

Opportunists on rampage

Only tough and speedy action will set the right tenor

A SUDDEN spurt in violence across the country, especially reported incidents of repression on the minority communities, has taken some gloss off the free and fair election to the eighth Jatiya Sangsad. There have been attacks on leaders and activists of the Awami League and ransacking of their houses and properties, and clashes between followers of the victor and the vanquished in the polls. Besides, scuffles also ensued over control of halls of residence at different educational institutions, including Dhaka University, markets, launch terminals, etc. The aggressors are allegedly claiming connection to or flaunting the names of Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and its electoral allies.

Naturally, many would try to trace a pattern in these incidents and hypothesise on the days of governance to come under the new government. In fact, there have already been some grumbles and insinuations in this regard. However, such innuendoes are no less harmful than the acts of hooliganism, repression on the minority and other forms of violence being perpetrated countrywide. While some of these appear to be unalloyed cases of backlash, if you like, on the Awami League leaders and activists, the majority of the incidents reported thus far looks engineered by the opportunists, who want to make most of the transitional vacuum. With the caretaker government done with its constitutional mandate of ensuring a free and fair election and the new government still to be inducted, there seems to have been a sudden upsurge of self-proclaimed leaders and activists of the four-party alliance, especially of the BNP and the Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh.

Image of any government is usually created in the first few days of incumbency. The BNP and its allies may not want to take the responsibility for these incidents on the theoretical premise that they are still not in power. However, they must realise that it is people taking on their label who have been seen perpetrating violent activities and, in the long run, they, like it or not, these incidents could tell on their image.

BNP Chairperson and would-be prime minister Khaleda Zia has issued a strong warning that stern actions will be taken against anyone involved in unlawful acts, regardless of his status, political connection or affiliation. However, it seems, her warning has not had the desired impact yet. Therefore, our suggestion is that there should be reiteration of this warning now, and also in her first address to the nation, and translation of her government's intention into action in the first few days in power.

Fallout of the war could be Middle East peace

USA endorses both Israeli and Palestinian statehood

A MIDST the drums of a major war, the sounds of peace are also being heard. The global war on terrorism led by the USA is providing the strongest push to redesign political directions in search of peace. The latest statement by US President George Bush on the Palestine issue testifies to that.

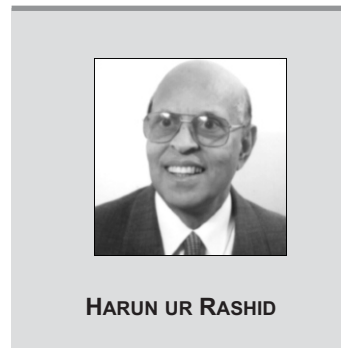
He has said that the idea of a Palestinian state has always been part of a vision so long as the right to Israel to exist is also respected. This remark is a major milestone in the diplomatic map that may give birth to durable peace there. For once it seems that the US, without whose active engagement no peace is possible in the Middle East has decided to take a stand and hopefully act accordingly.

There is no illusion that the US was pushed into taking this position because of political imperatives generated by the "Osama" crisis. The need to cobble together an alliance against Osama bin Laden, himself an Arab is critical and having the Arab world on their side is therefore even more so. But that isn't going to happen if the present US policy, heavily loaded towards Israel, partly because of domestic compulsions continue. In the fresh scheme of things, US policy has to take into account Arab views, especially Palestinian aspirations.

Understandably, Israel hasn't welcomed the statement while the Arab world has. But even as the US pushes for some kind of peace, both the Israelis and the Palestinians are at war and body counts climb everyday. Israelis and the Palestinians are unable to find peace even if they wish to because of hardline dogmatic positions. Israel is unwilling to accept the idea of a Palestinian state nor ready to let go the settlements erected within Palestine to support security and other needs. Meanwhile, within Palestine itself there are forces like the Hamas which is unwilling to even consider the existence of Israel.

While moderation seems like a way out, that isn't exactly a favourite item in the menu there. The root of anti-US terrorism lies in this small part of the world but little has been done to put out the raging hostile fires. If the global coalition is to succeed, there has to be a just peace taking every view into account. It's obvious to most as to where the root of the terrorist problem lies. One hopes it will also be clear to those who matter in the world.

AL's debacle and the way forward



HARUN UR RASHID

THE people of Bangladesh deserve congratulations on their peaceful and orderly conduct on the polling day. The European delegation, the international observer-team and the UN Election Assistance Secretariat have given their endorsement to overall fairness of the poll. The local FEMA (Fair Election Monitoring Alliance) also held similar opinion. As expected in developing countries, ordinarily poll is not held without sporadic violence and Bangladesh is no exception. Despite poor facilities, skirmishes and overcrowding in some polling centres, the local and foreign observers maintain that Bangladesh voters have been able to exercise their franchise in free and fair manner.

Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) led by Begum Khaleda Zia won a convincing victory at the eighth parliamentary election over its rival Awami League (AL) headed by Sheikh Hasina. It is a stunning victory for BNP because in its own right it can form a government with a majority in the Parliament. It does not need alliance with any other party to constitute a government in the country.

However at a press conference visibly shocked Sheikh Hasina questioned the fairness of the poll and accused "crude rigging" of voters' choice and listed a score of complaints to vindicate her claim. Her accusations apparently go against the preliminary views of international observers who reportedly said that the election had been

"free, fair, peaceful and orderly". Furthermore one could argue that there was widespread local media coverage and the active role of private and state-controlled electronic media allowed greater transparency of the election process.

The swing of voters from one party to another is not unique in Bangladesh and may not surprise any one. It occurs in many countries because the number of unaligned voters is getting larger than before day by day. The days of ideologically committed voters to a party have

been found wrong in their predictions on election results.

The question is why did Awami League lose the election so badly?

There are several possible reasons as described in the following paragraphs.

First, it has always been found difficult for an incumbent government to win an election. The ruling party contests the election with a "baggage" and voters often remember unpopular actions of the immediate past government and tend to forget or ignore good actions. In

democracy. Overlaid on this sort of sentiment was the decision of the AL government allowing Sheikh Hasina to continue to live in the *Gonobhavan* after her relinquishment of power. This was another damaging phenomenon for AL which was considered to be a party committed to rule of law. To many, AL seemed to have abandoned its principled position by this act of unwise move.

Third, there is also a perception among many sections in the community that AL leaders became "arrogant and unresponsive" to

democracy. Overlaid on this sort of sentiment was the decision of the AL government allowing Sheikh Hasina to continue to live in the *Gonobhavan* after her relinquishment of power. This was another damaging phenomenon for AL which was considered to be a party committed to rule of law. To many, AL seemed to have abandoned its principled position by this act of unwise move.

Finally, although Bangladesh's relations with India was not an issue at the election, many believe that an

that the protest vote against AL has given victory to BNP. They argue that the gain achieved by BNP is actually not as much in favour of it as against the AL. In other words it is the negative vote against AL that helped BNP. Although BNP has won this election handsomely, BNP may take into account the fact that the protest vote has been always against the ruling party and may again turn round against BNP at the next election.

Conclusion: If there are allegations of irregularities or illegalities in the conduct of elections, there are legal mechanisms available to remedy them. The country needs peace, security and stability for acceleration of progress and prosperity of the people. European observation team said that "we strongly hope that all the political actors will respect the people's choice as reflected in the results announced".

Both AL and BNP have governed the country. They are aware of mistakes of the past and have the courage to grasp the reality that politics of confrontation does neither help political parties nor democracy in the country. Rather such political game is divisive and destructive to the core interests of the nation. At the dawn of this century Bangladesh faces many challenging national and global issues and only a politically united Bangladesh will be able to address them effectively.

Tyrannical majority tends to give rise to confrontation. The BNP government may demonstrate its respect and tolerance to opposition parties and adhere to rule of law in all its governmental activities. Let the eighth Parliament of Bangladesh be a robust forum where the ruling and the opposition parties play their role in furthering consolidation of institutions of democracy, promotion of human rights and good governance for the people of Bangladesh. The people expect it from their political leaders at this juncture and the leaders may not disappoint them.

Barrister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

BOTTOM LINE

The country needs peace, security and stability for acceleration of progress and prosperity of the people. European observation team said that "we strongly hope that all the political actors will respect the people's choice as reflected in the results announced". Both AL and BNP have governed the country. They are aware of mistakes of the past and have the courage to grasp the reality that politics of confrontation does neither help political parties nor democracy in the country.

been disappearing fast and many voters tend to be "swingers" rather than guided by party ideology. To illustrate the point, a few instances are cited. In 1993 the ruling Conservative Party under Canada's first female Prime Minister Kim Campbell was almost totally routed (from a majority to only three elected members). She left politics and became an academic in a university in the US. In 1996 the ruling Labour Party in Australia was decimated and the Opposition party under John Howard came to power. In 1997 the ruling Conservatives (party of Margaret Thatcher) suffered its most devastating defeat in 100 years. None of the defeated parties was able to foresee the outcome of the elections.

