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NATURE OF ELECTORAL POLITICS IN BANGLADESH

Introduction

The study of 'electoral politics' is of great importance in understanding the political process of a country, particularly in a democratic polity. Elections constitute the most important lever for participation of the people in the choice of representatives to local and national institutions, and determines the nature and complexion of governments at different levels.¹ It is the only recognised means of providing succession in government and leadership in a democratic set up and plays most vital role in resolving the crisis of 'legitimacy' and 'participation.'² Elections provide an opportunity to legislate the elected party's programme and controls the policy-decisions of the government in power.³ It also ensures elected representatives accountable to their community and as suggested by John Badgley "accountability is the process by which political development, in fact, occurs".⁴ Elections as link between the society and the polity, can be a means of achieving

1. Stein Rokken, "The Comparative Study of Political Participation" in Austin Ranny (ed.) *Essays on Behavioural Studies of Politics*, (Urbana ; University of Illinois Press, 1962), p. 70.
2. Lucian W. Pye, *Aspects of Political Development*, (Boston : Little Brown, 1956), p. 63.
3. Richard Rose and Harva Mossavir, "Voting and Elections : A Functional Analysis", *Political Studies*, Vol. XV, No. 2, 1967, pp. 173-201.
4. Norman D. Palmer, *Elections and Political Development, The South Asian Experience*, (New Delhi : Vikas, 1976), p. 9-17.

national integration where deep-seated cleavages exist, particularly in society's transition to modernization. It is also to be noted here that elections and political parties have close relationship, the latter being represented by different groups and associations and providing political direction to the electorate. Thus through electioneering process political parties can activate the whole society in which they function and of which they are a part. Elections provide an excellent opportunity to examine the strength of organization, the personnel and policies of different political groups and parties, and thus affects the whole political life of a country.⁵

In the recent past, it has been observed that in most of the post-colonial societies there is a persistent demand for building democratic institutions and practices. As suggested by S.M. Lipset, in these countries, there exists a strong expectation of the people for change in the structure of the societies and at the same time, more and more demands for a high level of popular participation in the system.⁶ Norman D. Palmer suggested that in these countries, elections may be of great significance where any change in behavioural pattern upsets the status-quo and threaten to transform the existing value patterns.⁷ In this sense, the impact of elections is highly significant and a study of electoral politics itself involves an enquiry into the overall social system and political developments of developing countries.

It may pertinently be noted here that in the recent past the civilianization of military regime through holding elections and forming political parties have added a valuable material to the store of existing knowledge of electoral study thus supplementing and enriching the research of comparative politics. Elections offered by military rulers are also a rare but important phenomenon in politics of developing nations which needs much more extensive research to understand the evolving political systems of many new states like Bangladesh.

5. *Ibid*, p. 17

6. S.M. Lipset, *Political Man*, (London : The Heinemann Group of Publishers, 1960), p. 180.

7. Norman D. Palmer, no. 4, pp. 1-2; also see, V.O. Key, Jr., "A Theory of Critical Elections" *Journal of Politics*, Vol. XVII, February 1955, p. 3.

Bangladesh inherits a long tradition of mass movements with which elections are closely related each strengthening the other, and have played decisive roles in political changes of the country. Even the creation of the country have been the outcome of a popular movement and election results (1970) which finally took the shape of a politico-military war. Bangladesh, since its inception, have extensive experience of elections and within a short span of thirteen years of its independence, four general elections were held which indicates high level of politicization of the nation. But woefully, none of the elected office could complete their term and before long fell victim of the circumstances either by authoritarian move or by military interference. Furthermore, it may not be out of place to note that instead of four general elections held, the transfer of power was never done through democratic means. This adverse development in Bangladesh politics is a contrary to the general rules of election and democratic politics. However, the novelty lay in the fact that the elections in Bangladesh highly politicize the people and lead to a hope of greater participation compared favourably with many other nations.

