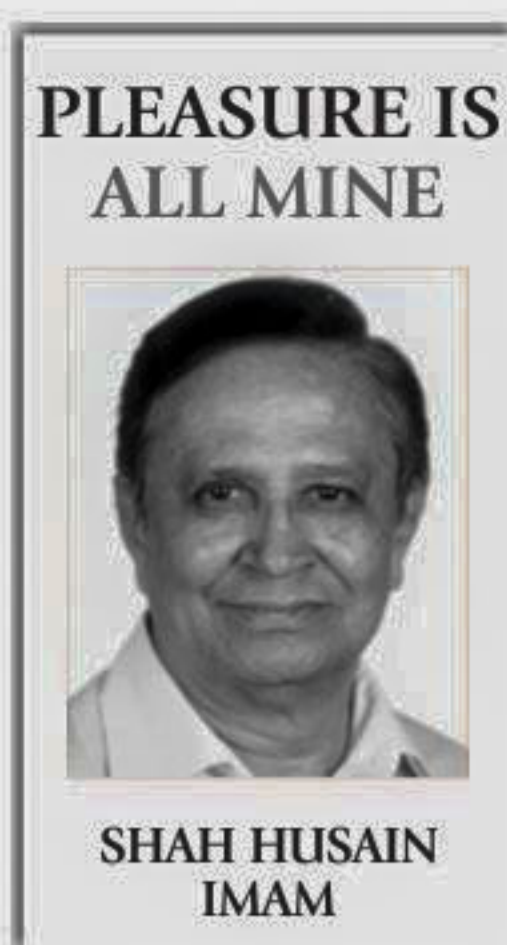


A learning curve for AL and BNP

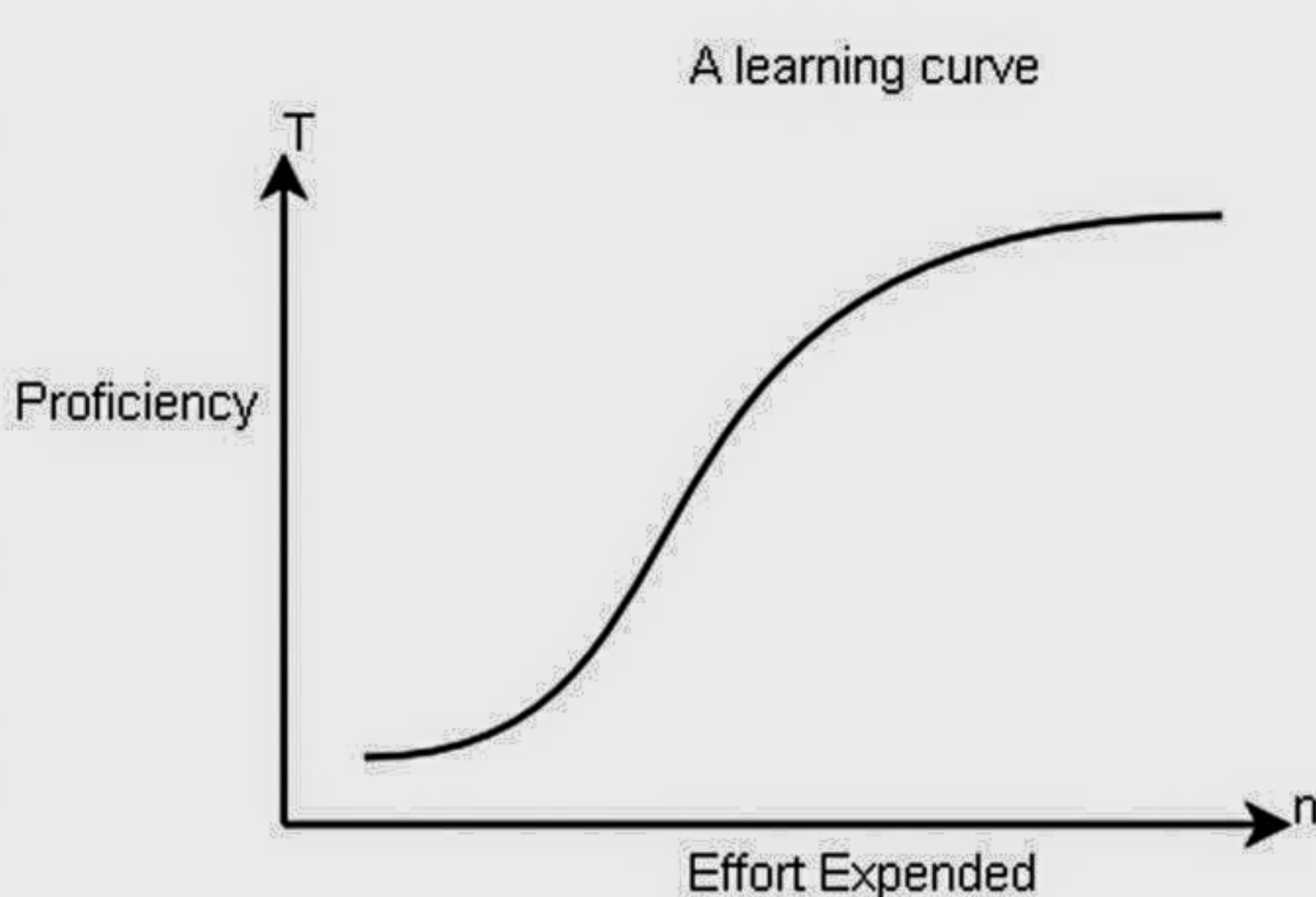


PLEASURE IS ALL MINE
SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

NORMALLY, reactions are calibrated to the level of a contest, and collateral damage to the losing side is by definition supposed to be peripheral. These two rules, however, do not apply to the consequences of Gazipur City Corporation election. A local government election and its results have both been hyped beyond their given calibrations. It acquired all the patina and trappings of a national event, played out more in desperation than with a panache. And the damage wreaked on the ruling party is neither peripheral nor incidental, rather it has hurt the mainstream image of the AL.

What stock-in trade the principal protagonists are left with? Where do they go from here in raising their stocks with the public? Is the AL licking the wounds and thinking of damage control and course correction and the BNP radiating confidence for the future from a political corner it had been holed up in?

You separate the chafe from the grain and this is what you find: For both parties the election outcome was something of a surprise. The AL was stupefied by the landslide victory of the opponent in Gazipur, touted a secure ruling



The two-party system may have been a boon in the USA and Great Britain but it has proved to be a bane for us. The national electoral outcomes have always been rejected by the vanquished, even though the polls were held under a caretaker system. The distrust that descends on the political culture immediately on the back of an election goes on ruling the roost of the shape of politics, governance and economy of the country for a full tenure of a parliament and a government.

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a caretaker system. The distrust that descends on the political culture immediately on the back of an election goes on ruling the roost in shaping politics, governance and economy of the country for a full tenure of a parliament and a government. Non-cooperating ruling party and denial of space to the opposition and oppression of dissenting voice by the ruling party have hollowed out what is in effect an election-only democracy.

There is a glimpse of hope from realignments between like-minded political groups trying to create a platform with a third voice. The amalgamation of splinter groups that are being cobbled up under some reputable persons is peeping under the radar. It is time people's faith with the traditional parties be complemented by a coalition of social forces as a balancing factor in national politics.

