

Election time government: Getting to yes?

IFTEKHARUZZAMAN

At the core of the on-going political crisis of destructive and blood-letting hartals, tension and conflict at the expense of public interest, insecurity and uncertainty that can be hugely detrimental to the progress of Bangladesh towards democracy, is the tenth parliamentary election due at the end of the tenure of the government.

Politicians all over the democratic world engage in politics for going to power through duly held free, fair and credible elections that ensure unrestricted and spontaneous participation of all voters and contending parties. The result of such elections, or in other words who will gain the mandate to form the government, and who will be given the responsibility to be in opposition to hold the government to account, is left to the people.

In our case the electoral game is played from a zero-sum platform of a pre-determined result -- one side stubborn to have it pre-determined that they will continue to hold power, while the other is determined to go to power that was lost the previous time. That the term "power" also entails responsibility and that being in opposition is also meant to exercise power and responsibility, particularly to ensure that the government is accountable to the people through them, is almost totally lost.

Over the years since restoration of democracy unseating the authoritarian regime, our leaders on both sides of the political spectrum have worked hard to have in place an election structure and process that can ensure only victory. Losing in election is almost absent in the political parlance to an extent that is akin to a "mutually assured destruction," although it is only the people who are exposed to this destructive strategy, as painfully demonstrated in recent skyrocketed political violence.

The economy is on the verge of being in shambles; business, investment and industry are faced with

unprecedented loss; key fundamental rights of people like life, safety, liberty, health, education are faced with unprecedented jeopardy; a whole generation of children whose schools and scores are exposed to indiscriminate risks on a regular basis is growing with a knowledge of violence and insecurity as way of life.

Can there be any light at the end of the tunnel? The answer is no and yes. No, if the mutual distrust, tension and hatred between the major contenders continue. In that case the end-result can help anything but democracy and democratic aspirations of the people.

The answer can be yes, if like the optimist in me says, there is a realisation at the top that enough is enough; that there is no option but to look for a mutually acceptable solution. They will have to do so because they are in politics, as we understand, for the good of

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the people and democracy; they are also the ones who don't need to be reminded of the ill-effects for the nation in general and for them in particular, of the failures in the past to ensure peaceful transition.

In this context Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) has proposed a framework and process as a basis to work for "getting to yes" towards an election-time government (ETG) that would conduct election not only in free, fair and credible manner but also ensure participation of all parties. This comes at a time when the ruling side is determined, as per 15th Amendment to the Constitution, to hold the election under its own authority, which is unacceptable to the opposition, while for the latter the now-unconstitutional caretaker government is the only option, a non-starter for the government. The proposal

also aims to address crucial concerns over conflict of interest and level playing field.

At the centre of the TIB proposal is a key role of the parliament and public representatives. The first step is a Parliamentary Consensus Committee (PCC). The speaker may call upon the two major parties/allies to form the PCC consisting of equal share in a total of four or six or any other mutually agreeable number of elected representatives from each side. The members of PCC would represent political acumen, mutual tolerance and respect. Once the speaker has received the list he will convene the first meeting of PCC, in whose work the speaker will have no further role.

The Committee will draw up a list of an 11-member ETG, one of whom will be the head, the remaining ten to be designated by each side in either equal number of

five each or in a proportion reflecting respective popular votes received in elections to the 7th, 8th and 9th Parliaments.

The head of the ETG will be identified by PCC in consultation with respective parties following one of the two options. One, to first select 10 members who in consultation with PCC will select a consensus head of ETG either from elected representatives, or an unelected non-partisan individual of high integrity and reputation for credible contribution to public life. The second option is to first identify the head, who in consultation with PCC will then identify the remaining 10 members.

The PCC may start work at least 30 days before the end of the tenure of the parliament and complete its work in time so that once the speaker has submitted

the list of ETG to the president, the latter can dissolve the parliament and call upon the ETG to take over. In case the PCC is not in a position to identify a consensus individual as head of ETG, they may draw a panel of three for the president to select one.

