

## A welcome move

Nation now expects wiser leadership from Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina

**W**E welcome the release of BNP chairperson Khaleda Zia on bail. We believe it bodes well for politics and the way will now be clear for a broad-based participation of all political parties at the general elections scheduled for the end of this year. It is our hope that Begum Zia's release now removes all the impediments that have so far prevented her party from taking part in a dialogue with the Election Commission. It is now our expectation that the party will take part wholeheartedly in all the preparatory moves aimed at a holding of the elections.

At this newspaper, we believe that the release of both Sheikh Hasina and Begum Zia basically removes the two most important hurdles to a normalisation of politics in the country. The Awami League and the BNP have both been vocal about the freedom of their leaders. We certainly take satisfaction from the fact that both major parties have now had their principal demands, namely, the freeing of their leaders, met. That should now clear the air and remove all suspicions and help the nation stride at full speed and without loss of time to the promised elections. In this context, however, we are happy to note the caveat served by no less a figure than Barrister Rafiqul Haq, legal counsel to both Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia and respected for his neutrality. He has noted that the two leaders and their parties must stop bickering and avoid a return to the conditions that led to the imposition of emergency on January 11 last year. These are surely words of wisdom at such a critical juncture in our national history as the present and should be paid careful attention to.

All said and done, we think it is only fair to remind both Begum Zia and Sheikh Hasina of the expectations the people of the country have of them. Those expectations are simple and yet high, which is that these two leaders now must set about improving the quality of democracy by moving away from the divisive politics of the past. Just as the people have stood by them through all their trials and tribulations in these past many months, so should they come forth with leadership that is wiser and more far-sighted than it has so far been. In simple terms, it now devolves on the two leaders to ensure a peaceful, constructive and development-oriented political future for Bangladesh.

## Positive trends in HSC results

Felicitations to achievers and performing institutions

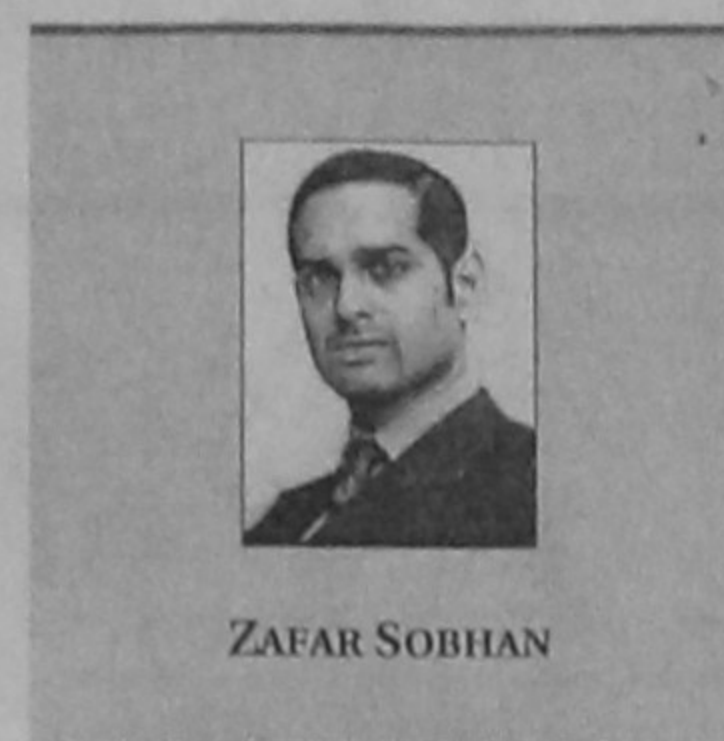
**P**REVIOUS records have been broken by this year's HSC results -- hands-down. The seven education boards have yielded a pass percentage of 74.85, a clear 10 percent increase over previous year's level with almost a doubling of the figure of GPA-5 achievers.

Our wholehearted congratulations to the successful candidates, their parents and guardians and the teachers. Noticeably, the nine boards worked hard to publish the results in 60 days as promised by the education ministry. This credit is due to the education ministry and the board employees for constant monitoring of the examination, tabulation and publication processes culminating in such a fantastic outcome.

