

Indian General Elections and the Media

Is Sonia the rising star on the Indian political horizon? Her headlong rush appears to indicate that such is the case. The way she handled Kesri, she gave every indication that she had read Prince of Machiavelli.

THE latest results of the Indian General Elections held well ahead of schedule, has produced a virtual copy of the past parliament. The only important exception is the United Front (UF) the third largest group within the parliament. Its strength has dwindled to nearly half its previous size. This is a lesson that will not be lost on the UF.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) campaigned energetically to attempt the impossible feat of emerging as the single majority party and failed badly. Through dexterous alignments it succeeded in gaining footholds almost throughout India, thus shedding the image of the party of the Hindi belt of the north. Indeed in a state like West Bengal climbing on the back of the firebrand dissident Congress leader Mamata Banerjee, it succeeded in wiping out the Congress party from this important State.

During the earlier part of the election campaign, the Congress, whose fortunes have been slipping downhill continuously, appeared to be sinking. It was the appearance of Sonia Gandhi, the Italian born widow of assassinated Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, that the campaign regained momentum and the Congress slightly improved on her past performance.

The United Front fared very badly throughout the country and came a poor third. The UF is a combine of a bewildering variety of political parties, some merely displaying a signboard, and they are divided on many issues which range from

extreme left to far right. Whereas in the past Government, UF had a voice that counted, in the present parliament its voice has significantly diminished.

Hardly the results were out that the BJP staked a claim to form a Government. They had an inauspicious start as they heavily depend on support from splinter groups. BJP itself is not a homogenous body and is composed of a large number of parties. The splinter groups drove a hard bargain and finally BJP

breadth of India, resigned. He had been a stop gap president and the resignation did not surprise many although the peremptory manner did. Within no time Sonia Gandhi was elected president of the Congress by the Congress Working Party. Kesri appeared peeved and protested and spread more battle nuts, while talking on TV. His protestation did not last long and he was quickly brought in line. Sonia has in the meantime got herself elected president of the Parliamentary Party although

Parliament. Yet Sonia cannot afford to stay too far away from power. There appears to be very friendly messages being exchanged between Sonia and the indestructible Chief Minister of West Bengal, Jyoti Basu. Basu has on more than one occasion expressed a desire to move from the Calcutta stage and play on the large stage of New Delhi. It is Sonia alone, who can offer him this prize. And since age is on the side of Sonia she can afford to wait a couple of years. And indeed by offering the Prime Minister's post to Atal Bihari Vajpayee of the BJP, she deliberately plays the waiting game, keeping her eyes fixed on New Delhi.

United Front appears to be stewing in its own juice and licking its wounds. It is incapable of getting together and be the coalition partner of the Congress. From the election results it appears like an anachronism. What kind of role it will play is anybody's guess. Here again the plum should not be too long in coming within the grasp of Sonia.

Sitting in Bangladesh, we have been bombarded by the electronic media of India and specially the channel called Star TV. It is amazing how many hours of news have been dished out through various channels of Star. And more hours of endless discussions, debates etc. have totally saturated the viewers. In fact the TV channels must have lost track of people's interest in the very detailed and intricate goings on throughout India. There has been attempt to copy the CNN and one Mr Proney Roy has been regularly informing the viewers we shall be there a la CNN.

And if one was to escape Star in favour of CNN or BBC one runs the risk of being confronted with news concerning the anatomy of the President of the United States. Here again it is amazing how insatiable is the desire for news of this variety. The ladies in question are graded with their lawyers in tow. President Clinton is shown holding the hand of his wife Hillary and boarding a helicopter for weekend retreat. The electronic media appears to have lost all sense of proportion.

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The Repercussions of BJP-led Government

Although it is somewhat certain that a BJP-led coalition would not be able to implement its election manifesto totally but at the same time Pakistan feels that the new Indian government would not be able to fully sway its course in an opposite direction, especially on Kashmir.

