

## BNP's thoughtful indication

The sign of maturity is welcome

WE are happy, as must be the electorate in general, to see some signs that the BNP is shaking off its initial diffidence in accepting the reality of the popular verdict at Monday's general election. The party's secretary general Khandaker Delwar Hossain indicated on Thursday that the BNP has no mental barrier in the Awami League's forming the government and running the country with the BNP keeping a watchful eye on its performance. He hasn't forgotten to mention in a curiously, but understandably, nuanced fashion that a 'so-called elected government' is better than an unelected one.

Although a clear affirmation or indication of an acceptance of the people's verdict is missing, we regard the BNP's gesture as manifestly reflecting signs of political maturity and correctness. We would also like to call it a quick welcome change of heart spurred on by a realisation of what will be in the best interest of the party and what would tune into the popular mood and global expectations.

Actually, the party has given out signals of settling down to playing an effective role as opposition in the parliament, something which the verdict has not only assigned to them but is also a constitutional requirement. The BNP's secretary general has expansively stated, not without a focus on his party's role, "We as well as the people will watch and monitor whether and how the Awami League fulfils the pledges it made before the parliamentary election. People across the globe will also see."

We would say to the BNP that it should come wholeheartedly out of its initial stupor and readily wearing the mantle of the opposition, go forward to test the government for all its commitments and pledges, monitor its activities and constructively engage the government in the parliament and outside to ensure national stability and rapid development of the country. If the BNP's monitoring and criticism of the government are objective, fair and constructive then it can rely on support from independent media and the people.

Sheikh Hasina in her pinnacle of triumph has given out a robust signal of engaging the opposition when she asserted that they would not be judged by their number. She has also wisely toned down the celebratory mode. These are by far the most categorical signals of deference that the BNP must appreciate and lend due credence to.

## CHT peace accord Implementation should be speeded up now

A comment by Jatindra Lal Tripura, MP-elect on Awami League ticket from Khagrachhari, has caught our attention. He suggests that with the ushering in of an AL government, prospects for full implementation of the accord have brightened. More so, because in other hill constituencies, too, AL candidates have come out winning. From the look of things, Jatindra Lal Tripura has stated the obvious inasmuch as the AL being the author of the CHT agreement, can only be expected to complete the process of its implementation.

It is worthwhile to recall that during the AL rule, 1996-2001, following the consummation of the CHT accord in December, 1997, the tribal refugees encamped in Tripura, India returned to Bangladesh and Shanti Bahini, the armed wing of Parbatya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samity (PCJSS) took to normal life by surrendering their weapons to the government. Concomitantly, peace was restored to the hilly region after two decades of insurgency and blood-letting.

The enthusiasm with which the accord was greeted by all concerned and sought to be implemented did produce some results as mentioned above. But generally speaking, the process of implementation was to slow down during the BNP rule, even though the party did not discard it. The AL got nearly four years to implement the accord since its signing in end-1997 and did what it could to restore peace in the region which was itself a big achievement but issues like land settlement, democratisation of the administration, strengthening tribal voice and all round development of the area remain.

The regional and district councils where the tribal people are to have preponderant representation and say are yet to be elected bodies. Therefore, the task is to hold election to these councils to make them truly representative in character and functioning. The land commission that was set up to carry out survey and resolve settlement disputes is yet to be fully functional to deliver the goods expected of it. Satisfactory solution of settlement issues can unlock a whole range of possibilities for healthy and interactive co-existence between the tribal people and the settlers from plain land. It is necessary to mention here though, the caretaker government has ensured tribal people's access to judiciary in the closest proximity to their habitats.

The Chittagong Hill Tracts has a vast potential for rapid development as a region, which the planners think, has remained largely untapped. The development partners have a soft corner for the CHT and have been keen on funding uplift programmes in the hill districts. There is all the reason why our private enterprise, the NRBs included, should come forward to assist the government in bolstering the development processes in the hilly region. Now is the time to roll up the sleeves and while speeding up the accord's implementation give a big push to development of the area.

# And now comes the hard part

## POST BREAKFAST

It is time to move forward towards a more inclusive engagement where all parties can come together for the development of the country. Sheikh Hasina, leader of the Grand Alliance has already reiterated her determination to work with the Opposition in the Parliament. The people of this country expect that to happen. This is also consistent with the spirit of democracy.

MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

THE nation waited patiently for over two years and has eventually completed the electoral process. A fair, impartial and credible election has reflected the desire of the people. The results have reminded many of what transpired in the historic 1970 election that subsequently led to the emergence of an independent Bangladesh.

The voters, thanks to a revised and corrected voters list, turned out in record numbers. Nearly 70 per cent of the eligible voters participated and crushed the hopes of the 4-party Alliance. The Grand Alliance led by the Awami League appeared to them as the best agents for change.

It has been a victory of the people. Once again, they have shown that they not only have a mind of their own but that they can decisively determine what is unacceptable behaviour, what is bad governance and who resorts to corruption.

