

# Electoral politics: Issues and non-issues

MIJANUR RAHMAN

**A**MID the ongoing tussle of our politicians over the nature of the next polls time government, a serious political issue which is frequently being reported and commented on in the print and electronic media, very few of us ponder over what, once a consensus is reached on this transitional government, could be the major issues for our politicians to argue about, refute and convince the voters with to win the much coveted next national election. A close analysis shows that some extraneous elements have dominated the electoral politics of Bangladesh.

The recently concluded five city corporation elections are the prime example of this. There were reports that BNP and Hefajat men successfully used religion as a major campaign tool in Gazipur in the same way as they did against the ruling Awami League-backed mayoral candidates ahead of the Rajshahi, Khulna, Barisal and Sylhet city corporation elections in June 15 this year.

This highlights a vital but disturbing issue in our national electoral politics. However, this tendency to depend on extraneous elements to gain public support in the election is not new.

One can still remember what Awami League and the Sector Commanders' Forum did ahead of the 2008 general election to garner popular support against BNP and Jamaat. It clicked then and a landslide victory for Awami League in that election only intensified that 'propaganda.' But a number of scandals and corruption charges along with many other factors, especially the dealing with Jamaat-Shibir and Hefajat movement, have started overshadowing the previously dominant discourse of anti-liberation forces, creating a completely new scenario. The table has been turned by the BNP-backed 18-party alliance through the agency of an alternative discourse, that of religion, this time.

This article does address the question whether people belonging to 18-party-alliance are all 'anti-liberation forces' or whether the 14-party-alliance adherents are all 'atheist and infidels.' This is because there are some questions in our life that we had better never ask. Consider the case of a married man having difficulties in reconciling his belligerent wife with an equally belligerent mother, with each expecting him to side with her. What can that hapless man do, being faced with the problematic question of choosing one over the other? For me, the ideal solution would be not to raise a question like that altogether and rather concentrate on the more substantive familial issues. Making a single choice would only aggravate the situation.

In recent times, a similar situation has prevailed in our national life. This sort of question was repeatedly asked and many of us allied with one option or the other, and what resulted was a nightmarish experience on the street. While Gonojagoron Moncho appealed to our sense of patriotism, Hefajat-e-Islam drew our attention to the religious status we have.

But do these two issues really matter when it comes to the development of our nation? This is a very sensitive question to ask as the majority of Bangladeshis are born and brought up with one religious status or the other. They are also taught to cultivate patriotism and to show respect to the Liberation War heroes and victims. While these two options are significant in their own terms, the attempt at persuading us to choose one

of the two does not really make sense. I know the case of a freedom fighter who fought bravely in 1971 with a small Quran in his pocket all the time. But we also know some persons who opposed the division of Pakistan for the same religious cause.

But do these issues of religion and Liberation War spirit actually play any role in bringing about positive social and infrastructural changes in our homeland? The answer, for me, is an emphatic and unqualified 'no.'

When it comes to the physical hard realities of life, the usually crucial questions of religion and Liberation War do not bring us any tangible results. But the tendency in electoral politics in recent years disregarded the issue and instead concentrated on these 'extraneous' elements to gain popular mandate. While more innovative techniques and strategies for changing Bangladesh for the better could have been the mechanism for public support, all political parties' priorities have been wrongly placed on some otherwise significant issues of religion and Liberation War.

What this situation shows is a kind of bankruptcy in our national politics, a symptom one cannot escape noticing even in the nation's highest law-making body, the Jatiya Sangshad, a place normally supposed to be used for dialogues and debates on the major policy issues of the country's present and future. Unfortunately though, what could have been a platform for healthy debates on the current issues between the government and the opposition has frequently turned into pandemonium with lawmakers from both the camps busy badmouthing and assassinating characters of the nation's veteran politicians.

In the heated debate on the nation's past, we have forgotten the present; and in forgetting the present, we have become oblivious of our future as well. That's why our politicians can manipulate the people's voting power by drawing their attention to not so significant issues, with the main questions of national development remaining unasked.

