

## Jatiya Sangsad elections: Past and future

IN December of 1970, I flew from Karachi to Dhaka and took a train to my village in Sylhet to vote in the first one-man-one vote election held in Pakistan. The election was achieved by the people of country in a mass upsurge that established the right of one-man-one vote. For the first time it gave more representation to East Pakistan in the National Assembly. As much depended on the outcome of the election, my vote was very valuable to me and hence the long journey. It was also the first time I had ever voted. I voted for then Col.M.A.G.Osmani, the Awami League candidate for the National Assembly. Col. Osmani won the seat and the Awami League went on to win 167 of the 169 National Assembly seats contested in East Pakistan. They secured 74.9 per cent of the 57.6 per cent votes cast in the province and 38.3 per cent of the votes cast in the country. They won 98.76 per cent of the provincial National Assembly seats. It was the zenith of the Awami League's electoral achievement. In East Pakistan it seemed that every man and woman had voted for the "Boat" symbol, but in fact, a quarter of the population did not.

It is often said that elections are unpredictable. This may be true in certain cases, but modern polling systems have narrowed down predictions to 3 to 4 per cent of the outcome, particularly in races that only have two or three main contenders. Prediction of results in multi-party, multi-ethnic parliamentary elections are more difficult due to the diverse factors at work. However even here Indian pollsters have, in recent years, had a lot of success. This is because Indian political parties have understood the shortcomings of Parliamentary systems where "first past the post" wins the seat. In most cases the number of seats won does not reflect the amount of popular votes won. Old European parliamentary systems, as well as new democracies such as South Africa and Thailand, have adopted changes in the form of party lists that give weightage to votes won, to the number of seats won.



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We all know the results of the 1991 and 1996 general elections. Not only do we know the results, but also we have lived and suffered because of them. However, how closely have we had the chance to examine the results? In the following piece a thorough study is made of the results of the two general elections, constituency by constituency. An analysis is also made of the last two general elections as to what would have happened had there been an alliance of BNP, JP and JI in 1996.

The author then makes a forecast of the 2001 general elections on the basis of the voting pattern of the 1991 and 1996 general elections. This forecast explains the importance of the alliance, and the government's eagerness to break it. However, the author concludes that this is the first time that the people will vote for the third election in a row and will have the chance to re-elect a party that has held power before. Thus a unique election may produce quite a unique result. With this in-depth analysis The Daily Star begins its special coverage of the coming general election. The views expressed are the author's own, and do not in any way reflect the view of this paper.

This in fact, means that political parties get seats in parliament that reflect popular will in the form of votes won in the election. This is not the case in India or Bangladesh. In India the political parties have tried to resolve the problem by making electoral alliances. The idea is to narrow the division of votes among parties of similar ideas and programmes. This has worked remarkably well in the recent few general elections, particularly against the Congress Party, which in spite of actually increasing its popular vote in the last election, saw its seats in parliament fall drastically.

In Bangladesh, an electoral alliance was tried only once, in East Pakistan province, in 1954. The United Front (of which the Awami League was the major component) won 228 of the 237 Muslim seats. The alliance government lasted less than two months as the Governor-General arbitrarily, and in a conspiratorial manner, dismissed the provincial government.

An electoral alliance is only possible when the voting population is divided along certain lines, be it religious, ethnic, cultural or political. Bangladesh is a homogeneous society with a single language, largely a single religion and similar culture. Its political division lies in its political legacy, and that is both the political strength and the electoral weakness of our political parties, including the Awami League.

### 1977 to 1989

The first election under the new constitution of Bangladesh was held in 1973 in which 55.62 per cent of an electorate of 34 million cast their votes. The election was not without controversy. The AL won 291 of the 300 general seats. The second election in Bangladesh, held under the martial law regime, was the presidential election of 1978. Ziaur Rahman, who contested from the office of the president as the candidate of the anti-AL alliance got 76.67 per cent of the approximately 54 per cent votes cast. General M.A.G.Osmani, the AL led Ganatantrik Oikya Jote (GOJ) candidate, got 21.70 per cent of the votes. In the parliamentary elections that followed in 1979, the AL's share of the popular vote increased to 24.55 per cent and they won 39 seats. The anti-AL alliance broke up with President Ziaur Rahman forming his BNP, which got 41.16 per cent of the votes and 207 seats.

