

PM's press briefing

Issue of political crisis skirted

WHILE a beaming, confident and self-satisfied PM claimed to have received mandate of the people in the 5 January election speaking to the press yesterday, we humbly differ on that count. Our estimate drawn from data received from the EC suggests around 32 percent turnout. Whereas that is debatable, what cannot be contested is the fact that in the past three elections the turnout was in the region of 70 percent

We must say that the PM is not in sync with the existing political reality. Given her position that this election was a Constitutional compulsion, we need to emphasise that it will not by any means resolve the current political instability. It was thus disappointing that the substance and tenor of her comments lacked any direction to resolve the political flux.

It would also be unfair, and indeed unwise to draw a broad brush of 'anti-liberation or antidemocratic' on all those who did not participate in the election. We do not believe that nearly 70 who chose not to vote are anti-liberation.

The allusion to the status of the BNP after 24 January, when the present parliament will cease to exist, is indicative of her mind. We would like to emphasise that whether it technically qualifies as opposition or not after 24 January, the BNP as the second largest party in the country, cannot be kept out of the political equation or out of any future political discourse. The BNP for its part should also realise that violence is not the solution to the problem that the country is facing.

Attack on minority community

Highly condemnable

THE Hindu villagers in Abhayanagar upazila of Jessore, on Election Day had to pay a price for exercising their democratic right to vote. With 130 houses vandalised and 10 houses burnt down some 600 Hindus had to flee their village by swimming across the Bhairab River as BNP-Jamaat men allegedly unleashed terror.

We condemn such attack by heinous elements. We also note the fact that Election violence of this nature could not be prevented as the law enforcers of the area were said to be busy on election duty. What's the point of performing Election duties, if vulnerable communities of voters are kept unprotected? Only a handful of Hindus could cast their votes in Lalmonirhat and Sathkira when majority of the community took fright of attacks by Jammata-Shibir elemets.

The government should have been more vigilant in terms of protecting local communities that scattered across the country. Law enforcers, in particular, should have been more heedful after the Jammata-Shibir activists beat up women and children, looted and torched shops and houses in Goshpara village on 28 November last year. During an opposition-enforced countrywide blockade at least 55 Hindu families had fled the area in December that year following threats and attacks. Protection of minority rights is a part and parcel of how a pluralistic society functions, and is a measure of good governance in a democratic society.

Victory worse than defeat

ALAMGIR KHAN

THE Economist predicted, 'The ruling party will win', but 'The country will lose.' The Economist view is extreme. Good people of Bangladesh don't draw such an extreme conclusion about the January 5 election outcome. With 153 candidates elected uncontested and major parties boycotting this election, this should have been the fairest of all elections and also free from vote-rigging and violence. On the contrary, this election has been tarnished with all negatives with only one plus point that this has saved the constitution. Former election commissioner M. Sakhawath Hussain said, 'the biggest loser is democracy. The other loser, perhaps a bigger one, is the Bangladesh Election Commission.'

Ahmed Sofa once said, 'When Awami League wins, Sheikh Hasina with a handful of people wins, and when Awami League loses, the whole Bangladesh loses.' There are two opposite conditions in this remark: when AL wins and when it loses. There are two consequences resulting from those conditions. This time AL has won with a resounding victory, legally. And Sheikh Hasina with a handful of people has won with it. But what about the rest of the people in the country? Yet the rest of the people must be contented that Hasina has done all this 'in the interest of the country, its democracy and the Constitution'. Farce also should have a limit.

Now the AL led by Sheikh Hasina has scored equal points with JP and BNP. Khaleda is three times prime minister of Bangladesh. So is Hasina. AL leaders have gone no less than JP and BNP leaders in accumulating and multiplying their wealth through means unreachable to non-JP, non-BNP and non-AL people. Ershad held a farcical election in 1988. Khaleda held a more farcical one in 1996 and Hasina a comparatively more farced one. No superlative degree of comparison will fit here because none can predict to what a degree this type of election farce can develop in future in our politics.

A parliamentary election is a sort of celebration, a festivity, to the poor but democracy-loving people of Bangladesh. But this pyrrhic victory has left such a bitter taste of defeat in the mouth that even the victors are now ashamed of celebrating their victory. If there are still people who boast of this victory, they must be jokers, not politicians.

