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men convicted over the past two years, most media reports suggest the parties would be robbed of key candidates.

BNP is missing big-ticket names and multi-seat winners like Nazmul Huda, Shajahan Shiraj and Mirza Abbas, not to mention the high-profile candidates such as Mosaddek Ali Falu, Harris Chowdhury and Chittagong's Morshed Khan and Mir Mohammad Nasir.

They are struggling to find strong candidates for at least 50 seats, even after nominating candidates' children and recruiting disaffected AL, JP, LDP and PDP leaders strong enough to challenge AL candidates. Importantly, the party's failure to nominate grassroots-endorsed candidates has only exacerbated their problem.

However, AL would be unable to use the BNP candidate-crisis because they suffer from the same malaise. They have struggled to find candidates around the country despite a much smaller list of convicted candidates. They will miss strong candidates like Mohammad Nasim and Mofazzal Hossain Chowdhury Maya and have gambled on over a 100 new faces.

That said, it is important to note that AL has managed to unearth new national leaders where the BNP has failed to produce one. The new AL spokesman, Syed Ashraful Islam, has emerged as a shrewd political player who is not only capable of spewing opposition rhetoric but has proved to be a brilliant strategist, organiser, and policy-maker.

He navigated the party through the last two years and demonstrated his organisational skills as one of the main architects of AL's new constitution. While his political nous has been showcased in the AL's ability to simultaneously attack the government and also produce a policy vision for the next decade.

The BNP, on the other hand, has not produced a single new leader capable of navigating the party through unchartered waters, visible in weak grassroots organisation and failure to design a new constitution.

This leadership vacuum has affected the parties' abilities to mobilise the party machine for the campaign. "We need them to organise the party and for their strategic input," said one senior BNP leader. Since most of the absent leaders are not standing committee or presidium members, except the BNP's Moudud Ahmed, both the parties have been able to work well enough to energise the party rank and file for the campaign.

The AL, however, did enjoy an advantage of having most of their presidium members available to organise the party while a number of BNP standing committee members were only released in the mass-release in October. But, the BNP leaders, especially since Khaleda Zia's release, have been quick to pick up the pieces and restore the party's chain of command after being devastated by the anti-