

Is this democracy or democrazy?

SHAKHAWAT LITON

A few lakh voters in five upazilas were entitled to exercise their franchise on September 22 to elect their local representatives. But they were not allowed to exercise their constitutional right to vote. Ruling Awami League men allegedly resorted to vote rigging, ballot box stuffing and creating panic among the voters and rivals to win the battle of ballots in Mehendiganj upazila of Barisal, Atpara of Netrokona, Phulgazi of Feni, Digholia of Khulna and Ranisankail upazila of Thakurgaon. The ruling party backed candidates won all the chairmen and vice-chairmen posts up for polls in those upazilas.

The large scale rigging in the polls failed to generate much attention. There was hardly any discussion on it at national level. This is an ominous sign. Has everybody accepted rigging in elections?

What happened in the five upazila polls on September 22 in fact was a reflection of the prevailing situation which developed through the voter-less and one-sided January 5 parliamentary election. The January 5 election bulldozed the electoral system which had been gradually strengthened over the last two decades. Yet, the government formed through the controversial polls survived, which encouraged ruling AL-men to resort to large scale rigging in polls to more than 400 upazila parishads held in February and March and to some more parishads in the following months. That election completely ruined the electoral system. So, there is little hope for free and fair election even in a local government body. Polls in local government bodies can in no way be overlooked or considered less important as democracy cannot flourish if democratic practice is absent at grassroots levels.

The government formed through the January 5 elec-

tions seems to have considered the rigging in the upazila polls as a normal practice. They have not taken any action against the ruling party men who destroyed the electoral system by resorting to widespread rigging in the polls. The government's will is a must for holding a free and fair election. It was proved during the past AL-led government during 2009-2013. A huge number of elections were held in local government bodies, and also by-elections to some parliamentary constituencies. All the polls were largely free and fair. The then government had felt proud of the fairness of the elections.

However, there is a fundamental difference between the past AL-led government and the present one. The past AL-led government was formed through a free and fair election held on December 29, 2008. It did not suffer from crisis of legitimacy. But the present government has lack of legitimacy. Therefore, one may argue that the ruling AL does not have the moral right to take strong actions against unruly party men as the party itself assumed power through a controversial election. The lack of action against the unruly party men will encourage them to destroy further the electoral system whenever any election is held.

The present Election Commission (EC) must take the responsibility for the damage done to the electoral system. It has become a completely dysfunctional body, and seems to have forgotten its constitutional responsibilities. It had opened investigation into the widespread rigging, but the process was a futile exercise as the EC did not find any proof of rigging in the upazila polls. Thus, it has demonstrated its inability to take actions against the widespread rigging in the upazila polls. This EC is also liable for damaging the electoral system by holding the voter-less January 5 election in which more than half of the parliamentary constituencies got their representatives elected without a single vote being cast.

The crucial question is how long will it take to put the electoral system in order? Are those people who were elected through voter-less and rigged elections public representatives? If they do not hesitate to steal people's voting rights, it is natural that they will not hesitate to embezzle people's money and wealth when they are in power. Those who assume power through violating the electoral laws will not be able to uphold the rule of law. They will continue violating the laws for their personal gains. This can in no way be a democracy. Is this a new form of kleptocracy?

Our politicians love to speak for democracy. They very often cite names of other countries when the references suit their purpose. Take two examples how democracy functions in other countries.

The existence of the United Kingdom was put on ballot in the Scottish referendum held on September 18. The UK government, led by David Cameron, did not resort to any means to rig the referendum in favour of the survival of the UK. The Scottish people were allowed to cast their votes to decide whether Scotland will continue staying with the UK or emerge as an independent country after staying with the union for more than 300 years. The outcome of the referendum frustrated those, including the chief of the Scottish government, who had wanted an independent Scotland. Yet, all accepted the outcome. This is the beauty of democracy. The beauty and power of democracy were also made crystal clear when a tea boy, Narendra Modi, emerged as the leader of India, the world's largest democracy. The elections allowed the people to decide how and by whom they want to be governed.

In Bangladesh, the present situation is completely the opposite of democracy. The beauty of democracy is absent.

The writer is Senior Reporter, The Daily Star.

FOREIGN MINISTER'S VISIT TO NEW DELHI Nothing concrete for Bangladesh

BOTTOM LINE



BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

THE third meeting of the India-Bangladesh Joint Consultative Commission (JCC) was held in New Delhi on September 20, 2014. The visiting Bangladesh delegation was led by Foreign Minister A. H. Mahmood Ali, MP, while the Indian delegation was led by External Affairs Minister Ms. Sushma Swaraj.

