

Govt's heavy-handed repression

Bodes ill for civic life and democracy

IN a blatant show of force, the government has thwarted opposition-planned 'march for democracy to Dhaka'. Yesterday, Dhaka was a city under siege -- totally in the grips AL activists and police. Amidst unprecedented police presence, the AL activists marched in force brandishing sticks ready to pounce on opposition elements.

Citizens of Dhaka had practically no rights as their movement was prevented. The poor were the hardest hit. Only some private cars and CNG three-wheelers could be seen on limited scale with public transport system completely shut off. Also people trying to come to Dhaka for emergencies including medical treatment and other pressing businesses suffered tremendous hardship having been stranded at various points not knowing what to do. At all entry points to the city pedestrians were subjected to frisk-searching and other forms of harassment.

Even a little show of demonstration by Supreme Court lawyers behind and iron gate was not allowed; in fact it was brutally dealt with including use of water cannon.

The government's use of force to thwart the opposition programme brought to bolder relief its repressive character distancing the ruling party from the people.

Particularly noticeable was the all-out police effort to prevent the opposition leader from exiting her house. As result, she pronounced continuation of Dhaka march programme today. This is a formula for further lawlessness and suffering. People anxiously look for an immediate halt to the spiraling cycle of violence.

Awami League manifesto

Limitless promises for voter-less election

AT last the AL has come out with a manifesto for the Jan 5th election seeking voters' support for another term. And it reads more like a fifty-year long-term plan rather than a party manifesto, which should really be looking at next five only. It is bizarre that a party hell bent on holding an election that has all but lost its moral and legal validity, came out with the manifesto only seven days before the polls.

The fact that AL's pledges come only seven days before the polls only betrays its lack of seriousness about the upcoming election.

It would be wrong on Sheikh Hasina's part to expect the public to take her seriously on the manifesto. There are promises galore with no indication from where the money will come. And when it hasn't managed the first Padma Bridge, the AL is talking about the second already. The party has failed to deliver on many of its pledges regarding governance, corruption, making the EC and ACC stronger etc, particularly on the accountability of its lawmakers. The pledge in the previous election manifesto, to make public the wealth statements of lawmakers and influential people, has been done away with.

We wonder whether it was at all necessary for the AL to conjure up so many promises now, given that more than fifty percent seats have already been won unopposed. The promises are therefore not meant for the more than fifty million voters who have been disenfranchised by the way

The givers and the grabbers!

S.A. MANSOOR

EVERY morning on TV, we see our glorious freedom fighters recount their valiant and selfless exploits that led to the birth of Bangladesh. These brave patriots were prepared to give their lives and limbs; and carried out the fight till outright military victory brought us Bangladesh! They are the givers, who gave us their all to have this nation! In stark and shameless contrast; today we have politicians who grab all that they can lay their hands on! Power, wealth and all other imaginable benefits they can acquire in search of endless wealth through any means, be it "beg, borrow, buy or steal"!

What a stark contrast between the givers, who were ever prepared to give their lives for their ideals, and the grabbers of today in the garb of politicians (notable exceptions excluded) who are out there to "make hay while the sun shines." This is the "demoncracy" of today; the mashed and smashed up version of democracy used as a tool for personal gain!

