

**Political Parties
Movements, Elections and Democracy in Bangladesh**

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1. Introduction

It is a great honor and privilege for me to be invited to deliver the Gyantapas Abdur Razzaq Foundation Distinguished Lecture. Professor Razzaq was my teacher when I was a student of political science at Dhaka University in the early 1960s. Later I became his colleague in the department when I joined the faculty in 1970. But above all I remember him most as a life-long mentor who always encouraged me to pursue academic excellence. He never let me feel less equal than anybody else because of my gender or age. It was Professor Razzaq who in 1964 urged me to apply to Harvard for my Ph.D when I was hesitant to do so fearing that I may not get admitted. It was Professor Razzaq who in 1973 requested me to be the head of the political science department when, again, I was hesitant to take up the responsibility because I was young, barely 30, and most of the faculty members were either my teachers or many years older than me.

My conversations with Professor Razzaq, who along with others, I always called “Sir”, generally revolved around potential research topics. During 1972-74, I was involved in carrying out two survey research projects, one on *Members of Parliament* and another on the *Parliamentary Elections of 1973*. Survey research on political topics was a novelty at that time and drew a lot of curious attention. Some of this attention was positive; but some were not so. My research assistants had to face a lot of questions from respondents. Police reports were also sent against me to the Home Ministry.

Despite my enthusiasm Professor Razzaq did not demonstrate much interest either in survey research or in the topics I chose. He tried to steer my research interest to economic and social history of Bengal. I must admit his efforts did not yield much success. On the whole I found Professor Razzaq not all that keen to discuss the state of affairs of current politics with me. However, one topic of politics he tried to encourage me to work on in the late 1970s was “civil-military relations.” He even volunteered to collaborate with me in researching the topic.

But strangely enough we never talked about doing research on political parties which was the topic of his Ph. D dissertation at the University of London. He worked on it in late 1940s and completed it in 1950. My attention to his thesis was first drawn by a reference in Khalid-Bin-Sayeed's book *Pakistan: The Formative Phase* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968). There he noted Razzaq's observation that political parties in India bore the characteristics of political movements. I was intrigued by this idea but did not explore it further.

Three decades later I did embark on my own research on political parties in Bangladesh and was amazed to discover how few studies exist on the topic. I decided to provide a broad overview of the evolution and functioning of major electoral parties with a particular focus on the challenge of democratizing the functioning of these parties. The study was later published as a book titled *Political Parties in Bangladesh: Challenges of Democratization* (Dhaka, Prothoma, 2015).

When I was asked to deliver the Gyantapas Abdur Razzaq Foundation Distinguished Lecture I thought it might be interesting to re-read Professor Razzaq's thesis to understand his analysis of the functioning of political parties in pre-independence colonial India to explore what characteristics and challenges he highlighted nearly 70 years ago. Were there some practices and patterns that were evident even in the foundational years of political parties in India? After all he was looking at the development of political parties in a country which was transitioning from what he called a "non-sovereign" to a "sovereign" state (Razzaq 1950: 10). He studied political parties which were mainly focused on leading the nationalist movement. The challenges political parties faced under post-colonial rule as organizations for contesting elections, governing the state and promoting democracy were yet to unfold.

Razzaq highlighted two roles of political parties: first their role in pushing forward the nationalist movement and second their role in promoting democracy. At a time when he was working on his thesis Razzaq could only observe the role of political parties as vanguards of nationalist movement though he was cognizant of their ultimate objective of capturing the machinery of government and their potential role in promoting democracy. However, he was not able to observe political parties perform the latter two

roles. Razzaq's observations about these roles were mostly normative statements, the roles he hoped parties would perform in the countries of South Asia.

In the following sections I shall discuss the gradual evolution of political parties over the last half a century focusing primarily on Bangladesh. The discussion will begin with a broad overview of political parties highlighting the changing party systems and key features of political parties. I shall then centre my discussion on the roles of political parties, in mobilizing people for social and political movements as well as for participating in electoral politics which is geared towards capturing state power. The final section analyses the role of political parties in promoting democracy.

I explore these roles because they are the most visible, discussed, and debated roles of parties in Bangladesh. The involvement of political parties in movement politics on the one hand and electoral politics on the other has left deep and sometimes contradictory imprints on the character of political parties. I shall highlight some of the key features of parties which originate from their involvement in movement politics as well as in electoral politics. In the final section I try to sum up how parties have performed in promoting democracy within their our organizations and outside in the country as a whole.

2. Evolution of Political Parties in Bangladesh

When Razzaq was writing his thesis, the premier political party of Bangladesh, the Awami League (AL) was yet to be born. Like many other academics Razzaq hoped that the party system in our country would develop following the model of the democratic party system of the West. He asserted that "the significance of the party system must lie in so far as it is an aid to the democratic process", (Razzaq 1950: 25). He argued "to be in power but to remain prepared to be out of it are conditions precedent to the successful working of the party system ... The majority and the minority party of the day must be capable of transformation the other way. Permanence either as a majority or as a minority breeds conditions in the body politic incompatible with the working of the party system." (Razzaq 1950:24)

Razzaq obviously was not contemplating the development of any other party system except a democratic one. But how did the party system actually evolve over the years,

first in Pakistan and more specifically later in Bangladesh? In this section I shall briefly discuss first the evolution of the party system in Bangladesh, and then analyse some of the key features of political parties that appear to be enduring over decades.

2.1 Changing Party System

The party system underwent significant changes in the four decades since the birth of Bangladesh. During the first three years of elected civilian rule (1972-1975) the country moved from a one party dominant to a single party system. During the fifteen years of military rule (1975-1990) we witnessed the emergence of state-sponsored political parties who retained control of government power but allowed multiple political parties to operate in opposition with restrictions on their freedom. After the restoration of electoral democracy in 1991, there was initially (1991-2001) a two-party dominant system which later evolved into two electoral alliances led by the two major parties. Since 2014 we appear to have again moved back to a one party dominant system.

Party System in the Foundational Years (1972-1975): From One Party Dominant to Single Party System

At the time of independence Bangladesh started with a single dominant party system. The Awami League (AL) was the dominant party. The party was founded in 1949 and soon emerged as the voice of the Bengali nationalists. The party picked up popular support by championing full regional autonomy for East Bengal and recognition of *Bangla* as a state language. The AL was the major partner of the *Juktofront* alliance that swept the Provincial Assembly elections of 1954 which demolished the hold of the Muslim League (ML), the party that led the Pakistan movement.

