Empowering Democracy in Bangladesh: A Roadmap for Enhancing Voter Engagement

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Abstract

Democracy is a form of government in which the people or the general populace of a state have the power of the state, where fundamental freedoms and human rights are respected, and where they freely express their will is carried out. Bangladesh is a democratic country but from the beginning, this state faced several military regimes and tried to get back in a democratic environment. The authors attempt to find out the objectives of why people are not going to cast their votes, why they are not satisfied with the electoral process, andwhy people do not have trust in elections. To scrutinize the evolution of Bangladesh's political situation, we have analyzed a total of 11 (from 1973 to 2018) general elections and followed up a municipality election. This study reveals that people are scared about unexpected situations, and threats but expect free, fair, peaceful, transparent, and participatory elections. To solve the problems the authors formulated a framework to engage people's participation in elections. Finally, the authors encourage the policymakers and election commission to take effective stepsfor the proposed solution to implement the upcoming national election to be more acceptable and uncontroversial which will be held in 2024.

Keywords: Democracy, Election, Voters, Political Party, Bangladesh.

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INTRODUCTION

From the beginning of the independence of Bangladesh, this country endeavored to get democracy in every election system. Though Bangladesh follows a democratic government its history is full of fragile from the first parliamentary election from 1973 to 1991 (Huque & Hakim, 1993). People of this country, have never been able to remain trust in these elections. The question at hand is, "Why couldn't people have faith in elections?" The likelihood of not voting increases when political ineffectiveness, lack of political interest, lack of political trust, and discontent with politicians and the political system exist. In terms of macro influences, 'old democracies and nations with

mandatory voting appear to have lower rates of non-voting, yet these effects disappear when the social psychological micro-level indicators are modeled concurrently (Hadjar & Beck, 2010). It has been determined that the election held in Bangladesh in 2014 while the current administration was in power was not free and fair as a significant political alliance (20 parties) led by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) boycotted it (Mollah & Jahan, 2018). After the autocratic rule was overthrown in Bangladesh in 1990, the establishment of a non-political caretaker administration (NCA) to provide the groundwork for the handover of power to a popularly elected government was the first step toward the country's transition to democracy (Zafarullah & Akhter, 2000). Election rigging in favor of the ruling class has become widespread in Bangladesh (Akhter, 2001). That is why people are going backward rather than casting votes. Meanwhile, in recent political history of Bangladesh, has been full of protests and hartals, Bangladesh needs to make structural changes to its economy and society so that people there have qualitatively different attitudes and outlooks toward politics and governmental issues (Hossain, 2000). The ideal system of government is democracy. Many industrialized nations around the world have a lengthy history of democratic government. However, democratic government in underdeveloped nations needs to be closely monitored (Khan & Islam, 2014). Beginning in the 1980s, a wave of democratization surged through the developing globe. However, only a small number of nations have been successful in constructing stable and functional democratic regimes, despite the profound alteration that this so-called "Third Wav" has brought to formal political systems in regions ranging from Africa to Asia to Latin America (Menocal, Fritz, & Rakner, 2008).

Bangladesh has gone through turbulent periods since gaining independence in 1971, the nation endured protracted military dictatorship from 1975 to 1990, yet democratic ambitions have shaped the direction of its politics. Since returning to parliamentary democracy in 1991, Bangladesh has experimented with a few different forms of government during the past forty years, including one-party presidential rule and the multiparty parliamentary system it presently uses (Riaz & Ali, 2014). In India, numerous factors, including religion, caste, community, language, wealth, policy or philosophy, the intended use of the elections, the scope of the franchise, political waves, etc., have an impact on voter behavior. To win the war at the voting booth, political parties, and groups take advantage of these characteristics. Politicians can be seen appealing to the religious and communal sentiments of the populace even though their professions are for enlightened secularism. They can also be seen using language or money to their advantage to win the vote war (Hazarika & Biraj, 2015). In Bangladesh, rural citizens, are not aware of elections and voting systems. Even they do not have enough knowledge to judge a candidate using critical power of thinking. Students in our Universities are losing their capacity to pursue research, but to solve voting problems and unexpected incidents; they should study on elections and voting awareness in our country (Hossan, Islam, & Khatun, 2023).

