

# Yellow card for the Grand Alliance?



The election of Chittagong City Corporation should be duly judged by the grand alliance, especially by the Awami League, as a yellow card, and they must act expeditiously in a pro-people manner by overcoming non-performance and changing their behaviour.

A.K.M.A QUADER

THE voters in the Chittagong City Corporation election gave the mayor a red card, ending his sixteen-year rule, and a yellow card to the grand alliance government. You may think differently, but an election reflects the voters' mood. Postmortems and analyses of this verdict will be useful if the grand alliance takes lessons and acts accordingly. The result is a verdict against non-performance and empty rhetoric.

The grand alliance will be mistaken if it does not acknowledge the mindset of the voters under 50 years of age, who want to see them-

selves as citizens of a free democratic country and whose expectation from the elected government is not limited to *dal-bhat* only. With electronic media and digital connectivity they are aware of performing governments elsewhere.

They know how a modern government functions, and who runs it; how elected representatives speak and behave; and how insignificant is the permanent bureaucracy in making decisions and policies. They consider good performance of the government as normal and business as usual while they are critical of non-performance.

Traditional supporters of Awami League and other political parties are dwindling as they are

ageing or dying. To survive the new voters' wrath for non-performance, the party in power needs to change its own mindset and style of governance. They have been elected to serve the entire people, not to rule it.

They must not consider themselves as the *ijaradar* (lease holder) of the country forever. Their words and deeds must demonstrate that they are responding to the people's wishes. The government must admit its mistakes, failures and oversight, and leave aside blame games and flimsy excuses.

The people voted for the grand alliance for change and for performance. During the past eighteen months, in spite of good achievements in certain areas such as price stabilisation of food and essentials, agricultural outputs etc., non-performance -- in power and gas sectors, continued campus violence, tender manipulation by hoodlums, wrangling between MPs and elected upazilla chairmen, environmental degradation, rehabilitation of Aila victims, etc. -- has irked conscientious citizens.

They believe in what they see on the TV screens and read in the dailies. They are shocked to see *dao* wielding students roaming in the campus, party hoodlums snatching tenders, stinking water bodies and breached embankments. These are not certainly the signs of change that they have been asking for.

The people are fuming because of rampant bureaucratic corruption, manipulation by hoarders and smugglers, excesses of the land developers, tycoons and political demi-gods etc. The clipping of the wings of the ACC has not been palatable to the common mass. Even if we do not approve of the past caretaker government, it had, through the ACC and other agencies, vividly revealed the rot and depth of corruption.

The written words and electronic clippings depicting those crimes and corruption are permanently embedded in the people's memory. They know how bad some of us are! During the past eighteen months of the grand alliance government, the ACC, or any other government agency, has not revealed any such corruption or malpractice -- as if the country is now blessed with Sufis.

The grand alliance is suffering from non-performance and image problems because of some cabinet members and advisers. Reshuffling a cabinet from time to time is a standard practice to purge the non-performers and to strengthen it with new faces -- like the substitutions made in a football game.

Reshuffling is certainly desirable in many ministries -- energy and power, home affairs, industry, environment and forest, water resource, science and IT, finance, law, and may be more. Some advisers should be axed for non-

performance and for embarrassing the government from time to time, and for not being clean in the public perception.

Whenever the Awami League was elected, the "Aa-me League" (I am the league), for unknown reasons, had the upper hand over the mainstream Awami League members, and it is not different this time. The "Aa-me Leaguers" have always successfully walked in the corridors of power, and have been patronised.

The recent appointments of civil servants at all levels, and of DGs, chairmen, directors VCs and Pro-VCs of the public universities, district administrators etc., are no exceptions. Why on earth should these positions be given to the "Aa-me Leaguers" by ignoring merit, competence, capability, track record, integrity, honesty, courage, leadership, excellence and vision.

The absence of in-house policy, programs, working papers and laid down strategies as per the election manifesto by the grand alliance has been compromised by induction of the "Aa-me Leaguers" who lobby for such posts by calling on ministers, advisers, MPs, labour leaders, student leaders, party *mastans* and so on. How can you, therefore, expect a change?

The chaos in the government has time and again been visible through ill-conceived actions. Examples include appointments to the war crime tribunal, appointment of law secretary and High Court judges, on-going struggle between MPs and elected upazilla chairmen, listing of schools for MPO etc.

The chaos exists because the ministers, advisers and MPs want to influence every appointment and decision to ensure that none should be anybody in Bangladesh, except for those blessed by them. They believe that they are the final arbiters of the nation. What a mindset for changing Bangladesh!

