

A political calculus: as Jamaat looms, BNP reaches out

by **Kazi ASM Nurul Huda**

RECENT comments by Mirza Fakhru Islam Alamgir, secretary general of the Bangladeshi Nationalist Party, following his meeting with Indian high commissioner Pranay Verma at the BNP office in Dhaka, have caught many by surprise. Alamgir claimed that relations between his party and India, which had been frosty for over a decade, had begun to melt. This declaration has raised eyebrows, as it follows a long period during which the BNP was kept out of power, largely due to India's staunch support for the then-ruling Bangladesh Awami League. The timing of this diplomatic shift invites questions: Why would the BNP, positioned for potential electoral success, seek to repair ties with the very country that played a significant role in their political marginalisation?

One plausible explanation lies in the spectre of Jamaat-e-Islami's reemergence, as the party seeks to reposition itself in the political landscape. At the same time, the BNP has found itself unfairly painted with the same brush as the Awami League. Despite the BNP's

consistent rejection of recent violence, corruption, and political malpractice, isolated incidents have fuelled an ongoing narrative that tarnishes the party's image. This comparison, however unfounded, poses a direct threat to the BNP's credibility as a legitimate alternative to the Awami regime.

This portrayal risks alienating the BNP's base, particularly younger voters who have grown disillusioned with the Awami League's unchecked rule. The BNP, if not careful, may find its political identity coopted and its reformist agenda diluted. Such misrepresentation serves those with vested interests in maintaining the status quo, and it is crucial for the BNP to recognise the dangers of this false equivalence. Though the BNP's political position is stronger than it has been in years, the party is still vulnerable to the same smear tactics that have been deployed against them in the past, first by aligning them with Jamaat and now by equating them with the Awami League itself.

This shift in narrative is both ironic and troubling for the BNP. The same smear campaigns that once under-

mined the BNP by linking it to Jamaat are now used to portray the party as indistinguishable from the Awami League, which makes the public oblivious to the key differences between them. During the Awami League's reign, equating the BNP with Jamaat served to stifle political opposition. Now, such tactics seem designed to clear the way for Jamaat's resurgence, a party that, despite its political setbacks, remains a significant force in Bangladeshi politics.

It is particularly striking that the BNP, a party that suffered under the Awami League's India-backed rule, is now looking to mend ties with India. What would motivate the BNP to extend an olive branch to the very nation that facilitated their political isolation? It is possible that the BNP, sensing the growing prominence of Jamaat in the political landscape, has pragmatically sought to counterbalance this influence by seeking an alliance with India. In the fluid landscape of Bangladeshi politics, where foreign influence plays an important role, India's support or at least its neutrality could be crucial.

That said, the long-term goals of the

BNP and India are unlikely to align. The BNP is focused on winning back power, a goal that seems increasingly attainable if free and fair elections are held. India, however, is primarily concerned with regaining its influence in Bangladesh, which has been closely tied to the Awami League. With the Awami League's popularity in decline, India may view the BNP as a temporary ally, useful for containing Jamaat's influence but not as a permanent replacement for the Awami League. Both the BNP and India see Jamaat as a mutual obstacle, an impediment to the BNP's electoral prospects and a challenge to India's political strategy in the region.

This could explain why Alamgir recently asserted that the ice is melting in BNP-India relations. The BNP, seeking to strengthen its position, might be using this thaw as part of a larger strategy to regain political legitimacy. This shift in tone could also explain Alamgir's recent comment that the Awami League should not be banned and should be allowed to continue its political activities. While this stance may seem magnanimous on the surface, many were shocked, given that

the Awami League is widely blamed for human rights abuses and the suppression of political dissent. The party's violent crackdown on protesters in recent months has made it the target of widespread condemnation, yet the BNP has called for its continued political participation.

This seeming generosity on the part of the BNP can be interpreted in two ways: as a display of political maturity or as a strategic concession. With the Awami League's legitimacy in tatters, some might argue that the BNP's call for their inclusion is a way to present itself as the more democratic party, willing to engage even its most bitter rivals. On the other hand, critics could see this as a political misstep, a tacit acceptance of the Awami League's right to power, despite its violent history.

For the BNP, the stakes are high. The party's recent overtures to India suggest that it is trying to position itself as a viable alternative, not only domestically but also in the eyes of international stakeholders. India's potential role in facilitating the BNP's rise to power remains uncertain, but the

relationship between the two could prove pivotal. If India sees the BNP as a useful tool for keeping Jamaat at bay while it works to rehabilitate the Awami League, then the thaw in relations could serve both parties' interests. In exchange, the BNP might expect India to use its considerable influence to shore up the party's standing, both at home and abroad.

Yet, amid this political manoeuvring, it is the people of Bangladesh who continue to suffer. The BNP's reliance on foreign alliances, whether with India or other powers, underlines a deeper problem within the country's political system: a lack of faith in the electorate and political parties. Instead of trying to regain the trust of the people by relying on the will of the Bangladeshi people, political parties seek validation and support from external forces. This latest chapter in the BNP's political journey exemplifies this trend and leaves the future of Bangladesh more uncertain than ever.

Kazi ASM Nurul Huda is an associate professor of philosophy at the University of Dhaka.

Editor: Nurul Kabir, Published by the Chairman, Editorial Board ASM Shahidullah Khan on behalf of Media New Age Ltd. Hamid Plaza (4th floor), 300/5/A/1, Bir Uttam CR Datta Road, Hatirpool, Dhaka-1205.
PABX: +8802-9632245-48. Fax: +8802-9632250, E-mail: news@newagebd.net