

Out of the past and into the new

AL can start a change in our political culture

AS the nation takes a deeper look into how Monday's elections went and its historic outcome, we cannot but note some particular features that characterised the polls. Voter turnout was a whopping 85 per cent, in the words of the secretary of the Election Commission, marking an increase of 10 per cent over the last election in 2001. Such enthusiastic and spontaneous exercise of the right to franchise is a highwater mark of and a point of pride for democracy anywhere in the world. This is also a fitting tribute to the congeniality of the election atmosphere which encouraged voters to come out in large numbers to cast their ballots. It is to the credit of the EC and the caretaker administration that their constant vigil ensured that goons or any other vigilante groups could not disrupt the voting process.

We congratulate Sheikh Hasina and her grand alliance once more on their stupendous success. But massive victory brings with it gigantic responsibility. The best way to approach that task is through promoting and implementing a policy of inclusion rather than exclusion. For her part, Begum Zia can inaugurate a new trend in political culture by congratulating Sheikh Hasina on her triumph. As for the BNP's complaints about irregularities at 220 centres in 72 constituencies we believe that while the EC should look into them, it also makes sense to say that even if the allegations were true, they still would not make any difference in the results.

We feel that the tone of the grand alliance's words and deeds in the next few days, particularly Hasina's, will set the tenor for future relationship between a party that has suffered a shocking defeat and a party in which the people have overwhelmingly reposed their trust.

A positive message was sent out on Monday night by Hasina when she called upon her party and grand alliance supporters not to bring out victory processions until the results were finally and officially declared. But the Chhatra League's attempt reportedly to bring a residential hall of Dhaka University under its 'control' on Monday is the kind of behaviour that must be curbed.

The voters have made clear their rejection of religion-based politics. A special feature of the elections has been the freedom with which religious and ethnic minorities have voted this time, which is quite a departure from their experience with some past elections.

Sheikh Hasina is now the prime minister of all the people which includes those who have voted against her. She thus represents all citizens and is in a unique position to unite the country and channel the constructive energies of every one of us towards nation-building.

Begum Zia, as the leader of the opposition, should be assured of all deference and respect, including even enhancing the position of the leader of the opposition in the order of precedence to number two. For her part, Begum Zia can give our return to democracy a good start by accepting the results and by being a responsible and active opposition leader.

Andamans tragedy

Lessons unlearned, one too many

A large body of gullible Bangladeshis, around 400, fell easy prey to machinations of fraudulent job brokers setting sail to the sea apparently on way to the Malaysian coast, some two months ago. Most of them are from Chittagong and Cox's Bazar. This is how their tale of tragedy unfolded: After the ill-fated Bangladeshis floated in the sea on six speed boats for some days, their fake employment agent put them on board a ship and abandoned them in the high seas. As they floated listlessly and ran out of water and food, seven of them died while 102 were rescued -- thanks to the Indian coast guard. As many as 300 have gone missing and many of them feared to have drowned.

This is only a repeat of the sordid stories we have heard about young unemployed Bangladeshis gambling their lives on dreadful uncertainty just to get a job foothold overseas. In the process, they allow themselves to be enticed by the carrot dangled before them by cheats and thugs who in no time would disappear from the scene once their ulterior motive has been realised. As they become hapless victims of human trafficking, they often have to court death, arrest, deportation, and pauperisation if they are lucky to be alive. They have been stranded and hauled up while trekking from Morocco to Spain, caught up with in the Mediterranean sea and as fugitives in the Malaysian jungle trying to escape arrest.

Call it tomfoolery or misadventure, the curse of joblessness drove them to desperation, so there is a human face to it. Of course, their gullibility is blameworthy, something they should be able overcome through sensitisation and awareness programmes at local community levels. Nevertheless, it is the state's responsibility to see that the unemployment rate is effectively reduced. The government needs to facilitate generation of employment in the private sector. It is time, the countries to which South Asians like to go for employment are approached through IMO, and also through inter-regional mechanisms, for attaining a favourable collective response to the issue of job-related migrations.

For the present though, the ministry of expatriate welfare and overseas employment should follow the developments pertaining to those missing in the seas near the Andamans and secure the safe passage back to the country of those already rescued by the good work of the Indian coast guard.

We express our condolences to the members of the families who have lost their near and dear ones.