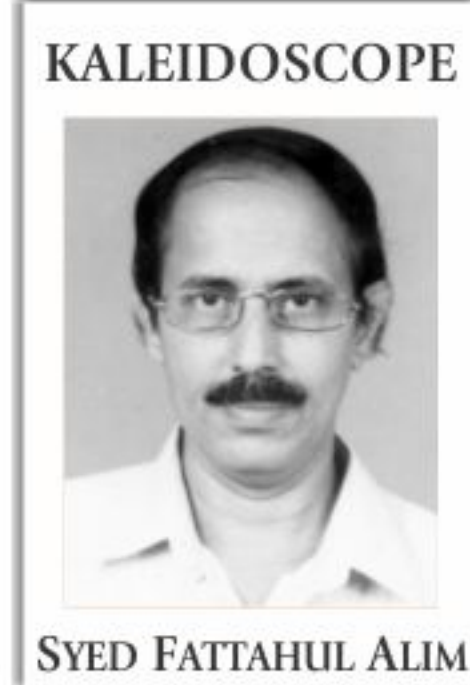
Who are the patriots and who the criminal opportunists is crystal clear to all! Our freedom fighters were noble, principled and brave persons, who handed over the country 'on a plate' to the greedy politicians who are nothing but "opportunists" involved in violence, looting, burning and killing innocent people going about their daily honest livelihood!

These are the 'Grabbers of Today'; unarmed robbers who, through their executive and political power when in government, become unprincipled seekers of all benefits -- both 'over and under the table' -- that is there for the taking and stashing it in banks 'beyond the seas'; to be enjoyed by their generations to come! Hence this tremendous 'Greed for the Godd!', for which all is fair to them! Shame on these white dressed, unprincipled 'robbers of the nation'!

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The writer is a retired engineer.

The game of shadow-boxing



party. The familiar old tactics of resorting to police excesses to drive away opposition protestors including members of the public from the roads, while at the same time allowing ruling party activists to hold processions and rallies on the street. However gross, unjust and contemptible such method may appear to a sane mind, the insane power politics of our country has become quite insensitive to it.

We have also seen how public and private transports plying between Dhaka and outlying districts have been kept off the roads. The story was the same for vessels bound for Dhaka on the waterways. Even trains were not spared. Passengers, all of whom might not have been part of the opposition programme, were forced to alight from buses, launches or trains and then either turned back or arrested. What moral right does this government have to criticise the opposition when people suffer due to the latter's enforcing similar blockades or shutdowns?

In this way, citizens of the country, which we claim to be a civilised and democratic one, are not only being denied their basic human right to free movement, but also being treated in such a brutal manner.

The ruling party leaders and the police this time appeared more blatant with their threatening postures against the opposition than before. Were they trying to show that they are not weak and so the opposition should not take them lightly? The question that naturally arises is, is Bangladesh at the moment a democracy or a dictatorship?

And if it is a democracy, then how can a ruling party and servants of the republic like the police openly declare war against the opposition and the public? How can they deny the opposition their right to assembly, a right they have been granted by the constitution? Given the maniacal frenzy with which all norms are being violated, one wonders if the entire political leadership is in the grip of mass hysteria. And to think that amid this mindless madness, they still have the temerity to say that it is all for the public's safety and for protecting people's right to vote.



What is this fury, frenzy and sabre-rattling for? Is it to make the 10th Jatiyo Sangsad election safe and which the opposition has boycotted and is trying to resist? But is there anything still left of that election to be saved?

Undoubtedly it's a novel way to protect people and their rights through unleashing mind-bending terror!

When dictatorial regimes like those in Syria or Egypt crack down on the peaceful marchers, we understand. When military dictators of Myanmar ruthlessly crushed pro-democracy movement, hijacked the result of popular election and held the democracy leader under house arrest, we understood. We understand the behaviour and language of those rulers, because that is only natural from a dictator. But we cannot understand when we see similar behaviour from the ruling party in a democracy.

What is this fury, frenzy and sabre-rattling for? Is it to make the 10th Jatiyo Sangsad election safe and which the opposition has boycotted and is trying to resist? But is there anything still left of that election to be saved? The result of more than half of the constituencies, where people have been disenfranchised, is already in hand, thanks to the technical rules of the electoral game. And is it not due to the opposition's boycotting of the polls that all those seats went uncontested?

One is then hardly surprised that important members of the international community like the EU, USA, and even Russia have declined to send their monitoring teams to oversee the January 5 election!