With the assassination of president Ziaur Rahman in 1982, presidential elections were held in November of that year. Vice-President Abus Sattar, the BNP candidate, got 65.80 per cent of the 55.47 per cent vote's cast. Dr.Kamal Hossain, the AL candidate got 26.35 per cent of the votes.

Martial Law of 1983 cut short the democratic process that was beginning to operate smoothly, and though elections were held in 1986 and 1988, they were of little consequence as they were corrupt, rigged, and boycotted by large sections of the political field.

### 1991 Elections

It would be the elections of 1991 and 1996 that would establish a firm pattern of voting and help to understand voting preferences. The election of 1991 was preceded by a mass upsurge that saw the over-throw of president H.M.Ershad's Jatiya Party (JP) government. It was also the first time that an election was held under a neutral interim administration. The electoral playing field was level for most players, the JP being the exception. Their leader was imprisoned, others were "on the run", and they contested the elections under trying circumstances. According to the media of the time, the AL were favourites to win a majority in parliament.

The BNP were untried and had suffered mass desertions over the previous seven years. The results belied all perceptions. The AL got 33.67 per cent of the vote, but won only 100 seats. (This figure includes all constituencies contested with the "boat" symbol). On the other hand, the BNP got 30.81 per cent of the vote and won 140 seats. The JP got 11.92 per cent of the vote and 35 seats while the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) got 12.13 per cent votes and 18 seats. The four parties between them got 88 per cent of the votes cast, which was 34 million or 55% of an electorate of 62 million.

While the BNP and AL got votes from all over the country, they both had their own areas of strength. For the BNP it was Dhaka division where it won 56 of 90 seats. The AL won 29. This was followed by Chittagong division where the BNP won 37 of the 59 seats while the AL won 14. In Rajshahi division the BNP won 27 of 72 seats while the AL won 20. In Barisal division the AL won 11 of 23 seats to the BNP's 10. In Khulna division the AL won 16 of 37 seats with the BNP taking 13. Lastly, in Sylhet division the BNP won only 1 of 19 to the AL's 9.

For the JP the main area of strength lay in north Bengal. It won 18 of its total 35 seats in the Lalmoinirhat, Rangpur, Kurigram and Gaibandha districts of Rajshahi division. Eight more seats came from Sylhet division and 5 from B'baria, Comilla and Noakhali districts of Chittagong division. The Jamaat-e-Islami's strength was in northern and western border areas where it got 15 of its 18 seats and most of its 12 per cent vote.

Though parliamentary elections were held in February of 1996, they were boycotted by all parties other than the BNP. The government was forced to resign after the passage of the caretaker government bill, paving the way for the general elections of June 1996 which was a most interesting election, and has set a pattern that re-enforces previous electoral trends. The boycott by all parties other than the BNP in the February election, and the widespread irregularities in the conduct of that election, may have been a major contributor to the vote swinging in favor of the AL.

