

# How can AL win majority seats again?

## NO NONSENSE

To win the majority seats in the general election, the AL leadership must neutralize the spawning of misinformation by the ruling alliance with irrefutable statistics. For example, challenge them with facts before their misinformation resonates the air waves. BNP-Jamaat alliance cannot be wrecked unless Nizami himself blasts a bomb in the PMO premises and gets caught on a surveillance video. Bear in mind that the alliance is a marriage of two rightist parties, each with its own plans.



DR. ABDULLAH A. DEWAN

THIS is a follow up to "Why BNP will be hard to defeat" published on January 15. Here I argue that BNP's election winning strategies can be significantly neutralized if AL plays the political hardball in proper perspectives. As its immediate predecessor this article also draws insights from my last month's "Seeing is Believing" trip to Bangladesh.

While meeting with a delegation of Bangladesh Muslim League on January 9, PM Khaleda Zia claimed that "BNP and development are synonymous." She claimed whatever development took place since independence was the work of BNP. When I was reading this, my

ear drums started reverberating with former President Ershad's screams: "Lies, lies, and lies."

In fact, Colonel Jafar Imam, a former minister under Presidents Zia and Ershad told me: "Whatever noteworthy development work you are seeing in Bangladesh were either completed or mostly planned during Ershad's presidency." Of course, whoever comes to power certainly does some work. But an outlandish claim that "BNP did it all" is simply a deceptive cheap shot.

One wonders if the funds spent on development work during Khaleda's current term falls short of the sum total of defaulted loans, black money, and ruling alliance functionaries' illegal takes. How would the country get the highest corruption ranking for five consecutive years if it was otherwise? My estimates are based on the widespread notion that nearly 50 percent of the development funds are gulped down the pockets of ward commissioners, local officials, lawmakers, ministers, and party election coffers.

Hasina has claimed that "not a single kilowatt of additional electricity was generated over the last

four years." New businesses and houses in cities and rural areas were built from remittances of expatriates. Bangladesh railway is in shambles and so is Bangladesh Biman. Roads on the outskirts of Comilla town near the EPZ enclave and most other places are not drivable. Narrow paved roads within all municipalities I visited were horrendously broken down. Most existing paved roads in almost all the cities are so wavy and uneven that riding on a car or three wheelers gives the nostalgia of a horse ride. A few of the 409 high schools I drove by from which no one passed the last SSC exam looked like animal shelters.

The northern districts of the country are not much more developed today than they were before Khaleda's accession to power. While in junior high, I read about Barisal as the only district not being connected by railway. It was also one of the poorest districts in the country at that time. While driven around the city last month what I noticed almost felt like a flashback of what I read during my childhood years. Although my round-trip travel to Barisal was by river, I was told it takes six to eight hours by

bumpy road and river ferries to travel to Dhaka. Of course, if you live inside the panoramic Cantonment areas of Dhaka and Bogra, you will live the fantasies of a fairy land.

Of course, some development works were done. Otherwise how else would the BNP politicians have made so much fortune and the party coffers be so full? Many observers allege that the PM turns a blind eye to the corruption of her ministers and lawmakers because her family members are also involved in the same activities. Overlooking their alleged corruption has also bought her their unwavering loyalty and guaranteed her continued reign as the chief executive in a majestically setting of power and perquisites.

Khaleda's current term of office is also marred by obliteration of the country's judiciary, politicization of civil service, and growth of religious extremism culminating now in country wide terrorist menaces. Poverty alleviation did not register much improvement. Macroeconomic stability is distorted by rising prices of daily essentials. Continued government borrowing from NCBs is causing wide swings in daily interest rates. The energy ministry is running feverishly from NCBs to local foreign banks to foreign lending agencies to borrow necessary funds for importing petroleum. The country's foreign reserves are dependent on remittances from expatriates. Unemployment rate is nearly 30 percent. So when the PM claims BNP's accomplishments she is simply invoking an age old question: When do politicians tell the truth?

To win the majority seats in the general election, the AL leadership must neutralize the spawning of misinformation by the ruling alliance with irrefutable statistics. For example, challenge them with facts before their misinformation resonates the air waves.

