

## Grand alliance's poll boycott

*Uncertainty stares us in the face*

**T**HE decision of the grand alliance -- announced by Awami League chief Sheikh Hasina yesterday -- to boycott the January 22 parliamentary election has created great political uncertainty. We are saddened by the development and worried as to its outcome.

The year 2006 ended on an optimistic note as the prospects of an election, with participation of all the major parties, looked bright. But now things are almost back to square one. The grand alliance has already announced a two-day siege program, which is likely to lead to the same political turmoil that caused so much dislocation to life in the last two months.

The political stalemate that persisted for so long, now sinks to a deeper level. In our view, all the parties have contributed to the process. The BNP's game plan was to test its rivals' patience and resilience on controversial issues, which the AL and its allies could not allow to go unchallenged. BNP was more interested in the letter of the Constitution rather than its spirit, which not only called for an election but also a free and fair one.

The caretaker government, which had the primary responsibility of resolving the crisis faltered at the very outset, and it failed to prove its neutrality to the AL and its allies. Its actions have since been viewed with great suspicion by all the parties except Jamaat-BNP, and an early end to the political crisis was never in sight.

The AL, unable from the beginning to come to terms with the flaws in the voter list and the fallouts of wholesale politicization of some vitally important institutions, could have articulated its demands much earlier to avoid the long-drawn political tug of war. It put forward one demand after another, thus making the task of reaching a consensus all the more difficult.

We now enter a very troublesome and uncertain phase in our political life, with hartals and other disruptive programmes staring us in the face. We once again appeal to both the alliances to rethink their politics.

Obviously, people's hopes and aspirations are not reflected in the present state of affairs. And how long can they repose their faith in the parties that cannot even agree to go to polls for keeping the democratic process alive?

## A fuel crunch out of the blue

*Govt needs to look into the matter and fix responsibility*

**A**LTHOUGH the closure of the oil companies' fuel supply depots for five days since December 29 officially ended on January 2, the chain impact it has had on the economy cannot be sloughed off so easily. In fact, this should form a subject matter of an immediate inquiry from the energy ministry. Transport, business, agriculture suffered intensely. In particular, the raw hide business during Eid-ul-Azha received a jolt because of the unforeseen transport problems.

While the supply of fuels should have been actually smoother during peak time Eid mobilities, it was the exact opposite that took place. To make matters worse, supply disruption occurred without any prior notice. We are constrained to say that there was either lack of planning or a deliberate attempt to create an artificial crisis with many raring in the wings to skim the cream in the black market.

But we have it on the authority of the president of Sylhet Division Petroleum Dealers, Agents and Distributors' Association that because of poor storage of Padma and Jamuna oil depots in Sylhet, the oil supply had almost come to a standstill sometime ago, so that there was an early warning of sorts. Nobody was apparently there to take the signal and do something positive about it. The question, therefore, arises as to what the BPC, the monopoly importer of fuel in the country has been doing to ensure that the supply line didn't face a crunch? Why did the storage capacity of Padma and Jamuna oil companies not improve in keeping with the increase in demands? Since the petrol pumps do not have the capacity to store five days' worth of petroleum products the stoppage of supply from the main depots evidently precipitated the crisis. On whose orders? The public have a right to know.

Will the energy ministry come out with a statement on the issue in a bid to allay public misgivings that must have arisen due to the unanticipated fuel crunch?

## Flirting with bigots: BNP vs AL



DR. ABDULLAH A. DEWAN

### NO NONSENSE

**N**o sooner was my defense of objective journalism archived before I found myself faced with an opportunity to prove the even-handedness of my column.

Sheikh Hasina's attempt to sugar-coat the Bangladesh Khelafat Majlis (BKM) deal by insisting that the 5-point MOU was "well-intentioned" felt more like salt in the wounds.

If it is well intentioned then why is no one, other than the BNP-Jamaat alliance (BJA), rejoicing with champagne and caviar?

