

'The right to fear-free democratic opposition must be ensured'

Shantanu Majumder, a professor of political science at the University of Dhaka, talks about his thoughts on Bangladesh's recent national election and its implications on society and opposition parties, in an interview with Afia Jahin of The Daily Star.

What are your thoughts regarding the January 7 election?

Whatever was predicted as the outcome of the national election turned out to be true. The implications of the election will span not only the country, but the South Asian region and even on an international scale. Compared to the previous two elections, the 12th parliamentary election received the most international attention.

From those in power, one thing we should hope for is that there is no post-election backlash. That is, the parties that chose not to participate in the election should not face intimidation or attacks. Moreover, these differences and the hostility between political parties must not affect society at large.

The existence of tensions, resulting from the nature of the election, cannot be denied. One major party was not satisfied with the election and thus boycotted it. So it would be absurd to think that, now that the election is over, they will accept defeat and react graciously. This prevailing reality must be acknowledged.

What are your expectations from the new government?

I am not saying that actions shouldn't

be taken against anti-democratic elements and anti-democratic actions in the name of preserving the rights of the opposition. And I also do not adhere to the cliché notion that someone who belongs to the opposition camp is by default an angel and the people with the ruling party are en masse wrongdoers. But, be it the opposing party or whoever, so long as they are not spreading disinformation or engaging in violence, they should not be harassed or subjected to false cases or violence.

Unfortunately, there is a section of unrestrained, uncontrolled government party activists who chant "Joy Bangla" and "Joy Bangabandhu" before initiating an offensive. I doubt whether these miscreants uphold the ideals of Bangabandhu. This section has existed for a long time. One can hope for a new start this time around, wherein this section can be reeled in internally.

The main political opposition, BNP, had brought up a couple of demands in their pre-election movement. Do you think these demands had substance? And what do you think is the future course for opposition parties in Bangladesh?

I know of two key demands of the



Shantanu Majumder

opposition before the election—the stepping down of the prime minister and the reintroduction of the unelected election-time caretaker government system. There's no point in discussing the first. I find it as a demand made only for the sake of it.

Regarding the second demand, I would advise against it. In my understanding, the caretaker system is anti-democratic. Democracy in no way permits unelected people to be in power. Moreover, "there

cannot be a fair election under a party government" is a dangerous statement to make. Sure, we can say that a fair election is not possible under the rule of a specific party. But by saying that a fair election cannot take place under a political party, we are taking a wrong stance.

Besides, was there sufficient data available when a section of the urban civil society began making this argument during the movement for the installation of the caretaker

system under the leadership of the then-opposition and current ruling party? We had only one election in 1973 under a party government. There was no party government between 1975 and 1990 in Bangladesh due to back-to-back military governments during that period. Finally, I hold Bangladeshi politicians in high regard. I do not think that they are the worst of the lot. We, unfortunately, have developed a culture of undermining our politicians. If we can get out of this, I believe we may see some positive results.

We need a strong opposition, and we need a few liberal democratic parties that will uphold the basic principles of the constitution and democratic values. Maintaining pressure on the ruling government is a priority, regardless of which party is in conflict with another.

At present, Bangladesh is gaining importance in terms of economy, geopolitics, and more. We are not a bubble anymore. If we aim to advance democracy in the country, the irregularities in elections and the undemocratic practices of the ruling party and even those of other political parties should surely be prominent parts of the discourse. The conversation should not end with the mention of a caretaker government.

And the alleged flaws of both the party in power and the opposition must be addressed.

Finally, what are your hopes for the new year?

In the realm of Bangladeshi politics and state affairs, I usually do not imagine the unimaginable. We tend to forget that Bangladesh is a post-colonial state. That it is a South Asian country. A country in the Indian subcontinent. We also forget that Bangladesh was also under military rule for many years.

I don't hope for too much in the new year; only that the political parties which truly uphold the values of the Liberation War should be strengthened. I hope that the government will effectively realise that its job isn't limited to maintaining discipline, but also extends to guaranteeing decent, liveable lives for citizens. From that point of view, I truly wish that the new government will be mercilessly heavy-handed against the people involved in price hikes, the so-called business syndicate, and the flight of capital. It would also be great to see the government attempt to reduce inequalities. And, importantly, the right to fear-free democratic opposition must be ensured.

Attacks on Yemen could open Middle East's pandora's box



A CLOSER LOOK

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TASNEEM TAYEB

open up a northern front in the Hamas war.

Iran's patience, however, should not be tested. Israel has already killed Sayyed Razi Mousavi, Iran's top military advisor, in what has been deemed a targeted assassination attempt. Israel's strikes against Lebanon are also resulting in the

To give the US the benefit of doubt, even if it carried out the strikes against Yemen solely to "defend" its interests in the Red Sea, the attacks are nonetheless irresponsible, reckless, and provocative and could potentially push the region to the brink of a large-scale conflict. It is difficult to fathom how the US—equipped

On January 11, as South Africa was presenting its case against Israeli genocide in Gaza before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague, on the opening day of the two-day hearing, Israel unabashedly continued unspeakable atrocities in the Gaza Strip, with incessant bombings resulting in the killing of more than 100 individuals. The death toll reportedly stands at nearly 24,000 now since October 7, including more than 10,000 children.

But that is not all. In the wee hours of Friday, the US and UK launched a joint multi-pronged military assault against Yemen, attacking at least 16 sites in 73 strikes and killing at least five people.

While the US, the UK, and their Western allies—none of whom backed South Africa's timely and rightful case against Israeli genocide in Gaza—defend the attacks as "defensive action," adding that, "These targeted strikes are a clear message that the United States and our partners will not tolerate attacks on our personnel or allow hostile actors to imperil freedom of navigation in one of the world's most critical commercial routes," there is no denying that the strikes are disproportionate, provocative, and highly irresponsible.

