

## PM warns of going tougher

Against an already repressed opposition?

In her post-election Suhrawardy Uddyan speech on Friday Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina warned against political violence and attacks on minorities vowing to 'act as tough as it takes' to save lives and properties of the people. In a strongly worded riposte she blurted, 'Awami League knows very well how to deal with troublemakers', an authoritarian streak showing up there.

Of course, the Prime Minister has many things to be tough about, especially against Jamaat-Shibir terrorisation and mayhem campaigns and the sweeping attacks on minority households, not sparing even their religious places. Take by all means the toughest of measures against the perpetrators of violence including arson and ransacking property of vulnerable communities and victimisation of the innocents. Ironically, however, most them elude the grip of law while opposition leaders are implicated in some alleged acts of criminality not consistent with their stature.

Most of all, wasn't the government obliged to protect the lives and properties of the citizens? So, there's an element of administrative failure which hopefully the Prime Minister is now trying to reverse.

Prior to the elections, her government's heavy-handed dealing with the opposition resulted in virtual confinement of Khaleda Zia, arrest of senior BNP leaders, taking some of them on remand, and forcing others into hiding. The party was effectively preempted and subdued. It was a clear case of taking "tough" action against the opposition while taking no action to protect the minorities. Taking "tough" action now hopefully will not be in the same mould.

Though re-elected to power in a one-sided and blemished election, one would expect her toughness to be used fairly and judiciously and not certainly vindictively.

## Increase in electricity tariff

Will government cut subsidy?

GOING by newspaper reports, we understand that the ministry of energy has asked for subsidies in excess of Tk12.5 billion to beef up the Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC) operations. The cash infusion would go to pay for fuel imports that are needed to keep power plants (including rental) up and running. This comes in the backdrop of intimidation by the Energy Division to the ministry of finance that US\$5 billion will be required for the current fiscal to meet fuel costs. \$1 billion will have to be coughed up by the government as subsidy to BPC. Despite such heavy duty subsidisation, BPC continues to suffer losses as both diesel and kerosene are sold at a loss.

The continued use of diesel as fuel for running plants to generate electricity is beginning to exact a pressure on financial resources. Little wonder that the government has had to resort to foreign bank loans. During 2011-12 fiscal years, it had to borrow \$2.6 billion from the Islamic Development Bank (IDB) to defray BPC costs. This year too, the government has had to resort to another \$2.2 billion loan from IDB. The downside to all this heavy duty foreign borrowing is the objections raised by International Monetary Fund (IMF) which had set preconditions that were accepted by the government when it availed itself of \$1 billion ECF loan facility some years ago. As per IMF terms, the government must reduce funding for foreign fuel import to \$775 million. Given that these are non-negotiable terms, consumers in all likelihood can expect another spiral in electricity bills coming their way soon.

## Keep cricket out of political impacts

SHAHRIAR FEROZE

BESIDES economy, education and the social arenas now it's sports, and more specifically the security environment of sporting events, that's being threatened by the overwhelming political agitations. Following an explosion of a crude bomb near the hotel where the players of the West Indies under-19 team were residing in Chittagong last month, the visitors pulled out from Bangladesh. The pullout was a political blow to Bangladesh's plans to host the 2014 World Twenty20s in March. It cannot be said with certainty that there will be no such incident in future.

In spite of several wins against the big teams, it was the scars of match fixing and spot-fixing that marred the domestic and international reputation of Bangladesh cricket. The corruption scandal unearthed by the ICC's ACSU, by engaging the BCB to provide anti-corruption cover during the BPL 2013, not only caused major damage to the overall image of Bangladesh cricket—the BPL too lost its credibility for good. We are, however, concerned as major security assessments are about to take place this month. A two-member Sri Lankan security team will visit Bangladesh on January 13 to see for themselves the security measures taken for the tour. Then the participating teams of the World Twenty20 will send their security representatives to Dhaka, Chittagong and Sylhet.

Together with the BCB president we also believe that it is not entirely up to the BCB to certify that Bangladesh is safe. What we expect to see is an all-out effort, including formally issued statements by our major political parties, to help in maintaining a favourable and secured environment while the visiting teams are in Bangladesh. Let's look at an ugly fact, since 2009 there has been no international cricket in Pakistan following a terrorist attack on touring Sri Lankan cricket team bus. And we definitely don't want this to happen in our case.

