

The PCJSS' approach to election self-defeating

They must call off hartal

PARBATTYA Chattogram Jana Sanghati Samity (PCJSS) has taken an untenable stance on the forthcoming elections. It is patently unfortunate, too. For, the PCJSS has come a long way since its days as the militant political wing of the once-insurrectionist Shanti Bahani not to sound so casual about national election. As co-signatory to the Chittagong Hill Tracts Accord with the National Committee on CHT representing the Bangladesh government side, the PCJSS, led by Santu Larma, emerged as an architect of peace in 1996. Subsequently, he became chairman of the regional council for CHT, a handmaiden of the accord, with the authority vested in him to exercise a high degree of tribal autonomy compatible with the Constitution of Bangladesh.

In the changed perspective, it was only natural for the PCJSS to slough off its tribal outfit image and begin its new life as a political party. A political party it has become alright; yet, whereas it should have evinced a keen interest in the general election with its newly-acquired status to field candidates, it has decided to go the other way.

Far exceeding a laid-back attitude to elections, or even a boycott of the same, which itself would have been shocking to many, the PCJSS has very regrettably decided to resist, even scuttle the polls. For, it has called a hartal in all the three hill districts -- Rangamati, Khagrachhari and Bandarban -- for Sunday and Monday, the day before the polls and the election-day itself.

Now, the purpose being touted behind the hartal call is to press for implementing a six-point charter of demand. The demands are for holding parliamentary elections in the area on the basis of a new voters' list comprising permanent inhabitants of the three hill districts; rehabilitation of Jhumia refugees; amendment to the CHT Land Settlement Act, 2001; winding up of all 'temporary' Army, Ansar, APB and VDP camps; dismantling of cluster villages; and rehabilitation of Bengali settlers outside Chittagong Hill Tracts.

It all began with a one-point demand for revising the voters' list prepared by the Election Commission to prune Bengali settlers from it so that it acquired a predominantly tribal character. The EC rejected the PCJSS proposal for an exclusive list of voters for the area arguing that there ought to be one and indivisible voters' list for the whole country. Unable to carry their point with the EC, the PCJSS resurrected the whole lot of their previous demands tossing them up to the caretaker government whose job it is to see the elections held and not obstructed by any quarter.

This is not to say we are unmindful of their sore feelings over the poor state of implementation of the provisions of the CHT accord they had pinned their hopes on for a better future. We share their sentiments but cannot endorse their approach to polls. It is the now-or-never attitude with their demands that we find difficult to appreciate. There is time for everything; and this clearly is the time for national elections to hitch our wagons to rather than spiking these in an important region by raising all sorts of old demands.

Despite our unflinching support for the rights of the minorities and indigenous people we see no reason why the PCJSS should cut itself off from the mainstream political process of which the elections are the staple.

So, we urge them to call off the strike and refrain from whipping up a law and order situation, so that the people of CHT can exercise their right to franchise freely and fairly.

PHOTORIAL

Readers are invited to send in exclusive pictures, colour or black and white, of editorial value, with all relevant information including date, place and significance of subject matter. Pictures received will not be returned.

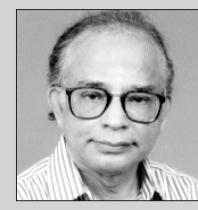


Bolstering voters' morale

Yes voters are generally more apprehensive of violence this time than they were during the earlier general elections. They suffer from a sense of insecurity in a situation marked by clashes between supporters and activists of rival parties and candidates, incidents of killing of members of one political party allegedly by another's, intimidation of supposed supporters of one party by cadres of another party and so on. So the army personnel have been called in to help the members of law and order enforcement agencies whom the people have already lost confidence in. The army is there to bolster the morale of voters. But people are still apprehensive following the two incidents of bomb blast at Bagerhat and Sylhet of late. Who would

STAR: PHOTO

Political economy of election



HASNAT ABDUL HYE

point of time in the life of a government and for whom it is set in motion.