Three parliaments in Bangladesh between 1991 and 2006 demonstrate that the institution has not succeeded in becoming the hub of political and legislative activity. This is primarily a result of the ruling parties purposefully avoiding parliament while the opposition abstains. For more than half of its existence, the parliament has been dysfunctional (Moniruzzaman, 2009). Due to the non-democratic caretaker government's two-year reign being ended by national elections, 2009 marked an auspicious beginning for Bangladesh. The nation was shocked by a perplexing mutiny in which military officials were slaughtered by the Bangladesh Rifles, marring the excitement of returning to democracy. The global economic slump had a significant impact on Bangladesh's economy as well, and environmental degradation is still occurring there (Momen, 2010). The Awami League (AL), which has dominated Bangladesh since early 2009, received a three-quarters majority on January 5 in a parliamentary vote that was highly criticized both domestically and internationally for lacking democratic legitimacy. The AL won 127 of these 153 seats. Since the main opposition party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), decided to boycott the election, the remaining seats had already been filled by uncontested candidates before the election even took place (Lorch & Jasmin, 2014). Even when we see the latest national election of Bangladesh, we can observe that people are not interested in taking part in the election, this is also a controversial one (FAIR, 2019). Consequently, it is time to find out, what the Parties should ensure to arrange a peaceful, fair, and accepted election. Though Bangladesh is young in the democratic system in this huge populous country, will be the perfect place for democratic governance.

METHODS

To acquire a thorough understanding of the complex challenges surrounding democracy, the study Empowering Democracy in Bangladesh: A Roadmap for Enhancing Voter Engagement normally combines diverse research approaches, typically combining both quantitative and qualitative data. To respond to the research questions and achieve the study's goals, the current study, which examined how national elections were conducted from 1973 to 2018, combined content analysis and observational methods. A research technique called content analysis is used to identify the existence of specific words, topics, or concepts in each set of qualitative data. The research method uses a variety of analytical tools to produce findings and put them into context and utilized in qualitative, quantitative, and occasionally mixed types of research frameworks (White & Marsh, 2006).

The authors of this study also use the observation method in a city corporation (Rajshahi City Corporation) election in 2023 in Bangladesh. The authors take part in several election campaigns and attempt to understand the mindset of the voters.

A sizeable amount of data and information has also been compiled from numerous secondary sources. By combining these approaches, it is possible to create a framework that might be helpful in managing voter participation in elections and promoting democracy in Bangladesh.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The conditions for democratic elections must not be disregarded if the goal is to promote ongoing progress toward a functioning democracy (Elklit & Svensson, 1997). There are two main political parties in Bangladesh's fading two-party system, making it extremely impossible for anyone to win elections under the guise of another party. However, even though the right-wing Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the center-left Awami League (AL) previously controlled politics in Bangladesh, both parties are now in charge of coalitions of like-minded parties, with the BNP bringing together the right-of-center parties and the AL leading the secular and liberal elements.

Name of Parties	Founded	MP's	Votes	Percentage (%)
Bangladesh Awami League (AL)	1949	302	63,523,066	74.63
Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)	1978	7	11,113,253	13.06
Islami Andolan Bangladesh		0	1,255,373	1.47
Jatiya Party (Ershad)	1986	26	4,443,351	5.22
Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal	1972	2	610,044	0.72
Bikalpa Dhara Bangladesh	2004	2	565,940	0.66
Workers Party of Bangladesh	1980	4	646,064	0.76
Nationalist Democratic Movement		0	496,427	0.58
Bangladesh Tarikat Federation	2005	1	429,955	0.51
Bangladesh Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal		1	282,313	0.33
Bangladesh Congress	2013	0	184,823	0.57
Jatiya Party (Manju)	2014	1	182,611	0.21
Zaker Party		0	109,440	0.13
Gano Forum	1992	2	103,535	0.12
Bangladesh Islami Front	1990	0	60,372	0.07
Independents		2	816,902	0.96
Total		350		100

Table 1. The table shows an overview of the general election held in 2018.

In the above table, this is clear to all that only the Bangladesh Awami League (AL) had unbelievable success in the 11th election of Bangladesh. Where AL got 74.63% vote of the total vote casting. But the second most important rival party Bangladesh Nationalist Party got 7 representatives which is 13.06% of the total votes. On the other hand, the Jatiya Party (Ershad) got 5.22% of total votes but their elected member of parliament is 26. Then they (the BNP) decided to boycott the election. In the following election, there were about 85,114,431 voters who cast their votes. But the total number of voters was at least 104,142,381 registered voters. It was 82% among the total electorates who took part in the election. Analysis Bangladesh held parliamentary elections on January 5. The opposition 18-party alliance led by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) boycotted them, which helped the Awami League win the election with a two-thirds majority and with little to no opposition (Joyeeta Bhattacharjee, 2014).

