

# Will the UK be OK after the election?

FARID BAKHT

THE 2005 UK general election will be over by Friday. We will know if the forecasts for a 80-100 seat majority and a return of the Blair-Brown team were correct or not. No one will be surprised if on Friday, May 6th they awake to a "I-feel-honoured-and-grateful" speech from Mr. T. Expect to hear a lot of cheering if instead there is a late swing, a low turnout or massive tactical voting that reduces the majority to only 20. We might even get to see that "famous bloody nose."

The head says, barring an earthquake such as "Madrid 3/11," the most one can expect is that the already written victory speech will be re-edited late Thursday night into "The British people have spoken . The message is loud and clear. We need to take stock, move forward and plan for the future. I am truly humbled and cannot take things for granted..."

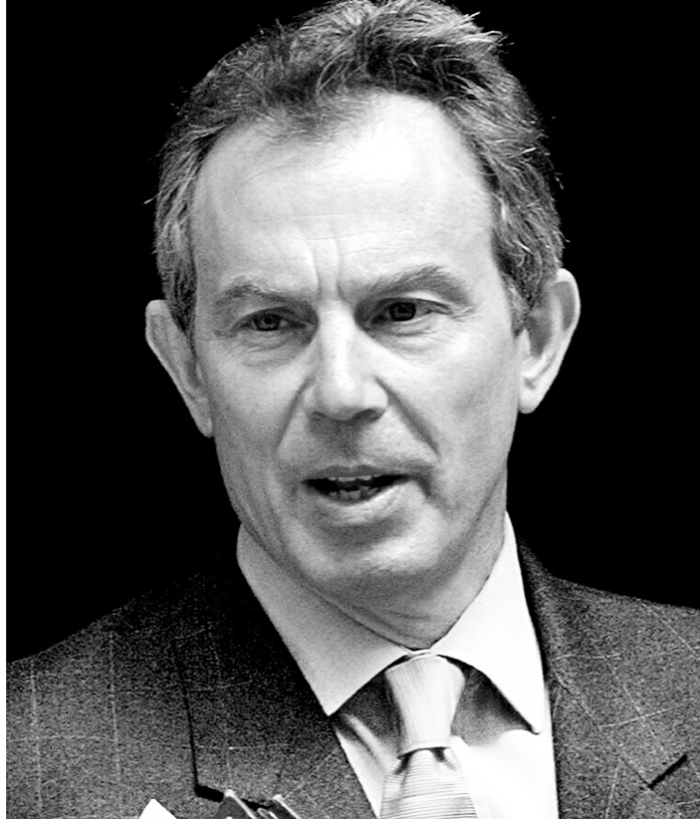
Unlike the US President, the British Prime Minister can choose the date of the election. It is being called over a year early. With a whopping majority in Parliament and no new Big Idea, there was no need to seek a fresh mandate from the people. So why call it a year early? It is a case of "cut and run."

Retail sales are down year on year as consumers realise they are heavily indebted and have to start saving. House prices are on the wobble and on the way down. How far, no one knows but the go-go years are definitely over. Better now than later.

### Crisis, what crisis?

The next New Labour government will be mired in a state of permanent crisis after a honeymoon of six

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months. The inevitable housing collapse will hit the consumer-driven economy for six from 2006 onwards. Once again (as in the early 90s), thousands of supposedly wealthy Britons will be forced to sell their holiday homes in Spain, Greece, and France. The downturn will last for the rest of the decade. The US Federal Reserve's Alan Greenspan cannot create another global credit bubble to get us out of this one.

Before 2009, don't be surprised if there isn't another "once-in-a-generation-sterling-crisis." Markets will no longer perceive sterling as a petro-currency as the decline in North Sea oil production coincides with Britain becoming a net oil importer. Technically this point was reached in 2004, but the gap between production and import will widen significantly. Oil production has helped underpin sterling's rise over the last few years as oil prices have soared.

### Back office

We should keep an eye on what the big financial institutions do during the downturn. After all, the "London Economy" is supposed to reach as far as Northern England's Humber side. Will the City permanently shed 50,000 or more jobs under cover of this gloomy environment? Will they see this as a chance to export jobs to India in the higher value back office occupations of research, analysis, and settlements? A lot of money shuffling activity in the second decade of this century may no longer occur in London, staffed by commuters from Essex or the Home Counties. These scenarios have been prematurely predicted before but now telecommunications, the Internet and a ready supply of educated Asian graduates have made it possible. Change may always be technically possible but it takes a decade or more for it to become accepted practice. We have now passed much of that decade.