The priorities before Sheikh Hasina

ELECTION 2008

GROUND REALITIES

In the short term, or beginning on day one of its taking charge, the government must have in place strategies on handling such issues as prices in the market, the economy, education, healthcare and employment. It needs to get down swiftly into the job of devising coherent policies on agriculture and industry.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

NOW that the people of Bangladesh have spoken, and spoken loudly, it remains for the incoming government of Sheikh Hasina to get its priorities right and go about putting them in implementation mode. The electoral triumph of the Awami League and its allies in the grand alliance has been on a monumental scale.

The sheer magnitude and historical dimensions of it can only compare with the victory the Awami League clinched under the leadership of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in December 1970. In that long-ago time, the party made new history, through charting the national course of freedom in an epic armed struggle for liberation.

Today, it is a new struggle that Sheikh Hasina must undertake as prime minister of Bangladesh. If her first stint in power between 1996 and 2001 was an exercise in rolling back such manifest injustice as the assassinations of Bangabandhu and the four national leaders in the bloody summer of 1975, her second time around must focus on the expectations the nation has placed in her and her colleagues for at least the next five years.

It is, once again, priorities that we speak of. And on an outlining and meeting of those priorities will depend the matter of whether the Awami League can truly transform itself into a natural party of government over the longer term. Which, therefore, means the new government will need to handle the issues from two perspectives.

In the short term, or beginning on day one of its taking charge, the government must have in place strategies on handling such issues as prices in the market, the economy, education, healthcare and employment. It needs to get down swiftly into the job of devising coherent policies on agriculture and industry. There is the all-important matter of law and order, of coming down hard on religious extremism, that certainly deserves the highest priority at this stage, a point that the government must make unequivocally clear before the police department and other security forces.

It will be naïve to expect these problems to be tackled and neutralised in weeks or

even months. But in the period of transition between now and their induction into office, the prime minister-elect and her cabinet will need to concentrate on a judicious selection of advisors, both from within and outside the party, who will not only have unfettered loyalty to the principles of the War of Liberation but will also have proven track records in doing their jobs well.

These men and women will be people of unquestioned integrity and unflinching moral purpose, able to distinguish between service to the state and sycophantic service to the party, willing to stand up for their principles when compromise appears before them as an option.

The new government will be expected to go for a reinvention of diplomacy for Bangladesh after years of a stultified and outmoded practice of foreign policy. Good, articulate, and urbane individuals should be sent abroad to speak for the country. In defence, the professionalism that has so happily come into the armed forces will need to be reinforced. Human rights, so often ignored or suppressed in the past, call for a quick restoration.

The corrupt must be identified, marginalised and penalised for all their sins in these past many years. And yet, care must be taken that retribution against the political rivals of the Awami League, against its detractors, does not come in, does not mar the new era of democracy we believe we have just set in motion.

Absolute probity and tested ability must underline the functioning of the cabinet that Sheikh Hasina will preside over. Partisanship must be kept at bay; and policy-making will call for transparency and academic debate in Parliament. The principle of cabinet government must come in where prime ministerial rule has been the bad norm for years on end. Nothing could be healthier than collegial administration; and nothing is more enervating than a concentration of power in one individual.

Those are the requirements in the weeks and months ahead; and on the acts of the new government on these issues will depend the course the country will take over the next five years. But along with them come the longer-term issues, those that have been responsible for keeping this



The work begins.

nation fractured right down the middle since the tragic happenings of August and November 1975.

With the huge mandate the Awami League and its allies have come by, the opportunity for a restoration of the nation's secular moorings, those that were instrumental in guiding Bengalis to freedom, is now at hand. By careful but sure degrees, the mistakes, blunders and chicanery that have laid Bangladesh low since the forces of counter-revolution commandeered the state in the aftermath of the murder of the Father of the Nation must be rolled back, to a point where the constitution as adopted in 1972 will once more be the cornerstone of politics in this country.

The elections on Monday demonstrated conclusively the idea that the call for a trial of

the war criminals of 1971 has resonated with the nation. Sheikh Hasina and her administration must heed that call. Any failure to do so could well cause a repeat of 1975.

The triumph of the Awami League is in essence a victory of the people. It is a reassertion of secular politics. It straddles generations and classes and gender and age. It is, we cheerfully note, our second coming home, after December 1970.

It is time once more to be proud of ourselves, of our legacy. It is that shining moment in history when the old battle cry of *Joi Bangla* stirs our emotions once again and points to the brilliance beyond the darkness that has long hung low over our dreams.