In the recently held five city corporation elections, religion had its sway, and with national election just a few months ahead, one cannot ignore it. Politics has taken a predictable path in the wrong direction as competing discourses are drawing our attention, keeping the more substantive issues untouched. Wrong questions have been asked and people have died. Crucial issues have not been asked and people are dying even now—in frequent road accidents, fires and building collapse. Political bankruptcy has descended on us.

The politicians are to be blamed for this. But a fair portion of the blame must also fall on the shoulders of the people who allowed the politicians to manipulate their sensibilities with no substantial gains. The remedy must also come from them as they are the stakeholders and main actors.

It is high time the people in general forced the politician to ask the right questions, especially before the next general election. For this, the civil society, conscious citizens, and the media people have to shoulder the responsibilities of promoting appropriate discourses to make the right areas the electoral political issues, and to make the aspiring political parties committed to addressing more pressing problems of the nation. Only then we can hope to radically change the face of our country.

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# Golden Jubilee of United World Colleges

K.Z. ISLAM

**O**N the 50th Anniversary of the founding of United World Colleges (UWC) on September 21, 2013 we must all say three cheers for Kurt Hahn who founded the colleges in 1962. Many books have been written on Kurt Hahn but hardly anyone remembers him. His vision was based on his post-war experience at the Nato Defence College where he had observed discussion and collaboration between former enemies. He wanted to transmit a spirit of mutual understanding to young people to help them overcome prejudice and antagonism through living and working together. The first UWC was founded in 1962 in St. Donat's Castle, St. Donat's, Llantwit Major, South Glamorgan, UK.

It had always been Hahn's view that education was a means of reducing national barriers and fostering international cooperation. This is the basic concept of United World Colleges. Outstanding students at an impressionable age of between 15 and 18 being brought close together are bound to make life long friendships. When they return home undoubtedly they will rise to influential posts in their country and will promote better international understanding and relations.

Subsequently, the movement caught on, with another 12 UWCs opening between 1971 and 2009. One UWC Simon Bolivar closed down in 2012 while another is on the drawing board as UWC Freiburg, Germany, and is expected to be opened in September 2014.

The UWC movement presidents have included Lord Mountbatten (1967-1978), Prince Charles (1978-1995), H.M. Queen Noor of Jordan (1995-present). Former South African President Nelson Mandela has been the Honorary President of UWC since 1999.

Gender Balance

The female-male ratio of the UWCs worldwide in 2012-13 was 58:42. In a world where women are grotesquely under represented in schools UWC should be happy to have made them the majority in its schools and colleges. The current average gender balance in the 4,000 universities in the US is approximately 60% girls and 40% boys.

In Bangladesh, in the period 1991 to 2013, a total of 123 students went through Bangladesh National Committee. Among them 66 were girls and 57 boys who went to different UWCs. In the earlier years, when the UWC National Committee for Bangladesh went through the selection process, the selected candidates were predominantly girls. We were requested by the UWC International Office in London to increase the number of boys to maintain a balance.

UWC National Committee

Worldwide, there are UWC National Committees in more than 140 countries who select the candidates. As far as the writer is aware most National Committees worldwide are made up of UWC alumni predominantly, except in Bangladesh where the same committee has continued for the last 23 years. Undoubtedly, UWC Society for Bangladesh has discharged its duties creditably under the brilliant chairmanship of A.B.A. Siraj Uddowah. No criticism has ever been heard of the selection process as students with most outstanding scores in SSC and GCSE and performance in the interviews are selected.

The one incident that comes to the writer's mind is interviewing Mollika Tahsin in 2011. Mollika, a tall girl, walked in for the interview carrying a guitar, thus annoying the committee. After few questions the chairman asked her how

she had done in the GCSE O-level exam. She gently pushed forward her official mark sheet. She had 11A+ with 100% marks in 3 subjects. After the interview the whole committee just stood up and immediately granted her 100% scholarship to UWC Netherlands.

