

# Time for introspection

ALI RIAZ

SINCE the 'election' of January 5 there has been growing criticism of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) for its inability to translate dissatisfaction against the Awami League (AL) regime into a popular mobilisation. Some have concluded that BNP has lost. Many have argued that the regime's success in holding the election is in itself a defeat for BNP, although Bangladesh history tells us that no election has ever been stopped by opposition activists once the election schedule was announced; the 1988 and February 1996 elections are cases in point. The cancellation of the 2007 election wasn't a result of the opposition movement but due to the intervention of the military.

Anyone who was expecting that the election would be stopped altogether, unless deferred by the government, was living in a self-made bubble. BNP's post-election posture, too, gives the impression that it is demoralised and disorganised. Some analysts have praised the party for not continuing with disruptive programmes like blockade and general strikes, which were often violent.

The criticism is warranted, particularly when the primary demand of the party -- installation of a caretaker administration to oversee the election -- had enormous support as recorded by the opinion polls throughout the previous year. But was BNP a step behind the ruling AL's strategic maneuvering since the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the constitution? Whether the ruling party had any interest in holding an election participated in by the opposition is an open and shut question.

The post-mortems, to date, have identified three primary factors for the setback of BNP: the party's lack of mobilising capacity -- a reflection on the ability and/or dedication of the leadership; the party's alliance with, perhaps dependence on, the Jamaat-i-Islami (JI); and the adoption of violence as the only instrument of movement. One can add another factor, the party's lack of clarity on the issue of the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT).

The ruling party, particularly Prime Minister

Sheikh Hasina, has long set breaking of the relationship with JI as a precondition for any dialogue with BNP. Criticism of the association with JI has gained further currency after the Resolution of the European Parliament on January 16, which urged BNP to disassociate itself from JI. Weeks before the resolution, BNP leader Khaleda Zia stated that her party's alliance with the JI was "not permanent" and that she would consider severing the relationship "when [the] time comes." Khaleda Zia's detractors and some sympathisers now seem to be on the same page. But the question is whether BNP will wait for an opportune moment or make the decision which some of her party leaders and activists consider risky. Is the absence of the JI leaders in the 18-party alliance public meeting held on January 20 an indication? Time will tell.

There is a call for BNP and its leadership to engage in introspection. Some recent commentaries are prescriptive too: what BNP should do now. The party never carried out any kind of self-examination after its worst electoral performance in 2008. BNP should welcome these comments and undertake a soul searching. But it must understand that time is of the essence. Neither can it rush, nor can it procrastinate. Both have serious downsides.

As BNP is called upon to reflect, so should the ruling party. Quick action on the oath taking of the parliament members and the formation of the cabinet in contravention of conventions and constitutional provisos are sending a signal that it is comfortable with the 'victory' it has achieved. Should the ruling party be complacent with less than 20% participation of the electorate? Can it claim to be representative of the people, and a democracy? The bizarre arrangement with the Raushan Ershad-led Jatiyo Party (JP) to act as 'a ruling-opposition hybrid' is not only unprecedented in parliamentary history but may also be an indication of the emergence of a one-party system. If the ruling party wants us to believe that this is not by choice, rather by default, a clear statement and urgent concrete steps are imperative.

The European Parliament's call to BNP to distance itself from JI is a reflection of their legitimate concern for Bangladesh, so is the call to the government "to find a compromise [with the opposition] which would give a chance to the Bangladeshi people to express their democratic will in a representative and credible way." The ruling party and its supporters should be reminded that the resolution called for "an early election," and to "offer voters a choice."

They should also read the transcript of the debate in the UK House of Commons that took place on the same day the European Parliament adopted the resolution. Taking part in the debate Rushanara Ali, the sole member of Bangladeshi origin, said: "I hope that, as we move forward, we can work as partners and continue dialogue, despite our frustrations, to try to achieve free and fair elections and move beyond what has happened in recent months." The jubilant tone and defiant mood of the government, and the repetition of the same arguments for not initiating a dialogue are worrying.

While the two major parties are asked to step up to the plate and think about their recent and future conduct for the sake of the nation, we should not forget about other parties which decided not to participate the election. Notwithstanding their size and reach, they too have a crucial role to play. If these parties and their leaders feel that a one-sided, non-inclusive election is detrimental to the nation and democracy they cannot accept the current state of governance as a fait accompli.

