

Eight reasons that explain Jamaat's rise



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Perhaps the most striking, and largely unforeseen, consequence of the fall of the Hasina government has been the surge in support for Jamaat-e-Islami over the past 18 months. The Islamist party's rise has been so dramatic that, although recent polling suggests the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) is likely to secure a majority in the February 12 election, some commentators argue that the Jamaat-led alliance could still emerge victorious.

The scale of this shift should not be underestimated. During Awami League's final years in power, Jamaat was so marginalised and repressed that it could barely function as a political organisation: many of its senior leaders were imprisoned, and the party operated under severe constraints, effectively in secret. Historically, Jamaat had never been a mass electoral force. In the series of elections following the fall of General Ershad, its vote share never exceeded 12 percent, with its high-water mark coming in 1991. Layered on top of this was the heavy stigma attached to Jamaat since Bangladesh's founding, owing to its association with forces that supported the Pakistani military during the 1971 war of independence and allegations of serious international crimes.

Against this backdrop, Jamaat's current momentum is remarkable. So, without suggesting that the party should be supported—or overlooking the legitimate criticisms one may have of Jamaat—how can one explain its meteoric rise? Below are eight possible factors, presented in no particular order:

The weakening of the 1971 stigma

Jamaat has not entirely escaped its past. It is still, at times, forced to defend its position regarding 1971, and rival parties continue to invoke the issue. Yet there is little doubt that, for a large portion of the electorate, Jamaat's role during the Liberation War is no longer politically disqualifying.

Several factors may help explain this shift. First, the senior Jamaat figures accused of involvement in 1971-era crimes were convicted and executed during Awami League's time in office, leaving the current leadership without direct links to those events. Second, the collapse of Awami League has significantly weakened the potency of its long-standing political narratives, one of which centred on repeatedly invoking Jamaat's alleged war-crimes legacy. Third, for a growing and increasingly influential younger demographic, 1971 feels distant, abstract, and less relevant to their immediate political and economic concerns.

