

## Sheikh Hasina's positive comments

Time for qualitative change has arrived

WE are heartened by the content and tenor of Awami League chief Sheikh Hasina's comments at her post-election press briefing on Wednesday. She has sounded some specific positive signals. The victorious AL leader has offered the position of deputy speaker of the Jatiyo Sangsad and the chairmanship of some parliamentary standing committees to the opposition. While these are certainly signs of a fresh new beginning toward making Parliament functional, Sheikh Hasina could go a step better by proposing that the Speaker of the JS, once he or she is chosen, should resign from the political party he or she belongs to as a first, significant sign of the neutrality demanded of such a key position. Indeed, the idea was part of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party manifesto and if it is accepted by the Awami League, it will serve as a good signal to the opposition about the sincerity of the ruling party. Elevating the position of the Leader of the Opposition right after that of the Leader of the House will be another positive gesture to the opposition.

The prime minister-elect has spoken of a qualitative change in the political culture which we think is highly imperative against the backdrop of our distorted political behavioral patterns. It is a commitment which resonates with the people, who will surely watch how the government follows through on the pledge as well. Sheikh Hasina has, happily for us, reassured the country, as a first step in the direction to which she means to take Bangladesh, by asking her supporters in the post-election euphoria to desist from any action that might mar the celebratory mood of the country. We think that to that should be added her clear, assertive message, to the law enforcing agencies as well as her party workers, that wherever sporadic incidents of violence occur swift action must be taken against those responsible.

Apart from the political moves the new government plans to make, there are the everyday issues that call for urgent attention. Most important is tackling the unbridled prices of essential goods. A clear strategy against man-made interventions, including syndication of the market, must be devised and implemented quickly. Such a move must of course be accompanied by a close watch on the interplay of demand and supply allowing for interventions for market correction. A coordinated programme of import, procurement and supply should be in place, and in good time. Next comes the matter of a decisive plan on energy generation that the incoming government stands committed to.

The days and weeks ahead will be crucial for the new government. Its early moves will indicate the tenor of its governance. For that reason alone, Sheikh Hasina and her team must get down to the business of concretising the positions they enunciated during the election campaign. We need not emphasise the fact that the new government will have to hit the ground running.

## Election of a truly world standard

It has indeed done us proud

BY holding a free, fair and credible election under probing international gaze, Bangladesh has fulfilled the fundamental precondition to the functioning of a parliamentary democratic system in a decisive way. Setting aside the verdict at the polls squarely reflecting the popular will, the process through which the election was conducted and the outcome reached does stand out. Professionalism, transparency and credibility have been the hallmarks of the ninth parliamentary elections. The minor technical difficulties aside, the main election undertaking has been completed to the satisfaction of international standards. Such is the essence of the observations made by the foreign election monitoring groups at the end of their mission. Some of them have even privately confided that this was the best election they have ever observed.

The kind of favourable impressions they are going back to their countries with, will surely go a long way to brighten Bangladesh's image as a model of competency among developing countries practicing democracy. In one word, the way Monday's general election has been completed has done us proud. The sheer magnitude of planning, organisation and orchestration that went into the making of such a massive electoral operation does immense credit to the election commission, especially to the leadership of the chief election commissioner and his colleagues. In a race with time, the EC responded to the challenges of delimiting constituencies, sorting out candidates, reprinting ballots to respect court verdict, setting up polling booths and distributing transparent ballot boxes and papers all over the country with clock-work precision. Actually, the successful completion of daunting logistical and operational tasks involving faultless coordination among the EC, government, local administrations, election officials, judiciary, armed forces, police and other ancillary forces demonstrates the exemplary commitment and competence of all concerned. Of course, the backbone to a credible electoral exercise was provided by the authentic voter list with photographs, and for this, let's repeat, the credit goes to the armed forces.

