

Four takeaways from the 2018 election



gave the incumbent Awami League a landslide victory—and reduced its arch-rival BNP, once again, to irrelevance. While an Awami League win was largely expected, the margin of victory surprised even its most hardcore supporters. To an outsider, an account of the whole electoral spectacle might read like the script of a Jason Statham movie in which there are twists and turns every step of the way, but in the end, it's the bad guy who always gets punished. In Bangladesh's politics, however, the "bad guy" is a relative term that has the same ideological elasticity as the "good guy". This kind of fluidity fuels the confusion with which the many conflicting details of this election were met.

That said, the 2018 election will remain statistically significant. It saw the confluence of a number of electoral records: it was the election in which ex-enclave voters were able to exercise their franchise for the first time; it also won Awami League a record third consecutive term in office, and fourth since democracy was "reinstated" in 1991; Awami League as a party has set a new bar for election victory after 259 out of its 262 candidates won their seats—with an incredible 98.85 percent success rate—which surpassed the 97.66 success rate registered in the 1973 election in which Awami League fielded 300 candidates and fetched 293 wins. On a personal level, AL chief Sheikh Hasina is set to rewrite a personal history as she becomes prime minister again, her third in a row. There were also several other records in terms of voter number, victory margin for the winning candidates, seats won by female and minority candidates, and so on.

These firsts, however, were closely intertwined with the contrasts that dogged the election. Consider, for example, how discussions on the pre-poll atmosphere



The 2018 election will remain statistically significant in the history of politics, but how significant was it in bringing about a qualitative change?

PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

attracted diametrically opposed views from opposite ends of the political spectrum: one calling the environment "the most peaceful" in the history of Bangladesh, while another rejecting it as the worst that was ever seen. Again, after the election, the AL coalition embraced its result wholeheartedly while the opposition Jatiya Oikyafront coalition rejected it as "farcical", calling for a fresh election. Such contrasting views followed nearly all critical situations as Awami League and BNP painted very different pictures of them. And the scarcity of reliable media reports, which could shed light on them, has created a situation in which an authentic appraisal of the situation has become very difficult.

Between these many firsts and many contrasts, however, there are a few points that merit scrutiny as we try to make sense of an immensely complicated electoral scenario.

How fair was the election?

Perhaps the more pertinent question is, how unfair was it? Or, was there anything approaching unfairness? And how participatory was it? Is an election still "participatory" if large numbers of candidates withdraw from the race midway through it? Or, more importantly, does mere (formal) participation of all parties lend credibility to

an election? There are many questions but few, if any, answers. When it comes to elections, there seems to be a dangerous trend to use these words—"fair" and "participatory"—interchangeably, as also was done during this election, although both have distinct requirements. In his post-election briefing, the chief election commissioner appeared satisfied as he said that the 2018 election was a "free, fair, and credible" one. "Nothing happened to feel ashamed of during the election," he claimed. Well, some things did happen, including the deaths of at least 18 people and injuries of over 200 in election-related violence. If this still doesn't qualify as "unfair", it must be the most dangerous form of fairness. According to various media reports, there were also allegations of vote rigging, ballot stuffing, intimidation, and many other irregularities in various constituencies across the country. But the EC continues to bury its head in the proverbial sand, ignoring even legitimate calls for investigation. Its refusal to take action or even investigate the crimes has set a dangerous precedent for election management.

A throwback to 2014 election

Before the election, Awami League had

stressed that it didn't want a repeat of the controversial 2014 election. The three key highlights of that election were violence, low turnout and opposition boycott. While the 2014 and 2018 elections should be judged on their own merits, one wonders if they were cut from the same cloth. Like 2018, the 2014 election also saw 18 deaths on the Election Day. Of course, voters came out in larger numbers this time and there was no pre-poll boycott either, but there were large-scale opposition withdrawals on the Election Day, which was preceded by a record number of nomination papers, mostly from the opposition camp, being rejected by the EC and over a dozen BNP contenders being disqualified by the High Court. Not to mention, the results of both elections were rejected by the opposition, and fresh elections were sought. Parallels can also be drawn in terms of the massive victory margin for the ruling party and the artificial make-up of parliamentary opposition (Jatiya Party may again sail on two boats by joining the government and keeping the opposition status at the same time). All in all, it appears Awami League will have to bear its 2014

legacy for a few more years.

