

## Book Reviews

***Election Under a Caretaker Government: Empirical Analysis of the October 2001 Parliamentary Election in Bangladesh*** by Waresul Karim,(second edition), 2007. Dhaka: UPL, Pp 478.

It is extraordinary how quickly people these days move across disciplinary boundaries and move on to new areas. This work by Waresul Karim of the Department of Finance and Banking of the University of Dhaka is a testimony to that. This book provides a meticulous examination of the history of voting pattern since the era of democracy in 1991, especially the 2001 parliamentary election of Bangladesh.

The study of electoral behaviour is a highly important area of research in political science and political sociology and has given rise to an extensive body of literature. Since the classic studies of Herbert Tingsten in 1937, and V.O Kay in 1949 and pioneering election studies by Columbia University sociologists – Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee, a huge body of scholarly works have sought to explore the interfaces of individual citizens, social contexts and elections. The key concern of electoral studies is the nature of people's preferences and the way these preferences are socially shaped. In the West key variables such as social class, ethnicity, religion, generations, on the one hand, act as important and stable social determinants of electoral behaviour and political party, personalities, party programs, party performances as direct and often variable determinants of electoral choice, on the other.

There are few studies of electoral behaviour in Bangladesh. Karim's book, first published in 2004, is a very welcome addition to this vitally important area of study. In some ways it is a different kind of book – different from social science tradition in the way the literature review has been done and the logical structure of the study conceived.

Divided into 13 chapters and 3 broad sections the main objective of the book is to provide an empirical analysis of parliamentary election of 2001 with focus on party performance in violence-prone area, swings, party performance and voter turn out and finally multivariate analysis. The multivariate analysis seeks to find robust answers for three research questions:

1. What are the factors that lead to the success or failure of a candidate in the election?
2. What factor or factors influence the share of a party's vote in the constituency?
3. What were the factors that were responsible for the retention or loss of a seat won by a party in 1996?

The book provides a detailed and comparative analysis of results of elections held in 1991, 1996 and 2001. It shows that Bangladesh has achieved a stable two-party system. The Awami League gained 88 seats and 30.08 percent of votes in 1991, 146 seats and 37.46 percent votes in 1996, and 62 seats and 40 percent votes in 2001. The BNP, on the other hand, won 140 seats and 30.81 percent of votes in 1991, 116 seats and 33.61 votes in 1996, and 193 seats and 40.97 percent of votes in 2001.

This book tries to show what determined the election performance of these parties. Of the 100 seats won by the Awami League and its allies in 1991, it retained 66 of them and gained another 80 seats from other parties, particularly from the BNP and the Jamat. In 2001 the party lost 64 seats out of 72 seats in which it had lost by a margin of 10 percent and less. In 1996, the BNP in a similar way won in 80 seats held in 1991 and added 36 new seats from other parties.

In spite of the Awami League's loss in 1991 and 2001 parliamentary election, its electoral performance was better than any other single party. It has been able to improve its electoral gain over the years. But the paradox is that this gain did not translate into winning parliamentary seats. As the author points out securing popular votes and securing a seat is not the same thing. The study found that 4 variables had significant associations with the Awami League's performance. Its 1996 election margins and the existence of BNP or Jamat rebel candidates were associated with Awami League's win and perceived terrorism and

alliance arithmetic or combination of BNP –Jammat votes had strong influence on its loss. The BNP also improved its position considerably, especially in urban areas and in the Rajshahi Division, particularly areas of the north Bengal dominated by the JP.

Thus the four-party alliance won on the basis of a combination of anti-Awami League forces and unusual vote swings in 58 constituencies which were violence-prone. In these constituencies the Awami League lost with a big margin. The test of association found no relationship between party performance and rural-urban location of the seats. But interestingly Dhaka led the nation in terms electoral outcome. There was a pounced pro-BNP swing in all the seats of the Dhaka city. A swing in Dhaka reverberated throughout the country.

The author has tried to speculate the reasons for the AL debacle in the capital city. The key cause seems to have been the rise of violence in the city and its perceived association with Awami League leaders. “[F]ew cases of highly publicized, high profile terrorist activities with which the names of some Awami League leaders and MPs appeared in the newspapers had made people to align the Awami League with terrorism. The government at the same time was not successful in clearing its name from alleged involvement with terrorism as they could not or did not find out and expose the real criminals who were perpetuating the crimes”(p, 254). Other contributing causes were corruption, mismanagement in the DCC and its mayor, load shedding, increase in hijacking, kidnapping and extortions etc.

The author did not find unusual swings in vote in more than 4-5 constituencies which could not be explained with known factors. The voter turn out was high in 2001 in the constituencies in which it was high in 1996. The voter turn out was low in urban constituencies, medium-level violence –prone area and where rate of increase in voters was high and where 4-party alliance had won in 1996. The author did not check on the proportion of minority votes which were cast, but the average turn out in 146 constituencies in which the Awami League won in 1996 was not significantly different from the average for the country. But the data allow the possibility interpreting that AL and minority voters faced intimidation.

This book has three minor shortcomings. The author has not looked across the disciplinary boundary and does not seem to have consulted, at least, a part of the enormous literature on electoral studies within political science and political sociology. The discrete literature review (using each work in isolation) uses mostly journalistic writings from Bangladesh. Thus, secondly, the research design has not been adequately built on the basis of theoretical logic. Thirdly, the conclusion of such a good book is disappointing. It provides a very brief overview of each chapter rather than highlighting the key findings of its empirical analysis.

The book does not become directly engaged with the issue of how free and fair these elections were (free and fair election were cited in 5 different pages in the empirical section of the book and election irregularities in 2) the issue that has led to the current breakdown of the democratic process. But it does provide powerful empirical analysis of why the four-party alliance did win. To reiterate the Awami League lost the election due to the aggregation of the votes of the BNP and the Jammat and perceived terrorism. But the message of the book is clear. The voters of the country have acted rationally. But there are many constituencies where elections were dictated by the show of force and most possibly money. This study shows clearly that the management of elections is a complex process and the electoral roll is only one component of it.

It also does not offer policy suggestions. The view of one who has worked with such a wealth of election data on the issue might have been very illuminating in a country where both political and intellectual views are often shaped by narrow group interest or common sense.

An analysis of election results does not show the way people actually vote or factors that shape voter's preferences. It is surprising that in a country where there has been so much controversy over the electoral process, there has been so little empirical study on it! This book shows how badly and urgently we need more studies on public opinion, and quantitative and ethnographic study of electoral behaviour in the country. It might have saved a lot of political turmoil in the country.

The UPL should be congratulated for bringing out the second edition of a high quality book with such care. The book would be indispensable for anybody interested in the issues of election and electoral behaviour of the country.

**S Aminul Islam**

Professor and Chair, Department of sociology  
University of Dhaka. Email: [aminuls2000@yahoo.com](mailto:aminuls2000@yahoo.com)