

# An Unavoidable Question



**BLACK, WHITE & GREY**  
ALI RIAZ

**B**ARRING any dramatic shift in the current political situation or unforeseen circumstances, the 11th parliamentary elections are to be held no later than

The demands of the opposition parties, irrespective of their ideological persuasions, that the parliament be dissolved prior to the announcement of the election schedule and that a neutral election-time government be formed through discussions with political parties to oversee the election, have been rejected by the ruling Awami League on the grounds of the demands being "unconstitutional". One can hardly forget how it had become "unconstitutional". But leaving history aside, it is obvious that despite differences among the opposition on various matters, a de facto consensus has emerged on these demands. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and the leaders of the AL-led alliance have reiterated their firm position regarding negotiations with the opposition.

Although these developments, especially the diametrically opposed positions of the ruling party and the opposition, are not entirely new, they have gained urgency as the election is imminent. Growing polarisation and the attitude of the ruling party have added to the concerns of the citizens: Will there be an election? Which parties will participate? Will it be a repeat of 2014? Will voters be able to cast their votes? The anxiety is real, yet the ruling party is not even recognising it.

The government's actions in recent days, particularly towards the newly formed Jatiya Oikyafront led by Kamal Hossain, are sending the message that it is not only unwilling to create a level playing field but instead would create as many hindrances as possible for all opposition parties prior to the election, particularly those which might pose a formidable challenge. While the prime minister, the leaders of the ruling party and its allies have commenced an "election campaign", the new alliance leaders have been repeatedly denied permission to hold any rallies

(although eventually the Oikyafront was given permission to hold its rally in Sylhet). Arrests of opposition activists and leaders under "ghost cases" have become routine. Vilification of opposition figures is being encouraged while the slightest criticism of ruling party leaders is being met with punitive measures. Cases under the draconian Article 57 of the ICT Act have been used to silence critics. Use of the Digital Security Act may soon begin, if it hasn't already.

disappearances. Taking all this into consideration, the central question regarding the election is not only about voting but about the overall political environment. Essentially, the question is whether a free, fair, inclusive, acceptable election can be held where authoritarian tendencies have been laid bare under a democratic pretense.

Oblivious to these developments, the Election Commission seems to be more concerned about the introduction of EVMs reportedly bought at

"unconstitutional," are inaccurate. The current EC, which has failed to deliver acceptable elections in five city corporation polls, commands inadequate trust. Instead of taking measures to gain trust, the EC is heading in the opposite direction at full steam.

The prevailing political situation—even a cursory glance at it—shows that the environment is far from suitable for holding an inclusive election, let alone a free, fair and acceptable one. Often the government has alleged that the opposition, particularly the BNP, is unwilling to participate in the election; the same can't be said about Oikya Jote or its leadership. Other opposition alliances, including the Left Democratic Front, have made it clear that they intend to participate, if a conducive environment is created. Many analysts, over the past four years, have criticised the BNP for its decision to boycott the 2014 elections, although they haven't been equally critical of others who trod the same path. The BNP's decision to join the alliance indicates, at least for now, its willingness to participate, perhaps even leaving Khaleda Zia, incarcerated.

Under the circumstances, feelings of uncertainty and anxiety among citizens are intensifying. The ruling party and the opposition appear to be moving on a collision course, thanks to the intransigent position of the ruling party. An unavoidable question is: Where do we go from here? Some may think that the status quo will continue and the nation will muddle through. Others want to see the situation get better. We do not have the answer to the question as to where we will go from here, but there is no way the nation can avoid asking the question.

Ali Riaz is a distinguished professor of political science at the Illinois State University, USA.



The government has already said that it will strictly monitor social media to filter and block "malicious and objectionable content" ahead of the elections. Needless to say, "monitoring" is merely a euphemism for "censorship". What will be "allowed" and what will be "blocked" is not a technical decision, but a political choice. This has added a sense of fear to the prevailing situation marked by pressure on the media, widespread practice of "self-censorship" among journalists, and a growing number of extrajudicial killings and enforced

exorbitant prices. Whether a fissure within the EC has emerged may be a matter of interpretation, but the demand of the ruling 14-party alliance that Mahub Talukdar, an Election Commissioner, must resign due to his disagreement with CEC shows what kind of an EC is expected by the ruling alliance. The claims by the 14-party alliance that Talukdar has violated his "oath of secrecy" and by Election Commissioner Kabita Khanam that Talukdar's proposal for bringing two ministries under the jurisdiction of the commission during polls is

Where do we go from here? Some may think that the status quo will continue and the nation will muddle through. Others want to see the situation get better.

