

Dynasty or democracy?

Party politics in Bangladesh



Tarique Rahman, the heir of Bangladesh' second biggest party BNP. Photo: *Tarique Rahman Fan Club website*

The two major political parties in Bangladesh are dynastic, like other well-known parties in South Asia. Political dynasty means a prominent political family runs the party. This restricts the level of internal democracy of the parties: decision-making, including leadership selection, becomes a 'family affair'. This is particularly problematic in Bangladesh, which struggles for democratic consolidation, and where the political parties should have been "schools of democracy" and develop citizens' civic skills through transparency, voice, and participation.

POLITICAL DYNASTIES IN SOUTH ASIA

Political dynasties are common in most of South Asia, with the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty of the Indian Congress Party and the Bhutto clan of the Pakistan People's Party as the best known. Yet, also Sri Lanka and Nepal has their share of dynastic politics with Bandernaike's children and the Koirala family, respectively, running political parties over several decades.

In contrast to India and Pakistan where the political dynasties are in crisis, the Bangladeshi dynasties are thriving and growing. In Bangladesh, the two same political families have led the two leading parties, the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) for 40 and 35 years, respectively, and family succession seems secured.

POLITICAL DYNASTIES IN BANGLADESH

In Bangladesh, one of the national political

dynasties has its roots in the struggle for independence, and the other in a military dictatorship. The dynasties were, however, established and consolidated only after Bangladesh' independence from Pakistan in 1971, and they have expanded and secured their status after the re-establishment of democracy in 1991.

The first Bangladeshi government was democratically elected in 1973 but did not last very long. President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and most of his family was assassinated in 1975, and the military made its first coup blaming his attempts to make Bangladesh a socialist one-party state. Another military government took over in 1982, and successive military rulers held the reins of power for many years.

Formal, multiparty democracy was restored with free and fair elections in 1991. Since

Inge Amundsen

Senior
Researcher

CMI CHR.
MICHELSEN
INSTITUTE

THE SHEIKH MUJIB DYNASTY



Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, 'Father of the Nation', President of AL, first President of Bangladesh 1971-75

Zillur Rahman, a distant relative to Hasina, former Gen. Sec. of AL and President of Bangladesh 2009-13 (deceased 2013)

Sheikh Hasina, daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, leader of AL and current Prime Minister

Sheikh Helal Uddin, cousin of Hasina, MP

Sajeeb Ahmed Wazed (Joy), son of Hasina, "special advisor" to AL and possible heir

Sheikh Rehana, Hasina's sister

Abul Hasnat Abdullah, cousin of Hasina, member of AL Working Committee

Sheikh Fazlul Karim Selim, cousin of Hasina, member of AL Presidium, MP, former minister

Nazmul Hasan Papon, son of Zillur Rahman, MP

Photos: Bangladesh Awami League, 123people.com, Wikimedia Commons, Parliament of Bangladesh, The Sun, Facebook, The Daily Star, khela24.com

then, the two parties AL and BNP have dominated politics, won every other election, and ruled one after the other (except for a military dominated interregnum in 2007-2008).

The Awami League (AL) is a centre-left and secular party, founded in 1949 in opposition to the domination of (West) Pakistan. After the assassination of its leader, the party was decapitated with other party leaders executed, arrested, or going into exile.

Sheikh Hasina, Mujibur's daughter, took over the party in 1981. She was the Prime Minister from 1996 to 2001, and is again today. In particular during her first premiership, the family established itself as a ruling dynasty, building up a political basis in government and administration, and expanding its economic power.

Sheikh Hasina's distant uncle (by marriage), Zillur Rahman, was President of Bangladesh from 2009 until he died early 2013. A couple of Hasina's cousins play important roles in the party. Her son, Sajeeb Ahmed Wazed (Joy), now seems to be groomed to take over. He has joined the party (as 'primary member') and he is a 'special advisor' to the party president (his mother). He has "been asked" by several local AL leaders to "take responsibility", and he has recently taken part in mass meetings and international visits along with her.

Bangladesh' first military ruler, Ziaur ("Zia") Rahman (not family related to the Rahmans above), founded the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) in 1978. As a part of a process of civilianising his regime and consolidating his hold on power, he launched the party that (unsurprisingly) won the elections held in 1979 under military rule.

