

===== <b>Journal of Social Science</b> =====	©Journal of Social Science Vol. 7 No. 10 July 2024 pp. 184- 200 Faculty of Social Sciences Begum Rokeya University, Rangpur ISSN 2305-1035 <a href="http://doi.org/">http://doi.org/</a> -----
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## An Analysis of Two Local Government Elections Based on Party Affiliation in Bangladesh

Saiful Islam<sup>1</sup>  
Md. Asaduzzaman Mondol Asad<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

*The then-ruling parties in Bangladesh experimented with and utilized local government more frequently in the past (Sarker & Akber, 2016). Article 59 of the People's Republic of Bangladesh's constitution states, "local government in every administrative unit of the Republic shall be entrusted to bodies composed of persons elected in accordance with law." Sarkar & Akber (2016) and Siddique (2005) note that since 1972, local government institutions have only existed continuously at the Union level. 1973 saw the nonpartisan holding of the country's first local government elections. All local government elections were non-partisan from the first day of Bangladesh's independence until the year 2015, despite the fact that there were many candidates with different political ideologies (Karim & Rashid, 2016). The government's decision to hold local elections on party lines without consulting political parties or holding a referendum to measure public opinion (Sarker & Akber, 2016; Nath, 2015) has sparked a debate among politicians, local government experts, and other civil society groups. Politicians, local government experts, and other actors in civil society expressed their worry that the new system of partisan local government polls would undermine the long-standing value system at the local level (Sarker & Akber, 2016; Safi et al., 2015). In the old system, the Union Parishad Chairman and Members were elected based on their family background, tradition, and reputation for social work (Sarker & Akber, 2016).*

**Keywords::** Local Government, Party Line, Election Violence

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<sup>1</sup>Lecturer, Dept. of Public Administration, Begum Rokeya University, Rangpur, Bangladesh. e-mail: [saufur@pad.brur.ac.bd](mailto:saufur@pad.brur.ac.bd)

<sup>2</sup>Associate Professor, Department of Public Administration, Begum Rokeya University, Rangpur, Bangladesh. e-mail: [asad.pad.brur@gmail.com](mailto:asad.pad.brur@gmail.com)

## **Introduction**

In the intricate tapestry of Bangladesh's local government, a notable transformation has taken place over the years, reshaping the relationship between local government and political dynamics. This evolution, marked by shifts from non-partisan to partisan elections, has sparked debates and redefined the contours of local democracy and societal values. Rooted in the country's constitution, Article 59 unequivocally assigns local governance responsibilities to elected bodies within each administrative unit of Bangladesh. However, the practical manifestation of this constitutional provision has undergone significant changes since its inception. The ruling parties in Bangladesh have periodically experimented with and harnessed local government, as highlighted by Sarker and Akber (2016). This experimentation has not only shaped the local governance landscape but has also been emblematic of the evolving relationship between local politics and national governance. The trajectory of local government development traces back to 1972 when local government institutions were first established at the Union level, a pivotal milestone discussed by Sarker & Akber (2016) and Siddique (2005). The genesis of these institutions paved the way for the first local government elections in 1973, characterized by a non-partisan approach. This non-partisan character endured for over four decades, with the elections remaining devoid of overt political affiliations, as illuminated by Karim & Rashid (2016). This continuity presented a paradox in a country where diverse political ideologies coexisted even within non-partisan electoral contexts.

However, the year 2015 marked a paradigm shift. The decision to transition from non-partisan to partisan local government elections triggered a cascade of discussions, debates, and assessments. This shift was not without controversy, as the move was undertaken without prior consultation with political parties or a referendum to gauge public sentiment, as noted by Sarker & Akber (2016) and Nath (2015). This decision fueled concerns among politicians, local government experts, and civil society groups. The anxieties were not solely rooted in the electoral process itself but stemmed from the potential erosion of the longstanding local value system that favored candidates based on familial heritage, tradition, and social contributions (Sarker & Akber, 2016).

The landscape of scholarly inquiry surrounding this transition is equally rich and nuanced. The literature review reveals a mosaic of perspectives on the relationship between partisan elections and voter turnout. While some studies, like Crepaz (1990), suggest that wide political spectrums can boost voter participation, others, such as Sanz (2015) and Bernhagen (2007), underscore the role of competitive systems and campaign activity. McGhee (2011) delves deeper, revealing the influence of campaign activity on the partisan composition of voters. Amid this

complexity, it becomes evident that voter turnout is influenced by a blend of electoral and extra-electoral factors.