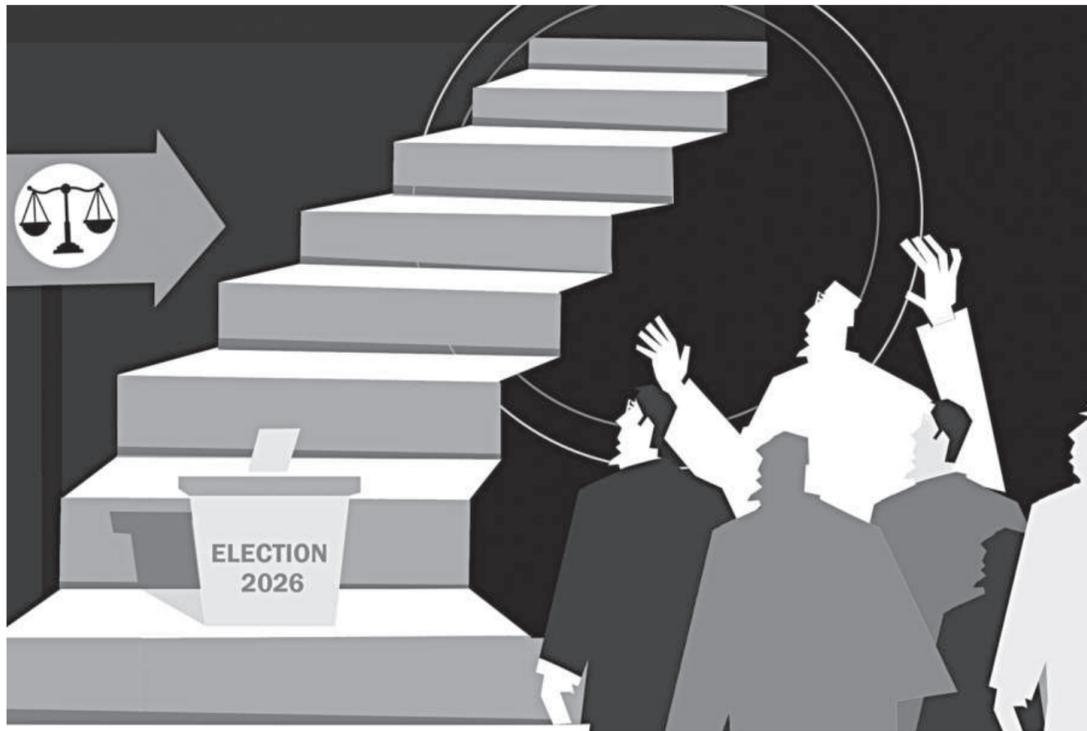


ILLUSTRATION: BIPOLO CHAKROBORTY

Jamaat's reputation for probity in contrast to BNP

Perhaps the most commonly cited explanation for Jamaat's growing appeal is its perceived distance from corruption. When the Hasina government fell, many Bangladeshis hoped this would mark the end of systematic extortion and rent seeking by ruling party activists at the local level. Yet since August 2024, many of the extortion networks previously controlled by Awami League cadres were quickly taken over by BNP-aligned groups. For a section of voters seeking genuine change, this reinforced the belief that BNP was, in practice, little different from its predecessor.

Jamaat, to them, stood apart. There were no widespread reports of Jamaat-run extortion rackets or organised corruption at the grassroots. This distinction, in their mind, reflects a deeper structural difference. Many local BNP activists apparently support the party in the expectation that access to power will bring financial opportunity. Jamaat activists, by contrast, apparently contribute

money to the party rather than extracting it. Their political participation is not framed as a route to personal enrichment, and this perceived difference may have resonated powerfully with some disillusioned voters.

Welfare politics

Following the fall of Awami League, hundreds of families were grieving lost relatives, and thousands more were caring for those seriously injured. Jamaat mobilised

to-door outreach in rural areas—an approach that may well be more persuasive than large rallies or media-driven campaigns.

Presenting a moderate, flexible position

Jamaat-e-Islami is, at its core, an Islamist party committed to the long-term goal of introducing Islamic law in Bangladesh. In recent years, however, the party has deliberately sought to project a more moderate and centrist image. Rather than

wary of supporting a religious party.

Non-participation of Awami League

The decision by the interim government and the Election Commission to bar Awami League from participating in the election may have also worked in Jamaat's favour. Historically, when Awami League is on the ballot, Jamaat either contests independently or forms an alliance with BNP. If it runs separately, most of the anti-Awami League vote consolidates behind BNP. If it allies with BNP, Jamaat typically contests only a limited number of seats.

In the absence of Awami League, however, the dynamics change significantly. Voters who previously supported BNP primarily to prevent an Awami League victory may now feel freer to support Jamaat, without concern that their vote could inadvertently help bring Awami League back to power.

Anti-Indian sentiment

During Awami League's time in office, anti-Indian sentiment grew steadily in Bangladesh. This was driven by several factors, including border killings, inflammatory rhetoric from Indian political figures about Bangladeshis, and the perception that the Indian government strongly supported Awami League. When the Awami League government fell in 2024 and Sheikh Hasina departed for India, public anger towards perceived Indian "hegemony" intensified, with many people feeling more able to express such views openly.

In this context, Jamaat is likely to be viewed by some voters as a more credible force in resisting perceived Indian influence than BNP, which is often regarded as more pragmatic in its approach to India and less instinctively confrontational. As a result, Jamaat may attract additional support from those for whom opposition to Indian influence has become a central political concern.

Jamaat as the party of 'change'

Following the fall of Awami League, there was a widespread public desire for change—change from autocracy, entrenched corruption, and what many described as the country's "tired old politics." In a political contest between BNP and Jamaat, it is Jamaat that, for some voters, is likely to more convincingly embody that sense of renewal.

Jamaat is often viewed as an outsider party, not deeply embedded in the patronage and corruption networks that many believe dominate the political system. Its leadership is not drawn from a dynastic political lineage, which further reinforces its image as distinct from the established political elite. And unlike BNP, which has a prior record in government that many voters may recall negatively, Jamaat does not carry the same burden of incumbency. These factors work to Jamaat's advantage among voters seeking a decisive break from the past.

Moreover, Jamaat has taken a more enthusiastic stance towards the July National Charter's reform proposals, while BNP has generally adopted a more cautious and conservative position. Jamaat's recent alliance with the National Citizen Party (NCP) has also likely strengthened its association with reform and political change, further consolidating its appeal among those prioritising transformation.

systematically to identify these families and, where possible, provide direct assistance—reportedly giving at least Tk 100,000 to each bereaved household and financial support to many of the injured, often through hospital visits.