An analysis of the factors behind such extra-ordinary results makes a revealing study. Serious pursuit of studies without distraction, competitive flair among students spurning the ways of cheating, better educational administration, improved classroom instructions including infusion of effective preparatory skill through model tests -- all contributed to the overall enhancement of performance. Crucially, the reduction in the rate of failure in English language test has had a concomitant effect in improving the pass rate across the board. Significantly, the stern approach taken to colleges with bad results by way of cancelling Monthly Payment Order (MPO) prompted them to roll up their sleeves to do better to survive.

The overarching feeling is, but for the long absence of political unrest and peace on the campus, such a cumulative improvement in the performance cards would not have been possible. Persistent doses of political turmoil, topped by strikes and academic closures and internal conflicts within institutions exacted a heavy price in terms of functioning and performance of the vital institutions. Left to themselves, the boards, educational institutions, teachers and students can do better. This is the dividend of peace that must be allowed to flourish by the political parties after the elections in the greater interest of the country.

# Now let's start the election campaign



ZAFAR SOBHAN

**E**VER since Sheikh Hasina was freed on medical parole three months ago, the country has been waiting for the other shoe to drop. Just as Hasina's original incarceration two months ahead of Khaleda Zia seemed one-sided until her counterpart was also similarly detained, so it was when Hasina was released.

The government, by all accounts, has been quietly prepared for Khaleda to be released on bail for quite some time now. The sticking point was always the prior release of her son, but Khaleda stuck to her guns, and got her way.

Awami Leaguers (and perhaps others as well) will argue that it is unfair for the two leaders to be considered in the same light, given the wide disparity in the misrule and abuse of power that they presided over when prime minister, and they may have a point.

But, regardless of the merits of this argument, and it is one with which I have a certain amount of sympathy, the *realpolitik* of the situation seemed to suggest that, at this stage in the proceedings, that the government may have

had little choice but to treat the two former prime ministers the same.

The imperative was always elections. For this government, there could be no back-tracking from its commitment to hold national elections in December. The public had patiently sat through an extended period of non-democratic rule under a state of emergency only because it was hoping for free and fair elections at the end of the process. Two years was absolutely the limit of the public's patience.

Ultimately, both BNP and AL are indispensable to elections. Elections without one or other of the two parties would run the risk of lacking credibility in the public eye and would likely not have provided the foundation needed for functional politics in the future. Thus, the government was, in the final analysis, obligated to do pretty much whatever was necessary to bring the parties to the table.

It would have been better if the elections had not been held hostage to the parties' preferred legal outcomes with respect to the cases against their leaders. But if that was the price of bringing

them to the table, then it is not immediately apparent to me what serious alternatives the government had at its disposal. If the government folded, it is because it knew that it was only holding a pair of twos.

Now that both the AL and the BNP have got what they want, let us move on to the long-awaited elections. The last thing we need now is to revert to unproductive histrionics as to the intricacies of party registration. The release of the party leaders as a pre-condition for contesting elections is something that most Bangladeshis can probably sympathise with, but tendentious nit-picking over the minutiae of the RPO is a lot less likely to meet with public support.

Looking back over the last two years, it seems apparent that the government would have been better served to have held elections within the 90 days mandated by the constitution instead of embarking on its more ambitious program for remaking the polity.

The question is whether the reforms that have been put in place and the new electoral roll are worth the damage done by what can only be viewed as the

failure of the anti-corruption drive, the fact that the country has essentially trod water for the past two years, and the bitterness that has been engendered.

Much depends, first, on to what extent the institutional reforms that have been put in place are continued under a democratic government, second, whether there is any long-term improvement in the governance and political culture of the country, and, third, whether the shock of 1/11 and the last two years will end the culture of corruption.

The danger, of course, is that the reforms will be junked, that we will revert to the dysfunctional politics of the past, and that corruption, far from being brought under control, will become even more institutionalised due to the demonstrated inability of the government to sustainably bring the corrupt to book.

But that is a chance that as a country we will have to take. The voters have shown, if the city council elections are any guide, that the two big parties are the ones that have their allegiance.

Now, I think it would be a mistake for the AL and BNP to take continued voter loyalty as any

kind of a sign of unquestioning devotion. The first-past-the-post system ensures that many people will hold their nose and vote for the lesser of two evils to ensure that the party they dislike most will not come to power.

In addition, many people are hesitant to oppose AL and BNP at this moment in time because they see the parties as vanguards of the democracy we all wish to protect. The voters remain cautious and do not want to pave the way for any non-democratic alternative, and to this extent, they see the existing parties as the safest game in town.

