

Tony Blair's fortune and the British electorate



M. M. REZAUL KARIM

WITH victory in the parliamentary election on 6 May 2005 Britain's Labour Party formed government again and made history for itself. Never before the Labour had won elections three times in a row. Victory in any election brings laurel to the leader of the winning Party and re-confirms due support for him. This also heralds, in Britain, continuation of his position as leader of both the Party and the government. Prime Minister Tony Blair's case may, however, prove an exception to this rule. He had been under heavy criticism during his second tenure for what was called dragging Britain into war in Iraq. This made him unpopular to a large section of citizens in the country and divided his Party. As a result, the Labour Party lost about 100 seats and returned to power with a diminished majority in the Parliament.

What did the election result signify for UK, the international community and, above all, our bilateral relations with that country? The impact on the people of the United Kingdom evidently gets precedence over others in this consideration. The first and foremost impression one gets about the election results is that, on the whole, it represents an endorsement of the policy and actions of the Labour Party, albeit in varied depth and dimension, in contrast to those attributed to the other contending political parties. The loss of the Labour seats represented corresponding gains

of the Liberal Democrats and also, to some extent, of the Conservatives. Both the Conservative and the Liberal Democratic Parties won more seats than in the last Parliament. The swing votes from the Labour were more to the Liberal Democrats than to the Conservatives. The total popular votes won by the Labour registered a decline and those by the Liberal Democrats relatively a sharp rise, with those for the Conservatives remaining static. The general turnout of voters in the election was slightly higher than almost record low in

responsibility (part) for the killing of a hundred thousand Iraqis since the war broke out, wastage of British taxpayers' money in waging war instead of using it for the welfare of the people were widely publicised before election. The Prime Minister, on the other hand, sought to defend his policy by saying he would not try to justify the war, but whatever he did in this matter was done in good faith, and claimed he did not lie.

As an election strategy, Blair sought to divert attention of the electorate from Iraq to the economy. The economy had

The overseas reaction to re-election of Blair's Party mostly followed the set pattern from cautious endorsement to jubilation. Although the protocol of expressing happiness and commitment to close collaboration in future marked the character of messages of felicitation sent to the victorious Prime Minister, one would assume that President George W Bush might have felt, though not expressed, some responsibility for the diminished popularity of his friend and ally, the leader of the trans-Atlantic country enjoying special relations with

the Bangladeshi expatriate community in the UK. For quite some years, they have been participating actively in local politics in the UK. But their attempts to put up a Labour candidate of Bangladeshi origin for a Parliamentary seat are yet to bear fruit. They rested hopes for this in their principal habitat in East London constituency of Bethnal Green and Bow, which had been represented by the late Lord Peter Shore, a former Minister, who was a forerunner in the movement for liberation of Bangladesh. But following his death several years ago, the Labour nominated a lady of non-British origin, Oona King, as his successor. Even she was beaten in this election by rebel Galloway of the newly formed Respect Party.

Someone commented that want of a Bangladeshi Parliamentarian in UK may have been compensated, in some measure, by appointing someone of Bangladeshi origin, Baroness Paula Uddin, as a member of the House of Lords in the British Parliament, and also by posting another Bangladeshi British as Britain's High Commissioner to Dhaka.

In retrospect, one may conclude that victory of the Labour Party in Britain may not necessarily mean victory of its leader, Tony Blair, who is deemed to be giving way, sooner than later, to his friend and political rival, Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown. Even following the election, a group of Labour MPs went to Blair demanding his resignation. They considered the Prime Minister now being a political liability. The Conservatives, on the other hand, stood by its tradition of supplanting its defeated leadership by a new hopeful, whereas the Liberal Democratic Party abounds in joy by gaining more swing votes than ever before and claiming emergence of a cognisable third force in British politics.

MM Rezaul Karim is a former High Commissioner to UK and a Member of the BNP Advisory Council.

