

AL should join Parliament

Negative politics will further erode party support

THE Awami League, vanquished in the number of parliamentary seats bagged but consolably a gainer on the percentage of votes polled, is skating on thin ice insofar as executing its agitation programme against the popular verdict goes. It will be highly suicidal for the party and destructive for the country's polity and economy if the AL should press ahead with its demonstrations, siege and non-cooperation programmes. The party will be doing disservice to its large support base by turning its back to the parliament and dashing the hopes that it will play its due role in parliament. And the costs to the fledgling polity and economy would be stupendous if the AL does not eschew anarchy being dreadfully glimpsed by what they have announced and not yet called off.

Immediately following the party's rejection of poll results on the alleged ground of massive rigging and its absurd call for a re-poll we urged it to spare the nation instability and economic ruin that they seemed hell-bent upon causing to it just because it has lost the elections. We counselled the party to go to the election tribunal or to the court for the redress of any grievance provided they have concrete evidence to base their complaints on.

The latest to join the chorus of clarion calls to Awami League that it eschew forthwith its destructive programme are the leaders of 26 chamber and industry bodies and 20 distinguished citizens of the country. The business community has put forward some of the strongest arguments against the AL's stance on poll results. The economy is in a fragile state with exports plummeting and imports under a severe strain. Cancellation of garment orders and dwindling remittances stare us in the face. The world economy is in a worse cycle of recession following the terrorist attacks on the US mainland and its knock-on effect on Bangladesh economy could be serious with a war against terrorism looking ominously ramified now.

In a context like this, it is highly imperative that we have a stable democratic order to inspire confidence among consumers, producers, manufacturers, businessmen, and, above all, investors, so that the negative effects of global recession can be overcome.

We endorse the views of the intelligentsia that if politics is for the welfare of the people then in the interest of public good the AL MPs-elect should take oath and play the role of a vibrant and responsible Opposition in the Jatiya Sangsad as their voters expect them to. Whilst they did so, their options to take resort to the Constitution and law for alleviation of their grievances, if any, remained intact. It will be patently impolitic for the AL to deny itself the opportunity to have its say in the parliament. Both in its own interest as well that of good governance and consolidation of democracy, the AL must cooperate in the furtherance of the democratic process in the country without any further ado.

Shame on the Speaker

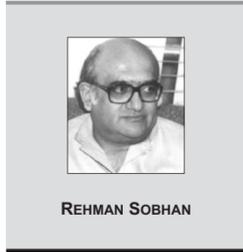
Constitution is greater than party

FINALLY, good sense has dawned on Speaker Abdul Hamid. He has dispelled the constitutional uncertainty he himself gave rise to a couple of days back by expressing unwillingness to administer oath to the newly elected members of the eighth Jatiya Sangsad. As much as we feel relieved that a potential constitutional crisis has been averted, we cannot but demur at the speaker vacillating on his obligation to the Constitution. His myopic appreciation of the office he holds has left us ashamed. By refusing to administer the oath until cleared by his party chief in the first place, Mr Hamid denigrated the office of the Speaker, the Legislature and by extension the Constitution. How could he give precedence to party dictate over constitutional obligation? Has he not taken the oath to uphold the Constitution above all else? Then why the dithering over the last couple of days? It is a pity that Mr Hamid viewed himself as an Awami League lawmaker first, not as one of the custodians of the Constitution.

Mr Hamid's dilemma, however, is symptomatic of the collective psyche of our politicians. What he did two days back had been done by many in the recent past, the former prime ministers not excluded. Time and again, we have been witness to how they compromised the status and prestige of public offices to meet their political, partisan, and sometimes even personal ends. The higher the offices were, the lower they had stooped. Mr Hamid, unfortunately, could not stand out as an exception.