In the 1960s, the AL expanded its mass base of support through its more radical autonomy proposal Six points, launched in 1966 under the charismatic leadership of *Bangabandhu* Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Campaigning on a Bengali nationalist agenda the AL won an overwhelming victory in the National Assembly (167 out of 169 seats) and Provincial Assembly (288 out of 300 seats) elections of 1970, the first free and fair elections held in Pakistan's history. This sweeping electoral mandate gave legitimacy to the AL-led government during the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971 and the post-independent AL regime in 1972.

The AL, again, won an overwhelming majority in the first parliamentary elections in 1973 winning 287 out of 300 seats. The AL faced little opposition from other political parties. The parties who opposed the birth of Bangladesh, Jamaat-i-Islami (JI) and the Muslim League (ML) were banned under articles 12 and 38 of the Bangladesh Constitution which prohibited organization of religion based parties. The main opposition to the AL was mounted by the leftist parties, the two factions of the National Awami Party (NAP) Communist party of Bangladesh (CPB), underground communist parties and the newly formed *Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal* (JSD) founded in 1972 by a breakaway faction of AL's own student front leaders.

Despite the AL's dominance in the electoral system the government moved to a single party system in early 1975. The party was named Bangladesh Krishak Shramik Awami League (BAKSAL). All political parties, including the AL, were dissolved and their members were asked to join the BAKSAL. But the experimentation with the single party system was short lived. After the assassination of *Bangabandhu* and the takeover of the country's rule by the military open party activities were prohibited under Martial Law proclaimed in November 1975.

Party System Under Military Rule (1975-1990): Emergence of State-Sponsored Parties and Return of Political Opposition

From November 1975 to December 1990 Bangladesh was essentially ruled by two military dictators, Major General Ziaur Rahman (1975-1981) and Lieutenant General Hussain Muhammad Ershad (1982-1990). Both Zia and Ershad floated their own state-sponsored parties using state patronage as well as state machinery, most notably the intelligence agencies, to build their parties. Break away groups from existing parties as well as some retired civil-military bureaucrats and technocrats joined their parties. To increase political support both Zia and Ershad made political use of Islam and rehabilitated the Islamist groups who had gone underground or became politically inactive after the national Liberation War of 1971.

In building political support, Zia was ideologically pragmatic appealing to both leftist and rightist political forces who were opposed to the AL. In December 1975 Zia repealed the Collaborators Act of 1972, which had originally disenfranchised those parties and politicians who had opposed Bangladesh.

Several religion-based political parties again became active. The ML was revived. The Jamaat-i-Islam (JI) and the Nezam-e-Islam (NI) banded together to form the Islamic Democratic League (IDL). Professor Ghulam Azam, the JI's former Ameer returned to Bangladesh in 1978 on a Pakistani passport. In September 1978 Zia founded the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) with both leftists (NAP-Bhasani) and United People's Party, (UPP) and rightists (ML) amongst its members.

In February 1979, elections to the second parliament were held which saw Zia's newly floated party, the BNP, win 207 out of 300 seats. The AL, participated in the election at the last moment and won only 39 seats. The ML-IDL electoral alliance where the JI was a partner secured 20 seats. The JI alone won six seats. The JSD secured 8 seats and independents won 16 seats.

Though twelve parties were represented in the second parliament, the elections, organised under a military regime, lacked credibility and were widely perceived as being engineered by the regime (Ahmed 2002:42). The opposition parties operated under strict control and elections were held when the country was under Martial Law.

After Zia's assassination in May 1981 Zia's widow, Khaleda Zia was persuaded to become the chairperson of the BNP in 1984 to hold the various factions of the party together. Since then Khaleda has remained the chairperson of the BNP. She succeeded in transforming the BNP from a state-sponsored party to an opposition party as she took the decision not to participate in parliamentary elections organised by the military ruler Ershad. For the first time the BNP became involved in movement politics demanding end of military rule.

Ershad who was the second military ruler (1982-1990) followed the path of his predecessor, Zia and founded his own political party, *Jatiya Party* (JP) in 1986, consisting of, again, breakaway factions of existing parties and some retired civil and military officials. The JP consisted of factions coming from the BNP, the UPP and the ML. Following the formation of the JP, Ershad organized a parliamentary election in 1986.

The BNP decided to boycott the elections but the AL, which was being led since 1981 by Sheikh Hasina, daughter of *Bangabandhu*, decided to participate in the election. Hasina was invited to be the president of the AL to avert splits in the party. The JI also participated in the elections, this time on its own. The election results showed Ershad's party, the JP win 153 out

of 300 general seats. The AL won 76, and the JI ten. Another 29 seats were won by eight other parties. Independents won 32 seats. This election was also widely perceived as rigged (Ahmed 2002:46). Again, the political opposition had to function within strict limits.

The AL, which initially participated in the 1986 parliamentary elections, eventually resigned from the parliament as a prelude to initiating street demonstrations against the regime demanding its resignation. In December 1987 Ershad called for another parliamentary election in March 1988. Both the BNP and the AL boycotted the elections to the fourth parliament. The JI also did not participate and joined in the pro-democracy movement. This enabled the JI to demonstrate its presence as a player in street politics and the party consolidated its position within mainstream politics. Neither the AL nor the BNP at that stage registered any discomfort in associating the JI within the anti-Ershad movement.

The results of the fourth parliamentary elections predictably showed the JP sweeping the polls winning 251 out of 300 seats. None of the other parties participating in the elections had any credibility and were reported to have been ‘gifted’ their seats by the JP so as to provide a token presence of an opposition in the parliament. Unsurprisingly, the fourth parliamentary election was, again, perceived as fraudulent and even farcical (Ahmed 2002:47-48).

Following this fraudulent parliamentary elections, political movement against Ershad intensified and he had to resign in December 1990. A parliamentary election organized by a *Non-party Caretaker Government* (NCG), held in February 1991, resulted in transfer of power from the military to elected political leaders.

