

Election 2007: A simple math

In my opinion, Nazim Kamran Choudhury, in his outstanding analysis and predictions on Election 2007, printed in The Daily Star on October 6, has very rightly pointed out a debacle for BNP-JI-JP combine. This is, however, not to mean that the current opposition parties deserve to win big in the next general elections for their effective role during the last five years against the misrule of the incumbents, it is more for the reason that the masses have still to get a viable political alternative.

KAZI SM KHASRUL ALAM QUDDUSI

YES, as simple as that. The floating or undecided voters decided the fate of the political parties in 1991, 1996, and 2001. I do not have even an iota of doubt in my mind that history would repeat itself and the simple math would come into play this time as well.

Yes, it is they who will sway things in the upcoming general elections (2007) as well. No coalition -- however big it may be -- is going to win the elections unless the non-partisan voters side with them. I also feel prompted to add that no vote bank could counteract the floating voters in the past nor will they succeed in the next general elections.

The floating voters are just like mammoth upsurge with outstanding capability to easily outsmart the so-called vote banks. In my opinion, Nazim Kamran Choudhury, in his outstanding analysis and predictions on Election 2007, printed

in The Daily Star on October 6, has very rightly pointed out a debacle for BNP-JI-JP combine. This is, however, not to mean that the current opposition parties deserve to win big in the next general elections for their effective role during the last five years against the misrule of the incumbents, it is more for the reason that the masses have still to get a viable political alternative.

Moreover, the public is raring to answer back the sheer misgovernance presented by the current coalition in terms of power crisis, price hike, insatiable corruption, gross human rights violation, repulsive use of security personnel, unprecedented politicisation of almost all sectors of the country, and what not. To be more precise, power crisis and price hike are going to cost the current coalition heavily. Yes, the math is as simple as that. Rice, sugar, vegetables, and even chola during holy Ramadan were dear to the average countrymen.

It is thus very likely that votes, too, would turn dear to the current ruling coalition in the next general elections.

The fasting Muslims were not provided with power (electricity) at least at Sehri, Iftar, and Tarabi prayers, so it is not unlikely that the people will snatch the magical wend of power from the said coalition. Mind you, the current BNP coalition hardly deserved a landslide victory in 2001 for their efforts and achievement. Rather, the then anti-AL stance of the floating voters handed them victory on a plate. The power-mongers in the country are powerful enough to manipulate things but only to an extent.

In the final analysis, however, it is the people's power that overpowers other monstrous powers or it is the public wrath that pulverizes the monolith of power at least on the day of general elections. Many, including the bigwigs in the ruling party may have the misconceived notion that money can buy

votes. Sorry, I beg to differ. Vote-purchase might succeed to a degree but not definitely in large measure. Poor yet spirited people of Bangladesh have by now become clever so much so that they might accept the money offered by the affluent candidates and they can even swear by God to vote for them.

It, however, does not guarantee their votes. Because, the rationale is quite simple: if an underserving candidate can buy votes through means which are unjust, why will it be unjust for the deprived and battered masses to vote against the underserving candidates of the tyrannical political parties while in power, especially the immediate incumbents? Besides, the Islam and India factors are also very unlikely to work, let alone work wonders, and more so this time around. Admittedly, people have been made to suffer greatly by the so-called Islamic parties who adopted militancy.

Many know full well about the catalytic role of the current ruling coalition's Islamic allies in abrupt rise of militants who at one stage ventured to tear apart the nation by horrible series and suicide bombings. The religious yet liberal Muslims are also very unlikely to forget the horrific scenes of bomb blasts at the holy shrines of great saints who were

instrumental in bringing Islam to this land. Whatever might have been the desire of the forces behind the militants, the image-damage will definitely pinch them more than anybody else because people will no doubt be less sympathetic to their political Islam this time around.

Anyway, a colleague of mine with economics background predicted months ago that the current ruling coalition would not get even 60 seats in the next general elections if the elections are held in a free and impartial manner. Mr Nazim Kamran Choudhury has predicted about 80 seats for the BNP-JI-JP combine (provided the JP join the combine). I think such sorts of observations are rapidly beginning to become a herd instinct.

