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Responses to Information Requests

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31 August 2015

BGD105262.E

Bangladesh: Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), including its structure, leaders, membership and membership documents, factions, associated organizations and activities; treatment of members and supporters by authorities (September 2012-2015)

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. Overview

According to sources, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) [Bangladesh Jatiyatabadi Dal] was established in 1978 (BNP. n.d.b; *PHW* 2014, 114). Sources describe it as the main opposition party (*Al Jazeera* 5 Jan. 2014; *Jane's Intelligence Review* 2 July 2015; *The Wall Street Journal* 1 Aug. 2013). Sources further describe the party as "center-right" (*ibid.*; *UCAN* 5 Jan. 2015; *IRGAmag* 7 Aug. 2013). According to the BNP's Constitution, as posted on the party's website, their objectives include: increasing democracy through "mass unity based on Bangladeshi nationalism"; protecting Bangladesh from "colonialism"; advancing economic development through a "free market economy"; and "preserv[ing] the...human values of the Bangladeshi people through the teaching of Islam" (BNP n.d.a, Art. 2). According to sources, the BNP leads an 18-party alliance (*PHW* 2014, 115; *South Asia Monitor* 27 July 2015; *Al Jazeera* 5 Jan. 2014).

According to the BBC, the ruling Awami League (AL) and BNP have "alternated from government to opposition for most of the last two decades" (BBC 3 Jan. 2014). Sources state that the BNP were elected to government from 1991-1996 and from 2001-2006 (*ibid.*; *PHW* 2014, 111-112). A 2014 monitoring report by Human Rights Watch on pre and post-election violence describes the relationship between the ruling AL and the BNP as "longstanding, bitter, personal, and [which] often turns violent" (Human Rights Watch Apr. 2014, 10). Sources describe the relationship between the leaders of the BNP and AL as a "personal feud" (*The Guardian* 6 Jan. 2014) or a "personal vendetta" (*The Economist* 2 Feb. 2015).

1.1 Structure and Leaders

The BNP website describes the structure of the party as being guided by the Standing Committee at the top. There is an Executive Committee elected by the members of district committees. The district committees are responsible for organizing committees at the lower level ... at the unions and villages within the relevant district. (BNP n.d.b)

For further information on the structure of the party, including information on the Executive Committee's structure, roles and responsibilities, see Response to Information Request BGD104933.

According to sources, the main leaders of the BNP are

- Khaleda Zia, former Prime Minister and head of the BNP, who served as Prime Minister in 1991-1996 and again in the 2001 term (BBC 3 Jan. 2014; BNP n.d.b; *PHW* 2014, 114);
- Tarique Rahman, Senior Vice Chair (ibid., 115; *The Wall Street Journal* 12 Jan. 2015); and
- Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, Secretary General (*PHW* 2014, 115; BBC 6 Jan. 2015).

1.2 Membership Documents

The BNP's Constitution states the following regarding applications for party membership:

Membership:

5. (a) Qualification for membership

1. Any Bangladeshi citizen of the age of 18 years or above can be primary member of this party. The aspirants have to declare adherence to the party's proclamation, constitution and programmes.
2. The application at schedule 1, form 'a' of the constitution will be filled up for primary membership. This form will be available at the party office. No other form will be accepted for membership but when not available, printing of same form will be allowed for application of membership,
3. If the form is accepted for consideration, identification (Schedule 1, Form 'kha') will have to be collected as evidence.
4. Subscription fee is 5 [Bangladeshi Taka, BDT] [approximately C\$0.09] only for primary membership. Annual subscription fee after getting membership is 5 [BDT] only. The subscription from the members will be taken by receipt and the receipt will be provided from the party's central office.
5. Every upazila or thana office at its own locality will preserve the list of members of the party. The party's central office in Dhaka will preserve as per rules the total number of members, name of members and their address. (BNP n.d.a)

Information on the appearance of, and procedures for obtaining membership documents for BNP party members could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

2. Factions

According to a July 2015 article in the *Dhaka Courier*, an English-language news magazine, infighting is spreading within the BNP and there are signs of "factionalism" and defection among the grassroots-level leaders (*Dhaka Courier* 30 July 2015). Without providing further detail, according to a July 2014 human rights monitoring report by Odhikar, an "organisation of human rights defenders in Bangladesh" that monitors and reports on human rights violations (Odhikar 1 July 2014, 2), between January and June 2014, two people were killed and 129 injured during internal conflicts within the BNP (ibid., 12). According to the US Department of State *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2014*, there were thirteen incidents of violence within the BNP, in which three people were killed and 83 injured (US 25 June 2015, 3). The same source further states that the violence was "often linked to criminal activities rather than to political motives" (ibid.). In July 2015, Odhikar reported that between January and June 2015, one person was killed and 69 injured as a result of intra-party violence within the BNP (ibid. 2015, 2).