This was the first visit of a senior cabinet minister from Bangladesh to India after Prime Minister Narendra Modi formed the government. This visit was important for the people of Bangladesh as it could provide picture of how and when the pending bilateral issues would be resolved.

After the conclusion of the visit, a 34-paragraph joint statement was released. When the statement is scrutinised, it reveals that only promises and commitments were made by India regarding the core issues raised by Bangladesh, without any concrete action with time-frame as to their resolution. On the other hand, it may be seen that concrete action with time-frame has been mentioned for issues which directly affect India. Below are some of the instances which may illustrate the above view.

First, regarding Teesta water sharing agreement and ratification of Land Boundary agreement (LBA), both sides "reiterated their commitment" to finalisation of sharing of the waters of the Teesta and Feni rivers, and that the ratification of LBA "was underway." No time-bound steps are provided because ratification requires political consensus in India.

Second, border management, transit or transshipment through Bangladesh to the northeastern states of India, coastal shipping and other related connectivity matters received so much importance that about 12 paragraphs on these issues were included in the statement. Time-bound steps have been mentioned regarding coastal shipping as both sides agreed that trial runs would be held in October and the next round of shipping secretary level talks will take place in Dhaka in October 2014. On border killing of Bangladesh civilians, both sides agreed that the number "should come down to zero" and not that the number should be zero.

On regional cooperation involving Nepal and Bhutan, both sides "stressed the importance of bringing about sub-regional cooperation in water resources management and power/hydropower and connectivity." Who does not know its importance? Where are the proposals for concrete action for regional cooperation under the 2011 Framework Agreement of Cooperation for Development? It is surprising that reference to this very significant 2011 agreement for regional cooperation is missing from the statement.

Third, on India's power transfer through Bangladesh, both sides welcomed the decision of the Joint Steering Committee to accept the recommendations of the Joint Technical Team on power evacuation from the North East of India through Bangladesh with suitable power tapping points in Bangladesh. They directed that the relevant report in this regard be completed within the "agreed six month period." Again, time-bound action has been mentioned in this case.

Fourth, on reducing huge trade deficit of Bangladesh, the two sides "agreed on the need to promote balanced bilateral trade and to address para-tariff and non-tariff barriers." The Bangladesh side handed over a list of barriers to trade being faced by Bangladesh exports to India. The Indian side agreed to examine the list, but no time frame is mentioned for such examination.

Fifth, on the issue of holding of meetings of the Joint Rivers Commission, both sides resolved to hold the 38th Meeting in Dhaka "at a mutually convenient date." No date or time frame for holding the meeting was mentioned. The expression "mutually convenient date" is generally employed to delay a meeting.

Sixth, there is no proposed step on further easing visa facilities for Bangladesh nationals, although the statement welcomed growing exchanges between the two peoples which is helping to foster greater understanding and goodwill between the two countries. Issue of visa for India has been a great barrier for Bangladesh nationals in increasing people-to-people contact between the two countries.

Seventh, on the status of implementation of projects under the \$ 800 million concessional Line of Credit extended by India to Bangladesh in 2010, both sides noted that projects amounting to \$ 751.95 million "were being processed and are at various stages of implementation." More than four and half years have passed, but many projects are still being processed. The Bangladesh side asked for favourable consideration for second Line of Credit from India, whose response to the request has not been mentioned.

Finally, it transpires from media that the Teesta water agreement cannot be concluded before 2016 as the election in West Bengal will be held in that year and both Trinamool Congress and BJP desire to win the state election, and that it is not politically desirable to conclude an agreement on Teesta water before the state election.

As regards LBA, BJP of Assam reportedly objects to the ratification of LBA as it loses some territory of the state. Meanwhile, the BJP government wishes to make progress in other sectors with Bangladesh without being bogged down with the above two issues. The position of the BJP government seems to be misconceived because the people of Bangladesh want the two issues settled first before moving to other areas of cooperation.

The writer is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

Coping with river bank erosion: What should we focus on?

MOHAMMED NORUL ALAM RAJU and AFROZA TAZNIN

River bank erosion

RIVER bank erosion is a regular phenomenon in Bangladesh, which is located in the delta of three mighty rivers -- Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna. According to CEGIS, 88780 hac of land had been eroded along the Brahmaputra, 27,990 hac along the Padma and 38,510 hac along their distributaries between 1973 and 2007 (IRIN, 2010). About 15 to 20 million people are at risk from the effects of erosion in the country while about 1 million people living in 94 upazilas are directly affected by riverbank erosion every year. As per different sources, 500 kilometers of river bank face severe problems related to erosion. The north-west part of the country is particularly prone to river bank erosion, which has turned the region into an economically depressed area. About 1 million people are directly affected by river erosion every year and landlessness could be high as 70% (RMMRU, 2007).