Arguably, elections in Bangladesh are profoundly influenced by immediate public sentiment, which is now clearly against the ruling political parties. If anything too dramatic does not happen in between, very few eyebrows would be raised should the predictions come true in full bloom.

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Military misjudgment

THE ECONOMIST

HERE are good things to be said about General Pervez Musharraf, Pakistan's president and army chief, and he is, as he might put it, proud and unstinting in his resolution to say them, over and over, in his cliché-ridden and boringly boastful autobiography, In the Line of Fire.

General Musharraf -- and there are enough phrases familiar to those who have followed his career to prove that he wrote quite a lot of it -- comes across as humourless, vain, and insecure. Sentences as smug as: "My career was now well on course, given all my qualifications and achievements" are spattered across almost every page. There are many references to the president's (allegedly) fine musculature.

Any less than glorious event in his life, after at least a refreshingly sinful youth, is blamed on some less worthy individual, a dull superior or jealous peer, whom the author is all too happy to name. And yet, painful though it is to read, this is a quite remarkable book, about dramatic events and, as the occasional sentence lets slip, an interesting and impressive man.

For a start, the book's timing is remarkable. It is unusual for serving heads-of-state to publish memoirs, for good reason. General Musharraf denigrates Pakistan's chief ally, America, for the bullying way in which it manages its foreign policy and for failing to live up to its promises.

He is also bafflingly rude about India, given that he has staked his name on making peace with it. Of India's leader, he says: "The initial signs of sincerity and flexibility that I sensed in Manmohan Singh seem to be withering away." He suggests that Osama bin Laden is not, as often supposed, in Pakistan's wild northern areas, but in eastern Afghanistan.

Hamid Karzai, Afghanistan's leader, whom General Musharraf accused of resembling an ostrich last week at a bad-tempered summit in Washington, DC, is not pleased by the book. Neither is almost anyone in Pakistan, although it is selling briskly there (see article). General Musharraf scorns most of the country's civilian politicians -- tactless, if justifiable -- including some of his supporters.

Insults aside, the book does not tell us much that is new. Most interesting are the details of events leading to the arrest in Pakistan of several top terrorists, including Khaled Sheikh Mohammed, the architect of the attacks on the twin towers, and other al-Qaeda members; General Musharraf says 689 al-Qaeda members have been arrested, of whom 369 have been handed over to America. That is a testament to the efficiency of Pakistan's security services, even though Mr Musharraf accuses America of having failed to provide the technical kit it promised.

Such digs at the superpower may be for the benefit of Pakistanis, many of whom find General Musharraf too quick to leap to its bidding. But the book is meant for a Western audience, by whom, it is clear, General Musharraf considers himself ill judged. It contains bold treatises on the political and economic reforms he has overseen since stealing power in his 1999 coup.

These include a messy, but promising, effort to devolve power to the local level, and the creation of elected councils with fixed quotas for women representatives. There are also quotas for women in provincial and national assemblies. General Musharraf has given a boost to female emancipation in Pakistan, although the full impact of the changes he has introduced will not be felt soon.

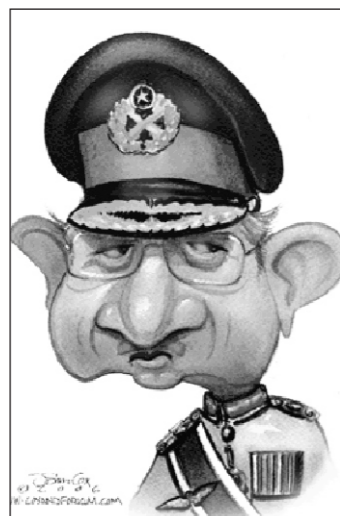
Even better, he has delivered broad structural improvements to Pakistan's economy, which had been in a desperate way. This was not, as he suggests, the result of his own genius. He is economically semi-literate. But he can take credit for appointing wise technocrats.

In short, heaven forbid that anyone unfamiliar with Pakistan should wholly trust this book. General Musharraf is as partial as any campaigning politician. One monstrous example is his account of a short war with India at Kargil in 1999, when he was merely army chief. It began when Pakistani state-sponsored jihadist militants attacked across the front-line in contested Kashmir, drawing a ferocious Indian response. General Musharraf calls this an over-reaction -- but if it were, it was understandable -- and he says that India's army came off worse in the fray, even to the point where the military ran out of coffins for their dead. Yet he omits to mention the hundreds -- some say thousands -- of Pakistani fighters who were slaughtered in a humiliating retreat.