Party System Under Electoral Democracy (1991-Present): From Two Party to Two Alliance System

In the three decades since the restoration of electoral democracy in 1991, the party system has become much more stable and partisan identification of voters has also deepened. This period has witnessed organisation of regular parliamentary elections and rotation of power between two major political parties, the AL and the BNP. Similar to other countries the First Past the Post (FPTP) electoral system facilitated the emergence of a two party dominant system in Bangladesh. Many of the smaller parties, particularly the leftist parties, gradually became

marginalised and incapable of surviving on their own in electoral politics. Even the share of independents in parliament declined over successive elections.

The FPTP electoral system also resulted in wide gaps between vote share and seat share of political parties in parliament. Each of the two major parties generally received near equal shares of the popular vote. But it was the disproportionate difference in their seat share in parliament that determined which party would form the government and who would serve in the opposition. Both parties gradually adopted the strategy of forging electoral alliances with smaller parties in order to pull in additional votes which may ensure their majority popular support in closely contested parliamentary seats. As a result, the two party dominant system evolved into two electoral alliances led by the two major parties which virtually wiped out the possibility of the emergence of a credible third party or an electoral alliance.

Since 1991 seven parliamentary elections have been held in Bangladesh, of which four–fifth, seventh, eighth and ninth–were organised by a Non-Party Caretaker Government (NCG). The two parties, the AL and the BNP rotated in power; the BNP with Khaleda Zia as prime minister formed the government during 1991-1996 and 2001-2006, and the AL with Sheikh Hasina as prime minister during 1996-2001 and 2009- present.

The first election, organised by the NCG in February 1991 was an ad-hoc arrangement after the fall of Ershad. The election to the fifth parliament saw both the BNP and the AL winning 31 percent of popular vote, with the former winning 140 seats as opposed to the latter's 88 seats. The JP with 12 percent of the popular vote won 35 seats. The JI won 6 percent of the popular vote and 18 seats. Lacking an absolute majority of seats, the BNP was able to form the government with the support of the JI. Thus, the JI became the king maker in the aftermath of a closely contested election.

Following the fifth parliamentary election, initially there was some bi-partisan engagement between the AL and the BNP but this initial engagement gradually eroded after the BNP led government tried to manipulate a by-election. The AL started a campaign to institutionalize a NCG system to organize future parliamentary elections. Following a voterless election to the sixth parliament convened by the ruling BNP which was boycotted by all parties, the AL succeeded in forcing the BNP to accept the NCG system which was institutionalized through

the 13th amendment of the constitution. Elections to the seventh parliament were organized under a NCG. This time the AL with 37 percent of votes, emerged as the single largest party in parliament with 146 seats. The BNP with 33 percent vote gained 116 seats. The JP (32 seats) again became the third largest party in parliament. The JI's vote share remained as before but its seat share (only 3) declined significantly.

Prior to the elections for the eighth parliament, the BNP began building an electoral alliance with the Islamist parties. Three parties, the JI, the Islamic *Oikkya Jote* (IOJ) and a faction of the JP (Naziur Rahman) joined this alliance which was titled as the four-party alliance. The move by the JI from a non-aligned political position which enabled the party earlier to join the AL-led mobilisation for a NCG, into political alliance with the BNP had a transformative impact on the electoral fortunes of the alliance in the subsequent parliamentary election. This alliance further hardened an Islamist/rightist vs secularist/leftist political divide in the country.

The eighth parliamentary elections on October 1, 2001 organized by a NCG again saw a transfer of power. This time the BNP-led four party alliance won a two-thirds majority in parliament securing 216 seats though it received only 47 percent of popular vote. Even though the AL increased its share of the popular vote from 37 percent in the 1996 election to 40 percent in the 2001 election, it could secure only 62 seats. The BNP's alliance strategy served the party well. Two members of the JI became cabinet ministers. Thus, the JI, which opposed the independence of Bangladesh and was banned in the post-liberation period of the 1970s could ascend to a share of state power in the four party alliance government.

The period following the 2001 election also saw the emergence of several extremist groups such as the *Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen* Bangladesh (JMB), its front organisation the *Jagrata Muslim Janata* Bangladesh (JMJB), *Harkat-ul-Jihad Islami* (HUJI), *Hizbul Tahrir* and *Hizbut Tawhid*. Some of these groups such as the JMB/JMJB and the HUJI engaged in widespread terrorist activities. The four party regime initially denied the existence of Islamist terrorist groups. But finally moved against them. Several leaders of the JMB/JMJB were arrested by the security forces. Following an international ban on JMB and Hizbul Tahrir, these groups were also banned by the government.

Witnessing the success of the BNP's electoral alliance strategy, the AL too started to look for parties to build an electoral alliance. While the BNP forged alliances with the Islamist parties, the AL sought support of the leftist parties. In 2005, the AL entered into an electoral alliance with ten other parties and later expanded it into a fourteen party grand alliance. Major alliance partners were Ershad's faction of the JP, the JSD (Inu), Bangladesh Workers' Party (BWP), and ten other small parties.

The elections to the ninth parliament however became highly contested as the BNP led government tried to manipulate the formation of the NCG and refused to correct the flawed voter's list. The AL led opposition threatened to thwart the elections scheduled for early 2007 and mounted violent street agitation. Finally, the military intervened and installed a civilian NCG backed by the military.

After a gap of two years the ninth parliamentary election was organised on 29 December 2008 by the military-backed NCG. The AL-led grand alliance was the winner with 262 seats and 57 percent of the popular vote. The opposition BNP led four party alliance secured 34 seats with 38 percent vote.

However, the NCG system under which three elections were organized in 1996, 2001 and 2008, was abolished in June 2011 by the 15th amendment of the constitution. The amendment followed a Supreme Court judgment which declared the NCG system as unconstitutional. The BNP led alliance began a street movement demanding the restoration of the NCG system and refused to participate in any election under the incumbent AL-led government.

The government however was able to contain the street violence and pushed ahead with the scheduled tenth parliamentary elections. Efforts by the UN to persuade the two political forces to come to a negotiated settlement about a poll-time government failed. The BNP-led alliance eventually boycotted and attempted to thwart the scheduled parliamentary elections by enforcing *Oborodh* (blockade) and *hartals*. The government countered with strong actions including repeated and large scale imprisonment of opposition leaders.

