

Read Alice, call Annan

IRENE KHAN

If you read Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* you will find a striking resemblance between the crazy, fantasy world of Alice and what we are currently witnessing in Bangladesh. Our country has become like the Mad

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Hatter's Tea Party where logic is carried to its extreme end, and some of our leaders sound as imperious as Carroll's Queen of Hearts who calls out: "Off with his head" whenever someone displeases her.

Our police chief believes bamboo-wielding thugs are flag-bearing pro-democracy activists. Supreme Court

lawyers from opposing factions hurl rocks at each other, rather than legal arguments. The government "blockades" the capital pre-emptively and more effectively than the opposition could ever have done. The opposition claims it is easing our path to democracy and development by burning cars, lorries and the economy to cinder. The Election Commission exhorts us to participate in free and fair elections while depriving half the electorate of their right to vote (having declared the candidates "elected unopposed").

Dhaka may be short of some things as the *oborodh* disrupts transport links with the rest of country, but there is plenty of *biryani*, Bollywood music and dancing at high society wedding parties in Gulshan, Baridhara and Dhanmondi. Never mind that international garment buyers are shifting their orders to other countries, the stock market is shaky, vegetable growers and poultry farmers are facing financial ruin, remittances are falling, and the poor are getting poorer.

Where is it all heading? Surely towards elections on January 5 and a

resounding victory for the Awami League, beating all previous records, and most certainly to months, if not years, of conflict and violence. Beyond that, it is anyone's guess. Neither side is strong enough to defeat the other, nor wise enough to compromise.

Bangladesh needs outside help -- and not just from the international community's efforts have failed to make much difference. The diplomacy is nowhere near the level reserved for the likes of Presidents Rohani and Assad. Bangladesh has neither the death rates of Syria nor the nuclear threat of Iran to warrant attention from the highest levels of the US, UK or UN. But it does have the potential to disrupt international peace and security through Islamist extremism -- and as the middle ground disappears through political conflict, the extremists in Bangladesh are getting stronger. The international community cannot afford to let our self-inflicted political wounds fester for much longer.

After the January 5 elections, the country will need a negotiated political

settlement and governance reforms to set right the democratic and economic trajectory which has gone awry.

In fact, we will be very much in the same position as Kenya which plunged into ethnic and political violence after its disputed presidential elections in December 2007. Over 600,000 people were displaced and more than 1,300 died as a result of the conflict. Kenya was pulled back from a potential political abyss by a transparent and inclusive process of dialogue encompassing political parties, civil society, the business community, religious leaders and the media. The negotiations were conducted by a panel of eminent African personalities headed by Kofi Annan and supported by the international community and regional leaders. They led to a national accord that included a coalition government, significant revision of the Constitution, reform of the judiciary, devolution of power, a truth and reconciliation commission, and international justice for crimes against humanity.

Some of the reforms are still in the

making, some did not get off the ground as promised, and there has been much frustration at the slow pace of change. But there was sufficient change (in which, incidentally, my organisation, IDLO, played a modest part along with many others), so that five years later in 2013 the Kenyan presidential elections took place without major violence, power was transferred peacefully and electoral disputes were resolved successfully through the courts. That is no mean achievement, and one from which Bangladesh can draw some important lessons.

In the words of Kofi Annan: "Kenya was bleeding and the people wanted peace. There was no alternative to dialogue and mediation. The leaders found the courage and the wisdom to seek a political settlement and stop the killing."

Throw away *Alice in Wonderland*, pick up the phone and call Kofi Annan.

The writer is Director General of the International Development Law Organization (IDLO) and wrote this article in her personal capacity as a citizen of Bangladesh.



PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

THE WALKOVER AND AFTER

Time-bound negotiation or nightmare?

IPTEKHARUZAMAN

THE national election being held today may be constitutionally and legally correct, but politically and morally flawed. There are no true winners in this walkover without credible opponent. It is a replay of bitterly farcical elections that we have had in Bangladesh, making a mockery of people's right to vote -- national election of March 3, 1988, by-election of March 20, 1994, national election of February 15, 1996, and the aborted one of January 22, 2007.

