

ELECTION -1

A predicted and hollow victory

AL has won a predictable and hollow victory which gives it neither a mandate nor an ethical standing to govern effectively. Elections to the 147 nominally contested seats of the Jatiya Sangsad are now over. With candidates to 153 seats earlier declared elected unopposed, the tenth parliament is now technically in place. Despite violence in some areas, voting of sorts and evidenced by low turnout took place in other areas in relative calm. A jarring note came, though, from those centres where not a single vote was cast.

As was expected, the turn-out of voters, even in Bangladeshi terms, was pretty low average-wise. According to early information no more than 20 per cent of voters went to the polling stations to make their electoral preferences known, which were of course limited owing to a boycott of the election by the largest opposition party and which, in effect, ended with only one option-- namely the ruling party. Moreover, the turn-out was impacted by violence or the fear of it from the opposition.

We cannot but register our sorrow at the deaths of sixteen people in police firing on the day, a measure ostensibly taken to foil any attempt to disrupt the voting through extremist terrorism. We certainly condemn the violence let loose, as anticipated, by the Jamaat-Shibir (our second editorial today deals with the particular issue in detail).

We also note the fact that prior to the voting, the heavy weight of the state machinery was brought to bear on some parties as a way of herding them to the polls. The Jatiya Party remains a glaring instance.

What does this election mean for the ruling party? The plain and simple truth is that the results have not given a mandate to the prime minister and her party but have only served up a tenuous victory of sorts. One then needs to ask the question: was it a reflection of the popular will, given the circumstances in which the election took place? To be sure, the rituals of an election, in the legal sense, have been fulfilled. The moral victory is missing.

We repeat: it is a victory of sorts. Let the powers that be now go for a process that will give them a definitive mandate for governance.

ELECTION -- II

Election violence

POLITICAL parties have the right to boycott elections. They also have the right to motivate people to side with their position. But what is unacceptable is using violence and intimidation to thwart an election. We must register our contempt at the systematic manner in which violence had been applied in yesterday's polls. We note with consternation the leading role Jamat-Shibir have taken in perpetrating violence.

It would have served BNP's cause better if they had dispensed with violence and depended on the prudence of the voters to choose between voting and abstaining.

At the time of going to press, polls in as many as 161 polling centers in more than 30 districts have been postponed and 19 people killed in election related violence only yesterday. Polling centers had been subject to arson attacks and a large number of schools, they being normally selected as polling centers, have suffered severe damage as a result. Regrettably, election officials have been attacked and two of them succumbed to their injuries the day before the election. All this means that votes in all these centers will have to be rescheduled.

We are also surprised at the policy devised to ensure security. We wonder whether the planners downplayed the threat, the potential of which the security forces and the EC could not have missed. And were there no better ways of providing security for the election?

AL and BNP win, people lose

SHAMSUDDOZA SAJEN

HISTORY repeats itself. First time it was BNP that stage-managed 6th Parliamentary elections and bagged 100% seats. 49 candidates won uncontested. Voter turnout was the lowest ever, 26.5%. Opposition parties boycotted the election. BNP defended their one-sided move claiming obligation of constitution.

This time it is AL-led alliance that has grabbed almost all the seats, 153 candidates won uncontested, voter turnout should be the lowest. They used the same excuse of constitutional obligation. The two parties have changed roles.

After this election, people's disillusionment with politicians and elections may run deeper. It has been proved again that upholding of the Constitution does not necessarily confirm legitimacy in public perception.

In our polity, failure in managing democratic competition has become chronic. When Ershad's autocratic regime was toppled by people's uprising, BNP and AL came to a basic consensus that in a democratic set up no one will use killing and state controlled elections, rather winning free and fair election will be the legitimate means of gaining and continuing in state power. Both the parties came to power alternately, each for two five-year terms, but did nothing to consolidate the ground rule of peaceful transfer of power let alone empowerment of citizens and democratic practices. Formal democratic institutions are present here but kept dysfunctional. Over the years the scope of democratic competition has been narrowed down to electing either BNP or AL nominated candidates who depend more on money and muscle power than popular support. In fact, election itself holds very little promise to general people.

