

Elections unlikely in 2008

Despite the much-touted Road Map, the feasibility of holding the parliamentary elections in 2008 is in question

Rangs Bhaban, in its dilapidated state, has attained iconic status. The caretaker government, in its tirade against corruption, saw fit to pull down this tall structure as it had been illegally constructed and that too on the site for a new road. Unfortunately, the job remains half done. The building has been broken to the extent that it cannot be used, but it still stands there, making mockery of the lofty intentions. This, indeed, has come to symbolise the state of the caretaker government in its entirety.

Metaphors aside, the government set out with a tough job of cleaning up the nation of crime and corruption and putting it back on the democratic track. But the main agenda was to hold a free, fair and credible election. To that end, changes were made in the Election Commission, and other relevant institutions, and the ambitious Road Map was announced. The elections are now scheduled to be held towards the end of 2008.

The question is, will the elections actually be held as per schedule? Is it possible to hold the election within this year? Even the most optimistic observer turns a shade sceptical at the prospect.

The reasons for the prospects of an Election 2008 being so bleak are manifold. Analysing the intricacies and implication involved, it is clear that the Road Map is certainly not the cakewalk it may have initially been perceived to be. As Chief Election Commissioner Shamsul Huda himself once remarked, "We have a road map in place, but we must remember the state of our country's roads – full of potholes, speed-breakers and a lot of other ups and downs. The going won't be easy."

The 1/11 perspective

Firstly, the circumstances leading up to the 1/11 intervention throw light on certain factors relevant to the election. The election had been scheduled for January 22 with two major confronting political groups led by BNP and Awami League respectively. It was the compulsion of the Election Commission to hold the elections as per schedule and, despite the token protest here and there, Awami League too was all set to join in the polls. It had begun nominating its candidates, boosting its alliance from a 14 Party one to the maha jote or grand alliance. And luring Ershad with his Jatiya Party into their fold was the icing on the cake. But things fell apart when Ershad drew back, not qualifying to contest in the election due to legal hassles. Awami League, realising it no longer held the trump card, withdrew from the polls. However, they naturally didn't use Ershad as an excuse; they said they couldn't participate in the polls because of the faulty voter list. Yet they had previously been willing to contest in the election with the very same voter list and under the controversial Chief Election Commissioner Justice MA Aziz. While the Election Commission would have been obliged to hold the election in the constitutional time frame, the High Court ruling in the case relating to the voting list came as a 'saving grace'.

And now the voter list may remain the snag to hold elections on time. It is already 2008 and the list is still under process. Even if it proceeds at full speed and is completed, where is the time for at least a draft to be published for proper review? As each area is being covered and completed, no chart is being put up for proper assessment or checking. There is no clear picture of what percentage of enrollment has taken place. All this may cause controversy and confusion, both genuine and motivated. If a faulty voters' list had held up polls in the past, an ambiguous one may do so in the future.

Discussion and dialogue

The Election Commission has committed itself to discuss with the political parties about electoral reforms and the government has announced its intentions to start a series of dialogues with the political parties before going for the polls. The Election Commission started up its discussions already, but that in itself has caused a furore.

The Election Commission has held discussion with some of the political parties, but no discussion with BNP. Given the rift within BNP, it showed a bias towards one faction of the party, leaving the other out in the cold. In fact, it was the faction empowered by party Chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia that was overlooked by the Election Commission. The 'reformists' were invited to dialogue, but legalities have held this up. In the meantime, the Election Commission has prepared its draft for electoral reforms. This is contradictory to its contention to draw up the reforms based on its discussions with the political parties. If the discussions have not taken place with all the major political parties, how has the draft been drawn up? This surely will be another irritant in the electoral process.

Registration of the political parties will put forward another challenge in the form of Jamaat-e-Islami. If there is any obstacle to registering Jamaat as a political party, Jamaat will in all likelihood resort to legal measures -- another spoke in the wheel along the road map.

And many serious issues remain unaddressed during the Election Commission's discussions with the political parties. They never raised the delimitation issue during the dialogue. This too gives scope for debate.

In the meantime, the government's intentions of dialogue with the political parties are also hanging in limbo. The process hasn't begun as yet and political analysts wonder whether this will indeed materialise at all. And if it does, will this simply open up a fresh bag of worms? In Bangladesh, after all, there never has been a very good track record where dialogue is concerned.