While individual BNP politicians did offer aid in some cases, their efforts were neither as extensive nor as coordinated. Jamaat's response reinforced its image as a disciplined organisation capable of translating its resources into tangible support. This form of welfare politics—charitable, visible, and organised—has long been a cornerstone of Jamaat's strategy, and it continues to generate significant political goodwill.

Organisational discipline

Jamaat has benefited from its organisational strength. Almost immediately after the fall of Awami League, it began preparing in earnest for elections. Its disciplined internal structure has translated into more effective campaigning, particularly at the local level. Jamaat has invested heavily in face-to-face voter engagement, including extensive door-

foregrounding its religious agenda, it has emphasised practical reforms, particularly anti-corruption measures, institutional accountability, and improvements in governance.

A striking illustration of this repositioning was provided by a speech delivered by the party's leader, Shafiqur Rahman, at its Policy Summit in January 2026, titled "Aspiring Bangladesh." Notably, the speech did not reference religion at all. Instead, Rahman described Jamaat as representing "mainstream Muslim democrats," framing the party in terms that stress democratic legitimacy rather than theological ambition.

While the address may have been crafted partly with an international audience in mind, including foreign diplomats, it also reflects a broader strategic shift in how Jamaat presents itself domestically. Whether or not one finds this rebranding fully credible, it has undoubtedly helped the party broaden its appeal, particularly among urban and younger voters who might otherwise be instinctively

Fixing a broken education system



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As well as a moral duty to provide a decent education to its children, Bangladesh faces an urgent economic imperative to do so. The nation currently enjoys a "demographic dividend"—a large working-age population relative to dependents—creating a window for economic growth. But with falling fertility and mortality rates, that window is about to close. Unless education reform is placed centre stage, within a decade, Bangladesh will be locked in with a woefully undereducated workforce for years to come.

Last week saw the publication of a report on education reform that, if implemented, could transform the future of Bangladesh. Chaired by Abed Chaudhury and commissioned by the education adviser, the drafting committee included Mushtaque Khan, Erum Mariam, Sabina Yasmin, Ananta Neelam, and others.

An excellent presentation outlined the report. But in the ensuing discussion, almost to a person, the 50-odd attendees focused on matters such as curriculum content, teachers' conditions, textbooks, and so on, apparently failing to grasp the significance of the report. I presume that the 50-odd attendees from government and civil society had not had the benefit, as I had had, of reading the report in advance. Without an advance copy, it is quite possible I too would have failed to appreciate fully that such matters as curriculum content were not at all the focus of the committee's work.

A metaphor is useful here to draw the distinction between what this remarkable report is about and what it is not about.

In choosing a car, we might look at the size of its engine, the colour, whether it has

automatic or manual transmission, whether it has powered steering, whether it is a saloon or an SUV, and so on. This is an apt metaphor if we think of education as the car, we acquire at the outset of this, the journey of our lives. After all, it determines the speed and distance we can travel and underwrites our resilience when we navigate difficult terrain. The attributes of a car may be likened to curriculum content, or class size, or teacher training, all the things that the attendees wanted to discuss.

But the report was not so much about the attributes of a car as it was about how to make a good car manufacturing plant.

By taking this approach, the committee was able to identify the fundamental shortfalls of the education system and why they persist. Moreover, the report sets out how to assess any reform proposal, how to implement it, and, where a reform delivers, how to make it stick.

The substance of their approach is grounded in the powerful field of systems analysis. Rather than serving a menu of policy initiatives, the committee examines the systems-failure of educational governance. Rather than itemising every detail of a new curriculum, the committee explains how reform has invariably been thwarted by adverse incentives or signals within the system and the responses to those signals.

To elucidate this idea, consider exams and what the report identifies as the catastrophic failure of exams to prioritise competence or mastery over formal coverage of curriculum. Independent learning assessments show a widening gap between exam performance and actual competence. Achieving good

grades in exams has ceased to signal mastery of skills. Students progress from one year without having acquired the necessary skills for achieving competence in the next.

In a systems failure, venality and incompetence are not the issue. A teacher is doing exactly what the system signals are telling the teacher to do. Exam results are the signal and the teacher's mode of teaching is the response. Teachers teach to curriculum coverage and not mastery.