There are approximately forty registered political parties, but they cannot form government individually because of the domination of the two major parties. Both civilian and military regimes have ruled Bangladesh since its declaration of independence in 1971. By establishing political parties and taking part in general elections, the latter military administration, like many others, civilized its reign. It is enticing to draw a definite line between authoritarian and democratic regimes when diachronically analyzing political formations in Bangladesh (Suykens, 2017).

For these reasons, people are absent-minded about elections, participation, and politics. The analysis of data above the table shows that people are not concerned about the election. The parties are responsible for advocating for people's participation. But except for the mentioned two parties most of them are inactive. They just registered a political party but their inactiveness hinders democratic environments, which is clear in the table that they have gained in the latest election of Bangladesh.

Most of the parties even do not have a single Member of Parliament (MP) which indicates that the elections have been unipolarity. It is not expected by the people, to make the elections more participatory every single party must participate electoral campaign, advocate, be physically active, open discussion with people, and help the civil society to implement their agenda in the context of elections.
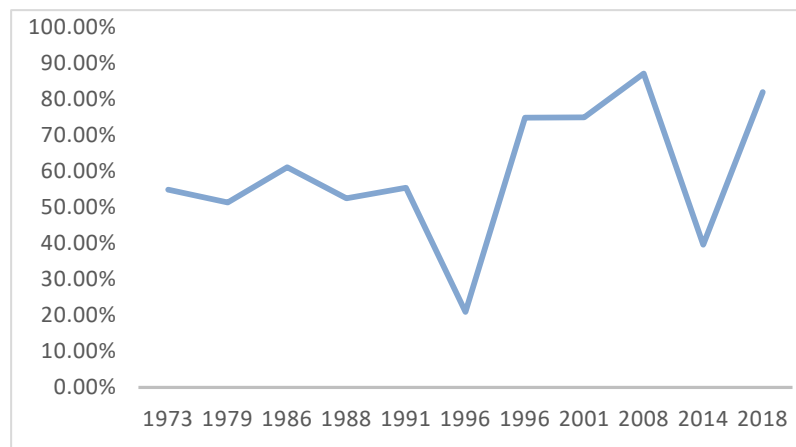
Figure 1: The turnout rate from 1973 to 2018 general election in Bangladesh.

The diagram is showing that total general election of Bangladesh, where people take part to elect their representatives. It is visible that from 1973 to 2018, people are not attending election spontaneously. At the very beginning of the emergence of this populous country, people who are known blood of the election but never attended 100 percent to make the country more democratic and more acceptable. People in this country are not concerned about elections. Sometimes they think that if one party governed for 5 years then we should give another the chance. But it is not the perfect decision they make. In the graph, we also see that in 1996 election was very controversial; in the election most of the crucial political parties boycotted the election. So, the parliament has very little tenure then again, the national election is arranged. In 2008, it was the highest turnout rate in the history of Bangladesh but again in the next year, it decreased to a high rate which was only 39.58% and the final 11th general election in 2018 was comparatively better but not satisfactory. In a democracy, representatives must at least tacitly agree that those who gain more electoral support or influence over policy will not use their short-term superiority to prevent those who lose out from gaining office or having influence in the future and that in exchange for the chance to continue competing for position and power, those who lose out temporarily will respect the winners' right to make legally binding decisions. Citizens are obliged to abide by the decisions made because of such a competitive process, provided that its conclusion is dependent upon their collective preferences as expressed through fair and consistent elections or transparent and ongoing talks (Schmitter & Karl, 1991). But we, based on data analysis, noticed that major political parties in Bangladesh decided to boycott the election when they saw their unconquerable defeat in that election.

The voting rate fluctuated several times. So, it is now clear that the voters are not going to the polls to vote to elect representatives. Because their favorable candidates or parties are going to reject the election.

Election Years	Bangladesh Awami League (AL)	Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)
1973	Won	Do not take part
1979	Loss	Won
1986	Loss	Boycott
1988	Boycott	Boycott
1991	Loss	Won
1996	Boycott	Won
1996	Won	Loss
2001	Loss	Won
2008	Won	Loss
2014	Won	Boycott
2018	Won	Boycott

Table 2. The following table indicates two major parties' decisions on general elections in Bangladesh.

