Democracy: implements and impediments

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It is now half well established that credible local elections can be held under this Awami League government, given that the opposition (BNP-Jamaat)-backed candidates have won handsomely in five major city corporations elections over the past month. For the other half to be acknowledged the nation has to wait for the victory of a candidate supported by Awami League and the subsequent BNP-Jamaat reaction to that defeat.

It was pitiable at best how the BNP leaders continued to harp on the once popularly employed theme that the Gazipur City Corporation elections will be rigged by the party in power several days before the polling with the volume turned on 24 hours before D-day. Their demand for deploying Army to counter government intimidation, cry of illegal flow of funds, fear of worsening law and order situation, etc. were all silenced by the victory of their candidate (a former minister) against an AL stalwart, a three-time Pourashava Mayor. A high-powered BNP delegation also visited the Election Commission during the elections to place their complaints of 'foul play'. They only withdrew their persistent opposition after the victory margin against the AL's formidable candidate settled at more than one lakh.

If free and fair elections at Gazipur and the four other city corporations earlier in June with a turn-out of plus sixty per cent were signs of democracy in Bangladesh, the customary preparation (read ploy) by any party of a set of grievances before the elections to reject the polls after a defeat is not. In today's context it is unfortunate, and an impediment to a nation's growth and stability. 'Gazipur City was fair' and 'Kishoreganj MP Elections were not' are unacceptable quick contradictions in today's widely media-covered polls procedure.

For the growth and sustainability of democracy the support of the opposition is essential. Our opposition, whosoever is that, has to swallow the fact the supporting democratic practices is not akin to supporting the party in government; it is approving their good work towards which the opposition also played a vital role.

Another indication of democratic process in order is the opinion polls conducted and the freedom to publish the results. One such poll was carried out by Connecting Dots, Bangladesh at Rajshahi and Sylhet before their mayoral elections.

Voters were asked, 'If you plan not to cast your vote for AL', what would be the issue; and they could vote for any number of issues. Contrary to media hype, Padma Bridge, Grameen Bank, Hefajat and Professor Yunus featured as the bottom four (2.5-8% of the respondents) and in that order. The real issues that the voters were pondering on were incumbent mayor's failure to fulfil last elections pledge, 65%, (AL take note), Stock market crash, 56%, mastani of local AL and affiliates, 55%, arrogance of elected leader, 54%, electricity crisis, 49%, prices of essentials, 43%, gas, 45%, and local corruption, 39%.AL, take note.

Several other ingredients of democracy are not yet fully functional. Police and local administration must appear to be neutral to the public, and be. They must work to earn the confidence of the people. The importance of the government's influence on the electronic media has largely lessened by the success of private Radio and Television channels.That is democracy. The compulsion of broadcasting BTV news on private channels should be stopped. That is not democracy. It is at best an indecent practice.

Another distasteful system being practised by all the major parties is that a large number of children of MPs are becoming (nay! being made) MPs. As has been said before, if the son of an engineer cannot become an engineer automatically, and likewise for doctors, lawyers, armed forces personnel, agriculturists, bankers, drivers, builders, is the job of representing a constituency and debating national and world issues that simple and undemanding?

Does that mean that babies and grandchildren of MPs and ministers cannot wear the shoes of their ancestors? Far from it, but the ratio has to be credible. Every child of an MP cannot be a sure-shot MP. Potential, yes!But the aspirant child has to put in a lot of effort, groom himself to the task ahead, be involved actively in local politics, and await his turn in the hierarchy of the party ladder. MP-ship should not be a gift to a grieving child, or the passing of mantle from an aging parliamentarian to his next of kin. If the trend continues then sooner than later there will be 330 MPs with the tag: s/o or d/o (former) MP. Are we going to vote every five years and in between to reincarnate the feudal system that our forefathers sacrificed their lives to rid?

The time has come to change our mind set. Over the past two decades, several rounds of national and local elections have brought to the fore the matter of accountability. The voters are surely more aware, although more needs to be done, as half-truths still find credence among the needy and the illiterate. And those half-truths are often created by the literate amongst us. ■