The writer writes on theatre, education and socio-political issues.

The ritual is over: What next?

KALEIDOSCOPE



SYED FATTAHUL ALAM

IT has been a caricature of an election. The results were known even before the votes were actually cast. Even in such a one-sided election, we witnessed instances of stuffing of ballot box, fake voters, ballot box hijacking and other kinds of gross irregularities. The tragedy is, an election that the ruling Awami League itself has termed as one to maintain the formality, has cost the nation enormously in terms of money, materials and

human lives. Thanks to the bullheadedness of the ruling leadership, an overzealous Election Commission at its beck and call that the farce could not be avoided. Thanks are also due to the opposition because their boycott, blockades and shutdowns supplied the ruling party with a cause to go ahead with this hollow electoral exercise.

Thus winning an uncontested election, the ruling party should now at least be relieved that it has been after all able to avoid the nightmare of ceding power to its arch rival the opposition BNP and its dreaded allies. Perhaps, BNP is also somewhat happy in that their boycott has led to a near voter-less election, which will lead to a government that will be suffering from a congenital legitimacy crisis.

Even so, the Awami League with its three quarters majority in the 10th Jatiya Sangsad (it has won in 235 seats out of 300) is set to form the next government. But what next? Will it be business as usual and the government continue functioning the way it has been during the last five years, or will it go for another election that will be a well-participated, contested, inclusive and a credible one?

The BNP has already declared a fresh 48-hour nationwide hartal from Monday morning demanding that the government scrap the result of the just-held election. Obviously the message it is trying to convey is that the days ahead for the outgoing government and the new one to be sworn in soon are not going to be smooth. Obviously, the aim is to put pressure on the government until it starts re-engaging the opposition in a dialogue on the conduct of the 11th JS election. The reason that the opposition BNP camp may be thinking in this line is manifest from the fact that the prime minister and her cabinet colleagues on several occasions stated before the just-held election for the 10th JS that it was a mere formality for the sake of meeting certain constitutional obligations and that after having completed this phase, the next step would be to set the

stage for holding the 11th JS election. And to that end they would initiate dialogue with the opposition subject to the condition that it (BNP) cuts off all of its political relations with Jamaat-e-Islami. Here again a condition is being set even before the circumstances for such a future dialogue has been created.

Given our past experience, the prospect of yet another round of dialogues between the two rival political camps and that too after the AL has consolidated its power in the new government is rather a pie in the sky for the opposition. There is hardly any compelling reason for the next government to consider holding such a dialogue in the near future unless there is some inescapable pressure from within or without the country. Still, one is led to believe that the new government would be willing to get rid of the 'insufficient legitimacy' syndrome that it is now afflicted with.

So, how long will the BNP be able to sustain with its agitation programme, if the deepening of the 'legitimacy crisis' of the 10th JS that it is banking on turns out to be a long-drawn one?

But such vulnerability of the opposition's situation does not also automatically provide the new AL-government with infinite latitude to deal with its opposition and its ally Jamaat with an iron fist, an idea that many in the ruling circle have already started to peddle. But such ideas are not only unsustainable, but also a prescription for disaster for a government that that does not enjoy adequate mandate from the voting public.

And the temptation of drawing a broad line between the ruling AL plus its allies and the opposition BNP including its alliance partners, especially Jamaat, as one between pro and anti liberation forces is too simplistic. Such stereotyping of the opposition with its Islamist ally linked to their anti-liberation role in 1971 can serve so long as the discourse is limited to electoral politics. But the thought of taking it beyond that to start a cleansing drive using the state apparatus is going too far. It is, in fact, an issue to be addressed and resolved on the political and cultural plane and not through the intervention of the state.

Hopefully, both the ruling party and the opposition are aware of their limitations and would soon find the reasons to reengage themselves in a dialogue. The aim should be to hold a well-participated and contested election for the 11th JS where people can take part in a festive mood. This is the only way for democracy to thrive undeterred in Bangladesh.

