

Awami League missed the bus at Shahbag

HAFAEJUL ALAM

ABOUT five months before Bangladesh's tenth parliamentary poll, the Awami League-led grand alliance has suffered at the hands of BNP-led 18-party alliance in the Rajshahi, Khulna, Sylhet, Barisal and Gazipur mayoral elections. The BNP-led candidates triumphed in all those cities with unexpectedly high victory margins. This signifies that secular pro-liberation Bengali nationalist forces that represent the Joy Bangla slogan and its inherent ideals are losing ground to those that seem intent on turning the country into a political mess like Pakistan or Afghanistan.

The AL is trying to pass off the BNP alliance's victory as a triumph of democracy. For a mass-based secular party like the AL, which is the bulwark of the country's pro-liberation forces, conceding defeat of this humiliating extent and yet hailing it as a victory for democracy may not be a cogent strategy. Of course, the purpose of adopting this unusual stance could be to infuse popular confidence in the AL government's ability to conduct the parliamentary poll in a free and fair manner.

The Chittagong-based Hefajat-e-Islam that proclaims itself as the guardian of Islam in Bangladesh, along with the Jamaat and the Islamist section of the BNP, had carried out an intensive house-to-house campaign that projected Awami League and other secularists as infidels. The Islamic card had never been played as brazenly as it was in the mayoral elections. Muslim voters were told that an Awami League victory would mean the exile of Islam.

The Hefajatis conducted a robust campaign among Muslims that the young generation of secularists, who were championing the cause of Joy Bangla, were about to turn the country into a land

of atheists with AL's complicity. Reportedly, it was these groups that had carried out attacks on minorities in March and April, destroying their properties and places of worship. The Awami League was unable to counter the campaign because of its vested group who has close business and social ties with the Hefajatis and the Jamaat. It is this element in the party, that exerts pressure on AL leadership to give in to Islamist demands to buy peace.

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The AL's organisational paralysis was reflected in its poor election campaign. The grand alliance existed only in name and it has so far held no meeting since the last parliamentary poll. Some of the alliance partners, like Workers' Party chief Rashed Khan Menon, have not been accorded the respect that they feel they deserve. On the other hand, undue privileges were accorded to former President H.M. Ershad and his Jatiyo Party men, only to be betrayed at critical times of the alliance. No effort was made to highlight the government's achievements, especially its poverty-alleviation drive and the tremendous strides in the public health and power sectors, which have earned international praise.

The sins of corrupt party leaders and ministers have turned into a curse for the prime minister, and she has to bear the cross on their behalf. The anti-incumbency factor, especially the reported corrup-

tion perception involving some important ministers, stopped the World Bank from funding her government's most ambitious project: the construction of the multi-modal Padma Bridge. This has had a negative impact on voters. Also, some of the electorate reacted negatively to their heavy losses in investments in dubious companies that received huge financial support from the government. The growing divide between the AL leadership and the country's powerful civil society also helped its rivals to buttress their communal campaign. It was the civil society's campaign that had contributed substantially to the Awami League's two-thirds majority in the 2008 parliamentary poll.

However, putting down the Gonojagoron Mancha in Shahbag appears to be the final nail in the coffin of the AL-led grand alliance. Much before the rout at civic elections, AL was actually defeated at Shahbag the day it dismantled Gonojagoron Mancha, which represented the hopes and aspirations of more than 80% population of Bangladesh, and they were progressive and moderate Muslims. They never came to the street with sticks, cocktails, bombs and brickbats.

It is now obvious that some party leaders compelled the prime minister to compromise with the Islamists and turned her against her natural allies, the secularists of the Shahbag movement. The upshot was that a large section of the people, particularly the younger generation, with secular and nationalist inclinations and who used to view the AL as their ally, were alienated to the extent that they boycotted the civic poll. It's now up to the prime minister herself as to whether she will rise to the occasion and deal squarely with the portentous political situation prevailing in Bangladesh.

