

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 said 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 Jafarpura 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

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 Jafarpura Bazar.

A few hours in Babanpur and Jafarpura 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 Sajidpur 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.)

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 Jannah," 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

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.

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.

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 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)

cannot ensure women's safety cannot develop." She also pledged strict action against drug syndicates and reforms in addiction treatment.

On education, she criticised corruption in school admissions, saying, "There will be no quota for MPs. Merit and transparency will be the only criteria." She also promised to advocate for teachers' rights and establish modern science labs, coding facilities, libraries, and initiatives to support students' mental health and extracurricular activities.

On security, she said, "A city that

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

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.

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

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'Will form inclusive govt if voted to power'

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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."

At 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

fears spread by opponents, he said, "Some try to scare people by saying, 'If the 10-party alliance, especially Jamaat-e-Islami, comes to power, they will lock homes one by one. They won't let sisters or mothers go out, study, or perform professional duties.' These are all lies peddled by deceivers."

After the Sirajganj town rally, he attended another rally in Ullapara upazila and later in the night in Pabna.

In Pabna, Shafiqur said some quarters have grown uneasy over the rise of freedom-loving people in Bangladesh.

"We'll not interfere in your internal affairs, and you must not interfere in ours. You've already interfered too much," he said while addressing an election rally at Pabna Government College ground.

At each rally, he introduced Jamaat and 10-party alliance-backed candidates, bringing the second day of his campaign tour to a close.

On Friday, the first day of the tour, the Jamaat ameer addressed rallies in Panchagarh, Dinajpur, Thakurgaon and Rangpur.

[Our correspondents from Monirhat, Bogura, and Pabna contributed to this report.]

Commit to equity, quality in edn

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University, said Bangladesh's education system reflects one of the gravest failures of political leadership since independence.

"Despite decades of promises, we still do not have a comprehensive education sector plan... While around 80 percent of children complete primary education, more than half of them fail to acquire basic literacy and numeracy," he told The Daily Star.

Successive governments have relied on fragmented sub-sector projects instead of pursuing a unified vision, thereby widening inequality across different streams of education and leading to weak learning outcomes, said Prof Manzoor, who led a ministry-formed consultation committee on improving the quality of primary and non-formal education.

He described the country's secondary education system as a "mechanical factory model" of schooling, where short class periods and rigid routines leave little room for meaningful learning.

"This pushes students towards guidebooks and rote learning instead of understanding the content," said Manzoor, also a member of a government committee formed to recommend measures to improve the quality of secondary education.

Regarding the incidents of teacher harassment at educational institutions, he said these are signs of institutional failure and inaction by the authorities.

"We have not seen effective measures from those responsible. In many cases, leadership either shares similar views or remains indifferent due to political loyalty."

The education sector has become deeply polarised. Teachers often carry their personal political ideologies into their profession."

Asked whether he expects the next government to address these issues, he said, "Our past history does not give us much hope... We are

yet to see any indication that future governments will avoid ideological bias and prioritise students' interests over party politics."

Noted educationist Rasheda K Choudhury said expectations from the next government are high because education has been deprived of its due priority for a long time.

"During the interim government's tenure of over one and a half years, the education sector has not received the attention it deserves. Quite simply, it has been deprioritised," said Rasheda, executive director of the Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE).

She further said that reducing inequality must be the foremost expectation from the next elected government.

Referring to the July uprising, she said young people had sacrificed their lives to end discrimination, yet disparities in education continue to widen among disadvantaged and left-out groups, including extremely poor families, geographically disadvantaged communities, ethnic minorities and people with disabilities.

"Those with resources can send their children to better institutions, while others are falling further behind."

Rasheda noted that reforms in the sector must focus on accessibility, affordability, quality and equity. "If you give poor-quality education to everyone, it achieves nothing... Education must be of acceptable quality. Ensuring equity will be the biggest challenge."

Referring to disorder on campuses, she said, "A new hope emerged after the mass uprising, but we are now witnessing chaos... Indiscipline is growing among both teachers and students."

Demands for auto-promotion and the humiliation of teachers reflect a complete breakdown of discipline, posing a serious threat to the foundations of the education system, Rasheda said.

"This must be addressed. We hope

BNP dismisses India deal claim as 'disinformation'

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He also said the BNP under late chief Khaleda Zia and Ziaur Rahman had consistently defended national sovereignty against submissive foreign policy.

Referring to past actions, Mahdi said, "We have seen large programmes and rallies held continuously along the banks of the Teesta and the Padma to demand a fair share of water. That's the politics of the BNP. After the killing of Felani at the border, the BNP was the first to protest and take to the streets."

Mahdi also addressed reports of irregularities involving the BNP's proposed welfare initiatives, under which the party has pledged to introduce "family cards" and "farmer cards" if voted to power.

He said some groups were demanding money by promising such

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.

BNP leader shot on Thursday

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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 Hazarapatpur 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.