

Voters have spoken, political parties must obey

Electorate defies conventional thinking and emerges as a major force

THE electoral verdict is in, and the BNP-led four-party alliance has achieved a momentous victory. In an unprecedented swing, the voters in Bangladesh overwhelmingly voted for the BNP and its allies, rejecting the AL policies and the party. After having ruled the country for five years, the Awami League has been handed a rejection slip by the voters. The size of the victory is such that it is certain that this generates new configurations in the politics of Bangladesh.

The election according to available evidence appears to have been a well held one. Although there was considerable violence in the campaign period before the polls, indicators point to an unexpectedly peaceful election. Around 135 centres have been suspended due to various reasons but that is a small number compared to the total number of almost 30,000 centres. There have been few reports of rigging, false voting and similar acts but the overall scene is one of a properly held election. In contrast to the above, the media, election observers and the Election Commission have given a strong and unambiguous approval of the election.

The scale of the landslide of course cannot be explained by any one factor. The arithmetic of politics definitely did play a part. The potential for a BNP-Jamaat alliance emerging as a winner in some seats was always on the board. This time they got together and did well. Combinations always do better and this election was no different and that should explain a lot about the large-scale victory of the alliance. Had the Awami League formed a similar alliance with other parties, the result in some marginal seats could have been different.

The alliance arithmetic notwithstanding, if there is any single issue on which the AL's "boat" has sunk, it is on that of terrorism. Terrorism did exist during the tenure of the previous BNP government, but it acquired an all-encompassing dimension that created the rejectionist wave which swept away the former ruling party.

But whatever be the causes, it also is a stern reminder that on a given day if everything is right and the voters get a chance to cast their ballot, they do constitute the most potent political force. They are no longer passive donors of their choice. With every vote they are getting stronger and this means that politics is less about streets and agitation and more about governance and performance.

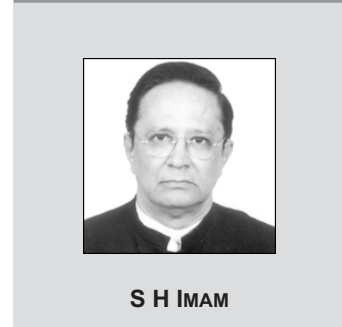
Which is why the parties that are perpetually in contest for the chance to govern must become more conscious about what they do when in government. Activities suddenly seem to matter more than traditional loyalties, vote banks and slogans when election time comes. Both the Awami League and the BNP have been in power before and they have to remember that their first innings as rulers have not exactly been unqualified success. In fact, both the voters rejected the parties after a single term and the opposition was voted in. A better response to voters needs and demands are needed if a party wants to survive politically. The BNP too has to do better this time if it wants another innings and so does the Awami League. One really wishes that the message of the supremacy of the constitutional process has been driven home to both the parties.

Regrettably, Awami League chief Sheikh Hasina rejected the election results. The arguments and evidences presented by her do not at all sound convincing. We would hope that after further examination our oldest and most famous political party will play the responsible role expected of it.

Everyone hopes that this will be an occasion to rejoice on account of the voter and not a time to consider agitational schemes to push for another movement. Simply put, Bangladesh cannot survive too many agitations and the voters have also indicated that they prefer to vote and exercise their power.

Every party will ultimately have to return to the voter for confirmation and affirmation and the voter as it seems now will always have the last word. They will have to approve everything because it's their country, their election, and their vote.

A vote for good governance



S H IMAM

IT's a verdict for change. So was it in 1996 elections, not to mention the sea-change that had occurred from autocracy to democracy in 1991. But what marks the craving for change this time around is the punishing indictment on the erstwhile ruling party, the Awami League, the like of which perhaps did not cross its mind even in the worst of nightmares. The disenchantment against Awami League has proven so assertive that it has yielded by far the most clear-cut mandate ever to be received by any

newly-chosen incumbent to rule the country.

