

A New Arithmetic



In 2001 the author stunned everybody with his election predictions based on his own research that foretold the sensational victory of the then opposition BNP. Five years hence he presents his new analysis for the coming elections in which he predicts a reversal of fortunes for the AL. We published his findings on a two-page spread five years ago. We treat his piece today in the same manner. We hope these personal findings of the author will generate a lively debate and further analyses on the coming national elections. We invite our readers to send us their comments and thus participate in the most important event in a democracy, that is electing a new government and public representatives for the next five years. -- Editor

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RENOWNED American artist Andy Warhol once said: "Everybody has his fifteen minutes of fame." Mine perhaps came after the 2001 national elections when my predictions for the election, published in The Daily Star six months earlier, turned out to be accurate. The results of the elections took most people by surprise, as for the first time we saw coalition politics in Bangladesh parliamentary elections.

The article I had written was in fact a summary of the presentation I had made to the BNP chairperson two years earlier. I had joined the BNP in 1978 and was elected to the 2nd Jatiya Sangsad in 1979 on a BNP ticket. I again contested in 1991, but was not elected. That year I retired from the party and all political activities.

I did not meet Begum Zia throughout her first term as prime minister, but met her soon after BNP lost the 1996 elections. In that meeting I advised her not to worry about the defeat, but that she should go to Parliament, make her policy statements, and hold the government responsible for its actions. The party had a sizeable presence in the House, and she should use this to consolidate democracy in the country.

Next met Begum Zia three years later. Mr Moudud Ahmed had rejoined the BNP. He had lost the by-election to the Lakshimpur seat vacated by Begum Zia, and after a book writing sabbatical to Europe, had returned to look for ways to bring the party back to power. He was among the few in the party who thought along those lines.

One of his first steps was to try to get what were termed as "nationalist forces" on to one debating platform. In essence, these were anti-Awami League forces. A series of seminars were held under the banner of a national solidarity front where participants included the Jamaat-Islami. However, this did not go much further.

In 1999, he asked me what BNP needed to do to win the next elections. I told him that they needed to firm up the anti-AL forces into one electoral platform and contest the elections by sharing seats. I pointed out that people voting against the AL are more than the people voting for

it. If the anti-AL votes were not divided, the alliance could win by a landslide.

The concept of Anti-Awami League Alliance

I had been studying election results for years. In fact I selected my parliamentary constituency in 1979 based on this theory. After joining the BNP, I visited my home district of Sylhet to organise the party for the forthcoming parliamentary elections. I did not know the district well, and since I was expected to contest, I scouted around for a seat.

My ancestral home was in a constituency comprising two large thanas with high voter population. It would be a difficult and unwieldy constituency, not easy to make a "safe" seat. I chanced upon a small constituency in the north of the district. Though it also comprised two thanas, they were small, and the number of voters was much less. There were few capable local rivals and the voting population included large numbers of people from other thanas of the district as well as other districts of the country. Many of these people were settlers that had earlier gone to Assam in the 1950s but were later driven back.

Records showed that the Awami League had won this seat in 1970 and 1973. However, this was with a minority number of votes and the majority voters had voted against the AL. But these votes were split over numerous candidates. I felt that if I could consolidate the anti-AL votes, I could win this seat.

The BNP leadership were a little sceptical about my choice as they did not think it a safe seat. Nonetheless, I went ahead. There were ten candidates in this seat in the parliamentary elections of 1979. Of the 44,290 valid votes cast, I got approximately 14,000, the AL candidate 10,500. Though I did not get the majority of the anti-AL votes, it was enough to prove my point.

The BNP did not contest the 1986 election and so I was not in the race. One of my school friends, who had helped me in my previous campaign, took the opportunity to contest on an AL ticket. In that year, about 41,000 votes were cast and the AL won with approximately 18,000 votes. 23,000 other votes were split among three other candidates.

I was again a candidate of the

BNP in 1991. My friend was the AL candidate. I was confident of winning as I pegged voter turnout at around 55,000 (due to increased voters). I expected the AL share to be around 20-22,000 and the majority to come to me as there were only four other candidates of little consequence. This was the trend till a week before the election.

Neither my friend nor I were "locals." My friend's advantage was that the AL was well organised with a minimum base. The BNP (basically myself) had been absent for two interim elections, and as we were involved in agitation politics (mainly city-based), the party organisation was weak. I was approached by "local" students to buy out my "local" rival. I did not see any necessity as that person had only got 597 votes against me on the previous occasion.

