

Regrettable post-election incidents

AL chief should request CG to punish culprits

WHEREAS we have had the satisfaction of the election passing off peacefully and yielding a resounding verdict, retaliatory and opportunistic incidents of violence have been reported from different parts of the country. That the tendentious disorder is erupting in spite of the exhortations and instructions of the AL chief for her party loyalists (some of them post-election turncoats) to apply restraint in their behaviour is a proof enough that all out effort will have to be made to checkmate the incidence of violence.

During transition of power, a modicum of intimidation and violence involving attempted exaction of vendetta from the supporters of the losing side by the wayward segment of the victorious party hasn't been unheard of. But the scale and severity of the outrage which have already fallen into a pattern now should be a cause for worry. It calls for a decisive intervention of the CG and government-elect lest it spirals out of control bringing bad name to both.

From different industrial zones and business centres reports have poured in to the media, both electronic and print, about acts of intimidation, plunder, vandalism and coercive demands for money and outright extortion.

Our specific suggestion here is that committees be immediately formed with AL local leaders, representatives from industry and shop owners and from law enforcement agencies to protect the local business people from the mischief of thugs.

The other form of dreadful news has emanated from the dormitories of Dhaka University presenting a scene of disorder and violence allegedly with the BCL cadres, their outgoing seniors and outsiders ousting the JCD cadres and their supporters from their rooms in a display of turf war. Even some university correspondents have not been spared their wrath. The violence-prone atmosphere is only exacerbated by the factious rivalry between BCL groups stocking arms on top, boding an explosive situation on the campus. The law enforcement agencies, for their part, must act with professional integrity.

Unless the tendencies are firmly resisted these might catch on in the other universities and academic institutions, casting a shadow on the beginning of an elected government on an auspicious note.

It seems mere words of counsel urging restraint and responsible behaviour cannot work. What Sheikh Hasina needs to do is to carry out a disciplining act among wayward party loyalists in a demonstrative and well-publicised way. At the same time, she can request the caretaker government to have the incidents investigated and the culprits ferreted out and punished.

Israel's aggression in Gaza

Chances for peace in Middle East pushed to the brink

THE aggressive actions of the Israeli government against Hamas in the last one week have been as outrageous as they have been morally upsetting for all men and women of conscience across the globe. As matters stand, Israeli strikes have killed an altogether 429 people, with casualty figures rising all the time. More than 2000 Palestinians have been wounded, most of them severely. Buildings, including a mosque, scores of homes and offices have been razed to the ground. Utility services have been disrupted, with the Israeli military or government showing no remorse or let-up in its actions. Targeted assassinations of senior Hamas leaders have been carried out. Indeed, individuals such as Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni and Defence Minister Ehud Barak have vowed to continue these operations until, in their opinion, Hamas is destroyed.

Particularly mortifying is the fact that western governments, notably Washington, have done precious little or nothing to make Israel desist from its actions. Despite the fact that a United Nations agency has reported that more than a quarter of the people killed in the Israeli raids are civilians, not many in the West have seen any reason to call for a halt to the onslaught. With Israeli forces massing for a ground assault on Gaza, which Hamas has been controlling in defiance of the authority of the Palestinian Authority headed by President Mahmoud Abbas, there is growing concern about a further escalation of the conflict. The Israelis have defended their actions by suggesting that it was Hamas which first launched rocket attacks on Israeli targets. But quite clearly it is the very large and destructive dimension of Israel's response to the Hamas rocket fire that has stunned the world. Even more stunning has been the muted response of Arab governments to the Israeli onslaught. What has, of course, surprised everyone is the defiance with which Hamas has been responding to the attacks. To what extent it will be able to sustain such a response is, however, to be seen.

Which raises the very crucial question of what the international community must now do to put Israel on a leash. Tel Aviv may win the battle against Hamas in the short term. It is the ramifications of its actions in the longer term that are of concern. In this past week, the chances of peace in the Middle East, slim as they always have been, have further been pushed to the brink. That is the tragedy.

A watershed verdict: The victors' challenges

With the trust and confidence of the people reposed so unambiguously on the grand coalition, it now has the opportunity and the responsibility to make the election a watershed in the development of democracy in Bangladesh.

MANZOOR AHMED

ON election night, I happened to be in a remote town in the southwest of Yunnan province in China for a conference on education for rural areas and ethnic minorities. As I kept awake late into the night tracking the election results on the internet, a Chinese friend wistfully wondered if it would take a hundred years for China to experience the excitement and suspense of a multiparty election.

In the previous days I had the opportunity to observe the magnificent development of the city of Pu-er, the capital of the prefecture in Yunnan with the same name, under the leadership of its slim and attractive mayor, Ding Yanbo, a former professor of philosophy at the local teachers' college.

