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## Exit strategies: The voters show the way

REHMAN SOBHAN

BY the time this piece appears in print the caretaker government will have made its final exit. As it has turned out, they will have a relatively graceful exit. They have presided over one of the freest and fairest general elections so far held in Bangladesh. They have kept to their promise to depart once they have discharged their primary responsibility of handing over power to the elected government. Finally, the CTG and its principal backers, the armed forces, have validated, by their actions, their repeated commitment that they had no ulterior agenda of perpetuating themselves.

Obviously the views of the Four Party Alliance are somewhat more jaundiced about the role of the CTG and the Election Commission. Khaleda Zia and her party secretary general have already introduced the narrative of a blueprint (nil naksha) election stage-managed by the CTG in favour of the Grand Alliance.

This unsubstantiated narra-

tive alluded to a conspiracy between elements in the armed forces and the Awami League, backed by sinister global and regional hegemonic forces, determined to maintain Bangladesh as a "subservient" state. The overwhelming nature of the victory of the Grand Alliance has given renewed currency to these conspiracy theories.

However, no one has come forward from the Four Party Alliance ranks to spell out the rationale or mechanics of this blueprint for election management. We have received no reports that any Four Party Alliance candidate complained that their polling agents were not permitted to witness the voting or be present at the counting and reporting of the votes in any centre. Nor have any formal complaints been launched before the Election Commission during or even after the election challenging the conduct of elections or the results in any constituency. Nor have any of the myriad international or national election observers given any currency to these fulminations, and have,

universally, given a clean bill of health to the elections.

### Saved by the voters

As we bid farewell to the CTG we should also keep in mind that a smooth exit was, until the actual count of the vote was nearing completion, hardly assured. In the last stages of their exit, the strategy of the CTG was in danger of imploding. The misconceived Minus 2 strategy, sponsored by the backers of the CTG, had collapsed.

It has been pointed out by commentators, including by me in my earlier writings in Forum, that any agenda for reform initiated by the CTG could only be sustained by an elected government. In such circumstances, Sheikh Hasina and her counterpart, needed to be made part of any reform process by the CTG rather than seen as obstacles to these reforms. Today the entire fate of the reforms initiated by the CTG lies in the hands of Sheikh Hasina, her government and the recently elected parliament. The parliament will have to ratify the ordinances legislated by the CTG

and the incoming government will have to implement the reforms.

Once the backers of the CTG concluded that the Minus 2 strategy was unworkable, they had to negotiate their exit strategy with these same leaders by ensuring their participation in the elections. To do so, both leaders needed to be freed from custody, and in the case of Khaleda Zia her two sons also needed to be released and permitted to go abroad.

Once these major actions were initiated the judiciary took their cue and opened the floodgates for releasing virtually every detainee held under Emergency rules, on bail. Many of the detainees were empowered to contest the elections. The Four Party Alliance, in particular, demonstrated their contempt for the CTG by nominating a significant number of the detainees and paying scant attention to the notion of preferring "clean" candidates. In contrast, the Grand Alliance, were much more circumspect in their nomination procedures, paying some

