

Flawed elections will damage our democracy

BADIUL ALAM MAJUMDAR

ALMOST all the preparatory steps for the first round of UP elections are now over – the only thing that is still left is the actual polling on March 22. We cannot be certain about the environment that would prevail on election day and whether the voters would be able to freely go to the polling stations and cast their votes without fear. However, during the preparatory phase we experienced some undesirable practices, which may, we are afraid, severely hamper the UP elections.

The first undesirable practice has to do with the major spread of what is called the *mononayan banijya* or 'nomination trade'. In our country, we have had nomination trade before, primarily in parliamentary elections. Stories of buying parliamentary nominations for millions of taka are common. Such allegations are against influential party leaders and are normally spread in the form of rumours, because no one has ever made any public accusation against anyone. Nevertheless, there is widespread public perception about its existence.

The nomination trade is alleged to have been more widespread in the present UP elections. However, such allegations are not made quietly or in the form of whispers, rather they are made loudly and against specific individuals (Jugantor, March 11, 2016). Newspapers frequently carry such stories.

It is clear that politics has become profitable in our country. In fact, the spread of nomination trade has turned it into a unique sector of business. Unlike in normal businesses, it does not require any capital as such. The spread of such practices to the UP level further expanded its scope and empowered a new group of such 'businessmen' at the grassroots. We are afraid that like a contagious disease such practices will further spread in all spheres of our politics.

The practice of buying votes for



PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

money from the grassroots to parliamentary elections has existed in our country for a long time. However, the spread of nomination trade has taken the role of money in our elections to a new level. We have now truly become the 'best democracy money can buy,' reflecting the degeneration of our politics.

Another undesirable aspect of the present UP elections is the return of the use of muscle power and violence. Again, the use of muscle power and violence in elections is not new in our country, which usually happens in and around the election day.

We were successful in eradicating violence from our elections and there was not a single instance of death in elections held between 2008 and 2013. However, muscle power and violence have returned, beginning from the parliamentary elections of January 5, 2014. Unfortunately it has reached a

dangerous level in the present UP elections. So far over 500 people have been reportedly injured and at least five persons lost their lives during the UP elections (Bangladesh Protidin, March 12, 2016). Such violence started long before the election date, and we are concerned that it will get worse as the election day nears.

A disturbing element in the present UP elections is the widespread intimidation of opposition candidates that has prevented them from filing nomination papers. BNP claims that in 83 Unions, ruling party activists prevented their candidates from filing nominations. Similar accusations are also made by some partners of the ruling alliance and the rebel candidates of the ruling party. Even those who could file their nomination papers are now complaining that they are facing various kinds of threats. For example, recently two chairmen candidates from

the Moralganj Upazila of Bagerhat held press conferences to plead that they had enough of running for elections and they now want to be left alone so that they could live safely in their homes with their families (Manabzamin, 12 March 2016).

This year's violence is primarily within the ruling party – between their nominated candidates and rebel candidates. This is primarily because in the present environment of a tilted playing field getting the ruling party nomination almost guarantees a 'win' on the election day. That is why we see such pervasive nomination trade and violent conflicts. Needless to say that the ruling party has more to lose from these excesses.

Because of the widespread threats, harassments and prevention to submit nomination papers by opposition party and rebel candidates, 62 chairmen candidates from the ruling party were

elected unopposed in the first phase, which is unprecedented. Unfortunately filing complaints about the irregularities and electoral offences to the Election Commission brought no remedy (Prothom Alo, 12 March 2012).

It goes without saying that behind all the above anomalies lies the decision to hold election of UP chairmen using party symbols. It appears that the decision was made without thinking through the consequences, especially paying heed to the warnings of the experts and taking into account our prevailing political culture of trying to capture power and hanging onto it at any cost. Prior to making the decision the process of nominating the candidates was not clearly spelled out, resulting in the present anarchy. For example, although the directives issued by the ruling party allowed no role for the MPs in the nomination process, yet in many cases they made the final decision. In the absence of hard and fast rules, in many cases committed party activists were deprived and undesirable candidates were nominated. Sometimes the cronies or the relatives of party bosses were nominated. Incidentally, the RPO specifies a clear process of nomination, although in our 'anything-goes' political culture the politicians have been ignoring it.