In this election, we have seen unprecedented violence. It exposes the bankruptcy of the major parties. AL feared to face people's verdict and BNP-Jamaat alliance feared that people would not come out to support their cause. So both of them resorted to violence and politicking panic. Panic is so strong that it creates an overwhelming feeling of anxiety that dominates or prevents any reason and logical thinking. In the present case, AL has succeeded in winning again and BNP has succeeded in disrupting election and restraining people from exercising their democratic right. Both of them have achieved their goal. We, the people, even cannot dare to ask where is our fundamental voting right, rather we are forced into thinking of BNP's and Jamaat's democratic right to be elected, and AL's pledge to hold war crimes trial so as to soothe their rage. The result of the 10th Parliamentary election is that AL, BNP and their respective alliances have won the game and we, general people, are the only losers.

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Realities that Bangladesh faces in the aftermath

SYED MUNIR KHASRU

ELECTIONS were held yesterday with moral defeat for a party with a long history of struggle for democracy and the distinction of providing political leadership in the country's war of independence -- the Awami League. Failure to field a credible opposition in an election where the AL and its allies were pre-scheduled to come out as 'winner' with more than 50% seats won unopposed is inconsistent with the image of a party that perceives itself as the champion of democracy.

Presence of politically insignificant parties like JSD or the Workers Party carried little weight among the voters. The JSD failed to win a single seat in 1991, 1996, and 2001 elections and the Workers Party won only one seat in 1991 and not a single seat in 1996 and 2001. In 2008 election, with AL backing these two parties together won 5 seats. After much arm twisting, a breakaway part of Jatiyo Party agreed to play the part of opposition. Quarantining Ershad in a hospital did not draw any accolade nor did prevention of Khaleda Zia from joining the 'March for Democracy' have any merit. Most importantly, these stage managed shows and acts of coercion could not either fool or convince the public.

In Bangladesh, people celebrate their democratic rights by casting votes in a festive mood. This time the mood was characterised by fear, anxiety, indifference, and apathy. The strong arm tactics of the government and violence unleashed by the opposition have created an environment of fear. In the last one year, violent agitation by the BNP- led opposition and aggressive response by the law enforcers have resulted in more than 400 people killed, many more injured, and public and private property worth millions damaged.

The AL's justification of elections to meet "constitutional deadline" and dogged determination to hold the polls is largely untenable. The 2011 Supreme Court verdict provided for two more elections under the caretaker system. The constitutional amendment passed by the government the same year was so rushed that it hardly allowed room for any inclusive stakeholder consultation. The constitution is the people's charter and not a means to serve narrow partisan interests that undermine the greater wellbeing of the people whose interest it is supposed to preserve and protect. Under the same pretext of "upholding the constitution," BNP held the farcical February 15, 1996 elections boycotted by AL and other parties, and which attached a stigma to BNP's name. By holding the January 5, 2014 elections, AL now gets even with BNP, again unfortunately for wrong reasons.

The International Community including the US, EU, China, UN, have repeatedly tried to facilitate dialogue and consensus between AL and BNP without any success. The EU, US, UN did not send election observer missions. While India is perceived to be single-handedly backing the AL, it rather reinforces, rightly or wrongly, the stereotype of AL being a pro-India party or India being a pro-AL country. How this would impact Indo-Bangladesh relations in the coming days as well as AL itself remains to be seen. Meanwhile, India is heading towards elections before May 2014, where the BJP candidate Narendra Modi looks strong and policymakers in India may rethink their stance in relation to Bangladesh. The Hindu -- one of the most influential Indian daily newspapers -- wrote on January 1, 2014: "The crisis poses a serious challenge for India's policy on Bangladesh... India could have helped at least by counseling Prime Minister Hasina to take less reckless positions against her opponents, but it is too late for that now. Post-election, Bangladesh appears headed for more volatility, and New Delhi's relations with a government that comes to power through a problematic process will only get more complicated."

Given the above background, the international community will view the new government as the outcome of an election lacking legitimacy. Their response to the government is likely to be gradual. They would encourage early timing of fresh election with all sides involved. If their urging is still snubbed, sanctions and punitive measures may eventually follow -- although it is too early to spell out what those might be.

The opposition would now push to hasten fresh, i.e. 11th, national election. Yet, it would be a heavy burden on the already imperiled economy, which will continue to stagnate until a political solution with buy-in from the two major political camps can be reached. The months of blockades and shutdowns prevent retailers, transport businesses, farmers, and exporters from carrying out regular business activities. Investors will hold back or shift their investments.