In Bangladesh the expectations from the general public about the economic performance of a government are modest in the sense that they don't expect any spectacular uplift in their living standard in the course of a few years. Except the various organised groups the demands for economic measures to be taken for their benefit are not articulated vigorously en masse. If there is no cataclysmic events like

suffered by those who survived the privation and their memory of those who did not can be ably exploited by opposition parties to damage the credibility of the party in power. Looking back it can be inferred that if election was held after the famine in 1974 the electoral fortune of the Awami League would have suffered a serious setback.

However much a government may be preoccupied with considerations of political economy indifference to the state of the economy by the general public while making

may be taken either in anticipation of demand or simply to gain popularity irrespective of demand. Some recent examples may illustrate the various ways in which political economy has been at work with election as the pivot.

The Awami League government just before completing its tenure prepared and passed the budget for the current fiscal year. By all indications it was a budget to win popularity before the ensuing election. To please all and sundry no new taxes were proposed, various reliefs were

group because of faltering popularity it may offer sweeteners for them also. The opposition parties, on the other hand, not having access to budget concentrates on promises of economic nature. As an example of this strategy of political economy the promise to waive agricultural loan up to Taka five thousand made by the BNP before the 1991 election can be mentioned. Though meant for farmers, the promise touched the sensitive chord of common people. The BNP subsequently used budgetary instrument while in power to

lated. However egregious for the economy as a whole, the decision may not weigh heavily in the voting behaviour of the large majority who were unaffected by the scam.

Political considerations have undoubtedly been responsible for the slow implementation of privatisation under both the BNP and the Awami League governments. The employees of the public-sector enterprises, though a minority compared to the rest of the electorate, constitute an organised and vocal vote bank. As a result none of the parties have thought it politically astute to antagonise this constituency.

The manifestos of the two parties announced recently appear to focus on the welfare of the general public. But there are promises to special interest groups also like making education free for female students, pay commission for government employees, old-age pension, etc. that aim at transferring income. In the absence of corresponding programmes for increase in revenue income these promises either cannot be fulfilled or can only be be financed through borrowing. This brings up the third postulate, which is that populism underpins political economy much more before election and with little regard for feasibility. The essence of political economy before election is populism without any obligation towards feasibility.

To sum up, political economy is very much a part of governance. The use of political power and resultant economic consequences more often benefits the elite who are important to parties for their financial support. The general public remains indifferent to political economy as long as it does not affect them too adversely. A party not sure of its popularity may opt for wild and extravagant promises both to specialised groups and to the general public. On the eve of election political economy often goes awry because politics alone is in command.

Hasnat Abdul Hye is a former secretary, novelist and economist.

IN MY VIEW

POLITICAL economy is very much a part of governance. The use of political power and resultant economic consequences more often benefits the elite who are important to parties for their financial support. The general public remains indifferent to political economy as long as it does not affect them too adversely. A party not sure of its popularity may opt for wild and extravagant promises both to specialised groups and to the general public. On the eve of election political economy often goes awry because politics alone is in command.

flood or drought affecting a large number of people the attitude of the masses towards standard of living is almost fatalistic. With widespread unemployment and endemic poverty continuing as a legacy of the past ordinary people don't normally hold the government responsible for their plight. This is in contrast to the sharp reaction of electorate to the state of the economy, particularly employment situation and inflation, in developed countries. There, prospect of a party in power in an ensuing election depends greatly on the number of people unemployed and the quarterly progress of GDP. On the basis of these two contrasting experiences it can be postulated that the more underdeveloped and un-integrated (dual) an economy is the less important is familiar economic factors (poverty, unemployment) as issues in election. But if the normal and familiar indicators take a turn for the worse, like poverty and unemployment suddenly deteriorating into famine, its repercussion on election can be substantial and negative for the incumbent government. The bitterness of hunger

