

Sanity in political leadership

With all the upheavals that the country witnessed during the last seven years, the country must see the emergence of new leadership in this critical period of its history. The leader we are looking for must try and win political allies, seek consensus and avoid vendetta.

MD ASADULLAH KHAN

SELDOME has this country so desperately needed a leadership to steer the country clear of crises, doldrums and chaos as it is in now. Political intrigue, in-fighting and bankruptcy have almost become norms in Bangladesh. The blistering attack on the EC by some stalwarts of certain political parties about manufacturing the election result seems to be totally unfounded.

With voter list with photograph, transparent ballot boxes, vote counting in presence of the polling agents of the parties and candidates, declaration of the result in presence of the candidates or their agents, handing over the result to the parties and media representatives at the same time, as well as forwarding a copy to the EC headquarters, people wonder what prompts the BNP chairperson or the AL chief to point their fingers at the EC with charges

of rigging and election engineering. There is little chance of manufacturing the election result this time, because election observers, both national and international, would be monitoring the polls process. Unless the presiding officer and the polling officers at the polling centres shirk their responsibilities while handing over the ballot paper to the right voters, there is hardly any chance of manipulation.

The EC, police and Rab must open cells to receive complaints and take instant remedial measures against any untoward situation that might develop. There are allegations that affluent candidates in some constituencies of Lakhimpur have already managed the local *thana* to keep things in their favour.

However, there is room for concern as Election Commissioner Brig. (Retd) Shakhawat Hossain pointed out recently that of the 3.5 lakh polling staff required to

conduct the polling, many are still working with partisan spirit. This is borne out by a report published in newspapers on December 23 indicating that the Pabna and Sirajganj DCs (returning officers in the respective districts) have been withdrawn on charges of partisan affiliation.

People do not know which party will come to power, but it is undeniably true that some parties will have to concede defeat. We must learn from the American presidential election. McCain, after being sure that he was going to lose, addressed his supporters saying: "My friends, we have come to the end of a long journey. The American people have spoken, and they have spoken clearly. A little while ago, I had the honour of calling Senator Obama to congratulate him." McCain's spirit might inspire our political rivals in building a country shorn of violence and hatred. Can the losing parties inculcate the spirit and magnanimity McCain displayed?

Political temperature is shooting up everyday in the marketplaces, streets and fields around the country, and it will continue to do so well after the declaration of the election result. Unfortunately, politics in the country is run with a primitive mindset and may still head towards a chaotic situation that spells disaster for the country already threatened by crop losses, shortage of production in the agricultural

sector, closure of mills and factories, and dwindling exports.

As Syed Manzur Elahi, a prominent industrialist, pointed out at a discussion on "Election and Future Bangladesh" organised by the daily *Prothom Alo*: "Bangladesh economy might face a serious blow in February/March next year because of a possible drop in profit margin from export commodities and in their prices. Food prices are soaring again adding to the daily miseries of millions of Bangladeshis who live in appalling poverty. All these crises have to be tackled by pragmatic leadership and vision. The people do not know how long they will have to wait for the kind of leadership the country needs."

Because of poverty and non-governance, the last few years witnessed a disastrous upsurge of violence that cost hundreds of lives, a steady worsening of the economy and an unprecedented polarisation of the society on extremist lines. The message from all these ominous developments is clear: Democracy norm is rapidly losing its grip over the society at large.

Undeniably true, the prime minister in the past alliance government, with her seeming arrogance and aloofness from the masses, pushed the country to the brink of disaster. Even when some 17 people were killed in police action for demanding *palli*



Leaders must reject this insanity.

biddiyut in Kamsat, she made no effort to visit the disturbed area and stand by the victimised families.

With all the upheavals that the country witnessed during the last seven years, the country must see the emergence of new leadership in this critical period of its history. The leader we are looking for must try and win political allies, seek consensus and avoid vendetta. There has to be a

change in the style of governance. The newly elected government has to be more transparent, and must make the parliament effective. It has to continue the drive against corruption, strengthen the democratic institutions and depoliticise civil administration.