Without providing further detail, sources published in July 2015 stated that "some" members of the BNP are leaving the party to join the AL (*Jane's Intelligence Review* 2 July 2015; *Dhaka Courier* 9 July 2015).

3. Allied Organizations

3.1 Jamaat-e-Islami

Sources state that the BNP is allied with Jamaat-e-Islami, an Islamist party (*The Economist* 5 Mar. 2015; *The Hindu* 28 July 2015). Sources further state that in 2013, a high court panel ruling canceled the electoral registration of the Jamaat-e-Islami party, preventing them from running in the 2014 elections (*The Guardian* 1 Aug. 2013; Al Jazeera 1 Aug. 2013; *The Wall Street Journal* 1 Aug. 2013), ruling that some elements of the party's Charter were incompatible with Bangladesh's Constitution (ibid.).

3.2 Front and Associate Organizations

The 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 (BNP n.d.a, Art. 13). The party's Constitution also states that all front organizations require the approval of the chairman of the BNP and that one secretary from each front organization will be included in the national BNP executive committee (ibid.). The purpose of front organizations is to support the "implementation of party programs" and as such, front organizations will "formulate [their] own programmes for the aim of creating influence in its own arena and extending the party ideology" (ibid.). The party's Constitution provides that the following front organizations have "received approval from the chairman":

1. Bangladesh Jatiyatabadi Muktijoddha Dal
2. Bangladesh Jatiyatabadi Jubo Dal
3. Bangladesh Jatiyatabadi Mohila Dal
4. Bangladesh Jatiyatabadi Samajik Sangskritik Sangstha
5. Bangladesh Jatiyatabadi Krishak Dal
6. Bangladesh Jatiyatabadi Sechchasebak Dal
7. Bangladesh Jatiyatabadi Tanti Dal
8. Bangladesh Jatiyatabadi Olama Dal
9. Bangladesh Jatiyatabadi Matshayajibi Dal (ibid.).

According to the party's Constitution, professional groups that "believe in the principles, ideology, objectives and programmes of the party" can be organized to protect their interests as an "associate organization" of the BNP (ibid.). The BNP notes that the Jatiyatabadi Chhatra [Chartro] Dal and the Bangladesh Jatiyatabadi Sramik [Sromik] Dal are associate organizations of the party (ibid. n.d.c), and according to the party's Constitution, these organizations will operate according to their own constitutions (ibid. n.d.a, Art. 13).

3.3 Youth and Student Organizations of the BNP

Sources indicate that the Jubo Dal is a "front organization" of the BNP (ibid. n.d.a.; *The Indian Express* 2 Jan. 2014; *The Daily Star* 8 Mar. 2015). Others describe it as a "youth wing" of the BNP (*Odhikar* 15 Apr. 2014, para. 226; Human Rights Watch Apr. 2014, 25; *New Age* 28 Dec. 2014). Without providing details of the charges, Bangladeshi daily newspaper the *New Age* reports that Syed Moazzem Hossain Alal, President of the Jubo Dal, was arrested in late December 2014 (28 Dec. 2014). According to another Bangladeshi newspaper, the *Daily Observer*, an arrest warrant was issued for Alal in June 2015 "in a sabotage case"; the source notes that the court rejected his "time petition" and that he did not appear before the court (23 June 2015). Further and corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

For further information on the structure, roles and responsibilities of the Jubo Dal and their Executive Committee, see Response to Information Request BGD104933.

While the BNP describes the Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal as an associate organization (BNP n.d.c), other sources describe it as the "student wing" of the BNP (*The Daily Observer* 24 Oct. 2014; *New Age* 2 Aug. 2015; *The Daily Star* 26 Feb. 2015). According to Human Rights Watch, the members of the student wings of both the BNP and AL "are often implicated in violent attacks and clashes" (Apr. 2014, 10). The *Dhaka Tribune*, an English-language Bangladeshi newspaper, similarly reports that in December 2014, charges were filed against "150 leaders and activists of [the] BNP and its youth and student wings" in relation to violent clashes in Bakshibazar ahead of a scheduled court appearance for BNP leader Khaleda Zia (26 Dec. 2014).

