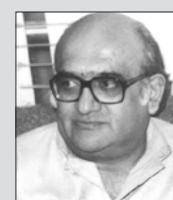


Dance of the scorpions



REHMAN SOBHAN

THE decision of the Grand Alliance to boycott and resist the holding of the January 22 elections to the Jatio Sangshad has put the two alliances directly on the path of confrontation. This denouement conjures up images of two scorpions who when they fight precede their battle by a ritual dance before they sting each other to death. Are we witnessing such a dance of death where the ultimate casualty will be the democratic process? Let us briefly review the role of the players in this macabre dance to which the nation bears mute witness.

The ostensible lead player in the dance appears to be the chief adviser of the caretaker government, President Iajuddin Ahmed. He has been from the moment he assumed office through what is perceived as a constitutional coup, the target of the 14 Party Alliance. The ongoing demand of the Grand Alliance that the president step down from his role as chief adviser, or at least conduct himself in a non-partisan manner, appears to mistake the dancer for the choreographer. This means that all attempts by the Grand Alliance and our development partners to periodically pressure the chief adviser to change his steps, were, from the outset, exercises in futility.

The key party to the perfor-

In responding to the prospect of a one-sided election all citizens and civil society itself will have to decide what role they will play. Will they accept an election result which does not involve all the principal parties? Will they be silent spectators to the resultant confrontation between the principal alliances or will they come forward to assert their democratic rights? The citizens of Bangladesh will eventually have to decide whether democracy in Bangladesh is a spectator sport or it is sufficiently important for them to come forward to ensure that they are served by a government which truly reflects their freely given vote.

mance of the chief adviser and hence the CTG was and remains the leadership of the 4 Party Alliance. The underlying motivations of this alliance remain unclear. In their public postures they project a firm confidence that they can win an election. They attribute the demands of their opponents for changes in the conduct of the CTG as motivated by a need to avoid elections. If they were so confident that they could win a free and fair election, they should have gone out of their way to ensure that the Grand Alliance participated by accommodating their demands for a non-partisan chief adviser and chief election commissioner.

Once Justice Hasan stepped down, the 4 Party Alliance could have agreed to have the surviving chief justice preceding Hasan, Justice Mahmudul Amin Chowdhury, as chief adviser. They could have further advised the president to induct a generally respected and acceptable person such as the former cabinet secretary under the 4 Party Alliance government, Sadat Hossain, as chief election commissioner. Faced with such a positive political response from the 4 Party Alliance, the 14 Party Alliance would have had no option but to go to the polls and to stand by the results, even if this meant a victory for the 4 Party Alliance.

Rather than accommodate its opponents, the 4 Party Alliance appears to have gone out of its

way to provoke the Grand Alliance. The latest provocation of instigating the revival of the corruption case against HM Ershad, just when the leaders of the Grand Alliance had decided to go for elections on January 22, in spite of the unevenness of the playing field, appears mind boggling for its pointlessness. From the moment the 14 Party Alliance accepted the president as chief adviser, and then went on to accept the watered down "package" agreement negotiated by the 4 Advisers it was apparent that the alliance, or at least its leadership, were keen to contest elections even on an unlevel playing field. It was also evident that this leadership was under great pressure from many of their associates to boycott the elections. Under the circumstances, everything should have been done by the 4 Party Alliance to strengthen the hands of the leadership of the 14 Party Alliance to stand by their original decision to contest the elections.

From their responses the 4 Party Alliance appear to suggest that they remain indifferent as to whether the Grand Alliance participates in the election. In the light of recent developments, the 4 Party Alliance appear to believe that they can compel the CTG to hold an election even without the Grand Alliance. They presume that the CTG will be able to withstand resistance to the polls from the supporters of the Grand Alliance, through the use of the law enforce-

ment machinery and the army, backed by local protection of the polling centres of their own party cadres. The 4 Party Alliance may possibly believe that however limited be the voter turn-out or strong the degree of resistance, once such a poll is held and votes them back to power, they would be able to deal with any further challenges on the ground.

Whether this scenario follows as planned so that the CTG does carry through an election and the elected government can then suppress all challenges to its authority, remains to be seen. However, what is more relevant is the credibility of an election held with a massive deployment of armed might of the law enforcement agencies, involving resistance and loss of life, and the subsequent legitimacy of a regime which would hold office as a result of an election boycotted by some of the major political parties.

The notion that a regime with such a questionable mandate could then resort to the level of wholesale repression needed to stay in power would be even more challengeable. Such a regime would need to keep in mind that apart from the internal challenge to such a regime, the international community would have severe reservations in not just recognizing the outcome of a flawed election but would hardly remain silent through the acts of repression which would follow.