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Extension of high-cost rental power

ABDUL MATIN

THREE years ago, I wrote an article (DS, May 5, 2010) entitled "High-cost rental power for three years!" soon after the first two deals for rental power had been signed. In that article I argued that high-cost rental power was a stop-gap arrangement to supply emergency power for short periods only. I suggested that we should not continue with high-cost and inefficient rental power for more than one year and we should go for more efficient (50%) two-

power plants. This would have substantially reduced the amount of subsidy that has been virtually draining out our economy.

There are two important issues that need to be considered here. First, the government took no practical step to increase the power generation during 2009 except organising some abortive 'road shows' in London, New York and Singapore to attract foreign investment in the power sector. As expected, the result of the road show was zero. This aggravated the power shortage and helped to justify



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stroke slow speed diesel generators to meet emergency power. In subsequent articles, I pleaded to phase out all inefficient rental power plants and also the old gas-based steam power plants and replace them by more fuel efficient combined cycle power plants.

At that time, I could not imagine that three years later I would be writing another article on extension of the high-cost rental power contracts! The government paid huge amounts of subsidies in thousands of crores for high-cost rental power. Simultaneously, the electricity rates have also been increased to partly compensate the subsidies.

There have been two interesting studies on extension of rental power recently. The executive director of the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) said, "The government should try to phase out the rental power plants as early as possible." According to a study by CPD, the subsidy on the rental power plants in 2011-12 accounted for about 44 percent of the total subsidy to the power and energy sector. The CPD correctly identified the problem of rental power. It said, "The inefficiency of using rental plants will increase further if the government gives extension to most rental power plants without taking into consideration their level of efficiency."

According to the CPD study, the gap between installed capacity and generation has been widening over the years, from 1,004 MW in 2009 to 3,118 MW in April 2013. Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, a government funded research organisation, on the other hand, said that the government could renew its power purchase contracts with a select group of the privately run quick rental plants that were running on 'good' operational conditions. Their findings are based on the recent government estimates that the electricity generated by the quick rental power plants (QRPPs) contributed between Tk 52,093 crore and Tk 121,168 crore to the national GDP in last three years.

In a country with a huge gap between power demand and generation, any amount of electricity, no matter how it was generated, would have contributed to the national GDP. The question is at what cost we generated that electricity. The contribution to GDP would certainly have been more significant if we could generate it at much lower costs using more efficient

the introduction of high-cost QRPPs in 2010.

Second, during the last four years the government could not complete any of the planned large power plants on schedule, mainly because of difficulties in funding. As a result, the gap between the power demand and generation has widened. The delay in implementation of the large power plants is now being used as an excuse for the extension of the contracts of the rental power plants. It is obvious that the justification for both the introduction and extension of rental power is based on the failures of the government to implement the planned extension of the power generation.

When it was difficult to find finances for larger power plants, was it not imperative on the part of the government to go for smaller power plants? Perhaps, it is not too late to abandon the idea of construction of large power plants and go for smaller power plants. This will make both funding and implementation of projects much easier.

Now, if it becomes imperative to extend the contracts for rental power, it should be done only on the following conditions:

1. The purchase price of electricity should be re-negotiated taking into consideration that the plant owners have already recovered their capital investments during the last three years. The future purchase price of electricity should, therefore, consist of the fuel cost, operation and maintenance cost and reasonable profits with no component of capital charges. It is estimated that the purchase price will thus come down by about 25%.

2. Since the rental power plant owners have by now accumulated sufficient experience in operation and maintenance of power plants, they should be given the option to replace their rental power plants by more efficient combined cycle power plants (~100 MWe) in next 2-3 years. This will enable the government to sign long-term contracts (~15 years) with them. It is expected that the cost of generation of electricity and hence the purchase price from the combined cycle power plants would be lower by about 30% compared with the price of rental power.

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A question of language

MEGASTHENES

THE UN came into existence in October 1945 with 51 founding members. Article 111 of its Charter stipulated that its five texts -- in the English, French, Spanish, Russian and Chinese languages -- were equally authentic. The first three languages were -- and still are -- widely used in many countries across the world; a not unhappy legacy of colonial rule. And the former USSR and China were Permanent Members of the UN Security Council.

In 1973, by which time UN membership had grown to 135, it was decided that Arabic would be the sixth official UN language. There were cogent enough reasons for this. Arabic was the language of more than 20 States. Moreover, the most intractable peace and security issue before the UN related to the Middle East. The Arab States agreed to defray all expenses in this regard for the initial three years. The six UN languages are the first or second languages of around 2.8 billion people, and the official languages of some hundred States.

