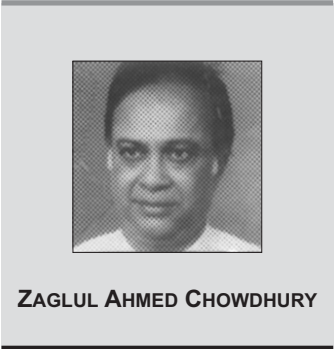


How much dent the Congress can make in the NDA citadel?



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

INDIA, world's largest democracy, has gone into first phase of the voting for the constitution of the 14th Loksabha, lower house of parliament, in a five-phase staggered elections that will culminate on May 10. The general impression is that the ruling rainbow coalition of the national democratic alliance(NDA) will return to power for another term. This is probably the most likely picture at the present situation but the scenario can be different even though something otherwise drastically only seldom happens in the balloting.

The ruling NDA is basking in the glory of having successfully completed the term in a country where culture of coalition politics has become a reality and in the process completion of the full term is also a kind of rarity. However, the present NDA government has not only faced no problem in the term but also advanced the voting by several months, which is a measure of confidence for the coalition headed by prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Any government that chooses to go for early elections deliberately abandoning the advantage of remaining in power for a considerable period of time can certainly be credited with such remarkable confidence. Hence, a victory by the ruling alliance may appear as a normal development. The chances of NDA returning to power as such seems on the cards

barring a late swing favouring the opponents which is not very much expected to take place.

But it will be wrong to say that the NDA led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) will have an easy sailing in the polls just because it has a popular figure like Vajpayee at the helm, a satisfactory economy and a friendly foreign policy, like relatively better relations with the neighbours -- mainly Pakistan -- at the time of the elections. True, the developments like cricket series in Pakistan

by Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who headed two successive 22-party NDA authority in New Delhi, had lasted for barely twelve days as it had to relinquish sensing clear failure to muster necessary support on the floor of the house. The NDA this time did not confront threat to its existence even though there were occasional and minor ruptures in its cohesion. Needless to say, the ruling coalition could not have opted for early polls if it had doubts about returning to power. From the per-

spective of power but her own credential as a "foreigner" is a big liability for the organisation. She is definitely from India's famous Nehru-Gandhi political family but her belonging to that dynasty is by sheer marriage, being the widow of late Congress president and prime minister Rajiv Gandhi. Not only many Indians but even a section of Congressmen feel that the Italian-born lady is not an ideal choice for the top position like prime minister in a country of more than 100 crores.

family and Congress. They are sparing no effort to malign Sonia as "foreigner". This too may work against the BJP as a ploy of splitting the Nehru dynasty politically.

The Congress which has been faring badly in the largest Uttar Pradesh state that sends 85 members in the 543-member lower house of parliament (Loksabha), may improve its tally this time here because of Rahul-Priyanka factor. But the performance of Congress in the other Hindi heartland parts like

Different parties have forged electoral alliance and the NDA is much ahead of the main opposition in this regard.

It is possible that the NDA will have an absolute majority securing more than 273 seats but the alliance may fall short of this target. The Congress is not expected to gain any majority -- probably not even a single majority --which the BJP will gain in all possibility. But a non-NDA government may still be possible in the event the NDA fails to secure absolute majority and dark horses may emerge in the scene like H.D. Deve Gowda becoming the prime minister of the United Front government. Smaller parties are likely to hold the sway if the NDA rather unexpectedly fails to command the number of seats required for forming the government. Some smaller organisations like the Samajwadi party of Mulyam Singh Yadav in Uttar Pradesh are maintaining distance from both BJP and Congress and may throw weight behind a big party only after the polls results.

There is no dearth of accusations and counter-accusations in the campaign. The Congress and the secular parties are attacking Vajpayee for his anti-independence role in the British India which the prime minister flatly denies. The BJP is trying to shed its communal image and even the hardliner deputy prime minister L.K. Advani is also talking soft about the minorities and good ties with Pakistan to placate the Muslims. But the hardliners are also blowing hot and cold as they have not abandoned the "Ram mandir" issue. Vajpayee is definitely the main asset for the BJP and the NDA. But contrary to NDA claims, there is no "Atal wave" in the Indian electoral scene. The conditions are favourable for the NDA but its easy sailing cannot be taken for granted.

Jagrul Ahmed Chowdhury is a senior journalist.

