

Goodbye talks?

Insincerity prevails over good sense

WHILE the skeptics never gave a chance to talks between Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia, we, being inveterate optimists, had nevertheless held hopes, however slight, that the two would ultimately sit across the table.

The tele-talks, though disappointing, had held out an opportunity for a dialogue between the two, with neither party rejecting the idea outright. However, since the talks, and after the contents of the conversation were made public, it seemed that the leaders were playing to the gallery standing more on protocol rather than addressing the immediate concern of the people. Regrettably, both sides stuck to their stated positions, which were a recipe for failure.

Earlier Mirza Fakhrul had said that talks could take place but only on caretaker system. And yesterday, Syed Ashraf said that talks could take place on the condition that hartal was withdrawn. The BNP has not responded positively, and the 60-hour hartal is on. The obvious conclusion is that the prospect of dialogue, if ever there was one, is dead. This is in spite of the FBCCI initiatives about secretary-general level talks.

We have been saying all along that dialogue is the only option to save the people from violent political confrontation, and only the day before yesterday the finance minister had also said there could be dangerous consequences if there was no dialogue. It is not as if the leaders are not aware of the consequences if the fundamental issue underlying the discord was not amicably resolved. It seems to us that neither party was sincere in its approach, and may not even have wanted the talks to take place at all.

Unfortunately, it seems that the doomsayers have won. And good sense has been overcome by insincerity.

National Service Programme

A good idea gone awry

THE National Service Programme is a classic example of how a very good concept can be scuttled by political interference, bad management and corrupt practices. The programme, a pilot project, which stemmed from the idea of providing youth with viable employment through training and financial support, has all but failed.

The project with an outlay of 860 crore taka, was originally going to involve 2000 individuals but had selected 56,054 participants. Needless to say, the amount is not a matter of joke and there was corruption in every step of the project, from selection to financial support. This, regrettably, is fairly representative of how public money is purloined from most public projects. Time and again personal gain has shown to be the main priority for the corrupt in our administration. Exploiting loopholes and creating political pressure have always worked for the benefit of the dishonest.

We keep talking about our youth, we blame them for not having vision for the future and then we reach out and we try to give opportunities to those who need them. Yet even in reaching out to them self-interest gets in the way and we often snatch the opportunities away from them for partisan gains.

It is just not enough for the Secretary, Ministry of Youth to say that new projects under the programme were not taken due to some problems. Such a huge undertaking cannot suffer because of lack of planning. Someone should be made to answer for it.

To hold a pen is to be at war!

SHAHRIAR FEROZE

AS the bullet-riddled bodies of two French journalists were discovered some 8 miles outside the northern Malian town of Kidal, we along with the rest of the world witnessed the risk and vulnerability shouldered by journalists while carrying out their duties in war and conflict zones. As a responsible media house, we condemn the ruthless killing of French journalists: Claude Verlon and Ghislaine Dupont, working at RFI (Radio France Internationale).

It is still unclear who carried out the killings and why? As keen observers of global issues dealing especially with talks between governments and disgruntled armed factions, we could not but notice the timing.

The incident happened at a point when the government had begun a dialogue amid violent protests prevailing in the northern half of the country. Reportedly, the journalists were working on a special programme to be aired on November 7. Conspiracy theorists may contend that the reporters had to give their lives to thwart an effort to initiate peace.

Unarguably, the nature and responsibilities of reporters and correspondents covering war and conflict zones are perilous, but in recent times, death of journalists in such dangerous areas has triggered concern. Barely eight months ago another French photo journalist covering the Syrian war was killed. If we concentrate only on war-torn Syria, we see that a staggering number of 110 professional and citizen journalists have been killed.

In a war zone, where rules are often flouted, there will be unnecessary deaths though if certain rules are respected, deaths of unarmed persons can be minimised.

Back at the home front, we don't have a war and the ongoing conflict is more political in nature, but our journalists also have to work in unsafe conditions. During political agitations, hartals and rallies, journalists often find themselves as targets of both the law enforcers and the protesters. Even while reporting on social irregularities, they face humiliation, harassment and assault. The beating of photo journalists documenting anomalies at the Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) earlier this year by DMCH staff, including doctors, comes to mind.

