

## Khaleda Zia dismisses poll result

*She must come out with proof*

WE are saddened, though not surprised, that BNP chief Begum Khaleda Zia has termed the JS election stage-managed and, as such, unacceptable to her party. However, she did not quite elaborate, beyond a trite generalisation, how and where things went wrong.

Now, people would really like to take the utterances of the BNP chairperson seriously, provided she comes up with solid evidence to substantiate her claim. Begum Zia is not only the chairperson of one of the two major parties but she was also the prime minister of the country for two terms. So, whatever she says should carry due weight. The only thing she has said in support of her contention is that while around 45% votes were cast in the first four hours of polling, the percentage rose suddenly within a short time though the polling booths were almost empty in the afternoon. The point she has tried to make is that there were massive irregularities like stuffing of ballot boxes. But the magnitude of the AL victory would have required irregularities on a scale that could not have escaped the notice of about two lakh local and foreign observers, journalists from the print and the electronic media and, of course, the BNP's polling agents who were present in every centre, as were the law enforcers.

We fully understand that the election results have greatly disappointed Begum Zia and her party leaders. But this is certainly not something that political leaders and parties never experienced before. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and his party had to face a major debacle in the election after he led Britain to victory in the Second World War. And in our context, the Muslim League was trounced in the 1954 provincial assembly polls. In 1993-94 election in Canada, the Conservative Party got only two seats. Even if we don't want to go that far, the Awami League itself had to swallow the bitter pill in 2001, managing only 62 seats! It is all decided by the people and their verdict is what the parties have to accept gracefully. One has to admit that fluctuating fortunes are part of politics and the prime virtue of a political party is to learn from such reversals and forge ahead through the tumults.

The BNP has a big role to play as the major opposition party in the next five years. People will certainly expect the party to show a degree of political maturity and acumen in performing its designated job.

## Hopes for the new year

*New day dawns for Bangladesh*

THE success of the recently concluded elections and expectation of a peaceful transition back to a democratically elected government augur well for Bangladesh, and we look forward to the coming year with a great deal of hope that the country is back on the right track.

Last year was one of uncertainty and anxiety. We were coming off a cataclysmic cyclone and entering the second year of emergency rule, and no one knew what was in store for the nation. The early portents were not good as the global economy started to stutter and there was considerable disquiet in the domestic political sphere.

But the caretaker government did a god job of weathering the economic storms and, after lots of political drama and ambiguity, was able to fulfill its pledge, and deliver us a free, fair, and fully participatory election by the end of the year.

As the year ends, we must give kudos to both the caretaker government and the Election Commission, and indeed our armed forces for their role in preparing the voter list, for, in the final analysis, delivering when it mattered the most.

The return of democracy is the best augury for the new year. Two years of transition rule and emergency was more than enough. The people were mature and willing to wait in the hopes of getting a good election and a reformed polity, and their patience has been largely rewarded.

We hope that, moving forward, the dysfunctions in our polity will be cleared up. There has been much needed institutional reform and the pledges and early statements of the in-coming government have been very positive. We hope that the time has come for the country to put the past behind us and take a giant step forward.

Ultimately, the people are sovereign in Bangladesh and always will be. If our leaders continue to understand this and to listen to the voice of the people, then the future is very positive for the country.

As the year begins we know we have many challenges ahead of us and that it will not be easy. But as we step into the bright sunlight of a new year we are confident that the country has turned a corner. We are confident that as our democracy is renewed, that our nation will be re-energised too.

We wish our readers, both inside the country and out, and all our fellow countrymen and women a very happy new year.

## Time for introspection, not rejection

### STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

If one were to believe that the voice of the people is the voice of God then the BNP, instead of rejecting the verdict, should spend a little time in looking at the mirror and do soul-searching.

SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN

BEGUM Zia's rejection of the poll results has proved once again that our political culture has not changed at all. We had hoped that the losing party, whoever that might be, would concede defeat gracefully, and pledge to work with the treasury to give democracy in Bangladesh a chance. With democracy in limbo for the last 2 years it was the least we could hope from the major political parties. That, unfortunately, is not to be.

