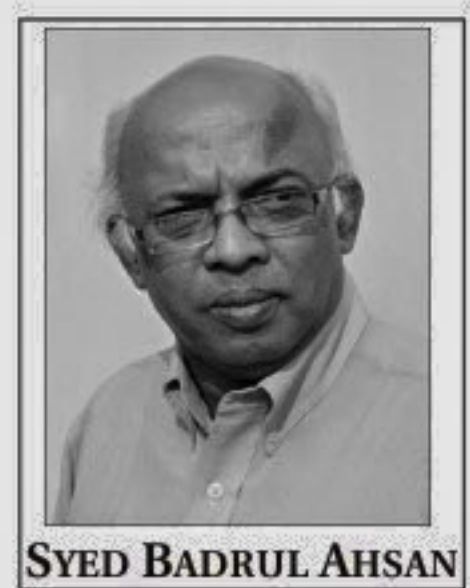


GROUND REALITIES

Of politics being dysfunctional ...



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

home in Bangladesh. And that is not all. She feels, as she has felt since the results of the general elections of December 2008 began to pour in, that the Awami League was installed in power by the caretaker government of Fakhruddin Ahmed. There is yet a little more that she told her party faithful in London on Monday. If the former caretaker chief and the former army chief of staff, General Moeen U. Ahmed, were around, they would be subjected to a public beating.

It is clear that the Bangladesh Nationalist Party has not yet fully comprehended the reasons behind its dismal performance at the 2008 elections. And there lies the pity, for had the BNP and its chairperson gone for some sort of introspection once it became clear that they had been routed at the polls, the country would stand to benefit from such an exercise.

An electoral defeat is not the end of the world. Besides, in the tumult that convulsed our world, which is essentially the country we inhabit, between the end of BNP rule in October 2006 and the return of the Awami League to office in January 2009, there were the lessons that the nation's politicians needed to learn.

Both the Awami League and the BNP ought to have been better political parties by now; both should have demonstrated to the country that they have actually and finally come of age; both should have gone the extra mile to convince the electorate that they have well-defined policies and priorities on offer.

None of these has happened. The

Awami League, having made a raft of promises to the nation in the days and weeks before the elections, has put up a disappointing show. It is not likely to do better than what it has done in the nearly two and a half years since returning to power. And hence the portents of deepening gloom.

The bigger disappointment for the nation has come from the BNP. Every time it has lost an election, it has cried foul and has come forth with untena-

marching on the streets.

It is an abdication of responsibility on the part of a party which does not see what it does not wish to see.

Begum Zia and her party leaders and workers would have done a far better and more appreciable job if they had looked inward, the better to comprehend all the mistakes they committed in government between 2001 and 2006. Political morality demands that when a party is comprehensively

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PRASHANT RAO/IRRAWADDI

ble reasons to explain its refusal to be part of parliamentary proceedings. Begum Zia and her party colleagues cheerfully describe the Jatiyo Sangsad as being dysfunctional. That is half the truth. The other half is what the nation knows and the opposition does not acknowledge: that Parliament does not function because the BNP still thinks it can and should overthrow a legitimately elected government through

rejected through an exercise of the ballot, it is time for the party go into seclusion, into reflection on what went wrong and why.

The BNP, despite its paltry number of lawmakers in Parliament today, could have added substance to parliamentary debate on the issues through coming forth with clearly set out policies and programmes on what it means to do given another stint in

power. Its presence in the House would have checked the arrogance of the ruling party. More crucially and critically, an unambiguous placing of arguments on its part in the Jatiyo Sangsad would have enabled the country to weigh the chances of its riding back to power at the next election or the one after that.

Let us be clear on one point. Conspiracies have never been part of the politics of the Awami League. You can raise all kinds of questions about the competence or governance skills of the governments formed by the Awami League since the beginning of the War of Liberation in 1971, but you cannot convince the people of this country that the party has ascended to power through backdoor deals with the military or with any other body at any point of time. If you speak of conspiracy, of illegitimate regimes, think of the fifth and seventh amendments to the constitution. Both have been struck down by the higher judiciary; and because they have, all of us breathe a little easier today.

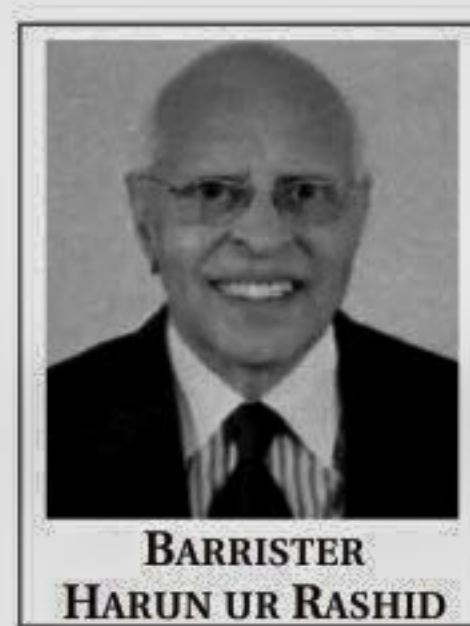
The BNP, therefore, needs to reinvent itself. If the Francoists could embrace the democratic process in post-Generalissimo Franco Spain and become a credible political machine, the BNP might as well do the same here. The Francoists never said anything about beating up King Juan Carlos just because he helped get Spaniards back to democratic order. Why must Begum Zia and her friends now be driven by a rampaging desire to have Fakhruddin Ahmed and Moeen U. Ahmed lynched by a mob?