MATTERS AROUND US

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and remarkable win by India has given a boost to the Vajpayee government ahead of the voting since it reflects popular feelings. Impetus to further normalisation of the ties with another hitherto unfriendly neighbour China will also be seen as favouring the NDA. Domestically, the results of the latest of the states that had gone to the polls also largely favoured the BJP and undeniably this development encouraged the NDA to go for early elections. All these bode well for the ruling coalition which did not face much serious challenge during its present tenure and consequently approached the voting with less tension and uncertainty.

The last NDA government had to quit office midway through the term because of inner squabbles particularly revolt by regional AIDMK party of Tamil Nadu led by its supreme Jayalalitha that caused the midterm polls. Earlier, a BJP government led

spective of the NDA, the timing for the elections is favourable for it by all counts and there is no reason whatsoever why it should not fare well.

This somewhat rosy picture notwithstanding, the main opposition Congress seemed gaining ground, albeit slowly, during the last phase of the electioneering. The announcement of early polls did not come as a surprise to any quarters since the victory in the state assembly polls particularly in the important Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan had left few in doubt that the NDA will advance the voting at the national level in a bid to reap the benefits of the results. The Congress was not better placed at that time having suffered crushing defeats in the state assembly polls despite its good showing in the state polls earlier. It's leader Italian-born Sonia Gandhi is engaged in a grim battle to unseat the BJP-lead coal-

NDA is happily aware of this and is pursuing the "foreigner" issue with all seriousness to discredit the Congress. Prime minister Vajpayee and other top NDA leaders are in the vanguard of this attack. However, the Congress has drafted Sonia's son Rahul into politics and he is contesting from slain father Rajiv's Amethi constituency in Uttar Pradesh while sister Priyanka is also busy in electioneering. Sonia is contesting from Indira Gandhi's adjacent Rae Bareilly seat. The entry of her son and daughter in active politics has served well for the Congress because here is a direct inheritance from the Nehru family. Besides, too much to trade against Sonia's "foreign origin" may also create sympathy for her. Indira Gandhi's younger son late Sanjay Gandhi's widow Maneka and son Barun Gandhi have joined BJP just before the polls clearly in a bid to stave off support for the Nehru

Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan is important since no party or alliance can form a government at the centre without good showing in the critically important Hindi belt. Its tally in the south has not been satisfactory last time but it needs to be improved for any chance of forming a government in India. In West Bengal, it is the leftists who are ruling the roost for many years and they would retain the ascendancy. In any case, the leftists and centerist like the Congress are considered as secular forces and hence are closer to each other compared to their difference with the BJP, widely seen as reflecting the views of Hindu nationalism or allies of communal forces. However, the party has a liberal face which is presented by prime minister Vajpayee. Smaller parties and the regional organisations will have a crucial say if the NDA fails to win outright majority in the parliament.

Empowering electorates to make informed choices

DR. BADIUL ALAM MAJUMDAR

POLLING in the Indian parliamentary elections has begun on April 20. Something unprecedented is happening in these elections. All candidates for the first time submitted, along with their nomination papers, affidavits disclosing some very sensitive personal information -- information about their educational background, past criminal records, assets they own and the debts they owe. These information are provided not because of the goodness of heart of the candidates, but because it is mandatory -- required by the Indian Supreme Court. More significantly, the affidavits containing these information are public documents, with everyone having the right to access their contents.

This unprecedented disclosure requirement did not come easily or without fights. The compliant politicians did not readily provide the information. Rather it was the result of a long and hard struggle by the vibrant civil society movement in India to ensure people's right to make informed choices in elections.

The long struggle

The idea of requiring elected public officials to disclose personal information owes its origin to a novel experiment undertaken by Public Affairs Centre (PAC), Bangalore prior to the municipal elections in 1996. The experiment -- Choose the Right Councillor -- involved collecting and disseminating information

It is clear that the quality of governance of a society can be no better than that of the quality of its elected representatives. The members of the Indian civil society, supported by the activism of the Indian courts, have taken giant steps to clean up their electoral process by ensuring people's right to know about the background of their elected officials. I hope we will do something similar in our country soon. Otherwise we will have no right to complain about criminalisation of our politics, which has become a favourite pastime for many.

about candidates contesting elections to Bangalore city corporation and its different wards. With the help of a questionnaire, candidates contesting in each ward were asked to provide information as to whether they were taxpayers and they resided in the ward from which they contested. They were also asked to give information on their criminal records, their level of awareness of civic issues, their commitments and priorities for their wards, and their past achievements. With the help of The Deccan Herald and other local newspapers and an army of volunteers, the information collected were compiled and distributed among the voters in order to help them elect the best candidates. The experiment created quite a sensation and caught the imagination of other civil society groups. Such information empowerment campaigns of voters are now carried out in hundreds of municipal wards in India.