As the Deputy Speaker of the seventh Jatiya Sangsad until he became the Speaker, Mr Hamid had commanded respect from the lawmakers, ruling and opposition alike, and the media with his unflappable commitment to the role entrusted upon him by the Constitution. However, when it really mattered, he wavered on his obligation. It is a pity that Mr Hamid let his stint as the custodian of the parliament end on such a shameful and sad note.

Misreading the October elections: Lessons for both parties



REHMAN SOBHAN

AFTER the October 1 elections the country appears to be tragically poised on the brink of yet another, avoidable, political crisis. It is argued that this crisis derives from a misreading of the lessons from the election. This paper seeks to provide a perspective on the October election which can, hopefully, be drawn upon by the leadership of both parties to assess the implications of their actions and then to move towards a resolution of the political crisis.

The elections of 1st October, 2001, to the 8th Jatiya Sangsad, have ended in an unprecedented landslide for BNP and its allies, the Jamaat, IOJ and Jatiya Party who, at the latest count, have won 203 seats in a house of 300. The Awami League, in power over the last five years, has so far won a mere 61 seats. The BNP led alliance is enjoying a sense of historic triumph, having done far better than even they expected. The Awami League is finding it difficult to come to terms with its significantly diminished position in the new Sangsad which appears to them to be at variance with the support they enjoy in the country. Ershad's Jatiya Party is somewhat deflated, with a halving of their vote and seats in the Parli-

Bangladesh Elections : Comparative Results for 1991, 1996 & 2001

Party	Election 2001			Election 1996			Election 1991		
	Seat	Votes (million)	% Share	Seat	Votes (million)	% Share	Seat	Votes (million)	% Share
Awami League	63	22.21	40.02	146	15.88	37.44	100	11.48	33.67
BNP*	185	23.48	42.31	116	14.26	33.61	140	10.51	30.81
Jamaat	16	2.34	4.21	03	3.65	8.61	18	4.14	12.13
Jatiya Party	14	3.62	6.52	32	6.96	16.40	35	4.06	11.92
Others	5	1.67	3.00	03	1.67	3.94	7	3.85	11.29
Total	283	55.49	100.00	300	42.44	100.00	300	34.10	100.00
BNP + Jamaat	201	25.82	46.52						

* Includes BNP + Jatiya Party (Nazir) + IOJ

** This computation is based on preliminary results published in the press and will need to be updated.

ment. The above table, however, shows that the vast disparity in seats between the BNP Alliance and the Awami League in no way reflects the preferences of the voters. The Awami League remains the party with the largest share of the vote, as it was in 1996 and indeed, 1991. Significantly, the Awami League vote share has gone up in successive elections. In 1991 the Awami League won 33.7 per cent of the vote, in 1996 it won 37.4 per cent of the vote and on 1st October, 2001, 40.20 per cent, where their vote share actually exceeded the share registered when they formed the government in 1996. These figures indicate that in terms of conventional election analysis, there was a small vote swing in favour and not against, the Awami League in the October 1, 2001 election. The retention by the Awami League of its share of the vote has been matched by the fact that the AL has increased the absolute number of votes polled by 40 per cent, from 15.9 million in 1996 to 22.3 million on October 1st, 2001. This is the highest number of votes ever received by the Awami League or any other single party in Bangladesh or Pakistan, over the last half century. Whilst the size of the electorate has undoubtedly increased, the fact remains that the Awami League has protected its share of the vote in 1996 and also captured 48.5 per cent of the additional 13 million votes, cast on October 1st.

