

Problems with land rights

Reforming laws a dire need

THAT the country has 146 separate laws governing the issue of land ownership is mind boggling. And many of these are overlapping, which make it immensely difficult for people to handle land ownership issues. We are not surprised to find that 80 percent of all cases lodged in courts are over land and that it can take an average of nearly ten years to dispose of a case. These were some of the findings brought out in a seminar in the city recently which assembled various stakeholders. With nearly 6 out of 10 people owning no land at all, unless laws are reformed to streamline procedures, there is a high probability that the vast majority of the populace will be left without land ownership.

From what information is available, we find that more than Tk24,000 crore is spent on land litigation. This is a massive drain on resources for the vast majority of people who can ill afford to continue court cases that can and do run for years on end. It is also a burden on the judicial system. Without reducing the current limits on individual ownership of land, the issue of marginalised and landless communities cannot be addressed properly.

If we are to take the data presented at face value, it would take the court system 27 million years to dispose of all the pending land-related cases. We feel many of the suggestions made in the seminar is worth serious consideration by the government. It is time to take cognizance of the fact that reform is urgently needed to simplify laws.

JU proctor's dubious role!

Deserves stern action

WE are outraged at the 'leaked phone conversation' of the Jahangirnagar University (JU) proctor that suggests a malintention on his part, quite unbecoming of a person in his position. Reports show that following an altercation between BCL activists and general students at a reunion programme of Pharmacy department, BCL-men went to the department chairman to talk about the incident. At one stage of the quarrel, BCL activists had attacked general students with chains and rods, and two students were seriously injured. The chairperson asked them to lodge a complaint with the proctor. When the proctor was informed about it, he, instead of resolving the matter, told the BCL activists to confine the department head and demand justice from him.

We wonder how a proctor can offer students such advice which has the potential of creating unrest in the campus instead assuaging the situation. It has set a very bad example.

Regrettably, JU has a long history of unruliness of government backed students' wing. Earlier in the same university, BCL activist Zubayer was killed in an in-fight between two BCL groups.

If teachers, like the proctor, who are entrusted to keep order and discipline in the university, indulge in instigating students, campus violence will keep recurring. In the present case, a probe committee should be formed to look into the matter and appropriate action should be taken to set an example.

COMMENTS

"Freedom fighters' age now below 13" (December 21, 2015)

Afrina Khanam

Fantastic! Now those who weren't even born before 1971 can take advantage of this law.

Riaz Al Mamun

It's nothing but a hoax. It is an attempt to give privileges to pro-ruling party men.

"DSCC knocks down 100 illegal shops" (December 21, 2015)

Shamsi Bd

Before knocking down these shops, alternative places should be allocated to these poor people; otherwise very soon they will be back to paying extra money to those who possess muscle power in that area.

K.m. Tazul

Thanks to the Dhaka South City Corporation for the drive.

Ibrahim Zaman

A very brave initiative by the DSCC. But the sad part is, the encroachers will soon rebuild it all.

Zarina

The drive would immensely help recover the occupied space of the roads in the area.

MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS

Happy endings to a troubled year?

ZIAUDDIN CHOUDHURY

THE year 2015 began with firebombs thrown at people, but if everything goes well it may end with people throwing firecrackers into the sky, celebrating the country's local body elections. In this turnaround, much has to be said about our people, their resilience, and ability to adapt considering the political arena of the country. For much of this year, it has been a period of great uncertainty, anxiety, and fear in the aftermath of the political wrangling between the two major parties and the damage it caused the common man. The relative lull that followed, along with a sudden quietness in partisan activism, led people to believe that perhaps this kind of indolence will be the rule for a few years. Many even sang the dirge for the main opposition in politics, with dire predictions for democracy in the country. But the scene that we are witnessing now in districts and small towns of Bangladesh today seems to direct the other way. The decision by BNP to join the municipal elections proves that the party is alive and kicking.