Moreover, the influence of ruling parties on elections is explored in multifarious dimensions. Baker (2007), Castanheira (2010), Bawn (2012), and Boix (1999) offer divergent insights into how electoral systems, party organization, and policy positions shape this relationship. The papers collectively underscore the intricate interplay between ruling parties, political strategies, and electoral outcomes, shedding light on the intricate web of democratic dynamics. Critics of the transition to partisan polls express concerns about the potential marginalization of non-party members and the infiltration of undesirable elements into the electoral process (Safi et al., 2015). The opposition party, "Bangladesh Nationalist Party," has gone so far as to label the partisan local government polls as a political ploy with concealed motives (Nath, 2015). Conversely, proponents of the new system point to international examples and local elections in Bangladesh where candidates embraced political identities without relying on party symbols, as highlighted by Sarker & Akber (2016). This shift signifies not just a change in electoral mechanics but also a manifestation of broader political strategies. In conclusion, the transformation from non-partisan to partisan local government elections has reshaped Bangladesh's political landscape. This evolution has invited scholarly inquiry into its impacts on voter turnout and the intricate relationship between ruling parties and electoral outcomes. While critics and proponents hold divergent views, the transition underscores the ever-evolving nature of democratic governance. As the Union Parishad election of 2016 unfolded in stages across the nation, it offered a microcosm for examining the consequences of this transformation on local democracy and societal values. This evolution, encapsulated in the realm of local government, illuminates the broader currents shaping Bangladesh's democratic journey.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Local administration in Bangladesh is divided into three administrative levels: Zila Parishad, Upazila Parishad, and Union Parishad. While Union Parishads have diminished in significance over time, they continue to function as effective local government bodies (Ahmed, 2016; Quddusi, 2016). In 2015, Bangladesh conducted its first-ever local government elections on partisan lines, allowing candidates to utilize party symbols and portraits of party leaders in their campaigns. This shift from non-partisan to partisan elections posed significant challenges for the existing political parties in the country (Sarker & Akber, 2016). The introduction of partisan local government elections raised concerns about the potential disruption of traditional values and the use of coercion by certain candidates to influence voters (Safi et al., 2015; Sarker & Akber, 2016). Maintaining fairness, transparency, and credibility in the electoral process has become a critical issue (Sarker & Akber, 2016).

Overall, the transformation to partisan local government elections in Bangladesh has brought about significant changes and sparked debates regarding its impact on the electoral system and the role of political parties in local governance, in this study,

we examine what significant changes happened in the local politics and environment of the election after the party line poll.

### **Method of the Study**

"Discovering and learning new things through the social research process is enjoyable. Research is not only enjoyable but also essential for understanding the events and structure of the social world. Social researchers also gain a lot of knowledge from qualitative research methods. Qualitative research is a valid and valuable, but different type of social research" (Neuman, 1991:143). This study used both qualitative and quantitative methods. Neuman argues that, to do good social research and acquire knowledge, we need to examine the social world from both a qualitative and a quantitative perspective.

### **Objective of the Study**

The study aims to investigate the impacts of party-based union parishad elections on both the electoral process and the local government system, as well as their effects on the general population's experiences.

### **Data Collection**

The data collected for this research actually comes from secondary sources. In these studies, primary sources are not to be used for collecting data. The primary sources are to be:

- Specific and structured questionnaires are used in the direct interview.

#### **Secondary Sources**

We have collected the information from secondary sources. These are as follows:

- Newspapers
- Books, journals, and publications
- Previous research, web browsing
- Articles and related materials.

### **Limitations of the Study**

1. The method of data collection, such as interviewing through a questionnaire, is hard to implement because it's a vast concept.
2. Limited observation, content analysis, and interviews are being applied due to a lack of time and financial hindrance, but more observation and interviews can provide more comprehensive ideas about the functioning and awareness level of this system.
3. The data collection methods described in this paper largely depend on secondary sources. Secondary sources, such as newspapers, books, and journal-related articles, etc., rather than primary sources.
4. Sometimes many of the newspapers publish the news with bias, so some vague information may be collected.

