

A hazy pre-election atmosphere



THE STREET VIEW

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Eid has always been a singular occasion for mass campaigns. Aspiring electoral candidates seize the opportunity to meet their voters in their constituencies amid festivities. And given the tradition of long campaigns leading up to national elections, it would not have been unusual to see candidates gearing up for their outreach programmes during the holidays as this Eid was the last time that candidates would find most of their voters home en masse.

But the hype has been absent. Other than a few pre-recorded voice messages that elicited little more than irritation, the initiatives taken this time paled in comparison to the previous occasions. Although not a voter in either district, this correspondent received two messages from the lawmakers of Sirajganj and Lakshmipur. As such, one could say that attempts to reach out to the electorate this time have been quite insignificant.

On the other front, the BNP has already made it clear that it would not join the upcoming parliamentary election under the incumbent government. The ruling Awami League has also made it clear that the election would be held according to the constitution, meaning it would not step down. This sort of uncertainty is not new in Bangladeshi politics where parties appear to be entrenched in their positions due to mistrust. On the last two occasions, the government proceeded with the elections regardless of BNP's position or protests. This time, however, it seems different.

The Awami League appeared to be more sure-footed about the elections and did not appear to mind so much that the BNP might not join the elections. But things may have changed since the evening of May 24, when it was announced that the United States would restrict visas to any Bangladeshi citizens believed to be responsible for or complicit in undermining democratic election processes in the country.

Initially, the announcement was warmly welcomed all around – by the ruling Awami League, Jatiya Party, main opposition in parliament, and BNP, main opposition camp on the streets. Arch-rivals Awami League and BNP both claimed that the measure was aimed at the other and that they had nothing to worry about. Shortly, however, the ruling

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This photo from 2018 shows a press busy printing election posters.

FILE PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

party distanced itself from that position, especially with the ruling party leaders vocally protesting the measure as nothing but an attempt to oust the incumbent government.

Through its visa restrictions, the US has made it clear that it wants to see a free and fair election in Bangladesh and that basic freedoms and rights needed for a democratic environment are upheld. This announcement, in a way, seemed inevitable if one considers that Bangladesh was not even invited to the democracy summits for two consecutive times. The latest measure might be a planned attempt to pressure the government to ensure a free and fair election at the end of this year.

What's even more interesting

is that when the ruling party members started criticising the US, Bangladesh's development partner China came up with a statement following a question-and-answer session of the Chinese foreign ministry. Without directly mentioning the US, the Chinese statement said "a certain country has long been interfering in the internal affairs of Bangladesh and many other developing countries under the pretext of democracy and human rights."

The statement further read, "We firmly support Bangladesh in safeguarding its sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity, upholding independent domestic and foreign policies, and pursuing a development path

that suits its national realities. We stand ready to work together with Bangladesh and other countries to oppose all forms of hegemonism and power politics, uphold the UN-centred international system, the international order underpinned by international law and the basic norms governing international relations based on the purposes and principles of the UN Charter, and build a community with a shared future for mankind."

This reaction clearly indicates that rivalry between China and the US has now touched upon Bangladesh. This is a rather ominous sign, especially when our foreign policy is "friendship to all, malice to none."

While the attitude of the US and China regarding the next general

election in Bangladesh may seem clear, we are yet to know what India's position is. We know that our neighbour wholeheartedly supported the 2014 election in which 153 lawmakers were elected uncontested. We have also seen them support the 2018 election. India is yet to make any official comment, but various Indian media outlets have given their interpretations. Most of the explanation focuses on supporting the Awami League regime and some articles also mention what the ruling party should do. But the necessity of holding a free and fair election where people's hopes and aspirations will be projected received little attention. Obviously, India will consider its geopolitical interests, especially regarding the security situation in the Seven Sisters.

Eid is over and people are returning to the cities. BNP has already warned that it would go for its one-point movement to materialise the demand for an election under a non-partisan interim government. A three-member high-powered US delegation is also expected to visit Bangladesh later in July. Media reports suggest that the US officials are likely to hold talks with political parties and civil society members.

While we have politicians, civil society members and other stakeholders, it seems that the next election is largely dependent on the attitudes of the big powers. It seems we are waiting to see how the big powers react in the coming days. Some are criticising the US, some China, while others are expressing their reservations about India's attitude.

If any one quarter is to be held responsible for such a turn of events, it would have to be the politicians. Unfortunately, no one is talking about the main stakeholders of the election – the people. Without them, democracy will neither flourish nor be strengthened.

US politics and the Paris finance summit



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Barbados Prime Minister Mia Mottley and French President Emmanuel Macron invited world leaders to Paris on June 22-23 to reach a new "global pact" to finance the fight against poverty and human-induced climate change. All kudos for the ambition, yet few dollars were put on the table. To an important extent, the continuing global failure to finance the fight against poverty and climate change reflects the failings of US politics, since the US, at least for the moment, remains at the centre of the global financial system.

To understand US politics, we should start with the history of the British empire. As Britain became an imperial power, and then the world's leading power of the 19th century, British philosophy changed to justify Britain's emerging empire. British philosophers championed a powerful state (Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*), the protection of private wealth over redistribution (John Locke's right to "life, liberty, and property"), markets over government (Adam Smith's "Invisible Hand"), and the futility of aiding the poor (Malthus' law of population).

