

No winners, only losers

SHIFTING IMAGES



MILIA ALI

ELECTION Day invariably creates a festive mood mingled with a sense of anticipation. The recent mayoral contest in Dhaka on April 28 was no different. It marked a surge of renewed hope that contestable politics was back in the country's political arena. As I walked to the neighbourhood polling station in Gulshan to cast my vote, I passed the usual potholes, piling garbage and overflowing gutters. The unkempt city steered my resolve to vote for an enlightened and dedicated City Corporation that might make a difference to the lives of ordinary Dhaka residents.

This election was not about sweeping promises to alleviate poverty in five years or for building a "Sonar Bangladesh". It was about cleaner living conditions, better traffic management and injecting some sanity in the urban sprawl – issues that affect our daily lives. Also, after the long hiatus in political activity and months of violence and uncertainty, the main opposition party, the BNP, had agreed to contest the polls. Thousands of voters swarmed the booths to choose their preferred candidates. It was a relief to see representatives from the two major parties facilitating the electoral process and the voting in our precinct was conducted in an efficient and professional manner.

Back home, I sipped my mid-morning coffee and felt a sense of comfort at the thought that Bangladesh was back on the democratic track. My coffee cup was barely half empty when I was hit by shock waves – no, it wasn't an earthquake. It was the announcement on the TV Channels that the BNP had cried foul and pulled out. Accusations began to fly and the rumour mills went into action declaring that the elections were a sham. The BNP claimed that their polling agents had been harassed and in some cases voted had been cast even before the voters arrived on the scene.

I am not a political analyst, neither am I privy to any inside information. However, after reflecting on the sequence of events I have mentally constructed two alternative scenarios on what could have gone amiss.

The first is the government's version that the BNP's withdrawal was pre-planned and part of a greater conspiracy to discredit the electoral process and reignite violent protests. The pur-