works better particularly where the vote banks are almost evenly shared by the two major political forces.

The prospect of independent candidates is somewhat circumscribed by the fact that an aspirant will have to procure signatures of one percent of the electorate of a constituency he or she intends to contest for.

Given the internal squabbles in the parties there are likely to be a large number of persons who would be frustrated in their bids for electoral tickets from major political parties. Usually, they take on the label of 'rebellious candidates' who when they stood for election fared reasonably well. This bit of opening too is being closed down. As I had pointed out in an earlier piece: "An amendment to the RPO is on the anvil. With this tool, rebellious candidature will be prohibited for the parliamentary elections. Both the submission of nomination and withdrawal of candidature will rest entirely with the party and not with the individual or his agent. In other words, whoever would be nominated by the party will be only able to contest. The government and the EC appear to be on the same page about this. The obvious implication of this will be the impingement on the right to contest which is the other side of the coin -- the right to franchise. As in Article 70 of the Constitution trampling dissent over party whip, the same attitude of total control is being reflected on the proposed amendment to the RPO."

With that I rest my case.

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Ill-prepared fight for liberal values

SULTAN MOHAMMED ZAKARIA

AWAMI League-backed candidates lost five city corporation polls. Losing in an election is not unusual in a democracy and of course not the end of the story. Today's losers are tomorrow's winners. That is the motto of democratic elections. But as usual, every election leaves a 'long trail' from which one must dig out the real causes behind winning and losing. This is also a healthy practice that offers opportunity for both, the winner and the loser, to look back at their strategy and revise it, if necessary.

Let us diagnose the recently-held city election results. Ruling Awami League claims that it has delivered on a lot of its promises and is not lagging far behind on other promises. Its opponents deny such claims and suggest that the ruling party failed to keep the promises it made to the nation and did everything wrong. Certainly, neither side is right in its assertion. Of course, there are failures as well as successes. It might be 50-50, or 60-40, or even 40-60. The question is how you reach out to your electorate with the right kind of message which they will keep in mind before they stamp the candidate's symbol in the polling booth.

