

ELECTION AND DEMOCRACY IN BANGLADESH, THE UNKNOWN RIDDLE AND PROPOSAL FOR IMPROVEMENT

INTRODUCTION :

In the contemporary world, in comparison with dictator, military or kings' rule, democratic governance by the elected representatives is considered to be the best. The democracy in Bangladesh is seen by the rest of the world with great interest and enthusiasm for one valid reason, this is the lone Muslim country (in the recent amendment of constitution, the religion of the Muslims has been retained as state religion, and by that way the validity of the term 'secularism' has been made questionable) in the world that has got some sort of multi-party democracy. Its story, however, is not that bright. During the short life-span of Bangladesh spanning about 41 years (1971-2012 AD), the country has been ruled by the military dictators for about 15 years (1975-1990= 15 years), at times under the name 'military rule' and at times, in the name of "democracy" as introduced by them. Theoretically the country can be said to be ruled under democracy for 25 years (1971-75 and 1991 to 2012). But the people did not see much success of this type of government. The prime cause of the failure of the elected government to work efficiently is "Efficient people are not elected in the election". The natural question here is "Why cannot the most efficient people be elected ?" The probable answers are : (01) There is no such efficient person in this country (may be). (02) The efficient people fight in election, but cannot win, and (03) There is little scope for the efficient people to win in the present system of election.

The people know very well that only the third answer is correct. How scopes can be created in our election system for the inclusion of efficient people is a big question and is not the topic of today's discussion. Today, we want to address the burning question, "How the election commission can assure a free and fair election". At present there are two parallel demands going strong in the country. These are : (a) Free and fair election can be held under the elected government and (02) Free and fair election can be held only under the Care Taker government.

In our country there happened as many as 8 general elections in (01) 1973, (02) 1979, (03) 1980, (04) 1988, (05) 1991, (05) 1994, (06) 1996, (07) 2001 (08) 2008, of which 4 (1991, 1996, 2001 and 2008) were held under the caretaker government. There is a belief going on the country that election, if held under the caretaker government, becomes free and fait. Today, in this paper we shall present documents that would prove beyond doubt that none of the above generation elections were in fact fair or neutral. In other words, the results of elections held under the care taker government failed to give fair and neutral results, not to say anything about that held under political parties.

In this paper we shall endeavor to show three things, viz. (01) Were the elections held under the caretaker government fair and neutral ? (02) Were the elections held under political government fair and neutral ? (03) How can we ensure free and fair results in the election, within the current basic framework of the system of election ?

(01) WERE THE ELECTIONS HELD UNDER THE CARETAKER GOVERNMENT FAIR AND NEUTRAL ?

We are told that in the present system the “popular persons are elected in the election”. This however, is absent in our system. The reason is, there are some serious loopholes in our system. One top level elected representative disclosed publicly that their party could not win one of the election held under caretaker government because some big power interfered, and it interfered because it failed to get expected business gains from their government. When a person with such rank and status opine that external interference can change our election results, we, who know almost nothing of the secrets prevailing in the election system, should not make doubt. Coincidentally, in this paper we shall prove that election results are really manipulated even when those are held under the caretaker government.

At this stage I shall request the readers to have a look at the Table below titled “RESULTS OF FOUR ELECTIONS UNDER CARETAKER GOVERNMENT”. In this table the results of four elections held under the caretaker government in 1991, 1996, 2001 and 2006 have been given. The participating political parties and persons have been divided into 5 groups. These are : (01) Bangladesh Awami League (they were / are in power), (02) Bangladesh National party (they were in power), (03) Bangladesh Jatiyo party (they were in power), (04) Minor parties (they never came to power) and (05) The independent candidates. Let us consider them as an independent group.

Let us say, there are 200 seats in an election, let 1000 (arbitrary number) voters cast their votes, let there be 5 political parties (A B C D E) and let the ratio of their votes be like : A- 35%, B- 25%, C- 20%, D- 15% and E- 5%. Commonsense says, the number of seats of these parties should get will be equal to : A- 70 seats, B- 50 seats, C- 40 seats, D- 30 seats and E- 10 seats (i.e. proportionate to their votes). However, some anomalies may take place because of the variation in the number of voters in various constituencies. Let us call this variation as “deviation”. However, the deviation must : (01) Stay within tolerable limit and (02) Those must show the same trend for all the participating parties and groups. We do not know the parameter of tolerable limit. But in case the deviations do not show the same trend in case of all participates, one does not need to be super-intelligent to realize that there were manipulations in the election results.

