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The 2018 Bangladeshi election

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Abstract

Between 1990 and 2009, the violent competition characteristic of Bangladeshi politics was tempered during elections through a system of caretaker government, which managed successfully to adjudicate between parties in a neutral manner. Since the system was repealed in 2011 however, elections have more closely resembled those seen previously under military rule. This paper examines the most recent election, the controversial 2018 landslide victory for the Awami League. Based on a multi-site analysis, we examine how the victory was achieved, reviewing the candidate nomination process, campaigns and election day itself. The ruling party's success lies in efficient party management, with factionalism kept in check, an appealing vision of a developed and 'digital' Bangladesh and, most fundamentally, widespread coercion of political opposition using the apparatus of the state. The election articulates two key characteristics of contemporary Bangladeshi politics: state coercion and developmentalist ambitions.

Keywords: Bangladesh, elections, coercion, security agencies, development, candidates

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1. Introduction

The 2018 Bangladeshi general election saw a third successive victory for the ruling Awami League (AL) party. This is a unique achievement in the country, where no other party has ruled continuously for so long. All three elections have been won with a landslide, albeit for very different reasons. The first, in 2008, was held under a neutral system of military-backed 'caretaker government' and saw a massive swing in electoral support towards the AL. The second, in 2014, was directly administered by the ruling party and boycotted by the opposition for this reason, with over half of seats being won uncontested. The most recent, in late 2018, was fought by the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) in an alliance with other parties (such as Gono Forum) under the banner of the 'Jatiya Oikya Front' (National Unity Front); this brought abysmal results, however, with the alliance winning only seven seats. The election has been mired in controversy, with polarised narratives portraying events. To its detractors, it exemplifies the 'authoritarian' grip that the ruling party has achieved, following a decade of alleged human rights violations, such as disappearances and extrajudicial killings, a stifling of the media and civil society, and targeting action to hinder the opposition. Few observers, however, expected such a resounding victory, with the party's own data reportedly suggesting that they would win between 168 and 220 seats. For the ruling party's supporters, the scale of the win reflects their superior organisation, campaigning and vision for the country's future.

This article examines how the AL won. Our analysis is guided in structure by an informant, an activist for the ruling party in a provincial city, who described the BNP not losing once in the election, but in fact losing three times: in the nomination process, the campaign, and the vote itself. We argue, first, that the ruling party effectively disciplined their members to prevent 'rebel' candidates and reduce factionalism, while the opposition in some cases nominated unknown candidates, and failed to control intra-party rivalries. Second, the ruling party's campaign platform focused on development, capturing the public imagination and creating momentum, while the BNP were incapable of standing their ground, both ideologically and on the streets. Third and finally, the opposition's inability to hold ground meant that ultimately they lost on the day, with their activists few and far between, unable to control polling centres or mobilise their voters. All of this has been made possible by the coercive use of state apparatus, which is crucial to maintaining the political authority of the incumbent. Relying on state security agencies, while increasingly placing development front and centre to the regime's identity, suggests that we should see the 2018 election as encapsulating the 'developmentalist' ambitions seen elsewhere in Asia. This vision appropriates the acclaim the country has received internationally for its notable development successes, and recasts it as a success of the ruling party.

Our analysis is based on research conducted pre- and post the 2018 election, primarily in two provincial cities (defined as having city corporation status) outside of

Dhaka. These have been anonymised as Dalipur and Pariganj. Both of our sites are opposition strongholds. In each city constituency, the AL was elected to parliament in 1973 (prior to the founding of the opposition BNP), and not again until 2008 in Dalipur, and 2014 in Pariganj. In the first stage of research (June-September 2018), the two authors conducted interviews with journalists, political leaders and activists in both cities. Respondents in both sites included prominent leaders from both parties, including mayors and MPs (both sitting and previously elected), as well as senior leaders within the municipal and district committees of both parties, lower-level activists from numerous wings, including the important student bodies of both parties. Here we studied the electoral histories, key lines of intra-party disputes, and strategies of both parties in the run-up to the election. In the second stage, conducted between February and March 2019, a research assistant returned to both sites to meet again with many of the respondents in order to examine how the election campaign and vote were conducted. Findings are supported by extensive consultation of secondary sources which came from collating relevant media articles on a daily basis between 2018 and early 2019 from prominent Bangladeshi English language newspapers.

2. 'Free and fair' elections in Bangladesh

The English term 'free and fair' is widely used in Bangladesh when discussing the state of elections. To some audiences, the term may seem categorical and clear, and as denoting that electoral candidates can compete openly, voters are not coerced or illegally solicited, and elections are peaceful. In Bangladesh, the practice of democracy diverges markedly from such qualities. Most fundamentally, the acceptable skills through which rivals compete include not only their ideological platform and vision, but their ability to induce voters, and intimidate and physically dominate rivals (Ruud 2010; Suykens 2018). As such, elections serve not only to channel the voice and preferences of the electorate, but also to judge the organisational strength of competing leaders, their respective activists and factions (Khan 2010). Patronage and violence are not then antithetical to the practice of democracy here, but key skills that candidates and their groups hone in order to be able to better compete with rivals, and virtues that are widely considered normal and, to an extent, even a legitimate part of political competition. Bangladesh is no exception in this regard, with such practices typical of democracy in many societies (Goldstein and Arias 2010; Vaishnav 2017; Michelutti et al. 2018). A 'free and fair' election in Bangladesh is thus one that can accommodate practices such as vote buying, and violence between rival leaders and parties, yet nonetheless still be considered locally as both free and fair. There are of course boundaries to this. For example, if a leader's activists take up arms to control a polling station and stuff the ballot boxes, this will probably be deemed illegitimate by the electorate; yet if leaders have clashed in the lead-up to the election to establish supremacy, bought votes and induced voters in other ways, this may pass within the boundaries of 'free and fair'.