The City always culls and then recruits when the good times return. This time round, will they fire and forget to rehire?

Thinking long term, the finance minister, Gordon Brown, once mentioned having to cope with the inexorable rise of China and India. The implication was that along with lucrative opportunities, there would be severe "challenges" to manufacturing and services. This is what one would expect to hear in an intelligent election campaign. Of course, this is the last thing any one wants to talk about.

*The Missing Big Issues:*

- When, how, or even if the UK should join the Euro;
- Rebalancing the relationship with Europe and the US;
- Medium term social and economic restructuring to face the Asian challenge;
- Energy security.

Instead it has been about race (under the guise of discussing immigration) and the legal minutiae concerning the invasion of Iraq. The Tory Leader is using ultra-right Australian advisors and engaging in "attack-dog-politics." It has not been a pretty sight. A constructive debate will occur once a crisis knocks out collective complacency and people can think the unthinkable.

What about the 2009 election? Will 2005 be to New Labour what 1992 was for the Tories? If so, by 2009, New Labour will be burnt out, incapable of regeneration and will implode amid infighting. Without an overriding Project, no one will be able to take centre stage. Old Labour will never return since it was based on manufacturing labour -- the original working class. That reality ceased to exist many years ago. New fads such as "Respect" will go by the wayside and never enter the mainstream. The Right will always be there but remain a minority magnet for Little England. The traditional Conservative Party will never reclaim the position of "natural government."

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## IN MEMORIAM

# Abdus Samad Azad

*We could not fulfil the commitment!*

ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

He first broached the idea to me quite a few years ago. It was the Islamic summit in Doha, Qatar. He was leading the Bangladesh delegation prior to the heads of government conference. Being an elderly politician familiar with many of our people for last several decades, a number of expatriate Bangladeshis would meet him there everyday either in his hotel or at their places. They were mostly from his party or from Sylhet area, but there were others as well -- from other areas of Bangladesh and non-political. He would mostly talk unremittingly about different phases of history that inextricably linked us, that he saw as a participant or witness, ranging from last days of British rule, Pakistan period, turbulent but glorious phase of 1971 and also the following period. I was present on one or two such occasions as our ambassador, my friend Nazrul Islam, now envoy to Turkey, would tell me that the foreign minister likes to see me. Incidentally, I was largely relaxed on that occasion since I was a guest of Qatar government and not much to do with reporting on the event back home.

Our people would listen to him with rapt attention and he too had the rare quality of keeping the listeners spell-bound narrating serious issues occasionally punctuated by wit and humor. "Sir, why do not you write all these historic matters -- you have such precious and rare experiences..." someone said. He remarked that hardly he had time and moreover advancing age would probably not permit for such an exercise. Then he turned at me and asked why not you -- help me? You write in newspapers -- can you? Conscious of the delicate task I was ambivalent, but said I would definitely try. How can I say otherwise to the senior most popular politician of the country, who was not only the foreign minister, but just after the prime minister in line of seniority. More importantly, professionally and personally I was quite close to such a distinguished person which in itself is a kind of asset to me or for that matter to anyone. Unfortunately, there was no headway in the writing issue. Later, he mentioned this once or twice in a casual mood in the midst of his hectic life here.

But it was three months ago when I went to see him at his Kalabagan residence on his return from medical treatment abroad that he was serious and told me, "you must come with Hasan Shahriar and Matiur Rahman Chowdhury and give me time to help my autobiography." Possibly, he felt that we three coming from Sylhet would know his background well. I conveyed it to the two others and both were willing as they also regard him with great reverence. But he was admitted to the BIRDEM as he fell badly sick on February 21 after placing wreaths at the Shaheed Minar early in the morning. He was supposed to take complete rest but as the kind of politician he was and his style being familiar to all, Abdus Samad Azad hardly cared for relaxation.

He never came back from the BIRDEM where he died on April 27. I would often visit him there but certainly consider myself very fortunate in a way to be at his bedside when the end came at 5-55 P.M. British high commissioner Anwar Chowdhury had just then entered the room with a bouquet. Watching all silent and in sombre mood with some trying to fight back tears, he asked, "Is it all over?". The answer was simple but crude reality "Yes". Anwar Chowdhury paid respect, saying Bangladesh will miss such a great person, people of Sylhet will miss and many others all over will miss him.

