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corruption purge last year.

Two crucial decisions by the government would also dash the parties' hopes to have these leaders run in the elections. Firstly, the government's reluctance to repeal clause 91(E) in the new amended Representation of People Order (RPO), which would benefit both parties. Although the BNP has demanded the resignation of the election commissioners and the AL has been complaining of a "conspiracy" to favour "one party," the current EC is far more impartial than the MA Aziz-led gang.

Secondly, the decision to lift the emergency after the finalisation of the nominations, which would prevent the parties from taking legal steps to halt proceedings started under the Emergency Power Rules (EPR). The BNP, due to more leaders behind bars, would suffer more under this condition, but unlikely to make a significant contribution to its electoral performance.

Similarly, redrawn electorates will not give any significant edge to either of the parties. Many mid-level AL leaders were over the moon at the prospect of electorates being redrawn according to population density. The idea being that this would better reflect the popular vote in parliament, which was taken over by the BNP in a landslide in 2001 despite a tight race in majority votes. However, according to both BNP and AL leaders, this will only affect a handful of electorates, with both parties sharing strengths and weaknesses in thanas and upazilas in the new constituencies.

These leave both the parties in a tight race which may be decided by their alliance partners.

At present, the BNP looks likely to continue its ruthless and effective seat-sharing policy of overlooking alliance demands in favour of strong candidates. Regardless, their four-party alliance is again likely to benefit from its partnership with Jamaat, who are more confident going into these elections than they were in 2001. The country's biggest Islamic party's influence was apparent in November when their threat to go to the elections alone reportedly held back the BNP from an outright boycott. Jamaat leaders are publicly and privately boasting they have expanded their based into urban centres in addition to their traditional strongholds in the border areas. But, tensions in the alliance emerged after Jamaat leaders were reportedly fuming at the suggestion that BNP's alliance partners would only get 37 nominations. If this number remains, the BNP candidates will benefit not only from Jamaat endorsements in several key seats, but may also receive support from AL supporters unhappy with their local candidates.

Also, the AL would have to shed their misplaced belief in invincibility to woo both the JP and the LDP. With former dictator H.M. Ershad clutching onto his dream of returning to the presidency, the JP are looking to gain greater leverage within the multi-party grand