CURRENTS AND CROSSCURRENTS

Victory of the Labour Party in Britain may not necessarily mean victory of its leader, Tony Blair, who is deemed to be giving way, sooner than later, to his friend and political rival, Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown. Even following the election, a group of Labour MPs went to Blair demanding his resignation. They considered the Prime Minister now being a political liability.

the last election of 2001.

The core issue in the Parliamentary election, as expected, was the highly controversial question of Britain's involvement in the war in Iraq. The rebel Labour members of the Parliament formed a sizeable group and sought to threaten Tony Blair's position as Prime Minister. But they failed. Perhaps, they did not seriously try for it. They also could not dislodge him from Party leadership in subsequent Party conventions. Even resignation of Foreign Secretary Robin Cook and former Development Secretary Claire Short from the cabinet did not evoke adequate moral compunction for Blair to renounce leadership. The rebel leader George Galloway, who had been expelled from the Labour Party, appeared to be the most outspoken critic of Tony Blair on the Iraq issue. His scathing criticisms of Tony Blair's bundles of lies, assertion of possession of weapons of mass destruction by Saddam Hussain,

never been so good and buoyant, he claimed, as it was during his regime. As a matter of fact, in his time the economy registered a steady progress with GDP amounting to an annual increase of 3 per cent, which was one of the highest in Europe. The unemployment figure came down to an almost record low of 5 per cent, the health and education sector also having made substantial progress at the same time. Whereas only 10 to 12 per cent of the population, who demonstratively opposed war in Iraq, consisted mainly of students and intellectuals, the large majority of the people comprising the rest were more concerned about measures having direct bearing on matters of their interest and personal welfare. The external and international issues did not generally appeal to them as much as the domestic issues, hence perception of relatively less adverse impact of the Iraq factor on election than what had earlier been predicted by many.

USA. A large section of the international community might have nurtured hopes of Blair receiving a real bloody nose, but their hopes were undermined in the same way as had been witnessed following re-election of Bush to American Presidency. The European colleagues of Tony Blair now appear to have subordinated their differences on Iraq to other pressing matters of interest in European affairs.

The British election is not likely to effect any change in Britain's bilateral relations with Bangladesh. Britain, irrespective of Party in power, maintains a consistent policy of promoting positive, friendly and co-operative relations with Bangladesh. Consequently, the new Labour government is expected to continue its role as a significant development partner of Bangladesh and as a hopeful for promotion of democratic values and human rights there. The other factor relates to its reaction among

PAC and CAG office : Operational relationship

ASIF ALI

PUBLIC Accounts Committee (PAC) is a parliamentary standing committee provided in article 76 (i) of the constitution and the details of its formation, scope and responsibilities are prescribed in regulation 233 of the Rules of Procedure of the Parliament. The fundamental object of PAC's consideration is the audit reports prepared by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) by auditing the accounts of the Republic and certifying the Annual Finance Accounts and Appropriation Accounts.

CAG derives his basic powers from article 128 (1) and mandate from article 128 (4) giving him absolute auditing freedom not subject to any other authority. CAG is also empowered by

λ CAG's (Addl. Functions) Act, 1974 to audit all the statutory/autonomous/semi-autonomous

public sector enterprises

λ CAG's (Addl. Functions) (Amendment) Act, 1975 to audit all the nationalised banks and financial institutions

λ Audit Code issued under the authority of the President

PAC while discussing CAG's Audit Reports delivers upon the following aspects

λ Whether the public funds have been spent in compliance with all the financial rules, regulations, propriety and austerity

λ Whether the public money has been used for the purpose for which the parliament made such grants

λ Whether money has been re-appropriated by the competent authority

λ Whether money spent or unspent beyond or below the parliamentary grants are appropriately justified by the executive

λ Whether money has been spent observing economy, efficiency and

effectiveness to ensure value for money

λ Whether individuals engaged in public spending have resorted to misappropriation, fraud, corruption and misuse of public money