On the basis of the arithmetical

evidence it would be fallacious to say that the polls reflect a massive rejection of the Awami League, its record in office or its politics. All of these factors may, in some measure, have worked against the Awami League, but the poll results can hardly provide the evidence for this. If an additional six million people voted for the AL in the October election, this suggests that the sense of revulsion against terrorism, corruption and partisan administration could not have been so powerful as to drive away its erstwhile voters or to attract new voters. After all, in Dhaka City, which was presumably the most affected by the issue of terrorism, in virtually every one of the eight metropolitan constituencies, the Awami League candidate substantially increased the size of the AL vote and attracted over 40 per cent of the share of the total votes cast. Indeed, the increase in the AL vote share and in the absolute numbers of votes polled, across virtually every constituency, suggests that the AL regime must also have registered some positive achievements to its

brilliant success, in spite of the defection of the JP under Ershad. The BNP retained the Nazir Rahman faction of the JP in the alliance so that the Ershad JP's vote almost halved from seven million in 1996 to 3.6 million in 2001. This residual JP vote, of around 3.4 million, may be presumed to have been delivered by the JP (Nazir), as its dowry to the BNP alliance.

The highly rewarding outcome of the BNP strategy of forging electoral alliances, is evident from the fact that, in the October election, the BNP-led alliance recorded 25.8 million votes. This was made up from the BNP vote of 14.3 million, 3.7 million votes of the Jamaat and 3.4 million votes retained by the JP (Nazir), all recorded in the 1996 election, which add up to 21.7 million votes. The balance of 4.1 million votes accruing to the BNP alliance may have come from its share of the 13 million additional votes cast in 2001 over 1996. Pooling the BNP, Jamaat and a share of the Jatiya Party votes, in all 300 constituencies, earned the alliance only 46.6 per cent of the total votes

new voters and 40 per cent of the electorate. Such a BNP-led coalition could have longer term implications for the Awami League. As long as the BNP keeps its anti-Awami League coalition intact, the Awami League stands in danger of being reduced to a permanent minority, within the prevailing constitutional framework, of Westminster-style, first past the post, parliamentary politics. If the Awami League is to ever hope to recapture power it will have to win over some of those people who voted for the BNP and Jatiya Party in the recent elections. In the October election the Awami League has retained most of its past voters and it has captured 48.5 per cent of the new generation of voters who have entered the voters' lists in the last five years. The BNP has also capitalized on these new voters but its principal strategy for 2001 was to ensure that the old voters of 1996 cast their votes for a single anti-AL candidate in every constituency. The Awami League, therefore, has to persuade a segment of these old voters who vote for the BNP to join with a rising

looking much more closely at the logic and implications of alliance building and, accordingly restructuring their political appeal to the new generation of voters whose votes will be appearing in the electoral market in 2006. For such a new generation of voters, the Awami League will have to project itself as a credible opposition in the new Parliament, where they can compensate for the smallness of their numbers, through the effectiveness of their voice on the floor of the house. They will have to use Parliament, as well as the public political platform, to hold the BNP accountable for their electoral promises and their various acts of misgovernance over the next five years. To play such a role in Parliament will demand serious and continuous homework rather than ad hoc responses and incendiary rhetoric. More importantly, the Awami League will have to put together a credible political agenda of its own, which responds to the needs of a new generation of voters, by providing solutions to the innumerable problems which face

Lessons for the BNP

There are lessons from the polls which also need to be absorbed by the BNP. The BNP has won a massive electoral victory which gives them an unprecedented two-thirds majority in the Parliament. This dramatic victory has come as a result of a strategy of political alliances which ties the BNP to the Jamaat. This link cannot be seen as a temporary liaison but may have to be transformed into a permanent marriage, if the BNP is to sustain its anti-Awami League coalition. The BNP should work out the implications of such a marriage and identify what political goals of the Jamaat they will have to accommodate, in order to sustain marital bliss. The voters, particularly the new generation, will monitor the impact of alliance politics on the working of the BNP administration very carefully over the next five years.

Beyond the issue of alliance maintenance this significant victory should not blind the BNP leadership to the reality that the Awami League has won two fifths of the vote whilst the victorious alliance has won 46 per cent of the vote. Indeed, if we take account of the votes received on account of the three allies, the BNP's individual vote share is perhaps less than that of the Awami League which increased both its vote share and also its absolute vote by 40 per cent. Under the circumstances, the BNP cannot afford to ignore the Awami League, even if they do occupy not more than 70 seats in the house, since it represents the aspirations of 22 million voters, of whom six million are new voters.

