

Promotion is earned, not gifted

When the opposite happens, it raises suspicion

With the general election just months away, it is disconcerting to see how the administration is giving in to demands for undue perks and promotions for public officials in vital positions. The latest move, according to a report by this daily, saw the home ministry request the public administration ministry to approve more in-situ posts of additional inspector general (IGP) and deputy inspector general (DIG) of police, among other positions, after its previous attempt failed to meet expectations. In-situ posts mean that police personnel will hold the same positions and perform the same duties as before even after promotions, because of a lack of vacancies. What's the point of a promotion, then?

Apparently, BCS police cadre officers have been spurred on by other instances of in-situ promotions of late, particularly within the administration cadre. While we recognise the importance of deserving officials getting the opportunity to advance their careers, the circumstances under which this is being done raises concerns. For one, the lack of vacancies at top levels, which makes any addition not just unnecessary, but also a huge drain on public coffers. Reportedly, the government would require an additional Tk 1.5 crore per month to pay for all the in-situ promotions originally requested.

More worryingly, the timing of the move, just ahead of the election, makes it appear as if the home ministry wants to appease police officers who will play important roles during the election to potentially influence its outcome. Such concerns are not unfounded given the role played by poll-related officials, including those in charge of security, during the last two controversial elections. Similar efforts at appeasing high-ranking officials have also been witnessed recently, when the finance ministry approved spending Tk 380 crore to buy 261 new vehicles for DCs and UNOs, reneging on its own policy on such purchases during the current economic crisis. The government should know that the implications of such undeserved provisions are not lost on citizens.

During the last 14 years or so that it has been in power, opportunities for serving public officials have increased manifold, but the quality of their service has not. Grievances abound, but efforts to address them, especially from the police force, are sorely lacking. Against this backdrop, the government must consider public interests before approving any additional spending to accommodate demands for promotions. Promotion should be given only when it is earned, through adequate public service, and as required by service rules.

The e-GP process must be competitive

It's essential for fair, transparent public procurement

We are disheartened to learn of anomalies in the electronic government procurement (e-GP) process allowing certain quarters to monopolise it. According to a new study on e-GP by the Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB), over the last 11 years, public contracts worth a whopping Tk 60,069 crore were awarded based on single bids. The study further reveals that one in five contracts is awarded through a single bid, without competition, which makes it glaringly obvious that something is amiss in the e-tendering process.

These findings are based on data collected from 64 ministries and divisions between January 2012 and February 2023. Apparently, the top five percent of contractors control nearly 30 percent of the e-contracts in the public sector, and their dominance is increasing. During the study period, as much as three quarters of the e-contracts awarded were single-bid contracts – given to 92 procuring entities. Furthermore, 416 contractors received at least 75 percent of their work as single bidders, the study found.

The government rolled out the e-GP process in 2011 to streamline the tendering process and increase transparency and accountability in the public procurement process. This was meant to utilise our limited resources optimally and meaningfully. Judging by the TIB statistics, however, the government has all but failed to achieve that goal. It is hard to accept that there is so little competition that such an overwhelming number of public contracts were disbursed through single bidding. It points to some level of manipulation in the tendering process with the potential collusion of politically backed entities and corrupt government officials, leading to a monopoly in the e-GP process. This is completely unacceptable.

Competitive bidding is vital to ensure that the best contractor is selected out of all competitors to do the job at hand, with the assurance of the best quality of work and value for money. That is exactly what we need right now, when our country is at a critical juncture of development. We urge the government to review and upgrade the e-GP process so that it is used for its intended purpose – which is to ensure a fair, competitive, transparent and corruption-free procurement system. The government must safeguard the process so that it cannot be manipulated by the corrupt and powerful.

New Message

To

Subject

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‘US visa policy alone cannot ensure fair election’

Ali Riaz, distinguished professor of political science at Illinois State University, analyses the relationship between the US visa policy, Bangladesh's politics, and broader geopolitics in an exclusive interview with Naimul Alam Alvi of The Daily Star.

The US Department of State has stated they are implementing visa restrictions on Bangladeshi individuals who have undermined, or are involved in undermining, the democratic election process in Bangladesh. What do you think is the significance of this policy?