January 28, 2019. It is against this background that the final session of the 10th parliament has commenced on Sunday.

The proviso of Article 123(3)(b) of the Constitution, which determined the possible time of the election before January 28, 2019, also stipulates that if the current parliament is dissolved prior to the completion of its term, there will be a window of 90 days to hold the next election after dissolution. This option is entirely within the purview of the president, as he has the power to dissolve the parliament, but only if the prime minister so desires because the Bangladesh Constitution requires that the president can only act at the advice of the prime minister. Consequently, this is a matter of the prime minister's wish. There is neither an indication from the prime minister nor is there a compelling situation, as of now, for such a development. Yet, normatively speaking, the government has until January 27 to take such a step, if it intends to do so.

The current session of the parliament might address issues such as the introduction of Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) which will have implications for the forthcoming election, but there is little possibility that it will deal with the political crisis which is at the centre of prevailing uncertainty and anxiety among the citizens.

## Mountain echoes for India

India-Bhutan relations are underpinned by security interests and trust

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

**T**HE recent elections to Bhutan's national assembly produced a victory for the Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa (DNT), a left-of-the-centre party led by Dr Lotay Tshering. This was the third national poll in the tiny Himalayan country since it switched to the democratic system of governance after Bhutan's King gave up power in 2007. And each of the elections since the first in 2008 brought a new party to power starting with Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT) spearheaded by former Prime Minister Jigme Thinley and followed by People's Democratic Party (PDP) led by outgoing Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay and now the DNT.

The PDP finished third in the first round of elections held in September with the DNT and the DPT coming first and second respectively. This set the stage for the final run-off in October between the top two contenders for power.

The outcome of the elections in Bhutan mattered to India perhaps more than any other of its neighbouring countries in South Asia—not just because the Himalayan nation has deep cultural and religious links with India but is also crucial to New Delhi's national security interests vis-à-vis China. That security aspect was most evident during the 73-day eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation between the armies of India and China in 2017 at Doklam plateau in Bhutan.

India's most important concern was the Chinese army's bid to extend a road towards the south which would give Beijing easy and shorter access to a strip of land called the "Chicken's Neck" providing vital land connectivity between mainland India and its northeastern region. This strategic location also has implications for any possible resolution of the China-Bhutan border.

No wonder, soon after the results of the elections in Bhutan came out, Prime Minister Narendra Modi made an important outreach to Lotay Tshering, who is set to be the country's new premier, by speaking to him on the phone and articulating the broad pillars of India's policy towards its northern neighbour. The significance of Bhutan is also evident in the fact that it was Modi's first port of call abroad after assuming power in May 2014.

India has its task cut out in engaging with the new leadership in Bhutan for the simple reason that the DNT is a comparatively new player in that country's political arena as the party was formed just five years ago. India has a two-pronged objective: (1) contributing to Bhutan's economic development which has always been the dominant theme in the country's elections and (2) cementing Bhutan's cooperation in securing India's national security.

The relations between India and Bhutan have evolved a lot ever since the Himalayan kingdom emerged



Indian PM Narendra Modi (right) called Bhutan's newly elected Prime Minister Lotay Tshering, president of Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa party, on October 19 to congratulate him on his election win.



PHOTOS: AFP

from the shadows of the status of being a protectorate under British India till 1947. Just two years later, India and Bhutan signed a friendship treaty to form bilateral ties from a modern perspective and in a template in sync with their standing as two independent countries. However, one provision of the 1949 treaty, that was widely seen as a legacy issue not compatible with the post-1947 situation, made it mandatory for Bhutan to be guided by India's advice on the conduct of its foreign policy and obtain New Delhi's nod for arms imports.