This paper intends to deal with the various social forces, their role and activities in election politics of Bangladesh. Under what circumstances elections take place in Bangladesh? What are the ideas, issues and factors that influence electioneering in Bangladesh? What are the strategies being followed by the participant groups and parties? How do they act and react to one another? These are some of the questions that will be discussed in this study.

Socio-economic Milieu and Political Tradition

To understand the nature of electoral politics in a country like Bangladesh, it is imperative to discuss the socio-economic situation and political perspective in which elections take place. Bangladesh is one of the most densely populated area of some 95 million people. The population is overwhelmingly homogeneous and there is no ethnic, linguistic cleavage in Bangladesh society and politics. But as viewed by Rounaq Jahan, the religious difference of the people is a source

of separate group identity and organization. Perhaps it may be due to separate electoral system for Hindus and Muslims during British colonial rule. After independence, inspite of joint electoral system "the Hindus tended to form a distinct social group and vote as a bloc", though there exists a peaceful religious harmony in Bangladesh since independence.⁸

As in many other Third World nations, Bangladesh's economy is based on agriculture and shares the similar socio-economic features of underdevelopment. Roughly one-third of the rural households belong to the category of landless and land poor. Though there is no traditional landlord class in Bangladesh, nearly a quarter of all land owning farmers have half the total rural income. This group dominate the social life and influences the modern economic and political institutions, and enjoy the benefits of official patronage. This way the class differentiation is shaped both by access to the means of production and by access to political power which however, has extended a class alliance composed of rich peasants and rural entrepreneurs in agriculture. These in turn, are closely aligned with the bureaucracy, the dominant political elites and urban investors.⁹ What follows is the pre-dominance of intermediate strata on electoral politics of Bangladesh. This dominant intermediate class—the civil-military bureaucracy, professionals, businessmen and the rural rich peasants, in reality, control state power in Bangladesh.¹⁰

The intermediate class based in urban centres and having rural rich peasant family background irrespective of their ideologies have been formed to provide the leadership of most major political parties and dominate the electoral politics of Bangladesh.¹¹ As the intermediate

8. See, Rounaq Jahan, *Bangladesh Politics : Problems and Issues*, (Dhaka : University Press Ltd., 1980), pp. 161-62.

9. B.K. Jahangir, "Nature of Class Struggle in Bangladesh" in Emajuddin Ahmed (ed.) *Bangladesh Politics*, (Dhaka : Centre for Social Studies, 1980), pd. 68-70.

10. Rounaq Jahan, No. 8, pp. 162-163.

11. *Ibid.* pp. 143-160.

class frequently distributes patronage to respective clients, the institutional base of socio-political organization remain weak. Political elites also de-emphasize ideology and specific economic programme, instead they try to win over local influentials who would ably supply votes. Since political elites make less attempt to weaken patron-client network, rather they build on them, the result is instability and

Urban-based intermediate class is the pre-dominant factor in electoral politics in Bangladesh.

more and more factional conflict within and among political organizations. Indeed, all the major political parties in Bangladesh are always threatened with factional splits and dissensions and are created out of intra-party group conflicts. The chronic factionalism and weak party-organization lead to the emergence of charismatic leaders. Since the charismatic leader can mediate among the factions and hold them together the success of electoral politics in Bangladesh had always dependent on the charismatic leadership.¹²

The history and tradition of political struggle against colonial rule has also strong effect on electoral politics of Bangladesh. The political history of the country for last four decades and during the period in which elections have taken place played decisive roles even in changing the geo-political configuration of the subcontinent. It should be noted here that while the election of 1946 was considered in deciding the fate of Pakistan movement, the election of 1970 was the basis of the legitimacy of the 1971 war of liberation of Bangladesh which lend solid support to the thesis that mass movement and elections are complementary in deciding the political direction of Bangladesh.

