Congratulations, 1st Time Voters:
The Journey has only begun


Syed Munir Khasru

DEAR First Time Voters, Congratulations on your successful participation in the 9th National Elections. With this vote, you have embarked on a very important role of your life whereby from now on you have a direct role to play as to who gets to represent your constituency in the parliament and ultimately who are the people who govern the country. Of the many things making this election unique, nothing is more inspiring and futuristic than the significant number of first time voters like you who have been unleashed into their franchise career on December 29, 2008.

You are a distinct group of people for a number of reasons. First of all, by the sheer number you represent, you have significantly impacted the outcome of this year's national elections. Secondly, you represent the seeds of positive transformation that Bangladesh will hopefully embrace in the near future. Thirdly, a big portion of your lives have been spent under a period where we have had parliamentary democracy firmly established but weakly practiced. Fourthly, you are the constituency of voters who will be spearheading the development of the country for a long period to come. Finally, you are the embodiment of energy and ambition, passion and idealism, honesty and patriotism in its purest form. Hence, how you continue to exercise your voting rights will have considerable effect on the democratic future of the country, both short and long term. That is why the underlying spirit of this year's election campaign was (in English), "My vote I shall cast, knowing the candidate well is a must." (in Bengali) "Amar Vote Ami Dibo. Dekhey, Shuney, Jeney Dibo."

Your dreams for a better Bangladesh and commitment to achieve the same gives the nation a beacon of hope even in the midst of despair and gloom. People of your age historically have been vanguards of freedom and democracy in Bangladesh. They have led the movement for establishing democracy in the early nineties when many who sought vote today failed to unite to achieve the same. If there is any group to which the democracy in Bangladesh is most indebted for its revival after the shameful dictatorial period it is the student community in the eighties and early nineties. They risked and some sacrificed their lives to depose the then dictator and to establish peoples' rights. Never did they perceive that one and half decade later something like 1/11 would happen. Nor did they imagine that the then deposed dictator would someday become a sought after trophy by the very political parties who wanted to remove him. Your predecessors could not foresee the failures of the future, but you have to dare to dream a better tomorrow for Bangladesh that has eluded us far too long as a nation.

The setbacks of politics of the last one and half decade have overshadowed whatever the nation has achieved a free and vibrant press that in many cases have acted as the de facto parliament when we either had no parliament or had a parliament more in paper than in practice. We also have seen growing presence of women in every sphere on national life, world class NGOs spearheading development and serving as a model for the rest of the world and so on and so forth. A resilient entrepreneurial class has emerged where people like you have started taking risk in expectation of a better return and freedom and the opportunity to use your creative energies to the fullest.

Now that the elections are over, that does not mean that your role in the governance of the country has ceased. Given the rather unfortunate and disappointing experience we have had in the past with the politicians, there is no room for you to be indifferent or nonchalant. You have to find ways to keep the politicians accountable by making your voices heard so that they know the days of shaking our hands before elections and shaking our confidence after elections are over.

Many of you may have been disillusioned by the quality of political leadership and frustrated by the deep divide between their electoral pledges and actual performance. In the past, election manifestos have become more a formal document than a credible commitment. Confrontational politics have driven many of you away from politics and corruption has eroded your interest in the same. Failed leadership can hurt the credibility of the politicians but don't let that disrupt your dreams for a better Bangladesh. That is why it is so important that you continue make your voices heard both before and after the elections.

You have the power to make a positive change and this is the beginning of your auspicious journey. Bangladesh does not belong to only 300 MPs, it belongs to all of us. By casting your first vote, you have exercised your first legitimate claim to the ownership of this great country. You will lose hold on this ownership if you become oblivious or idle about your continued role on how this country shall move to the future which belongs more to you than anybody else. As a wise man from the old said, "Politics is too important to be left alone to the Politicians."

(The author is a Professor at the Institute of Business Administration (IBA), University of Dhaka. He was responsible for designing the Voter Awareness Campaign for the National Elections 2008)