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Youth to the fore

Of the 81 million registered voters, about 32 percent have registered for the first time. Nearly a quarter of all voters are of a generation for whom this election is the first political exercise. And over half of all voters were born in an independent Bangladesh.

J. RAHMAN

ONE oft-noted feature of this election is the importance of first-time or younger voters. One of the main political parties has dedicated its manifesto to these young voters, while the other side has traditionally claimed to be the party of youth. What can the data tell us about the new or young voters?

Well, the first thing the data make vividly clear is the importance of the youth voters. Of the 81 million registered voters, about 32 percent have registered for the first time. Nearly a quarter of all voters are of a generation for whom this election is the first political exercise. And over half of all voters were born in an independent Bangladesh.

Let's juxtapose the large share of young voters against another set of data. In the 2001 election, the winning margin in 183 seats was less than 15 percent of votes cast. In 125 seats the margin was less than 10 percent. That is, in over three-fifths of seats, young voters make up much more than the winning margin

of the last election.

Is it any surprise that everyone is talking about the young vote?

Of course everyone wants to know how these voters will vote. That is something we cannot answer. With some assumptions, we can, however, guess which way their counterparts may have voted in 2001 election. And from that, we may form a hypothesis about which way they may vote this election.

Let's look at some aggregate numbers in the last two elections. Table 1 shows the number of voters, voter turnout, and number and share of votes won by the

	1996		2001	
	million	percent	million	percent
Total voters (mil)	56.5		74.9	
Votes cast (mil) / Turnout (%)	42.4	75.0	55.7	74.4
Votes won by:				
AL	15.9	37.4	22.4	40.1
BNP+JI	15.5	42.2	24.1	45.7
BNP	14.3	33.6	23.1	41.4
JI	1.2	8.6	1.0	4.28
JP	7.0	16.4	4.0	7.2
Other	4.1	3.9	5.3	6.9

Table 1: Votes won by parties in 1996 and 2001

four large parties.

In 2001, 13.3 million more people voted than did in 1996. Between the two elections, AL's vote went up by 6.5 million, while BNP's vote went up by 8.8 million. JP and JI saw their votes fall during that time. Does this mean that most new voters had gone to BNP in the last election? Perhaps, but before making that conclusion we need to consider three things.

- Not all 13.3 million additional votes in 2001 were from new voters. There would have been some people who would not have voted in 1996, but did so in 2001. And there would have been some who voted in 1996, but abstained five years later (or had passed away by 2001). It is difficult to tell how many such voters there may have been. Nor can we say anything definitive about the way how they have been voted, except to note that there would likely have been an anti-incumbency factor

- against AL in 2001. If there was such a factor, then it is reasonable to hypothesise that many people who abstained in 1996 but took the trouble to vote in 2001 may have voted for BNP. That is, the extra people who voted for BNP in 2001 would contain a good number of non-young voters compared with the additional votes AL received in 2001.

- The anti-incumbency factor would have meant a swing from AL to BNP. Depending on how large the swings were, the more tenuous the contention that young voters voted for BNP in 2001. Suppose all young voters voted for AL, but the swing away from AL was so large that it outweighed the young vote by millions? How would we know? In the absence of any credible exit poll, we wouldn't. We can, however, note the anecdotal evidence of the anti-incumbency factor.

- Finally, it is hard to make a direct comparison between the 1996 and 2001 elections because, in the former election, parties competed separately, while there was an alliance in the second one. We present BNP and JI's votes both separately and together, but this is less than satisfactory because of what happened to JP in 2001. Before that election, JP split into three factions. While the faction in the four-party



The vanguard.

alliance was small in terms of the number of candidates and MPs, when we look at constituency level data, we find that JP vote plummeted in most seats outside greater Rangpur. It is reasonable to guess that most of the 2.9 million votes lost by JP in 2001 flowed to BNP.

