

MYANMAR ELECTIONS IS EVERYONE CELEBRATING?

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THE euphoria, both inside the country and outside, which followed the recent and historic elections in Myanmar, was only to be expected. One hopes, at the same time, that it was not premature. History is awash with instances where populist and charismatic leaders turned out to be inept administrators and ended up becoming autocratic dictators. Hopefully, Aung San Suu Kyi will be among the exceptions.

Riding a wave of unmatched popularity and cashing on her personal charisma, Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi led her National League for Democracy (NLD) to an unprecedented landslide victory at the polls held on November 8. After more than two decades of defiance in the face of repressive authoritarianism, Suu Kyi's resilience stands vindicated. Her perseverance has been duly rewarded. The military backed party USDP has conceded defeat.

Suu Kyi, the daughter of the country's independence hero General Aung San, headed a non-violent opposition to Myanmar's military rulers since the aborted 1990 election, a great part of which she was forced to spend in isolation and under house arrest. No amount of repression, however, dampened her indomitable spirit. She even spurned offers of freedom from imprisonment by the military rulers if she agreed to leave the country for good. The decision meant not seeing her British husband before his death from cancer in 1999 or watching her two sons grow up.

As the dust of her resounding victory settles, Suu Kyi and her colleagues will have to take stock of certain sobering realities that lie ahead before her party takes office in March next year, assuming of course, all else remains same till then.

The ruling junta has accepted the outcome of the election, with the caveat that Myanmar must have a 'disciplined democracy', the implication of which is open to interpretation. The country's constitution crafted by the military rulers stipulates 25 percent seats in the parliament for the military. These seats will not be elected but appointed. Besides, the constitution also ensures that the key ministries of Defence, Home and Border Affairs will be headed by the military. These arrangements mean that even with such a strong mandate, the NLD will not be allowed complete sway over decision or policy making.

Then there is the big question of who will become the country's president, which is the office of the chief Executive. The current constitutional provisions bar Suu Kyi from assuming that exalted office as her sons have foreign citizenship. The military is unwilling to change that. Besides, one of the two vice presidents will come from the military, thereby putting checks on whoever becomes the president. Suu Kyi, however, surprised observers by announcing that she will be 'above the president', a call not seen as being in line with conventional democratic norms and practices.

Hence managing the transition without giving cause for worry to the military will be a major challenge for Aung San Suu Kyi and her party. As things stand presently, the NLD may be left with little choice than to settle for sharing some power with the country's military and the people of Myanmar may end up living with "controlled



democracy", which is perhaps better than no democracy.

Internationally, Suu Kyi will also need to address the lukewarm response to the election outcome from China, Myanmar's most important and strategic neighbour. Beijing, which has for decades been close to Myanmar's successive authoritarian military leaders, has so far stopped short of congratulating Suu Kyi or the NLD and has only provided assurances of assistance, friendship and "mutually beneficial cooperation". China had taken a pragmatic stance on the

evolving political developments in Myanmar and the Communist Party invited Suu Kyi to Beijing in June this year, a recognition that the party she leads would most likely come to power. While in Beijing, Suu Kyi met President Xi Jinping at the Great Hall of the People, a symbolic gesture usually reserved for visiting heads of governments or states. Beijing will now wait to see how far this crucial relationship evolves as per script, Beijing's script.

Among all the jubilations following the election outcome, one group that is holding back

on celebrating just yet is the Rohingya Muslim population living in the Rakhine state. Stripped off their right to vote by successive military governments, this ethnic and religious minority group had no role to play in this historic election and was reduced to being silent spectators. The country's Election Commission even disqualified every single Muslim candidate.