Now look at the Table where we have shown the results of four elections held under the Caretaker government. The information have been taken from election commission website. In the Table, Column (1) is the % of vote won by each party, Col. (2) is the number of seats obtained by the party in the present ‘head count’ method. The column (3) and (4) are our addition where, in No. (3), we have shown the number of seats this party should have obtained in the proportionate system and in (4), the deviation from the standard one.

FOUR ELECTIONS UNDER CARETAKER GOVERNMENT
(COMPARISON BETWEEN DECLARED RESULT AND PROPORTIONATE METHODS)

| Party | 1991 CARE TAKER GOVERNMENT | | | | 1996 CARE TAKER GOVERNMENT | | | |
|---------------------|----------------------------|---------------|------------------|--------------|----------------------------|---------------|------------------|--------------|
| | (1) % of vote | (2)Head-count | (3)Proportionate | (3)Deviation | (1) % of vote | (2)Head-count | (3)Proportionate | (3)Deviation |
| A.L. | 30.1 | 88 | 90 | - 2.2 | 37.4 | 151 | 112 | + 35 |
| BNP | 30.8 | 140 | 92 | + 52 | 33.6 | 116 | 191 | - 39.3 |
| JP | 11.9 | 35 | 36 | - 3 | 16.4 | 32 | 49 | - 35 |
| Others | 22.8 | 34 | 68 | - 50 | 11.5 | 5 | 34 | - 85 |
| Independents | 4.4 | 3 | 13 | - 77 | 1.1 | 1 | 0 | |
| TOTAL | | | | | | | | |

| Party | 2001 CARE TAKER GOVERNMENT | | | | 2008 CARE TAKER GOVERNMENT | | | |
|--------------------|----------------------------|---------------|------------------|--------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------|--------------|
| | (1) % of vote | (2)Head-count | (3)Proportionate | (3)Deviation | (1) % of vote | (2)Head-count | (3)Proportionate | (3)Deviation |
| A.L. | 40.02 | 62 | 120 | - 48 | 57.1 | 263 | 171 | + 54 |
| BNP | 41.4 | 193 | 124 | + 56 | 42.8 | 33 | 100 | - 67 |
| JP | 7.22 | 14 | 22 | - 36 | | Joined in A.L. alliance | | |
| Others | 7.3 | 26 | 22 | + 9 | | Joined in A.L. or BNP alliance | | |
| Independent | 4.06 | 6 | 12 | - 50 | 4.9 | 4 | 15 | - 60 |
| Total | | | | | | | | |

As we mentioned earlier, “Deviations” are realities, but they are acceptable so long they show the same or similar trend for all the participants. But what do we see here ?

The information supplied in the above Table indicate the following :

| YEAR | POSITIVE DEVIATIONS | NEGATIVE DEVIATIONS |
|------|---------------------|--|
| 1991 | BNP 52%. | AL 2.2%, JP 3%, Minors 50%, Indep. 77% |
| 1996 | AL 35% | BNP 39.3%, JP 35%, Minors 85%. |
| 2001 | BNP 56%, Minors 9%, | AL 48%, JP 36%, Indep 50%. |
| 2008 | AL(Alliance) 54% | BNP (alliance) 67%, Indep 60% |

It means, positive deviations take place only in case of one party, and negative, in cases of all other parties. (The lone case of 9% positive deviation for the minors in 2001 may be accidental). Can such a result at all be taken to be natural ? No. On the other hand, it is preplanned and perfectly engineered. This is a definite proof that there were manipulations in all the elections held under various caretaker governments.

| Party | 1988 under JP | | | | 1994 under BNP | | | |
|-------------|---------------|---------------------|------------------------------|-----------|----------------|---------------------|------------------------------|-----------|
| | % of vote | Seat by head counts | Seat by proportionate method | Deviation | % of vote | Seat by head counts | Seat by proportionate method | Deviation |
| A.I. | Albn p 12.6 | 19 | 38 | -100 % | | | | |
| BNP | | | | | 100 | 300 | 300 | 00 |
| JP | 68.4 | 251 | 205 | +22.5 % | | | | |
| Others | 2.7 | 5 | 8 | - 38 | | | | |
| Independent | 16.3 | 25 | 49 | - 49 | | | | |
| Total | | | | | | | | |

