

It is a Vote for Change

We would have been happier if we could complete the election process and have the final results of all the 300 seats instead of the present 271, with re-polling in 28 of them. We would have then had a clear picture as to how the next government would shape up. Notwithstanding the small glitch, we would like to congratulate the Awami League (AL) for being the clear leader by winning 133 seats. Obviously Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) cannot be said to be in a particularly happy position with having come down from 140 seats won in 1991 to the present 105. But still BNP has considerable cause for comfort having emerged as a very strong opposition party with more than one third seats of a 300 member parliament.

The election result is of tremendous significance to the AL. Having been forced out of power through a murderous putsch in August '75, the AL has had to operate under tremendous odds for the last 20 years. Its victory acquires a special meaning because the BNP's main election strategy was to depict AL as a party which would be anti-national and which never protect the nation's sovereignty. The decisive victory of the AL proves that people did not accept such vilification and have decided to trust the future of the country in its hands.

As we see it, the vote has been for change. Since '75 there have been two military generals and the political parties that they floated to 'civilianise' their tenure that ruled Bangladesh. Though Khaleda Zia's coming to power was qualitatively different from either yet her rule was patently similar to theirs in terms of policies and ideology. So the verdict of the voters in this election was to opt for a change. And the type of change that we want to see first is a shift from a 'party first' politics to a 'country first' politics. Sheikh Hasina campaigned on the platform of ruling the country on the basis of consensus. Now that she has a chance of heading the next government, let her fulfil that promise and start by offering a hand of cooperation to the BNP once the election results are officially announced. On the side of Begum Zia we urge that she also sets a new tone in our politics by congratulating the AL chief for her victory, though such congratulations were not forthcoming in '91 when she won.

We urge both leaders to give the nation a fresh start by beginning the new parliament in a spirit of, as we said earlier, putting the country first.

A Unique Election

The just concluded election — both in essence and content — marks a high point in our struggle for consolidating democracy in the country. Belying all foreboding, the people have emerged victors through this election. The high turnout of voters — initially estimated between 60 to 90 per cent — has proved the people's credential as the defenders of democracy. What is even more encouraging is the fact that female voters were not lagging far behind their male counterparts in exercising their franchise. Indeed, the voting performance is comparable with those of the developed democracies.

One unmistakable point here is that we are capable of bringing the best out of a worse situation. Despite all our flaws, we are able to rise to the occasion. The holding of the election in a near complete peaceful atmosphere is a testimony to our love for peace and democratic values. The stray incidents of violence that have taken place during the polls are to be treated more as a minor deviation rather than an order of the day. This factor alone should be enough to earn respect for us in the eyes of the outside world. Our claim to democracy has indeed been vindicated. We feel immensely proud of our performance.

Let the Election Commission, the caretaker government and above all the people bask in the glory of this high performance. The maturity of our people has once again been brought to the fore, thanks to the caretaker government and the EC's admirable sense of duty and dedication. The challenges that posed to be unsurmountable have at last been made to look rather easy to overcome — all because we are fortunate to have two most committed and competent men at the helm of affairs.

We profusely thank the Chief Adviser, the Chief Election Commissioner and all who have assisted them to accomplish this gargantuan job.

Case for Notebooks

Notebooks are on open sale in Narail, says a report carried in this daily yesterday. This is in violation of the government ban on the made-easy type of books. The rationale behind the governmental restriction is to encourage students to go through books thoroughly and develop their own appreciation. Sofar as the intention is concerned, no way of faulting it. But the question is, has the concerned authorities ever taken any effective steps to discourage students' dependence on the notebooks?

The crux of the problem lies here. Substandard notebooks have a demand not only in Narail but all over the country, largely because the standard of imparting lessons in the classrooms dropped, most often, far short of the desired quality. Why blame notebooks when you have not made arrangements for filling up the void created by substandard or even total absence of teaching in the classrooms? That the students are required to look up for a short-cut success with help from tutors is a good enough symptom of the disease.