There was, however, a nagging feeling in the hearts of many, after the drubbing BNP received from the electorates, that it would find excuses to dismiss the result, but they were also hoping at the same time that the party would be astute enough to accept the reality. It has chosen to do otherwise, and by so doing has insulted the verdict of the voters whose participation has not only been spontaneous, they, perhaps after many years, had the chance to cast their vote without fear or intimidation. This was reflected in the turnout, particularly of the women voters.

It was very interesting to hear the BNP, particularly its chairperson in the run-up to the election, regarding the general conduct of the election and the condition under which the party would accept the result of the vote. "We will accept the verdict if the polls are held freely, and we will win the election if it is transparent and impartial," so she had said.

It meant that the BNP would accept the result only if it won at the polls. What a convoluted logic! This, many thought was preparing for the inevitable outcome of the election, an inevitability that even the least perspicuous of her top leadership would not have failed to notice.

As for the allegations, other than some general and rather vague accusation of irregularities, the reasons for rejecting the decision of the majority of

the electorates appear as unconvincing as the demeanour of the BNP chairperson herself while giving out her party's reaction to the press on the outcome of the election late in the night on December 30. We are, however, still eagerly waiting for the details and substantive proof of the allegations, of which she claims there are plenty, and which she has promised her party would make public.

The foreign observers have given a clean chit to the way the election was conducted, though I care very little about foreigners' certificate validating our actions at various times, this time particularly, when one had the chance to visit several polling stations as well as being able to see the visuals carried by the electronic media.

We have seen no report of any irregularity which might have affected the final outcome from any of the local or foreign media, or from the nearly two lakh foreign and local poll observers.

Do the accusations carry any weight at all? The election, it is alleged, has been stage-managed, a blueprint election, not transparent, and farcical, where the result was predetermined and therefore not acceptable to the people.

One knows of no mechanism where the state machinery could stage-manage the vote of nearly eighty percent of the registered voters who turned up at the polling centers. There was, as far as one can recall, one instance of false voting. And from what one has seen firsthand, the voters had lined up well before the scheduled start and the voting continued well after the scheduled close.

There was no lull in between. Thus, the BNP allegations would find no credibility at all, at least with those that had gone to the polling centres and voted on December 29, i.e. nearly sixty five million voters.

Did the BNP really believe that the people would vote for a party that had



Accept the people's verdict.

teamed up with war criminals? That the people would repose their confidence once again in a party whose record of bad governance and corruption has become legendary? That the people were willing to entrust their safety in the hands of a coalition, which is alleged to have been responsible for the rise of extremism and terrorism in Bangladesh?

The verdict was a total rejection of the corrupt, and of obscurantism and extremism. It was an affirmation of support for a tolerant, egalitarian, democratic and secular Bangladesh. It has belied most forcefully the contentions

of those that have been trying to paint Bangladesh as a failed state and those that saw it going the way of Afghanistan.

If one were to believe that the voice of the people is the voice of God then the BNP, instead of rejecting the verdict, should spend a little time in looking at the mirror and do soul-searching. One wonders whether it ever realises that in Bangladesh the opposition doesn't win the election, it is the ruling party that loses it. And no party is worth the name if it cannot comprehend why the people have rejected it.

The author is Editor Defence & Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.

## Looking ahead

An appeal goes to the new government to work with a vision to change Bangladesh through inclusive, participatory, democratic and accountable governance, and to respect the voice of the people.

ZIAUR RAHMAN

As a nation, we need to realise that we have the responsibility to create a future of reasonable economic opportunity for the 15 crore citizens of Bangladesh. Unless we have a capable, responsive, forward-looking, and credible polity, we shall face difficulty moving our development agenda forward.

As a nation, we talk about education and development, but our allocation on the national education budget hovers miserably close to a single digit percent, out of which a large proportion is allocated to construction. Our education system needs a fairly urgent overhaul and this task must not be delayed. The budget for innovative, adaptive and industry relevant learning has to be ensured.

