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Bangladesh: Political Trends and Key Players

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Observer Research Foundation

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Strategic Trends presents a broad scrutiny of events and actors in the contemporary geo-political context for an informed appraisal of the near future. This series forms an important part of ORF's **Net Assessment Project** launched in January 2011. The project, in the present edition, is an attempt to study key developments and policy makers, especially in the political and military sphere, in South Asia with a view to map the emerging challenges facing India.

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Bangladesh: Political Trends and Key Players

Introduction

Bangladesh is one of India's closest neighbours, not only in geographical proximity but by their shared history. India has deep strategic interests in Bangladesh in terms of peace and stability of the region. In turn, a stable and sustainable democracy in Bangladesh is vital to such a strategic relationship.

India undoubtedly occupies a prominent place in the internal politics of Bangladesh. The bitter rivals of Awami League—Bangladesh Nationalist Party and Jamaat-e-Islami—have built their political fortunes on supporting extremist elements and by opposing India at all levels. Awami League, a comparatively liberal and centrist party with deep roots in the liberation movement, is currently swimming against the tide by trying to build bridges with India. The country is scheduled to go to elections in 2013 and with such a short time left, the Awami League government's overtures, unless reciprocated substantially by India, could prove to be its political undoing. To a large extent, the key rests with India. Thus, a study of Bangladesh politics—political parties, their leadership, their ideologies and attitudes—can provide a useful roadmap in understanding this dynamics and future trajectory of the country's future.

Political system

Bangladesh has a multiparty parliamentary political system. There are over 100 political parties in the country but only four political parties dominate the political scene: Bangladesh Awami League (AL); Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP); Jatiya Party (JP); and Jamaat-e-Islami (JI). Among these, AL and BNP enjoy majority support of the people and have alternatively formed the government since democracy was restored in 1991. Other parties, JI and JP, have not formed any government on their own but have enjoyed power by participating in coalitions.

Bangladesh has a unicameral legislature. The Parliament known as Jatiya Sangsad has 345 members, of which 300 are directly elected by the people. The remaining 45 seats are reserved for women elected through the process of proportional representation. The President is the head of state, but in practice the executive power rests with the office of the Prime Minister. The PM and the Cabinet are, however, answerable to the Parliament.¹

The country is divided into seven administrative divisions: Barisal; Chittagong; Dhaka; Khulna; Rajshahi; Sylhet; and Rangpur. Rangpur is the newest division created in January 2010. In all, there are 64 districts across the country.

Map of Bangladesh showing administrative divisions



***Since Rangpur was created later, all data available are of the other six divisions. Prior to January 2010, Rangpur was part of Rajshahi.*

Bangladesh has an estimated population of 158,570,535 (July 2011 est)², 61.1 per cent of which is in the 15-64 age group; 34 per cent are below the age of 14; and 4.7 percent above 65 years. Ethnically the country is homogenous in nature: 98 percent of its population is Bengali while the remaining two percent includes tribals and non-Bengali Muslims. The state religion is Islam (89.5 percent are Muslims; 9.6 percent, Hindus; and other minorities are 0.9 percent of the total population).³ The literacy rate is 47.9 percent, —with 54 percent for males and 41.1 percent for females.

Political Parties

Name of party	Founding year	Self-description	Support base	Current head
Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)	1978	Nationalist, democratic and liberal	All sections/ classes of people: religious, military and business groups	Begum Khaleda Zia
Bangladesh Awami League (AL)	1949	Liberal, democratic, secular and nationalist	All groups of people, including ethnic and religious minorities	Sheikh Hasina Wajed
Jamaat-e-Islami (JI)	1979	Islamic and conservative but pragmatic	Religious and business groups	Matiur Rahman Nizami
Jatiya Party (JP)	1986	N/A	Popular in Rangpur region of Bangladesh	Hussain Muhammad Ershad

Source: *Political Parties in South Asia: The Challenge of Change South Asia Regional Report by International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, Stockholm, 2007*

Awami League

Awami League (AL) is one of the oldest political parties of Bangladesh and came into existence in Dhaka on June 23, 1949. The party is a breakaway faction of the erstwhile All India Muslim League. AL played an active role in the country's liberation movement. The party's charismatic leader, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, led the country's freedom struggle. AL takes pride in its history and projects itself to be the champion and protector of the spirit of the liberation movement. The party pledges to uphold secularism, democracy and Bengali nationalism, which are the very values stated as the State's basic principles in the first Constitution of 1972.

The party's popularity is reflected in its electoral performance. In the last four parliamentary elections since 1991, the party has either

emerged as outright winner or secured second place with minimal difference of vote percentage in comparison to the victor. For instance, in 1991, AL secured 30.1% of total votes while winner BNP got 30.8% of total votes. In 1996, meanwhile, AL formed government by securing 37.4% of overall vote share, and in 2001, it got 40.2% of total votes as BNP bagged 42.7% of votes. In the December 2008 election AL rode to victory by securing 49.2% of total votes. The percentage of vote share suggests that the popularity of AL has increased in every election.

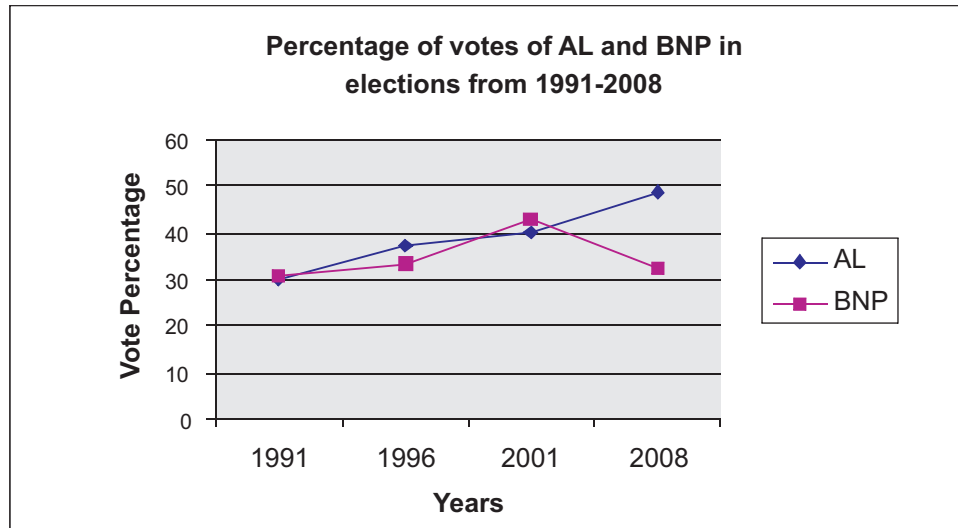
Initially, AL was regarded as a socialist organisation but ideologically it has recently evolved into a left-of-centre party. As a result, some of the party's policies today differ from that of its founder Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's. The party's stand on economy is a case in point. Soon after Independence, AL pursued the development of a socialist economy for Bangladesh. The first AL government led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (1972-1975), in tune with the party's ideology, adopted socialist economic policies, pursued a strategy of state intervention and controls over the trade sector, the services sectors, agriculture inputs, and price etc.⁴ Since 1991, however, the party has become a strong votary for free market economy.