The US visa policy was announced on May 24, and what we have heard recently is basically an acknowledgement that the US government has started to act on that policy. The US wants to send a signal which they have been sending for the last two years: that they'd like to see Bangladesh not have a repeat of the 2014 or 2018 national elections. The major implications of this policy are 1) a message that they are not convinced by the assurance of the Bangladesh government that the current process is going to deliver a free, fair, inclusive and peaceful election; 2) they would like to see the Bangladesh government take steps toward creating a conducive environment; and 3) they see that there are individuals who are acting in a manner detrimental to the democratic process.

With respect to the election, I tend to believe that the US visa policy is to help the process. But this in and of itself is not going to ensure a free and fair election.

Does the US government have geopolitical interests in Bangladesh's national election beyond its stated commitment to a fair and democratic process?

A policy, when enacted, is not entirely bereft of larger strategic interests or, in this case, broader US policies. Over the last two years, US delegates who visited Dhaka repeatedly insisted on this fair election. They've seen that the human rights situation and media freedom have deteriorated significantly. They have seen violence in politics, mostly perpetrated by state actors against the opposition. Those are the things they didn't like. But the most important thing is that this policy is not entirely separated from how the US sees Bangladesh's role in the Indo-Pacific region, especially in South Asia and also on the global stage. The US intends to see the Indo-Pacific as a region which doesn't fall into any one country's sphere of influence, particularly China's influence.

How, then, is the national election in Bangladesh connected to the Indo-Pacific strategy of the US? The US, to my understanding, would like to see a government which is accountable and represents the will of the people. A government which has a democratic mandate to govern is likely to make policies and take a position which is consistent with democratic principles. And if it is democratic, then in all likelihood it would align with the democratic forces globally. That would benefit the US, instead of if a country was authoritarian or aligned with a country which does not support



Prof Ali Riaz

democratic practices globally.

Does the US have a similar approach to democracy for all countries as they currently have in Bangladesh's case?

Absolutely not. No policy is made in isolation from the broader concerns and broader policy outlook. The US considers countries based on their relationship, and their geostrategic and geopolitical importance. Hence, the policies would in some cases be different. We can find contradictions in it. But remember that all states pursue national interest first. No state is a charity organisation. And national interest is not a one-size-fits-all matter. Definitely, you and I and everyone else can criticise US policies towards various countries. But, at the same time, neither you nor I can simply ignore the fact that the US would pursue its interest the way it sees fit. But with respect to Bangladesh, my point has always been that the fate of Bangladesh's democracy and governance should not be decided in Washington, New Delhi, Beijing or somewhere else. It should be decided by the people of Bangladesh.

What the US is asking here today, and the European Union is indicating, is that an opportunity should be given to Bangladeshi people. Bangladesh hasn't had a fair and inclusive national election for 14 years now. That is the point.

Two elections have been manipulated and engineered in a fashion that have delivered victory to a political party which has become more authoritarian by the day. But most importantly, there's a lack of moral legitimacy of this government. Bangladesh cannot afford to have another election like those of 2014 and 2018.

With the US sanctions on Rab and the new visa policy, and Bangladesh being more critical of the US lately,

how do you see the US-Bangladesh relationship going?

US policy with respect to Rab, which came at the end of 2021, was for the specific reason that this particular force was engaged in extrajudicial killings and egregious violations of human rights. And it is not that the Bangladeshi government was not aware of it. Moreover, the US has said that if the reforms are made, there is no reason to continue the sanctions they have imposed on Rab.

Similarly, with respect to the visa policy, what do we see? Bangladesh was told repeatedly ahead of time that there are issues with respect to the democratic process and fair election. It came on May 24, 2023, but if you look back at 2022, and even 2021, anyone who visited Bangladesh on behalf of the US government had underscored this point. So, with these, of course, there's a strain in the relationship.

The US position with respect to a fair election is somewhat a reflection of the aspirations of the Bangladeshi people. The people want to have an election where they can vote, their voices are heard, their opinions matter and they are part of these political processes and the governance. It is not about reacting to US policy or not. It is about ensuring that Bangladeshis do have this opportunity – in fact, this right.

But it is not irreversible. This is not yet determining all other aspects of the relationship between these two countries. I'm afraid that if this strain continues, the different aspects of the multifaceted relationship between Bangladesh and the US will eventually be hampered.

There have been claims of foreign interference, including the US', in Bangladesh's internal matters. What is your perspective on the issue?