Disingenuously, he says the war at Kargil was an important catalyst in the peace process that followed: if that is true, it is because Pakistan, not India, was forced to the table by the drubbing it took there.

An election is due in Pakistan next year, and General Musharraf is increasingly unpopular. This is because of a litany of perceived failures, including a muddle-headed war he has prosecuted in the northern areas, and rising inflation. It is also because, despite their appalling experiences of civilian leadership, and their acquiescence in his coup, Pakistanis have tired of army rule.

The bad news in this book is that General Musharraf refuses to recognise this truth: "The Pakistan army has always been held in high esteem as the only powerful stabilising factor in the nation," he insists. He does not seem to show any inclination to quit his twin role, as he is constitutionally obliged to do.



Should we rejoice?

FARUQUE HASAN

THEY are talking. Yes, the AL general secretary and the BNP secretary general are talking now on electoral reforms. The invisible hand of God in the form of the mighty donor countries, or what it may be, at last has made them talk.

Shall we, the Aam-janata (general mass) of this country, rejoice on their talking to each other? At the end of the talk, will they only agree to disagree; or will they be able to save the nation from the political quagmire in which the country has been bogging down deeper with the passage of each day?

So contentious are the two leading political parties of our county that the two general secretaries of these parties took such a long time to agree even on the venue for the talks to hold. AL even agreed to hold talks at the residence of an ambassador.

The frontline AL leaders, perhaps, did not know that premises of a foreign embassy or the residence of a foreign ambassador are treated as a foreign territory in a country. Such is the quality of our politicians that the mass people of this country may genuinely doubt whether the frontline BNP leaders or the leaders of any other political party not know that either.

We must sincerely thank the ambassadors of the "mighty" countries, for out of "love" of this country they have been meddling in our internal politics; thus often

help us get things straight in our perpetual political chaos.

Say and hope, willingly or under the pressure of the invisible hand of God, the two general secretaries, to the relief of the whole nation, will come out successfully from the talks with a bunch of agreed electoral reforms. But will that end the political contention in this country on electoral reforms forever? I am afraid, that won't be the case, not at all.

We won't be that lucky. Whichever party or alliance wins the general elections to be held under the reforms will not leave any stone unturned during its next five year tenure in power to find out ways to frustrate and negate the reforms to make them win the next general election through unfair means. And being angered, the parties in the opposition will be raising clamour for another round of electoral reforms.

With full respect to the integrity of the last retired Supreme Court chief justice, the 14th amendment to the constitution, which extended the retirement age of the Supreme Court judges, may be cited here as one of the dire examples of how political party in power gets all out to negate any electoral reform previously reached to hold a free and fair election in the country. Issuance of thousands of firearm licenses in the year 2001 to the party henchmen by the political party on the eve of its leaving power to the caretaker government is another example of this kind.

Wars outside and wars within

HABIBUL HAQUE KHONDKER

RIGHT after the terrible events of 9/11, I found my 13-year old daughter quite anxious, defensive and in conversation with me on world politics. A welcome departure from the usual drive-in conversation on the way to school about new hit songs of Sheryl Crow and Nelly Furtado which Singapore's FM98.7 would belt out endlessly.

In a feeble attempt to prove that I was not that ignorant I would mention that there was a famous left-leaning economist by the name Celso Furtado and whether Nelly could be related to him. Celso Furtado, it turned out was Brazilian, and his famous namesake Nelly Furtado was Canadian of Portuguese immigrant parents. Such small talks between a Homeric (not the Greek Hero but the one from The Simpsons) father and a Lisa-like daughter came to an end. September 2001 changed all that.

My daughter who was schooled in a convent and was then attending a Methodist secondary school knew the basic tenets of Christian faith. She looked worried and asked me why can't America respond by turning the other cheek in keeping with the teachings of Jesus Christ?

