

Awami League's national council outcome

The party should feel strengthened to think along new lines

WE congratulate Sheikh Hasina and Syed Ashraful Islam on their reelection as the party president and general secretary. The outcome was predictable and the procedure pretty much ritualistic in that they have been elected unopposed in keeping with party tradition.

Even so, the fact that the party held its national council to elect its top-end hierarchy after a time-lag of three years is commendable. For, our major political parties are not particularly known to hold regular national councils to infuse a sense of continuity, direction and dynamism into their organisations.

Having said that, we note the stark deficit in intra-party democracy. Not only the mantle of leadership in the two top positions is assumed uncontested, there is also a broader negation of democratic principle in the way party's crucial bodies are going to be formed. The council has given the sole mandate of choosing other members of the AL central committee to the party president and general secretary.

Let's not forget that the AL Central Working Committee is the highest decision making forum of the party. But the manner in which this is being formed contravenes with the AL charter and violates certain provisions of the Representation of the People's Order (RPO).

The AL charter mandates the councilors to elect all leaders including a treasurer. Also significantly, the councilors are to elect 13 members of the Presidium, the AL's highest policy making body as well as 31 secretaries including three joint general secretaries and seven organising secretaries.

As a registered political party under the RPO, the AL councilors were supposed to elect the entire central committee barring 26 members, the party chief is empowered to select.

The central question is whether voting rights of the councilors can be delegated to others. Obviously not. If a party is not seminally respectful of the rights of councilors to elect their leaders how could then it operate strongly and democratically in relation to the people as well as the opposition.

The negation of any semblance of intra-party democracy is opposed to the principle of check and balance and growth of leadership within the party.

It is time the registered political parties move towards embracing democratic practices within them. This will bring the added benefit of bridging the disconnect between party's top machinery, mid-level leaders and the grassroots that we often hear of.

Plying of battery-powered vehicles

Look at the issue realistically

AS reported in this newspaper recently, a large number of electric three-wheelers have flooded the port city. And they come in two forms, motor-rickshaws and easy-bikes, which are battery powered. They are unauthorised, not having obtained BRTA approval. The fact is, it is not only Chittagong but also many other towns and cities where these machines have made their appearance. And they have been there for quite sometime now, operating under the very nose of the law enforcing agencies illegally.

The question is if these have been declared illegal by the BRTA how come they continue to ply? We find it difficult to accept the Chittagong metropolitan police version that these vehicle are not allowed on the streets. Pictures speak otherwise. Going by the picture that appeared with the news, they are not in ones and twos but in large number, parked on a busy road. And for every one that is impounded, there are at least ten more that run on the streets, having 'managed' the police.

Admittedly, these are environment friendly vehicles, but being run on batteries, the recharging is being done in a completely unauthorised manner, from workshops or garages which themselves have unauthorised connections, incurring loss to the government apart from the fact that these also induce load shedding. And the motor-rickshaws in particular, are unstable.

We feel that all the relevant agencies must work together to address the issue. If they are illegal there must be public announcement in this regard. Merely asking the public not to use them is not enough. However, the government should also look into the merit of allowing the use of vehicles that cause little harm to the environ-

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

December 31

1600
The British East India Company is chartered.

1906
Mozaffar ad-Din Shah Qajar signs the Persian Constitution of 1906.

1946
President Harry Truman officially proclaims the end of hostilities in World War II.

1991
All official Soviet Union institutions have ceased operations by this date and the Soviet Union is officially dissolved.

Making 10th parliamentary election credible

MD. ABDUL ALIM

THE 9th parliamentary election of Bangladesh has been considered as the "best election in the country's history." One of the reasons for this success was the caretaker government (CTG). The initiatives taken by the Chief Election Commission were supported by the then CTG.

This election that set best practice in many areas and the achievement of the Commission has raised the expectations of the people to see freer, fairer and more credible elections in future. If the CTG is not reinstated, it would be a challenge for the EC to hold free and fair election.

In the changing context, the following issues could be considered which might help EC organize a free and fair election.

The EC is now preparing an electoral roll for the next election. One of the reasons of the failure in the January 22, 2007, election was the faulty voter list, which had 12.2 million excess or duplicated names. So the EC must ensure 100% authenticity of the voter list.

To do this, it should conduct a survey either by an independent agency or a team of experienced distinguished persons of the country that will not only promote EC for further improvement of the list but also increase the credibility of the EC by bringing trust of the people.

A good election depends on pre-election planning. We all know that the Commission drafted a roadmap, shared it with various stakeholders and moved forward with the final one. Also, an all-inclusive budget in line with the planning is crucial to meet the election expenses.

As we have about one year time in hand, the EC should prepare a comprehensive plan and budget, discuss the plan with the stakeholders and submit it to the government. The role of government here would be to provide the fund without any questions. Certainly, after election the con-

cerned department of the government will do the auditing. If the government does not agree to provide fund, the EC should inform the people of the country through a press conference.