The party occasionally realigned its policies in accordance with the changing circumstances both at home and across the world.⁵ For instance, Mujibur Rahman's support to socialistic economic policies was the result of the Cold War politics that existed during the '70s. During Bangladesh's freedom struggle, Mujibur Rahman was backed by the erstwhile Soviet Union, making him and his government a pariah in the eyes of the United States and its allies. In such a situation, Mujib

sought support and assistance from Soviet Union to help the new nation come out of the economic hardships caused by the armed struggle. But the internal and external developments of the '90s led the party to rethink its economic strategies.

The assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975 not only changed the political landscape of the country but also the fate of the party's economic policies. Gen Zia-ur-Rahman and subsequent military-led governments suspended the socialist economic policies, pursued a foreign policy which brought the country closer to the Islamic and capitalist block, and distanced itself from India and Russia. During the military regimes (1975-90), AL's activities remained restricted.

After democracy was reintroduced in 1991, AL formed the government for the first time in 1996. The world had become uni-polar by then and globalisation was beginning to sweep many areas across the globe. The internal situation in Bangladesh had also changed. People were now accustomed to the policies pursued by the military regimes that encouraged privatisation. Sensing these changes, AL moved away from its old socialist economic policies. So when it formed the government in the 1996, the party embraced a free-market economic policy, liberalisation and privatisation.⁶ Prior to the 2008 elections, the party reiterated its commitment to a free market economy.⁷



Secularism had been another important aspect of the party's ideology, making it distinct from its main rival, BNP. Still, doubts remain about the party's genuine commitment to this cause. During the first Awami League regime, though religious parties like the Jamaat-e-Islami were banned, AL did not do enough to punish the members of the party who were collaborators of the Pakistani forces in 1971.⁸ Again, Mujib revived the Islamic Academy, banned production and sale of alcohol and the practice of gambling, which had been one of the major demands of Islamic groups.⁹ Mujib sought Bangladesh's membership to the Organization of Islamic Conference (IOC) and the Islamic Development Bank (IDB). The party was also accused of not doing enough to strengthen secularism in the country.¹⁰

With time, the party increasingly emphasised its allegiance to Islam. In a manifesto issued by the party in time for the 2008 election, it declared, for the first time after 1971, that if voted to power, it will not enact any law contrary to the dictates of the Quran and Sunnah.¹¹

In fact, the party did not bother to adhere to its ideology and instead chose, when it saw the need, to forge alliances with rightist and openly communal parties. During the first Sheikh Hasina government (1996-2001) AL tried to co-opt the JI during the opposition's boycott of parliament, which considerably enhanced the political acceptability of the JI. Days before the postponed January 22, 2007 election, AL surprised many by forging an alliance with Khilafat Mazlis, a radical Islamic political party.

However, despite its growing fascination with Islam, the party has also taken a strong stand against religious extremism. Prior to the 2008 election, the party pledged to take action against the religious extremism that had surfaced in the country during the time of BNP-JI-led coalition government (2001-06). In conformity with the electoral promise, the party acted strongly against extremist groups and their leaders after it formed the government.

The party's reaction to religious extremism had an inherent political motive. Religious extremism in Bangladesh also existed during the previous AL rule (1996-2001) and the party hardly took any action then.¹² The need for the party's action against religious extremism has emerged as AL was targeted by militant groups during the BNP-JI regime. Again, it provided an opportunity to boost its image both domestically and internationally and prove that it was different from BNP, which was criticized for its inept handling of the issue of religious extremism. On the issue of foreign policy, AL wants to pursue friendly relations not only with the country's neighbours but as well as developed countries which would help the socio-economic

development of the country. This was particularly highlighted in the election manifesto of 2008 which stated that if voted to power the party would not only develop friendly relationship with its neighbours but would also work on promoting regional connectivity. In the election manifesto of 2008, AL also mentioned its intention of discussing bilateral issues with India.

Consistent with its election manifesto, the party formed a government in 2009 and began pursuing a foreign policy that focuses on attracting investments to the country. The AL government has approached various countries, including China and India, for investments. Again, to promote regional connectivity, the government is focusing on improving infrastructure by building new airports, roads and bridges. The country has also urged India to provide transit to Nepal and Bhutan so that land connectivity could be established between them via India.

It is worth mentioning that AL is regarded to be friendly to India, a characteristic which made it vulnerable to criticism from its rival parties like the Bangladesh Nationalist Party. Undoubtedly, the relations between India and Bangladesh have improved significantly whenever the party has been in power, but it would be wrong to assume that the party has given any special privileges to India against Bangladesh's interests. In fact, there had been occasions when the party backed out on issues despite its promises, in the face of threats to its own interests.¹³

The party enjoys substantial nationwide support that cuts across sections. However, minorities have a special leaning towards the party.

In this regard, election performance of the Awami League in districts with high minority presence is notable. There are 10 districts in Bangladesh which have a high density of minority population, varying from 20 to 35 per cent of total population: Gopalganj; Maulavibazaar; Khulna; Narail; Thakurgaon; Bagerhat; Magura; Sathkira; Pirojpur; and Dinajpur.¹⁴

Performance of AL in some constituencies with minority population of around 20 to 35 percent. (1996 & 2001 elections)

1996		2001	
Constituency	Candidate's performance	Constituency	Candidate's performance
Dinajpur-2	AL Won	Dinajpur-2	AL came second. Difference 8,261 votes
Magura-2	AL Won	Magura-2	AL won
Narail-1	AL Won	Narail-1&2	AL won
Khulna-1&5	AL Won	Khulna-1	AL won
Barguna-1	AL Won	Barguna-1	AL came second
Maulavibazar	AL won all 4 seats	Maulavibazaar	AL candidates stood second. In Maulavibazar 1 & 3 AL lost to BNP with a difference of 1742 votes and 13197 votes respectively
Khagrachhari	AL won	Khagrachhari	AL stood second with a vote difference of 38,550
Rangamati	AL won	Rangamati	AL came second, Vote difference 17,744
Bandarban	AL won	Bandarban	AL won

Source: Statistical Reports of 7th & 8th Parliamentary Elections, Bangladesh Election Commission in <http://www.ecs.gov.bd>

The party has a Central Committee, an Advisory Council, and various subcommittees to look after its activities. The Presidium is the highest policymaking body of the party. The party also has a wide network of organisations at the grassroots. However, the ultimate power is in the hands of Sheikh Hasina, daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and chief of party since the 1980s.

