

# All for an empty victory!

*But violence should be avoided at any cost*

DISREGARDING, what we consider to be well argued reasons, the EC and the ruling party are going ahead with an election which will be devoid of any public mandate. An election brings about an elected government. In the present instance, the majority of 153 seats have already been won uncontested, and the present ruling alliance has already gained enough seats to form the new government without the election being held, and a single vote cast.

While the government refused to work for an inclusive election, the opposition, regrettably, indulged in unprecedented and brutal violence, killing several hundred people so far. The most despicable part was the setting on fire a public transport and killing ordinary people.

The so-called election is an imposition on the people of Bangladesh. Likewise, the opposition's recourse to sustained violence is a crime against the people.

If the opposition had desisted from violence and allowed a normal environment on the election day, the anticipated low turnout would have had a stronger moral meaning than it would otherwise. If they intimidated, instigated and hindered the process, the government would have cause for explaining that the low turnout was the result of fear rather than a voluntary boycott on the voters' part.

Both the ruling party and the opposition have disappointed us. Our plea for an inclusive election fell on deaf ears. Our repeated condemnation of the opposition's violence did not elicit any positive response. In spite of the above, we make a clarion call for the shunning of violence and establishment of peace, which is what people want.

# Biodiversity in serious jeopardy

*Tree felling in unabated swing*

CHUNTI, an area in Lohagora upazilla that received the UN 'Equator' prize as a unique example of preserving biodiversity has been taking the brunt of Jamaat's tea-cutting orgy. The situation has literally become dire with trees as old as 150 years being felled indiscriminately. We are at a loss as to why such practice is being encouraged. The destruction of such ancient trees cannot be condoned by a political party or its student wing for the purposes of setting up road blocks. Such destruction of natural resources is not without method. Going by press reports, more than 5,300 trees of various vintages have been felled on both sides of the Dhaka-Chittagong highway. When trees that date more than a hundred years are cut and laid out, it takes authorities many days to remove it and free up this vital road link.

Yet, the loss of such magnificent trees is a loss for the environment, one that simply cannot be grown back overnight. Forest department authorities have not ruled out the connivance of forest officials in such dastardly acts. What is happening is Chunti is particularly worrisome. Jamaat goons have cut down one of the 485 teak wood trees, some that date back a hundred years or more. Are we then to understand the Jamaat-e-Islami and its student wing the Shibir have neither any knowledge nor respect for the environment and heritage sites? We strongly urge the authorities deal with such irresponsible behaviour with an

# What now?

NOW that all our efforts for persuading the government for cancelling the 10th JS election have gone in vain, it's time to mull over what happens next. An election is determined by the people who show up. As per percentage records for one-sided polls, the controversial February 15 election of 1996, under then BNP- led government, saw the lowest turnout of voters of some 26.5%, and we predict that today's JS polls may even break this low turnout record. With only 4 foreign observers from abroad (2 Bhutanese observers and 2 observers from the Indian Election Commission) against the turnout of some 593 observers in the 9th JS polls in 2008, we can well imagine the scene of how credible this election will be in the eyes of the international community.

In a functional democracy, it is the ballot that's far more superior to the bullet, but in light of today's polls, it is ego and self-indulgence that's superior to the ballot. Over the past 22 years it was the Election Day when the commoner, at least for a day, by casting his vote exercised his only democratic power. Today it is not going to happen. Since, the turnout of 153 candidates elected uncontested -- without a single vote cast -- clearly defies to respect and accept public opinion too. A common excuse regarding today's polls, cited by many AL leaders, is that "constitution gives the government no choice but to go ahead and hold the poll." If we take this to be a valid excuse, then what allows the AL to amend the constitution suiting its own political needs by abusing its brute majority also needs some explanation.

