

A welcome visit

GAUTAM SEN

Khaleda Zia, the leader of Bangladesh's main opposition party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), is visiting India after nearly six years at the invitation of the Indian government. Since her last visit in 2006 as Prime Minister of Bangladesh, there has been a substantial change in India-Bangladesh relations. Given the proximity of views on communal politics, their socio-cultural disposition and reckoning the historic background of affinity and cooperation between the Awami League of Bangladesh and the Congress Party of India, it was but natural that there would be an upturn in bilateral relations between the two countries with the Awami League and Sheikh Hasina in power. But the Sheikh Hasina Government went even further in its approach towards India, as has been evident on a range of issues such as facilitating transshipment of critical stores (though selectively as for example with respect to the Palaitana gas-based power project of Tripura), enabling the setting up of a number of border *haats* (markets) for the benefit of people inhabiting border areas, allowing the swapping of enclaves to go through and, above all, controlling the activities of anti-Indian north eastern militants and even nabbing and handing over some of them to the Indian authorities. It will be the endeavour of the Indian authorities to gauge the likely posture of Khaleda Zia, in the event of the BNP's return to power after January 2013, on continuation of cooperation in the areas where a large degree of mutual understanding has already been achieved.

It is interesting that Khaleda Zia's visit is taking place just after she, as the head of a BNP delegation, has returned from China. As per official declarations from the BNP's end as well as from Chinese Government sources, the visit seems to have been another occasion for reiteration of China's goodwill and commitment towards Bangladesh. China has assured Bangladesh of financial and technical support for the second Padma river bridge, development of the deep-sea port at Sonadia in the Bay of Bengal, operationalising the Chittagong-

Kunming rail link (through Myanmar, which will boost China's trade to and through Bangladesh) and also modernising the Bangladesh Armed Forces. Earlier, China-Bangladesh relations, particularly during the previous Khaleda Zia regime, were primarily politico-military in nature and derived significance when appraised in the context of China-India competition in South Asia. Nevertheless, Beijing maintained a thrust towards assisting Bangladesh in building up its infrastructure as noticeable from its earlier aid pattern including the funding of six "friendship bridges" in Bangladesh. Indian leaders will have to contend with the Chinese presence and influence while assessing Khaleda Zia's inten-



tions vis-a-vis India. At the same time, they also have to induce her to adopt a positive view on the overall benefits of all-round cooperation with India and overcome the mental block which the opposition political parties in Bangladesh have traditionally had with respect to comprehensive engagement with India.

A peaceful national election with results accepted by all the political parties of Bangladesh may augur well for India. As per past trends, polls have led to governments alternating between the Awami League and BNP. Therefore, a change of government in Bangladesh may not be unexpected if the next polls there are held properly with the confidence of that country's stakeholders. If the BNP wins by a good majority, then

the prospects of India working out a modus vivendi or a broad range of understanding over core issues of India's concern viz. control of anti-India militants in Bangladesh, trade and transit of select items from India through Bangladesh between eastern and north eastern parts of India and water sharing would be better though not necessarily assured. India will have to use all its tact to achieve this. However, an acrimonious, violent and less-than-transparent election process, even if resulting in a shaky BNP victory, will imply that the extremist and fundamentalist political elements will act as pressure groups and prevent the next BNP government from moving away from its traditional ambiguous and unfriendly

posture towards India. Indian leaders may have to convincingly convey to Khaleda Zia and her BNP party delegation their commitment towards the economic development of Bangladesh, continuation of Indian aid in different sectors of that country's economy and also on their positive intent to address the balance of trade issue, irrespective of the party in power there. In essence, India's Prime Minister will have to indicate that his government has strong political will to work with a government led by Khaleda Zia.

A second channel of dialogue at the political party level between the major parties of India and those of Bangladesh including the BNP would have been a reinforcing factor for improving relations between the two countries in the event adequate headway cannot be made at the governmental level. The problem however is that given the situation currently prevailing, the prospects of a peaceful poll with confidence of all concerned in Bangladesh is not too bright. Doing away with the institution of a caretaker government during the polls, which was earlier provided for under the Constitution of Bangladesh, has made the political situation quite volatile in that country. Nonetheless, the present dialogue between the Government of India and the BNP is welcome in the interest of both countries.

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Eid 'sensations'

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ON October 24, two days before Eid, an opinion piece published in the elite US journal Foreign Policy extolled the fact that US forces are winning in Afghanistan, adding, "Why doesn't the media notice?" In the article, the author suggests that Taliban forces are so demoralized and demoralized that they have been resigned to orchestrating "sensational attacks to give the perception [their] narrative is winning out and to reassure [their] followers."

