



CIVIL SOCIETY STRENGTHENS ELECTORAL DEMOCRACY



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DIVISION of work among various institutions is an organisational imperative. However, the reality is that no institution in modern times is capable of discharging its assigned duties autonomously without the help and cooperation of a number of other institutions who have some interest in achieving common goals. Civil societies have emerged in many countries in diverse roles and, among these, their role in strengthening electoral democracy has been quite significant.

Electoral Democracy: its meaning and import

A mature democracy, among other things, must firmly establish rule of law to ensure legal guarantees for citizen's life; it should have an electoral process that ensure free and fair elections; a developed political system and vital institutions of state to ensure civic, transparent and accountable delivery of essential services to citizens; responsive and responsible bureaucratic system and an institutionalised economic society.

Though election is an important step towards attaining embedded democracy, it needs to be emphasised that electoral democracy does not necessarily mean full-blown democracy. Whether a country is fully democratic or not is an empirical question and can only be evaluated on the basis of ground realities obtaining in that country. Interestingly, there is hardly any country in the world today that does not practice some kind of electoral democracy. Even the most oppressive of the autocracies, stage-manage shows of electoral processes at regular intervals to legitimise their stranglehold on power.

Nature of civil society

Civil societies must be distinguished from other intermediary organisations, such as interest groups, lobbyists, and non-government, religious and ethnic organisations. A civil society that dedicates itself to the task of strengthening electoral democracy must keep its distance from both the government and profit-seeking private enterprises. In that view, any organisation that is not part of the state, and is not based purely on some parochial considerations will qualify to be called a civil society.

There will be occasions when it shall have to stand up against the arbitrary action of the state or protect the citizens from coercion. At other times, its programmes for electoral reforms may directly collide with those pursued by the government.

Electoral bodies: convergence with electoral democracy

A common mandate for all the electoral bodies is to hold free and fair elections. Superficially, this phrase 'free and fair elections' seems very simple and straightforward; in reality, it is loaded with tasks and responsibilities that are overwhelming in terms of both their enormity and complexity. For an electoral process to be considered free and fair, it needs to be ensured that every eligible citizen has the right to participate as a vote and candidate; democratic rights and freedom of expression are freely asserted; electoral processes are regular and elections are periodically held; authorities administering elections are fully independent and neutral; an independent control system ensuring honesty of the process; a quick and hassle-free system to resolve electoral disputes.

Free and fair elections: the Bangladesh case

The task of holding free and fair elections involves the cooperation and support of a diverse set of stakeholders who may pursue different goals. In an effort to steer through this difficult task, I have tentatively catalogued a few essential activities in the following two groups that need to be pursued with the help of other organisations:

Group A



- Communicate widely the importance of an independent Election Commission for strong democracy and ensure the enactment of an appropriate law for the appointment of capable, honest and neutral Commissioners

- Maintain a partnership and dialogue with all of those, internally and internationally, who wish to see a strong democracy in Bangladesh

- Encourage democratic culture within the political parties

Group B

- Maintain a frequent and regular dialogue with political parties

- Promote and protect the legal, procedural and behavioural components of independence

- Encourage voter participation in the election, with special emphasis on overcoming barriers caused by social, religious and geographic factors, through work of the Commission and in partnership with civil society organisations

- Ensure that all eligible voters are on the electoral roll once and that those who are not eligible are not on the electoral roll

- Strengthen election planning process and capability

- Encourage political party compliance with the law and regulations through a mixture of dialogue and enforcement

Group A represents those activities that need to be pursued for and on behalf of the BEC. These are essential for carrying out the mandate of the BEC successfully but the Commission does not want to get involved with them directly. To elaborate, the Commission does not feel it appropriate to advocate its own cause in a

situation where the government is either the initiator or final dispenser. Neutrality and independence cannot be compromised with any sense of obligation to any individual or organisation. Any action that enhances the independence of an electoral body as a consequence of an enactment or amendment of law or conferment of any rights and privileges to the Commission or its members should under no circumstances have any scope for being projected as a favour.

The absence of a positive political culture is mostly evident from the behaviour of the political parties and their leaders in conducting fair campaigns and accepting defeat in reasonably fairly conducted elections. Such results are routinely rejected by the defeated party or candidate. In such a situation, however neutral and effective the BEC may be, its efforts will not be sufficient to build the desired political culture.

Another area crying for urgent reforms is the acceptance and practice of internal democracy within the political parties and accountability and transparency of their actions. Party councils are not held regularly and even when these are held after long intervals, office bearers are selected at the discretion of the top leader, the councillors virtually having no say in their selection. The nomination of candidates for various elections is also done in a similar fashion. There are allegations that money and muscle play the most important role in these affairs. The parties also shy away from divulging the

sources of their income. A major effort was made prior to the 2008 parliamentary polls to remedy this situation by making it mandatory for political parties to register with the BEC. However, the BEC is getting very little support from the parties towards their compliance.

Despite being a constitutional body and accorded a very high institutional status, the political parties look upon the BEC as an extension of the bureaucracy. A few attempts by BEC, during view exchange meetings on democratic culture or internal democracy, did not find much sympathy with them.

Group B represents those activities that are pursued by the BEC but need to be augmented by partner institutions. Awareness-building, educational and other motivational programmes need to be pursued vigorously by electoral bodies for ensuring the universality of the vote. However, BEC is run with a handful of core staff, lacks proper logistics and other resources. Its staff are not always professionally competent to carry on motivational works. In Bangladesh, it has proved to be very useful to use services of civil society organisations to complement the efforts made by the BEC and this will continue for a long time in the future.