For long the Rohingyas have been a persecuted and a discriminated lot. This group continues to suffer from scorn and open hatred by Myanmar's Buddhist majority, especially the powerful Buddhist clergy. More than a hundred and forty thousand of them are passing their days in utter misery in refugee camps after being internally displaced following the violent Buddhist-Muslim riots of 2012. Their treatment has drawn international criticism and censure. Even Suu Kyi, feted by many in the West as a champion for democracy, has been criticised abroad for her disturbing silence on the fate of the Rohingya Muslims. As the Election day drew close, she was even quoted as saying the issue is "being exaggerated" by the critics, clearly opting for a 'pragmatic' approach meant to pacify the Buddhist majority. In so doing, she risked raising further fear among the Rohingyas and the international community alike. Dealing with this issue, therefore, will be one of the most controversial, and unavoidable, in a long list of issues Suu Kyi will inherit from the military government. An NLD led government will in all likelihood come under increased international pressure to take a definitive stance on this sensitive yet critical issue.

However, Suu Kyi is also aware that speaking out for the Rohingya would carry a political cost at home, both among the Buddhist majority and the powerful military establishment, and even among some in the NLD. The hardliners see the Rohingyas as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. She could see a haemorrhaging of support by taking up the cause of the beleaguered minority too openly.

The NLD also faces a powerful local rival in the Arakan National Party (ANP) that has been accused of stoking anti Muslim sentiments and has even called for the deportation of the Rohingyas. The ANP won most of the 29 national level seats in Rakhine and has a decisive control of the state's regional assembly. How she will balance the diverse positions will be a real test of her political acumen. There is also a bigger angle to this issue. Scorned and fleeing persecution at home, exiled Rohingya refugees, especially the youth, have become easy recruits for extremist groups like the Al-Qaeda and now the IS.

So far the NLD has offered little in the way of clear policy to tackle the Rohingya citizenship status or their resettlement and integration in the society. The only ray of hope, albeit a guarded one, came from comments by the Party's senior leader Win Htun that the 1982 Citizenship Act that denied the Rohingya full citizenship "must be reviewed because it is too extreme". What that will mean in concrete terms once the NLD assumes office is something one will have to wait and see.

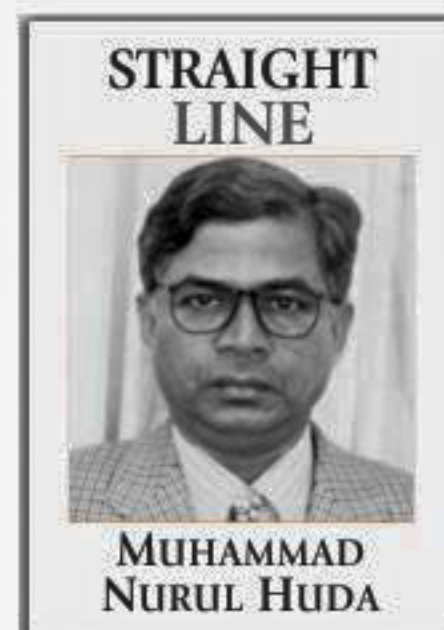
Till then, the Rohingyas may continue to hold back on celebrating Aung San Suu Kyi's thumping victory.

The writer is a former Foreign Secretary and Bangladesh High Commissioner/Ambassador to Sri Lanka, Germany, Vietnam and the United States.

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Understanding the insidious extremism

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religious extremists. Events in Bangladesh and France in recent times point to such an imperative. From a historical perspective, one may recollect the deadly clashes in 1953 when two groups of Muslims fought bloody battles on the streets of Lahore, the heart of Pakistan's Punjab, in the name of Islam. Hundreds died and a sect of believers was declared heretic and have been persecuted since then. At the core of the conflict was a simple question:

Who is a Muslim?

It was only eighteen years later in 1971 that the bogey of religion was raised to suppress the political rights of Bengali speaking Muslims in this part of the world. Torture and mass killings were engineered by the Pakistan army and its bands of religious extremists. A horrendous bloodshed stained Bangladesh. Violence against other fellow beings, including the co-religionists, was justified under religious causes.