In spite of a highly volatile situation, the government was able to organize the tenth parliamentary elections which was boycotted by the BNP-led forces. In the majority of the parliamentary seats (153) members of parliament (MPs) belonging to the AL-led alliance were

“elected” unopposed. In the remaining 147 seats, contestations took place amidst much violence and tension which yielded a rather low voter turnout on January 5, 2014. A parliamentary opposition was engineered with a faction of the JP who decided to join both the government as ministers and also serve as the loyal opposition in parliament. The AL-led alliance formed the government on January 12, 2014.

Following the tenth parliamentary elections the BNP-led opposition gradually became much weakened as it was not present in the parliament and has also failed to mount a successful movement against the government. Bangladesh, again, appears to be back to a one party dominant system.

At present, there are rumours of divisions within the BNP regarding their position vis-à-vis participation in the upcoming eleventh parliamentary elections scheduled at the end of 2018 or early 2019. But the party is still holding together. Feuds between individuals and groups are also present within the AL for nomination to parliamentary seats for the upcoming elections. But no body expects any open split in the party so long as Sheikh Hasina is the president to hold the party together. In both the AL and the BNP there will be keen contestation between party members for nominations in virtually all constituencies for the forthcoming polls. Both parties fear that rebel candidates from within the parties can spoil the chances of the party candidates in the forthcoming elections. The emergence of these rebel candidates reflects weakness and indiscipline in the organizational structures of the parties.

Let me now turn the discussion to highlight a few key features of political parties and party politics.

2.2 Key Features of Political Parties and Party Politics

All political parties, particularly the major electoral parties, demonstrate certain characteristics. They are organizationally weak, ridden with internal group fights and dependent on top leadership to hold the party together. When in power, the ruling party/alliance uses state resources for party-building purposes. Over the years, patronage politics has substituted ideology as the main attraction for recruiting supporters. I discuss below briefly some of these common characteristics.

Organisational Weakness

Though the major electoral parties maintain on paper an elaborate organisational structure at the national and sub-national levels, party machinery generally become active only around election time. To capture power through the electoral process the parties often co-opt the dominant local leaders who control the votes or are perceived as “electable”. These co-opted leaders generally move up faster in the party hierarchy over old and trusted party workers. Even the AL which traditionally had the strongest grassroots organisational presence demonstrate this tendency.

In the 1950s and the 1960s, the AL built up a grassroots presence when it was mobilizing people behind the Bengali nationalist agenda. The organizational strength of the party was demonstrated during the historic 1970 election campaign and the non-cooperation movement of March 1971. But during the nine months long Liberation War with *Bangabandhu* being imprisoned in Pakistan, the coherences of the party organization weakened. The organization was further weakened during the fifteen years of military rule when the party could not operate freely. During this time, two state-sponsored parties, the BNP and the JP emerged but these two parties focused their attention on patronage politics rather than building party organization.

After the restoration of electoral democracy in 1991, the AL, the BNP and the JP were preoccupied with the mission of winning elections by using money and muscle power rather than building up the party organization from grassroots to the national level. The erosion of organisational strength within the two parties are demonstrated by constant in-fights within the parties, intra-party violence and dependence on top leadership for decision making.

Both the AL and the BNP maintain large numbers of political workers but the workers are rarely used to propagate party ideology or programs or monitor the performance of their party representatives when they are elected to power. Instead workers are mostly used either for election campaigns or for agitational street politics, or for extracting tolls. Meetings to elect office bearers of various tiers of the party either do not take place or are irregular, or are cosmetic events. The AL at least organizes its national council meetings regularly but the BNP and the JP do not. The council meetings of parties these days are mostly ceremonial events and no discussion or debates over policies take place during these meetings. This is in contrast to the foundational years of the AL when council meetings did witness lively and heated debates including the famous split of the party in 1957 at the Kagmari council meeting over important issues of national and foreign policy.

Factionalism

Lack of organisational coherence is underscored by the pervasive group and individual feuds within political parties. There are contestations and jockeying for power not only among the senior party leadership but also among the young or perhaps not so young leaders of the student and youth fronts. These disputes often lead to violent clashes and killing of rivals.

Factionalism is, however, nothing new to Bengal politics. After all the AL, NAP, the BNP and the JP were all founded by breakaway factions of existing parties. But earlier these divisions were grounded in political differences between factions. Today it is rare for factions to form over issues of policy. Contestation are mostly over the spoils or office and positions in the party hierarchy. Factional groups continue their loyalties to the factional leaders but ultimately they abide by the decision of the top party leadership.

Over the years the group feuds within the parties have continued but since return of electoral democracy in 1991, the practice of factional splits to found new parties has declined. In part this is due to the strict discipline of Article 70 of the constitution which impose limits on the freedom of individual politicians to shift parties once they are elected to parliament on a party ticket. Another reason is the necessity of maintaining the party symbol as an winning asset in elections. Both the AL and the BNP now have brand values for politicians seeking electoral victories.

Dependence on Top Leadership

All the political parties are dependent on the charisma or name recognition of their leaders. Though at the time of independence the AL had developed a group of national level leaders, many of whom controlled various districts, and the party also had well known youth and student leaders, by 1970 *Bangabandhu's* stature and moral authority was so high that all other leaders and the whole party organisation became completely dependent on his charisma. This was demonstrated very clearly in the selection of the party president. Following the independence of the country, Bangabandhu had advised the party to separate the party organisation from the government machinery. In mid February 1972, the AL working committee decided to separate the party organisation from the parliamentary party and ministers were barred from holding any party office (Jahan 2005:109). But the party council, which met in April 1972, reversed this earlier decision and requested *Bangabandhu* to continue as party president as no successor

to him was acceptable to the party. He was also given the authority to nominate other office bearers including the general secretary of the party.

The meeting of party council had to be repeatedly postponed in 1973. At the council meeting in 1974, Bangabandhu persuaded the party to relieve him of the burden of the party presidency because of the heavy demands of the premiership. The party elected AHM Kamruzzaman, a member of the party high command, as the party president, but permitted him to continue as a minister. But this separation was short lived. After Sheikh Hasina became the party president in 1981 she continued to be the head of the party and also the head of the government when she was elected to be the prime minister in 1996, 2009, and 2014.

