

# The only budget I care about is one that reduces my bills

OF MAGIC & MADNESS



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**BADIUZZAMAN BAY**

Every year, as budget day approaches, I feel a strange sense of déjà vu. It's like preparing for election day: the air is thick with anticipation, promises fly around like confetti, and hope flutters tentatively in our hearts. These two days are to newsmen what the two Eid days are to devotees—the culmination of journalistic pursuits that leaves us simultaneously animated and exhausted. On both days, journalists remain caught up in frantic

know how to spend it even when we do.

I don't want to go into details about our budget implementation problem which we talk about, like clockwork, after every budget, and then throughout the year. But suffice it to say, this, along with corruption, irregularities and various entrenched systemic issues, have had deeply destabilising effects. The prices of almost everything from groceries and utilities to housing and education have gone through the roof. People are paying through their noses for essential healthcare. A budget has to make sense on a practical level for citizens, right? It has to deliver results beyond shiny economic indicators or infrastructure development. Right now, this is not happening. I see scrolls and infographics detailing the proposed increase or reduction in import duties, and I find myself asking: what does it all mean? Will it help reduce my monthly bills, or inflate them?

Perhaps I'm simplifying it a bit. You could say that rising prices are a global trend. In India, where I found the prices of food or groceries or commuter fares to be much cheaper compared to Bangladesh, one of the factors apparently leading to the humbling election result for the ruling BJP is high prices—or as they are calling it, people's "bread and butter issues". I guess, in the end, it all comes down to your lived experience. Your income versus living cost. You spend what

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VISUAL: STAR

activities, speeches and interviews, press conferences, and tireless decoding of every proposed plan or promise. The newsroom buzzes with excitement from midday to midnight. There are special meals, special pick-and-drop services.

But seen from a wider perspective, both days also seem to be following the same script—lots of build-up and rituals but a disappointing anti-climax in the end.

As a journalist, I am encouraged to look at the bigger picture on budget day, and think less of my own wallet and more of the wallets of my compatriots. But this façade, if I may call it so, is getting harder to keep up. For every time, as the finance minister concludes his speech and the numbers roll out, reality hits with a greater force. You worry where you fit into this maze of numbers. You rummage through them for a solution to your problem: stagnant income but inflated bills. And you feel as helpless as the next working person looking at the widening gulf between your budget plan and that of the government.

Budget day is thus turning into our very own Groundhog Day. Each time, we hope for change, yet the same reality comes back to haunt us. And the reality is, even after the proposed budget for FY2024-25 comes into effect, that cycle of stagnation and inflation will likely remain in motion. This may be my years of accumulated distrust talking. But think about it. When did we last have a budget, big or small, that sufficiently addressed job crisis or brought down essential prices? Even the FY2023-24 budget, which was 12.35 percent bigger than the previous year's, failed on both fronts. As Jaime Lerner once put it, "If you want creativity, take a zero off your budget. If you want sustainability, take off two zeros." I don't know about the government's motivation for going for a "tight" budget this time. But our main problem, in my view, is not that we don't have enough zeros for the more important sectors but that we don't

you earn. What if you don't earn enough? Or you do, but just barely? You still try to set aside some savings for a rainy day, but what if every day becomes a rainy day? What's the strategy then?

Not long ago, I remember willing myself to survive on two meals a day, especially towards the end of the month. It doesn't help, though. You have a family to take care of. And you need more than a full stomach to pass through life. I can only imagine how people lower in the

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food chain are getting by amid the never-ending struggle between low or stagnant incomes and inflated bills.

So, if you ask me what kind of a budget I need, the answer is pretty simple. I need a budget that relieves me of having to pay so much for the most basic of services and amenities. I need it to treat the cost-of-living crisis as a national emergency, not just a by-product of some economic influences that can't be helped. Above all, I want a solution to the unique development enigma that Bangladesh has become as at once one of the poorest and yet costliest countries in the world.

Is it too much to ask for?



The election verdict greatly tempered Modi's shine and energised the opposition.

PHOTO: REUTERS

# The majesty of 'public will'

## Rebirth of the Indian opposition

THE THIRD VIEW

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**MAHFUZ ANAM**



On Sunday, Narendra Modi will commence his third consecutive term as India's prime minister, a first after Jawaharlal Nehru, India's founding prime minister. The Indian people have chosen their leaders and representatives in parliament, and we congratulate them for it. This election marks the return of coalition government that had been the norm before BJP's single-party domination ended it in 2014. This will be the first time that BJP,

**This election marks the return of coalition government that had been the norm before BJP's single-party domination ended it in 2014. This will be the first time that BJP, having failed to obtain enough seats on its own—getting 240 while needing 272—will have to depend on its alliance partners to form a coalition government with Nitish Kumar of Bihar and Chandrababu Naidu of Andhra Pradesh. As reported in Indian media—and not unexpected in the tradition of coalition politics in the subcontinent—the two are already trying to extract the maximum price possible for their crucial backing.**

having failed to obtain enough seats on its own—getting 240 while needing 272—will have to depend on its alliance partners to form a coalition government with Nitish Kumar of Bihar and Chandrababu Naidu of Andhra Pradesh. As reported in Indian media—and not unexpected in the tradition of coalition politics in the subcontinent—the two are already trying to extract the maximum price possible for their crucial backing, without which Modi cannot form his new government. The bargain is, of course, focused on crucial ministries and the position of the speaker for the Telugu Desam Party, according to *The Telegraph*.

The election verdict greatly tempered Modi's shine and energised the opposition. A message doing the rounds on WhatsApp, as quoted by journalist Swapan Dasgupta in the aforementioned paper, goes, "The Indian voter has given a verdict that will be remembered for a long time. They have given the BJP and allies a victory that feels like a defeat. They have given the INDI [sic] alliance a defeat that feels like a victory."