The people are no fools. They understand the importance of such appointments and decisions; they are aware how the elected governments function vis-à-vis the roles of MPs, congressman and senators in a democratic society. An MP elected for legislative duties must give up his feudal mindset of being an icon everywhere in his/her constituency and elsewhere.

The election of Chittagong City Corporation should be duly judged by the grand alliance, especially by the Awami League, as a yellow card, and they must act expeditiously in a pro-people manner by overcoming non-performance and changing their behaviour. Let the Awami League leadership finally get rid of the "Aa-me Leaguers" to win the hearts and minds of all the people. Help us Almighty to change our mindset.

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# Passing the baton



The nation has seen civil society having a taste of power in caretaker mode over 2006-08. Indeed, it remains to be seen whether there is any direct role for the civil society in shaping the future political landscape as a fourth force after Ershad passes the baton.

MOAZZEM HOSSAIN

FORMER president, H M Ershad, put forward some of his thoughts on the issue of future stewardship of his party (JP) in this column on June 15. By all means, this has been an encouraging move on the part of the JP leader. This could be even a turning point and a catalyst for all other political entities, large or small.

The former president realises that he is 80 now, and that this is the prime time for passing the baton. In his piece, he mentioned all the achievements of his nine-year reign. While one would not disagree with some of his claims on development initiatives, the dark side of his regime, however, was not mentioned.

This write-up, however, does not deal with the pluses or minuses of Ershad's regime, but with the future political landscape if and when the former president relinquishes his position.

Examination of the future political landscape of Bangladesh is not easy. While politics has been marred by brutality and bloodshed since the liberation war in 1971, the military has been playing a major role in politics since August

1975. In 2006, the military had to intervene in the political process and ran the show from behind for over two years (2006-08), of course, with some legitimate reasons.

In almost 40 years of independence, governments had been formed through military intervention on at least three occasions (led by Generals Zia, Ershad and Mueen), and military and the quasi-military regimes had been in place for almost 20 years. Thus, it is hard to paint the future political landscape of a nation where things change radically and rapidly.

In the piece on June 15, Ershad has given signals on two fronts -- one, the legitimacy of his brother, G.M. Quader, taking over JP leadership and two, his desire to bring further administrative changes by converting all the divisions into provinces.

Let us examine the former and leave the latter for appropriate time in the future. Ershad is concerned that Quader could be put into controversy if the baton was passed to him since Quader is a sibling. Thus, he is now on a mission to establish Quader's legitimacy as future leader to the party and the wider community.

The JP certainly is not a stranger to the

nation's politics after democracy was restored through Ershad's in 1990. During Sheikh Hasina's two regimes (1996 and the present), the JP played a major role in helping the AL leader to form the government.

JP contributed significantly to the victory in the 2008 election, being a member of the AL-led grand alliance. If one takes Khondaker Mosharref's (a top ranking leader of BNP) defeat at the hands of the AL candidate as an example, it was the JP voters who played a decisive role in defeating him. One can find similar examples where the BNP-led alliance had been defeated due to the JP's decisive role in the grand coalition.

Today, while the AL is regarded as the top and the BNP its closest rival in electoral terms, the JP certainly remains as a third force. There is a possibility that with a new leader at the helm, this party will remain as a formidable force in the future. The present JP structure under Ershad is divided into factions because of the absence of democratic practice in the party. No one has the courage to object to or go against the opinion of the former president. This will certainly change under the new leadership.

If Quader holds the position, it appears that he has the mindset, teaching and capacity to move forward by establishing democratic practices at party level, which, if it happens, will act as the catalyst for the future political landscape of this nation. The discussion about the future political landscape will not be complete if one does not touch on the AL's and BNP's role in shaping it. Let us take the opposition first.

After the defeat of the BNP-led alliance in 2008, the party has been struggling to re-establish its credibility. The opposition has failed so far to act appropriately as an alternate government. It is going for a complete nationwide shutdown on June 27. Certainly, under the present environment this strategy will not work.

Unlike the incumbent, the opposition has been relying on the old guard who have tainted the party in the past and brought it to its knees in the last election. Last if not the least, Khaleda Zia's image of being an uncompromising leader has been shattered. She failed to bring reforms in the party after the defeat in 2008.

It is known that without Khaleda the future of BNP is bleak, and she is not in a mood to pass the baton before 2021, the golden jubilee year of independence. Unfortunately, it is clear now that the BNP leader is incapable of bringing innovation and change to the future political landscape. It seems the party is putting up with the status quo to avoid new challenges.