Performance of AL in some constituencies with minority population of around 20 to 35 per cent. (2008 elections)

Constituency	Candidate's performance
Dinajpur-1	AL won
Magura-1	AL won
Narail-1	AL won
Khulna-1	AL won
Khulna-5	AL won
Barguna-1	AL won
Maulavibazar	AL won in all the 4 seats
Khagrachhari	AL won
Rangamati	AL won
Bandarban	AL won

Source: Results 9th Parliamentary Election in <http://www.ecs.gov.bd>

Sheikh Hasina is one of the two surviving siblings of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. She was abroad along with her sister Rihana on August 15 1975, the day when her father and most of her family members were killed by a group of army officers. She went into exile in India, and while there was elected president of Awami League in 1981. She has formidable control over the party, as could be clearly seen from the inability of the military backed caretaker regime (2007-08) to remove her from the position of party leader despite its initiatives to carve out an alternative leadership for the party.¹⁵

Sheikh Hasina has often been accused of being autocratic in dealing with her party's affairs. Bangladeshi political analysts are of the view that Sheikh Haisna aims to consolidate her position in the party by being ruthless in crushing any dissent. Many of the top influential leaders who spoke about party reforms were ostracized within the party after AL came to power after the 2008 elections. These leaders

were ignored in the naming of cabinet members and lost their prestigious presidium membership in the central committee, the party's top policymaking body.

After the 2008 elections, the party tried to promote new leaders who could replace the elderly ones who had dominated party politics for far too long. As a result, young blood was infused in both the party presidium¹⁶ and the ministry. Majority of the ministers in 2009 AL ministry were named for the first time. However, most political analysts theorise that Sheikh Hasina's motive behind such a step was to consolidate her own position in the party: she wanted to reduce her dependence on the ageing leaders who have played an important role in running the party.¹⁷

Sheikh Hasina has crossed sixty years¹⁸ of age. She is yet, however, to give any hint that she is set to retire and give way to a rightful successor. This has triggered speculation about the future leadership of the party. Keeping in mind the party's history of succession, which has remained mostly within the family of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, it can be assumed that relationship with Mujib's family, especially with Sheikh Hasina, will play a key factor in the future developments. (A profile of probable successor to Sheikh Hasina is discussed in a latter section of this paper.)

The Bangladesh Nationalist Party: BNP is one of the country's two most influential political parties. It was founded by the military ruler , Gen. Ziaur Rahman, in September 1 , 1978, as his platform for contesting the presidential election.¹⁹ The party won, giving

democratic colour to the military dictatorship. The assassination of Gen. Rahman in 1981²⁰ changed the course of the party's politics.

BNP promotes a far -centre-right policy combining elements of conservatism, corporatism, nationalism, strong defence, anti-anarchism , and anti-communism. The party was responsible for bringing religion to the centre of the nation's politics and identity. This trend was initiated by Gen. Zi-aur-Rahman, the present leader's husband when he ruled the country. Zia was known for his anti-India stand. BNP is known for its antagonist attitude towards India. In the last BNP rule (2001-06), relations between India and Bangladesh reached a record-low.

After the death of Zia, the military continued to stand by the party. Its bonhomie with the army, however, was short -lived. Succeeding chairman of BNP, and President of Bangladesh, Justice Abdur Sattar was ousted by then Army Chief Gen. HM Ershad on grounds of incompetence in 1982.²¹ At that time many leaders abandoned the party and joined the military government. At this point, Khaleda Zia, the widow of Gen. Ziaur Rahman took control of the party and became chairperson of BNP. The party was a major opposition to Ershad's regime. BNP under Khaleda Zia's leadership formed a seven-party BNP alliance and launched a relentless struggle against Ershad's military regime. The party played a leading role in the pro -democracy movement that led to the ouster of military ruler HM Ershad in 1990.

Today the party has accepted the development of democracy as one of its primary objectives. BNP has been participating in the subsequent

elections since 1991. However, doubts are being expressed about the party's sincerity in strengthening democracy in the country, as it deals with the various institutions like the Election Commission, a necessary component for the smooth functioning of democracy.

The system of caretaker government had to be installed in the country due to the broad -based irregularities witnessed in the 6th parliamentary election of 1996, which was held under the party's government.²² Similarly, the January 2007 election had to be postponed as the BNP, which was in power just before the elections, tried to fix the parliamentary election by appointing party people into key positions in the Election Commission and the judiciary, which were to play a crucial role both in running the election and in the caretaker government.²³ Dismayed by the broad -based irregularities, the opposition declared a boycott of the election. The election was thus suspended and Emergency was declared. A military -backed interim government came to power and ruled the country for two years.

