

ANALYSING THE ELECTION

Minority intimidation and electoral bigotry

First, the minority voters are pressurised to stay away from the polling centre. If they somehow come to the polling centre, the polling centre itself is terrorised. After the poll, there are also credible allegations of post-ballot count result manipulation even at the returning officer level. Finally, a post-election horror awaits the minority community.

J. RAHMAN and S. AHAMED

MOST of us uncompromisingly show a conscious disgust against bigotry when it comes to foreigners -- be it some racist acts of foreign cricketers or Barack Obama facing a negative campaign during the US election. When our expatriate friends and families tell us their experience of racial intimidation, we listen to them with utter shock and question: How can people be so bigoted? And then we have a content, self-serving feeling -- at least we Bangladeshis are not bigots!

But, aren't we? Is bigotry only about skin colour? What about religious, ethnic, gendered, class or regional discriminations? Our bigoted face probably gets the ugliest when the election comes. As more than one third of the parliamentary seats

(126 seats in 2001) are decided by less than 10 percent voting margin, voting rights of minority voters become the target of troublemakers even where the number of minority voters are thin. The discrimination is at its highest where there is a significant concentration of Hindu voters.

The pre-election intimidation and post-election terrorising of minority groups during the previous elections are well known. There were efforts to keep the religious minority voters away from the polling centres while fake votes were cast. Such organised effort successfully deprived the minority voters without apparently reducing the overall voting turnout figure.

But even the most careful criminal sometimes leaves a clue behind. This piece will examine some of those evidence to show how a chain of communal intimidation is present in our system. First, the minority

voters are pressurised to stay away from the polling centre. If they somehow come to the polling centre, the polling centre itself is terrorised. After the poll, there are also credible allegations of post-ballot count result manipulation even at the returning officer level. Finally, a post-election horror awaits the minority community.

Intimidation starts even before the campaign, and includes open and public threatening of minority voters, denying access to polling centres by creating barricades, and keeping minority families under almost home-arrest during the election time. In many areas, the parents send their children, especially daughters, away before the election out of fear. In 2001, there were at least 59 constituencies where there is clear evidence of such pre-election rampage.

The intimidation then moves on to the Election Day. Let's consider a couple of cases.

Religious minorities accounted for 12 per cent of total registered voters in Bagerhat-4 constituency. In 2001, the result of this constituency was determined by a close margin of 1.13 per cent. Could the voters of this constituency cast their votes fearlessly? Let's just take one example. Parkumarkhali HS polling centre of Ramchandrapur Union was witnessing a high voter turnout on Election Day. Suddenly a number of miscreants went on the rampage and soon the polling centre was closed. As a

result of this unrest, only 55.77 per cent voters came to the polling centre during the re-poll, whereas other polling centres in that area witnessed 80 to 90 per cent turnout. It clearly shows the impact of terror on voting turnout.

In the same election, Jamaat as part of four party alliance won the then Khulna-5 seat by 2.13 per cent. In this constituency about 40 percent of the total voters are religious minority, with the Dumuria upazila having a higher concentration of Hindu voters, about 43 percent. According to the National Election Commission data, the Maguraghona HS polling centre of this upazila registered a ridiculous 110.21 per cent voter turnout during the 2001 election. Surprisingly, when one looks at the data supplied by the UNO office in Dumuria, the polling centre only showed 1,612 votes cast -- a 92 percent turnout. But when reported by the DC office, the number of votes cast jumped to 1,912 -- an extra 300 votes which were awarded to a single candidate. It only means, even if a minority can vote, it is possible to change the ballot count at the final stage.

Now how is the religious discrimination different from other types of bigotry? How can we condemn racism around the world when we practice the same thing with more cruelty? Ironically, a person who discriminates against another for religion or ethnicity may very well be a



Let everyone vote freely.

minority on political grounds. Isn't Jamaat a political minority given the fact that it gets only one per cent seats in the national election when they contest individually? Or can't a Muslim supporter of BNP or AL become minority based on his/her regional background?