Instead of defending this action time and again, the AL leadership should have scrapped the MOU forthwith and apologized for its misadventure. The minorities spent many sleepless nights in fear because of the intimidation during BNP-Jamaat's five years of repressive rule, and looked towards the AL leadership for relief from their nightmare -- only to be slapped squarely at the end.

At a time when the world is striving for the harmonious coexistence of different faiths, our politicians are turning the clock back to the dark days of rule by scripture.

#### BNP AL Electoral Gain Matrix under a free and fair election

AL	Box - 1			AL + Bigots	Box - 2		
	BNP	Others	20 seats		BNP + No Bigots	Others	135 seats
				AL + No Bigots	135 seats	AL + Bigots	145 seats
				BNP + Bigots	150 seats	BNP + Bigots	145 seats
				Others	15 seats	Others	10 seats

#### The numbers in the boxes are of hypothetical construct

Much recent scholarly Islamic literature argues that: "The doctrine that religion and politics can't be separated in Islam is a later historical construct, rather than the Qur'anic doctrine. It is a human construct, rather than the Qur'anic doctrine. It is human construct rather than a divine revelation."

The basis of modern secularism is, of course, separation of religion from the state. While the state shouldn't interfere with religious freedom, religious authorities shouldn't interfere in the affairs of the state.

The Indian ulamas had accepted this doctrine with good scruples throughout the freedom struggle, and it was on this basis that they became allies of the Indian National Congress.

But there is strong pressure mounting, and human rights movements are up-and-coming in all these countries. In these countries globalization may not be desirable,

but can't be put off for long because the information revolution precipitated by the Internet is fostering conditions for close interaction among various cultures and political systems.

One may wonder why it is that the major political parties are making ideological concessions to religious parties for the sake of forging an alliance with them, even though they don't have a winnable standing amongst the voters. Why not convert them instead of being converted? The clue is: their partnership is rewarding now, and will continue to be so in the future.

There are about 15,000 Qawmi madrasas under the Private Madrasa Board, in addition to about 9,000 state-registered ones, with numerous more yet to be registered or enlisted.

Over the period 2001-2005, the student population in general educational institutions grew by 8.64%, while the madrasas witnessed a 10.12% growth in enrollment.

Although madrasas have made negligible contribution toward producing skilled human capital in the country, increasingly a larger and larger religiously indoctrinated voting block is being spawned in these institutions.

Under the prevailing political milieu, the outcome in Box-4 is inevitable and cannot reverse any

of the scenarios that preceded it, unless the bigots break up the alliance with one of the two parties, or with both. Either party risks loss of seats if it extricates itself from alliance with the bigots.

Politics in Bangladesh has shaped up as a two-party system, with both having nearly equal strength. But either party needs the support of many smaller parties to tilt the balance. With all the collusions (or alliances) with smaller parties that were consummated, the politics in the country may be classified as a duopoly (like a two-firm oligopoly) similar to the current American political system, often cited as a paradigm of duopoly in politics.

The question as to why both the alliances are flirting with the bigots can be explained using a game theoretic "electoral gain matrix," analogous to the problem of "prisoner's dilemma" which is almost always presented in describing oligopoly firms' interdependence in price-setting behaviour.

Box - 1: Shows that without any alliance with bigots, both BNP and AL have equal chances of winning 140 (or majority) seats in the parliament handily.

Box - 2: Shows that if the AL allies with the bigots (with BNP contesting by itself) it wins the majority in the parliament handily.

Box - 3: Reverses the scenario presented in Box-2.

Box - 4: Both AL and BNP form alliances with the bigots and are, once again, evenly matched up (that is, equal probability of winning the majority).