Let us see AL's role in bringing change in a political landscape without Ershad. Looking at the AL chief's political direction in recent years,

one certainly observes lots of initiatives and reforms in the party. In this respect, the PM's resolve to bring fundamental changes in three fronts -- social, economic and political -- is worth mentioning.

How? Introducing social security schemes, initiating mega infrastructure projects and bringing in new blood in the cabinet and the party leadership immediately come to mind. These are changes whose outcomes cannot be seen immediately, however, if implemented as planned, they will bring a sea change in the future socio-economic-political landscape.

AL's future rests on the shoulder of the PM. She is no hurry to pass the baton before she realises the dream of making Bangladesh a middle-income nation by 2021. Indeed, this is a great challenge in a world of uncertainty and global warming. Most importantly, the world of "high growth" seems to be a thing of the past, if not over.

It is now clear that due to the global financial crisis (GFC) the developed nations are not in a mood to extend unqualified support to developing economies and, in fact, they are resorting to going backward by taking austerity measures and tax increases. Under this circumstance, export-led growth of developing nations is certainly under huge stress. Look at Bangladesh's export performance over the last one-year.

In this environment, though the current debate involving the government and the civil society on the issue of growth next year is warranted, it is certainly inconclusive and is damaging the credibility of both the parties. They can be even blamed for raising a storm in a teacup.

In an economy where no genuine figures on formal employment are available and when the central agency for collecting statistics has a reputation for cooking production figures, particularly for agriculture, it is hard to rely on any estimates from such an agency to argue any case. Certainly, adopting the growth data generated out of this source (BBS) is unscientific.

Our civil society's role in shaping the future political landscape cannot be underestimated, either. It has a strong base, with the support of reputable international agencies both in terms of capacity building and funding. The nation has seen civil society having a taste of power in caretaker mode over 2006-08. Indeed, it remains to be seen whether there is any direct role for the civil society in shaping the future political landscape as a fourth force after Ershad passes the baton.

Dr. Moazzem Hossain is the author of Democracy's Roller-Coaster Ride in Bangladesh.

# Tiny tot pols!

What we should not forget is that we have a tradition of running good primary schools with the help of dedicated teachers and local people. Can't we work on that, instead of looking for pilot projects?

MUHAMMAD QUAMRUL ISLAM

IT is strange that elections in selected primary schools were held on June 15 when annual students' union elections in universities and colleges have been in abeyance since 1991. One does not understand why elections were held in primary schools but not in universities and colleges. It would be proper if the government could also ensure students' union elections in universities and colleges.

The guidelines were issued by the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education, whose officials say that it will teach democratic practices and develop leadership qualities in the children. The Parliament and political parties were involved in this scheme along with the Ministry of Education.

The guidelines on formation of student councils and elections say that students from Class III to Class V will be voters, and students of the same class will be candidates. The students will elect 7 representatives, who will be keep the school premises clean, arrange books and writing material, and be involved in hygiene, health, sports and culture, water, mid-day meal, receptions and entertainment.

The head of the Council will be elected from the 7 representatives in its first meeting. There will be one meeting of the Council every month. No teacher of the school will interfere in the Council. In the first meeting, the Council will prepare a work plan. Help from the school management committee and local people may be sought to implement decisions of the Council.

The headmaster and assistant teacher will nominate a student of Class V to be the election commissioner. Students will act as presiding officers, polling officers and polling agents of candidates.

Elections will be held in 100 primary schools to elect 700 representatives. 603 representatives were elected on June 15 in 96 schools in 20 upazilas. In the elections, 1,612 candidates contested in 100 schools, out of which candidates in 4 schools were elected uncontested.

Elections were postponed at 5 schools in Double Mooring PS because of the Chittagong City Corporation election. At Ramu, Cox's Bazar, election was rescheduled in a school due to cancellation of nomination papers. In all these places elections will be held on June 22.

Student Council started as a pilot project for 100 primary schools, and the Primary Education Directorate has assigned 20 assistant directors in charge of 20 upazilas to implement it. It is not known if this project is funded from local resources or with funds from foreign donors.

It is not understood why our government authorities refer to the developed countries to justify their pilot project, as we are a least developed country. We cannot replicate their models because our culture, tradition and economic status are different from those countries.

