

Towards a banana republic?

PLEASURE IS ALL MINE



SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

BARRING a last-minute dissuading oracle of an inner voice wafting through the PM's mind, the January 5th election is upon us. Given the troubled preludes to national elections over the last two decades, can our major political parties have a decent claim to democratic credentials? The question answers itself. And, with the customary rejection of poll results by the vanquished party coupled with the boycott of parliament for the most part of its tenure by the opposition, democracy was reduced to an election-only exercise. Even that bit of people's right to franchise is now under threat.

The least said about the missing fervour and festivity associated with competitive well fought-out elections, the better. This is a great pity when you consider the fact that people in these parts have had elections since the British India Act of 1935 barring the dictatorial interludes. That landmark Act marked the introduction of representative government in the subcontinent. There have been anecdotes of electoral contests from those times. One that stands out head and shoulder above the present standards relates to the then incumbent chief minister of Bengal Khwaja Nazimuddin versus A.K.M. Fazlul Haque in Patuakhali constituency. The chief minister played out his official paraphernalia with his fleet of launches but Fazlul Haque would sit down to eating from a bowl of *pantha bhat* (water soaked rice) with a voter family beating his rival hands down.

So, from that point of view, despite our rich political heritage we are going down the slippery slope of being a banana republic!

As if to bear this out ANEKI.com, an independent, privately operating website based in Toronto, Canada has ranked Bangladesh 18th on a list of 20 politically most unstable countries in the world. Their data compilation sources are UN agencies and US' CIA. We are in the company of Nigeria, Ethiopia, North Korea, Yemen and Timor. Our score point is 98.1 compared to Pakistan's 104.1.

Basically, we are in the same broader bracket of Somalia, Zimbabwe, Sudan, Chad, Congo Democratic Republic, Iraq, Afghanistan and Central African Republic of Guinea.

In another listing of ten countries under the head Next Year's Wars (by Louise Arbour in FP, USA) Bangladesh which was not included last year in the antonym of Ivy League has gained an entry into it.

Indeed, we are finding place among such troubled groups of nations that we had never even been named unwittingly for rubbing shoulders with.

Why Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and opposition leader Khaleda Zia still remain stone-deaf to good counsel? People tend to blame their insensitivity on egotism and even on the high stakes they hold in winning elections. But the overarching lesson of history speaks otherwise. As they say, 'history teaches that it doesn't,' but empirical knowledge is surely something to go by.

Such knowledge establishes two facts: One, it is on the street that contentious political problems have been solved, forcing a ruling party into a discussion mode with the opposition and; two, when an understanding was reached, the outcome would be sealed, signed and delivered through undemocratic parliaments coming into being by the vice of one-sided election. The pressures from our international well-wishers and the con-

stant warnings from civil society and independent media about the consequences regardless, the political parties hang on to their experiential instincts. They do so with greater vengeance as their interests get ever more entrenched.

The prospect of a miracle was revived, howsoever faintly, by British and US envoys having met the opposition leader who is held in virtual confinement. The British High Commissioner went across to meet Awami League General Secretary Syed Ashrafur Islam to be told perhaps that talks could take place after the polls. The last ditch effort to soft pedal their influence in getting the parties to read from the same page turned into inclement weather-taking, so to speak.

The principal stakeholder India, however, rests content with its bilateral approach. Indian External Affairs Minister Salman Khurshid and its prestigious daily *The Hindu* have voiced their concerns with subtle differences in tone and temper, if not in texture.

Salman indicated that India's proximity to Bangladesh propels it to have its own assessments of the unfolding scenario in the next door neighbour and its implications in bilateral and regional terms. He argued that anything of conflictive nature happening in Bangladesh has its ripple effect on India and vice versa. This is because of their respective demographic compositions and contiguity to each other. So, Indian perceptions are likely to differ from the long distance reckonings of the USA.

The election over, the one-sided winner will be tested on its public pledge to hold the 11th general election based on full participation of political parties delivering a credible outcome.

On the one hand, Devyani issue refuses to go away between India and USA; and on the other, KSA has bankrolled Lebanon and Jordan over the head of USA which undercuts the US' clout with KSA to be a benefactor of the right-of-centre party in Bangladesh.