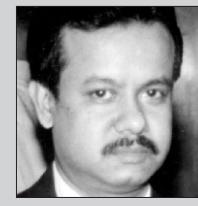
their electoral decision is the rule. The exceptions are to be found in years of extraordinary happenings and how much the debacle is attributed to the failure of the government. In spite of this tolerant attitude of the general public stemming from their acceptance of matters material as providential, the government have always given importance to economic policymaking keeping election in view. This is firstly to forestall a spontaneous backlash against the government or one manipulated and provoked by the opposition parties. Secondly, a government attaches importance to economic measures in order to win popularity among general public or to particular constituencies, depending on the scope and nature of the measures. It is observed that the second consideration gains increasingly more prominence on the eve of election. Political economy is thus at work both on a continuing basis during the whole tenure of a government and with greater urgency before election. Some of these measures are in response to articulated demand while others

given and in the process a whopping deficit was adopted to be financed by public sector borrowing. It was a budget based on unabashed political expediency to the total neglect of reducing the imbalance in revenue income and expenditure, which has already crossed the threshold of prudent GDP-debt ratio. Details of the budget also reveal various sweet deals for the besotted elite groups in anticipation of their contribution to party coffers and other support in the election. This is not an aberration of or temptation succumbed to only by the Awami League. Any other party would have behaved in the same way and with similar motive. It can thus be postulated that on the eve of election the financial management of the government through the instrument of budget becomes an exercise in political economy. This is designed firstly to promote the interest of special interest groups who are likely make direct contribution to the election campaign and secondly to at least maintain status quo for the rest of the populace. But if a party is anxious to win the votes of the latter

woo the rural constituency when it reduced the price of fertiliser in 1995. But this decision did not have political dividends, as the results proved disastrous. The government did not take the price across the border and the international price into account before taking the decision as a result of which there was large-scale smuggling and unprecedented export leaving a deficit supply to meet internal demand. The subsequent victory of the Awami League in the general election held in 1996 may have been significantly helped by the fertiliser factor.

More recently political considerations may have played a role in the decision of the Awami League government to withdraw the lock-in system in the share market following which there was a large outflow of capital. The adverse fallout of this decision may be limited as only a few thousand gullible investors in urban areas suffered loss. The trade-off between patronising a few powerful supporters/financiers and alienating a few thousand votes may have been deliberately calcu-

The bad thing about being good



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSEN

ASK yourself whether you are a good man. If the answer is no you are not safe, because the world is not going to push you around and take you for granted. Goodness is somewhat associated with the nature of a wimp, a feeble word that entails the connotation of something nice to have but not so useful. Good man is a myth, someone who exists in the ideal but not in the real, a Santa Clause who lives in the enduring Christmas of our moral illusions.

Goodness also has the impracticality of unalloyed gold, which cannot be used for jewellery because it is too flaccid to hold any shape or form. Ask yourself what good is goodness if virtue is at the mercy of vice, if the evil must rule the world while the meek obey. A good man goes by the book; his manners constrained either by the impulsive spirit of doing it right or by the compulsive fear of doing it wrong. "Man is neither good nor bad; he is born with instincts and abilities," Balzac said. A man is good, because he

worked for him because that is how he ensured that evil had the upper hand in its conflict with good. As a matter of fact fear is the protocol between good and evil. How does a mugger get away on a crowded street by brandishing his gun or throwing a cocktail bomb? Because he understands the efficacy of that protocol and knows that good will run with its tail between the legs when confronted by evil.

Let us say good is the alter ego of evil, only a weaker one for that

cannot be evil, because he cannot overpower the psychosomatic constraints of his own predestination. In other words, the meek is meek simply because he cannot be a geek, and it is also true the other way around.

Perhaps goodness is a kind of moral failure, ensuing from the golden rule of Immanuel Kant: *Do unto others, as you would have others do unto you.* The good man is good to others because he wants others to be good to him. And he

Maybe that is how this world has evolved since the Big Bang, since the primordial darkness was shattered by the flicker of the first light. Billions of human beings must have perished since then in wars, epidemics and natural disasters, yet the experiments of improving human lots still goes on within the same old clash between light and darkness.