The mayor, a Communist Party member, duly elected and re-elected through the party, during her tenure of over eight years, has presided over the spectacular progress of Pu-er and the surrounding areas. This is symbolised by wide boulevards, dozens of multi-storey housing projects, new schools and hospitals, brightly coloured shop-fronts, and investment and business deals taking advantage of the location of the prefecture on the borders of Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam. The wide authority given to the local government to mobilise resources and plan investments has been an important factor.

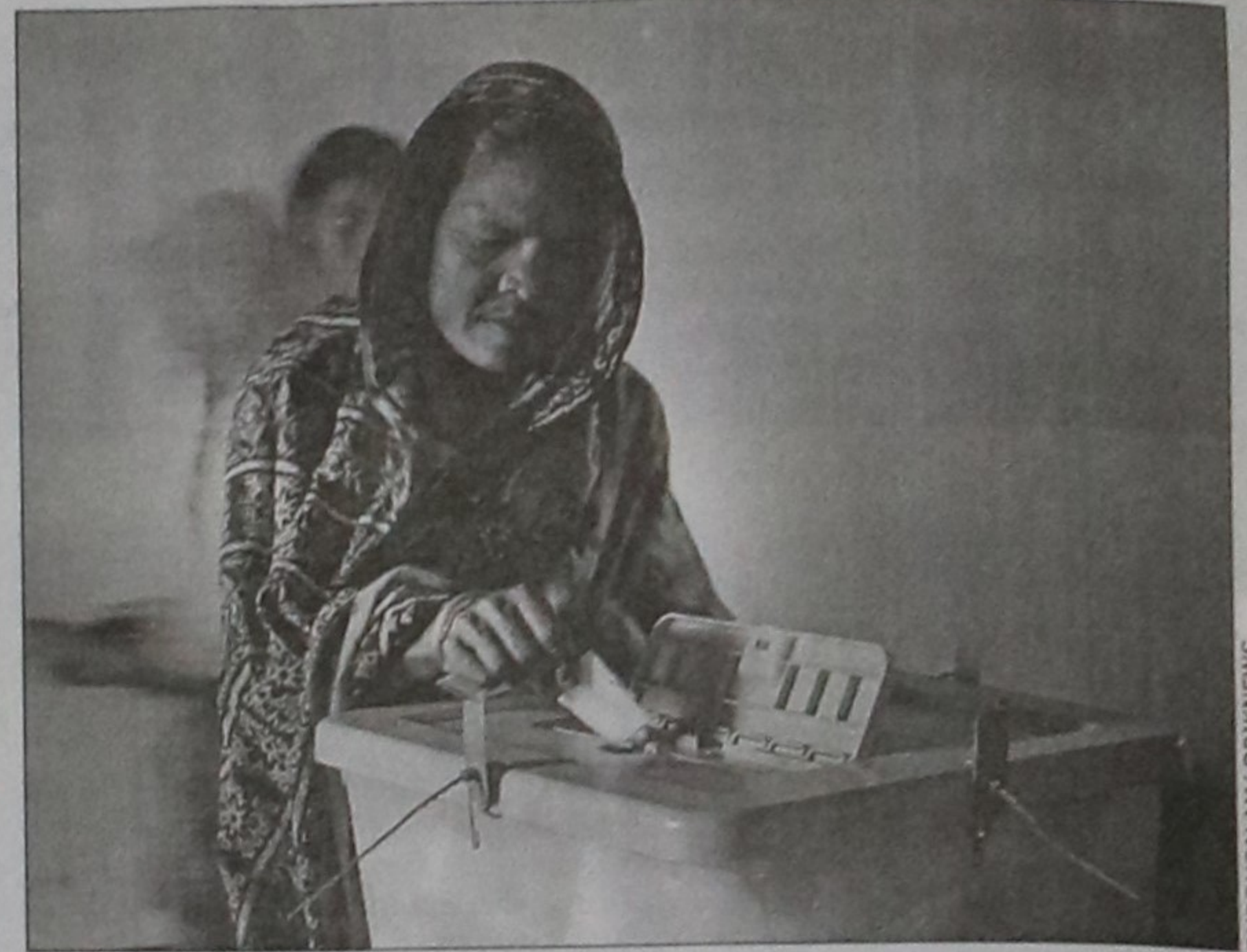
We had traveled during the day on the new 100 km, four-lane toll road with numerous tunnels and bridges to traverse the mountainous terrain between Pu-er and Xishuangbanna in this remote corner

of Yunnan. I ruefully thought of the absence of a decent highway that could connect the capital with the principal port city in my country. I kept to myself my ambivalence about the brand of democracy practiced so far and how poorly it has served my country.