But the first Gulf War would change that in Sylhet. Two weeks before the elections, a lot of local sympathy developed for Saddam Hussein. A lot of this sympathy transferred to Ershad's Jatiya Party (perhaps as an underdog), and in its absence, to "local" candidates.

Before my eyes, I saw my base erode, but I could not do anything about it. The results showed a casting of approximately 54,000 votes (approximately 35%, against a national average of 55%). The AL got around 23,000, while I got only 14,500. My "local" rival ran away with 13,000 votes. The AL base was as expected, but I was unable to consolidate the anti-AL vote.

In 1996, my friend was again the AL candidate. The BNP candidate was then Finance Minister M Saifur Rahman. Votes cast were approximately 93,000 or 62.5%. The AL got 22,725 votes. BNP won with 23,946 votes. Though the number of votes cast increased, it was spread over eight other candidates (BNP together with AL getting only 50% of the vote).

Mr Saifur Rahman gave up the seat as he had also won from Moulvibazar. In the by-election to this seat, the votes cast dropped to about 35%. My friend on the AL ticket got 23,634 votes (same as 1991) with the BNP candidate in third place with 9,664 votes. This in essence was my theory. The AL has a core vote, in most constituencies, of 30% to 35%. If the anti-AL votes could be consolidated, the AL could

easily be defeated in most seats.

The theory of an anti-Awami League vote bank is a peculiar phenomenon. The question that begs to be asked is why a popular party that brought independence to a nation has such a formidable section of the population against it. The answer lies in Baksal. The Awami League's imposition of one-party rule with all its appendages alienated the then major section of the population, forcing AL to spend the next two decades trying to make amends. It would be the entry of a new generation on to the voter rolls, coupled with an inept government, that would bring the AL to touching distance of power in 1996. A provision of "winner take all" reserved seats for women would then consolidate that party in government.

Theory of the Alliance

In mid-1999, Mr Moudud Ahmed asked me to explain my theory to Begum Zia. I presented my theory of electoral patterns and suggested that were she able to form an alliance with the Jamaat-Islami and the Jatiya Party, she should be able to win over 200 seats in the next elections. She seemed to grasp the core of the argument.

She then asked a few very pertinent questions, such as: Would in fact the vote of one party transfer to an alliance partner? In other words, would the Jamaat-Islami vote come to a BNP candidate in a particular seat and vice-versa? We needed to establish this. We also needed to know what the base support of the major parties was, and how much of the anti-AL vote could be consolidated. This would have to be done through field testing. I had this done by a very professional market survey company during June 1999, covering all the constituencies of Dhaka city. I did not have the funds for a national level study, but I believed that Dhaka would more or less represent the national average. The results supported our theory.

We found that the BNP, Jamaat, and Jatiya Party votes were transferable. The base support of the parties was also as per my estimates. In other words, the signal was green as far as Begum Zia was concerned. Once again I made my presentation of the results of the survey.

She had one more important question. Could Ershad be trusted? My reply was that the elections were two years away. If she could keep him with her in an anti-government movement for even a year, Ershad's possible betrayal would only split his party, and more importantly, the JP voter would be opposition attuned and stay with the movement.

I gave her a copy of the survey results. This would be my last meeting with Begum Zia. She asked for suggestions on which seats BNP needed to keep and which could be negotiated. This was given. Initially, she was one of the very few in the party who understood the concept of the alliance, and it is a credit to her

