Why are we so loyal to AL and BNP ?

Zahin Hasan looks into the hold the big two parties have over the nation

IT is generally accepted that BNP and Awami League (AL) are corrupt. We also know that these parties enjoy a lot of popular support. Some political commentators make the implicit assumption that ordinary Bangladeshi voters must be fools to support corrupt parties. I do not accept this assumption. My opinion is these powerful (though corrupt) parties are successfully fostering loyalty by rewarding it with concrete benefits.

First, consider what makes BNP and AL special: they are the only national political parties with active membership in every locality (thana and union). Local party members have two key functions in our political system: (1) to collect *chanda* (political contributions) from businesses in their area, and (2) to intimidate businesses so that only supporters of their own party will be hired. Both of these functions are accomplished through the threat of violence by *mastans* (party thugs).

Let's look at the situation on the ground a little more closely. Suppose you are an entrepreneur opening a business in a village or small town. You will be periodically approached by a local leader (probably a member of the local union porishod) for *chanda*. You will also be asked to hire job applicants recommended by him (as workers). Obviously, they will only recommend loyal supporters of their own party.

If you do not pay *chanda*, the local leader will employ *mastans* to damage your property or intimidate your employees; in extreme cases, *mastans* may even force businesses to close. However, the amount of *chanda* is negotiable. Every time you hire one of the local leader's supporters, you buy yourself a bargaining chip; it is difficult for him to demand a large amount of *chanda* if you are providing employment to many of his supporters.

Suppose now that there are several local leaders, and each has recommended many of his supporters (this is more realistic). Suppose that there are also many politically unaffiliated job applicants who are not recommended by any political leader. The more politically affiliated workers you employ, the less *chanda* you pay. So as an entrepreneur, you would be foolish to hire very many of the unaffiliated job-seekers. And job seekers will quickly learn that loyalty to a BNP or AL can get them a leader's recommendation, which improves their chance of being hired.