The writer is Editor, Science & Life, The Daily Star, E-mail: sfalim.ds@gmail.com

Beyond the farcical elections: The Black Swans of Bangladesh

TAJ HASHMI

THE late National Professor Abdur Razzaque once told us in late 1970s in his typical style: "Shara jibon political science poira ahono Bangladesher politics ki zinish, eida buzte parlam na!" ["After studying political science for so many years, I am still unable to understand what Bangladesh politics is all about"]. Nassim Nicholas Taleb's bestseller, The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable (2007), might explain the enigma of Bangladesh politics, and most importantly, what the country is going to face in the coming years beyond the 5th January's "Parliamentary Elections", which experts and observers have classified as voter-less and rigged.

Only die-hard Awami League supporters and beneficiaries, and dull and dim people think Bangladesh has just crossed another milestone by holding the farcical polls to uphold democracy, and to "save the country" from "Islamist extremism" and "anti-Bangladesh" elements. Fareed Zakaria thinks that illiberal societies cannot run liberal democracy; they only run "illiberal democracies" despite all the fanfares of elections. However, as we cannot wait for an indefinite period for the transformation of the "illiberal" societies into the "liberal" ones to start democratic process, Bangladesh possibly came up with a unique solution to hold fair and acceptable elections under Neutral Caretaker Government in 1996.

The Hasina Government, for known reasons but no justifications (other than the ridiculous and laughable assertion that Caretaker Governments pave the way for military takeover) arbitrarily scrapped the provision for the Caretaker Government in the Constitution in 2011 through the judiciary and parliament. In the backdrop of these flawed elections, now we realize that the Caretaker Government was done away with to perpetuate the "Awami Dynastic Democracy" to the detriment of the rival "BNP Dynasty". And we know dynasties are not about democracy and human rights; they are all about self-glorification and plunder.

Most Western countries refused to send poll-observers to Bangladesh to rebuff the Hasina government's obstinacy to hold one-party elections. Since January 2013 more than 500 people got killed at the hands of law-enforcers and political rivals. Twenty-two people got killed on the poll day alone.

The New York Times considers the polls "a bizarre election" due to the lack of competition, and that less than 25 per cent people voted this time against 87 per cent in the previous elections held in 2009. Aljazeera reveals that more than 200 polling stations were set on fire. We learn from the AFP that there were no queues to vote, and that only one person cast his vote in three hours at one polling centre. Interestingly, even the compliant Chief Election Commissioner admits the voter turnout was very low due to the stubborn resistance from the opposition parties. While 153 ruling party candidates were "elected" uncontested before the polls, the flawed polls have guaranteed more than two-third majority to the ruling coterie.

Now, are the ongoing political crises, social unrest,

economic down turn, and growing violence – terrorism and sponsored killing through death squads – going to usher in the Black Swan era in Bangladesh? "Black Swan", a common Western expression since the 16th century, denotes a non-existing object or what was considered "non-existing". All swans must be white became a false premise after the discovery of the black swan in Australia.

The Black Swan syndrome is also about the catastrophic impact of the "highly improbable" phenomenon on society. Bangladesh has already gone through its Black Swan moments in the past. Its liberation in the wake of a short civil-cum-liberation war signalled its first Black Swan moment, followed by other such moments after the killings of Mujib and Zia, and the two military takeovers in 1982 and 2007. Other Black Swan moments for Bangladesh came with the arrests and trial of "war criminals" (one of them has already been executed); the controversial scrapping of the provision of the Caretaker Government; and the holding of the flawed one-party elections.

The collective impact of these Black Swan Moments of our history is going to bring about the Black Swan Era of Bangladesh, which is likely to draw the country into a long-drawn civil war for decades, very similar to Iraq, Afghanistan and what Sri Lanka went through in the recent past for twenty-six years. Unless the Government annuls the results of the so-called elections; restores the provision of the Caretaker Government in the Constitution; releases all political detainees; stops judicial murder; and last but not least, disbands death squads, police and party cadres to destroy political rivals and to smear their image, Bangladesh is not going to remain a functional democracy, even in the most limited sense of the expression.

The constant cry wolf by the ruling coterie, "Islamists are coming", is likely to backfire. Closing all democratic outlets to force Islam-oriented people and political rivals to adopt terrorist means is reckless. Sooner the ruling elites realize it, the better. The over-polarized and fractious Bangladesh polity is as unpredictable as a not-so-dormant volcano, which has been erupting on an irregular basis since 1971. As the Black Swan of 1971 was unpredictable, so is the one looming in the corner.

