

GROUND REALITIES

Our elections, our fears . . .

Migrant workers' ordeal

Irregularities negatively impacting the economy

BANGLADESHI workers working abroad are a very significant source of income for the country, bringing in over US \$10 billion into the economy, largely from the remittances which the workers send in from their incomes abroad. However, this large input into the economy now faces huge risks due to the exorbitant migration costs charged by the manpower agencies.

Bangladesh and some other countries are attempting to set a cap beyond which a migrant worker will not have to pay to ensure work abroad. This cap should not exceed a migrant worker's basic pay of two months. However, at the moment, the costs exceed this amount by far, reaching over Taka 1.5 lakh to 5 lakh. It should be noted that the government fixed rate is Taka 84,000. Due to these costs, workers often overstay in host countries, working illegally to recover these costs.

This situation poses a three way problem for the worker, Bangladesh and the host country. One of the suggestions to end these illegal fees imposed on migrant workers is to have employers deal with the government directly regarding recruitment matters.

Aspiring migrants undergo many financial hardships as it is in order to obtain immigration abroad. This hardship should under no circumstances be increased due to unjustified costs.

In a two day meeting held jointly by Switzerland (Chair of the Global Forum on Migration or GFMD) and Bangladesh (Chair of the Colombo Press, a regional forum of labour-sending countries) some points have been discussed. These points include numerous issues related to labour recruitment, regulations, the matching of skills, simplified process for obtaining visas, job contract validation and social protection for migrants.

We remain hopeful that these issues, which are so vital and fundamental for the Bangladesh economy may be resolved soon and that there are strict regulations which prohibit brokers from charging heavy sums from the workers.

Disappearing historical relics

Govt should step in to protect heritage

THE latest instance of utter neglect to invaluable heritage sites consists in the demolition of 368-year old three-domed Mughal era mosque with a Persian inscription near Mitford hospital in old Dhaka. Although a five-storied mosque will be built in the space, this is hardly any justification for demolishing a historical mosque. The loss to heritage far outweighs the apparent gain from the new structure which could be put up anywhere else.

Actually what worries all heritage-conscious citizens is that at least a hundred Mughal era mosques have been demolished to make room for all kinds of commercial projects. The Berai, Churihatta, Alubazar and Hizzat mosques, are only a few on a long list of lost mosques.

We are surprised at the proliferating culture of vandalising extant monuments or sites with an increasing impunity. Most of them have been under illegal occupation or left uncared for in a state of progressive dereliction or scavenged on by local folks with muscle power to put them to commercial use. What constitute the building blocks of our priceless heritage going back to centuries are lost to a huge appetite for crass commercialism.

The finger of blame cannot be pointed to urbanization because in modern states it is inclusive of protection of historical sites as an inspiring link to our rich cultural heritage. So, the blame should be placed at the doorsteps of government policy makers from time to time. They have abysmally failed to provide sustained policy backups and required financial and technical supports for the conservation and protection of historical relics. Department of archaeology has neither the equipment nor manpower to oversee historical sites having been brought under its pale, let alone thousands unrecognized ones languishing in the backyard.

There are a plenty of vulnerable Mughal era residential areas requiring to be discovered, protected, reconstructed and showcased. We applaud the survey being conducted by a group of journalists, photojournalists, experts and scholars to identify the lost heritage sites. Such committed efforts patronized by private sector should have a multiplier effect in terms of preserving our heritage.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

October 5

1789
French Revolution: Women of Paris march to Versailles in the March on Versailles to confront Louis XVI about his refusal to promulgate the decrees on the abolition of feudalism, demand bread, and have the King and his court moved to Paris.

1864
The Indian city of Calcutta is almost totally destroyed by a cyclone; 60,000 die.

1910
In a revolution in Portugal the monarchy is overthrown and a republic is declared.

1944
Suffrage is extended to women in France.

1986
Israeli secret nuclear weapons are revealed. The British newspaper The Sunday Times runs Mordechai Vanunu's story on its front page under the headline: "Revealed the secrets of Israel's nuclear arsenal".



