

TALKING POLLS AND BEYOND

'Uncertainty will loom large over the reform initiatives after the election'

Hasanul Haq Inu is president of Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD). He started his political career when he was a student of Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (Buet). He was elected Buet unit general secretary of Bangladesh Chhatra League in 1969. A freedom fighter, Inu also played an important role in the historical mass upsurge in 1969. He organised the historical soldiers' revolt and mass upsurge against the military junta on November 7 in 1975. Inu was one of those who led the democratic movement against former military dictator H.M. Ershad from the forefront. Shariful Islam and Suranjith Deabnath took his exclusive interview.

How will you evaluate the reform measures undertaken by the CTG in the last 20 months? The CTG has reformed some important sectors like the Election Commission (EC), Public Service Commission (PSC), Anti-corruption Commission (ACC) and separated the judiciary. These reforms will help establish democracy in the country. But, administrative reforms and reforms in police and other security forces, which are very important, fell apart. I don't understand why the CTG does not implement reforms in the police department, which is very necessary for the upcoming election. Do you think that the CTG and EC have shifted from their previous position on the issue of reforms? Yes, the EC has shifted from its previous position. But its revised Representation of People Order (RPO) is better compared to all previous electoral laws. On the other hand, reform measures of the CTG are now totally derailed. It is very disappointing that the CTG has "renewed the license" of identified corrupt people, known killers and

war criminals to operate in the political field. Do you believe the political culture of the country will change due to revised RPO? Some positive changes will be added to our politics. Financial transparency and good management have been accepted by the political parties due to RPO. The EC proved its sincerity by relaxing some provisions of the RPO after consulting with political leaders. What measures are required to eliminate politics of conflict, doubt and abhorrence? Conflicts and doubts are deeply rooted in our politics because big political parties go into partnership with identified terrorists, war criminals, corrupt individuals, dictators, fundamentalists, diplomats and controversial foreign forces. Besides, ruling parties' repression of opposition parties will have to be stopped. None is above law. All political killings, including Bangabandhu murder, four-national leader killings and Kibria killing, need fair trial and the killers should be executed.

What's your opinion about the minus-two formula? Minus-two or manage two was a non-political plan. The government has failed to minus corrupt individuals, war criminals and militants from the upcoming parliament election. Do you support the EC's decision on front or associate organisations of political parties? The EC has taken this decision in consultation with political leaders. Associate organisations might be allowed, but front wings are not allowed. Student politics will operate independently. Do you think reform should be imposed? Reforms should not be implemented due to external pressure. Reforms are required in political parties for making them more democratic. A political party that does not reform regularly will be unable to do politics in the country. We have been raising demands for electoral reforms since 1991, and finally the EC has met our demand through revising the RPO. Many corrupt individuals are now

coming out under bail. What is your comment regarding this? The CTG started the anti-corruption drive and the countrymen welcomed it. But the drive shifted from its main aim, and started to fail when the government tried to conduct the drive in the name of balance. Now, identified corrupt people are returning to the electoral field after obtaining bail. So, the CTG has lost its moral ground. Should the political parties give nomination to those who are either convicted or accused in graft cases? I urge top leaders of all political parties not to give nomination to identified corrupt individuals, war criminals, militants and killers. JSD will protest and resist if these controversial people get nomination from the 14-party alliance. Meanwhile, I have proposed to the 14-party alliance to make a list of corrupt persons. But, the CTG has no right to make any list. The government's only duty is to assist the EC, they have no right to advise political parties and interfere in the nomination procedure. Do you have any confusion over holding of the election on December 18? I think the CTG's persistent dilly-dallying in fulfilling the conditions prerequisite for holding a free and fair election is the reason for the doubts. The CTG's recent open and secret meetings with different important leaders also created doubts as it is not clear what has been exchanged between them. Such meetings raised the question whether the CTG has any secret or hidden agenda centring the election. The state of emergency is an