As large-scale pre-poll violent attacks on rival party members, minorities and innocent civilians (many mercilessly burnt alive) indicated that Bangladesh was not at peace with itself, the post-poll attacks on political rivals and hapless non-Muslim communities indicate that the country is on the verge of widespread civil conflict, nobody has witnessed after 1971. The organized, frequent and growing spate of political and communal violence indicates that the Bangladesh polity no longer lives in, what Nassim Taleb calls, Mediocristan, but has already moved to Extremistan. While the Black Swans of Mediocristan show up infrequently, and are not that vile and vicious, Extremistan experiences nasty and brutal Black Swans, more frequently.

The writer teaches security studies at Austin Peay State University in Tennessee. He has published four books and Sage is publishing his Global Jihad and America: The Hundred-Year-War beyond Iraq and Afghanistan, in February 2014.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Election that could be avoided

As a young citizen of Bangladesh, I have always been against the violence carried out during hartals and blockades, targeting common people. Whether those are carried out by BNP, Jamaat, or Awami League, we do not know. But the ultimate victims of this violence are the common people of Bangladesh. However, the ruling party has remained oblivious to the sufferings of the common people, and made little efforts to initiate dialogues, which could have prevented loss of many innocent lives and saved billions of Taka. Instead, they have gone ahead with a one-party January 5 election where 153 candidates have been elected uncontested. Had Awami League cared for the people, they would have deferred the polls, as suggested by the civil society, and arranged an acceptable election. We are unfortunate that we live in a country where fighting for power is the only thing the parties do.

Tauhidul Islam
A-Level candidate
Uttara, Dhaka

Blame with proof

Khaleda Zia has been blaming the government for torching buses, burning people alive, destroying vehicles, cutting trees and derailing trains during the BNP-called blockades. Does she have proof or evidence of this? If she does, then by all means, she should make them public. She has also blamed the government for killing of army officers during the BDR massacre. Is this a fact by evidence?

Confining people to their homes and not allowing them to go on with their daily lives is also not democracy, not just when she was not allowed to leave her house on December 29 to attend her "Long March". I wonder how she felt to be "blocked".

Aminur Rahim
New DOHS, Mohakhali, Dhaka

What awaits Bangladesh's democracy?

The precondition for democracy is a free and fair election. But our government does not believe in it. Without paying any heed to the opponents' demands, they held a one-sided election, which proved that they are moving towards autocracy. We are at pain to see the fate of democracy in Bangladesh. People should raise their voice against such wrongdoing.

Md. Lutfur Rahman
Chandipasha, Nandail, Mymensingh

Comments on news report, "Election amid fears today," published on January 05, 2014

Na Vote

The 10th national parliamentary election is not acceptable to me.

Thor

How can you call it an election?

SM

I wish Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia listened to U2's song "Ordinary Love" from the movie "Mandela- Long walk to freedom": "We can't fall any further if we can't feel ordinary love; And we can't reach any higher if we can't deal with ordinary love..." Both these ladies are devoid of love, and their hate for each other will destroy Bangladesh further.

"An MP's lesson on rigging votes" (January 03, 2014)

Jafar Iqbal

This is the reason why the whole nation never trusted Sheikh Hasina as the chief of poll-time government.

Ash C.

No one should be surprised if this 'brilliant' Awami strategist is rewarded with an important post in AL!

Nasreen Chowdhury

I would say this is the strategy of this one-sided non-participatory election. End this charade and come to a peaceful resolution of the crisis.

Saleh Tanveer

I see. This is apparently the way the AL will claim that 70 percent of people voted.

Concerned citizen

Are we so helpless as a nation? Despite knowing all these, all we do is sit and watch the nation being destroyed. Thank you, DS, for publishing this, but please do not stop here, make sure this man is held to account.

Poy

Now think of Hasina saying this to the aspirant MPs.

Aasfisarwar

If someone loses two ears, he walks through the middle of the street.

Sum1

Beautiful!

Amzad Hossain

Even this shameful incident could be disowned by Awami League as before, on the ground that it is just an isolated incident. The election as a whole must be a fair and impartial one.