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

WHEN an election turns out to be a foretaste of disaster, you know something is terribly wrong with society. It is a bizarre condition

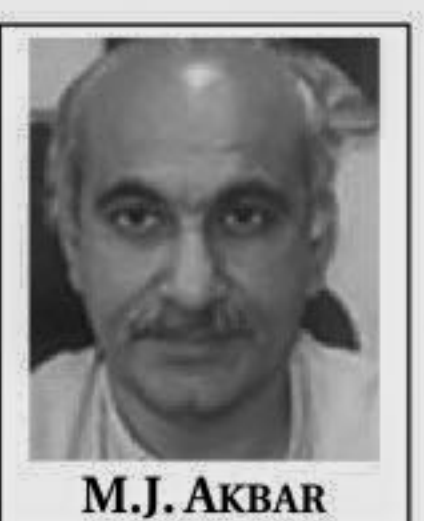
where elections, which ought to be harbingers of positive change, predict things dreadful and end up causing political crises at best and unmitigated mayhem at worst. That is the inference you draw when you reflect on the projected mayoral elections in Narayanganj at the end of this month.

With two of the nominees seeking a deployment of soldiers in the port city on election day, the inescapable assumption being that the third most powerful candidate around is or could be a threat to them, it is fair enough to suppose that much fear permeates the scene in Narayanganj at this point. It may well be that Shamim Osman will come by the Awami League's support for his candidacy. Or it could be that Selina Hayat Ivy will be the recipient of Sheikh Hasina's blessings. In the end, it is quite plausible to suppose that either Osman or Ivy will have a straight electoral confrontation with the BNP's Taimur Alam Khandakar.

That still does not give us reason for comfort. Narayanganj is too explosive a place for us to suppose that a clean election will produce an equally clean victor. With all the tales of politicians lining up their individual supporters, all of them likely armed and ferociously dedicated to their leaders, it is reasonable to suppose that conditions in the post-election period will offer little opportunity for us to sit back easy and breathe easy. In a social climate where the defeated are swiftly swooped upon, where the triumphant ones suddenly begin to believe in their immortality and are not prepared to acknowledge the truth that the sun will set someday, elections are an agonising affair.

You only have to think back on the general elections of October 2001.

BYLINE



M.J. AKBAR

THE Congress is suffering from the hammer blows of ambition on the anvil of power. The BJP has a splitting headache in expectation of power. The first is serious. The second is silly.

Indian politics is aghast at the extraordinary sight of leaders with long experience of office, like P. Chidambaram and Narendra Modi, struck by this non-partisan disease called impatience, with a subsidiary side-effect known as petulance. Chidambaram is affected by a deliberate loss of memory at a press conference; while Modi cannot recall the dates of the BJP national committee meeting. The Congress malady is serious because governance at the centre has become dysfunctional. As for the BJP, someone should inform its more aspiring leaders that the Indian voter tends to punish those who believe they have won the election before the electorate has voted.

The Congress is down, but certainly does not count itself out of the reckoning in the next general elections. Its strategy is built on five steps, linked by the logic of hope. The starting point is the generosity of the voter's memory. Congress trusts that it will be short. Second, that public anger will be assuaged by the passage of the Lokpal Bill. Some of its senior strategists even dream of receiving an endorsement from the man they first insulted and then sent to jail, Anna

Awami League supporters and members of the Hindu community, in a very large number of regions in the country, simply became refugees in their villages because the victors were out to punish them for their earlier sin of having voted for the party of their choice. Magnanimity in victory went missing. Those who lost ran for their lives.

the ministry had fallen. It was also the realisation that the wishes of the electorate had so rudely been cast to the winds.

In hindsight, the torpedoing of the 1954 election results was to be a precursor to the far greater misdeed of a nullification of the election results of December 1970. An entire political



AMDADUL HUQ/ DRIK NEWS

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There are stories, terrible stories, we remember when we speak of elections. In 1954, the triumph of the Jukto Front over a long-entrenched Muslim League opened the window to a new dawn of hope, or so we thought, for the people of Pakistan's eastern province. That dawn turned out to have been a false ray of light. Pakistan's civil-military bureaucracy swiftly went into action and soon made it hard for the new ministry headed by Sher-e-Bangla A.K. Fazlul Huq to carry on. Barely three months into office, it was brought down by a wily, Karachi-based central government. The shock was not merely that

leadership elected to govern Pakistan was denied power. That crime was followed by one even more sinister: a nation which had voted its politicians to electoral triumph was pushed into the dark depths of genocide. It was a sin which left an already weak state sundered. In the end, the irony was all: the Pakistan army's attempt to bury Bengali aspirations led to the burial of Pakistan in Bangladesh.

The point is simple: elections have by and large been messy affairs in our part of the world. At the general elections of 1973, there was absolutely no reason for Khondokar Moshtaq Ahmed, then sliding toward defeat, to

be retrieved by the government he was part of. Much calculation went into whether or not Ataur Rahman Khan should be elected to a seat in parliament. In the event, he survived.