In 1981 Zia was (like Mujibur) assassinated by a group of military officers, and new military leaders took over. Thus, the Zia dynasty was established only when Zia's widow Khaleda Zia took over the leadership of the BNP party in 1984, and it was

fortified and expanded when the party won the first democratic, multiparty elections in 1991.

Khaleda became Prime Minister from 1991 to 1996, briefly in a contested and short government in 1996, and again from 2001 to 2006. Her brother and sister (now deceased) used to have influential roles in the BNP party. Khaleda's son, Tarique Rahman, was nominated to the position of 'Senior Vice-Chairperson' in 2009 and effectively made the heir of the party.

Beyond the two major parties, there are two other relatively important parties, but these are not dynastic. The third biggest party, the Jatiya Party (JP), was established by (yet) a former military ruler, Ershad. The JP is more 'dictatorial' than dynastic. Although his brother and wife are members of the JP 'presidium', Ershad is the party chairman for life, dominating the decision-making process, and appointing all posts of his party. The fourth biggest party, the Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami, seems to be guided by principle (i.e. Islamist ideology) rather than person.

Bangladesh' 'first-past-the-post' (FPTP) electoral system favours the two leading parties, and all other parties gravitate towards the two. Although there are about 120 other parties, all the other six parties in parliament and very many others have allied with one of the two majors. From 1991 onwards voters have effectively been presented with two choices; one alliance led by the AL (the so-called Grand Alliance) and another by the BNP (the so-called 18-Party Alliance). In other words, the two dynasties embrace almost all political life in Bangladesh.

WHY DYNASTY?

In many countries, including India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, political dynasty is a vote-catcher. In particular in countries with large illiterate populations, well-known people simply gain more votes. When the parties' policies are hardly distinguishable and the simple majority ('first-

THE ZIA DYNASTY



Ziaur (Zia) Rahman, founding president of BNP, President of Bangladesh 1977-1981

Khurshid Jahan Haque, sister of Khaleda Zia, former MP and Minister (deceased 2006)

Sayeed Eskandar, brother of Khaleda Zia, former Vice Chairman of BNP, former MP (deceased 2012)

Khaleda Zia, wife of Zia, party leader since 1983, former Prime Minister

Tarique Rahman, son of Khaleda Zia, Senior Vice Chairman of BNP

Photos: jcd-bnp.org, BanglaNews; bdnews24.com, The Daily Star, The Hindu Images

past-the-post') electoral system personify politics further, election campaigns and politics tend to focus on personalities and families.

Besides, voters and party activists, as well as party officials at different levels, say the party president is the obvious leader because of his/her leadership qualities and that dynasty is a necessary tool to keep the party together (as factionalism is a real problem). In fact, dynastic leaders can be defeated in elections, but will not be pushed out of the chairmanship because of that (at least not in Bangladesh).

Political dynasty is also a mechanism for promoting and protecting the status and economic interest of the family. In the words of one observer, "even reluctant 'heirs' like Rahul Gandhi is dragged along and promoted because this is the only way the family can stay in power". Political dynasties tend to accumulate economic positions, to be owners of private businesses and to be managers of public enterprises, in addition their political positions. Political power gives the family businesses access to government resources, contracts, licences, and favours. Political dynasty is cronyism.

CONFRONTATIONAL POLITICS

Political dynasty in Bangladesh has contributed to the country's prevailing situation of highly confrontational politics. With the exception of the Ershad dictatorship (when Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia demonstrated a remarkable reconciliation and cooperation against a common enemy), the confrontations between the two arch-rivals have intensified. In fact, the rivalry between the two women leaders made the military intervene again early 2007. Then, the clashes between BNP-led and AL-led political forces were so intense the country faced a situation of near civil war.

The military-backed caretaker government that

ruled the country for almost two years attempted to implement far-reaching political reforms including the ousting of the two party leaders, Khaleda and Hasina (popularly nicknamed as the 'minus-two formula'). The two leaders however demonstrated their stronghold on the rank and file of their respective parties, and the regime gave up on the strategy and finally organised elections late 2008.

