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## *Power, Patronage, and the Candidate-nomination Process: Observations from Bangladesh*

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### **Abstract**

In this article, by studying the candidate-nomination process of the two major political parties, I show how power is distributed within the political party in Bangladesh. I show that the general acceptance by scholars that political power lies in the hands of the innermost circle of the political-party leadership in Bangladesh is too simplistic. A more nuanced observation of power and influence within the party structure shows that, in the context of Bangladesh's clientelistic political system, which is based on reciprocity between patrons and clients and relies on the ability of middlemen to organize and mobilize (in order to disrupt through *hartals* and strikes), power is often in the hands of those mid-level leaders who are in charge of mobilizing because their demands cannot be ignored by the topmost leadership. Through studying the candidate-nomination process of the major political parties and using the Narayanganj mayoral election of 2011 as a case study, I answer questions such as whose interests political parties are representing, what channels of influence are being used, and why these channels exist.

### **Introduction**

It is generally accepted that power within political parties in Bangladesh is concentrated in the hands of political-party leaders. The most commonly acknowledged reason for the concentration of power within the inner circle of political parties is that, being dynastic, the two major political parties (who have generally alternated power since 1991 until the 2014 election), the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, are characterized by a lack of internal democracy, with a highly centralized and personalized internal governance structure vesting near absolute power in the party chairpersons.

The party chairpersons, Sheikh Hasina of the Awami League and Khaleda Zia of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, are the daughter and widow of the father of the nation and one of the foremost freedom fighters, respectively.<sup>1</sup> BRAC's 'State of Governance in Bangladesh'<sup>2</sup> report notes: 'The innermost circle (of the ruling party) has de facto command over the entire party, legislature, parliamentary committees, procurement policies, development allocations, bureaucracy and law and order enforcement agencies.'<sup>3</sup> Others, such as Rehman Sobhan, Stanley Kochanek, Harry Blair, and Rounaq Jahan, express similar concerns about the monopolization of political power by the party leadership and the incumbent.<sup>4</sup> For most observers, one of the main reasons behind democratic erosion in Bangladesh is this concentration of power in the hands of the party leadership rather than throughout the rank and file of political parties.<sup>5</sup>

While the concentration of power within the hands of the political leadership is one of the criticisms levied against the state of democracy and governance in Bangladesh, another area of rising concern amongst observers is the role that political satraps play in maintaining power on behalf of political parties. Joe Devine writes that political-party activities in rural areas in Bangladesh have given rise to 'new forms of local and national level practices of violence'.<sup>6</sup> The role that local-level party organizers and political satraps in Bangladesh play is indispensable for political parties. These middlemen are responsible for both organizing, mobilizing, and enforcing violence on behalf of political parties at the local level and, when necessary, organizing and mobilizing their

<sup>1</sup> Islam, Mohammed Mozahidul, 'The Toxic Politics of Bangladesh: A Bipolar, Competitive, Neopatrimonial State?', *Asian Journal of Political Science* 21 (2013).

<sup>2</sup> BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee) is the largest non-governmental organization in Bangladesh.

<sup>3</sup> *The State of Governance in Bangladesh 2006*, Centre for Governance Studies, BRAC University and BRAC Research and Evaluation Division, 20 (December, 2006): 20.

<sup>4</sup> Sobhan, Rehman, 'Structural Dimensions of Malgovernance in Bangladesh', *Economic and Political Weekly* 39 (2004): 4101–4108; Kochanek, Stanley 'Governance, Patronage Politics and Democratic Transition in Bangladesh', *Asian Survey* 40 (2000): 530–550; Blair, Harry, 'Party Overinstitutionalization, Contestation and Democratic Degradation in Bangladesh', in *Handbook of South Asian Politics*, ed. Paul Brass (London: Routledge, 2010); Jahan, Rounaq, 'Bangladesh in 2003: Vibrant Democracy or Destructive Politics?', *Asian Survey* 44 (2004): 56–61.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Devine, Joseph, *Governance, Democracy and the Politics of Well-being*, WeD Working Paper 36, ESRC Research Group of Well-Being in Developing Countries, 2007: 24.

followers for the national level. The level of organization and the ability to mobilize are major determinants of political strength and the ability to win elections.<sup>7</sup> The organization and mobilization that mid-level political satraps provide for the party in turn lead to patrimonial loyalty between the party leadership and the local-level politician.

In this article, by studying what considerations political-party leaders take into account when giving their nomination to candidates and by using the Narayanganj mayoral election of 2011 as a case study, I show how patronage, money, and muscle play an increasingly integral role in consolidating political power in Bangladesh.<sup>8</sup> I show that the general acceptance by scholars that power lies solely in the hands of the innermost circle of the political-party leadership in Bangladesh is too simplistic. A more nuanced observation of power and influence within the party structure shows that, in the context of Bangladesh's clientelistic political system, which is based on reciprocity between patrons and clients and relies on the ability of middlemen to organize and mobilize (in order to disrupt through *hartals*<sup>9</sup> and strikes), power is often also in the hands of those who are in charge of mobilizing and imposing costs on society and other political parties on behalf of the party in question. And, oftentimes, the organizational capacity of middlemen and their *mastaans* (musclemen) are so vital to the survival of the political party that the party's highest leaders are dependent on and indebted to the mid-level organizers and must give in to their demands.

This article is divided into six sections. The second section provides a brief overview of the nature of political patronage in Bangladesh and

<sup>7</sup> Suykens, Bert and Islam, Ainul, 'Hartal as a Complex Political Performance: General Strikes and the Organisation of (Local) Power in Bangladesh', *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 47 (2013).

<sup>8</sup> This particular case study has been selected because it was widely covered by the media, thereby giving more access to information and details. Further, since the removal of the Caretaker Government's provision from the Constitution via the 15th amendment in 2011, the fairness and competitiveness of elections have been highly contested, thereby bringing into question the entire electoral process and the nature of democracy and political parties in Bangladesh. Please see Khan, Adeeba Aziz, 'The Politics of Constitutional Amendments in Bangladesh: The Case of the Non-political Caretaker Government', *International Review of Law* 3 (2015): 9.