Much to our dismay, our investigators have repeatedly failed to unearth the culprits responsible for the gruesome murder of TV journalist couple Sagar-Runi. Uncovering the truth has always come with risks, and in that crusade men and women with pens, cameras and laptops need some support from the authorities.

Thus, the journalists' perils compelled us to write.

The writer is current affairs analyst, *The Daily Star*.

Paradox that tells the truth



win in the next general election, they were not being equally positive about or supportive of the party in power. A majority (55%) said that it was the main opposition BNP that would win the election. The bad news for the ruling party is that less than half of these interviewees (22%) think AL will win. What's intriguing is that a huge majority (77%) of these respondents support the opposition's demand for a caretaker government to run the next election. The surprise does not end here. Of the section of the population so interviewed, a majority (47%) believe

How do we reconcile these mutually exclusive, sometimes clashing, opinions of the same group of people about recent politics in general and the government in particular?

The apparent dichotomies in public perception of things cannot also be attributed to any flaw in the design of the study's methodology. For it was framed in such a manner that it cancelled out any kind of bias that might have arisen from differences of the respondents along the lines of their gender, geographical location, profession, social class and rural-urban divide. It is worthwhile to note that the respondents represented all the age groups from 18 to 50 and above.

So how does one account for the apparent confusion in the public's expression, if not in their minds, about the recent events surrounding politics and government? The survey findings have also been described as a paradox in this paper's report on the study.

Call it a paradox. But what is paradoxical need not necessarily have to be untrue. Rather it implies that there must be some hidden, deeper, truth in the findings that is waiting to be elucidated.

When we ask a respondent from a rural agricultural background if he or she is happy with the diesel price and its availability to run water pumps to irrigate crop fields, or if the agricultural inputs like fertilisers or pesticides are cheap and are easy to get, he/she may give a positive response which is true to the prevailing situation. But it will be too early to jump to the conclusion that the same

A recent survey carried out to gauge the public's view of contemporary events involving politics and government has come up with startling results. The authors of the study, The Daily Star and the Asia Foundation, found that respondents from the sampled population gave the government high marks for performance in service delivery in the areas, such as, agriculture, power supply, public service and law and order. But when asked which party they think would

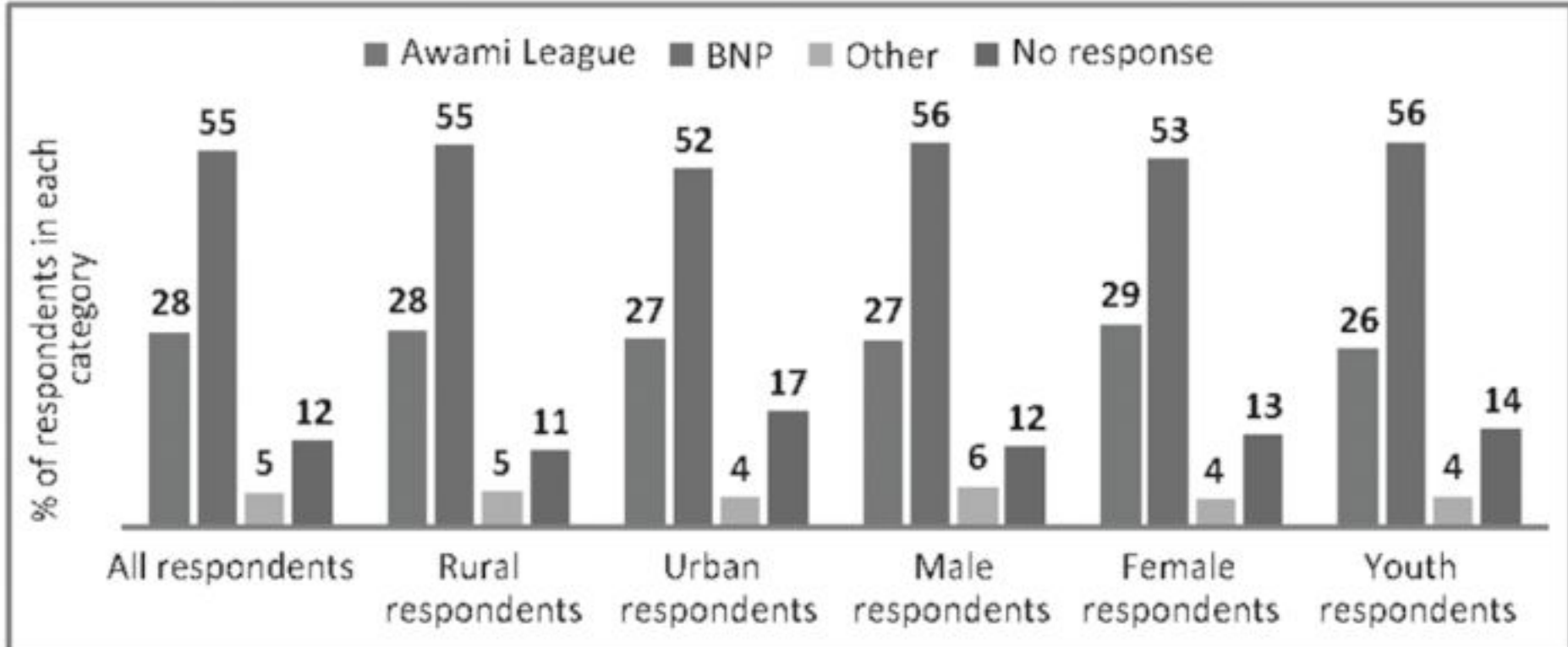
interviewee will also be wanting that the incumbent government should rule the country for another term.

