

## D-day for democracy

*The political parties must respect people's verdict in full*

**T**ODAY is democracy's finest day as people go to the polls to elect their representatives. A collective activity involving all sections of civil and political society, it's imperative that the polls are conducted in a free and fair manner. It's equally imperative that the voting process is transparent, efficient and conducted in a way that inspires confidence in the mind of political parties to accept the people's verdict without arguments.

The road to elections has been paved with huge tasks ranging from voters education programmes, deployment of the largest law enforcement contingent ever to maintain law and order and the presence of thousands of polls observers, all to encourage and ensure transparent and fair elections. This means a national mobilization of massive proportions. We have literally descended into a D-day for democracy. Bangladesh will be tested more robustly than ever before.

Both turnout and counting of votes will be critical. A low turnout will cast a pall on the representational nature of the elections but a counting process that fails to reach the minimum levels of credibility will simply lead to foreclosure of the verdict. The activities of a few hours may well decide the political future for many years.

The onus of the burden to make sure that we have a poll everyone accepts ownership of is with the Election Commission. They must do whatever is necessary, whether it's deployment of the para-military or the police or beefing up staff at the polling centres or zone or anything else but the EC must deliver. Admissions of failure won't do as enough time and space was given by a highly supportive caretaker government to do their part.

The final responsibility will be with the political parties. There is no substitute for commitment to democracy and this election is really a crunch time to test that. On their conduct may well depend the future of democracy in Bangladesh and their own future as well. Irresponsible acts or positions are unlikely to be forgiven by the people and this may well be a stern lesson in public opinion as the ultimate political pressure.

Voters presence has to be high, voting and counting process above board and the verdict clear and accepted by all because the verdict ultimately belongs to the nation. Everyone, whether voters, politicians or the administration must work as one to make democracy happen. This is the ultimate vote for democracy, which everyone must cast.

## Shaky ME ceasefire

*Israel's motivation needs changing*

**T**HE September 11 terror attacks in New York and Washington, and subsequent diplomatic manoeuvres by the United States towards cobbling a coalition for retaliatory strikes on the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and other terrorist havens in the region have raked up the Middle East issue. The violence and bloodletting in the Palestinian territory, especially on the West Bank and Gaza Strip have only lent poignancy to it. Over the last 24 hours or so, two or more people have died, as the Palestinian intifada and Israeli incursions show no signs of any let-up. Last Wednesday's meeting between Chairman Yasser Arafat and Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres brought about promises from both sides to work towards lasting peace all right; on the ground, however, the ceasefire they agreed on is being repeatedly breached.

The government of hawkish Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon is not obviously helping the situation. Although, in its full weekly meeting, the cabinet decided early yesterday to ease the sealing off of the Palestinian territories with the autonomous Palestinian town of Jericho in the West Bank, it made its military intentions clear at the same time. The cabinet said that it would apply the ceasefire for at least 48 hours and that if 'breaches continued' after that period the army would be given a free rein to respond. Such bellicosity could hardly be called conducive to any quest for lasting peace in a trouble-torn region.

Tel Aviv must understand that their current stance of belligerence cannot decimate the intifada. On the other hand, the Palestinians couldn't hope to get a separate homeland by pelting stones. Whatever the differences between the Israelis and the Palestinians these will have to be sorted out by them across the negotiating table, albeit with the US basically wielding its influence on Tel Aviv. Otherwise, the sordid tale of death and destruction would only be prolonged while peace and stability in the region remained far beyond reach.

## Election 2001: Rise of the electorate

**Is it premature to celebrate the democratic rite of passage? Will the victor be magnanimous and reverse the culture of "winner takes all" and deny any political space to the loser? Will the loser cry wolf and throw the democratic process into disarray?**

**HOSSAIN ZILLUR RAHMAN**

**A**ND so the electoral cycle has come to pass. Seemingly against all the odds, all the dire predictions that the pundits had been busy making and all the conspiracy scenarios sprouting unstoppably in the political grape-vines. Not that the fears had been groundless or the tensions fictitious. Far from it. But, as we await the electoral verdict, it is perhaps time to rejoice and wonder at a quiet turning of the tables. From being a footnote in the political process, the simple voter today suddenly looms large on the political horizon, his or her every vote jealously courted, his and hers infectious optimism a potent antidote to the conspiracy theorists and the terror-mongers. While the political and administrative actors have hogged the headlines, it is this quiet rise of the electorate which will perhaps turn out to be the most important story of election 2001.