Abdus Samad Azad was a history by himself. His political life spanned more than six decades as he threw his hat into the ring of politics as a student and remained active even after crossing eighty. Young Samad was a member of legislature way back in 1954 and also won the last elections in 2001. He would not submit to age and would remain in the thick of the game. Till he was taken to BIRDEM before the final journey, he characteristically fought physical and other odds to be at the centre stage as a leader of the people. Even when I went to visit ailing Samad Azad at his house three months ago, he was in his familiar fashion of recollecting many events with great aplomb for more than a

hour. My friend Shabbir Yusuf, son of late Mohan Mian Shaheb, was also there. As we returned, he was lamenting why we did not have a tape-recorder that could have preserved graphic description of immensely important events from the last of the titans of present time.

I knew him from 1972 when I was new in journalism. One can easily guess the importance and significance of the foreign minister against the backdrop of emergence of Bangladesh, which was a sensational and glorious global event of that time. Samad Azad, who was an adviser to the Bangladesh government in exile and moved from post to pillar in international arena for the cause of the independence during that critical phase, was fittingly given the key ministry by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Later, he was given the agriculture portfolio which too was of great importance in view of the devastating nature of the primarily agricultural country due to the liberation war. He did commendably well in both the ministries.

In the second Awami League government in 1996, he was again made foreign minister by prime minister Sheikh Hasina and was at the helm for full term. But Samad Azad's name will go down in the history of this nation as the first foreign minister of a full-fledged cabinet in independent Bangladesh, who took untiring effort in organising the ministry in the newly-born nation, conducting the external affairs policies by presenting Bangladesh to outside world, seeking recognition of many countries and garnering assistance and support required for the new nation. His first tenure as foreign minister was of extraordinary challenge which he accomplished with splendid adroit. He personally knew many great world leaders as he came in contact with them in 1971, later and also in 1975.

He would treat newsmen with great affection. He would maintain contacts with the people at grassroots at level and mingle with them at ease with a touch of fraternity. My relationship with him later blossomed



both professionally and personally. Many journalists would call him "Chacha", some "Sir" and more seniors as "Bhai". Many people of Sylhet would address him as "Leader." He was a younger friend of my late father as they were known to each other from Shillong-Sylhet days. I would call him "Chacha" and he would also affectionately call me at times by the same expression "Chacha" as he used to with many others. Many of his senior friends' sons and nephews are in the profession of journalism. His doors were open for newsmen -- many of whom are indebted to him for helping them professionally and otherwise. In late 1996, during his second stint as foreign minister, we, a group of newsmen, made a plea to go to his native Sunamganj and taste the delicious fishes there. He organised the trip and himself took care of every meal that we had there. In any gathering, even marriage ceremonies focus would be on him as he enlivened the ambience with his easy-going loveable nature.

For him political life was not a bed of roses. The long chequered career was marked by many ups and downs, and was a fighter from the ground. He was a born politician, who would greet both good and bad times with smile and he would not budge. Public life was not a pastime for him as he considered it practically everything in his life -- a mooring worth emulating for many others regardless of their political

affiliations. Admittedly no individual and for that matter politician is free from faults and faux pas. But the widely-held positive and admirable connotation of politician is unfortunately on the wane in our country. The culture of politics is essentially of cordiality, tolerance and the zeal to serve the people. Arguably, only few can probably fully meet what are expected. But one can come nearer and that is what is expected. It is heartening that prime minister Khaleda Zia went to see him in hospital and president Dr. Iajuddin Ahmed attended the Janaza despite their political differences.

Samad Azad epitomised the image of a full time public figure of long dedication, unflinching faith on the verdict of the people and remaining with the people no matter what shape the politics will embark upon. He falls in the line of Junius Jayewardene, Wali Khan, Jyoti Basu, A.B.A. Ghani Khan Chowdhury and many others of this part of the world. No nation can develop self-confidence and progresses unless it recognises its worthy sons. He played a colourful long innings which has few parallels in contemporary times in our country. Certainly we feel terribly bad that we could not help him in his autobiography -- an exercise that could have given us enormous satisfaction and honour of which we are robbed of. Whether he has an autobiography or a biography on him or not, Abdus Samad Azad will remain an integral part of the history of independent Bangladesh. In the words of another former foreign minister elderly Prof. Shams-ul-Huq, Samad Azad will have unique place in country's history for shaping the foreign policy at its nascent state besides having many qualities. "I join the nation in mourning this political leader and statesman" the nonagenarian scholar said in a fitting tribute.

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