

Bangladesh: Dance of the scorpions

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The decision of the Grand Alliance to boycott and resist the holding of the January 22 elections to the Jaty Sangshad has put the two alliances directly on the path of confrontation. This denouement conjures up images of two scorpions who when they fight precede their battle by a ritual dance before they sting each other to death. Are we witnessing such a dance of death where the ultimate casualty will be the democratic process? Let us briefly review the role of the players in this macabre dance to which the nation bears mute witness.

The ostensible lead player in the dance appears to be the chief adviser of the caretaker government, President Iajuddin Ahmed. He has been from the moment he assumed office through what is perceived as a constitutional coup, the target of the 14 Party Alliance. The ongoing demand of the Grand Alliance that the president step down from his role as chief adviser, or at least conduct himself in a non-partisan manner, appears to mistake the dancer for the choreographer. This means that all attempts by the Grand Alliance and our development partners to periodically pressure the chief adviser to change his steps, were, from the outset, exercises in futility.

The key party to the performance of the chief adviser and hence the CTG was and remains the leadership of the 4 Party Alliance. The underlying motivations of this alliance remain unclear. In their public postures they project a firm confidence that they can win an election. They attribute the demands of their opponents for changes in the conduct of the CTG as motivated by a need to avoid elections. If they were so confident that they could win a free and fair election, they should have gone out of their way to ensure that the Grand Alliance participated by accommodating their demands for a non-partisan chief adviser and chief election commissioner.

Once Justice Hasan stepped down, the 4 Party Alliance could have agreed to have the surviving chief justice preceding Hasan, Justice Mahmudul Amin Chowdhury, as chief adviser. They could have further advised the president to induct a generally respected and acceptable person such as the former cabinet secretary under the 4 Party Alliance government, Sadat Hossain, as chief election commissioner. Faced with such a positive political response from the 4 Party Alliance, the 14 Party Alliance would have had no option but to go to the polls and to stand by the results, even if this meant a victory for the 4 Party Alliance.

Rather than accommodate its opponents, the 4 Party Alliance appears to have gone out of its way to provoke the Grand Alliance. The latest

provocation of instigating the revival of the corruption case against HM Ershad, just when the leaders of the Grand Alliance had decided to go for elections on January 22, in spite of the unevenness of the playing field, appears mind boggling for its pointlessness. From the moment the 14 Party Alliance accepted the president as chief adviser, and then went on to accept the watered down “package” agreement negotiated by the 4 Advisers it was apparent that the alliance, or at least its leadership, were keen to contest elections even on an unlevel playing field. It was also evident that this leadership was under great pressure from many of their associates to boycott the elections. Under the circumstances, everything should have been done by the 4 Party Alliance to strengthen the hands of the leadership of the 14 Party Alliance to stand by their original decision to contest the elections.

From their responses the 4 Party Alliance appear to suggest that they remain indifferent as to whether the Grand Alliance participates in the election. In the light of recent developments, the 4 Party Alliance appear to believe that they can compel the CTG to hold an election even without the Grand Alliance. They presume that the CTG will be able to withstand resistance to the polls from the supporters of the Grand Alliance, through the use of the law enforcement machinery and the army, backed by local protection of the polling centres of their own party cadres. The 4 Party Alliance may possibly believe that however limited be the voter turn-out or strong the degree of resistance, once such a poll is held and votes them back to power, they would be able to deal with any further challenges on the ground.

Whether this scenario follows as planned so that the CTG does carry through an election and the elected government can then suppress all challenges to its authority, remains to be seen. However, what is more relevant is the credibility of an election held with a massive deployment of armed might of the law enforcement agencies, involving resistance and loss of life, and the subsequent legitimacy of a regime which would hold office as a result of an election boycotted by some of the major political parties.

The notion that a regime with such a questionable mandate could then resort to the level of wholesale repression needed to stay in power would be even more challengeable. Such a regime would need to keep in mind that apart from the internal challenge to such a regime, the international community would have severe reservations in not just recognizing the outcome of a flawed election but would hardly remain silent through the acts of repression which would follow.

Of course, flawed elections and/or repression have been tolerated in the past, as in Myanmar or Zimbabwe, though both regimes have acquired “outcast” status in the international community and remain cut off from most sources of development assistance. It is quite possible that the international community may bow to ground realities in Bangladesh and after administering a few ritual slaps on the wrist

of such a regime, however distasteful its origins, would resume business as usual. I cannot speak here for the international community but perhaps some of our resident envoys may speak up on the reaction of their respective governments to such a one-sided election and its possible repressive aftermath.