Most of us may thank our fate that we are not part of the religious minority, and keep our eyes shut to these discriminations. But the concept of minority is just a construction of convenience to divide people and gain strategic power. We can make a long list of instances when we are

discriminated in government offices and in politics for belonging to a particular district, how we struggle to find a suitable groom for our darker skinned daughter or sister, or how we become a victim of constant teasing for having a particular political belief. If we do not stand against the discrimination of religious minority, one day there will be no one to stand beside us when we will be the victim of bigotry.

S. Ahamed and J. Rahman are members of Drishtipat Writers' Collective. They can be reached at dpwriters@drishtipat.org.

Another wake-up call: Are we listening?

As the post-liberation generation prepares to take the helm of this country's politics in 5-10 years, we should ensure that Nurul Islam is a politician that they know about, draw inspiration from, and try to come close to the standards that he lived by.

MRIDUL CHOWDHURY

NURUL Islam is in the hospital fighting severe burn and Tamohar is no more -- a short email from a friend changed my day, perhaps even my life. I have watched unfortunate incidents happening in people's lives many times on TV news and read about them on newspapers -- but this was the first time it happened to someone I knew. I was dumbfounded, I was shocked, I was shaken to the core. Over the course of next few hours, frantic emails with updates and speculations of what happened started coming in, until the final news -- "Nurul Islam, too, is no more."

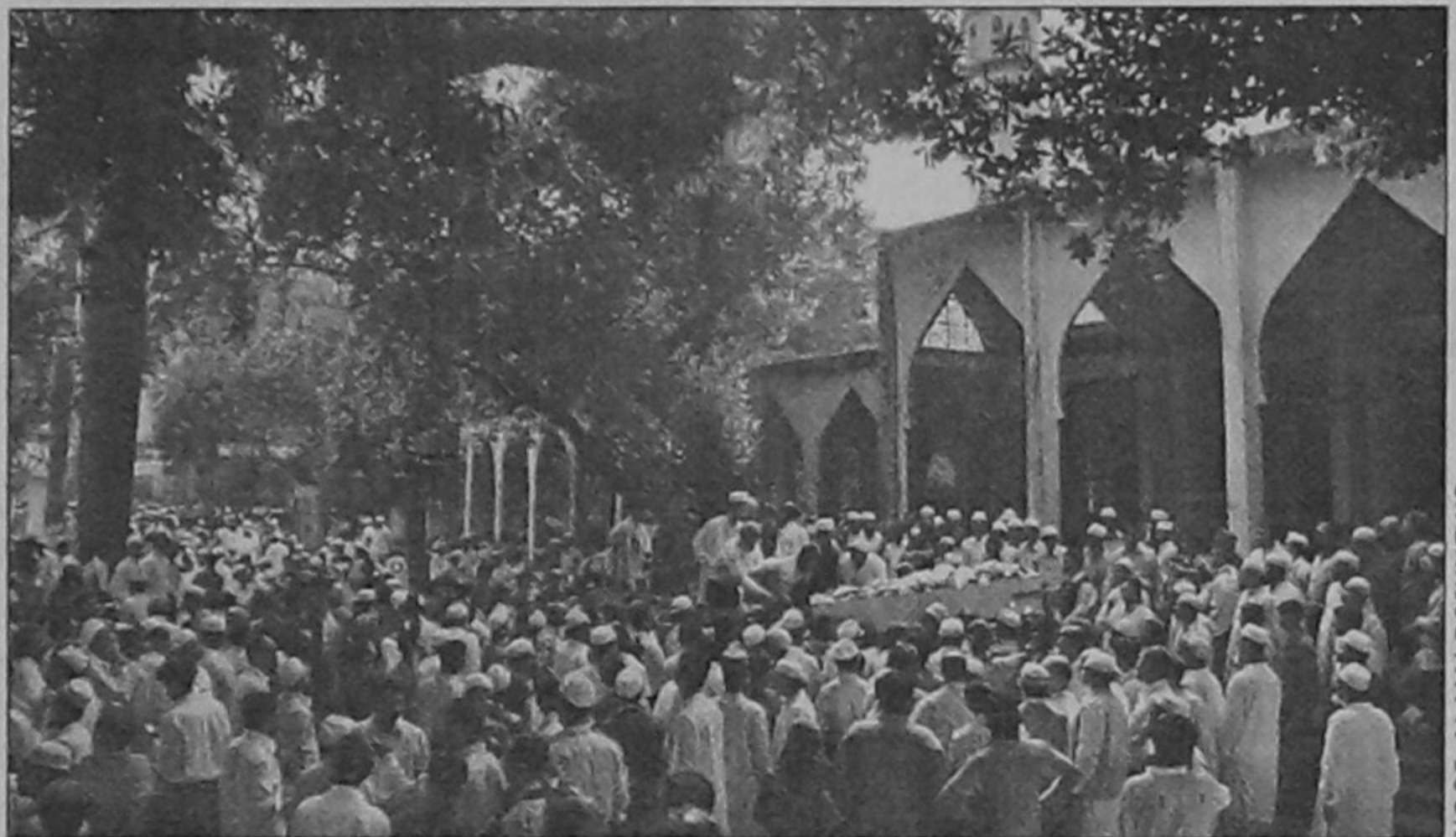
From several thousand miles away, I knew I could not get close to the people who are deeply hurt. I sat down to do what I can do in this powerless situation -- write about what was going on in my head -- but I couldn't. My emotions kept cloud-