Party strategists think that their campaign, policies and advertisements are so terrific that their party cannot lose. This appears to be a worrying trend for all parties. Unofficial polls published in the media do not always reflect voters' choice for the parties and are often misleading. Many a time political pundits

1996 the ruling BNP lost the election to AL which came to power. In the parliamentary election, voters ask themselves what kind of leadership, what kind of attitude and what kind of capacity to take decisions the country needs.

Second, many observers believe that the election was fought on the deteriorating law and order question. There has been a breakdown of law and order situation in the country and the print media has said it all everyday. It appeared that AL became complacent refusing to hear voters' complaints about law and order situation. It is a perception that AL protected the "maastans" (law breakers). This perception appeared to have damaged AL most in voters' eyes. Perception may not be reality but it sticks in the minds of voters and they punish the "guilty" party.

Furthermore, participation of women in this parliamentary election is comparatively very high. Ordinarily women do not approve the policies of fundamentalist parties because they impose restric-

people's wishes. The leaders gave the impression that they liberated Bangladesh in 1971 and questioned the role and "patriotism" of others which seemed to have annoyed many voters. It may be borne in mind that young voters did not have personal experience of liberation war and might have been disappointed with the governance by AL during the last five years. This sentiment by young unaligned voters worked against AL.

Fourth, some of the decisions of the AL government were not viewed as transparent, such as, the purchase of MIG planes from Russia and production-sharing contracts with foreign oil companies. The lack of transparency fuelled the impression that the government had many things to hide from public. Furthermore, the broken promises made at the 1996 election by AL (autonomy of state-controlled Radio and TV, separation of Judiciary from the Executive) coupled with the enactment of draconian legislation PSA (Public Security Act) was seen contrary to the spirit and traditions of

undercurrent theme was felt in some quarters that AL government had been playing a "second fiddle" to India. This kind of sentiment may have worked against AL. BNP opposed the 1996 Ganges Water Treaty as being unfair to Bangladesh. There was a perceived fear in some circles that Bangladesh was being used for India's economic and strategic interests. Furthermore the huge trade deficit of Bangladesh with India (Indian exports to Bangladesh was worth more than \$1 billion as against Bangladesh's meagre amount of \$47 million during 1996-97) has compounded the problem. The border armed conflicts in last April and thereafter the incidents of deaths of many Bangladeshis in the border areas by Indian Security Forces did not seem to help the image of the AL government as being strong in protecting national interests. It was seen by many a failure of resolute leadership that gave the impression of weak-kneed policy the last things the AL leaders needed at the time of election.

Finally, many observers believe

Why AL lost: An old man's story and others

MORSHED ALI KHAN

IT is not about how BNP won the eighth parliamentary election, but how Awami League lost it. At tea stalls, buses, public places and even at breakfast tables in the comfort of their homes people talked about the mistakes AL committed over the last five years. The silent majority, comprising even veteran AL sympathisers, believed the party suffered such a humiliating defeat because it nurtured terrorists and indiscriminately abused power. In Dhaka, Narayanganj, Feni, Barisal, Khulna, Chittagong and elsewhere in the country, the ruling AL not only sponsored terrorism but also immunised criminals from law by abuse of power.

AL's landmark successes in various sectors of development looked totally insignificant to the voters, particularly to womenfolk, who turned up in numbers 'not to vote for a party that disregarded people's basic rights to justice and security to a great extent'. By doing so, they also sent a stern warning to the incumbent rulers of a 'more humiliating defeat' if the 'same things are repeated'.

The verdict of the people in the October 1 election has definitely stunned the nation. Both BNP and AL camps could hardly conceive the results without being open eyed. But immediately after the results, people talked more about AL's blunders than a possible rigged election. For, most thought that AL's stunning defeat is the outcome of its own misdeeds. Wherever a post-election gathering took place, even among AL supporters, they readily referred to AL leaders in Narayanganj, Tejgaon, Lalbagh, Mohammadpur, Mirpur, Demra, Uttara, Dhanmondi, Barisal town, Feni and elsewhere. Many held these handful numbers of leaders responsible for the disastrous election results. The unabated anarchy created by these men during the AL tenure had already

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buried the outstanding achievements of this seasoned political party. People decided to look for a change.

Delwar Hossain, an elderly man from Feni Sadar, told a chilling story in tears during a bus journey to Dhaka a day after the October 1 election. Delwar said it was for the first time in his life that he did not vote for AL's symbol boat. He waited for more than a year, with a deep humiliation engraved in his mind, to take revenge on a political party that he had supported since the Liberation War risking his own life several times.

Delwar said it all started one day when his school-going daughter complained to him about some Jubo League activists disturbing her on way to school.

