

The fog before the election



THE STREET VIEW

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The jails are now full of opposition leaders and activists, BNP's central Nayapaltan office has been under lock and key since October 28, and opposition leader Ruhul Kabir Rizvi is now forced to hold virtual press conferences from a secret location. Amid all this, the Election Commission (EC) has said the election will be held on time at any cost, and Awami League leaders are taking all out preparations for the polls scheduled for early January. Meanwhile, ready-made garment (RMG) workers are on the streets demanding fair wages.

Besides, close to the end of the government's current tenure, a whole bunch of civil servants and police officials got promoted. One should note that these two groups are widely considered to be responsible for helping AL win earlier elections, and are set to play a significant role in the upcoming polls too.

opportunities for an unofficial election campaign. What's more, no one will deny that the country has seen massive development work in the last 15 years. However, the other narrative revolves around rampant corruption, blatant nepotism and substantial money laundering.

While the prime minister is unofficially on her campaign trail, the opposition camp is on the run. One can say that the opposition is responsible for such a turn of events, but no one can really be sure of who it was that threw the first proverbial punch.

Violence in Bangladesh politics is nothing new and not one-sided. When the Awami League was in opposition, it was also engaged in fierce violence. The major political parties—Awami League and BNP—have always been in clashes over the last three decades for their own political interests. So, blaming BNP



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PHOTO: STAR

Rising prices of daily essentials, the freefalling value of taka against the dollar, a plummeting foreign exchange reserve, unrest in the RMG sector, and the international community watching quite intently—all these might make it too costly to hold an election like the ones in 2014 or 2018. There are simply too many factors that are unfavourable for the incumbents. Even a slight change in the wrong direction may bring bad news for the authorities.

It is in this context that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is inaugurating infrastructure projects around the country, seeking votes for her party. A string of milestone undertakings is providing ample

alone for violence and clashes just before the national election is only an attempt to keep it away from the electoral battle.

This time, however, the circumstances are more complex.

The economic situation is quite precarious, the international community is keeping an eye on elections, and the people's frustration appears to have peaked from being deprived of their democratic right to vote. People's votes did not really seem to matter in the last two elections, as the results were obvious even before the first ballot was cast on election day. So, the ruling party wants to show at least a competitive election, and that's why, as per media reports, the government wants some BNP leaders in the election but not the BNP itself. Information Minister Hasan Mahmud told journalists that many were queuing up to join

Trinamool BNP, a party founded by former BNP leader Barrister Nazmul Huda in 2015, and that another party would be formed by former commerce minister and BNP leader Hafiz Uddin Ahmad. But Hafiz did not confirm the claim. He said he hoped to stay in the party till the end of his political career.

More than BNP's house of cards, these machinations and remarks reflect poorly on Bangladesh's oldest political party, which is now harbouring questionable ethics—so much so that it is now attempting to break up another political party, one that it claims was born in the cantonment and run by arsonists.

So, when this is the situation with the elections only two months away, one can easily imagine what is going to happen if this continues. And worryingly, we don't see any chance of the scene changing. If anything, it will very likely become more complicated once the election schedule is announced. The opposition parties will come up with more programmes, and the government will be harsher on the opposition to maintain law and order. And consequently, a fearful situation will arise in which voters will not be interested in the festivities surrounding the election, nor will they be interested in casting

their votes.

We all know that regional and global geopolitics is carrying a lot of weight in our national election right now. The international community has seldom shown so much interest in our state of affairs before. The US has made its position clear, saying that it wants to see a free and fair election, and for that, it imposed visa restrictions. China has said it wants Bangladesh's elections to be held as per the constitution. India said Bangladesh's election is an internal matter, and it is for the people of Bangladesh to decide their future. India has said as a close friend and partner of Bangladesh, it respects the democratic process and will continue to support the country's vision of a stable, peaceful and progressive nation.

All this can be interpreted in two ways. It can be a matter of great pride that we have become a centre of attention of the big regional and global powers. The other perspective, however, is that although the national election is an internal issue, it is unfortunate that we have not yet been able to devise a sustainable system to hold a free, fair and participatory election through which power can be transferred smoothly.

Winter is knocking on the door, and the morning fog is making its yearly return. The same way, the election is closing in and the uncertainty around it is thickening.

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Biden's backing of Israel will come home to roost

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US President Joe Biden's unwavering backing of Israel amid its ruthless war offensive on Gaza starkly contrasts with the founding principles of human rights he ostensibly upholds. The disparity between his advocacy for these rights and the horrific scenes in Gaza raises a moral conundrum that is likely to cast a long shadow over the 2024 presidential election.

Gaza's plight is distressing. Human rights activist Khalil Abu Shammala has called Gaza "the graveyard of human rights," succinctly capturing the dismal situation. Over 10,000 Palestinian casualties have been reported since October 7, the United Nations has noted, including a tragically high number of children. With more than 530,000 people taking shelter in UN facilities, the scale of the tragedy is massive. The infrastructure of Gaza lies in ruins, leaving civilians to scramble for safety among the debris of their previous lives.

