

The Group of 53 and the power of swing

SYED S KAISER KABIR

KAMRAN Chowdhury's article (DS October 6) on election 2007 inspired credulity in the incredible.

It is a depressing read for a BNP loyalist. Not only is the incumbent confronted with an unfavourable swing in voter sentiment, but also the much heralded inclusion of Ershad under its umbrella seems likely to negate any gains that the existing alliance with Jamaat might have yielded.

Barring gross irregularities in the conduct of the polls, the AL boat apparently should sail to the finish line ahead of the others. Yet, a significant uncertainty lies in the

fact that as much as 53% of electorates are yet to make up their minds. The eventual decision of this contemplative group could still deliver electrifying surprises.

The principal catalyst of tantalising electoral results is of course the power of swing. It is a peculiarity of the first-past-the-post mechanism in a parliamentary form of government that even minute changes in voter sentiment can yield very large upsets in the number of seats gained or lost. The following table illustrates this point using results from the last five general elections in the United Kingdom.

In 1992, there was a minor swing away from the Conservatives, a mere -0.38%. Yet, as it transpired, even that paltry change in sentiment cost them 40 seats. Turning to 1997, the year Tony Blair took over as prime minister, the Labour Party had improved its seat count from 271 to 418 -- a massive gain of 147 seats. Was this stunning accomplishment the consequence of an overwhelming increase in the

Returning once more to the 53% undecided, this group is now in a position to conjure up a massive swing in 2007. The sheer mass of this group can potentially upset many traditionally stronghold constituencies. Now this group is in a position to wreak havoc on many political fortunes. It is a propitious moment for them to demand for the political parties straightforward answers to issues of national importance. The major political players would do well to comply.

UK ELECTION RESULTS (1987-2005)

Table with 9 columns: Year, Labour (Share of Vote, No. of Seats, Swing, Change in No. of Seats), Conservative (Share of Vote, No. of Seats, Swing, Change in No. of Seats). Rows for years 1987, 1992, 1997, 2001, 2005.

Labour vote? Not really! This windfall in the number of seats was achieved by a relatively modest improvement in their share of votes, from 34.39% to 43.20%, i.e.,

only 8.81% -- a real bargain! Herein lies the power of swing.

Interestingly, though, the correlative relationship between the swing and seats gained/lost is

rather tenuous. In fact, the power of swing can be rather illusive at times. For example, in 2001 the Conservative Party increased its share of votes by 1.01%. In a depar-

ture from the disproportionate results engendered by even small movements in voter sentiment this swing, with respect to all other parties, gained them only one

additional seat. Whither, then, the power of swing? The answer depends upon the voting patterns prevailing in each constituency.

In a stronghold constituency, it would take a very large swing to remove the incumbent. On the other hand, in a marginal constituency, even a small swing would be good enough to bring in a new winner.

Thus, to gauge the power of swing, one has to categorise each constituency as stronghold, marginal, etc., and then calculate the swing required to upset the constituency. And this is exactly what Kamran Chowdhury has done in the context of election 2007. So, when he says that a small swing in overall voter sentiment would upset a huge number of seats, one should sit-up and smell the coffee.

Returning once more to the 53% undecided, this group is now in a position to conjure up a massive swing in 2007. The sheer mass of this group can potentially upset many traditionally stronghold constituencies. Such an impending threat should make the main politi-

cal parties very nervous indeed. Yet, it is their abject performance in government and in the opposition that has created the group of 53. And now this group is in a position to wreak havoc on many political fortunes. It is a propitious moment for them to demand from the political parties straightforward answers to issues of national importance. The major political players would do well to comply.

On the obvious flip-side, the Group of 53 has also provided an opportunity for smaller political parties and independent candidates to show their worth. Disenchantment with the major players being so great, statistical opportunities might have arisen in some constituencies for new faces to make an entrance.

There is strength in numbers, there is power in swing, a historic opportunity awaits the group of 53 to send a strong message all across the political landscape: "Don't mess with Bangladesh!"

The writer is a businessman.

Young Turks on the dark side of the moon

Current politics is a death-bound roller coaster, and the passengers can't disembark. People are always banging on about the resulting short supply of optimism. Dr. Yunus's Nobel Prize will bring a new rush of energy into the national psyche. Many more role models are also needed. The stories are there, inside and outside the borders.