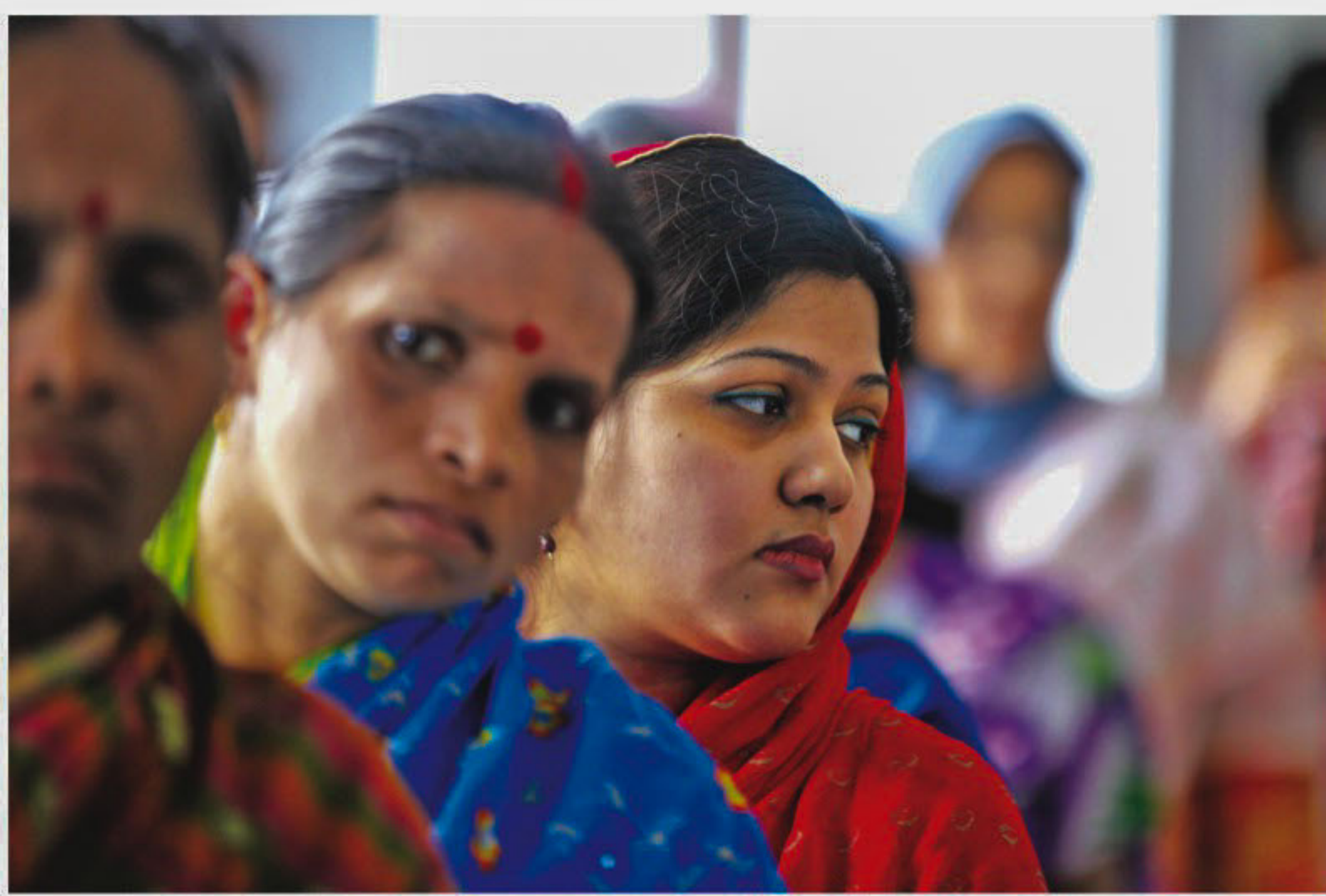


PHOTO: STAR

ported objective was to generate a state of anarchy that could force the government to concede to their demands of a national election. But if indeed this is true, the BNP's hasty withdrawal has failed to give the party political traction. On the contrary it has demonstrated a degree of insensitivity toward the voters' aspirations for "change". Prior to taking this extreme position, complaints could have been lodged with the Election Commission and the public should have been made more cognizant of the specific nature of voting irregularities.

In the alternative scenario, let us accept that the elections were not fair and the ruling Awami League (AL) did not adequately protect the rights of the opposition parties. But the question that puzzles me is: Why? The AL has an absolute majority in the Parliament and is in full control of major decisions pertaining to the country. Then why would it tamper with the results of a City Corporation election, which can only make a small difference in the bigger picture? Can their leaders be so shortsighted that they did not foresee that any anomaly in the electoral process would undermine the goodwill created through the promise of a free and fair mayoral election? Experience has shown us that a "winner take all" strategy does not pay off in the long run.

Whether the BNP's hasty decision was pre-planned or not, one cannot deny that the onus

of responsibility for ensuring a fair and transparent election lies with the government. It should have been more vigilant and instituted tighter checks and controls, particularly given the history of allegations and counter allegations. Even if the authorities are not directly responsible for voting irregularities they should have taken adequate measures to protect voters' rights. If eyewitness accounts are to be believed, the administration failed in maintaining the neutrality of the electoral process.

All elections have winners and losers, but this one only gave us losers. The main casualty has been the loss of trust and hope, which had miraculously revived during the election period. The old man limping with slow but confident strides toward the polling booth, the woman in a wheelchair who climbed up the stairs of the polling station leaning on her grandson's shoulder, the young people patiently waiting in the voting line, they all lost. Because they believed that they were empowered to elect a leader of their choice. Political analysts may rant and rave about "what happened" and "what next", but the truth is that there is only one solution to the problem. The solution will come only when the party leaders start thinking of what they can do for the people, not what they can do to win power and position.

The writer is a renowned Rabindra Sangeet exponent and a former employee of the World Bank.

Hear them

SHARBARI AHMED

THERE is a curfew in Baltimore, Maryland, USA which is in a state of emergency. So everyone was out in the streets at 6:33 pm GMT, April 29, 2015 before the curfew started. Also on that day, in an unprecedented event the Baltimore Orioles played the Chicago White Sox to an empty stadium because people were ordered to stay home. Baseball is America's National Pastime and only a handful of forlorn fans were able to watch from behind a fence. The National Anthem was played, echoing through the cavernous stadium and no one sang along. The words "the land of the free" would have rung slightly hollow to some residents of Baltimore. I often wonder about that. How do Black Americans reconcile being American and being systematically discriminated against on a regular basis? And on April 29 my question was answered.