λ Any other aspects deemed necessary to be examined

In dispensing with the above mentioned anomalies, PAC gives due consideration to

λ CAG's recommendations

λ Executive's replies, explanations and clarification

λ Hearing individuals responsible for misdeeds

PAC may resolve the audit objections through

λ 100 per cent settlement on the basis of consensus among the members

λ Partial settlement pending specific directives for subsequent compliance

λ Rejection of executive's reply and fixing up responsibilities

λ Recoveries

λ Adjustments

λ Departmental actions

λ Writing off

λ Allowing time for rectification of errors

CAG's audit is legislative audit meant for the parliament via the PAC. It is the producer of audit reports and PAC, on behalf of the parliament is the user. This operational relationship between the PAC and CAG needs to be very strong and effective. The following pre-requisites are important for that purpose

λ Quality audit reports

λ Modern audit reports like performance audit, system based audit reports etc.

λ Timeliness of audit reports

λ Proper briefing of the audit reports to the honourable Chairman and members of PAC

λ Close interaction between PAC and CAG with regard to preparation of agenda, minutes and fixation of date of PAC meetings

λ On the spot verification of the audit

objections by audit prior to PAC meetings to ascertain the latest position.

Step taken by CAG to strengthen the relationship is launching of Strategic Plan (2003-2006) by the present CAG w.e.f January, 2003 to revamp and refurbish the audit department to improve upon its overall efficiency and effectiveness by adopting

λ Short term plan to improve upon office discipline/attendance/ conduct/working environment

λ Mid term plan to enhance the capability of the work force by introducing daily work-book, in-house training, monitoring, supervision, inspection and involvement of senior officers in field audit etc

λ Long term plan to issue simple guidelines and directives to supplement the existing audit manuals and audit methodologies to evolve realistic field tested audit plans and audit strategies to issue re-structured audit reporting format in Vol-I, II and III to rationalise audit coverage through prioritisation of auditable entities and audit subjects/areas

λ Long term plan to arrange advanced long and short domestic and overseas training for the work-force to switch over to performance auditing or value for money auditing, issue based auditing and system-based auditing side by side with compliance auditing to start IT auditing to effect reforms through CAG's Strategic Plan (2003-2006) and the Financial Management Reforms Programme funded by the Department for International Development, UK and Royal Netherlands Government to motivate the work-force to accept the reforms through intensive presentation sessions on overseas audit reports, journals, magazines, domestic important reports. Seminars and Workshops to create knowledge and experience sharing relationship with the private sector accounting and auditing professionals of ICAB, ICMAB, Institute of Internal Audit etc. to enhance research and publication.

Crash programmes have been undertaken to settle the pending audit reports though bi-lateral and tri-lateral meetings with the Ministries departments at the instruction of PAC.

Recommendations

λ Chairman and members of PAC may visit the overseas parliaments like the House of Commons of UK, the Congress of USA etc. for familiarisation

λ PAC should have its own full fledged secretariat consisting of necessary staff and logistic support

λ Rationalisation of the working pattern should be as the following

λ Single Ministry wise meeting

λ Agenda may include the following representations of audit objections of a single Ministry-Div.

Compliance audit objections : 50%
Performance audit objections : 30%
CAG's recommended audit paras on already submitted audit reports to the parliament : 20%
100%

λ Agenda may include the following business of a single Ministry-Div.

New audit objections : 50%

Follow up of PAC's previous decisions : 30%

CAG's recommended audit paras on already submitted audit reports to the parliament : 20%
100%

Conclusion

Effectiveness of PAC largely depends on effectiveness of CAG. High quality audit reports catering to the present day needs will facilitate the better deliberations by PAC, thus each complementing the other. All possible steps, therefore, should be taken to enhance this relationship. 'Strengthening Parliamentary Democracy' project could play an effective role in this regard.

Asif Ali is Comptroller and Auditor General of Bangladesh.

20x3

9x4