NAEEM MOHAISEM

"I'm not actually from India, you know," said Samad.

Poppy Burt-Jones looked surprised and disappointed. "You're not?"

"No, I'm from Bangladesh."

"Bangladesh..."

"Previously Pakistan. Previous to that, Bengal."

"Oh, right. Same sort of ball-park, then."

"Just about the same stadium, yes."

(White Teeth, Zadie Smith)

THE American mediascape is agog about Google's \$1.65 billion acquisition of YouTube.com this week. The central "wow" factor is the insanely high valuation for a company that is only a year old, representing a return to the "irrational exuberance" of the first Internet mania (from which I carry battle scars). Much has been made about "Web 2.0," which is supposed to represent the new model of Internet startups -- steady leadership, bottom line focused, and no more

crazy parties. Whether that's true or not remains to be seen, but the zero-to-hero trajectory of YouTube has everyone using cliches like "paradigm shift" once again.

Discussing YouTube on San Francisco radio, I focused on the third co-founder of the company -- 27-year-old Jawed Karim, a graduate student who made a fortune as the third-highest equity holder. He also generated instant clout with his track record (he was an early member of PayPal, which was bought by eBay). The youth factor is also an immense lure for an age-obsessed media cycle. More important for my own intervention purposes are Jawed's Bangladeshi-German roots. DNA is not destiny (far from it) and nurture is the real determinant, but you can still spin this as a story of another Bengali doing quirky, unconventional projects.

While the US media is ga-ga over YouTube (the New York Times lead Business story -- with photo -- was about Jawed), there has been little coverage of the story in Dhaka. No

doubt that will change in the next few days, but it's interesting to note a seven-day lag on this story with a Bangladesh link in the Bangladeshi media, long after the CNN canines have chewed the story dry.

In a comparable high profile story involving an Indian, the Indian and Indian-American press runs at light speed to cover it. Kiran Desai winning the Booker, DJ Rekha's album release, Raju Narisetti becoming Deputy Editor of Wall Street Journal, Gautam Malkani's Hounslow rudeboys in London, Jagdish Bhagwati's nomination for Nobel Prize, Rana Dasgupta's shimmering ephemera in Tokyo Cancelled, Indra Nooyi becoming CEO of Pepsi, Shashi Tharoor's nomination for UN Secretary General, Jhumpa Lahiri's Pulitzer, Fareed Zakaria's tenure as Newsweek International editor, Saheber Bhatia's founding of Hotmail, Rajat Gupta's time as head of McKinsey -- every single one of these stories has been celebrated (often to excess) in the Indian press.

This can even lead to over-extending, as with front page stories celebrating Norah Jones' multi-Grammy sweep (her father is Ravi Shankar), even though Jones herself does not (publicly) claim a primarily South Asian identity. The NRI bloc has been so critical in molding India's global image, even crusty citizenship laws have been changed to create a new category of PIO (Persons of Indian Origin) passports. An excess of "India Shining" may lead to nausea in the audience, and the intersection with Indian superpower designs are a potential danger. But on a simpler level, the focus on diaspora accomplishes a limited goal of instilling optimism.

By contrast, the Bangla media are slow on the uptake to talk about the widespread younger diaspora. Deeder Zaman (Asian Dub Foundation), Akram Khan (Sacred Monsters), Moushumi Khan (Muslim Bar Association of NY), Farook Shamsheer (Job), Aziz Huq (former clerk for US Supreme Court), Sham Miah (Vol de Nuit), Sam Zaman (State of Bengal), Abeer Hoque (Olive Witch), Aladdin Ullah (Port Authority Throw Down), Shazna Nessa (Milky), Monami Maulik (DRUM), Fariba Alam (Bangla East Side), Shireen Pasha (Roti Eaters), Monica Ali (Alentejo Blues),

Chaumtoli Huq (Taxi Workers' Alliance), Dishad Husain (Viva Liberty), Ivan Jaigirdar (3rd D), and many others are not covered comprehensively or quickly.