Of course, flawed elections

and/or repression have been tolerated in the past, as in Myanmar or Zimbabwe, though both regimes have acquired "outcast" status in the international community and remain cut off from most sources of development assistance. It is quite possible that the international community may bow to ground realities in Bangladesh and after administering a few ritual slaps on the wrist of such a regime, however distasteful its origins, would resume business as usual. I cannot speak here for the international community but perhaps some of our resident envoys may speak up on the reaction of their respective governments to such a one-sided election and its possible repressive aftermath.

Now that Bangladesh is a less aid-dependent economy, the sanctions at the disposal of our development partners remain weak.

The one weapon that the international community does have at its disposal is their control over the levers of UN peace-keeping operations. Our armed forces are today one of the world's largest contributors to such operations and have justifiably earned an excellent international reputation for their performance in the field. The armed forces and the whole nation attach great value to this role, which is not without considerable material benefit to the national economy as well as to the peace-keepers. If our armed forces, who have already been

deployed in the field, are put into the unenviable position of repressing their own citizens, first in response to resistance to the election, and then to cope with challenges on the ground to the "elected" regime, this would be potentially detrimental to their image in the eyes of the international community.

The response of the CTG and BNP and its allies to the course of future events hangs, in no small measure, on the intentions and capability of the Grand Alliance. From the outset the 14 Party Alliance has continued to give confused signals of its intentions, culminating in its bizarre and unprincipled compact which challenged its historic commitment to secular politics.

The 14 Party Alliance's initial outright rejection of Justice Hasan as the chief adviser, in the light of their experience with the current chief adviser, may be viewed by their own ranks as a strategic error. After all, would he have been quite as partisan as the incumbent chief adviser? Once the president carried through his constitutional coup, the 14 Party Alliance continued to vacillate on whether to challenge the legitimacy of the chief adviser or to go along with various negotiated "package" deals offering piecemeal concessions. The latest offer of the leave of Zakaria but the retention of Mudabbir was part of the dance of the seven veils enacted by the chief adviser to tantalize the Grand Alliance into the elections. The dance may have indeed served its purpose had the gratuitous provocation of seeking to bar HM Ershad from contesting the elections not served the role of one provocation too many to be tolerated by the Grand Alliance.

Now that the Grand Alliance has decided to boycott the January 22

polls they have to reckon whether they can generate enough strength at the local level in every constituency to frustrate the holding of the poll or at least make voter participation very difficult. Mobilization at the constituency level would be very crucial to their strategy of challenging the polls. All the prospective candidates of the Grand Alliance, who have now withdrawn their nominations, will have a vested interest in ensuring that no election takes place in their constituency. All such candidates would feel compelled to challenge any sort of legitimacy being vested on the 4 Party Alliance candidates through the January 22 polls which would establish their power and control over patronage in the constituency over the next five years.

The Grand Alliance would further expect that large numbers of voters, not just their party supporters, would be hesitant to vote in a one-sided election, as was the case in February 1996 when most people simply kept away from the polls. However, the BNP and its allies would certainly aim to vote and would defend their right to vote. In challenging the poll, the Grand Alliance would have to reckon on the degree of repression they would have to face from the law enforcement agencies and possibly the army who would be mandated by the president to ensure that the polls were carried through. Finally, as and when the polls are completed and the 4 Party Alliance take over power, the Grand Alliance would have to realistically evaluate their capacity to withstand massive repression whilst mobilizing a much broader constituency of citizens to join them in challenging the legitimacy of a flawed poll.

In responding to the prospect of a one-sided election all citizens

and civil society itself will have to decide what role they will play. Will they accept an election result which does not involve all the principal parties? Will they be silent spectators to the resultant confrontation between the principal alliances or will they come forward to assert their democratic rights?

In asserting their position civil society will no doubt be keeping an eye on what will be done by the other players in the drama such as the armed forces and the international community. The citizens of Bangladesh will eventually have to decide whether democracy in Bangladesh is a spectator sport or it is sufficiently important for them to come forward to ensure that they are served by a government which truly reflects their freely given vote.

In the final analysis, a major conflict, with prospects of violent confrontations, will damage both the alliances since neither of the protagonists can be sure where this dance will end and what consequences it will have for either of them or for our democratic process. Can the two principal alliances step out of the circle where they are engaged in their fatal dance of destruction and seek the path of statesmanship?

There is a universal demand across the country for a free, fair and peaceful election held under a non-partisan CTG. Neither constitutional niceties nor partisan politics should be allowed to frustrate this deeply felt demand. Can civil society play any role in this process of sustaining our democratic institutions or will they remain silent witnesses as the lights across the land go out one by one?

