

Scrutinising election officials

Isn't the police acting beyond its writ?

THAT the police is gathering background information about potential polling officials, who would oversee the forthcoming election, and their families, is surprising. The move is not only an overstretch of responsibility of the police, it has also caused discomfort among these officials.

We understand that the Election Commission has sent no instruction to the police to do so. Yet, the local police in many districts have gone about obtaining the list of probable polling officers and launched inquiry into their personal backgrounds including their political affiliation.

As explained by Rafiqul Islam, one of the election commissioners, to Prothom Alo, it is not the police's responsibility to seek such information. It is the exclusive right and authority of the returning officer to appoint public officials as polling officers.

We wonder why the police is carrying out such unauthorised query. What has prompted the police to do this on a priority basis? The fact that the police in many parts of the country is doing the same job suggests it's being coordinated. We are, therefore, curious about the purpose of this exercise.

Given its obscure nature, such informal investigation must be halted for the sake of a credible election devoid of administrative influence. All actions related to the election should be under the order of the officials appointed by the EC. The EC should instruct the police to refrain from devoting time and resources to something beyond its purview.

Why is govt. primary school enrolment falling?

Ensure quality education

THE falling rate of enrolment in government primary schools across the country should be a cause for worry, given the stress on education at this level, although the number of schools has increased during this time, according to a Directorate of Primary Education (DPE) study. For example, a primary school in Manikganj has only one student in Grade II. We learnt about another school in Patuakhali recently which has over 100 students but is running with only one teacher. The DPE data has revealed that there are thousands of primary schools where there is no standard teacher-student ratio and many of these schools are running with only one teacher.

Many educationists believe that government primary schools are losing students because of the rising educational cost and the lower standard of education. Although we have achieved 97 percent enrolment rate in primary schools, ensuring quality education in these schools still remains a far cry. And sadly, a large number of children don't learn how to read and write even after completing primary education.

Shortage of teachers in primary schools is an age-old problem which has never been addressed properly by the government. And the existing teachers in the schools have hardly been provided with any training. Moreover, many of the primary school teachers do not get salaries for months on end. In addition, many of the schools lack proper infrastructure and there is a lack of transparency in the use of government funds. Needless to say, ensuring quality education is the only way to keep the students at schools, and to do so, these issues must be addressed with due importance.

What we can do to keep the train of democracy on track

CYBERNAUTIC RUMINATIONS



HABIBULLAH N KARIM

DEMOCRACY works only if people who have the right to vote can exercise that right without fear or favour.

This is increasingly being challenged by the political atmosphere of the

country. For starters, elections are supposed to be held in a free and fair political environment. The institution that is in charge of securing that environment is the Election Commission—an independent state agency entrusted with the triple ordeals of: 1) administering political registrations, contestant nominations and participatory elections in an honest, transparent and credible fashion; 2) making local government functionaries maintain neutrality towards all candidates; and 3) confirming election results strictly as per election rules that reflect the will of the people.

The only way the above challenges can be met if the Election Commission asserts its independence and earns the confidence of the people. Forty-seven years after we have achieved independence as a nation, we seem to be still uncertain as to how to secure a participatory and honest election. It is, therefore, a historic opportunity for the Election Commission to rise up to the occasion and deliver a great election that would be beyond reproach.

For that to happen, the party in power has to give the EC a wide berth in the discharge of its responsibilities and allow open communication with all quarters in a spirit of patriotism and inclusivity. At the same time, the concerns of political parties or factions that are not part of the government need to be given due importance and addressed according to the merit of the issue.

Leading up to the elections, the local administrators have to be allowed to function in a non-partisan fashion as per the code of civil service. However, in view of the increasingly partisan pressures on civil servants and other state