The media plays the most crucial role in delivering messages and influencing the consent of the voters. Noam Chomsky argued that 'yes' consent can be 'manufactured.' Civil Society, through its independent voice, also plays a pivotal role in educating the public on important issues. But what matter most in a democracy are the grassroots political workers who have the important role of going door-to-door to the electorates, giving them the right (or wrong) kind of information as per their election strategy, and many a times taking the voter to a polling booth. They are a big factor in influencing opinion at the ground level.

Awami League is said to have the strongest political organisation which extends to the grassroots and is blessed with many dedicated and devoted party activists. BNP, too, does not lag far behind. Since 1991, both AL and BNP enjoyed two-terms in power, and voters are well aware of their record in office. Both have serious allegations of widespread corruption, squandering public money, and mal-governance against them. The degree might vary but most agree that many of the allegations are true.

Therefore, it would be unusual for voters to show preference for either of these two parties -- no matter

how good they pretend to be, people have their score cards of two decades. The five city corporation polls had to be analysed in this context. Did Awami League so far deliver up to the expectation? The answer will be 'no.' Did BNP deliver last time? The answer is again 'no' (if it had, it would probably have

fronted Jamaat and Hefajat, then the scenario would be that despite the bad governance of AL it would still remain competitive and, given their image, most of its candidates would be reelected. This is because, BNP, the main competitor, also bears the stigma of corruption and mal-governance.



STAR

The results are certainly a big lesson for the political parties. If neither the party leaders nor the workers deliver good governance, preaching honesty and moral values will not be convincing to the electorate; nor will it be easy to correct the wrong acts of the past.

made a comeback). Will BNP deliver if voted to power next time? About this, the people are ever sceptical.

This being the case, it would be fair to assume that the voters, in choosing who to vote for, will focus on candidates and their track records rather than decide along party line. However, this logic did not apply in city elections. As media reports suggest, most of the losing candidates (from the ruling party) were better than their counterparts. Here lies the big question. Then, what else influenced the elections? The answer will be seemingly the religion card. The results suggest that Hefajat and Jamaat were able to successfully reach out to the 'independent' voters by labeling Awami League an anti-Islamic force. Why could not the ruling party and its candidates defend themselves against what they believed was a smear-campaign that severely hurt their election campaign? The answer to this question may provide us an insight on how the Hefajat-Jamaat campaign was apparently so successful.

Let us assume that Awami League had not con-

fronted Jamaat and Hefajat, then the scenario would be that despite the bad governance of AL it would still remain competitive and, given their image, most of its candidates would be reelected. This is because, BNP, the main competitor, also bears the stigma of corruption and mal-governance.

Let us recall the reelection of Mizanur Rahman Minu in Rajshahi City Corporation election during the last BNP regime. Despite being heavily criticised for massive corruption, rise of religious extremism, torturing of the then opposition activists and minorities, Minu managed to stay competitive and won the election. It is a lesson for AL that if it can't rein-in the party thugs, and cannot deliver on governance, then confronting idealists and fundamentalists will only significantly compound its woes and influence the election outcomes.

AL is now facing a dilemma. Despite, its higher scores on many economic indicators in comparison with the last BNP regime, the religion card has been really hurting its prospect. BNP's political network is not better equipped than that of AL's, it cannot also outsmart AL in corruption allegation, and its party rank and file are also as de-motivated as their counterpart's. These factors would allow AL to fight neck-and-neck, and sometimes with some leverage.

However, although BNP doesn't have the moral standing to seriously question AL's mal-governance issues because of its own pitfalls, the religious extremists have the fullest motivation to pursue a deadly and dedicated campaign against AL. To face such an organised and dedicated campaign at the grassroots level, Awami League's grassroots workers no longer appear to be strong enough. While AL workers can effectively be at par with BNP workers, there isn't much qualitative difference between them.

The results are certainly a big lesson for the political parties. If neither the party leaders nor the workers deliver good governance, preaching honesty and moral values will not be convincing to the electorate; nor will it be easy to correct the wrong acts of the past. Taking on the extremists will also be difficult. Once the people's trust is lost, big talk on big ideas (secularism, morality, spirit of liberation, which are good and real causes) will only hurt those real causes and undermine our national pride.

The writer is a political analyst and researcher at the Institute of Governance Studies, BRAC University.