That is why to get successful voter engagement in the election, it should be ensured that every political party must take part in elections and must take part in campaigns and advocacy.

Bangladesh, a democratic country that is still in its infancy, became independent in 1971. The country made significant strides toward democracy with the restoration of parliamentary democracy in 1991 after several years of military dictatorship and the installation of a non-party caretaker government. However, in recent years, combative politics have seriously undermined Bangladesh's democracy and growth. It is no longer only a domestic problem; it is now a top priority for international contributors to Bangladesh and the wider region (Rahaman, 2007). If we see (Table No. 2) it is clear to us that the major powerful parties (who commonly form the government) boycotted elections many times. In the beginning, the Awami League was the only party that was fit for the government. But in the decease of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (Founder of Bangladesh), this country lost its driving force. Then the countrymen witnessed severalmilitary regimes. In the table, we have seen that AL has formed the government 5 times but decided to boycott 2 times, and lost 4 times. On the contrary, BNP won 4 times, boycotted the election 4 times, and lost 2 times. These data proved that democracy in Bangladesh is not constant, it is fragile. Most opposition groups that have used the election boycott tactic have failed and given the playground to the ruling party since it is a controlled tactic (Gordji, Askari, & Abdi, 2018). So, the ultimate result is that people are not going to the elections because of the blunder of their Parties.

To get more and more participants in the elections, we must make sure the party's engagement in elections first. Bangladesh, the third-largest Muslim nation in the world, has a democratically-run government and does not adopt Sharia law as its primary source of legislation (Hasan, 2011). In the political system in Bangladesh, it has been proved that other political parties are vulnerable in the context of forming the government. The small parties are taking coalition government to take part in the government. Nowadays comparatively small parties compete in elections but this is not participatory. They cannot enrich their followers as well. To be successful in participating inthe upcoming election, this is mandatory to ensure absolute participation of all the registered parties of Bangladesh.
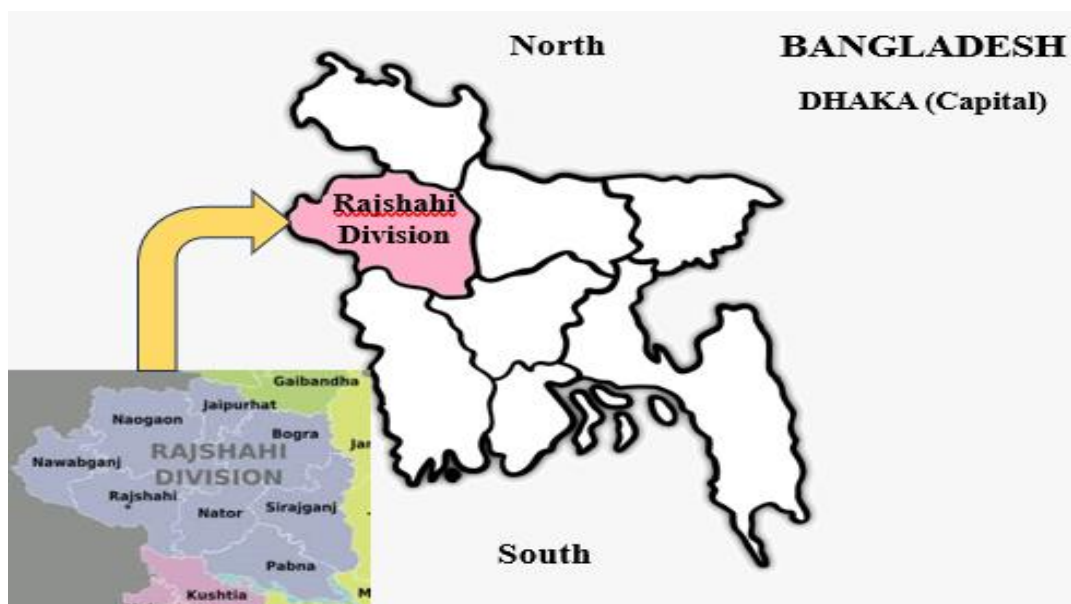

Figure 2. The Figure demonstrates the Rajshahi Division and the Rajshahi City.