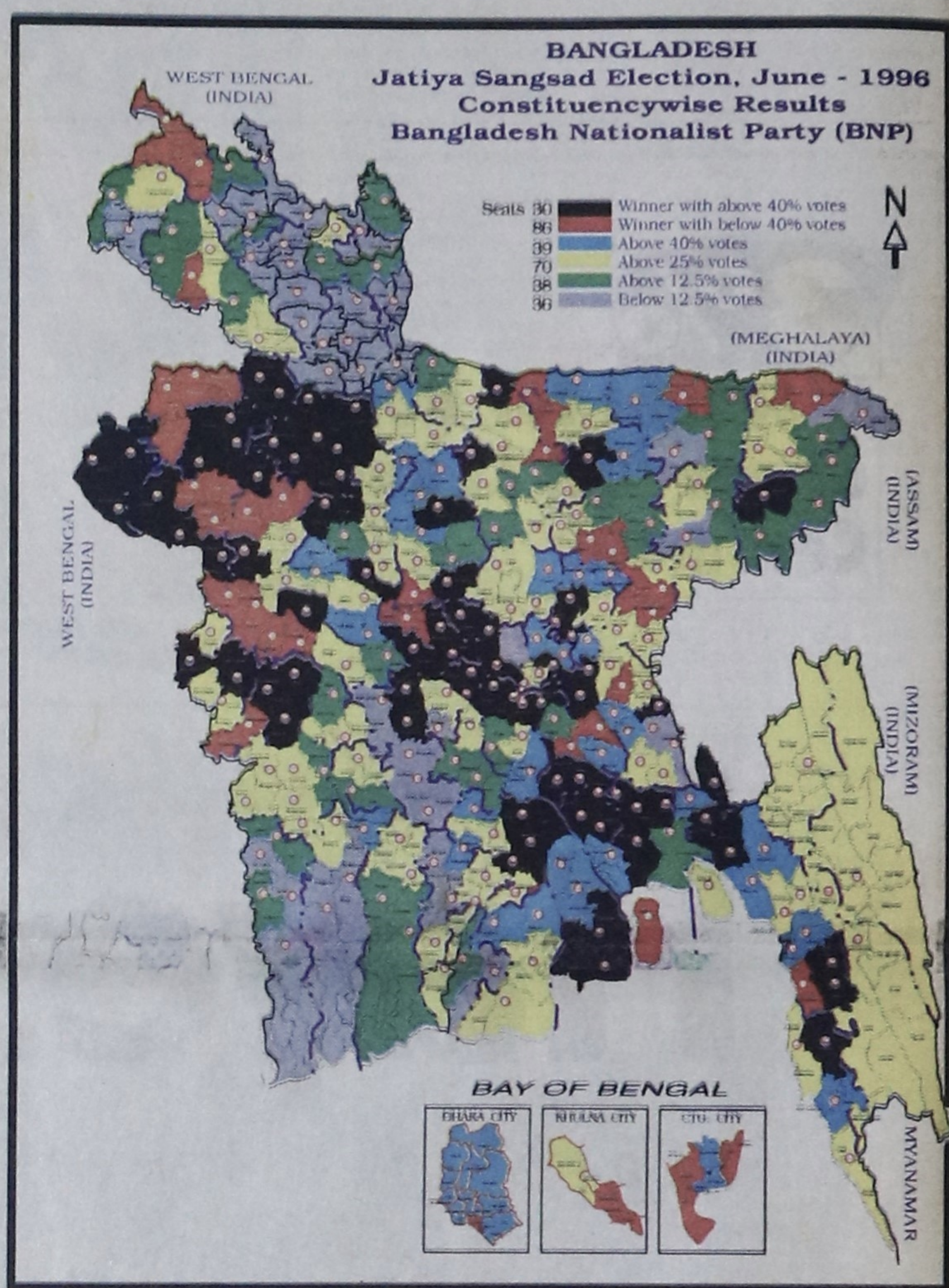
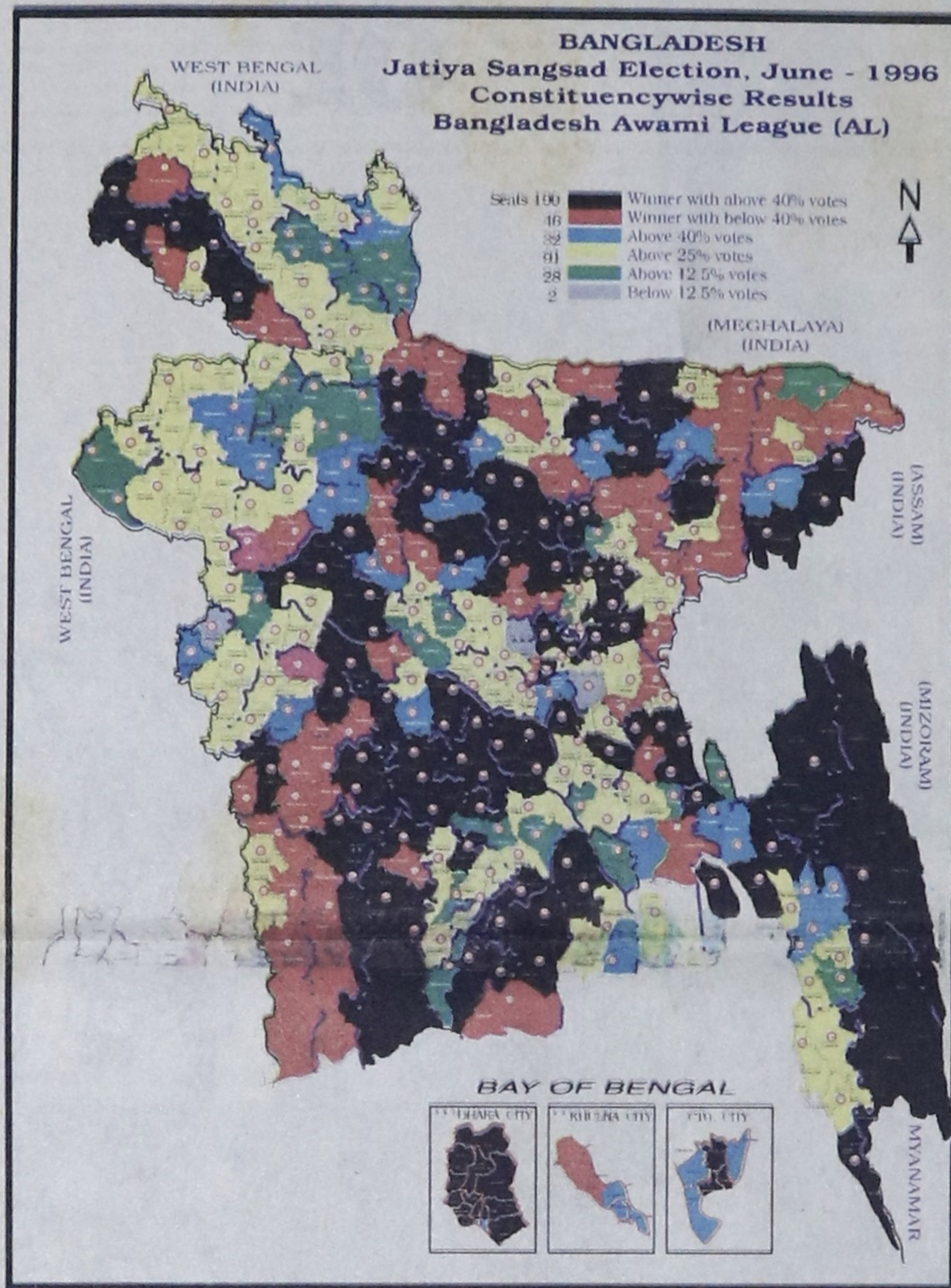
### June 1996 Elections