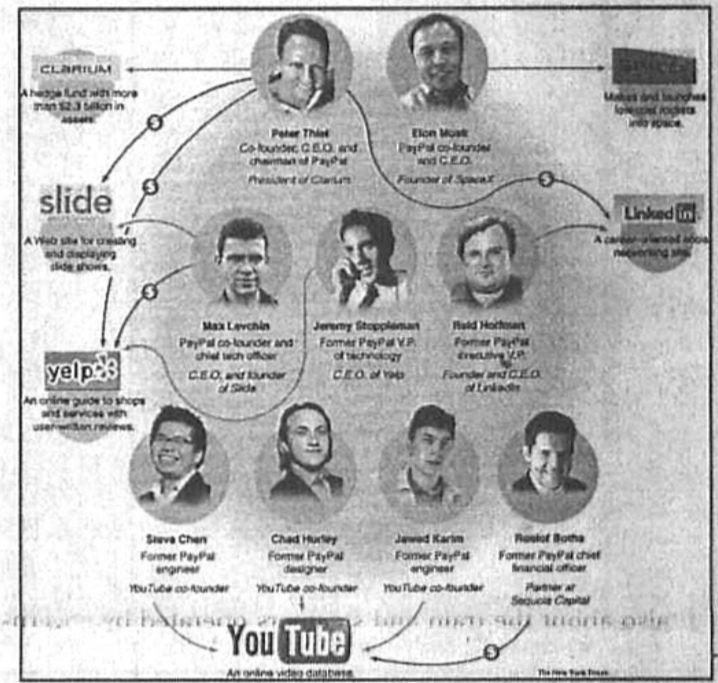
When the voracious Chernobyl virus invaded the Internet, a young student of BUET programmed an anti-virus in 24 hours. If he had been an Indian student of IIT, the Consulate would have ensured that he was on CNN by live satellite link within hours. But I had to wait two years until the BUET wunderkind came to graduate school in the US to meet him. Living inside the New York media frenzy, I look at the wall-to-wall coverage of Indians in the media and think that Bengalis are the little engine that could travel really far -- if only the Bangla press would wake up.

I am always wary of excessive nationalism because it can quickly lead to chauvinism and exclusion. We only need consider our horrendous record in Chittagong Hill Tracts to see the dark side of nationalism. There is also a deep contradiction in gaining domestic applause after validation from a Western power structure. But at the current crisis crossroads, we could do with an injection of optimism and inspiration from unconventional locations. A decade ago, Mahfuz Anam gave a heartfelt

lecture at Columbia University about the Bangla diaspora. But The Daily Star and others have been slow to follow the lead of those words.

Media profiles do not have to focus only on middle class professionals, or the sons and daughters of "established" people back home (the latter would only re-inscribe hierarchies and local elites). There are many other stories to track down -- the near monopoly of Bengalis in Brooklyn's brownstone renovation business, the Bengali head cheese buyer at Balducci's, the huge bloc of Bengalis in the pugnicious taxi drivers' union, the Sylheti clan's dominance of "Indian" restaurants in London and New York, the packed-to-the-gills Belgian bar-restaurant and trendy East Village hotspots, the new young Bengali activists in New York's immigrant rights battle, and the men who commandeered a signature campaign for International Mother Tongue Day.

We can also attempt, emotionally and politically, to embrace a pan-Bengali identity and take the success stories of West Bengalis as part of our mosaic. The network can extend to projects that have a Bangla link, such as My Architect (we failed to build on the buzz around that film's Oscar nomination), and Telling Nicholas (HBO documentary about 9/11 that features a Bengali family).



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national psyche. Many more role models are also needed. The stories are there, inside and outside the borders -- vested with the tireless activists, Young Turks, and culture agitators.

Naem Mohaism is a film-maker and a media-activist.

Solving the RMG wage problem

All parties should sit together with the factual information and data about current CM of garments in international market, productivity, profit, market price of essential goods, minimum needs of workers, workers' skills and education, and also about the threats and opportunities in our garments industry.

MD. EFTEKHAR HOSSAIN

THE biggest problem in our ready-made garments industry at this time is the minimum wage issue. It has become so critical that our total ready-made garments (RMG) industry is now facing a challenge for survival. The current situation of unbelievable price hike of essential goods on one hand, and the gradually decreasing CM (the amount paid for cutting and manufacturing) of garments in the international market on the other hand, has made the situation more difficult, almost unsolvable.

have to face an even more competitive market, and consequently there is every chance of reduction of CM of garments in the international market one more time. There is little doubt that our garments industry will not have the capability to take the load of increased production costs, the ultimate result of which will be that foreign companies will pack-up for other countries and our local companies will be sitting without work.

