

Hartal politics and examination results

M. NIAZ ASADULLAH

AROUND the world, children's education suffers in conflict-prone areas, particularly in countries in Africa, the Middle-East and Central Asia. Although Bangladesh is not affected by civil wars and violent conflict, we have an unusual domestic situation of our own making. Each year, a number of *hartals* strike the school calendar. Streets become war zones, forcing students to stay at home, leaving classrooms empty. Alongside the business community, children also bear the brunt of *hartal*.

When announcing the results of this year's HSC examination Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was therefore quick to blame BNP and Jamaat for this year's "poor" and "unexpected" results. In the general stream, pass rate went down from 76.5% in 2012 to 71.3% in 2013. The combined (general, technical and madrasa education) pass rate also fell by 4.37 percentage points. According to the PM, more students would have passed if the opposition had not enforced *hartals*. Given the timing and frequency of *hartals* this year, her accusation doesn't seem unreasonable.

The opposition on the other hand exchanged verbal invectives and blamed AL for messing with the education system. The acting secretary general of BNP stated that the dip in pass rate reflected a downfall in education quality. His remark did not go unnoticed. The education minister stood firmly by the PM and was prompt to demand an apology from Mirza Fakhrul for mocking the students. Thankfully, this war of words did not go far. BNP showed restraints by not retaliating with another *hartal* over "poor" HSC results!

Our politicians rarely lock horns on issues that matter for the country. On this occasion, they have brought several important topics to public attention.

Analysis of periodic data on *hartals* in Bangladesh shows two patterns. First, we experience more *hartals* in pre-election years. Second, the overall number of *hartals* at the national level increased steeply between 1991 and 2006. However, compared to past political regimes, 2009-2013 has seen fewer *hartals*. It

may seem that the incumbent government has succeeded in fighting *hartals* by introducing additional public exams during its tenure: PSC and JSC. Together with SSC and HSC, four public exams may have led to a *hartal* squeeze. Unfortunately, there is nothing in the data to suggest sensitisation of *hartal* timing. According to the education minister, as many as 32 public examinations had to be rescheduled this year because of *hartal*.

Year and month-wise information on *hartal* is hard to come by. According to a UNDP report published in 2005, both major political parties -- BAL and BNP -- have been equally active in using *hartals* as a means of political protest. During 1991-2000, 67 national *hartals* were called by the AL, while the BNP called 61. We lost 173 days during 2001-2006 when AL was in opposition. During 2009-2011, on the other hand, 17 days were lost to *hartal*; the figures for 2012 and 2013 are 29 and 36 days respectively.

If AL is right in blaming this year's low pass rate on *hartals*, we would expect a higher pass rate in years that were less affected. When combined with data on *hartals*, a number of patterns can be detected from an analysis of public exam results. First, pass rate grew steadily throughout 2001-2006, a period when there was the highest number of *hartals*. This is true for both SSC and HSC results. SSC pass rate grew from 35% in 2001 to 59% by 2006 whilst

the figures for HSC were 28% and 69% respectively. Second, SSC pass rate increased throughout 2009-2013 showing little sensitivity to *hartal*. Pass rate in madrasa (Dakhil) exam also registered an increase this year. In Alim (HSC-equivalent) exam, madrasas also enjoyed consistently high pass rate in 2012 and 2013. Third, the frequency of *hartal* increases in pre-

2013. Such high pass rates make little sense given the poor quality of our primary and secondary schools.

It is hard to explain away year-to-year fluctuation in public exam results solely in terms of days lost to *hartals*. Even then, the latter should be phased out. There is no room for marathon closure of schools if we are serious about educating our youths.

Compared to other developing countries, Bangladeshi schools already suffer from very low teacher student contact hours. At the same time, the buck should not stop with *hartal*. Low classroom contact hour is because of a host of governance related reasons that have little to do with *hartal*. Fixing them and making schooling a valued experience is the most potent strategy to mobilise public opinion against frequent closures of educational institutions on political grounds.

As a student of Dhaka College during 1991-1993, I barely remember attending classes. My HSC "education" had very little to do with what happened inside lecture rooms in Dhaka College. Classes were irregular (because of absent teachers) and/or often ended prematurely or remained suspended (because of political events). None of these bothered my classmates. For us, hours spent studying at home mattered most, aided by an army of well-paid private tutors.