We, therefore, need to understand that if the so-called religious extremists can have their way then they will make deliberate efforts to realign State and cultural power in the interests of the majority. This will result in non-Muslim minorities being defined – explicitly or implicitly – as second class citizens. Herein it would only be proper to remember that the spread of modernisation has given rise to 'religion as

an ideology'; this means ready-made formulas to advance national or political interests.

Incidentally, one has to bear in mind that in post-1975 Bangladesh, the liberal democratic front faces an uphill task in recapturing the political as well as the psychological ground already lost to the extremist quarters. The nation may have to face another round of aggressive social mobilisation by the religious extremists.

Against the obscurantism of the scheming religious extremists, one has to realise that in rural Bangladesh, religious and traditional beliefs are far more tenacious than the liberal fronts imagine. Additionally, secularism as State ideology finds itself unable to compete with a language of belonging saturated with religion. Liberal democrats have been under attack by the political forces mobilised by the extremists.

It would be pertinent to recollect that religious extremism has been responsible for the deplorable violence that has resulted in a heavy toll of human lives in Pakistan in the preceding decades, and the same continues unabated. Hate politics along sectarian lines have increased manifold. It is sad that in Pakistan, political context at large continues to cast its shadow on the way the sectarian conflict threatens to disturb the inter-communal harmony.

Interestingly, the slogan of the Islamic groups in Pakistan was 'Chaddar and Char Diwari' (the veil and the four walls of the house) and the sanctity of the private domain was epitomised by this statement. The segregation of sexes and the separation of women from public life were seen as goals that would enhance the security of women. However, the violence generated by

Jihad culture and the circuits of weapons and narcotics closely associated with it had the opposite effect. There was increasing violence against women and assault of the sanctity of the private domain.

The inescapable fact is that the ultimate responsibility of breeding a violent culture and its multiple social ramifications shall fall on State agencies that fail to see the ominous signals of religious extremism and perhaps willy-nilly nurture and protect the jihadi groups.

There is a causal relationship between policy and violence on the social level within the country and on the personal level within the household. The State has to accept responsibility for the overall propensity for violence in the public and private places. It has to recognise respect for religious, sexual, racial differences, and equality and liberty.

The writer is a columnist for The Daily Star.

QUOTABLE Quote

MAHATMA GANDHI

You must be the change you wish to see in the world.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- Amorphous mass
- Like this answer
- Staff member
- Bar exercise
- Put together
- Puget Sound city
- Pitcher's pride
- Pinup guy
- Take as one's own
- Chick holder
- "Shut up!"
- Relish
- Reed instrument
- Gambling city
- Surfeits
- Make fresh
- Filming site
- Coffee additive
- Flimflam
- Cereal bit
- Game outing
- Formerly
- Let up
- Bruce of "Ne-braska"
- Hinders
- Took in

DOWN

- Crimson Tide, for short
- Tale teller
- One that doesn't belong
- Pollen collector
- Malfunction
- Monk music
- "Casablanca" role
- Music's Yoko
- Add up
- Relaxing place
- Very popular
- Losing plan
- It's far from a long shot
- Vanished
- Expand
- Gear parts
- Qualified
- Vicinity
- Game official
- Mystery author Stout
- Invasions
- Despise
- Field measure
- Look after
- Despondent
- Justice Fortas
- Jack Sprat's no-no
- Exalted poem

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

S	L	E	D	L	A	B	E	L
P	I	N	E	S	I	R	A	Q
A	L	L	W	O	R	K	E	D
I	I	W	E	E	D	I	P	
N	E	S	T	E	D	S	A	N
S	T	O	R	M	E	Y	E	D
S	T	A	R		P	R	I	M
C	A	P	S		L	A	T	E
R	I	O		P	E	P	A	D
A	L	L	W	A	S	H	E	D
P	O	L	A	R		S	T	O
E	R	O	D	E		A	W	E

BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES

by Kirkman & Scott