Civil society in Bangladesh: past performance

Until now the performance of the civil society in Bangladesh has amply justified the conventional wisdom that they play a vital role in strengthening the hands of electoral

bodies. In particular, their role during 2006-2008, from the start of the first election campaign for the abandoned 2007 ninth parliamentary election to its successful conduct in 2008, was the most constructive for the revival of electoral democracy in Bangladesh. The civil society very deftly consolidated the findings of various studies carried out by them relating to various maladies in the electoral system and the legal and institutional reforms required to be implemented to remedy those. Their recommendations covered, among other things, independence of the BEC, methodology for preparation of electoral rolls, qualification requirements of candidates, disclosure requirements of candidates, registration of political parties and party financing and, with a view to minimise the influence of money and muscle power in election, selection of honest and dedicated candidates.

With the above agenda, the civil society held a series of view exchange meetings with different stakeholders and the public in general, thus effectively raising awareness among the people about the imperatives of the reforms. The political parties also watched the situation carefully and mentally prepared themselves for accepting some fundamental reforms coming their way. The civil society thus had created a momentum in 2006-7 for reform and the BEC reconstituted in 2008 lost no time in seizing the enabling environment for initiating the necessary legal and institutional reforms and succeeding in getting them finally enacted by the new Parliament in 2009. The passage of the landmark Bangladesh Election Commission Act 2010, ensuring the independence of the Commission from governmental regulations, and the various amendments to the Representation of the People Order, accounts for the large measure of success for the conduct of free and fair elections by the BEC since 2008.

The civil society also played a significant role in voter education and mobilisation of citizens for delivery of services. In the new method of voter registration, prospective voters are required to visit the registration centres to give their fingerprints and photos for data entry. Due to objections from some quarters, the BEC planned a countrywide voter awareness campaign but it did not have the needed manpower nor the resources to do this single-handedly. The civil society came forward to assist the Commission in this task. They also took part in programmes for voter turnout on Election Day.

Containing the influence of black money and muscle power is an important issue towards holding free and fair elections and inducing honest and dedicated people to seek nominations. The Supreme Court ruling requires that the information thus provided by each candidate be summarised individually, multiplied and then circulated in the constituencies from where such candidates are contesting, so that voters may make an informed judgment about the suitability of candidates. The civil society undertook the task of summarisation, multiplication and distribution of the leaflets.

The civil society also plays the role of a watchdog of compliance of various provisions of the electoral laws by the Commission, candidates and political parties. It checks and monitors incessantly, and immediately draws attention of concerned authorities of pitfalls and shortcomings.

The work done by the civil society is not spectacular and no immediate effect of their efforts would be visible. However, they work quietly in association with others to create and maintain an enabling environment in which electoral democracy can make steady progress and sometime in the future, attain the status of full democracy.

The writer is former Chief Election Commissioner.

QUOTABLE Quote

CHE GUEVARA

Democracy cannot consist solely of elections that are nearly always fictitious and managed by rich landowners and professional politicians.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Battery makeup
- 6 Office sights
- 11 Lawman Ness
- 12 "Three Sisters" sister
- 13 Hayek of "Frida"
- 14 Nev. neighbor
- 15 Golf position
- 16 Julep need
- 18 Second person
- 19 TV's Curry
- 20 Silent assent
- 21 Volleyball need
- 22 Hunting dog
- 24 Minuscule
- 25 Social facade
- 27 Do a checkout chore
- 29 Like New Year's Day
- 32 Ship sealer
- 33 Historic time
- 34 Busy one in Apr.
- 35 Quantity; Abbr.
- 36 Guitarist Paul
- 37 Stroller user
- 38 Kidney-related
- 40 Pitcher Satchel
- 42 Sweet liqueur

DOWN

- 1 Magnetic induction units
- 2 "Seinfeld" role
- 3 Business investor, of a sort
- 4 Huck's friend
- 5 Wood worker, at times
- 6 Chopped up
- 7 Historic time
- 8 It involves written bids
- 9 Cultery
- 10 Protection from harm
- 17 Prom date's gift
- 23 Toe count
- 24 Tavern
- 26 Ace
- 27 Stiffness
- 28 Phone feature
- 30 Orbit point
- 31 Current fashion
- 33 Bowling spot
- 39 Band blaster
- 41 Tad's dad

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

P	A	T	H	S	P	O	R	C	H
E	L	I	O	T	I	D	A	H	O
T	A	M	E	R	N	O	T	I	T
E	D	I	T	O	R				
T	I	C	P	O	T	T	I	P	
A	D	O	R	E	R	L	I	R	A
M	O	D	E	R	N	T	I	M	E
P	L	E	D	A	R	D	E	N	T
A	S	S	A	D	O	Z	E	E	
		G	R	O	T	T	O		
P	E	S	O	S	S	I	N	K	S
A	M	I	G	O	K	N	E	E	L
R	U	N	O	N	Y	E	S	N	O

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Request for Study Proposal

Katalyst is a market development project that aims to contribute to increasing the income of poor men and women in rural areas. It does this by facilitating changes in services, inputs and product markets, which in turn increases the competitiveness of farmers and small enterprises. Katalyst is co-funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), the UK Government, and the Danish International Development Agency (Danida). It is implemented by Swisscontact under the umbrella of the Ministry of Commerce, Government of Bangladesh.

Katalyst is looking to commission a study on the following topic: "Study to assess the impact of Katalyst's intervention to enhance women's economic empowerment in Craft".

Katalyst wants to work with a consulting firm who can carry forward the work of impact assessment in craft sector applying gender lens.

Details regarding the Request for Proposal are available at: www.katalyst.com.bd/rfp-aarong

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