The first national election after our independence was held on March 7, 1973. There were a total of 1,209 candidates including 120 independents for that poll. There were also 35,205 million registered voters. This time round, after 35 years, the election for the 9th Parliament was contested by 1,555 candidates that included 60 female and 148 independent candidates. The number of seats has remained the same—300, despite the fact that the number of registered voters have climbed to 81.058 million.

This was a colossal exercise that required a budget equivalent to nearly US Dollar 40 million. There were approximately 3, 55,000 domestic election observers and 673 foreign observers. No expense was spared to ensure credibility. There were some minor hiccups. That included instances of a few thousand persons (from all over the country) possessing valid National ID Cards (issued by the relevant authority) but unable to vote because their names were absent from the voters' list. This led to confusion and disappointment for these voters. Hopefully, the Election Commission will work out these unfortunate glitches

ahead of the Upazilla elections.

The Grand Alliance has won nearly 87 per cent of the seats in the new Parliament. The Awami League has emerged as the largest single political party with an absolute majority of over 75 per cent of the seats. The Jatiyo Party, another member of the Grand Alliance and other components have another 12 per cent of the seats. Comparably, the BNP-led 4-party Alliance has a miserable 10 per cent. The conservative Jamat-e-Islami has had a drubbing. The voters have clinically pointed out that they are against the use of religion in politics. Their leadership within the political process has been decimated.

This voter tsunami has changed the political landscape and become a thumping endorsement of the Awami League manifesto urging decisive change and seeking a constructive engagement within the Jatiyo Sangsad in the future.

The result has also been a twist in the tail for several analysts and publications. Some of them, particularly the 'Probe' magazine (as evidenced in their issue no. 26-27, Vol. 7, dated 19 December, 2008) will now be forced to eat humble pie. Its forecast and superficial projections that the BNP-Alliance would get simple majority and that the Grand Alliance would lose will now truly be a collector's item. Such projections in several other publications also appear to have been based on claims by BNP politicians far removed from ground reality.

The people have spoken. Hopefully, the politicians and others associated with good governance will take note of their views. Many promises have been made, both with regard to national issues as well as domestic problems.

In this context, it would be worthwhile to point out some significant aspects that have emerged from this election. It has confirmed that the younger generation (specifically the first time voters) agree with the emphasis of the Awami League on certain issues -- re-establishing values related to our War of Independence and the possible trial not only of war criminals but also the completion of trial of those responsible for the assassinations that took place in the jail in November 1975, the grenade attack on 21 August

and the brutal murders of members\* of the Awami League leadership. It is this spirit which has led to the decimation of the reactionary religious fundamentalist forces in the election.

The second notable feature has been the common man's approach towards corruption. This has been responsible for the cleaning of the political slate. Except for one or two party leaders, the rest of the BNP-Alliance has been decisively removed from the scene. The victory of the relatively unknown new candidates (including in my constituency of Dhaka-12) selected by the Awami League has also re-affirmed that in the public perception, corruption or allegations of being corrupt, has now emerged as an important detriment for fixing preference in a voter.

This poll has also been a clear demonstration of public disgust with regard to BNP-Alliance's past record of politicization of the administration and the judiciary and their inability to achieve self-sufficiency in food production and in containing the price spiral of food products.

The electorate through their vote has also clarified that they believe in the upholding of human rights, in bipartisanship and constructive engagement in the parliament.

The voters have opted for change, for devolution of power to lower tiers of government, for de-centralization in decision-making, for achievement of better socio-economic conditions, for a digital Bangladesh, for a more responsible relationship with our neighbours, for greater job creation within our vast rural hinterland and for a qualitative differ-

ence within our health and educational sectors.

Like many others, who had been fortunate to witness the US Presidential elections and the graciousness shown by Senator McCain, I had hoped that the BNP leadership would have also found the courage and democratic conviction to acknowledge their defeat as part of the political paradigm and congratulated the Awami League leadership and the Grand Alliance for their performance. Unfortunately, this has been on short supply and the usual recriminations of 'election engineering' have come to the fore. I believe it could have been better.

It is time to move forward towards a more inclusive engagement where all parties can come together for the development of the country. Sheikh Hasina, leader of the Grand Alliance has already reiterated her determination to work with the Opposition in the Parliament. The people of this country expect that to happen. This is also consistent with the spirit of democracy. Everyone concerned must understand that it is as important to be the Leader of the House as it is to be the Leader of the Opposition. It is this awareness that will enable us to successfully tackle and overcome the numerous problems that await our country in the coming years.

Compromise, flexibility and interactive engagement will be vital not only for our strategic security but also for investment and progress. It has to be participatory. There is no other choice.

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# Grievance or aspiration?

## BETWEEN THE LINES

The central government's authority, according to the Instrument of Accession Act, extends to three subjects, Defence, Foreign Affairs and Communications. If New Delhi agrees to confine itself to three subjects, most of the separatists may come along. They have asked for azaadi, but have never defined it.

KULDIP NAYAR

STATE elections in Jammu and Kashmir may not have provided many answers but it has made one thing clear that the Hurriyat Conference has been exaggerating its strength and lessening the exasperation of people over the kind of politics it has been pursuing. It was wrong in assessing the mood of the Valley because the voters rejected roundly the Hurriyat's call to boycott polls. Nearly 61 per cent of the voters queued up before polling booths in severe winter to elect their representatives. As many as 354 candidates contested to return 87 members to the assembly. It was democracy versus the boycott call.