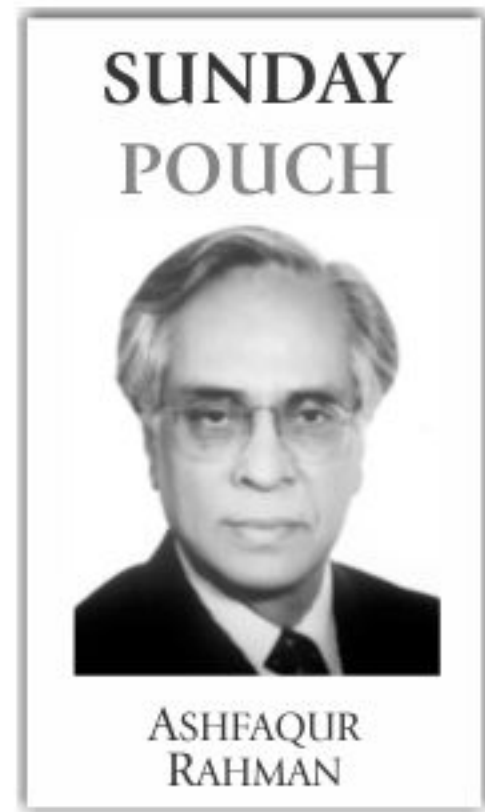
Elections are held in order to elect a leader for a particular time frame by popular choice. It's meant for marking the end of disputes and failures too. But what happens when an election plunges the country in to a chasm of anarchy? The Post election days are likely to be more chaotic.

Sheikh Hasina's stint as an absolute ruler is debated not to last more than a year. It is likely to be a short-term arrangement also. However, by holding the 10th JS polls the AL chief has hammered the last nail in the coffin for resolving all political disputes.

But it's the 'confrontational period' up till the run-up of the 11th JS polls that will be undeniably terrifying. Who would shoulder the blame for the traumatic outcomes in the near future for not holding a free and fair election?

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# 'Election' today: Challenges and opportunities tomorrow!



THE criticised 'election' to the 10<sup>th</sup> National Assembly is upon us today. The voter turnout is expected to be low. This is because the ruling Awami League is facing several obstacles in getting voters to go the booths. There is also the ongoing blockade (oborodh) of BNP. On top of this, a countrywide 48 hour hartal has been imposed from yesterday morning by BNP and other opposition parties.

With 153 seats already declared elected unopposed, the electorate is unenthusiastic to participate in a one-sided poll with BNP not in the field. BNP has however instructed its field level workers to form grassroots committee to resist the elections and to see that the voters are unable to cast their ballot. Although the security agencies including the army will help to ensure security of the voters, yet the number of voters is likely to be few.

But then, even with low turnout, the candidates contesting will be elected to the remaining 147 seats. So what happens to the country's politics from tomorrow? The opposition parties including BNP will not be accepting the results. Political pundits are telling us that, as a result, there would be a long period of political instability and uninterrupted violence.

The members of Awami League and the parties in alliance will not be wasting any time to be sworn in as soon the Election Commission publishes their names in an official gazette. Soon thereafter the prime minister will appoint her cabinet. Those members who were elected from other parties but are not included in the government would form the 'loyal' opposition in parliament.

Awami League should be ready to face serious challenges from the first day. The international community will not be ready to accept this government easily. Due to nonparticipation of BNP, which is a major party, no country or international organisation other than India and Bhutan has sent observers. They are, therefore, not ready to recognise the government that was in a way 'still born.'

There are strong possibilities that Bangladesh could face boycott of events hosted by it. However, at this early stage it is a far cry. All will depend on how successful BNP is in carrying out anti-Awami League propaganda abroad. Bangladesh could face some trade and investment related disadvantages in the international arena. This could also include denial of jobs to expatriate Bangladeshi workers, leading to a reduction in overall remittance figures. It could reduce our economic growth and thereby also circumscribe the economic growth ambitions as laid down in the Awami League election manifesto.

# One-sided election: What's next?

AN election will be held today, in which more than half of the electorate won't have to cast their ballots, where competition will essentially be limited to the partners of the ruling coalition, and many people will be afraid to venture out of their homes to vote for fear of attack. After months of street agitation, loss of hundreds of innocent lives, and amidst calls of the opposition to boycott it, an election will be held.

What will the country achieve by it? Will the election bring an end to political instability and uncertainty? Will it ensure citizens a peaceful tomorrow and beyond? Will it enhance the country's standing in the global community? Will it strengthen any of the democratic institutions? If the events of recent months are any indication, the answer is indisputably and regrettably negative. If the history of the country is our guide, the question still can't be answered positively. However, the ruling party and the prime minister will be able to claim that constitutional continuity has been maintained, and that they have made good their promise that the election will be held under the incumbent prime minister and the ruling party.