The election was the first to be held under a constitutional caretaker government. This was also the first time a large number of election monitors and observers, both local and foreign, were present. The election was generally considered "free and fair". This time the electorate was about 57 million of whom 42.42 million or 74.34 per cent cast their votes. This was the highest turnout ever. The four major parties accounted for 96 per cent of the votes cast, up from 88 per cent in 1991. BNP, AL and JP increased their share of votes at the cost of other parties including JI.

### BNP

The BNP's share of the vote increased by about 3 per cent over 1991 to 33.58 per cent or 14.24 million. The party was defending 144 seats (4 independents in the 5<sup>th</sup> parliament had joined the party). It retained 81, lost 63 old seats, but won 35 new ones to take its tally to 116. Its worst performance was in Dhaka division where it lost 31 of its old seats while picking up only 5 new ones. Its best performance was in Rajshahi division where it won 12 new seats while losing 7 old ones. The BNP's vote spread was more or less throughout the country and it came second in 113 other seats.

In Dhaka district, it actually got 43.46 per cent of the vote to AL's 41.55 per cent, but lost 7 of the 8 capital seats. In Dhaka City the BNP got 39.79 per cent votes, down from 53.18 per cent, while the AL got 46.53 per cent, up from



35.53 per cent. The JP got 7.75 per cent (up from 2.58 per cent) in the city, while JI got 2.81 (down from 3.39 per cent).

