

Intimidation tactics WON'T WORK ON VOTERS



Zonayed Saki is chief coordinator of Ganosambhati Andolan.

ZONAYED SAKI

What is happening in the name of a general election on January 7 is, in reality, an attempt to take away people's voting rights. In a real election, all contestants can take part freely, and voters have several options to choose from to be their representatives. As we can see, voters won't really have many choices on January 7. The Awami League has put up its own candidates as its "rival" contestants. Its allies did not have confidence in this "rivalry"; hence, they sought assurance on seat-sharing beforehand, and the ruling party came to an understanding with the allies in this regard. Besides, unofficial arrangements are being made to ensure seats for some.

In the rest of the seats where the ruling party is claiming to have the so-called "contest," the main Awami League candidates are competing against dummy or "independent" candidates put up by the party to make the election look free and fair. When this is the situation, this election cannot be considered a proper one. We think the people of the country have rejected this election seeing it for what it really is: a farce.

Though the ruling party has been claiming to want a participatory election, they have created such a situation—cracking down on opposition parties and arresting their leaders—that there is little scope for the main opposition to enter the race. Many political parties, including Ganosambhati Andolan, have been claiming for a long time that a free and fair election is not possible under a partisan government. This has always been the case, and it was the Awami League which, as the party in opposition,

waged a movement to establish a neutral caretaker government system.

However, the caretaker government system had some practical flaws. The Awami League accused BNP of trying to influence the caretaker government as well. Hence, a proposition to amend these flaws was raised, and even Awami League's parliamentary committee tabled some proposals to that end. But when it came back to power, it opted to scrap the caretaker government system

altogether through the 15th Amendment of the constitution and made elections under the partisan government constitutional in 2011.

Since then, the ruling party has been parroting that the election must be held in accordance with the constitution. We have witnessed two general elections under the Awami League government: In 2014, we saw an election where half the seats were won uncontested, and in 2018, ballot stuffing

happened the night before election day. These two elections proved without a shred of doubt that a free and fair election is not possible under a partisan government. So the main opposition has, quite logically, raised their demand for a caretaker government system to be framed in the constitution. And this demand is based on political consensus.

The Awami League could have done it if it wanted to. But instead, they snuffed out any possibilities of a dialogue. And using the

planned violence at the BNP rally October 28, they cracked down on the BNP members.

So the main opposition's decision to boycott the January 7 election can be considered fair. They are also urging ordinary people to boycott the election. This appeal is getting significant positive response from the people, and the government knows that.

If you look at the history of parliamentary elections in the country, it is evident how enthusiastic Bangladeshis are about exercising their voting rights. For instance, the participation of voters in the 1991 election was 58 percent, 74-75 percent in 1996, 75-76 percent in 2001, and almost 86 percent in 2008. This time, however, the Awami League government is holding an election where they themselves are saying that the main challenge is to bring voters to the polling centres.

Since voters are reluctant to take part in this election, the ruling party has resorted to intimidation tactics, such as taking away VGF, elderly allowance, widow allowance, etc cards from social safety net beneficiaries, holding the cards until after the election, telling the voters they could get their cards back after they vote on January 7. In some cases, we have seen how supporters of the main opposition are being threatened to go to the polling booths, threatening to withhold important public services like birth registration, character certificate issuance, etc if they don't. Such threats violate people's freedom of choosing to vote. This is how the ruling regime is trying to validate this farce of an election.

It may seem too late to state this now, but we believe that it is still possible to hold a participatory election by disbanding the parliament—the constitution allows a 90-day period to hold a national election following the disbandment of a parliament. During this period, the authorities can engage with the main opposition to resolve this political crisis. We urge all relevant authorities to take this route.

Translated from Bangla by Sumaiya Binte Shams.



ILLUSTRATION: BIPOLOB CHAKROBORTY

CROSSWORD

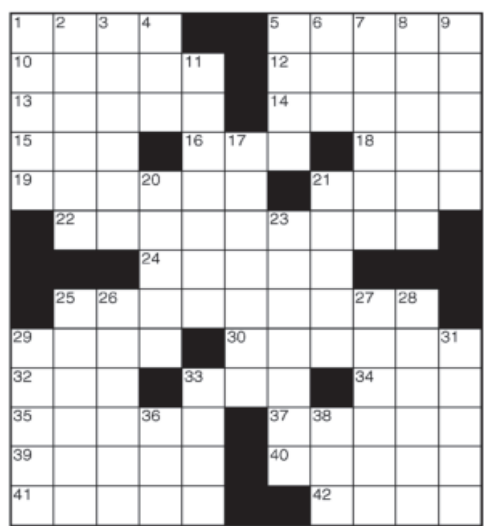
BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Eastern monk
- 5 Subject
- 10 "The end of —"
- 12 Texas mission
- 13 Awaited
- 14 Maryland players, for short
- 15 Running bird
- 16 CEO's deg.
- 18 Take a load off
- 19 Dog star
- 21 Reduced amount
- 22 First lady from Texas
- 24 Inform against
- 25 First lady from New Jersey
- 29 Refuse
- 30 "Twelfth Night" heroine
- 32 — pro nobis
- 33 Chopping tool
- 34 Fall mo.
- 35 Enter a password, say
- 37 Austrian poet
- 39 Correct, as text
- 40 Goalie's stat
- 41 Office sights