12. For detail see, *Ibid.* p. 164 ; Ralph W. Nicholas, "Factions : A Comparative Analysis", in M. Banton, ed, *Political Systems and the Distribution of Power*, (London : Tavistock, 1965), pp. 21-26 ; Emajuddin Ahamed, "Neo-Colonialism : Centre Periphery Relationship—Developing Countries and Political Development", *Dhaka University Patrika*, Dhaka, Vol. 10, December 1979, pp, 189-191 ; Richard Sandbrook, "Patrons, Clients and Factions", *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 1972, pp. 109-110.

Under the circumstances the political parties often regarded the election campaign as a 'sangram' to achieve certain political 'cause'. And in course of 'sangram' politics, the ruling party while brand the opposite parties as 'anti-state', 'enemies of independence', 'miscreants', and use the state power to restrict their activities, the opposition parties brand the ruling party as 'anti-people' 'anti-democratic' and organise general strikes and disorderly demonstrations to protest government actions. It is perhaps due to colonial legacy which have produced demonstrative and agitative character in political culture, the ruling elites behave in a way as they did during freedom movement. Often they impose many of the colonial restrictions on political freedom. Mass media had always been under the control of the government and on many occasions opposition newspapers were banned and their news had been censored. The governments frequently used repressive measures to limit the activities of the opposition parties and their leaders and workers were harrassed and imprisoned. This was followed by use of force and threat in which politics had always been less open, less competitive and more violent which facilitates the presence of musclemen, and as a consequence limits partisan identity in politics accept very few who are comitted to politics as a career.¹³

The Elections : Campaign Issues and Strategies

Given the above socio-economic and political milieu, we would now try to analyse and discuss various factors, ideas, issues and strategies in electoral politics of Bangladesh. In this regard it would be essential to make a differentiation between the 1973 parliament election, and subsequent elections held in 1978, 1979 and 1981. To make it more clear, while the 1973 parliament election conducted by an elected civilian government headed by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (Mujib) was held in an euphoria of the victory of the war of independence, the subsequent elections were held in a process of the civilianization of the military regime of General Ziaur Rahman (Zia) where Mujib's Awami League (AL) was on the opposition. Furthermore, during

13. Rounaq Jahan, No. 8, pp. 168-169.

the 1973 parliament election, the AL was the only broad based national organization which in fact did not face any major opposition party at the national level to challenge the AL in the election while the subsequent elections were fought mainly between the ruling military regime backed Nationalist Front—Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), and AL and its allied forces.

Parliamentary Election, 1973

Bangladesh started with a great achievement of its successful completion of constitution making which was an urgent task for the ruling elites of a new nation state. Immediately after the independence, the ruling AL government felt the urgency of making a constitution possibly to "provide a basic political framework according to its own preferences before serious controversies could arise over the fundamentals of the constitution" and also to "avoid the tragic experiences of the Pakistan period when delay in constitution making led to the loss of legitimacy of the Muslim League (ML) regime."¹⁴ The constitution which came into effect in December 1972, provided a competitive parliamentary political system in Bangladesh as it exists in neighbouring India and other Asian nations. With this basic political framework and as to help the emerging political structure of the country as well as to legitimise the system and also to renew ruling AL's mandate from the people, parliamentary election was conducted in March 1973. Fourteen political parties contested the election and in a house of three hundred (another fifteen reserved for women), AL won 291 (out of which 11 won unopposed). National Awami Party-Muzaffar (NAP-M), Jatiya League and Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD) won one seat each and the independents won five seats. Out of total, 56 per cent of the voters cast their vote and the AL polled 73 per cent, the NAP-M 8 per cent, NAP-B 5 per cent and the JSD 6 per cent.¹⁵

Election results show that despite economic mismanagement, mishandling of political affairs and widespread corruption then prevail-

14. *Ibid*, p. 67 ; also see, Talukder Maniruzzaman, *The Bangladesh Revolution and Its Aftermath*, (Dhaka, BBI, 1981), pp. 154-155.

15. Source, *Election Commission, Bangladesh*.

ing in the country, people perhaps had much faith on Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who would do all good for them and voted for what they meant, Mujib's AL. Bangladeshis were also restive so as to avoid violence or any more change in power. On the other hand, the parties namely JSD and NAP-M with a good number of students following and

The 1973 election was an urgent need to lay down the foundation of multiparty democracy in Bangladesh.