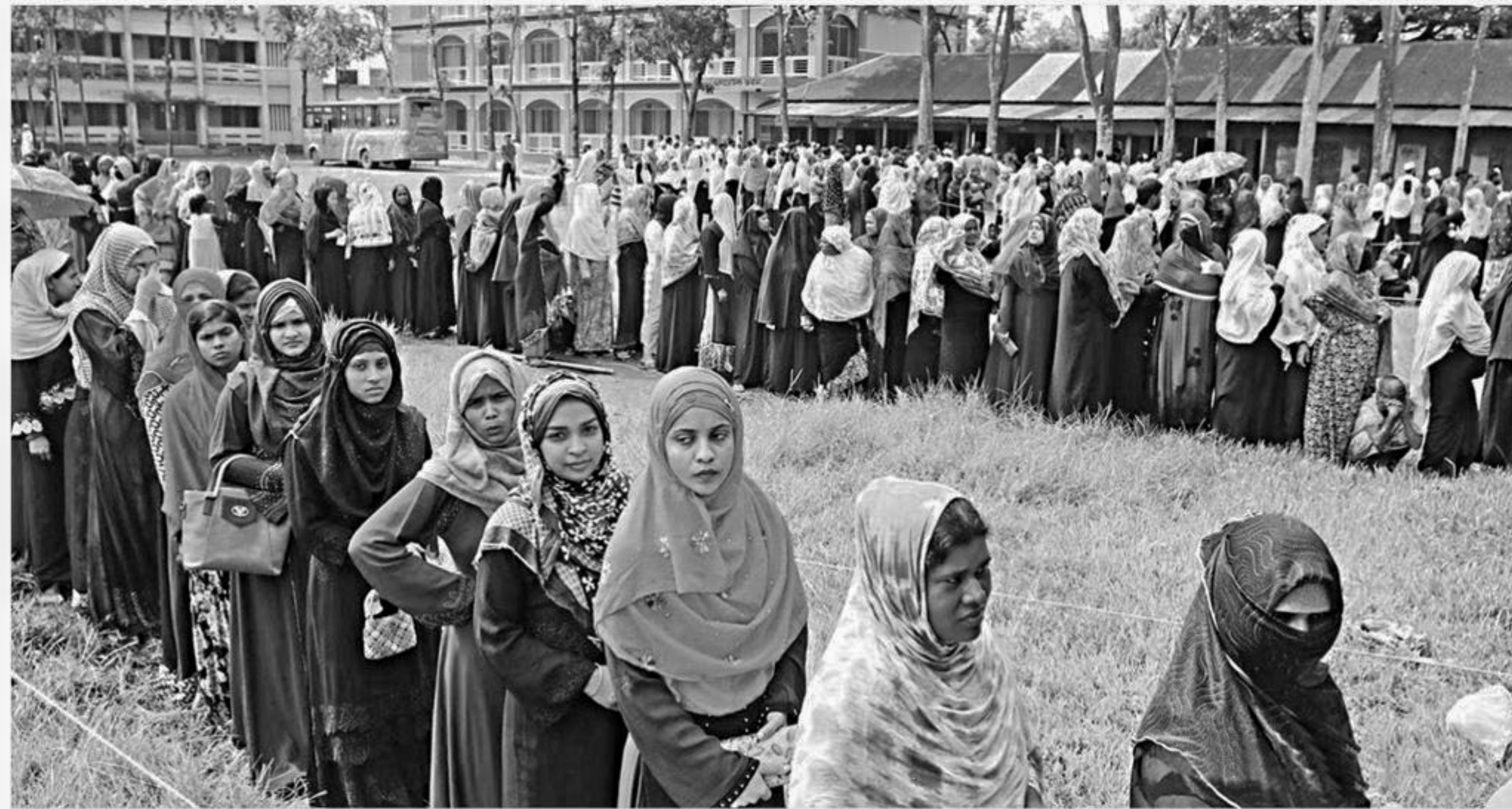


PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

functionaries such as those in the field administration, police and judiciary that we have witnessed in the last few decades, people find it hard to accept that the administration will behave in a non-partisan fashion if not closely supervised by the agency meant to keep any partisan administrators and law enforcers in check. That is the tallest order of the day for the EC.

Now that the election schedule has been declared, the process of nomination filing and campaigning is in full swing. Overzealous campaigning by candidates and use of state machinery for political gains by those in control of such state assets are a real possibility where the EC needs to step in like an impartial umpire to prevent such contravention of fair-play rules. The election economics is another major concern which is not in favour of professionals and honest politicians. The EC mandates a maximum expenditure of Tk 25 lakh but it is common knowledge that several crores are spent by the rich and powerful candidates openly flouting

the limits set by the law. It would be interesting to see how the EC addresses this thorny issue.

