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Discipline, Development, and Duress: The Art of Winning an Election in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Bangladesh's ruling Awami League Party has now won three consecutive general elections, an unprecedented achievement in the country's political history. The 2014 and 2018 elections were, however, mired in controversy. Current analyses of the most recent of these center on the institutional and coercive tactics used by the Awami League to limit the political opposition. International media outlets have focused on allegations of vote rigging and intimidation. This article develops a deeper analysis of the Awami League victory, focusing on two city constituencies, both of which are traditional strongholds of the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party. Based on research before and after the 2018 election, it shows that managing party discipline enabled a coherence in the election not achievable by the opposition. The Awami League has, furthermore, successfully built a narrative around development achievements in the country and its vision for the future, both of which have had genuine traction with the public. The 2018 election revealed three pillars of the Awami League's success: discipline, development, and duress.

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Introduction

The December 2018 general election in Bangladesh resulted in a remarkable victory for the ruling Awami League, whose “Grand Alliance” with minor parties won 288 of the 298 seats contested and counted on the day.¹ This returned the party for a third consecutive term in office, which is an unprecedented political achievement in the country's history. The opposition alliance, known as the National Unity Front (*Jatiya Oikya Front*) and led by the country's main opposition party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), won only seven seats (and one more in a re-balloting a month later). The magnitude of the victory and way it was achieved led to its

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¹Bangladesh's parliament, the *Jatiya Sangsad*, consists of 300 directly elected seats and a further fifty seats reserved for women, which are distributed following the general election in proportion to the number of directly elected seats won. Following the 2018 election, results were announced for 298 seats as polling was suspended in the Brahmanbaria-2 constituency due to violence (and later won by the BNP candidate) and postponed in Gaibandha-3 due to the death of the opposition candidate prior to the election (it was later won by the Awami League).

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characterization in international media outlets and reports from foreign governments as a rigged election, with reports describing voter intimidation, limits to free speech, and ballot stuffing.² The impression created was of an election won largely on the day of voting through coercive manipulation. Post-election analyses in part corroborated such a view, including various “mechanisms of manipulation” deployed by the government to quell the opposition.³ Other commentators, however, have suggested the opposition coalition lost because it lacked public support, a clear agenda, and relevance.⁴ Our intention in this article is to provide a deeper analysis of how the Awami League achieved this landslide victory. Our analysis builds on the widespread recognition that elections are a poor indicator of democracy, and an important tool in authoritarian or autocratic settings worldwide.⁵ Ostensibly democratic institutions such as candidate selection processes, voting, and election commissions are in practice often a veneer for what has been termed “electoral authoritarianism.”⁶ This describes situations in which elections do not primarily channel inter-party competition and the voices of voters, but protect and consolidate the interests of those in power. The more precise roles that elections play, however, differ. They can provide a degree of legitimacy at home and abroad to a government, help discern the stronger elements of a ruling party, serve as a tool to distribute patronage among elites, and be used to co-opt opponents.⁷ Elections are also part of an increasingly wide array of strategies used in authoritarian states to sustain and extend the authority of those in power. These are often intended “to mimic the presence of horizontal and vertical accountability, but also prevent the actual practice of it.”⁸ Examining the art of winning an election is therefore important for understanding some of the strategies deployed by governments to sustain their rule.

Our analysis is guided by an Awami League informant from Khulna, a mid-sized city, who described to us how the BNP lost the 2018 election. The BNP lost, he argued, not once, but three times in 2018. Their first loss was in terms of party discipline. Political parties need to ensure that they choose the right candidates and are able to discipline them. Candidates who do not receive a party endorsement can choose to stand as independents, thereby taking some of the party’s voters with them and threatening the chances of the party locally. In this regard, the Awami League managed to keep potential rebel candidates in line, while the BNP succumbed to intra-party tensions. The second loss concerned the visions articulated by each party during the electoral campaign. The Awami League’s message of development was consistent with the country’s experiences over the past decade, and arguably more attractive than the BNP’s message of a return to democracy. Finally, the BNP lost the vote itself. Having lost ground on the streets and in the popular imagination, on election day the BNP were represented on the ground by very few polling agents, and few of their activists responded to the party’s call to guard polling stations against potential vote manipulation. Together,

²In the days following the election for example *Time* (2018), *Financial Times* (2018), *New York Times* (2018), US State Department (2019, 26).

³Riaz 2019.

⁴Hasan and Ruud 2019.

⁵Schedler 2006; Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009; Levitsky and Way 2010.

⁶Schedler 2006.

⁷Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009.

⁸Morgenbesser 2020, 1054.

these points suggest that the art of winning an election in Bangladesh is a delicate and multifaceted task.