For an election in Bangladesh to be judged locally as not 'free and fair' indicates that political candidates and parties have not been able openly to employ such skills to

outdo their rivals within reasonable bounds. Such situations most often arise when the apparatus of the state is too politicised and co-opted to manage elections neutrally, and has been directed throughout the election period to hinder the opposition. The points at which this can affect political campaigns are numerous, from the organisation of the election commission, arrests and intimidation of candidates and activists by security agencies, the control of polling centre onelection day itself, the activities of journalists and the media, and so on. The moral yardstick for elections in Bangladesh is, therefore, one that prioritises whether parties are free from state interference to be able to compete, but not one that then judges so much the means by this competition occurs. By this standard, elections in Bangladesh have rarely been free and fair, and for the most part have been conducted under military and quasi-military regimes, with state security agencies enabling the ruling party to dominate in subtle or not so subtle ways. Rather than channelling the ideological preferences of an electorate, and organisational capacities of parties alone, such elections have served to confer legitimacy on the regime, and as a mechanism to maintain stability, for example through the distribution of political patronage to important actors, as is common across the world (Levitsky and Way 2012). We briefly review national elections in Bangladesh's history to contextualise current events.

Prior to liberation, a provisional government under the presidency of AL leader, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, was formed (known as 'Bangabandhu', friend of Bengal), which became a short-lived parliamentary system, with the AL in power (1972-1974). The country's first parliamentary election led to a landslide AL victory, winning 291 of the 300 seats, reportedly capturing 73 percent of votes, with a turnout of 56 percent (Jahan 1980: 84). The opposition, who were hardly represented in parliament, cried foul, with reports of vote rigging (Baxter 1998; Obaidullah 2019: 28-29), as well as stabbings, 50 deaths, the kidnapping of opposition candidates to prevent them from filing nominations, use of government resources to promote the AL agenda, and suppression of news (Lal 1985: 149-151). So fragile was the country, that 1975 saw a constitutional amendment bringing a one-party state under the Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League (BAKSAL) and presidency of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Following a coup, counter coup, and period of martial law, General Zia became president in April 1977, following which there was a referendum on his presidency, in which the regime dubiously claimed he won 99 percent of the votes (Jahan 1987: 211). The return to a multi-party system and the founding of Bangladesh's second major party – the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) – saw more elections to the presidency and parliament, although they were skewed by the hold that the regime maintained over the administration. The government furthermore introduced state administrative structures which bolstered support for the regime, such as the 'gram sarkar' (village government), 'Village Defence Party' (VDP) and 'youth complexes' (Maniruzzaman and Basu 1983). Other strategies to garner votes included staging union parishad elections prior to the general election, thus enabling the regime to rely on newly elected politicians to mobilise votes in their favour, motivated by patronage and state resources (Jahan 1987: 209).

After the assassination of Zia, a presidential election was held, in which the BNP candidate, Abdus Sattar, won by a significant margin, against the AL's candidate, Dr

Kamal Hossain, a previous foreign minister under Mujib and famed contributor to the country's constitution. One factor was the legacy of the institutions outlined above that had been introduced by Zia (Maniruzzaman and Basu 1983). The election was, however, swiftly followed by a further coup, with the chief of army staff, Hussain Muhammad Ershad, taking power, bringing a return to militarised rule for the remainder of the decade. Eventual presidential elections were held in 1986 under President Ershad's military rule, which required Ershad to stand down as military chief. While the BNP boycotted from the outset, the AL participated, leading to the now Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina becoming the official leader of the opposition. Further parliamentary elections were held, now boycotted by all major opposition parties, following which a faction of Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (Rab) under Abdur Rab, who played the role of token opposition, while in fact being loyal to the Ershad regime (Huque and Akhter 1989: 177).

Sustained protest and mass movement brought a return to parliamentary democracy in 1990, following which parliamentary elections have been held regularly, and moderated for most of the period by a system of 'caretaker government', whereby an administration led by a senior civil servant organised elections to ensure a large degree of state neutrality. This system has been regularly interrupted and now dissolved. In 1996, the then ruling BNP directly administered an election which was boycotted by the opposition, eventually forcing a rerun later that year under a caretaker government. From 2007, a caretaker government (widely considered to be in fact a military coup) arbitrarily expanded its mandate, ruling the country for two years, before administering the December 2008 elections. Since 2011, the system has been abolished through constitutional amendment under the ruling AL. The period from 1991 to the present can then be divided into two periods, pre and post the 2007-2008 caretaker government. In the earlier period, both parties competed vigorously to outdo their rivals, deploying all manner of electoral strategies to win constituencies, incorporating pre-election violence, vote buying and patronage. The parties revolved in power, with the losing side each time claiming electoral irregularities. While generally accepted, both domestically and abroad, there are then still serious allegations of electoral bias at the hands of the government during this period. In the 2001 election, for example, AL candidates and other observers have claimed widespread bias on the part of state security agencies (Centre for Research Information 2002).

The latter period begins after the ninth parliamentary election in 2008, which was won by the AL 'Grand Alliance' carrying 57.1 percent of the popular vote, with 262 seats, an achievement all the more impressive, given that voter turnout was at a record high of 87 percent. The BNP meanwhile won 40 percent of the popular vote and yet only 34 seats.¹ The landslide victory, on terms widely deemed locally as 'free and fair', was followed by the dramatic 2014 general election, which in the absence of the caretaker government system (repealed by constitutional amendment in 2011)

¹ Under the first-past-the-post system, the level of popular vote can return dramatically different numbers of seats.

was boycotted by the opposition BNP. Question marks surrounded the regime as it started its second term in office, with a strong sense of public resistance, yet it went on to complete a full five-year term. Voter turnout was remarkably low, at 40 percent, falling significantly from 2008, around half of MPs were elected unopposed, and in a parallel to the role of the Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal in the mid-1980s, the Jatiya Party have served the role of official opposition, while also being aligned to the government. This period saw intense street violence, including petrol bombings organised by the opposition (Jackman 2018), which was clamped down on firmly by the state, and has since supported the Awami League's rhetoric that the opposition are a party of violence and corruption.

3. The 2018 general election

To further foreground our analysis of the 2018 election, we offer a brief overview of events. The 11th Bangladesh general election was held on 30 December 2018, seeing a voter turnout recorded by the election commission of 80 percent, matching the then record turnout of the 2008 election. The AL contested under the 'Grand Alliance', with a number of minor parties, including the Jatiya Party, while the BNP formed the 'Jatiya Oikya Front' (National Unity Front), drawing together a broader political alliance in the absence of their former alliance partner, Jamaat-e-Islami, who have been banned since 2013. Despite the electoral violence typical to the country, such as *hartal* (general strikes), and seen in particular around the 2014 period, the BNP largely failed to mobilise in significant number in a manner that seriously disrupted the country. This reflects a decade-long process through which their organisational strength has been diminished, most notably through sustained arrests, court cases and alleged intimidation at the hands of the security agencies (Jackman 2019a; Jackman and Maitrot 2019). Despite this, there was widespread anticipation that the BNP would stand a chance, if not of winning, then of making serious inroads, reclaiming seats that they had held between 2009 and 2014. It was then billed as a last chance for the BNP to revive their fortunes as a political force. The following sections examine the election through three lenses: the candidates, the campaigns, and the vote itself.