Eid is traditionally a time to visit family and friends, and in Afghanistan it often extends into 5 or 6 days as millions of people relish this chance to reunite with folks who they care about. At the apartment of the Afghan Peace Volunteers where I am staying, we hosted many visitors over these days, including some kids from the tutoring class that usually meets at the APV apartment in the afternoons after the regular school day is done.

Some of them had come over on their way home from the Kabul zoo. For a while we had a rousing time talking about the animals at the zoo, while one of the young toddlers carried around by his older sister crawled out of her grasp to clutch a handful of almonds and raisins from the snack tray and throw them in the air.

At the same time as this visit, one of those "sensational attacks" like the ones mentioned in Foreign Policy occurred in a mosque in Faryab province. The attack came during afternoon prayers, killing 41. For the families of these 41 people, and for all the Afghan people terrorized by the fact that such attacks could happen anywhere with increasing regularity, the morale of the Taliban is scarcely relevant. Innocent Afghans continue to die, sensationally or otherwise.

It would be bad enough if the only effect of the US troop presence in Afghanistan were the increase in militant recruitment and the follow-through of increased attacks against civilian and military targets. Unfortunately, the US military is also an active participant in homicidal negligence, as the killing of 3 Ghazni farmers (a man, woman and child) in a night raid on October 29 recently showed.

NATO spokespersons call such killings accidental, if they confirm the incidents happened at all, but "accidental" murder, like "sensational" murder, is still murder, no matter what label one chooses to put on it. Afghans have been vividly aware of the consequences, since they are the ones living with them. Many wonder why the same horrid drama keeps repeating. How many times can the same mistake occur before it becomes intentional?

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US presidential elections in perspective



GEORGE FRIEDMAN

THE US presidential election will be held within few days, and if the polls are correct, the outcome will be extraordinarily close. Many say that the country has never been as deeply divided. Recently, I noted how this year's campaign is far from the most bitter and vitriolic.

Since 1820, the last year an uncontested election was held, most presidential elections have been extremely close. Lyndon B. Johnson received the largest percentage of votes any president has ever had in 1964, taking 61.5 percent of the vote. Three other presidents broke the 60 percent mark: Warren G. Harding in 1920, Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1936 and Richard Nixon in 1972.

Nine elections saw a candidate win between 55 and 60 percent of the vote: Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, Ulysses S. Grant, Theodore Roosevelt, Herbert Hoover, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Dwight D. Eisenhower and Ronald Reagan. Only Eisenhower broke 55 percent twice.

The United States not only always has had deeply divided elections, but in many cases, minority presidents. Interestingly, of the four presidents who won more than 60 percent of the vote, three are not remembered favorably: Harding, Johnson and Nixon.

Three observations follow. First, for almost 200 years the electoral process has consistently produced a division in the country never greater than 60-40 and heavily tending toward a much narrower margin. Second, when third parties had a significant impact on the election, winners won five times with 45 percent of the vote

or less. Third, in 26 US presidential elections, the winner received less than 52 percent of the vote.

Even in the most one-sided elections, nearly 40 percent of voters voted against the winner. The most popular presidents still had 40 percent of votes cast against them. All other elections took place with more than 40 percent opposition. The consistency here is striking. Even in the most extreme cases of national crisis and a weak opponent, it was impossible to rise above just over 60 percent. The built-in opposition of 40 percent, regardless of circumstances or party, has therefore persisted for almost two centuries. But except in the case of the 1860 election, the deep division did not lead to a threat to the regime. On the contrary, the regime has flourished -- again, 1860 excepted -- in spite of these persistent divisions.

The politically indifferent

Why then is the United States so deeply and persistently divided and why does this division rarely lead to unrest, let alone regime change? Let us consider this seeming paradox in light of another fact, namely, that a substantial portion of the electorate doesn't vote at all. This fact frequently is noted, usually as a sign of a decline in civic virtue. But let's look at it another way.

First, let's think of it logistically. The United States is one of the few countries that has not made Election Day a national holiday or held its presidential elections on a weekend. That means that there is work and school on Election Day in the United States. In the face of the tasks of getting the kids off to school, getting to work, picking up the kids on the way home -- all while

fighting traffic -- and then getting dinner on the table, the urgency of exercising the franchise pales. It should therefore be no surprise that older people are more likely to vote.

Low voter turnout could also indicate alienation from the system. But alienation sufficient to explain low voter turnout should have generated more unrest over two centuries. When genuine alienation was present, as in 1860, voter turnout rose and violence followed. Other than that, unrest hasn't followed presidential elections. To me, that so many people don't vote does not indicate widespread alienation as much as indifference: The outcome of the election is simply less important to many than picking up the kids from piano lessons.