In the above Table one may find the following realities :

| YEAR | PARTY | POSITIVE DEVIATIONS | NEGATIVE DEVIATIONS |
|------|-------|---------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1973 | AL | AL 33.8% | Minors + Independent 90% |
| 1979 | BNP | BNP 68% | AL 26%, Others 57%%, Indep. 65% |
| 1980 | JP | JP 20%, AL 4% | Others 17%, Indep 35%. |
| 1988 | JP | JP 22.5% | AL 100%, Minors 38%, Indep 49% |
| 1994 | BNP | BNP 100% | Others 00% (did not participate) |

(03) HOW CAN WE ENSURE FREE AND FAIR RESULTS IN THE ELECTION, WITHIN THE BASIC FRAMEWORK OF OUR SYSTEM OF ELECTION ?

The net findings of the above analysis is, in the current system of election, be it under political government or the caretaker government, fair and neutral results cannot be expected. In such a reality, in case we want get the most fair result, our first and foremost duty will be to go for “Proportionate System” in place of the current “Head count system”.

Even though people at times opine about complexities in the Proportionate system it is extremely easy, specially in the age when we have computers to do all the complex calculations. After the election is over, the jobs the election would have to do are :

- (i) Finding out the total number of valid votes cast throughout the country.
- (ii) Finding out the total number of votes won by each party. This result will be expressed as percent of the total votes. The independent candidates will be considered to belong to a single party.
- (iii) Each of the participating parties would be given seats depending on the percent of votes won by them throughout the country.

- (iv) The votes won by each candidate in his constituency will be found out and expressed as percent of the total valid votes in that constituency. The result will be calculated up to three places after decimal.
- (v) Requisite number of candidates from each party will be taken out from top winners (votes expressed in percent).

In the Proportionate system there prevails a system in which the participating parties submit the list of their candidates on the basis of priority. This system is not applicable in our country, because it would create scope of corruption for the political parties.

CONCLUSION :

We have mentioned that free and fair election does not always indicate that the team for governance will be good and efficient, unless only quality people are allowed to contest in the election. However, when malpractice exists right inside the election system, dishonest persons feel encouraged to participate. We have mentioned of unusual deviations in our election system. No one should believe that they do their job without gratification from the concerned people.

It is clear that the proposed “proportionate system” would eradicate the current malpractice existing inside the system of election. However, for making it more efficient we suggest few more measures as mentioned below.:

- (i) In place of one single day, election should be held for minimum 2 or more days (if required) such that the concerned people can work in peace and more security can be arranged in the booths. Voting may be held from 7.00 AM to 3 PM, after which there may be one hour break before counting.
- (ii) In the first counting, the total number of ballot papers will be counted to see if the number conforms to the number recorded by the agents. Every 100 ballots may be packed in one bundle in upturned condition and bound with a cover sheet. On the reverse side of the ballot papers there should be the seal of the Election commission and the numbering machine should continue continuous numbering each of them. Each of the properly signed bundles should be packed in a bigger box, sealed and preserved in the treasury or authorized branch of the bank. In case any of the boxes is lost or found tampered later, vote will be taken afresh.
- (iii) Detail counting shall start in the following day in presence of the agents, where the announcer shall openly declare the serial number (reverse side) of the ballot and its status (i.e. valid or invalid, winning party etc. and all would record it. Copy (preferably photocopy) of the final result sheet signed by the responsible authorities shall sold to the agents and copies, sent to the head office. The ballot papers must be preserved for a period of minimum six months and kept open for checking in case of challenge.
- (iv) The official result should be declared minimum one month after the final counting. We may remember that the scope for checking the ballots were earlier made null and void by making quick announcement of the

result. It could have been a mutual arrangement, when the privileged party immediately creates situation that clogged the scope of challenge. Intelligent steps must be taken to stop this possibility.

We live in a country where frustration has placed its root in the deepest soil. Our politicians have really made up to feel frustrated. The election Commission of Bangladesh has great responsibility to hold free, fair and neutral election. We do not know under whom (whether political government or caretaker government) the coming election will be held. We find no reason to be happy to know that manipulation takes place under the both. In such a situation the election commission can make some improvements by taking intelligent decisions to ensure transparency.

PROF. BIJON B. SARMA, Architecture Department, Ahsanullah University of Science and Technology,
Tejgaon, Dhaka 1208.