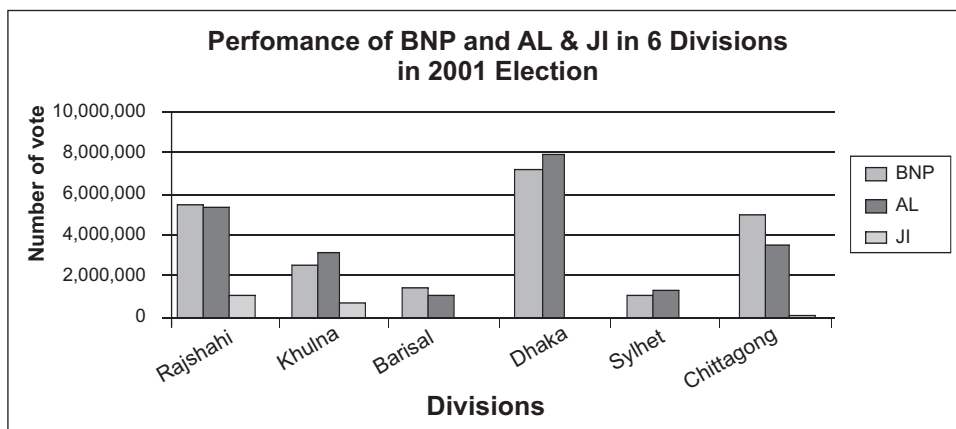
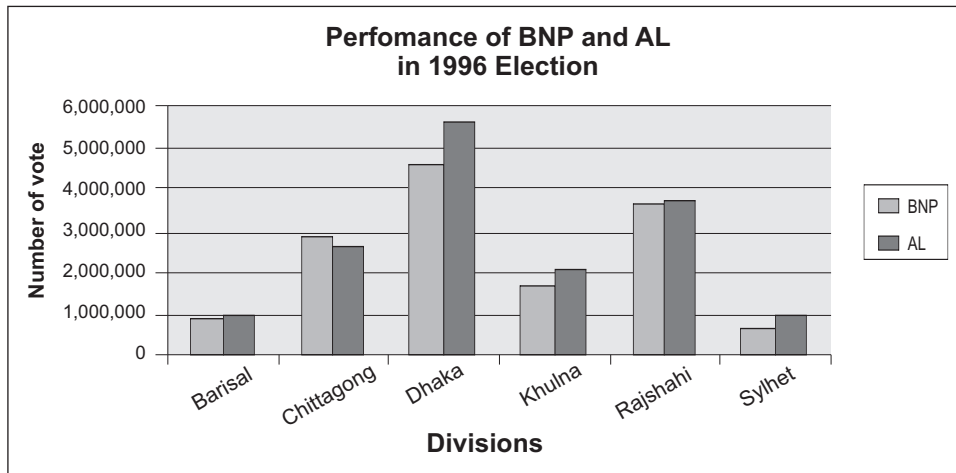
BNP lost the December 2008 election to its arch rival, AL. With its poor showing in the election it was expected that the party would learn its lessons and decide to play a stronger role in strengthening democracy in the country. Unfortunately, instead of playing the role of credible opposition, which is important for the growth of democracy, the party tried to revive the old culture of settling political differences on the streets. It organised protests instead of engaging in parliamentary discussions and debates. Such actions only served to undermine parliament and weaken the democratic institutions.

Another important aspect of Zia-ur Rahman's period was his initiatives in pursuing closer relations with Islamic countries. This has become a major pillar of Bangladesh's foreign policy and is now being endorsed by almost all the political parties, including AL. Zia also placed special emphasis on developing relations with China. In its election manifesto of 2008, BNP declared that economic diplomacy will be the basis of its foreign policy and special emphasis will be given in strengthening ties with Islamic and western countries.²⁴

In the 2008 election, BNP had declared that if voted to power it would take action against extremism. Right then doubts were raised about its sincerity. Instead observers saw its perceived leniency towards militant groups during its reign (2001-06). That period saw a surge in religious extremism in the country, with the government recognising the problem only after a series of bomb attacks on August 17, 2005. While it quickly banned some of the militant organisations like Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), its efforts were still considered to be insufficient. Investigations were then carried out during the rule of the military-backed caretaker regime, revealing the links shared by some of its leaders with the militant organisations. In October 2008, former BNP deputy minister Abdus Salam Pintu was arrested and charges were slapped against him for his alleged links with militant organisations.²⁵

BNP has been more popular among the country's business class, military, and conservatives. Recently, though, the party began gaining support from among the youth. The party has also made way for a student wing, called Jatiyobadi Chhatro Dal (Nationalist Students

Party). It is expected that the party will continue to be a major political force in the country; the possibility of its return to power cannot be ruled out, either.



BNP chairperson Khaleda Zia tends to be autocratic in running the affairs of the party and averse to any of kind of opposition. Col. Oli Ahmed, one of the more dynamic leaders of the party, had to leave due to his disagreements with Khaleda Zia.

Like Sheikh Hasina, Begum Zia is also elderly, being over sixty. However, unlike at AL, it is almost certain who will succeed Khaleda Zia: Tarique Rahman, vice chairman of BNP and Begum Zia's eldest son.

Jamaat-e-Islami

The Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) is the most influential religious political party in Bangladesh. The party was founded in 1941 in undivided India and Maulana Abdul Ala Moududi was its first Amir (chief). After the partition of India in 1947, the party was divided into Jamat-e-islami Hind and Jamaat-e-Islami Pakistan.²⁶ JI started its activities in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) during the 1950s.²⁷ JI supported Pakistani rule and even worked with the Pakistan army during Bangladesh's freedom struggle. Soon after Bangladesh's independence, JI along with other religious parties was banned. The party though claims to have continued its activities secretly.²⁸ The party resumed its activities after the ban on the religious party was lifted in 1979 and thereafter played an active role in the country's politics.

Ideologically, the party stands on the extreme right of the political divide. It claims to be a religious, political, social and cultural movement at the same time.²⁹ JI thinks that Bangladesh is a secular state, as the Quran and the Sunnah have not been declared as the principal sources of law, though Islam has been declared as the state religion.³⁰ It wants to establish an Islamic state in Bangladesh where the laws will be based on the Quran. In this regard it runs various socioeconomic activities and madrasas, health centres, and Islamic financial institutions. Politics is only one of such tools to reach their objectives.

Electoral performance of major political parties (1991 -2008)

	1991		1996		2001		2008*	
	% Vote	Polled seats	% Vote	Polled seats	% Vote	Polled seats	%vote	Polled seats
Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)	30.8	140	33.6	116	42.7	198	32.74	30
Awami League (AL)	30.1	88	37.4	146	40.2	62	49.02	230
Jatiya Party (JP)	11.9	35	16.4	32	6.99	14	6.65	27
Jamaat-e-Islami (JI)	12.1	18	8.61	03	4.62	18	4.55	2
Total Number of Seats	–	300	–	299	–	300	–	299