ing my analytical abilities -- this time it was too close, too personal, too emotional. I let a few days pass and made another attempt at putting my emotions on paper.

I am sad. Sad because Nurul Islam was one of the very few "clean" politicians this country has ever had -- who never gave up his ideals to join a major party with the hope of becoming a minister, who was not only a spokesperson for the downtrodden of our society but had fought for their rights all his life, who never shied away from raising his voice against fundamentalism despite repeated threats.

A friend wrote to me: "With people like him in the parliament, we could change Bangladesh." Losing someone of his stature is an immense loss to the future of this country's politics.

I am angry. Angry because I am not sure whether we, as a nation, have been able to pay due homage to this giant of a



Mourners pay their last respects.

man -- not only by going to his janaja or kulkhani or by organising shokh-shobha but by really demanding a true investigation of what really happened on that fateful night.

While the political parties have made their routine lip-service demands of justice, and some politicians have taken it upon themselves to directly point fingers at their rivals perhaps to gain political scores, I am not sure how much of that is genuinely meant to maintain close watch over the investigation process.

While so many prominent politicians, during the first few days cried out that this

had all the elements of a planned attack, no one raised a strong enough voice or raised critical questions when the government-appointed inquiry committee came back with the report that "positive proof was found of a short circuit as the cause of the fire."

We, as a people, have short attention span -- we grieve, we cry, we shout and then we forget. We also have a lot of cynicism -- we tend to "accept reality" and move on with our lives.

I am suspicious. Suspicious because the investigation process seems too focused on detecting short circuits and

not enough on some other important elements of the case, which raise important questions about the investigation report such as the following:

- How could a short-circuit lead to the explosion of a refrigerator that was supposedly out of order for years and remained unplugged, according to family sources mentioned in a press conference.
- How come the investigation has not found "signs of combustibles, explosives or any other suspicious materials" in the apartment when the physicians of Nurul Islam found "traces of gunpowder in his respiratory system," also mentioned by family sources in the same press conference.
- Why has the investigation not yet focused adequately on the telephone threats he has been receiving, which Nurul Islam himself mentioned with his last breaths?
- Why has the investigation also not focused on the uncanny similarity between this fire incident and that in B. Choudhury's house in 2006? Both happened late at night, both were limited within a narrow area of the house, and both have been attributed initially by the respective investigations to electrical short circuit. For the B. Chowdhury incident, there was ample evidence to suggest that it was not a short circuit

since the electrical appliances were functioning, window panes were broken and smell of toxic gas was reported, among other pieces of evidence.

