

## Curtain rises on a great day

Respect people's verdict

**N**EARLY 81 million voters are expected to go to the polls today to cast their votes. In the annals of democracy in Bangladesh this day is of enormous significance, it being the second time that we will see democracy being restored this time after a somewhat unusual interregnum of two years under a Caretaker Government and emergency rule.

Today's polls, we trust, will truly reflect the hopes and aspirations of the people who would be keenly looking forward to the country turning a corner in all respects. One hopes that the political parties would have registered in their mind a very important demand of the people, a demand for change in the overall political culture. Admittedly, such a change will not come overnight, and no change can last long unless the motivation comes from within. We hope that the process of change, which has commenced, would continue beyond election till it is brought to fruition.

What we have seen, as far as electioneering is concerned, augurs well for us. The election campaigns have been violence free barring a few stray incidents. In fact the bonhomie and good feelings displayed towards each other by political opponents in many a constituency is a whiff of fresh air into our political environment. To hear of election processions of opposing groups exchanging pleasantries while passing by gives us reason to feel reasonably confident that we have turned a new page.

Our optimism is reinforced by the speech of Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia, delivered to the nation through radio and TV Monday last. It is heartening to see both calling for abjuring the path of confrontation and seeking the way of cooperation. We only hope that the call is out of moral convictions and not merely a political ploy to wean away voters.

However, we cannot but note with dismay the fact that neither party has mentioned specifically their position on parliament boycott and hartal. Although Begum Zia has made only a tangential reference to the issue, we would have been happier had they both clearly come out with how they would like to use this potent instrument of expression of political disagreement in the future should they happen to be in the opposition. The people would certainly not like to see parliament boycott and hartal being resorted to at the cost of the country's interest.

We feel it worth reminding the political parties that in the past democracy was blunted, and much of our woes had stemmed from the unwillingness of the losing party to accept the verdict of the people. Therefore, all said and done, the final test of commitment and loyalty to democracy will lie in the losing side gracefully bowing out to the popular verdict. Respecting peoples' choice is the only way they can acquit themselves as mature political organisation setting a ground-breaking precedent for the vanquished party to be respectful of popular choice in future.

## The issue of war crime

It's a question that the nation must address

**T**HE collective voice against the participation of alleged war criminals in the national election has been louder this year than before. It is indeed refreshing news that voters, especially women and the young, have become more informed of the crimes committed against the freedom loving people during the 1971 War of Liberation. The more they learned about their atrocities, such as rape, looting of property, torching of houses and shooting down unarmed men, women and children, the more they were able to relate to the pain and anguish of the people. The graphic details of terror perpetrated by war criminals in support of the Pakistani occupation forces that were shown on various media have instilled a sense of profound abhorrence in the people in general.

Many religion-based political parties continue to carry the legacy of a deep wound they had inflicted on the nation 37 years ago in a bid to abort the birth of Bangladesh. Instead of allowing the wound to heal properly, they often find occasions to undermine the cause through releasing offensive comments. Surprisingly, after having been reinstated in politics, such parties never expressed regret for their role or apologised to the people.

In this connection we would like to comment why a party like Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami, following the tradition of the recognised political culture, cannot admit the crimes of its leaders and thus clean its conscience once and for all, especially when they have recognised the Liberation War in their constitution. Far from doing so, this party has chosen to keep the war criminals under its folds and misguide its supporters with confusing statements. It beats any logic why the party is keen on carrying the liability at the cost of public support.

This however needs to be said in clear language that our stand is not against any political party. But our conviction about the necessity that those who worked against the birth of Bangladesh should not have any part in its leadership and governance remains.

## Not just another election

### PERSPECTIVES

Yet, the election has its own dynamics, and its own peculiar arithmetic can spring surprises unsought. That apart, the election 2008 is crucial in many senses. The events of the last few years have brought us to a crossroads, from where we have to choose which particular course would we adopt.

ABDUL HAFIZ

**O**N January 11, 2007 we embarked on a journey to nowhere and were beset with speculations and conjectures about where we were heading. Amid a good deal of drama and experimentations with regard to our reformed political process, we only half believed, if at all, an election to be held before the year 2008 was out.

Yet the oft-respected promise to that effect has at long last come true, vindicating the bona fides of what the authority promised. Even if it is after a roller coaster journey, we are finally going to exercise our voting rights today. Indeed, but for the difficulties created by an intransigent BNP with regard to the election schedule, the much awaited election could have been held even earlier.

Among the contestants in the election, the BNP in spite of its jerky and belated start is most visible in electioneering, where its tense, desperate, and aggressive chairperson excelled in making promises and dangling carrots before the public.