NAP-B led by Maulana Bhashani could not create any national alternative to Mujib and AL. People also did not have any support to the left-wing underground parties who had been involved in armed battle with the government forces. The pro-Islamic parties were disbanded under the secular democratic policy of the AL government. However, the pro-Islamic parties could never play any commendable role in the elections ever since held in Bangladesh.

In the election campaign while the ruling AL highlighted the achievements of Mujib by glorifying the victory in the war of independence, gaining recognition to the new state by world community, making a constitution based on secular multi-party parliamentary system and holding election to the parliament, the opposite parties campaigned issues critical to the regime and blamed AL for corruption, political repression and deterioration of law and order situation all over the country. The AL, to implement the dreams of Mujib while campaigned for the establishment of four state principles—nationalism, democracy, socialism and secularism, the JSD campaigned for scientific socialism, and the NAP-B and Jatiya League criticised the foreign policy stance of ruling Awami League, and these three opposite parties together tried to exploit the rising anti-Indian sentiment in the country. Surprisingly the NAP-M and Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB) did not differ with the ruling Awami League on any of its fundamental issues including its foreign policy. All the parties branded each other as agents of foreign powers engaged in conspiracy. Thus the AL including NAP-M and CPB called the other opposition

parties as agents of "US-Chinese Imperialists" indulging in conspiracy against the socialist policy of Bangladesh, and to undermine the sovereignty and integrity of the new nation. On the contrary the NAP-B and JSD warned the AL, NAP-M and CPB were tools of "Soviet-Indian Social Imperialists".¹⁶ However, there was little controversy over any fundamental issues of socio-economic policies. Infact, non-issues featured prominently in the campaign and as a whole, the electioneering generated little public interest.

It may be noted here that the election results indicate one-party dominance on the emerging political system of Bangladesh as it has continued in India since independence. The election results had two impacts—on the one hand, it demoralised the opposition parties, and on the other, hindered the growth and development of multi-party system. The AL wanted such victory by winning all the parliamentary seats perhaps with a view to show the world its legitimacy in the war of independence and also to get recognition of Bangladesh from the remaining world. But for the interest of country's emerging political system, the AL could have avoided the use of force and threat in many constituencies.¹⁷ Moreover, the presence of some eminent opposite leaders could give more weight to the country's first elected parliament.

Presidential Election, 1978

Bangladesh met significant changes in its state affairs after the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in a military coup in August 1975. The junior officers who staged the coup did not last long. There were several coups and counter coups and during this power game, Major General Ziaur Rahman emerged as the strongest man in the armed forces. However, General Zia found a number of problems to survive in power depending on an army divided and factionalised. As in other countries, the military ruler of Bangladesh, General Zia did not want to go back to the barrack instead he tried to

16. Rounaq Jahan, No. 8. pp. 81-90.

17. Talukder Maniruzzaman, no. 14, p. 157 ; *Holiday*, 18 March 1973.

legitimise his stay in power following the policy of holding elections and forming political party with a view to extend support base among the civilians. General Zia's strategy also aimed to make a balance between the army and political forces so as to put the country on the rails of political peace and stability.¹⁸

The military regime of General Zia tried to consolidate power through some fundamental changes to the state commitment. General Zia dropped the word "secularism" as one of the four principles of state ideology and instead, asserted "absolute trust and faith in Almighty Allah". The state principle "socialism" was replaced by "economic and social justice" and the regime followed a policy of de-nationalization. Additionally with a view to differentiating the citizens of Bangladesh from the Bangalees in India and to favour a territorial definition of a nationhood, the amendment stipulated that a citizen of Bangladesh would be termed as "Bangladeshi" and not as a "Bangalee".¹⁹ It appeared that General Zia followed policy which represented the interests of middle classes, especially the civil-military bureaucratic elites. However, these fundamental changes, contrast to the previous regime offered due honour to the civil-military bureaucratic elites who ruled Bangladesh during Pakistan period and were not given due importance in the day to day affairs of the state functioning during Awami League rule, seemed to have regained ascendance. They continued to consolidate position and dominate decision making.²⁰ On the other hand, the new policy pleased the pro-Islamic and other anti-Mujib forces in the country. In international affairs, the military government developed friendly and closer relations with China, Saudi Arabia and United States with every effort not to antagonise India, the big neighbour.²¹