In addition, the merits of the following initiatives may be seriously mulled over in AL's election campaign and winning strategies:

- Sheikh Hasina still has a lot of public appeal. However, whenever she speaks in political gatherings she should follow a script. All others AL members should follow the same format.
- AL should encourage younger and new faces to address public gatherings by following a previously written speech.
- Ask the people that if the economy is growing bigger and bigger, as BNP claims, then who is getting that higher growth and why are they becoming poorer and poorer? Ask the people, who gets the new jobs that are created?
- If the country is producing more goods than ever before, why then the prices are rising? Why everything is more expensive than ever before?
- Explain to people how individual liberties guaranteed by the constitution have been denigrated by the BNP functionaries and criminals were granted amnesties.
- Organize political meetings at upazilla and ward levels as often as possible. The primitive straggle of great gatherings in Paltan Maidan, street agitations, and hartals will not win elections any more.
- Publicize that greed and extortions by BNP hooligans are scar-

ing honest people out of business investment. Ask the people if they have more money in their pocket than before BNP came to power? Lawmakers and ministers received two salary and benefit increases over the last four years.

AL must recruit young individuals of good education and character as political neophytes for the party's future in contrast to BNP's young and wealthy. Finally, AL must preemptively make a full unilateral disclosure of the assets of all its potential nominees. This will put BNP on the defensive.

BNP-Jamaat alliance cannot be wrecked unless Nizami himself blasts a bomb in the PMO premises and gets caught on a surveillance video. Bear in mind that the alliance is a marriage of two rightist parties, each with its own plans.

The alliance offers BNP the prospects for being the majority party while Jamaat gets a protected parasitic growth to spread its fundamentalist ideology among the rural populace. The alliance guarantees Khaleda to firmly root her son's future prospects in political power. She will continue embracing Jamaat no matter what and at the same time keep overlooking BNP ministers and lawmakers alleged culpabilities in exchange for their resolute loyalty.

AL leadership must articulate this sinister design to the masses astutely and may even seek professional guidance from political scientists and game theorists, if necessary.

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## Kushtia operation fiasco

Learning lessons to overcome deficiencies

THE eighteen and a half hour anti-terror combing operation in Kushtia, that involved over 1,700 BDR, Rab, and local police personnel, and ended with not one JMB operative being apprehended, brings into sharp focus our limitations in terms of putting to effective use any vital piece of information received about the movement and sojourning of any terrorist group in a particular location at a given point in time.

This is not to say that there have not been impressive results in the past months. Law enforcement has to its credit a string of impressive arms cache seizures and arrests. And, with respect to the Kushtia operation, even though, in the final analysis, it could not succeed in netting the terrorists as hoped for, the ambitious and bold effort taken by the authorities on a scale that it was is to be noted and commended.

It seems though that our human intelligence gathering on the ground as well as ability to keep details about operational matters confidential remains a problem as Kushtia shows. These gaps must be bridged and greater professionalism is needed if we are to be successful in pursuing the terrorists.

In addition, in between the original tip-off and the actual operation, it has been learned that four hours elapsed. When dealing with hardened terrorists, this is too long a window between intelligence and action, and law enforcement must develop the capability and flexibility to conduct large operations with greater secrecy and swiftness.

Clearly more professionalism is needed so that law enforcement is equal to the terrorist threat. The many variegated agencies and outfits that comprise our anti-terror efforts need to be better coordinated and systems and procedures need to be established and perfected so there is no confusion or mismanagement in handling an exigency on short notice.

Bangladesh has the advantage of other countries' knowledge and the expertise to draw on in her efforts to perfect its anti-terrorist offensive capabilities. There is much we can learn from the experience of others and we ought to do so to build comprehensive and effective counter-terrorism capacity immediately.

## Catching tax evaders

No haphazard move can do

THE National Board of Revenue seems set to bring buyers of pricey cattle during the last Eid under its probe network in its bid to raise tax collection. Businessmen travelling abroad frequently will also be watched. The idea of going after people spending huge amounts of money has somehow weighed heavily with the NBR decision makers.

At best, this is an attempt to deal with tax evasion in a haphazard manner. At worst, it's playing to the gallery and feigning toughness, giving the exercise more bark than bite. The whole idea is arbitrary and ad hoc which cannot serve the purpose of increasing tax collection on a durable basis. It seems no effective mechanism is in place to identify the tax evaders and have them pay taxes. Their number is pretty high, but ostentatious habits per se are not a reliable indicator of tax evasion.

We are certainly not against NBR's tax collection intelligence work but it has to be an ongoing self-sustaining process rather than a puerile resort to tokenism that may end up in witch hunting.