THE Indian political scenario following the eleventh Lok Sabha election held in early March 1998, has emerged more confusing than before. Though a BJP-led government has been sworn in following weeks of intense political dialogues but the hope for a stable government is still a far cry. First, it will have to demonstrate strength on the floor of parliament through a vote of confidence by March 29, 1998. Second, even with the requisite majority it will have to depend on such precarious coalition that the fragility of that government can hardly be overestimated. Besides maintaining the support of a vast array of conflicting interests it will also have to face the challenges from Sonia led rejuvenated Congress. Obviously there are many speculations and counter-speculations about the likely implementation of its election manifesto. Would it be a moderate and responsible government and concentrate on coalition building at the cost of shelving its extreme Hindu nationalist agenda? Or would it resort to an aggressive foreign policy of which Pakistan may become the major target? Since coalition building is difficult and complicated especially in the context of the nature of India's diverse polity, can the second option be completely ruled out? What then will be the likely repercussions of a weak BJP led coalition government regionally and internationally?

Immediate reactions to a BJP-led coalition government seem to be sighs of relief in all quarters — regional as well as international. During the pre-election rhetorical campaign it's agenda — ranging from unified personal code, building of a Ram Temple on so-called Ram Jannabumi, and its jingoistic nuclear policy — generated a degree of concerns both in Pakistan and in the United States. As such Washington is visibly relieved, despite its earlier declaration that it was ready to work with a government which comes to power, that once assumed BJP's invincible march towards a thumping majority has been thwarted and the party is in no position to pursue its Hindu nationalist agenda. The United States was concerned that if BJP had the mandate it wanted from Indian electorate and was in a position to translate the election manifesto, South Asia would once again get embroiled into both intra and inter-state conflicts.

This is not to state that the region has been completely free from conflictual situations. As a matter of fact even the end of cold war and consequent disappearance of superpower impingement on South Asian international system did not bring the much desired and elusive peace in the area. On the other hand, world's two most dangerous flash points — Kashmir and Afghanistan — continue to plague and hinder the prospects of a lasting regional stability, and raise concerns among international community. But it has been heartening to note that, at least, a process of good neighbourly relations between the two core countries India and Pakistan, which is almost a prerequisite for peace and stability in South Asia, had begun following the end of East-West confrontation.

Washington's apprehension has been a confident BJP government's policy and actions were going to upset that positive trend. The consequences of such development would have been renewed acrimony between India and Pakistan with its fallout with regard to Islamabad's alleged involvement in Kashmir as well as increased complexities of minority question

in India. Under the circumstances the natural corollary would be a dangerous nuclear arms race between Islamabad and New Delhi — an unhappy development which Washington wants very much to contain. Maintaining nuclear stability in South Asia, as we all know, has been a top priority in its South Asia policy. Introduction of nuclear arsenal into Indian military hardware, as promised by BJP, thus, viewed by Washington as a serious complicating factor.

In the context of the above factors prospect for a brittle BJP government is obviously more than welcomed in the United States. The new Indian government would hardly be in any position to pursue its election manifesto, and according to the predictions by American South Asia experts it would most likely try to follow a moderate path with pragmatic approaches. Even on nuclear issue, Washington does not apprehend any break by BJP from its predecessor's policy. Such expectations may be far-fetched as there may be a moderate BJP government correct as far as its domestic policies are concerned but there is great doubt whether its nuclear policy would augur an outcome as desired by the United States.

And as expected BJP is not openly going nuclear or testing a nuclear device but it has indicated in its recently released National Agenda that it would certainly allocate more money for the development of missile technology, and exercise options to induct nuclear weapons. Naturally such a policy would invite matching reactions from Pakistan. And to the dismay of Washington, Dr. Abdul Qader Khan, who is considered to be the architect of Pakistan's nuclear programme, has already reiterated in unequivocal terms that Islamabad would respond India's alleged nuclear black mailing of his country in a befitting manner. A complex situation is likely to arise in the context of Pakistan's reactions to BJP's recently announced nuclear policy which according to its Foreign Ministry spokesman has created a fearsome situation. He goes on to add that "in this situation, if need arises, we shall review our policy to safeguard our sovereignty, territorial integrity and national interests."

Moreover BJP's modified economic reforms programme, like 'reforms with strong Swadeshi thrust' would put a damper on US investment. Such developments in Indo-Pak relations would certainly be detrimental to US interests in the region and a set back for the United States' South Asian policy, which it had been pursuing since the end of cold war.