We have selected the Rajshahi City Corporation for taking part in the election observation. The picture indicates that area where a clean, silk, educated city exists. People live here very peacefully. This is also a democratic unit in Bangladesh. The 2023 Rajshahi City Corporation election was conducted on June 21, 2023, in Rajshahi, Bangladesh, to choose the city's new mayor and council members. The Awami League candidate won by a wide margin in this election. Meanwhile, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) boycotted the election and abstained from the election.People with improper educational credentials are elected to local government positions (Nasir, 2016). In the democratic system, Democracy can be found in settings where social action is founded on the underlying traits that all men and women share, without denying individual distinctions in genius or character (Burns, 1917). Here is also a lack of participation, which dominates the voter's mind to take part spontaneously.
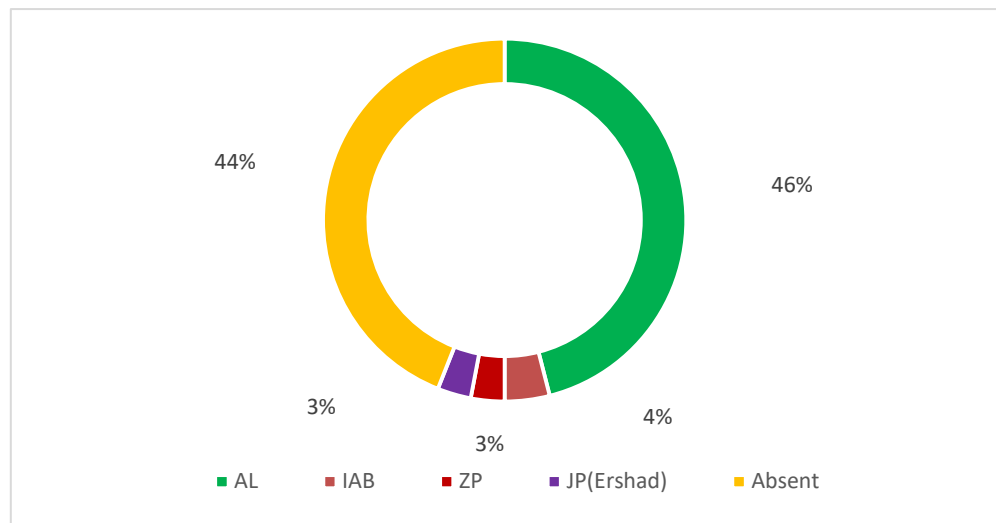
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Figure 3. The pie chart reveals the voting rate of parties among the registered voters.

The Rajshahi City Corporation election is the latest mayoral election in Bangladesh. We have observed the election physically and collected data which is not so positive for the future general election in Bangladesh (12th election), which may be arranged at the beginning of 2024. The pie chart shows that Awami League (AL) picked up only 46% of the total turnout which is the highest in the election. Subsequently, Islami Andolon Bangladesh (IAB) got 4% is the second highest, Zaker Party got 3% which is the third position, and finally, Jatiya Party (Ershad) got 3% which is also the third position. On the other hand, the most important political party in Bangladesh, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) boycotted the election. They (BNP) withdrew their candidates from the constituency. Here the top concern issue is that 44% of total registered voters reject the election. The result shows that the democratic situation in Bangladesh is being eroded day by day. Mutual co-existence and tolerance can trace the way of democracy in Bangladesh.

The findings also demonstrate that people are indifferent about elections because of frequent breaks off the party. Voters attend the poll to elect their representatives but when they confirm that their candidates or partiesare not taking part in the election then they ignore the election and do not go to the poll and escape the democracy. People learn how to interact with others through education, which also emphasizes the advantages of civic engagement such as organizing and voting. Democracy has a broad potential base of support in the conflict between it and tyranny, but it only provides limited incentives to its defenders (Glaeser, Ponzetto, & Shleifer, 2007).