In the heart of their hearts the 153 candidates who have been given the status of uncontested "MP-elect" must be deeply embarrassed to be congratulated even by their near and dear ones. Likewise, very few, if any, of the remaining 147 would have the satisfaction of having been elected in true sense of the term.

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We had seen this before. The difference is that this time the cost has become much higher because of newer forms of violence, loss of life, breach of public safety and security, capture of political space by brutally undemocratic means and, above all, threats to democracy and fundamental rights of the people. "Da-kural" (axes and choppers) and havoc by petrol bombs have come in response to "logi-boitha" (sticks and oars) for a ruthless game of hunger for power.

Our political leaders appear to be engaged in a senseless competition of doing worse than the opponent and causing deeper self-embarrassment, holding the fate of 160 million people hostage in the name of democracy. They have not shown any sensitivity to the hardships and human tragedies of the victims of violence, not least to losses incurred by the society and economy for now and for days to come. They are mak-

ing politics difficult for true politicians, and creating their own enemies. The lust for power is so brazen that they don't even mind hitting below the belt. By these and more, examples are being set of what a democracy-aspiring nation and its leaders must not do.

There is another difference this time, which may in fact be a dimming light at the end of the tunnel. The prime minister and a number of her party and coalition leaders, including powerful ministers, have indicated that they are holding this election for the sake of constitutional obligation, even though it is against their own conscience.

On December 21 last year, the PM said: "Of course we will score goals as the field is empty." One cannot ignore the factors that contributed to the field being empty -- whether it was for want of a level-playing field, or for the referee's lack of credibility, or because the trust level between the two captains is at the nadir, or because one is coached in such a company that challenges the fundamental values defining the context in which the game is being played.

Be that as it may, the candid acknowledgement that it was going to be a competition far from worth the name can be commended. On the other hand, soon after the election manifesto of Bangladesh Awami League was announced, the finance minister told a TV talk show that they did so as a mere formality and not to seek public mandate on it. He added that there was no scope to seek public mandate "because no election is being held ... our jono-netri has already announced that people's mandate cannot be achieved by this, she will soon arrange another election on the basis of consultation with the opposition party."

Today's election being a fait accompli, and much as it may appear unrealistic, this announcement can be viewed as a ray of hope for resolving the stalemate. Although it is going to guarantee them a brute majority, the ruling party and its allies are fully aware, as has been already announced, that it is not going to give them public mandate to form either the government or the parliament. Hence, the talk about negotiation for election to the 11th Parliament is a plain and simple recognition that today's election lacks both credibility and legitimacy.

The best outcome of the January

5 election, therefore, is the space for the government to take the lead to resort to the negotiating table to agree on a mutually agreed form and content of the election-time government to ensure a fully participatory election. If they mean it, they must, without losing a moment after the election, announce a specific time-bound framework for negotiations. By that they stand to gain more than lose.

Given the political will a negotiated settlement is not far to seek. Forget about expert opinion, and ignore international and diplomatic initiatives. Ask a randomly selected common individual in the street who will easily tell our two top leaders what to do -- place national interest and public expectations above mutual animosity, unacceptability and hatred; demonstrate that you have the genuine credentials of the two brightest torch-bearers of democracy in Bangladesh.

People tend to find ways to work together for two types of motivations -- to achieve common goals or to address common threats. The zero-sum game has become so blindfolded that there is perhaps no room for exploring common goals. But the brinkmanship has also brought them to a stage that they need to look at the threats they are inviting for themselves. These are the threats to democracy; threats to public interest, safety and security; and threats of sinister and undemocratic forces gaining more and more ground in political space. These forces are making targeted attacks on innocent people most ruthlessly; they are destroying the state infrastructure. If they are not contained now, such violence may emerge as part of the political culture, inviting more ominous risks for life, liberty and fundamental values of our society than seen so far.

Failure to work out a mutually agreed election-time government within a specific time-frame may create such a havoc of instability and violence that the situation may go beyond the control of democratic political forces. While it is hard to predict the implications of such a nightmarish scenario, an open-ended period of mayhem and higher-intensity violence may unleash what the country cannot afford.

