

Awami League scores a stunning victory

People comprehensively reject four-party alliance's record of misrule

THE Awami League-led grand alliance has swept back to power in a stunning landslide victory that is as much a rejection of the BNP-led four-party alliance as it is an endorsement of the winners. The voters seized their day and made their voices ring out all over the land, loud and clear. Once again, the Bangladeshi electorate has demonstrated its maturity by discarding party loyalty and turning against a party in massive numbers for its failure in office and lack of vision for the future.

There are some clear lessons to be learnt from the election. The people of Bangladesh, of all classes, have rejected the corruption, violence, and religious extremism that characterised the BNP-Jamaat rule between 2001 and 2006. Moreover, women voters, who are known to have voted for the BNP in the past, and who outnumber men in this election, have this time turned against the party in impressive numbers.

Most critically, the election outcome is a powerful message that the politics of assassination -- the murders of Shah AMS Kibria, Ahsanullah Master, the August 21 grenade attack on an Awami League rally that killed 22 people, including veteran AL leader Ivy Rahman -- and the failure of the then-government to bring the criminals to justice have not been forgotten by the people.

For its part, the BNP had little to offer this time in terms of change. Its harping on so-called threats to national sovereignty and its slogan of Islam being in danger, suggesting that it alone was capable of saving both the country and Islam, did not resonate with the people, especially with the young.

We congratulate the people of Bangladesh for the peaceful and disciplined manner in which they voted. Their enthusiasm only demonstrates the unflinching faith they have always had in free, fair and transparent elections and their abiding conviction in the power of democratic politics to change the fortunes of the country.

We also congratulate the political parties for the purposeful manner with which they have campaigned for the polls and the dedication with which they have upheld the democratic process in the last two years, even during the period of the state of emergency. Their realisation of what they needed to do to further pluralist politics has been well noted by the nation. Also deserving of credit is the EC for the steadfast and painstaking manner in which it shaped its electoral roadmap, including the preparation of a photograph-attached voter list, thereby making it possible for the country to have a credible election.

We also take this opportunity to thank the armed forces for the determined manner in which it assisted the caretaker government and the EC as they prepared for the elections. Finally, in spite of all the odds, the caretaker government has successfully completed the mission it set out to accomplish. We thank it for a job well done.

At this significant juncture in our national history, we expect the triumphant grand alliance to be humble and gracious in victory and send out the message that it means to speak for everyone, including those who did not vote for it. We emphasise the need for the victors to ensure that no violence or retribution against their defeated rivals mars the celebrations that will follow the electoral outcome.

In similar manner, those who have lost will be doing themselves credit and the nation enormous good by conceding in good grace and promising to work in close cooperation with those who will form the government for the next five years.

In a bigger sense, all citizens of Bangladesh have triumphed -- for they have all voted to uphold the values and principles inherent to democracy.

Gaza massacre

Stop the killing now

PERHAPS the world has grown too inured at the repeated Israeli butchery of innocent civilians in the occupied territories to react adequately to the mayhem caused by the illegal occupiers since the last few days in Gaza. The grossly disproportionate response of the Israeli military by way of aerial bombardments in Gaza, ostensibly at Hamas establishments, killing nearly 300 including large number of women and children in the process is reprehensible and must be condemned by all. This has been the pattern of Israeli military activity ever since the start of the occupation -- a record of utter disregard for human lives.

The Israeli action has gone beyond its much-touted plea of self-defence. This excuse had been used in the past by Israel to perpetrate destruction of civilian life and property in the occupied territories. The most recent example was early this year when Israel's right of self-defence against rocket attacks was flaunted to justify a blockade that had denied the very basic means of sustenance to the civilians. Even though the civilized world considered it a policy tantamount to collective punishment it could do very little to remedy the gross injustice.

It is disgraceful to see certain big powers including the US support the Israeli action on Palestinians while not bothering to make any mention of its blockade of Gaza. The illegal blockade had compelled the chief of UN humanitarian agency to castigate Israel reminding it of its bounden duty as an occupying power to fully end all actions that were inconsistent with its obligations under international law. As usual, Israeli could care less about the UN or world opinion.

