JAMAAT'S GAME

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If the ongoing political crisis is somehow resolved and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) decides to join the general election slated for January 5 or any new date is fixed after revising the poll fixture, which party will lose out the most? The answer is clear. Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), a key component of the BNP-led alliance will be harmed the most. The reason is clear. The party will not be able to contest the general election as the High Court has declared illegal its registration as a parliamentary party with the Election Commission. The electoral law, the RPO, does not allow any unregistered party to take part in the parliamentary polls. The High Court verdict remains enforced as it was not stayed.

What does Jamaat now want to do? The party has made its strategy clear. It will in no way accept Sheikh Hasina as the chief of the election time government, and hence it wants to make the election time government unable to control the deteriorating situation. To this end, the JI will enforce more violent street agitations, it will continue to carry out more destructive activities, and it will cause more suffering for people.

The ruling Awami League has also made it clear that it wants Hasina to lead the election time government come what may. So, the government led by Hasina will make some desperate effort in the coming days to control the situation. Law enforcement agencies will go tough on the opposition.

All the signs suggest that an amicable solution to the electoral stalemate over the mode of the election time government is not possible. No discussion, not dialogue can yield any solution to this stalemate.

In this process, Jamaat of course will use all its strength to fight the government. It is determined to foil the trial of war criminals to save some of its top leaders. It has been staging violent demonstrations in many parts of the country. Even during the enforcement of countrywide blockade, the JI activists enforced countrywide hartals on two days consecutive after the war crimes tribunal on Sunday issued a warrant of execution for Jamaat leader Quader Mollah, condemned to death for crimes against humanity during the Liberation War.

If Jamaat men become more violent and the situation goes out of hand, the BNP will not mind. Rather it will make the BNP happy as their violent activities will contribute to the possible scrapping of the January 5 election. Only a full blown out crisis can serve their interests. Jamaat's history may encourage its leaders and cadres to be optimistic in the wake of the worsening political crisis. Established in 1941, the party has always been benefited by political instability.

Established by Abul Ala Moududi, the JI was banned twice in 1959 and 1964 in Pakistan and again in independent Bangladesh for crimes against humanity during the 1971 Liberation War. It took political mileage and resumed its activities during the Pakistan era. It took similar advantage in Bangladesh. After the 1975 political changeover through the overthrowing of Sheikh Mujib regime that banned the anti-liberation elements constitutionally, the party men took the opportunity to regroup following the withdrawal of a ban on religion-based politics by the first martial law regime. When the AL, BNP and other parties were in the streets to oust HM Ershad led autocratic government in 1990s, they also took to the streets. Nobody objected. Ershad was the common enemy. Again, in between 1994-1996, when AL, JP and others waged violent street agitations against then BNP led government for the introduction of the caretaker government system, Jamaat men also contributed to intensifying the agitation. The party consolidated its strength at that time. At one stage, the party tied the knot with the BNP before the 2001 parliamentary polls and the top party officials even managed to taste state power, two of them becoming key ministers in 2001-2006.

During the AL's current term in office, initially, BNP had maintained some distance with the party, leaving Jamaat alone to protest against the war trial. But it later relied on the JI to intensify the agitation against the AL-led government. It boosted up Jamaat men who have been unleashing a reign of terror in many parts of the country in the name of anti-government agitation. And they may not stop until the situation is worsened to the extent that it gives Jamaat what its wants. The BNP may get some benefit from this. Other forces may also get benefits. But how is it going to benefit the ordinary people?

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