It is not very useful for the BNP to argue that the Awami League, in office, ignored the opposition in the last Parliament which commanded the allegiance of 60 per cent of the voters. It is recognized, after three elections, that the BNP and the Awami League both remain equally powerful and cannot be eliminated from political consideration. Bangladesh's two party political system is here to stay and policy making has to be built around this reality. Begum Khaleda Zia, as the prospective Prime Minister, should therefore take some lessons from her first tenure in office, as also from that of the Awami League, and move away from a winner take all strategy by making a genuine attempt to initiate an ongoing consultative political process with the opposition. This exercise has to be sincere and not be designed as a cosmetic gesture. To move in this direction will require a serious effort at bridging the chasm which has opened up in communications between the two parties. To do so, Begum Zia will have to break away from the mirror image of politics where you do unto your opponent, what they did to you only moroso. This may require unilateral gestures which cater to the special sensitivities of the Awami League. Mahfuz Anam, in his thoughtful article in *The Daily Star* of 7 October has given some useful ideas of where this process may begin. The BNP should, however, ascertain for themselves, through informal exchanges, what are the most immediate concerns of Awami League and how far such gestures by the new ruling party would be reciprocated. Out of such a mutual set of gestures could come more substantive discussions on ground rules for the functioning of the new parliament and other pressing concerns. Such concerns would need to address more substantive issues such as the structure of politics and the direction of policymaking, in the days ahead, to ensure that we move away from the dysfunctional politics of the last decade to build a more inclusive and tolerant democratic polity.

Prof Rehman Sobhan, an eminent academician, is Executive Chairman of Centre for Policy Dialogue.

A negative approach could undo the political gains of the AL, registered in the election, by demoralizing their workers and would leave 22 million of their voters voiceless in parliament... Indeed, if we take account of the votes received on account of the three allies, the BNP's individual vote share is perhaps less than that of the Awami League which increased both its vote share and also its absolute vote by 40 per cent. Under the circumstances, the BNP cannot afford to ignore the Awami League, even if they do occupy not more than 70 seats in the house, since it represents the aspirations of 22 million voters.

credit, which were appreciated by the voters. The above statistical evidence is not intended to suggest that citizens were not concerned about terrorism and corruption in casting their vote or that the AL

cast, compared to 40 per cent received by the AL. However, when this 7 per cent higher vote share is spread across 300 constituencies, it was enough to win the BNP Alliance the two-thirds majority which they command today, in the 8th Parliament. Had Ershad remained loyal to the 4-Party alliance the Alliance's share of seats could have been even larger since the JP (Ershad) has won 14 seats and 6.5 per cent of the vote.

This evidence of the electoral outcome of such a BNP-led alliance was provided some months ago in two long articles by Nazim Kamran Chowdhury, in the columns of *The Daily Star* of April 13, 2001, a summary of which also appeared in the *Holiday* around the same time. In an article presented in *The Daily Star* of 6 October, Kamran has, most presciently, drawn attention to these forecasts he made in April 2001. The recent *Daily Star* article shows how Kamran's forecast of April 2001 has largely matched the outcome of the October poll. What Kamran had done in the April article was to add up the votes of the BNP, Jamaat and JP in 1996, in each constituency and to show how many seats could be won by such an anti-AL alliance if they voted for a single candidate. The Awami League should have heeded Kamran's exercise in electoral arithmetic more carefully, to help them to quantify the magnitude of the task before them in the forthcoming polls. I doubt if the electoral strategists in the Awami League were even aware of this article, though some persons did bring it to their notice.