The election results have gone down as something of a 'stunner', which it basically is not, if one were to plumb into the vote-bank arithmetic. One could say with a degree of certitude that there has been a pro-right swing. The right-of-centre vote bank has been intrinsically larger than the AL phalanx, a point that was driven home by 1991 and 1996 elections. The four-party alliance pooled all of that without any undercutting of votes which had happened in the 1996 election

JUST ANOTHER VIEW

The moral of the electoral verdict cuts the BNP way also in the sense that the party as the victor carries a greater responsibility than might meet its eye in a euphoric state it could find itself in over the landslide win. Voters in Bangladesh seem averse to giving two consecutive terms to any incumbent party, so that the BNP would do well to work within a five-year frame of reference to perform optimally to deliver goods to the people. It has been a reaction vote, something that the BNP will not hopefully lose sight of as they work their way through the second incarnation in power

because of Jamaat-e-Islam aligning with the AL at that time. Ershad was pulled out of the alliance in 2001 at the behest of AL but not weaned away by it as such. And with his Islamic alliance led by his party polling its share of the rightist vote it was a loss to the Awami League.

The BNP and its allies' success could partly be the handwork of the fervour permeating a segment of voters in the warlike situation prevailing after the twin-tower disaster in New York. But that no one would know for sure, given our limitations in terms of conducting gall-up polls

on any scientific basis. The heavy turn-out definitely worked in favour of BNP with its constituents of under-25 generation and women voters made for a big chunk of support.

The Awami League's cardinal sin was two-fold: nurture of hooligans within her party ranks and the personalised and partisan rule of Sheikh Hasina to which Khaleda Zia aptly referred in her election-eve national hook-up address. Needless to say, both made a dangerous brew.

Incidentally but importantly,

Begum Zia referred to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's name among the pantheon of our national leaders placing Ziaur Rahman after him in a chronological order. This was highly sensible and politic on her part to have done so, reach out to as it did to many an undecided voter.

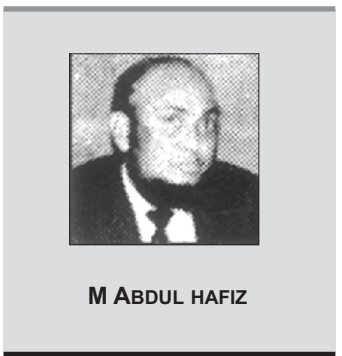
Sheikh Hasina's coming out in personal defence of sons of ministers, MPs and Chief Whip accused in murder and expropriation of property cases could well have been her unmaking. That she could not conceivably give indulgence to

Joynal Hazari, Shamim Osman, Haji Salim, Maqbul, Dipu, Suman, Mirza Kader, Akhtaruzzaman Babu etc, even as party chief, let alone as Prime Minister of the country without sullying her image beyond repair apparently never crossed her mind.

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SH Imam is Associate Editor of The Daily Star.

More carrots and less sticks for Pakistan?



M ABDUL HAFIZ

ONLY weeks before the US-Pakistan relations bordered on an absurdity characterised by its one way channel, that of US' punitive measures dished out on regular basis against the latter. In the latest phase of a roller-coaster relationship between the two countries, since the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989 Pakistan was almost unceremoniously dumped by the Americans who took every possible step to thwart its nuclear programme. In 1990, President George Bush Sr. refused to issue the mandatory certification of Pakistan's nuclear innocence and Pressler Law amendment automatically came into force. As a result all aids to Pakistan were cut and even the delivery of military hardware already paid for was stopped. In 1993 Pakistan, to her shock, was put on terrorists' watch list for its suspected support to Khalistan. When in 1998 Pakistan, in a quick riposte to India's Pokhran II, exploded its own device against US' wishes the country has been under the latter's sweeping economic sanction. Then with the coming of the Kargil and military take over during the next year Pakistan's fortune plummeted to a nadir. The nation just survived like a comatose patient with life saving elixir transfused by international financial organizations.