For many students, school closures in

Bangladesh still do not mean much as far as public examinations performance is concerned. Their preparation takes place in private setting, in close supervision of a competent tutor at home or in a coaching centre. But this opportunity is limited to better-off, urban students. Poor school attendance does not hold them back from appearing in exams. At the same time, for rural students who rely on lessons imparted in schools and colleges, *hartal*-induced closure may matter significantly. Therefore, alongside continuous social campaign against *hartal*, we must demand an education system from the government that is accountable to parents and students and functional in two dimensions: (a) enough classroom time and (b) learning centred activities inside the classroom.

With the national election around the corner, Bangladeshi parents want to see a clear commitment to educational reform in the manifesto of all political parties. The starting point should be a shift of focus away from narrow indicators such as pass rate in public exam. Issues that need to be prioritised include implementation of a competency based curriculum, tackling teacher truancy, reducing double-shift operation of schools/colleges and proper training of teachers before changing the curriculum and the examination process (both exam paper formulation and marking of exam scripts).

Reform attempts must not be rushed. Although nearly half a million secondary school teachers have been trained on 'creative' question method during the current government's tenure, questions remain over the quality of training provided. We need to learn from past mistakes (e.g. using multiple-choice question test bank for SSC exam in the late 1990s) and be prepared to abandon failed policy measures. Through field research and careful piloting, effective reform measures should be identified so that students do not suffer from poorly executed policy experiments.

The writer teaches economics at Reading University, UK. He is currently visiting Brac as a Distinguished Fellow and Brac University (the Institute of Governance Studies) as a Senior Fellow.

E-mail: m.asadullah@reading.ac.uk



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/election years (e.g. 1995/6, 2005/6, 2013). But so does the political incentive to deliver favourable education statistics to appease the voters.

The sharp jump in pass rate in all national exams in 2006, arguably the most violent year in Bangladesh's recent political history, is a case in point. SSC pass rate jumped from 52% to 59% between 2005 and 2006 whilst HSC pass rate shot from 59% to 64%. Similar jumps are visible in this year's SSC and PSC results. As a matter of fact, SSC pass rate crossed all past records by reaching a record high of 89.72% in

DYNASTIC POLITICS

Rocky road ahead for the new entrant

MOZAMMEL H. KHAN

THERE are many Bangladeshis, living either at home or abroad, who are devoted to the values of our Liberation War, albeit most of them have no affiliation with the AL party or acquaintanceship with the party bosses. Many of them have, over the years, pointed to the lapses of the AL government.

These people, mostly academics, litterateurs, freedom fighters (who joined the war out of conviction), and cultural personalities and activists are the natural allies of AL. They are both boon and bane for the party. This observation will make sense if one takes look at the political landscape the Harvard educated grandson of the most illustrious son ever born in this soil is plunging himself into.

The fact that his political opponent is someone by the name of Tareque Rahman is both a challenge and an opportunity for Joy. Tareque Rahman is known both nationally and internationally, in the words of a former US envoy, for his "egregious political corruption and violent politics" which is a challenge for Joy to prove that he is different.

Tareque's father, despite criticisms of his politics was known for his personal honesty. Tareque inherited none the qualities for which his father is still held in esteem even by his bitter critics. A former diplomat and adviser to the BNP chairperson confided to me how he fell from grace of the party after giving advice to Tareque to follow in the footsteps of his father, which was to become a politician only and not a businessman at the same time.

Though it is true that Joy did not create a 'Hawa Bhaban' while his mother has been at the helm of the state, there remain many unanswered questions about the alleged wrongful financial involvement of Joy. A case in point could be an item in some news dailies on July 9 that read: "A Dhaka court yesterday

acquitted Amar Desh acting editor Mahmudur Rahman and two others in a defamation case filed by the prime minister's Energy Adviser Tawfiq-e-Elahi Chowdhury. The court passed the acquittal order as Tawfiq did not appear before it for seven consecutive dates of proceedings. According to the report, Tawfiq and Joy took a bribe of \$5 million from the American energy giant Chevron, promising to award it a gas compressor station project." If the report was not true, why didn't the adviser attend the court proceedings and prove it? Except for the blind supporters of the adviser and Joy, how would a common citizen interpret his nonattendance of court proceedings and the subsequent acquittal of the accused?

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The party has no publicity wing, an indispensable organ to tell the people about the accomplishments of the government, let alone a propaganda wing.