The optimism of the electorate defies conventional political analysis. It is easy for the pundits to dismiss it as ignorant foolishness. Certainly, people's optimism is not a reflection of their superior assessment of the situation. They know, perhaps better than the pundits, of the godfathers who lurk in the shadows, and of the venality of the politicians who will break promises no sooner than they have made it. No, the optimism of the people bespeaks of an altogether different political message. By their exuberant presence on every inch of the political space, by transforming the election process into a gigantic social utopia, the electorate's optimism reflects most clearly their determined desire that the democratic transition shall come to pass. And as we stand on the penultimate moment of the electoral process, it is clear that this determination has come close to bearing fruit.

The rise of the electorate has

also been mirrored in the humbling of imperious attitudes. Our two major political leaders, Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia, to their great credit, have brought politics out of the backrooms into the full view of the voting public. Criss-crossing the country without a thought to their comfort and rest, they have injected new meanings into the art of electioneering. The larger political message which has given heart to the people of Bangladesh is that electoral victory has to be striven for with one's best efforts. The era of palace politics may truly be over. Most of the candidates have followed the lead of their leaders. Door-to-door canvassing will perhaps be one of

the more enduring political images of Election 2001.

Election 2001 will also be marked by a swing towards the mainstream structures i.e. Election Commission, administration and the armed forces. In earlier elections, the emphasis was perhaps more on the safeguards, i.e. observers, monitors etc. Their role this time is clearly secondary though still important. Some of the moral shine has also come off these safeguards what with the scramble for money and a craze for numbers.

Hossain Zillur Rahman, formerly a senior researcher at BIDS, is currently the Executive Chairman of Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC).



The enthusiast voters: Too much of promises by the politicians.

## Bangladesh polls in the post 11th September world

**The story does not end if the polls today are held peacefully. There will be losers. Whether democracy will flower or not will depend on how the winner and the loser, particularly the latter, behaves. If someone cries "foul" only because of defeat, the prospect of building a strong democracy will be dimmed.**

**DR MIZANUR RAHMAN SHELLEY**

**B**ANGLADESH goes to polls today as the dark shadows of an apparently imminent conflict spreads over the World. The unprecedented and tragic happenings in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania, USA on the 11th September have entirely transformed the tone and temper of our times. It is a new and changed world and the change is evidently for the worse. A USA which feels like someone "Who has been mugged in broad daylight in a safe street" is rallying round and gathering strength to fight a long and protracted struggle against deadly terrorism. Even though it is the sole superpower in the present-day World, it is not going to fight this total

war all by itself. It is organising and mobilising a worldwide coalition to take on the hitherto elusive terrorists who seem to lurk in every nook and corner of our restless world. The fight is not going to be only on the military front. Its dimension will be many and varied: psychological, political, economic and social. The psycho-political and economic impacts of these coming global struggle will tend to have more adverse effects on such politically uncertain and economically weak countries as Bangladesh. Though the leaders of our major political forces have not, so far, significantly stressed the implications for us of the disastrous events in the USA, the opinion leaders and conscious citizens may not be oblivious to all this. What impact, if any, this would have on voters of Bangladesh is difficult to predict. What the nation would certainly desire is a government led by people competent to respond to the gathering crises. It is all the more important now, than ever before, for Bangladesh to have peaceful, orderly and acceptable elections. This will strengthen our fledgling democracy, which many observers categorise as "uncertain" or "illiberal democracy". Our nationalism is still to be fully institutionalised. The major political parties of the country do not often practise democracy within their own folds. Personal leadership in party and government is still dominant, weakening the foundations of the democratic order. Governance is inadequate not only in nation building, but also in state-building, economy-building, participation and distribution. The institutions of the state inherited from the colonial days have been weakened and are found to be out of tune with the tenor of the times. Our economy is still poor and backward, although there have been some encouraging progress during the decades after liberation. Participation in the sense of a fully conscious and empowered citizenry, taking part in political and economic life is still far from adequate. The ends of socially just

economic benefits and developments are yet a distant goal.

