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PARTISAN LOCAL GOVERNMENT POLLS

PARTIAL REFORM WILL NOT WORK

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I have some reservations about the way the government has unilaterally decided to amend the local government act and introduce partisan election system for the local bodies. They should have taken such a major decision only after having discussions with all the major political parties and stakeholders.

However, party based local election is not an exception. Both India and Britain have been practicing this system effectively for many years without any intervention from the ruling parties. I am afraid how effective it will be in our existing political culture where even the non-partisan local elections are highly influenced by the ruling parties and their acquiescent administrations.

Furthermore, this single change in election procedure is not sufficient to make the local government strong and effective. Major reforms are needed in the existing local government system. First, a unified law, known as framework law, should be formulated for administering all the local bodies. In Bangladesh we have different laws for different levels of local governments which create confusion and hinder coordination among the local bodies. In West Bengal, local governments of district council, panchayat samity and village panchayat work under a unified law. They hold elections on the same day so that all the elected local bodies can work within the same timeframe. We should also include this provision in our local government regulations.

Secondly, our local bodies work in a presidential system where the chairman dictates all the activities of the local government. This is an anomaly as our national government follows a parliamentary system. At the local level we should elect only members who will have the power to elect the chairman. It will reduce the gap between members and the chairman, make him accountable to the council members, and strengthen the decision making process at the grassroots level with increased participation of the elected members.

Thirdly, adequate funds need to be allocated for local governments and local bodies must be able to participate in planning how they will be spent. Fourth, the government should strengthen the local bodies with adequate manpower. They can recruit new officials or delegate existing officials to the local bodies so that they can work in tandem with elected local bodies.

A partisan election system has some positive features. When a candidate participates in an election with party symbol then the party will be responsible for their candidates. The candidate

must also be a member of the party. It will definitely strengthen the party mechanism at the ground level and ensure participation of the grassroots members in the decision making process. It will certainly help democratisation of party politics. But these positive changes will not happen until and unless political parties change their behaviour. The ruling party should not interfere in the election and activities of the local governments. They should rise above petty party interests and respect the rule of law. I would like to request the government to include the above mentioned reform proposals in finalising the local government act.

The commentator is a local government expert and Honorary Visiting Fellow at BIGD, BRAC University. Comment taken by Shamsuddoza Sajen.