### AL

The AL also increased its vote share by a little over 3 per cent over 1991 to 37.44 per cent or 15.90 million votes. The party was defending 99 seats (they had lost one bye-election). They retained 65, lost 34, but won 81 new ones to take their tally to 146 seats. Their biggest gain was in Dhaka division where they won 35 new seats losing only 5 old ones. This was followed by Chittagong division where they won 16 new seats, losing 7 old ones. The AL came second in 133 seats. The vote spread for the AL is even more uniform and their strength is throughout the country.

**Literacy may be low in Bangladesh, but the voters are intelligent and motivated. This is evident from one of the highest turnouts in the world. As we see from the results of the '91 and '96 elections, more than 85 per cent of the voters, both men and women, have become core supporters of one of the four parties, with about 10 per cent swinging from one or the other, and 5 per cent voting for others. It is difficult to say exactly what the support base is for each party and here I can only give my own opinion. I would put BNP's base at 30%. The AL has about 32 to 33% support base. For the JP it would be around 14% and for JI 8%.**

### JP

The JP vote share had the most increase, from 11.92 per cent to 16.23 per cent or 6.88 million votes. They defended 35 seats of which they retained 20 and lost 15. They won 11 new ones for a total of 31. The main strength of the JP is in the Panchagarh, Thakurgaon, Dinajpur, Nilphamari, Lalmonirhat, Rangpur, Kurigram and Gaibandha districts. They came second in 37 seats.

They also have a strong support base in other areas that could be crucial to an alliance partner.

### Ji

This party's performance was the poorest. Their vote share came down from 12.13 per cent to 8.61 per cent. The number of votes won was 3.62 million. They were defending 18 seats of which they lost 17. They won 2 new ones for a total of 3 seats in the 7<sup>th</sup> parliament.

Though the party lost a lot of seats, it maintained a strong presence in the northwest, the western and southwestern districts. It came second in 14 seats. It can strongly support an alliance partner like the BNP in these areas. However its support capacity is greatly reduced east of the Jamuna.

### Divisional performance

#### Rajshahi Division-72 seats

In 1991, the BNP had won 27, the AL 20, the JP 18 and the JI 7. This time around the BNP retained 20 of the 27, and won 12 new ones to increase their tally to 32. In 1991 the AL had won 20, but lost 11 of those.

They won 9 new ones. In 1996 their net loss was 2 bringing the total to 18. The JP had won 18 seats in 1991. Of these they retained 17 and won 2 new ones to increase their total to 21. The JI had won 7 seats in 1991.

They could not retain any of those, but won 1 new seat. No seats were won by anyone else.

#### Khulna Division-37 seats

The BNP had 13 seats to defend. They retained 9 and won 3 taking their total to 12, a net loss of 1 seat. The AL had 16 seats, of which it retained 13 and won 9 new ones. Their tally increased to 22, a gain of 6 seats.

The JP won 1 new seat in this Division. The JI had 8 seats of which it lost 7 without adding any new ones. Other than these parties, only 1 independent candidate won.

#### Barisal Division-23 seats

The BNP were defending 10 seats but could retain only 3. They won 2 new seats but saw their previous total reduced to half (5). The AL had 11 seats of which they retained 7.

#### Dhaka Division-90 seats

This Division perhaps presents the most interesting picture in that there appears to be a direct switch between the BNP and the AL. In 1991 the BNP had won 56 seats while the AL had won 29. This time the AL won 59 while the BNP won 30. Of the 56 seats that BNP had won, it retained 25 or less than half, while it gained only 5 new ones. Of the 29 that the AL had won, it retained 24 and won 35 additional seats. The JP lost all 3 of its 1991 seats but gained 1 new one in Mymensingh (Begum Raushan Ershad). The JI had won 1 seat in 1991, which it lost in 1996. Aside from the one JP seat, all seats in this Division went to either the AL (59) or the BNP (30).

