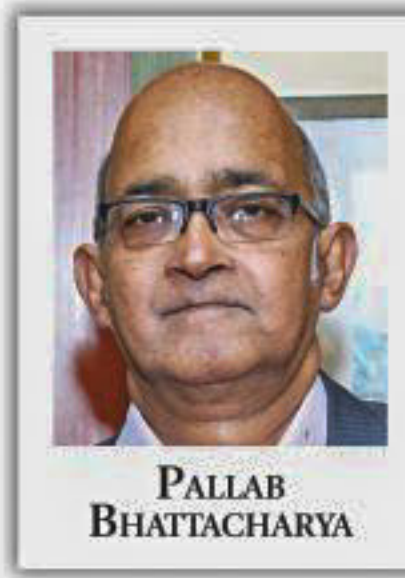


Sonia Gandhi returns to coalition-building to stop BJP



PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

AFTER staying away from the heat and dust of gruelling summer electioneering and leaving the job of fronting the Congress Party's campaign to her son Rahul and daughter Priyanka, Sonia Gandhi is back to doing what she does best—coalition-building—even before the last votes in India's parliamentary polls are cast today and results declared four days later. The purpose: to stop the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) from recapturing power in the event of a clear majority eluding the saffron party and the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) led by it.

Sonia Gandhi is understood to have written to the Congress' existing allies in the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), inviting them to a joint meeting in New Delhi on May 23, the day poll results will be declared, and her party colleagues are already reported to have mounted efforts scouting for new allies outside the UPA fold like Trinamool Congress, Samajwadi Party (SP), Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), Biju Janata Dal (BJD) which rules Odisha, YSR Congress Party (YSRCP) (a breakaway group of the Congress which is tipped to pip ruling Telugu Desam Party and win power in Andhra Pradesh state assembly elections), and Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) which is in power in Telangana. Between them, Trinamool, BJD, YSRCP and TRS are expected to get the lion's share of nearly 100 parliamentary seats in West Bengal, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana taken together. The SP-BSP alliance in Uttar Pradesh with 80 seats is also expected to put up an impressive show.

In most of the key states barring Maharashtra and Karnataka, the Congress fought or was forced to fight the parliamentary polls without allies

hoping to revive itself on its own. But the Congress leadership seems to have, over the last one month, come around to the view that if the BJP returns to power, it would be more difficult for the party to survive in the face of a fresh saffron onslaught and what BJP President Amit Shah had proclaimed "Congress-mukt Bharat." In an increasingly fierce, competitive and toxic political landscape in India, the Congress appears to have given priority to survival over revival. The Congress was on the opposite side of TDP, SP-BSP, TRS, YSRCP, BJD and Trinamool Congress in the parliamentary elections

Sonia Gandhi's outreach to UPA and non-NDA parties was preceded by the spadework done by senior Congress leaders Palaniappan Chidambaram and Ghulam Nabi Azad who went public with an important message reflecting a change in the party's strategy—that it will not insist on leading the next government or stand in the way of a coalition government of regional parties heading the new dispensation if the NDA falls far short of the majority mark of 272 seats in the 543-strong Lok Sabha. In short, the Congress has signalled that its top priority is to

In an increasingly fierce, competitive and toxic political landscape in India, the Congress appears to have given priority to survival over revival.



Former Congress President Sonia Gandhi was brought into the alliance-building game because the Congress knows she has much greater acceptability among both allies and non-allies.

keep the BJP at bay like it had done in Karnataka last year when it gave up its claim to chief ministership despite having more seats in the assembly—allowing its junior alliance partner Janata Dal (Secular) with a lesser number to head the coalition government in order to stop the saffron party which had emerged as the single largest party without majority. This is a clear re-think in the Congress Party's tactical line. Sonia Gandhi was brought into the alliance-building game because the Congress knows she has much greater acceptability among UPA partners like Nationalist Congress Party and outside such as Mamata Banerjee, Mayawati and BJD Chief Naveen

Patnaik who are less comfortable with Rahul Gandhi who is much more junior in age.

The main motive behind Sonia Gandhi's overtures to UPA and non-NDA parties is to ensure that in case of a fractured electoral mandate, the opposition camp is not caught napping and can move fast and not allow the BJP to win over the allies it needs to shore up the numbers in the event of a hung parliament. The three key issues the opposition faces are: (1) a show of unity post-polls after having fought the elections against one another in most states; (2) moving the president of India not to invite the largest single party first to form government; and (3) ironing out differences among the regional parties on the contentious issue of prime ministership. BSP Chief Mayawati has since long hinted at her prime ministerial ambitions. Mamata Banerjee too is known to nurse aspirations for that post.

While UPA constituents Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) have already backed Rahul Gandhi as PM, TRS Chief K Chandrababhan Rao has hedged his bets so far. Rao had earlier indicated that his party is not averse to doing business with the BJP. This time, he has also kept his other option open through his non-Congress non-BJP Third Front. Rao met Congress ally DMK head MK Stalin and Janata Dal (S) leader HD Kumaraswamy last week exploring the idea of a Third Front as well as exploring the possibility of working with the Congress. Stalin was understood to have conveyed to Rao that he should give up the Federal Front idea and join hands with the Congress. Regional leaders like Patnaik and Rao would like to keep options open in case of a hung parliament, hoping to extract pounds of flesh for their original political turf in states in return for extending to any grouping forming the new government.