Finally, the promptitude and transparency with which the election results were announced is a new, highly praiseworthy phenomenon. Given the 87 per cent turnout from amongst 81 million voters, the fact that the poll results were available in the early hours of the day following the election, the efficiency of vote counting, tabulation, and the transmission of results stands out in bold relief.

## New ball game

### STRAIGHT TALK

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ZAFAR SOBHAN

NOW that we have had a few days to digest the magnitude of Monday's election result, the time has come to try to decipher what it all means for the future of the country.

The only two scientific polls taken before the election, as far as I am aware, were the two-part Daily Star/Neilsen poll and the New Age poll, and both suggested the same thing. When it came to issues and leadership, the people favoured the AL over the BNP by an eye-popping margin.

If read objectively and not through the distorting prism of past results, the polls suggested a landslide victory for the AL. But due to the track record of the two parties in the last three elections, analysts had a hard time accepting what the data so clearly indicated.

After all, there were over 70 seats that the BNP had never lost in the last three elections, and the combined BNP/Jamaat vote from 2001 had been 47 per cent.

But the tell-tale signs of the coming landslide were there for all to see in the poll

results: Which party has nominated better candidates? AL over BNP: 54-26. Which party's manifesto is better? AL over BNP: 53-25. Which party will deliver better? AL over BNP: 50-25.

The signs were there in the 47 per cent who said that prices were their primary concern (as opposed to saving Islam) and in the 37 per cent of repeat voters who said they were seriously thinking of switching their vote from the 2001 election.

We do not yet have exit polls that break down the voters by age and gender, and, in any event, it will be quite some time before complete and accurate data is available for the experts to crunch. But when it is in, I think what we will find is that the models that we have used in the past to decipher Bangladesh elections no longer hold true and that when it comes to the electoral landscape that we have entered new and uncharted territory.

We are all aware that some 33 per cent of the electorate was first-time voters. But we also need to be aware of the 23 per cent second-time voters who voted for the first time in 2001.

Added together, that makes over 55 per cent of the voters for whom previous models of voting patterns no longer seem to apply. It is no wonder that the conventional wisdom was so up-ended in this election and that the armchair pollsters and prognosticators fared so poorly in their predictions.

In 2001, the then first-time voters broke largely for the BNP. This confounded conventional wisdom regarding the voters, that suggested that voter loyalty had reached almost tribal levels and that first-time voters merely repeated the voting patterns of their parents/elders.

However, the first-time voters in 2001 preferred BNP to AL due to the anti-incumbency factor which remains strong in Bangladesh and due to the fact that BNP ran a savvy campaign targeting the young voters and projecting itself as the party with a vision for the future.

But these voters were issues-based voters, not party loyalists, and they turned against BNP in droves in Monday's election due to its shambolic tenure and inability to articulate a compelling vision for the future.

Similarly, I think we will find that the first-time voters this time were more likely to vote AL, based on their assessment of the relative merits of the two parties, even if their parents or elders were more likely to stick with BNP.

The lesson to take away from all this is that politics in Bangladesh is now an entirely new ball game. As analyst Jyoti Rahman blogged in real time as the results were coming in:

"Even in 1973 AL lost here [Rajshahi

Sadar]. Liton's win in the mayor race was meant to be because BNP was not 'in the game.' If Badsha wins then we are potentially looking at a new political landscape tomorrow morning."

It seems that the old AL/anti-AL, Bengali nationalist/Bangladeshi nationalist, Islamist/secular break-down of voting patterns no longer apply. The new electorate has clearly rejected the fear-mongering identity politics that have plagued Bangladesh for so long.

No longer can one hope to sweep to victory on the back of slogans such as "save Islam" or "save the country" or by playing the anti-India card. Voters want forward-looking policies not alarmist rhetoric.

The political parties will need a new play-book to navigate this new political landscape and to speak to the new voter. The new voter cannot be influenced by horror stories of the distant past. The old scare tactics just didn't work this time.

