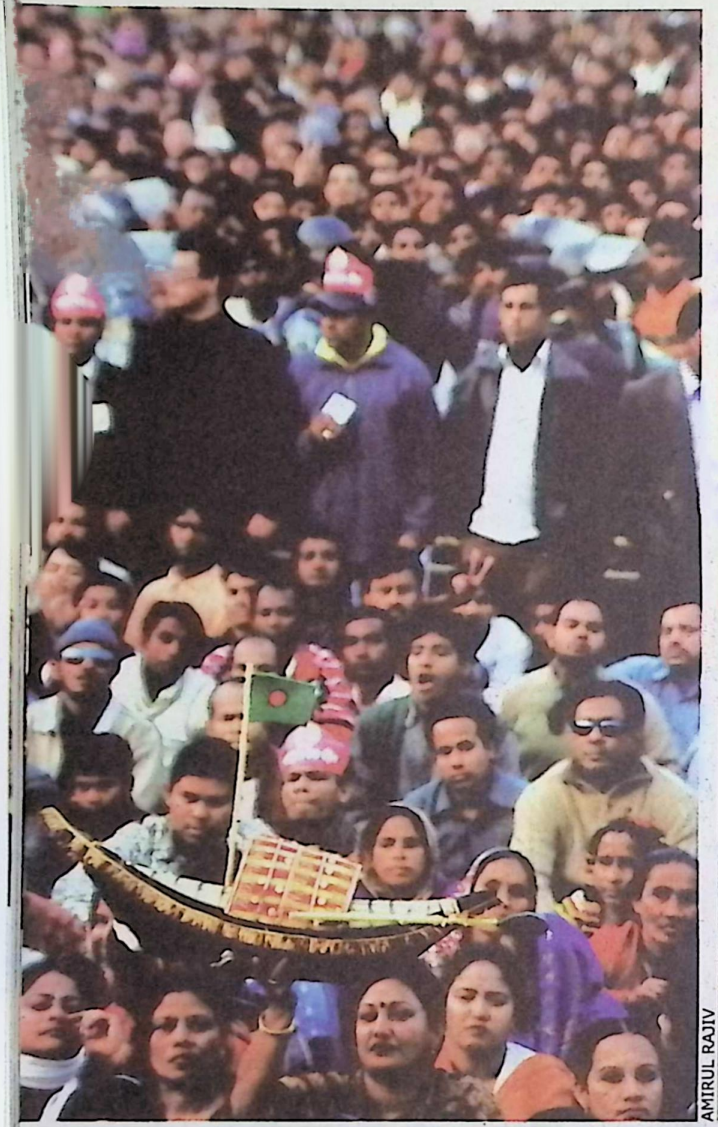
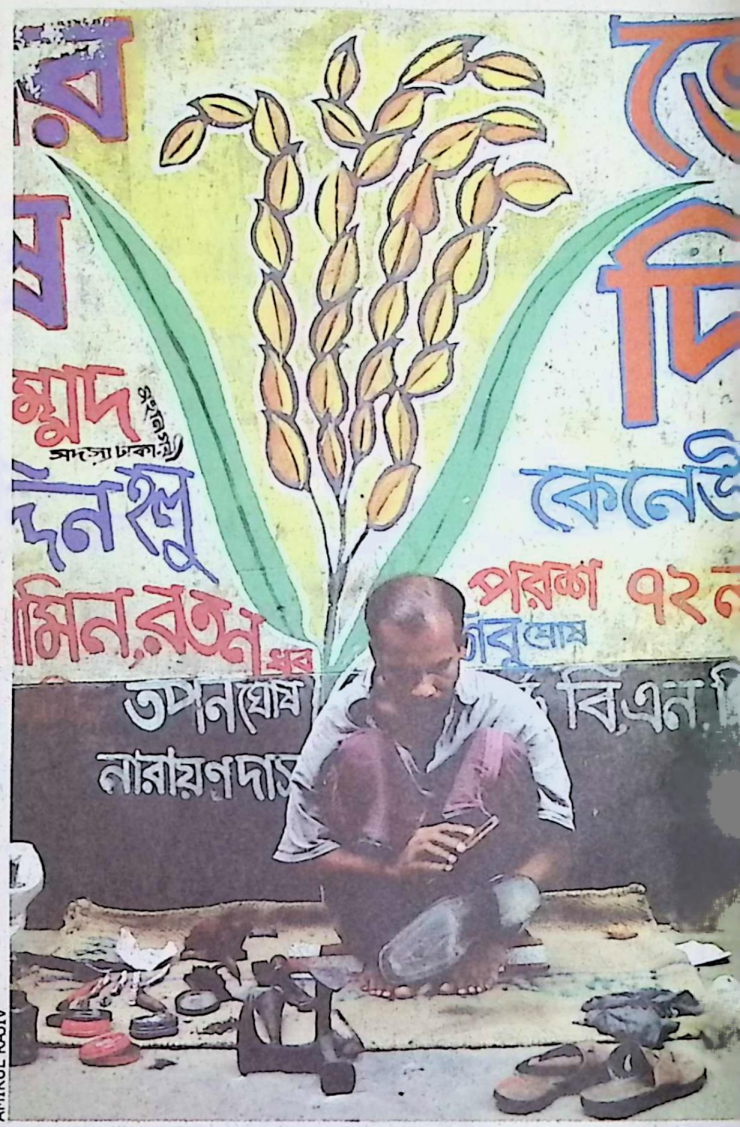




AMIRUL RAJIV

Individual voters are not stupid. They can see that political parties employ criminals (*mastans*). In their view, however, local leaders and their *mastans* resemble Robin Hood and his Merry Men, preying on the wealthy (entrepreneurs) and creating benefits for the poor (unemployed party supporters). In this environment, any unemployed young person would be foolish not to support BNP or AL; such support may be rewarded with a job, or at least with a small share of the *chanda* collected.

Why do clean parties like Gono Forum do poorly in elections? I think it is because people who have "invested" years of support in BNP or AL will not suddenly desert their party. To most voters, concepts such as good governance are abstract, whereas the rewards of loyalty to BNP or AL are much more concrete. Many voters desire clean and effective government less than they desire the benefits of loyalty to BNP or AL (especially if that benefit is a job).

Almost everyone recognizes today that old-school socialism -- nationalized industry -- is a recipe for economic stagnation. Profitable companies expand and create more employment; state-owned companies are never profitable, and never create more employment. Why is it that state-owned companies are never profitable? In Bangladesh, at least one reason is that they all have far more workers than they need. Excess workers have been hired over the years under pressure from whichever party was in power. Though the losses of state-owned companies are a drain on the treasury, they have fostered support for BNP and AL by employing so many of their supporters. This is why political parties want to keep state-owned companies the way they are: over-staffed and in the red.

There is no easy way out of this. If BNP and AL are successfully rewarding loyalty, most voters will be loyal to them. Basic needs -- food and shelter -- can only be met if people have income. The need for good governance is not a basic need; poor people who are worried about food and shelter will vote for a party which can use influence -- even threat of violence -- to get them a job, not for a party which promises good governance.

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