Inspired by the experiment in Bangalore and its replication in other municipalities, a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) was filed in Delhi High Court by the Association

of Democratic Reforms (ADR) in October 1999, seeking disclosures of past criminal records and pending criminal cases against candidates contesting elections. In December 2000, the Delhi HC upheld the ADR petition and directed the Election Commission to secure these information from candidates.

Politicians fighting back

In January 2001, the NDA government and Congress party appealed to the Indian Supreme Court against this judgment on the grounds that the judiciary encroached into legislative arena. People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL), ADR and Lok Satta fought against the government and Congress party on this issue.

On May 2, 2002, the Indian Supreme Court delivered a landmark judgment directing the Election Commission (EC) to make mandatory for each candidate in Parliament and Assembly elections to furnish: (a) whether the candidate was convicted, acquitted or discharged of any criminal offence in the past; (b) whether the candidate was accused in any pending case of any offence in the six months prior to

the months of filing nominations; (c) lists of assets (immovable, movable and bank balances, etc.) of the candidate; (d) lists of liabilities, if any, of the candidate particularly to public financial institutions and to the government; and (e) evidence of educational qualifications of the candidate.

Although members of the civil society welcomed the decision, political parties strongly opposed it. In fact, the government did not act even after the EC wrote a letter seeking the issuance of an order amending the Election Rules 1961, which prescribes the format of nomination papers for elections to legislatures. In order to give full effect to Court's directives, EC subsequently issued an order on June 28, 2002 making it mandatory for candidates to provide the above information. The order stated that furnishing of wrong or incomplete information or suppression of any material information by any candidate could result in the rejection of his/her nomination papers.

The Union Government convened an all-party conference on July 8, 2002, which unanimously rejected the EC's order. The government subsequently prepared a draft bill for electoral reforms, which was presented at another all-party conference on July 15, 2002. The bill nullified the Supreme Court and EC directives and only provided for disqualifying candidates convicted of heinous crimes by courts in two separate cases. Congress and left parties, however, rejected the proposed legislation on the ground that it would compromise people's right to information. In July 2002, PAC, Bangalore, and other leading civil society groups sent a letter to all MPs demanding the implementation of the EC directives.

The government submitted an Electoral Reform Ordinance to the President in the 1st week of August 2002. A delegation representing the National Campaign for Electoral Reforms (NCER) met with President Abul Kalam on August 16, 2002 and appealed to him not to assent to the Ordinance in order to protect citizens' fundamental right to know about the candidates' antecedents. Consequently, the President returned the Ordinance on August 23, 2002 for clarifications and reconsideration. The Cabinet, however, rejected the President's request on August 24 and resent the Ordinance to him. The President signed the Ordinance on the assurance that the government would consider his suggestions at the time of legislating the Ordinance in Parliament.

In September 2002, the civil society groups challenged the Ordinance terming it as a "constitutional monstrosity." They argued that the legislature had no power to ask the instrumentalities of the State to disobey or disregard the decisions given by the Courts, or to declare that the decisions rendered by the Courts were not binding or were of no effect.

On December 28, 2002, the government introduced the Representation of People's (Third Amendment) Act. Section 33B of the Act nullified the May 2, 2002 Supreme Court directives for disclosures.

On March 13, 2003 the Supreme Court struck down Section 33B of the Act and required the enforcement of Court's May 2, 2002 judgment and EC's notification of June 28, 2002. The Court specifically directed that the candidates disclose: (1) all their criminal records;

(2) all assets and liabilities of themselves and their families; and (3) their educational qualifications. The Court further directed that the non-disclosure of the above information would be a ground for the rejection of nomination. The EC issued a revised notification on March 27 to implement the Court verdict.

On June 25, 2003, All India State Election Commissioners' (SEC) Conference in Bangalore took the decision to implement the Supreme Court judgment, requiring candidates in elections of local bodies to make similar disclosures.

It is clear that the quality of governance of a society can be no better than that of the quality of its elected representatives. The members of the Indian civil society, supported by the activism of the Indian courts, have taken giant steps to clean up their electoral process by ensuring people's right to know about the background of their elected officials. I hope we will do something similar in our country soon. Otherwise we will have no right to complain about criminalisation of our politics, which has become a favourite pastime for many.

Badiul Alam Majumdar, PhD is Global Vice President and Country Director, The Hunger Project-Bangladesh.

