

We are outraged

We protest Pak assembly resolution

WE are surprised, shocked and outraged at Pakistan legislature's having passed a resolution denouncing execution of Jamaat leader Quader Mollah following a death verdict handed by High Court for his crimes against humanity in 1971. Since the trial and the punishment of Mollah were carried out according to the law of the land, we consider Pakistan government's reaction to it as an unabashed attempt at interference in our internal affairs. We have no words strong enough to condemn it.

What is the Pakistani authority trying to convey with its present stance on Mollah having been brought to justice? It looks like the present Pakistan government endorses the heinous crimes against humanity that he committed during our Liberation War in 1971. And are they oblivious of the fact that it is the then-Pakistani military junta that dictated the criminals of Quader Mollah's ilk to decimate freedom loving Bengali people in thousands without any qualm? By this act, Pakistani authorities have again proved that they are not only not sorry for the genocide their predecessors committed 42 years ago, but are still active in sympathising with the likes of Quader Mollah and not with their victims.

At the same time, what we find reprehensible is their casting aspersions on the judicial proceedings of a sovereign country.

It again proves beyond doubt that they have no understanding of our history, neither have they any regard for it.

In fact, we demand that Pakistan government apologise to Bangladesh for the genocide that its predecessors perpetrated against Bengali people in 1971 which has been long overdue.

Migrants Day message

Address expatriate workers' concerns

THE international Migrants Day for the year 2013 was observed on Wednesday as majority of Bangladeshi expatriates and workers abroad expressed their concern over the political unrest and violence prevailing in the country. It is now imperative to free our expat Bangladeshis of worries and fear, and this job is now up to our politicians.

With Bangladesh's foreign exchange reserve touching the \$17 billion mark, it is now second after India in South Asia, in terms of a huge forex reserve. However, the lion's share of this foreign reserve comprises remittances sent by our expat Bangladeshi workers scattered across the globe. According to the World Bank Bangladesh stands 7th among the 10 top nations that earns the maximum remittances.

Reading between the lines, we would say the above scenario could have been an even better one. Though increase in remittance rose by 211 percent with over a million workers sent over the past 4 years, yet a number of potential markets for manpower export remain unexplored. A number of markets in the Middle-East and in the South Asian countries were shut down -- where once our intrepid workforce was ahead of others.

In the end, if the image of the country improves it will impact positively on the lot of the workers.

Let sanity prevail

MOHAMMAD ZAMAN

HOWEVER quarrelsome they are, the fact still remains that the two bickering ladies remain the sole arbiters of power in Bangladesh. Like her predecessor, the sitting prime minister wields unfettered muscle even beyond her constitutional ambit. If she wants to she can undo even the most difficult of Gordian Knots.

But the million dollar question is, does she have the desire ... or does she still have the unfettered power she once had, for we know political entropy has a life of its own?

Bangabandhu once famously said that he was surrounded by thieves. Such utterances were not followed by effective executive measures. If that was done, our fate possibly would not have been so full of miseries. Following the widespread destruction of the infrastructure and an empty exchequer, he did not have the best hand to play well. However, things are different now. Bangladesh no longer is a bottomless basket. Entrepreneurs in Bangladesh are achieving international acclaim. Muhammad Yunus and Fazle Hasan Abed stand out -- but there are thousand others.

Competent, smart and well educated Bangladeshis abound both at home and abroad. They are the real engine of the economy that, for lack of right governmental vision, continue to plod forward in struts and frets. A dream of joining the club of other Asian Tigers is yonder -- separated only by the lack of a visionary leader.

For us, the chemistry is ripe. Although our prime minister has squandered a year's worth of time and even more of political capital she, or her absence thereof, still remains the only option left. At the precipice, not much time left to reign on her non-ideologue sycophants who never cared for the country to begin with. It is high time she begins to listen to the outside voices of sanity and unleash the power of governmental juggernaut for the right causes. If the story from the news outlets is right and if the AL-goons start their mop-up operation under the aegis of government outfits, eventual chaos shall supervene.

The nation voted for a change. The nation voted for a *Din Bodoler Ongikar*. Sheikh Hasina is bound by her promise. Rightfully, the nation deserves better.

The writer is an occasional contributor.