Bangladesh is a part of the global community. As partners in various global institutions, even if you don't call them development partners, they have concerns about governance and democracy in Bangladesh. There are strategic and business interests as well. Let us not forget that the government has not abandoned the idea of having a Data Protection Act, which is going to hinder the business interests of the US and other countries. So, do they have a right to express their concerns?

Definitely they do. It is not an intervention. The US has not taken a position in favour of any political party whatsoever. Rather, it has said that it just wants to see a free and fair election in Bangladesh. And the Bangladesh government should have a popular mandate; a legitimate one – morally, constitutionally, and politically.

How do you assess Bangladesh's response to the US visa policy?

The Bangladesh government's reaction seems to swing among "yes, it is a great thing," "it is supportive of Prime Minister Hasina's effort to have a fair election," and "we don't care about it." The prime minister's reaction in the New York press conference seems to be exactly the opposite of what her ministers have been saying. Is this a reasonable response to this policy? It seems that they have not made up their mind yet about their official reaction. But if you take it at face value, Bangladesh's ruling party does not seem to be concerned.

Bangladesh should be concerned. This is a clear testimony, an unequivocal statement from the United States, not only through its delegates but through its policy, that they are convinced that a free and fair election might not take place in 2024. The assurance that the government of Bangladesh has given has not convinced them.

Considering that the Bangladesh-US relationship is a multifaceted thing, there is no reason to have a belligerent tone towards the US. Both parties have underscored from time to time that the Bangladesh-US relationship is a friendly relationship. Bangladesh's economic interest aligns with having a better relationship with the United States. Bangladesh's government needs to decide what they are going to do.

Ideally, what should Bangladesh do now?

The US position with respect to a fair election is somewhat a reflection of the aspirations of the Bangladeshi people. The people want to have an election where they can vote, their voices are heard, their opinions matter and they are part of these political processes and the governance. It is not about reacting to US policy or not. It is about ensuring that Bangladeshis do have this opportunity – in fact, this right. History tells us very clearly and unequivocally that present circumstances and the present system of governance would not be able to deliver a free, fair, and inclusive election. So, something must be done, some kind of neutral administration has to be installed so that people have confidence and the opportunity to exercise their constitutional right to vote and express their opinions. That is what matters, that is what is most important. It is far more important than what the US or other countries are saying.



READERS' VOICE

Are feminists asking for 'too much'?

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The most common "criticism" of modern-day feminism is that women don't face the kind of severe discrimination that the movement had once fought against. Proponents of this argument claim that, since women have achieved certain rights already, there is no need to continue advocating for gender equality. This reminds me of a Tumblr post that read, "You know how first-world feminists get told that they don't need feminism? They're told that they should be glad they're not 'really oppressed' like the women in third world countries, that things could always be worse..."

The post goes on to explain how feminists everywhere are dismissed

just because someone else in another place is worse-off, while those who are presented as worse-off are being told the same, and so on and so forth. These psychological tricks generally work by guilt-shaming a victim, distracting them from their problems, belittling

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their issues as being "not real," and emotionally blackmailing them for being ungrateful. Just because things could always be worse doesn't mean that the current issues are not worth fighting for.

Whenever I talk about women's rights, many men instantly argue that the feminist movement has given women so much special treatment that it is now unfair to men in some cases. They use designated bus seats as the ultimate example. Those who argue about these issues don't understand that feminism starts off with equity, not equality.

The movement is not meant to diminish the distinction amongst gender needs. Rather, it caters to those who are deemed inferior (in this case, women) so that they are not considered inferior anymore. For example, to ensure fair treatment for those with disabilities, wheelchairs are provided to those who need them. Is this "special treatment"?

Should everyone, including those who can walk, get a wheelchair? Similarly, women are given special quotas in some sectors so they can get access to the opportunities that men get by default. It is not pushing them ahead in the race but only giving them a fair chance to win.

Failure to understand this basic fact has led many to hate the overall idea of feminism. The word itself has been associated with such negative connotations that even some women's rights activists don't call themselves feminists.

To bring about a welcome change, people need to understand feminism's multifaceted nature and the ongoing struggle for gender equality in a society that often downplays or misunderstands women's issues. Properly educating the younger generations about feminism can erase the negative connotations associated with the word, and only then can feminists freely advocate what they stand for.