There is a curfew because the people of Baltimore are rioting. They burned buildings, attacked police cars and screamed to be heard. They are protesting 300 plus years of Jim Crow which are tacit and official laws put in place the moment slavery ended, aimed at keeping Black Americans, former slaves and generations of their descendants in a constant state of fear and prey to capricious arrests, and ultimate incarceration. Sometimes the law dispenses with arrest and imprisonment and simply lynches or murders these American citizens, as is the case of Freddie Gray whose spine was severed last week while in police custody. He died seven days later. He was in coma.

In the early years of the last century lynching was a social event. Entire white families would gather under a large tree, usually in the South of the US, sometimes with picnic baskets and cameras and would watch as black men and women were lashed, burned and strung up and hanged until they were dead. The crowds would cheer; children would pose with the battered, torn bodies and save the snaps as mementos. Billie Holiday sang a song about it, called "Strange Fruit" referring to bodies swaying, hanging from trees. Sometimes club owners would ask her not to but she always insisted, she had the right to. It was an awful part of American life that needed to be revisited every now and again.

The lynching is America's shame, testament to the brutal inequities between the American races and now Black Americans are rising up, after many years of some complacency, and answering violence with violence. It was not what Dr. Martin Luther King espoused as he fought for his people's right to vote and pursue happiness 50 years ago. He wanted peaceful protest, but even he said: "A riot is the language of the unheard".

I had to ask myself:

If my unarmed, helpless son had his spine severed while in police custody, what would I do? If many, many sons and daughters from generations past and present had their retinas detached after a beating, their backs scored with a thousand lashes so it looked like a someone had carved an oak tree into their skin, had been stripped naked, battered with batons, pinned against a brick wall by a water hose while German Shepherds snarled at them, what would I do? If those sworn to protect and serve my community executed members of this community with impunity, what would I do? I would riot. Plain and simple. I sincerely hope you would too. What I would say is this: you don't want to hear me? Well, I will make you hear me. And my anger is nothing compared to their righteous one.

Sharbari Ahmed is a Bangladeshi American writer living in the US.

Preparedness is the best defence in an earthquake disaster

BITTER TRUTH



MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

THE Nepal earthquake and aftershocks are definitely a wakeup call for Bangladesh, as the epicentre is gradually moving towards the Northeast of India, within 350 km from Dhaka. The devastating earthquake in Nepal on April 25 instantly killed more than 4,000 and injured more than 7,500. The death figure continues to rise (it has crossed 6000).

Dhaka, a mega city with a population density of about 45,000 per sq km, has little cause for comfort. In the event of such a major quake, the biggest problem will be that rescue vehicles will get trapped in the maze of narrow lanes in most parts of the city. More alarming, the city's overburdened sewer system might rupture, unleashing deadly germs and disease-carrying bacteria in the days after the quake. In the older parts of the city, old and dilapidated buildings will collapse onto teeming streets, setting off severe road blocks other than panic, chaos, devastation and homelessness.

The first 48 hours after any quake are very critical in saving lives. Even calling in the army who have committed manpower may be of no use because they don't have the expertise and equipment to deal with the situation. In Kutch of Gujarat, residents used rudimentary tools like household hammers to chip away debris for rescuing those trapped under rubble. Delay and dilly-dallying are the biggest challenges in an earthquake event. Speed is of great essence in any rescue operation, especially in an earthquake disaster. Most importantly, an earthquake itself never

kills people; it's the badly constructed buildings that kill. Enquiries have revealed that there was little damage to Ahmedabad's (India) 30,000 Gujarat Housing Board flats, even as other prominent buildings like Shikhar Towers and Mansi apartments were totally disintegrated. Seismologists say that Dhaka lies on fault lines and according to experts at least 50% of the buildings can't resist quakes. Earthquake resistant designs have been known to structural engineers since long and the National Building Code of 1993 clearly identifies structural designs in terms of earthquakes and cyclones.

When an earthquake occurs, it causes vibratory ground motion in three different directions that make buildings sway 'drunkenly' which can be fatal to high-rises. The violent ground motion pushes the building rapidly from one direction to another making it difficult for the super structure to constantly balance its load. The result is that while columns can bend, they snap like sticks and collapse if the swaying motion intensifies.

What the structural engineers suggest now to prevent collapse of a building in an earthquake is to include "seismic isolation" by incorporating seismic bearings under the foundation that allows buildings to shift several inches with the ground movement. Shock absorber bearings with layers of steel and rubber also absorb the sideways motion. Experts also suggest inclusion of concrete slab raft foundation which is more difficult to sink in an earthquake as the pressure gets spread over a much greater surface area.

