

Chapter 3

The Campaign and the News Media

The Campaign

The campaign, which began on 22 May 1996, was generally regarded by those we met in our observations around the country as the “cleanest” and most trouble free in Bangladesh’s recent political history. The political parties were in general restrained, a factor that went a long way towards creating the relatively peaceful and non-confrontational environment that was a hallmark of the general election. We did, however, hear reports of strong-arm tactics and intimidation, including harassment of women and minority communities, particularly in isolated rural communities.

Strict guidelines, as in other spheres of the election process, were set by the Election Commission. These were contained in the Election Code of Conduct. The overall aim was to ensure that each political party started from the same footing and that size and influence, whether financial or otherwise, would have little or no effect on the campaign. One noticeable change from past elections in Bangladesh was the absence of big colourful cinema-style hoardings of portraits of candidates, decorated arches, vast banners or the defacement of campaign posters by graffiti and rival party leaflets.

Among other things, the Code of Conduct ruled specifically that party posters could not exceed 22 x 18 inches (approximately 56 x 46 cm) and were to be in black and white and printed on what was described as ‘country-made paper’. This was simply inexpensive newsprint. Furthermore, ‘wall-writings’ (usually offensive graffiti) were prohibited; posters, leaflets and handbills could not be pasted over those of rival candidates; the use of motorised vehicles was forbidden for campaigning; only three microphones could be used at a time by a candidate in his/her constituency and were limited to the hours between 2 p.m. and 8 p.m.; and it was



Campaigning ... activists in Narayanganj District, south-east of Dhaka, demonstrating support for their party



Party speakers ... rickshaw-borne loudspeakers (top) were used throughout the country, while (bottom) party workers in Barisal also mounted speaker systems onto a boat – their party's symbol



unlawful to disrupt or attempt to disrupt a rival meeting or to prevent the movement of people.

Probably the most notable of all the measures was the ceiling put on campaign expenditure. This was set at 300,000 taka (approximately £5,000) for each candidate in each constituency. We heard reports from the political parties that this limit was being exceeded, especially by the two larger political rivals. Reference was also made in our conversations with members of the public, the Press, NGOs and politicians to 'black money'. This, they said, was being used to evade the Code of Conduct. When questioned, the charge was always denied, usually to be followed by a counter-charge against the candidate's or his political party's main rival. The Deputy Commissioners and other agents of the civil authority in areas we visited told us that there was no evidence of any large-scale abuse of the spending limit, although they conceded that there may have been minor infringements.

The Election Commission made provision for the hearing of alleged infringements of the Code of Conduct by establishing Electoral Enquiry Committees which comprised senior judicial officers. They were empowered to investigate cases and make recommendations to the Election Commission which in turn could impose fines of up to 5,000 taka (approximately £85) for any breach.

The total number of violations reported to the Group varied from Division to Division. A large percentage of complaints in all Divisions visited related to what might be regarded as minor infringements – for example, the use of loudspeakers outside the specified hours.

Some violations of the Code, however, were of a significantly more serious nature. In several Divisions – in particular Chittagong and, to a lesser extent, in Barisal and remote areas of Khulna – our teams came across reports of intimidation, which had been passed on to the authorities. These reports included allegations concerning the intimidation of minority groups. We also heard of one case of threats of violence against an independent regional newspaper and there were allegations of influence peddling, particularly in Barisal.



Poster politics ... on the eve of the elections the parties plastered the areas immediately outside polling centres with posters urging support for their candidates

The Group also received reports, from what it considered to be credible sources, of intimidation in the Chittagong region. The Fair Election Monitoring Alliance (FEMA) and the Co-ordinating Committee for Human Rights in Bangladesh (CCHRB) and other NGOs said that there had been serious violations against minority communities in Rauzan, Rangunia, Boalkhali, Satkania and Chandanais, which were being warned not to vote.

Violence was sporadic, although during the last days of the campaign three people were killed in three separate incidents in one Division: one involved an alleged attempt to make bombs and the other two resulted from clashes between party workers. Despite these relatively isolated incidents, the campaign was disciplined and peaceful with an almost carnival atmosphere in the final days. On the afternoon and evening of 10 June, before the campaign came to a halt, roads and country lanes were filled with processions, political rivals passing one another without provocation.

