Elections in the Memory

SYED BADRUL AHSAN



Fatima Jinnah (left) though very popular, lost to Ayub Khan (right) in the 1965 elections.

Now that we are about to have an election, or a non-election — and it all depends on how you look at it — there is this huge temptation in many of us to recall some past elections that we have seen happening in our times. For the present, let it suffice that the Awami League is poised to form a government after 5 January. To what extent that will resolve the ongoing crisis, or defuse it, remains to be seen.

Be that as it may, the history of elections in our part of the world, especially that concerning Pakistan and Bangladesh (remember, we were one country once upon a time), has never been of a comforting kind. At times there have been all the comic situations that left us all greatly amused and our interest in politics a trifle more aroused. For myself, I recall a day in 1964. That was the day when 80,000 Basic Democrats, under Field Marshal Ayub Khan's concept of democracy, were elected in East and West Pakistan. In Quetta, Baluchistan, the candidate my father had voted for lost. But the triumphant nominee had no way of knowing that, did he? So he and his supporters, in a big procession, paraded the streets and at a point stopped before our house. Full-throated slogans of 'Haq sahib zindabad' and 'Mashriqi-Maghribi Pakistan Bhai Bhai' were raised. 'Haq saheb' was, of course, my father. He, in his grand way, acknowledged the greetings of the victorious man's campaigners.

In late 1964, as Pakistan prepared for its presidential election, again under the Basic Democracy system, it was interesting to read of the rousing receptions Fatima Jinnah, sister of Pakistan's founder Mohammad Ali Jinnah, was getting in East Pakistan. She was the candidate of the Combined Opposition Parties (COP) against Ayub and it looked as if she would be able to unseat the military ruler. In the end, despite her very strong showing in the east, her defeat in the west ensured that Ayub would win. The presidential election was held on 2 January 1965.