

# Electronic Voting Machines

*must be introduced with caution*

MOHAMMAD ANWARUL KABIR

**T**HE Bangladesh Election Commission plans to introduce Electronic Voting Machines (EVM) in the forthcoming national election in 2019. Some political parties, meanwhile, have questioned whether EVM would subsequently increase chances of election engineering through the manipulation of electoral results. In this context, a vivid discussion from a technological point of view is essential.

Before going any further, let us discuss the objectives, working principle and construction of EVM. According to Wikipedia, "electronic voting refers to voting using electronic means to either aid or take care of the chores of casting and counting votes." The very objective of EVMs is to automate the election process, especially in casting and counting votes. Definitely this automation should speed up the election process effectively and efficiently without introducing any intentional or unintentional errors.

A complete EVM consists of two units—Control Unit and Balloting Unit with cables connecting it to the Control Unit. The Control Unit is kept with the Presiding Officer and the Balloting Unit is used by voters for polling.

The Balloting Unit of an EVM is a small box-like device, on top of which each candidate and his/her election symbol is listed like a big ballot paper. Against each candidate's name, a red LED and a blue button is provided. The voter casts his vote by pressing the blue button against the name of his/her desired candidate. The Control Unit keeps track of the casting of votes against each candidate and subsequently generates the electoral result. As soon as the last voter has voted, the Polling Officer in charge of the Control Unit will press the "close" button. Thereafter, the EVM will not accept any votes. After voting ends, the Balloting Unit is disconnected from the Control Unit and kept separately. Votes can be recorded only through the Balloting Unit. Again, the Presiding officer, once voting ends, will hand over to each polling agent an account of the votes recorded. When votes are being counted, the total will be tallied

with this account and if there is any discrepancy, this will be pointed out by the counting agents. During the counting of votes, the results are displayed by pressing the "result" button. There are two safeguards to prevent the "result" button from being pressed before the counting of votes officially begins: i) "This button cannot be pressed till the 'close' button is pressed by the Polling Officer in-charge at the end of the voting process in the polling booth." ii) "This button is hidden and sealed; this can be broken only at the counting centre in the presence of designated office." So, from a technological point of view, the general working principle of EVMs is not at all that complex.

erroneous voter database may be intentional or unintentional. Creating an error-free voter database without any political motivation should come first if we want to ensure an impartial election. A voter database may also be erroneous due to (unintentionally) mistaken data entries. In this context, it may be noted that in the 2000 presidential election in the US, some voters failed to cast their votes due to erroneous information being inserted into the database. So, precaution should be taken during the data-entry phase.

The major complaint against EVM is that in the existing system, there is no paper trail for recounting the ballots like in the traditional system. Moreover, source codes

also has many advantages. The best thing being that it saves a lot of time. The counting of votes is done within the shortest possible time. And, if properly maintained, bogus voting is greatly reduced as the vote is recorded only once.

Now the question is whether EVMs should be used in our national election or not. The answer fully depends on how we address the loopholes of this system as discussed above. The first and foremost issue is that voters and relevant stakeholders (mainly political parties) should have trust in this new system. Though EVMs have been used in local government elections, we have to keep in mind that the national election is completely different because of its size and political importance. So, before introducing EVMs in the forthcoming national election, the Election Commission (EC) should make voters and other relevant stakeholders confident in using this technology. For this, the EC needs to address the following loopholes so that stakeholders trust the electronic process.

i) The major flaw of EVMs is that there are no paper-trails for the counting of ballots in case of any complaint by any candidate(s). Technologically, this can be resolved quite easily. The EVMs could be connected to a printer which will eventually print ballots in a locked opaque box as votes are being cast. If recount is necessary, then these deposited ballots can be counted to ensure that there is no mismatch.

ii) For improved security, biometric information of voters, especially fingerprints, should be used as input with a view to restricting false voting.

iii) Sufficient backup of batteries and UPS should be maintained so that there is no interference in the electoral process because of power outage.

iv) The most important thing for any election is the creation and maintenance of a flawless voter database. The data-entry work for this should be done carefully to avoid the insertion of any erroneous data into it in the first place.

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The US, India and many other countries have effectively used EVMs in their electoral processes, although not without controversies. Bangladesh first used EVMs in the 2012 Chittagong Municipality Corporation Election and later in the Comilla City Council Election. The use of EVMs in those elections was quite satisfactory.

Yet, there is an ethical debate over the use of EVMs in the electoral process. To evaluate the nature and extent of this debate, we need to have a clear picture of the electronic voting process.

The success of any election depends on an error-free voter database, vote-casting and vote-counting process. Creation of

of EVM software is a business secret of vendor companies and so, it is not possible to examine whether any fraudulent codes are written into it. Besides the manipulation of the software, any insider can also manipulate its hardware by inserting a malicious component that can steal votes. Moreover, any person who has access to EVMs can take the memory card out and insert a new one with an intention of tampering the electoral outcome. It is perhaps because of such loopholes that some countries like Ireland, Italy, Germany, Netherlands and Finland have rejected the use of EVMs in their electoral processes.