Is the ruling AL aware that the opposition BNP has already succeeded in achieving what they wanted, which is to show before the people at home and the international community abroad that January 5, 2014 election will be a sham and a crying shame? It's already a debacle. Perhaps, the opposition could well do without going for any further agitation programme against the government.

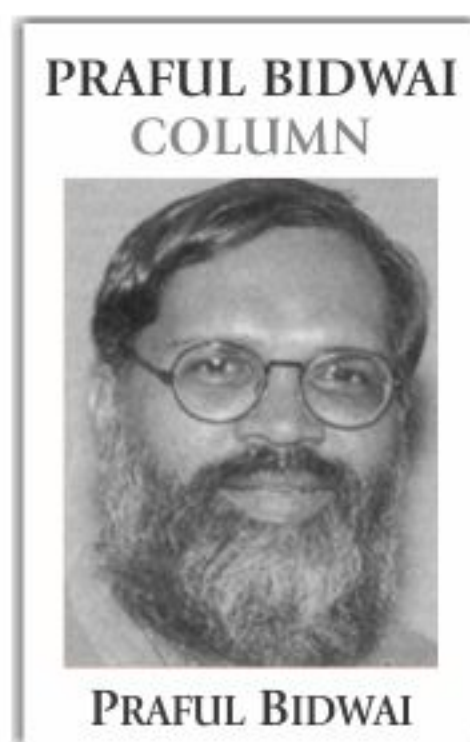
Still, for some unknown, somewhat mysterious, reasons the ruling AL appears adamant about going through the rituals of the January 5 election. And with an Election Commission too eager to serve the government, billions of taka worth of public money will be going down the drain through it.

That the January 5 election is going to be a farce was in effect admitted even by the PM herself on December 19 when she said that a fresh election would be held after dissolving the 10th Parliament if an understanding was reached subject to the BNP's shunning violence, etc. But then why is the PM still willing to go through the wasteful ritual? Does not the constitution, through Article 123 (3) (b), provide a way out of this unnecessary electoral exercise? The president, after dissolving the Jatiyo Sangsad, can still create the condition for the EC to reschedule the 10th JS polls within the next 90 days. Why is she not taking recourse to that path to avoid further instability, violence and bloodshed?

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AAP set to gain, Congress to lose



THE Aam Aadmi Party's (AAP) dizzying ascent to power in India's capital should make politicians revisit their assumptions about what strategies win elections and shape political equations. This rank "outsider" poses a challenge to all of them.

AAP has fired the popular imagination and kindled the hope that a "new" grassroots-based "people's politics" is viable even without established leaders. This hope is likely to trigger experimental launches of new parties which could affect many of India's 94 urban and 122 semi-urban Lok Sabha constituencies -- regardless of AAP's strength there.

AAP has taken a risk by accepting the Congress's support for its government. The Congress can withdraw support anytime. It toppled Charan Singh in 1980, and forced Prime Minister H.D. Deve Gowda's replacement by I.K. Gujral in 1997.

The Congress has managed to keep the BJP out of power in Delhi. But nationally, AAP will harm the Congress -- unless AAP adopts a strong line against Narendra Modi-style toxic Hindutva.

The Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) is widely held responsible for inflation, corruption and economic mismanagement. Its anti-incumbency burden is rising by the day. But it shows no recognition of this -- as the Maharashtra government's shameful rejection of the Adarsh scam report demonstrates.

The BJP too will feel the heat from AAP -- not just in eight of India's 35 states and Union territories which witness bipolar contests with the Congress, but nationally. If AAP wins 20-40 Lok Sabha seats, which is conceivable unless it botches up Delhi, it will become an influential bloc comparable to regional parties like AIADMK, Samajwadi Party, Bahujan Samaj Party, Trinamool Congress or Biju Janata Dal. Such blocs will be the kingmakers of 2014.

The BJP-led National Democratic Alliance is now left with just two allies (Shiv Sena and Akali Dal) in place of 20-odd in the past. Expanding the NDA is crucially important for the BJP: some 250 constituencies, mainly in the South and the East, are no-go areas for it.