In another promising technique, engineers use special steel configurations, lead shock absorbers and similar "dampers" to slow a structure's swaying during a quake. Studies of earthquake devastation by experts have revealed that corners of walls are subject to enormous stress. As such, a steel bar bound to the



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

edges with concrete allows the structure to withstand it. Most of all concrete lintel beams above the doors and windows bind the walls and prevent them from flying out. Pure geometric shapes like squares, rectangles and triangles disperse the seismic force equally in all directions.

The government must enforce the safety laws, and create public awareness for their enforcement. Most buildings in Bangladesh are designed by the owners and contractors with no knowledge of building construction and most do not realise that their homes built in this way may become their tombs. Two essential factors, good design and good construction must be followed very stringently for stability. The best defence is to strengthen national capacity to reduce

such risks and ensure response and recovery effort speedily. To be sure, meticulous safety preparations, regular drills, and quake-proofing buildings and infrastructure have saved thousands of lives. Many people subscribe to mobile phone quake alerts, and in Japan school children have padded and flame retardant headwear under their desks. The government must launch public awareness campaign through radio and TV. Tightening building codes, to say nothing of retrofitting, will be no doubt expensive. But not as expensive as the thousands of lives lost and the millions of dollars in damage that a quake inflicts.

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QUOTABLE Quote

The poor have to labour in the face of the majestic equality of the law, which forbids the rich as well as the poor to sleep under bridges, to beg in the streets, and to steal bread.

Anatole France

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- | | |
|------------------------|------------------------|
| ACROSS | DOWN |
| 1 Travel document | 1 Bud holder |
| 5 Sound of delight | 2 Sacred bird of Egypt |
| 11 Border on | 3 Heat-based ailment |
| 12 Atlas section | 4 Had lunch |
| 13 Trig function | 5 Car type |
| 14 Dressed in | 6 Broker's numbers |
| 15 Twisty letter | 7 Big planters |
| 16 Porch items | 8 Long, long time |
| 17 Steakhouse order | 9 King Kong, for one |
| 19 Youngster | 10 Went ahead |
| 22 Racer Andreotti | 16 Cow call |
| 24 Biblical kingdom | 18 Bitterness |
| 26 MP's quarry | 19 Typing unit |
| 27 Oglad | 20 "Yeah, right!" |
| 28 Magic Johnson, once | 21 June honorees |
| 30 Forgoes food | 22 Shopping spot |
| 31 Caustic stuff | 23 Not at home |
| 32 Take as one's own | 25 Pile |
| 34 Antlered animal | 29 Baby's toy |
| 35 Uncooked | 30 London weather |
| 38 Little squirt | 33 Stunned |
| 41 Golf target | 34 Ailing |
| 42 Source of wisdom | 36 TV's Trebek |
| 43 Hawaiian strings | 37 Sunset setting |
| 44 Hit on the noggin | 38 Cry loudly |
| 45 Printed matter | 39 Old hand |
| | 40 Operated |
| | 41 Crude abode |

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

A	P	E	X	G	R	A	P	E
C	R	I	E	S	R	I	V	A
H	O	L	D	T	H	E	M	A
E	V	E	R	O	W	T	O	P
S	E	E	D	E	R	B	A	L
S	N	E	E	R	E	R	A	S
U	T	I	C	A				
S	P	E	C	F	A	N	G	S
P	A	V	E	I	N	S	E	T
A	C	E	D	E	N	L	A	W
C	I	N	C	O	D	E	M	A
E	N	T	E	R	D	E	T	E
R	O	S	E	Y	N	O	D	E

CRYPTOQUOTE

OYI HGDQIF HZ HYI OGQWLEYH; NQF OYZZU YID VIWWZI YINE, NQF TYLOMIDIF HZ YID QILEYAZD: "TLQHID LO FINE."

- N. N. SLWQI

YESTERDAY'S CRYPTOQUOTE:

HOPE IS BEING ABLE TO SEE THAT THERE IS LIGHT DESPITE ALL OF THE DARKNESS.

- DESMOND TUTU

BEETLE BAILEY



by Mort Walker

HENRY



by Don Trachte

A XYDLBAAXR is LONGFELLOW

One letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used for the three L's, X for the two O's, etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each day the code letters are different.