Impact of river bank erosion

River bank erosion contributes immensely to the marginalisation process of a large number of people of the country by displacing households and adversely affecting their social and economical circumstances, triggering the flow of migration and increasing urban poverty as consequences. Although a number of policies and acts have been formulated with the aim of addressing of needs of marginalised people, the country is far from developing appropriate guidelines for addressing the causes and consequences of river bank erosion. Unfortunately, river bank erosion does not draw the attention of the government and non-government agencies as the other disasters do.

The affected people do not have access to institutional support and are not included in any rehabilitation programme, while the main issue is overlooked. When they are displaced from their birth places they become disconnected from their sources of income, lands, food production and other livelihood options, which forces them to engage in new livelihood activities. Education of their children is disrupted, and they are deprived of safe water, sanitation and other basic needs.

Coping mechanism

As part of their coping mechanism, the affected people depend on their local knowledge and strategies. When rainy season comes and if erosion begins, they start shifting their belongings to safer places. The households experiencing river bank erosion first send away their women and children to safety. Those who have access to boats and manpower can save their belongings while others could lose everything.

A few of them who have the capacity to buy new land shift there while most of them continue to live in temporary shelters for a long time. Most of the households are forced to sell their personal belongings to survive after displacement. The place of resettlement completely depends on their networks, availability of the options and social kinship. Other factors also impact the choice of destination. As part of long term survival strategy, support from government and NGOs, and credit and loans from



relatives and neighbours help them a lot to begin a new livelihood. It is not easy for them to gain access to banks or other financial institutions for credit or loans.

How to address river bank erosion

There is a major gap in coordination among the various government agencies and also between the government and non-government initiatives with regard to water logging. The government initiative is mainly focused on some subsidy programmes including relief distribution, Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF), Vulnerable Group Development (VGD), etc., however, these programmes are often inadequate, disorganised, politicised, ad-hoc and ineffective; thus there is much scope for improvement of government initiatives. Close coordination is prerequisite to reduce the problem among different local government institutions. On the other hand, few NGOs have specific programmes targeting those affected by river bank erosion although they make enormous efforts for addressing the other disasters, both natural and man-made.

The government should include river bank erosion disaster in its five year programmes and a clear vision should be set for addressing it. A data base is required to assess the magnitude of river bank erosion and the number of people affected by it. A national habitat policy should be formulated that would ensure the need for shelter of thousands of people displaced every year. In all these phases, local government agencies should play the lead role and they should have the statistics of possible affected people who live in the risky side of the river. Along with these, local government agencies should be decentralised and have the capacity along with account-

ability mechanism with the aim of reducing vulnerability, and responding quickly and effectively.

Besides these broader aspects, there is a need to implement some activities in the river bank erosion prone areas, including setting up early warning systems in all the critical zones and monitoring during critical periods using the local knowledge; establishing embankments or spurs in the erosion affected areas; generating alternative employment opportunity related to fishing and industry; and taking initiatives to distribute 'khas' land to most vulnerable people. This 'khas' land distribution programme may reduce the flow of migration to the urban areas.

During rehabilitation of the affected community in the erosion prone areas, there should be a resettlement plan for income generating activities and development of health care facilities, services and education. NGOs can provide flexible credit schemes to the affected people so that they can immediately restart their income generating activities. NGOs can campaign for rights-based advocacy campaign so that affected people may be encouraged to demand access to education, health care, water, sanitation and work opportunities as part of their rights.

Considering the magnitude and intensity, it is high time to develop national level strategies for better response to floods and riverbank erosion disasters. We may not be able to fight against the forces of nature, but we can develop strategies to fight the consequences.

The writers are Nation Union Coordinator at World Vision Bangladesh and, GIS Analyst at Helen Keller International, respectively. Email: raju_ahmed07@yahoo.com

CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph

ACROSS

- 1 "It's a Wonderful Life" director
- 6 Brief
- 11 In the area
- 12 Shade
- 13 Some lights
- 14 Irish author Doyle
- 15 Abates
- 17 Beatles descriptor
- 19 Cash dispenser
- 20 "My word!"
- 23 Denali setting
- 25 Rum mixer
- 26 They may be served at the beach
- 28 Just
- 29 Phone photo
- 30 In medias—
- 31 Great weight
- 32 Nap sack
- 33 Red Cross headquarters
- 35 Ornamental flower
- 38 Movies
- 41 Pious sort
- 42 Ocean arm
- 43 Resort spots
- 44 Irritable

