

DHAKA FRIDAY OCTOBER 12, 2001

### Was the big cabinet necessary?

The cabinet size can only be justified *if it is efficient* 

UR hearty welcome to the newly inducted government led by Begum Khaleda Zia who brings to bear a massive electoral mandate on her office to run the country for the next five years.

This is an auspicious occasion. The mood is happy and the feelings exulting. Three elections later, democracy looks stronger, and the supremacy of popular verdict well-established. How assertive people's choice of public representatives can get has been amply demonstrated in the last elections. The heavy mandate that Begum Zialed four-party alliance has received is without parallel in our recent history. Commensurately, the public expectations from the new leadership are that much high and need to be met with a sense of proportional obligation. Seized of the popular mood, Begum Zia quickly on the heels of being elected as the Leader of the House, said, she would observe the work of the ministers for a year to form her opinion about them, one way or the other. We have all the reason to believe that her sense of urgency to deliver is shared by her senior colleagues.

That said, let's now turn to the mixed feelings we have about the size and composition of her council of ministers. This is by far the largest one in the history of Bangladesh with 27 full ministers, 28 state ministers and four deputy ministers taken on board. With Begum Zia as the PM, it is a sixty-member council of ministers and a 28member cabinet, both markedly bigger by past standards. It is as if a big victory has yielded a big cabinet! It has been a cabinet put together by compromise, accommodation and a certain rewardist recognition of contributions to electoral victory. Old guards have a big presence, regardless of their previous performance-tags, and the number of new faces is very high. Regrettably, some controversial figures have been given ministerial berths.

But what is definitely disappointing is the lack of gender balance and minority balance even in such a widebodied council of ministers. Hopefully, the argument is not that a sufficient number of them did not get elected to provide any workable range of choices. In case it is so, we would point to the 10 per cent technocratic quota which could be utilised to strike a balance in terms of gender and minority representations in the council of minis-

In the present scheme of things what assumes critical importance is the delineation of power, authority and responsibilities between the ministers on the one side and state ministers and deputy ministers on the other. The mechanism of their mutual functioning will have to be clearly spelled out. Allowing for efficiency-friendly latitude to each group of functionaries, the very crucial matter concerning who should report to whom needs to be settled once and for all. Just as nothing should be done over the heads of the ministers, something that the PM has to consciously discourage, so would the state and deputy ministers need some element of freedom of action to add to the decision-making process. One can cite a plethora of instances of relations between ministers and state ministers souring to a point of ministerial paralysis both in the first cabinet of BNP government and that of the immediately preceding AL government. These confused the bureaucracy and created loyalists in their ranks for the ministers and the state or deputy ministers taking their infighting to debilitating levels. In certain ministries work came to a grinding halt. So, the immediate task before prime minister Begum Zia is to make a clear-cut delineation between the power and functions of the cabinet ministers and the state ministers. The fact that there are 31 state and deputy ministers to 27 full ministers makes a clear definition of their fields of competence all the more compelling. In making our suggestion we are aware that with delineated powers state ministers may start acting like independent ministers themselves. The challenge is how to get work out of both the groups of ministers. We do not want to see a cabinet where ministers and state-ministers fighting with each other for power and authority. We also do not want to erode the power of the cabinet ministers. Yet we cannot have a replay of the past situation either. The big size of the council of ministers portending a sort of burden on the national exchequer will have only appeared in a mellow light if it ended up performing well. People will then think they have got the value for their money. Indeed, the taste of the pudding is in eating, so that a high premium is placed on the new government's capacity to deliver. In the fluidity of the global situation today, they have to start performing from day one to stay on course lest they are overtaken by events. We are forced to conclude with the question whether such a big cabinet was necessary.

# Anatomy of a debacle

may have denied the right to vote by

genuine voters who turned up late.

But all these aberrations and viola-

tions of election procedure were

random in nature and cannot be

construed to be part of a game plan.