The ninth parliamentary election gave a stunning victory to the grand coalition, especially the Awami League, which alone commands two-thirds majority. The voters clearly rejected the political ideology of the four-party coalition as it was practiced during their rule in the recent past. This must not, however, be seen as a vindication of the past style and substance of Awami League politics in the government and in the opposition.

The voters remembered the miscarriage of democracy under the four-party coalition that led to the imposition of the army-backed emergency rule for two years. Voters remembered that the country was spared only by the interregnum of emergency, brought about by a combination of kleptocracy of the Tarique-Babar-Hawa Bhaban clique and ruthless political exploitation of religion by identified war criminals. The voters also saw that there was no hint of contrition in the four-party coalition; rather only a condemnation of the caretaker government for spoiling the game-plan for staged election on January 22, 2007.

The false cries of "sovereignty under threat" and "Islam in danger" clearly had no appeal to the voters. A partnership with known anti-liberation forces and alleged prominent perpetrators of war crime in total disregard of popular concerns, espe-



Time to deliver.

cially in the month of remembrance of the killing of intellectuals and the victory day, did not sit well with voters.

The overwhelming support to the Awami League-led grand coalition indicated that voters preferred to repose their trust on the positive and forward-looking position of the grand coalition. This position is reflected in the recognition in its election pledge of the need to bring about change in the political culture, time-bound goals to address critical economic and national development problems, its realistic assessment of the caretaker government record, and the assurance to protect the reforms initiated by it.

The scale of support to the grand coalition, enabling it to bring about constitutional changes, offers it the challenge and the responsibility to consider changes that would strengthen democratic institutions and practices. More specifically, failings of

the parliament, governance and democratic institutions, including the functioning of the judiciary and statutory bodies, point to glaring limitations of the constitution.

Previous military rulers at various points altered the constitution at will, undermining its fundamental spirit. But the magnitude of voter support can be seen as the expectation of the citizenry about necessary reforms in fundamental laws and institutions of the country.

With the trust and confidence of the people reposed so unambiguously on the grand coalition, it now has the opportunity and the responsibility to make the election a watershed in the development of democracy in Bangladesh.

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Rise and fall

BENEATH THE SURFACE

If prices could be controlled and relatively peace could be ensured, half of the services to the public would be delivered. Bear in mind that this time most of the poor people voted for the boat and demand only two things: low price and peaceful atmosphere to eking out a living.

ABDUL BAYES

H EARTIEST congratulations to Sheikh Hasina and her party for the epoch-making victory in the just concluded general election. We are immensely pleased to note that she called upon her party workers to remain calm and quiet after the election. So far, barring a few stray incidents, no rein of revenge could be read from newspaper reports.

This, perhaps, went beyond the estimates of the so-called sushil shomaj who weigh the two major political parties on the same scale. We have seen the atrocities in the post-2001 election in our campus and in rural areas. The moment the election results were declared, rapes, burnings, lootings were order of the days and there was none to arrest the atrocities. In that sense, the situation is much better now.

Hasina's first press conference also raised her height a bit further. It was a statesmanlike speech in a country where the winner typically goes to wipe out the loser on every front. No attack on the past government(s), no rhetoric but a cordial invitation to work together.

Why did BNP-Jamat alliance nose-dive from 193 to 30 seats? First is rampant corruption and "corporatisation" of corruption that was, allegedly, led by the family members of the former PM. Second, the onslaughts on political opponents including grenade attacks on Sheikh Hasina and others and the mockery of an investigation. Third, the rise of the militants with alleged support from the government. Third, the skyrocketing prices of food grains that marked its upward movement since 2004. And finally, the last nail in the coffin was placed by the drama staged to cling to power through a managed EC, the president and all that led to the emergence of 1/11.

The order of the causal factors that I submitted before changed over the course of the last two years. Thus, for example, it was not terrorism or corruption that aggrieved people so much as it was the skyrocketing prices of essentials. I interviewed a dozen rickshaw pullers just on the day of the election and all of them vowed to vote for boat with the hope that prices would stabilise if boat wins the election. The perception comes from the previous rule of Awami League

when prices were reasonably stable and the purchasing power of the poor remained up. My visits to villages in last couple of months sent the same message.

Happily, the new government would meet some positive developments in domestic and international fronts as far as prices of essentials are concerned: declining prices of energy and a relatively better boro harvest. Appropriate demand-supply projections, stock building and tough stance on syndicates could make the task easier than before.

Despite the failure of the CG on many fronts, a large segment of the population think that the law and order condition of the country is much better than before. The greatest irony of the BNP-Jamat government was that their own cadres (students, politicians, and also intellectuals) killed them. Controlling own party cadres is a sine qua non for a smooth sailing through the rough weather. I hope Sheikh Hasina would target this as her second most important doable immediately after assumption of power.