The nation has long been hostage to the whims of the two parties which engendered the present political situation. This should not be viewed as a battle between two parties; the other parties have stakes and responsibilities too. In the same spirit, may I ask the members of the civil society, who raised the red flag prior to the election about the long-term implications of a non-participatory election, to explain where the nation is heading and what role they intend to play in this journey?

The writer is professor and chair of the Department of Politics and Government at Illinois State University, USA.

# Tariff subsidy in Delhi and the domino effect

MUSHFIQUR RAHMAN

AS per a report published in *The Daily Star* on January 21, the state government of Maharashtra in India has decided to cut electricity tariffs by 15-20%. The decision was taken by the Congress Party-ruled Maharashtra state government following the decision earlier made by the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) led government in Delhi state. AAP, soon after taking oath at the end of last month, announced that the new government would implement its election pledges to subsidise power tariffs (50% subsidy for the consumers using up to 400 units of electricity a month on the existing rates charged by the Delhi Electricity Regulatory Commission) for lower user customers with effect from January 1. AAP has also decided to supply limited volume of water free of tariff for the citizens in Delhi.

The politically sensitive but very popular decision of AAP government in Delhi encouraged lawmakers in different states in India to demand similar tariff cuts for utility services. As declared, the AAP government in Delhi would make 20,000 liters of water free of cost to every Delhi household that is connected with pipe water supply systems having water meters. The household that exceeds the consumption limit of 20,000 liters by even one liter will have to pay for the total volume of water used. AAP actually offered mass subsidy for water and electricity targeting mainly the poor and lower middle class consumers. As per the existing tariff structures in Delhi, utility companies charge all consumers the same low tariff rate for the first 10,000 liters (Rs. 2 per 1,000 liters for the first 10,000 liters, Rs. 3 for 10,000-20,000 liters, and Rs. 15 for 20,000-30,000 liters). Everyone paid higher rates for additional water consumption.

The published information suggests that subsidies for fuel and electricity have been in existence in India, including in Delhi. Before the AAP government took charge in Delhi every household was required to pay Rs. 3.90 for the first 200 units of electricity consumption, Rs. 5.80 for consumption of 201-400 units and Rs. 7 for more than 400 unit consumption.

Now, users consuming up to 200 units will pay Rs. 1.95 against the existing rate of Rs.3.90. Similarly, consumers will have to pay at a rate of Rs.2.90 per unit against the existing Rs.5.80 for the 201-400 unit slab. The Delhi state chief minister, after announcing the subsidy, clarified that the state government cannot fix the tariff, but

it can give subsidy, which they have decided to extend.

The Indian central government minister of state for power, Jyotiraditya Scindia, asserted that it was the prerogative of state government to decide which category of consumers deserve to get power subsidies, they also need to ensure that the impact on distribution companies remains 'revenue neutral.'

Opponents of AAP have been trying to brand the power and water tariff cuts as 'populist' measures. They say that only 68% of households have piped water supply, therefore offering payment waiver for 20,000 liters will not really make a lot of difference for the people without pipe water supply networks.

The critics also are doubtful whether the schemes announced by AAP can be implemented. Indian daily *The Hindu* published an article on January 21 stating that "the Delhi government has a deficit of Rs.17,250 million. After announcing a 50% reduction in power tariff, the chief minister announced it was only under consideration. He had asked people not to pay power bills. Many did not, and faced power theft cases. If Mr. Kejriwal withdraws the cases that would be a bad precedent; no court will permit that. If he does not, his followers will feel victimised." Critics also fear that people will be tempted to tinker with their power and water meters to make them run slowly so that they remain within the subsidy thresholds.

*The Indian Express* published a report on January 17 stating that the Power Ministry of India was set to approach the central government cabinet of ministers with a proposal to make some amendments to the Electricity Act 2003 and the National Tariff Policy. The proposal is aimed to reform the existing policy so that the Electricity Regulatory Commission would be empowered to determine tariffs beyond the 2012-17 five year plan period, enabling the cost plus tariff structure. The amendment is also aimed to segregate the functions of the power distribution sector.