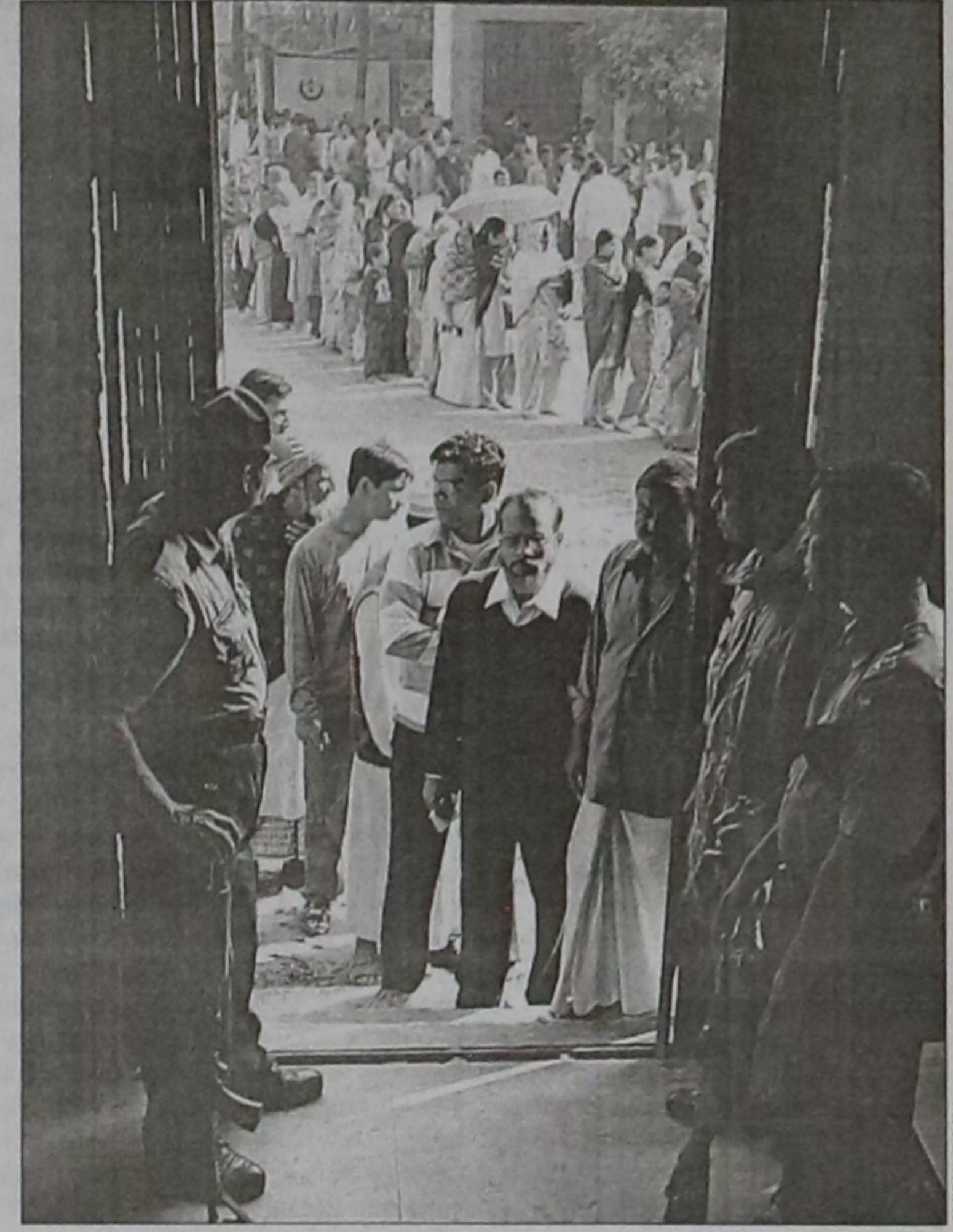
attention to grassroots opinion in their selection of candidates, though there were a few conspicuous exceptions to this trend.

Had the voters endorsed the judgment of the Four Party Alliance and not only returned them to power but elected some of their more conspicuous detainees, the CTG would have been compelled to make an ignominious exit. Such an election result would have vindicated the record in office of the Four Party Alliance and indicated that the reform initiatives of the CTG were misplaced.

It was the ever-wise voters of Bangladesh who once again provided the basis for a peaceful democratic transition. Whenever the voters of Bangladesh have been given the chance of voting freely, without intimidation or electoral manipulation, they have made decisive choices.

For the full version of this article please read this month's Forum, available free with The Daily Star on Monday, January 12.

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AMRUL RAJIV

## Why AL won

SYEED AHAMED

THE Awami League has won the National Election 2008 by a stunning landslide for many solid reasons including some indefensible faults of its opponent. In a pre-election analysis, Jyoti Rahman and I identified five decisive factors which were likely to determine the results of this election.

In the absence of a credible exit-poll, this article reevaluates those determinants and correlates them with the final election results to see exactly what happened on December 29, 2008.

These are the five reasons, all of them reinforcing, which together created the conducive environment for AL's massive win.

### Anti-incumbency

In western democracies, election result always goes against the incumbent when 50 percent of the voters think that the country is not on the right trajectory. Evidently, Bangladesh is no different either.

As we mentioned in the pre-election analysis, 50 seats won by the BNP in 1991 went to AL in 1996, and 89 seats won by AL in 1996 went to BNP in 2001, showing a strong anti-incumbency trend in these constituencies.

We predicted that the party better



percent though it would be corruption. This means that these are the same two issues that influenced the voters when they cast their ballot. To elect the best party to handle these two issues, the voters definitely judged each party's respective performance in previous terms.

First, it was hard for the voters to distinguish BNP and the caretaker government on issues of commodity price and energy crisis. Both management failure and global price hike haunted the two regimes, whereas AL showed a remarkable success during its tenure by keeping the inflation rate under control and adding substantive new electricity to the national grid. Hence, criticism against the caretaker government for price and energy by default went against BNP, too, and AL won the anti-incumbency vote.