3.1. Candidates: managing the parties

'Some will bribe intelligence, some will look for a party godfather. Everyone is looking for a door, but there are very few.'

Candidate vying for AL nomination

3.1.1. Nominations: Business and image

Candidate selection in both the BNP and AL is controlled formally by selection committees known as 'parliamentary boards' under the leadership of respective party chiefs (the AL's president, Sheikh Hasina, and BNP's 'acting' chairperson, Tarique

Rahman).² Formally the process includes interviews, surveys and some degree of participation by regional party committees. In the run-up to the 2018 general election, for example, prospective candidates within the AL reported surveys being conducted by think tanks and other organisations in constituencies where the party was considering changing their nomination, as well as party committees being sent to the field level and being hosted by and interviewing candidates. It is widely felt that the selection process is highly centralised (Khan 2015), with such processes feeding into a decision-making power that rests firmly in the hands of the party chiefs, although it also recognised that such decisions are also influenced by senior party figures and the patronage they can bestow on prospective candidates (Khan 2020; Jackman and Maitrot 2019).

Thousands of aspirants in each of the major alliances bought nomination papers prior to the election. Not all bought with the intention of receiving the nomination, instead seeing it as a strategy to raise their profile with longer-term ambitions within their party. In almost all constituencies, however, there were serious contenders for the ticket in both major parties and alliances. In the AL, for example, over 4,000 bought nomination papers, and in many constituencies between three and five serious contenders were seeking the party ticket. Diverse factors play into the nomination decision. As in most contexts, the popularity and image of a candidate is important, as is the muscle power they command, and their ability to compete with all the skills required (Ruud 2010; Suykens 2018; Jackman and Maitrot 2019). Candidates bring different strengths, some are from political dynasties, some close to the Sheikh family, some prominent industrialists, others seasoned party figures, others are celebrities, and so on. Crucially, the party chiefs are also lobbied by senior party figures and, in the case of the incumbent, senior administration officials close to the leader can also influence decisions. The incumbent also relies on reports from agencies such as the National Security Intelligence (NSI) and Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI).

Winning the party nomination is then a complex game, in which there are multiple strategies being pursued to ultimately influence the senior party leadership. Candidates smear their rivals to party seniors, and it is alleged (by candidates) that formal processes are often unduly influenced, such that the overall process is opaque, with formal mechanisms often a veneer overlaying the politics behind the scenes. The panels sent by the central party to review local candidates become an opportunity to induce and bribe, and even intelligence reports can be biased. It was often reported by candidates – and widely discussed in Bangladesh – that nominations become a business for senior party officials. One nomination seeker, who previously ran to be MP, described 70 percent of people seeking the party ticket in this way, searching for a party ‘godfather’ who has influence with the party chief,

² In the case of the AL, this consists of 11 members from the Awami League Council, and in the BNP it is formed from standing committee members along with other senior officials within the party.

and then 'acting like their slave' and paying them to arrange the nomination. Another potential nominee who also previously ran in a parliamentary election described this:

'The nomination business increased a lot around 2009. It comes from the top, not the PM, but the people around her. If they stopped this, corruption in the country would drop dramatically straight away. It always existed, but increased a lot in 2009, and now in this election, everyone has to give. Everyone. I am now trying this line. It will cost 5 crore. I will have to sell land for the ticket. You have to pay one time and then you have five years to eat. You need to do corruption, otherwise how can you pay back this money? It's impossible just from doing business. How could you earn this amount of money? The MP gets 1 coti every day from different sources: CNG, city corporation, rickshaw, auto.'

Such nomination business can have a highly detrimental impact on the party, creating instability and discord between the higher echelons and its base, leading to decisions made not on the basis of local popularity and support, but on capacity to induce party seniors financially. More broadly, the nomination process is also a test for party discipline, with official party candidates only announced a short period before the election itself, meaning that the preceding period is fraught with intense competition between candidates and the activists they command (Andersen 2019; Jackman and Maitrot 2019). Through 2018, this competition was often violent, with factional clashes common, and incumbent MPs using their privileged relationship to the administration to have the followers of challengers arrested and intimidated. AL candidates described being stopped from campaigning, their events broken up, their activists attacked by rivals. This competition has a useful function for party seniors, serving as a stage to judge the strengths of leaders and therefore guide the nomination decision. It also, however, comes with significant risk and can inflame factionalism to such a degree that it undermines party stability and elections themselves. In constituencies across Dalipur district, for example, journalists and activists claimed that such rivalries were so intense that they could easily undermine the AL (Jackman and Maitrot 2019).

3.1.2. Controlling the candidates

Key then to the AL's first victory was their ability to show a united front, marked by successfully controlling the nomination business, managing factionalism within the party, and bringing in popular parliamentary candidates. The BNP, meanwhile, are perceived as having brought in many unknown figures and have faced severe intra-party corruption.

Prior to the election, there had been much talk of the AL bringing in a new wave of leaders, in an attempt to appeal to youth voters and marginalise the more criminal elements of the party, whose activities threaten the broader public legitimacy of the party. It was widely perceived that up to a third or half of candidates would be changed. In fact, there were only 43 new faces brought into the AL and grand

alliance, less than one-sixth (Bangladesh Pratidin, 2018).³ This was interpreted as a strength of the party, erring on the side of stability. One explanation for those who did lose the party ticket was their involvement in crime. The election came in the context of a 'war on drugs', in which there have allegedly been hundreds of extrajudicial killings. Prior to the election, the security agencies drew up a list of the politicians (and police members) implicated in the drugs business, with many then serving MPs identified as local 'godfather'. Most infamously, MP Bodi from Teknaf constituency, bordering Myanmar, was identified as a 'yabba godfather' (many of his relatives have given themselves up in a surrender programme which he has coordinated). Some such candidates have then lost the AL ticket. From our research sites, this was the case in the Pariganj, where the ruling MP had been listed as a drugs 'godfather', and also implicated in the murder of a number of local popular (and rival) AL politicians, and the anti-corruption commission had launched an investigation into his activities in early 2018.

