

## Preventing BNP meeting uncalled for Shun the anti-democratic stance

WE notice with concern the government's attitude towards the BNP that is reflective of its unwillingness to listen to criticism or provide political space to its main opponent. Last month the BNP was prevented from holding a public rally at Suhrawardy Udyan, and on Thursday it was barred from holding an indoor meeting at the Engineers' Institute. The aborted meeting was scheduled to discuss the recent incidents of abduction and killings.

The ostensible ground was that the party had not obtained permission from the police. But what is extremely reprehensible is the high-handed manner in which the said meeting was foiled, by putting the main gate of the building under lock and key and then putting the onus on the Institution's authority.

We feel the administration owes the citizens an explanation. What were the considerations that prompted the police to preempt a meeting that was supposed to be voicing protest over a spate in abduction and killing?

The government has to bear in mind the fact that free speech and the right to assemble are constitutional rights which can be gagged only at the cost of the democratic system. And no party with a claim to long democratic traditions can afford to resort to such actions without being described as autocratic.

Dissent cannot be suppressed for long, and when attempt is made to do so, it can only negatively impact on the state of democracy and consequently on the credibility of the government.

## Law and order anything but normal Denial mode unhelpful

WE are taken aback by the statement by the police chief on May 23 that crime control in the country was at a satisfactory level. With so many killings and kidnappings, some high profile, happening all over the country, such pronouncements coming from the top law enforcer in the country are anything but reassuring. When he indicates that incidents of murder like the ones in Narayanganj, Lakhshimpur or Noakhali should not be treated as a benchmark for law and order in the whole country he is repeating the vacuous rhetoric of these being isolated incidents.

The recent spate of killings has unnerved the people. Instead of making gross understatement that are in conflict with the realities on the ground, we impress upon the police to actually go about taking proactive measures to investigate and apprehend perpetrators of heinous crimes. What we do not need is to listen to verbiage but see action on the ground. It is not surprising that the outlandish statements made by persons in authority do not go down well with the people. The snail's pace with which investigations are carried out into a number of crimes gives out a wrong signal to criminals, i.e. it is alright to commit crimes as long as they can get away with it.

## Dholaikhal spikes come into action

SHAHRIAR FEROZE

INSTALLING retractable device in the form of metal spikes in a part of the city, with many more to come, should have been introduced long ago but as they say it's 'better late than never.' It, however, escapes our understanding why Hare Road was chosen as an experimental route when there were so many other roads where driving on the wrong side was more frequent?

We who move on the streets of Dhaka almost every day gather firsthand experience on how the different types of vehicles pass through the wrong side of the roads. For private cars, buses and trucks, the metal spikes will be an obstacle for illegal shortcuts. The propensity for taking the shortcut through the wrong way may be reduced, but in the case of two and three wheelers—bicycles, motorbikes and rickshaws—the spikes may not be as effective as for the four wheelers. Physically lifting a heavy vehicle may not be possible, but two-wheelers and rickshaws can be lifted. In most cases the biker or the cyclist simply lifts up his/her bike partially or entirely and then keeps moving against the traffic flow, and this was witnessed at Hare Road yesterday. These motorbikes and cycles speed up along the wrong and narrow roadsides and also footpaths, making it become extremely difficult and unsafe for other commuters to move. Nevertheless, we also expect that the spikes will help to reduce the traffic congestion due to movement on the wrong side and also prevent accidents. At the same time a similar device should be set up to deter the two-wheelers from taking the wrong way too. Also, now that we are thinking of installing metal spikes we should also think of how to maintain and ensure their effectuality.

We were happy to see that the device, costing around Tk.5 lakhs, was built by a local metal engineering company located at the capital's Dholaikhal, a place renowned for duplication and creepy inventions. What concerns us is that there could be another device or method in the pipeline for deactivating the proper functions of the metal spikes. We know by now what 'incredible capabilities' the shops at Dholaikhal possess, so let's make sure it doesn't happen. Finally, we don't want a controversy to spring out from the metal spikes device's usability, commercial venture, or large scale production. So before we think of using them on a larger scale a thorough study needs to be done.

