

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
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A charged, eventful election

We congratulate the winner

AS this newspaper prepared to go to press last night, the candidate of the opposition 18-party alliance at the Gazipur City Corporation elections held a huge lead over the nominee of the ruling Awami League-led 14-party alliance. Our congratulations go to whoever ends up winning the polls.

The Awami League and the BNP developed a high stake in the election. Both the parties' prowess was concentrated on Gazipur to beat each other hands down.

From early morning, the BNP had started leveling allegations of rigging reflecting on the integrity of the conduct of the polls. On a closer scrutiny, however, most of these couldn't stand up to independent verifications. That the proceedings of a local government poll were monitored and observed by as many as 94 international observers is a marker of importance given to a consolidation of the democratic process in Bangladesh.

The voter turnout, which was expected to be around 80 percent early on, has proved to be close to 60 percent. The strong presence of women voters was a notable feature of the election.

The contestants and their supporters became combative on a scale that had not been experienced in the preceding city corporation polls. Just as there was a sense of relief at the passage of the election so is there a concern over the way electoral contests are increasingly coming to a simmering point. They are becoming very nervy affairs.

Why the blame game?

Industry should set house in order

WHEN the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) comes up with an outlandish statement pointing the finger at international politics rather than the collective failure of industry and monitoring bodies to conform to safety and labour standards, we are naturally taken aback. More than a thousand workers have died over a decade from poor safety standards, and the failure of the garments sector and the government to wake up to repeated warnings from western development partners to avoid attracting suspension of preferential treatment has now recoiled on us.

So, when BGMEA tries to gloss over its foot dragging measures in improving the risky conditions workers are forced to work in the large number of factories, the argument doesn't cut ice. Suspension of Generalised System of Preferences was to a large extent linked to workers' safety at the workplace and the right to congregate under a collective bargaining authority, i.e. the right to form unions. The pace with which reform has been initiated since the Rana Plaza building collapse has left little doubt about the sincerity of industry to bring about serious changes to prevent another Rana or Tazreen-type disaster. While we have been fortunate to have not faced a similar cap on privileges from the Europeans and the Japanese markets, nonetheless governments across Europe and Japan want to see greater compliance on these issues. At the end of the day, we must get over our national pastime of accusing external factors for problems of our own creation.

GSP suspension: Who is to blame?

ALAMGIR KHAN

THE suspension of GSP facilities by the US has prompted hot discussions in Bangladesh and elsewhere. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and opposition leader Khaleda Zia blamed each other for 'inducing' the US president to take the step. But neither the US president nor the EU would ever be prompted to make such a decision because of any statement of either of our leaders, who should be more responsible in their requests to foreign leaders.

US's suspension of GSP facilities is not only an economic decision, it is political as well. The process started in 2007 with AFL-CIO's petition for withdrawal of GSP benefits to Bangladesh on the ground of labour conditions. It gained strength with the killing of labour activist Aminul Islam and the fire accident at Tazreen Fashions. The final blow was the collapse of Rana Plaza. All these tragedies brought the poor labour conditions in the country into sharp focus.

The *New York Times* editorial on June 27 said: "Ms. Hasina has repeatedly said her government would beef up inspections and make it easier for workers to form unions, but she has not done enough to follow through. Her government recently proposed changes to the country's labour laws that would not allow workers to unionise in export-processing zones where many large factories are."

The *Economist* wrote on May 4: "Bangladesh's garment business has growing clout. The BGMEA's 4,000 members account for four of every five dollars earned from exports. And the industry is tied to the corrupt political system: at least 25 MPs have investments in the garment business."

The suspension itself is not likely to cause much harm to Bangladesh's trade, but it may prompt the EU to follow suit, and that will be a big worry for the country's policymakers. Now the government has decided to give workers full freedom to run trade union in factories. The government is hopeful of persuading the US for reinstatement of GSP.

Why can't we move forward on our own instead of waiting for others from outside to tell us to do the right thing, in this case for 4 million garment workers?

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Egypt good coup, or bad?



ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

SUNDAY POUCH

LAST week, when the Egyptian army ousted the duly elected government of President Morsi, who was just one year in office, the world was astounded. The army was careful not to join the political fray directly. It appointed the Chief Judge of the Constitutional Court, Adly Mansour, to hold power on its behalf and draft a new constitution so that free and fair elections can take place. No time limit was set to turn things round, but the Egyptian people are impatient and want to see change take place at the earliest. The clock, therefore, has started ticking.

