

# What Sheikh Hasina should do now

ELECTION 2008

Bangladesh now stands on the brink of becoming one of the few Muslim-majority countries that have given a very strong national verdict about keeping religion out of politics. The nation also stands a very good chance of overturning its image as one of the most corrupt in the world. However, a lot needs to be done before any of these dreams can be materialised.

MRIDUL CHOWDHURY

**W**E have made history! Not only in the national context, but also in the global context. Just when many were thinking that our country was increasingly falling within the grip of Islamic fundamentalists and that their religion-based fear-mongering campaigning was working, the people of this nation have spoken with decisiveness.

Just when many were thinking that even the army-backed caretaker government has almost completely failed in its mission of ridding politics of corruption with most of the old faces back in the race, the people have taken a stance with determination.

Bangladesh now stands on the brink of becoming one of the few Muslim-majority countries that have given a very strong national verdict about keeping religion out of politics. The nation also stands a very good chance of overturning its image as one of the most corrupt in the world. However, a lot needs to be done before any of these dreams can be materialised.

The fact that the Awami League has received such an overwhelming mandate from the people is just as much a cause for grave worry as it is for a sigh of relief. The people of this nation had seen landslide

victories before, in 1973 and 2001, and neither of them worked well for this nation. In fact, both were disasters. One led to a "transfer of power" through multiple political assassinations, and the other led to a "clinging to power" at all cost through tampering with the courts.

Both led to power centralisation, trampling over opposition, and high-levels of corruption that went beyond the control of the government. Worst of all, both eventually led to a near-breakdown of democracy, the very apparatus the respective parties hailed when they initially came to power. So, if history is any lesson, there is no reason to be too jubilant too soon.

Now, what should AL/Sk. Hasina do to make sure that past mistakes after landslide victory are not repeated? Here is my list of to-do's besides the economic and infrastructural goals:

- Sk. Hasina should not surround herself with sycophants, who will give her a rosy picture of the country to serve their own individual interests -- this mistake led to the downfall of Bangabandhu. The fact that the people have given the AL such a huge mandate does not mean that they are beholden to the AL for 5 years -- if anything, it means that their expectations from AL are sky-high and that



The ball is in her court.

their disappointments will be "space-high." Sk. Hasina needs to keep her ears to the ground at all times.

- She should allow the utmost freedom to the media. This is the best possible way of keeping in touch with the pulse of the nation. Any kind of self-censorship can lead to the kind of disaster we have seen before. It is always important to remember that people have voted for AL in such large numbers, not because they are blind supporters of the AL but because they want change; and change is what AL has to deliver. If the citizens are not satisfied, a free and fearless media will be able to pick it up much before the politicians can or will want to.
- AL should seriously consider adopting a BNP manifesto promise -- that the speaker and the deputy speaker will

resign from their respective parties and the deputy speaker and some parliamentary committee chairmen will be chosen from the opposition. Realistically speaking, there is a good possibility that the BNP alliance may very well "walk-out" on the results of this election, if past behaviour of our parties is any indication. Nevertheless, the AL should sincerely try to retain their respectful involvement in the parliament -- this can only enhance the image of AL and perhaps even neutralise opposition resistance and hartals.

- Sk. Hasina should choose some able technocrats to run critical ministries such as finance, commerce, foreign, education and health, or at least take them as deputy ministers. She will possibly be under intense pressure to

distribute the major ministries among the AL presidium members and senior mohajot leaders as reward for winning her the landslide victory. However, I hope she recognises that this aspect of our democratic system is not at all "democratic" -- the practice of distributing key ministries to MPs based on their seniority and influence in the party, and not as much on their ability to perform in that position. In one of the acclaimed democracies -- the USA, the president chooses his/her cabinet almost fully from technocrats; their ability to perform in a particular position is the single-most important criterion taken under consideration. Even if due to political expedience, she has to choose her ministers from senior MPs who are mostly in the final phase of their careers, I hope that she will take the deputy ministers from technocratic backgrounds. By the same token, I hope that she will break from the past and will resist the temptation of placing her own family members in important political and diplomatic positions without required training and proof of competence.