In South Asia, BJP is going to take a two-pronged approach. It would not deviate from its predecessor's policy of good neighbourly relations as far as the smaller South Asian states like Bangladesh are concerned. This has been already demonstrated through the statements of the newly sworn in Prime Minister Vajpayee. In order to pursue the above mentioned policy, he has even gone to the extent of displacing its election ally in West Bengal — Mamata Banerjee's Trinamul Congress, and reiterated to honour Gujral government's Water Sharing Treaty with Bangladesh. But most observers feel that this policy of good

neighbourly relations will not encompass Pakistan as well. The Prime Minister's silence with regard to his policy towards Pakistan is an indication to that trend.

As a matter of fact Pakistan has been concerned more than any other South Asian countries at the prospects of a BJP government in India. The reasons are quite obvious. Any student of South Asian interstate relations and politics is aware of the bitter and acrimonious Indo-Pakistan relations since 1947 and its repercussions. Fifty years of independence have witnessed three wars between the two countries and diversion of region's meager resources into their respective military build up. However, since 1990 both have been willing, at least in public pronouncements, on the necessity of having cordial bilateral relations between the two.

As a result a slow process of dialogue between India and Pakistan had begun to deal with various issues confronting these countries including Kashmir. Although even a working group on Kashmir was not agreed upon at the Secretary level talks, the hope was through the working of non-contentious issues like trade, cultural cooperation and others eventually a political and contentious issue like Kashmir could be taken up. Though Pakistan feels that free trade between the two depends on the amending agenda does not generate any confidence in Islamabad, which feels that it is not India's real change of heart on BJP's part. And Pakistan finds it extremely difficult to digest BJP rhetoric implying that it might seek a military solution to Kashmir problem.

Matching with such rhetoric there has been equally hawkish thinking by BJP on India's military doctrine. Historically, India and Pakistan have been at odds with each other. Even during cold war period the military hardware acquired by India and Pakistan to ward off alleged communist invasion into the region were freely employed against each other during the periods of hostilities. Pakistan used its military arsenals, procured from the United States, to fight a war with India in 1965. Whereas two of the eight mountain divisions acquired by India with the help of West, following the Sino-Indian war of 1962, were employed in Kashmir along Pakistani border.

The conventional arms race has now culminated into a dangerous nuclear one converting the region into one of the most dangerous flash points in post-cold war era. Both India and Pakistan deny having nuclear weapons and have maintained ambiguity but it is a common knowledge that both are capable of producing nuclear arsenal within a short period. Whereas India's nuclear programme is motivated from its deterrence value as well as New Delhi's quest for global power, Islamabad's sole factor for its nuclear programme has been to deter India. Proving the point that is, Islamabad feels that its core security is threatened by India's military posture. In the context of alleged deployment of Prithvi, a short-range missile, along Pakistani border by New Delhi and its alleged plan to impart nuclear warfare training to its troops have further heightened Islamabad's anxiety. Obviously, fresh emphasis on using India's nuclear option by Prime Minister Vajpayee is not going to help the evolution of good neighbourly relations with Pakistan.

In short, what can be summed up is that prior to any breakthrough in Indo-Pakistan relations the advent of BJP government in New Delhi has made Pakistan worried. Although it is somewhat certain that a BJP-led coalition would not be able to implement its election manifesto totally but at the same time Pakistan feels that the new Indian government would not be able to fully sway its course in an opposite direction, especially on Kashmir. It has already indicated and compromised its domestic agenda especially on the minority issue, for example, by dropping the construction of Ram Temple. No further compromise is possible, particularly its extreme rightist nationalism ideology cannot be completely diluted. It cannot afford to do that as such policy would undermine its credibility vis-a-vis its Hindu support base. Compulsion of modified domestic policy and its regional ideological inclination would most likely trigger an assertive foreign policy vis-a-vis Pakistan. As the Pakistanis feel that have 'a 1000 years to avenge.' Obviously, Islamabad would try to allay its apprehensions not only through diplomatic initiative but also with an effective military preparedness to back it up. The net result would be, much to the detriment of peace and stability, a renewed tension in the region.

