

World Cup there and violence here

How can BUET students behave in such scandalous manner?

THE on-going World Cup in South Africa has caused, improbably, an indefinite closure of a university here in Bangladesh. The authorities of the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET) were compelled by circumstances to shut down the institution for an indefinite length of time only because a group of unruly students wanted classes to be suspended from June 19. The reason for such behaviour was the World Cup which the students wanted to watch at leisure. For their part, the university authorities decided that classes would be suspended from June 26.

That should have been the end of the matter. It was not, for then some students, all of them at the junior level, took matters into their own hands by shutting the main gate of the university and compelling other students to stay away from classes as a way of putting pressure on the authorities. In no time, some senior students intervened, the inevitable result being a violent clash between those determined to keep the gate shut and those wishing to have it opened. Five students were left badly injured. In the event, it was a hapless university administration that moved to suspend classes and order students to leave their residential halls. It is at this point that our sense of outrage arises. When a simple game of football played out on a global scale can lead to impetuosity among youth here, we are left wondering at what could be going wrong with our young people. The BUET incident is not the only instance of Bangladeshi squabbling over the World Cup. Similar incidents have been reported from other places as well. One could now well ask the question: why must the young, especially students, get so worked up as to engage in such swift over reactive demonstrations?

The question above is not confined to football related incidents alone. Almost everywhere --- on the streets, at industrial installations, at political rallies, in public vehicles, on television talk shows --- there seems to be a readiness on the part of people to abjure reason for self-defeating sentimentality on the flimsiest of pretenses. Conversation is no more the art it used to be or should have been. It has, in a number of instances, been replaced by hectoring and haranguing. Tempers fly, epithets are hurled and limbs are attacked where decent talking ought to have been. How does one explain such a steep fall in patience and decency? Suffice it to say that the old values, upheld by earlier generations, have systematically crumbled; and polite behaviour has made way for roguish acts.

It is time for all of us, political classes as well as civil society, to make a good assessment of the situation. Poverty forces people into strange behaviour, of course. So does an absence of enlightened leadership, at all levels. That, however, is no reason for the BUET students to behave as they did on Saturday. We disapprove of such behaviour on their part.

RMG workers' recurring unrest

Is it an unsolvable problem?

DISTURBANCES in the readymade garment factories are happening with appalling regularity. The reason, this time as well as for most of the previous incidents, has had to do with the workers' pay and remuneration. It is alarming to see the garment workers indulging in destruction of the very things that provide for their livelihood. What started off with demands of one single garment factory in Ashulia, spread to a large number of factories in the vicinity, which eventually led to the shutting down of nearly 50 of these.

Not only were factories damaged and looted, the main highway connecting the capital to the country's East remained disrupted for the greater part of the day also. We cannot but condemn the violence. The workers should understand that it is the national economy that their senseless act is destroying. They must not fail to see that resorting to vandalism, if anything, will only compel people to lose sympathy in their cause which we feel is justified.

While violence is unwarranted and inexcusable what we fail to understand is why the owners and the government have not been able to do anything to prevent the recurring unrest in the RMG sector?

The issue of remuneration of the RMG workers has been a lingering bone of contention. The issue of a minimum wage remains unresolved despite the fact the government has acknowledged that the current wage structure needs revision, but has done nothing tangible to ensure that a rational pay structure is put together.

No doubt the existing minimum wage is grossly inadequate. In the first place the amount was fixed half a decade ago, and it is below the minimum wage in many other sectors. The minimum wage must be tagged to the rate of inflation and should provide the basic minimum for a family of four to keep body and soul together. Whatever happened to the idea of providing the workers ration at subsidized rates? What about better working conditions and daycare centre for the mothers at the factory premise?

We feel that there is need for a channel of communication to remove misunderstanding and mistrust between the owners and workers and for this trade union rights should be awarded to the workers.

We suggest that the matter be addressed by all the relevant stakeholders urgently. The grievances of the garment workers are genuine, and need credible action. Tossing about various figures of minimum wage by the owners and the government is unrealistic. Reasonable criterion must be applied in fixing the wage that should take into account the interest of the owners as well as the workers. The propensity to see outside manipulation in the matter be abjured, instead the owners and the relevant ministries must hone in on the real issue.

All elections are unique

Once the parties, both in power and in opposition, started to reflect on this uniqueness of every election, they would not behave so violently to manipulate the results of various other elections.