She has developed her mealy-mouthed mendacity into an art form, hoping that it would work in taking the simple folks for a ride again. By giving a damn to electoral code of conduct and defying the public craving for a change in our political ethos, she is in a mood to

bandy calumny and innuendoes, thus vitiating the atmospherics at this sensitive time. Disregarding the grass-roots aspirations of the party, she has fielded most of the criminals of her immediate past regime smeared with ignominy as her nominees for ninth parliament.

On the contrary, Awami League has uncharacteristically kept a low profile and made bare minimum appearance before the electorate. But it has struck a chord with the public mood for a change. It has proceeded with a positive outlook as an agent for that change and developed a congruence with the political reforms initiated by the caretaker dispensation.

In a welcome course changing, it has been able to sift essentials from the cliches and rhetoric, thus projecting a vision for the future. That's where much restrained Awami League of today enjoys an edge over others. It's jettisoning of the party hoodlums has also been appreciated.

Yet, the election has its own dynamics, and its own peculiar arithmetic can spring surprises unsought. That apart, the election 2008 is crucial in many senses. The events of the last few years have brought us to a crossroads, from where we have to choose which particular course would we adopt. The grab mentality and "winner takes all"



Moment of truth for the nation.

tendency introduced by the BNP in our politics along with an authoritarian impulse in successive governments have seriously jeopardised our democratic prospects.

The religious militancy spawned, and wave of bigotry and obscurantism nourished, by BNP-led alliance pose today an equally grave threat to our democratic values. Also, for the first time, the founding principles of our independence are under attack by the constituents of the alliance. If voted to power, these forces will constitute an even greater threat.

Unless utmost caution is exercised, and this remorseless lot who have neither compunction nor contrition for their past sins is kept from returning to power, it will spell disaster for the country and its value system.

The politicians of the genre of religious right and fundamentalists are making their bid to capture the citadel of power, desperately playing with fire by stirring up frenzy by questioning the patriotism of their liberal secular opponents.

Drunken and intoxicated with a

heady brew of power politics, they will go to any extent to desecrate the soul of the nation. Therefore, the conscious people of the country have a sacred duty to stop them. In that sense the upcoming election is much more than just another election. Hinged to it are existential issues and that of our pristine and primordial culture.

The three million martyrs of our independence will never give us if we yield to their power of the money they accumulated from the public coffers and are now spending for buying votes in various garbs whether it is so-called Islami relief of four kilograms of beef and two of rice.

We must not barter our principles for the scraps they are doling out. We cannot afford to be confounded with the fast talk being parroted by an "uncompromising" leader of doom. Let us say an emphatic no to her sophistry. It is a defining moment and we must be able to rise to the occasion.

Brig (retd) Hafiz is former DG of BISI.

## Young voters in ballot battle

### BY THE NUMBERS

The young voters in the country who are preparing to cast their first vote in life, are expecting a paradigm shift in national politics through the forthcoming polls. Interestingly, around one in three voters will cast their votes for the first time and they are truly thirsty for a qualitative change in politics.

A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

**S**URPASSING all suspicions and speculations, the country now inexorably moves towards an elected government through the December 29 balloting. This election is particularly significant as the voting takes place in a different background with a variety of changes that happened after 1/11 with a rallying cry to cleanse politics.

The two major political parties, which are leading two alliances for the December 29 polls, have set their eyes on the young people who got registered for the first time as voters, and desperately trying to woo them in a bid to win the ballot battle.

AL has dedicated its "Vision 2021" to the young generation and has pledged to present a digital Bangladesh to them by 2021. BNP has also a waft of promises for the young voters including a bright and successful future for the new generation.

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The maiden voters consisting of 33 percent of the total electorates and having no allegiance to any particular political party are the crucial deciding factor in this election. Therefore, they have a vital role to play in paving the way for clean and competent candidates to sit in the parliament. The judicious casting of votes by the young voters can open avenues of opportunity to cultivate a politics with some core values and principles.

The young voters imbued with dedication, courage and determination can steer the country clear of the politics of plundering, casting their precious votes judiciously for entry of clean and compe-

tent people into national politics, who can work for peace, prosperity and welfare of the country.

The young generation to whom the country's leadership will be passed on, have a lot of well articulated opinions on how the politics and the society should be moulded. But their opinions have hardly been taken to account by the peoples in power. They have now poised to elect a government that will tend to their aspirations for a prosperous future.

The findings of SHUJAN, which conducted a survey on the candidates of the ninth parliamentary polls in 102 constituencies is simply mind-boggling. A total of 48 candidates which include 27 from BNP and 17 from AL, are charged with corruption, while 100 candidates, including 34 from BNP and 24 from AL, are facing murder cases. Besides, at least 87 candidates of grand alliance including 67 from AL and 102 of four-party alliance candidates including 88 from BNP are facing cases on various charges.

