Coalition. Their dominance in greater Rangpur (and reaching out to LDP) is essential for the AL to form a government-forming majority in parliament. But, it is still unclear how the AL and JP would move past the Ershad-as-president scenario. However, even with the JP's likely 15-seat contribution the AL is likely to fall short of its 151 absolute majority.

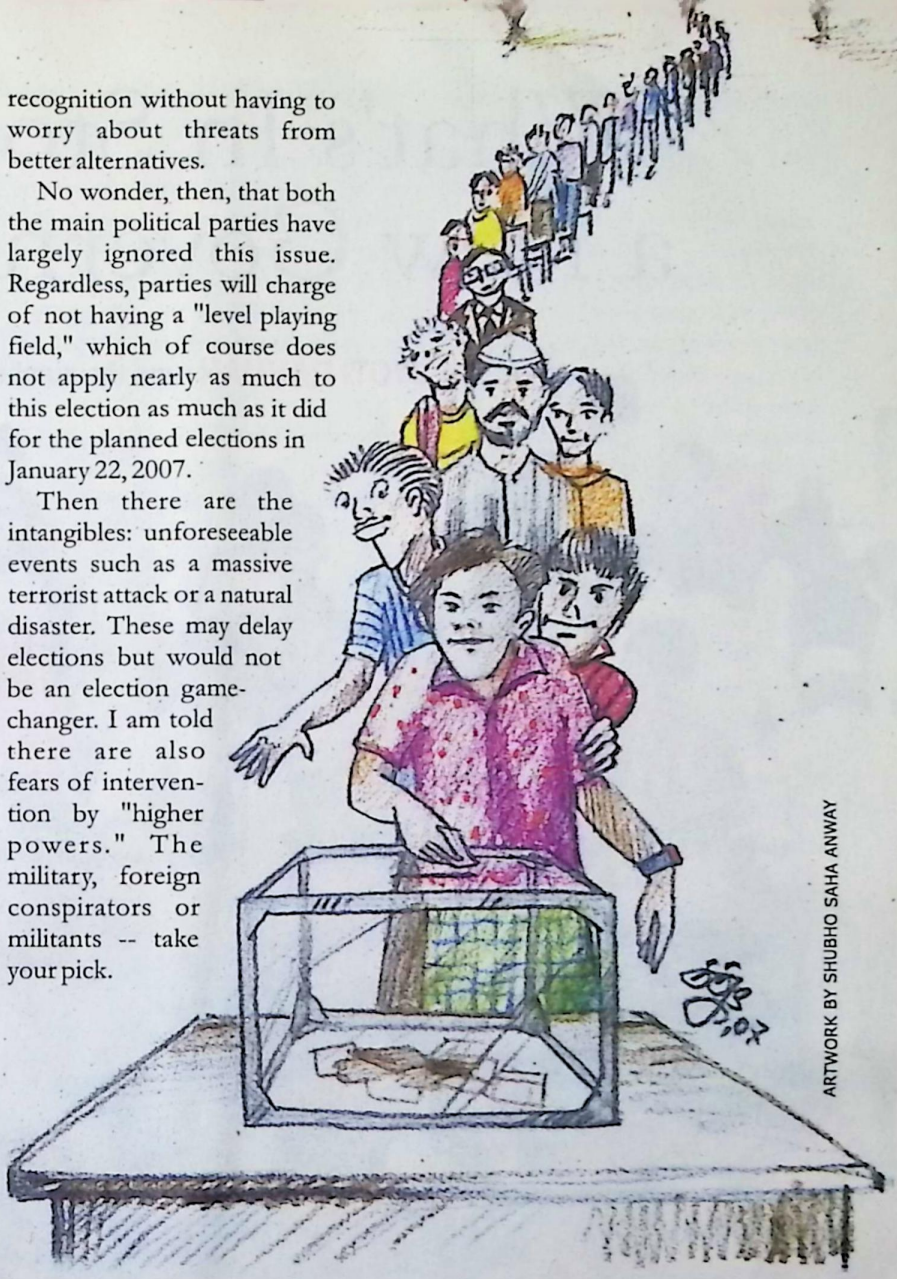
Given such a tight race, this invariably brings us to the question of fairness. This time around, the question is not so much about a proper voter list as it is about the environment and administration of the election itself. No one can argue against the impressive effort to cull the whopping 13 million false and duplicate names off the electoral roll. It is an outstanding achievement, despite being bankrolled by foreign aid, and has not received the plaudits it deserves from the public or the parties. In addition, fears that lifting the state of emergency would result in uncontrollable violence around elections could well be misplaced as the new electoral code of conduct is more severe on electoral violence than the Emergency Power Rules (EPR).

That said, a number of frustratingly incomprehensible rules have been set in place by the Election Commission. The most difficult to understand is the seemingly contradictory rule limiting campaigning to only two weeks. How candidates, especially the government's favourite new "honest and competent' candidates," could ever offer voters any substantial personal or policy information within that period is hard to comprehend.

Disturbingly, this makes a serious and dangerous implication that Bangladeshi voters are somehow incapable of making an informed choice and hence, do not need those options. Effectively, this harms new candidates and helps the old guard from the main two parties, as they can bank on their name-recognition without having to worry about threats from better alternatives.

No wonder, then, that both the main political parties have largely ignored this issue. Regardless, parties will charge of not having a "level playing field," which of course does not apply nearly as much to this election as much as it did for the planned elections in January 22, 2007.

Then there are the intangibles: unforeseeable events such as a massive terrorist attack or a natural disaster. These may delay elections but would not be an election game-changer. I am told there are also fears of intervention by "higher powers." The military, foreign conspirators or militants -- take your pick.



ARTWORK BY SHUBHO SAHA ANWAY

But, given how hard the military and Western envoys have forced the negotiation process, it is unlikely they would seek greater meddling in the result as it would only prolong uncertainty and pose serious questions about Bangladesh's democratic future.

In politics as in war, the danger is that a retreating army can always adopt a scorched earth policy. If the losing party decides to return to violent ways, this will open up questions of a second election and possibly a far more disturbing scenario of further military intervention.

Hopefully, both the winners and losers in this election would recognise what is at stake and will worry about their political future.

Both have done enough over the past two decades to not be written off as complete failures. But to go down as the party that destroyed democracy in Bangladesh would surely be a horror beyond imagination and hopefully, a legacy that either party will do anything to avoid.

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