

10TH PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION

Shortcomings in boundary delimitation

MD. ABDUL ALIM

ON February 6, the Election Commission (EC) announced the draft electoral boundaries of all 300 parliamentary constituencies in the country. Delimitation of boundaries is one of the most fundamental pre-election activities, and this has moved the EC one step closer to holding the 10th parliamentary election.

The EC has redrawn 87 electoral constituencies and the rest remain the same as they were in 2008. In preparing the revised delimitation EC considered administrative units: (i) boundaries of administrative districts have been kept unchanged and (ii) boundaries of upazilas, unions and wards have been kept undivided as much as possible. Moreover, easy access of voters to the polling stations has also been considered.

Delimitation is a complicated and controversial issue, and if the process does not ensure a level playing field for all candidates and parties, election results may vary. As a result, free and fair election cannot be ensured. Although, till date, there is no independent approach to boundary delimitation, the process must have some guiding principles: representativeness; equality of voting strength; independent, impartial boundary authority; transparency and non-discrimination.

Among these, the most imperative principles are representativeness and equality of voting strength. Due to the importance of these two principles, the UN Committee on Human Rights declared that "the drawing of electoral boundaries and the method of allocating votes should not distort the distribution of voters." OSCE's assertion in this case says: "The delineation of constituencies in which elections are conducted must preserve the equality of voting rights by providing

approximately the same ratio of voters to elected representatives for each district."

But our boundary delimitation has neither addressed the representativeness nor the equality of voting strength. At the constituency level, according to the draft boundary delimitation, the highest number of voters is 80,2164 -- in Dhaka-19 -- while the lowest number is 144,046 -- in Jessor-4. The gap in the number of voters between these two constituencies is more than 6.5 lakhs. Inequality of voters is also observed among the administrative districts. In Dhaka, highest number of voters is in Dhaka-19, while the lowest is 152,517 in Dhaka-1. In Gazipur-1, the number of voters is 621,786, but in Gazipur-4 the number is 229,883. This gap, which is against the principles of delimitation, has been observed in more than 60% of the districts.

In fact, since the 1973 election, Bangladesh never followed an absolute and all-inclusive method for boundary delimitation. Even in the last parliamentary election held in 2008, which is considered as the "best election in the country's history," delimitation was not done with proper representation as well as with



STAR ARCHIVE

The legal framework of Bangladesh needs to be revised so that the EC can involve technical experts, introduce electoral quota, conduct consultations and form a special tribunal to deal with appeals by aggrieved persons.

equal voting strength. There were huge gaps in the number of voters among the constituencies. According to 2008 delimitation, the lowest number of voters was 1,17,730 in Khulna-1 while the highest number of voters was 6,02,386 in Dhaka-19 (Savar) constituency. The difference of voters between these two constituencies was 4,48,656 (about six times). Inability to achieve proper representation of voters is a huge deficiency in delimitation. Many discrepancies were also discovered in the constituencies in a district in 2008 delimitation.

One of the big shortcomings in delimitation is that we do not have any mandatory provision to involve technical experts

Another deficiency in delimitation is that we do not have any electoral quota, i.e. average voting strength for the constituencies. In many countries, there is a quota system. In UK, the current (2013) electoral quota for each constituency is 76,641. Every constituency -- except two covering the Isle of Wight -- must have a number of registered electors that is not 5% lower or higher than this figure. In practice, this means constituencies must contain between 72,810 and 80,473 electors. Due to lack of quota system, there is enormous difference between the numbers of voters in the constituencies of Bangladesh.

in the process. In many countries, delimitation is done by a separate commission consisting of technical experts. In Australia and New Zealand, the delimitation commissions incorporate electoral officers and the surveyor-general. In India, there is a separate delimitation commission headed by a judge of the Supreme Court with representation from election commission. In England, there is an independent and impartial Boundary Commission which reviews all Parliamentary constituency boundaries every five years and submits its report to the parliament.