SYED FATAHUL ALIM

MOST of the democracy-loving people are divided among one political camp or the other. There are, however, others who do not follow any particular party, but during elections they vote for the candidate they think would be able to deliver best for their consistency.

But apart from their choice of a candidate, be that from partisan or personal considerations, the very opportunity of the electorate to exercise its franchise in a free and fair manner is what constitutes democracy. From that point of view, can we not claim that the just held mayoral election in Chittagong bore the hallmark of a thriving democracy in Bangladesh?

And since, unlike most other elections held earlier -- whether parliamentary or local government -- the Chittagong poll was conspicuous by the absence of violence, can we not also say that our democracy is also getting more mature by the day?

Whomever the credit for the just held impartial election may go to -- the Election Commission's competence, the ruling party's respect for democracy or the winning candidate's popularity with the constituents -- the result of the election has definitely gone to enhance the nation's image in a big way.

But before rushing to such conclusions, one needs also to think in retrospect. What really has happened only about two months after the Bhola by-

election that all the parties involved in the Chittagong mayoral poll have buried their differences and the electorate could be weaned from their attachment to their parties overnight?

It cannot be gainsaid that in Bangladesh, elections are highly partisan, though the advocates of the different political camps would like to call it political. And the voters' choice for their candidates is determined more by their blind partisan allegiance than by any critical judgement of their party programs or the candidate's merit. And the supporters' allegiance to their party is comparable with the bond between the members of a clan and its guardians.

As a result, the leaders and activists of the different parties, especially of the most influential one's such as Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), consider their sway over their supporters for granted. That is more so because it is the personal charisma of the top leadership of the contesting parties that outweighs other considerations in the choice of their candidates.

Even then, if there is ever any exception to this tradition and if that becomes evident from the party activists' assessment of the pulse of the people in a constituency, then the likelihood of violence in that constituency gets higher. The power of muscle and money then prevails over that of logic and persuasion.

Now if one reflects on the result of the Chittagong mayoral poll, it may appear

that some established notion about the voters' loyalty to their favourite party or the leadership might have gone through a sea change. Otherwise, why this exception in the electorate's behaviour as manifested through the outcome of the election in question?

Oddly enough, so far, neither of the major political parties throwing their weight behind their candidates has brought any allegation of rigging against the other. Even the prime minister and supreme leader of the ruling Awami League has congratulated the mayor elect from the second biggest city Chittagong. And the victor from the major opposition has even sought the cooperation of the defeated mayoral candidate from the ruling party in running his office once he takes charge.

Have then all the earlier calculations on the result of the election been proved wrong, or is it that we are witnessing a major shift in the pattern of the voters' loyalty to their parties? At least, the winning party in the election would like to evaluate the polls outcome in such light.

One may recall here the parliamentary by-election in Bhola was held in the fourth week of April. The behaviour of the contending parties and their candidates was predictably different in that election as it was marked by serious instances of violence and charges and counter-charges of rigging and all kinds of criminality levelled against one another by the contending Awami League and the BNP.

One explanation may be that widespread violence and charges of rigging that dominated the electoral scene during and after Bhola election were due mainly to the fact that it was a parliamentary one and that it was a prestige constituency for both the ruling and the opposition party.

It would be worthwhile to point out what one of the prominent leaders of the ruling Awami League, Obaidul Kader, said in his post-election reaction when he warned the opposition saying that they should not go overboard with this election result simply because it was concerned with a local government and hence it had no political significance.

At the same time, he advised the opposition party to remember a similar victory that their just-defeated mayor had won during the four-party alliance government between 2001 and 2006. In the same breath, he also suggested that the defeat of their mayoral candidate in Chittagong was something that they themselves wanted to happen.

The ruling party leader's view of the election result cannot be dismissed out of hand either. In fact, a strange combination of factors, including the disillusionment of a section of the electorate with the erstwhile Chittagong mayor, together militated against him to influence the polls result.

Despite the strangeness of the factors playing their part, it cannot be denied that, after all, the electoral result reflected the people's choice. But then, such uniqueness of circumstance does also come into play in the case of national elections! Had it not been so, all the election results would become predictable.