- Sk. Hasina should bring back the issue of secularism to national center stage as promised in AL's manifesto through the following clearly stated words: "Use of religion for politics will be stopped." With more than a two-third majority in the Parliament, the AL should be in a position to even change the constitution, if needed, to restore the ideals around which this country was created. It is apparent from the results that the citizens in general are in a mood for change -- all the more reason for the hardest challenges to be taken up the soonest

before the mood fades.

- Sk. Hasina should not postpone the trial of war criminals with the excuse that citizens have more important things to care about. Nothing can be more important than the question of our identity, which will always be muddled as long as war criminals are around to twist our history. Bangabandhu postponed it, the price of which we are having to pay till today. Bangabandhu did not realise the consequences of his action since he could not see the future, but now that we have seen "the future," we know how important it is not to repeat the same mistake.
- Sk. Hasina should recognise that the success of AL is largely due to the youth votes. If translated to astute political terms, it means that it is this constituency that she has to give high priority to, starting from the highly-talked about economic opportunities to less-talked about political opportunities. There should be an explicit effort to try to bring more and more young people into prominence in the core political party -- they should not only be regarded as part of Chatro League. Younger but able politicians within the AL ranks should be given prominence when distributing responsible positions. Age was a critical factor in targeting campaign priorities, as was indicated by AL's declaration that the manifesto is dedicated to the youth. Now, we, the youth, will keep a close watch on what the AL does when it comes to giving importance to the youth from a political standpoint.

Mridul Chowdhury is a co-founder of Jagoree and CEO of a global social business venture. E-mail: mrcbangladesh@gmail.com.

# Opportunity knocks

ELECTION 2008

It is now up to the newly elected government to be installed, and more particularly up to Sheikh Hasina as the new prime minister, to prove equal to the task of giving us democracy, social justice, rule of law, communal harmony, progress and development, etc which constitute the benchmark of good governance.

SHAMSUDDIN AHMED

**I**f free, fair and credible election is the road to democracy, we have walked the distance covering the road as best as we could. December 29 finally marked the end of the cold long night of slumber of despair and the beginning of the dawn of hope for democracy as people across the country turned up in large numbers to cast their vote for a new parliament after long seven years.

The AL-led grand alliance under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina has won by a landslide. The BNP-JI alliance led by Begum Khaleda Zia has been convincingly voted in to opposition. This is a clear verdict of the politically conscious people censuring the BNP-JI alliance not only for its failure to deliver but also for its temerity to have torn asunder the image of this country by promoting authoritarian rule, rampant corruption, criminalisation and Islamist militarism to a height never seen before in the history of this country.

The poll results prove once again that if

people of this country are allowed to vote freely they do not make mistake in pronouncing their verdict.

There is no doubt whatsoever that it was the fairest and most credible election ever held in this country. Although some old tainted political faces have reappeared in the new parliament, we can legitimately boast of moving forward towards democracy. This massive electoral victory by AL and its allies is essentially a victory for democracy, communal harmony, social justice, progress, and development and the rule of law.

It is now up to the newly elected government to be installed, and more particularly up to Sheikh Hasina as the new prime minister, to prove equal to the task of giving us democracy, social justice, rule of law, communal harmony, progress and development, etc which constitute the benchmark of good governance.

We do not expect full-blown democracy to descend on this country in a single stroke from the new government and the

new parliament. But what we do expect is the minimum democratic culture to be introduced and practiced by the government and all our elected representatives including the opposition.

To begin with, let those who have won and are going to form the new government not to be arrogant of power but be as humble as possible in a spirit of shouldering enormous responsibilities given by the people.

And those who have been voted by the people to sit in the opposition should gracefully accept defeat in a spirit of showing respect for the people's verdict.