<sup>9</sup> *Hartal* is a forced imposition by the opposition parties on the people to observe a total shutdown of every sector of the country such as transportation, offices, business activities, industrial production, banking, and transactions to oppose the sitting government. Please see Moniruzzaman, Mohammed, 'Party Politics and Political Violence in Bangladesh', *South Asian Survey* 16 (2009): 61–83.

the role played by mid-level organizers and their musclemen followed by an overview of the formal candidate-selection process that political parties espouse that they follow and are expected to follow versus the actual methods and reasons for candidate selection used in Bangladesh in the third section. The fourth section sets out the case study and the fifth section explains the observable outcomes of the case study, followed by the conclusion, in the final section, that, in patrimonial Bangladesh, mid-level politicians with organization ability and family ties to the leadership often have great bargaining power within the political party.

### **Political parties and the role of mid-level organizers and their *mastaans* in Bangladesh**

Bangladeshi scholars agree that the entire society is structured around a complex network of patron–client relationships, which have both economic (jobs, credit) and political (protection) aspects.<sup>10</sup> Clientelism in the context of Bangladesh is explained not only as exchanges between individual leaders and their clients, but rather is described as factions that work within a pyramid structure. Political parties form the top of the pyramid while the base is formed by groups and classes created through a series of patron–client networks, which penetrate all levels and sectors of society.<sup>11</sup> In clientelistic societies, patron–client networks are mechanisms through which power is exercised. The typical patron is an organizer of power and organizes groups of clients. Clients offer their support to the organization in exchange for benefits that the patron offers.

Mushtaq Khan describes patron–client politics as a system of politics in which the common feature is the personalization of politics by faction leaders and the organization of politics as a competition between factions. Faction leaders offer payoffs to those who support them and capture the resources for making these payoffs by mobilizing their supporters in factions on behalf of their respective political parties.<sup>12</sup> The people at the bottom of the pyramid offer loyalty in exchange for the benefits they receive from their local patron. One of the reasons for

<sup>10</sup> Kochanek, 'Governance', pp. 530–550.

<sup>11</sup> Khan, Mushtaq, 'Class, Clientelism and Communal Politics in Contemporary Bangladesh', in *The Making of History: Essays Presented to Irfan Habib*, ed. K. N. Pannikar, T. J. Byres, and U. Patnaik (New Delhi: Tulika, 2000): 17–18.

<sup>12</sup> See Suykens and Islam, 'Hartal as a Complex Political Performance'.

the enduring nature of clientelism is that, in developing countries, clients recognize that the small gains to be made from factional allegiance and patron loyalty (such as a retainer payment for physical protection) are still likely to outweigh those that might arise from class-based political action.<sup>13</sup>

These basic patron–client factions are existent at every level, starting from the neighbourhood to local government leaders. Each of the factions is led by a patron belonging to a slightly higher social class. Bargaining power of these local factions or local faction leaders depends on the number of people who belong to the faction and who can be mobilized for electioneering, demonstrations, and other forms of activity, which inflict costs on the opposition and factions supporting the opposition. The higher the organizational and destruction capacity the local faction leader possesses, the more important he or she becomes to the national-level leadership.

Arild Ruud discusses the violence that Bangladeshi political activists engage in and how political violence has become an essential tool in winning elections. He traces back the relationship between criminals and politicians in Bangladesh to the years after the 1971 war of independence. Mohammed Moniruzzaman argues that the most commonly used weapon in the hands of political parties in Bangladesh are *hartals*. A *hartal* is the most widely used means of registering opposition in Bangladesh<sup>14</sup> and *hartals* have been on the rise throughout the democratic era.<sup>15</sup> Although the original objective of holding a *hartal* had been to achieve goals in the greater public and national interest,<sup>16</sup> during the parliamentary era of Bangladesh, the aims have deteriorated and *hartals* have become a tool of the opposition to express its rejection of the government and also to display its strength. Bert Suykens and Ainul Islam argue that *hartals* provide ‘unique opportunities for local party organisers to show, maintain and improve their position in the local power structure’.<sup>17</sup> As a result, conflict between intra-party factions also results in clashes and *hartals* in today’s Bangladesh and William

<sup>13</sup> Khan, ‘Class, Clientelism and Communal Politics’, pp. 17–18.

<sup>14</sup> Islam, Aminul, ‘The Predicament of Democratic Consolidation in Bangladesh’, *Bangladesh e-journal of Sociology* 3 (2006): 15.

<sup>15</sup> Moniruzzaman, ‘Party Politics’, pp. 61–83.

<sup>16</sup> Datta, Sreeradha, ‘Political Violence in Bangladesh: Trends and Causes’, *Strategic Analysis* 29 (2005): 432.

<sup>17</sup> Suykens and Islam, ‘Hartal as a Complex Political Performance’.

B. Milam (United States Ambassador to Bangladesh between 1990 and 1993) made the observation that:

Political leaders and their parties have had no inhibitions about creating crises of almost any nature and dimension to gain or regain office. No amount of money is too much to spend on political victory; no course of action is too immoral or illegal to achieve it; no amount of violence is too brutal to sustain it. For many years, Bangladeshi politics has resembled a bare-knuckle fight—bloody, vicious, without rules, and sometimes fatal.<sup>18</sup>

Joe Devine asserts that violence goes hand in hand with democracy in Bangladesh and writes: ‘The particular way that democracy has evolved in Bangladesh ... is inherently linked with the emergence of new forms of violence ... it is the organisation of political life ... which gives shape and legitimacy to the articulation of violence in the formal political process.’<sup>19</sup> Indeed, from 1991 to 2014, Bangladesh saw an alternation of power at each election, and the use of violent forms of protest by the opposition prior to election. It may be deduced that such a show of strength by the opposition before elections seems to be fundamental to winning the polls. Therefore, the political strongmen in charge of demonstrating muscle strength on behalf of political parties are fundamental to the success of the political party. In Rehman Sobhan’s words:

The patronage extended by a political party to *mastaans* or hoodlums derives from the dependence of political figures on these forces to ensure their election and the retention of their political authority in their constituency area. Many politicians now increasingly use *mastaans* as a political resource in the contention for political office and state patronage to access public resources .... *Mastaans* therefore play an integral part in the election process, and as a result both parties have tended to depend on such undemocratic instruments as political resources for realizing their electoral ambitions.<sup>20</sup>

Local politicians who act like the go-between for the party at the national level and help with organizing low-level *mastaans* therefore have become crucial to the party. It is generally acknowledged by civil society and the public that all political parties have their own armed cadres.<sup>21</sup> The responsibility of these cadres is to maintain and strengthen the political base of the respective political party and to counter the cadres of rival parties. This has meant that politics has increasingly become more

<sup>18</sup> Moniruzzaman, ‘Party Politics’, pp. 61–83.