This article builds on research conducted before and after the 2018 election in two cities, Khulna and Comilla, that traditionally have leaned toward the BNP. Comilla city has a population of approximately 440,000 and constitutes the Comilla-6 constituency for electoral purposes. The Awami League won this seat in the country's first election in 1973 (before the BNP was even founded) and again in 1996. Since 2008 it has been represented by Awami League MP AKM Bahauddin Bahar, although from 2012 until 2022 it also had a BNP Mayor (Monirul Haque Sakku). Khulna has a population of 720,000 and constitutes the Khulna-2 constituency.⁹ While the Awami League also won this seat in Bangladesh's first election in 1973, they only won again in 2014 (represented by Mohammad Mizanur Rahman). Since 2018, the seat has been held by Awami League MP Sheikh Salahuddin Jewel.

During our first stage of research in June and September 2018, we conducted forty interviews with political leaders, activists, and journalists in these cities. These included former MPs, mayors, senior leaders of various wings of both parties, and low-level activists. Key lines of analysis were the cities' electoral histories, intra-party dynamics, and party electoral strategies in anticipation of the general election. The second stage was conducted between February and March 2019 by a research assistant, who returned to both sites and conducted fifteen interviews, primarily with mid-level activists and journalists, to ascertain how events had unfolded during the 2018 election. We have supplemented this qualitative data with a review of secondary sources, primarily newspaper articles from major daily newspapers.

The following section offers a brief overview of Bangladesh's electoral history and is followed by three empirical sections corresponding to the arguments outlined above.

A brief history of elections in Bangladesh

When British India was partitioned in 1947, the province of East Bengal became part of Pakistan, conjoined with provinces in the western part of the Indian sub-continent, yet separated by thousands of kilometers. Over the next two decades, the Awami League led a campaign for Bengali independence. This culminated in an armed uprising in March 1971 known in Bangladesh as the Liberation War. India intervened on the side of Bangladesh in early December and on December 16, Pakistani military forces in Bangladesh surrendered.

Bangladesh's first national election in 1973 was won in a landslide by the Awami League, led by the "father of the nation" Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (popularly known as Bangabandhu, "friend of Bengal"), who became prime minister.¹⁰ Left-wing opponents alleged widespread election violations by the Awami League, including vote rigging, stab-bings, killings, kidnapping of opposition candidates, the illegal use of government resources, and censoring the media.¹¹ After its electoral victory, the Awami League amended the constitution to legalize a one-party state led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

⁹Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics 2022.

¹⁰The Awami League won seventy-three percent of the popular vote and 291 of 300 parliamentary seats. See Jahan 1980, 84.

¹¹On allegations of vote-rigging, see Baxter 1998; Obaidullah 2019, 28-29. On other allegations, see Lal 1985, 149-151.

After Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was assassinated by disgruntled military officers in 1975, a coup, countercoup, and martial law ensued, eventually bringing Liberation War hero and military chief General Ziaur Rahman to power. He was appointed president in April 1977 and consolidated his status with a referendum in which he allegedly won ninety-nine percent of votes. President Ziaur then formed the Bangladesh Nationalist Party in 1978.

President Ziaur was assassinated in 1981 by a group of army officers. This led to another period of martial law and a second military coup, with the army's chief of staff Hussain Mohammed Ershad becoming president in 1983. During this era of military domination, elections continued to be held, although the results were always skewed by the military character of the regime and its grip on the apparatus of the state. But in the late 1980s, a popular movement for democracy led by students temporarily unified the political opposition (principally the Awami League and BNP) against Ershad and led to a return to parliamentary democracy in 1990.

This, however, unleashed fierce competition between the Awami League and BNP, both of which sought to extend their influence at the grassroots in order to dominate politically. Elections and wider politics during this period were often violent and coercive, characterized by national strikes (*hartal*) called by the party out of power, the ruling party's use of the state to quell unrest, and politicians routinely patronizing infamous gangsters and muscular cadres against their rivals.¹² Despite the intensity and violence of this competition, power changed with each electoral cycle. The BNP won the 1991 national election, the Awami League won in 1996, the BNP won again in 2001, and the Awami League won in 2008. Throughout this period the Awami League was led by Sheikh Hasina, daughter of the late Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and the BNP by Khaleda Zia, widow of the late Ziaur Rahman. Although there are broad ideological differences between the two parties, in many respects they mirror each other organizationally. Both are led by political dynasties, and each is supported by a range of interest groups. These wings of the parties include students, youth, and workers, among others.

Crucial to holding together this fragile parliamentary democracy through the 1990s and 2000s was the military as guarantors for a system of caretaker government. Under this system, national elections were administered by a caretaker government for a fixed period that was led by a civil servant, usually a chief justice appointed by the sitting president.¹³ Under this system, although the military may have been politicized, it was one step removed from everyday politics. This arrangement broke down in 2007 when the military-backed caretaker government, led by the former governor of the country's central bank Fakhruddin Ahmed, greatly expanded its mandate and ruled the country for two years in an attempt to root out corruption, introduce wide ranging reforms to strengthen public institutions, and reform the organization of the country's major political parties.¹⁴ This caretaker period ended with the general election of December 2008, and a landslide victory for the Awami League and its allies (under the

¹²Jackman 2019a.