### Economic engines

While there is no clear barometer that can signal the health of Bangladesh, I propose a structure may be developed and a benchmark be set up on relevant areas to give an objective view of the economic condition of Bangladesh. This is essential in order for systemic development and critical economic analysis of the country.

Through a knowledge-based infrastructure and regular dissemination of research, Bangladesh can move forward, and these new technology supported research findings can work as objectively verifiable indicators, putting an end to emotional lashings of the political opposition, and also work as a guard against falling below a certain threshold.

### Branding Bangladesh

In international domains, Bangladesh is often projected as a poor country having chronic natural calamities. While we have tidal waves and environmental disasters, we also have the courage to stand up and build on broken dreams. I believe we ought to create a "Bangladesh Connect" campaign and that the government and the private sector must together take up the task of uplifting our global image.

Bangladesh needs to begin its journey to change through putting the right resource persons in the right places and empowering them to take decisions, especially at the international consulate levels that are our windows to the world.

Every year we send many lakhs of people to the Middle East. Let us begin to educate and train these workers so that they produce incremental wage benefits and also position Bangladesh in a better light globally, impacting our national image.

Let us start upgrading our airports, railways, transport systems, especially the halls of bureaucracy by legislating better performance that is publicly accountable, and we will have made a giant leap forward in branding Bangladesh.

Bangladesh needs investment, finances, and entrepreneurial zeal -- let this government take a solemn pledge to reduce inflation and cost of finances for organic development to take place.

### Decentralisation

The large cities, especially Dhaka and Chittagong, are straining from huge population. More than 50% of all national activities are clustered around

these two cities. This sends disturbing signals especially in times of natural and political turmoil. If the two cities are shut down, then the country suffers irreparable damage.

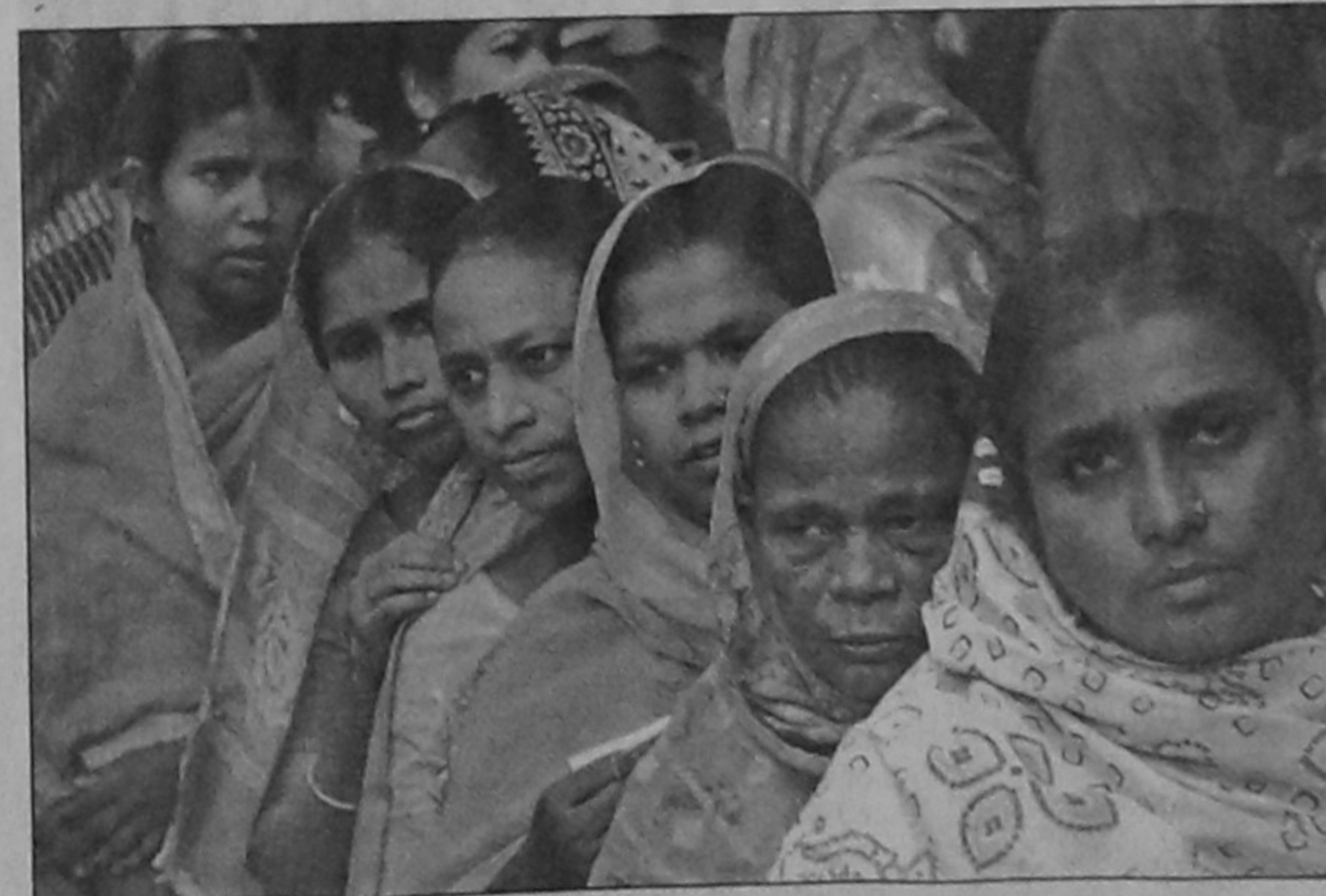
The newly elected government must emphasise finding a decentralised solution. Additionally, many believe that the development of Bangladesh lies in the development of its rural bases. Therefore, the government policy framers must initiate a national plan of networked cities with specialised services and attributes.