18. For detail see, author's *Bangladesh Nationalist Party : A Political Analysis*, Ph.D. thesis submitted to the University of Rajasthan, Jaipur, India, 1984, pp. 31-60.

19. See Rounaq Jahan, No. 8, pp. 205-206.

20. Emajuddin Ahamed, *Bangladesh Lokproshashan* (Public Administration in Bangladesh), (Dhaka : Golden Book House, 1980), pp. 295-305.

21. Talukder Maniruzzaman, *Group Interests and Political Changes-Studies of Pakistan and Bangladesh*, (New Delhi : South Asian Publishers, 1982), pp. 196-216.

Once in firm saddle, General Zia understood the utility of holding elections as a mechanism of gaining legitimacy, and also for a respectable image at home and abroad. And to contest and win an election, the military regime needed to recruit support of political forces. General Zia allowed the political parties to function, but within limit under Political Parties Regulation (PPR) and tried to win the fragmented factions of different parties. In the meantime, General Zia also issued a broad-based election manifesto, the 19 Point Programme, which however, helped him to win centrist majority support. In May 1977, General Zia held a National Referendum to seek people's mandate for his 19 point socio-economic programme, and won a massive vote of confidence. General Zia went ahead and with his all official backing, formed 'JAGODAL' with trusted men of his Council of Advisers. While either Jagodal or opposition parties were busy in consolidating their organization, General Zia ordered presidential election to be held in June 1978 on the basis of adult franchise.²²

All the major political parties participated in the election. But in reality, the election was fought mainly between two major alliances—'Nationalist Front' (NF) comprised with Jagodal, Muslim League, United Peoples Party, National Awami Party—Bhashani, Bangladesh Labour Party and Bangladesh Schedule Caste Federation of which General Zia was the nominee, and "Ganotantrik Oikya Jote", an electoral alliance of Awami League, NAP-M, Peoples League, Jatiya Janata Party, Krishak Shramik Party and Jatiya League of which General Osmani was the candidate. The election campaign created more enthusiasm than the previous one. Thus while contesting General (Rtd.) Osmani, General Zia and NF leaders criticised "Awami-Baksalites" for misrule, creating inflation in the country, for the famine of 1974, political repression and killing, deterioration of law and order situation and for "selling out of national interests to India".²³

22. Talukder Maniruzzaman. no. 14, pp. 214-225.

23. See, Sultan Ahmed, *Awami-Baksali Dushashaner Itihas* (History of Awami-Baksali Misrule), Dhaka, n.d.

General Zia and his supporters emphasised election theme on "good days of Zia" and claimed credit for having brought down prices of necessary commodities, improved law and order situation and defended national sovereignty. While blaming Awami-Baksalites for its political sovereignty mortgaged to foreign power (India), Nationalist Front leaders talked for 'Bangladeshi Nationalism' as cementing force to consolidate people's unity and that there was no place for any foreignism in the Country.²⁴ General Zia and his associates bitterly criticised Awami-Baksalit for 'palace politics' and 'conspiracy' to undermine national independence and sovereignty and proclaimed that he would establish 'peoples democracy' and brought down politics to peoples door steps.

Martial Law is no substitute for the normal practice of electoral means. If it continues for long, it is inimical to the developmental process of a country.

