

An election in the shadow of grief

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from that noise and listen instead to how politics is understood at the grassroots.

For the first episode of this series, I travelled to Babanpur, a village in Rangpur’s Pirganj, that briefly entered national consciousness after Abu Sayed was shot dead by police during a demonstration on July 16, 2024, turning him into a symbol of the movement that ultimately led to the collapse of Sheikh Hasina’s 16-year rule.

Eighteen months later, Babanpur is quiet again. The attention has largely faded, but the consequences remain.

On the afternoon of January 23, I met Mokbul Hossain, Abu Sayed’s father, at his home, along with his eldest son, Ranjan Ali, and Rubiya Begum, a neighbour and sister-in-law. When I asked whether they could feel the election approaching, Rubiya said yes, activists from both the BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami had been visiting homes in the area.

Beyond that, however, national politics felt distant to her.

“I don’t know what is happening around the country,” she said.

That sense of detachment stood in sharp contrast to the scale of campaign promises circulating nationally. I asked what they thought of the BNP’s proposal for family cards providing Tk 2,500 a month to millions of households, or Jamaat’s pledge to help hundreds of thousands of unemployed young people.

None of them appeared particularly interested. They were unfamiliar with the details, and the promises stirred little expectation.

Their scepticism was not rooted in ideology, but in experience. Mokbul told me that such pledges are routine before elections and rarely followed through. “These things are said every time before elections,” he said. “Then they are forgotten.”

Rubiya’s response went further. For her, politics should not be complicated. “We want a peaceful life,” she said. “What they give or don’t give does not matter to us. My brother-in-law was killed. I don’t want anyone else in the family to be killed. No mother should lose her child.”

Government assistance, she added, rarely reaches people like them anyway. “All those dalals (middlemen)

take the lion’s share,” she said. Peace and security, not promises, were her priorities.

When I asked Mokbul whom he would vote for, he did not name a party or candidate. He said he would wait and see where public support appeared to be moving before deciding. Most people in the village, the elderly farmer said, preferred to be on the side of the eventual winner.

Later that afternoon, I stopped at a tea stall in Jalarpara Bazar, about a mile from Babanpur. There, Abul Hossain, Nazrul Islam and Abdur Razzak, all farmers in their 50s, spoke with greater political engagement. Unlike the family in Babanpur, they were eager for an election and believed it could bring an end to the current uncertainty.

“This government is not representative,” Nazrul told me. “It was not voted in by the people.”

Asked how they decided whom



to support, Abul Hossain offered a simple explanation. “You can sense who is a good man,” he said. “We want someone who can run the country properly.” Pressed on what “properly” meant, he said all they wanted was a life without constant disruption.

The men at the tea stall expressed deep scepticism about campaign rhetoric. Abul laughed as he described what he saw as outlandish promises. “They even give certificates to Jannat (heaven),” he said. “All fraud.”

Nazrul raised the question that cuts through much of rural political debate. “The country itself is needy,” he said. “Where will the money for all these pledges come from?”

Abul admitted to having a soft corner

for the BNP and spoke cautiously about its chairman, Tarique Rahman. Years spent abroad involuntarily, he hoped, might have changed him. “Maybe he has learned something,” Abul said. “Maybe he will be more sensitive.”

Others at the tea stall remained non-committal, weighing their options. Posters and banners of both BNP and Jamaat candidates competed for space around Jalarpara Bazar.

A few hours in Babanpur and Jalarpara made it clear to me that for many in rural Bangladesh, work, faith and survival come first. There is little trust in politics or government, but enduring faith in the Almighty. People are convinced they must survive through hard work, regardless of who is in power.

Mokbul Hossain’s parting words captured that sentiment succinctly: “If the government helps us that is good. But we do not rely on them.”

Meanwhile, campaigning in northern Bangladesh is intensifying. On the day I landed at Saidpur airport, BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir arrived from Dhaka on his way to Thakurgaon. That same night, Jamaat Ameer Shafiqur Rahman addressed a rally in Rangpur city after touring other northern districts. The choreography of the election is clearly underway.

Babanpur, too, bears traces of political attention. The village road has been paved since Abu Sayed’s death. Senior government figures have visited. On the day I was there, government adviser Adilur Rahman Khan briefly paid respects at Abu Sayed’s grave. Jamaat leaders were also expected to visit.

Yet for Abu Sayed’s family, these visits and gestures do not translate into political faith. The election feels close in time, but distant in meaning. In Babanpur, the ballot is measured not against manifestos, but against memory, loss and a fragile hope that this time power will not demand such a personal cost.

As he saw me off, Babanpur resident Tota Mia offered a confident warning: whoever comes to power after the election can no longer govern the way the Hasina administration did. “People will come out onto the streets once again if they do,” he said.

(Shakeel Anwar is a former BBC journalist.)

Engaging children in sports

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six and 18 has a lot of physical and mental energy. That energy must be used properly. If given the right place, it will be used in the right way. If not, it will be used in the wrong way...”

“Keeping children engaged would reduce their misuse of the internet,” he said, stressing plans to include sports, a third language, recitation, art, music and culture in school syllabuses.

