

A Victory More Damaging than Defeat

WHEN does a party win a seat but lose an election? When it does what the AL did in Tangail. This election will haunt the Awami League as the Magura (by-election) haunted the BNP. How history repeats itself and how we refuse to learn from it! AL has handed BNP its biggest moral victory, without the latter even trying for it — and we dare say deserving it. By all accounts there were widespread false voting casting serious doubt on the credibility of the process. Many of the voters were prevented from coming to the polling station. Of those who dared to come, many were forcibly prevented from casting their ballot and were openly told, "Go home, your votes have been cast." Journalists on the spot saw many discrepancies in the conduct of the election. They brought these to the notice of the EC and the accompanying magistrates to no avail.

The die appeared cast much earlier. And that is where AL's real tragedy lies. What should have been a marginal electoral phenomenon was made into a central event simply because of AL's arrogance. It had to prove that there was no political future for a party dissenter and, to do so, the party was willing to go to any length — and that it did. Suppose AL allowed Kader Siddique to return to the parliament, what would have happened? The fact of his winning would have been taken most casually — after all Tangail was his base — and his role inside the House would have been a one-man show. With our honourable Speaker in the Chair, that too could have been taken care of. And all of it would have lasted a maximum for 18 months, even less if the PM does what she hinted she might. Instead, what AL has proven is that while in power it cannot be trusted to permit free and fair elections. Just as the conduct of Magura by-election by the BNP government gave credence to all AL's claims about the then ruling party, similarly the conduct of Tangail by-election has done the same for BNP. If the AL leadership has the capacity to honestly weigh what it gained and lost in the Tangail by-elections, it would realise that, for a seat it did not need, it has committed the biggest political blunder of its three-and-a-half years in power, putting at risk the credibility and acceptability of its rule.

EC's credibility is another casualty of AL's behaviour. We have serious questions about the way EC conducted itself in the pre-election days. Its handling of the election day's events adds to our further concern and needs to be scrutinised most seriously.

Historic Sino-US Deal

THE Sino-American trade agreement, improbable although it appeared even at the latest and eventually successful round of talks at the Chinese capital, is now a reality. The deal, which effectively eliminates the biggest hurdle on China's entry to the World Trade Organisation (WTO), no doubt opens up a new vista of bilateral trade between two nations who have traditionally looked at each other with overt suspicion and mistrust. Given the disaster of diplomatic relations the countries have between them, an agreement at any level has always been viewed as an impossible proposition. While the US has been severely critical of China's grim human rights record, the latter has spared no opportunity to decry the former's nosy attitude. Yet, they were successful to strike the 'breakthrough agreement', primarily because "it would lead to increased trade that would benefit both countries". Simply put, economic gains heavily outweigh political considerations.

Intriguingly, although ideologically poles apart, both countries carefully, albeit too conservatively, pruned the path to convergence. Even at the testiest of times, they did not allow excessive zeal cloud the greater goal. A few years back, when the International Property Rights (IPR) debate had pushed the countries to the verge of a trade war, contrary to general expectation, the US government retained China's most favourable nation (MFN) status. While the Americans have sought "more growth potential for the American companies (in China) and creation of more jobs back home", the Chinese, on their part, have pursued the objective of becoming "a full member of the WTO". However, China had been scrupulous and, in fact, the communist leadership appeared divided over WTO membership in recent months. Nevertheless, the prospect of a much-needed thrust to 'long-stalled economic reforms' prevailed over fears of intensified global competition overwhelming the state factories and inefficient farms, thereby raising unemployment.

In the increasingly changing global trade scenario, the Sino-American agreement was inevitable and should be viewed in that perspective by countries inclined to overplay on 'ideology'. They must realise that in the face of fast-paced globalisation, isolation could mean economic death.

Miracles Still Happen

FOR Bangladesh, November 12, 1970 was surely cruel. But for Sadek Majhi of Daulatkhan in Bhola, like many, it was the cruellest. Because that luckless day he was destined to spend the rest of his life with the pain of losing his family — his wife and nine-year-old son, Mostafa. They were washed away. When the storm was over, Sadek Majhi searched for them. He didn't find any of them. But after long twenty-nine years, believing that they will never see each other again, both father and son's sadness turned into an absolute bliss. In almost a supernatural occurrence, the boy — now a thirty-four-year-old man — turned up after living in eastern Myanmar and was reunited with his father. Mostafa's memory now fails him about the catastrophe, but he certainly have brought all the emotions back in his father. Amazingly this, also, in another November.

We share their happiness, though impossible to express in words. The father, an old man now, could not have asked for a better gift from life. At his advanced age he will now have a son to look after him. We are of course conscious of the fact that Mostafa has grown up in a totally different environment with his own links and relationships. We pray that the reunited father and son find tremendous fulfilment in each other and make up for the loss they both so cruelly suffered.