Now the problem is from both the sides. We have to save our workers and also our RMG industry. Without analyzing the situation, and going deeply into the problem, anybody may call for mutual understanding of workers and garments owners. But it is not that simple. The root of the problem runs far deeper.

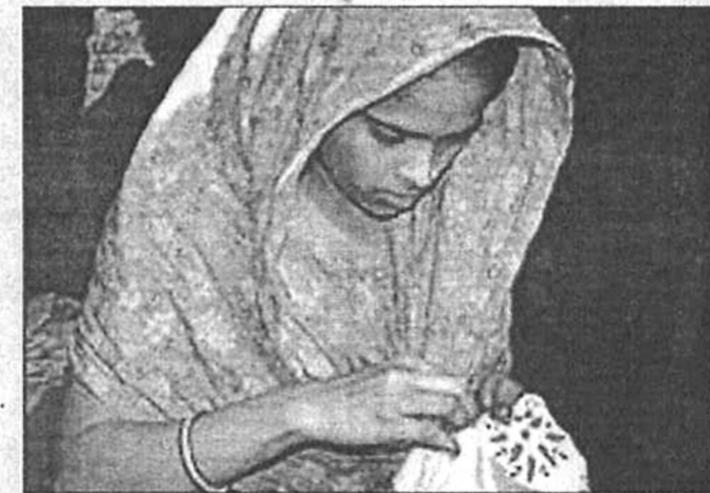
We need the integrated efforts of owners, workers, and the govern-

ment. Before that, all of us have to realize this from very deep in our hearts, and take an oath to save our garments industry.

The variables are as follows:

- Present market price of essential goods.
• Workers' existing salary.
• Price received from international buyer (CM).
• Productivity (production per person)
• Unit production cost.

Unfortunately, while bargaining with each other, we are talking about the first three points; consequently, there is no solution. But no one is talking about the last two. The wage board recently settled Taka 1662.50 (revised) as minimum wage, which is 78.70% more than the present salary. This increment is unbelievably high, but is still not satisfactory, not enough to survive on. The reason is the unbe-



lievable price hike of essential goods at present, and the low level of the existing salary.

Workers have to survive, and garments owners have to make profit -- this is reality. We cannot go beyond these two basic conditions. Whenever we think, whatever we think, and however we think -- we have to think about satisfying both of the above two basic conditions. By bargaining in the present style, that is by ignoring each others'

needs, nobody can come to any solution.

Let us discuss the solution based on the following five variables -- where the role of the government is the major part in this process:

The prices of essential goods and services: These need to be brought to a realistic/logical level, and need to be kept stable. There is no alternative but to do this, if we fail the whole Bangladesh economy is

bound to fail. At present, the situation is so bad that every employee is in dire straits. Can anybody think about the situation of the garments workers whose salaries are exceptionally low? If this situation is not rectified the crisis will never end. And, ultimately, our garments industry will be under threat.

Productivity (production per worker): This is the main issue, where there is solution of main conflict. Can anybody imagine what our average productivity level is? It is not above 40%! Some factories are even far below this level. In the long process of bargaining about salary, has anybody said: "Ok, I will pay you this much salary, in return how much production you will give?" Or has anybody from workers' side said: "Ok, I will give you this much production, in return how much you will pay?" It can be fruitful bargaining, and by increasing productivity both owners and workers can preserve their interests.

Productivity is the integrated process of workers and management. First, we need positive attitude of both the parties. The own-

ers can appoint some consultants to re-arrange the whole process in scientific way. They can introduce a standard production organogram and train the management people and workers; introduce computer software to minimize wastage and process loss, smoothen supply of raw materials, and bring transparency and accountability. This is the only way to ensure increased production, and, thus, more benefit for owners and workers.

Introducing high productive-automatic machineries: Owners can reduce the dependency on workers by introducing high productivity automatic machinery, though this is costly, but in the long run it will be beneficial. It will ensure more production, more employment, more benefit. It will also help to attract the attention of buyers in our country. It will open the door for more orders in our country.

Reducing process loss and harassments in government offices: Wherever we have involvement with government offices there is the question of loss of money and time.