In memoriam

Prof Nurunnahar Fyzennessa

So far, yet so close

AZIZ MALLICK

TODAY, heaven has one angel more in its midst. To many of you who didn't know my grandmother, the shock of hearing her parting us, will not sink in. But watching her for the better part of twenty-five years, I know there are few people whose life she didn't touch and few who will not mourn her.

Nurunnahar Fyzennessa -- Jana, to me -- passed away on the morning of March 31.

Thousand of miles away from her, all that comes to mind are scattered memories and images, instances that defined the spirit she embodied. As an educationist, a woman's right activist, on the stage or in front of a rally, she never struck me as anything but a person of indomitable personality, a woman far ahead of her time.

Back in the 1950's when women were still closeted within the four walls she was winning gold medals in the 100m hurdles, at the Dhaka University. At a time when America seemed a world away she was at Denver as a visiting professor, as a Fulbright Scholar, and later at Colorado, in 1966 working on her Doctorate in Education. I grew up hearing stories and seeing the innumerable pictures my grandparents took near the Grand Canyon, The Disney Land, or in the deserts of Arizona smartly posing in Mexican hats.

After she came back from the US, she joined Dhaka University. In 1985-86, she became the first woman in Dhaka University's history to become Syndicate Member, the university's apex body. She was then the Provost of Rokeya Hall, and what started as tenure of four years actually spanned to over eight. I remember getting quite frustrated at the number of hours she would spend with the hostel authorities, the students, day in day out. To her, she was the surrogate mother to the hundred or so girls, and shying away from that responsibility was tantamount to sin. Little wonder during her tenure, there were no untoward instances and the throng of students who flocked to Jana's bedside is a testament to her legacy.

She was the front runner in women's rights. When she was the Provost, her peace rally was bated charged by the police. At the age of 55 she had to resort to running from the police and helping her colleagues over the walls. Observing her closely, I noticed she never compromised with indiscipline, injustice, and violence. After running the Rokeya Hall administration for more than a decade she unhesitatingly relinquished the job of Provost in protest against injustice and terror. She even took shelter of law just to vindicate her stand against evil doers.

Her zest for living was contagious. Otherwise my mother, Sadya Mallick, would never have ventured at the tender age of 15 to perform concerts in Calcutta or take the stage amongst the few child artists when BTV was launched.

This positive attitude to life was so typical of her. To Jana, life never stood still, and she urged all around her to soak in all life had to offer. If you remember her radio show Khela Ghor, you will probably remember how she would host the children's show, egging them on to sing, recite, play out drama or simply talk! So many of the modern-day stars like Sabina Yasmin, Shahnaz



Rahmatulla, Sabiha Mahboob started off sitting on her lap in front of that microphone.

Among her glorious achievements, the most noted ones are the founding of Chhayaneer, a day care centre, and starting of Rokeya Foundation at Dhaka University. Rokeya Foundation gives scholarship to meritorious students every year.

In fact, she had her first attack when delivering a speech at a 'Mahila Parishad' meeting. After she collapsed on stage, and was rushed to the hospital, her first words were about how the meeting ended. A month after she recovered, she was off again against her doctor's orders to attend the meetings and push the agenda for women's right forward. It simply drove me nuts, why she would continually put her needs behind everyone else's.

In family circles, despite her busyness, she was the first to rush to someone's side, whether it be standing vigil at the hospital or cooking that special dish for the 'special' dinner, and be the last to leave once she made sure everything was under control. Even in her advanced stage of dialysis, when she had to move in a wheelchair, she never used that as a reason not to go up two flights of stairs to her daughter's house or to throw a party herself when her son or even a relative had come back from overseas after ages.

Outside her family circle, she was no less caring or far sighted. A few years back, she started a project for developing a senior citizens' home. Her idea was to have a place, a dream house she would say, where senior citizens could in each other's company, be cared for, looked after and spend lazy afternoons. There was hardly a sponsor she didn't meet to convince them of the tremendous social benefit this would have. Sadly sponsors aren't made in the same mould as her. Even from her hospital bed, she would have us call her colleagues and set up meeting to follow up on what was being done. Nothing brought on a bigger smile than anticipation that maybe the following meeting would be more fruitful.

Today I cannot be at her side, or sprinkle rose petals on her resting place. From London, Dhaka seems an eternity away. All I have are these memories, a sudden uncontrollable deluge. Even with all the optimism Jana had inspired in me, I cannot think of a world without her. But somewhere deep down I know that even though she is forever beyond my reach, she will never be more than a heartbeat away. For now, all I can do is stitch together these few words in her loving memory.