What's now for BNP?

Never before has BNP looked so vulnerable than it does after its humiliating defeat in the election, winning a measly five seats and looking set to be out of power for a total of 17 years, which is enough for the disintegration of a party. BNP has been progressively dwarfed by its rival, whether in strategic and tactical planning or in building up a political resistance. While it is expected that politicians will play fair, the fact is, fairness works insofar as everyone has an equal regard for it. Playing by a rulebook of "hook, crook and ballot"—as *The Economist* summed up the strategy behind Awami League's landslide win—is what wins elections these days. BNP paid dearly for its failure to lead, organise and sustain on its own, and for its questionable association with Jamaat-e-Islami. True, with Awami League using the full might of the state to suppress it, it had few choices but the BNP didn't appear as organised or desperate to win as its powerful counterpart, and couldn't judiciously use the support that it still commands at home or abroad.

Back to square one

With the opposition rejecting its results, the 11th parliamentary election has failed to initiate the process of a return to a functional multi-party democracy with a fully functional parliament, which means that we are back to square one—the "post-2014 days" of one party calling all the shots in parliament. On the plus side, the election gave Awami League an unprecedented mandate—a feat unmatched in Bangladesh's politics. This is simultaneously a huge challenge and a unique opportunity to effect change should the party decide to do so. Importantly, the party has pledged electoral reforms in its manifesto. It will be interesting to see how it does that. But bringing electoral reforms is no easy task. It will require a strong political will at the highest level of the party, a consensus across the political spectrum on issues such as the constitution of an EC or the poll-time government—and no small amount of sacrifice on the part of those who directly or indirectly benefit from a dysfunctional electoral system.

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It's Party Time!



rooftops (no mention of backyards, since they are practically extinct), most have pushed back the partying by a week, unless they are already in Bangkok.

Bangladesh can accommodate only so many parties. The party of December 31 makes way for the party of the parties on December 30.

Just like the midnight countdown of the New Year's Eve party, there is also a countdown to the December 30 party—4G, 3G, 2G ... till all we have are fancy cameras to which we used to stick our mouths and ears. It is a blessing in disguise as couples finally rediscover each other and kids are truly bored. To add to the rustic picnic vibe, motorised vehicles, except for the necessary ones, are a no-no.

10:00 pm, December 29, 2018. My Facebook gets blocked. Wow! I'm finally rated!! But wait, I am probably the most apolitical person around—switching off whenever there's discussion on politics. The 72-hour Facebook block (which I challenge in vain) is due to a 6-month-old video clip of *The Naveed Mahub Show* with FIFA footage. Ok, at least FIFA takes note of me. Well,

Twitter is now my only social media outlet, not popular to any Bangladeshi as we are incapable of the 280-character reticence.

11:30 am, December 30, 2018. That's when I wake up despite being an early riser. There is a systemic failure of all the cascading alarm clocks—construction equipment, honking cars, yelling people (we suffer from collective voice immodulation), air conditioners, generators ... resulting in an eerily quiet Dhaka city.

In a way, it's good, as we'll beat the rush. The wife and I are about to start for our polling station at Gulshan Model School when our seven-year-old nags: "I want to go to Gulshan Model School—I want to be a [fashion] model." After explaining to her the difference between the two models, we two head out. We hold hands like newlyweds and walk the empty streets, at times venturing out to the yellow dividing line in the middle—an action on this day not deemed as jaywalking.

Once we reach Gulshan Model School, it takes us another hour to go to our polling booths. No, not because we didn't have our serial numbers, but because it was party time—socialising with just about everyone from the area. For once, it is not a sad *gul khani* or a painstakingly obligatory wedding that forces us to socialise and reconnect with those we haven't seen since the last Halley's Comet. Plenty of selfies. One even comments with a grin: "Man, even the Dhaka Club voting took longer!" That's right, for those who were smart enough to use their dumb (mobile data-less) smart phones the day before to get their serial numbers via the good old SMS.

Armed with my SMS obtained serial



number, I make a beeline for my room, where I am handed my ballot paper and stamp in a jiffy. Once I'm inside the polling booth, I stamp the ballot paper, but I take ages before folding the paper—like clinging on to the HSC answer sheet till the last minute, despite revising a hundred times. I make sure there is no equivalent of Florida's dimpled or hanging chads. The official outside says sternly: "Naveed Shaheb, hurry up, people are waiting!"

