

Early indications from municipal polls

Sagacity on the part of political parties is called for

As we write this editorial, the votes are being counted in the 49 municipalities for which elections were held on Thursday. While it is yet too early to make any clear assessment or analysis of the overall election results, seeing that a fairly good number of municipal polls yet remain to be decided, we do believe that the rather peaceful manner in which the elections have been held so far says something about democracy in Bangladesh. The fact that elections were held without any disturbance in Rajshahi and Rangpur divisions on Wednesday is a tribute to the professionalism demonstrated by the Election Commission, to the maturity displayed by the political parties and to the democratic character of the voters as a whole. So far the municipal elections have pointed to the sort of democratic behaviour that we have long yearned for in this country. It is our trust that such an attitude on the part of all will be maintained not just in the remaining municipal polls but in future general elections as well.

It is encouraging that voter turnout in Rajshahi and Rangpur was between 60 and 65 per cent. The election atmosphere apart, it is the early trends in voting which are now a focus of public interest. However, what is clear is that the lead taken by candidates backed by the opposition BNP shows a degree of vibrancy about the results that one cannot miss. The opposition gains, assuming they are maintained, will add a new interest and new dimension to national politics. Without taking away the credit from the opposition BNP on its performance, we note that the northern region of the country has traditionally been a BNP stronghold. However, what is surprising is the poor show by the Jatiya Party.

For the present, though, we can safely suggest that if these early trends are any guide, there is an unambiguous message here for the ruling Awami League. It is that the party cannot afford to be complacent and certainly cannot be dismissive of the results if they go against the candidates it backed. In this connection, we recall the results of a Nielsen poll carried out on behalf of this newspaper recently, which pointed to a decline in popular support for the ruling party. Such a conclusion now appears to be borne out by the results of the municipal polls.

As the nation waits for a full, clearer picture of the elections to emerge, we must emphasise the need for restraint and especially on the part of the political parties. We have noted in earlier instances that while the parties demonstrate restraint before and during voting, it is in the post-results period that things begin to fall apart. We trust such a pattern will not be repeated as the municipal polls come to an end. Indeed, the onus for keeping order through preventing any violence from marring this electoral exercise lies with the ruling party. The question is not whether the municipal election results go against or for it. It is one of a need for sagacity on the part of the ruling dispensation. The ruling party will, we hope, demonstrate the kind of maturity it so clearly showed after the Chittagong mayoral elections not so long ago. So far, the Awami League has shown wisdom in its approach to the Rajshahi and Rangpur results. Let that wisdom be maintained.

Bhutanese PM's visit

Dhaka-Thimphu cooperation to expand

AGREEMENTS, assurances, and exchange of fresh ideas to move forward bilaterally as well as regionally marked the outcome of Bhutanese Prime Minister, also the SAARC Chairman, Jigmi Y Thinley's visit to Bangladesh.

Bangladesh and Bhutan signed an agreement on cultural exchange and a memorandum of understanding (MOU) pertaining to cooperation in the health sector. In terms of the MOU on health cooperation, upwards of 90 medical specialists and physicians, would be recruited by Thimphu in three years. Exchange of cultural delegations on a regular basis would help strengthen people-to-people relationship. In this context, Thinley's endorsement of a proposal for package tourism among Bangladesh, Bhutan and other neighbouring countries under a single umbrella should be followed up on.

Of particular significance is the joint resolve to expand bilateral trade from worth US\$ 30 million now to US 100 million within next few years. Many tradable goods of complementary nature have been identified. An interesting trade-off between our winter vegetables and horticulture commodities and those being produced by Bhutan during its summer months with relatively high altitude will keep the markets of both countries saturated with vegetables round the year.

It is good to know Bangladeshi entrepreneurs would be encouraged to invest in Bhutan's IT, agro-processing, education, hospitality and construction sectors, opening a fresh window of opportunity for us.

That Bangladesh's offer to landlocked Bhutan the use of Chittagong and Mongla ports would be worked out in detail by officials of both countries augurs well for mutually beneficial connectivity across the region.

