Bangladesh: Bangladesh Nationalist [National] Party (BNP), including its structure, leaders, factions, associated organizations, activities, membership and membership documents; treatment of members and supporters by the authorities (2017-May 2019)

1. BNP

For information concerning the foundation, history, ideology, and structure of the BNP up to 2015, as well as information concerning qualification for membership, see Response to Information Request BGD105262 of August 2015.

Sources indicate that the BNP is the main opposition party in Bangladesh (Odhikar 17 Apr. 2019, 6; Al Jazeera 29 Dec. 2018). The Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) describes the BNP as a party that is "more conservative, anti-India, urban-based and more accommodating of political Islam" [than the Awami League (AL), which leads the government] (Australia 2 Feb. 2018, para. 3.51). In 2017, Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment, as cited in a UK Home Office report, described the BNP as follows:

"The BNP follows a broad centre-right policy combined with a nationalist ideology. It has positioned itself more inclined towards the population of the country which wants to see a stronger role for Islam in society. However, while its nationalist credentials have remained undiminished, over the years, the BNP has sought to reduce its image as a political party with an Islamic orientation.

The party draws it political support from across the country, although initially its support was strongest among urban voters." (UK Jan. 2018, para. 4.5.1)

According to sources, politics in Bangladesh are dominated by the BNP and the AL in a two-party system where political coalitions led by the two parties occupy power alternately (Freedom House 31 Jan. 2019; Australia 2 Feb. 2018, para. 2.20, 3.51).

1.1 Participation in the December 2018 Parliamentary Elections

Sources report that parliamentary elections were held in Bangladesh on 30 December 2018 (Prothom Alo 5 May 2019a; IFES n.d.). Sources indicate that the BNP participated in those elections as the leader of the Jatiya Oikya Front (National Unity Front, NUF), a coalition of multiple parties (Al Jazeera 29 Dec. 2018; PTI 30 Dec. 2018). Sources further indicate that, at the time of the election, the NUF was led by Kamal Hossain (Al Jazeera 29 Dec. 2018; PTI 30 Dec. 2018; IFES n.d.) in the absence of Khaleda Zia, chairperson of the BNP, who is in jail (Al Jazeera 29 Dec. 2018). Sources report that the AL [leading the Grand Alliance (IFES n.d.)] won the elections with 288 seats out of 300 available seats, while the NUF won 7 seats (US 13 Mar. 2019, 26; IFES n.d.). Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was thus re-elected for a third consecutive term (BBC 31 Dec. 2018; The Guardian 31 Dec. 2018).
The results of these elections, sources report, were rejected and qualified as "farcical" by the opposition (BBC 31 Dec. 2018; The Guardian 31 Dec. 2018). According to sources, the BNP alleged various "irregularities" during the vote (The Daily Star 1 Jan. 2019; BBC 31 Dec. 2018), including "stuffed ballot boxes," in 221 of the 300 seats (BBC 31 Dec. 2018). Human Rights Watch reports the following:

Opposition parties, journalists, and voters alleged serious irregularities including ballot stuffing, voters being denied access to polling places, ruling party activists occupying polling places and casting ballots in the place of voters, electoral officials and the police behaving in a partisan manner, and violations of voter privacy in an atmosphere of blatant intimidation. The [BNP] said its polling agents were denied access in 221 constituencies. (Human Rights Watch 2 Jan. 2019)

The Bangladeshi human rights organization Odhikar similarly reports:

In this election, incidents of stuffing ballot boxes in the night before polling day, casting fake votes, voters being forced to vote openly for the ruling party candidates, "capturing" polling centres, arrests and forcibl[e] ousting of polling agents of the opposition party-nominated candidates and intimidation of voters by supporters of the ruling [AL]-nominated candidates, were just some of the actions taken to ensure victory. (Odhikar 17 Apr. 2019, 6-7)

Sources further mention that the BNP candidates who were elected rejected the results and did not "take oath" (Prothom Alo 5 May 2019a; The Daily Star 1 Jan. 2019).