On the other hand, the opposite parties including AL, while campaigned for restoration of parliamentary democracy according to constitution, General Zia did not emphasize the issue of form of government. The opposite parties, while charged Zia regime of being military dictatorship and rehabilitating the enemies of independence, and distorting the true history of the Bangladesh nationalist movement, General Zia claimed credit for broader participation and restoration of multi-party system which was disbanded by the AL regime under one party Baksal model imposed in 1975.

In its electoral strategy, General Zia's Nationalist Front, a pragmatic centrist electoral alliance developed campaign themes and issues so as to attract the support of the prosperous rural pesantry, big and small businessmen, urban salaried service class and military officers who are politically patronage groups in Bangladesh. Since the Ganotantrik Oikyo Jote was a slightly left of the centre coalition, the

24. For similar analysis See, Ayub Khan, "Pakistan Perspective", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. XXXVIII, 1960, p. 550.

Nationalist Front efforts were directed to form a slightly right of the centre majority coalition to win the maximum electoral support. The election programme of General Zia while promised land reforms and promotion of agricultural production through large scale subsidies and an industrial programme with emphasis on private enterprise and export led growth strategy with sufficient bank facilities and smoother mobilization of other inputs for the investors and landowners,²⁵ the Ganotantrik Oikyo Jote and other opposite parties charged Zia regime with too much dependence on foreign aid that its foreign policy subservient to the capitalist powers, rising inflation and high prices of agricultural inputs thus helping to widen the disparities between the rich and the poor.²⁶ The election result showed that the people voted for General Zia. Out of total, 53 per cent of the voters cast their votes of which General Zia won 76 per cent, and General (Rtd.) Osmani polled 21 per cent.²⁷

Parliamentary Election, 1979

Following the landslide victory of 1978 presidential election, General Zia found his road open to go ahead with his strategies. So to further consolidate the support he received in the election, General Zia dissolved the Nationalist Front, and what he had in his mind, in September 1978 formed Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) headed by himself. Meanwhile, the major opposition party AL went under a split between two factions one led by Mizanur Rahman Chowdhury and the majority faction led by Abdul Malek Ukil.²⁸ This also created an opportunity for General Zia and he lost no time. In November 1978, General Zia announced that parliamentary election would be held in January 1979, that the parliament would be sovereign and that Martial

25. Emajuddin Ahmed, Mohammad Mahabbat Khan and Habib Mohammad Zafrullah, "The 1979 Parliamentary Elections of Bangladesh : An Analysis of Voters Choice", *The Dhaka University Studis*, Part A, Vol. XXXVI, June 1982, pp. 125-129.

26. For detail see. No. 17, pp. 232-252.

27. *The Azad*, 6 June 1978.

28. Talukder Maniruzzaman, No. 14. pp. 225-226,

Law would be lifted after the election. General Zia also resigned from the position of Chief of Staff, but remained as the C-in-C of the Armed Forces. The opposite parties strongly reacted the presidential announcement and set a number of pre-conditions which included withdrawal of Martial Law, restoration of civil rights and repeal of the fourth amendment of the constitution. The opposite parties however, agreed to participate in the election without succeeding in extracting any major concession from the government. Finally, the election was held in February 1979. In all 31 political parties contested in the election ; the BNP won 251 (including 30 reserved seats for women), AL 39, ML-IDL 20, JSD 8, other small parties 10 and 16 independents.²⁹ It appeared that while the 1979 presidential election was held to legitimise the military regime of General Zia, the 1979 parliamentary election was held to extend his power base among the civilians. As in 1978 election, the 1979 election was also fought between two major political forces—General Zia's BNP and AL. In both the elections, BNP and AL, and also the other parties harped the same issues. Circumstantially, BNP had an added advantage of its leader General Zia's charisma and his untiring tour throughout the whole country. He visited innermost rural areas and addresssed hundreds of meeting attended by thousands of people. In contrast to the ability of General Zia, the opposition parties failed to offer a viable alternative in terms of socio-economic programme, politico-cultural dynamics and clean image of leadership.