A recent issue of confrontation is the decision by the current AL-led government to abolish the constitutional provision of caretaker governments. The AL wants to organise future elections with an independent election commission instead of a caretaker government. But the BNP has rejected this and wants the caretaker system back (or some other neutral, non-elected interim government). This has led to a political deadlock, in which the BNP boycotts the parliament and threatens to boycott the next elections in late 2013.

Yet another confrontational issue is the sentencing of the leader of the Jamaat-e-Islami party for crimes committed during the liberation war. Jamaat is allied to the BNP, which sees the judgement as initiated and arranged by the AL government. Both sides have been manifesting since the sentence was passed in February 2013; the AL forces for his capital punishment, the Jamaat, BNP, and alliance partners for leniency and against the government's "anti-Islamism".

In fact, the ruling party (no matter the party) has always used the incumbency advantage to the full, and tried to establish a hegemonic control over the political agenda and over the use of public resources. Confrontational politics is, according to one observer, "a manifestation of the undemocratic (feudal) political culture in which each party seeks to monopolize state power as if the other party does not have the right to exist".

Thus, the opposition (no matter the party) have claimed to be marginalised and that parliamentary

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Author: Inge Amundsen

work is without purpose, and the opposition has actually boycotted almost half the sittings of parliament over the last 20 years, making a mockery of this arena of formalised politics.

LACK OF INTERNAL DEMOCRACY

In addition to the confrontational politics in Bangladesh, a main problem with dynastic political parties is that they are not internally democratic. Dynasty and family interests is inimical to party-internal democracy and party institutionalization. It undermines rules and regularised procedures.

For instance, in formal terms, party leaders in Bangladesh (presidents/chairpersons and general secretaries) are elected at regular (bi- or tri-annual) party conventions. In the case of both AL and BNP, the party leader is elected at the party convention, but there has not been any alternative candidates presented for the election of party president. The election is just a formal approval of a single candidate, usually by acclamation.

Regarding the selection of the other party bodies, in formal terms the tri-annual council elects the majority of the members whereas the party president nominates a certain number. In reality, however, the party conventions has always authorised the party president to nominate almost all members, in "consultation with" other office holders.

Thus, in practice, the members of the party presidium and executive and advisory bodies are for all practical purposes chosen by the party president and a small group of party insiders, both within AL as well as the BNP. There is no real democracy in party leadership selection within the leading parties, although the AL is a bigger party that is better organised and structured in formal terms than is the centralised and informal BNP.

Furthermore, as in most of South Asia, policies, programmes and election manifestos of the political parties in Bangladesh are generally worked out by the top party leadership. Party programmes are discussed in the highest decision-making bodies before they are made public or presented before the party conventions for approval (which means, usually, a unanimous approval without any substantial

discussions or changes made). Likewise, the daily policies as well as decisions to form (or break) alliances with other parties are also mostly made by the party president and an informal group of family members, party officials and advisors.

LUKEWARM REFORM

One of the consequences of the prevalent practice of dynastic rule in Bangladesh is a confrontational political climate that looks like a family vendetta. The two leading parties are with their families, friends, and supporters cultivating two opposite and incompatible narratives about the history of the liberation war, international relations, religion and society; demonising the other for being erratic, hegemonic, corrupt, and dictatorial.

Another consequence is a low degree of internal party democracy. The party leaders are elected without contestation, and vital decision-making is the exclusive right of the party leader and the inner circle of the party. In Bangladesh the inherent contradiction between dynasty and democracy is spelled out to the advantage of the former; the dynasty protects itself from democratic infringements.

The political parties of Bangladesh are no longer engaged in a struggle for the establishment of democracy, which could have legitimised the oligarchic party leadership styles. Political reform is hardly on the agenda; the parties are not fighting for democratic reforms that can restrict executive power and reduce the influence of political families, neither in the polity nor in the parties. Dynastic power is invested in protecting family interests and in scorning the other party, rather than in promoting democratic values. Consequently, the arguments in favour of dynastic style of party leadership are weak.

Instead of recurrently instigate confrontation, Bangladesh needs political parties that can train, educate, and coach people in democratic values, principles, and procedures. Bangladesh needs political parties that can contribute to the establishment of a democratic culture by being themselves internally democratic, and Bangladesh needs inclusive politics and party-internal democratic procedures that can restrict the vested interests of the ruling families.

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