By all accounts, Modi's victory is very impressive. BJP won 240 seats on its own, which is more than the combined seats won by the opposition and more than double that of Congress's tally of 99. Why, then, should a tinge of defeat be associated with it? Because it overlaid its success, and the slogan that BJP would win more than 400 seats in the House of 543 itself exhibited an arrogance and overconfidence that has made its success look like a defeat—a case of shooting oneself in the foot.

When democracy is on the slide in many

countries, and election as an event is suffering from many distortions, especially instigated by the ruling party (don't we know it?), for the Indian national election to have come through with credibility and overall acceptance is an achievement that must be praised and celebrated by democracy-loving people everywhere. Around 969 million people, 70 percent of a population of 1.4 billion, were eligible to vote. According to figures from the Election Commission of India, 642 million voters voted, of whom 312 million were women, making for the highest participation by women voters in the country's history.

Though victorious, the ruling coalition NDA has been dealt a body blow that has surprised most election watchers both inside and outside India. Though Narendra Modi as the tallest leader in India and the BJP as the largest single party have retained their strong positions, the resurgence of the opposition and, within it, that of Congress—the grand old party that many pundits had written off—are signs of the emergence of functioning democracy that can only bode well for India and its neighbours.

What we consider to be the most noteworthy aspect of the Indian election is the rebirth of the opposition. In fact, it can be termed a "rebirth" of a parliament long overwhelmed by a single-party dominance, and without a viable opposition, the House really loses its functionality. In a parliamentary form of government, the House acts as the centre of all national politics. It is where national issues are debated, the government made answerable, policies judged, and resource allocation scrutinised in depth. It is the parliament where a government, however powerful, is made aware that people are its "master."

The gradual erosion of the central role of parliament, which we have witnessed in Bangladesh, was also evident in India with

the administration as a whole—especially the bureaucrats, whose mindset is far from serving the people.

Reviving the effective role of the opposition in monitoring and holding the government accountable is of great significance for us in Bangladesh, as we have almost forgotten that the parliament is really where public representatives are supreme. In our case, the overwhelming presence and almost monopoly control of the House by one party has literally obliterated the powerful role of the House, the role of the speaker, and of individual MPs.

Along with the all India elections, the one in West Bengal also has special significance for us in Bangladesh. The popular expectation that BJP would fare better than the last time and might even get more seats than before was proven wrong. Mamata Banerjee, due to her political acumen, election strategy, and campaigning energy, must be congratulated for the way she single-handedly held back the Hindutva tide to return her own candidates in the election.

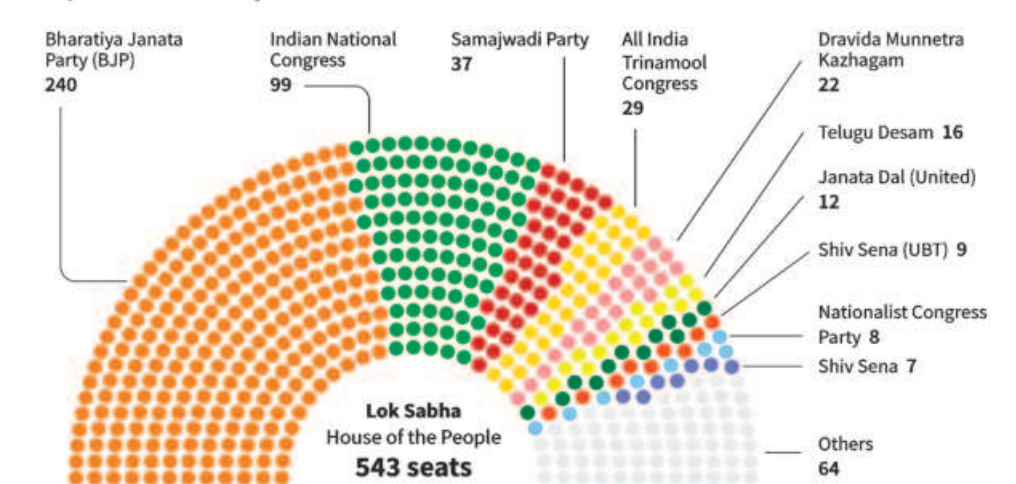
A significant takeaway from the results of the Indian election is that religion-based election campaigning has its serious limits. Voters in a country where democracy has been practised since 1947 have the wisdom to see the damaging impact of such campaigns and the courage to set a corrective course in motion.

For us, a nation constantly badgered by endless controversies surrounding every poll of any sort, the Indian election is a matter of envy as no one as yet has raised any objection about the election process or the outcome. The results of each phase—and there were seven in total—were stored by the Election Commission of India and made public after 44 days when the whole process was completed. The whole election was conducted through EVMs that provided a paper trail to reinforce voters' confidence in the machines. For us, EVMs remain a far cry as public confidence, instead of rising, has dwindled further during the last election.

As we congratulate India's new leadership, we celebrate the victory of democracy in our giant neighbour, with whom we have forged partnership for our mutual benefits. It was the might of the verdict of the Indian voters that resonated throughout the world, the region and also, hopefully, within Bangladesh where our own voters aspire for the same power. It

### The Indian parliament after the 2024 election

Composition of the directly elected lower house



SOURCE: ELECTION COMMISSION OF INDIA

proved that a mature voter can see through the superficiality of populism, the danger of divisive politics, the pitfalls of using religion to gain votes, and the price that people end up paying when hate and othering becomes instruments of gaining support. In some fundamental ways, the Indian voters saw the tragedy of opting for creating deep wounds that has the possibility of festering into long-term, if not permanent, fault lines. The Indian election proved once again that, if allowed free expression, public will always strengthens democracy. Conversely, if not allowed, it destroys democracy from within.