So here is a case that is more a creation of the education authorities and teachers rather than of students and guardians. The notebooks too are a brain-child of teachers mostly. If the notebooks cannot be effectively banned, qualified teachers should be invited to write such notes and the best ones be allowed for publication and sale. At least students will be able to have the best out of a hopeless situation.

It is my understanding that the national parliamentary elections held on 12 June were free and fair, barring a few incidents here and there. People have spoken. The results may not have satisfied everybody. But the people are sovereign and the source of all political power. Their verdict must be accepted.

That is at the heart of democracy. This is therefore time for reconciliation and renewal. This is time for all patriotic forces to work together from their respective positions to build the nation, to alleviate poverty of the mass of the people, to move the nation forward. In order to be in the company of the nations marching towards 21st century and the new millennium growing from strength to strength, there is no alternative but to strengthen both the economy and the nation state.

An equitably distributed development is essential for strengthening the nation state, thereby enabling it to sustain the national political sovereignty and further and sustain its international respectability. In this context, both economic and political process must be people-centred and reinforcing. National consensus must be developed on important national issues using all possible means of consulting people — e.g. through peoples representatives, local governments, opinion polling, etc. People at large must also be involved in governance at all levels — from national to local — in appropriate ways. The implication is that democratisation of the whole society is an urgent need. In this context, the establishment of local governments at appropriate levels with true devolution of power becomes a priority.



A Nation Looks Forward

by Qazi Kholiquzzaman Ahmad

It is my understanding that there has never been a properly coordinated mechanism for economic policy-making in this country. Whims and caprices of the head of the government or other influential ministers and adhocism have always tended to be the bases of economic policy-making.

On a personal level, I am very happy with the verdict of the people. I believe the change was absolutely necessary for strengthening the evolving democracy in this country. Recently *The Daily Star* (9 June 1996), I argued in an article why this time it should be the turn of the Awami League. In early stages of democracy, alternating of state power between major political parties is more likely to keep the party in power alert and pro-people and therefore more active in promoting people's and national interests instead of self and party interests than if the same party returns to power again and again. In a highly iniquitous society like ours it is important that participation in governance widens and deepens. Also, when a party is voted out of power and finds itself in opposition, it gets an opportunity to review why it was rejected by the people and can seek to reposition itself for doing better in the future.

I congratulate the Awami League on its electoral success, in particular the party president Sheikh Hasina for her thoughtful, purposeful and courageous leadership in running the campaign. One would expect that she will provide an effective, responsible, and people-focused leadership when, as is expected, she is elected head of the government.

The strengthening of the nation state and sustainable human development must proceed simultaneously. For both the processes, appropriate

analytical frameworks are required. Otherwise, setting and achieving certain goals, however relevant those might be, would not lead to a comprehensive social, economic and political progress. In this article, I intend to briefly talk about an economic framework that, I think, is appropriate for Bangladesh. Regarding the political framework, let me just mention that it has to be democratic and people-centred; the rule of law and public accountability must be established; there must be effective separation of the judiciary and the executive branches, and steps must be taken to eradicate corruption and violence from the society. What people really want is peace, security, stability and employment opportunities. They are against violence, corruption and power play by vested interest groups.

The concept of sustainable human development may be the basis for developing an analytical framework for social and economic policy-making. The concept has however become quite amorphous as it is used by different people in different ways. But it can be a very useful concept to build on in a situation like Bangladesh's if it is clearly and purposefully defined. The concept can be reduced to two kinds of relations: human-human relations and human-natural environment relations because development is about people and human societies are ultimately dependent on their natural environment. Bangladesh faces formidable problems of very

low per capita income, low economic growth rate, large-scale poverty, high socio-economic inequality, and large-scale environmental penalty in terms of air and water pollution, deforestation, loss of biodiversity, degradation of soil quality etc. The country is also constrained by a large and fast growing population, low level of human capability development, technological backwardness, and organisational inadequacies and weaknesses. A strategy of long-term sustainable development cannot therefore be achieved unless all the three broad dimensions economic, socio-cultural, and environmental are addressed systematically. It has to be conceived in terms of a package keeping in sharp focus on economic, socio-cultural and environmental realities prevailing in the country. Certain basic messages and guiding principles may be common with other similarly placed countries so that lessons can be learnt from their experiences in these regards; but the package must contain specific prescriptions in response to the specific realities and experiences facing the country. The idea is to build on the local views and knowledge of the people and communities and not to impose world views; the latter should provide the necessary resources, incentives and linkages.