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING



Brig Gen
SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN
ndc, psc (Retd)

infection called 'electionitis' and we are unable to find a cure for it. Doctors say too that the life cycle of the virus is short; it gestates and dies in only three to four weeks. This means that we could be free of it sometime after January 5. But the doctors also caution that such a viral attack may have a debilitating effect on our democracy and cause 'democratitis.'

Banter apart, we feel that all the pretenses by the so called election-time government of Sheikh Hasina, and all its shenanigans, are because of AL's desperate bid to win the next elections at any cost keeping the BNP out of it.

And to this end all pretensions of democracy, freedom of expression etc, have been cast aside. The government's threshold of tolerance has been brought so low that it is unwilling to entertain a whimper let alone a loud expression of dissent. It is reminiscent of the days of the military dictators, the only difference being that the former used force to suppress nonconformist views. In recent times it is being suppressed in a veiled manner, either by causing dissenters to fall sick or persuading them to take leave outside the country.

Take the case of BNP and the forthcoming polls. While certainly the situation obtaining today is in no little degree the making of the BNP too, but as the party in power the AL has displayed little sincerity to make the BNP participate in the election. Political space for the opposition was constantly shrinking and in fact AL's inflexible stand on the 15th Amendment has ensured BNP's election boycott, something that many say was the AL strategy in the first place. The telephone talk, and the sham of a dialogue at Taranco's prodding, was to pull the wool over our eyes. The

Of sleazy politics and sick politicians

WE do not have only sick politics but also sick politicians, who are having to be in that state on government diktat and may even have the pleasure of enjoying the bliss of an all paid up foreign trip in the name of treatment.

While we have no idea what the particular ailment that H.M. Ershad is suffering from, we have no doubt that the ruling party is in the grip of an incurable viral

What we are witnessing now in respect of Ershad is a reenactment of 1986, of actions of an autocrat to lend credibility to a stage-managed election and to produce a loyal opposition in the parliament. One cannot conceive of a worse scenario than when an elected government resorts to ploys of an autocrat to perpetuate power.

public has seen through the trickery, and are waiting to see how much more of a laughingstock the government can make of itself.

The Ershad episode is as shoddy as politics can ever get. It is an irony that we are writing in defence of a person who was single-handedly responsible for the demise of democracy in Bangladesh, who conjured up all the tricks to divide the polity and conduct sham elections in one of which he managed to 'persuade' the present prime minister and her party to participate. It validated the election but only for a while. But Sheikh Hasina went back on her promise to the nation not to participate in Ershad's charade of an election.

What we are witnessing now in respect of Ershad is a reenactment of 1986, of actions of an autocrat to lend credibility to a stage-managed election and to produce a loyal opposition in the parliament. One cannot conceive of a worse scenario than when an elected government resorts to ploys of an autocrat to perpetuate power. But the last act is even more reprehensible. Just because he demurred on election Ershad has been incarcerated in the hospital just a day before the last date of withdrawal of nomination, to prevent him from withdrawing his candidature and from communicating with the EC or his party men. And even the party spokesman, reportedly, was asked to shut up. Democracy indeed!

The forthcoming election has become a farce with more than 50% of candidates being elected unopposed. The prospect of a loyal opposition in Ershad has vanished.

The more and more dubious scheme the so-called multiparty government employs the more of the hideous face of its politics it reveals. If this is being done for the sake of democracy and for upholding the constitution then it is time to say that we do not want the kind of politics which demeans the constitution and subverts democracy. There is nothing of 'demos' in the 'kratos.' It is everything to do with partisan interest and continuing in power. This has set the most dangerous precedent. It has also revealed the scant respect of AL for public opinion and its disrespect for the rights of the people.

We have sick politicians but Ershad is not the only one who needs treatment.

The writer is Editor, Op-Ed and Defence & Strategic Affairs, *The Daily Star*.

Congress faces rout as BJP advances

PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN



PRAFUL BIDWAI

THE message from the Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh and Delhi Assembly elections is stark. The Congress stands routed and faces further decline. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has gained impressively. And the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) has made a spectacular debut in Delhi.

These states account for 72 Lok Sabha seats. So one cannot extrapolate this verdict to the national elections to 543 seats. But the national mood is turning against the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), primarily because of rising prices, as recent Lokniti-CSDS polls show.

Unless the UPA executes radical changes in economic policy, political strategy and top personnel, it's likely to lose power.