In selecting the 10 cabinet members, there can be three options maintaining the two above-mentioned ratios of equal or proportionate to popular votes. In the first option, all 10 members can be from elected representatives; second, a combination of both elected representatives and un-elected non-partisan individuals; or third, all 10 can be un-elected non-partisan individuals.

The PCC may elect two co-conveners representing both sides to convene and conduct meetings and function as spokespersons to communicate their work to the people in the interest of transparency, ensuring necessary confidentiality and credibility of the process. The office of the secretary of the Parliament may provide secretarial support to the Committee.

The tenure of ETG will be 90 days, provided that only in case of extraordinarily grave natural disaster the possibility of extension of the tenure can be considered apropos Article 106 of the Constitution. The head of the ETG will arrange cabinet portfolios in consultation with the 10 members, whom s/he will lead and guide with advice of the president, if necessary. No member of ETG may be elected to the 10th Parliament, nor gainfully employed under the new government's tenure. The jurisdiction of ETG will be restricted to conduct of the election ensuring full independence of the Election Commission and running only the routine matters of the government.

TIB is aware that the above comes as no magic wand to resolve the on-going crisis, but may provide a basis to start dialogue to get to yes. If agreed upon, these will require the necessary constitutional amendment, which may also be preceded by referendum.

The writer is Executive Director of Transparency International Bangladesh.

SEMINAR AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY

Environment-development relationship: The context of Bangladesh

MIZAN R. KHAN

The South Asia Institute and Center for the Environment at Harvard University is sponsoring a seminar on the above topic on April 13. It is being attended by faculty members of Harvard, MIT, Brown and other premier US universities, expatriate Bangladeshis and home experts. Bangladesh minister of environment and forests, Dr. Hasan Mahmud, MP, will attend the day-long event as the chief guest, and present a Paper on Climate Change, Bangladesh and Global Responsibility. Channel i is the media partner for the event.

Why is the topic so important for Bangladesh at this juncture of global and national development? The debate over environment-development relationship is not new. However, for the last few decades, this relationship has become extremely crucial for reasons that we, each and every citizen of this globe, and particularly of Bangladesh, experience each day.

Let me go back a bit to recall the trajectory of development engineering that developing countries have traversed for the last few decades. After decolonisation, we started with the "growth-based trickle down" idea, then came "growth with equity," followed by "basic needs approach" and "participatory development." Finally came the magic wand of sustainable development (SD) in the mid-1980s, which embodies all these previous strategies, with only one new element added, i.e. environmental sustainability. This new mantra in development was accompanied by the end of communism in the

eastern bloc, and Fukuyama was a pioneer in trumpeting the "End of History" in the form of final victory of capitalism. The mission-like and contested concept of SD, with its hundreds of interpretations, finally had a consensus based on three dimensions -- economic, social and environmental.

When we all are floating in the raging tide of globalisation, what do we see in the economic dimension after more than two decades? We see financialised capitalism, plain and simple, riddled with severe crisis, starting in the 1990s in East Asia and spreading to Russia and Argentina and beyond. Finally it has spread the world over. Now investments go more for trading in virtual assets -- financial assets and their derivatives -- rather than investments in production of real goods and services. So, the result is growing unemployment in the US and Europe.

Daniels (2012, 6) argues about globalisation that the "unevenness is not just incidental, but crucial to understanding the consequences of financial globalisation" Many LDCs remain largely "off the map" of finance, both discursively and materially. Nobel Prize Economist Joseph Stiglitz, in his latest book *The Price of Inequality* (2012), shows that globalisation has increased inequality both within and between nations, and he warns that this is not good for the global economy and the top rich at the end of the day. He has developed and popularised the thesis of "1% of the people, 1% by the people and 1% for the people." Just one number suffices to testify about the reality of inequality: only 400 persons in the US own assets more than the combined worth of 185 million US citizens.

In similar vein, another economist, Richard Jolly (*The Broker*, 2011), argues that the global system has created "intersecting inequalities," which trap people

in poverty from generation to generation. Similar is the condition of a group of LDCs in the world, which are condemned to a "ghettoised space" under this uneven globalisation. It is interesting to note that now almost 80% of the global poor live in the middle income countries (MIC), such as China, India and countries of Latin America.