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When it comes to economy, AL-BNP Never forget Kathmandu play a politics of consensus

Bangladesh is, of course, not the only country where mainstream political parties do not represent qualitative differences in terms of economic policies. The United States is also an example of a very similar phenomenon. As a range of political critics argue, in the United States, when it comes to basic political-economic and philosophical characters, there is no major difference between the Republican and Democratic parties. But, in spite of this suffocating commonalities, there are still voices within the Democratic party that talk about expansion of welfare measures, the possibility of creating a national health care policy, or a progressive income tax structure. Unfortunately, in Bangladesh, Awami League and BNP have failed to define their positions on economic policies even on that sort of basic grounds.

PIASH KARIM

THE decision of Awami League-led Grand Alliance not to participate in the election has thrown our politics into another round of confusion and antagonism. In many ways, it revealed a profound rupture between the two largest political parties of the country. But in some other ways, there are more similarities between these major political contenders than meet the eye.

Just a while ago, the five-point agreement signed between Awami League and Khelafat Majlis has demonstrated one of those common grounds. The Awami League leadership's attempts at clumsy damage control notwithstanding, the agreement betrayed a deeper crisis of our mainstream political culture, a culture that promotes an "anything goes" ideology as long as it serves narrowly defined interests of a specific party. (From a pragmatic vantage point, how much electoral clout Khelafat Majlis holds that prompted Awami League to make that compromise is an important question in itself).

But there is another important area where the line of demarcation between the two major political parties is quite blurred. I am talking about the concrete differences between Awami League and BNP in regard to the most important economic issues confronted by our nation. If politics is ultimately a practice of social transformation (or maintenance of social status quo, depending on the political context and equation of forces), then there can never be a dividing line between politics and economics. Politics is always, invariably, embedded in economy as economy is unavoidably political in nature.

With all the debates on constitutionality and fairness of election, there is hardly any debate between the major parties on important economic issues. The difference between Awami League and BNP in terms of a spectrum of issues - recognizing social

inequality as a fundamental feature of our political economy, the nature of state-market relations, terms of participation in a globalized market economy, direct foreign investment, terms of trade etc. is minimal. The much needed discussion on land reform is absent in the rhetoric of both parties. There is no serious discussion on labor rights in either party's platform. Neither party has unfolded a serious program for poverty reduction.

The influence of illegitimately accumulated wealth on politics seems to be a given thing in our mainstream bi-partisan politics. The power of both parties is deeply embedded in a vested structure of economic privilege. The nouveau riche has strongholds within both of them. Money, in both parties, plays a central role in getting nomination and running campaigns. While legitimate accusations of election engineering against BNP is raised by Awami League (not that Awami League did not, albeit to a lesser degree, attempted its own share of election engineering under its watch), there is hardly any viable discussion on black money in either parties. Neither party has taken this issue raised by citizens' groups seriously. In spite of their incessant rivalries and power struggles, when it comes to economy, Awami League and BNP seem to have created a strange politics of consensus.

Through its evolution as the vanguard of the nationalist movement, Awami League also articulated a central-left position on economic issues during the sixties. Among others, it was a leader like Tajuddin Ahmed, the unsung hero of our national liberation struggle, who played a major role in the evolution of that position. The leftist turn of part of the young leadership of the party was also an important component of that process. The 1972 constitution of the newly independent country embodied socialism as a central principle. Along with three other core principles--democracy, secularism, and nationalism--

incorporating socialism in the constitution was a remarkable recognition of the legacy of our liberation war. The success and failure of that principle in the immediate post-independent Bangladesh, however, is a whole different story.

Through political turmoil and ups and downs, Awami League started taking a central-right direction in the eighties. That drift is due partly to the party's embedment in economic privilege and partly to the crudely defined pragmatism of conventional electoral politics. The collapse of alternative visions in international arena and its domestic ramifications also made social justice a less appealing agenda. The party steadily committed itself to an uncritical acceptance of the market economy mixed with rudimentary welfare state rhetoric and policies.

Since its inception, BNP's economic policy has been central right in nature. A major demonstration of that character is the way Ziaur Rahman, through unconstitutional means, jettisoned socialism, along with secularism, as a state principle. But despite its different genealogy, BNP's economic position has not been different from that of Awami League in any substantive way. Like its political nemesis, BNP's economic agenda constitutes a commitment to market economy combined with state-sponsored (no matter how weak and ineffective) welfare measures.

Bangladesh is, of course, not the only country where mainstream political parties do not represent qualitative differences in terms of economic policies. The United States is also an example of a very similar phenomenon. As a range of political critics argue, in the United States, when it comes to basic political-economic and philosophical characters, there is no major difference between the Republican and Democratic parties. But, in spite of this suffocating commonalities, there are still voices within the Democratic party that talk about expansion of welfare measures, the possibility of creating a national health care policy, or a progressive income tax structure. Unfortunately, in Bangladesh, Awami League and BNP have failed to define their positions on economic policies even on that sort of basic grounds.

