



Polls in Bangladesh: Implications for Future Theory and Practice of Electoral Politics

Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury

Executive Summary

The dust from the elections in Bangladesh of 30 December 2018 is yet to be settled. This paper analyses the lead-up to and the conduct of the polls, including the results and the implications. Yet, it is already apparent that these will not only have consequences for Bangladesh's immediate and future civic evolution, but could also provide interesting theoretical inputs into the understanding of post-colonial political debate.

Introduction

Bangladesh is the world's eighth largest country in terms of population. It exceeds 165 million people. The electorate of voters total 104 million. The sheer numbers involved render the administering of national elections a difficult exercise in the best of times. The times were less than the best on the eve of the 11th Parliamentary elections that took place on 30 December 2018. A sense of deep bitterness and distrust pervaded the national scene. The traditional dichotomy that normally divides the country between its Bengali-ness and Muslim-ness appeared to further widen and deepen. The conduct of the democratic process of the polls in an acceptable manner became a huge challenge for those mandated to organise it, in particular, the Election Commission which was commissioned to perform this task.

The Awami League versus the Bangladesh Nationalist Party

At the elections, the contest was, of course, as has been the case for decades, between mainly the Awami League (AL), headed by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), whose current leadership is complex and merits some explanation. In theory, it is led by its Chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia, arch-rival of Hasina, one of the two so-called "Battling Begums of Bangladesh" who is currently incarcerated on corruption charges, in a legal process, which was actually initiated by the previous government. The baton passed on to her son, in the typical dynastic mode that permeates South Asian politics, Tareque Rahman, the acting Chairperson, who is currently a fugitive from Bangladeshi law, residing in the United Kingdom. The latter still calls the shots from London, some say to the chagrin of many leaders of the party at home, who have questioned his political sagacity, particularly his decision to boycott the 2014 elections, one that had given the AL the unimpeded capacity to consolidate its power in the country. Consequently, the leadership of the BNP devolved on its Secretary General, Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, who, though a diligent, sober and well-regarded politician, is not widely seen as prime ministerial material. Understandably, he turned for leadership to a respected octogenarian jurist of international repute, Dr Kamal Hussain. However, Hussain was no longer in the AL and had his own party called the Gono Forum. So, of necessity, a coalition of the opposition was created. Others, some who were stalwarts in their own right but lacked significant political platform, joined the coalition and

the result was a bit of a political hodgepodge, now named Jatiyo Oikko Front (JOF) or the National United Front. The BNP was undoubtedly the key component of the coalition, which now numbered around 20 parties, as evidenced in the decision of the JOF to adopt as its election symbol – the BNP’s ‘sheaf of paddy’. The AL, already another coalition of 14 or so parties, the Mohajote or the Grand Alliance, whose election symbol was the same as that of the AL – a boat. So, in effect, both the key parties fought the elections as a component of two opposing coalitions, which, between them, covered pretty much the entirety of the wider political spectrum of Bangladesh.

As stated, the politics of the country have traditionally been polarised between the AL and the BNP. Through much of the past, they represented one or the other element of the national divide, Bangladeshi people secular side finding reflection in the AL and their ‘Muslim-ness’ or religiosity in the BNP. Over time, this gradually eroded. Both sides now seek to widen their bases. The AL has managed to obtain support of some Islamic components of the community by pandering to some of their demands like the recognition of degrees from the religious academia, and the BNP has some leading members of the minority community supporting its cause, such as former Chief Justice S K Sinha, unceremoniously dismissed by the executive, and now compelled to live in the United States (US). He has recently authored a book in which he has severely critiqued the ‘rule of law’ in Bangladesh.

Both parties also conform to broadly similar economic agendas. The leadership is broadly middle class in the case of both. The ideological differences are so narrow as to be imperceptible. As a result, politicians often tend change parties without any damage to their essential values, as the parties tend to rally around individuals, or individual families, rather than ideas and beliefs, as distinct from many systems where parliamentary political practises are followed, including in the UK. As the elections unfolded, such cross-overs from one party or coalition to another became a frequent feature, often to the confusion of some elements of the electorate, which compounds the existing complexities.