Coincidentally, the Holy Dalai Lama wrote to President George Bush, a day after 9/11 asking him to respond to the terrorist attack in

a non-violent way. But I knew, at my heart, that was not to be. In the world of realpolitik, precepts such as "an eye for an eye" rather than "turning the other cheek" still dominate.

We talked at length. Here was a 13-year old NRB (Non-Resident Bengali) who grew up with both religious education at home and Bengali language at a community-run weekend Bengali school, dancing to Tagore song under the keen direction of her dance teacher Kanta was presented with a troubling situation.

She was confronted with the question of her identity. I share this family story to explore how wars and conflicts between nation-states, albeit dressed up as religious wars (not clash of civilizations, sorry Professor Huntington), affect young people, especially young Muslims worldwide. Thanks to globalized media, the acts of terror, war, and wanton violence are brought home to our family room in no time. What in the past would be war out there is now a war in here.

The perception of religious conflicts made my daughter particularly worried since all her best friends were non-Muslims. To see the world -- especially her world of finger-numbing online chats and never-ending phone conversations with her friends, a world of music and movies -- disintegrating into conflicts between religions, at least, in

appearance, was particularly troubling for her.

My daughter, like any other teen-agers in her situation became defensive about her religion. Why was our religion put under the spot-light? Under the global gaze? Even to say: "Islam is a religion of peace" was a reminder that it was now an issue. Why no one was saying: "Buddhism is a great religion, a religion of sublime peace," or "Jainism is in perfect harmony with nature where a lowly ant also gets protection." Thirteen-year olds understand all that.

How do young people live and fit in in a conflicted world which adds an extra-load to their anxiety-laden existence. This may be especially a problem for overseas Bangladeshis but in a globalized world those who remain within the country are no less globalized than those in the diaspora. We are all conflicted. There are wars outside, as there are within. How do we live in the world?

The state of normlessness we see in Bangladesh today needs to be situated in the larger geography of a conflicted and anomic world. Some try to escape from all these troubles into the charmed world of designer clothes and branded-cars (provided they can afford them), others try to hide behind the veil of an exaggerated piety (to me, they are not all that different) Parading a religion of materialism or trying to live in the

Bangladesh? Because here in Bangladesh, power has turned into a means of minting money, so every corrupt person wants to be in power by any means.

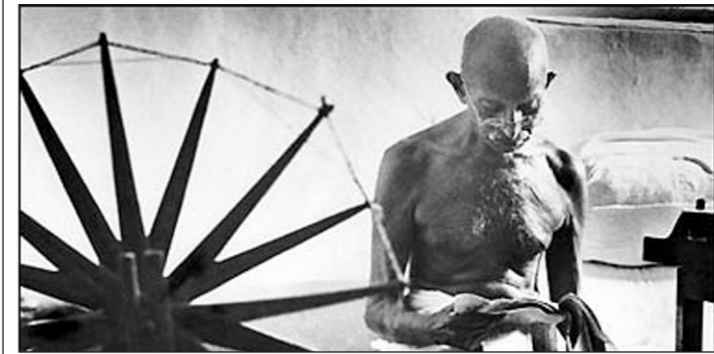
We need to get rid of the caretaker government system to hold free and fair elections, sooner the better; otherwise it will be very difficult to keep the image of our Supreme Court -- the institution which still draws some respect from the populace; while almost all other government institutions have lost their respect in the eyes of the ordinary citizens.

The dialogue is progressing and so far so good. But we, the ordinary citizens of this country, cannot feel gratified only knowing the two general secretaries are talking in "cordial atmosphere."

We want they reach a consensus on political reforms and sign an agreement that none of their parties will ever try to negate the reforms reached upon whenever their parties will be in power. We know it's very easy, in our present political culture, to break such an agreement, still we want that.

The politicians of this country must understand, if they don't behave, the unconstitutional force will feel encouraged to meddle in state affairs. And again we will have to start from the zero.

Experiments with truth



VINAY LAL

IT is that time of the year when, in a ritual invocation, many people find it necessary to proclaim that Mohandas Gandhi, in India also the "Father of the Nation," is still "relevant."