It is equally plausible that low voter turnout indicates voter satisfaction with both candidates. Some have noted that Barack Obama and Mitt Romney sound less different than they portray themselves as being. Some voters might figure there is not much difference between the two and that they can therefore live with either in office.

Another explanation is that some voters feel indifferent to the president and politics in general. They don't abstain because they are alienated from the system but because they understand the system as being designed such that outcomes don't matter. The Founding Fathers' constitutional system leaves the president remarkably weak. In light of this, while politically attentive people might care who is elected, the politically indifferent might have a much shrewder evaluation of the nature of the presidency.

The role of ideologues

The United States always has had ideologues who have viewed political parties as vehicles for expressing ideologies and reshaping the country. While the ideologies have changed since Federalists faced off against Democratic-Republicans, an ideological divide always has separated the two main parties. At the same time, the ranks of the true ideologues -- those who would prefer to lose elections to winning with a platform that ran counter to their principles -- were relatively sparse. The majority of any party was never as ideologically committed as the ideologues. A Whig might have thought of himself as a member of the Whig Party when he thought of himself in political terms at all, but most of the

time he did not think of himself as political. Politics were marginal to his identity, and while he might tend to vote Whig, as one moved to less committed elements of the party, Whigs could easily switch sides.

The four elections in which presidents received 60 percent or more were all ideological and occurred at times of crisis: Johnson in 1964 defeated Barry Goldwater, a highly ideological candidate, in the aftermath of the Kennedy assassination; Roosevelt defeated Alf Landon, an anti-Roosevelt ideologue, during the depths of the Depression; Nixon defeated George McGovern, an anti-war ideologue, during the era of the Vietnam War and the anti-war challenge; and Warren G. Harding won in the wake of World War I and the latter debacles of the Wilson administration and its ideology.

Crisis tends to create the most extreme expressions of hostility to a challenging ideology and creates the broadest coalition possible, 60 percent. Meanwhile, 40 percent remain in opposition to the majority under any circumstances. To put it somewhat differently -- and now we get to the most significant point -- about 40 percent of the voting public cannot be persuaded to shift from their party under any circumstances, while about 20 percent are either persuadable or represent an unrooted voter who shifts from election to election.

The 60-40 break occurs rarely, when the ideological bent rallies the core and the national crisis allows one party to attract a larger block than normal to halt the less popular ideology. But this is the extreme of American politics; the normal election is much narrower.

This is because the ideologues in the parties fail to draw in the center. The weaker party members remain in their party's orbit and the 20 percent undecided distribute themselves fairly randomly, depending on their degree of indifference, so that the final vote depends on no more than a few percentage points shifting one way or another.

This is not a sign of massive divisions. Whereas the 60-40 elections are the moments of deepest political tension in which one side draws the center to it almost unanimously, in other elections -- particularly the large number in which the winner receives less than 55 percent of the vote (meaning that a 5 percent shift would change the outcome) -- the election is an election of relative indifference.

This is certainly not how ideologues view the election. For them, it is a struggle between light and darkness. Nor is it how the media and commentators view it. For them, it is always an election full of meaning. In reality, most elections are little remembered and decide little. Seemingly apocalyptic struggles that produce narrow margins do not represent a deeply divided country. The electoral division doesn't translate into passion for most of the voters, but into relative indifference with the recognition that here is another election "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

The fact that nearly 50 percent of the public chooses not to vote is our tipoff about the public's view of elections. That segment of the public simply doesn't care much about the outcome. The politically committed regard these people as unenlightened fools. In reality, perhaps these people know that the election really isn't nearly as important as the ideologues, media and professional politicians think it is, so they stay home.

Others vote, of course, but hardly with the intensity of the ideologues. Things the ideologues find outrageously trivial can sway the less committed. Such voters think of politics in a very different way than the ideologues do. They think of it as something that doesn't define their lives or the republic. They think of politicians as fairly indistinguishable, and they are aware that the ideological passions will melt in the face of presidential responsibility. And while they care a bit more than those who stay home, they usually do not care all that much more.

The United States has elected presidents with the narrowest of margins and presidents who had far less than a majority. In many countries, this might reveal deep divisions leading to social unrest. It doesn't mean this in the United States because while the division can be measured, it isn't very deep and by most, it will hardly be remembered.

The polls say the election will be very close. If that is true, someone will be selected late at night after Ohio makes up its mind. The passionate on the losing side will charge fraud and election stealing. The rest of the country will get up the next day and go back to work just as they did four years ago, and the republic will go on.

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