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The Way Out

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Bangladesh is now standing at a crossroads. In fact, it stands now where it was before the 1/11 government took over in 2007. The country's stability is precariously hanging in the balance and the chance of a peaceful handover of power is increasingly looking slim. It all goes back to the abolishing of the caretaker government (CTG) system, which has presented the country with four free and fair elections. The absence of the CTG and the presence of bitter acrimony and mistrust between both the major parties mean an election without the participation of Awami League (AL) and BNP will not be acceptable to the country's political players.

Actually, a one-sided election, without the BNP and with deposed dictator's Jatya Party (JP) onboard, has always been a possibility. But the chance of the AL government holding such polls has melted into thin air when the party has been trounced in the five city elections this month. A case in point is Gazipur where even Ershad's last minute support did not come handy for the AL candidate. The election has been a big blow for the AL, and some commentators have rightly said that the results of Gazipur polls did to AL what the BNP's months-long violent agitation could not do--it destroyed the former's morale, rendering an ignoramus defeat to the ruling party.



PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

But the worst affected is perhaps Ershad. Gazipur is an example that the former military strongman will not be a big help in Bangladesh's future politics. That an Ershad supported candidate has lost over 100,000 votes in an election where thousands of voters were from his support bases like Kurigram and Rangpur should be a matter of grave concern for the JP chief. To make matters even more grievous, he cannot leave AL led Mohajote now for cases are pending with the court where he might be sent to prison again. That is a dangerous possibility for the 83-year old.

The JP, as a newspaper has said, is tittering on the border of a split, with three factions armed to the teeth to break the party along their ideological line. Ershad's plan to rope in Anwar Hossain Manju and his faction of the JP has fallen flat it seems, and the former President, in his speeches, is putting emphasis on keeping the party's unity intact. Ershad might try to break away from Mohajote at the fag end of the government's tenure to forge a strategic partnership with the BNP. It might not be an alliance per se, but Ershad might try to form his own block with like minded small parties and it will not be surprising to see BNP and JP working together from their own platforms.

Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), faced with war crimes trial and an unofficial ban, now seems to be on its knees. The violent agitation that it has orchestrated after Delwar Hossain Sayeedi was awarded death penalty for crimes against humanity has not been replicated after other war crimes verdict. It will not be surprising if the BNP tells Jamaat to leave the 18-Party-Alliance to contest the polls on its own. Having said that, one cannot really tell if the BNP will unofficially leave 8/10 seats for its long time junior partners in the coming election. It will be interesting to see how JI reacts to any future hanging (if and when there is one). More intriguing perhaps are the reasons why a supposed talk (as reported by two newspapers) between the party and an AL representative has fallen flat. We can only guess. Reluctant bedfellows?

Turning back to the AL, the possibility of a credible one-sided election boycotted by the BNP is gone, especially after the five city polls. Taking advantage of a loophole in the constitution and remaining in power for an extended period through declaring emergency will be suicidal for the party that is the vanguard of democracy and rule of law in the country. The AL should sit with the BNP to find a way out of the mess. The only way out lies in holding a meaningful dialogue before the election. The sooner the better. ■

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