No dogmatic approach, be it state or market-centred, can achieve the goals. A pragmatic approach is required. Appropriate roles will need to

be performed by the state and the market forces, given the existing or emerging realities. A broad guideline would be that production and distribution of goods and services are the domain of the market, while establishing and enforcing a level-playing field is the responsibility of the state. But, depending on the ground realities, state policy may seek to influence the allocation of resources in certain respects in the overall national interest. For example, state intervention may be required in the field of environment and also to ensure the necessary flow of resources to social and productive sectors which are more poverty-alleviating and inclusive than others and may also strengthen the national economic base. Also the primary of agriculture calls for more attention to be given to this sector than has hitherto been the case.

The tools to be used by the government to achieve the objectives obviously include fiscal and monetary policies, budgetary allocation, institutional support and, on occasions, if required in the national interest, direct state interventions of one sort or another. There must also be a proper coordination between the macro management of the economy and meso and micro policies to be pursued. Indeed, the above is the microcosm. It needs to be developed and elaborated before it can be put to practical uses for policy making and implementation purposes. I have elsewhere tried to say more on these is-

It is my understanding that there has never been a properly coordinated mechanism for economic policy-making in this country. Whims and caprices of the head of the government or other influential ministers and adhocism have always tended to be the bases of economic policy-making. Sometimes an announcement by the prime minister in a public meeting was all that was necessary to undertake a project. In such a fluid situation outside dictates have often been very influential. An immediate review of the whole economic policy-making process is therefore order. While strengthening of the inter-ministerial coordination may be one mechanism to pursue, it may be a very useful step to establish an appropriately empowered Economic Advisory Council (EAC) in the office of the Prime Minister to assist in the process of coordination, review and analysis. Indeed, such councils exist in the UK and the USA, assisting and advising the chief executives. It may be necessary to establish similar councils for other policy areas such as environment.

Finally, I would urge that the new government does not repeat the serious mistakes, high-handedness, and wrongdoings of the immediate past and previous governments. Care will need to be taken so that sycophants and those given to self-aggrandisement do not become important personalities around the chief executive and other important functionaries. Such people isolate the leadership from the realities and the people, sowing the seeds of autocracy and minimizing, even shattering, democratic values and practices. The writer is Chairman, Bangladesh Urnayan Parishad.

Post-poll Reflections: A Change in the Offing

by M Anwarul Haq

The BNP had to face the political fallout of a government that was perceived as not serious at governance. It lacked strong policy decisions in most vital areas and was always wavering and hesitant in implementing whatever it decided upon or still worse it was seen to be indecisive.

THE Bangladesh Nationalist Party perhaps had its setback cast as a ruling party not at the Wednesday polls outcome but when it opted for holding the one-party elections on February 15.

Although there is no last word in politics, the setback of BNP as the major party in the present polls was evident when it failed to turn the tide of public opinion in its favour for a long time. It not only refused to address the simmering issue of the caretaker government in its proper time but kept its foot dragging on the subject even after the opposition succeeded in capturing the public imagination and garnering public sympathy on the issue.

Although the BNP did finally concede to the demand of the caretaker government and will have its name etched in our political history as the mover of the non-party government in the Parliament, there were no loud plaudits from the people. After all a stitch in time saves nine. In this case the stitch came not only much beyond its time but also be-

came out of tune. In the art of governance, sometimes good works are marred by bad politics. Even for the considerable successes attained in mobilising domestic resources, containing inflation and achieving micro-economic reforms, applauded by international institutions, there was hardly any trickle down effect to change the lives of the common people.

