



PARTY POLITICS IN SEMI-DEMOCRACIES:  
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF BANGLADESH AND  
MALAYSIA

BY

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## ABSTRACT

Political parties are crucial actors in representative democracy. Bangladesh and Malaysia are two democratic countries in Asia with a common British colonial heritage. This study analyzes and compares the party systems in the two countries based on their practice of semi-democracy in contemporary politics. This study has adopted an institutional approach to analyzing party politics in Bangladesh and Malaysia. It has used qualitative data analysis involving description and explanation of important factors, characteristics and tendencies of certain political parties. Based on data collected from secondary sources the research has identified similarities and differences among the political parties in the areas of regularity in party election, decision-making process and frequency in leadership change as well as mode, issues and methods of interactions. The research has found that both Bangladesh and Malaysia have maintained vibrant party systems throughout their history, though in the case of Bangladesh party politics have experienced military constraints for about a decade. Comparatively, Malaysian political parties maintain a better profile compared to their counterparts in Bangladesh. In terms of frequency in leadership change, the three older political parties in Malaysia have relatively frequent and regular leadership changes compared to the three Bangladeshi parties which have maintained very poor record. However, with regards to decision making and party elections, the political parties in Bangladesh and Malaysia similar to each other, though the three political parties in Bangladesh are more dictatorial in decision-making and in keeping party elections at bay. Malaysian parties have the tendency of maintaining regularity in elections even though there are alleged manipulations in the process. In terms of internal party democracy, Bangladeshi parties perform poorly compared to the Malaysian ones. The level of tolerance, cooperation and coexistence is very low in the case of Bangladeshi political parties, while these are more solid in the case of Malaysian political parties. Finally, the ruling parties in both countries have resorted to legal means to suppress the opposition, especially targeting its leaders. A one party dictatorial rule has become a political norm in Bangladesh. In Malaysia too it is apparent that the ruling BN has resorted to legal means to tame the influential opposition leaders. However, at the end party institutionalization and inter-party systemic interactions in Malaysia are apparently more stable, formal and non-violent compared with Bangladeshi political parties.

## ملخص البحث

تمثل الأحزاب السياسية الجهة الفاعلة، والحاسمة لتمثيل الديمقراطية في البلاد. وتُعد بنغلاديش وماليزيا نموذجاً للديمقراطية في آسيا لامتلاكهما إرثاً استعماريًا بريطانيًا مشتركاً. لذلك فإن هذه الدراسة تحلل، وتقارن أنظمة الأحزاب السياسية في البلدين على أساس ممارساتها شبه الديمقراطية في السياسة المعاصرة. وقد اعتمدت هذه الدراسة على نهج مؤسسي لتحليل السياسات الحزبية في كل من دولتي بنغلاديش وماليزيا. تم تحليل البيانات النوعية التي تنطوي على الوصف، والتفسير وفقاً للعوامل المهمة، وخصائصها، وميول بعض الأحزاب السياسية. واستناداً على البيانات التي تم جمعها من المصادر الثانوية والتي حددت نتائجها لأوجه الشبه، والاختلاف بين الأحزاب السياسية في مجالات التنظيم في انتخابات الحزب، وعملية صنع القرار، والتردد في تغيير القيادة فضلاً عن وضع المشاكل، وطرق التفاعل معها. لذا فقد توصلت الدراسة إلى أن كلا من بنغلاديش وماليزيا قد حافظتا على النظام الحزبي النابض بالحياة طوال تاريخهما، وإن كانت السياسة الحزبية البنغلاديشية قد شهدت القيود العسكرية لنحو عقد من الزمان. فيما يتعلق بالأحزاب السياسية التي تعمل كمؤسسات ديمقراطية، وكذلك توصلت الدراسة إلى أن الأحزاب السياسية الماليزية تحتفظ بسجلات تاريخية أفضل مقارنة بنظيراتها في بنغلاديش، ومن حيث التردد في تغيير القيادة، فقد تكرر تغيير قيادة الأحزاب السياسية الماليزية نسبياً، وبشكل منتظم مقارنة بالأحزاب السياسية البنغلاديشية الثلاثة التي تحتفظ بسجلات تاريخية ضعيفة. ولكن، فيما يتعلق بصنع القرارات، والانتخابات فإن الأحزاب السياسية في بنغلاديش وماليزيا قريبة من بعضها البعض، وإن كانت الأحزاب السياسية البنغلاديشية أكثر دكتاتورية في صنع القرارات، والاحتفاظ بانتخابات الحزب لتبقى على السلطة. بينما الأحزاب السياسية الماليزية تتمتع بالانتظام في الانتخابات حتى وإن كان هناك تلاعب في العملية الانتخابية. أخيراً، من حيث الديمقراطية الداخلية للأحزاب، فإن أداء الأحزاب السياسية البنغلاديشية ضعيفة مقارنة بالأحزاب السياسية الماليزية. ولكن مستوى التسامح، والتعاون، والتعايش ضعيف جداً في حالة الأحزاب السياسية البنغلاديشية، في حين أن هذه هي أكثر صلابة في حالة الأحزاب السياسية الماليزية. ومع ذلك، لقد أصبح الحكم الديكتاتوري من طرف الحزب الواحد هو القاعدة السياسية السائدة في بنغلاديش. وفي ماليزيا فمن الواضح أن حزب الجبهة الوطنية الحاكم قد لجأت إلى الوسائل القانونية لترويض زعماء المعارضة النافذين. إضافة إلى ذلك، فإن حزب الجبهة الوطنية الحاكم بدأ يحافظ على جهوده المتواصلة لزعزعة الاستقرار في تحالف المعارضة من خلال خلق البلبلة، والتحريض لكل طرف ضد الآخر. ومع ذلك، وفي خاتمة المطاف، فإن إضفاء الطابع المؤسسي، ونظام التفاعلات بين الأحزاب في ماليزيا على ما يبدو أكثر استقراراً، ورسمية، وغير عنيفة مقارنة بالأحزاب السياسية البنغلاديشية.