In a country that has gone through many shocks in its short democratic history, elections are where people can express their voice and hope in democracy. The horrific events of inter-party feuds less than two years ago led to a national election that was void of the cheers and festive processions that usually accompany our elections. Instead, we saw an election that was mostly uncontested, marked by voter-less election booths, empty ballot boxes, and hardly any processions, as the major opposition opted out of the national elections. It was not just that the party held out, it also went out of the way to stymie the elections with muscle power and violence. Nothing worked, and the party in power retained its control. The country set sail on a path that some thought would be the beginning of a managed democracy that would operate by exclusion and not inclusion. A democracy that would negate plurality, the very essence of democracy.

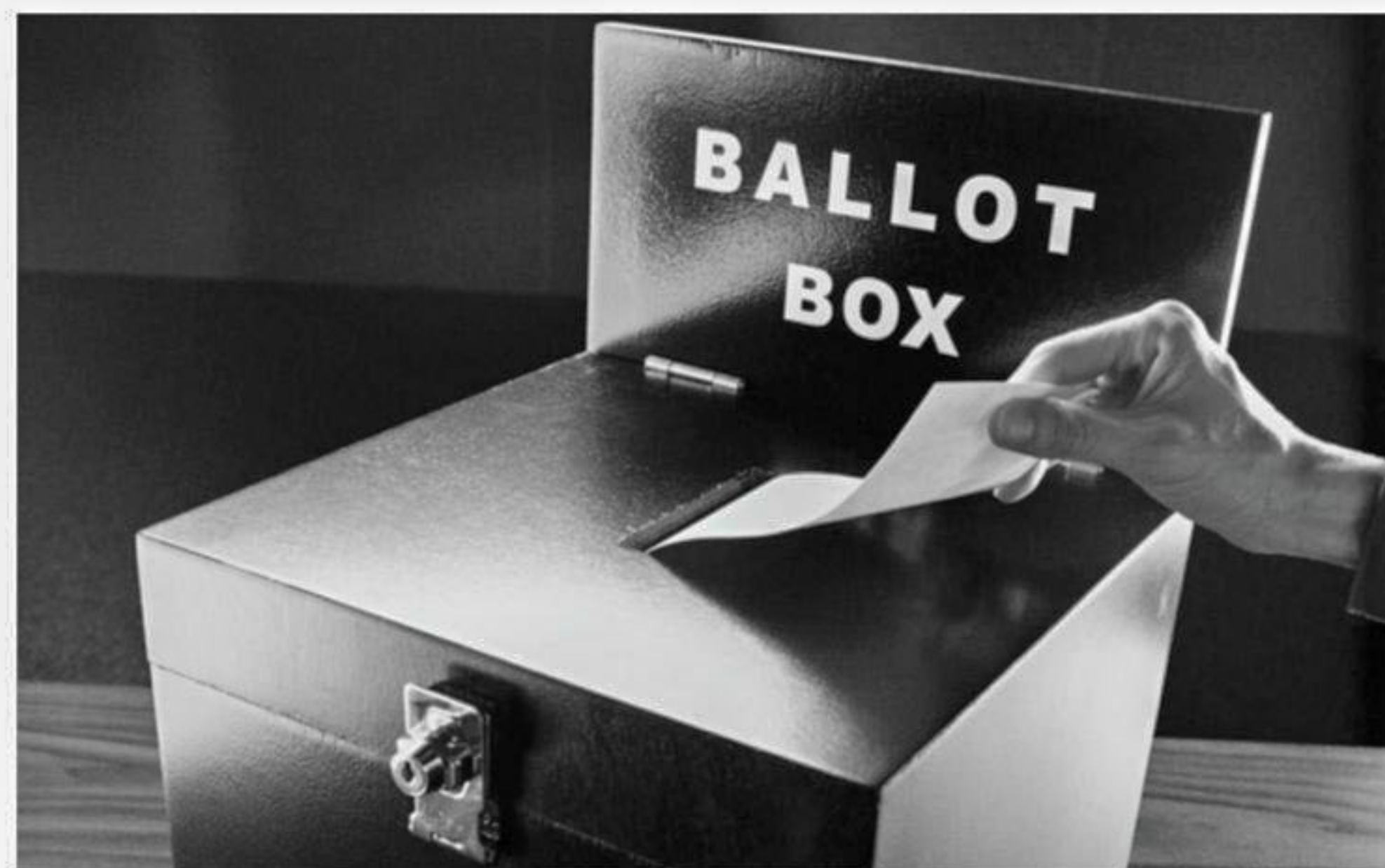
There are two significant aspects of these elections for municipal bodies. First, of course, is the government's decision to let the elections be contested on party basis, all 234 of them. Second, is the main opposition's decision to take part in these elections. There are differences of opinion on whether the elections should have been allowed to be contested on a party basis because this opens doors to the probable use of monetary resources to win party