When the respondent's attention is drawn to the broader subject of governance and politics, a whole range of other issues, that may not have been included in the questionnaire, but are affecting public life all the same, will also come under his/her review. Those may include the local MPs' record on honesty or otherwise in public dealings, local law and order situation, the incumbent government's handling of vital issues of national interests with the bigger neighbour, the issues affecting the common border with the neighbouring country, and other widely discussed recent incidents (for example, the government's bungling of the Padma bridge project with World Bank loan, the recent scams in the banking sector, and so on).

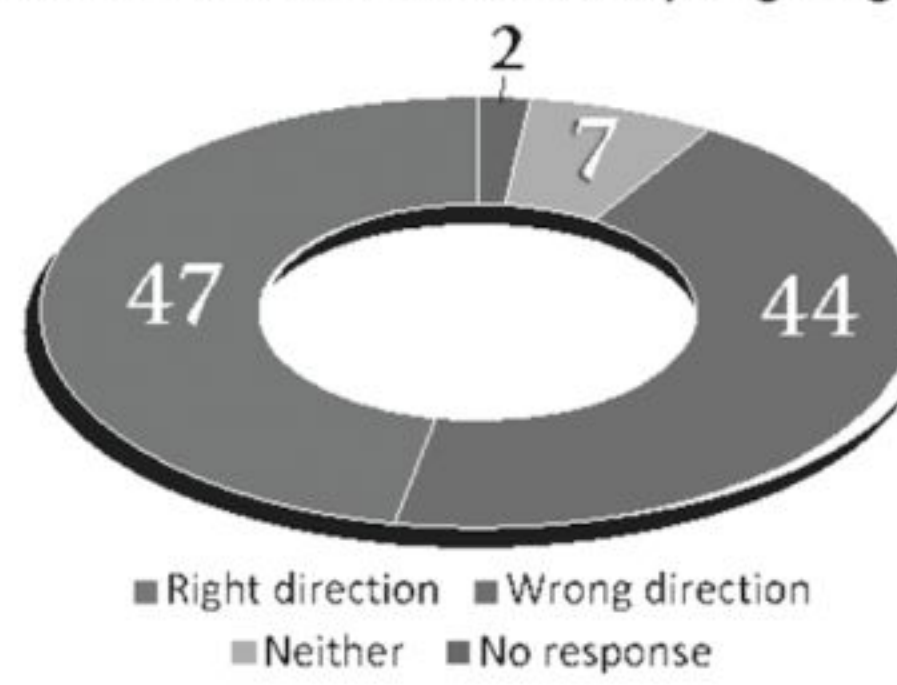
So, these issues may weigh in to influence the respondent's answer. Which is why, the response of the interviewee may not necessarily connect the question asked in a linear fashion. And this non-linearity of the question-answer relationship has presented itself before us as a paradox. Like an exception proves the law, so does a paradox point at a greater truth. The task of the researcher is to incorporate it into his thought paradigm.