## APPROVAL PAGE

I certify that I have supervised and read this study and that in my opinion; it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Master of Human Sciences in Political Science.

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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of my own investigation, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

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A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF BANGLADESH AND MALAYSIA**

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*TO MY BELOVED PARENTS AFSAR ALI AND HAZERA KHATUN*

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BA	Barisan Alternatif
BAKSAL	Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League
BAL	Bangladesh Awami League
BJI	Bangladesh Jamaat-e Islam
BN	Barisan Nasional
BNP	Bangladesh Nationalist Party
CAC	Central Advisory Council
CC	Central Committee
CEC	Central Executive Committee
CMC	Central Members (Rokon) Conference
CMLA	Chief Martial Law Administrator
CMS	Central Majlish-e-Sura
CWC	Central Working Committee
DAP	Democratic Action Party
DPM	Deputy Prime Minister
EC	Election Commission
JP	Jatiya Party
MCA	Malaysian Chinese Association
MIC	Malaysian Indian Congress
NC	National Committee
NJP	National Justice Party
PAP	People Action Party
PAS	Pan-Malaysia Islamic Party
PKR	Parti KeAdilan Rakyat
PM	Prime Minister
UMNO	United Malays National Organization

# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 INTRODUCTION

First and foremost, political parties in any form are important actors in representative democracy. Parties aim to manifest group aims, cultivate political leadership, develop and support policy alternatives and present electoral alternatives to the voters. Political parties have a tendency to be mindful of each other and keep power relationship with others. In other words, political parties guarantee that voters have the power of electing decisions and that decisions made in elections will interpret into choices in the general domain. However, a more important consideration is the question of how political parties take their decisions and presents themselves to the voters. Particularly, the question of what extent the political parties practice their democratic nature internally or externally.