The writer is Professor, Department of Government and Politics Jahangirnagar University, Savar, Dhaka

The Horizon This Week

Arshad-uz Zaman

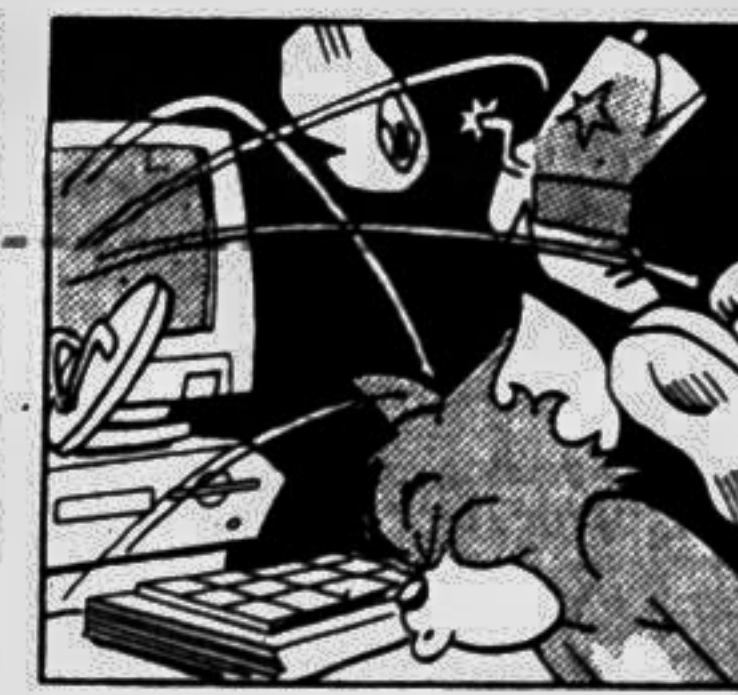
she did not contest the elections. It is evident that Sonia has decided to play politics to the hilt. (In fact she reminds me of her mother-in-law Indira Gandhi, who had very brisk manners including a very quick walk with that tiny frame). Sonia Gandhi has met the President of the Republic and has informed him that her party did not have the number to form the Government thus clearing the path for BJP and its allies. Sonia has taken such a giant leap forward that it is in her interest to consolidate her position.

Sharad Power, the other powerful figure in the Congress party has received the leadership of the party within the

Garfield



Tom and Jerry



by Jim Davis

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Dilara Chowdhury

resolution of Kashmir, and is not very happy with the passing of a resolution in Indian Parliament by Gujral Government to the effect that it does not want to talk about UNICIP resolutions, it finds other Indian parties, besides BJP, less ambitious on this particular issue. Other parties are probably agreeable to the partitioning of the State of Jammu and Kashmir along the LOC, which Islamabad finds difficult to stomach for political reasons, but it feels that it can, at least, be the basis for further dialogues. With BJP it seems that there is no such scope. There is just no telling in which direction its Kashmir policy i.e. Pakistan would flow.

BJP's official stand on Kashmir, which in effect is the symbol of historical and deep-rooted suspicions and mistrust between India and Pakistan, is well known. It wants to get rid of Article 370, which gives Kashmir a special status within Indian Union, and make it as one of the regular states. Prospects of such development with its devastating consequences for Pakistan as well as for Kashmir, and pre-election rhetoric by Govind Acharya, the Secretary-General of Janata Party that India would, if needed, wrest control of 'Azad Kashmir' have sent shock wave throughout Pakistan, and regional tensions are soaring.

To Pakistan's relief, the newly sworn government has given up the idea of amending the constitution. It has restricted such possibility within the purview of 'thoroughly reviewing the constitution.' This is another dilution on BJP's part. It is, however, by compulsion not voluntary. Abolition of the said constitutional provision would require two-third majority which it cannot even dream of getting in foreseeable future. On the contrary, it is a fragile coalition led alone a comfortable majority. So the dilution of its constitution

Metropolitan

Gen Aurora calls on Samad Azad

The Chief of the Indo-Bangla Joint Command during the 1971 Liberation War, Lt Gen (ret) Jagjit Singh Aurora called on Foreign Minister Abdus Samad Azad at State Guest House Padma yesterday, reports UNB.

During an hour-long meeting, they recalled the eventful days of the Liberation War of Bangladesh.

Welcoming the chief of the Eastern Command of India, the Foreign Minister thanked him for his contribution during the Liberation War.

Azad said the people of Bangladesh would never forget the contribution of India and also of General Aurora to liberate the country from the occupation forces of Pakistan.

