

BNP manifesto

Emphasis on functional parliament, institutional reform and safety net welcome

BANGLADESH Nationalist Party chief Khaleda Zia has made public 36-point election manifesto of her party along with the slogan 'Save country, save people' as the central theme.

She has been markedly focused on making parliament effective and functional through taking some pragmatic steps. She suggested that speaker and deputy speaker will have to resign from their party posts after nomination and that the deputy speaker will be nominated from the opposition.

The BNP manifesto further suggests that parliamentary standing committees will be formed by the second session of parliament and chairmen of important committees will be picked from the opposition bench. According to the manifesto, no party or alliance should boycott parliament sessions though they would be able to stage walkouts on specific issues. We believe the idea of parliament members on both sides of the aisle enjoying full access to government funds and facilities will ensure participatory role of all MPs.

BNP remains pledge-bound to form an all-party parliamentary committee to ensure transparency in the Anti-Corruption Commission and the University Grants Commission.

Khaleda Zia has pledged to take effective steps to curb corruption, contain price hike of essentials, improve law and order and fight terrorism. No doubt corruption of despicable proportion has pervaded every stratum of society and maybe if only she had hinted at corruption and malpractice seeping through the four-party alliance government it would have gone down well with the audience.

There is no denying that a great deal has to be done to address the spiraling prices, improve law and order and face the rising spectre of terrorism in the country. These should be at the top of the agenda to end people's sufferings and bring credibility to the government. Her promise to make the judiciary fully independent conforms to people's expectation. However, we remember how the relevant file had gone back and forth from the ministry of law towards the fag end of the immediate past government, with a record number of extensions sought from High Court for compliance from the latter's directives.

It also suggests making arrangement for farm subsidies to ensure food security and taking measures for optimum use of the country's oil and gas resources. We find the ideas of introducing health insurance for the poor, offering unemployment allowance and ensuring job for one youth from each family as extending the reach of the safety-net. Her emphasis on decentralisation of the administration and making changes in the caretaker government system is well taken.

While a few of the ideas on the list can be labeled as new ideas, others appeared as mere echo from the past, reminding listeners of what she had been saying before every election, but not taking steps to fulfill while in power. For example, she talked about scrapping the Special Powers Act, but our experience says that it never happened in the past fifteen years under none of the democratically elected governments.

What intrigues us is the overarching slogan -- 'Save country, save people.' What is not clear to us is who or what the BNP is trying to save the country from? We think the party needs to explain it to the people for it to have any meaning.

Terrorism and Indo-Pak standoff

Fight the scourge jointly

ONE cannot but note with concern the renewal of acrimony between the two nuclear neighbours in the wake of the Mumbai massacre. From materials appearing in the media so far, the terrorists were from Pakistan, having, allegedly, been patronized and trained by radical elements in that country.

Hafiz Mohammad Saeed, founder of an Islamic militant group accused of having links to last month's Mumbai attacks have been put under house arrest. Pakistan has also closed offices of Jamaat-ud-Dawa, after it was blacklisted by the UN.

These actions of Pakistan, apparently, have not been enough to assuage the feeling of India. Even if one were to accept that the terrorists that perpetrated the bloody November massacre were non-state actors, nothing can detract from the fact that Pakistani nationals have been involved in the attack, and that its territory might have been used as a launching pad for terrorists attack on a neighbour.

It was, however, reassuring to hear the Indian political leaders' eschewal of war as a solution, although the opposition BJP has not been so forthcoming in discounting military action as a possible option. And this is the cause for concern for the people of South Asia who are only too aware of the serious consequences of an Indo-Pak conflagration. And this is what reinforces our oft repeated exhortations that the phenomenon cannot be addressed by any one country alone, that there must be a cooperative effort if we want to see the end of terrorism, in South Asia and indeed the world.

Pakistan, perhaps more than any other country in the region, cannot be oblivious of the deleterious consequences it has had to suffer since the cessation of anti-Soviet operation in Afghanistan in 1988. And perhaps nobody feels the urgency to put an end to extremism and terrorism more than the people of Pakistan.

It cannot be lost on the countries of South Asia that almost all of them have been victims of terrorism, although in varying degrees and intensity. And although there may not be organic links between the indigenous terrorist groups of the region and international terrorists, one cannot rule out their capacity to set up intra-regional networking. This is what calls for the South Asian countries to come together by, first, removing the deficit of trust that exist; and second, by formulating strategies to combat the phenomenon jointly.

Who to vote for

BY THE NUMBERS

The time has come for the political parties to vow to shun hartals and conflicts and promise to build a better Bangladesh through collective endeavour of all. The parties must also say in the manifestos what they will do if they lose in the polls.

A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

ELECTIONEERING is going on full swing with the withdrawal of restrictions on rallies and completion of seat-sharing deal by the major parties. The electorate will vote after considering the parties' manifestos and competency in tackling the myriad problems facing the country.

Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia kicked-off their respective parties' election campaign by visiting three shrines in Sylhet, which is seen by many as using of religion for political gain.

Awami League's election manifesto prioritises five tasks, including curbing of prices of essentials and continuation of the anti-corruption drive. AL promises to form a task force along with a centre for collection and analysis of data to help cope with the global economic downturn, and to ensure self-reliance in food production.

The party wants to ban the use of religion in politics and bring the war criminals to justice. Independence of judiciary will be guaranteed and good governance will be ensured through establishment of fundamental human rights and the rule of law.

AL will resolve the power crisis by raising

generation capacity to 5,000 megawatts by 2011 and 7,000 megawatts by 2013. It also promises to deal with militancy and terrorism with an iron hand, forming a South Asian task force.

AL pledges to present a bright and successful future to the new generation, but it has not set any specific targets in the political, economic and social sectors if it is not voted to power.

BNP's election manifesto gives top priority to restoration of the economy, aiming to reduce poverty by generating employment and increasing local and foreign investment. BNP promises to formulate an integrated anti-terrorism and anti-militancy policy with participation of the countries of the region. Along with a "Look East" policy, economic diplomacy will be the base of BNP's foreign policy.

Jatiya Party promises to establish a terrorism, corruption and misrule-free society. Under its administrative reform agenda, the party pledges to divide the country into eight provinces, having provincial assemblies and provincial cabinets.

Jamaat-e-Islami will enact a blasphemy law to prevent anti-religious publications or criticism of religion, and punish those responsible. The party seeks votes in the



Which party will meet these demands?

name of Islam.

The need of the hour is for the parties to state their ideas on the kind of economic development they are aiming at. No party has yet made its plan for protecting remittance from the expatriate Bangladeshis known to the electorate.

The parties must specify how they will deal with the problem of employing 20 million unemployed youth. This is the touchstone for judging the parties.

Improvement of quality of life of about 30 million hardcore poor is not among the top priorities in the election manifestos. The parties should clearly state how they will face climate change, which is a great threat.

The time has come for the political parties to vow to shun hartals and conflicts and promise to build a better Bangladesh through collective endeavour of all. The parties must also say in the manifestos what they will do if they lose in the polls.

Unfortunately, they have released their

election manifestos very late, leaving little scope for the electorate to debate their plans and vision for the next five years. The electorate is more conscious than ever before, and is no more willing to be deceived by hollow pledges.

Inspired by Barack Obama's victory, the young voters who are preparing to cast their first vote expect a paradigm shift in national politics through the forthcoming polls.

The parties lack democratic credentials, which assume paramount importance in a country like Bangladesh. Therefore, credibility of the parties must be carefully taken into account, without being misled by their pledges, while choosing a party to vote for.

Sadly, the moment a party is voted to power, their election manifesto finds its place in the wastepaper basket. The time may have come for the electorate to articulate the demand for a legal compulsion for the political parties for meeting their polls pledges.

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AL eats humble pie

PERSPECTIVE

A pusillanimous AL finally yielded to Ershad's monkey tricks, and the latter succeeded in making the AL eat humble pie and lose the support of those who so long saw the AL standing on a moral high ground. Dislodged from that ground, the AL will now be dictated by Ershad's terms.

M. ABDUL HAFIZ

TILL the last, the AL could not exorcise the demon that possessed it. Although a "now on and now off" game of alliance-making was going on with the JP, the party's supporters hoped that good sense would dawn and the party wouldn't court the much despised Ershad. The negative impact of an AL-JP deal was sensed even within the so-called mohajote, and a lot was written in the media to dissuade the AL from making the gaffe and incurring an irreparable damage to its image on the eve of an important election.

As late as December 10, it was a great relief to learn that the AL-JP marriage of convenience had broken up over seat-sharing. But to the disappointment of many, the finalisation of AL-JP alliance came after a great deal of theatrics on both sides. A pusillanimous AL finally yielded to Ershad's monkey tricks, and the latter succeeded in making the AL eat humble pie and lose the support of those who so long saw the AL standing on a moral high ground. Dislodged from that ground, the AL will now be dictated by Ershad's terms. It the man's record both in public and private life are any guide, it cannot be otherwise.

Inherent in the whole drama is a moral defeat of sorts for the AL, a party nourished and built up by Bangabandhu, a rallying point for society's underdogs and a platform for the promotion of democratic ideals. The AL leadership has smashed the dreams and aspirations of the party's foot soldiers, who made the sacrifices for its sustenance, took the brunt of autocratic repression, and even courted martyrdom. Those who fell to Ershad's bullets, like democracy's lone ranger Noor Hussain, must be tossing in their graves.