#### Sylhet Division-19 seats

In 1991 the BNP had only 1 seat in this Division which it lost in 1996. However it gained 3 new seats, all won from the AL. The AL had 9 seats of which it retained 5 and lost 4 (three to BNP and 1 JP). It won 8 additional seats to increase its tally to 13. The JP had 8 seats. It lost 6, retained 2 and won 1 new one. No other party or candidate won any seats in this Division.

#### Chittagong Division-59 seats

The BNP in 1991 had 37 seats of which it retained 24. It won 10 additional seats to take its total to 34. The AL had 14 seats of which it lost 7 or half. However, it gained 16 additional seats in 1996 to increase its total to 23. The JP lost all 5 seats it held in this Division and the JI the 2 seats it held. With the exception of JSD-Rab (the sole other winner) all seats (58 results) in this Division went to either the BNP (34) or the AL (23).

### An analysis

The 1996 election confirmed a voting pattern that emerged in 1991. The major parties (except JI) not only retained their vote share, but also increased it. The increase was proportionate to the increased turnout, and in their areas of strength. The increase was at the cost of minor parties and individuals. It appears that voters now prefer to vote for the major parties, and individuals, no matter how influential in their own areas, do not count. The vote base has consolidated on party lines. While the BNP and AL have a vote base throughout the country, the JP and JI have particular areas of strength and are less broadly represented in other areas. We will see later how important this is to alliance formations.

In most elections in our part of the world there is an anti-incumbency factor. While on the basis of the results the BNP actually increased its vote, the anti-government movement of 1996 impacted heavily on it in crucial areas. If one recalls, the Dhaka City was the epicenter of the anti-government movement. There was an 11 per cent vote swing to the AL, costing the BNP 7 city seats.

In Tangail, Jamalpur, Sherpur, Mymensingh, Netrokona, Kishorganj, Gazipur, Narshingdi and Narayanganj districts, there was on average, around 5 per cent vote swing away from the BNP, but it cost them 20 seats. Aside from the movement, these districts had seen strong anti-government agitation in the winter of 1995/6 due to acute fertiliser shortage. This appears to have cost the BNP dearly. The AL appear to be given a chance at government attracted the swing voters and gave them an increase of 23 seats in these districts.

The JP and JI remained strong in north Bengal. Though the JI got a national average of 8.61 per cent of the vote, this does not give the actual picture. The party has a very strong presence in the districts of Dinajpur, Nilphamari, Gaibandha, Joypurhat, Bogra, Nawabganj, Sirajganj, Pabna, Meherpur, Chuadanga, Jhenidah, Jessore, Bagerhat, Satkhira, and Pirojpur. In these districts, the JI averaged a vote of 15 per cent.

Most of these districts are contiguous and added to the BNP's own strength, can be a formidable anti-AL electoral force. However, east of the Jamuna, the JI does not have a wide vote base other than in the adjoining areas of Noakhali and Lakshimpur and in Cox's Bazar. None the less, its average 3 to 5 per cent votes in Dhaka, Sylhet and Chittagong divisions can tilt results in closely fought constituencies.

The JP base is north Bengal where it won 21 of its 31 seats. Its next strength lies in Barisal division where it won 5 seats (2 each in Jhalokathi and Pirojpur, 1 in Bakerganj). East of the Jamuna, they pulled good votes (average of above 20 per cent) in the Sherpur, Mymensingh, Manikganj, Gazipur, of Dhaka division, and in the whole of Sylhet division (3 seats). In Comilla district too, they pulled over 20 per cent.

### Profile of the voter

Literacy may be low in Bangladesh, but the voters are intelligent and motivated. This is evident from one of the highest turnouts in the world. As we see from the results of the '91 and '96 elections, more than 85 per cent of the voters, both men and women, have become core supporters of one of the four parties, with about 10 per cent swinging from one or the other, and 5 per cent voting for others. It is difficult to say exactly what the support base is for each party and here I can only give my own opinion. I would put BNP's base at 30%. The AL has about 32 to 33% support base. For the JP it would be around 14% and for JI 8%.

The BNP was created from forces opposed to the Awami League, while the JP was created from breaking the BNP support base. The JI has always been