anti-democratic and anti-human law. The caretaker government's persistence in continuing emergency power rules has also created a doubt. Moreover, the government stance about the two top leaders, Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia, is also not clear. Sometimes it seems that the government wants an election keeping the two leaders out by ensuring their convictions, sometimes the government is taking initiatives to ensure their participation in the election. So, there is doubt, whether Awami League (AL) and BNP will go for election if the two leaders are convicted. How do you see the government's announcement to hold election under emergency? There is no threat to the government from political parties. So, why is the government keeping the emergency in force? I think, this caretaker government has a secret agenda, and emergency might be used for implementing the secret agenda. There was no problem in holding city corporation elections under emergency. So, what's the problem in parliament election? It is not true that the city corporation elections were free and fair due to emergency. They were free and fair due to the assistance that political parties extended to the government and Election Commission. However, the CTG could not stop the use of black money and criminal activities in the city corporation elections. So, there is no need of state of emergency during the parliamentary election to make it free and fair. Do you support deferral of upazila elections? All political parties agree to hold upazila elections. But, now the government has fixed upazila elections only five days after the parliament election. Upazila elections should be held at least 30 days after the general election. AL opposes local observers for the coming poll, do you support it? Partisanship has reached such a level that no organisation in the country is neutral. Organisations having direct links with political parties should not be allowed as observers. Local observers can be allowed, but the government must remove those organisations from the list of observers as soon as objections against them arise. How do you feel about the activities of foreign diplomats? I don't bother about the activities of foreign diplomats. These diplomats give the wrong advice all the time. All incidents that they did not want have happened. For example, foreign diplomats did not want our independence, but we triumphed in 1971. These diplomats wanted us to participate in the election on January 22, 2007, but we refused. And, finally, we won and the election was cancelled. What is your observation about the post-election situation in the country? We will not get a parliament free from the corrupt, war criminals and militants because these people are being allowed to participate in the upcoming election. The next election will be an election to rehabilitate them. The election will not bring any good for democracy. Political parties defeated in the election will deny its result and restart conflicting politics because

the allegations that it has been a playing biased role has already been raised against the CTG. Uncertainty will loom large over the reform initiatives after the election. What is the position of JSD and 14-party on the issue of forming grand alliance with Ershad? A grand alliance with other parties is yet to be decided. We will consider forming an electoral alliance with the former dictator if he agrees to stand strongly against BNP-Jamaat, militants and war criminals. We will agree to share seats with Ershad for the greater interest of the country



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and democracy. Have the leaders of 14-party begun to discuss the issue of seat sharing? How many seats do you expect from the alliance? We are yet to have any discussion on seat sharing. This time, we will share seats more logically. We will expect more seats than the previous time. What are the lessons for politicians from 1/11? The main lesson from 1/11 is that great and powerful persons are not safe. The person who is president or prime minister or general must go to jail if he or she breaks the law. Nobody is above the law.

Sher-e-Bangla: A natural leader

Like a genuine natural leader, he had always been wedded to his ideals and, in his ardent desire to realise them, he unhesitatingly lighted upon truths that "perish never." He never bothered about creating any effect. He took up a cause if it came naturally to him, and always worked for it with genuine sincerity, devotion, indomitable courage and conviction, befitting a natural leader of the first order.

DR. T.G. SPEAR OF Cambridge University has divided leadership into five types: (1) natural, (2) charismatic, (3) rational, (4) of consensus, and (5) by force. According to him, the natural leader is selfless; he is, in fact, not interested in leadership. He exerts himself to the best of his ability and with all the sincerity and devotion under the sun without any expectation of reward. Because of his sincerity he is able to establish a personal bond between himself and his followers. Generally, the cause throws up such a leader, he takes to it like a duck to water. Dr. Spear cites Napoleon Bonaparte as an outstanding example of a natural leader, the imprint on the sands of time of this "Child of Destiny" can never be erased. Sher-e-Bangla A.K. Fazlul Huq, the indomitable champion of truth and justice, was also an out and out natural leader. It is true that he was not fated like Napoleon to eat his heart out in exile, or to bury himself during the closing years of his life in bitter memories of a stirring past. In a sense, Napoleon had been fortunate in his death, he had been spared the torment of brooding over the ruins of his ambition. But Sher-

e-Bangla did not fade away gradually. He died, as was proper, in the fullness of his glory. Like Napoleon, he was also a patriot, an idealist, a man of action, a dreamer of dreams. A review of his career reads like a romance: it seems unbelievable that a man so daring, so adventurous, so bold, so reckless of consequences, and yet so intensely practical, should have arisen in this benighted land of ours. Yet, a study of his life will show that "the elements" were: "So mixed in him that Nature might stand up, And say to the world: 'This was a man!'" Like a genuine natural leader, he had always been wedded to his ideals and, in his ardent desire to realise them, he unhesitatingly lighted upon truths that "perish never." He never bothered about creating any effect. He took up a cause if it came naturally to him, and always worked for it with genuine sincerity, devotion, indomitable courage and conviction, befitting a natural leader of the first order. In all respects, indeed, was he a true natural leader. His towering frame overshadowed everyone and everything around him. But more, much more, than the physical charisma was the vision and the deep humanity that came through and left an