Thus, once that spectre of non-democratic government is removed, and hopefully it will be banished by the coming elections, and voters need not be concerned that they are unwittingly digging democracy's grave, they may well be in the mood for some change.

My guess is that neither party is much in the mood for change. Indeed, the opposite: they feel vindicated. Perhaps the excesses, missteps, and rule of law and due process violations of the past two years have even managed to convince them that they are innocent victims of a witch-hunt to discredit them.

But the party that promises to deliver more credible change going forward is the one that will win the trust of the voters.

For the BNP, this might mean the voluntary retirement of Tarique Rahman from the political scene together with the cronies who surrounded him and made a mockery of the BNP's last tenure in office. This would enhance the credibility of the party going forward and create

impetus for a new generation of leadership to join the ranks and for far-reaching reforms to be instituted.

There is plenty of meat on the reform bone for the AL as well. If it can signal credibly to the voters that it really means business and that it has turned the corner into a new era of openness, internal democracy, and accountability, there is no question in my mind that the party will be rewarded at the polls.

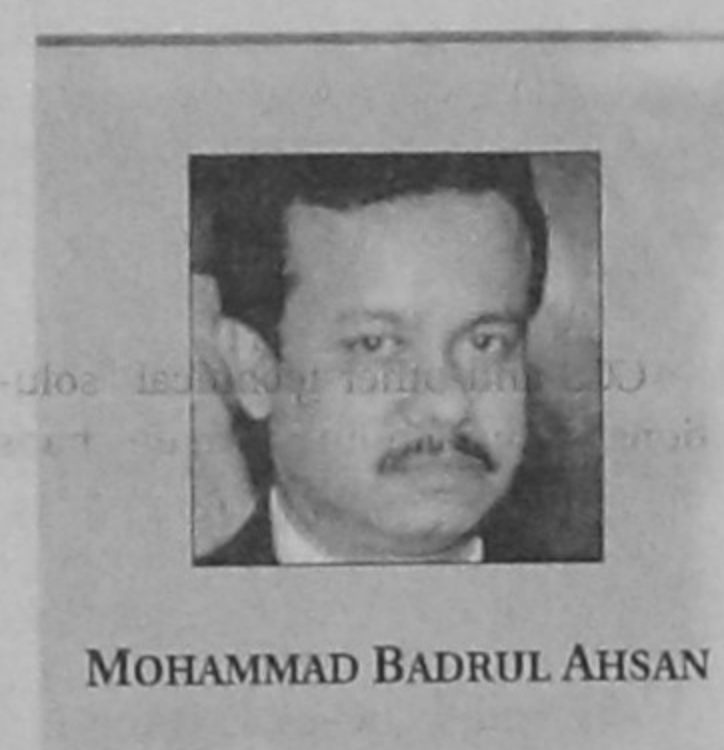
The worst-case scenario is if the parties refuse to reform themselves, or indeed, continue worse than before. This is, regrettably, perhaps the most likely scenario. But the two parties shouldn't think that, if that is the case, that the people will not rally behind the standard of the party that offers the most comprehensive and credible vision of change and progress.

Here we are: two years on. Right now, let us look to the future. AL and BNP have got their wish: their leaders have been released. Now, let's have that election. It is long over-due. There is much work to be done that only an elected government can do.

There are many more reforms that we need to consider, from repeal of Article 70 of the constitution to proportional representation to prime ministerial term limits, that might make our democracy more functional. There is policy to formulate. There are serious decisions that need to be made to meet the challenges of the 21st century. But only an elected government has the mandate to make these decisions and deliver these changes.

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# The Mercury retrograde?



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

**I**N so much as a good thing going has started to sputter, the current state of our national affairs is comparable to this comic situation. A man is pulled by the hair on his head, only to find that he couldn't retaliate because his assailant was bald. We are victims of a similar disappointment.

At the end of twenty months going on twenty-one, the government which raised our hopes is trashing them. What can we do to this government? Not even ask it to step down, since it's ready to quit in less than four months.

A fundamental question arises: Can anyone take over this country in the name of change and leave it worse than it was found? For those who need to know, this is the harm that has been done. When antibiotic fails to kill all of the bacteria it targets, the surviving bacteria

become resistant to that particular drug. These bacteria are called superbugs, which quickly learn to withstand antibiotics and perpetuate a cycle in which increasingly powerful drugs are required to treat infections.