According to the survey, at least 139 candidates from BNP and 101 from AL, 22 from JP, 12 from Jamaat, eight from Islami Andolok Bangladesh and 44 independent candidates faced cases in the past. At least 493 parliamentary aspirants have no TIN numbers.

The survey further revealed that of the candidates, 130 have no educational qualification while 305 passed SSC or HSC. Citing several reports published in newspapers, the survey said that at least 21 war criminals are contesting in the

election, and most of them are from four-party alliance.

One need not have much wisdom to assume what sort of people are likely to be elected for the ninth parliament if the conscious youths of the country do not come together for the imperative of casting their votes for the right persons.

Of course, we do not expect our MPs to be saints. But they must not be individuals who are markedly corrupt, tax evaders, loan or bill defaulters, and war criminals. Our overriding concern, however, is that the political parties are not really ready to take the country into a new direction by remoulding politics in accordance with the demand of the time.

Our valiant freedom fighters, the youths of that time, snatched the victory in this month thirty seven years back, fighting a fierce armed battle. Today's youths are now poised to fight a battle of ballots to restore the democratic polity, paving the way to lead the nation on to the promised path of progress and prosperity.

The cost we had paid for our victory was very high indeed in any standard. But the fruits of our efforts were systematically whipped away by a group of people in power in the political and social spheres. Let the spirit of independence inspire once again our young voters into voting for a government that will make a way for materialising the dreams we fought for in 1971.

A.N.M. Nurul Haque is a columnist of The Daily Star.

## The secular vote bloc

These are darkness politics we have faced down since the 1950s. The "mosjid e ulu dhoni," the vote for us to "save religion," the false blasphemy allegations, the attacks on Bangla culture as "Hinduani." It won't work, not this time, not any more. Perhaps it never did.

NAEEM MOHAJEMEN

**S**TANDING at many intersections, what were the arguments in favour of secularism? In the 1960s, a push-back against West Pakistani colonisation. In 1971, it was simply and joyfully, a decisive rejection of the Pakistan model. Later in the 1980s, it was also expanded to explain that religion was for private space, inner life, spiritual healing; but not for politics. Now in this decade, we also insistently emphasise that religion is to be respected (because secularism's critics falsely accuse it of being anti-religion), but it should not be involved in the running of the state.

A symbolic principle first settled in

decades. This December 29, it is time to decisively vote, again, to separate religion from politics.

I have to look at the calendar to remind myself. It's almost 2009. But in some political party rallies are still *bashi* slogans reminiscent of a political past, not a present or future. When voters hear of "Islam in danger" or "Vote for us to save Islam" they should raise their eyebrows, express a skeptical gesture and turn their head.

Islam "in danger"? A religion in its fourteenth century, with 1.8 billion global followers (second highest after Christianity), a robust tradition and teachings (the only problem being occasional misinterpretation) in danger? And we need to vote for someone to save religion. It won't work, not this time, not any more. Perhaps it never did.

These are darkness politics we have faced down since the 1950s. The "mosjid e ulu dhoni," the vote for us to "save religion," the false blasphemy allegations, the attacks on Bangla culture as "Hinduani." It won't work, not this time, not any more. Perhaps it never did.

But still broken tactics hammer on. In our education system we are in the grips of triple tracks: English medium, Bangla medium, and madrassa. The expectations and training created by each track, along with the intersections of class and locality, is different and sometimes clashing. Divide and rule. What are needed are education systems that can train people for the future. To work, earn and live.

Rumi Ahmed talks about the "Manna Factor," to delineate a first-time voter group that is outside everybody's definition, constituency, or appropriation: "Nobody organised them, no chain email notified them, and no Facebook group was created to make the event successful." Actually none of the political parties know how to reach out to this voter bloc. There is now some talk about job creation programs, global competitiveness and "digital" Bangladesh, which is a good, late start. Certainly talking about job

creation is better than the politics of "religion in danger," which has no impact on the daily practical life of the nation's gigantic unemployed youth bloc.

We need candidates who can get us jobs, safeguard our economic livelihood, build up the national economy. They need to explain how to do all that, and earn our vote. A columnist once talked about the shadows "behind the BMW shine." While business and development has empowered a tiny elite, the vast majority are still *shei timire*. A particular political hysteria keeps yelling that the toiling masses should be voting to save religion. Actually, they should be voting for jobs, school, education, equality.

The five years that follow this election, people will watch, monitor and participate and see how the winning side makes economic lives better. In a way connected to practical issues, to economics, to income, to the world inside and outside these borders. In an age of brutal global competition, fluctuating open borders and rapidly evolving economic scenarios. A forceful return of the politics of *bhat-kapra-makaan*.

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