The BNP and the JP never attempted to separate the offices of the head of the party and head of the government. In the last three decades all major parties have become even more dependent on the top leadership of the parties. Over the years, the two dynastic leaders, Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia had consolidated their hold on their respective parties. Though both leaders lost parliamentary elections, they faced no challenge from within their parties after electoral defeats. The two leaders, have exercised hegemonic control over the executive, legislative and political agendas of the country without any check on their authority. Not only Hasina and Khaleda, but top leaders of other parties also hold similar absolute power in their respective parties.

Dynastic Leadership

To prevent fragmentation, both the AL and the BNP turned to dynastic leaders to hold the various factional groups together. Two dynastic women leaders emerged during the 1980s and have continued to hold the reins of their parties. Sheikh Hasina, daughter of *Bangabandhu* was made the AL's president in 1981 in order to avert the splitting of the party. Similarly, Khaleda Zia, widow of Ziaur Rahman was made the chairperson of the BNP in 1984 to hold the party together. These two leaders then gradually built strong grassroots support in their respective parties based on their dynastic name recognition. The successful pro-democracy movement led by these two women leaders also helped in transforming them from mere dynastic inheritors to credible party and national leaders. Since the early 1980s these two leaders have succeeded in asserting their control over various feuding groups and have held their respective parties together emerging as the unchallenged leaders of their respective parties. They have led their parties through victories and defeats in six parliamentary elections.

Party-Building through State Patronage

The military rule was marked by the emergence of state-sponsored parties built on patronage system. Ideological principles played little role in their formation though both the BNP and the JP made some symbolic gestures to Islam. A new breed of political actors emerged who were catapulted to leadership position without apprenticeship in party politics.

Unfortunately this tradition of using state patronage for party building continued even during the democratic era after 1991. Party politics during this period revolved around competition to get into state power. Control of state power became almost an obsession with the parties because the ruling party could use state resources to sustain and expand partisan support. The ruling parties continued to use the civil administration, law enforcement agencies and intelligence services to promote partisan interests. By controlling state authority the party in power could not only reward its supporters, more importantly it could punish its opponents. The rewards system controlled by the ruling party included appointments to various institutions, business deals and contracts big and small. It also provided impunity for ruling party *maastans* (thugs) to extract tolls and break laws, while offering access for the party faithfuls to the wide range of public services e.g. health, education, water, energy and so on. The punishment that could be meted out to the opposition included threats by ruling party *mastaans*, court cases on various charges, imprisonment, and even physical harm or elimination.

Growing Influence of Money

After 1991 as elections became the only game in town and contesting in elections became more expensive, men with money increasingly became more influential in party politics. For many people politics became a business investment which then had to be recouped with manifold returns when their party captured state power. Businessmen remained heavy contributors to party funds. They invested in particular politicians who could then work as their business intermediaries and even as partners. Many businessmen also directly entered electoral politics. Politicians too started using their political connections to turn themselves into businessmen. The growing influence of money in politics, already visible during the military rule, became further entrenched during the period of electoral democracy. For example, while during the early 1970s only a quarter of MPs were businessmen, in the fifth through ninth parliament over half of the MPs belong to the business class (Jahan and Amundsen 2012:32).

Criminalisation of Politics

There is an increasing trend towards criminalisation of politics as *maastans* became an integral part of political parties and electoral politics (Sobhan 2004). While *mastaans* were sparingly used by politicians in the 1950s and 1960s, in the last three decades their use by political parties have become pervasive. The student and youth fronts of both the major parties have been dominated by *maastans* who frequently turn campuses of various colleges and universities into battle fields when they clash with deadly arms. Many of these *mastaan* student/youth front leaders have become party bosses in various constituencies and continue to practice their violent and criminal activities. Political opposition always complains that the law enforcement agencies are being used in a partisan manner to protect the ruling party *mastaans* and arrest or compel the *mastaans* serving the opposition to become fugitives. *Mastaans* not only serve the interests of their respective party patrons, they also use their immunity from law enforcement to extract tolls from various business and construction contracts to further their own individual wealth. However, since *maastans* are not simply criminals but often people exercising considerable local influence with the capacity to get things done, they are a prized commodity in a highly competitive and confrontational political environment. The nexus between politicians, businessmen, *mastaans* and the law enforcement agencies, have thus, have become embedded in the political system.

Decline of Ideology

As capturing state power became the only goal of players of electoral politics, ideology or policy development lost their importance to political parties. The ideological divide between the mainstream parties on economic policies disappeared after the AL moved away from its socialist agenda and embraced economic liberalism. The only difference between the AL on the one hand and the BNP, the JP and the JI on the other centered around the issue of national identity. The AL remained formally committed to secularism and pluralism, while the other three have been committed to privileging Muslim identity. But over the years, the AL too started making symbolic gestures to Islam. The AL leaders have started using ‘*Bismillahir Rahmanir Raheem*’ (in the name of Allah, most gracious, most merciful) in their public speeches. The AL’s contradictory stand on the issue of secularism became most evident in the 15th amendment of the constitution which restored secularism as a guiding principle of state but at the same time kept Islam as a state religion.

Some of the above trends of party politics, particularly the decline of ideology in the discourse of party politics, and the rise of the power of men with money and muscle have been much discussed, and lamented yet not deeply analyzed by observers of Bangladesh politics. In the next section I try to argue that their involvement with movement politics led political parties to pay attention to ideological discourse, but when political parties became too engrossed in electoral politics and contestations for gaining state control, the parties put ideology on the back burner and men with money and muscle power gained ascendancy in party politics. Let me then discuss how engagement with movement politics changed over the years, and what impact these changes had over political parties and party politics.

3. Movements and Elections

In Bangladesh political parties developed through their involvement in political movements as well as through their engagement in electoral politics. In fact both went hand in hand one reinforcing the other. In the foundational years engagement with political movements strengthened the political parties and they increased their support-base. But in recent years the engagement with movement politics has declined, and parties have become more interested in electoral politics. This disengagement from various social and political movements had a chilling effect in attracting the support of the people who are yet to develop any partisan identification.

In his thesis, Razzaq underscored the important role of political parties in leading nationalist movements. While he recognized this positive role, Razzaq also noted some of the limitations this deep involvement in nationalist movements imposed on political parties in performing their other roles.

