

Why did AL-backed candidates lose?

BOTTOM LINE



BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

Although the AL government can justifiably claim many substantial achievements at home and at multinational forums, those did not influence the voters. What is important is not the reality but the perception of the people.



THE results of the recent elections of mayors of four cities in the country reflected a nationwide erosion of support for the ruling Awami League (AL) party six months ahead of general elections. Even some senior ministers view the results as an ominous turn of events for the AL. Although local elections are not held on party-basis, candidates had the full support of the AL and BNP. One very significant thing is that the victorious and defeated candidates demonstrated their respect for the people's decision and the defeated candidates congratulated the winners and even embraced them. This is a very healthy sign for democracy in the country. In my view, there are several reasons for the loss. Some of them are mentioned below: First is the incumbency factor. Voters psychologically want to see a change, and one of the main reasons is that the

performance of the incumbent mayors could not satisfy the people and there were huge perceived gaps between the promises at the time of election campaign and performance when elected. The mayors were perceived as being disconnected from the people. Second, in local elections, the ruling party shows poor results because voters want to send a "wake-up" call that they are not happy with the party's performance. In Britain, when the ruling party loses local elections it takes it as a warning to improve its performance. Third, the recent polls published in some media showed that AL has lost 20% of its popularity from its peak of 48% when the parliamentary elections were held in December 2008. Therefore, it is no surprise that AL-backed candidates lost. Fourth, although local elections are ordinarily fought over local issues, the mishandling of some national issues

by the AL government appears to have had an adverse impact on the mayoral elections and many voters believe that the ruling party is not listening to them. For example, the vacillation in starting a dialogue with the opposition BNP party on the mode of the government under which the next parliamentary elections will be held in 2014 did not help the ruling party, which is perceived as "arrogant" by voters. Fifth, the mass arrests of top leaders of BNP without bail for some weeks are seen as being contrary to the spirit of multi-party democracy and were considered as harsh. The government has also failed to protect the temples and pagodas of religious minorities in the country. As a result, AL may have lost the support of the minorities. Sixth, Qawmi madrasas are privately funded. The number of such madrasas increased dramatically between 1999 and 2005, and there are reportedly about 20 thousand in the country. Hefajat-e-Islam represents the Qawmi madrasas and came up with the 13-point demand. Although, on May 3, the prime minister clarified the government's position on the 13-point demand stating that some of them could not be accepted as they were contrary to the Bangladesh Constitution, the response appeared to be too late, according to many observers. Many people who support the government on the issue feel that the prime minister was not advised properly on how to deal with the sensitive religious issue in a country where almost 90% of the people are Muslims. Many say there should have been a dialogue with the leaders of the Hefajat-e-Islam. When supporters of Hefajat-e-Islam gathered in Dhaka to press their 13-point demand on May 5, it turned out to be extremely violent and the government dealt with them firmly. The Islamists, including Hefajat-e-Islam, seem to

have been successful in branding the AL as being 'anti-Islam' for this action, and this perception worked among the voters. Seventh, Jamaat-e-Islami has been trying to project the trial of its leaders for crimes against humanity as being "revengeful" and meant to destroy the party. After the verdict by the International Crimes Tribunal, the unprecedented violence dismayed ordinary people as the government is seen to have failed to protect private and public property. Eighth, there have been a few scandals, such as share market, Sonali Bank's loans, as well as allegation of corruption-conspiracy in the Padma Bridge project, during the term of the government. In addition, the undesirable activities of some AL- allied organisations have not helped the ruling party. Although the AL government can justifiably claim many substantial achievements at home (reduction of poverty, self-sufficiency in food, empowerment of women) and at multinational forums, those did not influence the voters. What is important is not the reality but the perception of the people. However, some analysts say the loss of the mayoral candidates could turn into a positive gain for the AL because it can robustly argue that the BNP's demand for a non-party caretaker government to hold the next parliamentary elections is unjustifiable and unconstitutional as the mayoral elections were held in a free, fair and credible manner. Finally, it is important for all political parties to note what constitutional expert Sir Ivor Jennings said: "Tyrannical majority and recalcitrant minority are enemies that destroy democracy." The writer is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

TICFA: New benefits, new burdens

MAHFUZ KABIR

ON Monday, the cabinet approved the draft Ticfa -- even though the process started more than two decades back, the inter-ministerial meeting on Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) began only a decade ago. However, the entire process had been stalled due to criticism, particularly from civil society and development activists.