The distribution of the party ticket led to much disquiet within the AL locally. There were, for example, around 100 AL nomination seekers who were not given the party ticket and yet continued to campaign and put their names forward to the election commission as independents. Protests for losing AL factions were seen across the country. Three important mechanisms by which the AL managed these internal rivalries were: offering alternative opportunities for the losing faction, choosing candidates that would unify the local party base, and threatening expulsion from the party. Where the rivalry was extreme, in many cases the party was able to offer compensation to the losing candidates. In the case of Bodi mentioned earlier, for example, the party nomination for his constituency was given to his wife. In Dalipur, there is a long history of factional rivalries within the AL that in the past have undermined their success in elections. In past mayoral elections, there have been allegations that the MP has worked against other AL candidates, not wanting his rival faction to grow in strength. In the build-up to the 2018 election, there were descriptions of a rival AL contender for the MP position hoping to sabotage the sitting MP's chances by running as an independent, drawing votes away from him and thereby either winning, or enabling the BNP candidate to win, with whom he had allegedly built a secret alliance. Here, the ruling MP was again given the ticket, and the eldest child from the family of the losing faction was made an MP from the reserve seats for women. In other constituencies within the district, for example, losing candidates were offered seats in the upazila election, which took place in early 2019.

A further mechanism was more coercive, with the warning that whoever went against the party nomination decision would be expelled from the party forever, a warning that was taken seriously by the grassroots. Some members not towing the line were publicly suspended in the weeks prior to the election. Journalists interviewed

³ As is common, minor parties each made bold claims for seats, with the second most prominent party in the alliance, the Jatiya Party, reportedly demanding 100 seats, although eventually receiving 47 to contest.

described aspiring candidates elsewhere in the districts studied also being indirectly threatened by the security agencies to ensure acquiescence. Elsewhere, candidates have been brought in whom rivals dare not confront, or who are too popular to confront. One such type of candidate is celebrities, which brings the added benefit of popularity to the party at a national level. A popular folk singer was made MP in one of the 50 reserved seats for women (and later sang the PM's praises in parliament), the film star Farooque became an MP, and most notably the country's cricket captain, Mashrafe Mortaza, became an MP, reportedly receiving 96 percent of votes. Another type of candidate, as seen in the case of Pariganj, was a candidate whom others could not risk opposing, and who thereby united the party locally: a close member of the Sheikh family (the family of the prime minister).

By contrast, the selection process within the BNP was perceived as chaotic. The party sat alongside a range of minor parties within the Jatiya Oikya Front, under the leadership of Dr Kamal Hossain, a jurist and former AL leader, in the absence of either Khaleda Zia (the jailed party chairperson) or Tarique Rahman (her son, the 'acting' party chairperson, in exile in London). While Jamaat-e-Islami were disbarred from participating, many of their candidates received the party nomination, creating a jarring alliance led by a famed freedom fighter and yet including candidates who were their ideological enemies. Kamal Hossain reportedly later said he would not have formed the alliance if he had known Jamaat candidates would be selected by the BNP. Furthermore, of the alliance, 85 'new' candidates were reportedly selected (Bangladesh Pratidin, 2018), many of whom were reportedly less known figures, without such popular appeal. BNP proposed many new candidates, with, for example, former student leaders, and relatives of previous leaders receiving the nomination, including candidates who attempted to 'reform' the party during the 2006-2008 military/caretaker government regime, and 25 Jamaat-e-Islami leaders. Seasoned politicians lost out of receiving the party ticket, leading to protest at the BNP's party office, and allegations that such decisions were made not on political calculations, but due to the 'nomination business', with senior party leadership being swayed by those who can bring much needed capital to the party and leaders. Confusion around nominations was also due to senior party figures being investigated by the anti-corruption commission on grounds of money laundering, rendering them ineligible for the election. After the formation of the Oikya Front, two partners – the National Democratic Party (NDP) and National Awami Party (NAP) – left, allegedly intimidated by state security agencies.⁴

While, in our cases, well established BNP leaders were selected as MP candidates, the coherence of both parties locally was affected by intra-party rivalries. In one case, there is a sitting BNP mayor, who has, locals allege, developed an informal alliance with the AL MP, which is used to maintain dominance over a rival BNP faction led by

⁴ The BNP decided to nominate multiple candidates in each seat to counter the likelihood of their candidates being rejected by officials. This proved a useful strategy with, by 5 December, 141 of the nomination papers rejected, leaving them without candidates in six seats (The Daily Star 2018c), on grounds ranging from loan defaults to failure to pay electricity bills.

the party's candidate for MP. In the other, there were reports that a former BNP MP, who formally quit the party in early 2019, had instructed his supporters to vote for the AL candidate. Nationally, a section of BNP leaders known to be loyal to Tarique Rahman refused to run in the election, which, it was suggested, indicated dissatisfaction with the leadership of current General Secretary Mirza Fakhrul, a dynamic also supported by leaked phone calls between senior leaders.

3.2. Campaigns: Development vs. democracy

'The opposition couldn't show their strength in the election, it is true. But that's not the only reason for their defeat. The ruling party criticised the opposition and showed their successes, but the opposition just criticised, which people didn't like.'

Journalist, Pariganj

3.2.1. For development!

The AL's second victory lies in their campaign. Here they deployed their core rhetoric to uphold the ideology of the liberation war, and fulfil the dreams of the father of the nation to create 'sonar bangla' (golden Bengal), but also focused more particularly on two pillars: development and anti-terrorism, calling on the country to follow them to 'Bangladesh's road to prosperity'. Throughout the campaign – across speeches, rallies, videos and campaign songs, at the both the national and local levels – development was central. The party's manifesto highlighted the future –economic growth, poverty reduction, job creation, safer roads, rural development, 5G services. Leaders proudly spoke of the achievements over the past decade in power, such as eye-catching projects including the Padma bridge, which is a point of pride, given its construction despite the World Bank withdrawing funding after alleged corruption; as well as mitigating electricity crises, urban developments, such as new flyovers, on-going work on a 'sky train' in Dhaka, and sending a satellite into space (Bangabandhu Satellite-1). The prime minister has publicly called for Bangladesh to become the 'Switzerland of the East', echoing her father's aspiration made following independence. This is seen as a fulfilment and continuation of the party's original campaign platform in 2008 for a 'digital Bangladesh', as part of the 'Vision 2021' for the country's 50th anniversary. A vote for the AL was then portrayed as one for development, with bold ambitions and promises laid out in speeches, such as that there would be zero poverty by 2041, no-one homeless, that new flats would be built for those in slums, and Dhaka would be turned into a modern capital. All of these embody a vision of a prosperous Bangladesh, one becoming more real with the announcement that the country has achieved (lower) middle-income status. The message then has traction, particularly the association between development and the 'digital', felt through the massive proliferation of technologies, access to smart phones and social media, and steps towards the digitalisation of public services. The country's plan to become a developed nation by the year 2041 may be highly

ambitious, and yet as part of an electoral campaign feels coherent with the past decade and a compelling vision for the future.