Democracy has been resurrected in Bangladesh a decade ago. Two largely acceptable and free elections have been held and the third is to take place today. Democracy, in our country still remains unable to achieve the purpose of democratic freedom: orderly, peaceful, socially-just and prosperous life enabling the citizens to realise their best selves.

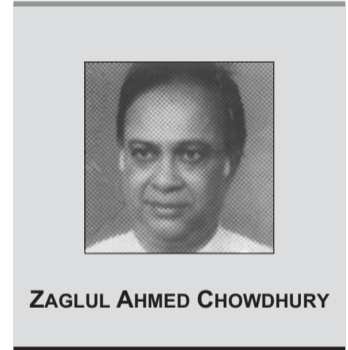
The general election to the national legislature which will decide the shape and substance of the coming government is immensely important to our future. Everything depends on whether this can be held in a peaceful and orderly manner. Ensuring that is the responsibility not only of government of the day, the Election Commission and the security forces but also of the leaders and workers of the political parties, especially the major ones, and the voters themselves. One should not forget that the spectre of violence haunts the nation. Illegal arms are all around. There is dangerous political intolerance in various nooks and corners. It will need very determined, cooperative efforts on the part of all concerned to ensure that violence does not ruin the prospects of a peaceful democratic transition.

The story does not end if the polls today are held peacefully. There will be losers. Whether democracy will flower or not will depend on how the winner and the loser, particularly the latter, behaves. If someone cries "foul" only because of defeat, the prospect of building a strong democracy will be dimmed.

Post-polls violence, if it is widespread and uncontrollable will spell disaster for us. Then indeed, the present crisis of the World will also inevitably become inter-twined with the gravest crisis of the state for Bangladesh.

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## Bangladesh elections and relevance to outside world



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

**H**E general elections in Bangladesh are being held today. Rather unexpectedly, the attention and interest the occasion was receiving before were largely subdued because of the sudden eruption of the international crisis stemming from the massive act of terrorism in the United States and subsequent shift of the tensions Bangladesh's neighbourhood. Part of south Asia and its adjoining Afghanistan have now become the cynosure of all eyes since the region has emerged as the latest world flashpoint. The determination of the United States to take on Afghanistan's Taliban regime because of its reluctance to hand over dissident Saudi billionaire Osama Bin Laden, whom Washington views as the prime suspect in the attack on New York's towering World Trade Centre and Washington's sensitive Pentagon, has turned this area, near to our country, focal point of all attention. Needless to say, India and Pakistan, two main countries in south Asia, are getting embroiled in the crisis in the sense that the United States has asked their all out assistance in the event of an attack against Afghanistan. The issue is raising a

lot of dust in both the countries as their governments' acceptance of the American request has triggered off certain criticisms in India and Pakistan, and the debate is more intense in the latter where religious groups are opposing Islamabad's position on the issue.

But what is more interesting is that Bangladesh is not excluded from this scenario. Washington has also asked Dhaka to provide certain facilities and the caretaker government has acceded to the request

suspects and more importantly, innocent people in big number may perish in the retaliation bid. In any case, this international crisis got mixed up with Bangladesh election scene in the sense that the two issues are hogging maximum space in newspapers and time in electronic media.

But till the attacks in the US domestic political scene capped by the polls occupied all attention in the country. Most space in the newspapers including front page used to be

Asian and other democratic nations as well since this country has a sizeable population and its march towards strengthening democratic institutions is being closely watched. There is no denying that the state of democracy in this country is still at nascent stage since history of representative government is not as old as the country itself. Much of the time was consumed by one-party, military and quasi-military rule till democratic values were re-established in

Monarch is of late softening his grip on the rule to facilitate a semblance of people's wishes while tiny Indian Ocean island of Maldives has a system which Male says democratic but many others feel not as fully so. The situation is wellknown in the neighbouring Myanmar where the military is the factor in ruling the nation. However, this election in Bangladesh is being closely viewed by different countries since a credible balloting here will send the positive signal that third world

healthy democratic atmosphere and hence this country needs to come out from this undesirable situation. Political behaviour here is much more wary and most often than not physically violent. Clashes among the main contenders are galore ahead of the balloting and this needs to be curbed. President Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed and caretaker government's chief adviser Justice Latifur Rahman are right when they say that only main political parties can change it and they ought to be sincere. The trend of mud-slinging mostly crosses minimum level of decency and unfortunately prominent figures on both sides are not lagging behind in this regard. Campaign and verbal attacks against the opponents at this stage are usual but these should not be devoid of norms and finesse.