¹³This system emerged in 1990 when President Ershad handed power to the then-Chief Justice, who established a caretaker government to oversee the 1991 general election. This arrangement was institutionalized through a constitutional amendment in 1996.

¹⁴Ahmed 2010.

“Grand Alliance”), winning 262 of the 300 seats in Parliament. Of the record total turnout of eighty-seven percent of registered voters, the Awami League won forty-nine percent of the popular vote and the BNP received 33.2 per cent.¹⁵

After the Awami League returned to power in 2009 under Sheikh Hasina, the system of caretaker government was abolished by a 2011 Constitutional amendment. The 2014 election was boycotted by the BNP because it claimed that the Awami League would not ensure fair electoral conditions. This resulted in a much lower voter turnout of 39.58 percent, around half of MPs being elected unopposed, and an ally partner of the Awami League (the Jatiya Party) serving as the official opposition. The period saw intense unrest in major cities, along with violence in Dhaka, where bombings of public spaces and buses were orchestrated by the opposition.¹⁶ In hindsight, the BNP’s decision to boycott the 2014 election was a serious misstep, leaving the party without a modicum of state protection or access to the spoils of office. Former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia was imprisoned on corruption charges, leading her son, Tarique Rahman (who lives in exile in London), to become acting chairman of the BNP.

The 2018 election was portrayed by our respondents as a last chance for the BNP to claw back some of its former status and resources. In response to the Awami League’s Grand Alliance, the BNP formed the National Unity Front (*Jatiya Oikya Front*) in October 2018. But the electoral results, as noted above, were abysmal for the BNP. To critics, the election results were the latest manifestation of the ruthless authoritarianism of the Awami League, characterized by extrajudicial killings and disappearances, along with threats to and pressure on media members and civil society organizations. Few analysts, however, predicted such a resounding victory for the Awami League, with the party’s own pre-election data reportedly suggesting that they would win between 168 and 220 seats.

In the following sections we offer an empirically grounded analysis of how the election unfolded to understand how the BNP lost in such spectacular fashion. In so doing we shed light on the characteristics of contemporary politics in Bangladesh. Indeed, a wide variety of terms have been offered to conceptualize the country’s present politics, including “hybrid regime,” “competitive authoritarianism,” and “democratic authoritarian party-state.”¹⁷ Rather than add to this list of labels, we examine some of the key dynamics that characterize politics in the country under the ruling Awami League. Our analysis highlights three key pillars on which the authority of the Awami League rests: party discipline, development, and duress. Together these help explain how the Awami League has maintained the longest period of political control since Bangladesh became independent in 1971.¹⁸

¹⁵Riaz 2019, 86.

¹⁶Jackman 2019b.

¹⁷Jackman and Maitrot 2022, 1520.

¹⁸The Awami League has now been in power for over thirteen years, the longest a party has stayed in office during the country’s history. Sheikh Hasina is currently the longest serving prime minister in the world. Our analysis is certainly not exhaustive, and there are many other important facets for understanding this victory which require further analysis. These include co-opting of the military, the party’s relationship with the Jatiya Party, its management of international opinion, and its successful co-option of other political elements, such as Hefazat-e-Islam.

"The BNP lost this election three times"

Party (in)discipline

"Some will bribe intelligence, some will look for a party godfather. Everyone is looking for a door, but there are very few."¹⁹

The Awami League's first victory of the 2018 general election was their success managing the candidate selection process. As noted above, deciding party representatives is a process fraught with tension, where formal procedures for candidate selection are often usurped by backroom deals, competition within parties frequently breaks out into street confrontations, and politicians find "allies among enemies."²⁰ These tensions result from a political system in which authority is at times highly localized, with local politicians holding huge discretionary power in their domains, often enabling them to disobey the interests of their party's center.²¹ In both the BNP and Awami League alliances, thousands of aspiring and incumbent politicians bought party nomination papers. Some did so with their longer-term future in mind, knowing they would not win during this cycle, but seeing the process as an opportunity to get noticed by their party's chief. In most constituencies, between three and five contenders sought their party's nomination. Over four thousand Awami League party members put their names forward for the 300 parliamentary seats.