Why did President Morsi have to go only a year after his inauguration? The answer they gave from the revolutionary Tahrir Square this time was 'everything.' His predecessor, Hosni Mubarak, who was eased out in 2011 by the army, had given them subsidised bread, cheap petrol and personal security. It was hoped that after Mubarak's departure the people would get more than what they had, and not less. Morsi would be the harbinger of change and would provide them what they were shouting for from Tahrir. They expected that at last their voices would be heard, their democratic rights restored and human rights honoured. However, under Morsi things worsened on all fronts.

Let us begin with personal security. The police were suspect because Morsi's government thought that they remained loyal to President Mubarak. They were therefore sidelined, their privileges curtailed. So they hardly attended to their duties. Street robberies, criminal activities became rampant. The people became less secure and were hesitant to go out freely.

Next, prices of essentials shot up during Morsi's presidency. There were fuel shortages, inefficiency in administration and a severe scarcity of foreign currency. The value of the Egyptian currency also fell dramatically. So, with the Egyptian economy on the slide, confidence in Morsi's government fell.

Morsi and his party were confident that as they had won the national elections, they could do whatever they felt right. It was incomprehensible to them that under democracy they are accountable for their actions to the people who voted for them. In the initial days, he had taken the bold step of dismissing many senior army officers who he thought were the hard core and would not allow him to operate freely. By doing so, he had alienated himself from the main power in the country. Then he took the foolish step of making a constitutional provision to be able to act above the law. When the people in general protested he replaced it with another provision.

Thus, he was seen to be doing 'illegal things' on his own behalf instead of looking after the crying needs of the people. The people also discovered that Morsi and his Muslim

Brotherhood displayed a dictatorial streak when taking major decisions. The people of Egypt came to believe that Morsi governed for the good of Muslim Brotherhood party only and not for the general good of the people and the country.

Unfortunately, because of Morsi's partisan approach in politics, the Egyptians soon became a people divided. He could not gain the confidence of the liberals and the secularists as well as the Coptic Christians and the intellectuals aligned to the highest seat of Islamic teaching, the Al Azhar University. He stood alone on the political platform with only his Muslim Brotherhood party. So when the Egyptian army, being already alienated, gave him an ultimatum to change things or be ousted Morsi had few options left. He and his followers could only describe his ouster by the army as a 'bad coup.'

The secularists and others, however, think otherwise. Since Morsi's politics was not an inclusive one, the army noticed that Egyptian society was being increasingly polarised. A civil-war-like condition was prevailing. 14 million people had gathered on the streets of Egypt and 50 people were killed in the ensuing troubles. These people did not consider it as a 'coup' or even an 'intervention.' It was just an 'action at the request of the people.'

So, can this changeover in Egypt be labeled as a 'good coup?' By calling it a benign one is it suggested that politicians of different hues can join hands and help the army restore civilian rule again as per their political road map? Egypt has not only to have fresh elections but it also has to build democratic institutions, democratic habits and representative bodies of civil societies. It may, therefore, be appropriate to describe it as 'atypical coup' that will put Egypt on the path to inclusive democracy.

An important question is, how are the Arab countries and big powers like the US, Russia and the European countries viewing this change-over?

The US, a longtime friend of Egypt, is in a dilemma. President Obama has expressed his "deep concern" about the Egyptian army action. But US has not dubbed it a military coup. The US has been training Egyptian soldiers and providing them with equipment for a long time now. It even has \$1.5 billion lined up this year as aid for the Egyptian military. The US had been worried about the Muslim Brotherhood coming into power last year, so it could be just good riddance as far as the US is concerned.

Saudi Arabia has formally welcomed the changeover. Embattled Assad of Syria has also done so. The UK is questioning the legitimacy of the takeover.

We can only hope that Egypt returns to the path of democracy soon. It is important that the Muslim Brotherhood do not feel that their army has 'robbed' them of power. This time round the political dispensation has to be an inclusive one, which incorporates all views and politics in Egypt. Anything short of that is not deserving of this great country in the Middle East.

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Limits of the Modi 'wave'



PRAFUL BIDWAI

PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN

INDIA'S ruling United Progressive Alliance is losing popularity by dithering on progressive measures like the land acquisition Bill, universal healthcare, and social security for unorganised workers. It has just passed a food security ordinance -- after greatly diluting the original universal food provision.

