

Snakes and ladders: Where will the next EC be in the game?



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THE history of our Election Commission may be likened to a large extent to the popular story of a monkey and a greased pole. The monkey wants to climb up the pole of 50 metre height. He first climbs up one metre but he falls back by the same height. Again he climbs up two metres but slides back by one metre. He climbs up three metres and falls back by one metre. Finally, after many attempts, the monkey finally reaches the top of the pole and does not slip back.

In the last 25 years since restoration of democracy, the EC climbed up the ladder of success sometimes. But it fell back almost equal times. It could not prevent itself from falling back due to confrontational culture in politics which always poured grease on the EC's path making it slippery and difficult to negotiate.

The EC-led by Justice Abdur Rouf climbed up the ladder of success by holding the fifth parliamentary election in a free and fair manner in February 1991. But it had to slip back in 1994 during the Magura rigged by-election. Again the EC-led by Justice Sadek had to slide back more by holding the one-sided sixth parliamentary election in February 1995 amid a growing political crisis.

The two ECs-led by Abu Hena and MA Sayed were able to climb up the ladder of success by holding the seventh and eighth parliamentary elections in a free and fair manner in June 1996 and in 2001 respectively. But under leadership of Justice MA Aziz, the EC went back a few notches as it was mired in controversy for many of its actions including the preparation of a voter list with more than one crore fake voters, in the run up to the ninth parliamentary election due in January 2007.

Amid growing political crisis, the state of emergency was declared on January 11, 2007 which led to the cancellation of the scheduled election. Aziz and all others election commissioners had to resign after the declaration of a state of emergency.

Formed in February 2007, the EC-led by ATM Shamsul Huda then accomplished the uphill task of preparing a flawless voter list with photographs and sweeping electoral reforms. It successfully held the December 2008 parliamentary election. With its diligence the EC was able to bring back people's overwhelming confidence in it. Its success was considered as a big boost for the EC and strengthening the electoral system.

But the present EC-led by Kazi Rakibuddin Ahmad failed to live up to people's expectations and accomplish the tasks carried out by his predecessor for the sake of a continuation of electoral reforms. Amid political crisis it held the one-sided parliamentary election which



scope for a dress rehearsal by holding some major elections to local government bodies. Elections to five city corporations -- Rajshahi, Khulna, Barisal, Sylhet and Gazipur will be due in 2018. If the EC can hold the city corporation elections in free and fair manner, it will help largely to regain people's confidence in it before the 2019 parliamentary election. Any failure to do so will further jeopardise the future of the electoral system, determining the fate of the next parliamentary election. If the next parliamentary election is not participatory and fair, it will bulldoze afresh the country's fragile democracy which largely exists only in elections.

Considering all aspects, the formation of the new EC is immensely important. The new EC will have no alternative to climb up the ladder of success. Any fresh fall back may be suicidal for the country's democracy. Political parties should realise the importance of this truth and cooperate with President Abdul Hamid, to form a strong EC with competent people, who are able to give leadership to bring qualitative changes in the electoral system.

For the sake of the country's democracy, the next EC must keep climbing up the ladder of success so that its successor can reach the top of the ladder. Political parties and the government must cooperate with the EC to prevent it from slipping back.

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put it in the bracket of previous ECs led by Justice Sadek and Justice Aziz. Almost all the local government elections held after January 2014 were controversial because of undue influence in the polls and allegations of stuffing ballots. The electoral system has been largely destroyed and has slipped back quite a few steps from the ladder.

The current EC has made the tasks difficult for its successor. The new EC which will be formed next February will have to carry out the formidable task of restoring people's confidence

in it by repairing the damages in the electoral system. Therefore, the formation of new EC with competent persons appears to be very important.

Wrapping up talks with political parties President Abdul Hamid is supposed to form a search committee in January to form the new EC in the middle of the following month. His dialogue initiative generated some hope that the new EC will be free from controversy. The most crucial task of the new EC will be holding the 11th parliamentary election in January 2019. For holding the

parliamentary election in a free and fair manner, it will have to accomplish some important works including bringing necessary reforms to electoral laws and restoration of people's confidence in this constitutional body. The new EC will have to conduct the 11th parliamentary election under a partisan government. So, it must demonstrate its strength and leadership ability to hold a free and fair parliamentary election with a partisan government in office.

