

The trust factor

ELECTION 2008

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SYED SAAD ANDALEEB

RESEARCHERS have long studied the concept of trust. It is seen as a calculative process used to assess whether persons or parties one interacts with for a "salient" outcome will continue to meet their obligations. The calculation involves an estimation of the costs versus the rewards. It also involves imputing the benevolence of the other party to act in the best interest of the perceiver.

The sales literature is replete with studies of the customer-salesperson dyad where the customer's trust in the salesperson is a determining factor as to whether the transaction will take place. Based on past history and present cues, the customer must make a forecast of the likely behaviour of the salesperson that will determine the ultimate outcome the customer will experience. Most relationship dyads -- interpersonal, inter-community or even inter-country -- must reckon with this powerful behaviour modifier: trust.

Today's election also parallels the above where the aspiring candidates and the political parties they represent are like salespersons representing a certain company or product. In this particular con-

text, the candidates make the big pitch with many promises of sunny days and eternal spring for the voters. With the all-important item in their possession -- the vote -- voters must make the same calculation to determine who will best represent their future and who will worsen their miseries.

Candidates who will garner the requisite number of votes will be catapulted to power for the next five years. How they will exercise that power is a moot question. Clearly this is serious matter and voters must give it serious attention. Only then can they choose the right product (candidate). They must carefully consider history and they must carefully consider the present cues (e.g., how realistic are the promises that are being made, do the candidates have the competence, who do they associate with, and so on). The successful product should be the one that is most likely to deliver long-term customer benefits and satisfaction.

What constitutes that successful product? In marketing parlance, successful products are those that subscribe to the marketing concept that stresses: identify a need and satisfy that need. Simple as the statement may be, successful products

invest enormous amounts of time, resources and creativity to gain the customer's favour. They build a brand identity that speaks for itself. The brand that delivers customer satisfaction time and again wins acceptance and long-term loyalty.

Then there are the products that fail customers. Think of the recent milk products that were found tainted, causing harm to those who chose them or the restaurants that sell sub-par quality or even adulterated food that can endanger one's health. Are customers likely to choose them again? Occasionally, some of them may sneak in, disguised as another brand, to gain a second chance. But if they again lead to similar outcomes for the customers, what should their fate be?

The best products offer what the customer is seeking. Only by researching customer needs, adapting the product attributes, and paying the highest attention to satisfying the needs of the customer can success be guaranteed. The best products represent a set of core values that customers prefer and benefit from. They are developed with the right combination of attributes that the customers will really like and purchase.

Politicians and political parties are like these brands and companies in the marketplace of votes. If one might assume that the voter is rational, they will choose the best possible candidate. Past experience suggests that voters have done so, although there are skeptics also who challenge this contention.

In this election, what attributes are the voters seeking? One poll suggests that the primary attributes they are seeking are honesty (61%), education (33%), and

dedication (18%). In another poll, voters (91.1%) clearly stated that they would not vote for a candidate who is perceived as corrupt, even if they represent the same party the voter supports. Topping the list, a third poll indicates that voters want the newly elected government to tackle corruption first (67%).

Clearly, voters are seeking candidates who are perceived as honest and trustworthy. How do politicians rate on these two attributes? A study published in the Journal of South Asian Studies several years ago, rated politicians in Bangladesh a 2.60 on honesty and 2.91 on trustworthiness on a ten-point scale where the lowest attainable score was 1 (not zero). If the current slate of candidates rate similarly, and the media has produced evidence to that effect, what is the voter to do?

Lack of public confidence in its leaders is a persistent concern. One of the latest polls even lashes out at the present caretaker government, suggesting that any elected government will do better than what they have accomplished. Whether this is true or whether this represents voter fickleness is something that hindsight will tell us in the next few months. But what is important is to focus on those candidates who will inspire the most confidence.

Such confidence has tremendous implications for building social organisations, facilitating social cohesion, and creating an environment where economic and social exchange can take place without fear or apprehension. The bulk of this responsibility will fall on the elected. They must demonstrate serious intent to gain the trust of the voters and serve them.