On two other particular points the understanding that has been forged between the two governments is of special import: first, the sharing of data between upper riparian Bhutan and lower riparian Bangladesh on the Brahmaputra river, especially pertaining to its frequent flooding; and cooperation in hydro-power sector following augmentation of capacity in Bhutan on a regional basis.

The hall-mark of historic ties between Bhutan and Bangladesh lay in the contributions of Atish Dipankar, a Buddhist scholar from Bikrampur to the spread of Buddhism and knowledge across the world between 980-1052 AD. It is upon such foundations that secular values of

The earnest of being homeless

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

THE homeless people work the opposite shifts as the stars in the sky. They are visible by day and invisible by night. During the day they scramble for living with the rest of us. They beg, they hustle, they peddle, they scrounge and they grunge. Then the sundown sets them apart. We return home and they return to nature.

Where do they go? Not to well-lit, warm and decorated homes, of course. They don't have proper accommodations, no bedroom, no bed, no kitchen and no washroom. They have no holding number, postal code, telephone number, TIN or email address. They live in suspended animation, non-entities between statistical figures and human existence. At night they sleep under the open sky on sidewalks, park benches, railway stations, launch terminals, bus depots, steps of shops and houses and mid-islands on the roads.

The homeless people are an aborted phenomenon. They come two-thirds of the way to make their ends meet and then exhaust themselves like a credit card after the user has fully utilised its limit. They earn enough to barely fulfill two of the three subsistence needs: food and clothing, but stumble on the third, which is to have a shelter, a roof over their heads. This is where the rational adjusts to the animal. They retain the streaks of wildlife in them, condemned to roam in the wilderness of their absurd destinies.

The Dhaka city requires 60,000 new homes every year. This is the figure one can find scouring different websites. Another statistics says that 320,000 migrants enter the nation's capital every year and three-quarters of them find shelters in slums or don't find a shelter at all. This city is like a botched up invitation. It attracts more people than it can attend to.

Daniel Akst, an American novelist and essayist, writes in his book *We Have Met the Enemy: Self-Control in an Age of Excess* that the problems of free-

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dom and affluence is the problem of "managing desire in a landscape rich with temptation." He compares the American life to "a giant all-you-can-eat buffet" offering "calories, credit, sex, intoxicants" and other invitations to excess.

In fact, the homeless people are an extreme contradiction to that excessive excess. In the midst of construction boom, splendour of material progress, inordinate luxury and sinful wastes, these people are like an intrusion to a party, a disruption to the encomiums of temptation. They are like the crumbs fallen off life's table, at best leftovers after the more fortunate amongst us have gone through the feast.

A study shows that 47% of the homeless in Dhaka lives on footpaths, 23% in stations and terminals and 12% in front of major shopping centres. Others end up in parks, abandoned buildings, and construction sites. Many of them live in cardboard or plastic tents, which reflect their desire to have a home more than the home



PHOTO: STAR

they desire to have. But the largest section of the homeless population sleeps without having anything but the sky above them.

It is not that having homeless people in a country is end of the world. The National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty in the United States estimates that between 2.3 and 3.5 million people experience homelessness in the most affluent and powerful country of the world.

People become homeless for a number of reasons, which include loss of employment, divorce, long-term illness, domestic violence, substance abuse, institutional discharge and many others. Ultimately, it boils down to the age-old precept: some will have it, some will not.

While some of the above factors apply to Bangladesh, we also have our own peculiar reasons. Monga Mukto Bangladesh Pracharabhiyan Daptar stated in a press conference in 2008 that 13% people become homeless every year during the Monga period. In north Bengal they said 37% people lose their work ability, 84% live in dilapi-

dated homes and 88% are burdened with loans from moneylenders.

These facts give us a sneak preview of behind-the-scenes. The homeless people who clutter the cities are the piling debris of lives being shattered in the countryside. The man, who crouches on the pavement and shivers in the cold like a trembling silhouette or the homeless woman whose body is treated like an open house by lecherous men on cold concrete, comes at the end of a long trail of devastations wrought by hardship and misfortune.