Keeping actual data and information: I was talking to a labour leader, and in response to one question he told me that garments owners are making profit five times more than workers' salary. The workers are demanding three times salary. He should have the actual data and then he could calculate how much he should demand. On the other hand, the garments owners should have the information about the basic needs of workers and their lifestyle.

As such, the governments, the garments owners, and the workers should sit together with the factual information and data about current CM of garments in international market, productivity, profit, market price of essential goods, minimum needs of workers, workers' skills and education, and also about the threats and opportunities in our garments industry. Along with this, all the parties have to have respect each other. If this were to happen, I think the solution would not be far away.

MD Eftekhari Hossain is a garments researcher and consultant.

Will voters pull the trigger?

BADRUL ISLAM

LET me begin by quoting at length from Washington Post op-ed columnist David Broder's October 12 column:

"A fundamental and welcome change in the political environment is possible -- but only if the voters pull the trigger. When you examine the latest round of pre-election polls, what is striking is the stability of public attitudes over the preceding months. In this week's Post-ABC News poll, for example, President Bush has a job approval score of 39 percent, with 60 percent disapproving. Eleven months earlier, in November 2005, the

scores were identical.

"What all this suggests is a settled judgment on the part of the majority of Americans that the current leadership of the nation is not doing the job that people expect. This is the government the people chose in 2004, but now they are showing clear signs of buyer's remorse.

"What is driving public opinion is an overall impression that those in office -- meaning mainly Republicans -- have let things slide out of control and need to be relieved. The failure of this Congress to act meaningfully on immigration, energy, health care or other vital needs has left the public frustrated -- and members of

Congress feeling embattled."

"Fortunately, the voters have the power -- if they pull the trigger on Election Day -- to create a new plot for the Washington drama. That kind of fundamental change in the political environment is possible -- indeed, it is imminent and will be welcomed. But it will happen only if voters pull the trigger. Elections do matter, and this one matters more than most."

The reason that Broder's ideas caught my attention is that there is a striking similarity between the political environment in America and Bangladesh; though the countries are miles apart otherwise. But then, this is what is called democracy -- practiced worldwide, its

ideology is the same; that whenever elected governments fail to fulfill the commitments made to their citizens, the citizens exercise their right to choose their representatives.

In Bangladesh, too, there is lot of pre-election speculation for the upcoming 2007 elections. Like the Americans, the Bangladeshis, too, openly declare that the present leadership has failed to fulfill the commitments made to the citizens, specially with respect to power, price of food items, containing corruption, ensuring human rights, etc. Therefore, they need to exercise their right to vote to power another party which will fulfil

its commitments.

But the pre-elections polls survey records indicated in Nazim Kamran Chowdhury's article "A New Arithmetic," published on October 6 in The Daily Star, is absolutely stunning.

Firstly, due to record of bad governance by the AL and BNP-led alliance, the core base (vote bank) of all parties has been massively eroded, and secondly, 53% of the voters are undecided.

Choudhury states that: "It seems that voters are disenchanted with the whole political system, and that they are frustrated with the lack of a viable choice in future election."

In a democratic system, the most important requirement is the utilization of the citizen's right to vote to choose the representatives; there is no alternative. My personal opinion is that if citizens don't exercise their right to select qualified candidates they cannot expect economic and social justice from the party that forms the government. So the main screening test begins here.

The main question that is now in the minds of the Bangladeshis is this: How can we know who will be the right candidate? My opinion is that we should, like in America, try to know the candidate, his educational qualification, records of past

performance, and his present agenda for development of the constituency he would represent in the parliament.

In America, as Broder states in the same article of his: "This election campaign has been a learning experience for candidates of both parties, incumbents and challengers alike. They have been bombarded with messages from their constituents, telling them that the public is tired of the partisan bickering, tired of the gridlock and eager to elect people who will focus on the real problems and work together to find solutions. If that lesson is reinforced by the election results, Washington will change."

Mr Choudhury in his article speculates that Bangladesh is also reaching political maturity whereby voters will tend to look for performance rather than politics, and this suggestion should be accepted by the leaders of all the parties should they intend to be identified as a credible and contesting party. Also, there remains a possibility that many from amongst the 53% undecided voters may then decide to vote, which could turn the tables in favour of the right party.

Badrul Islam is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.