The verdict has led some commentators to argue that India is entering a "new" political era in which "old" caste-community equations don't hold; poverty and inequality don't matter; and welfare schemes don't influence elections. What matters is the "aspirational," upwardly mobile, voter who despises welfare. Narendra Modi greatly appeals to this voter. So the 2014 election will also be his!

This argument is specious. The results confirm that "old equations" determine election victories. Besides, Mr. Modi's campaigning had no impact except in Rajasthan, where it wasn't decisive.

The four states swing between the BJP and Congress. The BJP's share of their Assembly seats has risen from 50% (2008) to 70%. But such gains don't readily translate into Lok Sabha outcomes.

In 1998, the Congress won all these states. But the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) won the 1999 Lok Sabha. In 2003, the BJP won three states, but lost the 2004 Lok Sabha polls. The 2008 Assembly score was 2-2. Yet, the UPA emphatically won the 2009 Lok Sabha.

The BJP has outperformed the Congress in all four states. But its victory was convincing only in Rajasthan and MP, and compromised or thin in Delhi and Chhattisgarh.

In Delhi, the BJP didn't win a majority; its vote-share fell from 36.3% to 31.4%. The Congress collapsed from 43 seats to eight; its vote-share falling to 23%, a historic low.

The AAP won 27% of the vote despite fielding many unknown candidates. It won handsomely in slums, and bagged nine of twelve reserved Scheduled Caste seats. Arvind Kejriwal massively defeated Chief Minister Sheila Dikshit, winning more votes than her and the next candidate combined.

In Chhattisgarh, the BJP won 49 seats to the Congress' 39, but their vote-difference was 0.7% -- 60,000 of 11 million-plus. The Congress could have scraped through had its state leadership not been wiped out by extremists in May, and had it campaigned with equal gusto in all state regions while containing factionalism.

What saved the day for Chief Minister Raman Singh were his welfare schemes: the Public Distribution System, which made foodgrains affordable for nine-tenths of the population, and similar anti-deprivation measures -- in other words, "old equations."

Welfare's effects were screamingly obvious in MP too, through Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan's PDS, a vigorous National Rural Employment Guarantee Act

programme, free bicycles for schoolgirls, provision of rural infrastructure, drinking water, roads, etc.

Mr. Chouhan, an OBC, contrasted himself with former Congress CM Digvijay Singh, who let MP languish for 10 years. He also stressed MP's emergence as India's highest-growth state with rising social indices. It's no longer a Bimaru (Bihar-MP-Rajasthan-Uttar Pradesh-acute-deprivation) state.

The BJP's Rajasthan performance was beyond its dreams. Bagging over 80% of seats, and 45% of votes, it reduced the Congress to just 21 seats, taking a 12 percent-age-point lead.

Why didn't CM Ashok Gehlot's famed welfare measures -- including free medicines, subsidised food, old-age pensions, Dalit housing, government jobs, and India's best NREGA record -- help?

Many factors worked against him, besides rising prices, which blunted the effect of welfare. These include alienation of Jats and upper castes, who never reconciled themselves to this OBC leader; Muslim disillusionment because of the Gopalgarh firing (which the BJP exploited by fielding four Muslims, two of whom won); and deteriorating power supply amidst a worsening agrarian crisis.

Ironically, NREGA's success in Rajasthan became a liability: it raised rural daily wages to Rs.300-350, adding to farmers' woes.

Flaws or administrative laxity in service delivery, poor public communication, and corruption in cash transfers worked against Mr. Gehlot. The BJP viciously branded free medicines as "poison," confusing people.

Many Congress tickets were given to elite nominees of Rahul Gandhi's advisers, who don't comprehend ground realities. A Gehlot rival was appointed Congress campaign chief. And there was internal sabotage.

Mr. Modi took over election micromanagement in Rajasthan, especially in the South. He deployed 20-25 Gujaratis at each polling booth. They inflamed middle-class Hindu communal prejudice by citing Muzaffarnagar episode and spreading "love jihad" rumours.

Mr. Modi's Rajasthan rallies in 23 constituencies were well-attended, leading to a doubling of the BJP's seats to 20. In MP and Chhattisgarh, he addressed respectively 15 and 12 meetings, with a poor, dwindling turnout. His September 25 rally in Bhopal attracted five lakhs. But his November 18 rally drew just 4,000.