It seems from all this that there is a high probability that the UP elections will be flawed, which will compromise the credibility of our electoral system. The democratic process breaks down when the process of peaceful transfer of power through fair elections is thwarted and the citizens lose confidence in elections and do not care to vote. Such a situation is likely to have dire consequences. As Justice Badrul Haider Chowdhury, in AFM Shah Alam v. Mujibur Rahman [41DLR(AD)(1989)], warned us, 'perverse election or voterless election destroys democracy'.

The writer is secretary, SHUJAN: Citizens for Good Governance.

It is clear that politics has become profitable in our country. In fact, the spread of nomination trade has turned it into a unique sector of business.

The truth about tobacco

Putting graphic warnings on the front of the industry's most pervasive marketing channel – tobacco packs – is the best way we can guarantee that tobacco users receive regular reminders of the harm they are causing themselves.

MD. SHAFIQUIL ISLAM

AT an advocacy meeting of civil society, doctors and public health officials recently held in Dhaka, the Minister for Health, Hon. Mohammed Nasim MP, confirmed the government's intention to fully implement tobacco control laws. Graphic health warnings are supposed to appear on all tobacco packs sold across the country from March 19, 2016, as per a provision of Bangladesh's law, which was passed by the parliament in 2013, but has been delayed by tobacco industry interference. Even now, the tobacco industry – rich on the profits of selling a product that kills as many as two-thirds of the people who use it as intended – is still attempting to subvert the intent and impact of the law. Intense lobbying is likely to have been behind this week's public circular suggesting that the warnings can be printed on the lower half of the pack if necessary. The original legislation clearly specified that packs should carry one of nine graphic warnings, covering 50 percent of the top of the pack – where the images would be most visible.

These nine powerful images depict oral and throat cancers, lung cancers, stroke and asthma and other diseases directly caused by tobacco use or exposure to second hand smoke. Some may find them horrific; but a growing number of our fellow Bangladeshis are finding that the health costs of tobacco use are more alarming. It's a truth we cannot afford to ignore. Some say that children should not be exposed to these graphic images, but children are being exposed to tobacco



industry marketing on a daily basis. The majority of lifetime tobacco users become addicted before the age of 21, so the tobacco industry targets youth by portraying smoking as a desirable, aspirational and fashionable past-time, with celebrities contracted by the industry to promote attractively branded tobacco products through

movies, television soap operas and point of sale advertising. Which imagery does more harm? Certainly not a graphic warning that could help children avoid future tobacco-related diseases and premature death.

In fact, I hope graphic warnings on tobacco packs will result in greater willingness to talk

openly in our society and our media about the harms of tobacco. Last year, a national TV channel refused to run an anti-tobacco public service announcement (PSA) that graphically shows what happens when a smoking-related blood clot affects the brain. This PSA had been approved by the Government's own IEC Committee and launched by the Minister for Health. Similar versions of this PSA have run on national TV channels in many other countries. More recently, I saw a media report on the new warnings where the image was blurred so it couldn't be seen. Similar graphic warning images are already used in other countries. Are their citizens really better able than Bangladeshis to face the truth about tobacco? I think we underestimate our fellow citizens and their desire for a healthier life.

Health authorities in Bangladesh have worked hard to push back against the aggressive marketing strategies of the tobacco companies. Putting graphic warnings on the front of the industry's most pervasive marketing channel – tobacco packs – is the best way we can guarantee that tobacco users receive regular reminders of the harm they are causing themselves. Evidence from countries where large graphic warnings have been implemented – 78 so far – tells us that this will help us reduce tobacco use. If we are serious about saving the lives of our fellow citizens, we cannot be shy away from showing people the truth about tobacco.

The writer is the Bangladesh Country Advisor for Vital Strategies (formerly World Lung Foundation).

শেল্টেক্ বর্ষপূর্তি মেলা ২০১৬

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