Second, the criticism against CTG's anti-corruption drive could not be materialised either. While there were many valid allegations against the process of CTG's anti-corruption drive, the voters were able to separate that from their own observation and assessment of the BNP's unprecedented corruption.

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## Quest for a worthy government

SHAYAN S. KHAN

THE consolidation and subsequent retention of power has historically proved an altogether more difficult task for Bangladeshi political parties than gaining it. It has given rise to the theory that the Bangladeshi electorate is overcome by some kind of "anti-incumbent" tendency each time they go to vote.

It is a theory that stands the test statistically, since a new government has indeed been elected in each of the elections since 1991, but it is one that grossly undermines the weight of the people's verdict.

Closer to the truth, each of these verdicts since 1991, except for the very first one, has been a verdict against malgovernance. Each time, we may have lacked a necessarily better alternative, but that does not mean we were going to in effect endorse the misdeeds of the last one by re-electing them. That would be defeatism tantamount to hopelessness. The democratic agenda however, cannot survive without hope.

So here we have the Awami League again, dressed in the grandest mandate we have yet handed to anyone. There is a fear doing the rounds that too much power has been vested in them, far too much considering the consequences the last time a government took oath with a two-thirds majority in parliament.

But without forgoing our vigilance, let us not wallow in negativity and hope that the

resounding defeat that has been inflicted on that past government, and also the heavy defeat the Awami League themselves suffered in 2001, will have opened their eyes to the pitfalls of misusing this mandate.

For most people, it was plain to see that the general atmosphere surrounding December 29, 2008 lent itself to a victory for the Grand Alliance led by the League. The month was December, Koko's bank account was in the papers, and the public was running a very high election fever.

Anyone who knows of the advantage that accrues to the party that was not last in power from a high voter turnout, and was out and about on the day knew which way

the wind was blowing. I personally visited six of the constituencies in Dhaka and everywhere, in all the polling stations, the lines for the men stretched forever while the women's stretched a day longer.

The air was festive, and succulent with a certain taste of victory. This holds true for everyone who voted, irrespective of whether their candidate was elected or not. After seven years, this nation forever enamoured by politics was having its say again, and clearly relishing the opportunity.

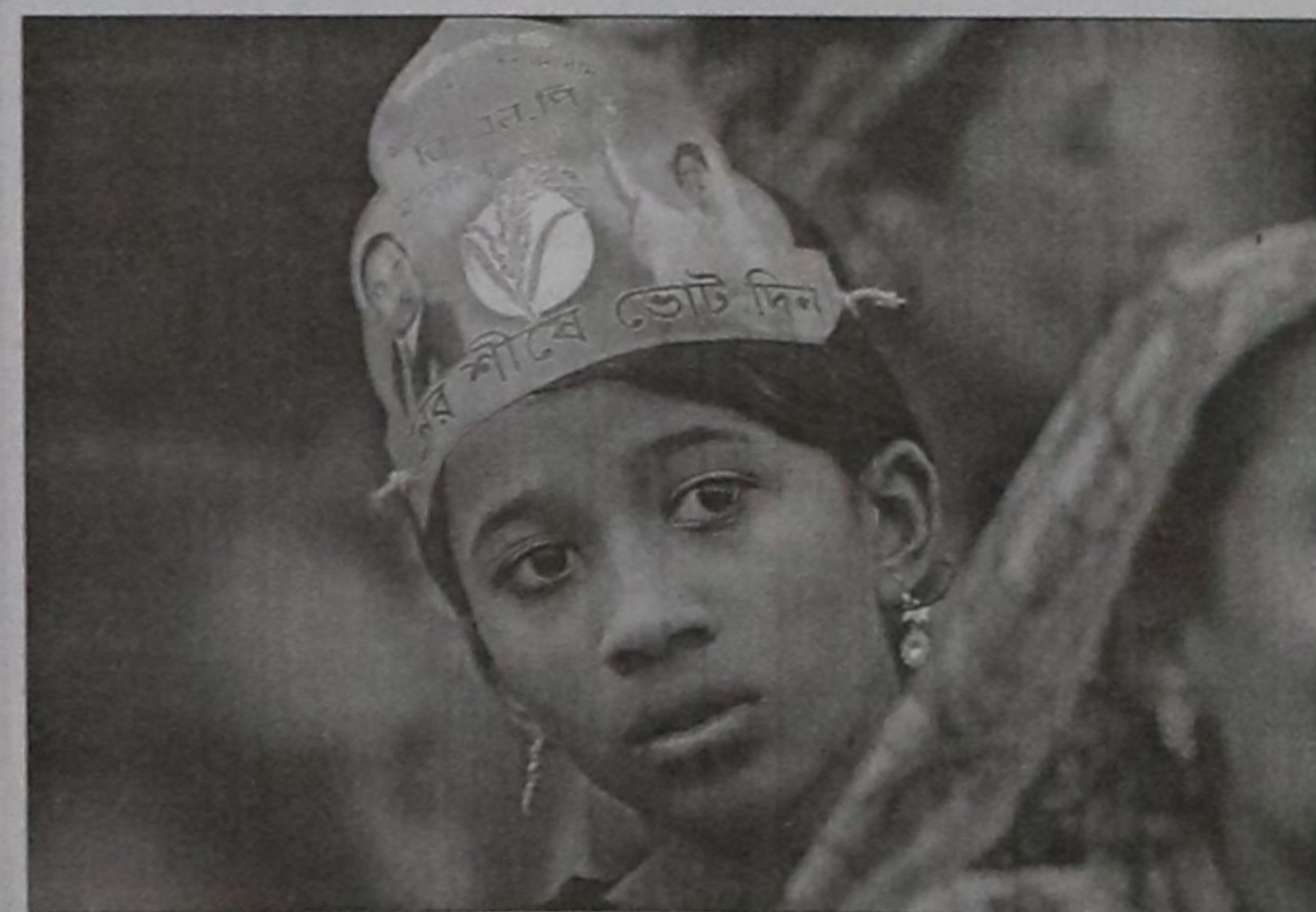
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PHOTO: REZAKOR NEWS