nominations. It also makes a non-party candidate vulnerable, as they would lack the strength and support of a party backed candidate. The arguments may be valid, but the government decision to make the contest on a partisan basis was a clever way to make the elections more meaningful and participatory. BNP's decision to join the elections is proof of that.

There may be many reasons about this turnaround in the main opposition's decision. These range from pressures from the rank and file of the party to join in the local elections, to a rethinking within the top leadership to resuscitate the party from the inertia of the last one year. There may even be some behind the scenes political

near-rural towns distributed all over Bangladesh. Many of these can be best described as market places (bazaars) that have little infrastructure such as paved roads, electricity, water supply, and sanitation. The finances of these municipalities are sustained partly through market revenues and partly through government subsidies. In all, but a few, the municipalities can ill afford to provide the basic civic services with their income, yet the candidates are promising their voters the moon. In reality, what they are trying to achieve are offices which will bestow them honour and prestige.

If the enthusiasm of the voters and the candidates is any proof, the local bodies can fill a big gap in people's expectations. What



manoeuvres or external pressures that led the party to this decision. However, all these are speculations. The ground reality is that despite the dormancy in party politics, a good number of BNP workers at field level have popular support and want to participate in these elections. The leadership at the top may not have had a second choice.

Irrespective of the expediency of the government decision to have the municipal elections on party basis and BNP's choice to participate in these elections, people in 234 municipalities are now eagerly waiting for the elections, with each party campaigning in a festive mode for its favoured candidate. But then what?

The municipalities for which the contests are being held are mostly semi-urban or

they lack now is both ability and resources. The ability to provide the services cannot come from legislation or simply by renaming a bazaar as a municipality. This will come from the ability to generate resources from taxation, devolution of power from government to local authorities, and control and coordination of local government agencies. This may take time.

Meanwhile, like the voters in the municipalities, we are all hoping that these new elections are held fairly and transparently. The history of the last upazila elections does not bring happy memories. The firecrackers will herald the end of the year only if we can present a fair election.

The writer is a political analyst and commentator.

PROJECT SYNDICATE

Patriotism in the age of globalisation

BILL EMMOTT

THE new fault line in politics, according to Marine Le Pen, leader of France's far-right National Front, is between globalists and patriots. It is an argument similar to those being made by euro-sceptics in the United Kingdom and Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump in the United States. It is, however, as false as it is dangerous.

Judging by the results of the second and final round of France's regional elections on December 13, it is also an argument that French voters, at least, roundly rejected. They cast 73 percent of their ballots for the National Front's rivals, depriving the party of even a single victory.

Le Pen accused the mainstream parties of ganging up on her, describing their cooperation as a denial of democracy. Her argument is, of course, a classic example of sour grapes; the entire point of a two-round voting system is to force parties and their supporters to seek a consensus and form partnerships. Unless and until the National Front finds a way to win allies, it will not achieve an electoral breakthrough. (The same is likely to prove true about Trump.)