Perhaps the timing of the approval speaks volumes. From the strategic point of view, this agreement will bring Bangladesh-US relations to a new height. Even though Bangladesh recently conducted a few bilateral partnership dialogues with the US, there is still no formal mechanism for discussions on issues pertaining to trade and investment.

Once signed by the two countries, this agreement is expected to provide a formal space between the countries on increasing trade and investment relationships. Currently, the American Chamber of Commerce in Bangladesh and Bangladesh Chamber of Commerce US are involved in protecting business interest of the two countries, where state parties are not involved in addressing bilateral trade and investment matter.

Currently, the US is one of the largest trading partners of Bangladesh, from which the latter enjoys a huge trade surplus. In the fiscal year 2011-12 the bilateral trade volume was \$5.8 billion with the second-highest position with a trade surplus of \$4.4 billion. At the end of this fiscal year, as the data of the last eleven months show, it would be Bangladesh's third largest trading partner because of high import from India.

Nevertheless, both India and the US are likely to remain close in terms of trade volume with an estimated trade of slightly more than \$6 billion. From July 2012 to May 2013 Bangladesh exported about \$4.5 billion of RMG items to the US, of which woven garments accounted for \$3.5 bil-

lion. As the US is the largest export destination country, especially for RMG products, it is of utmost importance to secure this market to finance large trade deficit with the two giants, China and India.

The two recent major tragedies, Tazreen and Rana Plaza, that posed a big question mark over GSP facility in the US market seem to be in the background for now because of approval of Ticfa. However, the ruling party in the US is insufficiently empowered to influence decision on whether GSP will continue. But optimists would, for the time being, conclude that it would send a positive message to the US policymakers that Bangladesh is at least ready to resolve all trade related matters under a 'formal' framework.

To derive maximum benefits from Ticfa, the government should immediately form a task force including scholars, professionals and civil society members in the relevant field. It is also very important to commence national dialogue through all means -- print and electronic media, seminars and symposiums, and scholarly deliberations -- so that a national consensus can be developed regarding this extremely sensitive agreement.

As per the latest Bangladesh Bank survey report, FDI from the US was in 7th position with \$25.6 million in January-June 2012. Majority of the FDI came in the gas and petroleum sectors (\$13.5 million) followed by banking (\$8.9 million). However, the US had the second-highest position with \$696.7 million at end-June 2012 if we consider FDI.

The gas and petroleum sectors again received the highest FDI (\$521.68 million) followed by banking sector (\$123.6 million). FDI from the US is traditionally seen to be important for developing our energy sector even though it received critical attention of many local scholars and development activists.

In the latest bidding of offshore natural gas blocks, very few international oil companies participated -- Conoco-Phillips is one of them. Bangladesh's public investment in surveying and drilling offshore gas field is considered to be

economically unviable because of lack of technical ability and high uncertainty with such a huge investment.

Conversely, although the government does not allow direct investment from the country to the US, a formal government-to-government bilateral framework agreement on investment promotion and protection would help derive maximum benefit out of the US FDI in Bangladesh.

Apart from these apparent benefits, there are apprehensions regarding intellectual property rights (IPR), environmental standards, non-tariff barriers and governance issues, particularly corruption and bribery. Some of these are not very difficult to address gradually.

The major problem is the enforcement of Trade-Related

safety are being gradually addressed by the government and being adopted fairly by the firms in EPZs; the government of Bangladesh has just initiated a labour law that includes major compliance issues. But still there are many export oriented firms in which the issues are rarely taken into consideration.

Furthermore, measures to reciprocally eliminate non-tariff barriers and reduce tariff are difficult to adopt because of greater national economic interests.

Above all, there is a need for political consensus about national ownership of such an important agreement, which is largely missing in Bangladesh. Given this backdrop, the chance of deriving benefit out of such an agreement is meagre for Bangladesh, given the fact that the country is yet to work on these critical issues.

News reports reveal that the US government will consider reducing the existing high duty on Bangladesh's exports to its market. Besides saving GSP, Bangladesh must initiate preparations in the areas of tariff and non-tariff barriers through rigorous policy analysis since the government has approved the draft agreement.