A free and fair election mostly depends on the election-day -- a role of the temporary poll workers such as Returning Officers (ROs) and Presiding Officers (POs). The ROs are recruited from the admin cadre who are known to be highly politicised.

Under a political government, it would be a big challenge for EC to ensure neutrality of the ROs. By law, ROs are responsible to recruit POs who

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are all in all in polling stations. In order to ensure the neutrality of these officials, EC should prepare a list of potential ROs, publish it in the website and newspapers for voters comment and finalise the list based on the comment of the voters.

Moreover, in the current legal context, EC only can recommend punishment if an RO violates election rules. To keep the neutrality of ROs, EC can propose a new law which would allow it to form a high-level committee with the authority to fire the ROs for tempering election.

On the other hand, POs, who are currently recruited by the ROs, could be recruited by the local election offices. The local office could make a potential long list for each of the constituency. This list should also be published in the EC website for voters' comment before finalising.

Unlike ROs, they also could be fired by EC for election engineering.

Secretary is the administrative head of the EC secretariat. Although, the

Election Commission Secretariat Act 2009 provides that the secretary is accountable to the CEC for his duties and responsibilities, the position has scope to guide or misguide commission for engineering the election.

The current practice of recruiting secretary and additional secretary is that they are deputed from administration cadre and then back to the government. EC could move to revise the law with a provision that the secretary and additional secretary, once in the EC must not go back to the government. They will retire from the EC.

This will empower secretary and

additional secretary to work more independently and their role would be out of question by any quarter.

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In order to address these issues, EC could form an Election Monitoring Committee for each constituency consisting of local election officials and CSO/NGO representatives. The committee could be given the responsibility to monitor all activities in relation to the election. To do this, if necessary, law should be revised.

There is a co-relation between impartial election observation and a free and fair election. Observing election is, thus, an important integrity safeguard. It works as checks-and-balances that protect viability and honesty of election administration and participation of all stakeholders.

In order to frame a complete picture of a polling station, it is important to stay in a polling station all the way through. Although Bangladesh does not allow stationary observation, many countries of the world such as Georgia, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka allow observers to stay in the polling stations the whole day.

Stationary observation would be more effective rather than the mobile observation. So EC should revise the observers' guidelines and permit both stationary and mobile observation.

Media plays a vital role in three ways, i.e. communicating political messages from parties and candidates; relaying important voter information from election administrators; and subjecting the whole election process to independent scrutiny and comment.

Although EC during the previous years initiated to distribute the slots for the political parties in the state-owned media, there is no permanent code of conduct for them. Moreover, Bangladesh now has a vibrant private media -- both electronic and print. In order to ensure a level-playing field in the election, a code of conduct for all media is very important.

EC could move forward for this.

The presence of army always carries a significant impact in elections here. In all the elections held since 1991 the army was deployed. After 2008 election, the RPO was changed and there was no scope to deploy army under the current legal context.

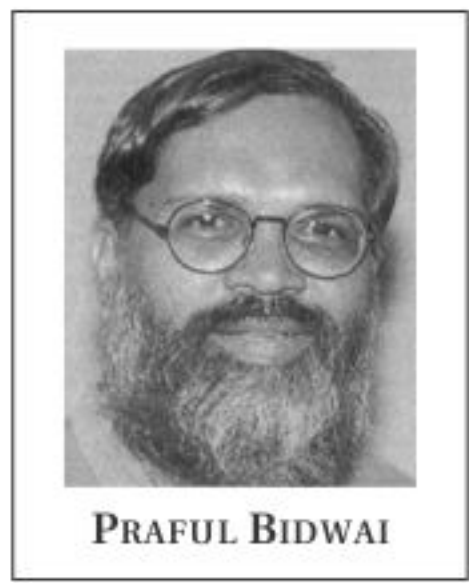
If we recall the post-election situation of 2001 and 2008, we all will agree to deploy army in elections. In this issue, EC must not consider any alternative.

All these suggestions can only be implemented if EC initiates and government agrees. We hope these two parties will move forward with these and the nation will see another free and fair election.

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PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN

Meaning of Modi's victory



PRAFUL BIDWAI

NAREN DRA Milosevic Modi's third consecutive victory is a big step backwards for Gujarat and a political setback for India.

The result will raise Modi's national ambition, as he so clearly indicated through his victory speech in Hindi. But it will also infuse more strife and communal-sectarian poison into Indian politics without removing the major obstacles that he faces in winning the National Democratic Alliance's nomination as its Prime Ministerial candidate.

Contrary to hype, Mr. Modi's win isn't historic. He is only the 13th Chief Minister in India to be elected a third time. Jyoti Basu in West Bengal served five terms. Currently, five Chief Ministers are in their third term -- in Assam, Delhi, Manipur, Odisha, and Tripura.