In Baghelkhand (MP), despite Mr. Modi's intensive campaign, the BJP's tally fell from 21 (of 29 seats) to 20. In tribal Chhattisgarh, he drew much smaller crowds than Rahul Gandhi. The BJP's score fell from 35 to 34.

Mr. Modi's six rallies in Delhi didn't stem the AAP tide. He addressed anti-Congress meetings in Chandni Chowk and Sultanpur Majra. The Congress retained both seats. In Northwest Delhi, many among the bored audience left before he finished his speech.

Mr. Modi's appeal is limited and may be decreasing. That's no consolation for the Congress. Its gloomy prospect cannot improve unless it radically corrects course by adopting combatively anti-communal and anti-elitist policies. It must control prices through the Essential Commodities Act, lower interest rates, tax the rich, and launch yet more pro-poor welfare measures.

If this means sacking those most responsible for the UPA's pro-Big Business policies, including Finance Minister P. Chidambaram and Planning Commission deputy chief M.S. Ahluwalia, so be it. The alternative is decimation.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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President can act to restore order

Article 93(1) of the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh states "At any time when Parliament stands dissolved or is not in session, if the President is satisfied that circumstances exist which render immediate action necessary, he may make and promulgate such Ordinances as the circumstances appear to him to require, and any Ordinance so made shall, as from its promulgation have the like force of law as an Act of Parliament."

The recent cruel and devastating incidents like rails and roads disruption, torching of vehicles, arsons in mills, factories, offices and residential houses, burning and killing people with fire, cocktails and petrol bombs, etc., demand serious action. The on-duty law enforcers and security forces and innocent people of all walks of life are the victims of these escalating atrocious activities. Our economy is shattered. We request the Honourable President of the People's Republic of Bangladesh to kindly consider the circumstances and take necessary actions in order to restore conditions for normal life.

Alhaj Professor Dr. A.K. Md. Habibullah
Bashundhara R/A, Dhaka

People die on political leaders' watch

For the past few weeks, Bangladesh has been experiencing deadly strikes and hartals. Our opposition party leader Khaleda Zia and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina are the ones to blame. Offices and schools have been closed and no one dares to go out. Those who must go to work always remain in fear of getting burned or bombed. If these hartals continue throughout December till the election day, we will have to see more deaths and loss of properties. When will our leaders learn to compromise?

Mahirah Samah
On e-mail

Comments on news report, "Panicked, Hindus flee," published on December 16, 2013

Dev Saha

The government should protect the minorities! Doing nothing is not an option.

Kalu_Mia

Awami League is using the Hindus as bait. In many areas Awami thugs are torching and looting Hindu properties, and propagating that Jamaat-Shibir has done this.

Minority

We do not want to see more violence. In Satkhira, Awami League also attacked Hindu families. We will not accept such type of attack by the ruling party.

Talat

Is there a government?

Aasfisarwar

Some of the houses belonging to minorities were ransacked and torched by majority AL. Trust me, I saw some pictures in the local newspapers.

Ben10

India with its allies in government is indirectly responsible for this. India's similar interference caused anarchy and destruction in Sri Lanka where Hindu Tamils fought Buddhist Sinhalese. With turmoil and chaos, it's only India that will benefit by making Bangladesh dependent on India. The people of all faiths and beliefs will have to pay a heavy price unless Bangladesh is freed from Indian hegemony.

Bangla girl

You guys are creating panic among Hindus by this type of news, and you are well aware of this.

Abul Mashud

You are only pointing to the Jamaat for this heinous vandalism. But do justice to yourself as a reporter: find out who is the beneficiary of such attacks.

"An undignified acquiescence" (December 12, 2013)

Arif Abu

Quite interesting. The struggle in Thailand is completely different than what we are seeing in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Ezajur Rahman

You mean if this government was in opposition it would not behave in the same way?

Arif Abu

If they did I would not support them. When this party was in opposition they did not behave in the same way.

Nds

These leaders did not fall from the heaven; they grew up by public support and sustenance. The unceasing mayhem with increasing ferocity is going on for the last few months for which according to the author both the parties are equally responsible but none of them are taking the responsibility. But I am sure if by a miracle a free and fair election is held right now under a neutral caretaker government, either of these callous parties will be voted to power again. People will never unite and refuse to cast their votes for either of these parties. So who is really responsible?

Salim Ullah

If people are given a "No vote" option, majority people certainly would cast their vote to 'No', because people have no confidence at all on either of the parties.