

Proportional Representation in Parliament: Its merits

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For the sake of wider participatory democracy, there is a strong view in the community that voting system of proportional representation (PR) -- sometimes also called "full representation" -- needs to be introduced for electing members of parliament in the country.

The voting system based on the PR system is widely considered to be fairer and more democratic than the current first-past-the post system in Bangladesh. PR is based on the principle that a political party should win seats in parliament in proportion to its share of the popular vote (currently about 90 million voters).

With the PR, first and foremost, people have a larger choice of parties/candidates to vote for. This means that there is a wider selection of candidates from different parties who can represent different sections of society.

Whereas the current voting system awards 100 per cent of the representation to a 50.1 per cent majority, PR allows voters of different parties to win their fair share of representation on the basis of proportion of popular vote. For example, with PR, a party that wins ten per cent of the popular vote would win one of the ten seats.

All elections in Bangladesh under the current voting system are based on the "winner-take-all principle". Candidates who get most votes win representation and other candidates win nothing. It is unjust.

It is simply unjust because it leaves minorities (ethnic or political) unrepresented. As the 19th century Scottish philosopher John Stuart Mill said: "It is an essential part of democracy that minorities should be represented." Mill stressed the importance of voters having a full range of choices and representation in parliament of their different communities of interest.

Various mechanisms may work to provide proportional representation system. One PR system may not suit all countries, while the principle of full representation through PR is fundamental. New Zealand, Italy, and Germany are among a growing number of democracies that use systems with a mix of winner-take-all districts and PR seats.

Consider the following most important failures of the current system of representation:

*Members of ethnic or political minorities are under represented;

*Professional class or eminent citizens are under represented

*Women are under represented

Correcting these failures requires PR. There is a view among many citizens that no other political reform will suffice to correct these deficiencies in our democracy.

If polls are taken, it is believed most Bangladeshis would like to see minor parties (some of them having principled stance on various issues) represented in the Parliament. Minor parties by definition begin with minority support, which wins nothing in “winner-take-all elections.”

Legislation in democracies with PR generally requires the support of representatives elected by a far higher percentage of the electorate. Majority rule on the basis of popular vote also is undercut by winner-take-all elections.

PR is important for national interests because it provides represented minorities to have a say in the parliament. PR is likely to increase the number of women in parliament. Furthermore PR fosters ongoing challenges to major parties, and thus complements democratic pluralism. . It is instructive that women in countries that have introduced PR are three times more likely to win seats than to win in the first-past-post system.

In short, governance is more likely to take place at the center of the political spectrum with PR, since the electorate is fully represented and voters are able to express a wider range of preferences. Opposition voices will be heard, and their ideas will be far more likely to be debated. If those ideas win growing support, the major parties will adjust accordingly in order to hold onto their supporters.

The system of PR has its critics as well. They tend to argue that proportional representation often may lead to [coalition governments](#). Since representatives of so many parties are elected, it is very unlikely that just one will gain sufficient seats to form a [government](#).

However, it is noted that in India, there have been successive coalition governments under the first-past-the post system. In modern day politics, the emergence of various interest groups representing political parties including the environment –friendly parties, is a new phenomenon and it demonstrates plurality of views among electorate. Besides India, many European countries are compelled to form coalition governments even under the first-past-the post system.

One political party majority rule has been gradually disappearing in parliamentary democracy. This being so, the argument against PR for coalition government tends to be weak

The advantages of PR far outweigh its disadvantages, according to many constitutional experts .Under democratic pluralism, it is important for the [government to debate](#) a topic enough in parliament and come to compromises so that [legislation](#) takes into account the views of the most people, represented in the parliament with PR.

The ramifications of our current fundamentally flawed voting system are being ignored. The real culprit for deficit of genuine democracy in our country is “winner-take-all elections”. Voters across the spectrum can support greater democracy or feel poorly represented by “winner-take-all” elections. In South Asia, Nepal is reportedly considering to adopt the PR for election in parliament.

It is argued that Bangladesh has immediate opportunities to join the vast majority of mature democracies (such as Italy, Germany and New Zealand) that have already adopted systems of proportional representation.

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