There are those who, witnessing the continuing violence in Iran, Afghanistan, and Sudan, or the recent blitzkrieg launched by Israel on Lebanon, or indeed the myriad other instances of acts of violence, terror, and aggression that comprise the daily news bulletins, aver that Gandhi has never been more necessary.

Since the human addiction to violence scarcely seems to have diminished, the Gandhians view the Mahatma's staying power as a self-evident truth; however, another class of his admirers read the same evidence rather differently, as an unfortunate sign of the fact that Gandhi's teachings have been repudiated if not rubbish. The small voice of non-violence, many agree, is seldom heard in the din of violence.

In 1907, Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce published a book, What Is Living and What Is Dead in Hegel Today? Croce knew better than to ask if Hegel was "relevant," which is, to put it bluntly, a word strictly for the unintelligent, certainly for those who are apolitical.

Nevertheless, if the more familiar variation of this question inescapably presents itself to anyone confronting the figure of Gandhi, we must surely ask what kind of Gandhi, and whose Gandhi, we seek to invoke when we wish to stress his relevance.

One of the most enduring aspects of Gandhi's life is that he seldom allowed himself the comfort of platitudes, just as he was quite mindless of established conventions, protocols of social science discourse, and known parameters of dissent.

Around the same time that Croce had finished writing his book on Hegel, the young Gandhi, providentially ensconced in South Africa, was embarked on a novel political and moral experiment. Quite oblivious to history, he declared in Hind Swaraj, that "Non-violence is as old as the hills". At the same time, he was the first to recognise that where others had embraced nonviolence strictly from expediency, ahimsa was for him an inextricable part of his being. He was always the first to recognise that he was his own master and disciple and was unlikely to carry anyone alongside him.

Even many who openly admire Gandhi doubt the efficaciousness of satyagraha. In his own lifetime, many claimed that it could only have succeeded against an allegedly mild-mannered opponent such as the British. If Gandhi could not forestall his own violent death, if indeed his teachings appeared to have left little impression upon his own countrymen, should we at all expect the primacy of non-violence to be recognised by actors in the modern nation-state system which was born of violence and feeds on it at every turn?

In his defence, Gandhi argued that non-violence is not merely a weapon to be adopted or abandoned at random will, and that practitioners of non-violence are ethically bound to understand that shortcomings in the application of non-violence do not reflect upon any limitations inherent to non-violence itself.

Moreover, though it is commonplace to view Gandhi's adherence to non-violence as a measure of his alleged romanticism and failure to recognise the inescapably coercive nature of modern politics, it is telling that Gandhi did not construe himself as an uncritical proselytiser on his behalf.

When asked by American journalist Louis Fischer why he did not preach non-violence to the West, Gandhi replied: "How can I preach non-violence to the West, when I have not even convinced India? I am a spent bullet."

On a recent visit to South Africa, I attended a special screening of Shyam Benegal's The Making of the Mahatma at a cinema complex in Durban on September 11. This cinema stands in the midst of the Suncoast Casino complex, and by way of refreshments invitees were offered free Coca-Cola and popcorn.

Gandhians will doubtless take umbrage at this heady combination of junk food, sugared drinks, and the ultimate vice of gambling being put together at an ostensible homage to the Mahatma. It is certainly true that the well-intentioned admirers of Gandhi remain utterly clueless about Gandhi, and do not understand that Gandhi, engaged in the relentless pursuit of truth, would have been at least as vociferous an opponent of sugar, modernity's pre-eminent mass killer, as he was of alcohol.

In truth, however, the casino may be the most apposite place to reflect on Gandhi. His followers might be reminded that Gandhi took a great gamble when he endeavoured, as his assassin charged, to foist non-violence upon India. Like that other troubled gambler and paragon of truth in Indian civilisation, Yudhishtira, Gandhi gambled away everything and put his life on the spot.

No more interesting gamble has perhaps ever been waged in contemporary history, and Gandhi's critique of modern knowledge systems, his interrogation of received notions of politics, development, and dissent, and his suturing of non-violence to mass resistance all stand forth as vivid testimony of his political genius and ethical probity. We should be immensely grateful that he took the gamble that he did.

The question for us, therefore, is just this: Will we content ourselves with mindless discussions of his "relevance," or are we willing to gamble ourselves on Gandhi?

The author is a sociologist.