Perhaps my suspicion is pre-mature and the investigation process is just taking its time to bear out the facts and I would be delighted if that is the case. But I have a nagging feeling that is aggravated by the fact that most high-profile "unnatural death" cases in our country are not fortunate enough to find any resolutions.

I am also hopeful. Hopeful because despite the terrible loss, there are some who passionately carry in their hearts the idealism of Nurul Islam -- young and old. A friend wrote to me: "We have to carry on the torch or else we will lose the fight [that Nurul Islam perhaps gave up his life for]."

Investigation is something we have little control over -- we protest, we demand, we raise questions and hope someone with authority will listen. But what we do have control over is not to let the ideals of Nurul Islam fade away. As the post-liberation generation prepares to take the helm of this country's politics in 5-10 years, we should ensure that Nurul Islam is a politician that they know about, draw inspiration from, and try to come close to the standards that he lived by.

Mridul Chowdhury is the CEO of a global social business venture and can be reached at mcbangladesh@gmail.com.

My homage

As the first secretary general of Saarc, Abul Ahsan played a crucial role in the setting up of the Saarc secretariat in Kathmandu, and wrote a valuable book about his experience as well as about various aspects of the regional forum.

SYED MUAZZEM ALI

THE sudden passing away of Ambassador Abul Ahsan, a former foreign secretary and the first secretary general of Saarc, is a great loss to the nation, and to his friends and admirers at home and abroad.

In every profession, there are some people who excel through their sheer brilliance and Abul Ahsan was surely one such officer in our diplomatic service. He was a meritorious student, standing first not only in college and university, but also in the fiercely competitive Central Superior Services (CSS) examination of

the-then Pakistan. He was a teacher in the economics department of the Dhaka University before he joined the Pakistan Foreign service in 1961.

I had heard about Abul Ahsan before I met him. He had a very high reputation in the Pakistan Foreign Office and was well-known for his professional competence. He escaped from Islamabad through Kabul, joined our foreign ministry in Dhaka in early 1973, and played a significant role in the formulation of our foreign policy during those crucial initial years.

He played particularly important roles in the tripartite negotiations between

Bangladesh-India-Pakistan to restore peace in the region, and in Bangladesh's efforts to join the United Nations and other international organisations. He had a fantastic capacity to critically analyse any complex external issue in plain and lucid terms, and was always precise in his presentations. What someone would say in three pages, Abul Ahsan could convey in less than one page.

I met him for the first time in Islamabad before leaving for my first foreign assignment at the end of 1970, and had regular interactions with him for over three decades, both at home and abroad. I also had the pleasure of working directly with him for a brief period when he took over as our ambassador in Warsaw in mid-1978. He had sterling qualities, but at the same time was so simple, unassuming, helpful and cooperative. He was a teacher and a mentor to his junior colleagues, without pretending to be one.

I particularly recall one episode. Way

back in the eighties, Iran and Iraq were fighting a fratricidal war and Bangladesh, as a member of the OIC Peace Committee, was making frantic efforts to put an end to the hostilities. Abul Ahsan was our ambassador in Rome and I was director (international organisations) at the Foreign Office in Dhaka. In early 1981 he came to Dhaka on home leave, and one day dropped by my office. Among other things, we discussed about our peace efforts and I sought his views on what more could be done at the upcoming Islamic Summit Conference.

He did not respond to my question immediately. Instead, he asked for a cup of tea and a cigarette, and continued talking about different issues. After some time, even I forgot that I had asked him that question. Suddenly he paused and said: "You had asked me a question about that war." Surprised, I nodded. He gave me a luminous history of the centuries-old rivalries between the Persians and the

Arabs, and his conclusion that the warring parties were hardly in a position to abandon the war at that stage. He felt that, while we should continue with our reconciliation efforts, we should also be prepared for a long wait as neither party may give up until it had reached its point of exhaustion. He was so prophetic. Despite efforts by UN and other international efforts, Iran and Iraq fought for nine long years before agreeing to a UN ceasefire in 1989.