Sources indicate that the BNP has been "weakened by regular harassment and arrests of key members" (Freedom House 4 Jan. 2018, 3) or "marginalised" by its defeat in the December 2018 elections (Jane's 9 Apr. 2019). Al Jazeera reports that there was "obvious state bias" against the BNP, and states the following:

In 2018, the BNP agreed to peacefully participate in the general election, yet failed to regain popular support. With most of its leaders and activists either in hiding or in jail, the party was almost invisible during the campaign and on the day of the vote. (Al Jazeera 9 Mar. 2019)

2. Leaders

Sources indicate that the BNP's Chairperson is Khaleda Zia, but that she is in jail on corruption charges (Al Jazeera 9 Mar. 2019; Freedom House 31 Jan. 2019). Sources state that the party's acting chairman is Tarique Rahman (Dhaka Tribune 5 May 2019; Prothom Alo 5 May 2019b; PTI 9 Feb. 2018), Khaleda Zia's son (Dhaka Tribune 5 May 2019; PTI 9 Feb. 2018). Tarique Rahman has also been sentenced to jail and is living in "exile" in London (Al Jazeera 9 Mar. 2019; PTI 9 Feb. 2018). According to sources, the party's Secretary General is Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir (The Daily Star 1 Jan. 2019; Dhaka Tribune 5 May 2019). Sources mention that "[m]any" BNP leaders are either in prison or jail, in "exile" (Al Jazeera 9 Mar. 2019; Amnesty International 8 May 2017, 12), or facing charges (Amnesty International 8 May 2017, 12).

3. Affiliated Organizations

Sources state that the BNP, like the AL, has "auxiliary" (Australia 2 Feb. 2018, para.
3.56) or "front" organizations (ACLED 9 Nov. 2018). According to Australia's DFAT, "[w]hile the exact size of these organisations is unknown, they are large" (Australia 2 Feb. 2018, para. 3.56). According to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) [1], these organizations allow the BNP to be "deeply entrenched into Bangladeshi society" (ACLED 9 Nov. 2018). As reported by the EU’s European Asylum Support Office (EASO), "[t]he BNP's Constitution states that 'front organizations' for the BNP have their own 'proclamation, constitution, flag and office,' but 'fall under the discipline' of the BNP" (EU Dec. 2017, 28-29). Australia's DFAT further notes that "auxiliary organisations support the political parties through fundraising and election-related activities. They also play a major role in inter- and intra-party violence" (Australia 2 Feb. 2018, para. 3.57). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The Australian DFAT provides a list of some of the BNP's "auxiliary" organizations:

- Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal (JCD) (student wing);
- Jatiyatabadi Jubo Dal (JJD) (youth wing);
- Bangladesh Jatiyatabadi Mohila Dal (women’s wing);
- Bangladesh Jatiyatabadi Krishak Dal (farmers' wing);
- Bangladesh Jatiyatabadi Muktijoddha Dal (freedom fighters' wing);
- Bangladesh Jatiyatabadi Sechchasebak Dal (volunteers' wing);
- Bangladesh Jatiyatabadi Samajik Sangskritik Sangstha (cultural wing);
- Bangladesh Jatiyatabadi Sramik Dal (workers'/labour wing);
- Bangladesh Jatiyatabadi Tanti Dal (weavers’ wing);
- Bangladesh Jatiyatabadi Olama Dal (religious wing);

4. Membership and Documents

Information on membership documents could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Information on membership was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response. The UK Home Office reports that, according to information provided to them by Transparency International Bangladesh in December 2017, the BNP, like the AL, has "several million members" (UK Jan. 2018, [4.1.2]). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

5. Factionalism

Information on factionalism in the BNP could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

