

Bangladesh's Parliamentary Election 2001

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The parliamentary election just completed is the third successful election carried out since the establishment of democratic system in 1991. Ten years of democracy are a tribute to the nation. This election demonstrates the resilience of the democratic approach. Elections are windows into a society. The purpose of this article is to describe one person's views about the election. I will explain what seem to me to be the main trends in the political process and what are the implications for the future of democratic politics.

This is the third election held under a caretaker government. While the first caretaker (1991) election was required since President Ershad's government was overthrown and some authority was needed to effect the transition, the 1996 and 2001 caretaker managed elections are an innovation in democratic politics. After two such elections what is one to conclude? The concept of the caretaker government developed by former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has proved successful. Both caretaker governments executed their duties in an exemplary fashion and successfully completed the election process. Bangladesh's experience is worthy of introduction in other countries struggling to introduce democratic systems. The caretaker government provides protection against the abuses of the government in power. These are all too common. The experience of Bangladesh can be usefully studied and its relevance for other countries assessed. The advantage of the caretaker government is that it can focus attention on the election and its management bringing fresh energy and focus. The difficulty is the danger of a national crisis emerging in midst of the caretaker government's period. This is a very unlikely danger.

The number of seats in the first past the post system shifted sharply. The following Table gives the seats for the three elections. With a majority of 214 seats the 4 party alliance has a dominating position in Parliament. Most people I speak with hope that the BAL will participate in Parliament. But their position is greatly weakened by the limited number of seats. For example BAL participation in the Parliamentary committees is quite difficult as there are so few members. Joining Parliament will result in a heavy committee work load for the BAL. There are more than 30 committees so each BAL member would serve in several committees to insure fair representation. Since the heart of the Parliamentary process is the operation of the committees accommodating BAL member participation is important. Perhaps this is the time to expand government and opposition staff support for the committee. The emergence of permanent committee staff attached to the party is an important step in strengthening of democracy. This would be an excellent opportunity to initiate the practice.

Number of seats won

Party/Alliance	1991	1996	2001
AL	101	146	62
BNP	140	116	214*
JP(E)+JP(M)	35	32	15
Jamat	18	3	-
IOJ	1	1	-
Other	5	2	7
Total	300	300	298**

* Alliance

** 2 seats yet to be decided

The 4 party alliance strategy was to add the votes of several parties together so as to take advantage of the first past the post system. The strategy worked brilliantly. The result is reflected in the overwhelming share of seats the alliance won. The BAL found no response to this key strategic move.

Turning to the popular vote I summarize the voting in the three elections. The number of voters has increased from 34 million in 1991 to 55 million in 2001. Participation in the past two elections has been at 75%. The 1991 election worked off voter list of 62 million which was probably too high; in 1996 the voter lists declined to 57 million, and in 2001 it rose to 74 million. Participation in the election was high and reflects continuing great interest by the public.

The population vote must be interpreted carefully. The 4 party alliance received 26 million against 22.3 million for the BAL, a difference of 3.7 million. However, we expect that 4.3-4.7 million votes were supporter of the two Islamic parties. In 1991 these parties received 4.4 million votes and in 1996, 4.1 million votes. Taking 4.5 million as a reasonable figure for 2001 for the two Islamic parties the BNP has the support of 21.5 million vs 22.3 million for the BAL. The BAL probably has more support in the popular vote than the BNP has. This was also seen in the two previous elections.

Another characteristic is the convergence of the vote on the two major parties. In the 1991 election the two main contenders (the BAL alliance and the BNP) received 63.3% of the vote. In 1996 this increased to 71.1% and in 2001 the 4 party alliance and the BAL obtained 87.1% (excluding the two Islamic parties estimated votes, it comes to 79.0%). The voters are increasingly focused on the two major parties. This is an important factor in Bangladesh independents will have less and less chance of being elected. The most dramatic examples are the Jamat and IOJ that have strengthened their position only under the umbrella of the alliance and the Jatiya Party

which has lost much of its support. If these trends continue the next election should see 90-95% of the votes going to the two main grouping. This is good for political stability. A Parliament with several parties will be unstable in Bangladesh conditions. The first two elected Parliaments since 1991 were stabilized by the 30 woman seats; the third by the strong showing of the alliance.

Free and Fair Election? Was the election free and fair? The domestic and international observers generally found everything was satisfactory. We examine some of the issues. First the voter lists. There was considerable uproar about voter lists. Scanning the lists revealed there were 4.3% duplicates. On a probability model constructed using this data about 2.5% of duplicates were legitimate. Hence there is suspicion of 1.8% of the votes. There was a wide range of duplication rates, up to 15% in some areas. In areas with such high duplication rates there was potential for abuse. It is unlikely that voter list manipulation made any difference in most constituencies. More important it suggests that this is an area where the Election Commission has done fairly well but can do better. Interestingly there were far more female than male duplicates.

Claims were made that the Hindu vote was less than it should have been. There is no clear evidence of this. However, to the extent this happened it took place in rural areas. Urban areas are much more difficult to influence. The participation rates are such that it is unlikely that there was widespread repression. At least it was not worse than in the 1996 election.

The most illusive impeachment of the election comes from the lists of "terrorists" or trouble makers" supplied to the army and police by the caretaker government.

Some claim these were biased against the BAL and the lists contained important BAL election staff. Detention of these people made it very difficult for some BAL candidates to carry out their duties. Others claim that these lists were indeed the trouble makers and the fact these are mostly BAL simply reflected the real situation! This conflict in views cannot be resolved.

The extent of the alliance victory is not easily grasped by the number so far. The following Table reports the margin of victory (%). This is calculated for various margins for the 1996 and the 2001 election. For the 2001 election the winners by party are also shown. In 1996 the election was very close. More than half of the seats had margins less than 10%. In 2001 only 45 seats had such small margins and of these 19 were won by the alliance. A 10% improvement in the vote would have won only 19 more seats for the BAL. The alliance had 150 seats won by margins of 15% or more. All parties together had only 83 seats won by such larger margins in 1996.

Margin of Victory
(%)

Margin	1996	2001	Winner		
			BNP	AL	Other
<2%	37	8	3	5	0
2-4%	32	12	5	5	2
4-6%	39	10	6	2	2
6-8%	25	10	3	4	3
8-10%	26	5	2	2	1
10-12%	25	12	8	3	1
12-15%	33	20	10	7	3
15-20%	31	25	14	6	5
20-25%	20	19	12	3	4
25+%	32	177	128	25	24
Total	300	298			

Percent margin is the percent by which the winner exceeded the second highest voter receiver

The next point we wish to make deals with the probability of participating in the election. The polling data available indicates that more persons support the BAL than BNP. A poll published just before the election had this conclusion. How to interpret this? The difficulty in polling for the election is that one cannot tell whether a respondent is going to vote. Generally he says he will. Detailed polling data from 1996 and 2001 suggest the same story: The alliance gets a greater share of their supporters to the polls than does the BAL. This is not a consequence of wrong doing. Instead it reflects attitudes, status, and involvement in politics. There is a similar phenomena in the USA where one party has more support but has trouble getting their voters to the polls!

The Bangladesh voter has demonstrated great interest in the electoral process. People will increasingly demand from their leaders policies and programs relevant to their needs. Education and the position of women are leading most persons to have their own views and to break out of the hierarchical framework of the past. Urban voter concerns for law and order were important in the just concluded election. Rural voters found that their candidates were not very knowledgeable or interested in their deepest concerns. The ordinary Bangladeshi voter has an increasingly clear of idea of his problems and what he expects from his leaders. This election widely demonstrated that future political leadership has to focus on the agenda of the people, not only abstractions.