On the election day, all voters need to feel safe while going to polling centres to cast their votes as per their choice without coercion, enticement or fear of retribution. This will be possible only if the polling officers and law enforcers carry out their roles dispassionately as impartial agents of the state.

Each of these tasks will require a highly charged EC armed with an indomitable zeal to deliver participatory and credible elections to the nation. Accordingly, the EC needs to have the appropriate administrative machinery and budget. We can only hope that is the case as the current EC has been in office for nearly three years now.

It is very encouraging to see that the head of the government has engaged in dialogues with a number of political parties and coalitions which has created some space for the contestants affiliated with parties not part of the ruling coalition to take part in the electoral process. Dialogue is the *sine qua non* of a

democratic polity. For the nation to see a fully functioning parliament, such dialogues are paramount even when prickly issues stand in the way of civil discourse.

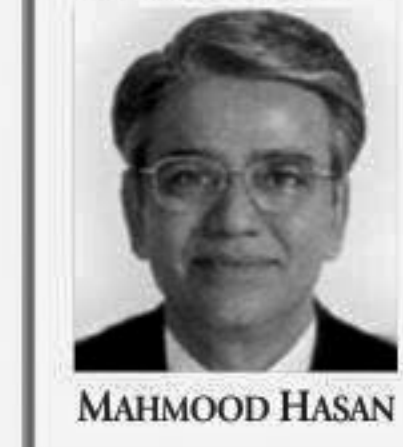
In the end, all political parties—those in power and those outside of it—are part and parcel of our rich polity. Our vibrant political legacy has produced some of the greatest leaders in history that have brought us the eighth largest independent nation in the world (in terms of population). We can be proud to be a part of a nation that is taking confident steps toward economic development and social progress. It is heartening to see that contestants from all political shades are taking part in the upcoming election. It is a simple wish of the common men and women of the country that their collective political will prevails irrespective of party affiliation, money or force.

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Dramatic twists in Sri Lanka's political turmoil

FROM A BYSTANDER



MAHMOOD HASAN

October 26, there have been several twists in the developing political drama. The power struggle has not ended and people in the island are now clearly divided.

Soon after Sirisena removed Wickremesinghe without a floor test and prorogued the parliament until November 14, parliament Speaker Karu Jayasuriya (an MP from UNP, who is theoretically neutral) declared that the presidential decree was illegal and called upon the president to reconvene the parliament so that it can prove who exactly has the majority — Wickremesinghe or Rajapaksa. Ranil Wickremesinghe also defied the dismissal and refused to leave the prime minister's residence, claiming that he still enjoyed majority support in the parliament and was the prime minister. Wickremesinghe could not go to the court as the Constitution empowers the president to choose the prime minister of his government and has the power to prorogue or dissolve the parliament.

Sirisena's power alteration game was based on parliamentary seats controlled by Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP) and Rajapaksa's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) in the 225-seat parliament. Although the National Unity

government has collapsed, Wickremesinghe currently has 125 MPs on his side, while Rajapaksa has 98 legislators supporting him. To win a confidence vote, Rajapaksa needs 113 MPs—that is, he has to convince at least 15 MPs to switch sides. Naturally, Sirisena prorogued the parliament until November 14 so that Rajapaksa could win over or buy up the MPs in the intervening period. According to reports, Rajapaksa offered between rupees 100 million and 500 million to buy some MPs. There are also reports that China was helping Rajapaksa to finance these defections.

However, Sirisena soon realised that Rajapaksa did not succeed in his poaching. Thus, on November 9, Sirisena dissolved the parliament and announced fresh elections to be held on January 5, 2019. The new parliament is supposed to be convened on January 17, 2019.



A man reads a newspaper carrying the news of the Sri Lanka's parliament being dissolved, in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

PHOTO: REUTERS/DINUKA LIYANAWATTE

Sirisena's decision to dissolve the parliament did not go unchallenged. Immediately, three political parties including UNP, which together enjoy absolute majority in the parliament, petitioned the Supreme Court against the president's decision. On November 13, a three-judge panel headed by Chief Justice Nalin Perera issued a temporary injunction on the president's order to dissolve the parliament. The court said it will deliver a verdict on December 7 after the full hearing. The judges also ordered the Independent Election Commission to halt preparations for the January 5 election. The court's decision was a boost for Ranil Wickremesinghe's UNP and bad news for Sirisena.