While urban poverty increased, rural suffering escalated and the agricultural sector which is the Achilles Heel of the economy continued to be battered by price hike in agricultural equipment, farm inputs, higher diesel costs and artificially inflated fertiliser prices. Prices of agricultural produce, finished goods and consumer items continued to mark a spiralling increase during BNP's five-year in office

while real income dropped significantly in both rural and urban areas. Both producers and consumers have strong memories and they strike back when it comes to declining money-power.

Besides the BNP had to face the political fallout of a government that was perceived as not serious at governance. It lacked strong policy decisions in most vital areas and was always wavering and hesitant in implementing whatever it decided upon or still worse it was seen to be indecisive.

A sliding law and order situation, continued campus terrorism and perpetuation of a *masdan* culture affected the ordinary citizenry much and made them wonder what was the difference between BNP and its major rivals. Corruption inherited from the Ershad

regime was not contained, rather perception of corruption on a growing scale dominated several areas of government, bureaucracy and business.

Although BNP had to its credit the introduction of a parliamentary system of government backed by popular consensus, it failed to make the Parliament perform. If the opposition was guilty of boycotting the Parliament for long periods, the BNP could be held responsible for making the Parliament non-performing. Its parliamentary leader ignored it and was even inconspicuously long absences while the show that more laws were promulgated by ordinances than through parliamentary initiatives. The House was also bypassed in announcing or consulting on any major policy issues.

The voters seem to have rejected the BNP for now and given a chance to the Awami League (AL) after the party's long 21-year in the wilderness. The AL has said that it may be forgiven for the mistakes that it might have committed in the past. AL chief Sheikh Hasina and senior party leaders have made repeated appeals to the voters so that they may

be allowed another opportunity of coming back to power.

The Awami League which spearheaded the Independence struggle has apparently got its second chance of governance ever since its ouster by a military putsch. But it is time for the Awami League to perform and deliver and meet the expectations of the voters. It has ahead of it a difficult agenda. It has not only to beat its own past record but also the past record of the BNP.

The Bengali nation is sometimes forgiving without being forgetful. And both winners and losers should take note of that.

OPINION

Democracy and Dreams

M Ahsanur Rahim

Bangladeshis have always liked to dream. Whether it is about winning fifty lakh taka in lotteries, or about marrying the pretty girl next door, Bangladeshis have dreamt and will keep on dreaming about all good things in life. We dreamt a lot about the government which came to power in 1991, only to be disappointed again. The continuing clashes among the various political parties, caused our dreams to die and led us only to chaos. Our dreams often turned into nightmares.

There is no need to describe what happened during the last two years. We simply did not want that. We just understand that in a parliamentary democracy the responsibility of running a country lies with all parties their MPs elected to the parliament. It is not just with the party holding the majority seats in the parliament but also with the parties who are in the opposition bench. But as it seems, despite all differences, one thing that all Bangladeshis political parties have in common is perhaps a trait of irresponsibility. To an outsider, it might even seem, as if the various political parties are in a constant contest with each other in this regard the BNP had not unnecessarily delayed the formation of a neutral caretaker government. God knows how less the AL and its associate parties would have gone in realising their demands. The people or *Jonota* might have, at one point, wanted a caretaker government, but no one had wanted the state of chaos that prevailed in the process of its coming into being. The economy of Bangladesh was very nearly crippled, and many valuable lives were lost.

It is my opinion that if there was any real democracy within the political parties, they would never have indulged in these activities. When there is little democratic practice within a party, how can one expect a party to respect democratic norms and principles? Since, the rise to power in a political party depends on following blindly the orders of the chief members of the party, the orders, even if damaging for the country, are carried out without any question.

How does differences in opinion among rival political leaders affect ordinary people in the streets? Well, the first thing that an angry politician goes to is to order his followers to go to the streets and hold demonstrations in his/her support. In a democracy, his/her opponent can and does the same.