Common people are sensitive not only about issues of their immediate interests, but also equally so about larger issues of wider significance. So it should not surprise us if

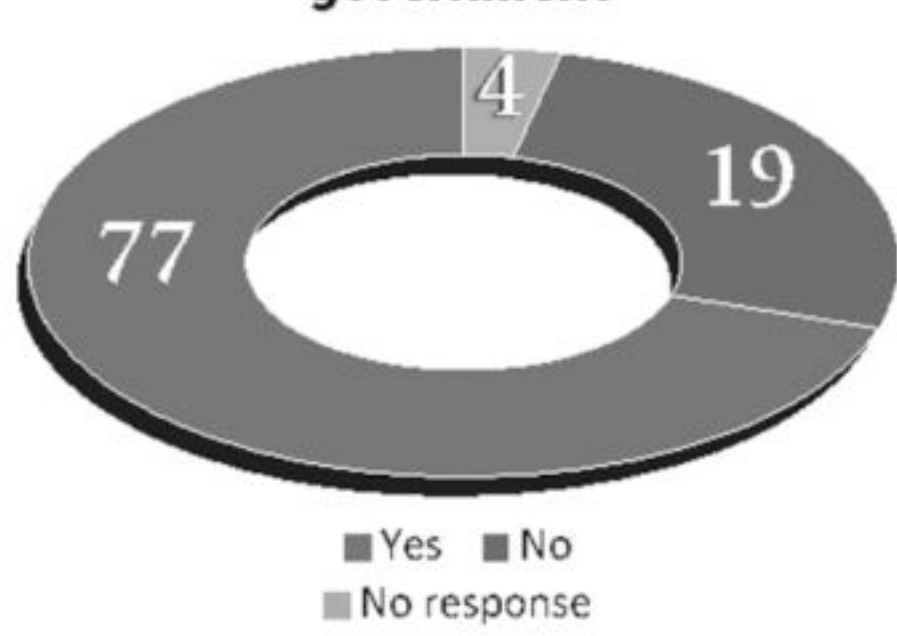
The upcoming national election WHICH PARTY WILL WIN?



Which direction the country is going



Demand for a caretaker government



they answer a question in its broader context, even though its (the question's) focus was narrower. One cannot, after all, bind the imagination of the responding public.

In fact, there is no question of any confusion in the respondents' mind. They were just expressing their instant feelings through their answers to the questions asked. And when we are talking about feeling, people can only express their honest feelings instantly. To be honest, it is falsehood, not truth, that needs some thinking before it is expressed. So people were neither confused, nor were they lying, they were just telling the truth. So it is our turn to come to terms with this fact of life by whatever name we may call it, paradox or what.

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Changes in RPO: Recipe for electoral and political distortion

M. SAKHAWAT HUSSAIN

THE foundation of strong democracy is the process of choosing people's representative who will speak for them in Parliament and elsewhere. The only process through which people can choose their representatives in a transparent manner and keep the essence of democracy is through election arranged by the Election Commission (EC). The tools that are needed by the (EC) include an accurate electoral roll, appropriate electoral law -- the People's Representation Order (RPO) -- and credibility.

Strong electoral law ensures a congenial atmosphere for holding of free and fair elections and strengthens the EC, which is an independent institution under Article 118 of the Constitution. RPO lays down the ground rules for a credible election. Therefore, formulation and periodical reform of the law has to take into account the social environment and its effect on political and electoral culture.

The electoral reform carried out by the previous EC led by Dr. Huda (2007-2012), included major reform of the RPO. The changes in the RPO and reforms were suggested, as enacting law is the function of the Parliament, by adopting a consultative approach. The reform that were made were participatory in that people from all walks of life and the main stakeholders -- the political parties -- were consulted more than once prior to approval by then caretaker government. The major reform was brought in the Chapter III Article 12(1) of the RPO, pertaining to the disqualification of a candidate. This was the focal point of the electoral law.