There is no doubt, however, that its use

## IPU call for UNSC intervention

*Myanmar must be made to stop the killing*

**T**HE Inter-Parliamentary Union has delivered a strong condemnation of the atrocities committed by Myanmar in Rakhine State, adding its voice to the growing call for actions by the global powers. The global parliamentary community, in a resolution that echoed Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's five-point peace plan, called for concrete steps from the United Nations Security Council—including creation of "safe zones" inside Myanmar—to put an end to the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya community. The statement lends further weight to the belief that this crisis may not stop without a stronger intervention by the UNSC permanent members and other strategically important countries.

Since the persecution began in Rakhine in late August, nearly 600,000 Rohingyas have crossed into Bangladesh. Witness accounts, satellite imagery, and photo and video evidence gathered by different agencies including the UN, show how a country used its geo-economic advantage to preside over one of the worst and fastest growing humanitarian crises in history. It is frustrating to see that many countries, despite holding Myanmar's military leadership responsible for this situation, have failed to come up with an action plan. China and India continue to turn a blind eye, emboldening Myanmar to renege on its commitment to restore peace. If the fresh influx of refugees is any indication, token measures and perfunctory condemnations are not going to work any longer.

What is needed is concrete action to ensure that Myanmar immediately stops its bloody crackdown. A sustainable return of the displaced Rohingya people to their homeland is also a priority, and for that to happen, the UNSC should use any means necessary to make the country grant citizenship and all other rights to these people, including access to the labour market, education, health and social services.

## Easy bail and acquittal for muggers!

*Legal process in need of review*

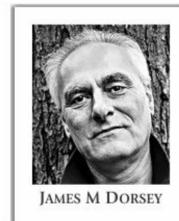
**T**HE recent killing of Khandaker Abu Talha, a student of Daffodil University student who protested against muggers trying to rob a pedestrian, has brought to the limelight how easy it is for muggers to slip through the legal system and become repeat offenders. *The Daily Star* has learnt that nearly nine out of 10 muggers who got caught between January and June of this year managed to post bail and the cases against them fall through easily due to non-cooperation of both witnesses and victims.

According to former court officials, witnesses often fail to turn up at the court during the hearing of a case. Why are witnesses so reluctant to appear? It is because there is little protection for witnesses from violence by the accused or their cohorts.

The act of mugging falls into a grey area in our law, i.e. there is no legal definition of mugging. If someone's valuables are snatched away forcibly by armed perpetrators then the incident is recorded as robbery under Section 392. So the court proceedings that follow fall under the act of robbery and not mugging. However, mugging often takes place in the street by criminals who do not usually openly display arms to their victims. Moreover, the lengthy legal procedures are often not deemed to be worth the trouble of reporting the crime.

The ambiguity regarding how to treat incidents of mugging, allows for muggers' legal representatives to get them out of jail. There should be a specific provision in the law on mugging so that these criminals cannot slip through the system so easily.

# Kurdish battle positions Kurds as US ally against Iran



JAMES M DORSEY

**T**HERE may be a silver but risky lining for Kurdish nationalists in their devastating loss of Kirkuk and other cities on the periphery of their semi-autonomous region as they lick

their wounds and vent anger over deep-seated internal divisions that facilitated the Iranian-backed Iraqi blitzkrieg. Mounting popular anger coupled with US Congressional fury could, however, position the Kurds as a key player in potential US efforts to roll back Iranian influence in Iraq and counter the Islamic republic as part of President Donald J Trump's tougher approach towards the Islamic republic.

Kurdish President Massoud Barzani, in his first comment on the military rout of his Peshmerga forces, vowed last month that the overwhelming vote for Kurdish independence in a controversial referendum "won't be in vain". Refusing to take responsibility for the rout, Mr Barzani blamed the Kurdish predicament on his political rival, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) that allegedly ordered the withdrawal of Kurdish forces from Kirkuk.

Technically, that may well be correct. An Iranian Revolutionary Guard general and close associate of Quds Force chief Qassem Soleimani known as Eqbalpour, accompanied by two Iraqi military commanders, reportedly met on the eve of the Iraqi assault on Kirkuk with Kurdish officers in the offices of the PUK in the city. Eqbalpour urged the Kurds to surrender the city peacefully.

"If you resist, we will crush you and you will lose everything," he warned, pointing to a map that detailed how the Iraqi assault would unfold. "This is our military plan. We will hit you tonight from three points—here, here and here," Eqbalpour said. His Kurdish interlocutors agreed to withdraw.

The Kurdish withdrawal, prompting a Kurdish exodus from the city, was a stab in the back of the PUK's arch rival, the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP), that is headed by Mr Barzani. It has sparked a wave of popular anger against Iran that could complicate any effort to negotiate a compromise between the Kurds and the government in Baghdad of Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, who has vowed to ensure Iraq's territorial integrity.