Democracy never rides piggyback on abrasive politics and pluralism does not look kindly on those who go around smelling conspiracies everywhere. Begum Zia is right to suggest that Bangladesh's legislature is dysfunctional today. The ruling Awami League is not responsible for things having to come to such a pass, though.

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BOTTOM LINE

Impact of Mamata's victory on Bangladesh



BARRISTER
HARUN UR RASHID

after 34 years of rule. Trinamool Congress (TMC) led Ms. Mamata Banerjee and her ally the Congress Party won 226 seats out of 294.

The outgoing Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee and 16 ministers of the Left Front lost their seats. The Left Front secured only 62 seats.

Ms. Banerjee declared her party's success as "the new day of independence for the people of West Bengal."

TMC in West Bengal is a partner of the Congress-led government in New Delhi. Ms. Mamata Banerjee has been the union railways minister. She is expected to become the chief minister of West Bengal.

The historical defeat for the Left Front in West Bengal, after three decades in power, is the product of perceived arrogance and political blunders where party convictions and commitment were ditched.

The popular 56-year-old Banerjee, who is the founder and chairperson of the Trinamool Congress which she set up in 1998 after falling out with the Congress Party in West Bengal, can now have the satisfaction of being a victorious party leader.

For years the face of the opposition in West Bengal, Banerjee, known to her supporters as *Didi* (sister) has been the nemesis of the ruling CPI(M)-led Left Front over the last 23 years and has earned the reputation of being a street-fighting politician.

Banerjee, a firebrand orator, coined a catchy slogan *Ma, Mati o Manush* (mother, land and people) before last year's Lok Sabha polls and played on the anti-incumbency factor after more than three decades of Left rule and the creeping disillusionment among several sections, like Muslims, to decimate the Left in partnership with the Congress.

Her nondescript residence -- a tiled single-storey house in a dingy lane close to the Kalighat temple -- and equally simple attire comprising cotton saris, jhola bags and cheap hawai chappals,

states. Private sector was hesitant to invest in West Bengal because of their political ideology. In recent years, many factories shed their workers and unemployment increased in West Bengal;

- The density of population in West Bengal is quite high (almost 900 per sq kilometre) and, as such, land allocation per person is quite meager. In 2007-08, West Bengal had witnessed large-scale agitation spearheaded by Banerjee in Singur and Nandigram over land acquisition, which alienated

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endeared her to the masses.

The Left Front leaders say it will play the role of a responsible opposition by accepting the people's mandate. "A majority of people wanted us to sit in the opposition. We respect the people's verdict. We will act responsibly, we will not act like them (the Trinamool Congress)," said West Bengal state secretary member Gautam Deb, who was housing minister in the Left Front government.

Why did the Left Front lose the election? There are many reasons but those below deserve mention:

- India is so large, with 1.2 billion people, that regional interests override national interests. That is the reason why regional parties, based on caste or state-issues, do well in states. Regional parties are often personality-based and personality clash exists within the states;
- The economy of West Bengal is poorer than that of northern and western

the Left Front from the masses. It dented the compassionate image of the Left Front when police with fire-arms assaulted the farmers, including women, who protested the acquisition of their lands;

- In 2008, Nobel laureate Prof. Amartya Sen, who described himself as a Leftist, also questioned the policy of land acquisition for industrialisation which was being pursued by the Left Front government. "Land acquisition for setting up industries should be the last recourse," he said;
- Ms. Banerjee was able to project herself as leader of the poor and the rural have-nots, a friend of the minorities, a champion of inclusive growth and one genuinely interested in delivering the goods;
- The long-term rule of the Left Front had created an impression of tiredness and stagnation, and people wanted a change from its 34-year rule. The Left Front was not able to con-

vince the voters during the election campaign because of its past record. It had lost its credibility to the majority of the people.

Out of our 4,096 km border with India, 2,216.7 km lies along West Bengal. Farakka Barrage is located in West Bengal and was constructed to flush the silt of the Hoogly River for navigability of the Kolkata sea port.

New Delhi may not be able to force West Bengal to do what the centre perhaps wants. For example, the delay in handing over the Tin Bigha corridor to Bangladesh enclave Dhahagram and Angopota was reportedly partly due to the opposition of the West Bengal Assembly.

It may be recalled that the 30-year old Indo-Bangladesh Ganges Water Treaty of 1996 was possible because of the active participation of the then chief minister late Jyoti Basu.

Again, reportedly the interim Teesta Water Agreement with Bangladesh could not be signed until the West Bengal election was held. Transit from Bhutan and Nepal through Bangladesh involves territory of West Bengal.

The attitude of the West Bengal government toward bilateral issues with Bangladesh plays a major part in implementing whatever decisions New Delhi agrees with Bangladesh. Now that TMC, a partner of the Union Congress-led government in New Delhi, will be in power in West Bengal with the Congress, West Bengal-New Delhi relations may be on the same wavelength.

Whatever New Delhi decides may not face bottlenecks in West Bengal. It is hoped that some of the issues with Bangladesh that involve West Bengal will be resolved in the days ahead.

The writer is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

May 18

1498

Vasco da Gama reaches the port of Calicut, India.

1804

Napoleon Bonaparte is proclaimed Emperor of the French by the French Senate.

1910

The Earth passes through the tail of Comet Halley.

1950

US and Europe agree Nato aims. Twelve nations agree on a permanent defence organisation for the US and Europe.

1991

Northern Somalia declares independence from the rest of Somalia as the Republic of Somaliland but is not recognised by the international community.

2009

Sri Lankan Civil War: The LTTE are defeated by the Sri Lankan government, ending almost 26 years of fighting between the two sides.