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Guest Column by Kazi Anwarul Masud

Political pundits are now dumbfounded. They predicted close elections between David Cameron and Ed Miliband.

When the votes were counted the Conservatives ended with 331 members of Parliament enough to form a government by themselves. Cameron became the first prime minister since Anthony Eden in 1955 to increase his party's vote in both the number of seats (up from 306 in 2010 to 331) and percentage terms (up from 36.1% to 36.9%). Most of the other parties were crushed and their leaders resigned to make room for others expecting them to energize their political parties.

The exception has been Nicola Sturgeon's Scottish National Party with 56 seats in the House of Commons. So powerful was the SNP tide that among those swept away was Douglas Alexander, -Labor's shadow foreign secretary and campaign chief, who lost his seat to a 20-year-old student.

The powerful sentiment displayed by the Scots in the election is likely to be repeated in the next referendum promised by David Cameron. Additionally the referendum on Britain's continued membership in the European Union would pose a challenge to David Cameron. Rank and file of Tory members in the House of Commons is increasingly becoming Euro-skeptic. It is believed that at least 60 members have become die hard anti-EU. In such a situation, writes commentator Giles Merritt, this parliamentary arithmetic suggests that while Cameron's personal stature and authority may have received a strong boost, he will be very vulnerable to pressure from his own MPs. Unless he agrees to water down the new government's pro-EU stance, runs the argument, he could very well suffer a rebellion and even the collapse of his majority. Because EU membership figured so little in the UK's election campaign, it is difficult to gauge the country's mood on the issue.

Business leaders have swung belatedly into action with warnings of the serious economic consequences of Brexit, but voting intentions – as the election has plainly demonstrated – are opaque. Cameron regards himself as an internationalist who is at odds with the “Little Englanders” within his party. His best policy now would be to capitalize on his surprise victory and set a very early date for the referendum. Added is the difference between Chancellor of Exchequer George Osborne, now anointed as First Secretary of State or the preferred candidate to succeed as Conservative leader, and foreign Secretary Philip Hammond on the question of European Union. Osborne, an unemotional power broker, instinctively believes that Britain should remain in the EU on the grounds that membership enhances the UK’s standing in trade and diplomatic negotiations. Hammond is a stronger euro-skeptic who has suggested Britain should have nothing to fear outside the EU. He caused some alarm last year when he said the prime minister should light a fire under with his plans for a referendum by the end of 2017. European Commission sought to ensure that the negotiations start on a positive note. The European Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker congratulating David Cameron on his resounding victory and pledged to stand ready to work with Cameron to strike a fair deal for the United Kingdom in the EU and to look forward to British ideas and proposals in this regard.

If Brexit becomes a reality after a referendum by the Brits, George Osborne’s apprehension of weaker negotiating position of Britain in international affairs could become a reality. On the other hand, a consensual position taken after agreement by 28 nations of the EU could reflect the common minimum denominator and a weakened position for Britain as a nation. For the Brits, membership of the European Union is a controversial subject. There are people both for and against the membership in both the Conservative and the Labor Parties. The main argument against appears to be lessened sovereignty in parliamentary affairs, judiciary and in trade deals. Skeptics argue for a Swiss or Norwegian model of relationship with the EU. But there is no certainty about the outcome of a referendum though currently majority led by David Cameron appears to be in favor of retaining EU membership. Yet bigger countries may see EU membership as a loss in sovereignty compared to that of the smaller ones. On the other hand, the UK has been affected in a negative way by the EU fishing policy that has a large effect on British economy; but she still has little power over the economies of other nations.

The conventional view is that there has been transfer of sovereignty from London to Brussels in agriculture and fishing policies and in immigration laws. One should not lose sight of the facts that Britain is a member of the UNSC, G 8 and G20 in its individual capacity as a nation and not representing EU. No less than Germany, Britain cannot forget the days when the sun never set on the British Empire and Britain ruled the waves (one of the reasons of Kaiser Wilhelm’s envy of Britain that contributed to ignite the First World War).

But the world has changed as William Hague, former Foreign Secretary, acknowledged in July 2010 and warned that British foreign policy has to change accordingly to play its due role in international affairs. William Hague estimated that by 2050 emerging economies will be up to 50% larger than those of the current G7, including the United Kingdom. Yet the latest figures showed that at that moment Britain exported more to Ireland than to India, China and Russia put together.

As regards South Asia, British emphasis on furthering relations with India was expected in line with the US policy. Britain under the new

government reiterated and emphasized increased relations with India. Speaking in Mumbai after flying into India's commercial capital with the largest overseas trade delegation ever assembled by a British prime minister, Cameron declared his intention to forge a "special relationship" with India. He spoke of historical relations with the sub-continent and of – shared language, culture, ties, the Diaspora in Britain. Cameron expressed hope that Britain would become India's "partner of choice".

According to British estimate and of some international agencies India is expected to become the third largest economy in the world by 2030. David Cameron described India as one of the success stories of the 21st century. One may recall that soon after forming his government in May 2010 Cameron had committed his coalition government with Liberal Democrats to forge a 'new special relationship' with India, and followed it up with three visits to India as Britain grappled with an ailing economy. He visited India in July 2010, and in February and November of 2013.

Given the complexity in the South Asia it is unlikely that Britain will lessen its relations with Pakistan for the simple reason that Pakistan remains with her large and poverty stricken population the most prolific producer of terrorists of different variety. In August last year David Cameron warned that Britain faced the “greatest and deepest” terror threat in the country’s history, as he pledged emergency measures to tackle extremists. The UK threat level was raised to “severe” — it’s second highest — meaning that a terrorist attack is “highly likely” in light of the growing danger from British jihadists returning from Iraq and Syria. He said that the risk posed by Isil (the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) would last for “decades” and raised the prospect of an expanding terrorist nation “on the shores of the Mediterranean.

Early this year John Kerry in the same vein wrote in an op-ed that the rise of violent extremism represents the pre-eminent challenge of the young 21st century. Military force is a rational and often necessary response to the wanton slaughters of children, mass kidnappings of schoolgirls, and beheading of innocents. But military force alone won't achieve victory. In the long term, this war will be won only by deploying a broader, far more creative arsenal.

The new government is expected to continue its policy of “special relationship” with the US a term first used by Winston Churchill in 1944. Labour Party’s defeat was welcomed by Israel though he is of Jewish stock and if elected he would have been the first Jewish PM since Benjamin Disraeli. Israeli ire was due to Ed Miliband’s criticism of Israeli action in Gaza and his support for a Commons motion for the recognition of Palestine as a state. These are early days to comment on the policies that David Cameron would unfold as time passes by. But Cameron has proved his mettle to the British public and they seem to be satisfied with stability rather than volatility that could have been their lot.

(The writer is a retired Secretary of the Foreign Ministry of Bangladesh)

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