

VISUAL: TEENI AND TUNI

From Magura-2 to Brahmanbaria-2

Two by-polls set apart only by the decades in-between



THE STREET VIEW

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MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

After Bangladesh's journey began on the path to becoming a modern democracy in 1991, many expected that electoral democracy would gain a strong footing gradually. But that hope and aspiration stumbled for the first slip at the infamous Magura-2 parliamentary by-polls on March 20, 1994. It became a symbol of a rigged election in the era of democracy, which seemed to have been restored after Ershad's autocratic regime came crashing down.

That by-election brought two issues to the fore: that a free and fair election was not possible under a partisan government, and that the Election Commission was not free at all under a political government. The by-polls helped the Awami League-led opposition parties of that time to intensify their campaign for the introduction of a non-partisan, election-time government.

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Then came the two controversial national elections of 2014 and

2018. While the BNP boycotted the 2014 election, the 2018 election saw 153 ruling-party-aligned candidates elected uncontested amid widespread allegations of irregularities. There were allegations that ballot boxes were stuffed the night before the election, and the opposition camp lost the election even before voting had begun.

In recent times, we have also witnessed voter turnouts gradually declining, which is surely an ominous sign for democracy.

After around three decades, if we look back at that fateful by-election

all three ruling Awami League aspirants – it was open to anyone interested to run – withdrew their candidacy following the directions of party high-ups. It turned out to be a cakewalk for Sattar. On AL's part, it was presumably a good gesture to let a senior politician of the opposing camp have a last hurrah, since he is most likely at the twilight of a long and distinguished career. However, it is so rare that this incident is certain to go down in history as a very likely one-off where the ruling party favoured an opposition candidate.

The ruling Awami League has repeatedly said that the next election will be a free, fair, and inclusive one. BNP sent a strong message through the resignation of its lawmakers, saying that it was not making empty threats when saying that the party would not join any elections under the incumbent government. And Awami League appeared to have countered this with a tactic of sending a message to BNP aspirants,

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of Magura, we would realise that the situation has not changed much. It happened again at the Gaibandha-5 by-election. The issue of by-elections came into discussion once again when seven BNP lawmakers – the only BNP candidates who had managed to win in 2018 – resigned. After their resignation, the Election Commission announced the election schedule, and the ruling Awami League and the main opposition in parliament, the Jatiya Party, nominated their respective candidates. But the Brahmanbaria-2 by-poll stole the show as a former BNP leader (after having been expelled from his party), Ukil Abdus Sattar, contested the election as an independent candidate.

Sattar had been elected five times from the constituency and had been state minister as a technocrat. His loyalty to the party was unquestionable. Following an order from the party high command, he had resigned from parliament, but made a surprise turn-around as he decided to contest the by-election as an independent candidate, in turn getting himself expelled from the BNP. The belief held in his constituency is that Sattar is contesting the polls for two reasons – first, he was trapped by the government and second, out of fear that he would not get the party ticket for the next election as he is over 83 years old. Another reason is that BNP leader Rumeen Farhana has a high probability of getting the party nomination in the next election from that constituency. For Sattar, his political future is almost ending. Many in the constituency have also said that it is actually Sattar's son who is trying to "make his future" through this by-election.

This particular by-election attracted further attention when

saying they might get an open field if they break away and run during the elections. Then, Awami League could claim the elections to be inclusive and also be certain of retaining office.

It is often said that in politics, there is no last word. Through Sattar's participation, the ruling Awami League will try to prove a few things, particularly that BNP's decision to resign from the parliament was wrong, and will send a message to BNP leaders and aspirants that they may have a chance in the next polls if they betray their party and create a few cracks in what has so far remained steadfast determination. It is perhaps BNP's biggest achievement of the last 15 years that the party remained intact, with none of its stalwarts breaking away. But Sattar's election may have an impact.

But one must wonder whether this move was indeed a good strategy for the ruling party. Is politics just a voting game? Should there not be moral or ideological practices in politics? After all, the one thing politicians must keep in mind is that once someone is labelled as a traitor, it hangs around their neck like the fabled albatross.

BNP had to rig the Magura by-polls in 1994 to back their claim that their popularity had not decreased. Three decades later, the AL took on a different strategy and let an independent candidate win to coax out aspirants from BNP's fold. In 1994, although BNP won the polls, it was defeated in politics. The Awami League might console itself with a self-congratulatory chuckle thanks to Sattar's victory. It might almost seem that the Awami League has manipulated a win in the first skirmish. But will such a stratagem or tactic win them the war?

A letter from Iran

MF is a humanitarian worker responding to the refugee crisis in the vulnerable areas of Iran. Her name has been hidden to protect her identity.

MF

To my dear friends, I am so angry it is beyond explanation. But there is a smile on my face, and tears in my eyes. I am hurt, and so is Iran.

The past months have been extremely difficult, not just for Iranian women like me, but for anyone who has experienced female oppression and the dominance of patriarchy, and in general, has lived under a dictatorship. A large majority of Iranians have been experiencing the latter for 43 years – 43 years of living in exile, poverty and hunger, and of brutal and unjust killings, executions, rape, torture, and imprisonment.

When my cousin was starting school after the Islamic Revolution, as a little girl of seven, she was told not to tell anyone that her father occasionally drinks, or that they had a VHS video player in their house. These were major taboos in Iran at

sanctions, lack of medicine, murder, sexual violence, financial difficulties, the systematic destruction of history, culture and religion, the imprisonment of the innocent, and the targeted murders, will neither be tolerated nor forgiven.