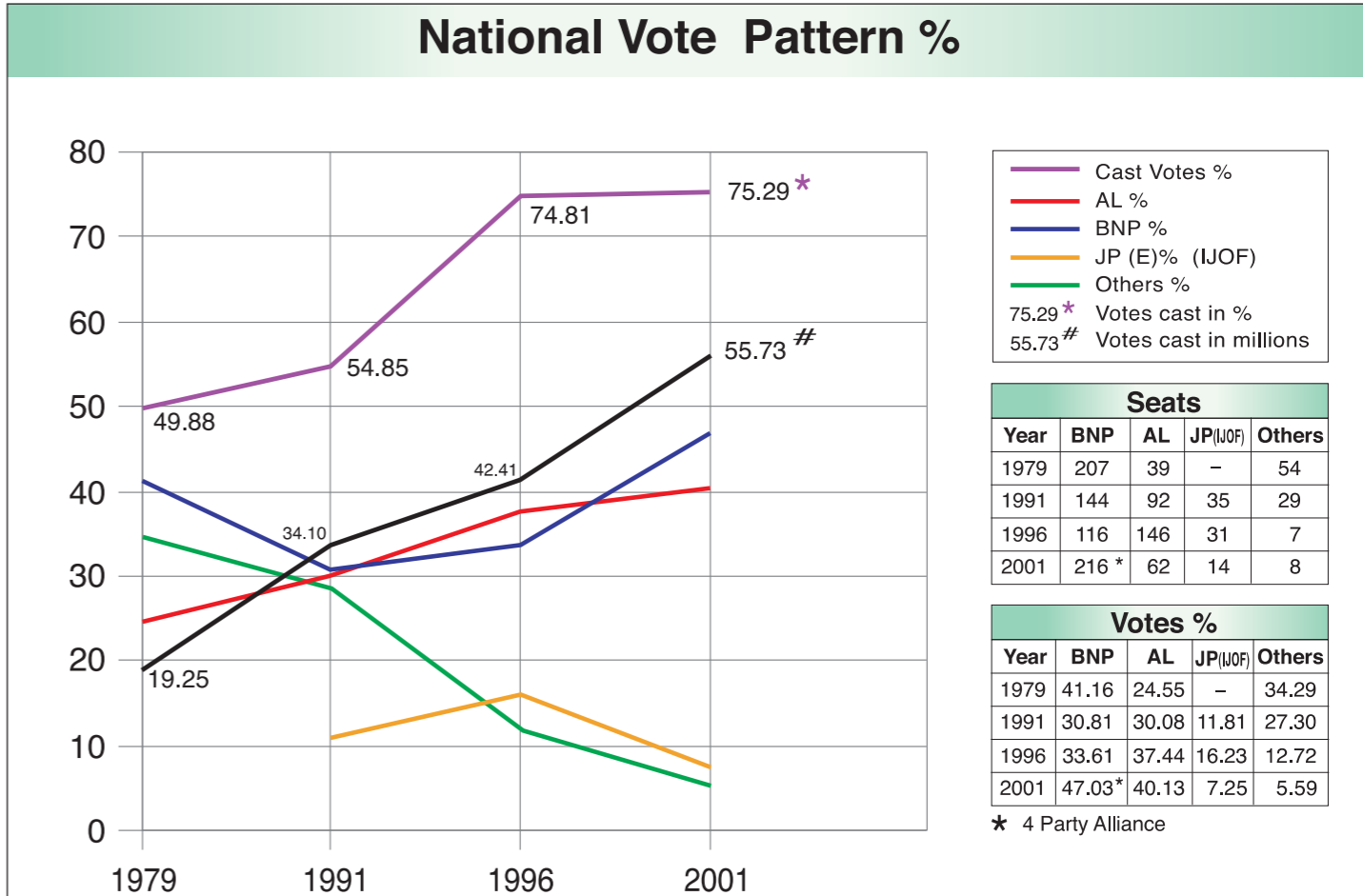


Table 2 Survey 2006
Who will you vote for in the next election?

	Survey 1999	Election 2001	Survey 2006	18- 25 Yrs	26-34 Yrs	35+ Yrs
AL	39.20%	40.13%	23%	25%	21%	23%
BNP	30.30%	47.03% *	16%	15%	18%	16%
JP	10.20%	7.25%	4%	4%	6%	4%
Ji	3.20%	—	1%	1%	1%	1%
Others	6.60%	5.59%	3%	3%	2%	3%
Don't know	10.50%	—	53%	52%	52%	53%
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

* 4 party alliance

Lessons of 2001 Elections

The results of the 2001 elections are known to all. Though I had expected the Alliance to get 200-plus seats, the votes received by the AL and the Alliance were a surprise to me. I had not expected the AL to get as many votes as it got, which was 41% against an Alliance total of around 47%. This meant that the AL had crossed the magic figure of 40%, and that the anti-AL vote theory would not work any more.

The Awami League apparently had come out of its Baksal stigma. The majority of the 2001 voters were of a post-Baksal generation. They had seen the two parties in government, and the issues were not of past politics, but one of governance. The Alliance was very lucky to get the number of seats they got compared to the votes cast in their favour.