Yet, there is enough to fear for. If the Asia cup isn't held here then apprehensively then there is little chance for world Twenty20 to take place as per schedule. But, before even the Asia Cup, it's the Sri Lankan team that's due to arrive on January 24 for a series scheduled to begin on January 27, with two Tests followed by two Twenty20s and three ODIs. We must ensure that Sri Lanka's tour to Bangladesh, which also marks the run-up to the Asia Cup, ends unhindered. Bangladesh remains the host for the Asia Cup —unless violence caused by political instability changes the whole scenario.

Cricket to a great extent has changed Bangladesh's image. It is perhaps the only game to have given Bangladesh a positive international exposure. It is the politicians that can ensure that the image is not tarnished.

The writer is Current Affairs Analyst, The Daily Star.

# Assessing the election: What now?

### SUNDAY POUCH



ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

**T**ODAY, Sheikh Hasina, as leader of the majority party in the Jatiya Sangsad, will take oath as prime minister. Later, the president will swear in her cabinet. With this, a post-election government will be in place. Naturally, all political agitation as well as related violence, which have plagued the people for almost two years now, should end. The people now need and deserve to live in peace for the next five years. But is this going to happen from tomorrow?

Not likely. The 18-party alliance led by BNP has called a programme of indefinite blockade (oborodh). More violence is expected. By not participating in the just concluded elections they had lent their support to the demand for a non-political caretaker form of government, which they felt would have been best able to deliver a free and fair election. The BNP has over 40% of the electorate with it.

But the 14-party alliance led by Sheikh Hasina and AL aborted this by amending the constitution (15th Amendment) and introducing a system of interim government to oversee elections. The catch was that the interim government would be led by the prime minister. The BNP boycotted such an election. The result was that AL snatched up 153 out of 300 seats uncontested. In the end the AL took 232 seats, thus getting more than 2/3rd majority in the House. So when the 10th Parliament sits on January 25, the House would be almost a sea of Awami Leaguers.

The election result has not gone down well with the people in general. Nor has it been appreciated by the international community. No country or international organisation sent any election observers. Only India and Bhutan did so in a token manner. An election where the voter cannot exercise his choice is indeed a flawed election. No congratulatory message has been officially received by Sheikh Hasina. It is unlikely that in the near future the new government, which is to be sworn in today, will be easily accepted both within and outside the country.

There are good reasons for that. The turnout of voters, by all estimates, was very poor. Although the Election Commission (EC) claims 40% of the total voters turned up in the 145 constituencies where elections were held, local observers say it was much lower. The BNP think it was between 10% and 15% only. Sheikh Hasina said that whatever the turnout, what matters most is that, in spite of hartal and oborodh on election day, the polling was held, votes were cast and results could be announced. In fact, AL stalwarts in some constituencies were even defeated. The refrain goes that the election was indeed well contested. What an empty boast indeed.

Then there was the matter of ballot stuffing, violence within some polling stations and the failure of some law enforcers and polling officers to take action against miscreants who violated norms on election day. Of course, the defeated candidates can file specific complaints before the EC and seek redress. So, in all fairness, when an audit of the 10th parliamentary election takes place, the verdict would be worrisome to hear. To start with, participation in the polls

was not inclusive. It was also not violence free or even fair. Intimidation was used to achieve political ends.

The question that begs an answer now is, can we live with an election whose result does not reflect the will of the people? Unfortunately, we cannot. Bangladesh is a country on the threshold of an economic take off. It has many challenges and opportunities before it. It cannot afford to run on the back of a flawed electoral system that rewards malfeasance and punishes good practice. International acceptability of an election is important in this difficult and competitive world. The US and the European Union, besides Australia, Japan and China, have urged in post election messages for arranging a mid-term election after negotiating with BNP to make it more participatory and transparent.