The summit is intended to bring together Islamic thinkers and activists in an ongoing cross-cultural forum to formulate and share "no-nonsense" strategies and disseminate them to the public worldwide. So, why not send some of our religious scholars to participate in the forum at state expense?

of the scenarios that preceded it, unless the bigots break up the alliance with one of the two parties, or with both. Either party risks loss of seats if it extricates itself from alliance with the bigots. The outcome in Box-4 is the Nash Equilibrium, named after the famous mathematician John Nash, who formulated it and shared the 1994 economics Nobel Prize.

Note that the distributions of seats in the boxes are constructed to make the point that flirting with the bigots is a natural political expediency. Both AL and BNP will continue to be allied with bigots for the foreseeable future (Box-4), and both will yield to their nagging demands to get religious cover. This being the fait accompli, what we can do, though, is enlighten the bigots through intellectual discourse.

An international forum for secularists of Islamic societies has been scheduled at St Petersburg Hilton, St Petersburg, Florida over a two day period, March 4-5, 2007. This forum was organized in response to calls for a "reformation," a new enlightenment, or a secularization and liberalization of Islamic thought and practice.

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Dr. Abdullah A Dewan is Professor of Economics at Eastern Michigan University.

## Awami League, fatwa and our self-esteem



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

### GROUND REALITIES

**I**t may be that the Awami League will own up to its mistake. It may even be that it will, under pressure from its followers, repudiate the deal with the Khelafat Majlis. The damage, though, has been done. And all secular Bengalis have felt diminished by this assault on their self-esteem.

today is about winning power. Nothing else matters.

And yet the Awami League, in all its long history, has been a much more substantive affair than attaining power. It has, in the course of modern Bengali history, been a proper vehicle for a propagation of secular democratic ideals. When it jettisoned its communal skin in the 1950s, it sent out the powerful message that it was inaugurating a fresh, new, necessarily liberal trend in the politics of Pakistan.

The reality is quite something else, which is that it is not the BKM but the Awami League which has had a climb-down in policy enunciation. Through linking up with men who plainly would like to see a religious political dispensation, if not exactly a communal polity, in place, Sheikh Hasina, Abdul Jalil, and everyone else behind the five-point deal with the Khelafat Majlis people have only stepped into the camp of the BKM people. It is not the other way round.

And if, now, the Awami League wishes to portray the memorandum of understanding with the BKM as an electoral strategy, it is making an even bigger mistake of informing the country that its fundamental concern

religious decree, in these days of modern political sensibilities runs counter to the principle of law, to due process of law. There is the very real probability of the "fatwa," if the fourteen-party alliance wins the election, taking the place of the universally accepted pattern of rule of law, particularly in the villages, and thereby ensuring the rise of a parallel system of justice in the land.

We in Bangladesh certainly do not have tribal laws in operation, behaviour that is preponderant in large areas of Pakistan. But when you decide that clerics can dispense "fatwa" you are telling the country, in so many words, that the possibility of the law and human rights being undermined in the villages and small towns of Bangladesh is about to become pretty real.

In the second place, despite everything that the Awami League might say about the "fatwa" being decided upon and imposed by clerics conversant with Islamic law, the truth is somewhat a little uglier than that: imposing religious edicts on a populace in a modern political dispensation is a clear attempt at a

revival of medievalism. It is a point that the Awami League seem not to have remembered.

The result is all the fear, all those worries which we now have before us. There are all the women who, in the rural regions, have, of late, made contributions to their family's economic welfare through employment with, or sponsorship of, non-governmental organizations. Once the "fatwa" becomes an officially sanctioned instrument of operation, it is these women, their futures, that will come under a huge, increasingly darker shadow.

And that is not all. The Awami League's deal with the Khelafat Majlis comes underpinned by the pledge not to allow any criticism of, or derogatory remarks about, the Prophet of Islam. Any individual who

understands history, or has climbed the peaks of urbanity, will do nothing that can humiliate a religion or undermine a great religious icon.

