

STAR

Weighing the Odds

ASHFAQ WARES KHAN takes a look at where the parties are as the election approaches

IN early September, dark despair was coursing through the core of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). From the top brass to the rank and file, there was a hardening awareness that to go to elections in barely two months would be to court disaster. For some, the talk was no longer of defeat, but outright annihilation. A boycott was in serious play.

Across town, the BNP's cries of despair were being drowned out by the clamour of Awami League's (AL) premature crowings of self-congratulation. There was talk of an absolute majority of 200 seats in parliament, leaders were discussing possible cabinet posts, while a select few were working hard on a vision for Bangladesh 2021 -- an outline for a decade in power.

Two months on and a growing number of political pundits are asking the question: can the AL win the election at all? Forget an absolute majority, could they and their coalition partners even muster the 151 seats required to form a government? The BNP is back in the game, thanks to the release of party chief Khaleda Zia and key leaders, who resurrected a comatose party and breathed new life into a fledgling campaign. Those AL members complacent enough to still predict a landslide are now met with harsh rebukes and dark tales of 1991.

Both parties are already on manoeuvers. In November, the AL was forced to entertain ideas of an Ershad presidency. The BNP humiliated itself by disposing of their own farcical ultimatum when their alliance partner, Jamaat-e-