The reform, if allowed, will authorise one company to own the entire wire network but the electricity supply at the retail level would be carried out by different organisations. The existing provisions allow a company to act as supplier of power as well as to manage the entire wire infrastructure that transmits electricity to different categories of customers. Clearly, the central government is putting emphasis on the logical pricing of power so that this sector of the industry grows viably.

The writer is a mining engineer.

# Khaleda's Freudian slips

M.H. KHAN

KHALEDA Zia, in her first speech after the January 5 national election, congratulated the country's people for 'rejecting' the election. It was a large gathering indeed at the Suhrawardi Uddyan on January 20. She began her speech by greeting BNP and the 18-party coalition; however, the controversial Jamaat was not represented in the meeting. This is a gesture which, truly, will give BNP positive mileage in the eyes of many young people, the largest vote-bank.

Her almost hour-long speech can be seen as a complex web in which the references were made somewhat haphazardly, and often whispered into her ears by a leader standing nearby. Interestingly, he also corrected her on the date of the election, i.e., January 5 instead of May 5 (this can be read as a Freudian slip, i.e., a consequence of her repressed thoughts on distancing the Hefajat and other Islamists).

Still, the speech should be welcomed as Khaleda Zia showed 'genuine' interest in discussing with the government about fixing a date for a free and fair election as soon as possible. She was also right to express her worries about the fact that the law enforcement authorities freed many top-listed terrorists (not the Islamic militants, although she equated *shontrashis* with *jongi* at least once in her speech), and that the government was unable to take measures against many corrupt MPs and ministers who sat in the previous parliament and cabinet respectively. She also mentioned the controversial Hall-Mark, Destiny, Bismillah Group and share market

scam cases. While she was certainly right about these issues, she was absolutely wrong when she claimed that this government has destroyed the garment industry because it would be established in another country if it was destroyed here!

She mentioned the entente between Jamaat and AL during the farcical election in 1986, and said that AL has collaborated with Jatiyo Party and the autocrat Ershad despite the movement against autocracy throughout the 1980s. Khaleda suggested in her speech that Ershad has repeated in 2014 what Hasina did in 1986. This story of entente is known to the people of the country, but re-telling the history afresh is not without consequences. The advantages are: first, it gave Khaleda Zia the opportunity to make political entente look like an incidental choice in which the partners may not have any ideological common ground. Second, it shows that AL had an understanding with both Jamaat and Jatiyo Party, in case the young generation did not know about it. Khaleda Zia indicated that since Ershad was known as an autocrat and AL had established Baksal, they shared a similar authoritarian temperament. She said that TV channels were shut down one after another by the AL government, and also newspapers like *Amar Desh*.

Khaleda Zia claimed that BNP does not have 'relations' with Hefajat: "They came to us with some pleas, some demands." She then accused the police of killing many Hefajat activists. She wondered whether or not these police officers were Bangladeshis. This accusa-

tion, whether there were outsiders to run the operation led by the combined forces, has its root elsewhere. The daily *Inqilab* recently published a report regarding the help of another country in containing the political protests. Khaleda Zia said that the government should have clarified whether there was any participation of another country; instead, the government shut down the newspaper.