In both parties there were many formal processes for allocating nominations. Media images at the time showed the BNP's acting party chief, Tarique Rahman, attending a meeting with senior party members via Skype from London to conduct interviews and discuss prospective nominees. Awami League candidates we later interviewed described detailed surveys sponsored by the party in sensitive constituencies across the country to gauge the popularity of possible candidates. The Awami League also sent party committees to the field to interview candidates and relied on reports from the country's intelligence agencies to ascertain potential candidates' local profiles and activities. For many potential candidates, however, these processes were a façade for hidden maneuvers and backroom deals for the League's endorsement. This process is known in Bangladesh as "nomination business," in which influential party figures are bribed by prospective candidates to influence official party decisions. One respondent who has unsuccessfully stood as an MP candidate on a number of occasions estimated that seventy percent of nomination seekers try to cultivate relationships with senior party figures in the hope of being able to bribe them to sway the nomination. He described how candidates search for a party "godfather" and then "act like their slave." Another unsuccessful parliamentary candidate described the process to us:

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 five crore

¹⁹A candidate vying for an Awami League nomination.

²⁰Jackman and Maitrot 2021. Also see Kuttig's 2019 account of students vying for party tickets in Rajshahi and Khan's 2020 analysis of the role that clientelist networks play in the nomination process.

²¹One example is when an aspiring candidate is denied a party's nomination and chooses to run as an independent candidate, known as a "rebel" or "renegade" candidate in Bangladesh's English language press. See Ruud 2020; Jackman and Maitrot 2021.

[fifty million] taka.²² 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 one crore every day from different sources. CNG [auto-rickshaws], the city corporation, rickshaws.

In popular discourse, the nomination business is a major source of instability for the Awami League. At the top it signals corruption, and locally brings incoherence and friction if it results in the official party nomination being allocated to a candidate who is less popular locally. In the run up to the 2018 election, tensions between potential Awami League candidates frequently broke out into street clashes. Those already in office were portrayed by their party opponents as using their influence over the security agencies (particularly the police) to intimate and sometimes arrest supporters of their challengers. A nominee for the Awami League ticket in one constituency described being stopped from campaigning by security agencies, having his events disrupted, and his supporters attacked. On the one hand such competition is a useful indicator of the respective local strength of candidates. When left unchecked however, these divisions risk undermining the party's local prospects. Rebel candidates running as independents can defeat official party nominees, and unsuccessful candidates can lend support to the opposition by siphoning off votes.

The Awami League's success in the 2018 election in part then stemmed from successfully managing intra-party dynamics. Through disciplining party members at both the top and bottom, and by endorsing popular candidates, senior party officials projected an image of unity and stability. In the run up to the election, rumors circulated that a new generation of younger aspiring politicians would be giving party nominations, with potentially a third or one half of candidates changing. In practice however, the party's central leaders were relatively cautious, only bringing in forty-three new candidates.²³ Some incumbent Awami League MPs lost their party nominations due to criminal associations.²⁴ A major government initiative in the run up to the election was a declared war on drugs, during which a number of local ruling party politicians and even MPs were implicated by security agencies as godfathers of the trade. For example, Abdur Rahman Bodi, MP for Teknaf in the southeast of the country, was named in a report by the Department of Narcotics Control as the country's most notable *yaba* (a common methamphetamine smuggled from Myanmar) distributor.²⁵ Locally, many MPs are rumored to be involved in such illicit activities, but for those whose activities were widely known, losing the party ticket was a real possibility. In Khulna, the incumbent MP, Mohammad Mizanur Rahman, was portrayed by our respondents as a criminal figure who was the target of an ongoing investigation by an anti-corruption commission.²⁶ He also had been implicated in the murder of a

²²One US dollar is equivalent to 102.69 taka.

²³Mamtaji 2018. Minor parties in the coalition made bold claims for seats, with the second most prominent, the Jatiya Party, reportedly demanding 100 seats. They eventually received forty-seven to contest.

²⁴There is no comprehensive data on how many of the incumbent Awami League MPs who lost the party nomination for the 2018 election did so because of an association with crime, and indeed a number of notorious MPs did receive the party nomination. *The Daily Star* 2018a.

²⁵BDNews24 2014.

²⁶Also see *The Daily Star* 2018a.

popular local Awami League leader during a intra-party factional dispute. He did not receive the nomination in the 2018 election.

Managing the unrest that resulted from the allocation of seat nominations was not a straightforward task. After the League announced its candidates, approximately 100 failed nomination seekers said they would stand in the election as independents, and protests and clashes occurred in Dhaka. Awami League officials used three strategies to control these tensions.

First, they offered some unsuccessful candidates other opportunities within the party or state bureaucracy. In Comilla, the sitting MP, AKM Bahauddin Bahar, was accused of undermining another prominent Awami League leader in the previous two mayoral elections.²⁷ In the 2018 election, Masud Parvez Khan Imran, the brother of the Awami League's mayoral candidate in the city, was rumored to be considering standing as an independent so as to draw votes away from the incumbent and enable the BNP candidate to win. To control this threat, party officials nominated the former mayoral candidate for a parliamentary seat reserved for women. Elsewhere in the same district, losing factions were offered nominations for seats in local elections. In the case of MP Bodi in Teknaf, although he lost his seat, his p[lace was given to his wife.