Is the government that is taking oath today likely to listen to these urgencies? It is too early to say what Sheikh Hasina's intention is. She is unlikely to give away what she has gained through the elections so easily. If she agrees to a re-election during this term she will first take her pound of flesh. The BNP should be ready to give it. It does not have much of a choice. It is literally now wallowing on the street. It will not be in the government at least for the next five years. Nor is it

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in the opposition in parliament. It can only cry foul and appeal to governments and agencies that have the patience to hear it out. An opportunity can be available to it if its leaders can negotiate a snap election where it can show its mettle. But mind you, the people are fed up with violence in the streets as well as abstention from work. BNP has to find out a new strategy to address this issue. It needs to work to get its popularity back to fight a mid-term election and win.

However, AL must not itself fritter away the strength that it has in its grip. It needs to see that violence is not used as a tool to achieve political ends. It needs to see whether releasing political prisoners, allowing free political activities and bringing in the rule of law endears her more to the people. She can whittle away the popular support which BNP enjoys in this way. The goal for AL should be to win the hearts and minds of the people by doing development work, and go for mid-term polls with the goal of winning.

Let both the parties and their allies bring Bangladesh back to work.

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## Communal or political violence?

JYOTIRMOY BARUA

**I**T is impossible to answer the question in the title in one word. The nation is witnessing post-electoral violence against the Hindus across the country in the name of democracy.

The tenth national election was unique because it was an "election against each other" in those constituencies where elections were held. In most of the constituencies, the party candidate was from the ruling party AL and the independent candidate was also a leader of AL. So, whoever was defeated blamed the voters. Hindus were told to go to the polling centres by the Hon'ble prime minister herself and by leaders of AL, so they went.

At the same time, BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami threatened them with dire consequences if they cast their votes. So the reaction was three-fold; one from the defeated AL candidate who contested as an independent candidate, the second from BNP and the third from the Jamaat-e-Islami.

We have reason to believe that the Election Commission (EC) had information of possible violence in Hindu populated areas. Pre-election violence in many districts, starting from November 25, 2013, was an indication that there would be violence during and after the election. Yet, the EC had not taken any measure to protect the minority group. The first area attacked was Malo Para of Abhoynagar at Jessor, where about 400 Hindu villagers were forced to leave their homesteads, which were looted, torched and ransacked. Two women were gang raped on 9 January even though the law enforcing agency gave

them assurance that nothing would happen if they came back to their village! The victims had nowhere to go when their attackers were those for whom some of them went to cast their votes!

Yet the EC didn't bother to make its stand clear to the nation, and the temporary government during the election washed their hands off it by giving absolute power to EC to deal with matters relating to national election.

Is this violence purely political or communal? Violence has a long track record in our country and has become a chronic disease now. No one had ever tried to cure this disease, and it is apparent that the medicine used on it has not worked at all.

It is a tendency of politicians and common people to term organised crime as political violence. Every attack has politics behind it but every attack is not political. By terming an attack as political, we give legitimacy to the perpetrators to escape from the regular legal liability of facing prosecution. If Hindus, who are mainly supporters of AL, are attacked by any other political party then it is vehemently

argued that it is political violence. The next thing we see is that the political leaders start protecting their followers/supporters. This way of tackling the violence has cost many lives since 1971.

The attacks on Hindus have always been one-sided and faced no retaliation. But people often use the word riot to describe communal violence, which is completely wrong.

What happens when we categorise violence as communal violence? The word 'communal' denotes a community. This community feeling should give strength to the minorities rather than exposing them to organised crime. The community's failure to protect them and the repeated failure of the State encouraged the perpetrators again and again. Communal violence is often said to be a "crime committed out of religious hatred." This implies that the attackers were pious people, who became violent and launched the attack after being provoked. That means this was not a planned attack. Is that so? Was it really a sudden act of violence or a premeditated act of organised crime where only one group is attacked?

Both the approaches, in case of a violence committed



against the religious minority people, are problematic. Whatever the reason, every violence against the religious minority, especially against Hindus and adibashis, was either to take away their property and valuables or to establish terror among them. And also to scare them so they leave the country and the attackers could grab their property.

We give the perpetrators the chance to get away without facing prosecution, thereby creating a culture of impunity.