Pallab Bhattacharya is a special correspondent for The Daily Star.

The man who fearlessly fought for freedom

Remembering Shaheed Abul Kalam Shamsuddin

ABUL KALAM SALAUDDIN

TODAY, May 19, 2019, is the 48th anniversary of the passing of my beloved father, Shaheed Abul Kalam Shamsuddin. Abba was one of the leading organisers of Bangladesh's independence struggle in 1971. He was a born leader who, despite having everything going for him as a privileged CSP officer and the SDO of Sirajganj, chose to engage in active resistance movement against the Pakistani army and led by example.

At the young age of 28, it was his destiny to stand out amongst his ranks, to dare to go against the establishment and risk everything for a singular reason: freedom. The precious freedom that would bring an end to the socio-economic injustices and would create endless opportunities for a new nation. The message of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's call to arms in the historic March 7 World Heritage Speech resonated in my father's veins to rise up, organise and lead a resistance movement against the occupation army. He was successful in realising his dream partially but not without paying



Freedom fighter Shaheed Abul Kalam Shamsuddin.

the ultimate price: giving his own life for his dream of a new nation.

The Pakistani army subjected him to inhuman torture for three days until they took his life in Dhaka Cantonment. He gave his life, yet they could never take away his pride. He believed pride is worth dying for;

pride is integrity and establishing your identity. But till this date, in today's Bangladesh, questions remain whether we have truly realised that dream of socio-economic justice and endless opportunities.

It took the government of Bangladesh 41 years to recognise his ultimate sacrifice for a greater vision, the message of Bangabandhu's historic March 7 speech. The Honourable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina recognised his bravery and extraordinary sacrifices for this nation by awarding him the nation's highest civilian award, Swadhinata Padak (Independence Award), in 2012 posthumously.

As his only son and a representative of his family, I had the distinguished honour of receiving the award on behalf of my beloved father. It was the proudest and highest moment of my life. I remember that day, March 25, 2012, vividly; pride swelled my heart and tears rolled down my eyes that were hard to control as I received the award on behalf of my father Shaheed Shamsuddin. That great man whom

Bangladesh, and especially the people of Sirajganj, will never forget. The great Shaheed Shamsuddin who dared to fight and go against the establishment. The people of Sirajganj honour and celebrate Shaheed Shamsuddin every day; they have dedicated a beautiful gate in front of the District Commissioner's Office in Sirajganj. They will forever cherish his memory with a memorial office dedicated to him. The people of Sirajganj hold major sporting events in the Shaheed Shamsuddin Stadium.

Shaheed Shamsuddin was born on August 2, 1943 in Tangail. He completed his matriculation from Nawabpur Government High School and his higher secondary studies from Notre Dame College in Dhaka. For higher education, he was awarded a scholarship that was exclusive to the West Pakistanis and attended the University of Punjab in Lahore, Pakistan where he earned his bachelors and masters degrees in chemistry with distinction in 1963 and 1964, respectively. He declined a scholarship to earn a PhD in Canada and decided to pursue a career in civil service.

Prior to joining the Civil Service of Pakistan in 1967, he briefly served as a scientific officer in the Atomic Energy Commission in Dhaka.

Shaheed Shamsuddin was one of the finest and brightest of the civil service cadre of his generation as his distinguished friends and colleagues affectionately and respectfully remember him today. He is among one of a few civilians who have been buried in the Military Cemetery in Banani, Dhaka. People of Bangladesh, especially those of Sirajganj, respectfully remember him and the memories of "Colonel" Shamsuddin for his invaluable contribution to the struggle for freedom.

The memory of Shaheed Shamsuddin will never fade away as we will always remember him as a young, dedicated officer. His family, including his only son Biplob, daughter-in-law Dipty, his grandson Orko and his wife Shamim, asks their friends and family to pray for his departed soul.

Abul Kalam Salauddin (Biplob) is the only child of Shaheed Shamsuddin. He is an IT professional based in the USA. Email: abuls@hotmail.com

ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY

MAY 19, 1743
Jean-Pierre Christin invents the Celsius thermometer

The centigrade temperature scale, which is based on the freezing and boiling point of water, is used by most countries around the world. Exceptions include the United States, Belize, and Palau.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS	33 Ruin	8 Texas mission
1 Vends	34 Slow tempo	9 Stacked
6 Golf Bunker	36 Seat of Hawaii	11 Forensic workplace
10 Cager Shaquille	County	15 Young one
11 Tex-Mex staple	37 Rascal	17 Veins' counterparts
12 Pretentious	38 "Splish Splash" singer	20 Vacuum lack
13 Of the kidneys	39 Streetcars	21 German article
14 Knee protectors	40 Make blank	24 Fleet leader
15 Checkers demand	41 Coop group	25 Pragmatic person
16 Sense of self	42 Tuna sandwiches	27 Sticky stuff
17 Objective	DOWN	28 Unmanned planes
18 Lawn starter	1 TV serial	29 Singer Brooks
19 Gave a treat, e.g.	2 Angers	30 Find irresistible
22 Peeved state	3 Disappointment	31 Heathen
23 Tragic king	4 Highlands girl	35 Canine holders
26 Looked upon	5 Cunning	36 Fast runner
29 Opening	6 Subsequently	38 Rep.'s rival
32 Hold up	7 Saturn feature	

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

R	A	D	A	R	C	E	D	A	R
A	D	E	L	E	A	G	I	L	E
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