**Introduction**

At partition of India in 1947 there was virtually one overwhelming party in East Pakistan, the [Muslim league](http://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Muslim_League). In the elections of 1996 in Bangladesh, eighty one political parties participated. In spite of the rise of so many political parties over time, the public is essentially grouped under two major political parties, [Awami League](http://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Awami_League) and [Bangladesh Nationalist Party](http://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Bangladesh_Nationalist_Party), the next major parties being [Jatiya Party](http://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Jatiya_Party) and [Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh](http://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Jamaat-e-Islami_Bangladesh).

**Political party system in Bangladesh**

The party system inherited by Bangladesh at birth underwent significant changes over the years. During the first three years of elected civilian rule (1972-1975), the country moved from one-party dominant to a single-party system. During the following fifteen years of military rule (1975-1990) we witnessed a return to a multi-party system, but at the same time emergence of state-sponsored political parties. Finally, the period after the restoration of electoral democracy in 1991 is marked by a two-party system which later evolved into two electoral alliances led by the two major parties.

Unlike many new democracies, Bangladesh has a long tradition of multi-party and electoral politics. Awami League (later Bangladesh Awami League), which led the nationalist struggle, was founded more than sixty years ago in 1949. Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), which has regularly rotated in power through elections in the last two decades, was founded in 1978. Jammat-e-Islami (Jamaat), the dominant Islamist party is even older; it was established in 1941.

Here is the short description of four major parties about their party ideology, organizational structure, leadership, membership, support base and factionalism.

### Ideology: Over the years the electoral parties have undergone some changes in their ideological orientation. There has been a narrowing of differences on economic policy issues as all the four parties have committed themselves to market-friendly liberal economic policies. The main ideological divide amongst the parties is on the issue of secularism and definition of national identity. AL supports secularism and a non-religion based definition of national identity (Bengali nationalism), while BNP, Jatiya Party, and Jamaat define identity using Islam as a basis for nationalism (Bangladeshi nationalism). The Jamaat goes to the extreme of supporting the establishment of an Islamic way of life. The three electoral parties AL, BNP and Jatiya Party are ‘catch all’ parties appealing to all social groups to maximize electoral support. Jamaat attempts to draw specific Islamist groups.

### Leadership: The party leadership has remained in the hands of single leaders for decades. Sheikh Hasina (AL), Khaleda Zia (BNP), and H M Ershad (Jatiya Party) have held party leadership positions without challenge for more than a quarter century. Even in the Jamaat, party leadership has been in the hands of two leaders, Ghulam Azam (1992-2000) and Matiur Rahman Nizami (2000-2010) for two decades. The top leadership in the two main parties, AL and BNP, are dynastic inheritors which make their positions unique and beyond challenge. Dynastic inheritance is pervasive in all the parties. In AL, not only Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’s family, but the families of the four national leaders have produced dynastic successors. In BNP and Jatiya Party, several members of Khaleda Zia and Ershad’s families have held various party positions and dynastic successors to top leaders are visibly present. Even in the Jamaat dynastic successors are being groomed in several constituencies.

### Organizational Structure: In theory, all parties have organizational structures from the national down to the local/ward level following the administrative divisions in the country. However, many of the organizational structures remain mostly in name. They hardly meet. For example, each party is supposed to organize a national council every three years to elect the party president/chairperson, general secretary and other members of different decision-making bodies, but these council meetings are not organized on a regular basis. Compared to BNP, AL has a better record in organizing council meetings. Since its inception AL has organized 19 council meetings which means one council in every 3.3 years, but BNP was able to organize only five meetings since its founding which averages one council in 6 years. There was a gap of sixteen years between the BNP’s last two council meetings held in 1993 and 2009. Not only are the meetings of the different organizational bodies infrequent, the meetings themselves have increasingly become pro-forma without substantial debate and discussion over policy matters in these meetings. The only party organizational structures that meet frequently are the top decision-making bodies, i.e. presidium in AL and the national standing committee in BNP. However, in our interviews with party leaders we were informed that the opinion of the party president/chairperson generally prevails in these meetings. Other members either go along with the party chief and/or strongly argue in favor of the leader’s views. Few members in these bodies dare to disagree with the party chief or argue against the strongly held views of the party leader.

### Factionalism: All parties are faction ridden. As ideology is receding in importance in differentiating various parties, factional groups contesting over distribution of resources are major sources of intra-party conflict and violence. Often incidence of intra-party conflict is higher than that of inter-party conflict. Factionalism increases the power of the party chief as she/he is the only person acceptable to all contesting groups and can hold together various factions. While in the earlier years (1970s and 1980s), factional groups tended to break away and form new parties, since the restoration of electoral democracy in 1991, factional groups have stayed within parties and did not attempt to float other parties.