Addressing the 64th session of the UN General Assembly in 2009, the Prime Minister of Bangladesh made a forceful plea for the adoption of Bangla as the 7th official UN language. This was reiterated at the 65th and 66th General Assembly sessions. Bangla is one of the most widely spoken languages of the world. A certain historical perspective would also have weighed with the prime minister, namely the singular role of Bangla in the evolution of Bangladesh's national identity and culture. To many, Bangla has become a symbol of the power of language. The prime minister's initiative was widely welcomed in Bangladesh and by Bangla speaking peoples everywhere.

UN membership today has exceeded 190. The proposal for Bangla as a UN language suggests the possibility of similar proposals for a few other languages that meet certain criteria. German, for example, is spoken in Austria, Belgium, Germany, Luxembourg, Liechtenstein and Switzerland. Germany is the third biggest

contributor to the UN budget and an aspirant for permanent membership of the Security Council. Portuguese is spoken in Angola, Brazil, Mozambique, Portugal, Cape Verde, Equatorial Guinea, and Sao Tome and Principe. Brazil is a contender for a permanent seat in the Security Council and the tenth largest contributor to the UN budget. Hindi, Hindustani and Urdu are mutually intelligible, and spoken by a large number of people in Northern India and Pakistan. There is also Swahili, which is spoken in a num-

ber of countries in East and Central Africa, including Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Swahili is the most widely spoken African language. In the UN context, the number of countries using a language is as germane, perhaps more so, as the number of persons speaking it.

A delegate to the UN would naturally wish to articulate his concerns and views in the language of his choice, so that every nuance and emphasis of language is reflected in official documents. For the sponsoring country or countries, the recognition of its language as a UN language would also be a matter of national pride. These aspects, however, need to be weighed against some practical considerations.

The Fifth Committee of the UN General Assembly, which is concerned with Administrative and Budgetary issues, would be expected to consider relevant aspects of any proposal for a new UN language, and make recommendations to the plenary Assembly. The primary concern of the Fifth Committee would be costs. A new language would involve administrative expenses. The UN provides for simultaneous interpretation of speeches and statements from one official language into all other official languages. Official documents are printed and disseminated in all official languages. A good number of jobs thus would need to be created -- interpreters, translators and perhaps also secretarial staff. Funding and finances have often enough been a constraint for the UN. The Committee would have to be satisfied that a new language would give good value for money, and there are two related aspects in this regard.

First an obvious -- and pivotal -- question. Would the new language enhance or bear upon the UN's performance in any manner. Would benefits, concrete or political, accrue to the UN and its Member-States.

And secondly, would it significantly impact on the sponsoring State's role or participation in UN activities. No one has seriously sought to argue that another UN language would enhance the UN's performance in any way. By the same token, it does not quite follow that the adoption of Swahili, for example, as a UN language will make for a more dynamic or high profile UN role for Swahili-speaking countries like Tanzania or Kenya. A new UN language could, of course, result in some benefits for States that use it. According to one estimate, the annual cost of adding Bangla as a UN language would be \$55 million. The jobs that would be created should mostly be filled by Bangladeshis and Indians from the State of West Bengal. This, however, is largely an academic issue at present, and will remain so until and unless Bangla does become a UN language. Yet another language is not a priority issue for the UN at this time, and all things considered, it does not seem very likely that there will be an addition or additions to the roster of UN official languages any time soon.

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CROSSWORD puzzle grid with clues for Across and Down sections.

CRYPTOQUIP puzzle with a grid and a clue: 'Yesterday's Cryptoquip: A FROZEN SCULPTURE I MADE ENDED UP BEING SO DAZZLINGLY BEAUTIFUL, I COULDN'T BELIEVE ME ICE! Today's Cryptoquip Clue: H equals L'

BEETLE BAILY and HENRY comic strips by Mort Walker and Don Trachte.

QUOTABLE Quotes section featuring a quote by J.K. Rowling: 'We are only as strong as we are united, as weak as we are divided.'