Before 2019, the new EC will have

How to stop corruption in recruitment of university teachers

MD. REZAUL KARIM

TRANSPARENCY International Bangladesh (TIB) in its report revealed allegations of unauthorised financial transactions in eight public universities and political patronage, nepotism, regionalism and religious identity as dominant drivers of corruption in the recruitment process at 13 public universities. In reaction, major stakeholders including the University of Grants Commission (UGC) of Bangladesh and the Federation of Bangladesh University Teacher's Association in their public statement have termed the report as biased, baseless, conspiratorial, imaginary and self-contradictory, etc. In fact, similar reactions on TIB's report were noticed in the past, but refusal of corruption allegations is not a sensible response, rather, it is a strategy of neglecting the problem. These practices often dishearten the messenger and inspire wrongdoers to continue their corrupt practices.

As human beings, we cannot expect 'zero corruption' or 'no corruption' in personal, private or public spheres. Incidence of corruption is a crux reality. The key concern is whether corruption is predominant or hinders public interest and wellbeing or not. Prevalence of corruption also matters by context or culture. If we look at the legal, institutional and operational framework of public institutions like public universities, we could easily observe that there are certain red-flags, i.e., integrity concerns; those create ground for corruption in the recruitment of lecturers in public universities. The

red-flags in recruitment of teachers are deep-rooted.

Unchecked autonomy

Public universities in Bangladesh are autonomous. There is no regulatory entity to regulate or oversee their operations. Universities decide and revise recruitment rules with approval from the syndicates as they desire. The Ministry of Education (MoED) and UGC also have enforcing authority even in case of proven allegation of corruption against the high officials of public universities. The MoED requests UGC for inquiry into the allegations and UGC follows accordingly, and finally, MoED recommends the government to take actions. Public universities are run by public money, but in reality, these are not under the vigilance of any entity. This unchecked autonomy has created frontiers of opportunities to misuse public money through recruiting hundreds of excess teachers over the years.

Dubious recruitment process of Vice Chancellor (VC)

There is no transparent and credible procedure for appointment of VC in public universities. There is fierce competition for this position. The appointment of VC is not based on professional excellence, personal competency and credibility, rather on political association and loyalty. Political appointment is not a predicament, but this becomes problematic when substandard partisan teachers get appointments, and later damage the image of the government as they abuse their position for personal gain. A section of teachers even with-

out any administrative experience or good track record become VCs by using their strong connections with influential political leaders belonging to the ruling party and policy makers. After holding the position, a VC has to compensate by fulfilling the requests of these people. This reflects in the recruitment of teachers along partisan lines, ignoring merit of the candidates. In recent years, there have been allegations of incompetence and corruption against a few VCs which were also looked into by UGC investigations. Therefore, the absence of a credible appointment procedure of

of pro-ruling partisans as its members. Accordingly, VCs do not have to face challenges from the syndicate to approve any decision. No example has yet been found regarding the rejection of a recommendation given by a recruitment committee headed by a VC in recent times. There is a good example of recruiting teachers fairly and credibly and continuing these by overlooking political pressure and threat from public representatives. Therefore, the honesty and positive will of VC is an essential prerequisite for credible recruitment of teachers.

Finally, there is no generic or taken-for-granted way for fighting corruption. Context specific controlling and corrective measures could be undertaken followed by multiple and comprehensive actions.

VC in the public universities has created grounds for endangering the recruitment of teachers based on merit.

Unlimited and unchecked discretions of VCs

A VC (in some universities the Pro-VC), the head of the recruitment boards/ selection committee and the syndicate of the university, could be considered as the nucleus of teacher recruitment process. In reality, a VC decides, determines and administers the whole recruitment. There is scope to form syndicates with the majority

'Corruption-friendly' recruitment procedure

The world's leading universities have comprehensive policy documents on the whole process of recruiting teachers. Unfortunately, none of the public universities in our country have this kind of policy guideline, on how the recruitment process should be implemented. Universities have dozens of internal circulars, procedures and laws related to recruitment. Furthermore, university administration could make any change or revise existing qualification criteria of the

applicants as it desires. These documents could be amended even if a VC desires to recruit a specific candidate(s) by using pro-ruling party dominant syndicates at universities. This gap also has created grounds for abusing the position of VC, syndicate and people involved in recruiting teachers on political ideology, kinship, regionalism, religion and ethnic identity and unauthorised financial transaction.