As the first secretary general of Saarc, Abul Ahsan played a crucial role in the setting up of the Saarc secretariat in Kathmandu, and wrote a valuable book about his experience as well as about various aspects of the regional forum. When Iraq invaded Kuwait, Abul Ahsan was our foreign secretary and he played the major coordinating role in the repatriation of our evacuees, as well as in our participation in the multinational forces for the liberation of Kuwait. As the Bangladesh consul general in Jeddah at

that time, I had regular interactions with him.

Abul Ahsan also served as our ambassador in Washington DC with distinction. After his retirement from service, he took part in various international election monitoring groups to oversee elections in different countries. He also served as the Bangladesh representative at the Unesco Executive Board, and as the ambassador of Bangladesh to France and to Unesco. I had several opportunities to meet him in Paris and exchange with him views about diplomacy. He also served as a vice president of the Independent University of Bangladesh (IUB).

I pay my homage to this outstanding diplomat of our time, express my deep condolences to Begum Ahsan and to members of the bereaved family at their irreparable loss, and pray to Allah to grant eternal peace to his soul.

Syed Muazem Ali is a former Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh.

Cold, raw sheep's brain and other popular foods

NURY VITTACHI

I used to think I was an adventurous diner. Until I went to a Uyghur restaurant where the signature dish was "cold raw sheep's brain."

Suddenly I was filled with longing for instant noodles, and bitterly regretted the times I had maligned that simple, wholesome foodstuff.

I've had noodles on the brain lately, though not literally.

You see, I wrote a column last week saying that curry was probably the world's most popular foodstuff. Readers rushed to correct me. An e-mailer named Hayat

said noodles were far more universal.

Journalist Wyng Chow said: "I would personally argue that sweet and sour boneless pork is the world's most popular food. Even my Jewish friends love it. They consider pork to be kosher as long as it's smothered in sweet and sour sauce." His Indian friends love it too.

"No, the burger is the world's top dish," said another reader, showing me quotes to that end from magazines (all American). Another reader said the pizza was the world's favourite food, and showed me two articles backing this claim from Italian publications. Clearly,

this is a matter of national pride.

I Googled "world's most popular food" on the Internet. Wheat is the number one food, said the Discovery Channel website. No, it's cheese, said a website promoting a book called The Cheese Bible. No, it's chocolate said a website selling boxes of chocolate online.

The incontestable answer to the question was: there is no incontestable answer to this question.

So I went to the see the smartest man I know, my mentor/bartender.

"Burgers, bread, cheese, pizza and chocolate are all recent arrivals in Asia, popular

with the young," he said. "But if older Asians don't eat them, they're not on the chart. You see, Asians eat more food than any other group of people on the planet. That's because there are more of us."

The world's top food is rice, he said. "You eat rice for breakfast (Coco Pops), rice for lunch (rice noodles), and rice for dinner (sushi), and wash it down with a cup of rice (sake)," he explained.

He had a point -- especially since noodles are often a sub-group of rice.

The other day, I saw my children slipping packs of instant noodles into their schoolbags.

"Will the school supply boiling water and sterilised bowls and clean forks?" I asked.

They looked at me as if I was from another planet. "You don't need all that stuff," said my daughter. "You just eat them."

They simply open the packets and crunch their way through the dry, raw noodles. Each portion comes with a small packet of monosodium glutamate to sprinkle on for flavour.

I'm not sure what this proves, except that young humans and old humans are actually unrelated species, one of which morphs miraculously into the other at a

certain age.

Anyway, I decided that this issue was pretty much settled, when I had an idea. My office is near a university canteen which serves thousands of meals a day.

I asked the staff's opinion. The number one dish among all diners, Chinese, south Asian and Western, was curry, they said. Back to square one.

Meanwhile, I expect to get some mail from Uyghur readers with their nomination for world's most popular foodstuff: cold raw sheep's brain.

Depress your appetite further by visiting our columnist's website: www.vittachi.com.