The problem with the Hurriyat is that it is frozen in the time when the Valley was agog with the demand for azaadi. People have moved on because they have realised over the years, after losing thousands at the hands of the security forces, that the ground realities are far different from what the Hurriyat has been peddling.

This does not mean that the Valley's alienation from India has gone. It only means that the Kashmiris are questioning the Hurriyat way of seeking a settlement with New Delhi. They are sick and tired of violence and extremism and want peace and normalcy which they believe will give them back the tourists and free them from terrorists. Even those with the gun did not disturb the polls lest they should invoke the voters' anger.

Without doubt, the Kashmiris want to have an identity of their own. The pattern of voting indicates that. Both the



Omar Abdullah: He has an advantage.

National Conference (NC) and People's Democratic Party (PDP) have won practically all seats in the Valley -- the first getting 28 and the second 21 -- underlining the aspiration of the Kashmiris to be different from the rest of India. The NC asked for autonomy plus and the PDP proposed self-rule and dual currency. Yet both never preached any status outside the Indian Union. It is, however, significant that the PDP increased its tally from 16 to 21 by taking a hawkish line. It looks as if it will continue to do that.

New Delhi will delude itself if elections make it believe that it can arrive at a settlement without the separatists. They represent a dream which tickles the imagination even if it remains unfulfilled. However, there is a new opportunity for the governments at Srinagar and

New Delhi to start afresh: begin a dialogue with the separatists so as to retrieve them and to hammer out a settlement which is acceptable to all the three -- India, Kashmir and Pakistan.

The disconcerting fallout of elections is the sharp division between the Kashmir and Jammu regions. The NC has won four seats in the Jammu region but that too from Poonch where the Muslims have a majority. The party has also lost 3 per cent of votes. The PDP has increased its support by 3.8 per cent but mostly from Poonch and Rajouri. Communal polarisation is also visible because the BJP which had only one seat has returned 11. Its percentage of voting has also increased in Jammu region, from 12.4 to 21.8.

The Amar Nath yatra agitation over the piece of land allotted temporarily to the management board came in handy to the BJP. It was able to mix religion with politics and reap the harvest of agitated Hindu voters. The party also benefited from the negligence of the Jammu region as pointed out by various commissions. In comparison, the Valley's main parties found less support of Hindus. The Hurriyat too has no base in the Jammu region because it has preferred to give its movement an Islamic edge. The new government at Srinagar will have to give the Jammu region a sense of participation which it lacks. Otherwise, the voice for Jammu to be part of a neighbouring state in India may become louder.

The Congress, part of the ruling coalition after the last election, has suffered the most. It has lost 10.7 per cent of the electorate, 5.3 per cent in Jammu and 5.4 per cent in the Valley, although in terms of seats, its loss is only three. Its tally is reduced from 20 to 17. The main reason is that it has been held responsible for the Amar Nath land debacle, although it was the PDP Minister who had approved the land allotment when Ghulam Nabi Azad from the Congress was the chief minister.

The NC and the Congress which have joined hands to form a coalition government represent the middle-of-road approach. Their problem will be how to deal with the PDP and the BJP, both hard-

liners. The PDP will try to distance Kashmir from the rest of India and the BJP for closer integration. Election results show that the PDP, which has increased the vote percentage by 6.1, was helped by the Jammat-e-Islami, headed by pro-Pakistani Syed Ali Shah Gillani.

The NC and the Congress coalition give it an absolute majority, 45 in the house. Yet, the history of relations between the two is not too happy. The first government in the state was that of Sheikh Abdullah, the NC chief and grandfather of Omar Abdullah. Jawaharlal Nehru was the prime minister of the Congress party. They were personal friends and comrades-in-arms in the struggle of independence against the British. This was an ideal combination. Yet they fell out and the Sheikh remained under detention for almost 12 years.

Once Nehru wrote to the Maharaja of Kashmir saying, "the only person who can deliver the goods in Kashmir is Abdullah." But they went so apart that Nehru wrote to him: "I greatly regret that you should have taken up a position which indicates that you do not value any friendly advice that we might give and, indeed, consider it as improper interference, of which you take a very great view."

Omar Abdullah, son of Farooq Abdullah, has an advantage because he knows the Gandhi family well. But personal relationship may matter little if and when Srinagar pushes to implement the autonomy resolution which Farooq vainly tried to do when he was in power a few years ago.

The central government's authority, according to the Instrument of Accession Act, extends to three subjects, Defence, Foreign Affairs and Communications. If New Delhi agrees to confine itself to three subjects, most of the separatists may come along. They have asked for azaadi, but have never defined it. Is New Delhi ready to roll back from the extra space it has occupied since the Instrument of Accession Act? Can Pakistan do likewise in Azad Kashmir, giving it all the subjects except Defence, Foreign Affairs and Communications? Elections in Jammu and Kashmir have provided yet another chance to sort out these questions.

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