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KULDIP NAYAR
writes from New Delhi

HERE was no guillotine, no storming of Bastilles, no Madam Therese

Defarge to knit the names of oppressors in the scroll she wove throughout the day. Revolution in Nepal, unlike the one in France, was peaceful. None from among the oppressors was even touched. The fiasco of Hillary Clinton's health care proposals in the early period of the Clinton administration, there is no bold proposal on the part of the mainstream Democratic leadership to institute a universal health care policy. When it comes to quality of life measures like infant mortality, weight at birth, or per capita hospital bed, the United States is way behind many industrialized nations. It was, after all, under Bill Clinton, the last Democrat in the White House, the so-called welfare reform bill put the welfare system as we had known since the New Deal of FDR to an end. In many respects, the Democrats and the Republicans, like the memorable characters of Lewis Carroll, have become like tweedledee and tweedledum, indistinguishable characters with different names.

But, in spite of this suffocating commonalities, there are still voices within the Democratic party that talk about expansion of welfare measures, the possibility of creating a national health care policy, or a progressive income tax structure. Unfortunately, in Bangladesh, Awami League and BNP have failed to define their positions on economic policies even on that sort of basic grounds.

Citizens have the right to serious, substantive debates on issues that have tangible consequences for their everyday lives. Without addressing the bread and butter issues of economic democracy, our democratic political culture remains woefully inadequate. Yet, none of our major parties have lived up to that task. Without that, a major promise of our war of independence continues to be incomplete.

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BETWEEN THE LINES

The arduous task--finding resource for providing basic amenities to people and enforcing law and order-- will begin only when the Maoists join the government. They took to arms because the system could not deliver. The same question would stare at them after the parliamentary system is in place. The kingship, the Maoists' methods and the parliamentary ways or, for that matter, socialism and communism, are means to an end, not the end by themselves. How much good will they do to people is the criterion. If they are sacrificed, for what is considered good for the country, is that the right objective to have?

was no less significant than the end of the British Empire in the Indian subcontinent in 1947.

There was dignity about people's revolt, something that evoked awe, democratic and disciplined as it was. Yet there was a message of defiance to the tyranny of one man and his collaborators. Nepal had witnessed something similar in 1990 when the People's Movement had overthrown the panchayat system of absolute monarchy. The revolution made the Nepalese transcend the barriers of caste and clime, span the distance between rural and urban and Tarai and hilly tracts. Diverse communities rose like one person. This has its plus and minus sides. The plus is the unity that has come about. The minus is the rise in expectations.

However, what struck me at Kathmandu was the patience with which people wait for the outcome of talks between the two contesting sides, the Nepali Congress, along with its leftist allies, and the Maoists, the communist party of Nepal, commanding the People's Liberation Army. With bated breath, people saw finalisation of the interim constitution in November. A month later, they witnessed the removal of King Gyanendra as the head of the state. Both sides sorted out their difference by making the Prime Minister as the head of the state.

Prime Minister Girja Prasad Koirala has not apparently liked the arrangement because he has said in a statement that the Prime Minister has become too powerful and there is a danger that he can act as a dictator. The interim constitution has kept intact the institution of monarchy and it will be voted upon on the opening day of the constituent assembly, yet to be elected.

Indeed, it was a triumph of people, the teeming millions, poor or marginalized, whom the outside world had written off. A Nepali intellectual even authored a book, *Forget Kathmandu*. People retrieved freedom and restored power to the elected parliament which the king had dissolved. The change

revered, particularly in villages. One estimate is that at least 50 per cent of Nepalese want the institution to stay in some shape because they regard the king as the incarnation of god. The Royal Nepal Army is tilted towards the king. It has retained the word "royal," although the Nepal Airlines has dropped it. Even after the revolution, the interim coalition government sent a letter to King Gyanendra on his birthday, although it did away with the ceremony of ministers going in a delegation to greet him.

With the kingship out of the way, the Koirala government and the Maoists are concentrating on the surrender of arms. The kingship, the Maoists' methods and the parliamentary ways or, for that matter, socialism and communism, are means to an end, not the end by themselves. How much good will they do to people is the criterion. If they are sacrificed, for what is considered good for the country, is that the right objective to have?

Civil society which should provide the answers has a grievance that it has not got its due. I concede that the intellectuals in Nepal are better and more committed than the ones in India. But the latter have had a genial environment of open society. Tall national leaders gave them a headstart and recognised their importance. The Nepalese had to work with the king who, however benevolent, was the king. But Nepal is more homogeneous after the April revolution than ever before. There is freedom in the air. With the Maoists adopting democratic methods and the Koirala and his allies keeping their sides of the bargain, there is no reason why peace and prosperity should elude Nepal.

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