The hodgepodge of the last twenty months is going to leave us with the superbugs. It will make change immensely more difficult in future, because the resistance to change will be stronger every time.

Perhaps, it has even turned back the clock. It has taken us so far forward that we are going to spend a great deal of our future recovering the distance we went ahead from the past. It's likely that much of the ensuing debate will be whether this country has been made better or worse during the two years of this caretaker government. No questions asked for the things made better. What

about the things made worse? Who is going to take responsibility for them?

While these questions blow in the wind, can this government simply pack up and go? True, it had come to power with good intentions. True, it had come to fix our problems and save us from a disaster. True, it had come to clean up the mess that made our politics unbearable. But can it leave us just like this in the middle of nowhere? Can it abandon us on a rebound course, where everything condemned twenty months ago looks imminent?

Bob Woodward writes in *The War Within*, excerpts from which appeared in *The Washington Post*, that Donald Rumsfeld was fond of using a bicycle seat analogy to describe the US strategy in Iraq. This is how it goes. The Iraqi forces should be trained to

assume responsibility for the security of their own country and then the US should "take the hand off the Iraqi bicycle seat" to let the Iraqis ride on their own.

This is an apt analogy for what this government came to do. It wanted to reform the political parties, fight corruption and hold fair election to drive a culture of responsible politics. The ultimate objective was to take us to a stage when our politicians would learn to "ride the bike" by themselves.

Perhaps, it will be argued for years to come as to what has actually happened. Why this government went from the sublime to the ridiculous? What has happened to the exuberance it showed at the beginning? Why is it callous closer to the end? Why is this flip-flop? Why is this government rushing to fold its tent?

But the overriding question of

all is whether this government can quit without taking responsibility for its failures. What about those who ran this government and enjoyed the perks of their respective offices? Are they not accountable for not delivering what they promised? Are they not accountable if they are going to leave things as bad, if not worse? Who do we blame, should there be resurgence of corruption? Who do we blame if we return to October 2006 after two years of innovative government?

Well, there are provisions to correct mistakes in real life. Doctors are sued for wrong treatment. One can claim compensation for property loss. We can take others to court for hurting our reputation. Manufacturers recall defective goods. Shops give refund on erroneous sale.

But what about those who give us false hope, and then leave us stewing in our own juice? How do they compensate for the mistakes or failures if we are going to live with the consequences?

It must be understood that a nation's fate isn't for target practice, and there is no free trial in nation building. One must be consequential and take credit or criticism for which there is no second chance or guessing. When the lives of millions are involved,

it can't be a walk in the park or day of picnic. Between bluffing and bungling, a line of accountability must be drawn.

Where are we going to draw that line for this government? If it came to inject accountability into our politics and failed, the least it can do is show some accountability as it goes out. It can tell us that it failed or why it failed. It can say it's sorry. We are an eternally forgiving nation. We shall listen, and we shall forgive.

Is that accountability important for us? German philosopher Hegel argues in the *Philosophy of Right* that punishment always remains imprisoned in the repetition of vengeance. We need this nation to heal and reconcile. Before that we need to punish or pardon. Our lesson from history is the trial of the war criminals. We shouldn't let another cycle of vengeance run its course.

In the movie *Brokeback Mountain*, Ennis del Mar tells his lover: "If you can't fix it Jack, you gotta stand it." That gruesome message reverberates through this unfortunate land. The only way to explain it is that we are going through the mercury retrograde, unless somebody feels accountable and tells us what happened.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a columnist for The Daily Star.

# Trouble in paradise

US will remain the leader in high-tech systems integration and exploring new domains such as nano-technology and bionics. However, whether the US will enjoy advantages in the emerging domain of cyber operations remains to be seen. The Chinese have taken the lead here and plan on acquiring a capability to paralyse a country without using any destructive power. The potential exists to simply switch off the most powerful military capabilities, in addition to paralysing any society.

KLAUS NAUMANN

**I**T is obvious that, for mutual interest, Europe needs the US to be a global player and US needs Europe to sustain its global commitments. But, the future appears bleak, whether observing European sentiments at the mere mention of President Bush or comparing foreign-policy statements from US presidential hopefuls that include scant mention of Europe.

The reason the partnership is in trouble is because of different perceptions and gaps in capabilities to approach global problems. The West has lost credibility in the world and many Europeans hold US government

responsible for that.