In the RMG sector, 40% orders were cancelled in December 2013. India -- the tough competitor -- is working to ink Free Trade Agreement with EU, which might affect the RMG of Bangladesh. Vietnam and Pakistan are coming up as close rivals. The footloose RMG orders -- once shifted elsewhere -- do not come back. Many of the losing businesses would default on loans, while banks fret over diminishing credit appetite among clients. Already, the international institutions and the central bank have revised growth outlook downwards for the coming year -- which is now less than 6%. If the political stalemate is not resolved early, more downward revisions will follow -- spelling doom for the lives and livelihood of millions of ordinary citizens of the country.

The AL has often bemoaned the criticism it faces despite all the development successes and achievements it made in its five year tenure. Yet, the persecution of Dr. Muhammad Yunus, the Padma Bridge fiasco, the Share Market scam, and the one-sided election have laid ground for criticism for which AL cannot fault others. The irony is that both the parties have undermined the country and its people in the name of democracy and constitution.

After 42 years of independence and two decades of democracy, Bangladesh cannot afford to go back to square one. Unless this vicious cycle of acrimony and confrontation ends and we move to a democracy that is stable, matured, and functional, the outcome is continued slide to political bankruptcy and economic collapse. We are not a failed state but as a state we are failing on things that matter most. Are our leaders listening or do they care? We all know the answer.

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Crisis in consensus: Is election a way forward for Bangladesh?

MANZOOR HASAN and ASHIKUR RAHMAN

AREND Lijphart, an eminent political scientist of our era, wrote while dedicating his work *Patterns of Democracy* to his six grandchildren that he hoped that their century would be more democratic, peaceful, kinder, and gentler than what he mostly studied and experienced during his lifetime. This idea of inheriting or leaving behind a kinder and peaceful democratic society is appealing to all human beings with conscience, and yet so many societies that we see or know have lived through centuries of chronic conflict and anarchy. Why are peace and democratic governance so hard for us to achieve and sustain? Are most of the world's civilisations still suffering from scarcity of wisdom and resources that they cannot create conditions for a gentler and kinder democratic order?

The answers to the posed questions are difficult, but some insights on the mentioned issues are of fundamental importance for Bangladesh, which at present stands at a difficult crossroads. First, any basic polity generally experiences conflict amongst its citizens concerning the distribution of state resources. These conflicts have ignited political economists, such as, Karl Marx and Friedrich Hayek, to point out contrasting methods of conceptualising and organising the State.

Second, there is a deep division among the political actors concerning who gets what. That is, should 'winners' of the majority opinion have an unchallenged domination over the 'losers'? This is an essential issue and the idea of attaining 'balance of power' through the separation of judiciary, legislative and executive is an outcome of deliberation on such concerns.

Third, any given society struggles to find an optimal level of rent seeking that it allow its political elites to undertake. It is evident from popular media that the affidavits of the aspirant Members of Parliament of the 10th Parliamentary election have created a deep discomfort within citizens, which in some sense reflects that people are concerned with the level of rent political actors generate in the name of serving them.

Lastly, political landscapes of all nature and heritage will constitute groups that nurture values and ideological convictions that are difficult to reconcile, and that such polarised entities often engage with each other with extreme ferocity. What happens as a result is that the lives of those who belong to neither political camp are ultimately challenged in the process. In the case of Bangladesh, the role of 'Political Islam' advocated by Jamaat-e-Islam is one such issue where the divisions in the society run deep and no amicable solution to the current political impasse is in sight. In essence, the question that almost all political actors are asking today is: should we provide any political space to a party that not only challenged the emergence of Bangladesh as a sovereign nation, but had also ruthlessly aided genocide against its own people in 1971? Furthermore, does 'Political Islam' as opposed to 'Private Islam' have any meaningful role in our statecraft?

Thus, the turmoil that Bangladeshi political arena currently faces is ultimately a manifestation of these conflicts, which has been further magnified by the current electoral debates that have caught our attention and imagination. But, can a free, fair and participatory election provide an amicable solution to the deep divisions that have pushed us to this brink of madness? Can simply a change of political power be the magic bullet that moves us forward as a nation? Historical developments within societies carry imperative information on political order with grave mistrust and frictions. Bangladesh has not proved to be an exception.