Razzaq observed that the focus on the objective of driving out a foreign colonial power “enabled diverse elements with varying and divergent ideas and ideologies to come together on a common platform... But it also prevented the working out of a common positive programme on the basis of which political parties may function” (Razzaq 1950:6). He argued that the absorption in the pursuit of a “negative end” i.e. eliminating foreign control, “affected the structure and organization of the parties (Razzaq 1950:11). For example, it led to centralizing tendencies in the party decision-making process. He cited the Congress Working

Committee resolutions in 1920 and again in 1942 vesting all powers in the hands of Mr. Gandhi as examples of such centralizing tendencies.

Razzaq argued that it was the educated middle class who initiated the idea of a “nation” and nationalism in India and even when others joined the nationalist movement, the same middle class continued to retain the leadership positions. He discussed the complementary roles and close relationship between the intelligentsia and political leaders in the nationalist movements in the following way:

“The propagation of nationalism, in so far as it is an idea, ... is at least in the beginning the exclusive province of the intelligentsia ... “ The “nation” is discovered and identified, not by politicians who may initiate the political movements but by creative artists, ... who delineate the mind of the nation. The special characteristics of the habits of thought of the ‘intelligentsia’ are imperceptibly taken over by the politicians and political thinkers when they initiate the political movements’. (Razzaq 1950:28)

These characteristics of political parties in India which Razzaq highlighted in 1950 – their primary role in leading nationalist movements, their platforms bringing together people with divergent ideologies and ideas, and the relationship between the intelligentsia and the politicians in developing agendas for movement and party have endured for many decades following the writing of his thesis.

For example, if we analyse the evolution of the AL from its birth in 1949, we can discern all three above characteristics. From the beginning the party put a priority on the Bengali nationalist agenda in its platform. To increase popular support behind the nationalist agenda, the party appealed to groups with both leftist and centrist orientation and brought them together under a big nationalist umbrella with a pragmatic party platform. The party picked up its strength from its involvement in various social and political movements of the 1950s and 1960s. In many cases particular agendas were put forward by social or cultural movements which were later picked up by the AL and the party mobilized popular support behind these agendas. In turn these agenda items which were initially put on the table by social, cultural and other political movement helped the AL to increase its mass base of support. This ultimately helped the party to win elections.

For example, the language movement of 1948 and 1952 demanding recognition of Bangla as one of the state languages of Pakistan and the anti-Basic Principles Committee (BPC) report movement of 1950 demanding full regional autonomy of East Bengal provided two issues around which the AL successfully mobilized popular support. The party recruited well known student leaders of the language movement as AL party candidates to contest the Provincial Assembly election of 1954. Many AL leaders also played an active role in mobilizing peoples' support for the language movement and the anti-BPC movement. Academics, student leaders, cultural activists, civil society leaders and political leaders all worked together to move forward the Bengali nationalist agenda in the 1950s.

In the 1960s too the AL continued with the same strategy of lending support to various social and cultural movements such as the student movement of 1962/1963, campaign to stop the communal riots of 1964, movement by cultural activists to retain Tagore music and other Bengali cultural symbols and so on. This involvement with like-minded groups broadened the AL's support-base.

The AL under the leadership of *Bangabandhu* also initiated its own political movement by launching the famous Six Points Programme in 1966. The six points programme was developed following the popularization of the two-economy theory by the Bengali economists. The movement represented a qualitative change in the role and outcomes of movement politics. The mobilisations initiated by the AL and its associate organizations for the first time brought workers and shorbahara elements along with the students out on the streets to demand self-rule. Considerable state violence was used to suppress the movement. Bangabandhu along with AL party leaders and workers were imprisoned and kept in prison for a long time.

The next massive political movement to end the Ayub dictatorship, launched at the end of 1968, was initiated by the students of Dhaka University. This took movement politics to a new level. The 1969 movement was joined by workers in the urban areas, pressing their demand for both self-rule and higher wages and peasants in the rural areas protesting the corruption and domination of the Basic Democrats. The AL embraced the Eleven Points demands of the student movement which broadened the party's agenda six point to incorporate socialism in the party's platform.

The election campaign of 1970, initiated in the wake of the downfall of the Ayub regime, took the form of a massive nationalist movement. *Bangabandhu* used the election campaign to move beyond the traditional middle class urban base and reach out to the working classes. He extended the campaign into the rural areas to deliver his message of self-rule. The AL's election poster, *Purbo Bangla Shoshan Keno*, a summary of the statistics of exploitation by Pakistan, was posted in almost every village. *Bangabandhu* himself travelled all over the country and by the time of the election in December 1970 he was able to mobilize an entire nation behind his nationalist agenda and transform himself from the leader of a party to a national icon.

While *Bangabandhu's* charisma was a critical element in this mobilization, the AL's election manifesto, backed by the organizational strength and outreach of the party, also played a significant role in mobilizing people and thus winning an overwhelming election victory.

The massive scope of this political mobilization was evident in March 1971 when *Bangabandhu* could demonstrate, through the historic non-cooperation movement, the full support of the entire nation including officials serving the Pakistan government and private sector. This unprecedented mobilization effectively ended Pakistan's rule and transferred power to *Bangabandhu* even before the independence of Bangladesh was formally declared. This total mobilization led the people to spontaneously participate in the national Liberation War after the Pakistan government began its acts of genocide. It is this mobilization which was critical in sustaining the nine month long Liberation War.

The high level of people's mobilization, as an instrument of political struggle, which was attained in the period during 1969-71 was never again realized in the subsequent history of Bangladesh. After the birth of Bangladesh, the first major popular mobilization which was initiated by political parties, took place during the pro-democracy movement of the 1980s aiming to end military rule. But the anti-Ershad movement, which finally resulted in Ershad downfall in December 1990, rarely extended beyond the urban centres and mostly drew upon workers of the opposition political parties. It was only in the last days of the Ershad regime that elements of civil society and some segments of the bureaucracy joined the movement. Involvement in the pro-democracy movement helped the parties gain popular support in the fifth parliamentary elections of 1991.

The next such political movement during 1994-1996, led by the AL against the BNP regime, demanding a Non-Party Caretaker Government (NCG) to organize parliamentary elections again followed a similar pattern. The mobilization was initially limited to party activists. It was after the voterless election organized by the BNP in February 1996 that the mobilization extended beyond political activists and a cross section of civil society and the civil bureaucracy joined the movement which effectively rendered the government dysfunctional. Following this mobilization the AL was able to win the June 1996 elections and return to power after 21 years.