The AL's problems are understandable. The party is in the grip of the syndrome reminiscent of the 1991 election, during which it was deceived by its bloated optimism. It's pre-election buoyancy then turned into gloom. Perhaps that's the why the party does not want leave anything to chance. In its bid to ensure victory, it was in a frantic search of allies. Never before had the AL appeared so native and so devoid of gumption in choosing allies.

Ershad, the killer of democracy, the looter of the state exchequer for jaunts and junkets and for buying legitimacy, as well as a practitioner of right wing nationalist-religious politics, can by no means be a natural ally of Awami League which promotes democracy, secularism and non-communal politics. Any alliance between has to be spurious, and is thus not sustainable. It is, at best, a subterfuge of the AL so that an easy victory is ensured without incurring much pain.

Notwithstanding the need for an elec-



Back again.

toral alliance at times, the main dynamic behind success is the strength of a party's organisation. There has hardly been any organisational alacrity in the AL, although legendary organisation skill had been Bangabandhu's forte in his phenomenal landslide in 1970. No one ever seriously tried to breathe new life into what was left of the AL after Bangabandhu's demise. Hence, the despondencies the AL is now infected with. There is no innovative step other than dependence on autocrats or obscure religious outfits to lend the party a life-line. In the first place, it does not match the status of the country's oldest political party.

However, the AL is even now left with a few of its valuable assets that, if intelligently employed, can truth the electoral tide in its favour. The AL's share of popular votes has always been more than that of other parties, although it fails to bag a proportionate share of seats. Second, the party is still in one piece -- thanks to the sagacity of its leaders who, in spite of the different reformative ideas, did not let the party split. The last but not the least are its opponents, who are a demoralised lot because of their moral turpitude.

The AL started off well with its electioneering. Based on the panel prepared at the grassroots, the party hand-picked its candidates, who include a substantial number of new faces and women. Hard bargaining with Ershad resulted in the loss of 49 seats. But for the shedding of these seats, the party, observers reckon, would have fared far better. In the pre-election scenario, even if the AL is more visible, the BNP-led alliance can neither be brushed aside nor under-estimated.

No one will be surprised to see an apparently confident but flummoxed AL defeated. Madam Zia, is also exuding optimism that obfuscates her nervousness and calculated cover-up of her sunken fortune.

As I concluded this piece on Dec. 10, the worst fear of the formation of the AL-JP alliance came true.

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Nothing general

BYLINE

The Indian voter is more mature than the Indian politician. He was not distracted by emotion, even one as powerful as terrorism inspired by forces hostile to India. He concentrated on what mattered most in an assembly election, good governance, and he knew that this is provided by an individual, a leader.

M.J. AKBAR

THERE is nothing general about a general election. It is the sum of a set of particular elections in separate but contiguous and occasionally overlapping geographical and demographic spaces.

The Indian electorate lives in concentric circles, of which the federal state is one definition but not a comprehensive one. Identities can overlap into national space, as well as shrink into regions within a state. The case of Jharkhand and Telangana might be obvious, but even newly-formed Chhattisgarh has voters with different priorities.

Raipur, the old haunt of veteran V.C. Shukla, went largely to the party he has rejoined, Congress. But the tribals of Bastar gave the decisive tilt to the final tally, putting the BJP way ahead with an enthusiastic endorsement of the Salwa Judum program, in which the state government armed tribals against Naxalites.

This was greeted with palpable despair by urban liberals. But if they want to add to their despair they should note an almost imperceptible reversal of voter-preferences. Till the leadership of Rajiv Gandhi the Congress vote was secure among tribals, Dalits and the poor; the middle classes and the rich would abandon the Congress when they wanted to.