Hence, the same old story — this one comes from that part of the city, that one from this part; they meet at a point; then stage one: angry words; stage two: flying fists; stage three: 'bang! bang!' Next thing you, an ordinary passer-by, know is that you are lying on the street hit by a bullet or bomb particle. If you are unlucky — farewell; but if you are lucky, a few days later, still immense pain, you arrive home. Those's not all. Suddenly, those big fellows enter your home, put you on a wheel chair and parade you around the streets claiming that you are one of 'them'. Then you see another group coming towards you shouting that you are theirs and that you have been forcibly taken by the other party members. In the end, you wish that you had not gone out that fateful afternoon to buy a new shirt with the money you earned by tuitioning.

Our beloved and respected politicians must abjure the politics of terror and hockey stick and knife and gun. They have no alternative but to show more restraint and discipline. So should all the student and youth activists of various political parties. If all this happens we will all have reasons to celebrate. All religions teach us to love, understand and tolerate. Despite this, even religion-based political parties in Bangladesh are of violent nature. 'Man made money; money made man evil' — so goes the old saying! Most of the political leaders in Bangladesh apparently are running after power only because of the money that comes along with it. Not only this has to stop but all every politician must account for every taka, rupee, pound, dollar etc in his banks — both home and abroad. (If this even happens, I wonder!) A special and very stiff tax should be imposed on every unaccounted for paisa if necessary. The Bangladeshi politicians' obsession with money has gone too far; they say.

In the beginning, I was talking about dreams of a peaceful and prosperous Bangladesh. Now that another election has ushered in a new beginning, I must say that if all political parties work together, that dream can be a reality. It is not important who wins but that all parties, both government and opposition, come together in the need of the hour. The government party must not abuse its power, while the opposition should not oppose for opposition's sake. We have had enough of that.

To The Editor...

"Congrats to Our Boys"

Sir, Like every sports lover in Bangladesh and those at *The Daily Star*, we were extremely delighted to know that Bangladesh junior hockey team had beaten India in the third Junior Asia Cup hockey tournament in Singapore.

But we were surprised and failed to fathom why you should be unhappy with the progress of other sports, especially table tennis. We think you don't have the statistics correct when you say that table tennis is being patronised compared to hockey by the government (though you have not used the word government but it implies). For the record it needs to be said that the Hockey Federation receives from the National Sports Council an amount of Tk. 6,50,000 per year compared to only Tk. 3,50,000 for the TT Federation.

More pertinently, the Hockey Federation has an exclusive stadium with modern areostroturf surface totally dedicated to hockey which even cricket does not have, not to speak of table tennis. Your mention of the TT players getting foreign coaches is quite irrelevant because every federation has a duty to arrange foreign coaches for their players. Therefore, while we shall be very happy to see 10 foreign coaches for our hockey players we request you not to take our one word too seriously.

Your reference to BTTF's participation in foreign tournaments is also incorrect. In the last four years we have only participated in the SAF Games and no other foreign tournaments, leave alone world level meets, you should know better in how many foreign tournaments our hockey team has participated in those four years.

As sports organisers and sports lovers we want development of all the sports no matter how hard it is. Chances of success abroad, marginal as they are to almost all sports played in Bangladesh, cannot be made sole criterion for patronage by the authorities.

We are shocked when you write 'table tennis which has no prospect of doing anything worthwhile even in the next century...'. If your advice is heeded to, we are afraid the

government may dedicate all its resources to the development of shooting and chess only — which has been the only major sporting success by Bangladesh since independence.

Lastly, we hope you will agree that in order to compliment the achievement in one sport, you don't have to denigrate the others, who are also trying their best.

Ishtiaq Ahmed
Bangladesh Table Tennis Federation

Session jam

Sir, Owing to session jam problem of Bangladesh Agricultural University (BAU), Mymensingh, it takes six years or even more to complete a 4-year B Sc Agriculture course. For instance, currently the Part II B Sc Ag. examination of 1992 is going on!