6. Treatment of Members and Supporters by the Authorities

Sources state that the political culture in Bangladesh is characterized by violence (ACLED 9 Nov. 2018; EU Dec. 2017, 26) and confrontation (EU Dec. 2017, 26). From January through November 2018, Odhikar recorded 79 deaths and 3,826 people
injured as a result of political violence (Odhikar 9 Dec. 2018, 4). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Australia's DFAT reports that the political scene is characterized by a longstanding rivalry between the two main political parties, the AL and the BNP (Australia 2 Feb. 2018, para. 3.52). According to ACLED, Bangladesh has

an extremely violent and deadly conflict landscape that is marked by entrenched political bipartisanism rooted in the historic rivalries between the two major political parties – the secular, socialist [AL] and the nationalist [BNP] with its Islamic orientation. (ACLED 9 Nov. 2018)

The same source further explains that "[d]eep faultlines between the two major [political] blocks have led to an environment of toxic political enmity which frequently results in violence" (ACLED 9 Nov. 2018).

The British daily newspaper The Guardian reports that the leader of the AL, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, "has cemented her dominance in the past decade, using the state tools at her disposal to weaken the BNP and its organs, clamp down on judicial and media dissent and mostly check the country's small but potent Islamist movement" (The Guardian 31 Dec. 2018). In its 2019 annual report on the events of 2018, Human Rights Watch describes an ongoing "harsh crackdown to suppress those that disagree or are critical of the ruling" party in Bangladesh (Human Rights Watch 17 Jan. 2019). Freedom House reports that members of the BNP were harassed or intimidated by the authorities in 2017 (Freedom House 4 Jan. 2018) and in 2018 (Freedom House 31 Jan. 2019).

Sources indicate that the authorities blocked the BNP's official website in December 2018, ahead of the elections (Al Jazeera 29 Dec. 2018; AFP 22 Dec. 2018; The Daily Star 21 Dec. 2018). According to some sources, the reasons given were related to inappropriate content on the website (Al Jazeera 29 Dec. 2018; The Daily Star 21 Dec. 2018). AFP reports that, according to the BNP, the shutdown was allegedly for security reasons (AFP 22 Dec. 2018).

Sources mention that the authorities prevent the BNP from holding meetings and assemblies or rallies (US 13 Mar. 2019, 20; Odhikar 1 July 2018, para. 20, 22; Australia 2 Feb. 2018, para. 3.54). Odhikar reports that between January and June 2018, "police and members of the ruling party attacked and stopped peaceful rallies, meetings, signature campaigns, hunger-strikes, human chains and leaflet distribution programmes organised by BNP across the country" (Odhikar 1 July 2018, para. 22). Sources mention the following examples:

- According to the US Department of State's Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2018, "[t]he BNP was denied applications 'for security reasons' to hold rallies in Dhaka on March 11, 19, and 29 ..., but it was ultimately permitted to host its rally at a different location" (US 13 Mar. 2019, 20). The party received "verbal permission" to conduct a rally on 1 September 2018 in Dhaka and to create a human chain on 10 September 2018; however, hundreds of participants were "apprehended" during the events (US 13 Mar. 2019, 20);
- Odhikar reports that a BNP rally in Narayanganj city was stopped by a police barrier on 9 February 2019 (Odhikar 17 Apr. 2019, 17).

US Country Reports 2018 also indicates that the movements of some members of the
opposition are limited within the country, noting the case of senior BNP leader Moudud Ahmed, who was twice confined to his house in 2018 and prevented from contacting his "supporters and constituents, and from attending party-related events" (US 13 Mar. 2019, 22). Media sources also mention the confinement of Moudud Ahmed in June 2018 (New Age 20 June 2018; Dhaka Tribune 17 June 2018) and August 2018 (New Age 19 Aug. 2018; UNB 18 Aug. 2018).