How does he know my name? Surely, he doesn't have the page with my name open, for he has immediately gone to the page with the picture/ID of the next voter. I come out

and see a small line already formed. He adds: "I like your TV show, but you took a long time inside."

Voting is done. My thumb bears the modern-day black permanent marker mark, as opposed to what I think now in retrospect is water-proof eye liner that was used in the past.

More socialising, to the point that the cops on duty ask us politely to leave and not hang around. We get a ride back in a car this time, as my kid brother (mistaken as my parents' grand kid), drives my parents back home. The car is not stopped—they are senior citizens.

The empty streets of the Tri-State area take us back in time to when the area WAS like this. Many a Gulshanite are out with their kids, walking and more so, riding on this strange object called rickshaw. A rickshaw ride is no longer an excursion where you have to change flights a hundred times, based on the colour code of the jackets worn by the rickshaw pullers in areas demarcated by societies.

The time travel takes us further back to the elections of yester years with Bangladesh Television, the only channel at the time, luring us to stay up all night to follow the election results by way of dangling the "carrot" called a series of English movies. Needless to say, with election updates coming in every five minutes, High Noon takes nineteen hours to finish its run, if at all, with the late, great Sirajul Majid Mamun appearing with his rich baritone, gelled hair and Clark Gable moustache.

December 31, 2018. The results are pretty much out. The cities are quiet. The wife and I decide to have friends and family over for a BBQ while adhering to DMP guidelines. Everyone shows up uncharacteristically early at 6:00 pm, while we are still in pajamas. Besides, nobody has any party to go to. The youngest is my 87-day-old nephew and the oldest is my 87-year-old dad. It is a great BBQ as we usher in 2019, somewhat hush-hush and indoors.

January 1, 2019. It is still quiet, eerily quiet. And it still continues to be...

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QUOTABLE
 Quote

 LEO TOLSTOY
 (1828-1910)
 Russian writer
 Truth, like gold, is to be obtained not by its growth, but by washing away from it all that is not gold.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH
 ACROSS
 1 Instructional
 6 Marry anew
 11 Strike group
 12 Corundum, for one
 13 Cars' scars
 14 Good judgment
 15 Remain unused
 16 Not appointed
 18 Poem of praise
 19 Bar bill
 20 Golfer Ernie
 21 Drug agent
 23 Contented sounds
 25 Copier problem
 27 Some crime evidence
 28 Vatican-based
 30 Striker's foe
 33 Methane, for one
 34 By now
 36 Coronado's gold
 37 Radius, e.g.
 39 Veto
 40 Stowe visitor
 41 Racket
 43 1492 ship
 44 ATM button
 45 Real bargain
 46 Prom crowd
 DOWN
 1 River of New York
 2 Lake of New York
 3 Shrub with yellow flowers
 4 Stroller user
 5 Start
 6 Kane's last word
 7 Suit
 8 Herb with yellow flowers
 9 Old autos
 10 Title documents
 17 Pet perch
 22 Pinnacle
 24 Hosp. workers
 26 Like some local elections
 28 "Stop standing!"
 29 Cariou of Broadway
 31 Up
 32 Alternative to briefs
 33 Shocked sounds
 35 Principle
 38 Second letter
 42 Count start
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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46
 12-21
 YESTERDAY'S ANSWER
 S P A N K I L O I N F O D E A D L I N E R A V E N S A L I S T S O S H E A D W I N D R E H E A R A V I A R Y P A D D Y G E T I N A R M A D A L A B R A T L E A D R O L E G A G M A R I O D I N E R S R E A D O V E R R E D O R A G S A L E S

BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER
 Y'KNOW WHAT I REGRET? I DON'T HAVE ANY CHILDREN TO PASS MY WISDOM ON TO
 GREG+ MORT WALKER
 AND THE WORLD IS A BETTER PLACE BECAUSE OF THAT
 6-25
 BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT
 WHAT'S ALL THIS? DAD'S GIVING ME FIVE CENTS FOR EVERY STICK I PICK UP IN THE BACKYARD! BUT THOSE ARE STICKS FROM THE FRONT YARD. NOT ANYMORE! AN ENTREPRENEUR IS BORN.