In any democratic system of governance, elections are meant to be the means to express the popular will and to select representatives through a free, fair and competitive process. It is no longer sufficient, as it was in the 1970s and 1980s, to conduct an election in order to be considered a democracy. Experiences of countries worldwide in the past three decades have taught analysts, policy-makers and the international community that it is necessary to transcend the 'fallacy of electoralism,' i.e. to view elections as the only criterion for determining whether or not a democracy exists. The quality of the election is as much a consideration as other aspects, such as pluralism, free press, safety of political activists, freedom of expression, and accountability, to name but a few. It is no exaggeration to affirm that these indices will be taken into account in the framing of future bilateral and multilateral relationships.

It is well known that a country's people are the ultimate source of political legitimacy. This election, which has disenfranchised more than half of the electorate, will have failed to gain the required political legitimacy which only an inclusive process can confer. It will be viewed by many as devoid of moral legitimacy, although it may well be legally and constitutionally legitimate. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's offer to hold the 11th Parliamentary election through negotiations with the opposition a short time after the January 5, 2014, election is an admission that this election (of the 10th Parliament) will achieve very little.

This election will complicate Bangladesh's relationship with the international community. The decision to ignore advice on resolving the crisis proffered by the international community was not a prudent move. The resulting diminished global standing of Bangladesh will damage the country's legitimate claims. Pursuance of an isolationist policy is not in the best interest of

Perhaps India is one country, due to its public support for AL, that would consider cooperating with this government economically. But India accounts for only \$5 billion of Bangladesh's \$28 billion exports. It would in fact give active support to AL to ensure international acceptability of today's election.'

The challenges mentioned so far would put extreme pressure on the smooth functioning of the government. In short, it would be prudent for the new government to find ways and means to normalise diplomatic and international economic relations by making substantive political concessions to BNP.

A wise option for it would be to consider holding mid-term election with participation of BNP and other political parties for the 11th National Assembly. That would necessarily mean starting a political dialogue with BNP without any conditions. AL should not contemplate trying to divide BNP by bringing some elements within its fold. It tried before the 10th National Assembly but failed. The dialogue should aim at having BNP with its alliance participate in any future elections based on a formula that could help establish a level playing field for all parties. This is perhaps the best option left for AL to redeem its reputation as a democratic party with a 60 year or more history.

Let us not forget that the United Nations had been actively urging AL as well as BNP to talk and reconcile their positions in order for both the parties to participate in the

10th National Assembly elections. Since it failed at that time, it would be critical to help the UN succeed in its efforts for the 11th National Assembly election. That would make our people

happy no doubt.

On the domestic front, the challenges facing the AL government that will be taking oath after the elections to the 10th Assembly are many. So also are the opportunities. First, AL has to take steps to clear up the political atmosphere at the earliest. All political prisoners must be released without conditions. Not only BNP but also Jamaat activists could be released for the purpose of political dialogue. Those who were arrested for maiming and killing people, and for arson, need to be charged, tried and punished. Police officers and law enforcers who acted beyond their writ must also be taken into account.

If there is a sincere wish on the part of the new AL government to start reconciliation, it is likely to get support from all quarters. The people of the country today stand divided. National reconciliation is needed. Policies must be put in place that encourages all parties to work together to see a fair election take place in the near future.

Today's 'election' is therefore a stopgap arrangement for AL to fulfill what it calls a 'constitutional requirement.' But once done there should be no looking back. The challenges must not overwhelm us. Bangladesh is a land of tremendous possibilities. Let us all join together to push ourselves out of the present political quagmire.



Bangladesh, neither can it depend on one country to mediate its foreign relations.

In the event of a strained relationship with development and business partners, the economy is likely to suffer, indications are already palpable. It is well to bear in mind that Bangladesh's major trading partners -- the EU, the USA, Canada, Japan and China -- repeatedly called for a negotiated settlement of the crisis and that these calls fell on deaf ears. The continued political instability will hamper investments and ongoing businesses. Bangladesh is no longer dependent on foreign assistance. Thanks to the vitality of the private sector and the hardworking labourers of the country, the structure of Bangladeshi economy has changed in the past decades. But, it is inextricably integrated with the global economy. The size of the economy has grown and with it grew the reliance on global market. To assume that it will be a 'business as usual' scenario after a flawed election is unrealistic.