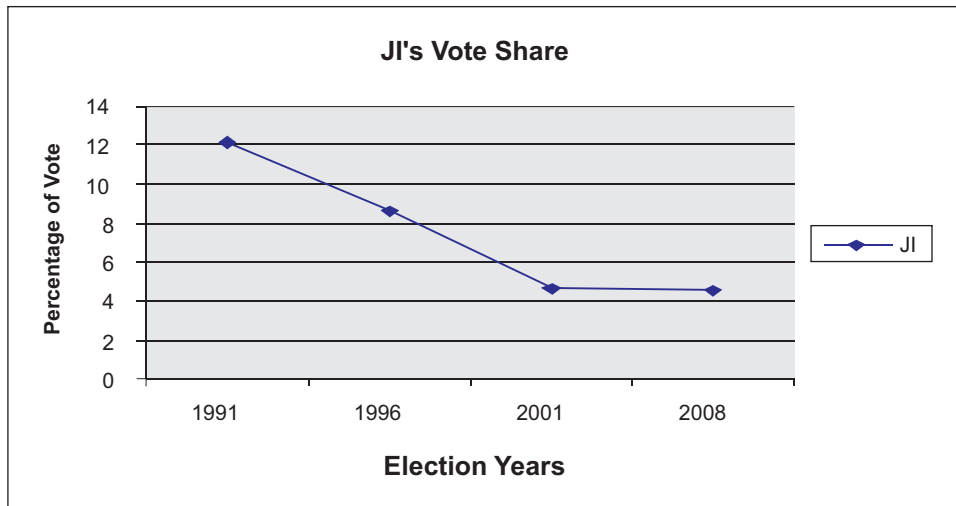
Decimals round off

Source: *Democracy Assessment report Bangladesh* <http://www.idea.int/publications/sod/upload/Bangladesh.pdf>

* a) %vote:- Shakhawat Liton and Shariful Islam, "Popular Votes AL 25pc up, BNP 20pc down", *The Daily Star*, January 1, 2009; b) Polled seats <http://www.ecs.gov.bd/English/>

Although the party has not been able to form a government on its own and is unlikely to do so, it continues to exert influence by participating in coalitions or else providing support from the outside. In the 1991 elections the JI, while securing only 12% vote and winning only 18 seats in Parliament, still became a key player in the formation of the government. The largest party, BNP, fell short of the requisite numbers to form a government, having won only 140 seats. Hence, JI's support became indispensable for BNP, which in turn put JI in a privileged position.

In 2008, JI got 4.48% of the total votes.³¹ However, some analysts feel that JI was able to secure almost a similar percentage of votes in 2008 election because it filed a higher number of candidates.³²



The party is suspected of having linkages with militant organisations. It denies the allegation. Investigations, however, have proved otherwise. Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) chief Saidur Rahman, who was arrested in 2010, had claimed his affiliation with the party. Saidur Rahman was an Amir of JI in Habiganj district in Sylhet. Also, executed JMB leader Banglabhai was also a member of Islami Chhatra Shibir, the student wing of JI.

Maoulana Matiur Rahman Nizami has been the amir of JI since 2001. He had to work hard in the party to reach this position.³³ JI is regarded for its practice of intra-party democracy.

Speculation is rife about the party's future, in the face of the trials for war crimes of 1971. Many more of its leaders are expected to be arrested in the coming days.

Jatiya Party

Like BNP, Jatiya Party (JP) is also a product of military rule in the country. Inspired by the success of BNP which helped Gen. Ziaur Rahman to lend legitimacy to his rule, Gen. HM Ershad also felt the need for launching a political party that would remain dependent on him and loyal, too.³⁴ Hence, JP was formed and it immediately took part in the 1986 elections. It emerged as the frontrunner, winning 153 seats in the national Parliament.

Eventually, the party's popularity waned after democracy was re-established in 1991 and it failed to show any spectacular result in the national elections. In 1991 the party secured 11.9% of total votes and won 35 seats; in 1996 it bagged 16.4% of total votes (32 seats); in 2001 it secured 6.99% of total votes (14 seats); and in 2008 election it secured 7% of total votes (26 seats). The party is a favourite of the two rivals—the AL and the BNP—for purposes of forging an alliance. Prior to the suspension of elections of January 2007, both the BNP and the AL approached JP for a possible alliance. JP agreed to partner with the AL, and BNP tried to turn the tide by reopening the corruption cases against its leader, Ershad.

Ideologically, JP is not very different from BNP; it is more of a rightist party. Some political analysts consider it not much different from JI and call it a 'proxy torchbearer' of the Islamisation of Bangladesh.³⁵ These analysts say that the party's alliance with AL in the 2008 elections was simply an opportunistic act: since AL was expected to win the elections, JP deemed it to be in its own interests to share power

at the centre rather than remain marginalised in the opposition. In fact, JP and Ershad are synonymous. Ershad has been the chief of JP since its inception. But age is catching up with him; Ershad is 1930-born.³⁶ The party is thus desperately looking for a worthy successor. Looking at the Bangladesh's tradition of family legacy with regard to succession in the party, Ershad's wife Roushan would have been the most prospective candidate, yet age is also not on her side. Thus the most probable contender for the post would be his brother, GM Quader, who is a minister in the present Sheikh Hasina government.

Family matters

Like in most of South Asia, Bangladesh politics is also driven mostly by family name, hereditary ties and alliances. Sheikh Hasina and Begum Khaleda Zia, leaders of the two most influential political parties—Awami League and BNP—for example, acquired their position by virtue of their relationship with the founders of these parties. In selecting their future leaders, Awami League and BNP are likely to give preference to people having familial connection with Mujibur Rahman and Ziaur Rahman.

Jl, for its part, may be the exception; it is the only party in Bangladesh which is not personality-driven. It has three major committees: the central executive committee; the central working committee; and the central mazlis-e shoora. The amir (chief) is most powerful.

Given the importance of the present and future political leadership in strategic assessments, it would be useful to briefly examine some of the actors in the horizon.

In Awami League, it is Sajeeb Wazed Joy who tops the list of possible successors to Sheikh Hasina. Joy is her only son, born in 1971 and a businessman by profession. He lives in Virginia in the US. He is a graduate from Bangalore University and the University of Texas at Arlington, Texas with a degree in Computer Engineering. Joy also studied at the John F Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

Joy has been vocal in his critiques of the growing religious extremism in his country of birth. For example, an article published in the Harvard International Review, 'Stemming the Rise of Islamic Extremism in Bangladesh', he has articulated exactly such concerns.

Overall, however, Joy has yet to be forthcoming about his political views. Whatever little public declarations he has made, have shown him to be treading along similar lines as the Awami League. Joy's remarks on the removal of Professor Muhammad Yunus from Grameen Bank, could be seen as an example. Some media reports claimed that Joy not only supported the government on its decision to remove Professor Yunus from Grameen Bank, but also made public his assertion that there have been 'massive financial improprieties' at Grameen Bank under Yunus.

Joy took preliminary membership of AL in March 2010 and not has contested any election till date. Still, many AL workers and political analysts in Bangladesh regard Joy as the party's future leader. Joy has become a fixture in Sheikh Hasina's entourage in her overseas visits and is an advisor to the Prime Minister. He is also the key person for the AL government's initiative of 'Digital Bangladesh'. Joy is the first

Bangladeshi to have been selected as one of 250 Young Global Leaders by the World Economic Forum.