Some of these measures were promised in the Congress's 2004 manifesto. The unorganised sector commission report was ready in 2010. The food security Bill was listed in UPA-2's "first 100 days" agenda. But the UPA has been half-hearted about these pro-poor initiatives.

Equally glaring is its rightward economic lurch: more sweetheart deals for Big Business, relaxing the single-brand rule in foreign-investment retail, and raising foreign investment ceilings in defence production and the media.

Worse, it has doubled the price of Krishna-Godavari natural gas for Reliance Industries -- at the expense of power and fertiliser producers and consumers. It's claimed this will stimulate gas exploration, but experience suggests otherwise.

The government is pushing the shady Jet Airways-Etihad deal, with an unjustifiable tripling of Abu Dhabi seat quotas, which will hammer the last nail in Air-India's coffin.

Public-private partnership (PPP) projects worth a massive Rs.1.15 lakh crores are being hastily promoted, including 60 airports and unviable elevated-rail corridors. This is meant to signal "investor-friendliness" (read, private super-profits at public expense).

The government is also pushing through environmentally harmful projects, including hydropower dams of the kind that caused Uttarakhand's flood havoc.

This betrayal of the pro-*aam aadmi* growth promise will further dent the UPA's credibility, already damaged by corruption scandals, which led to the resignation of several cabinet ministers.

The UPA, deserted by the Trinamool Congress and Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, could pay a high electoral price for all this.

Ironically, the Bharatiya Janata Party, with all its bluster, has failed to exploit the situation politically. It didn't even move a no-confidence motion against the UPA. It cannot rope in mid-sized players like Mulayam Singh or Mayawati because they loathe an early election.

More important, the BJP is itself in a mess because of Narendra Modi's aggressive entry into national politics as the BJP election committee's chief. This produced a near-cataclysm. L.K. Advani dramatically resigned from party positions -- only to back down after the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh intervened, confirming its stranglehold on the BJP.

It's tempting to see this as an ignominious defeat of an old man unreconciled to the end of the BJP's Vajpayee-Advani era. But Mr. Advani succeeded on three counts. First, he infused contention and conflict into the BJP's decision to elevate Mr. Modi.

This highlighted Mr. Modi's polarising persona. Mr. Advani resigned not because he has turned secular -- he remains Hindutva-obsessed -- but because he distrusts Mr. Modi. Mr. Advani struck a chord with those who see Mr. Modi as an autocrat who doesn't respect the Sangh Parivar's disci-

pline. Mr. Modi has reduced the Gujarat RSS to a non-entity, and may undermine the Parivar nationally for personal reasons.

Second, Mr. Advani articulated the ambitions of leaders who want a say in allotting election tickets. They include Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan (who challenges Gujarat's "development" record), Chhattisgarh CM Raman Singh, and Rajasthan ex-CM Vasundhara Raje.

Third, Mr. Advani's stance precipitated the Janata Dal (United)'s departure from the National Democratic Alliance. The JD (U)'s Bihar CM Nitish Kumar has long opposed Mr. Modi, and cannot afford to lose his Muslim base, with its 17% vote-share in Bihar.

Even the Shiv Sena attacked Mr. Modi's revolting attempt to hog the Uttarakhand limelight by ludicrously claiming that he rescued 15,000 Gujarati pilgrims. The Sena is extremely wary of the BJP's attempts to woo the rival Raj Thackeray-led Maharashtra Navnirman Sena. It also carries an anti-"outsider" anti-Gujarati animus.

With the JD (U) gone, the NDA has lost its only avowedly secular, "social justice"-oriented, face. Barring the BJP, it is reduced to two religion-based parties. The NDA, in power in four states, is a pale shadow of itself. It once included 23 parties ruling in a dozen states.

Here is the greatest obstacle to Mr. Modi's Rambo-like prime ministerial bid. He personifies Neanderthal-style aggression. Yet he invokes Atal Behari Vajpayee's "soft" legacy and ability to carry along others. The two just don't go together. Mr. Modi's tall "development" claims, demolished by numerous analysts, stand rejected by the Planning Commission too.

Mr. Modi's attempt to build bridges with Muslims isn't working, witness the June 30 Gandhinagar fiasco. This was boycotted by most invited Muslim scholars. Former Sachar Committee official Syed Zafar Mahmood convincingly accused Mr. Modi of promoting anti-Muslim hatred.

Even more damaging is the CBI charge-sheet in the Ishrat Jehan case, which points to a cold-blooded "encounter killing" on Mr. Modi's watch. He cannot evade constructive responsibility for it.