indelible impression. It always made one feel small and humble to be in his towering presence. Alone amidst the dazzling galaxy in the political firmament of Bengal was he capable of rising to the occasion in the hours of crises, rising higher and higher till he attained full stature, while others looked smaller and smaller till they sank beneath his great personality. A man with amazing foresight, he had the courage and conviction to demand a separate Bengali Army in British India. In a letter addressed to Sir John Herbert, the Governor of Bengal, on August 2, 1942, he wrote: "I want you to consent to the formation of a Bengali Army of a hundred thousand young Bengalis consisting of Hindu and Muslim youths on a fifty-fifty basis. There is an insistent demand for such a step being taken at once, and the people of Bengal will not be satisfied with any excuses. It is a national demand which must be immediately conceded." He also pointed out in the same letter: "Administrative measures must be suited to the genius and traditions of the people and not fashioned according to the whims and caprices of hardened bureaucrats, to many of whom autocratic ideas are bound up with the very



Sher-e-Bangla A.K. Fazlul Huq

breath of their lives." A natural leader with dauntless spirit, he never cared a button for his personal security and safety to bring a person to book, whatever might be the rank and status of the person concerned. Even the British Governor of Bengal was reprimanded in writing by this fearless representative of the people. In February, 1943, he made a statement in the capacity of chief

before announcing what purports to be a decision of the government." The letter very naturally angered Sher-e-Bangla and, in a befitting reply sent on the February 16, the Tiger of Bengal roared: "Dear Sir John, In reply to your letter of the February 15, 1943, I write to say that I owe you no explanation whatever in respect of my conduct in failing to consult you before announcing what, according to you, is the decision of the government, but I certainly owe you a duty to administer a mild warning that indecorous language such as has been used in your letter under reply should, in future, be avoided in any correspondence between the governor and his chief minister." What is more, he did not even hesitate to rebuke and bring to book the journalists for their passive role and cowardice. Reminding them of great dare-devil journalists like Maulana Mohammad Ali Jauhar, Motilal Ghosh, Surendra Nath Banerjee, he declared on the floor of the Bengal Legislative Assembly on February 27, 1944: "They were lions in their own days and we have the descendants of the lions of Indian journalism in our midst today. But the difference between the two classes of lions is very significant. Those were lions whose roars used to reverberate from Bengal across the seven seas to the homes of the British nation, but in the case of the present lions they are as docile as lions in a circus show. The roar of the lions of old used to make thrones tremble, but most of the present lions only know how to crouch

beneath the throne and wag their tails in approbation of government policy." No other politician in the history of this sub-continent ever had the guts to scold journalists in such a forceful language. But it was not only his indefatigable spirit and indomitable courage which marked him out from the average run of leaders in the unusually brilliant and colourful Indian political firmament; his brilliant wit and remarkable sense of humour, occasionally ably supported by his thorough grasp of mathematics, together with unparalleled ability to gather up complexity and transmute it to simplicity, also endeared him to the masses. When Dr. Nalini Ranjan Sircar, himself a renowned parliamentarian, urged the chief minister to change the angle of vision regarding a particularly ticklish issue, Sher-e-Bangla promptly replied that it was not his angle of vision but that of the honourable member which needed a change. With his inimitable sense of humour and superb command of mathematics, he retorted: "The angle of vision of my esteemed friend may be either acute or obtuse, but never the right angle." It was again the same mathematical expertise that helped him to bless us with a totally new definition of efficiency. In his own words: "Efficiency is most correctly measured by a fraction, the numerator of which varies as the amount of the work achieved and the denominator varying as the amount of energy spent in achieving the work. It is clear, therefore, that the denominator remaining constant, the extent of efficiency varies according to the

value and amount of the out-turn of the work put forth by any machine, or by a human worker of anything else." A highly skilled parliamentarian, Sher-e-Bangla managed to keep cool, calm, and collected in all difficult situations -- even when irritated or annoyed to an extent beyond measure. While facing a bitter opponent and critic during a budget session in the Bengal Legislative Assembly, Sher-e-Bangla was awfully irritated by the peculiar gestures and caricature of a hostile member. The member was urging the chief minister to rise to the occasion and face the music. He was harping on the same tune, and it was enough to try the patience of a saint. Sher-e-Bangla interrupted and said: "Mr Speaker, I can jolly well face the music, but I cannot face a monkey." All were dumb-founded as none expected such a crude remark from a seasoned politician like Sher-e-Bangla. The member concerned demanded immediate apology and withdrawal of the objectionable and unparliamentary remark of the chief minister. But, cool as a cucumber he always was, our beloved hero with his brilliant parliamentary skill replied: "Mr Speaker, I never mentioned any honourable member of this House. But if any honourable member thinks that the cap fits him, I withdraw my remark." This was our beloved Tiger of Bengal -- a friend, a companion, a colleague, a leader of the suffering millions.