So, once the parties, both in power and in opposition, started to reflect on this uniqueness of every election, they would not behave so violently to manipulate the results of various other elections. And they should already be wiser by now, if they consider the results of the previous national elections, notwithstanding all their efforts to influence those.

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A lesson for the government

If the AL candidate fails to win in the DCC election, the opposition will not allow the government to run smoothly. Thus, the government should learn from its mistakes and be cautious in its activities.

PRANAB KUMAR PANDAY

THE whole nation witnessed the Chittagong City Corporation election take place in a peaceful manner and festive mood. It has been recognised by the media and observers that the election was free, fair and credible, excepting a few cases of violence.

The Election Commission deserves appreciation and thanks for holding such a credible election. Even the government deserves special thanks on the ground that it did not try to manipulate the election result. One encouraging fact is that, unlike the Bhola by-election, the opposition BNP did not raise serious complaints during the election campaign.

BNP-supported candidate Mohammad Majur Alam Manju won the election by a huge margin of more than 95,000 votes. Through this result, the seventeen-year rule of the immediate past mayor A.B.M. Mohiuddin Chowdhury has come to an end.

This election was crucial for the opposition as well as the party in power. In the context of the opposition, the result will boost their tempo in carrying out movements against the government. On the other hand, it was a test of government's performance over one and a half years.

If we analyse the election result, it will

be evident that the candidates' personal image played an important role in influencing the electorate. Mohiuddin's dominating attitude, rudeness, and failure to win confidence of the party's ranks helped the opposition to secure this big victory.

It is taken for granted that minority voters usually cast their votes in favour of AL. But, in the CCC election, it was reported in the media that the minority votes were divided due to the ex-mayor's controversial decision to grab the Hindu community's land for making it a slaughterhouse. This ex-mayor's decision hurt the voters of that community, which might have made them cast their vote in favour of Manju.

Apart from the above causes, there were some other issues which had made Mohiuddin unpopular. One of them was the fact that he made his son the owner of Bijoy TV, which was supposed to be owned by CCC. Moreover, he appointed his son-in-law as health officer at the corporation.

In contrast, Manju is believed to be a gentleman with a clean image. The BNP, after offering their support to Manju, were able to reduce the intra-party conflict in Chittagong politics; while AL failed to minimise theirs, which affected Mohiuddin very badly. Moreover, Manju's prior affiliation with AL's poli-

tics might have helped him secure votes from a fraction of AL.

In the context of Bangladesh, 17 years in power is quite enough to make a person unpopular. The more popular support one gets, the higher the possibility of becoming corrupt, which happened in Mohiuddin's case. Most importantly, people wanted to bring change in the mayoral position.

Whatever might be the cause of Manju's win, the election result has sent a strong message to the AL government that the people have started losing confidence in it. In the last one and half years of rule, AL has taken several praiseworthy initiatives, including offering a healthy pay structure for the government employees, reduction of the market prices of essential commodities, taking initiatives for generating more power and so on.

But, there are some areas where they have not performed well. First of all, it is important to mention that AL has failed to control its student wing, Chhatra League, which has created a stalemate situation in almost every educational institution. They remain engaged in admission business, tender related violence, and intra-group conflicts etc.

Chhatra League's violent activities have already created a negative image in the minds of ordinary citizens about the intentions of the government.

Secondly, ordinary people did not accept the government's decision to change the names of different organisations and institutions. It is important to note here that voter's want AL to act differently from other political parties

because it steered the war of independence. Thus, if they see AL acting like the BNP, it hurts them all.

Thirdly, during the early days in power, the government was able to control the market price but it did not last long. Over the last six/seven months prices of some essential commodities, including rice, have gone up again, which has caused enormous sufferings for the middle class and lower middle class people. Moreover, conflicting information from different ministers about the rise of prices has annoyed ordinary citizens.

Fourthly, the most important reason behind reduction in public support is the growing public sufferings due to shortage of electricity, water and gas.

The CCC election result has sent a strong message to the AL government that brute majority is not an indication that people from all corners will stand beside the government for all the time. AL has only spent one and a half years in office, and still has three and half years to go. During the upcoming years, the government should be more strategic and careful while taking every decision.

In the past, we have noticed that the CCC and DCC election results played an important role in changing the political scenario of our country. If the AL candidate fails to win in the DCC election, the opposition will not allow the government to run smoothly. Thus, the government should learn from its mistakes and be cautious in its activities.

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