The BJP can make a convincing bid for national power only if it wins about 180 Lok Sabha seats. To do this, it must raise its all-India vote-share from the present 19% to 24-25% -- an extra 25-30 million votes.

Mr. Modi will find it hard to do this with his "Gujarat model" of an already developed, highly urbanised state. Most electors don't know about it.

Consider the larger picture. The BJP is out of electoral reckoning in West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu-Puducherry, Kerala and Karnataka, which count for 170 of 543 Lok Sabha seats. It's a small player in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar (120 seats), which can deliver bulk votes. It cannot do well in the Hindi belt unless there's a Hindutva wave. That's non-existent.

The party is near saturation in its "base" states. In Chhattisgarh, it holds 10 of 11 seats. In Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh, it can at best gain marginally. It only stands to make incremental gains in Rajasthan and Delhi.

A cohesive regional-party Third Front isn't emerging. A major Left bloc could give it direction. But if the Left only wins 30-odd seats, as seems likely, it won't be effective.

India could be headed for an unstable minority government dependent on uncertain "outside" support.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Use of loudspeakers in mosques

In order to reduce noise pollution and thereby giving relief to the people living close to mosques, the Indonesia Muslim Council has recently put restriction on the use of loudspeakers in the mosques. This has been done after receiving complaints for a long time from the suffering nearby residents. In Bangladesh can't we follow the Indonesians in this respect?

Ahmed Shah
Dhanmondi, Dhaka

Khaleda's write-up

Reaz Ahmad's front page report on July 3 makes us feel that Khaleda Zia is now in a challenge. If she does not file a defamation suit against the paper in USA, then The Washington Times is right. The people of Bangladesh are waiting for her move. We should hear from her about this step, the sooner the better. Otherwise, the trust on her will fade.

No doubt, Awami League will capitalise on this sensitive matter and try to create confusion and mistrust in the voters' mind about her. Not only that, chance of getting any support from the Jatiya Party will also go down the drain. The BNP high command should be aware of the potential negative consequences of the write-up in The Washington Times.

An aware voter
One-mail

Keeping Chittagong clean

The construction work of the four-lane road from Pahartoli to Kadamtoli in Chittagong is going on very slowly creating problems for commuters, especially when it rains. Construction of roads and flyovers has become a matter of pain for the city dwellers. Traffic jam is increasing rapidly.

Mayor Manzurul Alam assumed office with the commitment that he would make the city neat and clean. What happened to his commitment?

We draw the attention of the authorities concerned to keep the city clean and free it from traffic congestion and thus save the city dwellers from more sufferings.

Rafik Alamgir
Department of English
International Islamic University Chittagong

Comments on news report "Leave it alone," published on July 4, 2013

Nds
Yes, the facts on the issue have all been collected and made public through the print and electronic media. Now it is better to leave the question of authenticity. It should be determined by the people as they like.

Nasim Hasan
Einstein said "Only two things are infinite, one is the universe and the other is human stupidity."

Samih34
No matter who wrote the article in The Washington Times, one good it did, if at all. The letter did play a part in US decision making -- the suspension of the GSP by the US has brought Bangladesh government to its feet. Let us hope that the poor workers so long deprived of most of their basic rights get benefited now.

"Don't play foul with army" (July 4, 2013)

Ahmed Zakaria
Totally confused. Wonder which is the true version. Guess we'll never know.

Manjur Rahim
Then how did Reshma get new clothes during the rescue time?

Mofi
I am concerned more about the rest of the world's reaction if really Reshma's story was fabricated. The whole nation will be known as cheat, not only the Bangladesh army. May Allah save us from this humiliation!

T. Husain
Who are those people trying to make the army controversial, Mr. Major General? And why conspiracies began right after the army got charge of the Rana Plaza rescue operation? Can you please elaborate?

"On official trip, for niece's wedding" (July 4, 2013)

Ash C.
During her first term (1996 - 2000), she flew for a six-week private visit (turned into official) to be present at the birth of her grandchild! Obviously, the entire cost of her and her entourage's stay in USA was borne by the taxpayers of Bangladesh.

Qamar
It's nothing new. It's a matter of surprise to me why their marriage expenses are not paid from the taxpayers' money.

Saleh Tanveer
Our leaders appear to believe that the national exchequer is their own private piggy bank.

Dev Saha
Pretty pathetic! Why burden taxpayers with such extravaganzas?