Even the Bharatiya Janata Party's uninterrupted win against the Congress since 1995 isn't unique to Gujarat. The Congress has been kept out of power in six other states for 20-plus years: Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Bihar, Sikkim, Tripura and West Bengal (barring briefly this year).

The BJP won 115 seats in Gujarat, or 63% of the 182 contested. But this is well short of the target it had set of exceeding its 2002 and 2007 tallies (respectively, 127 and 117). Its slogan was 150-plus!

At least 10 to 15 of the 115 wins came because midway during the campaign, Mr. Modi projected himself as India's future prime minister. This mopped-up the votes of many in the elite, who chauvinistically believe that Gujarat gets a raw deal from the Centre and yearn for the days of high-stature

national leaders like Gandhi, Vallabhbhai Patel or Morarji Desai.

Mr. Modi isn't Gujarat's best electoral performer either. That record goes to the Congress, which won 141 seats with a 52% vote-share in 1980, and 149 seats with a 56% vote-share in 1985. The BJP's latest vote-share was 48%, one percentage-point lower than in 2007, while the Congress's share rose by one percentage-point to 39%.

The BJP did well among the middle and upper classes in the cities, where 58% of Gujaratis live. (Gujarat is India's most-urbanised state). But the BJP did poorly in villages and Adivasi areas. In North Gujarat, Mr. Modi's backyard, its tally declined from 25 to 16 seats and its vote-share fell below the Congress's. This highlights Mr. Modi's limits.

Had the Congress put up a spirited fight on issues -- like Mr. Modi's role in the butchery of 1,200 Muslims in 2002, his antipathy to religious minorities, and his elitist, slavishly pro-business policies -- it could have given him a run for his money. But it didn't muster the courage to do so, and repeated the weak-kneed strategy pursued since 2002.

The Congress campaign didn't refer to secularism or justice for the 2002 victims -- despite the recent favourable Naroda-Patiya judgment. Nor did it highlight the concerns of the underprivileged, or lambast Mr. Modi for pursuing a shamelessly crony-capitalist pro-Big Business agenda. Sleazy corporations became all-powerful under him and corrupted the bureaucracy and the media.

Mr. Modi won because the Congress

in Gujarat has ceased to have coherent policies, a well-defined base and a will to power.

Nevertheless, this was admittedly Mr. Modi's individual triumph. Mr. Modi's personality cult has reduced the BJP it to his personal fief. He emasculated the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh too. All Gujarat ministers are his pawns, without agency. Brand Modi, based on his macho, aggressive persona and deep lack of compassion, is all.

Gujarat's middle-class admires this brand. Mr. Modi delivers the distorted,

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lopsided, elitist growth it profits from. He panders to its deep-seated social conservatism, absence of exposure to social reform, casteism and hostility towards Muslims.

Mr. Modi's brazen refusal to accept culpability for the 2002 pogrom, and his mocking of the "Delhi Sultanate," impress the mid-

dle-class. As does the praise heaped upon him by Gujarat's numerous and reactionary North American NRIs.

Mr. Modi claims he won because of his development record, itself stellar. But if development has anything to do with people's welfare, and at least with reducing hunger and poverty, then Gujarat fares poorly.

It ranks 13th among 17 major states on the hunger index -- behind Uttar Pradesh, Orissa, Assam and West Bengal or sub-Saharan Africa's poorer countries. Nearly 45% of Gujarati children under five are malnourished.

Employment has stagnated in Gujarat since 2004-05. Its rural wage

rates rank 14th for males and 9th for females among 20 major states. Between 2005 and 2010, poverty fell in Gujarat by just 8.6%, much slower than in Odisha (19.2%), Maharashtra (13.7%) or Tamil Nadu (13.1%).

Between 2000 and 2008, Gujarat's rank in respect of people who attend any educational institution fell from 21st to 26th. Gujarat's sex-ratio in 2011 was only 918, compared to India's 940, and its female infant mortality higher than the national average. Economist Indira Hirway argues that "the growth story of Gujarat is not inclusive, sustainable, equitable or environment-friendly."

Gujarat's GDP growth rates are relatively high because of past record. Yet, they are lower than in Haryana, Rajasthan, Odisha or Chhattisgarh. In per capita income, Gujarat tails Maharashtra Tamil Nadu, Punjab, Haryana, even Uttarakhand.

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The RSS is wary of him because he's too individualistic and has destroyed the Sangh in Gujarat. NDA allies, especially Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, openly oppose his bid.

Worse, Mr Modi's public acceptability remains extremely low. He's too divisive, aggressive and communal to have an appeal outside the Sangh Parivar's rabid hardcore. He may find that his victory in a bipolar state like Gujarat can't be replicated in India's quintessentially multipolar polity.

He can't get India's top job -- except in the unlikely event that the BJP wins 200-plus Lok Sabha seats and he heads a post-poll alliance.

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