Presidential Election, 1981

General Zia, the first elected president of Bangladesh was assassinated in an abortive military coup staged by Major General Abul Manzoor at Chittagong on 30 May 1981. After the assassination of General Zia, Justice Abdus Sattar, the Vice President assumed the office of the president of Bangladesh under the provision of Article 55(1) of the constitution till a new President was elected according to

29. Source : *Election Commission, Bangladesh.*

the provision of Article 48(1) the constitution.³⁰ It may pertinently be noted here that while in almost all cases Generals are being succeeded by their fellow Generals, a noble development took place in Bangladesh that a General (Zia) was succeeded by a civilian politician Justice Abdus Sattar which indeed was unusual in the history of the role of the military in the politics of developing nations.³¹ The novelty lay in the fact that the democratic norms adopted by General Zia were spared and the constitutional crisis of succession was successfully resolved, with the help of the Armed Forces which should be appreciated. Furthermore, according to the Article 123(2) of the Bangladesh constitution, a new President is to be elected within 180 days of the vacation of office by the President. In order to meet this urgent constitutional need Acting President Sattar took advantage of the widespread emotional reaction of the people to General Zia's assassination and in a shrewd move, quickly announced the election schedule which however, was held on 15 November 1981.³²

It was generally assumed that the BNP, a poli-centric organization would disintegrate after the assassination of General Zia. And in fact, the party was threatened with a possible split between its two factions with two nominees, Acting President Justice Abdus Sattar and Agriculture Minister Major General (Rtd.) Nurul Islam for presidential election. Since most factions in the BNP were in favour of Justice Sattar and more significantly, the Generals also gave open support to him, Sattar was finally chosen he being treated as a kind of father figure and senior most among leaders.³³ Moreover, the constitutional bar of an acting President contesting the election was removed

30. *Constitution of the Peoples Republic of Bangladesh-1972; The Bangladesh Observer*, 31 May 1981.

31. Talukder Maniruzzaman and Razia Akter Banu, "Civilian Succession and 1981 Presidential Elections in Bangladesh" in *Transfer and Transformation: Political Institutions in New Commonwealth*, edited by Peter Lyon, James Manor and Hugh Tinker, (forthcoming) p.2.

32. *Ibid*, pp. 1-10 ; "The Prices of Victory" *Far Eastern Economic Review*, No. 27, 3 December 1981.

33. See, No, 18. p. 178.

by the Sixth Amendment of the constitution and Sattar's candidature was regularised.³⁴ On the other hand, the opposite parties including Awami League (Hasina) formed a ten party alliance demanding restoration of parliamentary democracy on the basis of 1972 constitution. The alliance however, broke up as it could not agree on a common candidate though attempts were made to the nomination of General (Rtd.) Osmani. The Awami League, the major component of the alliance finally put its own candidate Kamal Hossain while General (Rtd.) Osmani became the candidate of National Citizens' Forum comprising of some left wing intellectuals, businessmen and journalists.³⁵

The other major candidates in the elections were Major (Rtd.) M.A. Jalil of JSD, Muzaffar Ahmed of NAP-M and Muhammad-ullah Hafezzi Huzur, the Imam of a mosque in Dhaka. However, the 10 Party alliance led by Aatur Rahman Khan and former President Khandkar Mushtaque Ahmed abstained from taking part in the election.³⁶

In all 83 candidates filed the nomination papers for the Presidency out of whom 52 withdrew their candidature, thus leaving 31 contestants in the field. As a matter of fact, as in the last two elections, the 1981 presidential election was also fought between the two parties around two assassinated leaders—General Zia's BNP and Mujib's AL. The BNP candidate Justice Sattar won a massive victory and got 65.52 per cent polling 14,203,958 votes and AL candidate Kamal Hossain got 26.00 per cent polling 5,636,113 votes while 55.47 per cent exercised their franchise.³⁷

34. Article 50 (b) in conjunction with Article 66 (2d) of the constitution provides that a person holding an office of profit in the Service of the Republic would not be eligible for election as President while Section 2A of Article 66. stated that Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Ministers and Minister would not be deemed to have held offices of profit, it did not mention anything about the offices of Vice president, Acting President and President.