Let our ninth parliament function for the first time as the central and focal point of our politics as any parliament in a democracy does, giving maximum possible space to the opposition to freely articulate their views in objective criticism of the government and in lawmaking.

Let the deputy speaker be elected from the opposition and let both the speaker and the deputy speaker resign from their parties to be absolutely non-partisan while they preside over the proceedings of the parliament.

Let the new prime minister ensure that when he or she decides to face and answer questions from law-makers on the floor of the parliament, maximum space is given to the opposition members.

Let various parliamentary standing committees be constituted with adequate representation by opposition MPs as quickly as possible, but not later than the

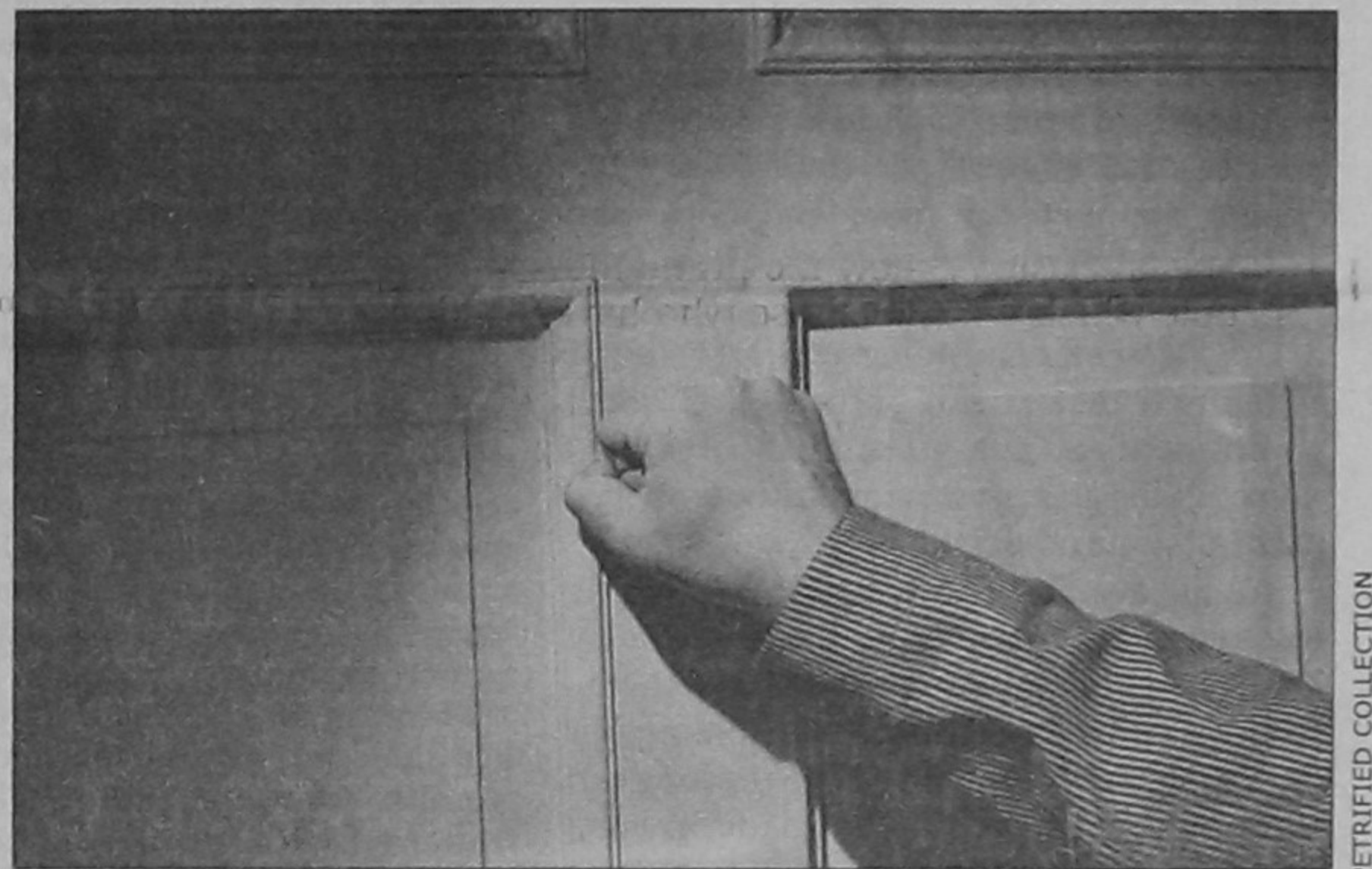
second session of the parliament. It would be desirable to have some important committees headed by opposition members.