The AL's campaign visibly dominated the country, with party posters plastered across city streets,⁵ hanging from wires and stuck to electric posts, prop boats (*nouka*, the AL's symbol) were paraded through the streets at events, and the party's campaign was supported by an unofficial anthem, which could be heard continuously across the country. The catchy chorus rang '*Jay Bangla, Jitbe Abar Nouka*' (victory to Bangla, the boat will win again!). The song accompanied the campaign throughout, creating a hype and momentum to the party. Activists with microphones on the streets used the song, it was played at large rallies, and on radio, television and the internet. Familiar party slogans could be heard throughout, such as '*Sheikh Hasinar salam nin, nouka markay vote din*' (accept salam from Sheikh Hasina, and give the boat your vote). These were accompanied by new slogans in line with the party's campaign, such as '*unnoyoner joware vashche desh, tai noukai abar chai*', (the country floats on development, so we want the boat again). Development was central to the local campaign platforms in our research sites. In Dalipur, the MP spoke of the new roads, ridding the city of drugs, and visibly dominated all forms of campaigning with the slogan '*Dalipur egole egobe Bangladesh*', meaning if Dalipur advances, Bangladesh will too. In Pariganj, the candidate celebrated new local infrastructure, the renovation of a prominent park and port, and wider infrastructure in the region, such as the Padma bridge, export-processing zones, new airport, railway improvements, and construction of motorway. The campaign song here rang '*jodi unnoyon mul montro hoy, tahole Pariganj basi Masud bhaike chai*' (if development is the main issue, the people of Pariganj definitely want Masud bhai).

These activities were supported by a massive digital presence. Groups of youth created flash-mobs from the campaign song, with videos spreading through Facebook through the well organised and vast network of ruling party activists, along with livestreams of rallies and campaign events, and selfies of supporters with candidates. Just over a week before the election, Facebook even removed pages and individual accounts from its platform that it described as intending to look like independent news sources, but about which they had evidence of their links to state authorities, and promoting the ruling party. Both campaigns were well covered in the media, with the volume of media output giving the impression in the early part of the campaign that there would be a similarity to previous competitive elections. Certain daily newspapers also published robust criticism of the government during this period, despite allegations of intimidation and a stifling of the press over the past decade.

A second key platform to the party's campaign was anti-terrorism, demonstrating the party's effectiveness at dealing with militant groups, and also characterising the BNP

⁵ The posters used in the campaign were reported by an activist to have cost far more than the election spending limit, not to mention payments to activists, food, transport and other logistical costs.

as a party of misrule, corruption and violence. Nationally, a focus then was on the BNP's past term in office in the early 2000s, portrayed as a period of money laundering, corruption scandals, complicity in the 21 August grenade attack (an attack in 2004 on the prime minister at a party rally, leading to a number of deaths and injuries) and the role of senior party figures in the infamous 10-truck arms haul (where arms were found which, it is suspected, were en route to separatist groups in India, allegedly with support from the regime). This has been a sustained campaign against the opposition, and is an image not helped by the BNP and partners' violent mobilisation around the 2014 election, which saw widespread petrol bombings of buses and other vehicles (Jackman 2018). Were the BNP-Jamaat to return to power, so the rhetoric went, there would be disorder and bloodshed. In the build-up to the election, the verdict on the 21 August 2004 grenade attack on an AL rally was declared, issuing a life sentence in absentia to Tarique Rahman, and a death sentence to then home minister, Lutfozzaman Babar, and 18 others, including senior security agency officials from the period. This rhetoric similarly played out locally. In Dalipur, for example, the MP claimed that in his past two terms in office he has created a peaceful city, overcoming many obstacles to bring calm. Similarly, in Pariganj, implicit within the campaign to bring a member of the Sheikh family to the helm was the promise of controlling party factionalism, which over preceding decades has been the source of most political killings in the city.

Such characterisations are a common form of political rhetoric in Bangladesh, and one that both the incumbent and opposition direct at each other. There are notable parallels. However, between this campaign and how the BNP themselves characterised the AL in previous elections. In the 1981 presidential election victory prior to Ershad's coup, for example, the BNP had emphasised the insecurity of Mujib's time in office, the fears of BAKSAL, and the violence associated with the AL's street politics, which remerged during the campaign in the form of factional disputes (Maniruzzaman and Basu 1983). Similarly, in the 1991 parliamentary election, Khaleda Zia focused on the AL's misrule in the 'years of darkness' during the 1970s, famine and dangers of a one-party system (Maniruzzaman 1992).⁶

3.2.2. For democracy!

The fundamental challenge for the BNP was to launch a coherent campaign without an active figurehead, given the party's chief was and is in prison, and the 'acting chairman' has been in exile in London for over a decade now. This poses a particular problem in Bangladesh, given the dynastic character of national politics, where the authority of party leaders is often inherited, and without which a party loses widespread appeal. Rather than campaign alone, the party formed an alliance a few months prior to the election, known as the 'Jatiya Oikya Front' (National Unity Front). The BNP's campaign was billed as a 'movement' (*andalon*) to mobilise the masses against the injustice of the present government, as is a typical strategy in times of

⁶ It has been suggested here that the AL overly focused on the legacy of Mujib, the public reaction to whom was mixed, while the BNP had a clearer vision of the country's economic future, with greater consideration given to the Islamic fabric of society (Baxter 1998).

political turmoil (Jackman 2019b). As indicated above, the Oikya Front is a mishmash of prominent leaders and parties across the political spectrum, seemingly united by little more than their opposition to the ruling party and aspiration for a 'free and fair' election. Many were previous stalwarts of the AL, including the alliance's leader, Kamal Hossain, who was the foreign minister in the country's first administration, and who still regularly speaks of loyalty to the vision of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Kader Siddique, another prominent member, is famed for being a decorated and feared freedom fighter, and for remaining loyal to Bangabandhu after his assassination, leading an insurgency from across the Indian border. It was then incongruent that the alliance had a functional, if unofficial, alliance with Jamaat-e-Islami. Following the international war crimes tribunal, many Jamaat leaders have been convicted, some received the death penalty, the party was de-registered and unable to officially mobilise, and yet many of its members became candidates in the election. This created incoherence in the alliance: a movement for democracy being led by some of the country's most prominent freedom fighters, while fielding candidates with anti-liberation backgrounds. It was also arguably unattractive to the wider electorate, and created an international image problem, which our BNP informants acknowledged.