If 'crude rigging' took place on a

large scale this would not go unno-

ticed by polling agents of parties and

by more than half a million observ-

ers monitoring the election. Though

some observers have mentioned

about irregularities they hastened to

add that such cases were not alarm-



INCE the election results became public there have been exaggerations galore. The large number of seats lost by the Awami League immediately led to a paroxysm of rage, which soon boiled over into allegations of "crude rigging". Intimidation and prevention of members of minority communities were added to the fulminations made. So far the Awami League was concerned, the people were cheated of their 'votes' through the machinations of the authorities and the four-party alliance. The fourparty alliance, led by the BNP, in their turn hailed victory as the mandate given to them by the electorate. Many analysts and a large number of articulate public interpreted the election results as rejection of the Awami League and consequently the BNP alliance becoming the winner by default. Both the allegations and the interpretations are overstated. On the basis of available facts and figures they may be shown to be incorrect, too.

It cannot be completely ruled out that there have been some rigging and other irregularities. With the best of intentions and under the best of circumstances it is almost impossible to guarantee a completely free and fair election. If in a country like America allegations of unfair practices could be made, how can this blight be banished in a fledgling democracy like Bangladesh? It is guite plausible that use of fake ballot papers was resorted to sporadically Mistakes in counting votes cast, deliberate or genuine, also may have been made here and there. Fracas and scuffles may have taken place injuring polling agents of one

margins. According to the same analyst the success rate of the Awami League candidate in areas of minority concentration has been three times that of the BNP plus (Asif Nazrul). Having demolished the case of rigging as put forward by the Awami League, one analyst has described this paranoia as a case of 'obsessive compulsive disorder' (Ziauddin Chowdhury). By looking at the measly number

of seats secured by the Awami League it is tempting to draw the facile conclusion that the voters party or another. Pre-emptive voting have rejected the party for its fail-

government have been mentioned. Among these failures terrorists reigning supreme with political blessing is on top of the list. The cases of ministers' and MPs' sons committing heinous crimes and getting away were too many and far too frequent. Some MPs unleashed reign of terror in their own constituencies in the full glare of media. Not a word was said against them by party high command nor any disciplinary action taken. To foil hartals called by the opposition the ruling where the Hindu voters are in the party organised processions, which majority the Awami League candiwere led by ministers and MPs dates have won by overwhelming accompanied by gun-toting goons. The nexus among terrorists, law enforcement agencies and the

ures in governance. The immediate

reaction among the articulate and

literate public has been that votes

have been given against the Awami

League and not so much for the

BNP alliance. In other words, the

BNP-led alliance has been the

beneficiary of the no-confidence

vote given to the Awami League. In

support of this 'popular' view that

made the rounds on gossip corners

at various levels and even in print

ruling party became firmly entrenched. Next to indulgence to terrorism was the widespread incidence of extortion and corruption in which mastaans, law enforcement agencies, officials of various departments and leaders of the party took part ravenously. Things got so worse that the Transparency International placed Bangladesh as number one in its ranking of corrupt

government has been pointed out to

countries. The third failure in the Awami League's scorecard as a

ures of the Awami League has been its attempt to claim sole ownership of the war of liberation and paving lip service to secularism (Ziauddin Chowdhury). It is true that terrorism, corruption and politicisation were not the invention of the Awami League and some of these had raised their ugly heads during the previous governments. But it is a matter of record that all these cases of abuse and misuse of power reached their apogee during the

be the politicisation of bureaucracy

tary seats from three to 16 (Rehman Awami League's governance. Given the scale and scope of Sobhan). The electoral triumph of the four-party alliance is thus clearly misuse and abuse of power it would be very much credible to observe the result of the alliance arithmetic that the Awami League's debacle in based on common candidates. Neither the BNP's programme nor the last election was the comeuppance that was waiting to happen. the charisma of their leaders con-But surprisingly the stunning defeat tributed significantly to the landslide of the Awami League was not due to victory. By the same token, nor did its misgovernance but entirely the negative image of the Awami because of a very simple factor viz. League stemming from its the arithmetic of alliance (Kamran misgovernance become a positive Choudhury). The most direct and factor for the alliance. This latter fact concrete measure of popularity of a is somewhat of a puzzle and a party is the number of votes garcause for concern. If in popular nered. In the recent election the perception the Awami League failed Awami League received more votes to 'deliver' to the people it should compared to the 1996 election. have received a double whammy in According to a preliminary report the form of both fewer seats and published in The Daily Star, smaller number of popular votes