However, there is scepticism about whether Joy would ultimately succeed his mother in the party, the reason being his marriage to a young American lawyer, Kristine Ann Overmire. The question that is in the people's mind is: Will Joy's family be ready to sacrifice their comfortable life in the US and move back to Bangladesh?

Meanwhile, Joy has certain weak points, most significant of which is that he has spent little time in Bangladesh. He has been abroad for most of his life, first for his education and later taking up a profession. It is safe to assume that his lifestyle and thought would be different from that of the common Bangladeshi. He may find it difficult to connect with the people at the grassroots, which is among the most important roles for a politician.

Some media reports in Bangladesh have even called Joy a 'reckless young man'. Media reports claim that Joy had been charged in the US for various offenses like drunken driving, speeding, reckless driving, unlawful use of radar detection device, and even carrying unlicensed gun. Some reports have also accused Joy of corruption. These reports in the media claim that Joy has amassed huge wealth while Sheikh Hasina was in power from 1996-2001. The validity of such claims, however, is subject to verification.

Sheikh Rihana is the youngest daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the only surviving sibling of Awami League chief, Sheikh Hasina. Born in September 1955, Rihana was in Germany along with her elder

sister Sheikh Hasina on August 15, 1975 when their father Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and other family members were killed by a group of Army officers. Rihana lives in London but frequently visits Bangladesh.

Rihana is considered as an important contender for the top position in Awami League. Though she holds no official position, neither in the party nor in the AL government, she is considered to be the most influential person in the party after Sheikh Hasina.

After AL formed the government in 2009 there was speculation that Rihana would be given an important position in the party. Rihana is known to assist her sister in delegating her various official responsibilities. She has become a regular member in the entourage of Sheikh Hasina in her official visits abroad. She however maintains a low profile and does not make any comments about politics or government policies.

There are charges of corruption against her. Some of the media reports claimed that during AL's tenure (1996-2001) Rihana was involved in corruption and she was referred as "Madame Commission". In fact, Azam J Chowdhury, a businessman, during the caretaker government regime (2007-08) filed a case of extortion against Rihana.

Rihana is married to Dr. Safiq Siddiqui, a professor in Dhaka University and a writer. Dr. Siddique is a relative of AL leader and President of Bangladesh Zillur Rahman. They have a son, Bobby and daughter Tulip, both of whom have grown up in London. Tulip is involved in UK politics.

Syed Ashraful Islam-Islam is the general secretary of Awami League and a minister for Local Government and Rural Development in the government. Born in 1952, Ashraful is regarded as a possible candidate for the top position in AL. Ashraful holds a MA degree and is a businessman by profession. He was actively involved in student politics and was general secretary of Chhatra League in the Mymensingh district and also publicity secretary of the party's central unit.

Ashraful's father, Syed Nazrul Islam, was the acting president of the Mujib Nagar government (a government in exile during the 1971 liberation movement) and a trusted lieutenant of Shiekh Mujibur Rahman. Ashraful is known to be equally close to the party supremo, Sheikh Hasina. He is also well regarded by the party cadres and the people.

Ashraful went to UK after his father was killed in prison along with four other founding leaders of the country in 1975. He returned to Bangladesh in 1996 and took part in the election as an AL candidate from Kishoreganj Sadar. Since then he has participated regularly in elections, emerging as winner each time. He represents Kishoreganj in the parliament. Despite his positive credentials there are allegations about his drinking habits, largely seen in political circles and among the public as a liability.

Abdur Razzak, born in 1950 in Tangail in the central region of Bangladesh, has been the Food and Disaster Management Minister in the Awami League government since 2009. Razzak has been involved in politics since his student life. He graduated from Bangladesh

Agricultural University in 1971 and obtained his PhD from Purdue University in the US in 1983. A former director of Bangladesh Agriculture Research Council (BRACI), Razzak actively took part in the freedom movement and was a company commander during the Liberation War. He was the secretary general of Bangladesh Agronomist Institution in 1996-97. Razzak is an influential member in the Sheikh Haisna cabinet and has won two consecutive parliamentary elections from Tangali-1 constituency (2001 and 2008).

Dr Dipu Moni is the first lady Foreign Minister of Bangladesh. She is an alumna of the University of London and John Hopkins University, US, from where she received her degree in Law and Masters in Public Health, respectively. She has travelled widely and is well-connected internationally. A first-time lawmaker from Chandpur-3 constituency, she is known to be one of Sheikh Hasina's most trusted lieutenants. Prior to becoming minister she was the women affairs secretary of Awami League (AL). She is the daughter of the late M.A. Wadud, a close associate of Mujibur Rahman and H.S. Suhrawardy. She is married to Tawfique Nawaz, one of two Oxbridge-educated Senior Advocates of the Bangladesh Supreme Court.

Motia Choudhury-Born on June 30, 1942, Motia Choudhury is the current Agriculture Minister in the Awami League. A presidium member of Awami League, she is well-regarded in Bangladesh politics. She has been actively involved in Bangladesh's political life since her student days. In 1967, she joined the Awami Party and became a member of its working committee. Between 1970 and 1971, she was an active participant in Bangladesh's independence struggle,

campaigning, lobbying, and nursing the wounded. In 1971, she became Organising Secretary of Awami League (AL). She was arrested several times during the period of late president Ziaur Rahman and former president HM Ershad. She enjoys good relations with Awami League supremo, Sheikh Hasina, and was also agriculture minister in the previous Awami League government (1996-2001). She was a student of Eden Girls' College in Dhaka.

Faruk Khan-Khan, a retired army Colonel, is an influential minister in the Sheikh Hasina government. He has been elected to Parliament three times in a row since 1996. Born on September 18, 1951, he is a graduate of the Pakistan Military Academy. He received his higher education in defence in the US. He has previously held positions in the parliamentary standing committees on government institutions affairs and youth and sports ministry. He is currently Commerce Minister and represents Gopalganj-1 in Parliament.

In Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the most prominent leader waiting in the wings is **Tarique Rahman**. Born in 1965 and popularly known as Tariq Zia, he is the eldest son of Ziaur Rahman and Begum Khaleda Zia. He serves as vice-chairperson of BNP and has a large number of followers within the party. His popularity within the party was apparent when he was elected unanimously to the position of vice chairman in the BNP's 5th national council in 2009. Tarique was exposed to national politics early in life, thanks to his father, Gen. Ziaur Rahman being the President and his mother ruling the country twice as Prime Minister. Tarique formally joined politics in 1993 as a primary member of BNP. He took his first significant step in hardcore politics in 2002 when he took over as the party's joint secretary.