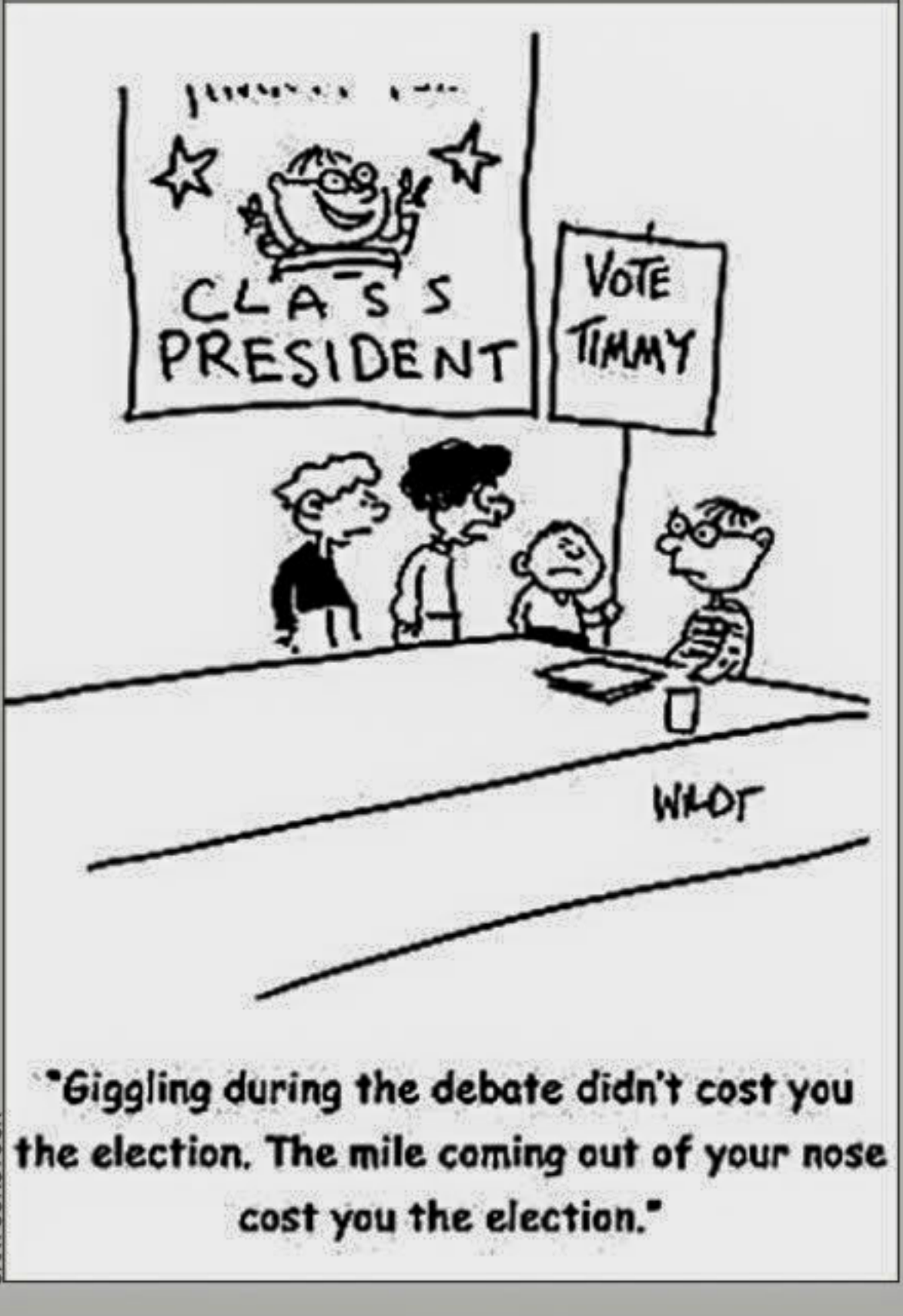
What we should not forget is that we have a tradition of running good primary schools with the help of dedicated teachers and local people. Can't we work on that, instead of looking for pilot projects? We do not know what the pressing need for the experiment on tiny tots was, as there was no demand from guardians and students in this regard.

Guardians want an academic atmosphere in which teachers take classes regularly and do not indulge in partisan politics at the cost of studies, of which we have seen enough. Of course, there were strikes by teachers of community primary schools, but they were for salary increase; but after the said project was completed the community did not pay the teachers.

According to the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education, elections will be held in all model primary schools next January. Elected representatives will be asked to distribute the 7 portfolios. The tenure of the council will be one year.

As this election was held in June will the tenure end next June? If the elections are held in January 2011, will the tenure end in January 2012? Before extending the project, we feel that the ministry should review the matter in entirety, including the points raised above. Let not our tiny tots suffer.

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