During all these years Pakistan's Taliban connection has been the country's extra-liability. Emerging from the obscure religious seminaries of Pakistan when the Taliban, mostly comprised of the Pushtuns, occupied Kabul in a sharp swift expedition in 1996, Pakistan was the first country to accord recognition to them. By aiding and abetting the Taliban in capturing power in Afghanistan Pakistan apparently made faux pas and created its own Frankenstein, although it was then argued that it was the best bet for Pakistan to restore order in a strife-torn country so that the dream of a Central Asian bonanza could come to a fruition. Far from being compli-

ant or of any help, the Taliban increasingly became a political liability and diplomatic embarrassment for Pakistan. So much so that the current brunt of the Taliban's ideological and ethnic excesses falls squarely on Pakistan. The crisis surrounding Pakistan's Taliban connection came to a head from 1998 onward when after terrorist attack on the US embassies in East Africa bin Laden, the Saudi dissident sheltered in Afghanistan,

years from either side are all washed away now. The alliance, coalition or friendship can always be formed by a power of America's stature in exchange of handsome largesse. As far as the junior partners of the alliance are concerned they have already developed a narcotic dependence on alliance relationship. Pakistan is a case in point. She has no qualm in returning to the alliance with the US in the name of help or cooperation, even

to debate about it. Yet the questions are open as to its moral dimensions and effectiveness at the end of the day. All successive governments in Pakistan pursued a measure of religious politics either to grab power or to consolidate its base. Later in the wake of Afghan resistance war and subsequently in a decade long insurgency in Kashmir a great number of Pakistanis were primed with a brand of Islamic faith that does not compromise with any

in the body politic of an already unstable Pakistan.

In the true tradition of the big powers' carrot and stick policy towards the weaker and poorer nations a lot of carrots would now be dangled before a pliant Pakistan. The US and allies have already lifted their economic sanction imposed after the country's nuclear tests in 1998. Obviously many more 'incentives' will follow with Pakistan's readiness to provide more

rubbing shoulders with the celebrities of international politics. The EU president was already in Islamabad and Colin Powell keeps calling Islamabad's foreign office these days. The US' advance military team is likely to be in Pakistan any day in preparation to an imminent strike on Afghanistan.

Once the game of 'fighting international terrorism' is over, when ever it may be, Pakistan will be left forelorn, dejected and abandoned once again. In the meantime, the carrots offered would have been stomached by the privileged few. And the country will remain in same dire strait as it was before. After all the fresh warmth generated between Pakistan and the US in last one or two weeks is one of expediency. Such exigencies arose also earlier when Pakistan was equally expansive in extending cooperation: providing Badaber base to US for its U-2 spyflight, joining an irrelevant military pact called SEATO etc. Those were also not without carrots, but they did not last long. The US did not hesitate to abandon its 'most allied ally' and tilt towards India, its 'natural ally'.

Brig (ret'd) MAbdul Hafiz is former DG of BIIS.

PERSPECTIVES

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became a suspect in US' eyes and pressures were mounted on Pakistan for using its good offices to secure his apprehension. Those were the days when the Taliban-trained Islamic militants ruled the roost so far as the public mood was concerned and no government would annoy them without putting at risk its survival.

This was the state of Pakistan's predicaments when an unprecedented terror struck the United States on 11 September last. As the needle of suspicion turned towards Osama bin Laden now holed up in Afghanistan which was closely linked to Pakistan, the latter became the centre of focus almost overnight not only of the United States but of the whole world. Because for any punitive actions against bin Laden or Taliban, Pakistan turns out to be an inescapable staging post. Pakistan is also in possession of invaluable intelligence about Taliban, Laden's possible hide-outs and his networks within Afghanistan. Its inter-services intelligence (ISI) which intimately tracked both Mujahideen resistance movement against former Soviet Union and Taliban's operations against Rabbani-regime is equipped with rare information about the country's terrain and topography. With regard to America's war against terrorism and Afghanistan, its base is her number one choice also for other reasons. Pakistan has long been sympathetic Muslim lifeline to bin Laden and his patrons in Afghanistan. It is of great morale value to the West to be able to break that nexus. Moreover Pakistan's airspace is the best strike route to Afghanistan.