Among the important changes in RPO in general and Chapter III in particular was 12(1) (j), which said that a candidate had to be a member of the party for at least three years before seeking nomination. That would have meant that one had to be a primary or otherwise at least for three years. This was made applicable from the date of registration of the party with EC. Only exception was made for those parties which had not been registered for three years.



Many analysts suggest that the changes that brought in RPO by deleting the article is a step towards holding an election that will not be inclusive unless a consensus is reached between the two rival coalitions.

dedicated political workers The passage of the RPO, deleting the much discussed article, has not been accepted by a large section of the population and party activists.

Deletion of Article 12(1)(j), if seen in the context of present political environment, will facilitate the party in power to hold elections under the amended constitution. Many analysts suggest that the changes that brought in RPO by deleting the article is a step towards holding an election that will not be inclusive unless a consensus is reached between the two rival coalitions.

The writer is a former election commissioner and a column writer.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Hasina-Khaleda telephonic talk

It's gratifying that at last two top leaders talked over the phone. But I am disappointed to note that your staff correspondent was not unbiased. It appeared to me that he was trying to place the telephonic talk favouring the PM by mentioning "Khaleda's harsh comments", "PM did not react for people's sake," etc.

I have not been in favour of publishing private talks of the topmost leaders, but now feel that it was good that the conversation was made public. I have heard some of the telephonic conversation and also read its full transcript in newspapers. I didn't find anything 'harsh'. But I think it was not the appropriate time for the PM to talk about Khaleda's birthday, when the nation is passing a crisis time.

A F Rahman
One e-mail

Why not a liquid fuel power plant at Chalna?

The PM's response published in most dailies on 24th. October on the above matter was rather dismissive. I am sure the MPs have access to websites which provide information on this issue. All information regarding the power plant should be provided there, giving all answers related to environment protection facilities. This should be done immediately. People must have the information in details relating to the measures to be adopted and equipment to be installed; starting from unloading of the coal at the plant site, subsequent screening, crushing final screening and its feeding to the boilers.

Further, all technical facilities that will be provided for handling and treatment and ultimate disposal of both fly-ash and that coming from the boiler hearth after combustion is also important.

It would be better to go for a liquid fueled power plant at Chalna port, where fuel can be imported and stored. In that case the adverse effect on the environment and the handling of ash could be avoided. This writer has had the bitter experience of this at Khulna Newsprint Mills; where we had a 2X5MW (10MW) Indian coal-fired power plant. We had big problems with the ash handling and disposal and ultimately were forced to convert both units to oil-fired ones which also easily provided us opportunity to increase the capacity of the power plant by 20 percent.

Engr. S. A. Mansoor
Dhaka

Points AL should ponder

Trial of war criminals was in the election manifesto of the AL. There is no denying the fact that this is the most sensitive issue of the country since there are people who are not happy to see this trial. Therefore, AL should have known that their term this time would not be as smooth as their tenure was during 1996-2001. The questions are: did AL take all the precautions necessary? Did AL remain extra vigilant? Did AL govern the country in a way they should have done? In my opinion, the answers to all these questions are NO. They needed to retain the support of all the people who voted them to power. People in this country know very well that the opposition has not done anything to gain support in their favour. People perhaps also know very well that if the current opposition is put back into power they might undo everything that has been achieved about the war crimes trial. If AL's popularity fades out, then they should blame none but themselves instead of finding conspiracy all around.

Dr. Kamrul Hassan
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Comments on post editorial, "What message does this politics give our students?" published on November 1, 2013

Salim Ullah

Students must come out, strongly protesting the irresponsible activities of our two leaders.

Nasirullah Mridha, USA

The two leaders' relatives study abroad. They don't care about general students' future. They can do whatever they want to cling to power.

A citizen

The message the students are getting from the politicians is that education is not important and their future is not important. When the exams are postponed for hartal, it gives the clear message that education is something not important and it can take a back seat because the leaders of this country are quarrelling over the red phone.

Akhtar Shah

One has to raise these important (a gross understatement) issues and they need be aired. Unfortunately they are too fine a thought process to be registering anywhere in the mindset of people who could and should think better! These students are instances of "collateral damage," just to coin a phrase! Both parties have their own "academics" who produce political types who perpetuate this type of power game. This "democratic charade" continues year after year with no sign of any substantive changes that will put "citizens first", not just in words, but in deeds.