

An ugly face

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franchise. Also, Article 65 (2) asserts the pre-eminence of voters when it notes that parliament shall consist of three hundred members to be elected by direct election. [Elections to women's reserved seats in parliament are not the subject of discussion here.]

Voters' right has been given pre-eminent position in our constitution where it declares the country as a Republic and makes democracy, one of the four fundamental state principles.

The January 5 parliamentary election, however, presents a different picture which can in no way be pleasant for voters and for democracy. The fate of more than half of the 300 parliamentary constituencies has already been determined much before the polling day. As many as 154 candidates are being declared elected without a single vote being caste, denying voters their constitutional "Right".

Now it will not matter whether voters go to the polling stations on January 5 to determine the fate of contestants for the remaining 146 constituencies. Fewer than 400 aspirants are vying for those seats. It is certain that the AL nominated candidates will bag almost all of the remaining seats. If some others want to win, they will need the support of the AL.

So, voters are not important any more. They have little say in this process. The will of the AL is the most important determining factor for the winning 154 seats.

Poor HM Ershad announced his quitting the election. He urged his party men to withdraw their nomination papers. Those who did not follow his directive will be blessed with AL favours. Already 20 of them are being declared elected uncontested as the AL withdrew its candidates from those seats to give the JP leaders a walkover. Some more JP leaders will see "victory" on January 5 as the AL is going to favour them.

It is also the generosity of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. She on Saturday said her party had reached a compromise with the other parties in the "polls-time government" over a sharing of parliamentary seats. "We've withdrawn candidatures from some seats through liaising with other parties," she said.

In her words, her party did it to ensure a "congenial atmosphere" during the January 5 election.

Hasina has made more shocking remarks. She said the AL would have conceded a "walk-over" to the BNP in some constituencies if it had joined the "all-party polls-time government."

Her remarks again prove voters are not important here. Her wish gets pre-eminence over voters' rights. She can distribute favours as per her will through pre-election horse-trading. Hence democracy and election got new definition.

Much before the polling day of January 5, the AL alone has already bagged 129 seats uncontested and with its support two components of its alliance, Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal and Workers Party, have obtained five. Hasina's adviser Anwar Hossain Manju's Jatiya Party has also got two. This means much before the actual voting, the AL alone is close to the magic number of 151 to form a new government. If leaders of the Ershad-led JP join the AL, to ensure which Ershad is being confined at the CMH, then Hasina will have the magic number, enough to form the new government without people having expressed their will through ballots.

Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that the will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.

The January 5 election runs counter to this declaration made more than six decades ago. So what will be the basis of the authority of Hasina's new government set to be formed after this election?

War trials

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statement available in the Pakistan foreign ministry's website.

It said Pakistan's policy was not to interfere in the affairs of any country.

In an oblique reference to the trials in the International Crimes Tribunal and execution of war criminal Quader Mollah, the statement also said, "We have noted the concerns raised by the international community and human rights organisations on the way recent trials have been conducted which have added to the current instability in Bangladesh."

"We wish the brotherly people of Bangladesh well and hope that spirit of reconciliation and an atmosphere, free of violence, will prevail," said the statement issued in Islamabad on Friday.

Express grief

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peaceful manner".

Razzaq, also an assistant secretary general of Jamaat, called upon the law enforcement agencies to allow citizens to exercise the fundamental right of freedom of expression without any intimidation.

Jamaat-Shibir men have unleashed a wave of violence since the execution of Mollah on Thursday night, leaving dozens of people dead and scores injured in different parts of the country.

The marauding activists attacked the houses of judges, the motorcade of a ruling party lawmaker and police outposts, disrupting life in many districts.

Razzaq said in a statement, "International criminal law experts are unanimous in their opinion that the law under which Mr Abdul Quader Mollah was tried was flawed and defective.... The defence has also made it clear that both the ICT and Supreme Court judgments are wrong."

He added, "While we sympathise with the sentiments of the followers and supporters of Mr Abdul Quader Mollah, we urge them to express their grief in a peaceful manner, because one wrong cannot justify another."



Prime minister's adviser Gowher Rizvi meets a "healthy" Jatiya Party chief Ershad at the Combined Military Hospital (CMH) in Dhaka Cantonment yesterday. Rizvi along with his family visited the former dictator who had been "admitted to the hospital under Rab escort".