Tarique is known to be the key election strategist for BNP. He is believed to be the chief architect of BNP's landslide victory in the 2001 elections. Some media reports have claimed that in 1998 he established a research wing for the party and drew expertise from academics, professionals and business entrepreneurs, as well as experienced politicians, in plotting the party's future.

In the last BNP government (2001-06), Tarique remained in the limelight because of his powerful influence within the party. During this period, Tarique travelled across the country and held grassroots-level conferences in every district which helped in uniting the party's youth cadre. In fact, some of the media reports said Tarique was trying to marginalise the party's old leaders in order to consolidate his control.

Tarique is a businessman by profession and known to be involved in the textile and river transport sector. Tarique favours promoting investments for industrialisation and development of the service and IT sectors. He believes in the expansion of private sector.

He has had his own share of controversies. For instance, Tarique is accused not only of corruption but also of encouraging cronyism. During the BNP rule (2001-06), he was popularly referred to as 'Mr. Ten Percent' for allegedly cornering commissions in government deals. He is said to have siphoned off large amounts of wealth outside the country. Tarique was arrested on charges of corruption in March 2007 during the reign of the military-backed caretaker. There are also allegations of Tarique's involvement with militant organisations like Harkat ul Jihad al-Islami. Some media reports claimed that HuJI commander, Mufti Hanan, had confessed that Tarique Rahman and

former BNP minister Lutfuzzaman Babar had asked him to kill Sheikh Hasina. Other reports have alleged that Tarique was connected to some Indian insurgent groups. He was alleged to have been involved in the smuggling of ten truckloads of arms that were seized in Chittagong 2004. The arms and ammunitions were meant for the United Liberation Front of Assam.

Tarique went to school in Dhaka and spent most of his life in Dhaka cantonment. He is married to Dr. Zubaida Rahman, a medical doctor who is the daughter of Rear Admiral Mahbub Ali Khan, former Chief of Naval Staff of Bangladesh. They have a daughter named Zaima.

Mirza Fakrul Islam Alamgir was born on August 1, 1948 in Thakurgaon. A postgraduate in Economics from Dhaka University, he is Secretary General of BNP. He joined government service in 1972. He worked in Dhaka College, Dinajpur College and with the Education Ministry. He resigned from service in 1989 and was elected Chairman of Thakurgaon pourashava. As a student, he was an active member of East Pakistan Chhatra Union. In 1968-69 he was the President of Chhatra Union's Dhaka University unit. He was an active participant in the 1969 mass movement. He also took part in the war for liberation in 1971.

Till 1992, Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir was President of BNP's Thakurgaon unit. Later, he was made Vice President of Jatiyatabadi Krishak Dal. In 2001, he was elected BNP MP from the Thakurgaon-1 seat. During the four-party alliance government rule, he was State Minister for Agriculture. At BNP's Fifth National Council in 2009, he

was appointed Senior Joint Secretary General of the party. Prior to that he served as Acting President of Jatiyatabadi Krishak Dal.

Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir's father, Mirza Ruhul Alim, had been an MP and minister. His uncle, Mirza Golam Hafiz, is a renowned lawyer who had previously held positions of MP and Speaker. BNP standing committee member and former Army Chief Lt. Gen. (retd.) Mahbubur Rahman is Mirza Alamgir's brother-in-law. Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir's wife, Rahat Ara Begum, is Vice Chairperson of Delta Life Insurance. They have two daughters, both of whom are married.

He enjoys good relations with Tarique Rahman; it was Rahman, in fact, who recommended his nomination for the post of general secretary. He is known for maintaining a low profile but has very good connections.

In Jatiya Party, **Ghulam Mohammed Quader** is regarded as a potential future leader. Quader was born on 24th February, 1948 at Dinhat, District-Kutchbihar of West Bengal. He attended school in Rangpur, Ershad's home district. He is an engineering graduate and has worked both at home and abroad. He is articulate and well respected. He enjoys substantial support of the party members.

Quader was consecutively elected thrice as Member of Parliament (7th, 8th and 9th Parliament). He has been a member of various parliamentary committees: In the 7th National Parliament (1996-2001) Quader was a member of parliamentary standing committee relating to Defence Ministry. In the 8th National Parliament (2001-06) he was a member of Rules of Procedure Committee of National Assembly and member of Standing Committee, Ministry of Agriculture. In the 9th National

Parliamentary Election held in 2008, he contested election from Lalmonirhat-3 constituency in Rangpur division as a JP candidate. Presently, Quader is Minister for Civil Aviation and Tourism in the Sheikh Hasina government by virtue of JP being a major coalition partner.

Abdur Razzaq has bright prospects of taking over the mantle of Jamaat-e-Islami in the near future. He is an assistant secretary general of JI. He is well regarded among the party cadres and known to be articulate. Razzaq is an eminent lawyer of the Supreme Court of Bangladesh and also general secretary of Islamic Lawyers Council of Bangladesh. He is also well regarded among the country's diplomatic community.

Razzaq is a critic of the Awami League government and its efforts to book war criminals. He is the key counsel defending the JI leaders who are facing trials for war crimes. Although he asserts that everyone should have equal opportunity and get equal treatment in Bangladesh, he criticizes Awami league for being secular. To Razzaq, the following are the complex issues facing Bangladesh: the Tipaimukh Dam issue; joining the Asian Highway; giving transit facilities to India; and demarcating the international maritime boundary. In March 2009, the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) of Bangladesh summoned Razzaq, in connection with the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) mutiny.

Conclusion

Awami League and Bangladesh Nationalist Party will remain the main political forces in Bangladesh. But right-wing parties like JI will continue to exert influence on the political process. Religion is going to play a major role in the country. All the parties will remain friendly to China. Pakistan's influence on right-wing parties cannot be discounted. The parties will remain sceptical of US role in the region. By and large, civil society will continue to support democracy. But the character of the democratic process will depend largely on how the two major political parties behave. To a large measure, **the strength of the institutions of governance like judiciary, election commission and Parliament** will decide the course of democratic process in the country. India and its actions will remain a key factor in Bangladesh politics.