## Whither nationalist politics?



JYOTI RAHMAN

THIS piece is not an attempt at predicting where nationalist politics will go in the coming years. Rather, I have outlined a few factors -- how to deal with India, income inequality and social dislocation, political Islam, and global geopolitical developments -- that nationalist politics will have to contend with independent of any personality changes at the helm.

However, it is a political analysis following a landmark election, and it is difficult to avoid the temptation to speculate. Given the above factors, nationalist politics can take a number of paths and become a credible political force again. I outline two such plausible paths -- populist and liberal nationalisms.

It is quite conceivable to see all factions opposed to globalisation, economic and strategic ties with India and the West come together under a nationalist banner. This will be more likely if the AL government fails to navigate the global economic crisis without a major domestic slump, or if the price of rice refuses to budge.

To the extent that Islamists, of whatever party affiliation, remain more organised than secular anti-globalisation forces, it may be that their social programs will dominate this coalition. And there will be ideological cover for this -- witness the noted columnist Farhad Mazhar's characterisation of the anti-women development policy riots in April 2008 as the first act of people's uprising against the current order in the daily

Naya Diganta.

As the current nationalist leadership has worked with Islamist groups for years if not decades, the path presented above would not involve serious leadership or organisational changes within the nationalist politics. And to the extent that it is always easier to create a coalition of discontents than present an alternative platform with concrete details, populism will undoubtedly be an attractive option for the BNP leadership. But it need not be the only option.

Another possible path for nationalist politics would be one that emphasises positive personal images of its iconic leaders and candidates, political tranquility and opposition in parliament, courts, and media rather than through growth that generates employments, an open arms foreign and trade policy that avoids being entangled with other people's conflicts, and a social policy that is pluralist if not secular.

One may call it, for the lack of any better word, liberal nationalism. But it is also possible to interpret this as Ziaur Rahman's politics of synthesis updated for the 21st century. Undoubtedly, it will be hard for BNP to take this path. For one thing, if it had enough candidates with positive image for projection, wouldn't it have nominated them? But is the challenge unsurmountable?

In an interview with the Bangla daily Prothom Alo last October, the noted political scientist Professor Talukder Maniruzzaman wagered

100 taka with the interviewer Mizanur Rahman Khan that BNP would win the election. I don't know whether Professor Maniruzzaman has settled the bet, but his argument that people uncomfortable about India and those who hold Zia in high esteem form a majority political coalition did hold true for the past three decades. But in this election, this logic failed.

The conventional wisdom is that the younger generation, not as apprehensive about India as their elders, and with no memory of Zia and only negative images of his sons, overwhelmingly rejected BNP and its brand of politics. Absent any credible exit poll, it is hard to categorically accept this conjecture, but it does seem very plausible.

If this is true, it will be hard for the nationalist coalition to recapture the majority with its current message. However, subject to external factors and the government's performance, it can become a competitive political force very quickly. And it can do so in a number of ways. Even if it fails to win a majority, with more than a third of voters under its banner, whatever path nationalist politics adopts will have major ramifications. It may have suffered a thumping defeat, but don't write the obituary of nationalist politics yet.

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# FORUM

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