What is that clash about? Why is that endless bickering between good and evil? Why is it important for

down so soon, and went back like ambitious divers into that sea of woes.

But either way, even if those firefighters were not good people in life, they became so with one stroke of death. We are not going to look back at their vices any more, because one heroic act has cleaned that slate. Now, how do we distinguish between good and evil? Do we say that each of them is a continuous process, or depends on one final act? Do we have to be either

CROSS TALK

There are people who cannot hurt an insect and there are those who kill everyday. There are those who are chaste and pure and there are those who are putrid and profane. There are those who never steal, and there are those who can hardly do a straight deal. Good and evil divide the realm of possibility between them, sharing nothing but different shades of the same moral strains.

does not always do it because it is sacred, but because it is safe. Think about a neighbourhood where nobody wants to testify against a criminal in the fear of reprisal. I asked a schoolteacher how he reconciled the guilt of suppressing facts that hindered the justice for his murdered friend. He said he did not have the courage to speak up, but hated the criminal in his heart for which God would understand and forgive him.

Thus good may be the defiance of bad, but at times it is also evil's best defence. Chenghis Khan slaughtered innocent people to send fear into the hearts of the vanquished. It

matter. It takes sacrifice of many lives before a tyrant is removed. On the campus of one university, a few miscreants raped more than hundred girls and then bragged about it. Only a few desperate men attacked the USA in New York and Washington, and took down several thousand lives, not to speak of how they shocked the entire world. If what the USA claims is true then the trail of that horror narrows down even further from few men to one, who is said to be hiding in Afghanistan.

Maybe good is determined by the law of large numbers, when the chance of success increases as the number of experiment increases.

men to be honest, sincere, truthful and kind? And are those who possess these virtues necessarily good? Hundreds of firefighters who entered the World Trade Centre never got out. Were they good people? Can we say that they never cheated on a friend, fought in a bar or lusted for their neighbours' wives?

We cannot, but those people crowned their lives with one last glory that has earned them the respect of all. They had the choice to stand back and watch in the face of imminent collapse of those buildings, instead of going back to save more lives. Or, maybe they didn't think the buildings would crash

good or evil all the time, or wait for an opportune moment to make that mark?

Ask yourself if you have already made that mark. If the answer is yes in favour of evil, you have nothing to fear. The world will come to terms with you, which Milton rejoices in *Paradise Lost*, "So farewell hope, and with hope farewell fear, farewell remorse! All good to me is lost; evil, be thou my good."

Evil conquers fear while good cowers, and that is the reality of righteous souls. They obey what is violated by evil, their sanctity embarrassed by evil's sacrifice. There are people who cannot hurt an insect

and there are those who kill everyday. There are those who are chaste and pure and there are those who are putrid and profane. There are those who never steal, and there are those who can hardly do a straight deal. Good and evil divide the realm of possibility between them, sharing nothing but different shades of the same moral strains.

My friend believes that good and evil showcase each other, the light of one projecting the darkness of another. Someone is morally right, because someone else is morally wrong. But is the right necessarily right and is the wrong necessarily wrong? He compared it to a show on stage, when performances are interspersed with moments of darkness. That is when performers change and prepare for their next renditions. Then he said that every human being accosts inner darkness when he shuts his eyes to go to sleep. Lights may be good for the actions of life, but one can rest better when it is dark.

Never mind if you are evil because it only shows that you have escaped the good. But it does not mean that the good has ever escaped you. Turn that game on its head, and it is equally true for those who are good. A hardened criminal often gives up on crime, while an innocent man commits atrocious acts. Minds often recede into the twilight of hypocrisy, where good and evil masquerade each other. Evil does it with ease, and that is why it is so powerful. Good refuses to wear a mask and suffers.

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America's new war: Can they really win it?