We have not seen a single perpetrator get punishment for his criminal act since independence. It is not that a person gets any additional punishment for committing a crime against a community; rather it is dealt with under the regular penal law, which finds no reason for giving it political colour. Unless there is a new law to handle the issue we cannot find a way out of this agonising situation. The secular people of the locality must come forward to save the diversity in their respective areas; no law will be able to replace this requirement to hold hands together, to save not only religious minorities but also the majority.

## LETTERS

### TO THE EDITOR

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### The law should be free from politics

It is observed that politics prevails over rule of law in most cases in Bangladesh. Rule of law demands that violation of law in the form of use of cocktails, petrol bombs and arms; attack on innocent public and minorities; cutting of trees; obstruction of the roads, railways and waterways; and preventing public from going out for work should be strictly and timely dealt with by the police and justice departments. Despite death of around 200 innocent people and attack against minorities by thousands of violators of laws, only a few hundred could be arrested; but none could be punished yet. Such slow arrest and punishment only encouraged violators of law leading to its open defiance.

The police and justice departments should avoid being involved in politics; but deal with the violators of laws strictly and timely. Criminals are criminals, not members of any political parties. The early everybody understands it the better.

Khaled Hyder  
Dhaka

### Who have really lost their marbles?

I read with both interest and disappointment the column "When a party loses its marbles" by Syed Badrul Ahsan (DS January 8) and was left with a sinking feeling that sometimes professional greatness is indeed clouded by political passion. Rightly so, Mr Ahsan condemns the delusions of grandeur that the BNP's utterly compromised heir apparent has: the London-exile's Hawa Bhaban days are too close in time to be forgotten by anyone with a half-decent sense of propriety. The same sense of propriety, however, militates against Mr Ahsan's dismissal of any concerns about the farce of January 5 elections by terming it 'legal': let us not forget that the Pakistani army's brutal occupation in 1971 was perfectly 'legal' in the eyes of Pakistani law. I am quite shocked and flabbergasted to see someone of Mr Ahsan's repute failing to distinguish between 'legal' and 'ethical'. History records that every mockery of election, from the Soviet "people's elections" to the Ershad referendum of 1986 were hailed as being 'legal'. When decorated freedom fighters like Bangabir Kader Siddiqui, Colonel Oli Ahmed, Major Hafizuddin, Sadeq Hossain Khoka, and Shamsher Mobin Chowdhury have all called the January 5 polls an exercise in incredulity, one has to wonder who have really lost their marbles, so to speak.

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*Comments on news analysis, "Why Hindus always under assault?" published on January 08, 2014*

### Truthprevails53

Hindus have always been under attack by BNP and Jamaat. They are under attack because they support a secular Awami League. Alas, 90 percent of Bangladesh has now become fundamentalist. I don't see anyone condemning the attacks on Hindus!

### An Observer

As a Bangladeshi, I apologise to each of my Hindu brother and sister in Bangladesh, for the barbaric acts of those terrorists. PM should take bold steps to bring all those to justice. And Khaleda Zia should condemn the attacks with the harshest words and should ask all of her party members and their Jamaat allies to stop this brutality.

### Hijol K. Goswami

There are not enough measures taken to ensure their safety. People just want peace, yet some groups like Jamaat are being rigorous and attacking innocent people. There must be something done to prevent such attacks, including stricter laws and regulations everywhere.

### Sardar M Shahrukh

What an article! Wow!

### Saiful

A real Muslim who respects Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) can not commit such attacks.

### S. M. Iftekhar Ahmed

Another miserable failure of the government.

### Zman7

The 10th national election is over, and now PM Hasina must pay full attention to stop these heinous acts of terror against the Hindu community (or other non-Muslim communities), and also stop blockade or hartal-related mayhem such as arson or petrol bomb attacks on buses, trains and other vehicles to burn and kill innocent people indiscriminately. Political acumen and the help of law enforcers—both are needed to bring back stability.

### Vikram Khan

Excellent analysis and I really hope that the authorities and government will have the decency to stop this ethnic cleansing of our Bangladeshi brothers and sisters!

### A reader

Let's be united to save our sisters and brothers.

### Sumon

Excellent write-up.