UWC Bangladeshi Alumni

The problem is that we have not been able to keep a track record all the alumni. A few of the ones we are in touch with are: (1) Prof. Tazreena Sajjad, American University, Washington; (2) Syeda Nazia Hussain, Director, In-Charge of Olympics in Brazil; (3) Faraz Munaim, Vice President, Deutsche Bank, New York; (4) Faria Rahman, MBA, Sr. Associate; (5) Azeza Khan, VP, Summit Group; (6) Amer Dastgir, World Bank, Washington; (7) Shejuti Sarwar, VP, Citi Bank, Hong Kong; and (8) Maksuda Lillah, M.Sc. Mining, Trimita Chakma

Trimita Chakma (b:Dec 1983) has been chosen for special mention because in the last 30 years of the Bangladesh selection we have never had a candidate from the Chittagong Hill Tracts. She studied in Mymensingh Girls Cadet College in Bangla Medium. Apart from academics she had many extra-curricular activities and passed her SSC exam with 92.2% average marks in the First Division and missed the top 20 merit list by 2 marks. Her extraordinary achievements are briefly highlighted below.

When she applied for the UWC she impressed the committee with her academic record but could not speak English. Since the writer has been a member of the selection committee for over 25 years his recollection is that Trimita was the only candidate who has ever been interviewed in Bangla. The committee was so impressed with her performance she was granted full scholarship to study at the UWC Atlantic College, Cardiff, UK. After completing her International Baccalaureate (2002) she joined Jacobs University, Bremen, Germany where she completed her B.Sc. in Electrical Engineering and Computer Science in June 2005.

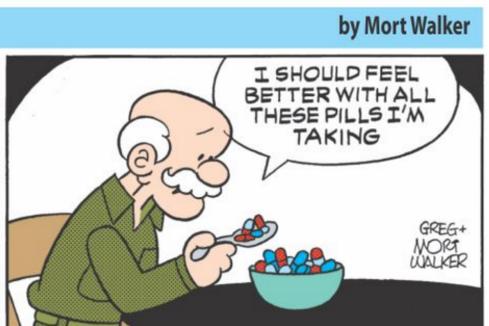
From December 2005 to November 2006, Trimita was involved in doing social work among her people in Rangamati. She was the IT consultant to Chittagong Hill Tracts Development Facility, UNDP, Rangamati. From January 2007 to Dec 2007, IT Academic Consultant, Hill Point School, Rangamati. January to December 2008, Master of Science, Carnegie Mellon University, Information Technology Management (with distinction), Heinz College, Adelaide, Australia. February 2009 to November 2010, IT Project Coordinator, Jobs-ICT Pvt. Ltd., Dhaka. December 2010 to November 2012, MIS/Network Manager, South Asia Scholarships Program managed by Coffey International Development on behalf of AusAID in South Asia, Dhaka. December 2012 till the present, Alumni/MIS Manager Australia Awards - South Asia Managed by Coffey International Development on behalf of AusAID in South Asia, Dhaka.

Freelance Work: IT Consultant Part-time, January 2009 to the present. Designed and developed websites using open source web technologies (Joomla 1.5/2.5) and provided web hosting and maintenance services for a number of organisations.

The brief career so far has been specially highlighted as Trimita has achieved a wide variety of technological distinctions in such a short time. I look forward to following her career.

The writer is an occasional contributor to The Daily Star.