Europe's risk awareness is very different from that in US. While most in US believe in the global war on terror, Europe doesn't see itself as being at war. US begins to understand the new dimension of trans-national threats and while European experts agree with their American colleagues, the general public don't.

Following a period of unilateralism, US might return to a new form of multilateralism but whatever the label, the net result for Europeans will be the same: They'll be called to take more responsibilities and show solidarity by risk-sharing without reservations. To avoid new disputes, both sides must con-

sider the perceptions they have of each other.

Europeans see US as prepared to use its overwhelming military power early in crisis. Indeed, the US often takes a robust approach -- although a growing number of Americans are aware that few future problems can be solved by such means.

Americans overlook the diversity of Europe and tend to see Europeans' use of soft power, dialogue and international law as a fig leaf to hide a lack of resolve. Europe is more reluctant than US to use military power.

Germany is, probably, most reluctant to use military power other than for homeland defence operations. Germany claims that

any war of aggression must be banned and that it's extremely difficult to justify war as an instrument of politics.

Most European governments must win parliamentary approval for any deployment in operations outside the country. This constitutes a major obstacle in any transatlantic consensus since US president can take advantage of the War Powers Act, whereas the allies must base their requests for approval on an international consensus.

Moreover, many Europeans believe that most conflicts can be solved through dialogue, negotiation and compromise, reinforcing a European school of thought aiming at a total ban on war.

But war is alive and well. Any claim otherwise was bombed into pieces when non-state actors using deadly instruments attacked the US on 9/11.

Nevertheless, many Europeans believe that one can cope with the dangerous world by applying traditional legal instruments to protect a state's citizens. The US understands

that new solutions are needed. But its initial steps suggested to the outside world that protection of American citizens took priority over customary international law. Consequently, two approaches have emerged from the transatlantic community: the legalistic approach and the protection-at-all-costs approach.

The first approach has two ways of legalising the use of force -- self-defence and a UN Security Council resolution. While the proponents of the legalistic approach are right in principle, the question remains what to do if the UN Security Council cannot fulfil its duty, even though an overwhelming majority regards the use of force as legitimate.

A strictly legalistic approach is therefore no longer appropriate. But to act with little or no respect for international law is no answer either since it ruins the credibility of the West's most powerful instrument: We stand for the rule of law and respect for human rights.

But the challenges are too big, the reality too compelling, that

we can afford being split by perceptions. There's but one way to respond, namely by standing together. Anything else signals that the West lacks the resolve to protect its way of life and values.

There is also a substantial gap in military capabilities between Europeans and Americans. Information dominance matters today, but the Europeans spend more money on legacy forces and personnel. Europe's defence spending amounts to 60% of US defence spending, but Europe produces around 10% of US power projection capabilities.

US will remain the leader in high-tech systems integration and exploring new domains such as nano-technology and bionics. However, whether the US will enjoy advantages in the emerging domain of cyber operations remains to be seen.

The Chinese have taken the lead here and plan on acquiring a capability to paralyse a country without using any destructive power. The potential exists to simply switch off the most powerful military capabilities, in

addition to paralysing any society.

Another capability that matters is the political will to take unpopular decisions. Obviously, this is easier for a US or French president than it is for a German chancellor or other European heads of government who must form coalition governments, inadequate for responding to the security challenges of today.

Turning public opinion around on controversial issues such as deploying forces in combat operations or on using all instruments of politics and tools in fighting terrorism is a demanding battle for politicians. Moreover, the historically well-founded desire of never again giving too much power to a centralised government produces additional impediments in quite a few countries.

In conclusion, the West is in serious crisis, and Europeans lack what's needed most at the dawn of a new administration in Washington: European unity and the resolve to find with its US allies common approaches that

coordinate all instruments of politics.

There's urgent necessity to begin any process of shaping a new transatlantic relationship by sincerely discussing what divides Europe and the US and what keeps us together -- a step not taken since the uniting pressure during the Cold War withered away.

Such a crisis of transatlantic relations is nothing new for NATO nations. Political leaders should take advantage of it and lay new foundations by moving to the bold vision of an alliance comprised of more than military precautions, prepared to use all instruments of politics in a comprehensive way, one that convinces citizens that preserving peace and protecting values and convictions are well worth the sacrifices.

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