The AL advanced the narrative that the return to power of Hasina and her party would be essential to maintain the very impressive development that Bangladesh has experienced over the last decade of the party’s period in office. The United Nations reports have stated that the literacy rate among Bangladeshi women is now 94 per cent, higher than the 91 per cent for men. Life expectancy of Bangladeshis is 73 years, compared with 66 years in India.¹ Women’s empowerment has been a major factor in this development story. Women constitute 80 per cent of the 4.5 million workers employed in the garment industry and 20 million are employed in agriculture, industrial and service sectors.²

As for the overall economy, mid-way through Hasina’s term in 2015, the World Bank recognised Bangladesh as a middle income country. The current forex reserves exceed US\$32.2 billion (S\$43.5 billion), almost three times, more than that of Pakistan, a country with which, for historical reasons, Bangladesh’s numbers are often compared. The per capita

¹ Subir Bhoomik, Bangladesh elections: Will Sheikh Hasina’s China-India Balancing be enough to keep power? www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/2174772/bangladesh-election-will-shei... Accessed on 7 January 2019.

² These statistics, and others below, were cited in Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s address at the 73rd Session of the United Nations General Assembly, delivered in New York on 27 September 2018.

income, which was US\$543 (S\$733) in 2006 when the BNP left office, has soared to US\$1,752 (S\$2,365) in 2018. The gross domestic product growth rate averaged a decent figure of six per cent in a sustained fashion through much of the decade and, last year, rose to 7.86 per cent with promises of reaching double digits in a few years. The government never failed to provide the vision of a 'Digital Bangladesh' and took ample pride in bringing the peaceful nuclear power plant programme to fruition to address the energy crisis. Just prior to the elections, the AL brought out its manifesto entitled 'Bangladesh on March towards Prosperity'. It made 21 special pledges, focussed on 33 sectors across the socio-economic spectrum and held out plans for 1.28 million youth.³

In all fairness, this development process was incremental, with contribution from every government that preceded. Nonetheless, it was beyond doubt that praiseworthy advance was made by the AL in the spheres of economic progress and social development. Out of power for 12 years, the BNP, of necessity, emphasised two things. One was governance and democracy deficit and the other was, of course, a future plan. Its own manifesto comprised 19 points. These unsurprisingly emphasised the rule of law, freedom of speech, reforms of the judicial system, repeal of 'repressive laws', such as the controversial digital security act, special relationship with neighbouring and Muslim states and the establishment of a separate Ministry for ethnic minorities, among others.⁴ The BNP narrative to the electorate appeared to be that man (and woman) cannot live on bread alone but the electoral results seemed to suggest that he (or she) might think he (or she) can.

Election Results

For the results of the polls on 30 December 2018 showed a crushing landslide victory for the AL-led coalition, the Mohajote. Out of the 298 (of the 300) seats of the Parliament that were contested, this coalition won as many as 288. The AL alone bagged 257 and its principal ally, the Jatiyo Party, led by former President General H M Ershad, a mercurial and unpredictable political personality of advanced age, won 22 seats. For the JOF, it was an unmitigated disaster. Its total number of was a paltry seven, of which five went to the BNP. The Election Commission announced the results informally the very evening, stating that a huge number 80 per cent of the electorate had cast their votes. Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir was among the winners but it is to be noted that the JOF coalition leader, Hussain, had himself opted not to contest. Almost immediately, the JOF as well as the BNP cried foul. Over the past few months, it had been complaining of the absence of a level playing field, exacerbated by violence and repressive and unwarranted actions against its supporters, including candidates, and the using of state and security instruments against it by the government. To these, the opposition now added allegations of stuffing of ballot boxes by the AL and even state agents and the relentless intimidation of JOF supporters. Hussain formally complained of massive rigging, not just to the Election Commission and the media, but also to foreign diplomats. The opposition rejected the election results and demanded fresh elections under a neutral government.

³ Sheikh Hasina: 'View our Mistakes with Kindness'. <https://www.thedailystar.net/bangladesh-national-election-2018/manifesto-al/21special...> Accessed on 7 January 2019.

⁴ Dhaka Tribune, 18 December 2018. <https://dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/election/2018/12/18/infographic-bnp-s-20-po...> Accessed on 9 January 2019.

Among foreign leaders, the Indians and the Chinese vied with each other to congratulate Hasina on her victory, succeeding in doing so in that order. The Saudis also quickly joined the queue. The reactions from many others, mostly western governments, were far more sobering. In a statement the US, Bangladesh's largest foreign investor, expressed concern about "credible reports of harassment, intimidation, and violence in the pre-election period that made it difficult for many opposition candidates and their supporters to meet, hold rallies, and campaign freely. We are also concerned that election-day irregularities prevented some people from voting, which undermined faith in the electoral process."⁵ The European Union stated that "violence has marred the election day, and significant obstacles to a level playing field remained in place throughout the process that have tainted the electoral campaign and the vote", calling for a "proper examination of allegations of irregularities".⁶ A careful parsing of the comments would show that the entire process, the campaign and the election itself, was questioned, the allegations were described as "credible", and the examination conducted would have to be "proper". The critique was strong and unlikely to be addressed to their satisfaction, as the Chief Election Commissioner has already denied the allegations.

Formation of the Government

Wisely, in a political move that was astute, Hasina wasted no time in announcing the new government at the earliest opportunity on 6 January 2019, and being sworn in the following day. She made some remarkable sea changes. Out of her new ministry of 47 men and women, 27 were new faces. As it that in itself was not enough of a surprise, she did something that was on the verge of a shock which is leaving out some very senior party stalwarts; a number of whom dated back to the time of her father, also the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, under whose stewardship the nascence of Bangladesh had taken place. No other alliance member was included as in the past. The old hands that were discarded from the ministry numbered no less than 36. Her action, bold as it was, seemed to reflect five elements. First, she was willing to make a new start with "clean image" faces, to a certain extent responding to the palpable desire for change among the electorate. Second, this was, after a long time, to be the government of only the AL, which would enable the pursuit of policies for which credit would go to her party alone. Third, it was a demonstration that she was the supreme leader in total control as prime minister unlike what could have been if the opposition was elected, which had no obvious potential head of government to rival her. Fourth, this could be important, if the party seniors can be so easily discarded, it was unlikely the party itself could have been involved in any major 'election engineering', as those now disgruntled could potentially become tellers of tale out of school. Finally, the impact of her actions could, at least for now, deflect discussions away from the conduct of elections to the formation of the government, which meant more in bread and butter terms to the electorate.

⁵ The US reactions, and those of the European Union that follow, are quoted from: NDTV, 'US, European Union Denounce Alleged Election Irregularities in Bangladesh', 2 January 2018. <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/bangladesh-elections-us-european-union-denounce-a....> Accessed on 7 January 2019.

⁶ Ibid.

Possible Ramifications

It may be too soon to list possible ramifications of the entire election process but some points would be worth noting. One, even if there was a perceptible burgeoning sentiment for change in the broader electoral community, it is possible that there were very important stakeholders in the political society-in the civil services, police, civil society, police, women's power groups, business circles and even the military who were chary of change. This was the new 'Bhadralok'⁷ of Dhaka who comprised the nation's 'political society'⁸. They sought to ensure continuity, not necessarily because they loved the AL more but because they loved any changes less. Secondly, because political parties did not represent absolutely distinct ideologies, any differences that exists could be incorporated in 'factions' within one large political party, which would entail intra-party rather than inter-party negotiations. These obviously point to the growth in theory as well in practice of electoral politics in Bangladesh and perhaps in other situations of comparable milieu.

These are some thoughts that come to mind but can only be tested with the passage of time. Right now Bangladesh is at yet another watershed point in its historical evolution that might have to combine progress with some pain.

.....

Dr Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury is Principal Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS). He is a former Foreign Advisor (Foreign Minister) of Bangladesh. He can be contacted at isasiac@nus.edu.sg. The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.

⁷ The term 'bhadralok', literally meaning 'gentle-folk' has been applied by sociologists to those representing the middle classes in the British Indian capital of Calcutta. They were a distinct Weberian status group who, unrelated to the processes of production, did not strictly constitute a class, in a Marxian sense or otherwise. See JH Broomfield, *Elite Conflict in Plural Society* (University of California Press, 1968) pp 5-6. In Calcutta they were mostly upper class Hindus. Societal development in earlier East Pakistan, and present day Bangladesh has also witnessed the rise of a group akin in behaviour-pattern to their earlier Calcutta counterparts.

⁸ For a better understanding of the concept of 'political society', see Partha Chatterjee, *Lineage of Political Society: Studies in Postcolonial Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011). The author, a pioneering interdisciplinary theorist, builds upon his earlier theory of 'political society', reinforcing its salience to contemporary political debate.