## **A Brief Overview of Local Government Elections with party-line Around the World**

Elections is one of the crucial way of practicing democracy in a country While national election draw more attention, local government elections are equally important, directly impacting communities' resources, services, and daily life quality. Around the world, various countries' experiences shed light on how parties balance unified platforms with grassroots engagement. This journey through time illustrates how party-line elections have shaped democratic ideals, highlighting the ongoing struggle between collective representation and individual voices. Exploring this past is crucial to understanding the present and future of local governance, where the interplay of party politics and local interests continues to shape our democratic landscape. In Malaysia, there is a lack of local government elections. During British colonial rule, the appointment of commission members by the British Governor was the method of overseeing local government institutions (Alim, 2015; Chowdhury, 2015). While municipal elections took place in 1857 and 1858, replacing the appointment system, the federal government suspended local government elections in 1965 due to the Malaysia-Indonesia conflict. Consequently, since 1965, local councilors in Malaysia have been appointed by the ruling party (Alim, 2015). In the UK, local government elections are very political, as political parties nominate and support candidates, and party leaders campaign for them (Chowdhury, 2015; Humes, 1959). However, in the US, local elections are not influenced by political parties. For example, in California, political parties have only been allowed to endorse or oppose candidates since 1986 (Alim, 2015; Chowdhury, 2015). In contrast, India started having partisan local government elections in 1978 in West Bengal (Alim, 2015; Nath, 2015). Later, in 1994, fourteen other provinces followed suit. But these elections were not fair and transparent, as there were many cases of voter fraud and manipulation by the government.

### **Data Analysis of the 2016 and 2021 Union Parishad Elections**

The data provided illustrates the results of two party-line elections, one in 2016 and the other in 2021, The elections were conducted in multiple phases, each involving a subset of UPs. In both years, the total number of UPs remained consistent at 4103 and 3920, respectively. In terms of AL's success, there is a notable decrease in the number of chairmen elected under AL's banner in 2021 compared to 2016.

This demonstrates a shift backward in AL's dominance in the UP elections over the years. Similarly, the number of uncontested elections has also risen significantly in 2021. In 2016, Bangladesh witnessed the Union Parishad elections for the first time under party lines across 4,103 UPs, divided into six phases. The results were declared for 4,002 UPs, while the remaining 101 UPs were scheduled for later elections. As reported by the Election Commission, the Bangladesh Awami League, the ruling party, secured 2,661 seats for chairman, whereas the Bangladesh Nationalist Party secured 367 seats. Amongst the various political parties, Jatiya Party, Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD), Jatiya Party-JP, Workers Party, Islami Andolon Bangladesh, Zaker Party, and Jamiat Ulama-e-Islam Bangladesh collectively secured 60 seats.

In addition to these, a notable count of 898 independent candidates emerged victorious, with a significant proportion of them being dissident candidates affiliated with the Awami League. In the latest 2021 and 2022 UP elections, which were held for the 10<sup>th</sup> time and boycotted by the opposition party BNP, this was the 2<sup>nd</sup> party line election. The 10<sup>th</sup> Union Parishad elections in Bangladesh occurred across the country in seven phases from June 2021 to February 2022. The ruling Awami League secured a significant number of elected seats (2,034) and won a substantial portion of seats uncontested (313), demonstrating their dominance. Independent candidates also performed well, securing 1,740 seats. Other parties collectively obtained 74 seats.

**Table 1: Overview of party-line local government elections in 2016 and 2021**

Phase of election	Total UP		Total elected(AL)		Elected Uncontested		BNP	Other party		Independence	
	2016	2021	2016	2021	2016	2021	2016	2016	2021	2016	2021
1 <sup>st</sup> phase	725	204	540	148	54	28	47	9	7	103	49
2 <sup>nd</sup> Phase	644	834	450	486	34	78	61	8	18	115	330
3 <sup>rd</sup> phase	615	986	395	525	29	99	60	16	21	163	445
4 <sup>th</sup> phase	703	836	439	396	34	48	70	13	10	161	390
5 <sup>th</sup> phase	717	708	431	341	39	48	67	11	11	170	346
6 <sup>th</sup> phase	699	218	406	98	27	12	62	3	3	186	94
7 <sup>th</sup> Phase	---	134	-----	40	----		----		4		86
<b>Total</b>	<b>4103</b>	<b>3920</b>	<b>2661</b>	<b>2034</b>	<b>217</b>	<b>313</b>	<b>367</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>898</b>	<b>1740</b>

Source: The daily Prothom Alo (March 01,2016-June 05, 2016 and July 01,2022 to February 20, 2023), The daily Jugantor (Mach (March 01,2016-June 05, 2016 and July 01,2022 to February 20, 2023).