Thus, if prices could be controlled and relatively peace could be ensured, half of the services to the public would be delivered. Bear in mind that this time most of the poor people voted for the boat and demand only two things: low price and peaceful atmosphere to eking out a living.

A number of the critics raised questions about the resources needed to meet Sheikh Hasina's monumental manifesto of 2021 vision. This is in fact a right question. I think that if massive corruption could be contained, a large amount of resources could be generated/saved. Experts tend to argue that in any project, half of the outlays go for paying "extras." Formalising informal remittances is another way. Quick decisions on project preparation and implementation remain to be the key.

I shall not expand the list right now. Suffice it to say, however, a landslide victory is both a blessing and a curse. The massive defeat of the 4-party alliance that earned a landslide victory just a few years back should be an eye opener on how and when it is a curse. The blessing is that this government would have much more leverage in drawing the course of action as it deems fit.

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Change at the top

GOING DEEPER

If they can be put out of business for good then the curse of transnational Islamic extremism that assails South Asia, among others, can be tackled successfully. The fear of some that banning religion-based parties will only drive them underground is not a sustainable argument.

KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

A WAMI League-led mahajote's stunning victory in the general election reflects several changes from the past elections held in Bangladesh. For the first time, female voters outnumbered male voters, and the number of female candidates who won was higher than ever before. For the first time, more than one-third were first-time voters. Despite BNP's allegations of irregularities in 72 constituencies, no law and order incident was reported.

The European Union Election Observer Mission opined that, apart from minor technical difficulties, professionalism, transparency and credibility were "the hall marks" of the election. The Commonwealth Observers Team found no evidence of "election engineering." NDI felt that the electoral process met international standard and advised all political parties to abandon the dysfunctional practices of the past.

All foreign observers advised the defeated BNP-Jamaat alliance to accept the peoples' verdict and to behave constructively as opposition parties. Prime minister-designate Sheikh Hasina pledged that there would be no tyranny of the majority, and they would present a new political culture to the nation by abjuring politics of vengeance and confrontation.

Her instruction to party leaders and workers not to bring out victory processions lest they lead to fracas between the victors and the vanquished was reflective of her good judgment and magnanimity. It was also a stark contrast to the 2001 election victory of BNP that let loose unspeakable atrocities on the opposition supporters and the minority community who, BNP believed, had voted for Awami League.

According to preliminary findings, Awami League's vote went up by 25% while BNP's vote went down by 20% compared to the votes the parties polled in 2001. One of the reasons for this is BNP's alliance with Jamaat-e-Islami, the Islamist political party that till recently had not accepted the existence of Bangladesh and does not accept Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as the Father of the Nation.

The incessant advocacy by the civil society, the freedom fighters and the Sector Commanders' Forum for the trial of those accused of collaborating with the Pakistan army in 1971 and of acts against humanity struck a cord with the voters who want these people to face trial for their misdeeds. Harvard Professor Daniel

Bell, in his End of Ideology wrote: "The ideologist -- communist, existentialist, religionist -- wants to live at some extreme, and criticises the ordinary man for failing to live at the level of grandeur. One can try to do so if there is the genuine possibility that the next moment could be, actually, a 'transforming moment' when salvation or revolution or genuine passion could be achieved."

Max Weber in a poignant essay, entitled "Politics as a Vocation," posed the problem as one of accepting the "ethics of responsibility" or the "ethics of ultimate ends." For the latter -- the "true believer" -- all sacrifices, all means, are acceptable for the achievement of one's belief. But for those who take on responsibility, who forgo the sin of pride, of assuming they know how life should be ordered or how the blueprint of the new society should read, one's role can be only to reject all absolutes and accept pragmatic compromise.

For the collaborators, transitional justice awaits. The concept has been defined as "a field of activity and enquiry focused on how societies address legacies of past human rights abuses, mass atrocity, or other forms of severe social trauma including genocide or civil war, in order to build a more democratic, just and peaceful future."

Sheikh Hasina is pledge bound to try war criminals. It is unlikely that the demand for their trial, now transformed into a national demand, can be sidestepped by her administration. One could also visualise a situation where a religion-based political party, Jamaat-e-Islami, can be banned because Bangladesh is a multi-religious country and religion-based political parties are known to thrive on hatred of other religions.

If they can be put out of business for good then the curse of transnational Islamic extremism that assails South Asia, among others, can be tackled successfully. The fear of some that banning religion-based parties will only drive them underground is not a sustainable argument as the recent election has shown Jamaat won only two seats, in place of seventeen in 2001.

There are many other causes for BNP's defeat, massive corruption and total mal-governance being among them. Sheikh Hasina has detailed many of the tasks her government will undertake on immediate basis. We hope all will extend cooperation in winning the battle against poverty and attaining her 2021 vision for Bangladesh.

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