In addition, to ensure the democratic culture among the political systems, it basically needs to enhance the meaningful involvement of all citizens of the state in making certain decisions about party affairs, usually through voting to elect representatives of the government. However, a trend of democratization from the 1980s onwards has opened new regimes stuck in transition, combining a rhetorical acceptance of liberal democracy with illiberal or authoritarian traits. Therefore, democracy in those countries is labeled as illiberal democracy (Zakaria, 1996, 2007), pseudo democracy (Volpi, 2004), partial democracy (Goldsmith, 2008), low intensity democracy (Gill & Rocamora, 1992) empty democracy (Haughton, 2010) semi-democracy (Case, 1996) or hybrid regime (Menocala, Fritz & Raknerc, 2008). So,

semi-democracy is a type of a governing system in which elections take place but citizens are deprived from knowing about the activities of those who basically exercise real power. Moreover, limited access of freedom of speech and lack of liberties make it extremely difficult for the opposition political parties to operate. The states very often control the media and strongly support the authority. The red tape, economic pressure, imprisonment or violence against the general peoples is the main instrument of the state authority. According to Zakaria (1997), “illiberal democracies are increasing around the world and are increasingly limiting the freedom of the people they represent. Illiberal democratic governments may believe that they have a mandate to act in any way they see fit as long as they hold regular elections”.

With particular reference to Malaysia, William Case has called illiberal as semi-democracy. In his article *“Semi-Democracy in Malaysia: Withstanding the Pressures for Regime Change”* (1993) William Case defines semi-democracy as dominated shifting coalitions of ethnic gatherings with a specific end goal to stay lastingly in power so as to dodge defeat oppositions in the elections. It is a linked aspect of soft dictatorship (political liberalism devoid of full democracy) and hard democracy (democratic procedures but lacking liberalization) approach. In such a system autonomous political claims are raised to the opposition political parties, occupational associations and interest groups. So, because of those authoritarian prevailing traits, Bangladesh and Malaysia display the semi or illiberal characteristics.

On that view, there are no political parties or political stand points where the best practices of healthy intra-party interactions occur (Scarrow, 2005). In respect of Bangladesh, where the multi-party democratic system of government is practiced with four major political parties which include the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), Bangladesh Awami League (BAL), Jatiya Party (JP) and Bangladesh Jamat-e Islam

(BJI). Party politics in Bangladesh became vibrant since the general election in 1991 that ensured institutionalization of a parliamentary form of democracy. In Bangladesh, more than fifty (50) political parties general function. Most are highly competitive, factionalized and ideologically isolated (Moniruzzaman, 2009).

The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) has allied with the right-wing political stands while the Bangladesh Awami League (BAL) has aligned itself with leftist and prominent secularist parties. Rivalry protests, road violence, intolerance, instability and alteration of the state power between two coalitions have created low institutionalized party politics in Bangladesh. A devastating situation for liberal democracy in Bangladesh that three of the main political parties like the Bangladesh Awami League (BAL), Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the Jatiya Party (JP) have developed a dynastic profile. That's why the internal decision-making characteristics of the parties including leadership selection remain questionable. But the fourth most influential political party the Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami, (BJI) is guided more by religious principles like the Islamist ideology rather than person involved.

On the other hand, Malaysia, since the independence practices the dominant party system whereby one party represents a high level of majority in Parliament while permitting the most dominant party to exercise the state power. When the Regular elections took place but the opposition had very slim options to win. For that reason, real democracy in Malaysia is confused with the economic development and political liberalization because of the stability of the dominant style of party regime. The most vibrant factor is ethnic politics where each particular ethnic group commonly units based on the respective interest. So, ethnic coalition or unity, to some extent stood as obstacle to form an authentic democratic system (Loh & Khoo 2001).

According to the Malaysian Election Commission, Malaysia has 32 functioning political parties. Since 1955, Malaysia has been ruled by the Alliance Party (Malay Parti Perikatan) coalition. Subsequently, the Barisan Nasional coalition is the successor from 1973 onwards. The coalition consists of the United Malay National Organization (UMNO), Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), and Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) along with 11 other political parties. Malaysian politics is comparatively stable though critics have alleged that the government and the ruling party are intertwined with a few controversies.

Moreover, the religious ideology of PAS, the socialism view of DAP and the social justice and democratic view of PKR as well as extreme stands on racial issues have made political parties in Malaysia unconventional. So, the haphazard coalitions have been built among the political parties in Malaysia (Case, 2008). The establishment of an Islamic state linking with secularism, Malay supremacy, and tolerance for all ethnic communities, economic growth and redistribution of wealth are the base of the Barisan Nasional coalition (Moten, 2009).