MAHFUZ ANAM

ASTRANGE feeling persisted among the world citizens in the aftermath of the tragedy that New York City had to swallow on a sunny, Fall day --- a feeling of horror and disbelief. No one, except for those who were responsible for this, ever had the wildest dream of such a gruesome occurrence. It took the world some time before it could really grasp the horror of the event, but once the ever shining World Trade Center collapsed burying thousands beneath the towers, even a child realized that people died: Americans and non-Americans.

America did not sleep that night, neither did the rest of the world; by next morning not only America was searching for the missing but also was eagerly searching for an answer to the simplest question: Who did it, and why? By the time, I'm writing this, America is preparing for its first war in the new millennium: a war that is unlike any other war. And, to win this war, America needs to do more than winning the fights in the battle fields ahead of them. This can be a long, painful, and most difficult war for America to win. But, it has no options: it must win this war; otherwise America as well as its allies' security will be an illusion for ever.

The nature of this war is totally different from that of all the conventional wars that America has fought since the day they proclaimed

independence. This is the first time they are going to fight against an enemy who is invisible. Although the clues and hints that FBI and other domestic and international agencies have gathered point towards Osama Bin Laden, a strong case against him is yet to be made. Questions are being raised whether it was indeed possible for Osama Bin Laden to do it by him alone? These questions have justifications. Not only this daring act needed money, time, and effort, it also required fine strategic planning and networking inside the U.S. for a long time. This could not be done within days or weeks. In order to hijack a number of planes of different airlines, the terrorists needed to infiltrate the security at a major level, they needed trained pilots, needed great timing. Can Osama Bin Laden be that powerful?

If we take it for an argument that Osama Bin Laden was indeed involved into this as well as others, and America just goes after Osama, and bring him into justice, the enemy will not be finished. It will wait patiently for another opportunity to inject another vicious attack like this one; it might be the case that America will have to witness bigger horror next time. Thus before taking any military actions against anyone, America needs to find who is/are the real enemy. Its actions should be based on concrete evidence, not on mere assumptions.

And, then think about another scenario. What will happen, if after

getting Osama, all of a sudden America finds out that it was not really Osama, and someone else that got the wrong person? What will America do then? Will it be able to convince the World that now it will go after new enemy? Where will America's credibility stand in an event like this? And, frankly, that is indeed a likely scenario. American intelligence has been blatantly wrong before. After the two embassies were bombed, America targeted a pharmaceutical factory in Sudan, and later admitted the mistake.

America needs to convince the world that this is not a crusade against a particular race, religion or a man. This is a war against terrorism. America needs to tell the world that no one is safe as long as it doesn't find them, and ensures that the threats have been eliminated. This can be tricky, and very often difficult given the fact that most people are sensitive regarding their religion, and pro-Jewish policies that have been harboured by America for ages have done a lot of damages among the Muslim community of the world regarding America's reputation of fairness and justice to all races and religions. Therefore, even before winning the war in the battlefields, America needs to win the psychological war. Politically, America has already won this war for ever before it has really been fought.

America needs to persuade the Muslim world that no matter how confusing and contradictory America's foreign policies are, this mass killing could not be justified. It killed people from every race, religion and culture that it shook the established belief in peoples' fundamental rights: right to live without fear, right to express different opinions, right to go to work and come back home to the loved ones --- rights that have to be preserved at any cost. America further needs to convince the Muslim world that this is war between America plus Islam against terrorism. If Muslims get convinced that this is a war between America against Muslims plus terrorism, America has already lost this war for ever before it has really been fought.

A considerable opinion is that America might fall into a trap like Vietnam, or that of Russia's fate in Afghanistan. That is a mistake. The war in Vietnam or Afghanistan was different. America did not have a solid mission in Vietnam, neither did Russia in Afghanistan. Their missions were to protect weak, corrupt,

and unpopular foreign governments. An American soldier never had any motivation to fight in Vietnam.