When we put all three factors together, it appears that a non-trivial part of the 8.8 million additional votes received by BNP in 2001 would be from older people. But no particularly strong case is apparent about why the older voters

would have swung to AL in 2001.

From all this, we can take away this: in 2001, both major parties won a substantial number of young voters, with neither side appearing to have a clear edge. If that trend holds, and there is no reason to assume that it will, then we may see the young voters evenly split among the parties on December 29. But in the absence of a credible exit poll, we won't really know how they will have voted.

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Comparing manifestos

Generally, most of the manifestos are to be distinguished in their marked similarities rather than in their differences. The differences are more noticeable in the styles of the respective parties.

A.B.M.S. ZAHUR

ELECTION manifestos are neither very important factors nor do they explain much about the parties. In educationally-handicapped Bangladesh, issues are brought home to the electors gradually as the campaigns of the parties become more intense. Generally, most of the manifestos are to be distinguished in their marked similarities rather than in their differences. The differences are more noticeable in the styles of the respective parties. Let us examine the manifestos of AL and BNP, which have caused some stirrings.

AL manifesto

The party has touched on almost all substantive issues. It is a product of shrewd draftsmanship. Its euphemistic terminology has been kept within bounds. Its prioritisation of issues like prices of essentials, inflation, poverty alleviation, energy crisis, good governance, trial of war criminals, suppression of religious terrorism, adoption of comprehensive employment policy and strengthening of ACC reflects public concern.

Generally speaking, during the 5-year rule of AL, Bangladesh attained self-sufficiency in food. Prices of essential commodities remained within the purchasing power of the people. Even after the longest flood prices of essentials did not go up. Growth rate of the economy increased to 6.2% from an average of just 4.4%. Growth of agriculture sector increased from 1.6% to 5%. The price of coarse rice averaged only Tk.10/kg. The rate of inflation was brought down to 1.5 percentage points/annum.

As regards poverty alleviation, it was reduced from an annual average of 0.50 to

1.50% while human poverty indicator came down to 32% from 41.6%. Achieving a growth rate of 56 percentage points in the Human Development Index in 5 years (1996-2001) was a glorious record.

Remarkable success was achieved in the electricity sub-sector; within 5 years production of 1800mw of electricity raised the total output to 4300mw.

The Public Administration Reform Commission (PARC) was formed to establish good governance in the country. Good result was achieved from the part implementation of the report prepared by the Commission.

The next parliamentary election has created an opportunity for reestablishment of democracy. AL's manifesto promises to make the country free from hunger, poverty, illiteracy, corruption and militancy.

Among the issues included in the manifesto the following are critical:

- Breaking syndicates that keep the prices of essentials high.
- Trial of war criminals and suppression of religious terrorism.
- Further strengthening of ACC.
- Ensuring true independence of judiciary and good governance.
- Generating 5000mw power by 2011 and 7000mw by 2013.
- Reducing poverty ratio from 45% to 25% within 5 years.
- Adopting a comprehensive employment policy.
- Raising economic growth to 8% / annum by 2013 and 10% by 2017.
- Reducing unemployment from 40% to 15%.
- Setting up a task force to combat terrorism and militancy in South Asia region.

From its record of achievements it appears

that the party is capable of fulfilling, or nearly fulfilling, the pledges with cooperation from the opposition.

BNP manifesto

The following issues of the manifesto are important:

- Increasing food production through subsidisation.
- Containing price hike of essentials.
- Allowing judiciary full independence.
- Improving certain parliamentary procedures and practices.
- Introducing unemployment allowance.
- Decentralising administration.
- Introducing health insurance.

We are disappointed to see the BNP manifesto. In the much-criticised BNP-led regime of 2001-06 we saw the ruling party men turning into "highway robbers." We have seen its poor performance in various projects of communication and highways, energy and foreign affairs. In fact, everything went wrong.

Though we may understand Begum Zia's anger, we fail to understand her lack of remorse. Her anger is mainly aimed at the media and the caretaker government, which has achieved so much in so short a time to re-establish Bangladesh through a free, fair, and credible election on December 29.