Unfortunately for the BNP, they have not understood this. They confused the number of seats won with actual votes cast. This is not so. Table 1 shows the actual voting for the main parties from 1979 to 2001. One will notice a steady rise for the AL as against ups and downs for other parties. Then again, only a 6% spread between the Alliance and the AL means that there will be a further shift in the base votes before a future election. 2001 elections was a watershed, and all calculations for the future needed to be done afresh.

Survey 2006

To understand the present support base, and to make an "intelligent guess" (it is not possible to do any better than this) at the possible results of the next elections, I needed a fresh survey of the voters. This was carried out during June of this year by the same organisation that did the survey in 1999, using the same methodology. The results were astounding.

At first I wouldn't believe it. I had it re-checked. The results were the same. The core base of every single party had eroded in a massive way. Table 2 shows the survey results of 1999, the actual votes of 2001, and the survey results of 2006.

How and why did this happen? It seems that the voters are disenchanted with the whole political system. They had voted for the Alliance on the hope of better governance, and when they did not see this, they moved away.

But why the erosion of AL's base? They are not in government. The answer has to be that the voters do not have much expectation from them either. The core vote for the BNP has dropped to 16% while that of the AL to 23%. This is the lowest since the presidential elections of 1978. The vote of the Jatiya Party has halved, while the Jamaat-e-Islami has two-thirds of its vote base eroded. Interestingly, the vote pattern is similar among both sexes and through all age

groups.

For the first time in our history, with elections less than six months away, more than half of the voters are undecided, i.e. not sure who to vote for. This indeed is an indictment of our political parties. One can only speculate as to what has led to this situation. As democracies mature, people tend to look more to performance than politics. For instance, in the UK, the core support for either the Labour or the Conservative Party is around 25%. Support for one or the other increases on the basis of the voters' perception of the party's performance, its policies, and its conduct.

So what does the survey tell us? It appears Bangladesh is reaching a political maturity of some sorts, albeit for different reasons. Voters are now more discerning in their opinions. They are better informed through private TV channels, the increased print media, both national and local, and the activities of "civil society."

They have the information, and are capable of judging for themselves. They feel let down by the political parties, including their own. Politics and slogans no longer appeal to them. They are fed up with inter-party bickering, unbridled corruption, total lack of governance, and signs of dynastic politics. They are also frustrated with their lack of a viable choice in a future election. This does not portend well for the future of democracy in the country. Thailand stares us in the face. My own belief is that if a poll is taken after a "neutral" caretaker government takes charge, the majority of voters will opt for it to continue for some years to come.

What holds for 2007?

But the reality of the situation is that we are headed for a national election. We have some facts on hand such as past voting patterns. I will use these, along with conjecture based on my insight and assessment, to give my personal opinion of what may be the outcome of the next election, if it does take place on schedule. I emphasise again, it is a personal opinion only. Today there are many permutations and combinations of alliances, partnerships, understandings, etc. We need to look at different scenarios, the parties and personalities in order to arrive at an "educated" guess as to what may be the vote pattern. Let us start with the Alliance. For all practical purposes it is the BNP and Jamaat-Islami.

BNP

The original basis of this party was to provide a platform to General Ziaur Rahman to break from his dependence on the army for support in the early days of this rule. The unstable days of 1976 to 1978, which saw a series of unsuccessful army coups, necessitated this. The Jagodal, and the subsequent Bangladesh Jatiotabadi Front were the predecessors of the BNP.

These forces were an amalgam of freedom fighters, far-right elements that had opposed the independence of Bangladesh, as well as far-left revolu-

tionary forces. After the presidential elections of 1978, these forces were consolidated into the BNP. The party never jelled. After the assassination of Ziaur Rahman, conflict developed in the party over the extent of intra-party democracy.

Marital Law of 1982 temporarily kept the party together, only for General Ershad to take away the major part of the leadership into his Jatiya Party. A small core was left to Begum Zia who had taken over the leadership. It was her championing of democracy and the reputation and memory of Zia as an honest person that brought BNP to power in 1991.

By then the party had begun to change as there was an influx of fresh members, mainly from the newly rich business community and the retired bureaucracy. Politics took a back seat to expedience. As a result, the party did not pay heed to the popular demand in 1995-96 for a caretaker government system. Mismanagement towards the end of its tenure, including the fertiliser crisis, saw the BNP lose support in its strongholds like Dhaka division, which resulted in the BNP losing the elections of 1996.