The newspaper *Hindu* and, in fact, a large segment of the Indian press, advised against hedging the bet on a single basket pointing to a certain India bashing mode, a shade different from the familiar variety. One can surmise, it is to this constituency that Khaleda may have appealed on 29th night, remember her sneaking allusion to Sikkim in a huff following her aborted Dhaka march programme.

Officially, however, India maintains respect for popular verdict in a neighbouring country regardless of which way it might have gone.

How do we bring a closure to the stalemate? The constitutional route has been theoretically traversed but not practically taken to by the party which holds the dispensing authority, like it or not. The election over, the one-sided winner will be tested on its public pledge to hold the 11th general election based on full participation of political parties delivering a credible outcome.

Both parties will have to recognise the futility of lose-lose option, adopt a win-win frame of mind and script a formula acceptable to both sides. The world has changed so must they.

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Morning Shows the Day

HUMOROUSLY YOURS



NAVEED MAHBUB

FEELING left out, the government carries out its own *oborodh* by cutting off all public transportation to Dhaka. Stranded travelers walk towards the capital, thus making the Long March at least a partial success.

The rare solidarity continues. The two parties join hands in forcing the cancelation of the other two parties -- Christmas and New Years.' However, Boxing Day takes on a whole new meaning on the premises of the Supreme Court.

The two parties are merely taking part in their joint five-yearly winter exercises. I just hope there isn't another two year intermission.

Meanwhile, the government, in its spree to lending a helping hand, starts with the ailing real estate and transportation sectors. It hires (commandeers) sand trucks to block the entrances to the Opposition Leader's house.

Furious, the Opposition Leader vows to take Gopalganj off the map. That may not be necessary, as, in a continuation of the rare solidarity, the leaders of both the parties are well on their way to getting Bangladesh off the map.

Perhaps there is a mad race between political warming and global warming to see which destroys Bangladesh first. So as to stay on track, the elections are etched in stone for the 5th. Preparations are in place. The military has been deployed to hazardous election duties. They would at least be better positioned to identify hostile elements in a far more hazardous South Sudan.

The Election Commission has galvanised its field officers by sending out the directive that should they get killed in the line of duty, their families would get Taka five lakh each. What better encouragement to show up at work than this...

And the candidates are as ready as one can be, unless already victorious while uncontested. Even the hospitalised Chairman of the third major party (last seen playing golf) is ready with his campaign slogan: "Please do not vote for me!"

God alone knows what will happen on the 5th. But if there is an election, where no voter has the faintest clue as to where to go and who the candidates are, at least limit the chaos to within an EPZ -- Election Processing Zone. What emerges then on January 6th is a one party (alliance) government. May I suggest the victory anthem be The Beatles' Back in the USSR?

Feeling crappy? Look at the brighter side -- we are at least contributing to the Thesaurus by adding two new words for 'depression.' I'm not talking about 'hortal' & 'oborodh.'

Here's the bottom line -- there is no incumbent Bangladesh and there is no opposition Bangladesh. There is only the Bangladesh that can't believe how bad the two have done in this encounter. To trace back to the roots of this longest running test match, let's keep in mind that it's not that only two volunteers stepped forward from a crowd of 160 million, but that 160 million have taken a step back, thus leaving only two in the front by default. The time has come for some from the pack to take two steps forward. Only then will we see the shepherd. As the saying goes: "A shepherd only emerges when the flock is ready."

Well, the flock is finally ready...

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Uncontested JS seat = Tk.10 lakh

Harsh political dispensation

SHAKHAWAT LITON

THE Election Commission has launched a campaign through posters and other means to encourage voters to pick competent and honest candidates in the January 5 election. One of the posters urges voters not to sell votes in exchange for money with a message saying selling vote is tantamount to selling conscience. The message couldn't be more correct.