<sup>19</sup> Devine, *Governance*, p. 24.

<sup>20</sup> Sobhan, ‘Structural Dimensions’, pp. 4101–4108.

<sup>21</sup> Moniruzzaman, ‘Party Politics’, p. 84.

reliant on muscle power and, according to Mohammed Moniruzzaman, a new breed of ‘politicians’ with money and armed support is increasingly replacing old-fashioned politicians,<sup>22</sup> who had power within the party based on their history of loyalty to and work for the party.

While scholars have observed the rise in dependence of political parties on mid-level organizers and strongmen, there is still a perception that ultimate power lies in the hands of the leadership.<sup>23</sup> The analysis of why the Awami League selected Shamim Osman as the Awami League-affiliated mayoral candidate in Narayanganj in 2011 shows that the rise in dependence on political strongmen by political parties means that the demands of mid-level organizers are increasingly important to the party leadership and challenge the traditional notion that party leaders are all powerful and free to make unilateral decisions. The ability to organize, mobilize, and create violence that is in the hands of mid-level organizers gives them great strength and power within the party. The consistent nomination by major political parties of known hoodlums and organizers of musclemen indicate that these members of political parties are also powerful and have great bargaining power within the political party. Thus, power is distributed within the middle and lower echelons of the political party in an eschewed manner, which gives power to local party leaders who can also serve as party ‘muscle’ organizers and discounts other grass-roots workers, furthering undemocratic norms within Bangladeshi political parties.

### **The candidate-selection process**

According to scholars such as Michael Gallagher, Michael Marsh, and Elmer Schattschneider, the candidate-selection process of a party both affects and reflects the distribution of power within the party.<sup>24</sup> Elmer Schattschneider writes: ‘the nominating process has become the crucial process of the party. He who can make the nominations is the owner of the party. This is therefore one of the best points in which to observe the distribution of power within the party.’<sup>25</sup> Further, what those

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> *The State of Governance in Bangladesh 2006*, p. 16.

<sup>24</sup> Gallagher, Michael and Marsh, Michael, *Candidate Selection in Comparative Perspective: The Secret Garden of Politics* (New York: SAGE Publication, 1988); and Schattschneider, Elmer, *Party Government* (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1942).

<sup>25</sup> Schattschneider, *Party Government*, p. 101.

making the nominations take into account when giving a nomination also says a lot about who and what is important for the political party and what wins seats within the nation.

Traditionally, political parties in Bangladesh are highly centralized and decision-making authority, especially in relation to important electoral decisions such as candidate nomination, remains in the hands of the party leader and his/her closest advisers.<sup>26</sup> During interviews with relevant actors, I found that most believed changes in the legal framework have done little to democratize political parties and the two major political parties—the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party—are run solely on the authority of Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia, respectively.<sup>27</sup> During interviews with leaders of major political parties, election observers, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) involved with elections, I found that most persons believed that dynastic and patronage links in the form of muscle or money were very important in order to receive a nomination from the major political parties and that the power of selection ultimately lay in the hands of the party leaders. For instance, I heard similar grievances about the nomination process from an NGO observer, Supreme Court lawyer, and a third-party politician, respectively, as set out below:

Businessmen are getting into politics by spending their own money and having cadres, even in their constituencies. But then in two to three years they have to make back the money. Tolls will have to be collected.<sup>28</sup>

Really what you have is selling of nominations. Any number of cases you will see local people had a good candidate but he has been brushed aside by the party. Nomination process is just rotten. It is not by party, it is one person. Party doesn't exist as a party, one person and a little court controlling a syndicate through money. And of course money also gets muscle power. They said through the reforms of the last election (Caretaker Government reforms of 2007–2008) that person will be nominated with consultation with the local level. But this doesn't matter. This is politics. Paying for nomination. Paying people to vote for you.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup> *The State of Governance in Bangladesh 2006*, p. 16.

<sup>27</sup> The author conducted 40 elite interviews in Bangladesh with relevant actors, including politicians, civil servants, lawyers, academics, and media personnel.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with a Senior Advisor at the National Democratic Institute, Bangladesh Chapter. Interview W (May 2014).

<sup>29</sup> Interview with a Supreme Court Lawyer. Interview N (November 2014).



Frankly, there is no democracy within the party, it's the two leaders who are in fact the most important organ of the party, whatever they decide, that is the rule. And this includes the candidate selection process.<sup>30</sup>

The reason it is relevant that all three interviewees agreed that candidate selection within political parties is determined by 'muscle' and 'money' and is entirely in the hands of the party leader is that, despite being from different sectors (NGO, legal profession, and third political party), they all agreed that the reason behind the deterioration of democracy and governance lay in the use of money and muscle as tools of political advancement. However, it is also important to note that the persons quoted above all fall outside the realm of the two major political parties, and therefore may have their own reasons and bias for believing the worst about the condition of the major parties. Despite the existence of bias amongst the interviewees, the interviews do ascertain that observers and participants in the electoral process in Bangladesh are generally convinced that the nomination process is eschewed and nominations are given on the basis of informal considerations such as muscle power and are dependent on the whims of the party leadership.