By 2001, there was another sea change in the party with the entry of a wave of young persons of suspect education and background. Now the party is devoid of politics. The capital that President Zia had given the party with his exemplary honesty is spent. The talk of following his ideals means little to the voter, as the party has been in power for ten of the last fifteen years and will be judged by its performance rather than anything else. The party is now on the verge of another break, even if partial. This will have a major impact on the party's electoral fortunes.

There is, at present, significant differences between the old and new leadership. Mr Tareque Rahman is leading the new wave. He appears to be in command, but he has neither earned the respect and loyalty of the old party members, nor inspired the "new" voters who are of his generation.

To this is added the conflict in almost every parliamentary constituency between the sitting MP and his rivals. Fueling this conflict is the horde of "newcomers" who have been associated with the Hawa Bhaban entering the electoral fray. Many of them are retired or retiring bureaucrats, who are now asking for their rewards.

The BNP no longer seems to be a political party. It is rather an association of interest groups aligned by their sole desire for financial gain at national and local levels. This also means that the local intra-party rivalry is based not on political differences, but on economic ones. This further means that disciplining by the high command will be all that more difficult, as the "economic" stakes are too high for the rival factions. The result is that almost every BNP seat is now "unsafe."

The BNP, and particularly Begum Zia's, election campaign seems to be based on a combination of its claim of development work and the bogey of "foreign hands." While it is undoubtedly that more development has taken place in the last five years than in the previous five, one has to see how the voters perceive this.

Historically, from 1960, successive governments have done more development work than previous governments. It is simply that annual budgets get larger and there is more money to

be spent. Ayub Khan and HM Ershad are two examples. But did they have immediate electoral benefits? Both had mass movements against them.

It may be argued they were semi-military governments. Well, the last Awami League government did far more development work than the preceding BNP government. Did it reap the electoral benefit? To a voter, development work is lower on his list of priorities. What is more important is the quality of life. Is he or she better off than before? Are prices of essentials higher or lower? Does he have better access to power and water? These are the issues the BNP will face in the next elections.

Than again, the bogey of "foreign hands" has been overused. In an absence of politics among the political parties, this is not a factor in our elections.

For the BNP there is a further problem. Dr B Chowdhury has broken away and formed the Bikalpa Dhara. Col Oli Ahmed and his associates are also likely to soon part from the BNP. They will draw to their fold many other lesser dissidents to whom politics is still important. All this will cut into the Alliance vote bank.

Consider the fact that in 1996 in Dhaka division (84 seats excluding Gopalganj and Madaripur districts), a vote swing of around 5% saw BNP lose 26 seats, while a reverse swing of 8% in 2001 saw them regain 26 seats. Also keep in mind that in 2001, in the same area, the BNP-led Alliance with 44.68% votes got 56 seats while the AL with 43.19% votes only managed 25. Amere 1.48% votes separated the two camps.

Also consider some other facts. In 2001, the BNP won 26 seats with a margin of less than 5%, 41 with less than 10%, and another 41 with less than 15%. That means a total of 108 seats are separated by a vote swing of 8%.

The electoral history of South Asia shows that almost no incumbent government gets as many votes as that which brought it to power, even if their governance has been good.

In the present situation, the BNP can expect to see an outward vote swing of up to 10%. If the outward swing is 4% from BNP to AL, the BNP will lose close to 70 seats. If the swing goes up to 8%, the BNP will be reduced to around 80 to 85 seats. Should the swing go as high as 10%, the BNP will have less than 60 seats in the next Parliament.

Election 2001, 4 Party Alliance and AL Vote % and Seats

Division	Total Seats	Alliance Vote %	Alliance Seat Won	AL Vote %	AL Seat Won	Difference Alliance% - AL %
Rajshahi	72	37.31	49	36.03	09	1.28
Khulna	37	40.16	29	42.62	08	(2.45)
Barisal	23	44.84	18	35.42	03	9.43
Dhaka	84	44.68	56	43.19	25	1.48
Gopalganj and Madaripur *	06	11.62	00	79.22	06	(67.60)
Sylhet	19	37.25	10	40.65	07	(3.41)
Chittagong	59	54.70	54	36.50	04	18.21
Total	300	47.03	216	40.13	62	6.90

* Gopalganj & Madaripur shown separately to correct vote imbalance