

Caution on proportional representation

by Kazi ASM Nurul Huda

RECENTLY, Bangladesh's interim government established a commission to reform the electoral system, which has sparked a long-standing debate about how to ensure fair representation. Supporters of the first-past-the-post system argue that it effectively allows the candidate with the most votes in a constituency to win a seat. In contrast, advocates for a proportional representation system contend that parliamentary seats should reflect the percentage of votes each party receives. Both systems have advantages and challenges, but it is important to critically examine several lesser-discussed flaws in the proportional representation system within Bangladesh's unique political landscape before taking a definitive stance.

One common critique from advocates of proportional representation is that first-past-the-post system allows candidates to win without securing a majority of the total votes. They argue that a candidate could receive fewer votes than the combined total of all losing candidates, which raises concerns about legitimacy. However, this critique overlooks a foundational principle of democracy: participation in the decision-making process. In a democracy, it is the involvement in the electoral process that matters, whether or not your preferred candidate or party wins. A decision is legitimate not because it represents every individual's preference but because it emerges from collective participation. Once elected under the first-past-the-post system, a candidate represents all constituents, regardless of how they voted. To suggest that a candidate lacks legitimacy due to receiving fewer votes than their opponents misunderstands how representation functions in this system.

To illustrate this point, consider an election where candidate A wins with 60,000 votes, while candidates B and C receive 59,000 and 58,000 votes,

respectively. Critics of the first-past-the-post system argue that the combined total of B and C's votes, which is 117,000, is greater than A's 60,000, and therefore A is not the true representative. This reasoning is flawed. If we apply this logic consistently, we could argue the same about candidates B and C. The votes for A and C could be seen as opposition to B, while votes for A and B might count as opposition to C. In fact, under this logic, more voters have 'voted against' both B and C than against A. In this example, 59,000 voters cast ballots against B, while 61,000 voted against C, compared to A, who faces 57,000 opposing votes. This demonstrates that the problem raised by proportional representation supporters is not exclusive to the first-past-the-post system; it applies to all candidates and becomes even more complicated in a proportional representation system. This system can result in parties with fewer overall votes gaining more seats than they deserve, granting them undue influence in parliament.

The proportional representation system introduces another significant problem: it risks rewarding parties that receive fewer votes by allocating them parliamentary seats that do not accurately reflect their electoral support. This situation resembles awarding an Olympic gold medal based on the total distances of all losing competitors, rather than the performance of the individual winner. Such an approach undermines the spirit of fair competition, just as proportional representation can distort the relationship between votes and representation. A key purpose of elections is to ensure that the people's collective will is reflected as clearly as possible. In the pursuit of inclusivity, proportional representation may inadvertently grant political influence disproportionately to smaller parties or coalitions that lack broad public support.

Another overlooked issue is how proportional representation could complicate the existing parliamentary

process. In parliament, votes on legislation typically occur as binary decisions: either yes or no. If we adopt proportional representation to ensure more inclusive representation, this logic falls short during actual parliamentary voting. When a bill is passed or rejected, the losing side's votes do not affect the final outcome. The same applies under proportional representation: even if smaller or marginalised groups gain representation, their views may still be excluded from key legislative decisions when their votes are outnumbered. Thus, shifting to a proportional representation system would not necessarily guarantee a greater voice for under-represented groups, especially in a political environment that continues to rely on majoritarian decision-making. If including marginalised voices is truly the goal, mechanisms such as reserved seats or quotas in parliament may be more effective in achieving this aim without the risks that come with altering the electoral framework.

One technical yet critical flaw in the proportional representation system is what I call the 'rounding problem.' Election results are often expressed as percentages, but these percentages do not always convert neatly into whole numbers of parliamentary seats. To resolve this, vote shares are rounded up or down. For example, if a party receives 34.55 per cent of the vote, it might be rounded to 35 per cent, while 38.41 per cent could be rounded down to 38 per cent. Although this may seem like a minor issue, rounding errors can have significant consequences in close elections. The votes of 0.41 per cent of the electorate might effectively disappear, while 0.45 per cent of additional votes could be created from nothing. In a system where every vote is supposed to count, the artificial inflation or deflation of vote totals can distort the final outcome and compromise the fairness that proportional representation claims to promote.

In Bangladesh, one of the central

arguments for moving away from the first-past-the-post system is the fear that it enables the prime minister to consolidate excessive power, potentially leading to authoritarianism. Proportional representation advocates argue that because it is harder for a single party to win an outright majority under their system, coalition governments become the norm. They believe that coalition politics can prevent the rise of strongman leaders. However, this argument overlooks a serious drawback: coalition governments often struggle to make decisive policy choices. Leaders in such governments may hesitate to take bold actions for fear of alienating their coalition partners. This dynamic can lead to weak, indecisive governance, where maintaining fragile political alliances takes precedence over implementing necessary but potentially unpopular policies. In extreme cases, a government might be forced to ally with fringe or extremist parties to secure a parliamentary majority, thereby limiting its ability to govern effectively. Far from preventing authoritarianism, proportional representation could lead to a different kind of instability, characterised by policy paralysis and compromised governance.

In fine, while both the first-past-the-post and the proportional representation systems have their merits, it is crucial to assess the potential downsides of proportional representation, especially in the context of Bangladesh's unique political landscape. The promise of inclusivity and fair representation must be balanced against the risks of disproportionality, inefficiency, and governance challenges. Any reform to the electoral system must carefully consider these trade-offs to ensure that it strengthens rather than undermines the democratic process.

Kazi ASM Nurul Huda is an associate professor of philosophy at the University of Dhaka. He holds a PhD in philosophy from the University of Oklahoma, USA.