What about the new dimension, i.e. environmental sustainability? Human-induced climate change is universally agreed to be the Red Light of global unsustainability. Even normally staid institutions like the World Bank and the International Energy Agency have come up with warnings of cataclysmic and irreversible changes in the climate system. The glaring contradiction is that while the industrial countries press for adopting newer market mechanisms for emissions trading, they don't commit to binding reductions! Even an O level Economics student understands that without binding commitments by major emitters for reduction, there will never be policy and market certainty, and private sector will never come in a vacuum. We witnessed in 2012 a 40% rise of greenhouse gas emissions globally, instead of the set target of 5.2% average reduction in industrial countries under the Kyoto Protocol.

So the question is: will this brand of carbon capitalism seeing into the neo-liberal market orthodoxy stop -- as Max Weber, the famous sociologist, cogently stated -- "until the last ton of fossil fuel is burnt?" Not for sure! On the other hand the LDCs have been condemned to double exposure - to runaway globalisation and climate change, making them "double losers." Just one example:

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Bangladeshi garment products end up paying 4/5 times more tariff to enter the US market than other industrial countries! On top of this, the imposed burden of climate change is pulling us decades

back. With a population half of the US, but 65 times smaller in territory, Bangladesh is actually regarded as a "development paradox," with its average of 6% growth a year during the last two decades. If we have no climate disasters during any year, Bangladesh achieves self-sufficiency in food production. What a miracle! Still, our country is regarded by many as a "test case" of SD, given its socio-economic and physical-geographical parameters. The question is: How can countries like Bangladesh develop sustainably under this model of financial globalisation?

This little snapshot on global and national scenarios gives the background of this important seminar being held this weekend. Specifically, we as organisers floated a few questions for participants to answers: how can Bangladesh leap into the rank of MICs by end of this decade? As the few latest successes in development by some countries are idiosyncratic, following no generic framing, what kind of a path can Bangladesh follow? How can our country overcome climate change predicaments, including the likely huge human displacements? How can we ensure sustainable energy and water security? How can our development partners support us more effectively? We hope to have some answers on these queries from the deliberations of distinguished experts from home and abroad.

The writer is Professor, NSU, Dhaka. Currently, Visiting Scholar, Brown University & Co-Chair, Seminar Organizing Committee. Email: mizan_khan@brown.edu

BITTER TRUTH

Save water save life



Md. ASADULLAH KHAN

WATER -- which always finds its own level -- also happens to be a great leveller. It is fundamental to the survival of every human being. But every summer, Bangladesh discovers that life with water shortages is increasingly becoming constrained. From being a necessity, water has now become a luxury. With pipes running dry, residents of Dhaka

and Chittagong use alternative sources like tankers serviced by Wasa during extreme shortage.

The situation in villages is more pathetic. With shortage of water due to drying up of ponds, and with no fresh ponds being dug during the last several decades, farmers have remained mired in digging tube wells deeper and deeper to reach the decreasing ground water. Water, it seems, is the single biggest crisis facing Bangladesh now.

How did the situation come to such a sorry pass? Tone of the reasons for the country's growing thirst is the rate at which its population is increasing. While that may be so, the water crisis is also the culmination of myopic planning, muddled policies and misguided perceptions. As cities grew and towns sprouted, no thought was given to the emerging mismatch between demand and supply.

In the quest for food security, groundwater was pushed as a solution -- it was cheaper and quicker -- while storage and distribution projects were neglected. Industry continues to be the biggest polluter along with pesticide and fertilizer-ridden discharge from fields. Even though most cities are based on river banks, the rapid pace of urbanisation has led to the drying up of traditional water sources like tanks and lakes.

The first signs of population boom and water stress were visible in the 1980s, but most municipalities and corporations focused on tapping ground water resources in and around the cities. Expectedly, pressure on ground water has built up. Tube wells are now routinely dug to a depth of about 100m and above in cities. Pumps are being sunk 10m to 20m deeper every year.