PHOTO: PMO

Rizvi meets Ershad

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him up" from his Baridhara residence on December 12.

Rizvi's visit came amid disputes within the JP over their participation in the polls scheduled for January 5.

Earlier on December 3, Ershad announced his decision to boycott the election, saying a proper atmosphere was missing.

The details of the meeting between Ershad and Rizvi could not be known.

However, some JP leaders yesterday told The Daily Star that they would have to contest the polls whether the party chief wanted or not, as many of their candidates either did not or could not withdraw nomination papers.

"It is the reality that around 20 top JP leaders are set to be elected unopposed. How will they [party members] ignore this? The other 64 leaders, who could not withdraw their nominations, will also have to participate in

the polls," JP Presidium Member Kazi Firoz Rashid said.

A group of JP leaders, who had supported Ershad's decision to refrain from the "one-sided" polls, were now trying to convince him to alter his stance, JP insiders said.

"Many of our top leaders could not withdraw their nomination papers and today [yesterday] we have been given electoral symbol. At this stage, we hardly have any scope to abstain from the polls," said a JP leader who was close to Ershad and had earlier supported his pull-out decision, wishing anonymity.

Many of the party leaders who had earlier been against contesting the polls were now keeping mum about the matter, which apparently meant they too had accepted that they did not have a choice, sources said.

Another JP leader, who too did not wish to be quoted, claimed that Ershad was not arrested and was running the party activities

from the CMH.

"Ershad delivered a statement yesterday marking the Victory Day. He also reconstituted the party's Rangpur district and city units and asked the new committee leaders to complete the committees within 10 days," he said.

"If he [Ershad] was picked up or detained, he could not run party activities publicly. Even today he promoted two leaders to the party's standing committee," he added.

Meanwhile, JP minister Anisul Islam Mahmud, who did not attend last week's cabinet meeting following Ershad's instructions, joined an inter-ministerial meeting yesterday at the secretariat.

Earlier at a press conference in Gulshan yesterday, expelled JP presidium member Kazi Zafar Ahmed said that the government was making "an unprecedented mockery" in the name of election.

Minds without fear, heads held high

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And yet there is something called history that connects the dots and links the linear lines of matters generational. That is the reason why we remember 16 December 1971 in winter 2013.

History is forever a matter of remembering what has been. And forty two years ago, in this land, history took shape and form and substance, through reinventing itself on a declining December day. It was the winter of ecstasy for the people of Bangladesh, for they had just succeeded in beating back an enemy which should have had no business running riot through their hearths and homes. All across the streets and alleys of this city was heard a continuum of Joi Bangla, the militant nationalistic slogan which had over the years turned into an articulation of the collective Bengali demand for democratic rights. The demand had, to be sure, changed course through the exigencies of the times --- from that of autonomy for a people long suppressed to that of freedom for a nation convinced that Bangladesh needed to be born if decency was to survive and thrive.

On the afternoon of December 16 four plus decades ago, it was freedom which stepped gingerly into our homes. Liberty, for long the stuff that dreams were made of, was suddenly and yet expectedly ours to savour. The 'brave' soldiers of the marauding Pakistan army, having put an end to the lives of three million Bengalis and dishonoured as many as two hundred thousand Bengali women, had finally caved in. Note that there were 93,000 of them, all men who had been taught to believe that the Bengali did not matter, that indeed it was 'East Pakistan' which had to be reclaimed, that nothing else was. The dramatic nature of the Bengali victory was as compelling as it was inevitable, for only days before his men bit the dust, General Amir Abdullah Khan Niazi had served the eerie warning that Dhaka would be taken over his live body. It was a living, breathing Niazi who had just capitulated before the rolling bandwagon of the national-

istic Bengali spirit.