New government likely to face adverse fallout

FARID HOSSAIN

TODAY, Bangladesh is holding its 10th National Election, considered the most controversial and chaotic since its independence in 1971, in which the winner is known even before the first ballots are cast.

In a last-ditch effort to stop the vote, Khaleda Zia's alliance has called for a nationwide *hartal* on top of the indefinite nationwide blockade, besides making a last-minute appeal to the people not to go to the polling stations to vote. Her statement came from her Gulshan residence, which has remained under heavy security cordon raising speculation that she is under house arrest, an opposition claim denied by the government.

In spite of the violence, deaths and destruction it appears that Sheikh Hasina will sail through this Sunday's vote and she is going to be the third-time prime minister in a nation that looks more politically polarised than ever.

Still, she faces the challenge of ensuring a reasonably acceptable turn-out in the vote. In the most controversial election held by Khaleda Zia on February 15, 1996, the turn-out was registered at 26.5% amid a successful Hasina-led opposition boycott. Even if Hasina is able to better this turn-out it will be an uphill task to prove its credibility.

Few in Bangladesh believe this Sunday's election and its outcome will be acceptable to the people of Bangladesh. Neither will be it seen as credible by the international community.

That no international organisation is sending any team to observe the election is a strong enough indication that it is not acceptable to them. Hasina's crackdown on the domestic opposition might have worked in taking the

heat off its campaign, but on the overseas front it is the international community which seems to be in the mood of cold shouldering Hasina's next government.

If Hasina can hold on until the formation of her next government after January 24 (when the still-alive 9th Parliament is due to expire), her first challenge will be get the new government recognised by the development partners. It's not that the donors will impose sanctions or suspend the diplomatic contacts. What is most likely is that their extreme disappointment over the irresponsible response from the country's major political players is likely to cause misunderstanding between Bangladesh and the international community.

Bangladesh's international isolation may come in various forms. Hasina's first test will be to get the foreign diplomats, especially from the donor nations, to attend the installation ceremony of her new cabinet. The focus then will be on whether the diplomats turn up at the oath-taking ceremony. If they do, that will be seen as a softening of their stance by the donors with the expectation that Hasina will keep her promise of holding a constructive dialogue with the opposition to hold another election (11th Parliamentary polls) with BNP and other major parties taking part in it. Who knows what will happen if the diplomats stay away from the ceremony.

What is going to happen is still not clear. In a regular briefing in Washington US State Department spokeswoman Marie Harf was asked if the US will recognise the results of this Sunday's election. She did not give a clear answer, saying only that she does not want to go ahead of the subject.

The writer is former Bureau Chief, AP.

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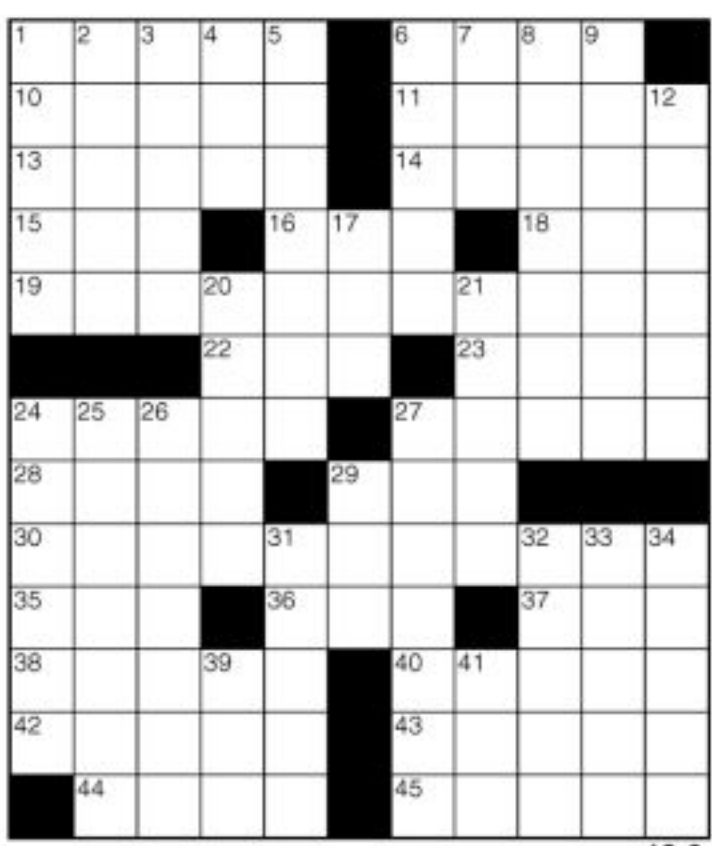
CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph

ACROSS

- Spots for tots
- Barney's buddy
- One of the Great Lakes
- From the area
- Blown away
- Sky blue
- Squirrel's snack
- Make mistakes
- In the style of
- Pioneer-ed, as a movement
- Early auto
- Solitary
- Fall flower
- More tender
- Field crop
- Univ. or acad.
- Perceptive
- Cain's mother
- Writer Rand
- S&L offering
- Coup-
- Detroit player
- Wear away
- Boot out
- Ignored the limit
- Cars' scars

DOWN

- Setting for goatees
- Incur, as debts
- Furious
- Violinist's need
- Scornful person
- Distress signal
- Cartoon-ist Chast
- Quito's nation
- "Rose-anne" daughter
- One in charge
- Letter before sigma
- Game setting
- Hawaiian hello
- Assent
- Crossword fans
- Bird's perch
- Like some candles
- Bashful
- Assessed
- "Eat up!"
- Put up
- Pub pastime
- Sports drink suffix
- "--- had it!"



Yesterday's answer



CRYPTOQUOTE

TL BSA TM EZ PH WTPHYSEHC
EZ HARZU BZYH WHTMFYH
VH BFME SWMZ PH QYHQSYHC
EZ HARZU EVTM WHTMFYH
LFWWU SAC GYHSETHWU
- HWHSAZY YZZMHIHWE

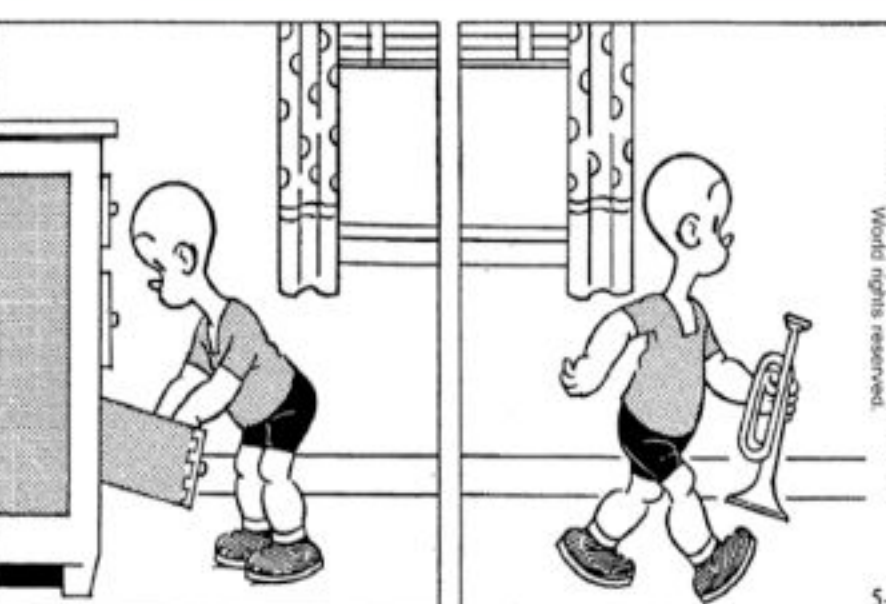
Yesterday's CRYPTOQUOTE:

After a good dinner one can forgive anybody, even one's own relations.
--Oscar Wilde

BEETLE BAILEY



HENRY



by Mort Walker



by Don Trachte



QUOTABLE Quote

If we open a quarrel between past and present, we shall find that we have lost the future.

Winston Churchill