The Oikya Front put forward a 35-point manifesto with wide-ranging proposals, many of which responded to areas of perceived weakness in the AL's rule, such as scrapping repressive legislation, withdrawing cases against recent student protestors, introducing prime ministerial term limits, combatting corruption and so on. The grounds on which it critiqued the government were numerous: extrajudicial killings, disappearances, persecution of the opposition, public scandals, such as the collapse in the shares market, the heist of the Bangladesh bank and hallmark scam.⁷ These were subsumed within a wider political agenda to free Khaleda Zia from imprisonment, and bring back democracy. This, by and large, however, failed to capture the public imagination, with the rhetoric described by respondents as tired and uninspiring, lacking a positive vision for the future. This was partly because it echoed the same agenda that has been advanced for the past decade, without substantial new ideas, but also, for some, because the attempt to take the moral high ground smacked of hypocrisy, given the legacy of violence from the 2014 period and corruption when they were last in office.

The AL agreed to dialogue with the Oikya Front, in which the prime minister reportedly listened to the concerns raised by the opposition, offered assurances of a level playing field, and led to some concrete steps, such as a limited reshuffle of police officers from a list that the BNP submitted. In practice, however, the period continued in a similar vein to the past decade, with targeted arrests of opposition activists and leaders. In the month of September in Dhaka city alone, 578 cases of sabotage against thousands of BNP leaders and activists were reported, with reports of crude bombs across the city, despite the city reportedly being almost entirely unaffected by such incidents that month (Prothom Alo 2018). Between 1 September

⁷ A case of state-owned bank lending large and fraudulent loans, allegedly on the basis of political connections.

and 7 November 2018, for example, the BNP claimed that 10,298 of its activists had been arrested (The Daily Star 2018a) in a list submitted to the Prime Minister's Office. Despite receiving assurances that such events would not occur, the BNP later reported that between the announcement of the election schedule on 8 November and up to only a few days before the election, 9,200 activists had been arrested, with 12,588 activists in the BNP and wider alliance injured in attacks (The Daily Star 2018b).

At a national level, there were widespread reports that BNP candidates had not even attended the constituency, out of fear of arrest and possible violence from ruling party activists, and their campaigning was limited to online activities and sending text messages to voters. Rallies across the country were sporadically granted permission, with many being rejected on security grounds. In our studied cities, the opposition leaders did campaign visibly on the streets early on in the election period; however, the closer it got to the election itself, the less they were able to mobilise, hindered by the arrests of their activists and intimidation. By mid-December, the police arrested huge numbers of BNP members. In Pariganj, the opposition claim that across the district, 775 activists were jailed during the election period, with 443 from the city chapter alone, many of whom were in non-bailable cases, meaning they were imprisoned until after the election. Rather than campaigning, activists spent their energy avoiding arrest. When BNP did campaign on the streets, they were also met with overwhelming force at the hands of AL activists. Nationally prominent leaders were attacked, including Kamal Hossain, whose car and entourage were attacked after paying respects to martyred intellectuals at a memorial. One leader, also the general secretary of the Supreme Court Bar Association, was shot, along with his activists, with rubber bullets, allegedly by the police, led by the local officer in charge (OC). Despite the deployment of the army prior to the election, these conditions did not ease.

In Pariganj, what should have been busy local party offices ramping up a campaign were instead described as empty. Activists were in hiding, fearful of arrest by police and detective branch, with a number of their prominent leaders, including the Chhatra dal city president and a local councillor, in jail. The candidate for the city alleged that not only BNP members, but also their families, have been threatened, and that AL activists entered their offices, took away their campaigning materials and voter slips, and took control of their offices. BNP members who returned to their area reportedly had their photos taken by AL activists. A ruling party student leader described the campaign:

'The BNP didn't campaign much. We would chase them if they tried to confront us. Whenever BNP activists with cases got involved in the campaign, the police were immediately informed, and then when police went to search for them, they fled.'

In Dalipur, their activists described being barred from holding programmes by the ruling party. In one incident, they had a large rally scheduled the other side of a river;

however, the AL's activists, armed with weapons, blocked the bridge connecting them. In another incident, their activists were attacked. In both sites, party factionalism also hindered activities. In Dalipur, journalists and activists for the BNP candidate allege that in every ward the sitting mayor's workers were paid to remain inactive in the campaign and work against the party candidate on the election day. In Pariganj, the local BNP chapter has divided loyalties within the party, with some favouring Khaleda Zia, and others her son, Tarique Rahman.⁸ The candidate is more aligned to the former, but has to contend with the lack of cooperation from those closer to the latter. The outcome is that through the election the alliance projected weakness, an inability to campaign in public and to deal with the overwhelming pressure from state security agencies and ruling party activists.

3.3. Votes: Intimidation and control

'The Awami League has the most important things: they have police, activists, and money. All illegal arms are in their hands.'

Senior BNP member in Dalipur

3.3.1. Controlling votes

The final victory for the AL was on the election day itself. The dominant image of the election day was one of calm and peace, with a strong presence of state security agencies guarding polling stations, and the media broadcasting images of voters waiting dutifully. The day before the poll, the army chief called on the public to cast their votes, describing it as the most peaceful election atmosphere ever in the country's history. The government officially recorded serious irregularities in only 22 polling stations, where voting was promptly suspended, and with the government publicly acknowledging problems in those constituencies. The reports from the day in our two constituencies paint a more complex picture, although it should be noted that our account is limited to reports from ruling and opposition activists, local journalists, and the polling data from one of our sites,⁹ and we cannot therefore claim to offer a comprehensive picture of how the day unfolded.