Lessons from the polls for the Awami League

There are lessons from the polls which need to be absorbed by both parties. The party which most urgently needs to take stock of the changing trends in electoral arithmetic is the Awami League, because its assessment will impinge on their immediate response to the October polls. The AL needs to come to terms with the fact that the BNP has built a political coalition which has carried them to a decisive electoral, rather than political victory, on October 1, even while the Awami League was winning the allegiance of six million

proportion of the new voters entering the lists in 2006, to vote for the Awami League in the next election. This new generation of voters, who came of age in 2001, presumably do not bring with them any inherited loyalties to either party or carry over fewer historical political memories. For this new generation of voters, the present is the moment. These new voters do not have any strong memory of the record of the BNP when they held office from 1991 to 1996. Otherwise they would have recollected that terrorism, corruption and a partisan administration were not invented by the Awami League and were alive and well under both the Ershad and the last BNP administration. New voters in the age group of 18-23 are more inclined to be cognizant of the terrorism, corruption, partisanship and misgovernance that they witnessed or read about over the last few years. Obviously, for this generation, the development performance, good crops and stable prices, recorded during the tenure of the Awami League regime needed to be highly persuasive to outweigh the image of misgovernance of the outgoing regime. The new voters appear to have divided their vote between the AL and that of the BNP led alliance. This statistical evidence of the behavior of new voters remains contrary to popular wisdom which implies that the new voters clearly opted for the BNP alliance. This perspective is not substantiated by the available evidence and, thus, holds some hope for the future, for the Awami League, when another 15-20 million new voters will come of age in 2006.

Whilst time will reveal how far the bias of the caretaker administration may have influenced the outcome of the October 1 election, it is likely that most of the vote swing towards the BNP alliance will remain ascribable to the changed political arithmetic provided through the strategic alliance crafted by the BNP with its three allies. Such a perspective on the October election suggests that the Awami League will be making a grave, if not fatal, political mistake, if it continues to ascribe its massive electoral defeat exclusively to the malign intent of the caretaker government. Rather, the AL should be

Bangladesh at the dawn of the new millennium. All these tasks will require serious self-assessment prior to a rebuilding of the Awami League. Such a move to transform the AL into a Party of the 21st century will need to reinvigorate grassroots organization, introduce professionalism in designing its political strategy as well as party organization and invest enormous creative thinking through drawing in expert advice in designing its future agenda. Such a rebuilding of the party would need to originate in a process of ongoing consultation with the voters, as well as drawing in a new generation of young people, with a clean image, who may be motivated to participate in the exciting task of renovating a major democratic party, over the next decade.

This task of rethinking and rebuilding the party will not be possible if the Awami League continues to remain without comprehension as to the principal factors contributing to its massive electoral defeat, in spite of the record level of support it has received from the voters at the recent polls. The current approach of the AL, of questioning the legitimacy of the October polls, is likely to devalue their own electoral performance in mobilizing 22 million voters who account for two-fifths of the voters. Such a record level of votes is not only the largest received by any party in the history of Bangladesh but is one of the largest votes recorded by any political party, within a democratic election, anywhere in the world, outside of the two largest democracies of the USA and India. Failure to diagnose their defeat correctly appears to be keeping the Awami League out of the 8th Parliament and is driving them down a political blind alley from which reversal would be difficult. Such a negative approach could undo the political gains of the AL, registered in the election, by demoralizing their workers and would leave 22 million of their voters voiceless in parliament. Such a process of potentially dead-end politics will delay, if not postpone, the crucial task of embarking on the Herculean political challenges which lie before the party, if it is to retain its position at the vanguard of the democratic movement in Bangladesh.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



"Recognise Bangabandhu..."

I write with reference to Mahfuz Anam's appeal to the prime minister designate Begum Khaleda Zia ("Recognise Bangabandhu as the Father of the Nation", October 7).

I find Mr. Anam's commentary presumptuous, patronising and premature.