Move on, to 1986. For all the disadvantages arrayed against it (and with the Bangladesh Nationalist Party having opted out of the voting), the Awami League seemed to be doing pretty well against General Ershad's Jatiyo Party. Perhaps a popular vote could actually eject a dictatorship from power? But then something mysterious happened. A live, direct broadcast as well as telecast of the results was stopped halfway through. The nation was told the next morning that the Awami League had lost the election.

Elections to the Chittagong mayoralty some years ago sent citizens into a state of foreboding about the results. Attempts to rig the voting were not ruled out. And so it happened that voters massed in large numbers before election offices, to make certain that no one walked away with the ballot boxes before coming up with results people had not voted for. A.B.M. Mohiuddin Chowdhury, through that popular vigilance, turned out to be a proper winner.

A rigged by-election in Magura in 1994, on the watch of an elected government, set the country rolling down the road to disaster. Politicians squabbled, a Commonwealth mediator flew in. Nothing happened, until March 1996. The caretaker form of government which had presided over the elections of February 1991 took upon its shoulders the burden of organising new elections again. The system prolonged itself, to 2001 and 2006.

The future? The ruling Awami League says elections will be safe under its supervision, without the presence of a caretaker government. The opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party refuses to buy the argument and pushes for a caretaker government to be in power when election time comes round.

Excitement builds up once more. And, with that, that certain sense of morbidity in us all.

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The certainty of uncertainty

Hazare. Third: Congress has convinced itself that corruption is not a gut issue, just a surface rash that can be massaged away with a little ameliorative balm. Fourth: the party believes that present ills can be dumped on the reputation of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, who will be eased out not because of individual culpability but because of political mismanagement. Congress also believes that any residual association with the heir, Rahul Gandhi, can be scrubbed out of public consciousness with the lather of high-profile public

from the UP elections, which Congress believes will be strong enough to propel Rahul Gandhi to the prime ministership. The key to this key is the management of expectations. Congress has, in fact, given up any hope of repeating its excellent UP performance in the general elections, when it won a rough equivalent of 120 Assembly seats. In 2012, it is prepared to declare triumph if it gets anything in the region of 60 Assembly seats, hoping to wrest them from Mayawati by focusing its attack on her. It will not be as abrasive about Mulayam

the latter in full play across the state. Priyanka will also contest the next general election from her mother Sonia's constituency, Rae Bareilly.

This is the sort of theorising that ensures a good night's sleep for Congress leaders, and persuades them to dismiss the Anna Hazare nightmare to a passing phenomenon rather than a permanent reality.

Realists within the BJP are also convinced that the impetus of their current upward mobility will depend on their performance in UP. Their minimum target is 80 seats. Both the BJP and the Congress cannot do well. The current expectation among political observers, rather than politicians, is that Mulayam, Mayawati and the smaller parties will win more than 300 seats between them, leaving around a hundred for BJP and Congress. Only one of them can be a respectable 60 or a bouncy 80.

Alas, if politicians, who live close to the grass, never know what is really going to happen in an election, columnists know even less. When the results come in, these numbers and assessments may have as little to do with facts as gossip has to do with the truth. What is relevant is that this is the speculation which is driving Congress towards its plans for the next two years, which are going to be difficult for the party even if all goes well, and disastrous if things go awry.

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What is relevant is that the speculation which is driving Congress towards its plans for the next two years, which are going to be difficult for the party even if all goes well, and disastrous if things go awry. The only thing that is certain about the UP elections and their impact on Delhi is that no one is certain.

welfare schemes, sequenced out of the Reserve Bank mint if budgetary resources prove to be inadequate. This, the fifth step, can launch the process of midterm correction after a successful Uttar Pradesh Assembly election. The turning point of the last elections, the party believes, came with the waiver of agricultural loans, although facts do not necessarily justify this conclusion: it was the urban vote which took the tally beyond 200. Nevertheless, this is the perception, and perceptions matter. The key is the expected bounce

Singh Yadav, as it needs a post-election ally.

However, it is not going to be too fussy; if Mayawati offers the better deal in terms of portfolios, Congress will align with Mayawati. Congress believes that these magic 60 seats will open the door to power in Lucknow, since no party will get a majority on its own, and it can then leverage this power to woo the electorate in preparation for the Rahul Gandhi election of 2014. Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi will be stars of the UP Assembly campaign next year, with

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