Delimitation is a technical job. For proper delimitation it is essential to form a technical body composed not only of impartial public officials but also of professionals with the requisite skills in election administration, geography, cartography, demography, and statistics. The legal framework of Bangladesh needs to be revised so that the EC can involve technical experts, introduce electoral quota, conduct consultations and form a special tribunal to deal with appeals by aggrieved persons.

Limited public access and inadequate consultation with stakeholders are the other shortcomings in delimitation. But delimitation without comprehensive public consultation lacks public confidence. To ensure public access in many countries, citizens are widely consulted during the process to solicit their comments and concerns regarding the placement of the constituency boundaries. A public awareness programme designed to educate stakeholders about the process, and advance consultation at the district level, might be helpful in the context of Bangladesh.

The other shortcoming is the arbitration process. After the draft electoral delimitation, aggrieved people can appeal to the EC. EC arranges hearings to resolve the matter. But in some countries legal provisions allow the persons aggrieved by a decision of the EMB in respect of a demarcation of a boundary to appeal to a tribunal. Additionally, a person aggrieved by a decision of the tribunal may appeal to the court of appeal whose decision on the matter is final. Bangladesh does not have such a provision.

Delimitation is a technical job. For proper delimitation it is essential to form a technical body composed not only of impartial public officials but also of professionals with the requisite skills in election administration, geography, cartography, demography, and statistics. The legal framework of Bangladesh needs to be revised so that the EC can involve technical experts, introduce electoral quota, conduct consultations and form a special tribunal to deal with appeals by aggrieved persons.

The writer is an international election expert, also perusing for PhD in the field of electoral governance. E-mail: alim3492@yahoo.com

Crop Insurance against climate hazards

MD. RASHED CHOWDHURY

AS an agrarian country in a deltaic environment Bangladesh relies on floods and the fertility of its soil to produce its annual grain requirement. But crop losses due to floods and other natural calamities are a recurring phenomenon which disrupts the entire economy of the country. For example, early monsoon floods, late onset of floods, and other climate variations impact food production and quality of life significantly. In addition to dislocation of cropping practices, large populations have historically suffered greatly in part due to unanticipated climate events that are typical in Bangladesh. When monsoons are delayed and crops fail as a result, farmers often don't know how to pay back the debts they have taken on to purchase seeds.

These fates are a shocking reminder of a global problem caused by global warming.

Farming has always been a gamble, but the growing number of "unusual weather events," as experts call them, makes seedling and harvesting an even riskier business. For example, In India more than 15,000 farmers commit suicide every year when they fail to pay the debts they owe to others.

"Climate change stands as a stress test for insurance, the world's largest industry with \$4.6 trillion in revenues, 7% of the global economy," writes Evan Mills, a scientist at the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory at the University of California (Berkeley). The industry now pays an average of \$50 billion a year in weather and climate-related insurance losses, including property damage and business disruptions, Mills writes in a policy forum article in the journal Science. Such claims have been doubling every decade since the 1980s.

Insurance industry representatives from the United States, Europe and Asia have been working with scientists on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change since the 1990s to better understand their exposure to risks associated with rising global temperatures. Members of the industry have taken a lead role in raising public awareness of global warming, supporting climate research, and mounting efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by making their own operations more energy efficient, and



The government has taken an initiative to introduce agriculture insurance through state-owned general insurance company Shadharan Bima Corporation for small and medium farmers. This is a praise-worthy initiative!

insurers' models extrapolate historical data rather than simulate the climate system, and they require outputs at finer scales and shorter time frames than climate models.

There is talk floating in Bangladesh about a crop insurance programme. Recently, the prime minister said in an international seminar on agriculture and micro-insurance that her government planned to bring the agriculture sector under insurance coverage to save farmers from losses caused by natural calamities. The government has taken an initiative to introduce agriculture insurance through state-owned general insurance company Shadharan Bima Corporation for small and medium farmers. This is a praise-worthy initiative!