Thus, the internal culture of democracy has apparently remained on paper. These characteristics of party politics in Bangladesh and Malaysia offer an opportunity for a comparative analysis between the two countries to know how they are functioning in terms of the practice of party politics.

## **1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Political parties are considered to be the main tools of democracy which advance the peoples' civic rights and skills through ensuring transparency and voice as well as people participation. This research aims to compare the nature and characteristics of political parties in Malaysia and Bangladesh in terms of internal party democracy and

inter-party interaction. The study intends to focus on four major parties from each of the two countries. The parties from Bangladesh are the Bangladesh Awami League (BAL), the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the Jatiya Party (JP) and the Bangladesh Jamaat-e Islam (BJI) while from Malaysia are the United Malay National Organization (UMNO), Parti KeAdilan Rakyat (PKR), Pan-Malaysia Islamic Party (PAS) and the Democratic Action Party (DAP).

### **1.3 OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH**

The specific objectives of the research are as follows:

- I. To compare the fundamental features of the political parties in Bangladesh and Malaysia.
- II. To find out how the party systems in Bangladesh and Malaysia work.

### **1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This research aims to answer the following questions:

- a) How do political parties work as institutions in Bangladesh and Malaysia?
- b) How does the party system interact in Bangladesh and Malaysia?

### **1.5 JUSTIFICATION OF THE STUDY**

This study is important for a number of reasons. Firstly, both Malaysia and Bangladesh have been maintaining democratic practices for a long time now. However, Malaysia's experience is about twice longer than that of Bangladesh. Hence, a comparative analysis might help to reflect each other's strengths and shortcomings. Secondly, Malaysia has the longest tradition of democracy in the Muslim world. Thus, a comparative study between Malaysia and Bangladesh might

suggest constructive instructions for party politics in Bangladesh. Thirdly, in the past 25 years, Malaysia's and Bangladesh's economic relations have strengthened substantially. Malaysia has been a popular labour and professional market for Bangladesh and Malaysia has been increasingly investing in Bangladesh's economy. Therefore, it is imperative to see how the countries may come closer and benefit in terms of political experience.

## **1.6 METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY**

### **1.6.1 Method**

This is a comparative study following a binary approach and focused comparison. Therefore by its nature, the study requires in-depth information and analysis. The comparative analysis has done using qualitative data analysis methods involving description and explanation of important factors, characteristics and tendencies of certain especially focused political parties. In doing so, the binary method of similarities and differences are applied.

### **1.6.2 Study Sampling**

The study has purposively selected four major political parties from Bangladesh and Malaysia respectively. From Bangladesh, the parties are Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), Bangladesh Awami League (BAL), Jatiya Party (JP) and Bangladesh Jamaat-e Islam (BJI) and from Malaysia, the parties are United Malays National Organization (UMNO), Parti KeAdilan Rakyat (PKR), Pan-Malaysia Islamic Party (PAS) and Democratic Action Party (DAP). These are major political parties of the two countries. These parties are selected as they are the main and dominant actors in politics.

### **1.6.3 Type of Data and Technique of Data Collection**

Basically, data are collected on the basis of secondary sources like manifestos, scholarly articles and publications of the political parties in practicing liberal democracy in both countries. Data are collected from the relevant party offices or their websites. Annual reports, reports on party conventions, party constitution are the primary documents.

### **1.6.4 Data Processing, Analysis and Interpretation**

The data are presented according to the indicators mentioned in the framework with the help of descriptive analysis. The primary tool is the binary comparison mechanism, and it has identified similarities and differences among the political parties in the area of regularity in party election, decision-making process and frequency in leadership change, mode of party interactions, issues of interactions and methods of interactions.

## **1.7 CHAPTERIZATION**

This study consists of six chapters. Following the current chapter, **Chapter Two** features **the Literature Review, the Theoretical Approach and the Analytical Framework** of the party politics. It presents the different theories and ideas to operationalize the concept of party politics. In addition, a theoretical framework is presented to analyze and compare party politics in Bangladesh and Malaysia.

