

FEBRUARY 8TH VERDICT

May cut both ways for BNP

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA FRIDAY FEBRUARY 2, 2018, MAGH 20, 1424 BS

Reverse the situation

Sliding down the EIU Democracy Index 2017

ACCORDING to the latest Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) Democracy Index 2017, our ranking has slipped eight notches from the preceding year as Bangladesh ranked 92nd compared to 84 in 2016. The Democracy Index is based on five factors: electoral process and pluralism; civil liberties; the functioning of government; political participation; and political culture. Bangladeshi media was touted as "partly free" ranking it 49th out of 167 countries. And in another index—the World Justice Project (WJP) Rule of Law Index 2017-2018—Bangladesh was placed at 102 out of 113 countries where a lower number indicates better performance. The results do not come as a surprise.

We would urge the government to look upon these indices not as an attempt to make the country look bad, rather treat the assessments as indicators of things going awry. When we talk about democracy, it is our tendency to win elections at any cost and then treat the opposition as losers without rights. The same goes for the media where investigative journalism is treated with hostility and intimidation. We have members of law enforcement being caught in acts of robbery and extortion. Human rights groups at home and abroad and the media have repeatedly expressed concerns at the growing number of disappearances and crossfire deaths. The political opposition is given no quarter when it comes for them to congregate and hold meetings while scores of journalists have been hauled up in court under ever more stringent laws that stifle free expression and objective journalism.

Both the ruling party and opposition parties need to take heed of democratic purposes. As we near general elections at the end of the year, the government bears the burden of creating a congenial environment for people to exercise their franchise in a free and safe environment. For us to improve our overall ranking, we will have to do much better in improving political culture and political participation, ensuring civil liberties, and curtailing harassment of journalists.

Girls taking up the gauntlet

Laudable step in the fight against early marriage

THE commendable initiative of a group of girls combating early marriage in Trishal, as reported by *The Daily Star* on Thursday, shows how social problems like child marriage are best handled: through greater community involvement. The girls are working to raise awareness of the consequences of early marriage among local people and girls/women themselves so that they can resist any such attempts on their own, without recourse to administrative measures and other such interventions. In the last two months alone, encouraged by the local UNO and community leaders, they prevented 10 early marriages.

The fight against early marriage in Bangladesh is not an easy one, given the complex socioeconomic reality, lack of awareness, and loopholes in child marriage laws which allow for exceptions in "special" cases. The country has the highest rate of early marriage under the age of 15, yet its policy responses and administrative actions to stop the practice have been quite inadequate. There is a sense that the issue is not being dealt with enough urgency. But the initiatives taken by the girls in Trishal, and others in various other districts in the country, show that the fight against early marriage is not a losing battle and that there have been encouraging gains at the community level despite the dispiriting national figure.

That said, there is no alternative to a coordinated effort for a better outcome. The fight against child marriage will be a lot easier if the community initiatives are backed by sustained administrative support and legal intervention, especially in places that have proved to be resistant to such attempts.

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING



BRIG GEN SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN
NDC, PSC (RETD)

awaited with much anticipation and baited breath. Anticipated as much by the BNP and AL, the former hoping she would not be convicted, and the latter, expecting the prosecutors' call for seven years in jail, will have the judge's ears. And the people are waiting with baited breath for what might happen were the BNP chairperson to go to jail.

The focus is on what kind of elections we are going to see in 2018. Will it be a replication of January 5, 2014? Will it be an inclusive election? At least the AL secretary-general thinks that it would be even if the BNP did not participate. One wonders how many of his party men and women would concur with him. Will the BNP repeat the mistake by boycotting the forthcoming election too? And what will their strategy be should the verdict go against them? Would the ruling party continue to deny political space to the opposition? We have seen it shrink more and more in the last five years. In view of this and the fact that there was little tolerance for dissenting voices, the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index showing the country slip down does not surprise us. These are a few questions that are occupying our minds.

Predictably, the BNP is accusing the administration of a predetermined verdict—very sure of the fate of the party chief. BNP sees the trial and the likely conviction as AL strategy to keep the party away from the forthcoming elections, hoping that the incarceration of Khaleda Zia would provoke similar reaction and the re-enactment of violence as the election of 2014 did, and reap the political benefits.