For the UN Security Council to simply say to both the parties to halt military action is not enough. It only goes to reconfirm the critics of UN who feel that the world body is completely sterile to take any action to address the gross violation of human rights by the Israelis in the occupied areas. Not only has the UN call fallen on deaf ears there is a suggestion from the Israelis that it might resort to ground offensive inside Gaza.

Most of the conflicts in the Middle East are a consequence of injustice, illegal occupation and policy of double standards. Unless those are addressed the problem will fester, and the weak and the aggrieved parties may be compelled to resort to measures that will keep the cycle of violence alive.

And so we voted ...

We did go to the voting centres, that looked nice and safe, not like it used to be in the past during the period of the "democratic" governments when the goons of the ruling party used to brandish arms and threaten voters.

SHAHNOOR WAHID

YES ... so we did, with great hope and hype, great fanfare if you like, but with one eye to the past records of the elected governments, with the unwavering resolve to bring about a change in the future -- a change most needed -- to let sunshine drive away the mist of malaise, to let fresh air clear the stench of the decomposing corpse of corruption that hung around our neck for many, many years, like the dead albatross.

Yes, we did go to the voting centres, that looked nice and safe, not like it used to be in the past during the period of the "democratic" governments when the goons of the ruling party used to brandish arms and threaten voters, especially those belonging to religious minority and ethnic groups.

This time around there was no goon in the vicinity of the polling booths, at least not in the capital city. Poor goons ... losing "vote baniya" worth millions of takas. No one to shoot point-blank. No one's throat to slit to please the "Boss." And the police and army patrols are making it tough for them to distribute cash money among voters. What a spoilsport! Why doesn't anyone show sympathy to us goons? We have to maintain a family, don't we? Now, we shall have to wait for five more years!

Around noon yesterday, people came in

to my room and said that there was very good turnout at the polling booths in the morning. Great sign indeed! That's exactly what everyone wanted, isn't it! Well, this is the first step towards democracy. Voters will know when to take the next steps. But, let us congratulate the Election Commission (EC), the armed forces and the police for keeping law and order around the booths.

Yes, there were some problems in finding the number of voters at some places. It took a lot of time in some places to find and tally the names and numbers of voters. In Paltan area, a senior journalist went back home as he saw a long queue moving very slowly. In some places they checked ID cards, but it was not followed everywhere. Many suggested that there should have been an EC staff with the list to find the name pronto.

Oh, talking about distributing money among voters ... in other words buying vote with cash. There are reports that brisk business took place in the city slums as well as in other places in the country. Well, it's nothing new. There are always buyers and sellers come election time. So, you can't really stop it totally. And to a person who earns Tk.100 a day, any amount will be gladly taken. But imagine cartons filled with nearly Tk 42 lakh brought in to buy votes! We came to know about it since the man carrying the money was caught red-



A rarity: Peaceful voting!

handed. But what about incidences going un-reported! Joyotu black money!

Now, let us turn our attention to the young, first time voters. What have they done? What was their choice? I personally know many of them...excited as they were...but mostly confused, as they knew very little about the candidates, their antecedents...their dedication...their pledges...their credibility. A large number of the young voters followed the instruction of their parents or that of some influential uncle in the family. This should not happen next time. They must take the trouble of doing their homework and then go to cast their votes. A lot depends on them. This is not the occasion to blindly follow someone, however close he or she may be.

But, what was most encouraging about the young voters was their unanimous rejection of the war criminals and religious

fanatics in the polls. Some of them might get elected by the vote of their blind supporters but the young generation has learned plenty by now about the horrendous acts of genocide perpetrated by these people in 1971. The good news is, the young generation is beginning to be proud of the history of our War of Liberation and wants to know more.

We all have received fantastic SMSs in the past two days haven't we? Vote for this...vote for that...vote for him...vote for her...and so on. I have received many too, but the most interesting one was sent by senior journalist Anwarul Haque. It read like this: "Vote for AL-BNP alliance and abandon Jamaat and JP." Thought-provoking, ain't it?