Of the remaining 290-odd constituencies, the BJP by itself is unlikely to win the 180-220 seats needed to come to power. That's a much higher strike-rate than it has ever achieved.

The BJP is mired in the same malgovernance, crony capitalism, corruption, and "Lal Batti" (red beacon) culture for which Arvind Kejriwal lambasts the Congress. If AAP targets systemic malgovernance -- which is logical if it wants to mobilise the urban poor on water, power and slum improvement -- it must attack the BJP.

The Congress too is in miserable shape after its defeat in the recent elections. Barring Karnataka, it cannot hope to sweep any major state. In Andhra Pradesh, where it won a handsome 33 of 42 seats in 2009, it faces defeat because of its colossal mishandling of Telangana.

The Congress commissioned a judicial report on Telangana, but sat on it for three years. It has allowed its own chief minister to subvert the creation of the new state in collusion with the rival YSR Congress and

Coastal business interests.

In Uttar Pradesh, the Congress won 21 of 80 seats in 2009 thanks to upper-caste disillusionment with the BJP and the BSP, and alienation of many Muslims from the Samajwadi Party.

But now, the upper castes have gravitated towards the BJP, as have Jats, owing to the Muzaffarnagar riots and the nasty "love jihad" campaign.

Muslims feel betrayed by the SP government's appalling handling of the riots. It didn't control the violence, and left thousands stranded in inhuman conditions in relief camps. It has washed its hands of rehabilitation and is offering the refugees Rs. 5 lakhs if they don't return home.

Yet, the Congress cannot win Muslim support in UP because it has no organisation worth the name. Mr. Gandhi's efforts to revive it have failed. Muslims are exploring other options like the BSP.

In Bihar (40 seats), the Congress can improve on its score of two seats only if it crafts an alliance with Laloo Prasad's Rashtriya Janata Dal, which seems to be in revival mode, and campaigns well.

Other big states like Maharashtra, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu also remain iffy for the Congress. Whether it retains its score of 17 of Maharashtra's 48 seats will hinge on Sharad Pawar's Nationalist Congress Party. Mr. Pawar is a slippery customer, with a history of defection.

In West Bengal (42 seats), Mamata Banerjee will probably gain at the expense of the Left and the Congress. And in Tamil Nadu (39 seats), the Congress, without strong allies, is unlikely to retain its eight seats.

The Congress's overall 2014 prospect appears dismal. Yet, instead of forging itself into a fighting machine, and adopting pro-people redistributive policies, it's trying to please the same interests whose appeasement through neoliberal policies has earned it unpopularity.

Rahul Gandhi recently promised not "to allow you (Big Business) to be held back by slow decision-making." To demonstrate this, the government replaced environment minister Jayanthi Natarajan with M. Veerappa Moily. Petroleum minister Moily promotes fossil fuels -- in conflict with his additional charge. He's also slavishly pro-business.

Ms. Natarajan was no green radical. She cleared over 95% of the proposals submitted to her. She diluted the recommendations of a thoughtful report on protecting the ecologically fragile Western Ghats.

Ms. Natarajan was turfed out to create an even more lax environmental regime than the existing one, which has been criticised for "arbitrary" clearances by the National Green Tribunal. This will ensure rapid loss of irreplaceable ecological resources.

Mr. Gandhi also offered to "reform" labour laws (read, remove paltry labour protections and promote hire-and-fire policies) while saying the old laws "forced businesses to use contract labour."

In reality, employers use contract labour illegally -- for perennial regular work for which they should hire permanent workers -- because it's underpaid.

