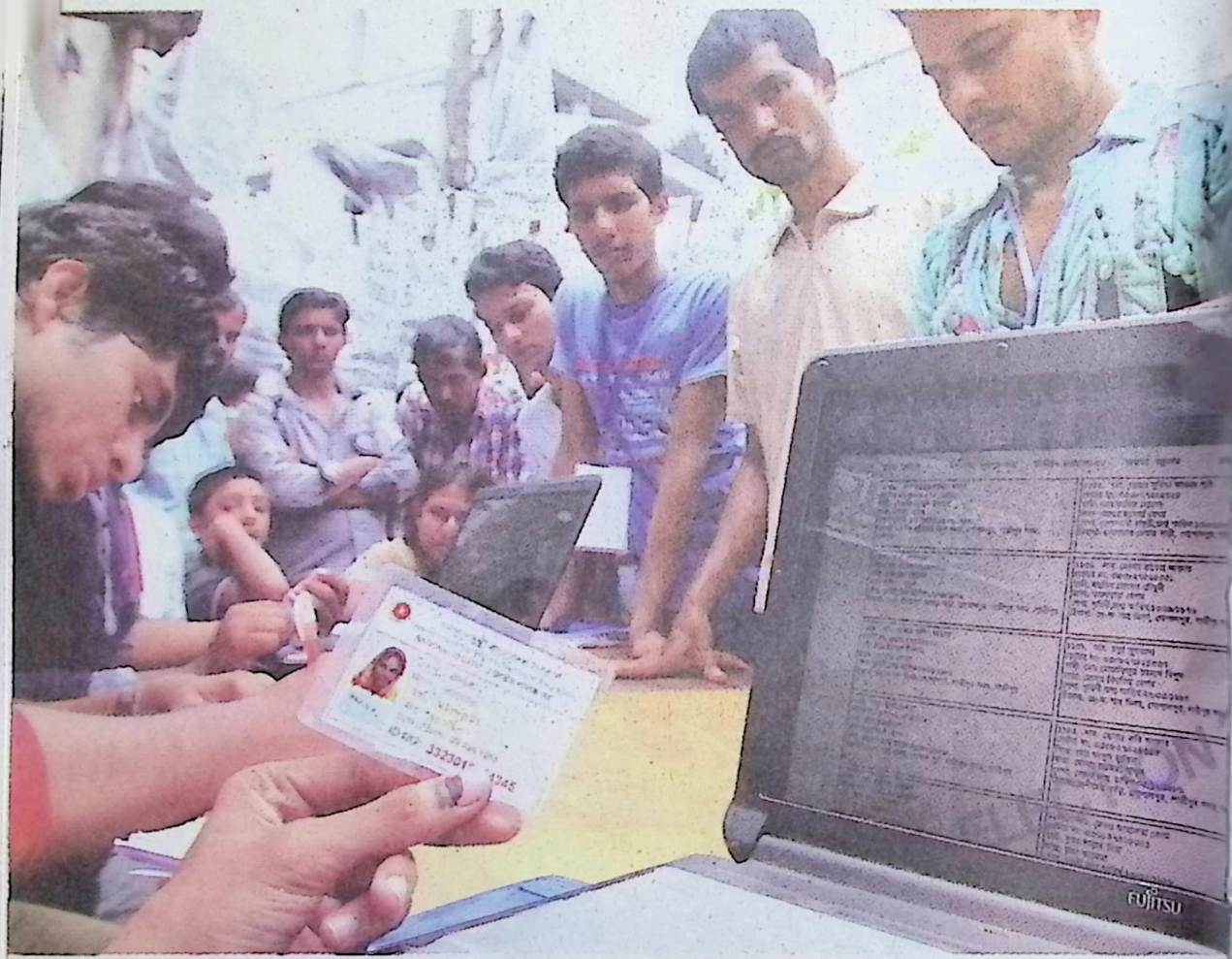
cally used religion, Islam in particular, to woo voters. Most importantly, after the Hefazat's May 5 Dhaka Siege, Awami League has suddenly started to portray itself as a guardian of Islam in Bangladesh. In the election of 1996, from the use of Islamic terms in speeches to Sheikh Hasina's religious headgear, the party used all it could to get the support of Muslim voters.

A *Daily Star* report says that when the electoral campaign began in Rajshahi, Khulna, Barisal and Sylhet city corporations towards the end of last month, local leaders and workers of Jamaat-e-Islam, Hefazat-e-Islam and some other Islamist parties and organisations started to openly use people's religious sentiments to gain political mileage in favour of candidates backed by the BNP-led 18-party alliance.

The anti-atheist campaign was so strong in Sylhet that the Awami league backed mayoral aspirant Badar Uddin Ahmed Kamran had to add a part in his 20-point election manifesto which assured the development of Qawmi madrashas in Sylhet. In Barisal, Awami league backed candidate Shawkat Hossain Hiron made a local Hefazat leader Nurur Rahman Beg the spokesperson for Hiron in his campaign.

A social scientist Anis Pervez traces a long legacy of mixing of religion with politics. According to him after the brutal assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Ziaur Rahman sieged power and started to politically use Islam. During his military regime he amended the constitution to add "Bismilla hir Rahmanir rahim"; his predecessor General Ershad went a little too far and amended the constitution to make Islam the country's state religion. He says, "If the trend continues, then it will not be long the nations democracy will be filled up with religious sentiments and the power will be entirely in the hands of the extremists.'



City corporation election, Gazipur.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN