

Time for politicians to prove a point

A new cycle of five years arrives after every election and we are tired of this vicious cycle of being optimistic at the beginning and disillusioned at the end. We have given the political parties chance again and again, its now time for them to give us a break from the practice of the past.

SYED MUNIR KHASRU

DECEMBER 29, 2008 was the calmest day of the year. From the morning, people were moving to the poll stations peacefully, transports were significantly less than the average day of Dhaka. Even on Eid, there is much more hustle and bustle in the streets than what we saw on the Election Day.

From the early mist of the foggy morning, the nation was literally waking up to the dawning of a sunny day of democracy. From the deep slumber of two years, we finally seem to be raising our two hands of democratic ambitions in the newly found air of freedom. The nation is yawning out of doubts and apprehensions in favour of the positive energy unleashed by the dream of a functional democracy that delivers goods to the people.

Yet, if history is of any significance and experience of the past fifteen years of democracy still alive in our memories -- can anyone be blamed if s/he still remains

skeptical on the future? In fifteen years, it has happened thrice -- our dreams have ended up in disappointments, promises have not been matched by performance, each time we were left off worse of than what we were at the beginning of the five year term of the elected government. So, if history and experience were to be replaced by change and optimism -- this time, it is the politicians who have to prove the skeptics wrong.

It seems that history already is on the verge of being enacted as the losing party (in this case BNP) already have rejected the outcome of the elections and have termed it as a "stage managed election." Sounds like heard it many times before. Begum Khaleda Zia stated that this is BNP's "primary reaction." God knows what waits us further.

This blame game and arrogant defiance has never taken anybody anywhere and nor will it take BNP anywhere as well. The sad thing is that BNP could have put the skeptics into shame by sending a warm congratulatory note to the winner Awami League. Then to have a future

revival, it is high time for BNP to start some honest and candid soul searching as to why a popular party with a two-third majority has ended up in such a dismal state.

While Awami League reserves the right to celebrate an outstanding victory which probably not even the would-be Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina imagined, AL should also not over-read the victory. A significant portion of vote for AL was a de facto vote against the misrule of BNP. There are additional issues which helped AL, some of the major being the growing apathy towards the war criminals and a successful awareness campaign done by the Sector Commanders Forum.

Then in people's mind, the causes of 1/11 are largely attributable to the chain of events prior to that for which BNP cannot deny the moral responsibility. Hence, Begum Khaleda Zia did AL more favour than helping BNP's cause by openly and unnecessarily trying to wrap 1/11 under the typical and ineffective branding of "conspiracy theory" against the "nationalist forces."

With power comes responsibility, with responsibility comes the need for having the courage to do the right thing. People of Bangladesh have given Awami League more than what it ever expected, it is time for Awami League to return that favour by at least doing the expected, if not more.

A good beginning would be to reach out the opposition BNP with a genuinely conciliatory attitude and not just doing

for the sake of looking generous. Even as kids, we were told by our parents to be kind, gentle, and generous to other kids who were either younger or weaker or less privileged and most of us did comply with our parents' positive sermons. If kids can do it, why can't the largest political party of Bangladesh do it as well?

I was too young to know Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman but from what I heard from my father (who was a serving secretary at that time) and his colleagues in the civil service, he was a generous man. Maybe at times more generous than the situation demanded. Hence, Sheikh Hasina, being his daughter should rise to the occasion and show the magnanimity the lack of which in the political arena over the years resulted in 1/11.

The onus is on AL to make the next parliament effective by giving the opposition due respect and privilege, no matter how few seats they have managed to win. This was one of the key electoral pledges of Sheikh Hasina, and by honouring that, she will send the first and most important signal to all whether our politicians finally have changed.

We have seen Sheikh Hasina express some initial positive intentions to work together with the opposition -- but she has a long way to go to achieve that. We hope she sincerely delivers on what she is committing. In this election, people have commendably demonstrated that they are much more aware and alert than anytime before. Particularly the last two years have given ordinary people the time



Will the incoming government be a break from the past?

to reflect on politics and politicians of Bangladesh. Hence, this time, politicians will be more closely judged by people by what they do and not just what they say.

We hope the politicians prove us wrong this time. Let them show that finally they have learned to accept results in good grace -- either as a winner or as the loser. When politicians say a change is coming, we expect them to practice more and preach less. A new cycle of five years arrives after every election and we are tired of this vicious cycle of being optimistic at the beginning and disillusioned at the end.

We have given the political parties chance again and again, its now time for them to give us a break from the practice of the past. We want to be confidently optimistic about the future as opposed to being cautiously optimistic. This great country deserves this. Each of us has no less right to this country than do the 300 MPs whom we have elected to represent us in the next parliament.

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Daring to dream

We, in our own areas, whether in media, NGOs, private or public sector, or the judiciary have house-cleaning and soul-searching to do as well. We need to assess the damage. Let us dream of a better future but let us not wash our hands off our responsibilities.