This article uses the Awami League's decision to support a controversial candidate in the Narayanganj City Corporation Poll in 2011 in order to observe the role that muscle strength/organizational capability and patrimonial loyalty play within the Bangladeshi political party. The nomination process in Bangladesh is an especially appropriate area to observe power within the party structure because candidate nomination in Bangladesh is deeply important for the patron–client networks on which Bangladeshi political parties depend for their survival. Some of the most valuable benefits that clients compete for and political leaders dole out are party posts and party nominations.

A study of the decision-making process of the Awami League during the mayoral elections in 2011, which became a damaging scandal for the party, as will be seen below, and brought the accountability and democracy within the party into question, demonstrates how divided political parties are and illustrates the workings of factions and power struggles within the political party. The reason that I chose this particular nomination as a case study is that the nomination became a national-level scandal and has been widely covered by the media, hence enabling access to details of the inner workings of the party.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with a former member of parliament. Interview V (April 2014).

The following section sets out the candidate-selection process of the two major political parties in Bangladesh and also to what extent these processes are adhered to. While these formal processes for local elections are not set out within the Representation of the People Order 1972 or its amended version of 2009, the process set out for the parliamentary elections is closely followed for local elections, as described to me during interviews with relevant actors.<sup>31</sup> The case study in the final sections of the article show how keeping mid-level organizers content has become so important for the political leadership—that keeping them happy may be one of the major deciding factors in the candidate-selection process in Bangladesh.

### **Candidate-selection rules of the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party**

The Bangladesh Constitution does not provide any specific methodology for candidate selection and nomination. However, in 2008, when the Representation of the Peoples Order (1972) was amended under the Caretaker Government, a significant change occurred to the legal framework for candidate selection and nomination. Article 90B(b) of the Representation of the Peoples Order (Amendment) Act 2009 makes it compulsory for political-party constitutions to have a provision for only finalizing the nomination of candidates after taking into consideration the recommendations of panels of members of the Ward, Union, Thana, Upazila, or District Committee, as the case may be of the concerned constituency.<sup>32</sup>

Candidates for City Corporation Polls were not directly and officially nominated by the political parties until 2016, although they did give their tacit support to a candidate and also backed their campaign. (This was made official in 2016 and, for the first time, local election candidates stood under official political-party banners.) The Central Selection Committee, which selects candidates for parliamentary elections, is also the body that decides which candidate to support in local city-corporation elections.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Interview with a senior member of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and interview with a senior member of the Awami League. Interview T (July 2012) and Interview J (November 2011), respectively.

<sup>32</sup> Article 90B(b), Representation of the Peoples Order 1972.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

Article 27 of the Awami League Constitution makes it mandatory for the party to set up a Central Selection Committee or Parliamentary Board to oversee the process of selection of candidates.<sup>34</sup> The Awami League Central Selection Committee constitutes 11 members, elected by the Awami League Council from amongst the members of the Council,<sup>35</sup> including the party's president, general secretary, and deputy leader. While the Central Selection Committee is given all authority to select candidates, the party president makes the final decision. District- or constituency-level committees prepare a panel of candidates after scrutinizing applications and the Central Selection Committee makes the final decision. Although the nomination is expected to be given to one of the names on the list of the constituency-level committee, this is not always the case.<sup>36</sup> According to the Bangladesh Nationalist Party's Constitution, the Central Selection Committee is appointed under the leadership of the party chairperson.<sup>37</sup> The party's Standing Committee members, along with the president, three vice presidents, and the general secretary of the particular district, form the rest of the members of the Central Selection Committee. A list is sent to the Central Selection Committee from a grass-roots committee, but the board is free to choose any person as a candidate, even if their name does not appear on the list, on the grounds that they are 'important' to the party.<sup>38</sup>

The Central Selection Committee of each political party is supposed to make its selection after interviewing the entire panel of candidates as selected by the District Committee. While these interviews do take place, it has been observed that there are no written procedures or grading systems for candidates.<sup>39</sup> The Central Selection Committee is expected to rank each possible nominee, depending on their past experiences, financial capacity, service and loyalty to the party, popularity, and likelihood to win the seat. The background information on possible candidates is collected via survey teams that are sent to the constituency. Both the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party send out survey teams. While these formal processes are in place,

<sup>34</sup> Article 27, Awami League Constitution.

<sup>35</sup> The Awami League Council is a part of the Central Working Committee.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>37</sup> Article 13, Bangladesh Nationalist Party Constitution.

<sup>38</sup> Mahiuddin, K. M., 'Candidate Selection Process: An Analysis of Post 1990 Parliamentary Elections in Bangladesh', Research Report, Department of Economics and Politics, Jahangirnagar University, Dhaka (date unknown).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

these rules appear to have been ineffective in genuinely democratizing the candidate-nomination process, both at the parliamentary level and at the local level.

Interviews were undertaken with senior members of both the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and the Awami League in order to get an idea of the nomination process followed by each party and it appears that, while the formal rules are in place, political parties view these rules as flexible or non-binding. For example, in an interview with a member of the Standing Committee of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, I was told:

For a political party, both for Awami League and Bangladesh Nationalist Party, winning the seat is the most important thing. It's an election politics, so seat is very important. So there suppose in one area, in a constituency, a dedicated leader is there but he has no means. Maybe he will get support, you know, but we know that the opposition candidate is very strong. So there, if I have a candidate with money, I give nomination to him to try out, so he can get the seat back for us.<sup>40</sup>

In another interview, an Awami League Presidium said:

My observation is that 100% of the time it is not the person recommended by the party who is nominated, nor is the name recommended by the party rejected 100% of the time. I would say about 60–70% percent nominations are given to those recommended by the party.<sup>41</sup>

These statements are significant because they come from within the leadership of the political parties themselves, and they acknowledge that there are times at which the political-party leadership choose to ignore grass-roots-nominated candidates and choose their own on the basis of considerations such as money. The bias of the interviewee here can only be on the side of the political party, and therefore their willingness to admit that the formal selection criteria are not always the primary reason for a selection indicates that this may be a more common phenomenon than acknowledged by the interviewed party leaders.