35. *Holiday*, 12 July 1981; *The Bangladesh Times*, 28 August 1981; *The Bangladesh Observer*, 29 September 1981.

36. *Holiday*, 1 August 1981.

37. Source : *Election Commission, Bangladesh*.

It appeared that the polling percentage in 1981 (55.47 per cent) election was higher than in the elections held in 1978 (53.59 per cent) and 1979 (50.94 per cent). However, the polling percentage of 1973 (56 per cent) election was higher than the subsequent elections.

After the assassination of General Zia, the civilian succession through election was a unique development in military dominated politics.

It is to be noted here that such a landslide victory of BNP in the 1981 president election was against the common expectation that in the absence of General Zia, BNP would not survive. But this did not happen because the BNP leasers might have thought that their disintegration would only bring their immediate downfall. In spite of difference of opinion on election campaign, the high ranking leaders handled party affairs very effectively. Almost all the factions in the party closed their ranks together and fought election battle with dedication as a single entity. General Zia's image as honest and capable leader, and his achievements and unity in the party perhaps were the secret of the success of the BNP in the election. On the contrary, the factional feuding which came up in the AL between its two high ranking leaders—Abdur Razzak, the Secretary General and Tofael Ahmed, the Organizing Secretary which ultimately divided the party greatly suffered its election campaign and helped the BNP victory as much as its own unity.³⁸ As for the other opposition parties are concerned, they bitterly criticised both the AL and BNP. While the leftist parties remained fragmented and faction ridden, the pro-Islamic rightist parties suffered from a handicap of their negative role during the liberation war of 1971. However, as the opposition parties attacked both the AL and BNP, the BNP seeing AL defensive, became offensive in its campaign strategy. These would have tilted the balance in favour of Sattar and BNP to win the election and to continue in

38. *The Bangladesh Observer*, 14 October 1981 ; *Holiday*, 13 December 1981.

power. The people gave Sattar a chance to continue his predecessor's policies and programmes. Finally, the achievements of Zia and his regime contributed immensely to the victory of Sattar and BNP. The people also wanted a continuity to stabilise the system.

Conclusion

As in many other developing countries, the ruling parties in Bangladesh have always been in the advantageous position for electoral success, and in fact, all the four elections held so far in Bangladesh were won by the party in power. The ruling parties greatly enjoy the bureaucratic support and the government controlled mass media—radio, television and newspapers regularly extoll the achievements of the regime. During the electioneering, since wall posters, placards and pamphlets, and mass rallies and public meetings assume greater importance the ruling party stand in positive side to enjoy the maximum benefit of official patronage which gives them both strategic and tactical advantages. On the other hand, opposition parties always remain suppressed to keep the regime in power. As a result, it has become almost impossible for opposition parties to come to power through electoral means.

We may also observe that the elections in Bangladesh have often been used as instruments of selection of public officials as to grant legitimacy to the claim of certain ruling elites to govern over others. Our analyses indicate that the electioneering process of Bangladesh always moved to a negative direction in which ideology seemed to have taken back seat yielding place to emotional overtones of politics which has largely characterised the Bangladesh politics and culture. More often, patronage and personality approach rather than socio-economic issues may be said to have constituted the central theme of electoral politics of Bangladesh as well as the political trends of the country.

Above analysis also shows that inspite of the vital importance of elections on national political process, they never proved to be recognised means of succession in government and leadership in Bangladesh.

Under military rule since 1975 civilianization process through holding elections was more of a facade than what it was claimed to be. The civilian succession after the assassination of General Zia which was a unique case in military politics, was also ephemeral. However, the civilian government continued in power until it was taken away by another General. In short, we may sum up by saying that power politics in Bangladesh has so far been dominated by the Armed Forces through 'electoral facade' and the latter is likely to continue with its domineering role in the composition and complexion of the ruling authority of the country in the foreseeable future