It will not be an easy task for the government departments concerned to tackle the issues related to labour standards, safety, environmental standards and intellectual property since no work has been started to prepare a feasible work plan and a pragmatic timeline for them.

Thus, to derive maximum benefits from Ticfa, the government should immediately form a task force including scholars, professionals and civil society members in the relevant field. It is also very important to commence national dialogue through all means -- print and electronic media, seminars and symposiums, and scholarly deliberations -- so that a national consensus can be developed regarding this extremely sensitive agreement.

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BEETLE BAILY



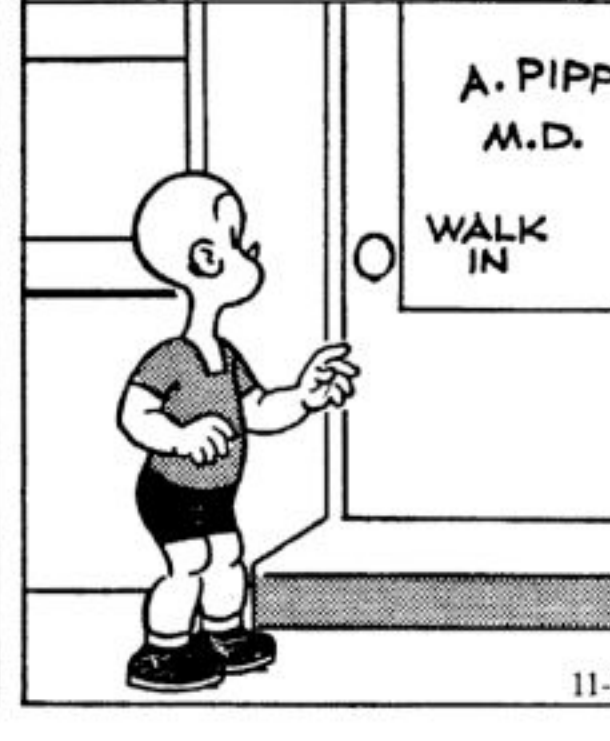
by Mort Walker



HENRY



by Don Trachte



ACROSS

1 Do arithmetic

4 Long tales

9 Stitch

12 Take to court

13 Treasure cache

14 Work with

15 Newly-weds' trip

17 Siesta

18 Chicken-king link

19 Waldorf salad ingredient

21 Floated on air

24 Remain

25 Ostrich's cousin

26 Blue

28 Ruhr Valley city

31 Tear

33 Cry loudly

35 Apiary structure

36 Boredom

38 Solidify

40 Morning moisture

41 Village People hit

43 Express sorrow for

45 Like a duck's feet

47 — Jima

48 Past

49 Wealthy one

54 Beer container

55 Over

56 Life story, for short

57 Praise in verse

Solution time: 24 mins.

DOWN

1 Fire residue

2 Pair

3 Lair

4 Fashions

5 Fleets

6 Sticky stuff

7 Acknowledges

8 Washing-ton group

9 Optimist's part of the street?

10 Jacob's brother

11 Cried

16 Dine

20 Whip

21 "The Way We —"

22 "So be it"

23 Sense of humor

27 Pooch

29 Tied

30 Mr. Gingrich

32 Foolish

34 Accept as true

37 "The — Cometh"

39 Attorney

42 Pueblo brick

44 Unruly bunch

45 Texas city

46 "Zounds!"

50 Autumn mo.

51 Honest politician

52 Martini ingredient

53 Turf

Saturday's answer 5-13

CRYPTOQUIP

AEX TNA NRR VBCHHGF HE N

QFNQJ-OCBBBCDV QETUENDR

CO AEX OGGG BCIG TNJCDV

AEXF ZUNQJBG ZUNFJBG.

Saturday's Cryptoquip:

VENOMOUS SERPENTS USED FOR CLEARING RAIN OFF A CAR WHEN SOMEONE IS DRIVING: WINDSHIELD VIPERS.

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: A equals Y

QUOTABLE Quotes

"As soon as the land of any country has all become private property, the landlords, like all other men, love to reap where they never sowed, and demand a rent even for its natural produce."

Adam Smith

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