and cronvism. Party affiliation and secured 63 seats (it is now 62) it not efficiency or even seniority received 40.26 percent of all votes became the criteria for important cast. This percentage is up by three postings at home and abroad while from what it collected in 1996. Other in business favour was shown to things remaining the same, on the supporters. The neutrality and basis of popular votes the Awami objectivity of bureaucracy in deci-League should have won the same sion making were rent asunder with number of seats in parliament as in far-reaching consequences. Even 1996. But other things did not the highest seat of judiciary was remain the same and there was the dragged down into the humdrum rub. By fielding common candidates in selected constituencies (where either the BNP or the Jamaat candi-

although the Awami League

date was the runner-up in 1996) the

four-party alliance trumped the

Awami League and took away a

large number of their seats. Accord-

ing to a preliminary estimate, the

BNP toppled the Awami League in

85 constituencies through the

coalition strategy. During 1996 and

the last election Jamaat's share of

total vote was 8.61 and 4.21 per-

centage respectively but in spite of

decline of popular vote the party

increased the number of parliamen-

than in the previous election. In the event, the party improved its popularity and collected a greater percentage of total votes. To explain this puzzle the following hypothesis is made

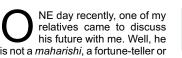
Let it be assumed that 10 per cent of the total voters belong to the rich category. Among the rich there was no significant switching of loyalties between parties as their affiliations are more or less fixed by virtue of patronage received and subscription made. The middle class in Bangladesh may range from 25 to 30 per cent of total voters. This is the class most directly affected by terrorism, corruption, cronyism and partisanship. It is also politically the most conscious and critically articulate. Here five to 10 per cent of the voters might have switched their support from the Awami League and voted for the alliance because of disenchantment, even indignation. But this swing was more than compensated by increase in votes from the poor who constitute about 60 per cent of the total. The reason for this is that members of this class are not directly affected by terrorism, corruption or partisanship on a daily basis. Moreover, the well-oiled grassroots organisation of the Awami League helped by some local organisations not only managed to retain the loyalty of the poor but also increased their number in their favour. Ratcheting up popularity by the Awami League is explained by this behaviour pattern. The above is a hypothesis and it

needs to be tested empirically. The election of 2001 is over. Its analysis and post-mortem will continue well into the future because of its landmark character. For the civil society the results have thrown up another challenge which is of grave import. How can popular perception about the image of a party and evaluation of its performance be reflected in popular votes cast? Democracy demands that a party that fails to govern should be rejected directly by the people and not through jugglery of arithmetic incubated in an alliance.

Hasnat Abdul Hye is a former secretary, novelist and economist

### Ad astra per aspera

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN



has an IQ of 75, but he goes through life with astounding success. He survives bullying, war and freak accidents, while more intelligent people around him get killed or die otherwise. Not only that, he also lives to win medals and to get fantastically rich. He defies the laws of survival as the gravitation of fortune pects of life can be very electric. puts him in the right places at the

right time. Thus luck's gratuity surpasses lack of aumption in Gump's life. But

for millions. Amadeus Mozart perished young under the stress of hard work and hardship. John Kennedy's life was cut short by an assassin's bullet at the height of its glory. The last emperor of China spent the last days of his life languishing in the communist labour camp. The pros-

Albert Camus once wrote that the human life is an absurd wedge between the unremembered past and the unknown future. But what

makes that wedge absurd also makes it so absorbing. Elvis Pres-

lev's music teacher did not think

Elvis had a future in singing. Lucille

Ball had to wait for fame until she

was in her 40s. It seems that there is

a right time for everything in life, and

one must wait for his turn, if that turn

the obfuscated future, one must go

on living, and it may not be easy.

Lord Buddha proclaimed that one

could escape that uneasiness

through the right kind of education.

Plato believed that ordinary people

Between the obliterated past and

is at all in the cards for him.

should be trained to happily do their tasks in a society. Aristotle saw education as a motivation for citizens to participate in civic duties. Success or failure, man must prepare to go through life understanding and executing his responsibili-

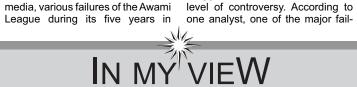
Above all, education was seen as a communicator between life and living, between existence and exertion. Based earlier in religion, it explained existence with exegesis,

instrument. If the strings are too tight, they might snap. But if they are slack, one cannot play music on them. Education, meant to bring balance, tipped life in anxiety and struggle Perhaps religion slackens life by

asserting that it is a mission of salvation. But science makes it taut as an unrelenting motion of survival. If religion denies life its living, then science wants to deprive the living of its life. In a nutshell, living may

When luck is forced upon talent, it can cause disillusion. Yet, when talent is forced upon luck, one can be despaired. Pereginos wrote books, which were not selling well. So he killed himself one day, hoping that the news of his death would boost sale of his books. It did not happen.