The new prime minister would do well to ensure that the mistakes of the past AL government are not repeated. In fact, the new government must walk an extra mile to give democracy an institutional shape. It must not interfere in the functioning of the EC and the ACC. It must provide these two institutions maximum possible support so that they can function as responsible state institutions and deliver as expected of them.

The government must not interfere in the holding of the upazila election, which must go ahead as scheduled. The other issue relates to electoral disputes. This is a matter which should be left to the judiciary to settle.

The new government should remain focused on how it delivers on its pre-election pledges and commitments more intensely than ever before. The new generation voters, the civil society and the media, particularly the electronic media, are more politically conscious now and represent a more powerful voice than any time in the past.

The government will have to undertake many essential political reforms in keeping with the aspirations of the people for a genuinely democratic polity. Nothing will satisfy the democracy loving people more than the restoration of the 1972 constitution in its original form and content.



Is AL listening?

It will now be very difficult for any government to get away easily with corruption and riding roughshod over the people as the BNP-JI alliance government did. Thanks to the mind-boggling media coverage of the saga of massive corruption and wrong-doings of the BNP-JI government and the equally startling hunt-down by the caretaker government for the corrupt political heavyweights and light-heavyweights after 1/11. The media people will doubtless keep up the pressure on the government.

BNP must realise that its consorting with the JI, which had opposed our inde-

pendence and our liberation war, has earned it the wrath of the people. It can still be a political force to be reckoned with if it can dismantle its authoritarian leadership structures at national and regional levels and allow democratic culture to flourish within the party.

But most importantly it must distance itself from political elements tainted as corrupt and as collaborators and war criminals. With clean and patriotic leadership it can bounce back again.

Brig. Gen. Shamsuddin Ahmed (ret'd) is a former military secretary to the president.

# Israel's endgame

Wherever they look, they see the balance of power tilting against Israel. Nothing seems likely to halt Iran's nuclear weapons program and, macho rhetoric aside, Israel's ability to destroy this militarily are limited, short of a nuclear strike of its own.



JOHN BARRY

**D**OES the Gaza offensive signal that the Israeli government has decided to embark on the endgame? The scale of the effort -- a massive aerial assault, with Israeli tanks massing

along Gaza's border in evident preparation for a ground assault -- certainly suggests that. What does the "endgame" mean? It's the term a longtime senior Israeli defense adviser used in a conversation with me a few months ago: a military effort to crush Palestinian resistance for a

generation.

Wars end in one of two ways: by negotiation, or by the decisive defeat of one side. But, as that Israeli adviser argued to me in a session in Washington, neither party to the 60-year conflict between Israel and the Palestinians has given its full support to either outcome. Each side has held back from commitment either to a negotiated settlement or to military victory.

Consider the Palestinian resistance. The carnage in Iraq from 2003 to 2007 demonstrates what a truly determined insurgency can achieve. By comparison, the three Palestinian intifadas have been amateurish; disorganized, limited in intensity and territory -- low-level unrest largely confined to the West Bank. Israel itself was barely touched; and the toll of Israeli military casualties, though steady, was slight compared to those inflicted by Hizbullah in one month's fighting in southern Lebanon in 2006.