The homeless are the stains of lives dislodged from their roots. They withstand blistering heat in summer and freezing cold in winter because they enjoy the certainty of freedom. It comes from their knowledge that they have nothing left to lose.

The homeless avoid the stars in the sky, because their own stars have let them down. We work with those stars because we are tied to the ground.

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Before the court of public opinion

M.J. AKBAR

AT some point, when the wound begins to hurt, the narrative in a scam story arcs towards the bizarre. You can be almost sure that the change in trajectory has been propelled by some lawyer trying to be a judge.

A lawyer's training is conditioned by loyalty to the client; a judge must rise above his background and become a servant of the law instead of the cheque-book. On Friday, Kapil Sibal gave a grand press conference to declare that his predecessor A. Raja was totally and indisputably innocent in the telecom scam that has disabled Parliament and rocked the country.

On the same day, in the same city, Delhi, yet another judge said in open

Courts, high, supreme and special, have seen the record and found a basis for prosecution. Sibal, being a modern Gandhian, can see no evil, hear no evil and will speak no evil unless it is about the opposition, in which case he can be vituperative.

The only concession Sibal made over this prearranged handout of licences on a first-come-first-served basis, was that there might have been a "procedural lapse." That is an elegantly discreet description of bribery, which should find a place in a quotation book.

If Kapil Sibal believes what he says, he should send in his resignation immediately so that Raja can be reinstated. Why was Raja dropped from the cabinet, at such political cost, personal

day or so immersed in his public service duties that he was totally oblivious of media when the Radia tapes took complete control of airwaves and print. Or, perhaps, again like a good lawyer, he had no interest in any fact that would be relevant to the prosecution.

Since Sibal will still need a job after resignation, he can easily step into a vacant home ministry. P. Chidambaram will surely now have to resign. Chidambaram, after all, sent a letter to the prime minister accusing Raja of malpractice, not mere "procedural lapses." A letter emerges from a conscious decision to place a view on record, so Chidambaram must have felt very strongly about what was happening. Nor is Chidambaram ignorant

reshuffle; so maybe these little dots scattered across the capital's landscape do connect after all.

Something clearly also needs to be done about this pesky Comptroller and Auditor General, Vinod Rai, who refuses to keep quiet even when someone as self-important as Sibal delivers an obituary. Rai insists, even after the Sibal intervention, that the treasury suffered a massive loss, and that a proportionate benefit went to private sector telecom players.

And then there is the insufferable judiciary, which remains coolly indifferent to the pressure tactics of such majestically powerful ministers. Surely there must be a way in which judges like Chaddha can be transferred to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

Sibal has eliminated the distance between the Congress and the DMK's spectrum sale at highly discounted prices. For some reason, an impression had been growing that Mrs. Sonia Gandhi and the prime minister wanted to increase this space. Clearly, that impression was inaccurate. It is inconceivable that Sibal would have gone public without clearance from both the PM and the party president.

The DMK-Congress alliance can now march shoulder to shoulder towards electoral triumph in the next Tamil Nadu Assembly elections using the spectrum scandal as a mark of pride rather than a sack of defacing coal. There is no question, either, of government seeking any compromise with the opposition during the budget session. If Raja did no wrong, why should there be an enquiry?

When a good lawyer gets a bad case his instinct tells him to shift the narrative. Political lawyers believe that they can manipulate the court of public opinion, but the people see all the evidence, not just some of it, before they reach a decision. The public is an excellent judge.



PHOTO: AFP

court that there was sufficient evidence to maintain a complaint against Raja. Special CBI judge Pradeep Chaddha, while admitting Subramanian Swamy's petition seeking Raja's prosecution, said: "I have gone through the complaint and the bunch of annexures... and I am of the view that this complaint is maintainable and the proceedings will continue."

Obviously, Sibal was either on holi-

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of the law; by any account he is as good a lawyer as Sibal, if not better.

So the only conclusion is that Chidambaram was consciously misleading the prime minister, on a matter of such public significance, possibly for partisan reasons, and therefore must be held accountable. Indeed, there is a strong rumour doing the rounds in Delhi that Chidambaram could lose his portfolio in the next

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