A second strategy used by national party officials was to identify and target popular candidates, such as celebrities. These included the film star Akbar Hossain Pathan (popularly known as Farooque) and the country's former national cricket captain, Mashrafe Mortaza.²⁸ In Khulna, Sheikh Salahuddin Jewel, a close relative of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, was chosen to replace the incumbent godfather MP Mohammad Mizanur Rahman, in a move than no contender would dare to challenge.

The third strategy deployed by party officials was coercion. Before the election the Awami League issued a firm warning to its members that whoever did not tow the party line would be expelled. In Comilla district, journalists described to us how some aspiring candidates had received indirect yet clear messages from security agencies of the consequences that standing as an independent would bring.

The opposition meanwhile appeared incoherent, both as an alliance and within the BNP itself. Because of the absence of the BNP's chairperson Khaleda Zia (then in jail) and acting chairman Tarique Rahman (in exile in London), the alliance was led by a famed jurist and former Awami League member, Dr. Kamal Hossain. His status as an elder statesman associated with the war for independence and as someone who had international standing provided the BNP alliance with credibility. But this was also inconsistent given that a number of the alliance's MP nominees were associated with Jamaat-e-Islami, an organization that had sided with Pakistan during the 1971 war and had been banned from contesting elections since 2013. Dr. Hossain even later commented that he would not have served as chair of the alliance had he known such candidates would be chosen. In addition, there was a widespread sense among our respondents that many of the candidates nominated by the BNP alliance did not have the gravitas or popular support needed to be serious contenders. One explanation is that the BNP also engaged in the "nomination business" for potential candidates. After years out of office, the party's finances were seriously depleted, hence candidates who could bring

²⁷Jackman and Maitrot 2021.

²⁸Mashrafe Mortaza was elected to represent Narail with ninety-six percent of votes.

much needed capital were viewed as opportunities. Meanwhile, the Awami League-controlled government tried to exploit weaknesses and destabilize the Jatiya Oikya Front. Senior members of the alliance were investigated by the national Anti-Corruption Commission, and two partners – the National Democratic Party (NDP) and National Awami Party (NAP) – left the alliance in the run up to the election, allegedly due to intimidation by security agencies.²⁹ In Comilla and Khulna, well-established BNP figures received the alliance's nomination, yet were undermined by intra-party rivalries. In Comilla, the then-BNP mayor Monirul Haque Sakku was portrayed by our respondents as a supporter of the Awami League MP Bahauddin Bahar, with whom he, it was widely believed, had an informal alliance. In Khulna, some of our respondents described a former BNP MP instructing his supporters to vote for the AL. In both cities we were also told that a BNP split at the national level between the acting chairman Tarique Rahman and party general secretary Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, fed into the rivalries seen on the ground.

“Switzerland of the East”

“The opposition couldn’t show their strength in the election, it is true. But that’s not the only reason why they lost. The Awami League criticized the opposition and showed off their successes, but the opposition just criticized, which people didn’t like.”³⁰

A second facet to the Awami League's victory was the character and traction of their electoral campaign. The party's well-worn rhetoric focuses on the liberation war and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's dream to build a *sonar bangla* (golden Bengal) that would be the “Switzerland of the East.” Development is central to this dream, reflected in the Awami League's 2018 campaign call to follow “Bangladesh's road to prosperity.” Development permeated almost all aspects of this electoral campaign, including song lyrics, speeches, and videos. The party's manifesto highlighted jobs, lower poverty rates, rural development, and plans for 5G mobile service. Candidates spoke of new infrastructure projects such as the Padma bridge, a future metro rail in Dhaka, and Bangabandhu-1, the country's first satellite, launched in May 2018.³¹ The extraordinary spread of new technologies in everyday life in the country over the past ten years is consistent with these claims about developing the country. Hence the party's bold ambitions for achieving zero poverty by 2041, modernizing Dhaka, and providing villages with the same services as urban areas felt coherent to voters. Seventy-six percent of respondents in a September 2019 opinion poll after the general election agreed that the economic situation in Bangladesh was either “good” or “very good.”³²

The party's campaign blanketed all corners of the country. City streets were plastered with posters of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Prime Minister Hasina, local Awami League candidates, and images of the party symbol (a boat). In addition, the party's unofficial

²⁹The BNP nominated multiple candidates for each seat to counter the likelihood of their candidates being rejected. This proved a useful strategy as 141 of their candidates' nomination papers were rejected on grounds ranging from loan defaults to failure to pay electricity bills. This left the party without candidates in six constituencies. See Liton et al 2018.

³⁰A journalist in Khulna.