Forty two years on, it is time to reflect on what was. On 16 December 1971, it was a cheerful rendering of 'aaj rishti shukher ullaashe' wafting along, per courtesy of a newly reopened and rejuvenated Dhaka Radio. The joy of creation was all, as was the painful happiness of a return home. Abdul Jabbar, having with so many others kept the spirit of triumph alive in the months preceding the end of the war, now sang 'hajar bochor pore abar eshechhi phire . . . Bangla'r buuke achhi darhiye'. In a few days, the Mujibnagar government would be coming home from exile. Within weeks, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman --- father of the nation, liberator, our friend and our window to the world --- would be back in our midst. There would be a constitution within a year, with a general election to follow. The secular, sovereign Bengali state, fashioned out of the crucible of a twilight struggle, would be on the road to a consolidation of life and liberty.

The rest is, surely, history. Forks in the road would take us down paths we did not need to take. And foul conspiracy would stand triumphant, through a wholesale murder of the men who had steered the nation to freedom. The brave soldiers who would not rest until liberty was at hand would disappear, one after the other, in the land they had caused to be born. These are realities that ought not to have been. This is history which fundamentally owes its reality to the elemental nature of those who have never tolerated the rise of truth. Anti-history was around, right from the moment of our rebirth as a proud, free nation. Precious years were lost through democratic politics being pushed into exile and unconstitutional rule taking over. Bangabandhu enlightened us, even as the euphoria of freedom kept us in thrall, on how Bangladesh could graduate to being the Switzerland of the east. Those who came after him, in predatory fashion, simply jostled us

back into the dark.

It was not, as Humayun Azad was to proclaim loudly, the Bangladesh we had bargained for back in the terrifying as also terrific months of the war. Our collective imagination and objective reality, as we serenaded a liberated land, did not envision an ambience of untruth, a political canvas where coups d'etat and a rapid decline in values would undermine our ethos before a horrified world. Bloodletting had never been our prediction; and yet blood streamed into the lives of people who had not forgotten the blood shed by their compatriots in all the years leading up to the arrival of liberty. A free nation does not relish the spectacle of blood. And yet blood has flowed.

Forty two years on, there is that compulsion in the heart, that tug at the soul, for new promises to be made in the interest of generations of Bengalis to be. Those promises come touched with necessary emotion. Now that we are forty two, it is time to restore the ideals we have lost along the way. Our democracy must be made stronger, through a strengthening of the institutions which underpin governance. Our political classes must inform themselves that politics is never combative or adversarial but is always cooperative; that Parliament, being the fountainhead of freedom and justice, ought not to be spurned by those elected to be part of it. Having arrived at adulthood that ought to be of a mature sort, we cannot afford to go on playing young any longer. Good governance is now the aspiration; and visionary politics is what defines the future.

As dawn breaks today, with memories as profound as they are painful, with the wheels of justice finally turning --- to inform ageing agents of the Pakistan army that they must finally pay for their sins --- this nation proudly recalls those who paved the way to freedom forty two years ago. Their minds were without fear. Their heads were held high. And we celebrate liberty in a Tagorean heaven of freedom.

Back to 1971?

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independence, he said.

It was a planned attack, and the attackers were well-trained, he added.

"I am not only an Awami League leader, but also a cultural personality. I have always raised my voice against militancy, fundamentalism, and Jamaat-Shibir. I am their target, as I have been very vocal about the trial of war criminals," said Noor.

Expressing gratitude to his party leaders and activists, Noor, also cultural affairs secretary of the AL, said four of his party activists had sacrificed their lives to save him.

"I am indebted to them and their families."

If the party men had not formed a human shield around him, it wouldn't be possible for him to escape the attack, said Noor.

"I went there [Laxmichap and Palashbari unions] to see the houses and shops of the Hindus damaged in Thursday's attack. It is my obligation to stand by the people in my constituency, as I am their elected representative."

He said the Jamaat-Shibir men made preparations for Thursday's attack at Tupamari, a Jamaat stronghold, and then torched and looted the houses and shops belonging to Hindus in adjacent Laxmichap and Palashbari unions at night.

"They also attacked and hacked some Awami League activists. The next day, I asked police to visit those areas but they failed to go there, as the attackers had blocked the road by felling roadside trees."

"When I visited the area on Saturday, I saw burnt houses. I learnt that women and children in these areas cannot stay in their houses at night. I had heard about such situation in 1971."

When Noor and his entourage were returning to the district headquarters, they were attacked by Jamaat-Shibir men at Ramganj Bazar.