Tarique’s daughter Barrister Zaima Rahman, who accompanied him at the programme, stressed the importance of digital education to prevent online harassment and highlighted the need for personal safety.

She urged the attendees to raise awareness regarding online harassment, especially among young social media users, adding that preventing hacking, teaching people how to report incidents, and setting up community desks could play an effective role in tackling online harassment.

‘Will form inclusive govt if voted to power’

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The day’s programmes began in Pirganj upazila of Rangpur with a visit to the grave of Shaheed Abu Sayed. He later met Abu Sayed’s parents and family members to express condolences.

“Not an inch of this country’s land will be mortgaged to anyone. Just as Abu Sayed and others stood firm with their chests bared, we too are prepared to do the same,” he said after offering prayers at Abu Sayed’s grave.

“Martyrs like Abu Sayed have placed the nation’s trust in our hands by sacrificing their lives. If necessary, we too are ready to give our lives to protect that trust.

Warning that no country would be tolerated as a master over Bangladesh, he added, “Our children showed hegemonism a red card in July; it is a permanent red card. This card will never turn green, nor even yellow.”

At 11:00am, addressing a rally at the SM Pilot High School ground in Palashbari upazila of Gaibandha, Shafiqur spoke about the development of North Bengal.

“We want to turn North Bengal into a fully industrial zone. Farmers are denied fair prices for two reasons – first,

Tarique also spoke about teaching compassion for animals, referring to incidents of cruelty shared on social media, and said his party was considering introducing a system where students would care for an animal as part of learning responsibility.

He highlighted other key initiatives his party would undertake if voted to power, saying restoring law and order and tackling corruption would be his top priorities, as these two are central to addressing many of the country’s problems.

“Our first task is to ensure law and order. That means... we must ensure that everyone can stay safe on the streets. And corruption – we have to address it in any way possible.”

Asked about who would receive family cards and whether widows would be eligible, Tarique said, “Single mothers, brides facing various problems, women whose husbands have left them – look, as far as I understand, there are 138

projects running under the Bangladesh government’s social safety net. These are run by different ministries or departments, but in a scattered way. This is not right.

“We want to organise this system through family cards. We want to make it universal. For example, a farmer’s wife will get it, a van driver’s wife will get it, and an office worker’s wife will also get it.”

TARIQUE REACHES CTG
Meanwhile, Tarique reached Chattogram last evening to address a grand rally at the historic Railway Polo Ground around 11:00am today.

This is his first visit to the port city in 21 years.

Shahadat Hossain, mayor of Chattogram City Corporation and former president of Chattogram city BNP, yesterday said, “His [Tarique’s] visit has sparked immense enthusiasm among BNP activists and the general public alike.”

middlemen, and second, extortionists at every ghat. We will eradicate these extortionists.”

At noon, at a 10-party alliance election rally at the Altafunnesa playground in Bogura, he promised to upgrade Bogura to a city corporation.

Pledging to ensure women’s safety at home and outside, he said there would be zero tolerance for harassment.

“There will be no place for harassers on Bangladesh’s soil. Ensuring that mothers are safe at home and women can move freely and safely on the streets is the government’s responsibility and commitment. They will contribute to nation-building alongside men with confidence, dignity and peace.”

After 2:00pm, at a rally at Mahipur playground in Sherpur upazila, he said, “We promise that if, by your votes, Allah bestows His grace upon us and gives us the opportunity to form the government, we will not lay a hand on a single taka of the people’s money. We will not tolerate the existence of extortionists anywhere within Bangladesh’s 56,000 square miles.”

From there, the Jamaat ameer joined a rally at the Islamia Government College ground in Sirajganj town. Addressing

Family, farmers cards BNP ploy to buy votes: Nahid

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for national reforms.

He identified water shortages and gas crises as major problems in the constituency and promised to address them.

In the afternoon, Nahid visited Subastu Market and held meeting in Sayed Nagar.

At a rally there, he said, “We do not want Bangladesh to return to the

past. We will not tolerate the rise of a new autocracy.”

He also urged people to vote ‘Yes’ in the referendum, saying the struggle for justice, fairness, and against authoritarianism that Sharif Osman Hadi, a frontline leader of the July uprising who was killed in December last year, began would be carried forward.

“If we can form the government,

ensuring justice for the killings of our brothers during the July uprising, including martyr Sharif Osman Hadi, will be one of our key agendas,” he added.

As part of the day-long campaign organised by the 10-party alliance, Nahid also took part in public interaction programmes in the Banshtola, Nobodhara Road, Ekota Road, and Nure Chala Bazar areas.

Bangladesh replaced by Scotland in T20 WC

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“We have accepted the ICC’s decision. The ICC has said that it will not allow us to play elsewhere or relocate our matches to Sri Lanka. Our stance remains the same that in the current situation, we cannot go to India to play. We are not going into any separate arbitration or any other process.” BCB media committee chairman Amzad Hossain said at a press conference.