³¹The Padma bridge, the largest bridge in Bangladesh, connects the country's southwest, north, and east. It was opened in 2022 by the Prime Minister.

³²IRI 2020.

anthem could continuously be heard, its chorus proclaiming: “*Jay Bangla, Jitbe Abar Nouka*” (“victory to Bangla, the boat will win again!”). Other slogans associated the party with development, such as “*unnoyoner joware vashche desh, tai noukai abar chai*” (“the country floats on development, so we want the boat again”). In Comilla, the sitting MP pointed to new roads and the government’s success in ridding the city of drugs while campaigning under the slogan, “*Comilla egole egobe Bangladesh*” (“if Comilla advances, Bangladesh will too”). In Khulna, the Awami League candidate celebrated new infrastructural projects such as a park, port, the Padma bridge, an airport, motorway, and railway. His campaign song began with, “*jodi unnoyon mul montro hoy, tahole Khulna basi Jewel bhaike chai*” (“if development is the main issue, the people of Khulna definitely want Jewel bhai”).

Crucial to the Awami League’s strategy was associating the BNP with violence, corruption, and terrorism.³³ The League portrayed the BNP’s last term in office as a period of chaos and corruption, exemplified by the BNP’s alleged complicity in a grenade attack on Sheikh Hasina at an Awami League rally in 2004³⁴ and an incident that is known as the ten-truck arms haul.³⁵ Violent urban unrest and petrol bombs orchestrated by the BNP and its allies during the 2014 election bolstered this narrative.³⁶ The sitting MP for Comilla, Bahauddin Bahar, claimed to have brought peace to the city, while the Awami League candidate for a seat in Khulna promised to overcome the city’s violent past of factional conflict. These efforts were supported by a strong online presence, designed to reach youth and attract new voters. Groups of teenagers started flash mobs with the Awami League’s campaign song, which they then posted on Facebook, alongside live streaming events and selfies of activists and leaders.³⁷

In terms of television coverage, both parties received coverage of their campaigns and events, and the lack of any stark biases with airtime in this particular period created a sense of anticipation for a real political competition.³⁸ Many daily newspapers published critical pieces aimed at the government. Despite this relatively equitable media landscape, the BNP was unable to articulate a compelling vision for the country, while being hampered at the street level by Awami League activists and the security agencies (in particular the police). The Jatiya Oikya Front oriented its campaign around rights, with a call to return the country to democracy and release Khaleda Zia from jail. As noted above however, the Jatiya Oikya Front was an odd ally for the BNP, as it included former

³³Such characterizations are common currency in Bangladesh, and the Awami League often has been portrayed in a similar way by the BNP. In the 1981 presidential election prior to Ershad’s coup, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’s time in office was portrayed as a period of insecurity when the Awami League deployed violent street politics. Cf. Maniruzzaman and Basu 1983. In the 1991 parliamentary election, the BNP portrayed the Awami League’s rule in the 1970s as the “years of darkness.” See Maniruzzaman 1992.

³⁴Prior to the election a life sentence was given to the BNP acting chairman, Tarique Rahman, and a death sentence to the Home Minister, Lutfozzaman Babar, as well as eighteen others, including senior security agency officials.

³⁵This refers to an incident in 2004 during the BNP’s last term in office when security agencies found ten trucks full of arms in Chittagong, which it is suspected were on route to the United Liberation Front of Assam (a separatist group in India). A number of senior bureaucrats and BNP figures (including the then Home Minister) have subsequently been convicted for orchestrating this.

³⁶Jackman 2019b.

³⁷Facebook removed pages and accounts that were purporting to be independent news but were suspected to be linked to the state and the Awami League.

³⁸More broadly it has been widely argued that the media is under tremendous political pressure. This is felt in a variety of ways, ranging from repressive legislation (such as the Digital Security Act) to legal cases against prominent editors and pervasive everyday pressure against journalists, all of which has led to high levels of self-censorship. See Riaz and Zaman 2021.

Awami League stalwarts and famed liberation war figures, as well as leaders associated with Jamaat-e-Islami (which notoriously opposed Bangladesh's independence struggle against Pakistan). The alliance also issued a thirty-five-point manifesto which outlined a wide ranging program of institutional reform and critiqued the government on issues such as extrajudicial killings and disappearances. According to journalists we spoke with, these campaign messages did not have significant traction at the local level because they were not new or exciting issues, while a call to return the country to democracy was inconsistent with the own BNP's behavior in and out of office.