Most of the citizens in this country are not aware ofelections and they do have not enough knowledge of how valuable their votes are. Proper awareness and knowledge should be highly implemented in the mind for success in the next vital election. Every single party should take part in the election to be meaningful in the 12th national election of Bangladesh.
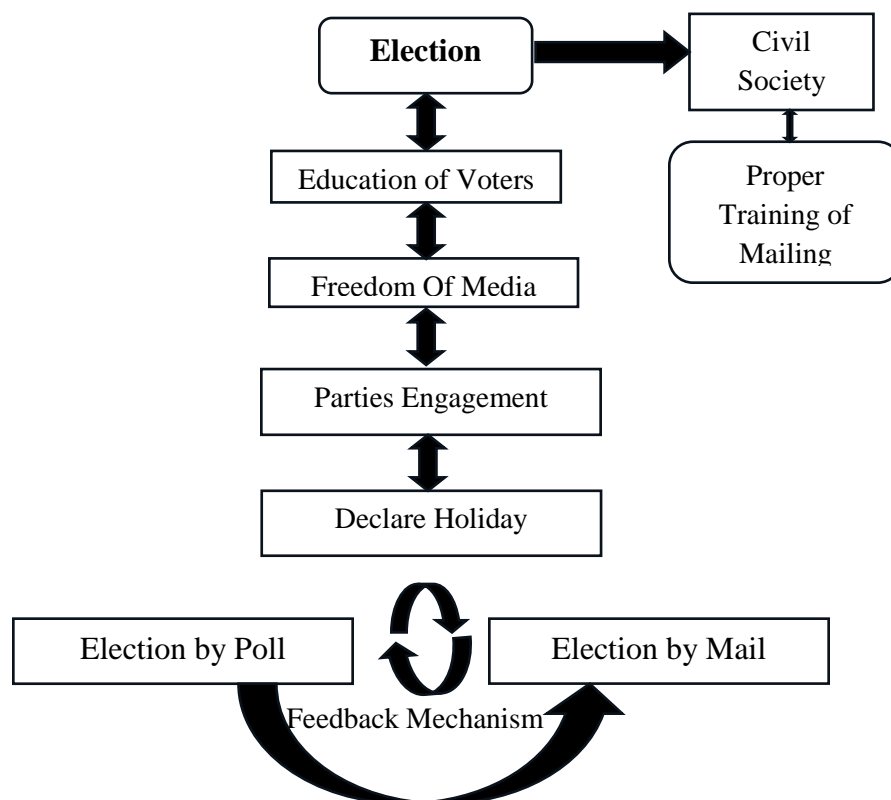

Figure 4. The proposed structure shows how to increase people's engagement in elections.

The proposed diagram demonstrates that if the voters are educated and have enough facilities, they will take part in the election. Media will work freely and fair. In the content parties will of participation is a major priority because we have seen the research results because people do not take part in elections. Voters avoid election because of the decision of the parties. When they boycotted the election, the whole election fell into controversy. Political parties' involvement is crucial for a better democracy. This is also mandatory that Election Day be declared as a national holiday as they feel free from any pressure and duty. Civil Societies would work for awareness, mail booths, electronic voting, use of EVM, mailing, and ethical order in the elections. Every political party would work individually but never interrupt any party but take part in the debate.

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Finally, the election will be arranged in two ways: 1) Physically/By Poll. 2) By Mail. The Election Commission will receive all votes and then reveal the results. There will be the option which is feedback. Voters will make a report to the Election Commission indicating the voting environments that they faced. As a result, fare and accountable counting would be presented to the countrymen. If the Election Commission can ensure the proposed process of election, people will go and the election will be successful. Like any natural calamity, pandemics have the potential to ruin politics. Voters who have been adversely affected by the crisis and who are afraid of what is yet to come may penalize incumbents or choose not to cast a ballot at all. Natural calamities do not, however, invariably determine political outcomes (Dulani, et al., 2021). When voters see an election is going under peace and there are not any threats orinterference in their choices. In the meantime, they prepare themselves to take part in the elections. In the constitution of Bangladesh, Article 57 and Article 58 clarified the issue.

CONCLUSION

Bangladesh is an infant country in democracy. This country gained independence from the then-west Pakistan in 1971. This country has a critical history of the governing system. The democratic system of this country fluctuated during different periods of the total regime. From 1973 to 2018 there were 11 general elections but most of them were controversial because the two most important parties, Bangladesh Awami League (AL) and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), boycotted the elections. This reevaluation will improve our understanding of election crises, their lessons, and our ability to store and apply this knowledge for upcoming national electionswhich will held in January 2024. People in all classes should enrich their critical knowledge and situation about the elections and should work together to make their parties victory. But in the study, it is now clear that people feel fear about elections and they do not want to encounter any critical events. Sometimes they are involved in their daily activities, feel indifferent, and miss the time to take part in the election. To make a stable solution the authors proposed a solution. This study will be helpful for the leaders and parties of Bangladesh to realize the causes of why people are backward in the election. On the other hand, the policymakers should consider the demonstrated problems and solutions. This paper also would assist the voters to criticize and make decisions about the right steps to elect their candidates. This is the study that attempted to find a proposed way to enrich people's participation in the election and to make the country more democratic. Finally, the world would see a free, fair, and acceptable election which is coming next year.

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