Increased US interest rates have triggered an outflow of more than 85 billion rupees from Colombo Stock Exchange up to October 2018, and in addition, another 11 billion rupees have gone out since Wickremesinghe's ouster.

announced the speaker. While the parliament was in session, a fracas broke out with MPs exchanging blows and throwing projectiles at the speaker, who quickly left the chamber. The deadlocked parliament actually helps Rajapaksa to gain strength.

However, the No Confidence Motion (NCM) against Rajapaksa has turned invalid as the speaker did not follow parliamentary procedures. The government announced that the newly appointed Prime Minister Rajapaksa will continue to be in his position as the NCM was unconstitutional. Without a formal no-confidence on a financial bill, the NCM is not binding. Only a moral victory for the UNP.

Nonetheless, Sirisena said that newly

appointed Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa will continue as the NCM was invalid. This announcement has actually immobilised the administration—not knowing whether to follow instructions from Wickremesinghe or Rajapaksa. Sirisena's move has been criticised by India, Japan, and the US, while China has recognised Rajapaksa as the new prime minister.

Since Sirisena's unconstitutional coup, Sri Lanka's economic situation has suddenly become acute. Wickremesinghe, while talking to Reuters, said that the US and Japan have frozen more than a billion dollars of development aid that may cause a balance of payment crunch. Increased US interest rates have triggered an outflow of more than 85 billion rupees from Colombo Stock Exchange up to October 2018, and in addition, another 11 billion rupees have gone out since Wickremesinghe's ouster. The current trade deficit is USD 6.4 billion, and the debt servicing bill for 2019 has risen to USD 4 billion. The Sri Lankan Rupee has also depreciated against the dollar by about 14 percent.

Meanwhile, the supporters of UNP and SLFP have been frantically manoeuvring to show off their strength in the streets. These rallies are worrying as showdowns can erupt into violence. People are confused and want a stable democratic government.

It is ironic that Sirisena who once revolted against Rajapaksa and ran the presidential election in 2014 to resist Rajapaksa's authoritarian rule has foolishly got entangled in a Machiavellian political conspiracy. He had promised that he will bring about balance in president's powers, resolve demands of the minority Tamil people, and initiate institutional changes in Sri Lankan politics. Sadly, he has flipped over and re-joined Rajapaksa. He has miscalculated his strategy that he can dump Wickremesinghe and induce defections from UNP to bolster Rajapaksa's SLFP.

In all likelihood, the Supreme Court will say that dissolution of the parliament is in line with the constitutional powers of the president. It is also likely that Mahinda Rajapaksa will win the January 2019 election, rule in a Marcosian style, and throw Sirisena to the dustbin of politics.

Democracy in the developing countries, unfortunately, are in recession.

Mahmood Hasan is former ambassador and secretary of Bangladesh government.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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The case for a new Upazila in Rangamati

Langadu Upazila, a sub-unit of Rangamati district, consists of a number of unions. Three of its unions—Gulshakhali, Bhashannyadom and Bogachottor—are completely detached from it. In addition, the Amtoli union of Baghaichari Upazila, which is adjacent to these three unions, is also less connected to its own Upazila Sadar. All these unions are situated on the eastern bank of the Kaptai Lake.

Residents of these unions need to cover several kilometres, ranging from eight to thirty, to reach the Upazila Sadar for basic public services. Also, there's no road communication between these unions and the Upazila. During monsoon, communication gets better as the Lake becomes fully navigable but the dry season is far from convenient.

Due to the communication problem, not a single major infrastructural project—such as building a higher educational institution or a hospital—has been established in these unions. What's more, people cannot also have basic administrative services without going through a long exhaustive journey.

The total area of these four unions is nearly 290 sq. km, while more than fifty thousand people live there. Compared to other smaller Upazilas, this large area certainly qualifies to become an Upazila itself. Moreover, the internal road communication system among these unions is quite good.

I think a new Upazila comprised of these unions should be formed in the best interests of the local people.

Aminul Islam, Mainimukh, Langadu