Sonia's 'Agni Pareeksha': It's the Economy, Stupid!

Praful Bidwai writes from New Delhi

The Congress was looking for victory without radically revising policies and restructuring its organisation. It thought Sonia-Priyanka "charisma" would somehow work, even without altering its image as a flophouse of a Right-leaning, communally compromised party, devoted to patronage, sycophancy and corruption.

THOSE who expected Ms Sonia Gandhi to fumble and stutter during her maiden Lok Sabha speech must feel disappointed. She held her own. But equally disappointed must be those who thought that the going would be smooth for her either as Congress president or Leader of the Opposition.

BJP leaders have ensured she would be on the defensive from Day One. Naming Rajiv Gandhi in the *Bofors* chargesheet divides the Opposition as nothing else.

Naming a dead person as accused does not square up with a basic principle of jurisprudence, namely, a criminal charge can only be brought against an individual causative agent. For instance, a government cannot be accused in a criminal case.

This only means Ms Gandhi has a bitter battle ahead. Add to this the fact that she has yet to evolve a personal equation with her Opposition colleagues. And you see the lady is in an untenable position, after winning just 112 seats for the Congress its worst-ever performance.

Rather than soul-searching over the election results, the Congress is indulging in self-delusion. Example: had Mr Sharad Pawar not split, it would have repeated its 1998 performance in Maharashtra. True enough. But the split was only waiting to happen once Mr

Pawar was denied the major position half-promised after Ms Gandhi was made party president in a midnight coup.

Coalition-building was clearly the key to success in the elections. The Congress dropped almost 30 seats while gaining three per cent more votes because it had few allies.

And yet, there were severe limits on how far the Congress could go. Parties like the BSP won't ally with it. Nor is the Congress as flexible as the BJP, which can make and break alliances at the drop of a hat: witness Tamil Nadu, Haryana and Maharashtra where a dirty BJP-NCP coalition very nearly materialised.

The fact is, the Congress is at a historical disadvantage. It is too small to form the core of a governing bloc. But it is too big to be an easy partner. The Congress is a universal threat. The BJP is not big enough to be one. Where regional parties see it as a threat, as in Andhra, they keep out of the NDA government altogether.

So long as it lasts, this situ-

ation disfavours the Congress. The Panchmari go-it-alone line is no remedy.

It is futile to argue that the Congress would have done better, say, in Gujarat or U.P., had it chosen more low caste candidates, or campaigned energetically among the poorest layers. The party has been badly alienated from its social base.

Poor election management is itself a function of the quality of the leadership.

The Congress was looking for victory without radically revising policies and restructuring its organisation. It thought Sonia-Priyanka "charisma" would somehow work, even without altering its image as a flophouse of a Right-leaning, communally compromised party, devoted to patronage, sycophancy and corruption.

Charisma is not an individual's property. It reflects the relationship between him/her and followers/supporters, based on policies and programmes.

The Congress has succeeded

to some extent in overcoming the terrible stigma of having colluded with the *sangh parivar* in razing the Babri mosque. But it must actively counter the BJP's agenda in education and culture, defend minority rights, and expand the secular space. It must mobilise people, work at the grassroots.

The Congress must work even harder on economic policy. The BJP is refashioning itself as a pro-Big Business neo-liberal party. Its agenda is singularly focused on the Insurance Bill: wholesale privatisation of key public enterprises e.g. in petroleum; deeper penetration of predatory foreign capital into the infrastructure; further weakening of the Public Distribution System; and tax bonanzas for the rich.

Even Mr P. Chidambaram has attacked it for "scandalously" underpricing GAIL shares. The BJP's goal is to make itself indispensable to Big Business.

The Congress should not try to compete with the BJP within this neo-liberal space. It should

advocate policies that defend the poor: universalise access to education, healthcare and safe drinking water; and promote regionally balanced, equitable growth.

It must openly acknowledge that what the NDA government practices and what it itself did under Mr Narasimha Rao, has little to do with liberalisation: i.e. relaxing excessive controls, or encouraging entrepreneurship.

Rather, neo-liberalism has meant monstrously distorting macro-economic parameters, disabling the state from doing what it should, favouring the privileged, and selling the family silver.

The Congress can regain political relevance only if it decisively drops the Narasimha Rao-Vajpayee neo-liberal project.

It must vocally oppose the Insurance Bill. The Bill amounts to gambling with our people's hard-earned savings by placing them at the mercy of racketeers. Insurance is one of

the weakest points even in successful Western capitalisms.

Almost a fifth of Western insurance firms fail — i.e. vanish with hundreds of billions of dollars of public money. There is a powerful case for reforming LIC and GIC, and introducing competition, but none for the Insurance Bill.