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Why they won

The unsung hero of this year's election might well be the new voter list which has discarded the 12.7 million ghost voters and may prohibit fake voting, thanks to the photo on the list and absence of dummy candidates.

SYEED AHAMED and JYOTI RAHMAN

CAN statistics predict the winner of yesterday's national election? Well, based on previous results, it is evident that Four-Party Alliance and Grand Alliance have some 80 to 90 seats each where they have their respective strongholds. Result of the rest 110-120 swing seats will depend on five major determinants of this year's election: Redistricting, New and Young Votes, Anti-Incumbency Votes, Alliance Factor, and No Vote.

This article will explore the plus and minuses of each alliance with respect to these determinants to help predict the final winner.

Redistricting (55 seats)

To better reflect the current population patterns, the Election Commission has redrawn boundaries of 133 constituencies. The redistricting can affect the election in a number of ways by reallocating the winning margins and dividing the vote banks and political strongholds. To understand this impact, we have regrouped the union level results of 2001 national election into new electoral boundaries and replayed the final result. The exercise showed that the redistricting has affected both the major parties/alliances and there is no evidence of any gerrymandering.

For instance, in 2001 election, AL won

the Mymensingh-1 by a modest margin, where four-party alliance won the neighbouring Netrokona 5 (then Mymensingh with Netrokona) by a larger margin. As a result of the re-demarcation, a portion of Netrokona-5's winning margin was merged with Mymensingh-1 making the four-party alliance as the net winner in both constituencies. On the other hand, major restructuring of the then Dhaka-6 has divided the vote banks ground network into Dhaka-8 and Dhaka-9 where once winner four-party alliance might face a delicate challenge.

There are about 55 constituencies where major redistricting has made the campaign more difficult. The alliance which could reorganise their political network within this shortest possible time will gain the benefits from these 55 seats.

New and young votes (35-40 seats)

More than one quarter of total electoral seats were decided by less than 10 per cent winning margin. Now with 32 per cent first time voters, the winner of this election will definitely need the endorsement of the new and young voters. The alliances also acknowledged this factor by nominating more young candidates and promoting a pro-youth digital Bangladesh. However, there are some 35-40 seats where anti-thug, anti-war criminal, and anti-autocrat campaigns will have significant impact on the minds of new

voters. So, the alliance that comparatively compromised more to these sects and nominated more immoral candidates will suffer more in this election.

Anti-incumbency vote (40-50 seats)

There is always a general anti-incumbency trend in some constituencies. There are 50 seats won by BNP by 1991 which went to AL in 1996, and 89 seats AL won in 1996 that went to BNP in 2001. There are 37 seats that went from BNP to AL in 1996 and then back to four-party alliance in 2001. These all reflect a strong anti-incumbency trend during the last three elections.

The crucial question is, who is the incumbent, and who is the opposition? In the last two elections, the answers were obvious. This time around it is more complicated. On the one hand, the AL campaign is portraying itself as the opposition. But on the other hand, BNP is making the case that it has been out of power for the past two years. Hence, result of these seats will depend on their respective success in portraying themselves as the main opponent.

Alliance factor (20-25 seats)

The result of BNP-Jamat alliance was evident in the 1996 election. Following the success, Jatiya party has aligned to AL and left wing parties to form a grand alliance. Will the JP voters join the alliance the way Jamat voters did in 1996? Hypothetically, there are two types of JP voters.

First there are voters who support JP because of its leadership or key personalities. Hence the pro-Ershad voters of northern district are likely to vote for the grand alliance.

Secondly, there are the anti-AL voters who voted BNP in 1991 and 2001, but voted JP in 1996 out of an anti-incumbency feeling. What will these voters do? With Ershad

closely aligning himself with AL symbolically -- references to Bangabandhu's dream for example -- the anti-AL feeling may dominate. If BNP can downplay the anti-incumbency factor, some may go back to BNP. Otherwise, they may go for No Vote (i.e. "none of the above" vote). There are some 20 to 25 seats where this alliance issue can be the deciding factor.

No Vote (15-20 seats)

It is not clear how the No Vote concept will play this year. First of all, the requirement of a 50 per cent No Vote (as oppose to plurality) has diminished the effectiveness of this tool. Also, it is not clear whether the candidates will be barred from the re-election if No Vote wins the 50 per cent.