Truly speaking, the BNP manifesto cannot make us happy because it hardly speaks for the country. In defending the corruption of the regime, it appears that Khaleda Zia is not at all embarrassed or repentant. She considers it a social problem. The manifesto does not say anything about religious extremism. It speaks of the values represented by Bangladesh nationalists and Islamists, and not a word about the need for trial of war criminals.

In analysing the manifestos of AL and BNP we may say that AL's manifesto is not only comprehensive it also aims at establishing true democracy where people of all religions will be able to live in peace and prosperity.

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Early childhood development issue missing in election manifestos

We need not go into a debate on why neither of the major political parties incorporated ECD in their manifestos. We do realise that it is the lack of understanding and knowledge of the manifesto writers, who also missed the demand for Bangladesh ECD Network (BEN) a networking association of 200 member organisations.

MOHAMMAD GOLAM NABI

THE year 2021 will mark the golden jubilee of Bangladesh's independence. AL prepared their visionary election manifesto to celebrate that day and named it *A Charter for Change*. There are around 8495 words in the AL election manifesto, but you do not find the words Early Childhood Development (ECD), which could be the most important words for the sustainable future of Bangladesh.

It is the same in the case of the manifesto of BNP. Their main slogan is *Save the Country, Save People*. Neither party considered ECD as important.

Enormous benefits can be achieved through an ECD program. It has been proved that young children respond best when caregivers use specific techniques designed to encourage and stimulate progress to the next level of development. It can ensure higher intelligence scores, higher and timelier school enrollment, less grade repetition, lower dropout rates, higher school completion rates, improved nutrition and health status, improved social and emotional behaviour, improved parent-child relationship, increased earning potential, and economic self-sufficiency as an adult.

Moreover, mothers who participate in quality ECD programs demonstrate

reduced rates of pregnancies. ECD will also increase female labour force participation. Participation in ECD programs is also associated with reduced criminality.

The long-term impact of early interventions dramatically influences their cost-effectiveness. The "High/Scope Perry Preschool Project" is estimated to have saved \$7.16 for every \$1.00 invested due to savings in lower education and welfare expenditures combined with gains in productivity over time. It is applicable for developing countries like Bangladesh also.

There are scientific reasons also. According to child development research there are 100 billion neurons (brain cells) in the brain at birth. These cells cannot function independently. They need connections with one another. Repeated interaction with, and stimulation from, the environment increases the connections. 90 percent of the brain cell connections occur during the first 8 years, of which the first 3 years are more crucial.

On the other hand brain cells develop before birth. So it is important to take care of the child from the womb to year 8. It is said that "the first step lasts forever," i.e., the early years of a child's life are critical in laying the foundation for lifelong development. So, if this sensitive period passes without the brain receiving the stimulation for which it is primed, oppor-

tunities for various kinds of learning may be substantially reduced.

We need not go into a debate on why neither of the major political parties incorporated ECD in their manifestos. We do realise that it is the lack of understanding and knowledge of the manifesto writers, who also missed the demand for Bangladesh ECD Network (BEN) a networking association of 200 member organisations.

Government departments, NGOs, and donor agencies are members of this network, which is implementing ECD programs in Bangladesh. They are developing a comprehensive ECD policy paper for children aged 0-8. The Ministry of Primary and Mass Education (MOPME) acquired the approval from the government for an operational framework for pre-primary education due to BEN's strong advocacy.

The University Grants Commission has also approved diploma and masters programs on ECD, which will be conducted under Brac University (more can be learned from <http://www.ecd-bangladesh.net/>). But compared to the need, the effort is insufficient.

We need a big program with full political commitment, and to raise the status of the Ministry of Children and Women's Affairs. I think a separate Ministry for Children is now the demand of the time. These changes can only take place if all the political parties realise the importance of ECD, which is critical to shaping the future of this country. Only political parties' efforts can fulfill the dream that we all share of a vibrant, progressive and developed Bangladesh.

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