It has also been observed that, even though suggestions by the grass-roots committees are taken into account, in the event that the party leader does not agree with any of the suggested candidates or prefers a candidate whose name is not on the list forwarded by the District Committee, then the recommendation of the District

<sup>40</sup> Interview T (July 2012).

<sup>41</sup> Interview J (November 2011).

Committee is ignored.<sup>42</sup> Thus, it seems that Central Selection Committees do not consider the District Committees' recommendations binding. As a result, as far as the formal process followed by the major political parties nominating candidates is concerned, the final decision is in the hands of the Central Selection Committee, where the party leader has the final say.

The following case study shows how the Awami League party leadership selected Shamim Osman, a known muscleman, as their affiliated candidate in the Narayanganj mayoral elections of 2011 rather than Salina Hayat Ivy, who was much more popular within the constituency. This in turn demonstrates how important organizers of muscle strength and *mastaans* have become to the political culture in Bangladesh. This has an implication on how power is distributed through the political party. It shows that the distribution of power is not as simple as it may appear because, in reality, party leaders are often obligated to local-level satraps and must meet their demands. Thus, the leadership may be limited in their decision-making ability because of the favours they owe to local-level organizers in exchange for their support in mobilizing and providing muscle strength.

### **Case study: Narayanganj City Corporation Polls 2011**

As has been observed in most clientelistic states, elections in Bangladesh feed neo-patrimonialism (a system in which political patrons use state resources as benefits to retain the loyalty of their followers) and voters often prefer efficient candidates who can deliver benefits to them and with whom they have a prior established patronage relationship over any other candidate.<sup>43</sup> Such voters often vote for known corrupt or violent politicians because they view them as more efficient than candidates with clean track records.<sup>44</sup> As a result of these trends, political parties usually hold the belief that voters in Bangladesh tend to look for two qualities above all in their candidates—efficiency in the implementation and distribution of benefits and the candidate's ability to access state resources—and candidate selection is made on this

<sup>42</sup> Mahiuddin, 'Candidate Selection Process'.

<sup>43</sup> Lindberg, Steffan, 'It's Our Time to "Chop": Do Elections in Africa feed Neo-patrimonialism rather than Counter-act It?', *Democratization* 10 (2003): 121–140.

<sup>44</sup> Piliavsky, Anastasia, 'India's Demotic Democracy and Its Depravities in the Ethnographi Longue Duree', ed. Anastasia Piliavsky (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

basis.<sup>45</sup> In order to be able to access state resources, the candidate's connection to the party at the national level also plays an important factor in deciding elections.

Voting in Bangladesh happens on the basis of political-party symbols and association as well as on the charisma of and strength within the party of the particular candidate.<sup>46</sup> This is because of the penetration of party patronage all the way to the grass roots, whereby voters are brought into the blocs supporting either of the two major parties and know that any benefit they can expect from the state is likely to come as personalized favours from their local patron (who should be efficient and be able to access resources above all else). The more weight that the patron carries with the party leadership, the more access to state resources he or she will have to distribute to their clients. For local leaders to be connected to the party in power, they have to be able to provide something to the party. This often is the local leaders' ability to organize and mobilize muscle power on behalf of the party and also the dynastic and family connections that the local politician shares with the party leadership.<sup>47</sup> This ability to deliver muscle power and have family links creates loyalty between the local leader and the party leadership at a national level. And, in most cases, it also creates loyalty from the voter to the local leader.

The Narayanganj City Corporation Polls were held on 30 October 2011. Two candidates went to Sheikh Hasina to ask for her blessing and the backing of the Awami League for their nomination. The candidates were Shamim Osman and Salina Hayat Ivy. A Selection Committee headed by senior Presidium member, Sajeda Chowdhury, would select and formally recognize the Awami League candidate.<sup>48</sup> While the committee met with both contenders, it failed to select a candidate. Both candidates were deeply associated with the Awami League and adamant to contest under the Awami League banner. Eventually, the Awami League central leaders told the media that the party would not give its official backing to any candidate, since the party did not want to alienate either candidate.<sup>49</sup> At the time, there were rumours that

<sup>45</sup> Jahan, Rounaq, *Political Parties in Bangladesh*, CPD-CMI Working Paper 8, August 2014: 30.

<sup>46</sup> Rahaman, Muhammed Mustafizur, 'Parliament and Good Governance: A Bangladeshi Perspective', *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 9 (2008): 39–62.

<sup>47</sup> Jahan, *Political Parties in Bangladesh*, p. 30.

<sup>48</sup> 'AL Still in a Fix as Ivy, Shamim Rigid', *Priyo News*, 11 October 2011; I was able to interview Sajeda Chowdhury for the purpose of this research.

<sup>49</sup> Ahmad, Shamim, 'The Importance of Narayanganj', *Dhaka Courier*, 27 October 2011.

Sheikh Hasina herself personally preferred Salina Hayat Ivy because she felt that Ivy's reputation as a clean and corruption-free candidate would portray the future of the party in good light. During an interview with a senior member of the Awami League, I was told:

you also have to see who provided support (to Shamim Osman), few of his friends in the party. Sheikh Hasina did not go, I did not go, none of the Presidium members went there ... but of course AL members who are his friends went, and gave him support. They said that we came from AL to give him support but he didn't receive outright support from the party.<sup>50</sup>

This statement would give credence to the rumours that perhaps Sheikh Hasina and the most senior leadership of the party would have preferred giving Salina Hayat Ivy the backing of the Awami League.

However, soon after the announcement that the Awami League would not back either candidate, three organizing secretaries of the central Awami League went to Narayanganj and declared their support for Shamim Osman.<sup>51</sup> Salina Hayat Ivy made a statement that this was not the decision of the party and the Awami League senior joint general secretary, Mahbulul Haque Hanif, also told the media that this was not the decision of the party.<sup>52</sup> Despite these statements, many Awami League members of parliament, ex-ministers and central leaders of the party, and its front organization extended their support to Shamim Osman, going so far as to openly campaign for him as the Awami League candidate.<sup>53</sup> Thus, for all practical purposes, Shamim Osman received the Awami League backing.