"On the day more than a year ago, I met one of the boys on my way to a tea stall and told him to leave my daughter alone or I would be forced to complain against him to his leader."

"About an hour later, as I was sipping tea, the young man stormed into the stall, held my beard in the presence of all my friends and dragged me outside. He then threw me on the road and swore at me. I fell motionless as he walked off the scene, still shouting insults."

Delwar said he went to the local AL leaders for justice but they told him he should have come to them before talking to their activist on the road. The police refused to record his complaint and at the end of the day, when he returned home, his son told him that half a dozen Jubo League men had just visited the house and warned the inmates of 'serious consequences' if Delwar 'exaggerated things'.

"Fearing for my family's security I

decided to keep mum and then one day recently I heard that Sheikh Hasina was coming to Feni for her election campaign," a tearful Delwar said.

"I eagerly went to her meeting but was greatly deceived because instead of warning these criminals and asking people for forgiveness, Hasina proudly said she backed Hazzari and would ensure a victory for him in Feni," He said.

As the bus rolled in high speed toward Dhaka on the deserted highway, more passengers involved themselves in talks.

"What about Iqbal, Haji Selim, Moqbul, Maya, Kamal Mojumdar, Abul Hasnat and their *mastans* sons. Why were not those criminals arrested despite clear evidences against them of murder, extortion, possessing illegal arms and forcibly occupying others' property," said another passenger.

Many people in Feni and Dhaka welcomed the change but sounded apprehensive of another sort of lawlessness in the country. Not all the beneficiaries of "escape votes" in the election are considered "good, law abiding citizens" of this country. Many in the Jamaat and BNP were elected because people rejected AL's failure and had no other better choice.

"In the newly elected BNP and Jamaat camps you will find war criminals, and notorious *mastans* who have long been waiting for this moment," said Abu Zafar, a Dhaka University MA final-year student. He feared that these people might try to enact new laws against the interest of the country or even embark on secret deals to eliminate opposition.

During the election day in the remote villages of Feni, men and women in their thousands queued

for hours under a blazing sun to cast their votes. Festive moods prevailed everywhere. Groups of women in colourful dresses walked towards the polling centers through green

paddy fields and small earthen paths. Others traveled to the centres by rickshaws and rickshaw vans. Having cast their votes, men in clean clothes gathered at tea

stalls and gossiped. Security personnel in vehicles patrolled the roads.

The verdict of people in this election has surely sent a message to all the political parties. It is now up to the elected lawmakers to fulfil people's expectations or face the same music again.

Morshed Ali Khan is a Senior Reporter of The Daily Star.

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.



Injurious to health
The rickshawvan-puller is compelled to pull a loaded van of sacks and the burden is immense. To lessen the pressure psychologically, he takes resort to smoking, which is even more injurious to health than it normally is. The deadly habit has engulfed almost the entire nation, be it the affluent section or the less privileged. It's urgent to let the smokers know working and smoking at the same time is dangerous.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

Arithmetic of elections

Thank you for publishing the charts showing the popular votes obtained by the various parties in the last election. Now we understand what has really happened. But if the Awami League can improve its popular vote despite its miserable performance while in government, it means it will always retain its vote bank, and hence if the BNP hopes to retain its responsibility (I think it is more proper to say that the voters give a party the responsibilities of governance, not any "power", which only despoils claim to possess) next time, it will again have to form a coalition with Jamaat.

The freedom fighters in BNP should consider carefully if the price is worth it. Let us see what concessions are given to Jamaat this time and the uncommitted people who vote freely will take the appropriate decision in 2006.

Sheikh Hasina and the Awami League should not be too aggrieved since they have not lost their base, and should abandon any attempt to disrupt public life and business.

Positive actions can only increase their probability of success in the by-elections and in the next general election. But they should get a time slot representation at the Parliament and in the government media proportional to their popular vote, as is the law in the UK.

Bazlur Rahman
Basabari Lane, Dhaka, on e-mail

The president's silence

After all the commotion that followed the election and Sheikh Hasina's "crude" vote rigging allegations, I am a bit surprised that our honourable president, Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed, has kept very quiet over the entire issue. As the president, he should rise to the occasion and call upon Sheikh Hasina to accept the election results.

Nipun W. Rahman
Washington, DC

Victory of democracy

Democracy has won a great victory in the recent general election but as it appears it's bound to languish under unbecoming attitude and

incivility of the Awami League leadership lacking munificence. Yet the winning party has extended warm embrace to the vanquished. Appreciable indeed.