Of course, this is not the first time people have risen up against the Iranian regime.

The first protest I participated in was about 13 years ago, during the first mass movement of my generation. I particularly remember a young person, who possibly saved my life one day by pulling me away from the crowd as the security forces released teargas and opened fire at it. He told me to leave as I still had my life ahead of me; I was young, and people like him had nothing to lose (he had been expelled from university due to his political activism).

To date, over 500 people have been murdered since the murder of Mahsa Amini on September 16, and thousands have been imprisoned. Some have been forcibly disappeared, and executions are taking place every day. Those facing execution have no access to lawyers,

religion as a weapon to separate and divide communities, people are now so aware of their "divide and conquer" approach that it has only brought individuals from all ethnicities, backgrounds, and beliefs together as the "People of Iran," standing against a brutal regime.

The people are now fighting for the rights that were taken away from them. They are fighting for revenge for the tears of the mother of a murdered child. They are fighting for the father who had to go home empty-handed. They are fighting for the lack of medical supplies and support. They are fighting for education. The list is long, but there are a lot of reasons why we want to change the country's leadership.

As a woman who grew up and lived most of my life in Iran, feelings of rage, anger, sadness, pain, heartache, frustration, and powerlessness have been my constant companions from day one. However, hope, unity, and solidarity have helped me to remain partially calm over the past months. It is hard to live with the loss of so many souls. The feelings of guilt, of wishing we could do more, and have more of



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FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

the time – everyone was tiptoeing on glass and being cautious about what they said. On the first day of school, when she was asked to introduce herself, my cousin stood up and said, "Hi, my name is... my dad doesn't drink, and we don't have a video player."

While it may seem like a funny anecdote, the pressure and anxiety she must have felt have been a constant for us, carried forward from generation to generation.

The revolution that is now happening in my country is not against any religion. The people of Iran are saying "enough" to the government – to oppression, corruption, death, and imprisonment. We want a free and democratic Iran, where Muslims, Jews, Christians, Baha'is – all religious or non-religious people can peacefully coexist. We want a country where the youth are given opportunities to build a future based on freedom, equity, and justice. Where voices are heard.

No matter what the current regime has achieved or may achieve, the poverty, discrimination, oppression of minorities and specific ethnicities,

despite this being a mandate of law, and many were tortured and forced to sign confessions without acknowledgement. At times, even their families were not informed of their executions. They were simply killed the next morning.

Citizens are on the streets, standing against the brutal, inhumane and non-Islamic actions of the Iranian dictatorship against the people of Iran. The demographic of the people shaping this resistance consists of women and men, young and old, Muslims and non-Muslims, and literate and illiterate people. It is a diverse group of "us" who are fighting for human rights, for women's rights, for access to basic services, for a life with less suffering, and for the day when we won't wake up to news of another execution.

The actions of the current regime have been so extreme that even major clerics are now questioning their approach, as none of it is justifiable under any religion or belief system. Their actions can only be identified as war crimes and violations of human rights.

Despite the government abusing

an impact never really go away.

However, every time I walk down the streets of Tehran and lock eyes with another woman walking towards me, there is a beautiful moment of camaraderie, filled with shared emotions of fear, pain, and hope. This solidarity and hope that we feel is incredible, not only there and then, but that which we feel with the whole nation, and with all those who have suffered oppression in the world.

No one knows what will happen, which way this resistance will go, but we can only hope for the best. We hope for equity and peace for the people of Iran and, of course, around the world.

I would also like to dearly remember and pay my respects to the political hostages who have been unrightfully imprisoned and sentenced, the activists in jail, those who have been murdered or kidnapped, those who have/unrightfully executed publicly or are in isolation daily, the families of the people mentioned above, the journalists who risk their lives every day, and finally, to the brave, courageous people of Iran.

In hope for peace and freedom.

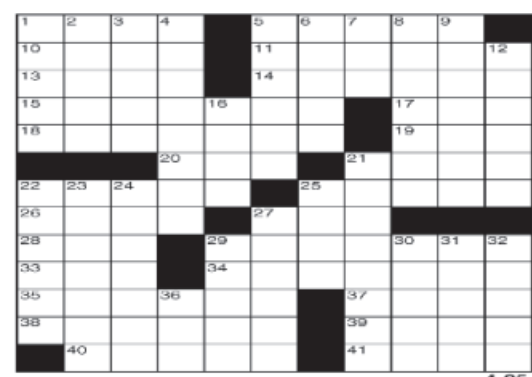
CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

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- 5 Piece of land
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- 14 Chant
- 15 Titanic sinker
- 17 The whole amount
- 18 Sandy expanses
- 19 Novak of "Vertigo"
- 20 Beam of light
- 21 List of choices
- 22 Practices for a bout
- 25 West Point student
- 26 Grant of film

- 27 Demure
- 28 Curved path
- 29 Course activity
- 33 Cheering word
- 34 Like "first" and "second"
- 35 Prolific inventor
- 37 Writer Ferber
- 38 Dream up
- 39 Swedish singer Jenny
- 40 Discourage
- 41 Calendar boxes

- 7 Gallery fill
- 8 Sounded like a toad
- 9 Sun bather's marking
- 12 Kohl of Germany
- 16 Historic times
- 21 "Superfly" singer Curtis
- 22 Trembling
- 23 Marched
- 24 Record holder
- 25 Chilly
- 27 Rook's starting space
- 29 Gander's mate
- 30 Delhi's land
- 31 Tot tender
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- 36 Use the couch



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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