### **Result analysis of two UP elections:**

The comparison between the election results of 2016 and 2021-22 provides valuable insights into the evolving political dynamics in Bangladesh. The Awami League demonstrated a significant increase in its vote share, surging from 45.46% in 2016 to 51.88% in 2021. This uptick signifies the party's growing popularity and continued political influence. In a noteworthy departure from conventional party-based politics, independent candidates witnessed a substantial rise in their percentage of the vote, climbing from 31.29% in 2016 to 44.38% in 2021. This shift underscores a changing preference among voters for non-affiliated candidates, possibly indicative of dissatisfaction with mainstream parties or a desire for more localized representation. Notably, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) opted not to participate in the 2021 elections, which significantly impacted the overall distribution of votes. Their absence was particularly pronounced considering their 18.98% vote share in 2016. Meanwhile, the combined vote shares of minor parties

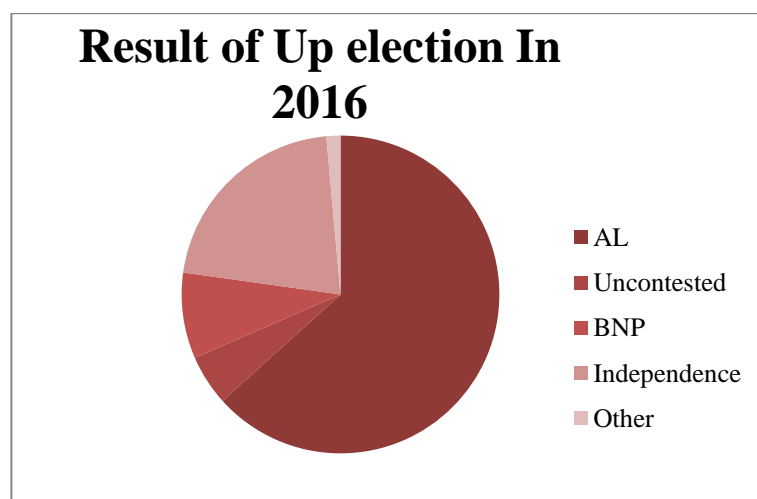
like the Jatiya Party and others experienced a slight dip, going from 4.54% in 2016 to 3.74% in 2021. This modest decline could be indicative of a trend where smaller parties face competition from independent candidates and the Awami League, hinting at a changing political landscape. Overall, these results highlight a dynamic and evolving political scenario in Bangladesh, characterized by shifting voter preferences and the rise of independent candidates alongside established parties.

**Table 2: Percentage of votes in Two Ups Election**

Party	Percentage of votes in 2016	2021
Bangladesh Awami League(AL)	45.47%	51.88%
Independent candidate	31.3%	44.38%
Bangladesh Nationalist Party(BNP)	18.97%	Not Participate
Jatiya Party (JP) and Others	4.54%	3.74%

Source: Compiled by author

**Diagram 1: Result of the UP Election 2016**



Source: Compiled by author

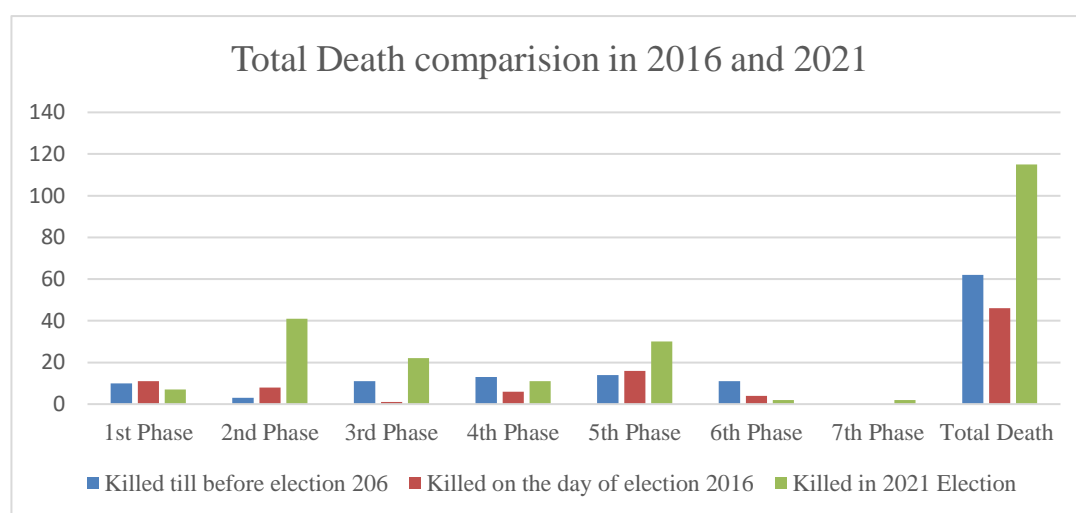
From the moment the elections were declared until the votes closed, 145 people died in the 2016 UP elections. Due to the absence of the BNP, there was little to no competition in the 2021–22 UP elections, which resulted in a modest decrease in fatalities from the previous one to 115. The division in Chittagong had the most fatalities (32), followed by the divisions in Dhaka (29), Rajshahi (20), Barisal (17), Khulna (17), Mymensingh (16), Rangpur (9), and Sylhet (5). During the electoral process, there were conflicts in every district, and 46 of the 64 districts reported deaths.