Unlike the 2014 election, cities were largely free from electoral violence in 2018, and yet activists and leaders of the BNP faced a barrage of police cases. In September in Dhaka alone, 578 cases of sabotage were filed against thousands of BNP members, alleging crude bombs had been thrown in the city, though reporters could find no evidence such events took place.³⁹ Between September 1 and December 27, 2018, the BNP claimed that around 20,000 of its members and leaders had been arrested.⁴⁰ In Comilla and Khulna, the BNP was barely visible by mid-December. Party officials in Khulna claimed that 775 of their members had been arrested in the district, many of whom were held without bail. Those arrested included the local president of the BNP's student wing and a city council member. Party activists described their families being threatened, Awami League activists entering their offices and taking away campaign documents, and being photographed by Awami League activists during campaign events. One Awami League student leader described the campaign this way:

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

Similarly, in Comilla opposition activists described being prevented from campaigning. In one incident they were directly blocked in the street by Awami League activists wielding weapons.

Not all obstacles stemmed from the ruling party and the government, however. Journalists and activists in Comilla allege that workers for the BNP mayor, Monirul Haque Sakku, were instructed and even paid to not campaign seriously, and actively campaigned against the BNP MP candidate on election day. In Khulna the local BNP was also split into factions. These internal conflicts fragmented the BNP campaign on the ground.

Duress on the frontline

"The Awami League has the most important things: they have police, activists, and money. All illegal arms are in their hands."⁴¹

The third aspect to the Awami League's victory was what happened on election day. Images broadcast nationally and internationally of the day were largely of voters dutifully queuing at polling stations against a backdrop of police diligently ensuring the peace. The day before polling, the army's chief of staff, Aziz Ahmed, had encouraged people to vote, describing it as the most peaceful election in the country's forty-seven-year history.

³⁹Prothom Alo 2018.

⁴⁰The Daily Star 2018b, 2018c.

⁴¹BNP Mayor of Comilla.

Irregularities were officially recorded, yet only in twenty-two polling stations was voting suspended. In Comilla and Khulna however, a different picture emerges.

As noted earlier, these two constituencies are traditional BNP strongholds. Khulna was one of six constituencies in which electronic voting machines (EVM) were used, while voting in Comilla was by ballot boxes in polling booths.⁴² Nationally, the official voter turnout rate was eighty per cent, but in the six EVM constituencies the turnout rate was just over fifty per cent. Consistent with this, Comilla-6 had a turnout rate of 76.5 per cent, and Khulna-2 of 49.1 per cent. Voting data from Comilla-6 and observations from our respondents, however, cast doubt on whether such statistics reflect real voting behavior.⁴³ In Comilla the official data suggests this was the busiest election in the city's history, however local journalists described witnessing extremely low turnout. Furthermore, a number of polling centers in the constituency recorded zero BNP votes, and almost half recorded less than one hundred BNP votes. While inconclusive, this data is inconsistent with the historic popularity of the BNP in the city and the fact that at the time it had an elected BNP mayor. It also resonates with reports from our respondents in the city of ballot stuffing and voter suppression.

In our research prior to the election, BNP respondents in both cities had expressed the likelihood of the election being a show. In Comilla one prominent BNP figure, who described having personally helped rig local elections in the past, outlined how elections typically work. He described how presiding officers are chosen, the police paid off at all levels, and how both police and presiding officers stuff ballot boxes the night before voting. In both cities respondents we spoke to after the election claimed neither Awami League activists nor politicians had to do very little to win the vote on polling day. Student activists from the ruling party in both cities claimed that the police, as one said, "did our job for us." A prominent former Awami League student leader in Khulna said that he did not bother to vote, knowing the police would "get the job done." He explained:

Really the police organized the election. The day before, the arrests started and continued through the night to dawn and then until the election was over. The Awami League 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 brought in before the election, and though he has a *Chhatra dal* [the student organization affiliated to the BNP] background, he is from the same district as the mayor, so he is loyal and trusted.

At polling stations, our respondents described seeing very few BNP polling agents. National newspaper reports suggested that the BNP had struggled to find people who were willing to represent them on the ground at polling stations, given the potential risks of intimidation from security agencies and ruling party activists. In Khulna the BNP candidate, Nazrul Islam Manju, described how he had to re-draft the party's list of polling agents on a number of occasions, given that so many of his activists had gone into hiding. Only a few days before the election, he described how between

⁴²This was the first time EVMs had been used in a general election in Bangladesh. Previously they had been used in some municipal elections.

⁴³We were unsuccessful in accessing polling data from Khulna, which is likely due to a scandal that arose in this district following the election. After the vote count, a local journalist named Hedait Hossain Mollah pointed out that the officially reported voting data from Khulna-1 constituency indicated a turnout higher than the voter register. This led to the returning officer correcting the information and the journalist being arrested. See *The Daily Star* 2019.

fifteen and twenty of the party's local polling agents allegedly had been arrested in the city. Other respondents described how police approached local BNP leaders and demanded to know who their polling agents were. On election day activists from both alliances described voters having to cast their vote in front of Awami League activists. Journalists in Comilla described voters being told by Awami League activists on their arrival at polling stations that they need not vote, as they already knew who they would vote for and would vote on their behalf. Voters interviewed in Comilla after the election described Awami League activists as polite but insistent that people did not need to vote as the votes had already been cast. Voters there also described abnormally long and slow queues, the implication being that people had been hired by the Awami League to slow down the voting process and frustrate voters. One activist for the student wing of the BNP described it as follows:

On the election day I went to see a voting center near my house, and there was a long queue to vote. But after a while I realized that I didn't recognize 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 cast 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 center was very peaceful, and said it was ideal for any election.