To mention one example, had F.W. de Klerk -- the last president of the apartheid-era South Africa -- opted for participatory elections without resolving the issue of reconciliation and peace with the leadership of African National Congress (especially Nelson Mandela), could one imagine an inclusive and peaceful political space in South Africa? The objective of evaluating this bit of history is to remind ourselves that elections on their own do not amount to creating consensus in a society. Therefore, what is needed in Bangladesh is constructive dialogue among political actors which will, once and for all, solve the principal source of violence and anarchy in our society.

In that context, the political leadership of Awami League and Bangladesh Nationalist Party have two critical issues on their plate, which need an enduring settlement. First, they need to pinpoint a basic institutional arrangement that will permanently solve the issue of elections and how they will be conducted by all future political governments. Second, the two political forces must determine the level of political space that they are willing to provide Jamaat-e-Islam, and whether or not such radical elements should ever be considered for political alliance which can fundamentally threaten the secular character of our nation. Without finding lasting consensus on these two issues simultaneously, no election -- participatory or non-participatory -- can deliver us the peace and democratic governance that the ordinary citizens of our country rightfully demand.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Jan 5 polls violated the constitution

The Supreme Court in a verdict on the CTG system said that free, fair and neutral election is the basic structure of the constitution. But January 5 polls raised a lot of questions as to whether this election



PHOTO: DARSHAN

has gone against the basic structure of the constitution. A free, fair and neutral election is the basic structure of democracy also. So, as far as we understand, the government has made a mockery of an election which has violated our constitution.

Md. Maskurul Alam
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What will happen after election?

Most of the opposition parties have boycotted the one-sided election held on 5th January 2014. Already 154 candidates were elected without contest. General people of the country have been passing their days in fear and anxiety. No doubt, the country will face a terrible unrest in the coming days. Only Allah knows what is in store for us.

S. M. Imranul Islam Rajon
Thanapara, Kushtia

EC made a cruel joke

On January 3, 2014 I received a message in my mobile phone from the election commission.

It said, "Apar vote apar gonotantrik odhikar, apnar vote, apnar pochondo. Dayittoshil vabe pochonder prarthike, dekhe shuney, bujhe apnar vote din. -- election commission"

I just could not believe my eyes. How could the election commission send such a message? It was audacious. The message reflected the election commission's total disregard for people's feelings and their rights.

153 candidates have already been elected uncontested and 147 candidates are going to be elected in a rigged election.

From the January 3, 2014 issue of The Daily Star we learned that Awami League MP Sheikh Afil Uddin was caught on tape instructing the party faithful on how to vote again and again: "One hundred boys will always be in the queue. One will go inside the booth and then stand at the end of the line again." The instruction was meticulous and lengthy, and it was so shameful. If this sort of people are at the helm of the country, then our future is doomed. In the one-sided January 5 election, the government has deprived people of their voting rights.

Nur Jahan
Chittagong

Comments on post editorial, "Confinement of Khaleda Zia," published on January 3, 2013

Sharukh Khan

Yes, this is Bangladesh. One ex-president is accepting a forced medical treatment and another ex-head of the government is under "house arrest." One wonders what is going on in Bangladesh. Why can't Bangladesh's previous heads of state be treated like America's George Bush, UK's Tony Blair or India's very respectable ex-president Dr. Abul Kalam Azad? Why is Bangladesh different from those countries? Who are at fault? People of Bangladesh and the politicians and intellectuals must find the answer to this question.

Nds

By confining Khaleda Zia, AL is creating a dangerous precedence.

"Turnout test for one-sided polls" (January 04, 2013)

Doronto

Going to a polling station to vote for a person who has no real opponent was nothing but waste of time. AL could have set a good precedence by taking right decision about yesterday's election. Now, unfortunately, the nation will count the losses, and casualties have occurred on election day. Shame on our political culture!

Mortuza Huq

When a new government is formed after this farcical election, will people be bound to pay taxes to a regime whose validity will be in question?

Probashi

After liberation the AL has achieved two major milestones for us (which they are always and will always be proud of):

- BAKSAL in 1975.
- Parliament election in 2014 in which majority MPs won even before the election was held, without the need for a single vote. The whole world will remember them as there is no chance for any other country to break this record.