Australia's DFAT indicates that it is "aware of cases" in which BNP leaders and members have been prevented from leaving the country (Australia 2 Feb. 2018, para. 5.20). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Sources report that false criminal charges [or "ghost cases" (Human Rights Watch 8 Feb. 2019)] have been made against BNP members by the police, listing examples of accused individuals who were dead, hospitalized or out of the country at the time of the alleged offence (US 13 Mar. 2019, 10; Human Rights Watch 8 Feb. 2019). According to US Country Reports 2018, "[o]n November 7 [2018], the BNP submitted to the Prime Minister's Office what it claimed to be a partial list of 1,046 'fictitious cases' filed against its leaders and activists" (US 13 Mar. 2019, 10). Odhikar reports that in November 2018, the police "filed 13 fictitious cases against 600 leaders-activists of BNP and Jamaat" in Comilla District, while 2 more cases were filed in Barisal against 87 leaders and activists of the BNP and its associated organizations (Odhikar 9 Dec. 2018, para. 4). US Country Reports 2018 indicates that, "[a]ccording to figures provided to the Dhaka Tribune by the BNP, 434,975 criminal charges in 4,429 cases were lodged against BNP members from September 1 through November 14 [2018]" (US 13 Mar. 2019, 9, italics in original).

Sources report arrests of BNP members and supporters by the authorities (Freedom House 31 Jan. 2019; Odhikar 9 Dec. 2018, para. 8). Some sources mention "mass arrest[s]" of supporters of the BNP (OMCT 22 Mar. 2018) or of "several thousands" of leaders and activists of the opposition, including the BNP (OMCT 22 Mar. 2018) and its affiliated organizations (Odhikar 7 July 2018, para. 20). According to Odhikar, on 26 March 2019, police arrested 12 BNP leaders and activists who were "pay[ing] tribute" at a monument to martyrs on Independence Day (Odhikar 17 Apr. 2019, 18). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response. According to US Country Reports 2018, "[p]olice implicated approximately 435,000 BNP members in criminal charges in the run-up to the national election and detained many of the accused. Human rights observers claimed many of these charges were politically motivated" (US 13 Mar. 2019, 27).

Odhikar reports multiple attacks against BNP protests and gatherings in 2018, including by the AL (Odhikar 9 Dec. 2018, para. 18, 19) and by police (Odhikar 9 Dec. 2018, para. 8; Odhikar 1 July 2018, para. 23). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Odhikar reports cases of alleged extrajudicial killings of BNP members:

On 22 May [2018] a Chhatra Dal [student wing of BNP] activist named Amjad Hossain in Netrokona and on 27 May a Jubo Dal [youth wing of BNP] leader named Rafiqul Islam in Jhenaidah, became victims of extrajudicial killing as alleged by their families. BNP claimed that their party leaders-activists were killed during such operations for political reasons. (Odhikar 1 July 2018, para. 10)
Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Human Rights Watch also notes cases of forcible disappearance of members of the opposition, including supporters of the BNP (Human Rights Watch 16 May 2018). Odhikar mentions the disappearance of Abu Bakar Siddiqui, Jessore District unit BNP leader, in November 2018 when he went to Dhaka to seek his nomination for his constituency; his body was found the next day (Odhikar 9 Dec. 2018, para. 10). According to the same source, BNP members alleged that he was "picked up by members of a law enforcement agency" and that, when BNP members went to the police, they were not provided with assistance (Odhikar 9 Dec. 2018, para. 10). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

6.1 Imprisonment of Leader Khaleda Zia

Sources report that in February 2018, Khaleda Zia was convicted on corruption charges (US 13 Mar. 2019, 27; ACLED 12 Apr. 2018) and sentenced to five years in prison (ACLED 12 Apr. 2018). Sources report that Khaleda Zia (Al Jazeera 29 Dec. 2018) [or her supporters (DW 14 Aug. 2018)] consider the charges against her to be politically motivated (Al Jazeera 29 Dec. 2018; DW 14 Aug. 2018). Sources also report that Khaleda Zia’s imprisonment prevented her from contesting the elections in December 2018 (Freedom House 31 Jan. 2019; Al Jazeera 29 Dec. 2018) "due to a ban on political candidacy by anyone sentenced [to] more than two years in prison," as per "a recent Supreme Court ruling" (Freedom House 31 Jan. 2019). Reuters similarly notes that "[u]nder Bangladesh electoral rules, anyone jailed for more than two years cannot contest an election for five years" (Reuters 12 Mar. 2018).