**Chapter Three on Political Parties in Bangladesh and Malaysia** provides an overview of the four major political parties from Bangladesh namely; Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), Bangladesh Awami League (BAL), Jatiya Party\_(JP) and Bangladesh Jamaat-e Islam (BJI) as well as the four from Malaysia which are the

United Malay National Organization (UMNO), Parti KeAdilan Rakyat (PKR), Pan-Malaysia Islamic Party (PAS) and the Democratic Action Party (DAP). In other words, this chapter also describes the histories and development of the parties, their ideologies, constitutions, manifesto, political behaviour and cultures.

**Chapter Four on Internal Party Democracy in Bangladesh and Malaysia** examines internal party democracy of two countries based on a number of criteria such as how they maintain their regularity in elections in terms of selecting candidates and leadership, the decision-making process and the criteria of frequency in leadership change.

**Chapter Five on Inter-party Interactions in Bangladesh and Malaysia** discusses the inter-party systemic interactions based on certain criteria such as the mode of interactions, issues of interactions and the important methods of interactions.

And finally, **Chapter Six** as the conclusion chapter presents the findings of this study.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW, THEORETICAL APPROACH AND THE ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK**

#### **2.1 INTRODUCTION**

Healthy and stable party politics do not happen when political parties behave autocratically with rewarding only their own political stands and punishing the opposition parties using illiberal forms of actions. The bureaucracy, judiciary, police or even the legislature are being used for their own interest by the ruling party. Opposition to government and the ruling party are not tolerated, the media is tightly controlled, and political participation is highly manipulated, controlled and manufactured. Elections are rigged, marred with violence, and opposition parties and candidates are systematically prevented from taking part in the competition. Those characteristics are phenomena of illiberal or semi-democracy prevalent in both Bangladesh and Malaysia. Thus, in Bangladesh and Malaysia the internal democratic processes and intra-party democracies are depicted the extensive variety of systems for incorporating party members in consultation and decision-making inside the political parties. Therefore, in order to find out how the political parties function, several scholarly literatures have been consulted. Moreover, the Institutional approach is followed to see party operations and outcomes.

#### **2.2 PARTY POLITICS IN BANGLADESH**

Bangladesh is politically and geographically an important land in the Indian subcontinent. Political parties in Bangladesh have been emerging like mushrooms. As Hasnat Shakil, Marzia and Kaniz (2013) argue in *“Political Parties and Good*

*Governance: Bangladesh Perspective*” political parties in Bangladesh are formed on the basis of different ideologies like secular parties, left-wing and right-wing parties conservative Islamic parties, moderate Islamic parties, student-affiliated organizations and nationalist parties. Few parties have the same ideology. There are six nationalist parties, sixteen left or right-wing political parties and six Islamic parties in Bangladesh.

Despite such multiplicity, Aminul Islam (2005) contends in *“The Predicament of Democratic Consolidation in Bangladesh”* that party politics alternates around neither identities, nor thoughts or institutions in Bangladesh. He is of the opinion that since endeavors in the rebuilding of democratic system were made in the 1990s, the party politics of Bangladesh have additionally shown a propensity of compromise, though have now moved towards a fiercer nature. This view is reflected in Nizam Ahmed’s (2003) article *“From Monopoly to Competition: Party Politics in the Bangladesh Parliament (1973-2001)”* that the Parliament of Bangladesh, the Jatiya Sangsad (JS), which was cornered by a single party during the independence has turned into a competitive institution. He looks at the importance of greater inter-party rivalry for parliamentary dominance.

Rounaq Jahan (2003) in *“Bangladesh in 2002: Imperiled Democracy”* claims that party politics have not brought about any positive change in the way the government and political parties function in Bangladesh. The damaging encounters among and between the legislatures and the political oppositions have proceeded. Most exasperating is the way the political pioneers are unwilling to perceive how their activities are debilitating in democracy. Likewise, Aminul Islam (2002) claims in his article *“Political Parties and the Future of Democracy in Bangladesh”* that the politicians and political parties have indicated a high level of instability in