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Keeping her word

Hasina showed no ambiguity in meaning that those elected by the people to rule the country the way it is expected to be should not mix their strategies of running the country with that of running the party.

ZAYADUL AHSAN

AT the moment when Sheikh Hasina, being the leader of grand electoral alliance, stands with congratulations raining down on her, I will take the opportunity to remind her of some thoughts she shared with the writer about one and a half years ago.

This is not meant to belittle the success of the landslide victory of her alliance in the parliamentary elections or to express any cynicism about the electoral pledges that she and her allies made before the elections.

This is rather a citizen's heart-felt reflection inspired by the then virtually embattled leader's seemingly well thought out observation regarding a clear line between the role of those holding the key party posts and of those running the government.

Hasina showed no ambiguity in meaning that those elected by the people to rule the country the way it is expected to be should not mix their strategies of running the country with that of running the party.

This statement is in reference to an interview of the former prime minister with The Daily Star, headlined: "Hasina wants reforms deeper than her party leaders do," which was published on June 17, 2007.

"One group of people should run the party and another set should run the government," Hasina said at a time when the country was going through an unusual political situation as many of the people's political rights remained suspended amidst the state of emergency.

The writer, who took the interview, also recalls that only a few of her party leaders used to see her and many top shots were busy passing edicts on how to reform the party to ensure democracy with an unsaid objective of weakening the party chief by curtailing her power. It would be a foolish to think that Hasina, who has led the country's biggest political party for about two and half decades, could not sense what was in the minds of such leaders. So, she retorted.

The AL president clearly said that she

believed that neither the party president's post nor any other party position should be held by the same person for more than two terms. My memory does not betray me in recalling that she also said that not only should the chief of the party be barred from becoming prime minister but all central committee office bearers also should be prohibited from becoming ministers or state ministers.

"Again, if the party chief cannot become the head of the government then no one from a presidium member to the secretaries should be allowed to be in the cabinet. Earlier, a similar system was there when Bangabandhu left his ministerial portfolio and got back to the general secretary's post," Hasina said during the interview.

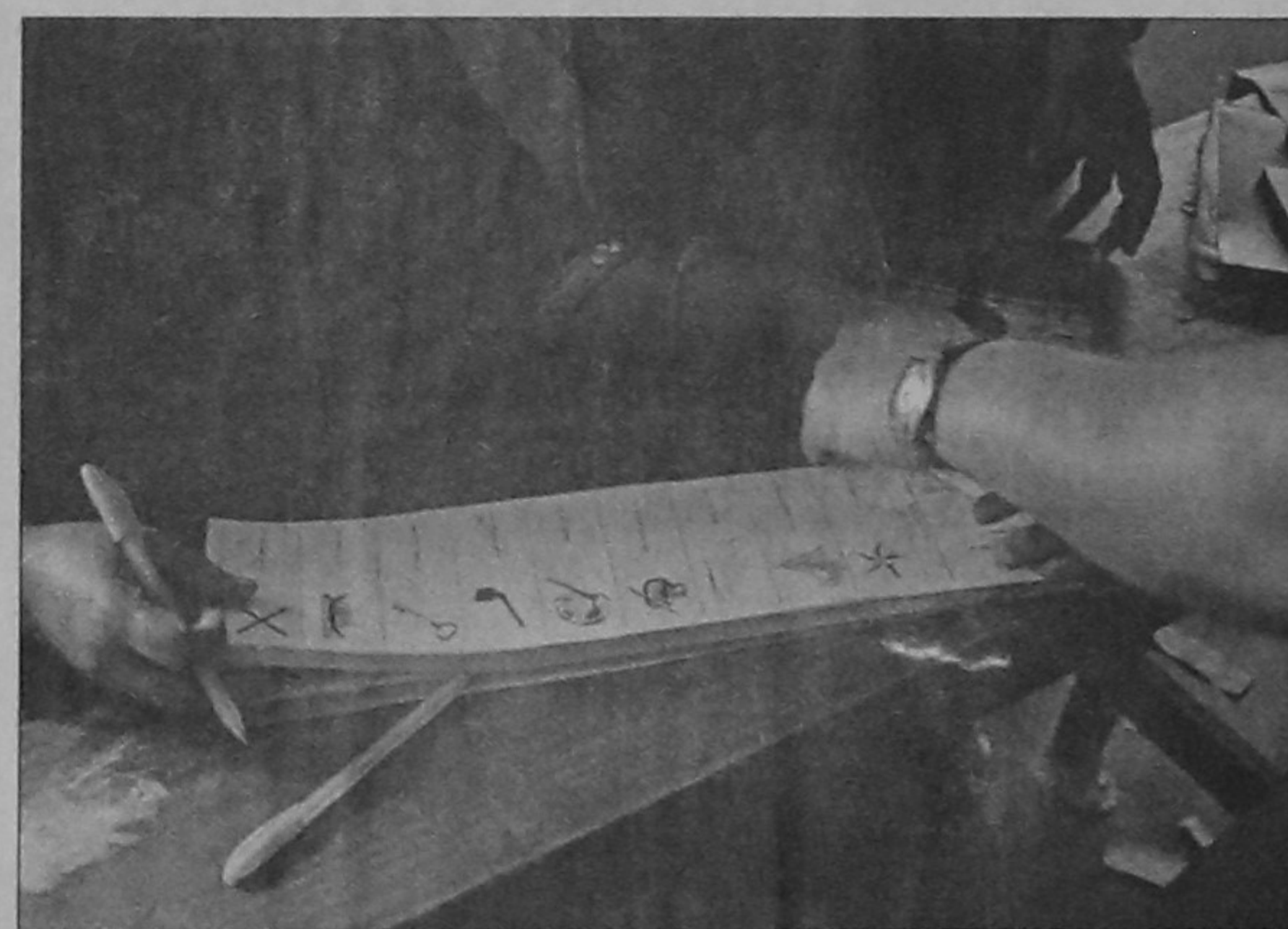
The ex-PM had suggested that one group would run the party and the other would run the government. That is how it had been written in the party constitution. "But we had to amend the constitution as no other political party had such provisions," she pointed out.