The Congress is taking these retrograde steps under the pressure of Big Business and the corporate media. But these don't deliver votes or legitimacy. The people alone do. But the Congress is turning its back on them.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Stop politics of killing people

Nowadays it has become a very common practice for the activists of political parties to throw explosives like cocktails and petrol bombs on buses and other public transports. Thus critically burned, common and innocent people of the country are dying. Most of the people who died were working class people. They didn't have any link with politics. They came out of their home in search of work but they were murdered in cold blood. What was their fault? Political parties never listened to us, but still we request them to please stop this politics of killing people. If they don't stop this, then people will give them the right answer at the right time.

Jannatul Ferdous Usha
Holy Cross College, Farmgate, Dhaka

Conduct peaceful politics

Political violence has been claiming human lives on a regular basis in the country. Miscreants are felling trees to impede the movement of vehicles. When it is crucial to plant more and more trees to save our environment, they are cutting down trees. Use of crude bombs has gone beyond the control of law enforcers; it is now a child's play. Setting fire to public vehicles, private cars, and public property is also causing serious environmental hazards.

Political parties should perform their programmes peacefully without causing any harm to the environment.

Ashikun Alam
Department of Marketing, University of Dhaka

Remembering M.R. Chowdhury

Former Director General of the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training, Mujibur Rahman Chowdhury (M.R. Chowdhury) passed away on December 22, 2013. He was a mechanical engineer, and perhaps, the first Nuclear Plant Engineer in Bangladesh, trained in Germany. After his retirement from government service, Mr. Chowdhury also served as a senior ILO expert for a number of years in Nepal.

M.R. Chowdhury was one of those few, who pioneered the export of manpower from Bangladesh. He introduced massive skill development programmes in various trades to boost up manpower export from our country.

He was a man of extraordinary honesty and integrity with a capacity for working hard. He was helpful to others and would treat friends cordially. Persons of his kind are becoming a rarity nowadays. I had the privilege to be his friend for more than thirty years. May with Almighty Allah's blessing his departed soul rest in eternal peace.

Mohammad Abu Misir
Former Managing Director
Bangladesh Overseas Employment Services Limited

Comments on commentary, "Please do not hold Jan 5 elections," published on December 27, 2013

Mahboob Shareef

Thanks Mr. Mahfuz Anam for making such a convincing and passionate appeal to the CEC and the prime minister Sheikh Hasina to postpone the January 5th election. We are convinced that the people of Bangladesh and the international community hold the same view as you have presented. In addition to what you have mentioned, it is very unusual in a democratic system that a party has secured mandate to rule the country for another term even before the party could publish its election manifesto.

Dying regime

Mr Mahfuz Anam, in 1991 BNP came to power without the help of Jamaat. In 1996 Awami League was the first party to handshake with Jamaat. In 1996 Awami League requested Jamaat to join their movement to remove BNP.

Kamrul Akhandh

Mr. Anam, please don't appeal to PM or EC. All of you editors and intellectuals, go to Indian High Commission and appeal to them. We all know who is the mastermind behind this.

Raihan Jamil

Shame on such ignorant comment.

Anonymous

Shame on people who fail to see the truth.

Bijoy Ekattor

You are not ashamed when AL led by Sheikh Hasina allows Indian government to play with our right to franchise and in turn makes these Bangladeshi leaders pawns to fulfill their desires.

Dev Saha

Only if Indians could give us a few basic lessons on democracy when democracy has been an illusion for us for the last forty two years with rampant political murders and military coups!

Aasfisarwar

The crisis began when CTG was abolished with the help of SC. If in future people regain their rights to choose freely, the police and justice systems should be reformed.

Nazim Uddin

Excellent Comments. Genuine supporters of AL will find it almost impossible to defend the allegation that AL is an anti-democratic party that believes in one party rule, similar to BKSAL

Poy

AL has already won the election, according to them. Why then the election?

Muzaffar Siddique

Mr. Mahfuz Anam, thanks for your excellent write-up. Your passionate writing echoes the passionate desires of the 95% of the Bangladeshis for a free and fair election participated by all the political parties. Let's hope at least your write-up today will