The NBR hype of a move being proclaimed from the house top, rather off season in an election year, should be supplanted by genuine efforts at developing a system of preventing tax evasion and black money accumulation duly backed by strong political will that overrides all forms of partisanship.

There is no denying that tax evasion has become a chronic problem and the government is losing out on a huge amount of prospective revenue because of it. But this is an issue which has to be handled on the basis of sound planning and strict enforcement of the law. Identifying tax evaders could be a complex job, particularly when a huge number of them are reported to have an unholy nexus with a section of tax officials. That is all the more reason why we should have an effective system in place rather than fits of shadow-boxing.

## A Somalia notebook

### BYLINE

The mansion in which the Lion of Judah, Haile Selassie, was born is in the old city, called Jubal, and was built by an Indian. You walk down a narrow stone alley full of shops and tailors with Singer sewing machines. Indians, particularly Bohras from Mumbai, dominated commerce during Muslim rule in Harar. Haile Selassie was born here because his father, Menelik's brother, was made governor after the defeat of Amir Abdullahi.



M.J. AKBAR

HOW many guns make a warlord? 25 technicals, so about 250 armed men with Russian AK-47s and Belgian pistols make you a lord, and you can go up the hierarchy to viscount or marquis or earl or proper baron if you include a couple of anti-aircraft guns and artillery pieces. But there are no kings in Somalia. A top of the line AK-47 costs between 400 and 500 dollars; many of the weapons are below the line. I picked up one, while we were lurching off chunks of dry roast camel in a dhaba, lent to me by a young man in a shy smile and a lungi. It was heavy, a little less than ten kilograms. I gave it back after making appropriate noises, carefully avoiding even passing contact with the trigger. At a rough glance, my benefactor had about a million and a half Somali shillings worth of ammunition in his belts: a dollar fetches three bullets.

Three great symbols of modern civilisation are available in Somalia: the AK-47, Coca Cola, and the mobile phone. Three mobile phone companies, Nationlink, TelecomSomalia, and Hormut, ensure proper competition. An

international call costs only 30 American cents. They also double up as money-transfer operations and one of them (defunct after landing up in the suspect category) sent Washington into paroxysms after 9/11 with a word that previously did not exist in a western dictionary but was perfectly understood in much of Asia, hawala. Americans were in Somalia a decade before 9/11 but never picked up this word. Maybe that is why they never stayed. You have to understand Somalia to stay in Somalia.

War is a great boon to technology. A cruise liner defended itself against heavily armed Somali pirate boats last year with the LRAD, Long Range Acoustic Device. It emits a sound from a long range that the human ear cannot tolerate and has proved a brilliant answer to pirate guns. So as long as pirates are human they can be driven. I am told that the device is being used in Iraq to disperse unwanted crowds. For more details on LRAD check Google. The Almighty, Omnipotent Google knows all.

Their present having been stolen, Somalis take comfort in the past. Ancient Egyptians imported cinnamon, frankincense, tortoise shells and "slaves of a superior sort" from Somalia and conceded that Somali civilisation matched their own. If the Magi were kings from Africa, then it is at least plausible that the one carrying frankincense for the infant Jesus came from Somalia. Ibn Batuta, the 13th century Tunisian traveler who did not waste time on inconsequential places, found "Maqdashaw" a "town of enormous size" where "a single person... eats as much as the

whole company of us would eat... and they are corpulent in the extreme." The only parallel I can think of is a Kashmiri enjoying his wazwan in front of us mere mortals, but of course the Kashmiri is not corpulent. The waters of Chashme Shahi keep him slim.

How many clans make a nation? The Arabs found 39 when Mogadishu became one of their principal trading colonies in the tenth century. This was the breakdown: Mukri (12), Djidati (12), Akati (6), Ismaili (6), and Afifi (3). The Mukri, who also had a dynastic ulema, were in the ascendancy when Ibn Batuta visited the port. The nation state is a recent idea. Nomadic Somalis lived across a far wider region than their present borders, including Ethiopia and Kenya. European colonisation came only towards the end of the 19th century. The British came to the north because, as they put it, they wanted guaranteed meat supplies for their garrison in Aden. The Italians wanted the fruit groves of the south. The French were tempted, typically, by temptation, and occupied Djibouti. The clans did not wait to be conquered. They took the easy way out and sold their rights, most often for less than a hundred dollars. The treaties were remarkable for their three-point simplicity. Point 1: All rights are yours. Point 2: I get 70 or 100 dollars. Point 3: You have the last word in all disputes. Neighbours could hardly resist exploiting such weakness. In 1891 Emperor Menelik II, founder of modern Ethiopia, wrote to European powers: "Ethiopia has been for 14 centuries a Christian island in a sea of pagans. If Powers at a distance come forward to