Firstly, it is presumptuous to assume that the prime minister designate will disregard history or the sentiment of the people. Although some political parties refuse to accept it, the fact is that all Bangladeshis regardless of political preference respect Bangabandhu as the Father of the Nation and acknowledge the position which is his due. I also firmly believe that contrary to the impression that is created by the same political parties and occasionally by *The Daily Star* there are very few persons who are "anti-Liberation" still living in this country after thirty years of an independent and sovereign existence. Most people who opposed the creation of Bangladesh did so in the context of the time and circumstances that prevailed thirty years ago. Those reasons lost their rele-

vance as soon as independent Bangladesh became a reality. To continue to polarise the country on this meaningless issue is to harm the very fabric of homogeneity which has knitted the country together.

Secondly although Mr. Anam clearly enjoys his position of moral authority his comment is patronising in its tone of high-minded righteousness and nobility of purpose. The reality is that political governments have their own imperatives and exigencies which influence decision making on the national level and public exhortations to "do the right thing" can have little effect on their actions. Surely Mr. Anam knows this well, having appealed to the past government to little effect for the last five years!

Finally, the appeal is premature because due to the childish self-absorption and refusal to face facts displayed by the same political party the duly elected representatives of the people are yet to be sworn in and take office!

Yasmeen Murshed, on e-mail

I would like to congratulate Mahfuz Anam, the editor of *The Daily Star* for another valuable commentary

"Recognise Bangabandhu as the Father of the Nation"

We must condemn all forms of destructive politics. Simply put, the Bangladeshi economy cannot handle any hartal or agitation by any political organisation any more. I support Mahfuz Anam's appeal to BNP to officially recognise Bangabandhu as the Father of the Nation. This should pave the way towards mutual respect and understanding amongst the top two political organisations in the country.

It is very depressing to read of all the destructive programs chalked out by the Awami League to protest their loss in the October 1 election. What are these politicians fighting for? If one party wins, the others will obviously lose. Has Awami League forgotten that Bangladesh has a well installed judicial system? Take all your grievances to court, if necessary. Why take to streets? Are we to believe that these politicians are in love with their position only and not the country? If they do love the country and people then why resort to such destructive programmes that not only hurts the country and economy, but the very people they begged votes from?

I feel that a mass awareness on

nationalism is paramount. Political scholars and the business community should use the print and electronic media to educate people en masse. BNP used the electronic media for election campaign purposes and they were well served. Bangladeshis should be aware and unitedly resist all the conspiracy against democracy regardless of their political affiliation. This is necessary for the very survival of the business community.

AA
California, USA, on e-mail

Spend less, get more work

The inspection staff in the public offices have low output, poor performance, and inefficiency due to corrupt practices (bribery, suppression of data, false documentation, etc). It is so easy to earn the monthly salary without justification and enjoy the benefit of a permanent job. There is no hire and fire atmosphere, and disciplinary actions these days are rare.

Hence the government may examine alternative means of payment for this type of fieldwork. For example, introduce basic retain-

ing pay (low), plus commission for each case detected and an additional amount on prosecution of each case. Each worker earns proportionately according to performance.

Initially a minimum monthly quota may be fixed during the probationary period. There should be fine for false cases and cheating. Existing officers will be allowed the option to retire voluntarily with some benefit.

It is not difficult to find a suitable formula for this type of "No-work, no-pay" scheme. It will save money and also more would be done.

AH
Dhaka

Terrorism

The other day Mr Karan Thapar, an internationally famous journalist was interviewing Mr L K Advani, the Indian Home Minister of BBC. In this interview Mr Advani was very vocal against terrorism. But he forgot that he still is fighting a case in the Indian Court for demolishing the Babri Mosque. Isn't it terrorism?

Badruddin
Dhamondi, 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: BELLA, FREE LANCER

Save the wealth of the river

Selling of jatka fish (Hilsha fry) is a good way of earning easy money and there are many who are involved in this business. Though catching of jatka fish is prohibited, there is an indiscriminate effort to do the same. At the Chittagong port, everyday a huge amount of jatka Hilsha is offloaded and traded. To save the wealth of our rivers, we need to stop the indiscriminate harvesting of fry which is the main reason for diminishing supply of Hilsha.