Now that Bangladesh is a less aid-dependent economy, the sanctions at the disposal of our development partners remain weak. The one weapon that the international community does have at its disposal is their control over the levers of UN peace-keeping operations. Our armed forces are today one of the world's largest contributors to such operations and have justifiably earned an excellent international reputation for their performance in the field. The armed forces and the whole nation attach great value to this role, which is not without considerable material benefit to the national economy as well as to the peace-keepers. If our armed forces, who have already been deployed in the field, are put into the unenviable position of repressing their own citizens, first in response to resistance to the election, and then to cope with challenges on the ground to the "elected" regime, this would be potentially detrimental to their image in the eyes of the international community.

The response of the CTG and BNP and its allies to the course of future events hangs, in no small measure, on the intentions and capability of the Grand Alliance. From the outset the 14 Party Alliance has continued to give confused signals of its intentions, culminating in its bizarre and unprincipled compact which challenged its historic commitment to secular politics.

The 14 Party Alliance's initial outright rejection of Justice Hasan as the chief adviser, in the light of their experience with the current chief adviser, may be viewed by their own ranks as a strategic error. After all, would he have been quite as partisan as the incumbent chief adviser? Once the president carried through his constitutional coup, the 14 Party Alliance continued to vacillate on whether to challenge the legitimacy of the chief adviser or to go along with various negotiated "package" deals offering piecemeal concessions. The latest offer of the leave of Zakaria but the retention of Mudabbir was part of the dance of the seven veils enacted by the chief adviser to tantalize the Grand Alliance into the elections. The dance may have indeed served its purpose had the gratuitous provocation of seeking to bar HM Ershad from contesting the elections not served the role of one provocation too many to be tolerated by the Grand Alliance.

Now that the Grand Alliance has decided to boycott the January 22 polls they have to reckon whether they can generate enough strength at the local level in every constituency to frustrate the holding of the poll or at least make voter participation very difficult. Mobilization at the constituency level would be very crucial to their strategy of challenging the polls. All the prospective candidates of the Grand Alliance, who have now withdrawn their nominations, will

have a vested interest in ensuring that no election takes place in their constituency. All such candidates would feel compelled to challenge any sort of legitimacy being vested on the 4 Party Alliance candidates through the January 22 polls which would establish their power and control over patronage in the constituency over the next five years.

The Grand Alliance would further expect that large numbers of voters, not just their party supporters, would be hesitant to vote in a one sided election, as was the case in February 1996 when most people simply kept away from the polls. However, the BNP and its allies would certainly aim to vote and would defend their right to vote. In challenging the poll, the Grand Alliance would have to reckon on the degree of repression they would have to face from the law enforcement agencies and possibly the army who would be mandated by the president to ensure that the polls were carried through. Finally, as and when the polls are completed and the 4 Party Alliance take over power, the Grand Alliance would have to realistically evaluate their capacity to withstand massive repression whilst mobilizing a much broader constituency of citizens to join them in challenging the legitimacy of a flawed poll.

In responding to the prospect of a one-sided election all citizens and civil society itself will have to decide what role they will play. Will they accept an election result which does not involve all the principal parties? Will they be silent spectators to the resultant confrontation between the principal alliances or will they come forward to assert their democratic rights?

In asserting their position civil society will no doubt be keeping an eye on what will be done by the other players in the drama such as the armed forces and the international community. The citizens of Bangladesh will eventually have to decide whether democracy in Bangladesh is a spectator sport or it is sufficiently important for them to come forward to ensure that they are served by a government which truly reflects their freely given vote.

In the final analysis, a major conflict, with prospects of violent confrontations, will damage both the alliances since neither of the protagonists can be sure where this dance will end and what consequences it will have for either of them or for our democratic process. Can the two principal alliances step out of the circle where they are engaged in their fatal dance of destruction and seek the path of statesmanship?

There is a universal demand across the country for a free, fair and peaceful election held under a non-partisan CTG. Neither constitutional niceties nor partisan politics should be allowed to frustrate this deeply felt demand. Can civil society play any role in this process of sustaining our democratic institutions or will they remain silent witnesses as the lights across the land go out one by one?

P.S.

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* Prof Rehman Sobhan is Chairman, Centre for Policy Dialogue.