partition Africa between them, I do not intend to remain an indifferent spectator." He did not. He sent word to Amir Abdullahi, ruler of the historic city of Harar and pivotal to Muslim east Africa, to accept his suzerainty. The Amir, heir to a dynasty of 72 generations, sent presents and a helpful suggestion, that Menelik should accept Islam. Menelik promised to conquer Harar and turn the principal mosque into a church. The Medhane Alem Church, in front of the Galma Amir Abdullahi, or the old palace, is evidence that Menelik kept his word.

The mosque was converted but not the people. While Ethiopia proudly and correctly claimed to have become Christian at the time of Constantinople, lands like Kenya changed only during the wave of missionary activity that accompanies colonisation in the 19th century. As Jomo Kenyatta, first President of independent Kenya, famously said, "When the missionaries came to Africa, they had the Bible in their hands and we had the lands. We closed our eyes to pray and when we opened them, we had the Bible in our hands and they had the lands."

Harar has the feel of a city that has traveled a long way through history but now has nowhere left to go.

Unesco has recognised Harar, about 450 kilometres east of Addis Ababa through land rich in the local addition, chat (or khat), a mildly intoxicating but stimulating leaf that is chewed slowly, as a heritage city. There is some excitement among the educated elite that Unesco may do more for Harar than all the rulers since the defeat of Amir Abdullahi at the battle of Chelenko in 1887. There is hope but not too much trust. As a sociologist who did his post-graduate studies at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences in Mumbai some twenty years ago, told me over mercato in the lovely cafe in the courtyard of the city, "We have been living too long on a diet of pledges."

Little was done for the people,

who are of Somali origin, but bitter wars were fought over them. In the seventies, Siad Barre of Somalia invaded Ethiopia to take back the Ogaden region, where Hararis. Talk that Ogaden possessed huge reserves of oil and gas might have encouraged the invasion. Siad Barre's tanks penetrated deep into the desert before they were defeated by Cuban soldiers who acted as mercenaries of the Soviet Union (Ethiopia had a Marxist-Leninist regime then, a fact that merely Socialist Siad Barre forgot). Hararis remember the Cubans as a wild lot, shooting donkeys playfully even after being told how valuable these pack animals were. A few Cuban faces in a traditional and conservative society are more evidence that "liberators" make their own rules.

The elders, gradually losing their eminence as a new anger slowly seeps through the young, are resigned to stagnation, and the eyes flicker with old zeal only when they dream that Menelik's church will once again become a mosque in their lifetime. The people, as elsewhere in Ethiopia, can be strikingly good-looking. The girls wear embroidered head scarves or, rarely, the hijab with jeans. The boys are in the ubiquitous football T-shirt. One bearded young man had EBAMA, San Jose, California, Badr 2004 written on his T-shirt. It stood for Ethiopian Bay Area Muslim Association. Had he lived in America, I asked, No, he said. Few leave Harar. Those who go send T-shirts along with cheques, but do not return.

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Unesco has allocated funds for the restoration of the mansion, but ten families have made it their home and will not move. The most interesting occupant is a healer.

He sits, erect, on a mattress at the centre of one end of a spacious drawing room on the ground floor. His fame is recorded for posterity in a notebook where his literate patients describe their miraculous recovery, and attach passport-size photographs to add a face to their identity. He is 52 and learnt his skills from his father, whose picture is framed on the high wall behind him, above a carpet with a drawing of the holy mosque at Kaaba, and a much-extended string of prayer beads which he uses for dhikr, a Sufi form of devotion, at night. A woman enters, kisses his extended hand twice while he continues talking to us, and joins another with a child in a corner. There is a telephone on a table, and two small tape-players, one broken. The telephone rings once during our visit, and is picked by an aide lounging on the side who, we realise later, also speaks English. A notice board indicates that the healer cures all the tough diseases, including gynaecological problems, but, alas, back pain is not on the list. He assures me that he can repair nerves that wrack your back as well, and there has been a cancer patient or two who has gone home happy. He explains that he uses herbs and plants, and not shaman-style magic. Perhaps he tells villagers, who crowd around him in the mornings since they have to return by nightfall, something different; perhaps he is equally candid with them. He asks about herbal medicines in India and I include Tibet's fame in my response.