The attention centering the US-Afghanistan situation notwithstanding, Bangladesh polls will attract greater interest since people have big stakes in the polls. Admittedly there has been a marked slackening of interest among international community and media about our polls because of the new world tension of alarming proportion. Mediemen from abroad for covering the elections here are less in number than thought of before since the focus is now on Afghanistan. Still, Bangladesh voting is a matter of discussion in South Asia and also elsewhere. The country should live upto the expectations by staging a credible election which will help invigorate democracy where it is still struggling to create a sound edifice.

Jaglul Ahmed Chowdhury is Senior Special Correspondent of BSS.

## MATTERS AROUND US

**Admittedly, there has been a marked slackening of interest among international community and media about our polls because of the new world tension of alarming proportion. Mediemen from abroad for covering the elections here are less in number than thought of before since the focus is now on Afghanistan. Still, Bangladesh voting is a matter of discussion in South Asia and also elsewhere. The country should live upto the expectations by staging a credible elections which will help invigorate democracy where it is still struggling to create a sound edifice.**

with a view to helping the US root out terrorism. Major political parties have broadly supported the position of the government. However, the decision is not fully without opposition and criticism since some quarters also feel that extension of facilities by Bangladesh like use of air space and ports to the Americans is not logical and right although there is no second view that the terrorism in the US causing death of several thousand people is highly shocking and condemnable and any action against the culprits are welcome. The reason for opposing the extension of facilities by Dhaka is probably the feeling that massive actions are being contemplated without sufficient proof against the

covered by election news and so was the case with the audio-visual media. Discussions and debates among the people revolved around the polls, prospects of the major players of the political spectrum and on top of it, which party or parties may come to power. But the developing scenario in the wake of the terrorism and Washington's vow to avenge has often relegated election scene to secondary place. Possibly, none could foresee such a situation as the national elections are a great event for the people by all counts. Then again, turning a Nelson's eye to the global tensions of serious proportion is out of question. Earlier, Bangladesh elections caught the imaginations of South

governance through 1991 general elections. The concept of polls taking place under an interim non-party government is admirable but still remains experimental. The largest country in the region, India is also the largest democratic nation in the world while elected government's system has suffered a big setback in Pakistan where military is in the helm toppling representative administration. Sri Lanka and Nepal have democracies, which, however, is still to gain firm roots. It is only a decade that the Himalayan kingdom is experiencing democracy while the island state of Sri Lanka is going through the system for a rather long time but perturbed by civil war and other domestic problems. Bhutan's

democracies are striving to consolidate representative system. The effort by developing and least developed countries to invigorate democracy will once again be underlined if a fair and free voting takes place in this country. As such, the coming elections in Bangladesh are a matter of interest for many in the context of flourishing of democracy. Different countries and institutions are taking interest because a good poll in Bangladesh will reinforce the belief that democracy is being consolidated in the third world nations.

True, the tendency of intolerance and lack of respect among the major political parties and their leaders seldom augur well for creating a

## TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

### Weekly holiday

I am a GOB service man. I work 9 to 8. Sometimes I work on Saturdays without any overtime. I have to go to office during Hartals amid insecurity. My salary is not enough to run my family. So I have to work on weekly holidays for extra income. My life becomes miserable when my boss feels good to work on Saturdays, while on weekly working hours he is not in office, spending his time in personal pursuits. On Saturdays he calls me in his office and begins to talk about his personal life and politics.

Madame Khaleda Zia in her election campaign said that she would cut the weekly holidays into one day. I hope this decision would make my boss as well as others like him happy. I am sure Bangladesh will not develop overnight with six working days a week. While millions of workers like me will suffer in many

ways. Our bosses will not increase salary nor they will provide any overtime.

I would suggest Madame Khaleda Zia, when she comes to power, to take initiative to increase the work-desire among workers of Bangladesh not workdays.