As a result of session jam, the Bangladesh Agricultural Institute (BAI) and other agricultural colleges of the country are facing serious difficulties in accommodating the excess students with their limited capacity and facilities. This situation is prevailing for the last several years and it will continue till eradication of the session jam problem. The concerned higher authorities are not in favour of sanctioning additional facilities plus financial support to the agricultural colleges for meeting up the extra burden. Often authorities suggest to contain session jam by quickly holding examinations and clearing the stranded students by the respective colleges with their own initiatives. This is indeed a very good suggestion. But the fact is, the agricultural colleges including BAI do not have the authority to hold final examinations according to their own calendar because these colleges are running under the academic control of BAU.

In order to solve the session jam and other academic problems, the teachers and students have been urging the government to sanction academic autonomy to agricultural colleges so that they can run their own academic activities as per the demand of the time by adopting modern academic curricula and system. We would draw the kind

attention of Joint Secretary, Agri Education Wing, Ministry of Agriculture and Director General, BARI to the above mentioned problem and would request their good offices to take urgent steps for solving the long-standing session jam and other academic problems of BAI and other agri-colleges.

M Zahidul Haque
General Secretary,
BAI Teachers' Association,

Phoney

Sir, In the news telecast on Thursday, 30th May, 1996 and the following Friday morning, the BTV news readers announced that the Sher-e-Bangla Nagar exchange had completed the conversion of analog to digital upto the number 315900. In fact they could not complete even upto 315400. What made them announce a wrong figure is indeed a mystery. Was the source from the horse's mouth i.e., BTTB?

A subscriber
Dhaka-9

A Very Bad Day

Sir, This refers to your editorial under the caption 'A Very Bad Day' published on 3rd June, '96 wherein it has been mentioned that death of 30 passengers was perhaps the highest in recallable memory. Deaths due to bus accidents are so frequent in our country that it is a mind boggling matter to keep all these tragedies in memory. After reading your editorial I'm trying to recollect the bus accident which occurred on the Dhaka-Aricha highway perhaps in April, '91 when a dangerously overloaded bus while coming to Dhaka skidded off a bridge and plunged into a dry canal killing around 85 persons. Those ill-fated passengers were returning to Dhaka after the Eid-ul-Fitr. His death toll, if it is correct, may be the highest in a bus accident in our country.

Deaths due to automobile accidents in any country are common and hard to contain. Even in the US 40,000 people die every year from automobile accidents. But for a country

like us where junks outnumber road-worthy automobiles, we have scope at least to minimize the death if the concerned authority puts the paramount interest of saving lives of passengers over the all powerful so called associations of owners or labourers of trucks buses.

Zaved Mortuza
230, Green Road,
Dhaka.

Neutrality of BTV

Sir, During the Ershad regime there was a joke about BTV news bulletins — they telecast news of Saheb (Ershad)-Bibi (Rowshan) — Golam (Ministers). When Begum Khaleda Zia became Prime Minister, a change was noted in the initial period and Khaleda's news was not given the lead if it was not so important. But later, Saheb-Bibi-Golam pattern was restored. The bulletins started with actions of Khaleda, followed by those of President and ministers.

But, how is the situation now? The same. As you switch on the 8 or 10 o'clock news at night, it's only Chief Adviser Abdur Rahman — addressing meetings, seminars, conferences, or meeting this visitor or that personality. On June 2, perhaps he did not have much activities. So his visit to the National Archives was shown in detail.

What do our political parties, particularly Awami League, which has been affected by this pattern most, because it has been out of power for such a long time and also because it is the most vocal on such issues, have to say? But, then why should AL resent? Now AL chief has been getting more coverage by BTV than others. On June 3, both Bangla and English news bulletins gave visual coverage of Sheikh Hasina and also Mizan Chowdhury's meetings. But it was not so with Khaleda's. In both the bulletins, there were no pictures of Khaleda's meetings. Well, this is not about the neutrality of the neutral government, but of BTV, isn't it?

Tarek Shamim
Dhaka.