DOWN

- 1 Record company
- 2 Zoo resident
- 3 One of the Gorgons
- 4 Verb for you
- 5 "See ya!"
- 6 Bullring cry
- 7 Examines sentences
- 8 Mischievous
- 9 Goes for
- 11 Navy bigwig
- 17 Vocally imitate a drum machine
- 20 Badtempered
- 21 Monday, in Marseilles
- 23 Basement fixtures
- 25 Composer Kern
- 26 For a long time
- 27 Change over time
- 28 Site of Jefferson's portrait
- 29 Meted out
- 31 "This is only —"
- 33 "No ifs, —, or buts"
- 36 Squid's squirt
- 38 Descartes's conclusion



11-19

TUESDAY'S ANSWERS



WRITE FOR US.
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'I Like America and America Likes Me'



SHAMSAD MORTUZA

BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

Dr Shamsad Mortuza is a professor of English at Dhaka University.

My PhD dissertation examined the shamanic in contemporary British poetry. My research resumed the master's thesis I had left off in the deserts of the American Southwest at the University of Arizona. In the Wild Wild West of Tucson, which used to be the capital of Mexico before the annexation and a popular venue for most old Western movies, I came across the tales of Coyote.

Coyote is a prairie dog with the reputation of being a trickster. He is always fooling around, making a fool of himself. He is a straddler of opposites. He seems to be a close cousin of the uncle fox or foolish crocodile in our Bangla folktales. The indigenous people of the American Southwest hold the trickster Coyote in great reverence. The Navajo people call him Old Man Coyote and consider him one of their tribesmen. Coyote does things that keep pushing moral boundaries and become a guiding reference for his people. In some stories, he even helps the great

figure of the trickster, which is a recurring idea in different cultures. According to psychologist Carl Jung, the trickster is an archetype that remains prevalent in everyone's mind, irrespective of time or place. The idea of an animal wedding at the time of sun showers is thus found in tales from Brazil, Finland, Korea, Nepal, India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, and others. The similarities suggest that human civilisations are connected at a deeper level. Even cultures that have never contacted one another may have similar ways of explaining their surroundings.

Our fascination with immoral or amoral animal figures predates the birth of organised religion or written literature. During my research, I learnt how the traditional medicine men of the Navajo people use coyote songs to heal their people. Only these shamans are privy to the hidden nature of these songs and their healing qualities. The watered-down version of a children's rhyme, "Raindrops

or colonialism, material greed, desires for power, exploitation of natural resources, violence and aggression manifest this sickness.

I was drawn to the work of German conceptual artist Joseph Beuys. In 1974, Beuys, for the first time in his life, travelled to New York and boarded an ambulance from the airport wearing a felt blanket to protect himself from the sickness of

America for the intellectual curiosity it has instilled in me. The freedom of thought it has given me. And Beuys reminds me that healing must come from within.

I remember while in Tucson, I invited one of my professors to dinner. She came to my house with a jar of pickles made of olives that she grew in her backyard. I told myself that this is the America I never knew; I had always thought my aunts in



PHOTO: CAROLINE TISDALL/ RONALD FELDMAN FINE ARTS

Joseph Beuys, 'I Like America and America Likes Me,' 1974.

America. He went straight to an art gallery in Soho and spent eight days inside the cage with a coyote before returning to Germany in an ambulance. During World War II, Beuys was made a member of a combat bomber unit. In 1944, a plane carrying his unit was gunned down. A Tartan shaman saved Beuys. Following this near-death experience, Beuys fashioned his art as shamanic. Once the Vietnam War ended, he performed this coyote art, titled "I Like America and America Likes Me," to remind his American audience that they needed to return to and reconcile with their native spirit to find solace from the racial divisions and subjugations that it witnessed during its Civil Rights Movement. Beuys previously refused to visit the US when it was engaged in the Vietnam War. So his claim that "America Likes Me" is ironic, to say the least. But the America he likes is America in its essential form: free in spirit, passionate, always evolving, with a strong survival instinct that celebrates humanity.

On the day before our national election, where individual rights are fraught with fears, both national and international, I am thinking of my Western education that I received across the Atlantic divide. I like

Bangladesh would do something like that. The Hollywood version of America has never shown me this America. Yet, this is the America I like, and this is the America that likes me.

There are, of course, many things I do not like about America. But as a country that has practised democracy for almost 400 years (including assemblies in New England colonies), there are lessons to be learnt. But as Beuys has exposed, America has its wounds too. No nation is perfect, because we humans are not perfect. However, aspirations to present our better selves make us humans in the great chain of being poised between angels and animals.

Life offers us moments to connect with one another at a deeper level. The wedding of tigers in Japan, wolves in Finland, foxes in Bengal, and coyotes in America when the rain and the sunshine coincide tells us that human minds desire to explain unnatural acts in a natural manner. But deep down, they do not want conflicts. They want union even in the face of opposition.

On the eve of the national election, I like this myth of union and harmony because this myth of union is like me: a trickster who straddles opposites.