**Table 3: Electoral Death and Violence in 2016 and 2021**

Phase	Death before 2016 election	Death in 2016 election	Killed in 2021 Election	Wounded
1 <sup>st</sup> Phase	10	11	7	More than 2000
2 <sup>nd</sup> Phase	3	8	41	More than 1100
3 <sup>rd</sup> Phase	11	1	22	More than 900
4 <sup>th</sup> Phase	13	6	11	More than 1000
5 <sup>th</sup> Phase	14	16	30	More than 600
6 <sup>th</sup> Phase	11	4	2	More than 350
7 <sup>th</sup> Phase	----	----	2	
Total Death	62	46	115	

Source: Kaler Kantho, (8<sup>th</sup> February, 2022)

**Diagram 2: Total number of deaths pre- and post-polls**

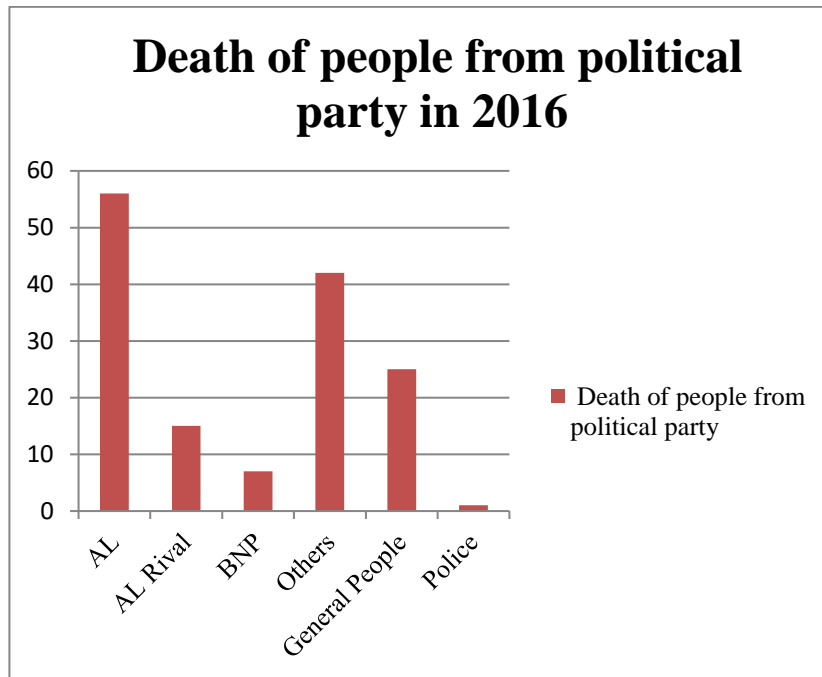


Source: Compiled by author

As per SUJON's report, during this election, fatalities occurred among different groups: 56 individuals from supporters of ruling party candidates, 15 supporters from opposing candidates of the ruling party, 7 persons affiliated with the BNP, 1 from the JP, 1 from the Jonosonghoti Party, 3 neutral individuals, 36 from supporters



of member candidates, 1 from the police, and 25 general citizens. (Hossain & Alam, 2016; Mojumder, 2016).



Source: Compiled by author

**Table 4: Total number of deaths in all Union Parishad vote from 1973 to 2022**

Year	Union Parishad Election	Number of deaths
1973	First	0
1977	Second	0
1983	Third	0
1988	Fourth	80
1992	Fifth	0
1997	Sixth	31
2003	Seven	23
2011	Eight	10
2016	Nine	145
2021	Ten	115
	Total	404