Some people ask whether the AL fears (nay hopes for) a violent reaction from the BNP following the verdict. The home minister has already sent out his message to the BNP that violence would not be tolerated. But why does he take for granted that BNP

would go for violence at all?

And that is exactly the reason why the public are waiting with a baited breath. They had had enough of violence after the 2014 election, an exercise which even the prime minister had accepted as being held only for constitutional requirement, implying that a "proper election" would be held to fulfil the democratic requirement. But that never was, and the current tenure of the AL by the end of its term will have existed on what can best be described as a makeshift election, with a unique distinction never attained before by any democratic country—that of the opposition in the parliament

It was a case of arm-twisting of some to fall in line, while some found the charm of ministership too hard to resist, and of course there was external persuasion on the Jatiya Party Chairman whose main preoccupation during those uncertain and somewhat tumultuous days was golf—whether on his own volition or otherwise is for people to judge. We are told that he had applied for withdrawal of his nomination, which was not treated with due diligence by the relevant authority. The consequence of all that is he finds himself, perhaps "most unwillingly," in the role of the PM's special envoy, and his party warming the

half the world away. Not a happy situation for the BNP, but would be relished by its opponents.

The BNP boycott may come as a boon for some political parties in the Mohajote. With an inclusive election on a level playing field, and the EC playing its due role, most of them would not pass, which they would otherwise, as in 2014, if the election was of the kind we saw in 2014.

But for the BNP boycotting election is not an option, and neither is violence. That would allow the AL to flaunt the argument that it has done, that it was not their fault that BNP did not participate in



being also a part of the government.

People do not want violence anymore and nobody more than the BNP realises that the burning and destruction unleashed in the aftermath of the 2014 elections have been very costly for them politically. And, therefore, one would not be remiss to suggest that violent agitation is something that should be far from the minds of the BNP leadership. Can the BNP afford the AL to reap the benefits of their 2014 agitation?

That being the reality, what sort of election are we likely to have in 2018? Surely, we don't want the kind we saw held in 2014. The election was legal, but whatever is legal is not necessarily moral.

treasury as well as the opposition benches simultaneously.

The BNP is certainly ruling boycotting the 10th parliamentary election. It fell in the trap and is still licking the wound, sustained more because of what it indulged in following the election than boycotting it. It has restated that without Khaleda Zia the party would not go for elections. And they have made provision of keeping her relevant by amending the constitution so that she would not lose her party membership even if she were convicted. But that does not solve BNP's problem. Should the chairperson be imprisoned, the party will have an absentee landlord giving directions from

the January 5 election. After all, getting elected uncontested is not unheard of. Moreover, the graft case, and the conviction, may play in favour of the BNP.

The sympathy factor cannot be overlooked, and of course there is always the anti-incumbency factor despite the development that the AL has made in several key sectors.

The verdict, whatever it is, will cut both ways for the BNP. Khaleda's conviction will reinforce the BNP accusation of political motivation, if not, of political harassment. And both may go in favour of the BNP.

Brig Gen Shahedul Anam Khan, ndc, psc (Retd) is Associate Editor, *The Daily Star*.

America has chosen the wrong partner



MEVLÜT ÇAVUŞOĞLU

and the United States share the goal of defeating terrorist organisations that threaten our nations. Daesh (or the so-called Islamic State) has been our common enemy, and the victory against the group could not have been possible without Turkey's active contributions.

American officials have told us that the United States wants to remain engaged and needs boots on the ground in Syria to prevent the remnants of Daesh from regrouping. But fighting Daesh cannot and should not mean that we will not fight other terrorist groups in our region that threaten our country and the security of our citizens.

An impasse has been created between us by the United States' choice of local partner in this war: a group that the American government itself recognises as a terrorist organisation. The so-called People's Protection Units, or YPG, is simply the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party terrorist organisation by another name.

The groups have adopted different

sophistication.

A NATO ally arming a terrorist organisation that is attacking another NATO ally is a fundamental breach of everything that NATO stands for. It is a policy anomaly that needs to be corrected.