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# A menu card for Modi

SUNDAY  
POUCHASHFAQUR  
RAHMAN

DIPIU Modi, our previous foreign minister, was reportedly more bluster than substance. She was smart but did not understand that there were smarter people than her. She also did not do her homework well. If she had not hired expensive experts and legal minds then our award on the maritime delimitation with Myanmar would have come to naught. This was very evident when we pursued our interests with India. There she left it to the Indian ruling Congress party to be the final arbiter of matters in several respects. She did not, on behalf of our prime minister, make the necessary political calculations that would enable her to see whether the Indian Lok Sabha would allow the passing of bills that would possibly give Bangladesh what Congress had pledged.

Congress was a coalition government and nothing would move if there was no unanimity in the House. A case in point was the passing of the Land Boundary Agreement (LBA). It meant that India's international boundaries had to be changed. The opposition Bharitya Janata Party (BJP) was vehemently against this. In spite of all of Congress' pious wishes, Bangladesh was left high and dry on this issue. The other matter was the resolution of the sharing of the waters of the Teesta. Here the West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee held the advantage. Her Trinamool Congress was a coalition partner with the Congress government. But as Congress did not consult her properly she declined to participate in the process. Bangladesh was left in the lurch. Congress knew very well that without Mamata the central government would fall. Hence, she shied away. Bangladesh is yet to sign the Teesta water agreement.

The parliamentary matrix has changed now in India after the Lok Sabha elections. The BJP has routed Congress and is now the single party with a majority in Parliament. So if BJP wishes it can go ahead with the signing of the LBA which has eluded the two countries from as far back as 1974. BJP knows it can earn all the kudos from the world if it signs the LBA. But it will depend on Modi to move in this matter. So is the case with Teesta. Modi needs to consult with Mamata regarding the possible sharing of its waters with Bangladesh, take the credit and move on. He will definitely appreciate the goodwill shown by Mamata and reciprocate this gesture in a different issue and time. Do not forget

Mamata needs funds from Delhi to rebuild her state's infrastructure. The Congress had denied this to her. Modi can also invite the private sector from Gujrat, where he was a successful chief minister, to invest in West Bengal. On both counts Mamata could be amply rewarded.

An important need of India is road transit to its Northeast, and to be able to use the Bangladeshi ports of Chittagong and Chalna. Shiekh Hasina can consider giving this to India now. But transit will be given to India at a price, and Modi knows it. It has to be negotiated. One of the other things we should request Modi to consider is greater and deeper market access of Bangladeshi products in India, and more duty free access and better access by road to Nepal through India. Modi also has to keep in mind that he should not at any time raise the bogey of the 'Bengali immigrant' in Assam from Bangladesh. We can accept that it was election rhetoric. But we must pin him down somewhere in writing so that this provocation is not used again. One of the things that disturbs good bilateral relations between two countries is when such 'non-issues' are flagged in order to provoke the other party.

Bangladesh has clearly pledged not to allow any insurgents from India to operate from its territory. This has led to peace in Northeast Indian states. We should remain committed to this policy in the future. But Modi should note that too comes at a price. In return, Bangladesh must be able to closely cooperate economically with all the Northeastern states. We wish this to turn out into a win-win situation. Similarly, India's recent change of heart to upgrade the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) talks to the governmental level shows that it is keen to participate in and benefit from this process. With BIMSTEC process added on, both India and Bangladesh can work closely towards prosperity.

Modi, when he cares to sit down with Bangladesh, will find a ready friend who is willing to hold his hand for mutual benefit. Can he say that for all his other neighbours? Certainly not in the case of Pakistan. We must therefore offer Modi a tempting menu card of bilateral goodies provided he comes with an open mind and clear conscience. In the past it was seen that major bilateral agreements could be concluded with BJP governments. It has always proved to be good to do business with. For one thing, we know what BJP's position on each issue is, and we can fix our negotiation positions accordingly. Though the negotiations will be tough the final outcome will be good. The Chittagong Hill Tracts issue is a case in point. The menu card that we will hold up to Modi must be doable and deliverable. The Congress was always a different animal. Always sweet in its disposition but hardly able to deliver.

## INDIA'S ELECTION RESULTS

# A case of distorted democracy?

PETER CUSTERS

THE outcome came as a shock for people who admire India's secular political traditions. On May 16, the results were announced for the elections to India's parliament, the Lok Sabha. Held in 9 rounds over a period of many weeks, India's national elections are described as the largest, most massive exercise in vote casting worldwide. Yet this year's outcome even at first sight is worrisome, to say the least.