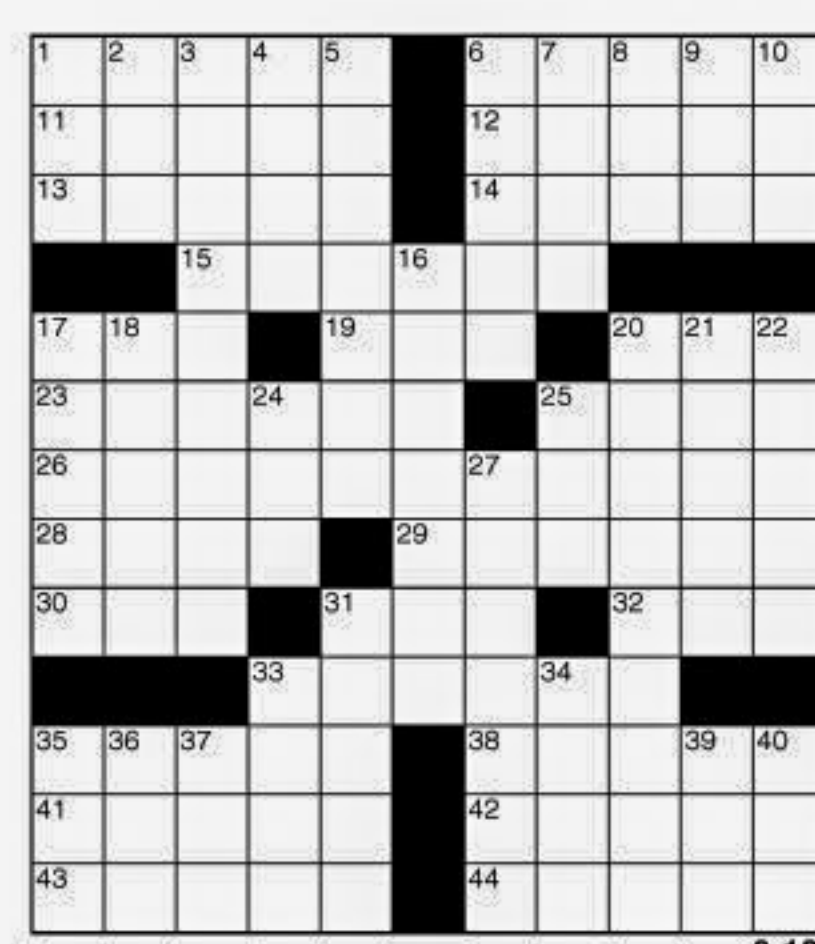
DOWN

- 1 Soup buy
- 2 Homer's dad
- 3 They may be in pockets
- 4 Celtic letter
- 5 On the line
- 6 Rugby scuffle
- 7 Old skirt part
- 8 Outmoded
- 9 Curtain holder
- 10 Take a stab at
- 16 Extends a visit
- 17 Party gift
- 18 Forsaken
- 20 They're course requirements
- 21 Carl's wife in "Up"
- 22 Moved slowly
- 24 Crafty
- 25 Baseball's Ripken
- 27 Charity event
- 31 College books
- 32 Depleted
- 34 Arbor climber
- 35 Next-to-last letter
- 36 Owns
- 37 -- Abner
- 39 Ran into
- 40 Messy diggs

QUOTABLE Quote

I don't believe you have to be better than everybody else. I believe you have to be better than you ever thought you could be.

Ken Venturi



Yesterday's answer

T	O	S	C	A	L	I	R	A
A	C	T	O	R	N	I	N	E
S	T	U	N	T	A	S	T	R
T	O	M	E	C	I	T	R	U
E	B	B	P	A	L	O	N	E
R	E	L	I	E	V	E	R	
R	E	N	T	D	Y	E	S	
		B	E	L	I	E	V	E
W	A	G	R	O	T	E	V	A
A	B	R	U	P	T	E	R	I
F	I	O	N	A	S	M	E	L
E	D	W	I	N	A	I	S	L
R	E	S	T	O	T	T	E	R

CRYPTOQUOTE

VZIJ EB L QENJ. WAM DFJMFJN EM EB XZEYX MZ DLNP UZAN FJLNMF ZN WANY RZDY UZAN FZABJ, UZA KLY YJTIJ MJVV. -HZLY KNLDQZNR

Yesterday's Cryptoquote: THE MOST HAPPY MARRIAGE I CAN PICTURE OR IMAGINE TO MYSELF WOULD BE THE UNION OF A DEAF MAN TO A BLIND WOMAN. -SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE

A XYDLBAAXR is LONGFELLOW

One letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used for the three L's, X for the two O's, etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each day the code letters are different.

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker



HENRY by Don Trachte