But more importantly, while No Vote is the last resort to avoid the thugs and criminal candidates, a "Nader-affect" may change the scenario for bad. It is evident that voters who always vote the wrong candidate do not go for alternative. As a result, votes of concerned voters get divided by the No Vote or by alternative candidates and results in the win of a relatively bad candidate. This is how a vote to Ralph Nader helped Bush win the election in US. We hope this will not be the case in Bangladesh.

However the unsung hero of this year's election might well be the new voter list which has discarded the 12.7 million ghost voters and may prohibit fake voting, thanks to the photo on the list and absence of dummy candidates.

Note: This was written before counting of votes was completed. The result will be analysed in greater detail in a follow up piece.

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Post-election scenario

Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty, therefore, the opposition in the parliament must remain engaged in working with the government to reduce poverty and to provide the basic necessities of life.

HARUN UR RASHID

THIS national election is over. Election is a means and not an end. It is the beginning of a political process can bring change, but only if the elected government remains committed to its election pledges and works to achieve what is possible.

Politics has been defined as the "art of the possible," by the German-Prussian politician Otto von Bismarck (1815-98). "Good politics" is finding the balance between the desirable and the possible.

In real politics, a government does not always achieve what people want because reality imposes limits on its efforts -- paucity of funds is one of them -- but the people expect the government to implement its pledges with determination and commitment.

It is this awareness of the government's efforts that separates critics and cynics. People should be able and willing to challenge what is wrong, and work to correct

policies and practices that they find deplorable. To bring about the change people seek, they must maintain a critical eye while engaging in the process that makes change possible.

Cynics, on the other hand, are like those sports fans sitting in the chairs, criticising their team's every move, calling for someone else to do something. It's easy to be a cynic, but cynics don't make change.

Hopefully, the outcome of the election offers change and new possibilities. It will not be easy, nor can it occur overnight. The change people seek will be incremental, and it is possible.

People expect good governance. Governance ordinarily means making decisions and implementing them. Transparency and objectivity are necessary while spending funds for the welfare of the public.

People expect good leaders to shun direct or indirect influence of relatives, friends and party followers, and not to engage themselves in appointing individ-

uals to positions of responsibility regardless of merit.

Since a government spends tax-payer's money, leaders must understand that the tax payers have the right to know how their money is spent. This is known as accountability, which emphasises that the public should be told why a particular decision was made and how it was made. Accountability to the people is the hallmark of good governance.

People expect good leadership that abides by rule of law. The rule of law is interlinked with democratic norms and, in a democratic society, the rights and freedoms inherent to the human person, the guarantees applicable to them, and the rule of law form a triad. Each component defines itself, and complements and depends on the others for its meaning.

Rule of law is considered as one of the key dimensions that determine the quality and good governance of a country. The rule of law does not mean rule by law.

Laws are made by states, but states are themselves subject to the rule of law. Rule of law sets the parameters within which government functions. Cost-effective and easy mechanisms must be in place to secure legal protection for individuals against arbitrary excesses of state power.

Equality before the law is an integral part of rule of law. That means law does not discriminate between powerful and

weak persons. Enforcement of law must be uniform and strong. Under the rule of law, the accuser cannot be at the same time the judge. Independence of judiciary is an important component of the rule of law. People expect that the elected government will address the huge challenges.

Bangladesh is a poor nation. About 49% of its people live below the poverty line, and there is a wide disparity in income between the rich and the poor. Some say about 10% of the rich own 40% of the total land in the country, while the poor 10% own only 1.84% of land. There have not been genuine land reforms and agrarian reforms.

There are three simple questions to ask to measure development: What has been happening to poverty? What has been happening to unemployment? What has been happening to inequality? If all these decline from high levels, there is a period of development.

It is to the achievement of these goals that the new government must commit itself to. Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty, therefore, the opposition in the parliament must remain engaged in working with the government to reduce poverty, to provide the basic necessities of life, to combat the effects of global warming and to fight extremist elements in the country.

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