Endnotes:

1. Constitution of Bangladesh, Part 4, Chapter 2, article-55.
2. CIA Factbook Bangladesh, online
3. Ibid
4. Md Tanzimuddin Khan, "Working of Democracy in Bangladesh", Paper prepared for the project on State of Democracy in South Asia,
5. Ibid
6. Ibid
7. "Election manifestos of the major parties", at http://femabd.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=109:election, dated November 27, 2008, accessed on February 10, 2011
8. Hiranmay Karlekar, Bangladesh: The Next Afghanistan, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2005,p-49
9. JN Dixit, Liberation and Beyond: India-Bangladesh Relations, Konark Publishers Pvt, Delhi, 1999, p: 226-7
10. The party made a half hearted attempt to dismantle the Vested Property Act (an act that deprived the minority Hindus of their homes and land-holdings as early as 1969) towards the fag end of its term in 2001.- Sunit Ganguly, The Rise of Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh, Specil Report, United States Institute of Peace, Washington DC, August 2006p-6
11. "Election manifestos of the major parties" at http://femabd.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=109:election-manifestos-of-the-major-parties&catid=25:the-project, November 27, 2008 accessed on February 10, 2011
12. "Huji was established in 1992. The HuJI-B intensified its subversive activities after the Awami League formed the Government in June 1996."Harkatul Jihad Bangladesh at <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/bangladesh/terroristoutfits/Huj.htm> accessed on February 14, 2011.
13. AL government (1996-2001) backed out from granting transit to India after agreeing as BNP and JI had run a propaganda campaign against it. Some observers of India and Bangladesh relations opine that one of the reasons for AL government friendliness to India is that it wants India's cooperation for the economic development of Bangladesh. They further observe that Sheikh Hasina, the current leader wants to promote Bangladesh as a hub for regional connectivity and this is not possible without India's support since India is the biggest and the most powerful country in South Asia.
14. Rabindranath Trivedi, "Bangladesh Hindu & Non-Muslim Minority Election Prosect", briefing to United States Commission on International Religious Freedom on the occasion of Public Hearing on Bangladesh: Religious Freedom, Extremism, Security, and the Upcoming National Elections on December 4, 2008
15. The interim administration (2007-08) held Sheikh Hasina of AL and BNP chief Khaleda Zia responsible for the evolution of the confrontational nature of political culture in the country and wanted to get rid of them; they even arrested the leaders on charges of corruption but the rank and file of Awami League stood firmly beside their leader.
16. Influential leaders like Abdur Razzak, Tofail Ahmed and Suranjit Sengupta were dropped from the presidium. "central Committee" at http://www.albd.org/autoalbd/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=135&Itemid=52. Accessed on February 15, 2011.
17. Anwar Parvez Halim, "Hasina holds the reins", Prome News Megazine, Vol.0 Issue. 33, February 4,2010.
18. "Prime Minister of Bangladesh" in www.bangladesh.gov.bd accessed May 10, 2011
19. Sreeradha Dutta, Bangladesh: A fragile Democracy, Shipra Publication, New Delhi, 2004, p-43.

20. Ziaur Rahman at <http://www.bogra.info/bogra5.html> accessed on February 12, 2011
21. "Bangladesh Nationalist Party' Banglapedia online, accessed on June 8,2011
22. "The elections to the 6th Parliament were held on February 15,1996, the entire opposition boycotted the polls. Not only Awami League but also others including Jamaat and Jatiya Party refused to fight the elections held under Begum Khaleda Zia's rule. The results vindicated the electoral farce... BNP secured more than five-sixth of majority in Parliament and secured 289 seats." Sreeradha Dutta, Bangladesh: A Fragile Democracy, 2004p-36
Though Khaleda Zia convened the Parliament on March 19 but she had to bow down to the public disapproval and ordered fresh elections. Before dissolving the parliament she declared institutionalizing of the caretaker government.
23. According to the Constitution, the non-partisan Caretaker Government will be formed within 15days of the desolation of the Parliament and the President "shall appoint as Chief Adviser the person who among the retired Chief Justices of Bangladesh retired last. As per Constitution, Justice KM Hasan, the last retired Chief Justice of the Supreme Court was to be the Chief Advisor of the caretaker government. But, opposition parties objected to Hasan's candidature primarily due to his proximity with Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)—the Khaleda Zia government had increased the retirement age of Chief Justice from 65 to 67 by amending the Constitution in 2004 to allow Hasan to head the caretaker regime in the even of an election.
24. Bangladesh Nationalist Party's manifesto 2008 (Bengali). A copy with the author.
25. Harkat-ul Jihad Bangladesh, at :www.satp.org accessed on February 15, 2011
26. Jamaat-e-Islami at http://www.islam-bd.org/jamaat/jamaat_home.html access on February 12, 2011
27. Anand Kumar, "Jamaat and its Agneda of Islamic States in Bangladesh", Strategic Analysis, Vol. 33, no.4, July 2009.
28. Jamaat-e-Islami at http://www.islam-bd.org/jamaat/jamaat_home.html access on February 12, 2011
29. An Introduction to the Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami at http://jamaat-e-islami.org/index.php?option=com_about&task=introduction accessed on February 12, 2011
30. Anand Kumar, "Jamaat and its Agneda of Islamic States in Bangladesh", Strategic Analysis, Vol. 33, no.4, July 2009.
31. Syeed Ahamed and Mashuqur Rahman, "Getting the math right", The Daily Star, January 12, 2009
32. Jamaat fielded candidates in nine more constituencies in 2008 than it did in 2001. In 2008, Jamaat competed in 40 constituencies, whereas in 2001 the party only fielded candidates in 31 constituencies. Jamaat competed in 25 of the 31 constituencies it ran in during the 2001 election, opting not to run in 6 of the 2001 constituencies.
33. Maulana Nizami served as Ameer of Jamaat-e-Islami Dhaka City Unit as well as a member of Central Executive Committee from 1978 to 1982. He also served as Assistant Secretary General of Jamaat-e-Islami from 1983 to December 1988. In December '88 he became the Secretary General. Prior to his election as Ameer of Jamaat, he was holding the position of Secretary General till 2000. "Profile of Maulana Matiur rahman Nizami" at http://www.jamaat-e-islami.org/index.php?option=com_popup_org&Sub_Menu=PR&Info_Id=12. Accessed on February 16, 2011.
34. Sreeradha Dutta, 2004.
35. Ibid.
36. Anwar Parvez Halim, "What's up in Jatiya Party?" at <http://probenewsmagazine.com/index.php?index=2&contentId=6047>. Accessed on February 16, 2011.

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