A great lesson of the 1990s is that raw, untamed, globalised capitalism is a disaster — just as statist socialism was. Even the West is getting tired of neo-liberalism, as the revival of Social Democracy shows.

Globalisation is contradictory and invasive of democratic control over economic processes. Resistance to it is growing as never before. Even the *Wall Street Journal* acknowledges this.

The Indian economy is in deep structural crisis despite moderate growth. Its macro-parameters are skewed. Government finances are appalling, with tax ratios dropping and borrowings going sky-high. Poverty indicators are worsening in three-fourths of our states. Worst of all, food security is threatened. Market-obsessed policies cannot change this.

The Congress has a future only as a Left-of-Centre party. Ms Sonia Gandhi's real *agni pareeksha* lies in reorienting it towards the Centre-Left. That's a real challenge.

the Great had to retreat from advancing further being afraid of the courage and bravery of the people of Bengal. The resilience of the people in the face of natural calamities is proverbial. A time-tested nation with such a glorious tradition can not afford to just weekly observe the power-hungry politicos fighting among themselves and leading the nation astray.

As in the past they should now come forward and dictate to the politicians for mending their ways and save the fledgeling democracy from floundering. The need of the hour is the granite-like unity of the democratic forces represented in the forms of various professional groups, intellectuals, NGOs and social workers who are dispassionate and are not aligned with any particular political party whatsoever. Such a grand alliance of the patriots can alone save the country from the road to catastrophe pushed on by vested interests and comprador bourgeoisie.

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The writer, a SAARC Gold Medalist, is a former Research Scholar of the Institute of South-east Asian Studies, Singapore and the Commonwealth Foundation for Broadcasting Development.

Political Stand-off : Let the People Take the Lead

by Mansoor Mamoon

The need of the hour is the granite-like unity of the democratic forces represented in the forms of various professional groups, intellectuals, NGOs and social workers who are dispassionate and are not aligned with any particular political party whatsoever. Such a grand alliance of the patriots can alone save the country from the road to catastrophe pushed on by vested interests and comprador bourgeoisie.

ally with impunity. Military dictatorship seems to have been replaced by elected autocracy. There has so far been no qualitative change discernible in the pattern and modalities of governance after the mass upsurge of December 1990. How long should such free-wheeling by the politicos continue to the detriment of national interest and how long should the people remain mere spectators?

It is indeed disgraceful to our national prestige and honour that foreigners dole out advice and even intervene in a bid to bring peace to the feuding political parties. The episode of the abortive mediation by Sir Ninian Peffer in 1995 to bring about a reconciliation in a similar situation of political impasse has no doubt tainted the image of a sovereign and independent country. Bangladesh has not only been turned into aid-addict but also prescription-addict of the donor countries and agencies. If the leaders can not resolve their own tangles by themselves how can they be expected to lead the nation and solve the problems confronting the masses?

When leaders fail, what should the people do or what is required of them?

We can look back to our own history and take enough cue from it. For a pretty long time from about the middle of the seventh century to that of the eighth century, Bengal (to which the present day Bangladesh belonged) relapsed

into a state of limbo. There had been no centrally unifying authority. Anarchy reigned supreme. People were groaning in utter despair. In Sanskrit literature this situation has been described as 'Matshannaya' (big fishes gobbling up small fish). As the situation reached the nadir, the veteran leaders and various elite groups, feudal lords, merchants and others sat together in the middle of the eighth century and elected a warrior named Gopal as the king of the landmass. Gopal succeeded in bringing peace to the people. When election was unknown in the rest of the world it was Bengal which opted for elected kingship back in the eighth century i.e. more than eleven hundred years ago. Bengal was, therefore, a trend-setter and it was the conscious segment of the society which took the lead to bring the country out of chaos, morbidity, confusion and anarchy.

Even in recent times there is a plethora of examples when the people, particularly the conscious segment of the society, and not the political leaders, came forward to help the nation steer clear of pitfalls. The historic Language Movement was spearheaded not by political leaders, but by different professional groups with the students in the vanguard. It was the decision of the Awami League and other opposition political parties in the then East Pakistan to persuade the students not to violate Section 144 Cr. PC on February 21,

1952. When the students assembled at the 'Bat-tala' in the old campus of the Dhaka University on that day that the then General Secretary of the Awami League late Shamsul Haque reportedly came to the students' gathering and implored them to be law abiding. But the students did not pay heed to the decision of the political leaders and created history by violating the imposition of the ban on processions. In the process many students embraced martyrdom and thereby created history. Had not the students backed by teachers and other professional groups and cultural activists, ventured on a dare-devil path on the fateful day of February 21, 1952, history probably would have been different. The United Front probably could not have swept the 1954 general elections and the anachronistic Muslim League regime would not have bid an ignominious exit after being rejected by the electorates.