We have no doubt that the United States will see the damage this policy is inflicting on the credibility of the NATO alliance and correct its policy by putting its allies and long-term interests first again. American reliance on the People's Protection Units is a self-inflicted error when the United States already has a capable partner in Turkey.

Turkey, however, cannot afford to wait for eventual and inevitable course corrections. Paying lip service to

law, in accordance with our right to self-defence. The targets are the terrorists, their shelters, their weapons and related infrastructure. The Turkish Army is acting with utmost precaution to avoid harming civilians.

We have already intensified our humanitarian efforts substantially, setting up camps to help the civilians fleeing Afrin. We are already hosting over three million Syrians, and Turkish humanitarian agencies are helping those who need our support.

Turkey will continue the mission until terrorists are wiped out. Turkey will not consent to the creation of separatist enclaves or terrorist safe havens that threaten its national security and are against the will of the Syrian people.



Turkey has launched Operation Olive Branch against the terrorists in Afrin. Maintaining the territorial integrity of Syria is key to the peace efforts.

PHOTO: UMIT BEKTAS/REUTERS

Those contributions continue even though the group has been defeated militarily in both Iraq and Syria. The Turkish military was crucial in the liberation of the northern Syrian city of Jarabulus from Daesh in 2016. Turkey detained more than 10,000 members of Daesh and Qaeda affiliates, and deported around 5,800 terrorists while denying entry to more than 4,000 suspicious travellers.

Daesh has lost territorial control in Syria and Iraq, but it still retains the capacity to inflict horrors. Turkish authorities recently carried out operations against Daesh cells and damaged its efforts to reorganise.

names and developed convoluted structures, but that does not cloak their reality. They are led by the same cadres, train in the same camps, share organisational and military structures, and use the same propaganda tools and financial resources. The Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, directs the YPG, and the PKK's suicide bombers are trained in YPG camps in Syria.

To our dismay, the YPG/PKK terrorists across our borders in Iraq and Syria are using weapons and training provided by the United States. The weapons confiscated by our security forces from PKK terrorists have also been significantly increasing in both numbers and

understanding Turkey's security concerns does not remove those threats and dangers.

In the recent weeks, Turkish authorities have documented an increase in threats posed by the YPG and Daesh encampments in Syria. Terrorists in the Afrin region in Syria were menacing the lives and property of both the people of the region and Turks along the border.

We had to act, and so Turkey has launched Operation Olive Branch against the terrorists in Afrin.

The operation has a clear objective: to ensure the security of our borders and neutralise the terrorists in Afrin. It is carried out on the basis of international

Turkey has already been active in every political process that seeks a solution to the quagmire in Syria. Maintaining the territorial integrity of Syria is key to the peace efforts. Clearing terrorists means opening space for peace.

Turkey has already been active in every political process that seeks a solution to the quagmire in Syria. Maintaining the territorial integrity of Syria is key to the peace efforts. Clearing terrorists means opening space for peace.

We strive for a future that is free of terrorist entities, imploding neighbours, wars and humanitarian calamities in our region. Turkey deserves the respect and support of the United States in this essential fight.

Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu is Turkey's Minister of Foreign Affairs.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Polls-time government

There seems to be a lot of controversy surrounding the nature of the government that is supposed to function during the upcoming general election. There is also a lot of confusion about whether or not the parliament should be dissolved before the election.

India is the largest parliamentary democracy in the world. Their chief election commissioner is vested with considerable power. Our election commission may lead a delegation of major political parties to meet their Indian counterparts. They should find out what procedures India follows before and during Lok Sabha elections. We can follow the same procedures and, if necessary, bring necessary changes to our electoral system.

Reza Hussain, By e-mail

Take steps to curb mugging

This newspaper recently published a report about a horrific incident that happened in Dhanmondi, in which a woman was killed under the wheels of a car as muggers snatched away her purse. A similar incident occurred a few days prior in Dayaganj.

Mugging is hardly a new phenomenon in Dhaka. But muggers are nowadays using private cars so that they can flee the scene quickly.

Law enforcement officials claim that the law and order situation of the country is fine and that these incidents are isolated. It is actually the other way around. Law enforcement agencies should allocate more of their resources and attention towards mugging which seems to have taken a more dangerous form.

Md Zillur Rahaman, By email