NOOR ALAM DRINKNEWS

Whose message can be believed?

Untrustworthy candidates portend dire consequences. Once in power, they can abuse the trust reposed in them with serious consequences for the voter. Bangladesh today has attained the reputation of being among the most corrupt nations in the world, a reputation that works resolutely against its opportunities in the global marketplace. For this, the political leaders have to bear responsibility, although businessmen, government officials, and in many cases the general public (who use bribes to gain advantages ahead of others) cannot be exonerated for confidence destroying behavior.

The ultimate question that voters must raise is a simple but powerful one: Whom can I trust? Informal polls in the media seem to suggest that the major political parties have discarded their ideals and

ideology in favor of marriages of convenience with only one purpose in mind: to win the elections. In its wake there is concern that the voters will get a bad deal.

If the voters feel they cannot trust any candidate on the ballot, is there a way out? Seemingly there is a no vote option, although it is seems not have been widely publicised. This is likely to cause some voter confusion. But this is an option that allows voters to send a powerful message to political parties to put up trusted candidates. Placed in a situation where "consumers" lack confidence in a product, they cannot be forced to buy it. Why should they "buy" candidates in whom they have no trust?

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Change is in the air

ELECTION 2008

The union election offices were more vibrant, the processions seem to attract more people, and the overall buzz, in the remote village of Kazimohallah surrounding the Awami candidate was clearly a couple of notches above the Jamaat candidate. It wasn't just the buzz; time and time again I heard the story of: "We have seen what has happened since 2001 and we don't want to repeat it -- we want change."

ARSHAD MANSOOR

TWO days in the far-flung village of Kazimohallah, in Shatkira district does not make you a political pundit, but like a pundit, I am predicting what could be a landslide for the Awami League-led coalition in the 2008 election. A reversal in fortune for the "Moha Jote" compared to the 2001 election.

I am daring to make this prediction despite very little knowledge of Bangladeshi politics. For the past 18 years I have been out of the country; now a citizen of the land of Obama, but never out of touch with where I was born and raised.

So what did I see in Kazimohallah, in two days, that allows me to make this bold

prediction without knowing about recent Bangladeshi politics? Sometimes ignorance is bliss. Being unencumbered by thousands of political commentaries regarding the 2008 election, it allows me to process information from the source, albeit a sliver of a source, and to draw conclusions from it.

I sensed a change in the air. Not the change that we saw in the land of Obama, but a change nonetheless. Shatkira district in 2001 went for Jamaat as part of the BNP-led coalition -- winning four out of five seats. Like typical border towns, Shatkira is a bastion for Jamaat as proven by their sweep in the 2001 election. But something seems different this time.

I was in Kazimohallah with my family

visiting our ancestral lands and also letting my two daughters to get a feel of Bangladeshi village life. While in Kazimohallah, I did what you expect any curious person would do to get a sense of the 2008 election. I went from tea stall to tea stall, talking with whoever had the time to spare and engage in a conversation on this election, and there were many.

Kazimohallah is part of Shatkira-3 constituency that includes Ashashuni, Kaliganj, and Debhata. Of the four seats in Shatkira district, this place is considered a safe haven for Jamaat. Jamaat candidate for this election, Moulana Reasat Ali, comfortably won in 2001 by a wide margin against Dr. Ruhul Haq, the candidate from Awami League representing the Moha Jote.

But the general sense that I was getting from the locale in Kazimohallah and also in Debhata was different. Dr. Ruhul Haq, who is again representing the Moha Jot from Awami League, seems to have penetrated the minds of the people of Debhata.

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clearly a couple of notches above the Jamaat candidate. It wasn't just the buzz; time and time again I heard the story of: "We have seen what has happened since 2001 and we don't want to repeat it -- we want change."

If I had to put my finger on one issue that was giving quite a bit of tailwind to the Awami candidate, it is the recent price increase in basic necessities like rice, fuel, etc. The incumbent party, in this case Jamaat, seems to be bearing the brunt of this ill will from the locals.