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The Bin Laden factor

But something else is going to happen. My money is on Osama bin Laden popping back up with a hate video, just as he did the weekend before the 2004 election. That tape reminded the public that the country was still at risk from this sickening terrorist and that President Bush had kept us safe for the three years since the September 11, 2001 attacks.

JONATHAN ALTER THE decision by Barack Obama to return to Hawaii to visit his ailing grandmother might not be the last surprise of the last fortnight of this campaign. Two weeks is an eternity in presidential politics, which means we're likely to have one more twist before this ends -- though with early voting, more than a quarter of the electorate now votes before Election Day. What will the twist be? Reviving

Jeremiah Wright, which the McCain campaign is hinting at, won't mean much. Unless the Reverend Wright himself resurfaces (he's abroad and on radio silence), that thrust would be easily parried by the Obama campaign. That's because John McCain is on tape saying a man's pastor should not be relevant in judging his character. Even if an independent 527 committee were to make an attack ad involving Wright, Obama's got an obvious jujitsu response ad making McCain out to be a hypocrite.

Maybe McCain could buy a half hour of time for a big speech that realigns his campaign. Problem is, any sudden readjustments now would play into the narrative that McCain is erratic and unprincipled. And the Obama campaign has bought up most of the remaining available time across the country, anyway. In fact, the earliest McCain can launch any kind of new offensive is Saturday, when Obama returns to the mainland. Otherwise it looks like he's beating up on a guy for

visiting his grandma. But something else is going to happen. My money is on Osama bin Laden popping back up with a hate video, just as he did the weekend before the 2004 election. That tape reminded the public that the country was still at risk from this sickening terrorist and that President Bush had kept us safe for the three years since the September 11, 2001 attacks. In that close campaign, it was this video -- not the Swift Boat tactics that got all the ink -- that made the difference. John Kerry, who led in several polls that weekend, saw his margin melt away. In 2005, Kerry himself said that 9/11 was the "central deciding thing" of the 2004 election and that the bin Laden video ended any chance he had of being elected. Just because it was convenient for him to say that doesn't make it untrue.

Why did the bin Laden tape do so much damage? The 9/11 attack was still fresh in Americans' memories, and the possibility of another one was on our minds. While sophisticated analysts could explain that bin Laden released the tape just before the election because he hoped Bush would win (Bush was a better recruiting tool for al Qaeda than a President Kerry would have been), none of that got through. The tape had the effect of freezing the 2004 campaign in place. Kerry couldn't criticise Bush at all for a pivotal 24 hours. This was partly Kerry's own fault. After his 2003 speech attacking Bush for letting bin Laden escape at Tora Bora, Kerry dropped most bin Laden references from his speeches. Internal polling by the Kerry campaign showed that voters didn't respond well to his talking

points about Bush's failure to catch bin Laden, so he gave the whole subject a rest. This was a terrible mistake. Had Kerry kept the heat on, bin Laden's re-emergence would have reinforced the message that he had not been caught. That's what would happen this time if bin Laden tried to intervene in another American election. Seven years after 9/11, the country is in a different place, and the Obama campaign would respond to a bin Laden tape in a different way. For two years, Obama has been reminding audiences that the Bush administration has failed to catch bin Laden. First with Hillary Clinton, then with McCain, Obama has made a point in debates of saying he would risk destabilizing Pakistan by bombing the border with Afghanistan if he had actionable intelligence that al Qaeda targets had been identified.

In the second debate, on Oct. 7, Obama brought up bin Laden again, making a point of stressing that he would "kill him" if possible. McCain's position on bin Laden has opened him up to attack in a way that Obama failed to exploit. In the second debate, McCain said, "I know how" to find bin Laden. This should have led Obama to respond that if he knows how to catch him, he should have told his friend George Bush. Obama missed a chance for that riposte in the debate, but he may yet have another opportunity. All of this sets up a quite different dynamic should bin Laden release another tape. After condemning the new tape, Obama could launch right into renewed criticism of the failure to catch al Qaeda's mastermind seven years after 9/11. Instead of making him look like

another weak Democrat, a new tape would give Obama a chance to seem muscular on national security. McCain would try to argue that the country would be safer with him, but it probably wouldn't have the potency of Bush's similar claim in 2004. Should there be, God forbid, an actual terrorist attack between now and the election, all bets are off. But it's instructive that only three days after the 2004 terrorist attack in Madrid that killed 193, the most deadly act of Islamic terrorism in European history, the Spanish socialists won national elections. We aren't Spain, but we're also not a country that can have a whole election thrown into disarray by terrorists. At least I hope we aren't any more, though we won't know for sure unless it happens.

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