Many countries have already implemented crop insurance programmes. In most cases these are all sponsored by the government. However, complementary to the federal (government) crop insurance programmes, a climate insurance company (The Climate

Corporation, a start-up based in Silicon Valley, USA) started a new type of "climate insurance programme" that is likely to reduce farmers' financial risks by crossing agriculture with the IT industry's latest trend -- big data (i.e., seasonal climate data). They call it 'Total Weather Insurance' (TWI). TWI is the full-season insurance programme that enables farmers in the US to protect their potential profits by insuring against adverse weather events that can cause yield shortfalls.

TWI's unique Farm-Level Optimizer provides precision coverage based on crop, field location, soil type, and relative maturity of seed planted. They collect all kinds of information -- including on weather patterns, climate trends and soil characteristics -- and analyses the data down to an individual field. These insights are then used to offer farmers tailored insurance policies against the damage from extreme weather events. Premiums for the TWI plans depend on crop and location. On average, they cost about 3% of the land's revenue. In case of extreme weather at the wrong time of the season, the insurance company pays out a portion of the damaged crops (roughly about \$300 per acre). In contrast to existing government schemes, farmers don't have to prove actual losses. Payouts are triggered automatically without paperwork when the firm's data show that writing a check is justified.

Finally, I would like to conclude that, as complementary to Shadharan Bima Corporation, the policy makers in Bangladesh may also think of gradually implementing the TWI programmes, as this could be one of the viable alternatives to help minimise the sufferings of the farmers during any climate extremes. In order to make TWI instrumental in Bangladesh, what is needed is better comprehension of seasonal climate variability and change (i.e., El Nino/La Nina based climate outlook is an option), and improved translation of this information into products and their coordination to the ground level. Like many other countries, I hope that the TWI will soon be instrumental in Bangladesh in protecting farmers against climate hazards.

The writer is Principal Research Scientist, Pacific ENSO Applications Climate Center (PEAC), University of Hawaii, USA. Email: rashed.chowdhury@outlook.com

More transcripts of real conversations



ALMOST every time you pick up the phone in Hong Kong, you end up with a good laugh. Here are seven real-life transcripts of conversations.

1. Simon Mok phoned a Wyndham Street restaurant to ask about its menu.

"You have an all-day breakfast?"

"Yes sir."

"When do you open?"

"Lunchtime, sir."

2. Colin Robertson called his own office at the Commission for Canada.

"This is Colin Robertson. I'd like to speak to..."

"Mr Robertson is not here."

"No. THIS is Mr Robertson. I want..."

"Why are you calling yourself?"

3. Sarah Morris went to the Apple Camera Shop in Kowloon to follow up on a suspiciously cheap price she had been offered for a Canon EOS 10 camera. The staff member recognised her as soon as she walked in.

"Sorry. No camera."

"What? Have you run out of stock?"

"No. They finished make. They no more make this model."

"You're telling me Canon does not make the EOS 10 any more?"

"Canon no make any cameras now."

4. Writer Simon Winchester phoned the concierge at the Mandarin Oriental hotel to ask him for some Beethoven. The usual concierge was off so Simon spoke to a young staff member.

"Do you know who Beethoven is?"

"No. What room is he in?"

"No, no, he's dead."

"Oh. We'd better call security."

5. A friend called the MTR Corp, Hong Kong's main underground transit system, to ask the name of the melody that was playing in a loop on the station sound system.

"What is the music that is playing in the stations?"

"It's a tape."

"Yes, but what do you call it?"

"We call it 'a tape'."

6. A journalist called the Hong Kong office of Hawley and Hazel Chemical Co.

"Good morning. Do you have a public relations department?"

"No, we don't."

"Do you use an agency for your public relations?"

"Yes, we do."

"Can I have their name and contact number?"

"No, I'm sorry. That information is confidential."

If that firm's PR agency is reading this, now you know why you never get any referrals.

7. Reporter Nick Griffin was weighed in a Hong Kong hospital. The reading showed he was underweight.

"It says 50 kilos."

"This must be the ladies' scales."

[The nurse then goes to the male ward and returns with another weighing machine.]

"This is from a male ward."

"Sixty kilos."

Nick said to me afterwards: "So there you have it. In Hong Kong, a kilo of male does not weigh the same as a kilo of female."