent a request to one of his colleagues to take his place at the services (worship) that day." Instantly, he started translating the historic document into Bangla. Carey reasoned that any delay in circulating the same in the local language might cause the unwanted death of some women. One of the greatest works of Carey was the foundation of Serampore College in the Danish colony of Serampore on river Hooghly in the year 1818. This college was founded with the aim of imparting modern higher education in India and served as a great source of enlightenment to the people. The writer is Principal, College of Christian Theology Bangladesh.

Palace coup in Egypt

MD. ARIF IQBAL KHAN

EGYPTIAN President Mohamed Morsi recently sacked the head of the powerful army and several other key members of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces. This is perhaps the third most influential event trailing only behind the Tahrir Square revolution and the subsequent rise of Muslim Brotherhood in general elections. Morsi's action was widely speculated since his Justice and Freedom Party, backed by Muslim Brotherhood, swept to power after decades of political silencing under the former strongman Mubarak. Morsi's rise to power came because of the people's desire to see him put his foot down and actually hold the levers of power in Egypt. His moment came when he effectively threw the generals out in a palace coup. Morsi scrapped the constitutional document that handed sweeping powers and autonomy to Egypt's military and ordered the retirement of Hussein Tantawi, defense minister and commander of the armed forces, and Chief of Staff Sami Anan, awarding both men state medals and appointing them presidential advisers. He also made the highly anticipated selection of vice president, naming Senior Judge Mahmoud Mekki as his deputy. Morsi is also expected to bring a woman and a minority leader into his close circle very soon. He, or equally importantly Muslim Brotherhood, is on a mission. They want to prove to the world, especially the western powers, that they (the west) were wrong all along. The western perception about political Islam as played out by Muslim Brotherhood does not fit into the erroneous picture painted by Mubarak. The thought of political Islam at the helm of arguably the most important Arab country, politically and intellectually, was played up by Mubarak as the worst nightmare for western powers backing Israel. Mubarak made them believe that his secular semi-socialist pro-western dictatorship was absolutely

necessary for protecting Israel and western interests in the region. Or else, the radical fundamentalists would let loose their ragtag army of *jihadists* on the Israelis. Muslim Brotherhood's mission for now would be to trash Mubarak's defunct theory of "its-me-or-those-crazy-radicals" into the dustbin for good.



AFP

Political analysts, Arabs and non-Arabs, have their eyes fixed on Morsi and his party for they might actually end up ushering in a new genre of political thought in the region.

What exactly is the stand of Morsi's Freedom and Justice Party? On launching the new party, the Muslim Brotherhood confirmed that it did not object to women or Copts serving in a ministerial post (cabinet), though it deems both "unsuitable" for the presidency. The group supports free-market capitalism, but without "manipulation or monopoly." The party's political programme would include tourism as a main source of national income. The Freedom and Justice Party will be based on Islamic law, "but will be acceptable to a wide segment of the population," said leading MB member Essam al-Arian. The party's membership will be open to all Egyptians who accept the terms of its programme. The spokes-

person for the party said that "when we talk about the slogans of the revolution -- freedom, social justice, equality -- all of these are in the Sharia (Islamic law)." Source: Wikipedia. The word on the street earlier was that Morsi would turn into a pinup politician with ceremonial powers. The coup turned the tables and made a hero of Morsi in a crisis situation. "This is a palace coup and a very risky one," said a North Africa expert. "Firing most of the SCAF is a bold move that could backfire at Morsi. He has been losing credibility with the Egyptian public since his election. The Sinai attack was seen by many in Egypt as a sign of Morsi's weakness, not of the military and intelligence people. Now he is trying to turn the tables on them." Since the popular uprising began in Egypt last year, much of the country has experienced a lapse in law and order, with incidents ranging from assaults on women and sectarian clashes to extremist activities in some outer-lying regions. Tensions in Sinai, long neglected by the Mubarak regime, have escalated significantly in recent days after suspected militants stormed border posts, killing 16 Egyptian soldiers and prompting a major military offensive. At least seven militants were killed in clashes with security forces in the Sinai recently. An analyst reported: "Sinai was critical. If it didn't happen, Morsi wouldn't have made these changes so soon." If elections brought Morsi to the presidency then the palace coup brought him to the real seat of power. His next move to build an inclusive governing cabinet will go miles to provide credibility to his party's promise of social justice to lead Egypt into modernity, by an Islamist party. Political analysts, Arabs and non-Arabs, have their eyes fixed on Morsi and his party for they might actually end up ushering in a new genre of political thought in the region. The writer is sponsor, FinExel.