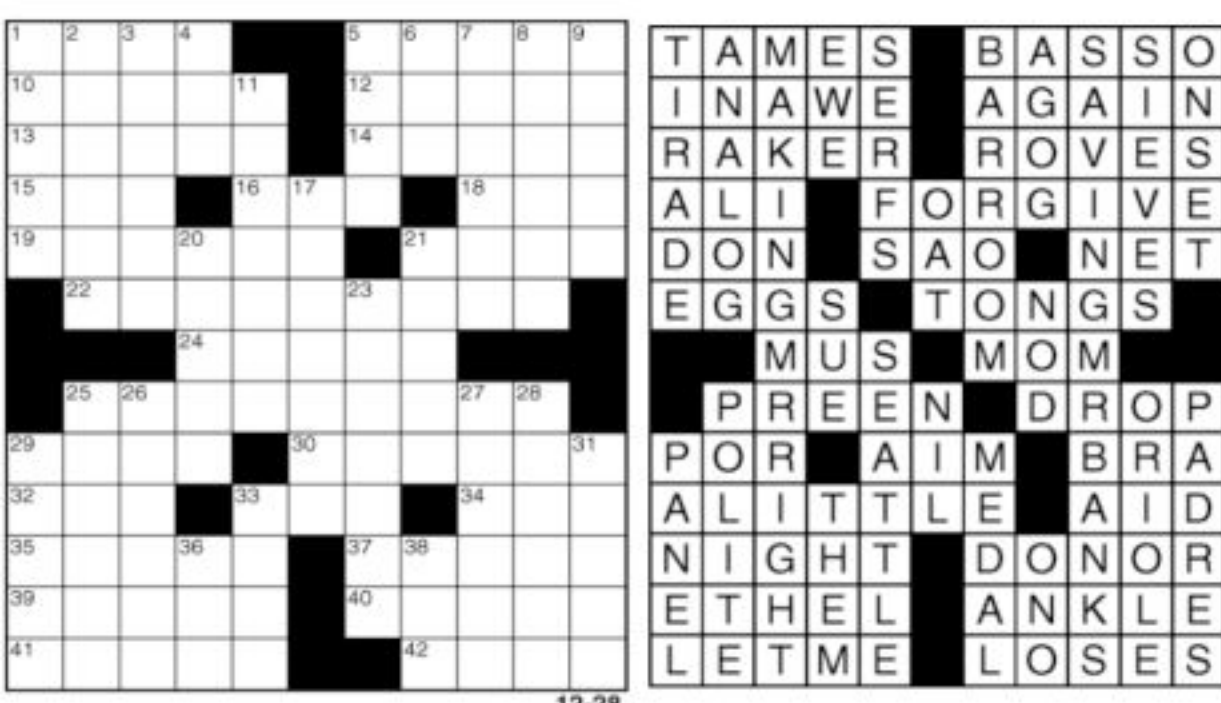
But being a leader of the largest opposition in the country, she cannot say things that could make people think there were intruders and the sovereignty of the country is really in danger.

Historically, the myth of 'outsiders' has been used in Bangladeshi politics for decades. In the then East Pakistan Bangabandhu once said that whenever we started a movement the West Pakistanis had always said that there was Indian money, assistance and support.

Khaleda Zia took the liberty to reconstruct history. According to her, it is not the AL but BNP which represents the real freedom fighters; the AL just crossed the border; and that they didn't take part in the war. On the contrary, by 1970 AL was the largest political party, and Khaleda Zia should have had the courage to tell her audience that BNP was born much later, and had nothing to do with organising the freedom fighters. AL and the Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB) were the two big organisers of Liberation War in 1971. If BNP comes to power one day we don't want history to be changed again.

The writer is a doctoral candidate at Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia.

## CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph



### Yesterday's answer

ACROSS

- 1 Take turns
- 5 Run up
- 10 Wine grape
- 12 Lightning home
- 13 Prelude
- 14 Swirly prints
- 15 Frat letter
- 16 Vitality
- 18 Chaotic spot
- 19 Rank
- 21 Sentence subject, usually
- 22 Ian McEwan book
- 24 Chopper part
- 25 Ian McEwan book
- 29 Fatigue
- 30 Did salon work
- 32 Radius' place
- 33 Sch. supporters
- 34 One, for Juan
- 35 Caribou's cousin
- 37 Eastern monks
- 39 Spoof
- 40 Subsequently
- 41 Puts away
- 42 Tall tales

DOWN

- 1 Barbecue rods
- 2 Candy-filled target
- 3 Sense
- 4 Postal oath word
- 5 Resting on
- 6 Subway aid
- 7 Warring woman
- 8 Fledgling plant
- 9 Squelched
- 11 Bun
- 17 It may start with "E"
- 20 Like Loki
- 21 Bookish, perhaps
- 23 Playthings for Zeus and Hera
- 25 Ventilate
- 26 Role for Peter Lorre
- 27 Homecoming group
- 28 Threat
- 29 Packs down
- 31 Medicine amounts
- 33 Stock holders
- 36 Scatter seeds
- 38 Suffer

## QUOTABLE Quote

*The only way to deal with an unfree world is to become so absolutely free that your very existence is an act of rebellion.*

-- Albert Camus



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