But in a society where the level of ignorance remains abysmally high, and where the tendency to intimidate in the name of religion is yet a potent factor of life, the "fatwa" can

be used to harass such beleaguered communities as the badly mauled Ahmadiyyas. How much security will an Awami League-led government be ready and equipped to provide to such victims of the "fatwa" peddlers?

The deal with the Khelafat Majlis paves a lot of holes in the Awami League's politics of secularism. If in the early 1990s when the party thought it politically expedient to include an Islamic motif on its posters, nestling as it did between the very relevant slogans of Jai Bangla and Jai Bangabandhu, in this season of political chaos it has taken expediency to ridiculous heights. Of course one understands the spirit behind such statements as no law is being made in clear contravention of Islamic ideals. But where does that place the other religious communities inhabiting the country?

The Awami League needs to step back a little, observe conditions as they are and consider the damage it has done to itself, and the distress it has caused to millions of Bengalis.

The Awami League is nothing if it comes denuded of its idealism. If the country sees nothing unnatural about the BNP tying the knot with the Jamaat-e-Islami (for the two have been soul-mates over a long stretch of time), it is quite an acceptable proposition for it.

But when the Awami League strikes a deal with elements which consider liberal thought a sign of godlessness, look upon the war of liberation as an act of heresy and

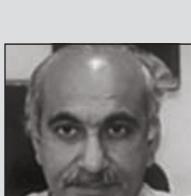
think nothing of women's rights, it simply gets the line between morality and political opportunism blurred. That is not merely a sad thing to happen. It also sends out shockwaves across a land in the historical transformation of which the party has been the leading mover and shaker. Why must the Awami League go to power in the company of men who live in caves?

The Awami League's understanding with the Khelafat Majlis is a demonstration of policy making without the accompanying factor of transparency. There has been little hint so far of a broad section of the party leadership having been involved in the "fatwa" deal, which again points to a danger: party decision-making could likely be slipping into the hands of a narrow band of politicians. That is unhealthy, particularly when you consider that the accommodation with the BKM has swiftly resulted in some significant nominations for the general elections going to individuals whose past cannot but cloud our future.

It may be that the Awami League will own up to its mistake. It may even be that it will, under pressure from its followers, repudiate the deal with the Khelafat Majlis. The damage, though, has been done. And all secular Bengalis have felt diminished by this assault on their self-esteem.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is former executive editor, Dhaka Courier.

## Year end jottings



M J AKBAR

### BYLINE

**Some odds and ends from a jumble of books picked up during a year's rummage of bookshops. Opening thought: can any piece of information be totally useless? The emphatic answer is no.**

identity for the new faith? That answer will come, hopefully, from next year's reading list.

There isn't that much difference between Plato's ideal society and the Hindu caste system. In both, a rigid hierarchy keeps society stable and every man in his place. The four Greek divisions are sage, warrior, trader and merchant, a precise mirror of brahman, kshatriya, vaisya and dalit. In Plato, property does not change hands; a class of wealth, rooted in land has been the norm rather than the exception till Marx smashed the class ceiling.

The fatal flaw in perfectionist Plato is the ban on anything new, even in poetry and music. Old is romantic; new is growth rate.

Which city was the real capital of the British Raj? There was no confusion in the East India Company days: Calcutta. But once the north came under Sahib sway, the government spent seven months in cool Simla and only five

in Calcutta. The choice of Delhi, far closer to Simla, was announced in 1911 during the visit of King George V and Queen Mary, the new capital would be a symbol of imperial power and British superiority, another Constantinople or Rome, designed in the "Grand Manner."

A debate arose over whether the look should be "Indo-Saracenic," Mughal, Rajput, or Renaissance classic. The much-vaunted Sir Edwin Lutyens dismissed Indian architecture as "cumbersome, poorly coordinated and tiresome." Hindu architecture was "veneered jointry" and the domes of Delhi's mosques were mere turnips. The viceroy, Lord Hardinge, thought such sentiments a bit thick, given that the bill for British grandeur was paid by India. Herbert Baker, Lutyens' less famous