Riding on a wave of aspirations of India's thriving urban middle classes, and lavishly supported by the corporate sector, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) which champions a Hindu-nationalist agenda gained an absolute majority of parliamentary seats. More ominous still, the electoral coalition headed by the BJP, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), succeeded in bagging over three-fifth of all seats in the new Lok Sabha. On the other hand, the Congress Party which has been ruling India during the last two consecutive terms was virtually decimated. Its share of parliamentary seats has been reduced to roughly a fifth its former size, to just 44 seats today. What are the implications of this upheaval in Indian politics? Is India heading for long-term consolidation of extreme right-wing rule, as some observers fear? Or is the picture less bleak?

First, there is little doubt that the outcome of India's recent elections reflects further communalisation of the country's politics. Whereas the minority of Muslims constitute some 17% of the country's total population, they are poorly represented in the new parliament, with only 20 in 543 seats.

Being afraid in view of the BJP's past record of instigating Hindu-Muslim religious tensions, most Muslims refrained from giving their vote to the BJP or any of its allies. This is true in particular for Muslims in the state of Uttar Pradesh (UP), which holds 80 seats in the Lok Sabha. Here, the BJP's electoral strategy had banked on both communalism and caste politics. In the state's Northern region around Bahraich, for instance, the party sought to reach out to dalit (outcaste) and low-caste Hindus by reviving the memory of an 11th century Hindu king -- at the expense of the martyred Muslim saint whom the king had defeated in combat. This saint, Salar Masood, is venerated by Muslims and Hindus alike. Keeping in mind the gruesome communal riots that have rocked Muzaffarnagar in the western part of Uttar Pradesh in August/September of last year -- which had resulted in scores of deaths and in over 40 thousand people displaced -- the state's Muslims largely refused to vote for BJP or NDA candidates.

Will the election outcome lead to a further deterioration in the interreligious atmosphere? How will it affect the Hindu-Muslim divide? It is middle class aspirations in favour of maximum growth and 'development' that have primarily driven these elections. Hence, the new Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who gained notoriety for having failed to prevent and who abetted the 2002 anti-Muslim riots in Gujrat, may well opt to spend his government's energies cautiously. And there are other factors that may put him on guard.

For one, monopolisation of power is complicated by the fact that the BJP did not score well in (most) Southern states. In Tamil Nadu for instance, the Tamil regional party led by Jayalalitha, the AIADMK, won a landslide victory: it won 37 of this state's 39 seats, while the BJP gained just one. In Kerala and in the two states of

bifurcated Andhra Pradesh, the party's show was relatively poor too. Karnataka is the one state in the South where the BJP has made significant inroads. Here the Hindutva party rose to prominence in the 1990s thanks partly to a nasty communal campaign aimed at undermining the syncretic, Hindu-Muslim worship around a famous shrine, i.e. the thousand year old cave-shrine of Sufi saint Dada Hayat. In Karnataka, the BJP managed to bag 17 of 28 seats.

Another factor emerges when the number of BJP's seats (282 in 543 seats) is compared with the party's share of votes. India's electoral system is not based on proportional representation. Instead, candidates are elected on the basis of electoral districts. In consequence, there can arise a discrepancy between a party's results as measured by number of seats gained and the actual number of people who voted for its candidates. In India's latest Lok Sabha elections, this discrepancy is large. Thus, whereas the BJP gained a majority of seats, its voter share was a mere 31%, implying a discrepancy of more than 20%! Figures for discrepancies in individual states are even more startling. Thus, according to Indian newspaper reports there are at least 6 states where the Hindutva party won a number of seats that in percentage terms was double or nearly double the vote share it obtained. In UP, the BJP's vote-share was 42.3%, whereas it got 71 in 80 seats. In Rajasthan, only 54.9% of voters chose the party, yet it could pocket all the state's seats. In New Delhi, its voter share was 46.4%; here again the party pocketed all seats. Similar discrepancies were registered for Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand and Chattisgarh.