Iranian involvement in the Iraqi blitzkrieg has also sparked anger in the US Congress even though the United States, which enabled Kurdish autonomy within

Iraq, vowed to remain neutral in the Kurdish-Iraqi dispute. Congressmen threatened to impose an arms embargo on Iraq, now that the Islamic State has effectively lost control of any territory in the country, in response to the alleged use of US-built Abrams tanks and Humvees against the Kurds by Iranian-backed Shiite militias known as the Popular Mobilisation Units (PMU).

The United States provides an estimated USD 1 billion in annual military assistance to Iraq. It has designated some elements of the PMU as terrorist organisations.

In a statement, Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman John McCain called on Iraqi forces to "take immediate steps to de-escalate this volatile situation

cannot in good conscience send money to an Iranian patsy working to subvert American interests," Mr Franks said.

Despite Iraqi denials that the PMU have access to US weaponry, Kurdish emphasis on the role in Kirkuk of the Iranian-backed militia and assertions of use of Abrams tanks and Humvees was designed to garner US support. Iraq's embassy in Washington charged that the claims constituted "a concerted misinformation campaign by elements in the Kurdish region to cover up their sinister actions in attempting to disrupt the coordinated and professional movements of the Iraqi security forces."

The Kurdish assertions amounted to an attempt to make it difficult for the US Department of Defence to certify, in

this month, to certify that Iran was complying with the terms of a two-year-old nuclear agreement that opened the door to the lifting of international sanctions. A potential re-imposition of sanctions by Congress in the next sixty days could throw the accord into jeopardy.

US and Saudi officials have repeatedly hinted at the possibility of attempting to achieve regime change in Iran. The Kurds, like the Baloch in Pakistan, could play a key role in any such effort. It is a strategy that would likely exploit anti-Iranian sentiment among Kurds in the wake of the Iraqi blitzkrieg, enjoy support from Israel which has already publicly come out in favour of Kurdish independence, and build on past US and Israeli support for Kurdish nationalism.

*On October 19, The Daily Star published an editorial titled "Another UN report shelved: Why?" based on a report by The Guardian. The following is the response from WFP Executive Director, David Beasley, to the journalist of The Guardian who covered the story.*

Regarding the removal from publication of a WFP food security assessment about the levels of hunger and malnutrition in the northern part of Rakhine State in Myanmar earlier this year, the assessment should not have been removed and I have directed that it be republished immediately in its original form.

Put simply, the World Food Programme stands firmly behind the findings of the report. It contained important information about the deterioration of food security in northern Rakhine and its impact on vulnerable people, especially women and children.

It is important to note that the report is now very outdated, because the assessment took place between March and April this year, before the latest surge in violence in northern Rakhine. The level of food needs on the ground has undoubtedly changed – sadly, most likely for the worse.

Now, more than ever, humanitarian workers must be given access to the communities living in northern Rakhine. My message to the authorities in Myanmar is clear: the World Food Programme must have free and unhindered access so we can provide the necessary food assistance to people who are hungry and in need.

Further, as you may know, I recently visited the Cox's Bazar area in Bangladesh and spoke to refugees from the northern Rakhine. As I said then, what happened to these men and women and boys and girls that forced them to flee Myanmar is truly appalling and stomach-turning. The violence must stop.



US and Saudi officials have repeatedly hinted at the possibility of attempting to achieve regime change in Iran. The Kurds, like the Baloch in Pakistan, could play a key role in any such effort. PHOTO: CLAUDIO VON PLANTANA

by ceasing their advances. I am especially concerned by media reports that Iranian and Iranian-backed forces are part of the assault. Make no mistake, there will be severe consequences if we continue to see American equipment misused in this way," Mr McCain said.

Mr McCain's words were echoed by Representative Trent Franks, a member of the House Armed Services Committee, who introduced a resolution in Congress supporting Kurdish independence. "I urge Iraqi Prime Minister Al-Abadi to fulfil his pledge to prevent any external or internal attack against the Kurds and prove Baghdad is not the puppet of Tehran. Otherwise, the US will have no other choice but to pull funding as it

accordance with US law, that Iraq has ensured that US military assistance does not fall into the hands of extremist groups that include those elements of the PMU that have been designated by the State Department.

The Kurdish position, beyond the immediate politicking that aims to weaken Iraq's position in any future negotiation, and garner US empathy if not support, also positions the Kurds as a potential US ally in any upcoming attempt to counter Iranian influence in Iraq or destabilise the Islamic republic with the help of ethnic groups that populate its borders.

Mr Trump signalled his tougher approach towards Iran, by refusing earlier

That is support that ultimately did not help the Kurds fulfil their aspirations. There is no guarantee that a repeat performance would fare any better. Kurds defended last month's referendum with the argument that there is no good time for them to stake their claim given deep-seated Turkish, Iranian and Iraqi rejection of their aspirations for independence. That makes their current attempt and potential participation in covert operations against Iran no less risky.

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