

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

Our election and them



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THE prospect of a participatory election come 2014 January is looking evermore bleak. Given the rigid stance of the two major parties on the focal issue that they had so virulently opposed or supported during its gestation, i.e. the caretaker government, a meeting of minds seems well nigh impossible.

That notwithstanding, the polls, or rather the result (if it gets to be held at all) of it has created more than the usual interest that parliamentary elections in Bangladesh generate around the world, particularly in the region. And the interest has manifested in worries in various quarters both at home and abroad, particularly within the intelligence establishment of our big neighbour.

Let us glance at the internal scenario and the likely dynamic of the impending elections. While the AL and BNP remain steadfastly firm, disregarding the dictum that in the field of politics the politicians, and in the field of battle the soldiers, can hardly risk to demonstrate their "firmness" the political wits have started predicting the outcome of the elections.

But apart from the foreseers, the two major parties seem to be quite confident of gaining a majority in the parliament although within the AL the euphoria which ushered in 2009 has given way to muted apprehension that they are more likely to be the victim of the anti-incumbent syndrome that every single party in office since 1991 has been. And that is reason enough to trouble the minds of the ruling party in particular, and of observers and the public in general.

What many people find hard to reconcile with is the prospect of a

once-reviled military dictator aspiring to cull the majority of votes, a win by default if you like, people being thoroughly disenchanted by the dismal performance of both the AL and the BNP. And General Ershad has made the fact amply clear in various forums.

It is the misgovernance of the two that he is trying to exploit. And at worst, he feels confident, he will win enough seats to be the deciding factor since neither of the two political antagonists is likely to win a clear majority. In that case, it will be for General

But not all are willing to accept such an argument, which they feel is not only facile but a very convenient cover up. Ershad is a put up, many feel, by the AL to act as the loyal opposition if they can create enough de-motivation for the BNP to boycott the polls and if the AL can somehow manage to drive the election down the throat of the nation in January 2014. It is AL's most earnest hope that the BNP would not take part in the election, some aver.

But that is not quite the scenario that the intelligence agencies in India,

It is the considered opinion of the Indian establishment that BNP has gained ground over AL in the last four years. But what is surprising is that they intuitively presume that the next Khaleda Zia government would automatically take a hostile posture towards India, and more importantly the anti-India elements who had found succor of sorts in Bangladesh during the previous BNP regime would again be the beneficiaries of the party's sponsorship, influencing the geostrategic dynamics of the Indian Northeast, particularly Assam.

While one cannot fault India for nurturing such apprehensions one is not certain whether any government in Bangladesh, whatever may be its disposition towards India, would benefit from an "indirect war" against it and whether BNP would be inclined to replicate such a "policy" the next time it finds itself in charge. But instances of "proxy war" are not new to the subcontinent and Bangladesh had suffered the ill consequence of the tribal insurgency that was supported and sustained by India.

The public mind will be influenced in the next election as much by the success of the AL-led alliance's internal policies as its foreign policy achievements. And given that our foreign policy has been heavily Indo-centric the successes or failures would come under intense scrutiny of the voters.

One wonders whether the Indian policy makers have given any thought to the reason for AL's slide in public estimation. Much of it is due to India's unfulfilled commitment and Bangladesh's eagerness to meet all of India's demands. Begum Khaleda Zia's party, should it come to power, may not be the pliant regime that the Indians found Sheikh Hasina's to be. And that, to me, is what concerns the Indians more than anything else.

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AMDADUL HUQ/DRIX NEWS

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Ershad to call the shots, and given that not principles but expediency stimulates politicians to shake hands even with the "devil" (pictures of such a convenient accommodation in 1996 with political foes is still etched in everyone's mind, except perhaps those that suffer from selective amnesia) one cannot put it past the AL or BNP to welcome the general in their fold with open arms.

who not only have an interest in who is in power in Dhaka but have a heavy stake in that, see happening. The dismay, that there may be a regime change in Dhaka in the next general elections, has been revealed in Baharati Jain's recent article in the *Times of India* titled, "India's worries could mount with Khaleda Zia's expected return to power in Bangladesh."

Critical voice missing in parliament

Opposition should shake off all excuses to join

PLAGUED by continuous session boycott by the opposition, the 9th Jatiya Sangsad or parliament has remained largely dysfunctional.

We have always felt and said as much repeatedly that opposition has had a point in complaining over a lack of its legitimate space in parliament. While even this point itself should be fittingly addressed in the House in full public glare, there is a raft of highly pressing issues crowding into the parliament over time. And these more than anything else demand the opposition's presence and participation in parliament without ado.

If they fail to see this point at this hour of national need, they are not only doing injustice to their constituents, but also committing a betrayal of public trust.

Their track record of attendance in parliament already reads very bleak: out of 319 sittings, BNP attended only 53 with its leader only eight. Why add more to the debit side?

The government could not properly handle some crucial issues of national importance like Padma bridge financing, Grameen Bank, Sonali Bank-Hall-Mark scam and conflict between Parliament and the judiciary

These issues hold out a big opportunity for the opposition to take on the government and create public opinion and put pressure on the incumbent to take judicious actions.

Why give a walkover to the government without subjecting it to criticism echoing public grievance and scoring points with the people?

In fact, the gravity of those and other issues currently affecting the common people's lives override all the opposition's logic of staying out of the House anymore.

The constitutional responsibilities apart, the opposition cannot justify its parliament boycott even on simple moral grounds. For despite its long absence, the opposition has never stopped taking the various benefits and privileges members of parliament are entitled to.