In a competitive election voters are important. Candidates throng to the voters seeking their blessings and votes. Candidates also spend money to entertain voters in many ways. Sometimes they even give cash to buy votes. But this time around, the situation is completely different. In the January 5 one-sided election, voters of 153 constituencies have already been denied their voting rights. Candidates of those seats were declared uncontested. And in the remaining 147 constituencies, election results have almost been determined in absence of BNP-led opposition alliance and other parties. This is a completely one-sided game the ruling Awami League and its allies are playing. So, voters in the remaining 147 are not important too. In most constituencies candidates do not need to win voters' hearts to win the battle. So, question of selling votes does not arise so prominently this time.

But the ruling AL is doing brisk business with the uncontested candidates. It has asked the 127 candidates who were elected unopposed on AL nomination to donate Tk.10 lakh each to the party fund. Why? The AL policymakers have found that the candidates who won unopposed did not need to spend money on electioneering. And it is unthinkable that one could become MP without spending anything. According to a report run by a Bangla daily on January 1, the AL treasurer has asked the 127 candidates to follow the party directive. And some of them, according to the report, have already donated the money to the party fund. The AL is expected to earn Tk.12.70 crore through this. Earlier it had earned around Tk. 7 crore by selling nomination papers. So, the one-sided election has given the AL scope to earn at least Tk.20 crore. This amount is visible. We do not know whether there was any invisible transaction for party nominations. The answer lies in the existing culture of

nomination business by the major political parties. Allegation was raised against both AL and BNP that they did the nomination business in the run-up to the aborted January 22, 2007, 9th parliamentary election.

The January 5 one-sided election had already been mired in controversy. Now AL's decision asking its 127 candidates to donate Tk.10 lakh each to the party fund has lent another dimension to the voter-less election.

This may also prompt people to raise a question whether rich people who get elected as MPs will be able to buy posts in the new cabinet by donating to the AL fund. This will severely undermine the government's efforts to fight corruption because, if the party takes benefits from MPs and ministers, it will be unable to take action against them if they involve themselves in making wealth by abusing their office.

What step should be taken to stop this system of getting elected uncontested in future? One thing has been clear, that it is not deference of the voters towards a candidate that has got him/her elected uncontested. Rather, the ruling AL has maneuvered the election in such a way that it has set an unprecedented record of unopposed election. So, the existing electoral laws must be amended to scrap the system which allows candidates to get elected unopposed by denying voters the right to choose their representatives.

The 'No' vote system must be reintroduced with a provision that if only one candidate remains in the electoral race in any constituency, s/he will not be declared elected unopposed. Rather, voters of that constituency will be given the right to exercise their franchise to decide whether they want him/her as their representative. If they do not, voters will have the scope to cast 'No' vote. If 'No' vote wins, then fresh election will be held in that constituency. And the candidate losing to the 'No' votes should not be allowed to contest in the fresh election in that constituency. If done, this will have an immense impact on the parties to nominate clean and honest candidates. This will also prevent the major political party from maneuvering the election. The country's democracy would not have been scandalised by the huge number of MPs getting elected unopposed in this election, had such a 'No' vote provision existed.

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SHAMSUDDIN AHMED

BANGLADESH is being presently governed with a very heavy hand by the jumbo size poll-time government headed by Sheikh Hasina, and she often claims that her's is a democratic government while in the same breath she derides the past military rulers.

There is no denying that the nation witnessed an extra-constitutional and autocratic dispensation under two military dictators. But by any stretch of imagination can we say that the way the democratically elected AL-led alliance government had governed this country, and the present poll-time government has been ruling us, is democratic? It has been very repressive in nature, to say the least. One renowned and very revered literary person of the country recently quipped in utter frustration that while in the past we had seen military autocracy, now we are seeing democratic autocracy!

Frankly speaking, democracy has never been our politicians' cup of tea ever since we achieved independence in 1971. It has been practically a one man rule in the garb of an elected government all the way. By and large our politicians seem to have a penchant for repressive rule and they exhibit sheer arrogance once they step into the corridors of state power.

In a democracy, the police as an institution of the state work relentlessly to ensure safety and security of the people. Ordinary people look to the police as their friends. But thanks to our political rulers, police has never been allowed to be friend of the people. They have been politicised so much by the party in power that they have, sadly, become an instrument of repression of the opposition.