The grudges and complaints of

after being abandoned or ill treated many times earlier. More so, when India, her archrival, is unabashedly courting the same power. When the world is saddened over the tragedy in America there is a bit of comic in the manner the two nuclear-equipped South Asian countries are vying with each other to curry US' favour by extending cooperation - sometimes not even asked for. Immediately after US' missile attack on Khost, Afghanistan in 1998, India not only supported the action although it unlawfully violated Pakistan's airspace, she has been trying to promote the case of an Indo-US anti-terrorism network and linking it to the militancy in Kashmir to internationally corner Pakistan. India was considerably successful in tarnishing the image of Pakistan as a country sponsoring cross-border terrorism leaving it only short of being declared a terrorist state by the West. So, after the tragedy in the US when bin Laden was made the 'prime suspect' for the crime India's first concern seemed to be to get Pakistan bracketed with Afghanistan. Pakistan's somersault in her long pursued policy with regard to Afghanistan and its Taliban regime and her known predilection for Jihadi groups not withstanding their growing challenge to the country's internal order was apparently to preempt India's likely move.

If that is the premise on which the Pakistani decision is taken to extend unstinted and unconditional help and cooperation to the Americans in fighting international terrorism presently symbolised by bin-Laden and his Taliban hosts in Afghanistan there is nothing much

worldly consideration, notwithstanding their many limitations and foolhardiness. You call them bigot or fanatic, they are certainly not hypocrite. When the combined power of their blind faith in their cause and fanaticism will be unleashed it would be difficult for Pakistani rulers to contain it on long term basis and a chronic instability is bound to occur

and more cooperation: allowing its ground and airspace to the US or 'coalition' troops and fleet of military aircraft, sharing her precious intelligence with the CIA, stationing foreign troops on its soil or allowing them passage through it. If not the public, Pakistani elite will once again enjoy the perks associated with inflated aid and privilege of

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.



Perennial problem

Waterlogging after a shower, not to speak of a downpour, is typical of Dhaka streets to the continuous plight of the city dwellers. This part of the Toyenbee Circular Road along the park in front of Bangabhaban simply speaks of the authorities' indifference to public suffering.

STAR PHOTO: AKIM MOHSIN

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

Other side of the coin

This is in response to Mr John Wood of USA's letter printed in your daily on Saturday.

As Bangladeshis and in particular Bangladeshis who have come in contact or visited the USA, we are very well aware of the kind of hospitality and the generosity of the American people. It is undoubtedly one of the best.

It is also meaningless to talk about American assistance to the rest of the world as it is the only country in the world which gives the most. There is no question about it and we are grateful for it. However, the Muslim world's adverse reaction towards the USA is not based on how hospitable and how much money and assistance America is giving to one country or other, rather it is purely political and is also not based on race or religion.

The two points, which always carries a soft corner or total support and unifies all Muslims from one corner of the world to the other is the question of the existence of the sovereign state of Palestine. The state of Palestine is a part of our

Islamic history. It must be allowed to exist on its own. The USA must understand this and act likewise on the Middle East crisis fairly. So far in the eyes of all Muslims around the world the USA has always succumbed to the American Jewish lobby and have always sided with Israel even when Israel evidently violated agreements with acts of terrorism on her part against the Palestinian people.

The second point is, so far the average American has had glimpses of the Islamic world through books, magazines, television and other media written or conducted by pro-Israeli sycophants which have unfairly depicted "the Muslim" as a bearded turbaned thug totally irrational in its behaviour. This has somewhat created a negative impact in the USA and conditioned the American people's perception of the Islamic faith and world. This is most unfortunate.

In order to change this perception of Americans from the point of view of the Islamic world, the USA needs to address these two points to form a bridge of peace and hope between the two worlds set apart on

an issue which is quite simple to solve, that is if one wants to solve it. Focus on the plight of the Palestinians for a permanent change.