## BEETLE BAILY



## HENRY



## By THOMAS JOSEPH

### ACROSS

- 45 Went fast
- 1 Soft mineral
- 5 Attacked
- 11 Theater award
- 12 One-celled creature
- 13 Floor covers
- 14 Crashed into
- 15 Sudan neighbor
- 17 Wine cask
- 18 Gate feature
- 22 Sweet liqueur
- 24 Beam
- 25 Gaul invader
- 26 Tooth sur-rounder
- 27 Reunion attendees
- 30 Needs a massage
- 32 Train station
- 33 Contrived
- 34 Reuben base
- 38 Not often
- 41 Formerly
- 42 Starting bid
- 43 Entice
- 44 Oust from power

**YESTERDAY'S ANSWER**

19 Make stricter  
20 This is one  
21 Dress lines  
22 Sudan neighbor  
23 Hold power  
28 Enter-tainer Rita  
29 Modes

30 LAPD alert  
31 Seasonal songs  
35 "Jane —"  
36 Plot unit  
37 Owner's document  
38 Gang-ster's gun  
39 Big galoot  
40 Dem.'s foe

## QUOTABLE Quotes

**"What a country calls its vital economic interests are not the things which enable its citizens to live, but the things which enable it to make war. Petrol is much more likely than wheat to be a cause of international conflict."**

Simone Weil

AXYDLBAAXR is LONGFELLOW

One letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used for the three L's, X for the two O's, etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each day the code letters are different.

### 8-28 CRYPTOQUOTE

PJ PECDCFB XK WMZ KTEZIFDTZ  
CS DXSZ. XW YPJ IZEPXI  
HTKW PNCTW PJBWMXJF.

— DBJJ HCMJKWCJ

**Yesterday's Cryptoquote:** A CHILD WHO DOES NOT PLAY IS NOT A CHILD, BUT THE MAN WHO DOES NOT PLAY HAS LOST FOREVER THE CHILD WHO LIVED IN HIM AND WHO HE WILL MISS TERRIBLY. — PABLO NERUDA

# Stateless Rohingya and violation of human rights

A.F.M. KHAIROL BASHER

**E**VERY human being has the right to live in his birth-place irrespective of religion, colour and race. But in case of Rohingyas in Myanmar, it is different and difficult. Rohingyas have been living in the state of Arakan in Myanmar since the 8th century, but have not been recognised as citizens. After decades of oppression and marginalisation by the General Ne Win in 1962 and passing of the Citizenship Law in 1982, Rohingyas have been officially stateless.

Buddhist Rakhines are carrying out repression of Rohingyas. Many cases of torture and human rights abuses against Rohingyas have been documented by international organisations. The UN and OIC have the responsibility to pressurise the Myanmar government to recognise the legitimate right of Rohingyas to live in peace in their homeland. Bangladesh, having sea and land border with Myanmar, has the responsibility to give due attention to this issue through bilateral and diplomatic channels. As Rohingyas are similar in culture, religion, language, and have family bondage with local inhabitants of Cox's Bazar and Teknaf, so Bangladesh government must have a system to identify Rohingyas for security reasons and deal with the issue considering national interest and human rights charter.

Security forces along Bangladesh-Myanmar and Thailand-Myanmar borders must look after Rohingyas in the border areas with the help of NGOs and provide them with shelter and protection on humanitarian ground. Muslim countries have many responsibilities to address this problem and help poor Muslim brothers by providing them with food, shelter and medical care. Human rights organisa-

tions along with leading countries like China and USA have to approach the Myanmar government to ensure citizenship of Rohingyas in Myanmar.

Politics in Myanmar is dominated by the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) led by military backed government of President Thein Sein. All the three branches of government -- legislature, executive and judiciary -- are controlled by the military generals and USDP members. The military has 25% of seats reserved in the parliament without election. Security related ministerial portfolios like defense, home affairs and border affairs are held by USDP members. The constitution of 2008 ensures immunity for military generals for their past actions and human rights violations.

The present government has reached ceasefire agreement with the majority of the armed groups, but there is no sign of political settlement with the ethnic groups on the question of autonomy. It is unlikely that the government will amend the 2008 constitution to end the role of military in politics and remove bad laws like citizenship law of 1982. It is also premature to predict that some positive outcome of the constitution review committee will help to solve all problems. It is also uncertain whether the election in 2015 will be fair and free so that the people of Myanmar get real democracy. Till that time, the military will play a vital role in the politics of Myanmar, and it would be difficult for ethnic groups to live in peace and get citizenship in their homeland.

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