Since 1996 political parties, particularly the political opposition had periodically launched movements against the government but the participants were mostly party workers. Episodes of street action by party cadres, during the respective tenures of the AL (1996-2001), BNP (2001-2006) and the AL (2009-2017), could never draw in the spontaneous participation of ordinary members of the public. As a result these political movements had limited impact on threatening the stability of the incumbent regime. For example, the BNP-Jammat alliance's movements before and after the 2014 parliamentary elections failed to galvanize ordinary citizens beyond party activists and hence could be repressed.

After 1991, in addition to movements initiated by political parties, there has also been a few movements initiated by civil society activists which drew in support of some political parties. For example, the movement against coal mining in *Phulbari* or against setting up of power plant in Rampal, were initiated by civil society actors and then received support of some small leftist parties. But these movements did not succeed in mobilizing large scale mass support. Major electoral parties did not pick up these agendas or rally popular support for them as part of their election campaign as was the case in the 1950s and 1960s which witnessed greater collaboration between civil society and major political parties in shaping party platforms.

Indeed in recent years we have witnessed some tension in the relationship between civil society and political parties. Prior to the scheduled elections to the ninth parliament several civil society organizations began a campaign for political and governance reforms and urged parties to nominate honest and competent candidates for election. Many of the proposals of the civil society campaign were adopted by the AL led grand alliance in its election manifesto including vision 2021. But following the election the government began demonstrating intolerance towards civil society actors demanding political and governance reforms.

In the last few years there has been two massive movements initiated by civil society actors. In February 2013 several student and youth groups, led by young bloggers, started street mobilization demanding capital punishment for the 1971 war criminals and banning of the JJ. This movement, by the secular forces known as the *Shahbag* movement, was soon countered by an Islamist extremist mobilization on the streets in April/May 2013 led by the *Hefazat-i-Islam*, a religious group with a numerically large following among Madrassa alumni and students who branded the *Shahbag* movement as atheist and demanded implementation of an extreme Islamist agenda. The two main political parties soon took positions behind the two mobilizations, the AL behind *Shahbag* and the BNP behind *Hefazat*. However, after an initial period of support for *Shahbag* and opposition to the *Hefazat*, the AL's position has evolved into dealing with both movements in a less categorical way.

Involvement in movement politics left its marks on political parties in several ways. On the positive side movement politics had helped political parties pick up specific ideological or policy agendas for their platforms and mobilize large scale support from different classes and groups. However, involvement in movement politics also resulted in some negative features. As Razzaq feared parties paid less attention to policy development and policy debate. It led parties to frequently engage in agitational politics on the streets as their favored instruments of protest rather than participate in institutions of governance or accountability such as the parliament. Paradoxically after 1991 when elections became more regular, we still witnessed the trend of the political opposition boycotting parliament and preferring to launch frequent street movements to topple the elected government of the day even before the scheduled parliamentary elections.

4. Political Parties and Democracy

Let us now look at the experiences and performance of our parties in promoting democracy. Here I focus primarily on electoral politics. Razzaq's views of contestations between political parties in a democracy were probably shaped by what he observed in the parliamentary democracy of the UK. The contestations between parties should be what he termed as "amicable bickerings." He argued that the differences between the parties can not be so wide that "men will stake their all" to uphold their views (Razzaq 1950:21).

After the long nationalist struggle for gaining independence from Pakistan, which was also a struggle for establishing democracy it was expected that Bangladesh would follow a democratic path. But within four years of independence the country fell under military rule which continued for fifteen years.

After years of pro-democracy movements, when Ershad fell from power it was again expected that democracy would be consolidated in Bangladesh. After all the two major parties, the AL and the BNP, were in the forefront of leading the pro-democracy movement of the 1980s. And in the 1990s we did witness regular elections and rotation of power between the two major parties and electoral alliances. It was hoped that the emergence of a two party system would lead to the development of a vibrant and stable parliamentary democracy in Bangladesh, on the lines of the United Kingdom or other democracies with a two party dominant system.

However, the ideal Razzaq hoped for that the differences between the two parties would be manifested through “amicable bickerings” never materialized. Mainstream electoral parties became pre-occupied with the mission of capturing state power at any cost “staking their all.” The politicians were staking their all not so much to uphold their views but to protect their political future and even life in a “winner takes all” political system.

After 1991, when elections became the only game in town, the party elected to power began to monopolise all state patronage and started demonstrating intolerance towards the opposition adopting various oppressive measures. In its turn, the party in opposition began to use the instruments of movement politics which had been popularised by the parties in their struggle against military rule in the 1980s. The opposition began to express itself through repeated calls for *hartals* and other forms of street protest. The intense competition between the two major parties for political supremacy created and perpetuated a culture of confrontation which contributed to pervasive violence leaving the country mired in an atmosphere of perpetual political crisis.

As political parties became more clientelist and less ideological in their orientation, competition for grabbing public resources encouraged corruption and in some cases criminalization. As discussed earlier in section 2, within political parties feuds between individuals and groups have multiplied due to increasing contestation for a share of the spoils reflecting an erosion in party discipline. Group fights within the organization and concentration

of power in the hands of the top leadership has created a vicious circle. Conflicts within the party could only be settled by a supreme leader. On the other hand, the dependence on an individual i.e. the supreme leader rather than on party rules, has weakened more democratic means of conflict resolution such as election, discussion and debate.

Another major issue of concern, again much discussed in recent years, has been the erosion of intra-party democracy. In my study on political parties (Jahan 2015) I have used six criteria to assess the state of intra-party democracy. The six criteria are leadership selection, candidate nomination, policy-setting, representation of social diversity, campaign and party funding and party induced violence. I note below some of the findings:

Leadership selection

- Though the party constitutions stipulate that the different leadership positions should be elected in the council meetings of the parties, these meetings are not organized regularly and even when they are held, the party president/chairperson is elected unopposed. Councilors delegate their power to the party chiefs to select members of all other bodies. For more than three decades there has been no challenge to Hasina and Khaleda for leadership positions in their respective parties. They have always been elected unopposed and were given the authority by party councils to select other office bearers.
- However, in all the parties there have been changes in the position of the party's general secretary. There were rival candidates and factions supporting different candidates for the party's number two position. But the fate of these candidates was not decided by votes in party councils. Rather, candidates preferred by the party president/chairman, were finally selected. The party president/chairman similarly selected members of all other key bodies though they are supposed to be elected by the party councils.