The notice outside affirms that the healer does not accept fees, but donations for the cause are not unwelcome. I do not use his expertise, but my donation is not unwelcome either.

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## TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

### Leaking Gulshan sewage

Thanks to FK Tanim for focusing on the deplorable sewerage condition south of Gulshan first circle (DS: 18 Jan). The problem is not just related to the Gulshan South Avenue but all the side roads, leading from it. I have written about it to WASA Gulshan office, a number of times, starting may be about a year and a half back and lastly about four months ago, but to no effect.

Their statement, "As soon as we set up extra manholes the problem of overflowing water will subside." It is not water but sewage fluid that is the problem. Water alone is fine, as it will reduce the dust and dirt. I do not believe the extra manhole will do the job, as we failed with our

sewage line overflow just outside the boundary wall even after spending a lot of money on an extra manhole and distribution box based on WASA's advice. It gave only partial relief temporarily. It is no solution even after a little shower. Further, being aware of the problem for over a year that the "soon" of WASA will possibly come in 2008 at the soonest, we feel worried. Meanwhile, the whole of Gulshan South Avenue and the road connected to it will be a pollution nightmare. Even the well-intentioned Gulshan Society, mostly comprising retired high officials, has managed to do nothing except endorsing the residents' complaint to WASA (typical govt. office process) to no positive visible effect.

Maybe it needs the government's attention and personal before something realistic may come about. S.A. Mansoor Gulshan 1, Dhaka

### Our airports

I would like to thank Mr. Shafiq Islam and Mr. Aziz Mallick for their valuable comments about Zia International Airport. I would like to add two instances of my personal experience in this regard. I am a student of AIT, Thailand. I had travelled to Bangladesh to attend the conference ICNEWS'06. I chose the Chittagong airport since it's a little bit cheaper than travelling to Dhaka from Bangkok.

At first when I was entering Bangladesh, I found the lock of my

luggage completely broken. And I did not receive any acceptable answer from the on-duty officers. In fact, I was advised by someone to leave the airport as soon as possible to avoid harassment, since I had already made them angry as I was asking questions. Secondly, when I was leaving Bangladesh I was standing in the queue for immigration. Two people were in front of me in the line and both of them were travelling abroad for the first time. One was a university teacher and the other gentleman was an officer of an NGO. Since they were new they came without filling the embarkation card. The immigration officer pronounced some shameful words ("egulu ekta o card fill up koree ashe ni, abar line edaraise").

That's the way our immigration officers behave at the airport. They forget that they are the face of the country. They just do whatever they like.

We the people at home and abroad expect the authorities to take the necessary steps so that passengers are treated in a much better way in our airports. A.H.M. Rezaul Karim AIT, Thailand

### Voter ID card and database

There are a lot of discussions going on about free and fair election. Some parties want changes in the caretaker government system; some parties want a strong Election Commission. But I think

the need of the hour is to hold a free and fair election and to ensure introduction of voter identity card with colour photograph and a computerised voter database. Now I am going to show some reasons in favour of my proposal.

Firstly, it will help to prevent fake votes because of colour photo and the information on the database. The voter database I proposed will be very easy to update. For example when people move from one place to another or when anybody dies the database can be easily updated.

Secondly, we can use this card as a national ID card. Anybody can use this to prove his or her identity for any purpose.

Thirdly, the voter database will help the government in planning. For this purpose, I propose to

extend this database where all the population will be included. Then it will help the government in planning. For example, the decision makers can work out how many hospitals are needed in a particular area. The same is true about schools and colleges. The police can use this database to curb crime.

So these database and ID card can be used for many purposes. It might take a lot of time and money to implement the plan. But the plan, once implemented, will pay rich dividends. Mainul Huda Quadery West Bakalia, Chittagong

### What's the point?

I've seen a mobile phone ad on TV, advising the viewers to say everyday "ami Bangladesh ke

valobashi". The advice was good!

Everybody loves the country and that's a truth you can't deny. But I couldn't get the point, what's the relation between patriotism and a mobile phone advertisement? I mean if I want to love Bangladesh I myself know it, and that's enough. Cantara Wali Ruhf Dhaka

### Road accidents

The number of road accidents is increasing alarmingly day by day. But precious little is being done to keep the situation under control.

The matter deserves a lot more attention than it has received so far. The government should address the issue in right earnest. Aziz Ahmed Dhaka