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Decentralise to move forward

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To deliver public services to this vast growing population requires effective legislative and executive decentralisation



Time to move the power around?

Photo- Collected

The 10th parliamentary election was held amidst a lot of confusion, obstructions, and violence. During the period preceding the election, many substantive issues were raised and discussed widely in the media. Issues such as there being too much of a concentration of power in the hands of the prime minister, restrictions on floor-crossing by the elected members from one party to another, and frequent boycotting of parliament sessions by the opposition were raised.

All these made the government of the country seem unaccountable and authoritarian. In this regard, Afsan Chowdhury said the 15th amendment was passed to make elections difficult for everyone except the ruling party. The enormous phase of violence was a joint product of the AL and the BNP. There was no need to pass this when no compulsion existed. The reaction of the BNP supported by Jamaat showed how deeply callous our politicians can be. But together, it showed, after 42 years we hadn't yet found out a constitutional way to rule and transfer power through elections."

Too much authority given to parliament members made the local government institutions virtually ineffective. The powerful position of MPs allowed them to accumulate vast amounts of wealth at the cost of good local governance, as it is revealed in their submission to the election commission.

Dr Kamal Hossain, in this connection, expressed that parliament and its members could be more effective if the functioning of parties could be brought into conformity with the mandates of the constitution. He said Article 70 of the constitution appeared to have made members apprehensive of speaking out on issues for fear of incurring their party's displeasure.

Reforms needed to be carefully considered to strengthen parliamentary democracy. If the strategic goals set for 2021 were to succeed, meaningful change had to be made in our institutions and our political behavior.

Too much centralisation of power at the headquarters of the government in Dhaka has hindered expected growth some of the regions, especially the northwestern parts of the country such as North Bengal, as well as some southern districts.

As a result of this deprivation, people in these areas clearly showed their disliking of the Awami League government at the centre. These revealed preferences of the people need to be recognised through changes in the constitution of the country before another election is held under the existing constitution.

It may be mentioned that when Bangladesh became independent in 1971, it had a population of only 75 million. The current population is about 160 million. To deliver public services to this vast growing population requires effective legislative and executive decentralisation.

There are many countries such as Sri Lanka and Malaysia with less than one third of our population that have provincial legislature and governments under federal systems. Professor Rehman Sobhan opined that 2013 had brought into full public view the weaknesses of our democratic system.

Can Bangladesh adopt a federal system similar to Malaysia or Sri Lanka, with Dhaka city being like New Delhi?

It may be mentioned that former president HM Ershad, during his regime in the 1980s, proposed the creation of 4-5 provinces, and devolved government. But his move was stopped by the High Court as it was against the unitary form of governance laid out in our constitution.

Perhaps it is time that we take his idea seriously, and establish a high-powered constitutional commission to study and propose necessary legislation in the 10th parliament. This has become essential now, given the dysfunctional state of governance under the existing unitary system. While these legislative and administrative changes are being deliberated, it would be appropriate of the current AL government to make the upazilla system more active and effective.

There is going to be a new round of elections in the upazilas soon. Before these elections are held, the government must curtail all the powers and positions given to the MPs as they have been, by and large, misused and caused quite some dissatisfaction among the people. They should, especially, be withdrawn from their chairmanships of schools and colleges.

Headmasters and principals should be made ex officio chairs of managing committees with all powers. In addition, administrative and financial control of educational institutions should be placed under district education offices.

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