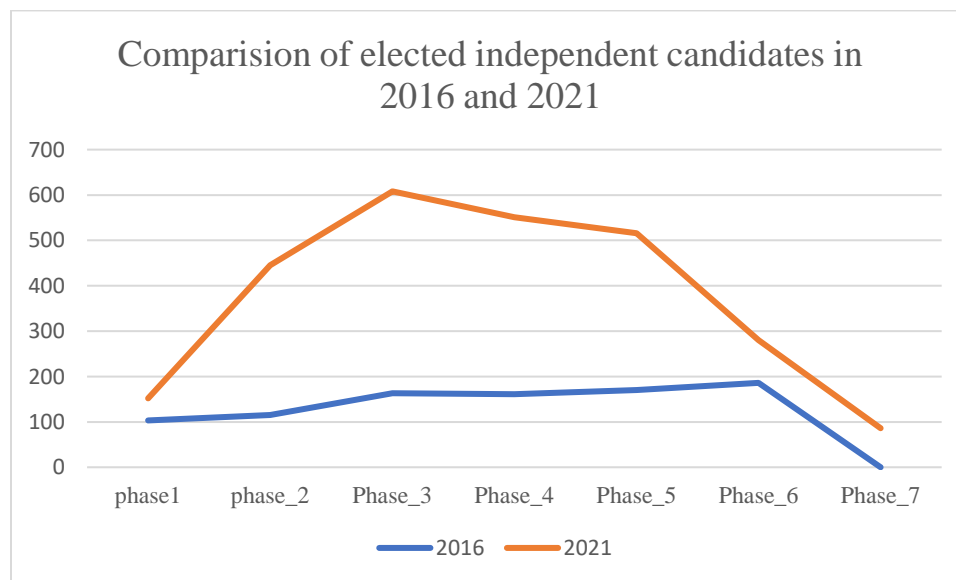
Sushasoner Jonno Nagorik, a civil society platform, asserted that a combined tally of 71 individuals lost their lives and over 6,000 sustained injuries due to violence linked to the polls following the Election Commission's announcement of the staggered schedule for Union Parishad elections on February 11. Sujan emphasized that throughout the history of the country's Union Parishad elections, the most violent and contentious instance occurred in 1988, resulting in the deaths of 80 individuals. In the ongoing Union Parishad elections, 71 fatalities have already been recorded after three phases of the process, with three more phases remaining to be conducted. in the 2016 UPs election.

### Unusual voter turnout

Examination of the election outcomes as reported by the Bangladesh Election Commission of 2016 election reveals that, on average, 73.92% of voters participated in 207 municipalities. Among these, five municipalities registered voter turnouts exceeding 90%, while 74 municipalities displayed voter participation exceeding 80%. Election experts have scrutinized the figures released by the Election Commission and found them to be atypical. They assert that voter turnout in local elections typically falls within the range of 60% to 65%. Drawing from past electoral experiences, they noted that previous local body elections did not witness such elevated levels of voter participation.

### Independent candidate dominance

In the 2016 election, 898 chairman candidates won, while 1740 chairman candidates, which was double the number from the first party line election, won in the next election. Media reports said that most of the candidates who were elected independently were the rebel candidates of the ruling AL men, due to their internal feud and not getting the party symbol. The number of independent elected candidates was doubled because the main opposition party of Bangladesh, the BNP, officially couldn't participate in the election, while some party men competed in the election independently. The number of independent candidates was doubled from the first phase.



Source: Compiled by author

### **Violence and rigging in the UP election**

At least 115 people have died and several more have been injured since the UP polls began on June 21, 2021, making it one of the most violent and coercive elections ever. in the 10<sup>th</sup> UP election. The majority of documented confrontations during the electoral process involved candidates backed by the ruling Awami League and rebel candidates as the main opposition. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party and other significant parties abstained from the elections. They expressed skepticism about the Election Commission's capability to conduct impartial elections, thus opting for a boycott. (New Age,2022).

Since the beginning of the recent UP elections, the exhibition of power and illicit weapons has become pronounced as ruling party candidates initiate actions against BNP candidates through various means. BNP candidates faced hindrances in submitting their nomination papers. The manner in which Awami men, with the support of the administration, Election Commission, and government entities, curtailed citizens' voting rights is nothing short of a mockery of human rights, demonstrating a bold manifestation of authoritarianism that starkly defies international standards and ethical principles. This situation even drew disapproval from the government's coalition partners.

### **Lack of international observers**

In contrast to the city corporation elections, merely two international election monitoring groups have submitted applications to the Election Commission for observing the December 30th elections, states UNB. As per insiders at the EC Secretariat, these two overseas supervisory organizations are Democracy International and the International Human Rights Commission (IHRC). Foreign observers have displayed limited enthusiasm for municipal elections.

### **Ancient Election Commission**

The Election Commission (EC) still runs in an old colonial way in digital Bangladesh. The EC can't officially accept reports of vote robbery via MMS, SMS, or voice call. They need a written or typed official report with details via proper channels—i.e., faced with imminent or ongoing violence or irregularity, the presiding officers must send an original written report via courier to the DC office, where it is officially received with a seal, then the DC (returning officer) writes and signs a note and faxes it to the EC, then the full commission goes over the report and decides on what is to be done. And while the formality goes on, all ballots are already sealed and stuffed in boxes.