This catastrophe has unfolded despite President Biden's advocacy for human rights, an advocacy that has been called into question by his administration's continuous military support to Israel. The Biden administration has faced sharp criticism for not halting arms sales or demanding an immediate ceasefire, fostering a growing disillusionment among voters.

The disillusionment is palpable in states like Michigan, where the Arab and Muslim American communities played a pivotal role in Biden's narrow victory. Their sentiment of betrayal could shift the political landscape. This feeling is echoed among young voters under 30, who, through social media, have become acutely aware of global injustices and the US' role in them. Polls suggest Biden's support is slipping among crucial demographics, notably Arab and Muslim Democrats.

Marione Ingram, an 87-year-old Holocaust survivor, stood outside the White House, pleading for a ceasefire. Her presence and her history lend a profound



The catastrophe in Gaza has unfolded despite President Biden's advocacy for human rights.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

weight to her calls for peace and cast a sobering light on the consequences of inaction.

Within his own party, President Biden faces criticism. Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib's vocal stance for Palestinian rights led to her censure in a controversial move by her colleagues, indicative of the party's division. "The cries of Palestinian and Israeli children are indistinguishable to me," Tlaib said, challenging her colleagues' perspectives. This sentiment was shared by Steven Donziger, a lawyer belonging to the Jewish community, who decried the censure in a tweet: "Despicable that 4,000 children in Gaza have been killed by bombs funded by US taxpayers, and yet our elected officials squander time 'censuring' the sole Palestinian American in Congress for speaking the truth."

Organisations like Jewish Voice for Peace and Torah Jews have held demonstrations, chanting "let Gaza live," and have made clear their opposition to Zionism, distinguishing between their faith and political nationalism. "The Zionist state does not speak for all Jews," they assert, which complicates the

The chilling statistics provided by the United Nations highlight a deepening humanitarian crisis. Al Jazeera's coverage has brought to light the perilous journey of Palestinians fleeing the violence. OCHA's reports indicate that nearly 1.5 million Gazans have become internally displaced. In central regions like Khan Yunis and Rafah, over half a million people have taken shelter near UNRWA facilities, struggling with scarce resources and sanitation.

The northern parts of Gaza and Gaza City are in an even more dire state post-evacuation orders, with around 160,000 internally displaced persons housed in UNRWA facilities. This only adds to the acute suffering of the civilians, with one casualty every 10 minutes—a grim figure that cannot be ignored.

The personal stories are harrowing. Emily Callahan, an American nurse with Doctors Without Borders, detailed to CNN's Anderson Cooper the desperation within the shelters: a shelter with only four toilets for 50,000 people, and medical staff enduring against all odds to save lives, knowing well the risks they face.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has publicly opposed the reoccupation of Gaza, yet the reality on the ground paints a different picture—civilians suffering, infrastructure destroyed, and countless lives lost. The gap between diplomatic speech and the lived reality of Gazans is vast and troubling.

The harrowing figures and testimonies from Gaza are not mere data; they signal a deep and escalating humanitarian crisis, demanding immediate and empathetic action. Just as Malcolm X's statement of the "chickens coming home to roost" encapsulated the inevitable return of negative consequences, the Biden administration's unwavering support for Israel might face a similar reckoning. Such policies, devoid of the human rights advocacy they profess, can lead to political and moral fallout, "roosting" in future electoral cycles and international relations.

In the intricate arena of international politics, the next moves by the Biden administration are critical. To maintain its status as a defender of human rights, a significant shift in policy towards the Israel-Gaza situation is imperative. This handling could indeed be a defining moment for Biden and the Democratic Party's future, as the phrase "coming home to roost" might ominously predict.

Will President Biden recalibrate his

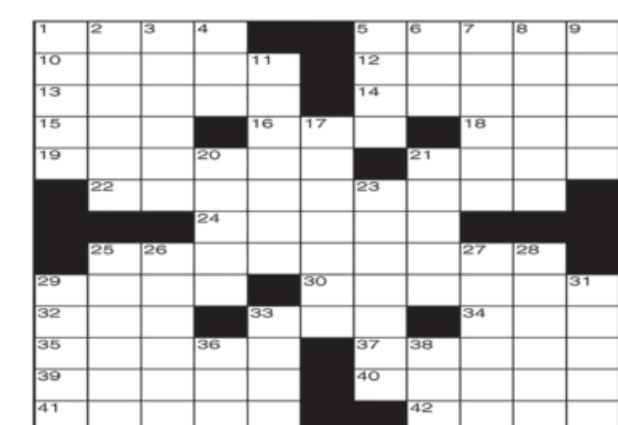
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stance on Israel in time to reconcile his policy with his professed values, or will the shadows of Gaza's suffering darken his campaign trail for 2024? The moral integrity of America's foreign policy, the potential re-election of Biden, and the faith in the Democratic Party's principles are at stake. The choices made now will resonate beyond the current crisis, shaping Biden's legacy and influencing the global political landscape for years to come.

CROSSWORD

BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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