In fact, the response from every level of governance has all too often been to lower standards so as to maintain an illusion that mastery is being achieved.

In place of mastery of primary skills, such as linguistic and mathematical skills, Bangladesh's secondary education system has prioritised things inimical to mastery, such as rote learning. Never in the history of homo sapiens has memorisation been the means of acquiring a skill.

A curriculum bloated by layers and layers of material, piled on by numerous actors without co-ordination, has undermined focus on mastery. But the issue with the curriculum is not so much excessive breadth as a "mismatch between expected learning outcomes, available instructional time, pacing assumptions embedded in curriculum documents and textbooks, and assessment signals that prioritise coverage over mastery."

The committee based its emphasis on a very strong research-backed trend favouring depth and mastery over breadth and coverage at the secondary level. That emphasis must be reflected in Bangladesh's education system.

Reform will be painful and while some reforms may be phased in, the committee stresses that others must be instituted more quickly. When exams properly assess pupil competence, grades act as a critical signalling function in every quarter of the education system. Poor grades demand reform of curriculum, teaching and textbooks.

The committee sets out several "non-negotiables," conditions that must dominate all reform. For example, new initiatives may only be introduced where they "replace,

consolidate, or retire existing activity." The endless layering of initiatives must stop.

Perhaps chief among the non-negotiables is that everyone must know in advance who is responsible for each system signal. The proliferation of burdensome and interminable pilot programmes, for instance, will continue so long as ownership of response is not clear.

While generally refraining from prescription of curriculum content, the committee does identify two subjects as crucial to any curriculum. (In my view, a third subject is omitted. I will come to that.) The first subject is Bangla language learning, the importance of which is self-evident. The second is mathematics.

Mathematical education has been central to any notion of a decent education for centuries, even when education was the province of the idle aristocracy. Today, throughout the world, secondary school students learn about quadratic equations and trigonometric identities, when virtually none of them will ever return to such things once they leave school. But there is a good reason so many children in so many societies and for so long are required to study such things.

I am embarrassingly fond of saying that mathematics is an education in thinking without the encumbrance of facts, something said to me by a court of appeal judge in England, upon hearing that I, like him, had studied mathematics as an undergraduate. No other subject offers as efficient a way to help young people learn how to reason. Every other subject involves learning a lot of facts before reasoning can get a look in.

Here, the tendency towards rote learning is most visibly destructive. Examinations that test for a pupil's knowledge of the quadratic formula reward rote learning. But the pupil who merely memorises the formula has gained nothing that the pupil who has learned how to reason and derive the formula has gained. The latter has learned how to think, even if she forgets what a quadratic equation is in years to come.

I come now to the subject that the committee omitted to identify as a priority.

A few years ago, I visited Amsterdam. I arrived at the city's airport, jumped in a cab and asked the driver, "I'm sorry, I don't speak Dutch, but do you speak English?"

The driver flashed me a vicious scowl before answering my question.

Later that day, I mentioned the episode to friends, who offered a fascinating explanation of that scowl. Asking the driver if he spoke English, they said, could be viewed as asking if he was illiterate or of the lowest class. Almost everyone spoke English.

After World War II, when the Netherlands was occupied by Germany, this small country, surrounded by neighbours speaking languages other than Dutch, decided that children would learn two other languages. The same holds for most of Northern Europe.

The academic literature is clear: in the young, learning another language has distinct cognitive benefits going beyond the acquisition of another language, improving even spatial reasoning.

The economic benefit is plain. One language is the currency of business and that language, above all others, is also the repository of what we collectively as a species have learned. The modern economy is all about that knowledge.

I suspect the committee refrained from stating that English should be a priority for fear of arousing linguistic nationalism and jeopardising reception of the whole report. For historical, understandable but unhelpful reasons, a monster of emotions is aroused by any discussion of language.

Bangladeshi elites, with their money, have liberated themselves from the inadequacies of the state's secondary schooling system. Since elites largely determine policy agendas, reform of public education has taken a back seat for years.

What becomes of this outstanding report depends on the next government, civil society, and the people. It is hard to be optimistic whenever reliance on government or civil society seems necessary. Some hope might yet be derived from the fact that the July uprising showed that the people still wield some power.