What is interesting from the perspective of the candidate-nomination process and how democratic this process has been is that Salina Hayat Ivy always had the highest support in the locality. Political observers stated that Salina Hayat Ivy's acceptance rate was the highest amongst voters and that, in terms of track record, Ivy, who was the chairman of Narayanganj City Corporation, was known as the 'cleanest character'.<sup>54</sup> It is important to note here that, even among the supporters of the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party, Salina Hayat Ivy was the more popular of the two Awami League candidates because of her clean

<sup>50</sup> Interview J (November 2011).

<sup>51</sup> 'AL Supports Shamim Osman', *BD News 24*, 13 October 2011.

<sup>52</sup> 'Hanif, Suranjit Deny AL Support to Shamim Osman', *Bangla Newspaper*, 16 October 2011.

<sup>53</sup> 'AL supports Shamim Osman', *BD News 24*.

<sup>54</sup> Ahmad, 'The Importance of Narayanganj'.

image and tested career.<sup>55</sup> On the other hand, Shamim Osman is feared in Narayanganj and is known as a ‘muscleman’.<sup>56</sup> Narayanganj is also known as one of the most violent cities in Bangladesh and, at the time of this election, Shamim Osman had 17 criminal cases filed against him. He has also been accused of being involved in the infamous seven murders of Narayanganj.<sup>57</sup>

Both Salina Hayat Ivy and Shamim Osman come from families long associated with the Awami League and both their fathers served as leaders of the Awami League.<sup>58</sup> Shamim Osman’s family is more closely tied to Sheikh Hasina because, upon Sheikh Hasina’s return to Bangladesh in 1981 for the first time since the murder of Sheikh Mujib, Shamim Osman’s father is known to have provided her with protection.<sup>59</sup> This sort of family connection is the basis of patrimonial loyalty and how political parties are developed in patrimonial states. Discussing the top leadership of Bangladeshi political parties, Ali Riaz and Mohammad Sajjadur Rahman write that ‘Succession to leadership positions is generally arranged to ensure it will remain within the family’.<sup>60</sup> This goes further down to the relationship between party leaders and party loyalists, for whom family connections are very important to gain leadership positions.<sup>61</sup> Nizam Ahmed writes that ‘party leaders tend to attract members, supporters and voters through patronage, rather than by developing a group of supporters genuinely dedicated to the party goals’.<sup>62</sup> Once the political party has become structured on the basis of this type of patrimonial loyalty, political leaders have to keep their clients loyal by doling out benefits and special treatment to them.

Family connection and patrimonial loyalty are not only important within the political party. Voters have observed over decades that strong familial connection makes leaders more powerful and efficient. During an interview with a member of parliament (who is a relative of Sheikh

<sup>55</sup> ‘V for Ivy’, Star Report, *The Daily Star*, 31 October 2011.

<sup>56</sup> ‘Say No to Evil’, Star Cover Story, *The Daily Star*, 28 October 2011.

<sup>57</sup> ‘Will Try Shamim Osman if He Is Involved in Seven-murder Case, Says Home Minister’, *bdnews24*, 14 November 2015.

<sup>58</sup> Ahmad, ‘The Importance of Narayanganj’.

<sup>59</sup> ‘Hasina Defends Osman’s’, *The Bangladesh Chronicle*, 3 June 2014.

<sup>60</sup> Riaz, Ali and Rahman, Mohammad Sajjadur, *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Bangladesh* (London/New York: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>61</sup> Jahan, *Political Parties in Bangladesh*, p. 30.

<sup>62</sup> Ahmed, Nizam, ‘From Monopoly to Competition: Party Politics in the Bangladesh Parliament (1973–2001)’, *Pacific Affairs* 76 (2003): 72.



Hasina), I asked why family connections are so important for elections in Bangladesh and was told:

I think it's about people's confidence, they wouldn't like to switch to somebody they don't know, so they would like to bet their confidence in somebody who has a record, family record ... after all, you are bestowing something to a person, some authority, some power, so people would like to bestow that to somebody who they know, they know their family background and they know they have confidence that he will be able to meet those responsibilities or obligations. So I think that sort of perception or mentality works amongst the voters and that's why they tend to go for a sure bet, that this is a person who they know or this is a person whose family they know and they believe or they have the confidence that this person would work for them, rather than going for somebody new or somebody coming from a low background or who doesn't have any background, completely fresh, to have their confidence in such a person ... I think it's about people's choice, and this is democracy and this is the will of the people.<sup>63</sup>

According to a Dhaka daily, Sheikh Hasina's final decision to back Shamim Osman's candidacy was based on a tearful plea from him.<sup>64</sup> The newspaper reported that a senior member of the Awami League informed them that Sheikh Hasina had even offered Shamim Osman a state ministership<sup>65</sup> to back off from the Narayanganj mayoral race.<sup>66</sup> However, Shamim Osman refused and, in the end, Sheikh Hasina was compelled to back him because of family ties and the fear of rebellion. This is an illustration of how higher-level leaders often have to give in or balance the distribution of benefits to lower-level leaders in order to keep the party from fragmenting.

Starting from the top leadership (both Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia are carrying on their family dynasties) to the grass roots, political leaders often come from political families. Family connections between the elite are highly visible and Stanley Kochanek contends that these connections often shape political participation, restructure and integrate group loyalties and identities, and make demands upon the political system.<sup>67</sup> It may be argued that the Awami League gave Shamim Osman its backing instead of backing Salina Hayat Ivy, despite her

<sup>63</sup> Interview H (February 2014).

<sup>64</sup> 'Narayanganj City Polls: Hasina Gave in to Tears, Intelligence', *Priyo News*, 1 November 2011.

<sup>65</sup> A state minister in Bangladesh is a junior minister who reports to a Cabinet minister.

<sup>66</sup> 'Narayanganj City Polls', *Priyo News*.

<sup>67</sup> Kochanek, Stanley, 'Patron Client Politics and Business in Bangladesh', *Sociological Bulletin* 44 (1995): 115–117.

popularity, because of underlying informal requirements of maintaining dynastic and patrimonial loyalty.