Rallies by the leaders of the two main parties drew big crowds in all regions, though our Group was struck by the absence of women. The most interesting development of the campaign was the attention given to door-to-door canvassing. This, we believe, involved individual voters directly in the campaign process and helped contribute to the large turnout, especially of women, on polling day. We welcome these changes that are taking place in political campaigning in Bangladesh, in particular those that help to ensure women become a permanent part of normal political activity.

Few major policy issues emerged from the campaign. The two main parties made almost identical pledges to further develop the country economically by encouraging foreign investment. They each declared their commitment to safeguard democracy and the country's independence. There was also some discussion of the country's relationship with India and the structure of local government. However, the campaign was also fought on accusations of misdeeds, corruption, incompetence and obstruction on the part of each of the main parties. They also charged each other with planning to rig the polls. No attempt was made to answer the accusations in any meaningful way.

During the campaign period it came to our attention that army officers were allegedly requesting copies of the electoral register from local Returning Officers, Assistant Returning Officers and Presiding Officers. Our Chairman notified the Chief Election Commissioner of this and suggested that Mr Hena might make a broadcast indicating that no registers should be given to anyone other than election officials and other authorised persons.

The Media

Bangladesh has a vigorous Press. It has a wide variety of national and regional daily publications in both Bangla and English which reflect the passionate interest of Bangladeshis in politics. The commitment to an open and independent Press was made clear to us in briefings where we were assured that the media was free to report as it saw fit.

A distinction, however, must be made when considering the state-owned broadcast media: radio and television. The Caretaker Government issued specific instructions to the broadcasting authorities that they were not to broadcast interviews with party leaders who were not standing as candidates or who were in jail. This automatically excluded the head of the Jamaat-e-Islami party (who was not standing as a candidate) and Mr Ershad, leader of the Jatiya Party – both significant figures in Bangladeshi politics. At the time of these elections Mr Ershad was three years into a controversial 13-year sentence for corruption and abuse of power during his time as the country's military ruler and was appealing against the conviction and challenging other charges. He was a candidate in five constituencies. His right to join other political leaders in making a television broadcast during the campaign was an issue that dominated the Jatiya Party's electioneering. The party took the matter to the High Court which ruled on 9 June, the day before the campaign was scheduled to end, that the ban on Mr Ershad appearing on television was irregular and was to be lifted forthwith. The Caretaker Government appealed to the Supreme Court on the same day and a 'stay order' was issued the following day until 11 June when the matter would be considered further by a full bench of the court. This kept the ban in force until the end of the campaign and made irrelevant any further consideration of the issue.

Given the low rate of literacy, radio is particularly important in Bangladesh and provides a news service in both Bangla and English. So far as we could tell its coverage was balanced.

Bangladesh Television made provision for representatives of every party fielding a minimum of 30 candidates to make a party political broadcast. Smaller parties were given 30 minutes, bigger ones 40 minutes. Begum Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina made consecutive television broadcasts on the last night of the campaign. On the eve of polling, the Chief Adviser and the Chief Election Commissioner separately addressed the nation on radio and television urging voters to use their democratic right and to cast their ballots peacefully.

We noted that Bangladesh Television was scrupulous in giving equal exposure to the main parties during the campaign and were impressed by its comprehensive election results coverage on polling day itself and into the next day.

The Group gained the impression that most newspapers were not overtly partisan in their presentation of the campaign. A report on the activities of one political leader was balanced by a similar amount of space given to a rival. This pattern was followed throughout. Both Bangla and English-language newspapers, with one or two exceptions, did not editorialise on who voters should support. Some newspapers in Bangla tended to show their support by the slant they gave to their news stories and commentaries. An exception was the *Daily Janakantha*, which said in an editorial that it was time for a change and voters should support the Awami League. There was no editorial advice for voters on the morning of election day in any English-language newspaper. The editor of the *Morning Sun*, Mr Ataql Alam, said this was a practice common to Bangladesh. There were, however, editorial comments on the nature of democracy in Bangladesh, including an appeal to the politicians to respect the result.