I told my young relative about a poster I saw during a Career Fair on the campus of Kansas State University, which had this announcement: Your future is in the stars. It was an affirmation that the future is unknown no matter if one is armed with talent or luck. In other words, the lucky will be talented and the talented will be lucky so long as it is the stars. I told him to work hard for the best and then prepare for the worst, because one could not have control over the fruits of life. For example I mentioned that an eccentric man named John Nash won a Nobel Prize nearly 44 years after he had completed his work.



The election of 2001 is over. Its analysis and post-mortem will continue well into the future because of its landmark character. For the civil society the results have thrown up another challenge which is of grave import. How can popular perception about the image of a party and evaluation of its performance be reflected in popular votes cast? Democracy demands that a party that fails to govern should be rejected directly by the people and not through jugglery of arithmetic incubated in an alliance.

ing in number and scope. The Awami League itself would have detected rigging if it was so 'crude' and made protest without waiting for the results. Their reticence on the day of election proves that rigging was neither crude nor blatantly rampant. As regards the intimidation of some voters, particularly the members of minority communities, analysts have explained with fact and figures that there has been no deliberate and large-scale victimisation. In the twelve constituencies

even a futurologist. He is just a young man, who is studying MBA in one of the ersatz business schools in the country. He is already worried about the future, because the job market is tight and he is not sure if he has been adequately bracing for

I did not know what to tell him. But he wanted my advice. So I guoted him from the Tom Hanks movie, Forrest Gump, I told him that life is a box of chocolates. Then I asked him to see that movie. The movie opens to this surrealistic scene showing a feather. The feather floats over houses, churches and trees - dipping and soaring. Occasionally, it settles, only to rise again and peregrinate in the air. It symbolised so well the crests and troughs of human life!

Needless to say, the feather is a metaphor for the life of the movie's namesake character. Forrest Gump

Between the obliterated past and the obfuscated future, one must go on living, and it may not be easy. Lord Buddha proclaimed that one could escape that uneasiness through the right kind of education. Plato believed that ordinary people should be trained to happily do their tasks in a society. Aristotle saw education as a motivation for citizens to participate in civic duties. Success or failure, man must prepare to go through life understanding and executing his responsibilities.

CROSS TALK

expounding that the exertion of this have changed a great deal over the centuries. but life has only changed living is to prepare for the existence of life after death. But the Renaisfrom despair to desperation. sance ushered in a new awakening. Which brings one back to the

It made man the master of his desissue of balance between luck and tiny and confined the exertion of this talent. Luck is despairing because it living to the existence of this life. If cocoons a man within the limits of religion attempted to explain life, destiny. Talent promotes desperascience adventured to explore it. tion by demanding that destiny is What transformed education, what man makes of it. Nero was a also transformed life. Education. Roman emperor who craved to become an artist. But he was not which started as a pursuit of life, turned life into a pursuit of educalucky with the talent for it. At the time tion. Lord Buddha had overheard a of his death, he is said to have musician telling an admirer why it resented that a great artist was

perishing with him.

But my relative reverted to his original question. Was it enough for him to complete an MBA, or should he gather additional skills? I told him what any sensible senior relative would tell. I advised him to learn computers and to go abroad to acquire a foreign degree

Will that secure the future for him? I told him I did not know that answer. Ad astra per To the stars through aspera: difficulties. That is one thing, which cannot change. He must be patient to know his stars.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

#### 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.



#### Cruelty, thy name is human

It may be livelihood for the man who's using the monkey; entertainment for those who are watching; but what does it mean for the animal? We don't know. But we have separated it from its own environment for our pleasure, for our profession. Do we ever ask ourselves how much cruelty we are showing to these animals? Laws regarding animal rights need to surface and put to practice.

## **Attacks on minorities**

KAMRAN REZA CHOWDHURY

that does not happen to everyone.