This was the most heartening lesson from the election. We have entered a new political era in which divisive, wedge issues and identity politics take a back-seat, and the voters make their decisions based on the parties' respective visions and policy proposals and on their assessment of the candidates' honesty, competence, and ability to deliver.

So the ball is now in the court of the political parties. They know what is expected of them, and they know what fate awaits them if they fail to deliver.

Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

## Hourglass politics, coin toss election

### CROSS TALK

Should these happen, the hourglass is going to flip again. People will even more ruthlessly empty the glass bulb they have so adoringly filled last Monday. It will be sad that elections will turn into a coin toss exercise. Tails we lose: a corrupt government loses re-election. Heads we win: a corrupt opposition returns to power.

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

IT was late British playwright Harold Pinter who said to a friend that people often speak in order to hide or avoid what they really feel or think. When people of this country spoke on December 29, 2008, they handed a landslide victory to the grand alliance. If we were paying attention, we should know. They left unsaid much more than what they have said.

If we compare 2001 to 2008, the election results invoke the image of an hourglass. The two alliances are like two glass bulbs, one placed above the other connected by a narrow tube called election. In 2001 the top bulb was filled with popular goodwill, which ran into the bottom bulb during the five years of the 4-party alliance. In 2008, the hourglass has been inverted for a fresh countdown.

What the people haven't said though is that they have placed the grand alliance on the same pedestal

where the 4-party alliance stood seven years ago. It's basically a depletion-repletion game. People withdraw support from one political group and give it to another, if, they believe, it can do a better job. When they flipped the hourglass last time, it sized up one alliance. This time when they flipped it again, they threatened to wipe out another.

So, this election has reaffirmed that people strike back when they have lost patience. In 2001, it was corruption, crime, nepotism and godfathers, which got their goat and they didn't hesitate to pull the plug on Awami League, giving a landslide to its opposition. Seven years later they have knocked the living daylight out of BNP, more or less, for the same reasons. Parties of the future should beware that if they are careless, it might happen again and again.

German cultural critic Walter Benjamin argues that there is no document of civilisation, which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.

Likewise, there is no document of victory, which is not at the same time a document of defeat. There are lessons to learn for both alliances. The 4-party alliance, particularly BNP, needs to analyse its defeat in the coming months if it wishes to regain victory.

For the grand alliance, particularly Awami League, it's time for immediate caution. They need to protect their victory if they wish to avoid defeat. First thing first, their leader has made sweeping promises to sweep the election. It's important that she remembers and acts on those promises within the first six months of her swearing-in.

We hope that the prices of essential commodities will start falling soon, and the heads of the war criminals will start rolling as well. But the least common denominator of last two elections is that people hate corruption. More than anything, the voters rejected corrupt politicians of one party in 2001 and the corrupt politicians of another in 2008. While many corrupt politicians still got elected, most of the big names in corruption have been ditched.

In the next five years we don't expect the new government to right all the wrongs, but the least we expect is that it will be sincere about carrying the fight against corruption. While it will be required to keep its other commitments, it must also finish the trial of corruption suspects on both sides of the political divide, of those who are still locked up in jail and of those who are out on bail. It must strengthen the Anti-corruption Commission, giving it

freedom to do its job.

And it has to be done quickly, before the landslide turns into mudslide. It must be done before godfathers start crowding the scene, before new monsters of corruption start raising their heads, and before new sons of old fathers and old sons of new fathers start smearing the hard-earned victory.

People won't mind if the price of rice comes down to twenty-five instead of fifteen. They will understand if all of the war criminals aren't tried. They will forget if the plan for having the underground railway is never implemented. They will also forgive if some of the overbridges are never started and finished.

But if this election is any hint, people will not tolerate another corruption binge. They will not tolerate it if the ministers wallow in ill-gotten money, if their children grow unwieldy and the country shoots again to the top of the TI list. People will be ready to forgive other shortcomings, but not another rerun of hit-and-run with public money.