The students again were the first to protest the imposition of Martial Law by Ayub Khan. Various professional groups started portraying gross inequality meted out by the Pakistani ruler to the Bengalees. Political leadership capitalised on the movement of the students and the bold revolutionaries ideas generated by the professional groups, particularly the teachers and the economists. In the infamous Agartala Conspiracy Case except Sheikh Mujibur Rahman all thirty-one accused persons

belonged to professional groups, civil service and armed forces. The Six-point formula was said to be the brainchild of the proponents of the two economy theory and the Bengalee bureaucrats. Ayub Khan was toppled mainly by the aggrieved agitating students with whom professional groups worked in close concert.

After the 1970 unprecedented elections victory the leadership could not vacillate and waver due to the resolute stand taken by the students and professional groups. When the Pakistani army cracked down on the unarmed people in the dead of night of March 25, 1971, the students and various professional groups, particularly the Bengali members of the army, EPR, the police, Ansars etc., fired the first salvos of the War of Liberation. The political leadership either courted arrest or took to heels and ran helter-skelter to their safe sanctuaries.

After Bangladesh came into being the students and the professional groups continued to play bold roles in all successive mass movements and in their turn underwent immense sacrifices. But since the 1950s all the fruits of their sacrifices were reaped by the political leaders who all through played only second fiddle and jumped into action when situation appeared ripe for them. Since time immemorial, Bengalees were regarded as a brave people. Herodotus — known as the Father of History — mentioned that Alexander the Great had to retreat from advancing further being afraid of the courage and bravery of the people of Bengal. The resilience of the people in the face of natural calamities is proverbial. A time-tested nation with such a glorious tradition can not afford to just weekly observe the power-hungry politicos fighting among themselves and leading the nation astray.

OPINION

Of Nobel Laureates

Shafiqur Rahman

pounds that are the basic building blocks of all life form. That's why the fertilizers that are applied for growing all crops have nitrogen in them.

But because of the difficulty of synthesizing nitrogen compounds all fertilizers before this century had to be organic materials, like cow dung that have nitrogen in them. The enriching capacity of bio-mass is limited and they are not always easily available in large quantities. When Haber discovered synthesis of ammonia, a basic nitrogen compound, from the inextinguishable reservoir, simple air, it became possible to produce nitrogen-rich fertilizers industrially. Artificial fertilizers liberated the farmers from constraints of soil and nature. It became possible to enrich soils beyond natural capacities. Urea, TSP all well-known fertilizers have nitrogen in them. It is because of artificial fertilizers and high yield strains of crops that the Green Revolution became possible and humanity managed to confound the dire predictions of Malthus. So, today when 6 billion people live on this planet without any catastrophic famines, few other Nobel prizes have more justification than Haber's.

Interestingly the Haber story ends not so soon. The next chapter is perhaps the finest illustration of the dual nature of scientific bounties. Nitrogen is a key element for explosives and gunpowder too. TNT (Trinitrotoluene), Nitroglycerine, Nitrocellulose etc are few well known examples. Prior to the First World War, all industrial explosives of the world were made from salt-petre or niter that was mined in the deserts of Chile. When the war began, Allied countries mounted a sea blockade against Germany, reasoning that diminishing reserves of explosives would soon halt the marauding German war machine. The German chemical industry had foreseen this scenario and mobilized to tackle this problem. Haber developed a process of making Nitric Acid, a key ingredient for most explosives.

Now come the ugly parts. Haber was not a Nazi collaborator, but he was a fanatic ideologue of the Nazi creed. He hailed Nazism as the liberation of human spirit in this century. The protagonist, an illegitimate offspring of a rich philanderer, had to face sadistically cruel adversity of fate at every turn of his life. But he never gave up and rose time and time again for a renewed struggle, "to strive, to seek and not to yield". It is not just the plot that made this novel a masterpiece, Haber's strong prose throbs with immanent energy in every line of the book. "The Hunger" is simply an experience that few readers will ever forget.

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To the Editor...

Physics can't explain politics

Sir, I would like to thank Mr Mohammad Badruzzaman for his article *Semiotics of Politics* published in DS (12-11-99). Everything is all right except "Newton's Third Law of thermodynamics". The writer probably means to write Newton's third law of motion which states the equal and opposite reactions of all actions. Third law of Thermodynamics is a recent concept (not Newton's) and if we try to connect Bangladeshi-politics with it, we have to think again. Also, physical systems never make people confused. If we try to understand the rules, we can. But there is no clear way to understand the so-called politics imposed in Bangladesh by our so-called popular political leaders.

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