These data, however, do not just illustrate that India's formal electoral system -- like that of many Western states -- tends to offer distorted results. The comparison between data on voters' and seats' shares brings this out with indisputable clarity. Yet the lesson to be drawn on the Lok Sabha elections stretches well beyond this obvious point. Campaign funding by corporate capital towards India's latest national elections was overwhelmingly biased in favour of the BJP. This party alone could muster huge advertisements in the country's newspapers, could undertake prolonged advertising via internet/the social media, and in addition had a huge edge over all other parties, including the Congress, in terms of access to TV broadcasting stations. In spite of this, there was no groundswell of overwhelming popular sympathy for the BJP's prime ministerial candidate Modi, and a safe majority of voters and the electorate voted for parties opposed to the BJP's Hindutva politics.

Clearly, these facts constitute a source of encouragement for Jayalalitha's AIADMK and other regional parties likely to form a joint opposition bloc in India's new parliament. Narendra Modi is likely to focus one-sidedly on infrastructural projects and investment oriented growth so as to ensure double-digit growth, as is desired by India's restless IT professionals and educated urban youngsters. He will probably ignore progressive demands for more egalitarianism, for protection of India's natural wealth and for planned disposal of waste. Yet in case his government overtly opts to exploit and enhance religious divisions, this is likely to arouse widespread indignation -- including by sections of the country's aspiring middle classes.

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Forming committees not enough

After MV Shatil, another launch- MV Miraj-4 capsized. We are really shocked to know the sad news. We pray for the departed souls and express deep sympathy to the bereaved families. Hearing the sad news the shipping minister, local administration and higher authority of BIWTA visited the spot, formed an investigation committee and declared a lump sum compensation for the bereaved family.

These types of accidents happen frequently in Bangladesh during April-September period and the authority always does the same thing -- visits the spot, offers condolence and lastly forms an investigation committee. But the result is always zero.

Every year launch accidents happen due to bad weather or for carrying more passengers than launch's capacity. If BIWTA and the ministry concerned play a strong role regarding this, launch owners will be bound to obey the rules of BIWTA and thus we will not see any more launch accident in the future.

Md. Abdullah-Al-Mamun (Badshah)  
Daffodil International University

### What was the AAG's fault?

Recently the government relieved the Additional Attorney General MK Rahman of his post without showing any reason. Sources said that MK Rahman didn't make any strong arguments against the HC's order of arresting the alleged Rab officials in Narayanganj seven murder case and the government was irked by this.

I don't understand what the government expects from its officials. Though MK Rahman has a pro-AL background, the government, (especially the PM) was annoyed with him over a number of issues including the Narayanganj case. So, he has been terminated in a sudden move. This will discourage government officials to act in public interest.

Sunehra  
Rajshahi

### Financial backing for community radios

In Bangladesh, 14 community radios are operating in different parts of the country to help rural people uplift their socio-economic condition by increasing their access to information and encouraging community action. Currently these radio stations are running as non-profit media. They have only a limited scope for earning revenues to meet their operational costs. It may be mentioned here that the Indian government has allocated 100 crore rupees for the development of the country's community radio sector. At present, 161 community radios are on air in India.

Community radios are functioning in almost all the countries of the world. So, it is strongly felt that the government should allocate sufficient fund for community radio for its development and better management.

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### Comments on news report, "ADP gets even bigger," published on May 21, 2014

#### Hard reality

Our PM has made a big cabinet just to satisfy a large number of her sycophants and now she is bulking up ADP every year just to satisfy their demands; without seriously taking step to implement the projects timely, as huge number of projects remained unimplemented year after year. The question is, whether our PM is here to make general people happy or just her close coterie.

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### "18 Rab men reinstated" (May 21, 2014)

#### Abbasuddin

It is now clearly proved that RAB is involved in the crimes.

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### "PMO refutes Dr Kamal's rejoinder" (May 21, 2014)

#### Barkat

As if the nation had no other issues. Does any single person have any benefit with these filthy facts of who did what for Hasina?

#### Mofi

Can our PM kindly be magnanimous and listen to the people of Bangladesh and help holding a true election?

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### "Upazila chairman shot, burnt alive" (May 21, 2014)

#### Shahin Huq

Since the floodgates of killings and murders have been opened by the Awami League government, the blood will inundate all in Bangladesh including pro-Awami people.