When humanitarian crises arose in the British empire, such as the Irish famine in the 1840s and the famines in India later in the century, Britain rejected providing food aid and left millions of its subjects to starve, even though food supplies were available to save them. The inaction was in line with a *laissez-faire* philosophy that viewed poverty as inevitable and help for the poor as morally unnecessary and practically futile.

Simply put, Britain's elites had no interest in helping the poor subjects of the empire (or indeed Britain's poor at home). They wanted low taxes and a powerful navy to defend their overseas investments and profits.

The United States learnt its statecraft at the knee of Britain, the mother country of the American colonies. America's founding fathers moulded the new country's political institutions and foreign policies according to British principles, albeit inventing the role of president instead of a monarch. The US overtook Britain in global power in the course of World War II.

The lead author of the US Constitution, James Madison, was an ardent enthusiast of Locke. He was born into slave-owning



The US leaders who attended the Paris finance summit have long-standing commitments to fighting poverty and climate change, yet they cannot deliver the actual US policy.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

wealth and was interested in protecting wealth from the masses. Madison feared direct democracy, in which the people participate in politics directly, and championed representative government, in which the people elect representatives who supposedly represent their interests. Madison feared local government because it was too close to the people and too likely to favour wealth redistribution. Madison, therefore, championed a federal government in a far-off capital.

Madison's strategy worked. The US federal government is largely insulated from public opinion. The public majority opposes wars, supports affordable healthcare for all, and champions higher taxes on the rich. The Congress routinely delivers wars, over-priced private healthcare, and tax cuts for the rich.

The US calls itself a democracy but is in fact a plutocracy. (The Economist Intelligence Unit categorises the US a "flawed democracy.") The rich and corporate lobbies finance the political campaigns, and in return, the government delivers low taxes for the rich, freedom to pollute, and war. Private health companies

dominate healthcare. Wall Street runs the financial system. Big Oil runs the energy system. And the military-industrial lobby runs the foreign policy.

This brings us to the global climate crisis. The most powerful nation in the world has a domestic energy policy still in the hands of Big Oil. It has a foreign policy that aims to preserve US hegemony through wars. And it has a Congress designed to protect the rich from the

demands of the masses, whether to fight poverty or to fight climate change.

The US leaders who attended the Paris finance summit, John Kerry (US special presidential envoy for climate) and Janet Yellen (US treasury secretary), are individuals of outstanding ethics and deep and long-standing commitments to fighting poverty and climate change. Yet, they cannot deliver the actual US policy. Congress and the US plutocracy stand in the way.

The leaders at the Paris summit recognised the urgent need for a massive expansion of official development financing from the Multilateral Development Banks (MDBs), meaning the World Bank, the African Development Bank, the Asian Development Bank, and others. Yet, to expand their lending by the amounts needed, the MDBs will require more paid-in capital from the US, Europe, and other major economies. Still, the US Congress opposes investing more capital in the MDBs, and the US opposition is (so far) blocking global action.

The Congress opposes more capital for three reasons. First, it would cost the US

a little bit of money, and rich campaign funders aren't interested. Second, it would accelerate the global transition from fossil fuels, and America's Big Oil lobby wants to delay, not accelerate, the transition. Third, it would hand more policy influence to global institutions in which China participates, yet the military-industrial complex wants to fight China, not collaborate with it.

Thus, while developing countries

CROSSWORD

BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Cats' quarries

5 Made amends

11 Revered one

12 Famed isthmus

13 Transmit

14 Trample

15 They're not too risky

17 Much of N. Amer.

18 Impudent

22 Rash

24 Spinetingling

25 Here, in France

26 "Not — dare!"

27 Vault intersection

30 Career soldier

32 Thus

33 Outback bird

34 Lunar events

38 White Rabbit's cry

41 Opera set in Egypt

42 Carter's successor

43 Beef cut

44 Ticks off

45 Pot start

DOWN

1 Fall short of

2 Concept

3 Puzzlement

4 Senior

5 Church area

6 Be a snitch

7 Infant outfit

8 Catch some z's

9 Moody music

10 Dapper

fellow

16 Inlet

19 Abundance

20 Freshener scent

21 Calendar span

22 In the clouds

23 Plot unit

28 Glacial period

29 Sweet drink

30 Island souvenir

31 Gazelle's cousin

35 Eye part

36 Fix a story

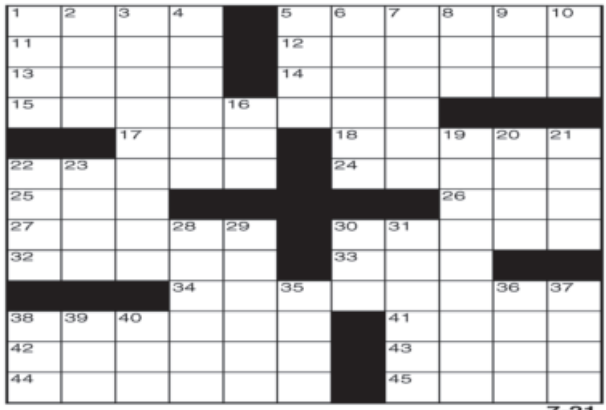
37 Rational

38 Nest egg acct.

39 Fellows

40 Fall back

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WEDNESDAY'S ANSWERS

C	A	S	E	A	S	T	R	O	S
O	X	E	N	S	Q	U	A	R	E
M	E	L	D	N	U	G	G	E	T
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	S	W	O	R	N		F	I	T
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B	O	O	T				A	L	E
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