As a Bangladeshi I am sure the USA will rise to the occasion not only to overcome this unbelievable terrorist act and tragedy but to recompose herself and be the leader of the world as we perceive it to be.

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High time to ban student politics

In the wake of political transition in the country, most of the public universities have been closed which again reflects volatile situation in our educational institution. The apparent linkage between closer of the universities and transition of power can be readily assumed and it is easily perceived that it is the struggle of dominance in the campus during the absence of political government, that leads student wings to resort to violence. Series of

incidents in recent time in the campuses reveals grim picture of our higher education, which has reached the edge of abyss. This unfortunate development reminds us of the evil aspects of student politics that is currently plagued by parochial interest, narrow understanding and relentless intolerance.

There is no denying that our students played pivotal role in the major political movements including language movement and war of liberation. They have also acted as catalyst in overthrowing autocratic regime. But their glorious contribution is now overshadowed and marred by violence, killing and other heinous crime perpetrated by students under the banner of politics. Now student politics is doing more harm than it is promoting the genuine interest of the student community. The activists are acting on the dictate of their political mentors rather than serving collective interest of the students. The highest seats of learning are now safe heavens for criminals. Universities, which are supposed to be centre of excellence, transformation of knowledge, and nourishing civilized

norms, are now treated as breeding ground of intolerance, violence and dominance.

Rule of law is virtually absent in university campus as perpetrators of the offences, even killing and raping, can hardly be subjected to legal process of the administration of justice. Nearly two hundred students have been killed in university premises, but there is no single instance of conviction, which presupposes that universities are outside of normal judicial process. Not surprisingly, all these are happening under active protection and shelter of political parties.

Realizing these evil aspects of student politics, President Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed called upon the political parties few years ago to reach a consensus on banning student politics. Unfortunately, no political party responded positively to the clarion call of the President. Student wings of the political parties also vehemently opposed to any proposal of banning student politics under the pretext of emotional attachment to the past involvement in national struggles. It is commonly understood that since political

parties are beneficiaries of student politics, therefore it is hardly possible for them to reach such a decision.

Therefore, only caretaker government being in neutral position can shoulder the responsibility of banning student politics with active support of our honourable President. The caretaker government has already taken initiative on separation of judiciary from executive, which involves lot of constitutional, legal and policy issues. Similarly, there is no reason why it should not ban student politics, which has been posing threat to our entire education system. It is widely believed that roots of many problems prevailing in the university will be eliminated if student politics is banned officially. The argument that proscribing student politics can jeopardize their legitimate demands does no longer hold as true. History is replete with instances that even without attachment with political party, students being most conscious segment of people can play their due role in national crisis. This is also evident from the history of our progressive movements. Therefore,

time is ripe to ponder again on the proposal of our revered President. The sooner student politics is outlawed; the better is for the country. It should be borne in mind that national emancipation will not come from narrow gates of politics, but can only be achieved through floodgate of education.

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No matter who wins and who loses

Being far away from the country, the only election news we are getting here is through the internet. Looks like despite wide-spread violence all over the country, most polling centres were able to conduct the polls peacefully, that voter turnout was high, and that most observers expressed satisfaction at the procedures. However, both the major political parties are already filing complaints against and pointing fingers at each other.

We know that during the campaign, both the leaders did not even answer journalists' questions as to what they would do if they lost there is no question about their victory if polls are conducted fairly, they answered. One doesn't have to be a mathematician to deduce from their statements that they will not accept defeat. Inevitably, one of them will lose and we know from our previous bitter experience that the winner will stop whining about the unfairness at once, while the loser will blame massive conspiracy against themselves.

Our bitter experience so far is that, the winners go on extorting the country (they have invested millions in the campaign, they have to get handsome returns on investments!) and the losers go on destroying the economy by calling hartals (why should they let the country prosper if they can't get their "fair share" through corruption and extortion?). The real losers are always the people. Call me cynical, but is there any other way to look at our future considering our past? A C O N C E R N E D C I T I Z E N Dallas, USA