Recalling his memories of the surrendering ceremony of Pakistani Army, Gen Aurora said it was the greatest event in his life.

He praised Bangladesh's effort towards development and said, in his view, the change of the Dhaka city was tremendous.

General Aurora also recalled his days working with the Bangladesh government in exile in Calcutta.

Akku Chowdhury, a trustee of the MuktiJuddho Jadughar (Liberation War Museum), was present during the meeting.

Programmes on Eid-ul-Azha

The government has chalked out elaborate programmes to observe the holy Eid-ul-Azha with due religious fervour and enthusiasm, reports UNB.

An inter-ministerial meeting in the city on Sunday with Religious Affairs Secretary Mohammad Ismail Hossain in the chair finalised the programmes.

The President and the Prime Minister in separate messages will greet the people on the occasion.

The main Eid congregation will be held 8 am at the National Eidgah at High Court premises. In case of inclement weather, the main congregation will be held at Baitul Mukarram National Mosque at 8 am.

National flag will be hoisted atop all government and private buildings on the Eid day.

Main roads and road islands from the airport to Bangabhaban will be decorated with national flags and banners inscribed with Eid Mubarak both in Bangla and Arabic.

Bangladesh Television and Bangladesh Betar will broadcast special programmes upholding the significance of the day and national dailies will publish special supplement.

Quality food will be served in the hospitals, jails, government orphanages, baby homes, vagrant and destitute welfare centres across the country.

Screening of film and cultural programme will be organised at different parks and important places after the Eid congregations, said an official handout.

Islamic Foundation will hold seminar and discussion meeting on the significance of Eid-ul-Azha and Islamic cultural centres in different districts will also take up various programmes on the occasion.

Eid reunion for the children and friendly football matches will also be held.

Divisional Commissioners, DCs and TNOs will take up programmes in accordance with the national programme while Bangladesh missions abroad will also arrange different programmes on the occasion.

The meeting called upon the people to dump the garbage of sacrificial animals into earth. Dhaka City Corporation authorities will take necessary measures to clean the garbage in the city.

Govt plans to build, renovate Dist Judge Court bldgs

Law Minister Abdul Matin Khasru Sunday said that the government has a plan to construct and renovate District Judge Court buildings throughout the country, reports UNB.

Addressing as chief guest at the annual dinner of the Feni District Lawyers Association on Sunday, he said a comprehensive Judicial and Legal Capacity Building Project has been under taken with the assistance of World Bank at a cost of Tk. 200 crore.

He said the proceedings of the district courts will be computerised in phases in the next two years.

Khasru said lawyers are an integral part of the justice delivery system and urged them to devise a mechanism for quick and easy dispensation of cases.

The Minister said access to justice is a fundamental right of the people and pleaders as the leaders of the society should play their due role in ensuring justice for the poor people.

He regretted that justice now a day has become a privilege of the rich people and it has become imperative for all concerned to bring justice within the affordable reach of the common people.

Earlier, addressing a reception for the newly elected Union Parishad chairman at Feni, the Law Minister said the present government is determined to ensure proper representation of the women in all levels of national life.

Joyal Abedin Hazari MP also spoke at the meetings.

'Social disparity was patronised in last 27 yrs'

Speakers at a function in the city yesterday observed that the independent Bangladesh, during its 27-year journey, could not attain desired progress because social disparity was patronised instead of making thrust for improving the lot of the common people, reports BSS.

"Only a minor section of the society made sky-high gains while the vast majority were deprived of owing to lack of a rational national policy for attaining progress, prosperity and social justice during this period," they added.

They were speaking at a seminar on '27 years of independence: Expectation, gain and future course of action' organised by the Association for Development Agencies in Bangladesh (ADAB) in the city at the auditorium of National Museum in connection with celebration of 26th anniversary of country's independence.

Discussion

A discussion meeting on 112th birth anniversary of late Khan Bahadur Badi Ahmed Chowdhuri a former MLC and MLA will be held at Chittagong Press Club today at 3 pm, says a press release.

M. A. Mannan, Minister for Labour and Manpower will attend the meeting as chief guest.

'Coalition politics inevitable in India'

Eminent economist and executive chairman of the Centre For Policy Dialogue (CPD) Prof Rehman Sobhan yesterday said that coalition politics had become inevitable in India with the Congress failing to remain as an all-India party any more, reports BSS.

