

How to Engineer Elections: A Quick Guide

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"It is great that Bangladesh's emergency government has emphasized its commitment to hold elections by the end of 2008. But if you think the elections are going to be free and fair, think again. A fully free and fair election will almost certainly result in an outcome that the current regime has reason to distrust. So the engineering of elections has already begun, and it will win the approval of international observers who won't understand the subtleties."

Imagine that you're sitting on the throne of Bangladesh's politics. You are ruling with emergency powers, but dissent is swelling. You are in the midst of an economic crisis. You are threatened by powerful shadowy figures in your own security and intelligence apparatus. Your previous international patrons now uncomfortable. You need an exit, preferably an honorable one.

So you want to hold elections. But a fully free and fair election will almost certainly result in an outcome that you have reason to distrust, for it may return to power many popular politicians that your administration has persecuted severely. So what do you do in this tense situation?

The answer: engineer the elections—but do so carefully, without raising too many alarm bells. Ensure that voting goes smoothly on election day, without hijacking of ballot boxes, prevention of voters from casting ballots, or any such crude tactics that would be obvious to an observer. In other words, engineer it, not rig it. Here's how...Bar dissenters

The first step that the regime has taken: prevent feisty politicians from running in the election. Convicting politicians in quick trials—whatever the charges—will come in handy: declare them ineligible for holding public office. Then government would then intensify an "anti-corruption drive" prior to the candidate registration date in order to bar the local political activists that it doesn't like. Field proponents

At the same time, the regime has to leave enough of Awami League and BNP outside the legal net so that the parties themselves can participate in the election. It will continue hand-picking "reformist" politicians or possible turncoats, and intimidate or otherwise persuade them to compete. It will support selective campaigns from both security and funding standpoints. As a recent report by the International Crisis Group noted, "the army is preparing a nationwide list of its own 'clean' candidates to contest the 2008 polls."

Whether or not these candidates will represent a King's Party or an existing political platform doesn't matter. What matters is that mostly pro-regime candidates will be allowed to compete. Shape the grassroots

Then the regime has to ensure that the party rank and file do not rebel. It has already arrested thousands of activists all over the country to prevent dissent, and intimidated thousands others to conform. The government is also trying to bar parties from having students', teachers', and workers' organizations, which usually house most of the activists. In this altered playing field, the government wants to hold local elections first, under either a state of emergency or very limited openings, to ensure that its supporters are able to infiltrate the grassroots level prior to a national election.

Since parliamentary candidates have to rely on grassroots leaders to carry their campaigns, shaping the grassroots will help ensure that parliamentary candidates are forced to a pro-regime line.

And local elections are not going to be monitored as much by international observers, so the field will be set to stage "upsets". After all, this unrepresentative government claims that it's only doing what the 'people' presumably want. Control the cities

Another area that the regime has been trying to bolster is its support base among the urban civil society elite. Its attempt to get Dr. Yunus to lead this effort failed. Many of its other supporters among the urban elite are unappealing and unelectable in the perspective of the majority of voters. So, to the extent possible, it is redefining the boundaries of constituencies to give urban areas a greater share. This increases its chance to increase regime loyalists at least in the metropolitan areas. Holding non-party municipal elections is part of this plan. Increase authority

The final ingredient is to increase the power of electoral authorities to arbitrarily declare results void. The Election Commission has been doing exactly the same. It is about to "empower it to cancel the candidature of any parliamentary contender for gross violation of electoral laws and declare vacant the seat of an elected lawmaker for giving false information in the account of the election expenses" (New Age, 29 April 2008). And who's going to determine this violation? The Commission of course. Given this government's woeful record, you can

wave due process bye-bye in any such decision.Satisfaction guaranteed

So voila! Now hold national elections, and at the end of the day, you have engineered a nice exit strategy by making sure only your friends are elected. No violence, no ballot box hijacking, and a lot of claps from foreign observers.

About the author