No regulatory power of UGC

The UGC is expected to be the guardian and authority of public universities, but in reality, it is a 'toothless' tiger. UGC has no control over the recruitment activities of teachers in public universities. Furthermore, because of the absence of a transparent procedure for appointing the UGC Chairman and its members, it is often used as a 'dumping ground' for the tacit supporters of the ruling party.

Utility dominant over risk of loss

A section of VCs and university teachers involved in corrupt teacher recruitment practices know that there is little chance of being caught or penalised. There is also the example of a VC with allegations of corruption against him being given an opportunity to complete his tenure. Two UGC investigation committees and concerned ministry advised the government to take punitive measure against him, but no measure was ever taken. This incident gives a clear message that persons involved in recruitment and related corrupt practices have rare

chance of facing departmental prosecution or penalty. In the absence of effective mechanisms to punish corrupt actors, a section of VC and teachers involved in teacher recruitment do not dare to manipulate recruitment process in favour of their preferred candidates. Therefore, the prevalence of opportunity in gaining benefits through corrupt behaviour is a dominant red-flag. This could be termed as the foremost cause for corruption in the recruitment process.

Finally, there is no generic or taken-for-granted way for fighting corruption. Context specific controlling and corrective measures could be undertaken followed by multiple and comprehensive actions. The foremost concern is the 'tone of top', especially when it comes to controlling corruption at permissible level both in public and private institutions. Partisan appointment in public institution is not a big concern, but problems arise when wrong people are being appointed. I have confidence that the present government will take effective measures to address the integrity concerns, adopt a comprehensive set of policies or guidelines on recruitment of teachers, and bring universities under effective oversight and accountability, and thereby, create an environment for recruiting the best candidates as teachers in public universities.

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QUOTABLE Quote

RON PAUL

AMERICAN AUTHOR, PHYSICIAN, AND FORMER POLITICIAN

Real patriotism is a willingness to challenge the government when it's wrong.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Can't stand

6 Climber's spike

11 As -- (generally)

12 Bring out

13 Bellini opera

14 In a way, informally

15 Sight site

16 Carnival city

18 DC baseballer, for short

19 Application

20 Powerful people

21 Cain's mother

22 Bookish sort

24 Blissful place

25 High school course

27 Paella base

29 Presentation aids

32 Before today

33 Miniature

34 Balderdash

35 Chestnut case

36 Bank offering

37 Coronado's gold

38 Insidip

40 To this time

42 Like argon

43 Jiffy

44 Bakery buys

45 Quite full

DOWN

1 Emotional problem

2 Kindle

3 Began to improve

4 Shade source

5 Very hot

6 Cuban cash

7 Altar oath

8 Made money

9 Music range

10 Spruce

17 Counting number

23 Brewpub order

24 History chunk

26 Chicken choices

27 Hare's cousin

28 Large lizard

30 "Satires" poet

31 Put away

33 Loses freshness

39 Museum subject

41 -- pronobis

BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker

I'D LIKE TO SHOW YOU MY PLANS.

HOW DID YOU GET IN HERE? GET OUT!

AND DON'T COME BACK!

WHEN'S THE BEST TIME TO CATCH HIM IN A BETTER MOOD?

GREG+MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES

by Kirkman & Scott

I'M GOING TO TAKE THAT VIDEO GAME AWAY IF I HEAR ONE MORE BAD WORD UTTERED IN HERE!

SORRY, MOM.

JUST DON'T LET IT HAPPEN AGAIN.

SO STOP UTTERING, DAD!

THEN STOP BEATING ME!

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

WAIVER EQUAL

ELOPE SURGE

DARED SINEW

TESTED

TON PIX NUB

UNISON WISE

NIGHTY NIGHT

ACHE TITHES

SET HIT TRY

WAMPUM

TOPAZ IPASS

ALIVE COREA

REPEL KNEED