**Democratization within political parties**

There are six indicators to check internal party democracy in the political party. They are:

* processes of leadership selection
* candidate selection
* policy-setting
* diversity profile of party leadership
* party and campaign funding
* inter and intra-party conflict resolution

#### **Leadership Selection:** Though the party constitutions stipulate that the different leadership positions should be elected in the triennial council meetings these meetings are not organized regularly, and even when they are held, the party president/chairperson is elected unopposed. Councilors delegate their power to the party chiefs to select members of all other bodies. For more than a quarter century there has been no challenge to Hasina and Khaleda for leadership positions in their respective parties. They have always been elected unopposed and were given the authority by party councils to select other office bearers. However, in all the parties there has been change in the position of party general secretaries. There were rival candidates and factions supporting different candidates. But the fate of these candidates were not decided by votes in party councils. Rather, candidates preferred by the party president/chairman, were finally selected. The party president/chairman similarly selected members of all other key bodies who are supposed to be elected.

#### **Candidate Nomination:** Of the four parties, AL and Jamaat made some efforts to follow the RPO guidelines during the 2008 parliamentary elections to get the grassroots committees of the parties to prepare a panel of nominees for each constituency. In AL, in many cases the recommended nominees of grassroots committee prevailed. However, in some cases AL ignored the panel nominated by the grassroots committees. BNP, on the other hand, made no effort to get nomination from grassroots committees. Instead seven special teams were formed under the leadership of the NSC to collect information from the grassroots and prepare a list of potential candidates before the 2008 parliamentary elections.

#### **Policy-Setting:** Though constitutions of all parties provide scope for policy deliberation and debate within smaller decision-making bodies of the party organizational structure, in practice, key policy decisions are frequently taken by the party chief. Other members of the decision-making bodies rarely try to argue a position contrary to the one taken by the party chief. This leads to highly dictatorial style of policy-setting. At local levels, party activists are not engaged in discussion and debate of policy issues. They spend their time mostly planning celebration of different special days or organizing rallies.

#### **Representation of Social Diversity:** None of the parties have met the RPO guideline of having 33 per cent women in all its committees. AL has a better record than others. In the top decision-making bodies of the parties, AL has 33 per cent women’s representation; the other parties have much less (BNP: 10 per cent; Jatiya Party: 10 per cent; and Jamaat: 0 per cent). AL also has a better record in nominating and getting women elected as MPs from general seats. However, nearly half of these directly elected MPs are ‘proxy’ women, inheriting seats from their fathers or husbands. Representation of women in the sub- national level committees is low in all parties. The representation of religious minorities in top decision-making bodies of parties is poor. Both AL and BNP has one member each in their top decision-making bodies. There is none in the Jatiya Party. Jamaat only recruits Muslims. Businessmen dominate the top decision-making bodies, particularly in BNP and Jatiya Party.

#### **Campaign and Party Funding:** The RPO guidelines stipulated a ceiling on campaign funding and required parties and candidates to submit reports to the EC. But these reports are gross underestimates of actual spending. The parties are also required under the RPO to submit annual audited reports to the EC about party funds but these reports are not made public. In actual practice, most party and campaign funds are undocumented and non-transparent. The bulk of funding for party activities and election campaigns is privately channeled to either party leaders or accumulated by individual party members.

#### **Party-Induced Violence:** Inter-party and intra-party violence is endemic amongst all parties. Various human rights organizations have regularly reported on high levels of violence such as killings and injuries, as a result of clashes between party activists. Generally, student and youth organizations associated with political parties, engage in violent clashes. Some of these violence’s occur between parties, and some happen within parties. In many cases, the conflicts are not due to ideological differences, but due to struggles over distribution of patronage. Incidence of intra-party violence is generally higher than inter-party violence. Additionally, incidence of intra-party violence is higher within ruling parties compared to opposition parties. This implies that most of the intra-party violence is caused by factional contestations over grabbing of business contracts or other patronage deals.