### **Opinion of Election Observers and Experts**

Many election observers, experts, and members of civil society, including SUJAN (Citizens for Good Governance), Broti, Dr. Tofayel Ahmed (Local Government Expert), Dr. Moinul Islam (Educator and Economist), and others, have expressed their displeasure and grave concerns regarding the violence, extensive rigging, and irregularities in party backed UP elections. Additionally, the Election Commission has come under harsh fire for its inaction and failing to

guarantee a fair and impartial electoral process. Diplomats stationed in Dhaka have also expressed their serious apprehensions about the violence and fatalities that occurred during the UP election. The credibility of the election outcomes could be upheld if impartial observers affirmed the fairness and peacefulness of the elections. Nevertheless, reports from the media have indicated numerous instances of coercion, clashes among party members, intrusion into polling stations, and manipulation of ballots in the recent UP elections. There could be numerous adverse consequences arising from election results perceived as neither free nor fair. The potential challenges posed by the ongoing UP elections are multifaceted.

### **Concerns Over Efficacy, Violence and credibility**

First, the efficacy of elected chairpersons may be compromised, as their loyalty to the nominating party might overshadow their responsibilities, leading to disappointment among voters. Second, the manipulation of the electoral process and the prevalence of violence could deter voter participation and create a gender imbalance among contestants. Third, the shortcomings in conducting credible and inclusive elections might undermine the international community's faith in the country's democratic institutions, thereby tarnishing its global image. Fourth, internal conflicts and fictionalization within political parties could intensify, jeopardizing their unity and long-term stability. Finally, a noticeable contrast in these UP elections relative to the past lies in the deterioration of the country's capacity to ensure free and fair elections, an area in which substantial progress had previously been achieved.

### **Observation of the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Union Parishad Elections under party line**

On November 23, 2015, the Bangladesh Cabinet passed a new law regarding the local government system. This move represented a noteworthy shift from a tradition spanning a century. The novel legislation granted political parties the authority to put forth nominees for regional elections, thus paving the way for the nation's inaugural localized elections with a partisan dimension. These historic elections unfolded on December 30, 2015, across 234 municipalities. Regrettably, the electoral proceedings were tainted by instances of violence, confrontations, discrepancies, withdrawals by 19 candidates, and a tragic fatality. No observer organization categorizes the municipal election as either 'credible' or 'unacceptable'. According to the preliminary statement from the Election Working Group (EWG), despite numerous electoral incidents of different levels of seriousness on Election Day, the majority of voters managed to cast their votes and express their preferences. Conversely, another statement acknowledged that the elections appeared to be open and equitable, with only minor discrepancies noted in polling centers. However, the civil society group SHUJAN expressed a different viewpoint, asserting that the recent municipal elections did not meet the criteria for fairness and impartiality, as they did not meet the standards set for credible elections. The media reports said that voting was stopped in 25 centers in 10 municipalities across the country, and the Election Commission dismissed five police officers for failing to do their duty. At least 78 people were wounded in clashes at different polling centers in 12 districts across the country. In this election, AL candidates won 179 mayoral posts, while their opponents from the BNP got 21. And the AL rebels got 19 posts. Experts said the party backed municipal elections did not meet the expected standards. The Election Commission lost an opportunity to improve its declining image in the January 5, 2014, national assembly election. After all, from this observation,

it can be assumed that election in the party line of a local government body is not suitable in this condition. Though it's helpful for strengthening the political party, it hampered the autonomy of the local body and caused internal feuds among the local body. In previous elections before 2016's, parties simply implied their support for candidates, who were allowed to accept numerous nominations. Notably, in the current election, the nominee of the Bangladesh Awami League (AL) emerged victorious in 1,777 out of the 2,540 UPs for which unofficial results have been declared, while the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) candidate secured 235 UPs. Conversely, during the 2011 election, candidates backed by the BNP won 1,618 seats, and AL-supported candidates clinched 2,101 chairman positions out of the total 4,298 UPs. This data underscores a shift: AL's success rate escalated from 49% in 2011 to 70% in 2016, while BNP's success rate plummeted from 38% in 2011 to 9% in 2016. This dynamic highlights the merits and drawbacks associated with voting in accordance with party affiliations.

### **Advantage and disadvantage of party based local government election**

The implementation of a new system is poised to simplify the intricate fund allocation processes for local government institutions, streamlining the distribution of resources. Introducing party-based local body elections not only facilitates more efficient developmental endeavors by the government but also mitigates unnecessary controversies surrounding the engagement of political parties in these local polls. This practice is well established in advanced democracies like the UK and India, where local government elections are conducted with party affiliations, allowing political parties to actively vie for positions within local governing bodies. Such a partisan approach to local elections holds the potential to enhance the capabilities of these local governing entities. The potency of political parties, fundamentally rooted in their grassroots-level strength, becomes more evident. This shift also emphasizes transparency and accountability within the scope of local governance, as elected officials are held accountable to their respective parties for their actions. Consequently, political parties wield a certain level of control over these elected representatives. Moreover, such party-oriented local government elections serve as invaluable training grounds for upcoming national elections, preparing both parties and voters for the larger political arena. This practice empowers voters, as political parties present their agendas and policies well ahead of elections, allowing citizens to align with specific programs and candidates. In intricate societies, individual voices find greater resonance through organized entities, effectively channeling their aspirations. Ultimately, these changes aim to ensure a level playing field, foster transparency, and build confidence among all political parties involved. The interference in the independence of local government institutions becomes evident through partisan local elections, which amplify the undesirable influence of political parties.