Our constituencies displayed a diverging pattern of voter turnout. Pariganj was one of six constituencies nationally where voting was conducted through electronic voting machines (EVMs).¹⁰ Here the official voter turnout was just below 150,000, which, although double the number for the 2014 election, was around 35,000 lower than that of 2008. Nationally, those constituencies using EVM had on average just over 50 percent voter turnout. In the second constituency, Dalipur, however, which was not conducted through EVM, the official voter turnout was recorded as over 320,000,

⁸ According to the candidate in Pariganj, many of the party's leading activists locally had been coerced to join the AL during the last term, leaving them organisationally weakened, and activists were continuously arrested through the campaign period.

⁹ Voting data per polling station from the second research site was unavailable, because of particular political sensitivities in this constituency, as discussed below.

¹⁰ These six constituencies had been selected through a lottery by the election commission, in the presence of journalists.

around 90,000 more votes than seen even in 2008, making it a strikingly high turnout. Despite being a BNP stronghold, the AL candidate won just shy of 300,000 of these votes, with the BNP candidate trailing in second place, with less than 20,000. Remarkably, the BNP candidate received zero votes in a number of polling centres, and fewer than 100 votes in approaching half of the centres. This is all the more striking when placed against the fact that journalists and voters described low turnout in this latter constituency, estimating that it was around 30 percent.

Prior to the election, many respondents within the opposition had expressed fear that the election would not be 'free and fair', but engineered. A prominent BNP politician in Dalipur, who himself described having personally orchestrated the rigging of local elections in the past, described how elections in Bangladesh often play out in practice, and how he suspected the election would too. We quote him at length:

'Would you like to know how elections work in Bangladesh? There is a presiding officer involved in a centre, with more than one assistant presiding officer, and some policemen. Then there are some polling officers, who give the ballot paper, taking your fingerprint and signature. Imagine there are 100 centres, so 100 presiding officers are needed, 200 polling officers, and 100 assistant presiding officers. There will be political involvement in selecting these, led by the MP. He will organise them from the administration, but here and everywhere there is politics, and if they are managed in this way, who will they support at the voting centre?

'Then come to police, police have no party, their party is money. Now I send TK1 crore to the SP, the money will first go the district intelligence. And then I give TK 1 crore to OC, then TK1 crore to the magistrate. This is TK3 crore. Then between TK1 lakh to TK1.5 lakh to each voting centre, with one SI [sub-inspector] and eight to ten police, then there is BGB [Bangladesh Border Guards], they have five teams, then I will give them 2 or 3 lakh each. If they see the money is coming from the ruling party, then they will receive the money with pleasure, they feel so safe. If it's the opposition party offering the money, it is difficult for them to take it. This is why a non-partisan government is necessary during election in our country.

This isn't the end of the election game ... Now, say I am in charge of this area, as I give the police TK1.5 lakh the night before, so the police will listen to me, and I arrange all his food. So he will follow what I say. So I go to the presiding officer the night before, and ask him to give me some blank ballot papers, if he is dishonest he will himself seal the ballots in the night if they reach an agreement. He and the OC will seal the ballot papers, and put the ballot boxes in the voting centre. A presiding officer is everything in the centre, if he himself steals the vote illegally, what can I do? Engineering works in all elections in this country. Whoever has money and activists in the field will win the election.'

While we do not claim all such mechanisms were deployed in this election, this analysis provides a useful reference point to understanding the final days of the election, and the voting itself. The portrayal locally from both sites was that the election was riddled with fraudulent practices. Voting centres are the stage on which this plays out. In the build-up to the day, the BNP candidate in one of our sites had emphasised to his activists and supporters that that they needed to be out in force on the day itself, controlling the polling centres to prevent any rigging. Competition to physically control centres typically plays out also in the days before the election, and locals described a series of scattered clashes in the city in the build-up, as rivals vied for local supremacy. Towards the end of the campaign, however, it became evident that there was no serious contest to be had, and in both cities, ruling party activists were described as becoming lazy after seeing the activities of the police. A number of ruling party activists went so far as to say that the police 'did our job for us'. A former prominent AL student leader in Pariganj described it:

'Really the police organised the election. The day before, the arrests started and continued through the night to dawn and then until the election was over. AL didn't have to do much, and the BNP knew they couldn't do much because of the role of the police. The police commissioner was transferred before the election, and though he has a *Chhatra dal* background, he is from the same district as the mayor, so he is loyal and trusted.'

Prior to the election, the police had identified over half of all polling stations as at risk of serious irregularities, with plans reportedly in place to ensure security. Privately, a locally senior police officer in one site had confided his opinion that 'If the election is free and fair, the BNP will definitely win. The AL will maybe get 35 percent of the seats'.

3.3.2. Centres, agents and voters

A prominent way in which the organisation of voting can be seen is through the activities of polling agents. Polling agents are key to candidate and party visibility on the ground, and are present within the voting centres themselves. Prior to the election, it was widely reported nationally that the BNP were struggling to find polling agents, who, they allege, were being intimidated by the police and party activists and too fearful to work on election day. The coverage from prominent national newspapers on the day suggested that, during the voting, polling agents from the BNP/Oikya Front were few and far between.¹¹ A similar story was seen in the constituencies studied. The candidate in Pariganj, for example, publicly alleged that they had had to re-draft the list of polling agents a number of times, that a number of people whom they had selected had been intimidated and some were in hiding, leaving them struggling to find anyone willing to take on the responsibility. From the final list they had, between 15 to 20 polling agents were reportedly arrested only a few days before the vote. Activists described the police going to the houses of ward-level presidents and secretaries of BNP and affiliate organisations, and demanding to

¹¹ Newspapers even found cases where people were posing falsely as their agents.

know who the polling agents were and where they lived.¹² They similarly described polling forms and electoral papers held by polling agents being taken by the police, and armed ruling party activists setting up surveillance at key entry points to wards, to intimidate opposition activists.¹³

Kamal Hossain had called on the public to guard polling stations from the morning to ensure that there were no hindrances to voting, but the absence of a party's polling agents signals to their voters that the situation on the ground is unsafe. Journalists described many BNP voters as simply deciding to stay at home. Those who did go found the voting centres surrounded by activists from the ruling party. Across both our sites, there were descriptions (including from ruling party activists themselves) that voters had to cast their vote in front of party activists. In Dalipur, journalists described voters being turned away from polling centres, with AL activists saying: 'You don't need to vote, we know who you will vote for, we will make sure your vote is cast'. Voters similarly described ruling party activists behaving well with them, but also telling them: 'You don't need to vote – the votes have already been cast'. Voters also described abnormally long queues to cast their ballot, with some claiming that the ruling party hired people to stand in line the whole day, in order to slow down or prevent others from voting. An activist for the Chhatra dal in Dalipur described the following:

'On the election day, I went to see a voting centre near my house, and there was a long queue to vote. But after a while I realised that I didn't recognise most of the voters, who all seemed to be the same age and young. I went to the booth and saw some senior brothers who are involved with the ruling party. One activist was insisting to someone that he casts his vote directly in front of him. I didn't say anything because something bad could happen ... afterwards a team of police arrived and observed that voting in the centre was very peaceful, and said it was ideal for any election.'