Go with the flow

HUMOROUSLY YOURS



NAVEED MAHBUB

BE proud of our engineering feats. We take an ordinary building and turn it into a residence, office, hospital, school, university, bank, restaurant, embassy, or even a Yaba factory. The bedroom where you are chilling out at today, can be a vice chancellor's office tomorrow, or the operating theater of a complex vasectomy operation the day after. Thank you, urbanisation.

We take our kids to the countryside. They get out of the car. They scream, "Baba! What is that?" "It's grass..." Thank you, concrete jungle.

I get a clean shave and start from Gulshan-2. By the time I reach Gulshan-1, I look like Haider Hossain. Thank you, traffic jam.

I don't even bother about where I want to go. I just go with the flow -- I throw myself on to traffic and let it take me wherever it wants to take me.

"Naveed! I wasn't expecting to see you at my office!"

"Oh, neither was I. The traffic brought me here."

If you live in Gulshan and your girl friend in Banani, it's a long distance relationship.

There was a time when parents were reluctant to have their daughters married off to men living far away in the US. Now, if the girl lives in Dhanmondi and the boy in Muhammadpur, the parents of the girl are reluctant for the same reason.

I hate sitting in the car during a traffic jam. It's a big blow to my ego to see pedestrians go faster than myself.

In traffic, we are all too close to each other for comfort. In fact, I make sure I brush my teeth and use a good deodorant.

This is one time I wished I had a flag car. I would feel like Moses with the traffic parting like the Red Sea.

Ok, it's not that I always mind waiting in traffic. It's just that, if I really have to wait for two hours in a line (if we call it a line at all), I hope there's a buffet at the end.

But it is the most consistent thing in our inconsistent days. So, being late for traffic is the lamest of all excuses. If you have an appointment at 10am on Thursday, start at 9am... Tuesday.

Interesting that we actually have traffic reports on radio. That's another consistent news. In fact, if the radio reports of no traffic, that is cause for alarm, especially if there is a haltal the following day.

Time to stop complaining. Let us not forget that Bangladesh is in its middle ages. The arteries are clogged with CNG cholesterol and Toyota triglycerides. Triple bypass already underway -- Jatrabari, Kuril and Mouchak. Give it time to heal, as with any mega city. Why complain here when we smile while posing for a photo at Times Square and 42nd Street of the Big Apple with a squadron of yellow cabs behind us?

Still grumbling? Here's a piece of good news. Dhaka City Corporation was divided into two -- North Dhaka and South Dhaka. So, to go from one city to the other, it now takes only three hours.

Till the traffic wanes, do be careful on the streets. Remember, 90% of the people on the streets are born by accident.

The writer is an engineer & CEO turned comedian (by choice) and the host of NTV's Gamephone Presents The Naveed Mahbub Show.

ACROSS

- Autumn mo.
- Healthy
- Dairy item
- Breckinridge
- Drag along
- That girl
- Quite some time
- Shrek is one
- Remiss
- Flattery
- Eye-related
- Marry
- Hen pen
- Famous
- Flowering vine
- Clinton veep
- Standard
- Billow
- Watch chain
- Sister of Osiris
- Grump
- Eighth Greek letter
- Flip

DOWN

- Norway's capital
- Fellow
- Libretto
- Team animals?
- Ever-green type
- Caviar, really
- Aye the start
- Frank
- Khan
- Web address
- Albanian money
- Vail gear
- On in years
- Lemieux
- Piece of work
- 1992
- Libretto
- Team animals?
- Bean curd
- Cupid's alias
- Society newbies
- Skewer
- Launder
- One of HOMES
- Chills and fever
- Dutch Renaissance scholar
- Coffee break hour
- Audio-philie's setup
- Expert
- Joan of --
- Weaponry
- Loosen
- Catch
- handed the color
- Changed
- Hot tub
- Painter's medium
- Last (Abbr.)
- "A mouse!"
- Blackbird

CRYPTOQUIP

Y B I B U A N M D U B F Y A E B C
T B F A N B L A D U B P E Q L B L D T W B I A
C B F N A P K A E F J F Y A K F N

Solution time: 21 mins.

OPED ASIA BINA
LOLLI TIONS EON
DEFENDANT FUN
REEK RHONE
LODGE VIOL
OBEY TRADEINS
SOBS QUOTE AUK
SIEZ QUOTES ONLY
GO GOK TITLE
BACON POOL
AKA DEODORANT
BIN AGED IRON
ANT MOMS GENT

Yesterday's answer: 6-5

BEETLE BAILY by Mort Walker

HENRY by Don Trachte

QUOTABLE Quotes

"One of the penalties for refusing to participate in politics is that you end up being governed by your inferiors."

Plato