The attack on Noor's motorcade triggered a three-way clash between Jamaat men, AL activists and law enforcers, leaving five people dead.

Four of the victims were ruling party men, and the other was a rickshaw-van puller, who had nothing to do with politics, he said.

"They [the attackers] also torched 41 motorbikes belonging to local Awami League leaders."

The law enforcers tried their best to contain the attack, but they were outnumbered and overpowered by the attackers, he said.

"People in our area are peace-loving. But Jamaat with the help of some BNP leaders are causing troubles over the last six months," he said.

War crimes witness

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thrown into the compound of his house did not explode, reports our Faridpur correspondent. But his firewood shop, just 200 yards away at Rathkhola in Faridpur town, was set on fire around 12:30am. By the time local people put out the fire, the shop was partially burnt.

Ranjit, who had testified against Jamaat-e-Islami Secretary General Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mojaheed and expelled Jamaat member Abul Kalam Azad, known as Bachchu Razakar, held Jamaat-Shibir activists responsible for the attack.

"I am sure that people loyal to Mojaheed have made the attack as I testified against him," Ranjit told The Daily Star last night.

The attack on Ranjit's house and shop came in a series of attacks on the houses of judges, prosecution witnesses and prosecutors involved in the war crimes trial.

Yesterday around 12:45am, an employee of Riya Bakery beside the firewood shop informed Ranjit about the torching of the shop. As Ranjit along with his family members made a dash for the shop, they found a petrol bomb in front of his house intact.

On information, police went to his house and recovered the unexploded petrol bomb, said Tapan Debnath, a sub-inspector of Kotwali Police Station.

"We have taken the incident seriously and beefed up security measures in the area," said Officer-in-Charge Syed Mohsinul Haque.

Following the incident, police remained on guard around Ranjit's house until the day broke.

Talking to The Daily Star, Ranjit said he was feeling insecure.

He had told the International Crimes Tribunal that he was tortured by Abul Kalam Azad and others after Mojaheed held a meeting with a Pakistani army officer and local razakars at Faridpur Circuit House during the 1971 Liberation War.

The court found both Mojaheed and Azad guilty of the charge and awarded them different jail terms.

It, however, condemned the two, from Faridpur, to death for committing other crimes against humanity during the war.

Mojaheed is now in jail. His appeal against the ICT verdict is pending with the Supreme Court. Azad has been on the run since April 2012 before his trial began.

On December 10, Mostafa Hawlader, a key witness in the war crimes case against Jamaat leader Delawar Hossain Sayedee, died two days after he had been hacked in sleep at his Pirojpur home allegedly by Jamaat-Shibir activists.

On October 28, alleged Jamaat-Shibir men attacked the house of Mahabubul Alam Howlader, another prosecution witness of the case, and vandalised all valuables he had. He escaped unhurt hiding in the attic.

Village houses of Justice SK Sinha, Justice ATM Fazle Kabir and Justice Jahangir Hossain Selim, all linked with the trial of war crimes, came under attack between December 11 and 13. Hand-made crude bombs were also exploded in front of several prosecutors' houses.

Justice seekers and campaigners of war crimes trials have been demanding a law for the protection of witnesses and victims, but in vain.

Peter O'Toole dies

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the very best sense and a giant in his field," Kenis said.

The hell-raising icon of stage and screen was nominated for eight Oscars before finally being given an honorary award in 2003.

Irish President Michael D Higgins said it was "with great sadness" that he heard of O'Toole's death.

"Ireland, and the world, has lost one of the giants of film and theatre," he said in a

statement.

The son of an Irish bookmaker, O'Toole was born in 1932 and raised in northern England.

After working briefly as a journalist and a radioman for the Royal Navy he went to study at the prestigious Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, in a class that included future stars Albert Finney, Alan Bates and Richard Harris.

After making a name in theatre, his big break arrived in the form of David

Lean's 1962 desert epic "Lawrence of Arabia".

In a career spanning half a century, the Irish-born actor, who died on Saturday aged 81, lent his rich voice to the roles of kings and military heroes, as well as colourful hard-drinkers whose lives were rather closer to his own.

He had characteristically announced his retirement with typical cheerfulness in July 2012, saying it was time to "chuck in the sponge" at the age of 79.