True, if one is not gifted with talent.

one can be lifted by the transcen-

dent. Demosthenes suffered from a

lisp, vet he became one of the

greatest orators in history. Thomas

Alva Edison invented the gramo-

phone when he was deaf. One

American president, who was a C

student in Harvard, raised his dis-

tressed country from the wheel-

when talent is pervasive. Van Gogh

died a pauper without recognition,

although his paintings are now sold

Again, luck can be elusive even

chair.

HE conscious citizens of the country cannot but be worried over the reports of recent attacks on the minority communities in the country following the 8th parliamentary election held on Oct 01. Attacks were reported from different parts of the country including Bagerhat, Gopalganj, Rajshahi.

Bangladesh Awami League has blamed the BNP and its allies, the victor in the election, for the attacks on them. The BNP-led four party alliance has denied the allegation and termed it as 'conspiracy'. In her first reaction after the historic victory in the parliamentary election, the alliance chief and Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia urged her party activists not be 'over enthusiast' and show 'maximum restraint'. She also urged all segments of people to forget all differences with a view to building a happy and prosperous nation

Again, it was also reported that Idris Ali, President of Awami League unit at Badhal union under Kachua upazilla of Bagerhat district, was

arrested on September 28 on charge of setting fire to some houses of the minority community. The OC of Bagerhat DB police said that Idris was caught red handed while setting fire (The Daily Star Sep 30). So it is difficult to comment who have been perpetrating such heinous crimes against humanity as both the parties are accusing each other.

However, it is certain that whoever may be the perpetrators, they are not the friends of the country. They do not want to see prevalence of a happy and peaceful coexistence of all communities in the country.

There is a widespread impression that the minorities, especially the Hindus, are the Awami League 'vote bank'. The idea took roots among the countrymen before the 7th parliamentary polls in 1996 when some BNP leaders and activists circulated different rhymes branding Sheikh Hasina pro-Hindu with a view to alianate Muslim voters.

Even, some BNP leaders in 1996 publicly declared that "if Awami League came to power, the Hindus'

Uludhoni would replace Ajaan of the Muslims". Definitely these were ploys to defeat Awami League in the polls, but the plan proved futile and Awami League came to power. No Uludhoni, even after the completion of the Awami League's five years tenure, has replaced Ajaan at any part of the country. These prove that the countrymen are not guided by any communal sentiment.

was important to properly tune his

**OPINION** 

Though it was a political tactic, we should discard such utterances. Mentionable, such slogans were not heard from any political activists or leaders of any party during the 8th parliamentary polls. And albeit Jamaat-e-Islami is a component of the four-party alliance, we do not believe that minorities will be undermined in the country

The notion that 'Hindus are the supporters of Awami League only' is not correct. Because, they are also rational beings and have enough wisdom to judge which party or candidate to be preferred. They are also patriots. They also took arms to fight the occupation forces in the War of Independence in 1971 and sacrificed their invaluable lives for the sake of the nation and the coun-

There are many Hindu leaders in BNP who vied in all parliamentary elections with BNP ticket. Again there are Hindu leaders who were Ministers during the previous BNP regimes. So it is really unwise to push the minorities towards a specific political party, which will surely result in communalised political polarization in the country.

Both the Awami League and the BNP are secular political parties, that is why the minorities may have the choice to be involved with politics of any of the parties. It is very natural

Hon'ble Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia should prioritize checkng of the violent incidents occurring in the country, right now. The BNP leadership should not forget that the countrymen gave them mandate to govern the country being frustrated with unabated lawlessness in the country during the Awami League regime. Every citizen, from all walks of life, interviewed by different media, harp on the same string that their desire from the new government is restoration of law and order in the country.

The image of any government depends largely on the performance of the party during the first quarter since its ascendancy. So please take immediate action to curb terrorism in the society and ensure the security of lives and properties of the minorities in the country. Because, our sacred Constitution has made provisions for ensuring equal rights for all citizens irrespective of sex, religion, cast and creed. If you fail to thwart the evil design of the vested interests out to spread terrorism and communalism, this will, certainly, erode the existing peace and harmony in the country.

Bangladesh is the third largest Muslim country in the world. We earned a very bad name in the international arena when branded as the 'most corrupt country' in the world. If we cannot ensure the peaceful co-existence of all people of the society, it will, surely, sully the image of the country as the 'Moderate Muslim Democracy' in the world we gained by practising democracy.

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