Looking globally, cities of the world are focusing and promoting as hubs of certain industry domains for competitive jockeying for economic positions and creation of employment and Bangladesh must begin to elevate its global understanding.

The government of Bangladesh must vigorously ensure SME financing at the rural communities and ensure that the funds are used in those communities. Similarly, the financial institutions must be strongly monitored so that rural branches are not used for funneling development within Dhaka and a few other metropolises.

### Monetary policy

It is true that inflation has cut into our real wages and most affected were the lower middle class and the poorer community. Much of our consumption at almost all levels is import dependent, meaning we spend local currency to buy foreign currency (especially US dollar) to buy goods from overseas.



Our voice is powerful.

Now, if we strengthen our currency, then the cost of these imports will be cheaper and hence the burden on the local citizens will be lower for those who use a disproportionate amount of their income in buying necessities, many of which are imported. The appreciation of the taka will also reduce our cost of importing fabrics for re-export and capital machinery.

While the garments industry and overseas employment are two major foreign exchange earners, and appreciating the taka may create a small dent in their incomes, the overall national gains are significantly greater; therefore, a gradual but definitive appreciation of Bangladeshi taka makes strategic sense and will also work to tame inflation. The government of Bangladesh has a strong inclination to hold foreign currency in US dollars. However, due to other currencies gaining momentum and becoming instruments of trade, I would urge the new government to encourage and hold trading in other currencies like Chinese yuan and euro.

### Globalisation

In many development indexes the position of Bangladesh stays close to the bottom. As a country, we are not particularly trade savvy and focus heavily on a few business segments without much innovation in practice to build trade and trade linkages in other areas.

Business development through engaging trade bodies, businesses, and public and private stakeholders would be key in expanding our trade baskets. We must also realise that knowledge itself is a product and must have an accounting value when business lending is considered.

Research being of paramount importance globally, must also be given its due respect in Bangladesh and let the government undertake no projects with public finances without researching and validating the reasons behind their existence.

In conclusion, 2009 is the year for the elected government. Both contenders spoke of lofty ideals and objectives in their election manifestos and the public responded well by ensuring massive turnout in our most peaceful election.

Therefore, an appeal goes to the new government to work with a vision to change Bangladesh through inclusive, participatory, democratic and accountable governance, and to respect the voice of the people.

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