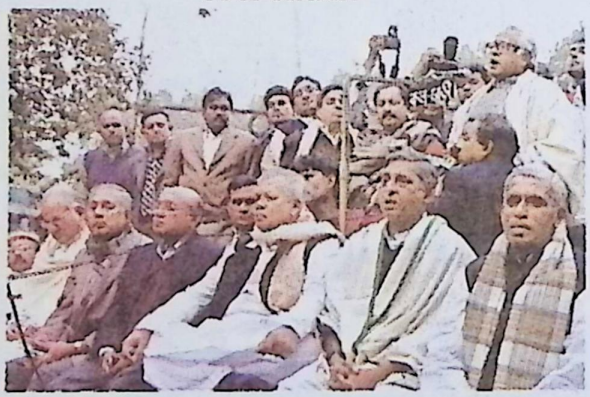
AL's Catch January 22

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The Awami League has come full circle. From no elections, to elections, back to no elections. Along the way, they picked up all and sundry and now find themselves burdened with the ignominy of carrying the motley crew of dissident opponents, a military dictator and little known but well-reported alleged band of militants. All because of the League's central dilemma: How to loosen the double-bind of the BNP and the caretaker government on the elections, while maintaining public and international support for a movement that is crippling the country.

Signs were ominous from the end of 2005 that the electoral process was being set up to improve on preceding attempts to engineer the polls. Regular reports appeared in the media. All of them damning indictments on the state of political control over what is supposed to be an impartial election process. The word around AL's decision-making circles has always been that everything the four-party coalition government would do, it would always remain reversible. Only when they tried to open each door to the election process did they find all of them locked and the keys stored away under the care of someone someplace higher. They came far too late to the game. A number of party insiders say this has been a lesson in advanced power politics that not only took the League by surprise, but one that the party had to learn.

But, the AL couldn't afford to sit on their hands and reflect on a comprehensive psychological defeat. They knew they had the upper hand in an election race despite all of BNP's chicanery. The tangibles were laid bare: rising price of essentials, and constant power cuts. The intangible factor of unprecedented corruption (alleged, of course) and alleged iron-fist rule made an AL victory all the more likely.





The AL has drowned itself deeper into the murky waters of political gambling.

So, in the esteemed traditions of Bangali politics, the only way to shake the caretaker government's stand was to mount a movement so powerful that some people might not even bring their cars out. Although there has been widespread criticism of the move to call a string of countrywide blockades, any pragmatic political observer of Bangladeshi politics would agree that there is no other way to enforce even a modicum of accountability. Much of what has been gained from the blockades have been subsumed by ever-changing demands, but the ostensible success of the blockades remain. The League was already behind the game and with each blockade they gained a number of significant concessions: preventing KM Hasan from assuming the post of the Caretaker Chief; removal of the Chief Election Commissioner and another election commissioner; and what was thought to be successful at that time, the move to create an updated voter list.

But, in the middle of December the Awami League dived headlong into a stinking whirlpool. There were at least four contradictory statements made by League leaders within the space of four hours on December 17. The general secretary in the morning said they are willing to participate in an election within 90 days of caretaker rule if the interim government was sincere. This comment was followed by three others: first by an AL presidium member who said they reject the notion of an election within the 90 days and require another 45 days, secondly, by another AL presidium member who said they were positive about going to the elections after joining a grand electoral alliance, and finally a AL leader who was more concerned with his election nominations. This very public rift within the party was one of the first fissures of a party that was desperately searching disparate lifelines.