

BNP Boycotting the UP Elections: Loss or Gain?

MAHTAB UDDIN CHOWDHURY

The politics of hatred and polarisation have resulted in various unpleasant practices in the political landscape. Boycotting an election is a strategy used by political parties to undermine an election's credibility. They expect voters to oppose the electoral system and enable political parties to attract observer organisations' attention from home and abroad. In Bangladesh, multiple political parties have followed this trend at various times.

BNP's election boycott in 2014 and its consequences

Having a lack of confidence in the government and election commission's ability to ensure a level playing field, the BNP boycotted the 2014 national elections. Although the aftermath of the election put the country in jeopardy owing to deadly clashes inside the nation, the political fallout from this stance was not favourable for the BNP. They could not generate widespread popular support to oppose the government, allowing the Awami League to continue their ruling. Meanwhile, the government continued its crackdown on the opposition, claiming that BNP used violent means for their anti-government protest. Raids and arrests were continued, and the BNP as a political party was on the verge of collapsing. Since 2015, three big youth mobilisations such as 'No Vat on Education,' 'Quota Reform Movement' and 'Road Safety Movement' have occurred, where BNP could not participate or stake a claim in any of the debates.

Nonetheless, they took part in the very next national election under the Awami government, which was also controversial regarding lack of inclusivity and participation. There were records of vote-rigging, violent acts against opposition candidates, and misuse of power by the government entities. BNP rejected the results amid vote-rigging claims despite winning very few seats in the election. They tried to justify their stance on the 2014 election by showing the calamity of the election, particularly under the ruling party and exposing the incompetency of the election commission.

The culture of rebel candidates in the local elections

BNP's decision in the last year not to contest in the local election warrants thorough case study based analysis. As indicated by their Organising Secretary Ruhul

Quddus Dulu, "What did we achieve through taking part in the previous polls? Nothing at all, but many cases have been filed against our leaders and activists. So why should we contest polls?" "The general election is ahead. Now we need to keep our togetherness intact. There is a great battle inside the parties like BNP for nominations, and it sometimes produces split within the party," he added. The statements that are given here demonstrate two main things. First of all, their previous experiences in different elections under this government were not good. Secondly, BNP wanted to forget the prior election experiences instead of focusing on the impending national election while avoiding any competition that could generate division within the party.

BNP's withdrawal from the recent local election allowed the AL to compete on an empty playing field. The opportunity did not bring many positive outcomes due to the increasing emergence of rebel candidates. In 2016, the AL won roughly 65 per cent of the local level seats; however, based on the results of the first six rounds of this year, the figure dropped to approximately 54 per cent. A similar scenario was also applicable to BNP. In 2016 BNP's official involvement led them to win 338 seats overall, but even without party symbol, the BNP leaders obtained 367 seats so far in the 2021-2022 UP election. Needless to say, absence from the election was not a blessing for either of the groups in respect to strengthening intimacy inside the party and obtaining voters recognition.

Concluding remarks

A participatory and inclusive election is a critical component of parliamentary democracy. A political party's ultimate goal is to form a government through electoral victory. Election participation necessitates substantial planning, diverse projects, and successful execution. Simultaneously, when a party develops its voting campaign, two distinct modes of communication are critical. One is intra-party communication, and the other is party-voters communication. The first helps keep party members proactive and motivated, while the latter increases the party's acceptance among the mass people. In the current scenario, neither the BNP nor the State can benefit from the culture of boycott as far as democracy is concerned.

***Mahtab Uddin Chowdhury**
Research Assistant
Centre for Governance Studies*