The ICC also mentioned in yesterday’s statement that the decision was taken after an “extensive process” that found no “credible or verifiable security threat” to the Bangladesh national team in India.

“The ICC engaged with the BCB through multiple rounds of dialogue conducted in a transparent and constructive manner,” the statement read, adding that the process included video conferences, in-person meetings, independent security assessments, and detailed reviews of federal and state-level security arrangements.

The ICC said it had shared enhanced security and operational plans with the BCB at several stages, including during discussions involving the IBC Board. However, after assessing all available information, the ICC concluded that altering the published schedule “so close” to the tournament was not justified.

“The ICC also noted the importance of preserving the integrity and sanctity of the tournament schedule, safeguarding the interests of all participating teams and fans,

and avoiding the establishment of precedents that could undermine the neutrality and fairness of ICC events,” the release added.

Earlier on Wednesday, the ICC had formally rejected the BCB’s request to relocate Bangladesh’s matches from India to Sri Lanka. A vote was held during the ICC Board meeting, where only the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) supported Bangladesh’s stance, while the remaining members voted to retain the original schedule.

PCB chairman and Pakistan’s Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi reiterated his support for Bangladesh yesterday, accusing the ICC of double standards.

“Bangladesh has been treated unfairly,” Naqvi was quoted as saying in several media reports. “You cannot have double standards, where one country can make whatever decision whenever and do the total opposite for another country.”

Asked about a potential boycott of the World Cup by Pakistan, he said the government would make the decision. “We are waiting for the prime minister to return,” he said, adding that a final decision would be taken then.

On Thursday, following a meeting with cricketers, Youth and Sports Adviser Asif Nazrul on said there was “no scope” for the Bangladesh team to travel to India as the security situation there has not changed.

Hours after that meeting, the BCB claimed to have approached the ICC’s Dispute Resolution Committee (DRC)

to intervene in the relocation request.

Scotland, the highest-ranked T20I side which did not originally qualify for the tournament, will now take Bangladesh’s place in Group C, alongside West Indies, Italy, and England. They are currently ranked 14th in the ICC T20I rankings – ahead of seven teams already in the competition, namely Namibia, UAE, Nepal, USA, Canada, Oman, and Italy.

This is not the first time Scotland has been named as a replacement in an ICC event, having also stepped in for Zimbabwe at the 2009 T20 World Cup due to political relations between Zimbabwe and the UK.

Past tournaments have also seen teams withdraw over security concerns. Australia pulled out of the 2016 Under-19 World Cup in Bangladesh, while Sri Lanka received walkovers in the 1996 World Cup after Australia and West Indies declined to tour. England and New Zealand skipped matches in Zimbabwe and Kenya, respectively, during the 2003 World Cup.

The current standoff began on January 3, when Bangladesh pacer Mustafizur Rahman was dropped by Indian Premier League (IPL) franchise Kolkata Knight Riders under directives from the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI). Despite continued discussions, both the ICC and BCB never changed their stances, causing a deadlock that has now cost Bangladesh their place at the World Cup.

economy, she said, “There is talent, but no capital. The system is not youth-friendly.” She pledged to launch a ‘Start-up Dhaka-9’ fund for young entrepreneurs and set up community daycare centres for working mothers.

She also promised to establish permanent constituency offices and launch an open digital dashboard for lodging complaints.

Tasnim ended her post, urging voters to support her with the ‘football’ symbol in the upcoming election.

‘The days of neglecting Dhaka-9 over’

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LPG syndicate, modernise drainage and waste management systems, and ensure accountability in road construction.

Highlighting healthcare challenges, she said Mugda Medical College Hospital faces immense pressure, serving 700,000 to 800,000 patients a month. She pledged to upgrade community clinics into mini-hospitals and establish a year-round dengue task force.

On security, she said, “A city that

BNP leader dies from gunshot wound

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After undergoing surgery at DMCH, he was later shifted to the ICU of Holy Family Hospital, where he died yesterday afternoon, Hasan’s younger brother Rakib Hossain told reporters.

Rakib earlier said Hasan suffered a gunshot wound to the right side of his abdomen when two armed criminals shot him while he was returning home from a waz mahfil on Thursday night.

Talking to The Daily Star yesterday, Rakib, who is an assistant publicity secretary of BNP’s Hazaratpur union, said the motive behind the attack on his brother was not clear to him.

He said there is no influence of any political party other than BNP in their area and claimed that his brother, who was a land broker, had no known enemies.

However, he suspected that the attack might have stemmed from an internal conflict within the party.

cards to create controversy.

“If BNP is given responsibility through people’s votes, these cards will be delivered completely free of cost, through state initiatives, to rightful recipients,” he said.

He urged citizens to report any fraudulent activity to the BNP and law enforcement agencies, stressing that attempts to exploit the initiatives were unacceptable.

To strengthen communication with voters, the BNP has launched an election hotline (16543) and a WhatsApp hotline (01806977577).

Mahdi said the services would provide information on election laws, monitor voter complaints, and receive feedback.

“Our main goal is to ensure a transparent, acceptable and citizen-friendly election by involving people from cities and villages across the country,” he said.