At other polling stations in Comilla, however, there were reports that voting was not slowed down, but in fact sped up, with all votes cast by the end of the morning. One respondent, a local journalist, described seeing one polling official remonstrate with Awami League activists to leave some votes to actual voters. One polling agent and activist for the Awami League described it as such:

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 center the BNP got around 300 votes, otherwise people would ask questions.

Similar irregularities were reported by the media in Dhaka. In Khulna and Comilla, however, journalists were far more restricted in their movements. Although many had been allocated passes to travel around the constituency on election day, their movements were highly limited by security agencies, and they were not, as is usually the case, allowed inside polling centers.⁴⁴

Conclusion

The lack of widespread violence, street clashes, and confrontations on Bangladesh's 2018 election day gave a degree of credibility to the government's claim that the election was held in a free and fair manner. Images in the media of voters waiting in orderly queues were also supported by positive comments from the limited international observers.⁴⁵ Yet, in a political system in which the ability to disrupt and confront opponents on the streets is a key political skill, the fact that the election was conducted in such an ostensibly smooth manner without a caretaker administration is revealing. It suggests the sitting Awami League government has strong command of the country's security

⁴⁴Also see *The Daily Star* 2018d.

⁴⁵Observers from the Asian Network for Free Elections cancelled their mission due to visas not being granted on time.

agencies and their coercive capacity, more akin to military periods in the country's history than to parliamentary rule.⁴⁶ Commentary in the international media and academic analyses highlighting the centrality of state coercion to the electoral victory is, in our view, then correct.⁴⁷ Our analysis corroborates this view by pointing to both everyday intimidation of opposition activists and leaders during the campaign period in the two cities we observed, as well as a clear sense of irregularities on election day itself. Our analysis, however, also suggests that far more was at play in this election than state coercion.

The election also demonstrated the capacity of the Awami League's senior leadership to discipline and effectively manage the party's hierarchy. Elections are opportunities for senior leaders to discern the most effective local leaders but are also tests of their authority over the party base. As has already been noted, it is extremely common for renegade Awami League politicians to compete as independents if they are denied the party's nomination, thereby potentially splitting the Awami League vote.⁴⁸ The fact that the Awami League has remained in power for over a decade also concentrates political competition within the party, because it signals to aspiring politicians that a successful career is more likely if they align themselves with the Awami League. This creates even greater competition for positions within the party, and the resources and opportunities that accompany them. The successful disciplining of the party's base during the 2018 election was in part achieved through intimidation by both the security agencies and the party itself, which illustrates a second important sense in which coercion underpinned the League's electoral success. This was demonstrated during the electoral campaign, when party leaders made concerted efforts to clean up the more egregiously criminal elements of the Awami League, arrested senior leaders of the party's youth wing (Jubo League), and reshuffled leadership in the party's student wing (the Chhatra League). This capacity to discipline the party base reflects a deeper institutional shift in the country's politics over the past decade, in which domestic security agencies have played an increasingly central role in maintaining the authority of the party on the streets.⁴⁹

The Awami League's reliance on security agencies was matched by a compelling ideology that was relentlessly promoted and often had genuine traction among the public.⁵⁰ This speaks to the country's history and the party's legacy as the liberator of the nation as embodied in Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, but also speaks to a generation without any memory of or tangible connections with the independence campaign. Stark inequalities and poverty remain clear and pressing realities, yet for a majority of people, everyday life has changed significantly for the better since the Awami League returned to power. Although this is not of course solely due to the Awami League's time in office, these improvements are promoted by the party as their success, which can be linked to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's dream of making Bangladesh the "Switzerland of the East." Having now been out of office since 2006, the BNP cannot claim any responsibility for the country's recent successes and is consistently characterized by the Awami

⁴⁶Jackman and Maitrot 2022.

⁴⁷Riaz 2019.

⁴⁸The effects of such intra-party rivalries are particularly seen in local elections. In various rounds of Union Parishad elections in 2021 and 2022 the number of successful rebel candidates approached fifty per cent. See Shawon 2022.

⁴⁹Jackman and Maitrot 2022.

⁵⁰Hasan and Ruud 2019.

League as a party of venality and misrule. The 2018 election thus revealed three pillars to the Awami League's success – party discipline, development achievements, and an ability to coerce – all of which distinguish it from the opposition.

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