**Performance of political parties**

Here we are showing a chart of the summary of the Bangladesh elections from 1973 to 2014 which represents the performances of the four major parties. Though there were many political parties participated in the elections, but we are showing only four major political parties performances in the election.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Summary of the 07 March 1973** [**Bangladeshi**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bangladesh)[**Jatiyo Sangshad**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jatiyo_Sangshad) **election** | | | | | |
| **Serial** | **Party** | **Total Candidates** | **Seats** | **Votes** | **%** |
| 1 | Awami League | 300 | 293 | 1,37,93,717 | 73.2% |

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Summary of the 18 February 1979 General Election election** | | | | | |
| **Serial** | **Party** | **Total Candidates** | **Seats** | **Votes** | **%** |
| 1 | Bangladesh Nationalist Party | 298 | 207 | 79,34,236 | 41.16% |
| 2 | Awami League(Malek) | 295 | 39 | 47,34,277 | 24.55% |
| 3 | Awami League(Mizan) | 184 | 2 | 5,53,426 | 2.72% |

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Summary of the 07 May 1986 Bangladeshi Jatiyo Sangshad election** | | | | | |
| **Serial** | **Party** | **Total Candidates** | **Seats** | **Votes** | **%** |
| 1 | Jatiya Party | 299 | 251 | 1,76,80,133 | 68.44% |
| 2 | Bangladesh Awami League | 256 | 76 | 74,62,157 | 26.15% |
| 3 | Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh | 76 | 10 | 13,14,057 | 4.60% |

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Summary of the 03 March 1988 Bangladeshi Jatiyo Sangshad election** | | | | | |
| **Serial** | **Party** | **Total Candidates** | **Seats** | **Votes** | **%** |
| 1 | Jatiya Party | 299 | 251 | 1,76,80,133 | 68.44% |

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Summary of the 27 February 1991 Bangladeshi Jatiyo Sangshad election** | | | | | |
| **Serial** | **Party** | **Total Candidates** | **Seats** | **Votes** | **%** |
| 1 | Bangladesh Nationalist Party | 300 | 140 | 1,05,07,549 | 30.81% |
| 2 | Bangladesh Awami League | 264 | 88 | 1,02,59,866 | 30.08% |
| 3 | Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami | 222 | 18 | 41,17,737 | 12.2% |
| 4 | Jatiyo Party | 272 | 35 | 40,63,537 | 11.92% |

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Summary of the February 1996 Bangladeshi General Election** | | | | | |
| **Serial** | **Party** | **Total** | **Votes** | **%** | **Seats** |
| 1 | Bangladesh Nationalist Party | |  |  | | --- | --- | | 11,776,481 |  | |  |  | 300 |

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Summary of the June 1996 Bangladeshi General Election** | | | | |
| **Serial** | **Party** | **Votes** | **%** | **Seats** |
| 1 | Bangladesh Awami League | 15,882,792 | 37.4 | 146 |
| 2 | Bangladesh Nationalist Party | 14,255,986 | 33.6 | 116 |
| 3 | Jatiya Party | 6,954,981 | 16.4 | 32 |
| 4 | Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh | 3,653,013 | 8.6 | 3 |

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Summary of the 1 October 2001 Bangladesh Jatiyo Sangshad election** | | | | |
| **Serial** | **Parties** | **Votes** | **%** | **Seats** |
| 1 | Bangladesh Nationalist Party | 23,074,714 | 41.40 | 193 |
| 2 | Bangladesh Awami League | 22,310,276 | 40.02 | 62 |
| 3 | Jatiya Party (Ershad) | 4,023,962 | 7.22 | 14 |
| 4 | Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh | 2,385,361 | 4.28 | 17 |

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Summary of the 2008 Bangladeshi Jatiyo Sangshad election** | | | | |
| **Serial** | **Party** | **Votes** | **%** | **Seats** |
| 1 | Bangladesh Awami League | 33,887,451 | 49.0% | 230 |
| 2 | Jatiya Party | 4,867,377 | 7.0% | 27 |
| 3 | Bangladesh Nationalist Party | 22,963,836 | 33.2% | 30 |
| 4 | Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh | 3,186,384 | 4.6% | 2 |

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Summary of the 2014 Bangladeshi General Election** | | | | |
| **Serial** | **Party** | **Votes** | **%** | **Seats** |
| 1 | Awami League | 36,173,883 | 79.14 | 234 |
| 2 | Jatiya Party (Ershad) | 5,167,698 | 11.31 | 34 |
| 3 | Jatiya Party (Manju) |  | 0.3 | 2 |

**Conclusion**

This assignment has looked at the evolution of party system in Bangladesh over the last forty-three years. We have analyzed and compared the main features of four major electoral parties, AL, BNP, Jatiya Party and Jamaat. We have focused on several features such as ideology, organizational structure, leadership, membership, support base and factionalism. We have used six indicators to assess internal party democracy. The indicators has been used in here are leadership selection, candidate nomination, policy-setting, representation of social diversity, party funding and inter and intra-party conflict resolution.

**References**

* Political Parties in Bangladesh: Challenges of Democratization by Rounaq Jahan
* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elections\_in\_Bangladesh