Sheikh Hasina, after her debacle in the national polls, has started blaming all in the caretaker government, the Chief Election Commissioner and the general administration for her party's inevitable defeat. And now she has threatened to wage 'non-cooperation movement' against members-elect and rule of law.

Sheikh Hasina and her party is always vociferous in declaring "the people" and "the verdict of people" are in their favour, as if they are the only champion and sole bearer of the people, 'democracy' and 'the war of liberation'. If the Awami League does have real trust and confidence in people it should now abide by the verdict of people, who gave the landslide victory to the BNP and must not clamour unreasonably and create law and order situation.

The Awami League and its cohorts could never think of such a debacle and they have no means to explain this defeat to their workers

and cadres, while the election has been held in most fair, free and neutral atmosphere without coercion or intimidation by terrorists and has been acclaimed nationally and internationally as one of the best elections ever held in this democracy-loving country.

The most frustrated and fed-up populace have expressed their rejection of the Awami misrule and atrocities through the ballots. If they are genuinely in favour of democracy and popular verdict they ought to have accepted the election result and opted for peaceful transition like any other democratic nation with all grace and humility and extended the wholehearted support to the incumbent government (to be formed) of the people and by the people (who voted them).

When people of all walks of life have shown commitment for furthering democracy by their overwhelming turnout at the voting centres Sheikh Hasina is trying to find faults and agitate people (some of whom still lend support to them) by pointing fingers at alleged intimidation and "crude rigging".

Hats off to the caretaker government and the EC for presenting the

nation a very well thought, well organised and perfectly programmed election.

This time the people's struggle was for the sovereignty of Bangladesh and for the safety of life and property of the people. And this victory is against corruption and terrorism. It is against abominable practice and injustice and expression against party-wise affiliation and nepotism in every sector. This victory of democracy and will of people shall be written in annals of democratic movements in golden letters. May Allah give us the strength and fortitude to survive and sustain the spirit and opportunity to enjoy the fruits of liberation. Long live democracy. Long live Bangladesh.

AF Rahman
Dhaka, on e-mail

Child's play

"The game isn't over until I win" this is something I expect from my four-year old daughter, not from an ex-prime minister.

It is about time the sensible leaders within AL took a stand and ask Sheikh Hasina to stop acting

like a child and face the truth for a change. Accept the fact that people of Bangladesh are not stupid, they did what they thought was best for them, which fortunately for some and also unfortunately for some has been a verdict against the Awami League.

I sincerely hope that our ex-PM will realise that after everything is said and done, she is a servant of public, not the other way around and should not try to force her will on the unfortunate people of our nation for the sake of her own political future. History will not forgive her if she spoils the new dawn in a nation that has been in the dark too long.

Anwar Babar
Dallas, Texas

People's mandate

Though somewhat surprised but not totally bemused, the people of Bangladesh have generally accepted the poll result. The 'silent majority' who has voted against terrorism and corruption played the decisive role. It's time that we took concerted efforts to uproot corruption and curb terrorism.

We sincerely hope that good sense will prevail upon Awami

League and Sheikh Hasina will accept people's verdict. Throwing the nation into uncertainty and trepidation will certainly go against the little popularity Awami League still enjoys.

Instead, Awami League may review the reasons for their debacle in the parliamentary elections and take corrective measures to rebuild its image and play effective role as opposition party in the Parliament. Patience always pays and it is one of the postulates of democracy so avowedly like to advocate.

Mohsin, on e-mail

Bias operators

It seems that the cable operators in Dhaka have a grudge against the Russian channels. While catering programmes through various channels they show a step-motherly attitude towards the Russian channels and censor them at will.

Of late we have been enjoying the REN TV channel which airs not only entertaining movies but also very well edited programmes. The transmission of this channel is, however, cut short whimsically both in the morning and at night. The

Dhaka Cable Vision authorities switch on and switch off the transmission of this particular channel with a dictatorial attitude, without caring a button for the likes and dislikes of the subscribers.

For example, the famous movie 'Daddy long legs' was broadcast a few days ago only for half an hour. We were thoroughly enjoying the brilliant performance of the great dancer Fred Astaire, but the transmission was suddenly cut short at 1:30 a.m. without any rhyme or reason. Last night also its transmission was discontinued at about 12:30 a.m. If other channels can continue in the small hours, what is wrong with the REN TV?

We subscribers pay the cable operators and expect to enjoy the programmes uninterrupted. They have no right to deprive us of some good movies late at night. We urge the Dhaka Cable Vision authorities to continue the transmission of REN TV uninterrupted till its end every night. There is no reason why we should be strict only with the Russian REN TV.

Masud Khondoker
Dhanmondi, Dhaka