Armed with intelligence for the tea stall "addas" I wanted to hear it from the horse's mouth and tried to schedule a meeting with Dr. Ruhul Haq, the Moha Jote candidate. Lo and behold, the night before we were supposed to leave Kazimohallah I got the opportunity to meet Dr. Haq at the Nolta hospital, which was built by him and serves as the hub for his campaign headquarters.

Armed with a camera and feeling like a reporter I went to Nolta hospital with some of my relatives and friends. What happened during this interview not only reinforced my belief that Awami League will give Jamaat a run for their money in this "safe" Jamaat seat, but also changed my perception of "typical Bangladeshi politicians."

First, Dr. Ruhul was punctual. He came to the hospital minutes after we arrived; greeted us and took us upstairs to the conference room. Second, within the first ten minutes of conversation it was clear he was a physician first and a politician, a distant second. He was proud of Nolta hospital, proud of his association with his friend and colleague in Spokane, Washington who helped him create the prosthetics wing in Nolta.

A hospital like this could have made him a millionaire, many times over, in Dhaka, and maybe he is. But in Nolta, where the total cost of an appendix operation is 1,000 Taka and chickens are sometimes used as a proxy for 50 Taka as doctor's visit, you can't expect to make money.

Clearly he was not aspiring to be a politician. He was a physician who wanted to do something in the place where he grew up, established this first rate hospital in the 90s and was roped in by Sheikh Hasina to represent Awami League in the 2001 election. I am sure this story has been told many times over, but he came across as the real thing and somebody who wanted to do something for his area.

The gist of the conversation with Dr. Haq was no different than what I was

hearing from the tea stalls. He is cautiously optimistic, he sees the change in the air, and he is pragmatic enough to acknowledge that people seem to remember the recent past more so than the distant past. Even though the past Moha Jote MPs were not necessarily any different than the Jamaat candidates who won in 2001 -- but voters seem to remember what the last MP had done for them than what his predecessor did.

If Dr. Haq wins, in what is considered a stronghold for Jamaat, it will not be a good omen for the Four-Party Alliance. While two days of tea stall discussions do not qualify for an educated political commentary, I do sense a change in the air that could lead to results diametrically opposite to what happened in 2001.

After all, Bangladeshis are known to "throw the bums out," and incumbents don't really enjoy the advantage like they do in US where more than ninety percent incumbents get elected. We'll see what happens -- and if my prediction is wrong I still can go back to my day job in US!

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The search for justice for 1971

ELECTION 2008

As the next generation of this country who face a different set of challenges in the shape of religious radicalism, persecution of religious minorities, marginalisation of indigenous populations, corruption and morally decrepit political leadership, we need to ask where the next frontier of liberation is and whether we are willing to go the distance.

TAZREENA SAJJAD

THIRTY-seven years ago, they fought a war of independence on the political frontlines, on the social fault-lines and took up arms as a means of resistance. Today, the same generation, many united under the Sector Commanders Forum, has called upon itself to continue a task left incomplete despite the birth of the nation they struggled for.

Once on the frontlines of war, today, they have begun the frontline for seeking justice for human rights atrocities and demanding that these individuals culpable of unimaginable human suffering have no moral right to stand for public office and are not fit to govern the nation.

For more than three decades, the military victory in Bangladesh has rung hollow because of the desultory complacency and the systematic negligence to take advantage of key opportunities to cash in on the social, economic and political capital that

could have been built with a vision that is inclusive and accountable.

Consequently, since its inception, Bangladesh has been a silent and often compliant witness, a mere by-stander to the transference of power from the hands of the rulers to many of the collaborators of 1971 with little going to the hands of the common woman and man of this country.

If independence has truly been enjoyed by anyone in Shadheen Bangladesh, it is not a stretch to state that a lion's share has been claimed by the war criminals and collaborators in all sectors of the country. Victory and independence became buzzwords, a mere symbolic gesture of glorifying the nation with little reflection on what accountable governance and citizen ownership of a political process can truly mean.

Beginning from the issuance of state sanctioned pardons to the nonchalance demonstrated by political leaders to the participation of the guilty in public office, the legal, political, moral and social fabric

of this country have faced severe crises; yet, the absence of sustained political will and a desire to forget mainly by the political and economic elite have ensured the discussion of accountability has never been part of the public discourse.