**Tarek**  
Indira Road, Dhaka

### US-Bangladesh axis?

The USA is situated in one corner of the globe, Afghanistan in another corner, and Bangladesh is far away. Why has USA bracketed Bangladesh into US-Afghanistan-Osama bin Laden war? Bangladesh has nothing to do with Osama bin Laden and Afghanistan. Under what international law, norms and right does USA want to use Bangladesh air space and sea ports in the event of its attack Afghanistan? Is it because Bangladesh is a poor country and heavily indebted with colossal

amount of foreign loans? Would US write off all the foreign loans and pour in further dollars to make our country a Sonar Bangla?

No, Bangladesh would suffer more and more in future to suit the interest of others.

In 1991 when the USA built up an international alliance against Iraq the American leaders promised that after the liberation of Kuwait the Palestinians would have their own independent and sovereign homeland. But what happened afterwards? Everything went adverse. The US increased military and economic aid to Israel which intensified its atrocities on the Palestinians.

If the US has ample proof that Osama bin Laden is guilty of terrorist attacks in New York and Washington only then we are prepared to extend our moral and diplomatic support to US to arrest and punish Osama bin Laden but never to

attack Afghanistan and exterminate millions of innocent men, women and children.

**O. H. Kabir**  
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### We condemn and we are concerned

The recent terrorist attacks on American landmark sites was a barbaric act and we condemn it but perhaps no words of condemnation is enough for such an evil act. We share the grief of the American people and pray for the unfortunate ones irrespective of their religion. Many countries have blamed the US foreign policy for triggering terrorism. But in my view no reason is good enough to justify such a dastardly attack. Whoever carried out the attack should be brought to book and cannot go unpunished. This is an act against humanity and caused the loss of a colossal number of

civilian lives.

As with previous terrorist attacks on the US, the suspicion is again on Muslim militant organizations. The Saudi dissident Osama bin Laden has been alleged of masterminding the attacks. Whoever is responsible for the attack, this act has clearly dented the image of Islam in the West. Arabs and Muslims all over the US are now under threat. They are the scapegoats and face an uncertain future. It is also feared that US immigration law will be tightened which may go against many immigrants from developing countries including a large number from Bangladesh. This will dampen our economy by reducing the amount of foreign exchange. We hope that good sense will prevail and all Muslims will not be made to pay for the acts of a handful of extremists if it is proven to be so.

**MHF**  
University of Dhaka

## 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.

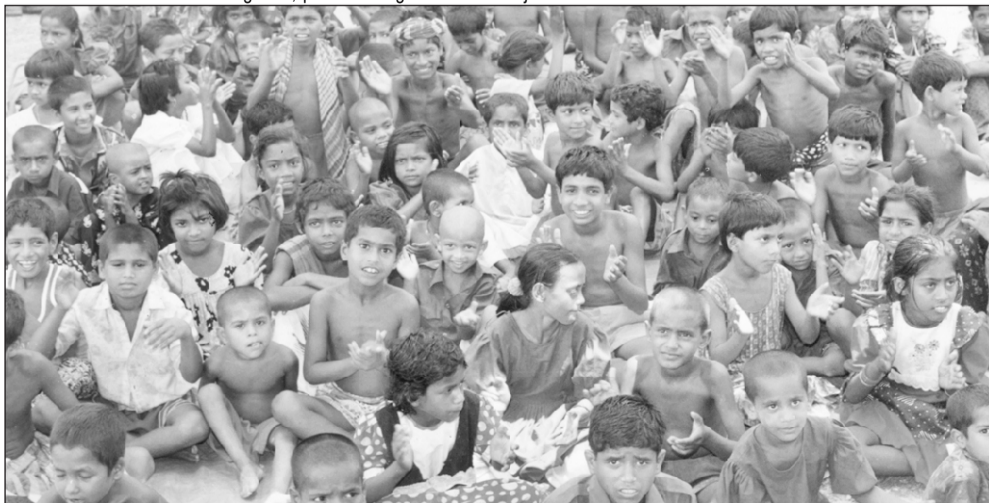


PHOTO: STAR

## Home is a place where...

Out on the streets on any day or at any public gathering, they are there, scantily clad and malnourished with blissful smiles nonetheless. Home and where come to their minds always in the interrogative and most of them have no definite answer to the question - slums, in the open, wherever. The World Habitat Day curiously coincides with our national election today, as if to remind the government of tomorrow that these children do not have any place they can call home.