The opposition must reconcile to the fact that no reason is enough to justify their continuous boycott of the Jatiya Sangsad at this point of the parliament's tenure. It is hoped that they would be able to understand the pointlessness of their present stand and embrace the urgency of joining the parliament at once.

The noise that is Dhaka

Laws against pollution must be strictly implemented

ONE of the key characteristics of our capital is the level of noise one is exposed to. Loud construction sounds and shrill vehicle noises magnify in multitudes the chaos of over 16 million people trying to make their way around Dhaka every day, making it one of the most 'unlivable' cities in the world, according to international reports.

Noise pollution, an unfortunate but perhaps inevitable by-product of growth, has become a major social -- not to mention health -- concern in developing cities around the world. Thus it must also be dealt with as effectively. In the case of Dhaka, however, despite detailed laws to counter the problem -- such as prohibition of motor honking within a certain distance of hospitals, schools and offices, or of specified construction work in residential areas -- slack enforcement of the law allows people to flout the rules with impunity. What distinguishes noise pollution from other forms of pollution and environmental hazards is, interestingly, the fact that it is created by the direct actions of people and can be reduced drastically by greater awareness and action to follow.

While the obvious effect of noise pollution is loss of hearing, it is hardly the only one. It can aggravate everything from stress levels, headache and irritation to increased blood pressure and heart disease.

Green activists have recently demanded that mobile courts be allowed to take action against noise polluters and that the traffic department cooperate with the Department of Environment to check noise pollution in the city. Awareness campaigns may also be useful in making people more conscious about their pollution-causing activities. We urge the authorities to launch a powerful campaign on the different types of human-made pollution and to ensure that the law is strictly implemented

Road to the White House

MAHMOOD HASAN

IN less than seven weeks the most powerful nation on earth will go to polls to decide who will be the next incumbent at the White House.

Presidential election campaign has gripped the Americans following the National Conventions of the Republican Party on August 30 in Tampa, Florida and the Democratic Party on September 7 at Charlotte, North Carolina. This year the election will be held on November 6.

The American political arena is clearly divided between two parties -- the Democrats and Republicans. It is a duopoly. Yet, the presidential election is both complex and interesting.

The campaign actually began almost a year ago with caucus and primaries in each state. During this period, normally several aspirants from each party vie for the support of the delegates. The primaries are full of energetic discussions and debates on national and international issues and help in selecting the leading candidate to run for the presidency.

National Conventions, held a few weeks before the actual elections, confirm the nomination of the leading candidate. Delegates to the National Convention are selected at the state level according to rules and formulas determined by each political party's state committee.

Willard Mitt Romney (65), former governor of Massachusetts, accepted the nomination at the Republican Convention attended by more than 4,400 delegates. Romney selected Paul Ryan (42), congressman from Wisconsin, as his running mate. In the primaries, Romney ran against three other candidates -- Senator Rick Santorum, former House Speaker Newt Gingrich and Congressman Ron Paul.

The Democratic Party did not need primaries, as the incumbent president was their obvious choice for the second term. At the Democratic Convention, attended by nearly 6,000 delegates, President Barack Obama accepted the nomination for a second term in office, with Joe Biden for vice president.

The election process of the American president and vice president goes through an indirect voting system. Citizens elect an electoral college consisting of 538 electors, which in turn directly votes for the candidates. The candidate securing 270 votes (simple majority) goes to the White House.

National Convention of each party is meticulously planned by campaign strategists months ahead. They work over different aspects of the election campaign -- most importantly the "party platform," which actually is the party "manifesto." The Conventions set the character and the strategy for each running candidate. Evidently, the

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strategy focuses on how to communicate and connect with the voters.

The major issue of debate in this election is obviously the economy. President Obama inherited a battered economy when he took office in January 2009. At that time he promised to fix and revive the economy.

Now that the Conventions are over -- the two candidates, with their running mates, shall hit the road, traveling to the swing states to convince voters.

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It was interesting to watch some popular well known personalities addressing the Conventions to bolster

their candidates.

To give a boost to Romney the Republican organisers invited Sen. Rick Santorum, Sen. John McCain, Clint Eastwood (movie star), and former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice among others. It was Condoleezza who stood out as the most eloquent supporter of Romney. Strangely, former President George Bush did not attend. The themes were -- "A Better Future," "We Can Do Better," "We Can Change It."

In his acceptance speech, Romney kept harking on fixing the economy with tax cuts on the rich, and reducing spending. He did not touch upon foreign relations or the wars US is fighting

in Afghanistan and against terrorism. He did not mention why the American economy sank into recession in 2008 under George Bush, a Republican. He kept attacking Obama for not being able to revitalise the economy and create enough jobs. Romney declared that the next election would be a referendum on Obama's four years in office.

Critics commented that Romney's biggest handicap was that he was a candidate "out-of-touch elitist," who was trying to rehabilitate the discredited big businesses that caused the 2008 recession.

Speakers at the Democratic Convention had a natural advantage to rebut the attacks on Obama, since it came after the Republican Convention. Among the notable speakers were First Lady Michelle Obama and former President Bill Clinton, a master communicator, apart from the candidates themselves. The themes of the Convention were "Change," "Forward," "Four More Years," and "Middle Class First."

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

September 13

- 1948**
Deputy Prime Minister of India Vallabhbhai Patel ordered the Army to move into the Hyderabad to integrate it with Indian Union.
- 1953**
Nikita Khrushchev is appointed secretary-general of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.
- 1971**
People's Republic of China: Chairman Mao Zedong's second in command and successor Marshal Lin Biao flees the country via plane after the failure of alleged coup against Mao.
- 1993**
Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin shakes hands with PLO chairman Yasser Arafat at the White House after signing the Oslo Accords granting limited Palestinian autonomy.