ASIF SALEH

TWO miracles happened in Bangladesh a few days ago. First, over eighty percent of Bangladeshis voted in one of the most peaceful elections in its history. Secondly, Bangladesh, the second largest Muslim majority country in the world, voted for a party that believes in secularism by giving it eighty-five percent of the parliament seats.

International media and the super-powers: please take note. It's a resounding endorsement of democracy and an emphatic victory of the pluralistic and progressive nature of our country. Although the international media finds it easy to do a stereotypical portrayal of the "dysfunctional two begums," the real story of Bangladesh, however, is in the details.

In often focusing on the two "Battling

Begums," and the occasional stories on Islamic extremism, the international media tends to overlook the progress Bangladesh has made under the two Begums, its vibrant civil society and its "dysfunctional democracy." The election, and its outcome, is a continuation of that progress.

Things were far from ideal in the past. But with their thumping participation in the electoral process, voters have said that they would rather go back to the flawed process of democracy which gave them a steady 6-7% economic growth over the last 17 years, a dramatic poverty reduction rate, a dynamic private sector, a growing skilled labour force and a capable network of NGOs.

What was even more remarkable in the election was the strong signal sent to the political parties by the voters -- reform or perish. Yes, "reform" is now a clean word again. Voters have aban-



Only we can make our dreams come true.

doned the parties that ran a fear mongering campaign, used religion in politics and showed no intention of reforming themselves. On the other hand, they embraced the party that nominated a group of fresh politicians, talked about a vision of a pluralistic and developed Bangladesh, and championed separation of religion and politics.

However, those who expect an overnight, full-scale reform imposed upon the parties will be disappointed unless they accept that such reforms come

through a slow and iterative process. The true reform process has just got started. They should take heart in the fact that the electorate is aware and powerful, and will not hesitate to obliterate a party to send a message unless it changes.

No one found this out more painfully than Khaleda Zia, who failed to reverse the downfall of her party even after a hard-hitting campaign where she sought apology from the public for past mistakes. Khaleda Zia threw a challenge to the reform process by nominating the

likes of Nasiruddin Pintu, making a mockery of the apology for past mistakes. She lost.

The people were in no forgiving mood. Not only did they reduce BNP's seats by ninety percent, they almost wiped out its alliance partner Jamaat-e-Islami, whose leaders have been accused of war crimes. The Western powers, like Khaleda Zia, have often over-estimated the power of Jamaat in a diverse Bangladeshi society. This decisive verdict should finally show them that they were wrong.

Over the next few days, Sheikh Hasina will get a lot of advice from a lot of people, no doubt. She will have lots of new friends. But I will just offer her one advice: Surround yourself with true friends who are not afraid to tell you things that you don't like to hear. The people of Bangladesh do not expect miracles from you, but they want to see a continuously accountable and a transparent government and policies that will give work for them and will give them some opportunity to change their luck with some hard work.

All you have to do is be on their side.

Does this mean a new beginning for Bangladesh? That would depend partly on how well the Awami League can

deliver for the people, beyond the rhetoric and its commitment towards continuing the institution building. It's a collective shame for the politicians that it took the army and a group of un-elected individuals to have such a wonderful election in Bangladesh. Let's not make this happen again.

Today, as Bangladeshis, we are believers. Not because Awami League has won but because we have put the people of the country back in the driving seat, and this is just the start of another journey. Our dreams may be in for a rude awakening in a few months, like so many other times. But unlike other times, let's do things a bit differently.

Let us not expect only the politicians to deliver. We, in our own areas, whether in media, NGOs, private or public sector, or the judiciary have house-cleaning and soul-searching to do as well. We need to assess the damage. Let us dream of a better future but let us not wash our hands off our responsibilities. Staying engaged and holding people accountable for their past actions is something where we all can start.

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What happens next?

I tried to do some reporting, but couldn't help thinking about what we might do in the event of a ground invasion. What would happen if militants launched a rocket from nearby our home? I went over in my mind how we might stockpile food, water and other necessities.

HASAN JABER

WHEN the first blast sounded, on Saturday at just past 11 a.m., I hardly took notice. I was at work in my office on the second floor of the Palestine Tower in Gaza City, where I write for the local newspaper. Large explosions had been increasingly rare since Hamas and Israel struck their ceasefire pact six months ago. Still, I decided to stay put and keep writing. By the time the second bomb landed, moments later, I knew something serious was happening. The whole office broke into a panic. I ran as fast

as I could, shouting to my colleagues to leave the building.

The streets outside were packed with terrified people. I could hear a cascade of Israeli bombs falling in the distance. Mothers rushed to the nearby kindergarten and pulled their kids out of class. The scene was so chaotic that I thought Hamas might be losing its grip on power. I ducked into a shop. I began to worry that the Israelis might target the Palestine Tower, where Hamas keeps its media office on the third floor. I tried to call family members on my cell phone, but the lines were jammed. Finally I heard the news: dozens of

Palestinians had been killed. I knew then that the Egyptian-brokered peace talks had collapsed.