If one looks at the auxiliary wings of the two big parties, one would need a microscope to see any difference between the 'Dals' and the 'Leagues.' At the so-called 'intellectual' level, Tareque enjoys an overwhelming advantage over Joy. BNP's nationalist 'intellectuals,' most of whom are former pro-Chinese ultra-leftists, which propelled many of them even to align with the wrong side of our history in 1971, are solidly behind Tareque.

Joy had better not rely on the support of the 'natural allies' of AL, let alone former vice-chancellor or professor belonging to the 'natural allies' group.

The writer is the Convenor of the Canadian Committee for Human Rights and Democracy in Bangladesh.

POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE



SALEEMUL HUQ

Even though people may not (yet) believe that these events are due to human induced climate change, they cannot deny the reality (and devastation) of the events themselves, and hence more and more sensible people (specially the educated young people) are willing to accept that precautionary measures to prevent damage from such events in future should be supported.

I have just spent several weeks in various parts of the United States of America meeting with scientists, journalists, senior government officials and ordinary citizens. I have also been following the daily electronic, print and social media about news coverage of climate change.

I am giving below my view of where I think the US is on the topic of climate change and what it is prepared to do to tackle it.

My first impression is, surprisingly for me, one of a greater sense of optimism than I have had for a long time. This does not mean that the US has turned the corner on recognising the scale of the problem and its responsibilities towards leading a global response, but the wind is definitely beginning to blow in the right direction. Below are a few elements to support my sense of optimism.

It is very clear that President Obama and his team of senior advisers all accept the scale of the climate change problem and recognise the US's responsibilities. This is in stark contrast to his predecessor President Bush who refused to take any significant action for eight years. During President Obama's first term of office he tried to bring Congress on board towards a national response to tackling climate change, which proved to be unsuccessful. So in his second term he has decided to take whatever action he can by executive order and without requiring Congressional approval. While I have criticised his Climate Action Plan as being too little too late (when compared to the scale of the problem that has to be tackled), I must acknowledge that it is indeed a significant step forward compared to the past.

The second important personality that is involved is the new Secretary of State (and former Senator) John Kerry who has a long and honourable history of engagement on this issue both at national as well as international levels. Unlike his predecessor, Hilary Clinton, he is very interested in this topic and is determined that the US plays a more positive role at the international level. He has already taken personal charge of US international relations on this topic.

The most difficult element of the political landscape in the US on the topic of climate change has always been, and continues to be, the Republican Party, who control the House of Representatives in Congress (and thus can, and do, block any attempts to bring legislation to tackle climate change). Within the Republican Party the climate change denying tendency is led by the Tea Party wing of the party and a handful of Congressmen and Senators.



However, even here there is a growing awareness amongst more sensible Republicans that they cannot continue to deny the reality of climate change. An example is the recent article in the New York Times, jointly authored by three former Republican heads of the US Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA), arguing for the Party to take sensible actions to tackle climate change.

The final element in changing public attitudes in the US is the reality of climatic events like Hurricane Sandy that hit the New York area a few months ago, causing over \$50 billion worth of loss and damage and the even bigger losses from the severe droughts (biggest in over fifty years) in the south and mid-west of the country.

Even though people may not (yet) believe that these events are due to human induced climate change, they cannot deny the reality (and devastation) of the events themselves, and hence more and more sensible people (specially the educated young people) are willing to accept that precautionary measures to prevent damage from such events in future should be supported.

For the rest of the world the advice of the scientific community, through the periodic reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) over the years have proved sufficient to convince most leaders and people that human induced climate change was a reality and needed to be tackled by concerted global actions. Only the people (and some politicians) in the US have not been convinced by the scientists. So the people and politicians in the US may need different arguments to convince them. These will include the reality of major climatic impacts (such as droughts and hurricanes) in the US, or the threat of mass migration and conflict raised by the Pentagon, to perhaps being overtaken by China to reach the post fossil-fuel economy. Whatever the reason for taking actions, even if they take the right decisions for the wrong reasons, I can live with that.

The writer is Director, International Centre for Climate Change and Development, Independent University, Bangladesh, Dhaka. E-mail: Saleemul.huq@iied.org

NOTICE

Due to unavoidable circumstances we have not been able to carry our Crossword and Cryptoquip puzzles. We will resume it as soon as possible. We apologise for the inconvenience to our readers.

QUOTABLE Quotes

"Political language is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind."

George Orwell

BEETLE BAILY

by Mort Walker



HENRY

by Don Trachte