In cold military terms, suicide bombers striking in Israeli cities -- the tactic Hamas, in particular, espoused from the mid-1990s -- offered the Palestinians their first strategic weapon, as Israel's political leaders acknowledged at the time. But the suicide-bombing campaign waned.

One reason, no doubt, was because the Israelis managed to kill its early organizers. But such evidence as we have suggests that Hamas itself decided to halt the suicide bombings. Why? A theory credited by significant Israeli analysts is that Hamas feared the campaign's success

would provoke an overwhelming Israeli military response.

In short, the Palestinians have held back from waging an all-out military effort -- aiming, on this analysis, to do enough to coerce Israel to meet their settlement terms but not enough to provoke Israeli wrath.

Now consider the Israelis' response. The mountains of rubble in Nablus and Jenin after the Israeli air and tank assaults in the summer of 2002 invite derision at any talk of Israeli restraint. But the reality is that the Israelis have, for most of this long-running conflict, showed remarkable military restraint. The destruction in Jenin and Nablus -- or across southern Lebanon in 2006 -- could have been repeated many times over. That it was not suggests that the Israelis, like the Palestinians, have held back from a military resolution to the conflict.

Yet neither side has really committed itself to the painful compromises that a negotiated outcome would entail. Accords, interim settlements, intermediate steps -- of these there has been no shortage. What all have in common is that the difficult issues are postponed to some future Age of Aquarius.

The status of Jerusalem, the right of Palestinian return, Israel's withdrawal from the lands won in 1967: on none of these has there ever been any evidence that either side is prepared to meet the other's core political needs. Nor is there any reasonable hope that, even if Israeli or

Palestinian leaders could steel themselves to make a deal, they could sell the compromises to their followers.

The "two-state solution" pressed so fruitlessly by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice is arguably merely the latest delusion. Any plausible blueprint for West Bank withdrawal would require Israel to forcibly evacuate tens of thousands of settlers who are armed, determined to stay and have powerful allies in Israel and in the United States.

The likely outcome would be something close to civil war in Israel. Some Israeli defense officials even wonder, privately, whether the Israeli Army might surrender. And to what end? Hamas would remain committed to the destruction of Israel; and any attempt by, say, the Fatah leadership to impose settlement terms would entail something close to civil war among the Palestinians, too.

Against that bleak background, what might Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Defense Minister Ehud Barak see as Israel's options? Olmert, about to leave office, has publicly lamented years of lost opportunities for peace. But might-have-beens are for historians; political leaders have to play the hands they're dealt. And, as one senior British official concluded after a recent trip to the region, "Israel's leadership sees Israel as facing an existential crisis."

Wherever they look, they see the balance of power tilting against Israel. Nothing seems likely to halt Iran's nuclear

weapons program and, macho rhetoric aside, Israel's ability to destroy this militarily are limited, short of a nuclear strike of its own. Oil-rich and Shia-dominated Iraq and Iran will have ample resources to fund and supply any Palestinian group they choose to support. (The Bush neocons' belief that a democratic Iraq would make peace with Israel looks to be as flawed as their other judgments.)

Washington's desperate efforts to bail out the US banking system by soliciting cash from the sovereign wealth funds of the Gulf states will give the Arabs more clout on Wall Street, which in time will surely influence America's policies in the region. And Israeli leaders fear that President Obama will push them harder than any of his predecessors to agree to settlement terms none wants to contemplate.

The great Athenian historian Thucydides, writing almost 2,500 years ago, concluded that one reason a nation goes to war is a perception of waning power: act now because the future looks worse than the present. The scale of the assault on Gaza suggests that the Olmert government is validating Thucydides' analysis: embarking on the endgame to crush Hamas before it gets stronger, and Israel's position gets weaker. As Thucydides also observed, though, nations taking this gamble tend to be poor judges of what the consequences will be.