Today, front ranking senior leaders of BNP are being treated as if they are riff-raffs who could be arrested by the police at will at any time and from anywhere on trumped-up charges, kept on remand, and released on bail only to be rearrested on another flimsy charge.

As of now, many of the senior BNP leaders are languishing in jail. It appears that any BNP leader who tries to act as the spokesmen of the BNP chairperson is being arrested by the police. The spectacle of the police watching a lady in black coat being roughed up mercilessly by an unruly mob is disturbing. The picture of our police

shoving and forcing the pro-BNP lawyers to stay behind the gates of the Supreme Court compound and then spraying coloured hot water on them is disgraceful. This does not happen in a truly democratic state.

Besides, Khaleda Zia has virtually been kept under house arrest as a massive police force including female police has cordoned off her official residence with sand laden trucks in front of her house. And she has not been allowed to come out of her house, which is bizarre. No leader of the opposition had been treated like this even by the military rulers.

In a democracy the prime minister remains in constant engagement with, and shows maximum respect to, the leader of the opposition, but not quite so in this country of ours.


The present political stalemate, the systematic tearing asunder of the fabric of democracy and social order and colossal death and destruction we have been watching, centre around one issue -- election for the 10th Jatiyo Sangsad.

While Sheikh Hasina is hell bent to win the election by hook or by crook in order to hold on to power as long as she can, for which she had unilaterally scrapped the CTG system through the 15th constitutional amendment using her brute majority in the Jatiyo Sangsad, Khaleda Zia is determined to put in place a neutral poll time government to oversee a free, fair and credible election because she is confident that BNP would win such an election hands down and come to power. Morally, Khaleda Zia may be right because the BNP-led opposition has been totally denied any political space and a level playing field by the government.


The January 5 election will not give any legitimacy to the AL government to be formed. Neither the people of this country nor the international community will accept this one party election devoid of voters. Why waste Taka five to six billion of tax payers' money of this impoverished country for such a futile electoral exercise? The least Sheikh Hasina can and should do is to step down gracefully and allow a poll-time government headed by someone who stands on a moral high ground and commands respect of the people cutting across the political divide. Is it too difficult to find such a person?

The writer is a retired Brigadier General.

QUOTABLE Quote



Progress is impossible without change, and those who cannot change their minds cannot change anything.



George Bernard Shaw

CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph

ACROSS

1 Fast food quaff

5 Belfry bunch

9 Milky stones

11 Provinces

13 Showed again

14 Pitch choice

15 Make a misstep

16 Symbol of solidarity

18 Sci-fi weapons

20 "This is tasty!"

21 Jimmy of "Dexter"

22 Bank boosters

23 "60 Minutes" network

24 Circle segment

25 Flock member

27 Surgery aid

29 Outback runner

30 Albatross or auk

32 Pecan candies

34 Tell tales

35 Extreme

36 Super-man's real name

38 Candidate of 1996

39 Sailors cry

40 Sharon's "Cagney &

DOWN

1 Kitchen gadget

2 Verdi works

3 "Lone-some Dove" writer

4 Imitating

5 Some football players

6 In- (stuck)

7 "Who Asked You?" writer

8 Stockpile

10 Pig parts

12 Appears

17 Solution: Abbr.

19 Singer Barry

22 Mecca resident

24 "The Last Frontier"

25 Abate

26 Charm

27 Curved letter

28 Mass leader

30 Roofing material

31 Shoulder muscles

33 1982 Disney movie

37 Gardner of "Mogambo"

Yesterday's answer



CRYPTOQUOTE

11-27

IAS VC HA FQTSAPVI SZ LAZLIA ERZ DTUA VC RTLLK; SRAK TQA SRA YRTQDJMF FTQWAMAQC ERZ DTUA ZVQ CZVIC HIZCCZD.

- DTQYAI LQZVCS

Yesterday's CRYPTOQUOTE:

The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.

- George Bernard Shaw

A XYDLBAAXR is LONGFELLOW

One letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used for the three L's, X for the two O's, etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each day the code letters are different.

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker





HENRY by Don Trachte