In the end, Salina Hayat Ivy won the City Corporation Polls in 2011 despite the Awami League backing Shamim Osman. Salina Hayat Ivy always had substantially more voter support (*The Daily Star*, Bangladesh's most widely read English daily, notes that initial surveys indicated that Salina Hayat Ivy would receive 130,000 votes while Shamim Osman would receive 75,000 votes<sup>68</sup>) than Shamim Osman and it is likely that she also received the votes of Bangladesh Nationalist Party supporters when the Bangladesh Nationalist Party-supported candidate backed out one day before polling day.<sup>69</sup> Notwithstanding Salina Hayat Ivy's popularity, the Awami League made a decision to back Shamim Osman and lost the Narayanganj mayoral seat in 2011. This arguably indicates that the Awami League's decision to give its backing to Shamim Osman was perhaps influenced by political and social pressures (Sheikh Hasina's family's personal relationship with Shamim Osman's family) not related to the likeability and track record of their selected candidate.

The case study of the Narayanganj mayoral election of 2011 is exceptionally revealing because it shows a moment in Bangladeshi politics when the party leader, in this case Sheikh Hasina, had to bow to the pressures of the mid-level party organizer and give him her backing, despite his being a less eligible candidate. This is likely because the Awami League was counting on voters in patrimonial Bangladesh preferring the candidate who has family ties, muscle strength, and money, which would traditionally show him as more efficient in managing the clientelistic mode of politics over the candidate with a clean, corruption-free, and non-violent track record.<sup>70</sup>

This case would indicate that party leaders of the major political parties are indebted to and rely upon mid-level organizers and feel that they do not have the option to nominate cleaner mid-level politicians, because of both the party's requirement for mobilization and the traditional style of voting for 'efficiency' in patrimonial societies. Therefore, power is not as strongly concentrated in the hands of political-party leaders as literature on Bangladesh has generally believed it to be. There are moments

<sup>68</sup> Khan, Shahrier and Ahmad, Reaz, 'Hasina Gave into Tears', *The Daily Star*, 1 November 2011.

<sup>69</sup> 'V for Ivy', *The Daily Star*.

<sup>70</sup> Piliavsky, 'India's Demotic Democracy'.

when the party leaders are held hostage because of their dependence on the muscle and disruption ability of mid-level leaders.

### **Lessons from Narayanganj**

There are two main lessons about the politics of Bangladesh that can be drawn from the case of the mayoral election in Narayanganj. The first is the importance of family connections, dynastic politics, and patrimonial relationships for political parties, its leaders, its rank and file, and for the voters, showing that patron–client relations are widespread and evident at every level of political life. The second is the key role that money, organizational capacity, and patronage play, and how these three are interlinked when selecting candidates or giving out other benefits that the party leadership has control over. These two factors in turn show what pressures and parameters the political-party leadership works under and who has bargaining capacity within the political party.

According to Inge Amundsen, dynastic and family politics in South Asia, particularly in India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, is a ‘vote catcher’.<sup>71</sup> In other words, dynasties and family politics attract votes in these countries. There are several reasons for this. First, wherever there are large illiterate populations, people who are more known simply gain more votes.<sup>72</sup> This is particularly the case when political parties have hardly distinguishable policies. Second, the first-past-the-post system particularly encourages charisma- and personality-based politics, and politics tend to focus on personalities and families.<sup>73</sup> Finally, family-based politics becomes important in clientelistic societies such as Bangladesh because of the high level of factionalism. This means that a strong and unquestioned leader of the party is the only one who can hold the party together. This is why even defeated leaders are not pushed out of the chairmanship of the party—their leadership is not questioned and is accepted by everyone. This dynastic mindset, as argued by authors such as Stanley Kochanek, finds its roots in the social structures and historical developments of a country in transition—gaining legitimacy from charismatic leadership and patronage during

<sup>71</sup> Amundsen, Inge, ‘Dynasty or Democracy? Party Politics in Bangladesh’, CMI Brief, Vol. 12, No. 6, November 2013.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> As above.

and after the liberation war.<sup>74</sup> Stanley Kochanek observes that ‘[i]n the absence of social cohesion, political consensus, strong ideological commitment or effective organisational structures, charisma, patrimonialism, and patronage have become the only mechanisms for building and sustaining political support’.<sup>75</sup> Mustafizur Rahaman similarly notes that:

[t]he reason patrimonial leadership is deep-rooted in Bangladesh is because the people are emotionally attached through patron-client relations to either Khaleda Zia or her late husband (Ziaur Rahman), or to Sheikh Hasina and her assassinated father (Sheikh Mujib). In a hierarchical organisation, such patron-client relations are perpetuated through a reciprocal system where followers work for their superiors or patrons with a view to gaining benefits, while patrons provide material benefits or opportunities.<sup>76</sup>

The embeddedness of this system in Bangladeshi political structures explains why Shamim Osman received the Awami League’s support. Higher-level leaders often have to give in or balance the distribution of benefits to lower-level leaders in order to keep the party from fragmenting. Starting from the top leadership (both Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia are carrying on their family dynasties) to the grass roots, political leaders often come from political families. Family connections between the elite are highly visible, and Stanley Kochanek contends that these connections often shape political participation, restructure and integrate group loyalties and identities, and make demands upon the political system.<sup>77</sup> The end result is that, in Bangladesh, dynastic, patrimonial politics is the norm and the importance of patronage is evidenced at every level of political life. Those mid-level politicians like Shamim Osman, who have personal and family ties with the party leadership, have great bargaining power within the party.

The prevalence of patronage politics at every level of political life is also the most important reason why the Awami League backed Shamim Osman rather than Salina Hayat Ivy. Shamim Osman got the nomination despite having 17 criminal cases filed against him.<sup>78</sup> However, the fact that he had 17 criminal cases filed against him may very well have been the reason he got the nomination. Shamim Osman is known in Bangladesh as an

<sup>74</sup> Kochanek, ‘Patron Client Politics’, pp. 115–117.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Rahaman, ‘Parliament and Good Governance’, pp. 39–62.