Human Rights Watch reports that "[h]undreds" of BNP supporters, among others, were arrested or detained in the days leading up to Khaleda Zia’s sentencing, noting that some groups alleged that the number of arrests or detentions was as high as 1,786, according to "Dhaka-based group Ain O Salish Kendra" or "thousands," according to the BNP (Human Rights Watch 8 Feb. 2018). The World Organisation Against Torture (Organisation mondiale contre la torture, OMCT) claims that the authorities "began arresting supporters of the [BNP], ahead of the verdict" against Zia, "[s]tarting on 30 January 2018" (OMCT 22 Mar. 2018). ACLED further reports that "[a]pproximately one thousand BNP leaders and activists were arrested in the cities of Dhaka and Chittagong while protesting the verdict" in February and March 2018 (ACLED 12 Apr. 2018). OMCT states that "[o]ver the course of a month [following the sentencing], almost 5,000 opposition supporters, including ordinary people who were suspected of being opposition sympathizers, were arrested throughout almost all of the country’s districts. Most of them remain detained in prisons throughout Bangladesh" (OMCT 22 Mar. 2018).

6.2 Pre-Electoral Period

Sources indicate a "crackdown" on the opposition or on the BNP ahead of the 30 December 2018 elections (Freedom House 31 Jan. 2019; FIDH 29 Dec. 2018; OMCT 22 Mar. 2018). According to Human Rights Watch, "[a]head of [the] national elections ..., Bangladesh authorities detained or jailed senior members of main opposition parties, [and] lodged politically motivated trumped-up cases against thousands of opposition supporters" (Human Rights Watch 17 Jan. 2019). According to Freedom House, the "BNP claimed that 6,000 of its supporters and 10 of its
candidates had been arrested ahead of the elections, and that its candidates were subject to intimidation and violence" (Freedom House 31 Jan. 2019). Al Jazeera reports that the "BNP claims half of the opposition’s 300 candidates were attacked while campaigning, while more than 11,500 of its members, including over a dozen contenders, [were] detained in [December 2018]," in the lead-up to the election (Al Jazeera 29 Dec. 2018). According to the International Federation for Human Rights (Fédération internationale des ligues des droits de l'homme, FIDH), "at least 43 candidates of the Jatiya Oikya Front were attacked and 13 candidates were seriously injured, [and] 17 opposition candidates were arrested" (FIDH 29 Dec. 2018). Media sources report in December 2018 that six people were killed in election "campaign clashes" (Al Jazeera 29 Dec. 2018; AFP 22 Dec. 2018), four of whom were BNP members (Al Jazeera 29 Dec. 2018). US Country Reports 2018 indicates that "[a]ccording to data assembled by the NGO Democracy International, there were 1,324 acts of violence against the opposition BNP and its political allies ... during the month prior to the election" (US 13 Mar. 2019, 27).

Sources also report that BNP candidates were disqualified from participating in the elections by the authorities (Freedom House 31 Jan. 2019; FIDH 29 Dec. 2018); according to Freedom House, 141 BNP candidates were disqualified (Freedom House 31 Jan. 2019).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

Note

[1] The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), which receives financial support from various governments and organizations, including the US Department of State and the European Research Council (ERC), is a project that aims to collect the dates and locations of all reported political violence and protest events across Africa, South Asia, South East Asia, and the Middle East, among others (ACLED n.d.).

References


Additional Sources Consulted

**Internet sites, including:** Bangladesh – National Portal; Bangladesh Nationalist Party; Bertelsmann Stiftung – Transformation Index; eci.net; Europa World Year Book; France – Office français de protection des réfugiés et apatrides; Germany – Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge; International Crisis Group; *Political Handbook of the World.*