The box brouhaha

A pre-condition which was voiced regarding free and fair elections was the use of transparent ballot boxes. This, it was said, would remove any doubt from the minds of all concerned, about the boxes being stuffed in advance. The proposal initially came from the Danish Embassy, a development partner keen on seeing democracy take firm root in this country. The authorities immediately latched on to the suggestion and this also featured in President Iajuddin's 1/11 speech. Now, however, there seems to be a dilemma. The authorities are no longer speaking with conviction about transparent ballot boxes being a must for a credible election. They are vacillating in this decision. And if this is to be discussed with the political parties for a decision, that means further delay.

Obtaining transparent ballot boxes is not an overnight matter. After all, it was suggested that rather than importing readymade ballot boxes, a mould be brought in and local technology be used to manufacture the boxes. This involves the private sector, selecting a factory/ies (another matter of transparency involved), importing the plastic, shipment procedures, making a prototype, having it approved and then going for the real thing. All within 2008 when the process hasn't even begun?

And if the government is deciding to shelve the hole transparent ballot box issue, then why did Election Commission Sohul Hossain recently state that they would use transparent boxes so as not to give the defeated party scope to blame them for the results?

Local govt election first

It has been said that the local government elections would first be held. Even British High Commissioner Anwar Chowdhury has spoken to this effect (though how he qualifies to speak on this head is another matter). It is heard that the government wants to hold these elections within April. They say this is quite feasible as no delimitation is needed. But the fact remains that the voters' list has to be completed first. By April? The Election Commission itself has hinted that it will take till October to finish the list. So then it has been said that the local government elections will take place in the places where the list is complete. Is this to be a sort of staggered election? Will this take place without Dhaka? There are questions galore.

Elections under emergency?

Another question raised by political analysts is, will the elections take place under emergency or not? If they do take place under the state of emergency, once the polls are over and the new government is installed, the validity of the election will most certainly come under fire. To ensure that the validity of the election under emergency is not questioned, a fresh law will have to be promulgated.

No alternative political force

When the present caretaker government came to power, there was talk of a brand new political alternative and the people responded to this with gusto. There was Ferdous Quraishi and his party, there was even rumours of the army chief forming a party, though this soon died down with the chief's brushing aside of such rumours. Enthusiasts flocked in large numbers to sign up with the new political force. However, when the party did not quite display any signs of the expected clout, the fair weather friends beat a quick retreat and the party was left high and dry. It's back to square one now, with no alternative political force in sight. Given the present state of BNP, analysts see the arrival of the Awami League-led 14 Party if the election is held. If that does materialise, once this group win, the grassroots party leader and workers will simply not allow the government to be formed without Sheikh Hasina back in the PM's seat. And if that is so, will that not be a failure of the entire 1/11 exercise, of the caretaker's commitment for reforms?

Peripheral problems

The peripheral problems concerning Election 2008 are many.

There is the matter of reforms within the political parties themselves. The reforms, so far, have been cosmetic with no indications of any sincere intentions of meaningful reforms. If that remains so and the government goes ahead with the election, what was the point of this entire hullabaloo about reforms, crime and corruption?

Another significant point raised by analysts is the need for an exit formula. The government may not want to talk about this too publicly, but the ground reality is that it is vital to work out an exit formula for the future. If not, there are bound to be ugly repercussions. After all, this government, with all good intentions, has stepped on a great many toes in the highest places. One cannot rule out a resulting personal vendetta, as has been seen in several Latin American countries and has been the underlying political culture here. But so far there has been no move for an exit formula or efforts to indemnify the present government's actions. Will the government go for an election, leaving itself so blatantly open to an uncertain aftermath?

The fate of the two ladies also remains in balance. They are yet to be convicted or freed, yet much depends of their fate. Even the political party leaders themselves cannot decide upon their next course of action until they know for sure whether they are to function under these ladies or without them. So this too is affecting the prospects of the election.

A means to an end

The Road Map for the election, in fact the entire 1/11 exercise and the mission of the caretaker government, is simply a means to an end. The end, in this case, being a free, fair and credible election leading to a tangible democratic system for a better Bangladesh, a Bangladesh free of the demoralising effect of crime and corruption, a Bangladesh with a chance to shrug of the overwhelming poverty and move towards a future of progress and prosperity. If the election is held in 2008 simply to stick to the schedule, will this aim be accomplished? Can the nation afford for the mission to fail? The consequences will be more dire than the half-done job of demolishing Rangs Bhaban.

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