That provision of the 1949 treaty was never invoked by India but opened it up to accusations by vested interests in South Asia of turning Bhutan into a vassal state. This too was done away with when the treaty was revised in 2007. The revised treaty only states that India and Bhutan "shall cooperate closely with each other on issues relating to their national interests. Neither Government shall allow the use of its territory for activities harmful to the national security and interest of the other."

That India did not interfere in

Bhutan's foreign policy was evident even before the 1949 treaty was revised. Savour these instances: Bhutan sided with China and others on Cambodia's Khmer Rouge issue at the Non-Aligned Movement's summit in Havana in 1979, did not follow India's stance on the status of land-locked countries at the United Nations, signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1985 (India is still not a signatory to it because it considers the treaty discriminatory) and supported Pakistan's Nuclear-Free Zone South Asia proposal.

Fast forward to the 21st century, Bhutan withdrew from the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal (BBIN) Motor Vehicle Agreement for the regulation of passenger and cargo traffic signed in June 2015 citing environmental concerns.

However, Bhutan has always stood by India and taken care of the latter's security interests. One of its finest examples came when King Jigme Singye Wangchuck himself led his troops to fight the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) insurgents in Assam. Prior to that, Thimphu sided with New Delhi during the Sino-India war of 1962 and Bhutan was among the first countries to support Bangladesh's call for independence.

But strains in ties between Thimphu and New Delhi surfaced in 2012 after a meeting between DPT leader and the then Bhutan Prime Minister Jigme Thinley and Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao in Rio de Janeiro

in June 2012. The meeting did not go down well with New Delhi. In the run-up to the Bhutanese general election in July 2013, India reduced subsidies on cooking gas and kerosene supplied by India. The DPT's defeat in the polls tended to reinforce a perception about India's overbearing tendency in dealing with its smaller neighbours and brought into question the wisdom of punitive measures against Bhutan, much like criticism in India of the economic blockade of Nepal in 2015. The 2013 episode had also triggered murmurs of unhappiness and mistrust as reflected in the social media in Bhutan about India's subsidy cuts.

India should never take for granted its relations with any of its South Asian neighbours. Prime Minister Modi's telephone conversation with Dr Lotay Tshering laid out the two key parameters of the future of India's outreach to Bhutan: (1) India attaches the highest priority to further strengthening "unique ties" of friendship and cooperation with Bhutan, based on shared interests and utmost trust, and (2) iteration of India's commitment to work with the new government in Bhutan in its national efforts for economic prosperity based on priorities and interests of Bhutan. Clearly, shared security interests and trust are the keywords in India-Bhutan relations.

Pallab Bhattacharya is a special correspondent to The Daily Star.

**QUOTABLE Quote**

**NIKOLA TESLA (1856-1943)**  
Serbian-American inventor, engineer and futurist

The spread of civilisation may be likened to a fire; first, a feeble spark, next a flickering flame, then a mighty blaze, ever increasing in speed and power.

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

**ACROSS**

1	32	9
5	36	11
10	39	17
12	40	21
13	41	22
14	43	24
15	44	25
16	45	27
18	46	28
20		30
21		33
23		34
24		35
26		37
28		38
31		41
36		42
40		44
43		46

**DOWN**

1	30
2	33
3	34
4	35
5	37
6	38
7	42
8	43
9	44
10	45
11	46

Write for us. Send us your opinion pieces to dsopinion@gmail.com.

**YESTERDAY'S ANSWER**

CIGARS PROS  
ACIDIC HEFT  
DENADA LFFY  
GENTLEFF  
DARE AIRED  
ALE COMPETE  
REV EWE NHL  
TRESTLES CAT  
STRUTLENA  
ENSURE  
TONY TIDBIT  
INCA ALGORE  
PEEN HEDED

**BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER**

LET'S DO SOMETHING FUN TONIGHT  
I THOUGHT WE WERE DOING SOMETHING FUN  
SITTING DOING NOTHING DOESN'T HAVE A VERY HIGH FUN QUOTIENT  
REALLY? I FIND DOING NOTHING IS A BLAST!

**BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT**

HAPPY SIX DAYS BEFORE FATHER'S DAY!  
GUYS! COME! IT'S 5 AM!  
THEY DIDN'T EVEN SAY "THANK YOU!"  
SO? WE GOT THEIR WAFFLES, DIDN'T WE?