Desperate inhabitants, not only in urban areas but also in villages, are forced to buy water from vans ferrying it in water-starved areas. Worse, conservation has not figured in our scheme of things -- neither directly through steps like water harvesting nor indirectly through restoration of canals, lakes and watersheds that have been encroached upon by land grabbers.

It is difficult to think of Baridhara, Gulshan, Banani, Dhanmondi and Uttara as being anything other than what they are today -- a veritable jungle of residential apartment blocks, schools, hospitals, clinics and private universities. Once, there were lakes and canals within and running through the city zones. About 250sq km of watersheds around the city have either been encroached upon or dried up due to inadequate flow from the main water bodies. The result has been a drastic depletion in the water table.

The dismal statistics are only a part of the story. To save the city dwellers from the sufferings of water logging at the slightest rainfall or rush of flood water, it has become imperative on the part of the government to constitute an independent Lake/Watershed Development Authority. This should be an autonomous body for the protection, conservation, restoration, regeneration, and integrated development of the lakes, watersheds, rivers Buriganga, Shitalakhya, Balu and Turag, and many canals.

Known as a barometer of the ecological health of a city, water bodies also determine its climate. They help control humidity and temperature levels, recharge aquifers, and also act as instruments of rain water harvesting. With a little initiative and commitment, these lakes could be turned into a hydrological chain, and during monsoon surplus water from the upstream lake could be flowed into the next lake.

Rapid urbanisation has led to the loss of wetlands. The biggest problem seems to be the disposal of untreated sewage into the lakes and water bodies anywhere and everywhere. Studies have revealed that these lakes and water bodies have become full fledged sinks for domestic sewages, effluents from industries and agricultural run off of silt and pesticides that are wreaking havoc on the ecosystem.

In Bangalore in 1995, a sudden rise in the death of fresh water fish in lakes like Sankey and Lalbagh sounded an alarm and the government then took a comprehensive plan for restoration of such lakes. Unhappily, in our country, mass death of fish in Gulshan, Banani, Baridhara lakes could not sensitize our administration. Even though the DoE conducted a lab test of the water in Uttara lake and made recommendation to Rajuk to stop fish harvesting in the lake until the water was free from toxic ingredients, no step in that direction has been taken yet. The government has to restore these water bodies because they could be a supply source Wasa for in times of severe crisis.

Because of indifference, negligence and inaction, Uttara lake has shrunk to 3.5km in length from 5km, and the width to 100m from the previous 200m, because of encroachment and siltation through years, and seems

destined to disappear in no time. It still exists, but is a cesspool of blackish stagnant water. The lake's poisoned water now symbolises not life but death.

Following a representation by citizens to

the prime minister, a directive issued by the office of the prime minister in January, 2011 asked the Housing and Works Ministry to take effective steps for the recovery and conservation of Uttara lake.

Consequently, Rajuk prepared a DPP costing about Tk. 86 crore keeping provision for acquisition of 2.433 acres of land on the last end of the lake. It went to the Planning Commission in July 2012 for final approval. The infrastructure Division of the Commission in its PEC meeting last December questioned the justification of including some components in the DPP. It asked Rajuk to resubmit the DPP after adjusting cost escalation through a joint survey by the Housing and Works Ministry, Rajuk, IMED, and Infrastructure Division of the Planning Commission with exclusion of some components that they deemed unnecessary. But Rajuk or agencies concerned have made no effort to do so as yet.

That's the story of development projects in this country stagnating year after year with hardly anyone held to account for such inordinate delay or inaction. It's not the question of availability of fund, but lack of willingness, initiative and commitment to improve our environment. It should be brought home to all involved in governance, planning and healthcare that air, land and water are precious natural resources.

Water, not oil, is the most precious liquid in our lives, and we must conserve surface water that will help recharge the aquifers. If we run short of oil or other fossil fuels, we can use alternative energy sources. But if we have no potable water, we are doomed.

The writer is a columnist of The Daily Star. E-mail: aukhandk@gmail.com