Until now. As the movement against participation of war criminals in the 2008 elections gathers momentum up until election day, it is important to inquire, how did, after thirty seven years, this level of consciousness develop among the public across the whole nation?

Sometimes for a movement to begin and to reach fruition, all it needs is a spark, even if it is a negative one. Recently, at a public event, a statement was made by some prominent leaders that the war of 1971 was a civil war. While the definition of civil war itself does not undermine the independence struggle since civil war connotes a high intensity power struggle between a state and domestic political actors resulting in a high level of casualties, the use of the term was politically loaded and interpreted by many to as an attempt to minimise a struggle that engulfed a whole nation.

Some of the loudest voices decrying the depiction of 1971 as simply a "civil war" came from many of the sector commanders who had provided leadership during the independent struggle. Beyond verbal protests, this depiction became the pivotal point for action, planting the seed for the Sector Commanders Forum and involving

the participation of many who actively participated in the struggle for freedom.

Today, the larger forum associated with the sector commanders and their struggle comprises professors, artists, columnists, talk show organisers, editors, journalists, families of shaheeds, cultural activists, lawyers, students, and freedom fighters. The core principle of the forum was established to be the trial of war criminals. With this purpose and starting at the end of 2007, the members began calling for a series of open discussions to garner people's concerns and encouraged the involvement of the media to begin the process of exchanging views about the issue of accountability for the past.

Members of the Sector Commanders Forum, many of them in the late sixties and seventies, have taken it upon themselves to travel the country, often to and through difficult terrains, to divisional headquarters, cities and upazillas to speak to five groups of people -- teachers, students, cultural activists, women activist groups, and freedom fighters and to listen to their voices and perspectives on 1971.

In addition, they also began the task of visiting killing fields and met with families who lost their loved ones. Other symbolic nation wide events have included a national convention on March 29, candle-light vigils on December 14 in 2007 and 2008 and a rally on December 24 from Shaheed Minar to Muktangon for raising awareness about the demand for war criminals and to protest their participation

in the coming elections.

As of writing of this article, the forum is taking advantage of the last day of the permitted period of the election campaigns, that it December 27, and has traveled to Sherpur to continue their work on raising awareness about war criminals' participation in the political process and encouraging people to protest their running for public office.

If the nationwide campaign to raise awareness of the atrocities committed in 1971 is successful through the people's movement of saying no to the participation of the war criminals in the 2008 elections, it will be a testimony of the successful and strategic measures taken by all those who have been intimately involved in the process of creating awareness and creating the foundation for a demand for a war crimes trial since the day the war of independence was framed as a civil war.

It is a testament to the strength of people's will to mobilise, organise, and lend voice to create a crescendo of denial to those who feel they have the right to govern by virtue of who they are, in terms of the political might and economic backing. Most of all, it is testament to the fact that the horrors of 1971 have not been buried, lost or forgotten; rather all it needed was a little reminder and some leadership to bring the discussion of accountability and culpability back into the public discourse.

As we head to the elections of 2008, with an expectation that Bangladesh can once again deliver some hope to its people, it is

important to also recognise the shoulders of giants we stand on, and the systematic failures that drew the curtain over the contributions of many of the individuals who could have provided strong leadership for a country we claim as ours.

The movement for vetting war criminals using ballot boxes is a humble reminder that the past was never adequately dealt with; that freedom is not merely achieved through the redrawing of political borders; that the people of this country are hungry for moral and inspirational leadership, not just political rhetoric, and that there is still space for those who were resigned to the fate of the nation to step forward and work with the new generation to promote a transparent, accountable political system.

Thirty seven years after they laid down their arms, the members of the Sector Commanders Forum have come forward, despite politicking, criticism, fear and distrust to provide some direction about the fate of the country.

As the next generation of this country who face a different set of challenges in the shape of religious radicalism, persecution of religious minorities, marginalisation of indigenous populations, corruption and morally decrepit political leadership, we need to ask where the next frontier of liberation is and whether we are willing to go the distance.

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