However, if this new parliament is utilised as a transition vehicle to pave the way for a more inclusive election, it might help end the ongoing political instability and potential violence. On the contrary, if the parliament is used to govern the country, the situation may deteriorate further. The first step to resolve the crisis is to allow the opposition party the space to express itself in a peaceful manner. Continued persecution of the main opposition party, a much discredited tactic, is not only unwise but also counter-productive -- a lesson the government must learn from the history of the country. Political differences cannot be resolved through force. In similar vein, the opposition should play its part in ensuring continuation of constitutional politics and refrain from engaging in wanton violence as a tactic. BNP should revisit its alliance with the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), which had acted against the liberation of the country in 1971 and its leaders never apologised for the crimes committed.

As of tomorrow, efforts should be directed towards minimising the fallout and acting promptly. That means, as acknowledged by the prime minister herself, negotiations and a new election. To do so, a clear roadmap must be laid out in earnest. Only that can lessen the damage already inflicted.

# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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## When will peace return in Bangladesh?

How long will this political unrest continue? The vehicles stopped plying the streets but we have to go out because our offices are not closed. When any of my siblings or I go out on the street, our parents remain worried. They call me and ask, "have you reached office safely?" If my cell phone is switched off for any reason, they become worried. The dreadful scenes of bomb blast or vehicles on fire keep coming to their minds. This is the situation of every household now.

We want relief from these dreadful circumstances. USA, UN, and other international communities failed to bring the two parties to an understanding. Serious actions need to be taken for establishing peace in the country.

Syeda Rezina Akter  
On e-mail

## Justify your wealth publicly

We are not just surprised, rather shocked to learn about the astounding increase in wealth of our politicians from your report 'politics of fortune.' No doubt, some of our leaders are very good magicians and mathematicians. The combination of both magic and mathematics made them fabulously rich. That's a feat they achieved by pulling the wool over the public's eyes. The public are always made fool and victim in the name of democracy. We can only pray for the purification of their minds and souls.

Now will the authorities concerned, the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), the EC request the great leaders and politicians to justify their wealth increase publicly?

M.A. Razzaq  
Kolabagan, Dhaka

## Stop this cat-mouse game

Wish all readers a very safe, healthy, and successful 2014. However, that, too, to a large measure, depend on the wishes of our political leadership.

The government's handling of the opposition-called March for Democracy (MFD) programme was undoubtedly self-defeating. In fact, it is the opposition that has won the public's sympathy, while the government lost whatever was left of its support among the people. The cat and mouse game between ruling and the opposition parties is ruining and hurting us. Please be serious. We are waiting for you (two great ladies) to be serious for the country and the people.

Iqbal Ali Khan  
Director  
Admin & Customer relations  
Naseem Group

## Comments on news report, "Love' for land knows no bounds," published on January 02, 2014

### Shahin Huq

This is according to what they have declared in their wealth statements. What about the properties they may have bought in developed countries? We have lost that money permanently.

### Nasreen Chowdhury

Good report.

### Alekanda

When will these dishonest hypocrites be brought to justice? Haven't heard any comments yet from our PM about this corruption. When BNP was in power they looted the country, AL did the same. What is ACC doing with the taxpayers' money?

### Nazmul Haq

Modern day zamindars!!

### Dev Saha

Pretty obscene!

### Mohammad Rahman

Will Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) take action against them? Will the prime minister expel them from the party?

### Nasreen Chowdhury

Politics is their business to get rich. That's why we don't have democratic institutions, democratic think tanks, etc. It's all about getting rich quick before the next election.

### Ash C.

Will it be wrong to say that a big percentage of the income or whatever from these properties go to the 'Genie' as 'nazrana'? Anyway, in Awami type of democracy promoted by Sheikh Hasina, such looting is part of AL 'democratic' policy!

### Akhtar Shah

Surprised? Don't be! BNP lot had free for all during their rule and AL lot is buying up the country. It's the name of this game. Why don't you think neither wants to give up power? They have turned a state into an 'AL estate'.