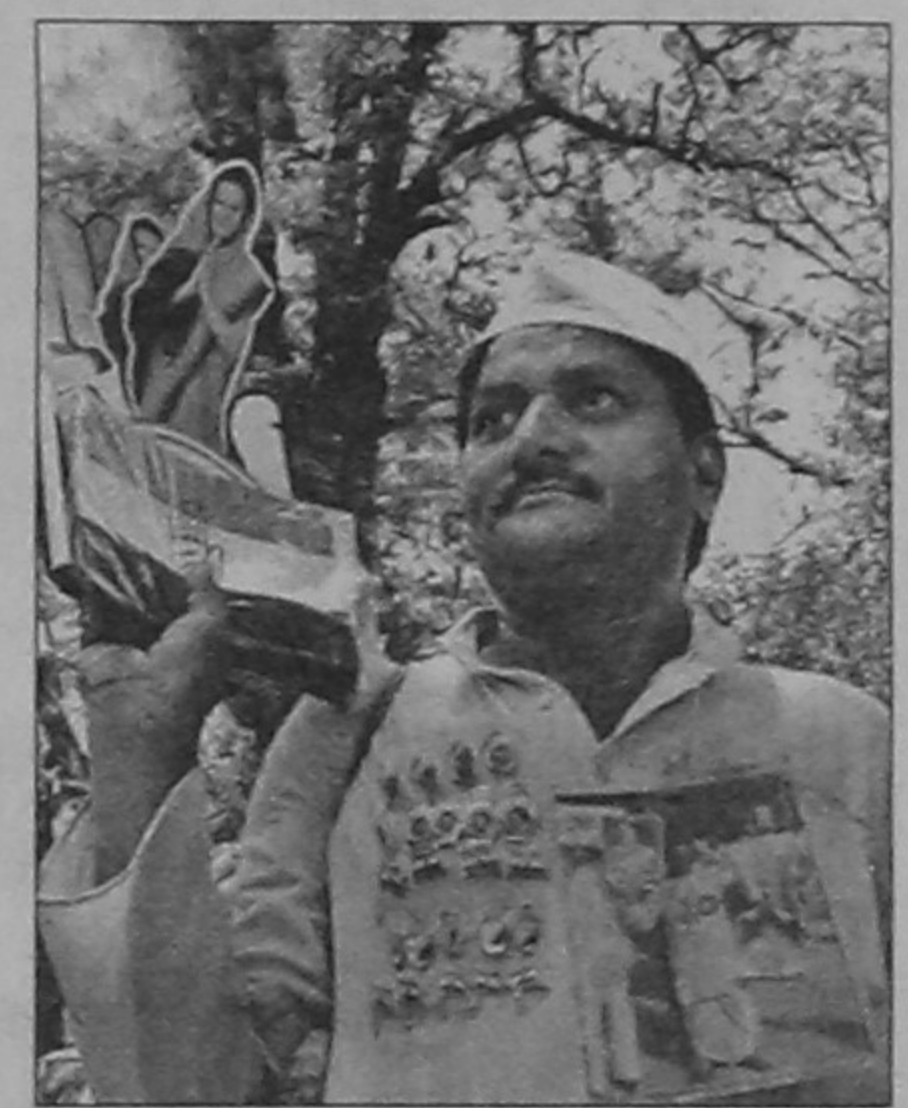
After fifteen years of Narasimha Rao, Dr. Manmohan Singh and Sonia Gandhi, the BJP has made serious inroads into the affections of the underprivileged in central India. This is a serious pointer to the growing perception that the Congress has become the party of the rich.

Every one of the recent assembly elections, from Delhi to Mizoram, was a referendum on the chief minister rather than the party of the CM. Mrs. Sheila Dikshit won reelection in Delhi, not the Congress. The BJP was ahead of the Congress, but Mrs. Dikshit was far, far ahead of the man who sought to replace her, Vijay Malhotra.

The Indian voter is more mature than the Indian politician. He was not distracted by emotion, even one as powerful as terrorism inspired by forces hostile to India. He concentrated on what mattered most in an assembly election, good governance, and he knew that this is provided by an individual, a leader. Equally, the leader is responsible for mismanagement and corruption, where they prevail.

He placed terrorism also within the matrix of good governance, for it is the duty of the state to provide security to the citizen. But his judgment was remarkably honest. He would not blame Mrs. Dikshit for the collapse of authority in Mumbai. Those who failed in Mumbai, whether at the state or central level, will be held culpable when their time comes.

In Delhi, Mrs. Dikshit had the record, and the attacks on her looked like gamesmanship because they were not backed by either a fresh face or fresh ideas.



Election season.

Everywhere, people are tired of politics at the expense of development. And they do not care if development comes wrapped in a tricolour or saffron. The voter is now colour-neutral.

Of course, victory and defeat in a state do impact the fortunes of a party. And so the advantage in the next general elections will lie with whichever coalition offers the better collection of chief ministers. Or, to put in another way, which team has fewer disasters in its ranks.

The Congress is in serious trouble in the two large states where it is in power. It has been forced to replace its chief minister in Maharashtra; unwisely, it shifted merely from a callous face to a lacklustre one. In Andhra, the extraordinary rise of Chiranjeevi is a warning to both the Congress and the Telugu Desam. He is soaking up the gap between anger and what might be called lukewarmth. Its principal ally, the DMK, has become synonymous with corruption, hobbling in the process Prime Minister Singh, who has tolerated putrid partners in order to remain in office.

The team must be led by someone who can display authority, and a program that encompasses a nationwide horizon. Manmohan Singh and L.K. Advani will be their respective team-leaders, of course; but the Third Front will be hampered if it cannot offer a candidate for prime minister.

There was a welcome sobriety in the commentary from spokesmen of both the Congress and the BJP following the results. It should have also reaffirmed to both parties that the general election is going to be won by whichever has the better allies. Neither is strong enough to march too far ahead of its partners. This will also have an ameliorating effect on the formation of the next government in Delhi.

December 2008 was a wake-up call. This should ensure that all political parties go into the general election with their eyes open, and common sense intact.

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