"Nehru's Congress has lost its control over the whole of India after its hold started to loosen helping caste politics to emerge in various provinces of India," he said while rounding up a discussion session in the city.

The discussion on 'Indian general elections-1998' was organised by the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS) with Prof Rehman Sobhan as the moderator.

Political Adviser to the Prime Minister Dr SA Malek addressing the seminar on '27 years of independence: Expectation, gain and future course of action' at the National Museum auditorium yesterday. — Star photo

Germs Galore! The Kitchen Sink

THE kitchen sink. We really tend to take this household contrivance for granted. It's the place where we dump all our leftovers.

Along with the dirty plates, all the little tidbits, the grains of rice, the curry, the vegetables and all the scraps left on the plate, invariably go into the sink. These little bits and pieces of waste food go down the drain, down the pipe leading from the kitchen sink.

Even while working in the kitchen, while preparing a meal, so much goes into the kitchen sink. When we wash a chicken, a lot of the little unwanted pieces fall into the sink. The same applies to vegetables, fish, beef, fruit or whatever it is that we're washing in the sink.

And, of course, there are the remnants of the tea and coffee cups, all day being poured into the kitchen sink, it sure does gulp down a lot. But, for a price.

The price is more costly than we may imagine. Being the dumping grounds of all that waste food, the kitchen sink has become the ideal breeding ground for germs. And it does nurture germs galore!

It is obvious, therefore, that any family should pay a great deal of attention to the humble kitchen sink. It needs to be kept clean, really clean. There is no room for perfunctory cleaning here. After all, this is the most likely source of bacterial contamination. If not cleaned well, it could pose as a health hazard to each and every member of a household.

The sink can be cleaned with hot water. This will prevent the pipes from blocking up. But hot water alone is not enough to annihilate the germs which live in the waste pipes.

There are means of keeping the sink really clean. Some families use chemicals like the chloride of lime once a week at night and then rinse it away the following morning. This does keep the sink sparkling, but by no means does it really get rid of the germs.

What would really eliminate germs from the kitchen sink would be a disinfectant rich in sodium hypochlorite. Not only would it kill the germs, it would also destroy dirt, cut through the grease and clean the pipes too.

Its bleach and detergent content would also remove stains caused by teas, coffee and other beverages.

While you may be kitchen proud, even proof of keeping your kitchen sink sparklingly clean, think twice. Is your kitchen sink really free of those deadly germs? Or do they remain as a threat to the health of your family and yourself? Don't forget germs are everywhere. And they love your kitchen sink, perhaps even more than you do!

Probe News Agency.

Germs Galore! Pots, Pans and Pollution

ARE you proud of your spick-and-span kitchen? Are you confident that you're serving your family health, wholesome and germ-free meals everyday? Perhaps you shouldn't be too complacent about the matter because there's danger lurking where you'd least suspect it.

You may be using the commonly available aluminium cooking utensils in your kitchen. You scrub and scour them to sparkling cleanliness before and after you cook. But you may be unaware of the risks that you are undertaking in the very effort to eliminate hazards.

Recent research suggests that aluminium in the body could result in the development of Alzheimer's disease. Alzheimer's disease is the ailment that causes a disabling loss of mental ability. There is no cure for this disease to date.

In Bangladesh, households are not aware of the risks that aluminium pots and pans used for cooking are made of aluminium.

Corrosion of aluminium increases when food is cooked in such utensils over high temperatures for a long time. When acidic food is stored in aluminium vessels, a significant amount of leaching of aluminium into the food occurs. Non-stick pans are not much safer as the coating gradually wears away, exposing the underlying layer of aluminium.

So however clean you may be, the very pan you have clean may be a risk factor. A cast-iron pot or pan is likely to be a safer vessel for cooking. However, you may already be using aluminium pans. In that case, it would be wise to refrain from scouring the pans with abrasive sponges of steel wool. Soft sponges and warm soapy water would be a safer bet.

So next time you walk into the kitchen, take time to think. Have you really safeguarded your family and yourself from all health hazards? We know that unhygienic practices can cause disease, invite germs. But even the detergents and cleaning agents you use in the kitchen deserve attention. After all, deadly germs are everywhere. We must not let them win.

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