Should these happen, the hourglass is going to flip again. People will even more ruthlessly empty the glass bulb they have so adoringly filled last Monday. It will be sad that elections will turn into a coin toss exercise. Tails we lose: a corrupt government loses re-election. Heads we win: a corrupt opposition returns to power.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a columnist for The Daily Star. Email: badrul151@yahoo.com

## Triumph of hope and change

### NO NONSENSE

With the realisation that her awe-inspiring victory has transcendental significance for the suffering masses, Hasina can achieve most of her targeted goals and thus establish herself as the worthy daughter of Bangabandhu.

ABDULLAH A. DEWAN

AWAMI League chief Sheikh Hasina's promise of change for a better Bangladesh has rekindled hopes among the impoverished masses, who gave her party 229 seats in the 300 member parliamenta surreal outcomewhich is comparable to the Democratic Party's control of both Houses of the US Congress and Barack Obama's winning the presidency.

The vanquished alliance and its leader Khaleda Zia could have graciously conceded the outcome as a surprise gesture and set a historic precedent; instead she chose to be her predictable selfpugnacious and suspectingagainst the claim by voters and international observers that it was a free and fair one. By being gracious in defeat she could have been in a position to exert a powerful leverage in the Hasina administration. By rejecting the results, she has virtually mar-

ginalised herself.

In an open and transparent election, BNP's demolitionthe tsunami of defeat with a breathtaking rejection by the peoplecouldn't have been engineered, as Khaleda claims, even by the most crooked election fixing machinery anywhere in the world.

"The process appears to have yielded a result that accurately reflects the will of Bangladesh voters," said Constance Berry Newman, the head of a 65-people delegation from the International Republican Institute, a Washington-based group that promotes democracy.

International Herald Tribune observed: "The voting Monday, which heralded Bangladesh's return to democracy after two years of military-backed rule, was the most peaceful in decadesa stark contrast to the failed elections of 2007, which dissolved into street riots and prompted the emergency measures."

Barring some isolated incidents, the election has set the standards and challenges for all future elections in a way never seen before. The outcome was clearly written on the wall long before the first vote was cast on December 29.

The people and the media were crying out loud against misuse for five years (2001-2006) -- but the alliance government ignored them. Khaleda's plea for forgiveness for all the gaffes of her 5 years of governance was "too little, too late." Now her defiance reveals that her plea for forgiveness lacked genuineness and may have simply been a gambit to gain voters' sympathy.

Whether BNP's mortifying defeat was in some way good for Khaleda and her party leaders' overblown egos can be a case study for political scientists. But for now, she and her party are poised to lose big with the dismemberment of an already fractured partyone that began nearly three years ago with the formation of LDP under the leadership Col. Oli Ahmed and then the expulsion of the reformist group.

By asking her party's winners to forsake noisy and boisterous revelry through street processions, Hasina has shown the composure and acuity expected of a leader. With her party's overwhelming victory, the burden of responsibility is also overwhelming. In

order to execute those responsibilities, Hasina set in motion the process of inclusivity and responsibility sharing when she declared that her government would work with the opposition's participation.

Being the leader of such a mammoth majority, Hasina can set another precedentby passing laws to minimise the influence and interference of MPs in the affairs of the local governments.

Once AL forms the government, the fear of being unseated in the 2013 election, hopefully, will induce the practice of good governance. If BNP can successfully regroup by distancing itself from the religious extremists and suspected war criminals it will be the worthy opponent to generate that fear.

In the past, a party with absolute majority had shown intolerance of the opposition and resorted to reckless use of power by politicising the state machinery. If BNP's debilitating defeat is any lesson, then there should be zero tolerance for any repeat of the mischief of the past. With the realisation that her awe-inspiring victory has transcendental significance for the suffering masses, Hasina can achieve most of her targeted goals and thus establish herself as the worthy daughter of Bangabandhu.

Dr. Abdullah A. Dewan is Professor of Economics at Eastern Michigan University.