She was also prompt in mentioning then that she had already collected constitutions of major political parties from various countries and commissioned a team to examine those and prepare a draft.

With a feeling that the AL chief would not be oblivious of her own observation while she moves to the cabinet, this write-up is just an expression of hope that the seasoned politician's wisdom would lead the course of implementation of her own observation in this regard.

Since the electoral alliance led by her party has won a landslide victory in the parliamentary elections, will she set out on the journey to bring the reform needed to transform her plans into action to materialise a truly democratic culture in her party? We have reasons to believe so, since the words came from a leader of such stature and wisdom.

The sweeping victory does not have the might to overshadow the wisdom and ratio-



Mandate given: Promises must be kept.

nality of thinking of the seasoned politician, we firmly believe. People's experience over the years, especially in cases when the winner had an overwhelming majority, as happened in the 2001 parliamentary elections, shows that such winners cannot rise over party interest overcome by a "winner takes all" impulse. But the people of the country voted for a change from that feudal mindset.

It is definitely beyond doubt that the people voted for the AL and its allies in Monday's election to put them in the driving seat on the voyage to a prosperous Bangladesh, but the analysts will also add that the disgust for the misrule of the BNP-led coalition government was also reflected in the election outcome.

It is clear that the people will never accept such misrule, even by the AL-led alliance government, which is going to be the strongest government, if it resorts to such acts no matter how strong the people's support was behind them during the election.

The results of parliamentary elections in the country's recent past show that people have put their weight behind the alternative big political parties the BNP and the AL since 1991. If calculated this way, it may appear that the BNP has a chance to win in the next parliamentary elections.

If the AL wants to put a brake on this, which it is assumed that the party definitely

does, leaders of the party must learn from history and act accordingly by changing the political culture, which the AL has already placed high in its election manifesto. People also embraced it, a sign that they want eagerly to see its implementation.

A major criticism was that the BNP-Jamaat alliance government cared little about accommodating the opposition, meaning the AL, in the parliament and in all other state affairs, and it is assumed, again, that the AL would not like to walk in the BNP-Jamaat's shoes.

We want to see that the AL, once it forms the government, will take the opposition, no matter how small, into confidence in tackling every national issue, besides ensuring their role in deciding state policy. This very attitude, which is the essence of parliamentary democracy, would make the parliament effective, which the countrymen have been waiting for long to see.

Sheikh Hasina has said many times that she is ready to sacrifice anything for the sake of the people. Having full trust in her statement, this write-up puts forward the point that she would prove her sincerity by actualising what she had said earlier regarding running the party and the government.

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