

ISAS Brief

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***Upazila* Elections in Bangladesh: Is It a Road to Political Stability?**

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Bangladesh is a democratic republic with a unicameral parliament called *Jatiya Sangsad* in Bengali and ‘House of the Nation’ in English. The 300 members of parliament are directly elected by universal adult suffrage for five years. The head of state is the president, who is indirectly elected by members of the parliament. The president appoints the leader of the majority party as prime minister and head of government. Bangladesh has a unitary form of government in which all of the governing power resides in a centralised government. For administrative convenience, the country is divided into six divisions; and each division is subdivided into *zilas* or districts and *upazilas* or sub-districts. There are 64 administrative districts; and below the district level there are 487 *upazilas* or sub-districts.

The chief representative of the people at the *upazila* level is called *upazila* chairman who is elected on the basis of adult franchise for a period of five years. Elected chairmen of *upazilas* (*parishads*) are considered grass-root leaders and are designated to perform functions relating to administration and the work of public officers, maintenance of public order, preparation

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and implementation of plans relating to public services and economic development in the respective *upazilas*. By and large, the average number of voters in an *upazila* may be around 250,000; and in a constituency for parliamentary election around 350,000. Given the number of voters and the authority the *upazila* chairmen exercise over the welfare of the people in each *upazila*, political parties are keen to win the *upazila* elections. Although *upazila* election is non-partisan in nature, all major political parties nurture grass-root leaders by choosing the candidates and supporting their political campaigns before polls across the country.

The ongoing 2014 *upazila* elections will be held in 487 *upazilas*, which have around eighty million voters. The Election Commission has planned to hold elections in all 487 *upazilas* across the country in several phases – the poll calendar being 19 February (the first phase, already held), 27 February (the second phase, today), 15 March, and 23 March.

No Boycott of Local Polls

The 2014 *upazila* election kicked off only one-and- a-half months after the one-sided parliamentary election held on 5 January amid a boycott by a key political party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), and its allies. Interestingly enough, all political parties, including the BNP-led alliance that once vowed not to participate in any election under the ruling *Awami* League, are participating in the crucial *upazila* polls. The BNP-led alliance is confident that it has a good chance to win in the majority of *upazilas* where the alliance contests.

It is important to note that elections create palpable excitement and a festive atmosphere among the ordinary people that enliven daily life across the country. Depriving people of that festive mood as well as their very right to vote by any government is likely to have a negative impact on the voting behaviour in subsequent elections. Since people from nearly half of the 487 *upazilas* could not cast their votes in the last parliamentary election held under the present ruling party, people from these *upazilas* are expected to express their dissatisfaction by voting against the ruling party, paving the way for the BNP-led alliance's victory in the majority of *upazilas*. Apart from this, as per past trends, voters tend to create a balance of power by casting vote against the ruling party in local government elections in Bangladesh. For instance, *Awami* League (AL)-led alliance triumphed in the local government elections

when the BNP-led alliance was in power (2001-2006) and the BNP-led alliance was victorious when the AL-led alliance was in power (2009-2013).

By participating in the ongoing *upazila* election, the BNP-led alliance will benefit in several ways. The party will get the chance to renew and revitalise its grass-root leadership and revamp its tarnished image as a party that “supported” a wave of political violence that killed at least 275 people in 2013. On the other hand, the ruling *Awami* League wants to prove its “popularity” through victory in these elections, as the party is mired in controversy at home and abroad over its holding of the one-sided parliamentary elections on 5 January 2014. Though non-partisan in nature, the current *upazila* polls have, therefore, become a prestigious issue for these rival camps.

In the first phase, people of 97 *upazilas* exercised their franchise in festive mood on 19 February 2014. The election was held peacefully and attracted a huge turnout of voters like in all other elections held under the ruling *Awami* League between 2009 and 2013. As expected, the BNP and its allies fared better than those supported by the *Awami* League in the first phase of the *upazila* elections. The pro-BNP candidates won 40 chairmen posts while the AL-supported ones bagged 34. Candidates backed by the *Jamaat-e-Islami*, a key ally of the BNP-led alliance, won 12 chairmen posts, *Jatiya* Party one and some rebels and independent candidates nine.

Broader Political Implications

Despite its failure to win the majority of the *upazilas* in the first phase, the ruling AL will gain politically as the result has proved that a free and impartial election is possible under an AL government and that the country does not need a care-taker government system to hold free and fair polls – a point that AL has been consistently making in the last few years. By participating in *upazila* election, the BNP has also proved that it is a dynamic, pro-election party which has strong base at the local level. Finally, the BNP remains the main opposition party in Bangladesh for now. Additionally and more importantly, the indirect participation of the BNP-led alliance in these *upazila* elections under the ruling AL-led alliance at the national level suggests that the BNP-led alliance is accepting the present government and repairing the damaged political relationship between the two major parties.

If the BNP-led alliance wins in the majority of the *upazilas*, which is considered likely in the end, the party will work more closely with grass-root leaders and set political agendas targeting the next parliamentary election in 2018. The AL-led alliance will have to perform well in the next few years to defeat an almost-invincible alliance in 2018. The broader implication of the ongoing *upazila* elections is that political parties, despite their differences, are likely to work together to earn the people's trust in them and win the hearts of the voters by ensuring a peaceful political environment that is conducive for economic growth in the coming years.

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