So shall you Reap

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In 1852, Karl Marx wrote an essay on the French coup that took place on December 2 the previous year. Napoléon Bonaparte had just assumed dictatorial power, the national assembly was dissolved and the French Empire saw a rebirth. Marx began the essay, *Der 18te Brumaire des Louis Napoleon* (*The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*), with: "Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce." Ironic though it may sound, 111 years after *Eighteenth Brumaire*, two leading ladies are about to prove Marx wrong. Or they already have done it.



Sheikh Hasina



Khaleda Zia

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It all goes back to the winter of 1995: a negotiated settlement over the caretaker government had failed, and the main opposition Awami League (AL) and Jamaat launched a non-cooperation movement to force Khaleda Zia-led Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) government to introduce a non-party election time government. A flurry of strikes called by the two main opposition parties crippled the country's economy. The following year, Khaleda went on with a one-sided election after the opposition MPs resigned from the parliament.

The 6th parliamentary election in which the BNP won all the 300 seats did the party more harm than good. Showing an uncompromising stance while you are in opposition might help, as it earned Khaleda a lot of respect during the anti-autocracy movement in the mid and late eighties. But for the ordinary Bangladeshis, stubborn behaviour to cling onto power is a major turnoff.

The decision to hold a one-sided election was indeed suicidal, for within four months, another general election was held, this time under a caretaker government, in which BNP bagged 116 seats, 34 short to form government. It has been a painful lesson for the party as it showed that had it not dilly-dallied over the caretaker government, it could have won 130/135 seats and forming government with Jatya Party (32 seats) wouldn't have been impossible. Bangladesh in 2013 eerily resembles its 1996 self.

The AL it seems has not learnt from the lesson that it has so famously given to the BNP. There is no denying that the party's popularity is plummeting sharply as the days pass by. A recent survey by Prothom Alo says 90 percent of ordinary Bangladeshis support reinstatement of the caretaker government system and almost the same number of people think the country's present situation is bad. In fact, the AL would have fared really well if it had reintroduced caretaker and went for snap polls in January this year--the party and its allies had the chance of winning single majority in the parliament. That possibility is running slim now. Ordinary Bangladeshis want their votes to matter; at the same time they want all the political players to be present in the electoral process.

Given the acrimony that both the parties share with each other, it will be impossible to run a government if both of them have equal presence in the cabinet. The 5+5+1 formula which suggests the formation of an interim government led by five elected MPs each from AL and BNP and Sheikh Hasina/President/Speaker as its head might fall flat because of the ever pervasive mistrust in Bangladesh politics.

In fact, the situation is graver than it used to be in 1996. A string of scandals, coupled with violence and the advent of Shahbag and Hefazat-e-Islam, have made Bangladesh look like an unsolved jigsaw puzzle, which its political actors are inept at solving. Failure of this kind is unpardonable and the politicians might not find it so pleasant when such vacuum is filled.

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