One widespread claim in the constituency without EVM is that the ballots were stuffed. An AL activist and polling agent during the election described the situation:

'I was a polling agent, so I saw the BNP had no polling agents on the day. We had to make sure the election didn't look too one-sided, so in my centre the BNP got around 300 votes, otherwise people would ask questions.'

¹² In one of the sites, prior to the election local police accidentally released a document to the press with a list of likely polling officials, their personal details such as workplace and phone numbers, and also their political loyalty, listing a number as supporters of BNP or Jamaat.

¹³ Only days before the election, RAB called a press conference, in which they displayed 8 crore taka they allege was intended for voters to sway the election, claiming the money had come through the 'hundi' system from Dubai, and was only a drop compared to the 150 crore already distributed. One of these figures was allegedly connected to Hawa Bhaban (a building in Dhaka from where it is alleged Tarique Rahman ran a parallel government when the BNP were in power). In our sites, the buying of votes was not portrayed as a prominent dynamic, which was explained by the fact that the overall environment was so biased, and so there was little hope (for the BNP) or need (for the AL) to do so.

Hence what should have been a daylong process was allegedly finished in many centres by only 10am, according to journalists in the non-EVM constituency. One journalist described the election official in a centre trying to persuade ruling party activists to leave some ballots for ordinary people. A former prominent Chhatra league leader in Pariganj city described not even needing to go to the polling station on the voting day, knowing that the police would do 'what needed to be done'.

At the national level, a number of prominent newspapers reported openly on the election day itself, bluntly highlighting serious irregularities. Locally outside of the capital, however, the environment was more restrictive. In one of our sites, a journalist was arrested after reporting a voter count that was higher than the total number of voters in that area (and hence voting data from this constituency could not be accessed). Others described losing interest in the election by the end, realising there was no real competition. In the other site, the right to report on the election was not given to all journalists, and different groups within the press club reportedly threatened a minority who are known to be unsupportive of the ruling MP about how they report on events. Even those with passes were not allowed inside the polling centres, and limited to broadcasting from outside. While they may not have reported it, more critical journalists in both sites described the election as a 'show', not an election at all, and a misuse of power. Meanwhile, many international observers were unable to obtain visas in time to monitor the election, and with the election held on 30 December, there was suspicion that the timing maximised the inconvenience to foreign observers, falling for many countries within a holiday period.

4. Aftermath and implications

In the aftermath of the election, the BNP were left with a sense of disbelief, not that the ruling party had seemingly engineered results, but that they had not been better able to confront this and win a decent number of seats as had been predicted by observers. Billed as a last chance for the BNP to rekindle their political fortunes, the devastating results have led to frustration and confusion. Locally, key activists have kept a low profile, out of fear of arrest and intimidation, and nationally the party has lurched from indecision to indecision. Elections in early 2019 to the Dhaka and Mymensing city corporations were boycotted, along with the national upazila elections, and had very low turnout. In this latter election, however, locally many members rebelled and stood as independents, leading to expulsions from the party. The party were at first publicly resolute that the few members who had been elected would not take their oath out of protest. Gono Forum MPs within the alliance, however, joined, followed, as of mid-2019, by all BNP MPs, with the exception of general secretary, Mirza Fakhrul, reportedly under instruction from the party's acting chairman. This dillydallying appears as weakness, with a sense that the BNP fall into the traps set by the AL at every turn.

That the election was by and large peaceful had been highly significant for the government, enabling them outwardly to point to the similarities between the election and those held under caretaker governments, to show voters going to the polls in a

seemingly calm environment. While the electoral process itself may not be credible locally, the fact that the government has maintained the peace is nonetheless highly valued by the electorate, and won the party respect. At the same time, the electorate also values the ability of a party to successfully confront a political regime, demonstrating its resoluteness and strength. By both measures, the ruling party has succeeded and the opposition failed. We should also not underestimate the failure of the opposition to impress the electorate during the campaign (Hasan and Ruud 2019), offering few new ideas to a public that has seen significant socio-economic and cultural change over the past decade and is drawn to the development that the ruling party claims to offer. What is striking, then, about this election is not so much the tools allegedly used to control opposition (intimidation, arrest and so on) but the terms on which this is being implicitly legitimised, namely a popular discourse of development that is intertwined with national pride and the identity of the ruling party, that appears to resemble a developmentalist model more akin to East rather than South Asia.

Serious questions, however, remain regarding the political utility of the margin of victory. It has been argued that elections won with 'huge margins ... generate an image of invincibility that works to dissuade potential elite challenges' (Magaloni and Kricheli 2010: 129). One interpretation for the results is that they were designed to indicate the AL's overwhelming superiority and strength. A further possible explanation is that they in part reflect a groundswell in public support for the AL that had been underestimated in election surveys, and been motivated also by the slick campaign of the party. At the same time, such results also do not present the image of a functioning democracy, which is nonetheless still important for the ruling party in order to maintain legitimacy at home and abroad. A further interpretation is that they in fact indicate an overenthusiasm by local administration and party activists in organising voting on the day. Rather than suggesting party strength, a less generous interpretation is that the extraordinary margin in fact indicates an inability of the political top level to carefully engineer results that both demonstrate strength and dominance, while also maintaining legitimacy, giving the opposition a reasonable presence in parliament. A key question left by our analysis, then, is where the momentum for such a result came from within the regime, and the degree of control that was exercised centrally over the process. Local elections conducted since through 2019 have also been muted (at the upazila level and within a number of city corporations, for example), have met with little public interest, and have had a clear sense of a foregone conclusion. The fundamental question then raised is whether the apathy created by such elections will morph into broader discontent, or whether it can be compensated for by the development and prosperity promised by the ruling party.

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