Candidate nomination

- Of the four parties, the AL and the JI made some effort to follow the Representation of the People's Order (RPO) guidelines during the 2008 parliamentary elections to get the grassroots committees of the parties to prepare a panel of nominees for each constituency. In the AL in most cases the recommended nominees of grassroots committees prevailed. However, in some cases the AL ignored the panel nominated by the grassroots committees. The BNP, on the other hand, made no effort to get

nominations from grassroots committees. Instead seven special teams were formed under the leadership of the National Standing Committee (NSC) of the party to collect information from the grassroots and prepare a list of potential candidates before the 2008 parliamentary elections.

Policy-setting

- Though constitutions of all parties provide scope for policy deliberation and debate within smaller decision-making bodies of the party organizational structure, in practice key policy decisions are frequently taken by the party chief. Other members of the decision-making bodies rarely try to argue a position contrary to the one taken by the party chief. This leads to a highly dictatorial style of policy-setting.
- At the local level, party activists are not engaged in discussion and debate on policy issues. They spend their time mostly planning celebrations of different special days or organizing rallies.

Representation of social diversity:

- None of the parties has met the RPO guideline of having 33 percent women in all its committees. The AL has a better record than others. In the top decision-making bodies of the parties, the AL has 25 percent women's representation. The AL also has a better record in nominating and getting women elected as MPs from the general seats. However, nearly half of these directly elected MPs are 'proxy' women, inheriting seats from their fathers or husbands. Representation of women in the sub-national level committees is low in all the parties.
- The representation of religious minorities in top decision-making bodies of parties is poor in all the parties.
- Businessmen dominate the top decision-making bodies, particularly in the BNP and the JP.

Campaign and party funding:

- The RPO guidelines stipulate a ceiling on campaign funding and require parties and candidates to submit reports to the EC. But these reports are gross underestimates of actual spending. The parties are also required under the RPO to submit annual audited reports to the EC about party funds but these reports are not made public. In actual

practice, most party and campaign funds are undocumented and non-transparent. The bulk of funding for party activities and election campaigns is privately channeled to party leaders while some individual party members also attempt to accumulate their own war chest.

Party induced violence

- Various human rights organizations and the media have regularly reported on high levels of violence such as killings and injuries, as a result of clashes between party activists. Generally, student and youth organizations associated with political parties engage in violent clashes. Some of this violence occurs between parties and some erupts within parties. In many cases the conflicts are not due to ideological differences but due to struggles over distribution of patronage. Thus, the incidence of intra-party violence generally tends to be higher than inter-party violence. Additionally, the incidence of intra-party violence is higher within ruling parties compared to opposition parties. This implies that most of the intra-party violence is caused by contestations over grabbing of business contracts or patronage deals or holding party positions.

5. Conclusion

I have drawn upon Abdur Razzaq's seminal, but largely unread work on political parties as a point of departure for my presentation. Razzaq's perspective on political parties originated in a different age, divided from us not just by time but by an altogether different culture of politics. Razzaq's own liberal sensibilities were informed by a world view influenced by the Westminster tradition of politics and the presumption that this would be reproduced and refined in the post-colonial polity of India. His own subsequent engagement with politics, as an adviser to some of the Bengali leaders engaged in the struggle for democracy in the 1950s, indicated that his earlier political expectations remained unrealized. The Pakistan state that inherited power in 1947 had little faith in democracy and believed that power must be concentrated in the hands of a small elite who would not face a free and fair election.

Razzaq and many of us projected our expectations of a liberal democratic order in a post-liberation Bangladesh. What we could not anticipate was the short life span of the post 1971 democratic order. After all aspirations for democracy had been the driving force behind a quarter century of our political struggle against the Pakistani rulers. Razzaq lived to see the

return of electoral democracy in Bangladesh in 1991 but he did not live long enough to witness the tensions and contradictions which have continued to disturb the working of our democracy in the following decades.

My presentation has attempted to track and interpret this departure from our expectations for the working of the democratic order in Bangladesh. The evolution of political parties using the instrument of political mobilization, inspired by clearly defined political objectives, could not survive beyond the historic movement led by *Bangabandhu* for an independent Bangladesh. The political parties which have emerged as heirs to this movement have progressively deviated from the ideologically purposeful politics which inspired the liberation movement towards a more materialistic conception of society based on an unrelenting struggle for capturing and perpetuating state exclusive power.

Here I suggest that a democratic process driven by political parties without strong ideological moorings, more engaged in capturing the spoils of office tend to be less inclined to practice democracy within their own organization or to strengthen democratic institutions and values. Within such a political order, which has contributed to the 'winner-takes-all' culture of today, intolerance underwritten by violence has come to define the relationship between parties. In such a world Razzaq's conception of an order built on 'amicable bickerings' between political parties, committed to a system of public reasoning to resolve political differences, remains a remote prospect. Within such a polity the workings of a democratic order, where power can peacefully change hands, where the rule of law can be relied upon to tame violence and elected representative can be made responsive to the concerns of the electorate remains no less aspirational today than it was when Razzaq completed his thesis nearly seven decades ago.

The above conclusions on democracy and the role of political parties which I have spelt out will be exposed to empirical verification over the course of the next year or so. We will be able to observe for ourselves whether the forthcoming election will be genuinely free, fair and competitive, conducted with a minimal resort to violence and without excessive dependence on the power of money. Such possibilities will be influenced by the processes through which party candidates are selected and the quality and credibility of the contestants emerging out of this process.

The post-election phase will be no less important. The winning party will need to demonstrate grace in victory, providing space to the opposition to discharge their designated political role without threats of violence or of persecution. In turn, the defeated parties need to accept the outcome of the elections, be willing to participate in the parliament and remain committed to play the role of the official opposition. The media and civil society need to be permitted to freely express their views without exposure to intimidation. The rule of law needs to be applied to all on equitable terms without fear or favour. As inheritors of a noble legacy of struggle for democracy which has cost countless lives we must continue to hope that Razzaq's and our own vision of a democratic polity will finally be realized in our land.

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