<sup>77</sup> Kochanek, ‘Patron Client Politics’, pp. 115–117.

<sup>78</sup> ‘Only Ivy among Frontrunners Has Clean Sheet’, *The Daily Star*, 5 October 2011.

Awami League organizer of muscle and an article in the *Daily Bangladesh* newspaper states that ‘The name of Shamim Osman, a local ruling party lawmaker and sometimes called a “godfather” has come up repeatedly in connection with the seven murders. It is nothing new for him because every time a major crime takes place in the port city (Narayanganj), his name comes up’.<sup>79</sup> If there is truth in allegations that Shamim Osman provides ‘muscle’ and organizational capability for the Awami League, then that may be the reason why Sheikh Hasina felt compelled to give him tacit support despite protests from civil society and from within the party. It also suggests that the Awami League’s decision to support Shamim Osman stemmed from the traditional voter bias of patrimonial countries to choose ‘efficient’ rather than ‘clean’ candidates.<sup>80</sup> According to Adil Khan:

One of the main reasons why competent and honest candidates fail to participate in the party based nominations process is due to the high transaction costs that accompany such a process. The existing arrangements favour the wealthy (and sometime a combination of wealth and ‘muscle power’) over quality. Also under the existing arrangements, the aspiring candidates who seek party nominations expect that by investing (heavily) in the nomination as well as the election processes (initially, to get party nomination and later, on election campaign to attract votes) and winning the elections, some sort of patronage, usually financial, will be made available to them to recover their election-related investments, perhaps few times over, in the future.<sup>81</sup>

Given the circumstances under which the Awami League gave its backing to Shamim Osman during the 2011 City Corporation Polls in Narayanganj, it may be assumed that factors other than popularity, character, and the background of the candidate were taken into consideration by the Awami League. In fact, the factors raised by Adil Khan for reasons behind the lack of good candidates in Bangladesh possibly had a role to play. The highly personalized governance structure of political parties derived from dynastic politics means that intra-party relationships are essentially characterized by patron-clientelism and sycophantic conformity.<sup>82</sup> The chairperson and a small group of senior leaders select party leaders on the basis of patrimonial loyalty and the money and organizational

<sup>79</sup> ‘Chronicles of a Crippled District’, *The Daily Bangladesh*, 5 December 2014.

<sup>80</sup> See Piliavsky, ‘India’s Demotic Democracy’.

<sup>81</sup> Khan, Adil, ‘Democracy and Its Electoral Challenges: The Case of Bangladesh’, <<http://unpani.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/un/unpano28465.pdf>> (accessed on 5 September 2015).

<sup>82</sup> *The State of Governance in Bangladesh 2006*, p. 16.

capacity that local leaders can provide. This undermines the party's ability to groom capable and effective leaders. Muhammad Rahaman notes that '[t]here is no example in our recent political history that any leader of these two parties (the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and the Awami League) has braved to oppose any proposal or decision of their chiefs. They (the chiefs) remain the key sources of power in their parties' and other party leaders get their posts only according to the 'sweet will' of their chiefs,<sup>83</sup> who, being dynastic, generally have very strong control over the party.

While this remains true, a deeper analysis gives an explanation of why party chiefs choose the candidates and party leaders that they do. In the case of the 2011 Narayanganj election, it appears that, for the Awami League, the strength of the candidate lay in their ability to provide patrimonial loyalty, muscle, and organizational capacity for the party, rather than in the character and popularity of the candidate. Thus, the ability to organize and provide muscle power gives mid-level politicians great leverage with the party leadership.

### Conclusion

According to Kaare Strom et al., political parties are organizations that align the preferences of the occupants of political offices and subordinate them to centralized control. They thereby present to the voters a package of candidate agents whose policy preferences are fairly well understood and whose behaviour will be strictly policed by this semi-public organization (the political party).<sup>84</sup> Kaare Strom et al. further elaborate that '[p]arty control means extensive screening of prospective (candidates).. Before candidates gain access to higher office, they must acquire the proper party credentials and prove themselves in lesser offices'.<sup>85</sup> However, in the clientelistic context of Bangladesh, though the laws give the lower ranks of the party substantial power to put in place *ex-ante* screening mechanisms by requiring grass-roots selection committees, in reality, nominations lie in the hands of the leadership, who give precedence to clientelistic considerations above all

<sup>83</sup> Rahaman, Muhammad, 'Origins and Pitfalls of Confrontational Politics in Bangladesh', *South Asian Survey* 14 (2007): 101.

<sup>84</sup> Strom, Kaare, Wolfgang, Muller, and Bergman, Torbjorn, *Delegation and Accountability in Parliamentary Democracies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004): 64.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

else. In Bangladesh, political parties have failed to act as a screening agent for electoral candidates and voters are therefore left with little choice of 'good' candidates, with aligned policy preferences and clean track records. Instead, political parties choose candidates on the basis of patrimonial loyalty and organization and muscle strength. (It has been argued that voters also prefer this and it is a different type of democratization—but I will leave that discussion for another time.)

Given the circumstances under which the Awami League gave its backing to Shamim Osman during the 2011 City Corporation Polls in Narayanganj, it is clear that factors other than the popularity of the candidate, their track record, criminality, and the likelihood of winning the seat were taken into consideration by the Awami League. The party leadership, constituting the chairperson and a small group of senior leaders, makes nominations on the basis of patrimonial loyalty and organizational strength. This weakens the party as a centre for grooming capable and effective leaders. Further, party leaders are beholden to clients/mid-level organizers because of past acts of loyalty and mobilization, and the need for future loyalty and support, and are therefore obligated to distribute benefits (including nominations) in order to maintain that loyalty, thereby affecting the type of people who will be elected and how they will behave in office. Thus, it may be concluded that patronage networks and power distribution within Bangladeshi political parties are more complex than simply stating that power is concentrated within the hands of the leadership. In order to understand the puzzle of how political parties work in Bangladesh and to answer questions such as whose interests political parties are representing, what channels of influence are being used, and why these channels exist, it is necessary to understand the actual existing social and power relations and why party leaders make the choices that they do.