I rushed to the nearby police headquarters. Smoke was still billowing from the destroyed building. It was full of bodies. The injured called out for help. A man with a short beard, wounded but barely alive, gasped for breath. Rescue workers and private citizens pulled the wounded from the rubble and packed them into ambulances and cars. But the large number of injured made their job difficult. Finally, an angry policeman shouted to us to leave the place, warning that the planes might return. I began to think again about my family. I tried my wife again, but still couldn't get through.

I hopped into a taxi and headed home. Thousands of frightened students were in the streets. On the way back I couldn't help thinking about the awful situation I was living in with my family in Gaza. According to local polls, nearly half of all Gazans want to emigrate. So do I. Why stay here among the war and killing? I don't want my kids to go through the same things I have. My wife has always refused to leave. In the car on the way home, I resolved to discuss it with her again.

As soon as I arrived home and opened the door, my kids rushed toward me. They covered me with kisses. My 10-year-old, Abdullah, described how he dove to the floor with his classmates at school after hearing the blasts. My 12-year-old daughter, Aseel, was embarrassed because in the rush to leave her classroom, she had lost some of

her textbooks.

When she passed the smoking police station on the way home, she said she thought she was going to die. The experience seems to have been hardest on my oldest son, Hosam, who is 14. He just sat in front of the television all day, glued to the news reports. He refused even to come to dinner. My wife and I have tried to talk to him about what he saw, but he stops after only a few words. I'm thinking about taking him to a mental-health clinic. But, frankly, we all need psychiatrists.

I tried to do some reporting, but couldn't help thinking about what we might do in the event of a ground invasion. What would happen if militants launched a rocket from nearby our home? I went over in my mind how we might stockpile food, water and other necessities. I thanked God when the electricity failed. At least we didn't have to watch any more TV. We sat in the dark, telling the children stories about their childhood to distract them. It worked -- for a couple of hours. Eventually, we got tired and went to bed, but my kids insisted on sleeping in our room.

My wife and I stayed up talking about the situation. It had never been like this before. We are paying a price in this crazy war, and nobody in the civilized world cares. But at least the chaos has finally motivated my family to do one thing. As the bombs sounded in the distance, I finally convinced my wife to leave Gaza.

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A gentle reminder

One thing is clear. The days are gone when Bangladeshis are going to sit idle and let a political horde walk all over them in the name of democracy. The governors must learn that power is fleeting. Nothing lasts forever, and if they fail it will be someone else's turn. Ask the baffled Begum and her entourage about that.

JUNAYED AHMED CHOWDHURY

DECEMBER 29, 2008 was a strange day. For me -- a first time voter -- it was like playing chess and making the right decision. Should it be the refreshingly novice advocate? Should the nation finally forgive the repentant general? Whether the disastrous dynasty should be given a second chance? Or should I just cast "no to all above" and vote them to oblivion? It was a day of dilemma and a day to decide.

Bangladesh did decide on the 29th. She decided for a change. But whether the new dress will look good on her is a question for the future to answer.

Bangladeshis have seen it all -- when calamity overtakes like a storm, when distress and trouble overwhelm, and when disaster sweeps over like whirlwind. Politics is no exception in this regard. Bangladeshi politics, as Ernest Benn puts it, "has been the art of looking for trouble, finding it whether it exists or not, diagnosing it incorrectly, and applying the wrong remedy."

But like many other things, abuse of power, corruption, and disorder can also become monotonous. It has been too long that Bangladeshis have been served the same old dish in the political arena. The vox populi has demanded a new recipe with a new ingredient -- honesty of the lawmaker. Indeed, The Daily Star Nielsen Election Poll 2008 showed

about 55% of the people demanding just that.

To me, however, that has become a cliché. Honesty is relative. What we want from the lawmaker is for him to do the right thing -- for the people and for Bangladesh.

A learned friend of mine was telling me the other day that while electing, we, the people, do not look at a candidate's personal qualities and virtues but at the political party the candidate is associated with. My good friend is correct. In a perfect world, we would have looked into the candidates' hearts and listened to their souls.

But, sadly, we do not live in a perfect world. Our choices are few and options are limited. Nevertheless, we hope that the newly elected regime will rise to the occasion and do what is best for our country.

It has taken a mighty effort to hold a credible election. It will take an even mightier effort to make a functional parliament.

But one thing is clear. The days are gone when Bangladeshis are going to sit idle and let a political horde walk all over them in the name of democracy. The governors must learn that power is fleeting. Nothing lasts forever, and if they fail it will be someone else's turn. Ask the baffled Begum and her entourage about that.

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