That is not to say that Le Pen's claim – that those who vote for her party are the only true patriots – should be casually dismissed. She has homed in on a powerful message, one with the potential to attract supporters from other parties.

That's why it must be rebutted, both in France and elsewhere. The assumption underlying such nationalist bombast – that a country's interests are better served by being closed rather than open – is extremely dangerous.

The belief that openness is treason and closure is patriotic is a rejection of the entire post-1945 framework of politics and policy in the developed world. It is an attempt to turn back the clock to the interwar period, when the focus was on closing off: imposing onerous trade restrictions and persecuting or expelling minority groups. This was true even in the United States, which enacted the most restrictive immigration laws since the country's founding.

The post-war years marked a complete change of direction, as countries opened up, allowing freer flows of trade, capital, ideas, and people. This process became known as globalisation only after China and India joined in during the 1980s, but it had started long before. It was globalisation, after all, that created what in France became known as *Les Trente Glorieuses* – the 30 glorious years of rapidly rising living standards following the end of WWII.

Le Pen and her fellow populists claim that globalisation was either an act of foolish generosity that helped the rest of the world at the expense of the nation, or a phenomenon that benefited only the elites and not ordinary people. For them, patriotism means being harder-headed about protecting the national

interest and adopting more democratic policies that help the working masses, not jet-setting fat cats.

The second part of this argument – that the interests of ordinary people have been subordinated to those of the elite – must be heard and responded to. A democracy in which a majority feels

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neglected or exploited is not sustainable. Either the government or the entire system will be overturned.

Elected officials clearly need to find answers to high unemployment and declining living standards. What mainstream parties need to be make clear,

however, is that the answers to those problems do not lie in closing borders or minds. There is no example, anywhere in history, of a society or an economy that has prospered over the long term by rejecting globalism.

Moreover, though openness may not guarantee prosperity, it has always been a prerequisite for growth. To be sure, the optimal amount of openness is a matter of debate. But the bigger, more productive arguments are about how to shape education, labour markets, scientific research, and social-welfare policies in order to help societies adapt to the world around them. The patriotic choice – the national interest – has always consisted in crafting domestic policies that best take advantage of globalisation.

For mainstream parties in France, the Conservatives in the UK, and Trump's more internationally minded Republican rivals in the US, there is nothing to be gained from copying the arguments of their extremist counterparts. Doing so would yield crucial ground in the political battle over how best to serve the country and its people. Mainstream parties must reclaim the mantle of patriotism and redefine the national interest accordingly. In today's world, the national interest lies in managing openness – not in throwing it away.

The writer is a former editor-in-chief of *The Economist*.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Universal Health Coverage project

It is heartening to learn that the government has launched Universal Health Coverage (UHC) project on a pilot basis to bring poor people under national health coverage. Initially, health cards will be distributed among the poor families of three selected upazilas. The health card holders will be entitled to free treatment of 50 diseases in their respective upazilas.

It may be mentioned here that due to climate change, the number of people suffering from asthma, respiratory, cardiovascular, air-borne and food-borne diseases will increase. Thus, I urge the government to make healthcare facilities throughout the country, including the capital, more effective and people friendly.

Professor M Zahidul Haque
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Wildlife conservation in Bangladesh

The human-wildlife conflict in South Asian nations including Bangladesh is a complex eco-environmental issue. Funding and security are important conservation efforts. Another significant yet neglected socio-sociological aspect for successful conservation is improving the socio-economic conditions of the people living in and around wildlife habitats. Most of the remote rural communities, fringe dwellers and forest residents are dependent on scanty forest resources for their livelihood. Unless



this issue is taken seriously, no conservation efforts can be successful.

My humble request to the government of Bangladesh is to kindly take some initiative for the conservation of wildlife in the country.
Saikat Kumar Basu
Lethbridge, AB, Canada