First of all, the actions of the Houthis must be properly contextualised. The Houthis' attempts to prevent Israeli trade through the Red Sea, by restraining the movement of commercial ships aiding the rogue state's trade activities, were aimed at stopping the bloodshed in Gaza. As a Houthi military spokesman said, "The Yemeni armed forces continue to prevent Israeli ships from navigating the Red Sea (and Gulf of Aden) until the Israeli aggression against our steadfast brothers in the Gaza Strip stops." That Yemen's actions were in solidarity with the Palestinians, and were only aimed at inflicting economic damage on Israel, is clear. It must be noted here that the Houthi interventions in the Red Sea did not result in any fatalities. In terms of Yemen's logistical capabilities, they are no match for the military might of the US in the region.

If anything, the deployment of US warships, air carriers, and nuclear-powered Ohio-class submarines in the Middle East are more provocative—and will embolden Israel in its genocidal actions against Palestinians—than the Houthi actions against Israeli ships.

Unsurprisingly, the US did not fail to seize this opportunity to mount disproportionate retaliatory aggression against the Houthis, in a country that is already plagued by impoverishment,



Yemeni demonstrators hold placards during a protest following US and UK forces' strikes, in the capital of Sana'a on January 12.

PHOTO: AFP

famine, and internal strife.

The US and UK strikes in Yemen have only aggravated the possibility of large-scale conflict in the already volatile Middle East. It is well-known that the Houthis are backed by Iran, which is accused by the West of enriching uranium at a steady pace since the US unilaterally pulled out of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (also known as the Iran nuclear deal)—without presenting any valid justification for its move—in 2018.

As recently as December 26 last year, UN nuclear watchdog International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reported that Iran is enriching uranium at 60 percent purity, which is close to weapons-grade enrichment. If this is true and Iran is indeed closer to developing nuclear weapons, shouldn't the US and UK have been wiser and not attacked Iran's proxy in the region?

Iran must be commended for acting with utmost restraint and caution in the face of the provocative rhetoric coming from the US and Israel since 2018, to the extent that it did not retaliate against the Israeli government's threat to "wipe" Iran and its ally Lebanon "off the face of the Earth" should the Lebanese Hezbollah

killing of Hezbollah fighters, Lebanese civilians, and the displacement of thousands. Coupled with the latest strikes on Yemen, these look like US-Israeli provocations in the region. The sporadic and unjustified attacks in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen—as heat from public anger pushes the limits of the Middle Eastern barometer, along with the US' significant military build-up in the region and the Israeli government's vitriolic rhetoric and provocative actions—have Middle East experts concerned about the West's endgame in the region.

The timing of the US-UK strikes in Yemen is also tricky. It comes just as South Africa presented the case against Israel in the ICJ. The possibility of the attacks being a means to distract the ICJ and world community's attention from Gaza cannot be overruled. Since Israel does not have a solid defence—the ICJ is the principal judicial body of the UN and at least 101 UN staff have been killed in the Gaza conflict—in the face of ample evidence of its genocidal intent and subsequent actions in Gaza, it is perhaps trying to find a way out of the substantiated accusations through other means.

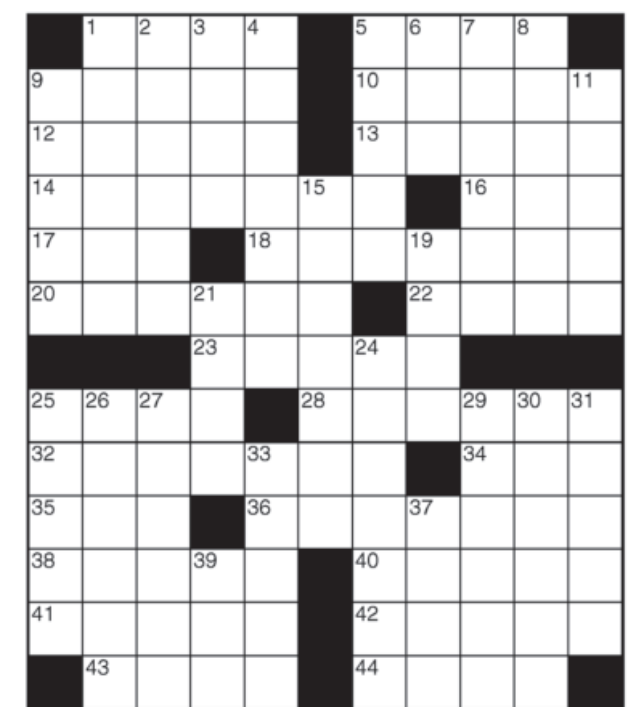
and empowered with multiple intelligence wings—could make such an injudicious move at such an inopportune time, unless its intention is to escalate conflict in the region, which it has successfully done in the past with disastrous results.

By arming the genocide against Palestinians in Gaza, the US has already earned the reputation of being a genocide enabler. The country's shameful travesties in Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen point to its complete military and intelligence failure in long-distance warfare. It risks becoming a pariah, just like its ally Israel, if it continues aiding and abetting bloodshed in the Middle East.

Ahead of the US' November election, the Biden administration is facing mounting internal pressures, which it would do better to focus on than waging an avoidable war in the Middle East. That is, unless this, too, is part of their election campaign. In which case, should the US' actions also be tried before the ICJ? In any case, the US and its allies, including Israel, will have to shoulder the responsibility and consequences of any escalation in the Middle East as a result of their incessant and uncalled-for provocations.

CROSSWORD
BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS



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