These elections discourage potential contenders with limited chances of victory, deterring rebel candidates. Consequently, such a system provides an avenue for self-serving individuals to exploit the masses for personal gains. This approach not only constrains people's perspectives, urging party members to prioritize their party over the greater good of the nation, but also establishes dual governing entities—the official government and the party caucus—leading from the shadows. This often deters meritorious and honest individuals from participating in local body elections, hindering democracy and autonomy at the grassroots level. The party-driven electoral environment

further complicates the development process as rural-level political party identities overshadow progress. In addition, the choice of single candidates for mayoral roles poses challenges, and internal conflicts within political parties are prone to arise. The far-reaching impact of party politics is palpable, even affecting the policies and functioning of local governments. Consequently, the system fuels tensions, damages national interests through self-serving propaganda, and fosters factionalism, all of which cast a shadow on the political landscape. Local elections in developing democracies are often marred by manipulation by the ruling party. Defeated candidates face direct rejection from neighbors, more so if their party is in power. Research shows that partisan local elections provide opportunities for such manipulation. Opposition candidates encounter barriers, including instances of disqualification, as seen in Azerbaijan's 1999 local elections. Ensuring fairness in these elections is a challenge due to the influence of the ruling party's "code of conduct," which alters the outcome. The sudden decision to hold UP elections under the political party system had raised many questions. Many experts opined that the new system would trigger widespread violence at the grassroots level. Though party-based local government elections are practiced in many democratic countries, it is time to consider whether the system is feasible and applicable in Bangladesh. Many people share the perspective that the Awami League's decision to hold party-based elections in Union Parishad (UP) is clearly a calculated strategy aimed at improving their tarnished reputation following the contentious and exclusionary parliamentary election on January 5, 2014.

This earlier election disregarded international norms, placing the government in a state of legitimacy crisis. Despite the ruling party's significant success in recent UP elections, with its chairman candidates prevailing in approximately 80% to 90% of cases, the government couldn't fully leverage this outcome due to widespread violence and substantial deficiencies that marred the process. Instead of resolving the legitimacy crisis, the aftermath of the election actually exacerbated the ruling party's difficulties. Additionally, candidates affiliated with the 14-party alliance encountered obstacles in their participation, with some being entirely prevented from submitting their nominations. Those who managed to do so were either coerced into withdrawing or struggled to run effective campaigns amidst obstacles and violence orchestrated by Awami League supporters. This situation led to resentment among the smaller members of the 14-party alliance. The choice to hold chairman elections based on party symbols while conducting member elections without symbols introduced conflicting dynamics into the electoral process. Regrettably, this election set a grim record in Bangladesh's electoral history, resulting in 116 deaths and approximately 8,000 injuries by June 14, 2016.

Visible violence ranged from physical attacks to instances of firing, destruction of campaign materials, and ballot box manipulation. Significantly, this election witnessed an unprecedented number of 530 uncontested declarations in two UP's election by Awami League UP Chairmen, a situation not seen for candidates from other parties. In contrast to practices in countries like India, where elections unfold in phases and results are announced after all phases are complete, Bangladesh's Election Commission chose to disclose results after each UP election phase, inadvertently fostering partisan practices within the process. Promptly, the pressing demand to safeguard democracy necessitates the establishment of a free, unbiased, neutral, and transparent

election commission. Addressing this imperative is crucial to upholding the integrity of democratic processes.

## Recommendations

To ensure the integrity of democratic processes in Bangladesh, several key steps have been proposed. These include the resumption of impartial elections with party symbols at various levels of local government, the government must commit to conducting transparent, equitable, and trustworthy elections within local bodies, involving all political parties, a strong election commission should be established, as should free media access in election centers, as well as the installation of CC cameras in all polling stations. Finally, emphasizing the significance of non-partisan elections as a cornerstone of democracy, and highlighting their role in ensuring universal adult franchise and equal voting rights, underscores the need for their continued implementation. Drawing inspiration from countries like South Africa, the establishment of an electoral court with powers akin to those of a Supreme Court could be explored as a potential solution to uphold transparent and impartial elections in Bangladesh.

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