Bangladeshi daily newspaper the *New Nation* reported in July 2015 that, according to several BNP leaders that spoke to the newspaper, many of the former student leaders remained in hiding "to avert arrest" and were quoted in the article as saying that the student wing of the BNP is "the main target of the government, as they play a vital role during movements" (29 July 2015). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

4. Activities

4.1 2014 Elections

4.1.1 Boycotting of 2014 Elections

Sources state that the BNP and other opposition parties boycotted the January 2014 general elections (US 30 Apr. 2015, 193; BBC 5 Jan. 2015; *The Christian Science Monitor* 5 Jan. 2014), in response to the refusal of AL leader, Sheikh Hasina, to allow a "neutral caretaker" government to oversee the election (ibid.;

BBC 5 Jan. 2015). The neutral caretaker system was seen as a safeguard against election fraud that had been used in Bangladesh since 1996 (UN 4 Feb. 2014; Human Rights Watch Apr. 2014, 10), a system that AL initially demanded be put in place while in opposition to the BNP (ibid.). It was abolished by the AL (ibid.; UN 4 Feb. 2014; *The Daily Star* 1 July 2011) in 2011 (ibid.).

As a result of the election boycott, the majority of the parliamentary seats were uncontested (Human Rights Watch Apr. 2014, 1; AFP 5 Jan. 2015; US 25 June 2015, 1) and the ruling AL won the election (ibid.). According to sources, there was also a low voter turnout (Freedom House 28 Jan. 2015; *The Independent* 6 Jan. 2014; *International New York Times* 5 Jan. 2014). Voter participation estimates ranged from 22 percent (*The Independent* 6 Jan. 2014; *International New York Times* 5 Jan. 2014) to 40 percent (US 25 June 2015, 20). According to sources, AL won between 232 (*The Independent* 6 Jan. 2014; *The Guardian* 6 Jan. 2014) and 235 of the 300 directly elected seats (US 25 June 2015, 20).

4.1.2 Political Violence and the January 2014 Elections

Sources state that prior to the January 2014 elections, the BNP-led opposition called for "blockades" [*abarudh*, or traffic blockades] in October 2013 (Human Rights Watch Apr. 2014, 13; *New Age* 14 June 2015) and *hartals* [general strikes] in October 2013 (ibid.). Sources further state that BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami supporters allegedly used petrol bombs to enforce the blockades (Human Rights Watch 29 Jan. 2015; *The Diplomat* 22 May 2015). According to Human Rights Watch, BNP and Jamaat supporters were identified by their neighbours as being responsible for attacks on Hindu homes and businesses, including an attack on the village of Kornai in Diajpur district (Human Rights Watch Apr. 2014, 19, 20). Sources state that approximately 500 people were killed in political violence leading up to the January 2014 elections (AFP 5 Jan. 2015; Andersen 4 May 2015). According to Human Rights Watch, the January 2014 elections "were the most violent in the country's history" (Apr. 2014, 1).

Sources indicate that opposition supporters also attacked polling stations during the 2014 elections (ibid., 13; AFP 5 Jan. 2015). According to the 2014 monitoring report by Odhikar, BNP supporters removed ballot boxes and papers from a school in Digharpar and polling was subsequently suspended at that location (Odhikar 1 July 2014, 15). The same source further reports that BNP and Jamaat activists attacked Palpara and Sahapur polling centers (ibid.). According to Human Rights Watch, local media reported that on 4 January 2014, between 100 and 150 BNP-Jamaat supporters attacked the Molani Cheprikura polling station in Thakurgaon (Human Rights Watch Apr. 2014, 18).

The US Department of State's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2014* for Bangladesh, states that violence decreased after the elections, though it did not end (US 25 June 2015, 3). The same source cites a local NGO as reporting that "124 persons were killed and 6,087 injured" in political violence between January and August 2014 (ibid.).

4.1.3 2015 Blockades

Sources state that in the days surrounding 5 January 2015, the BNP called for blockades to mark the anniversary of the contested 2014 elections (*The Economist* 2 Feb. 2015; Odhikar 1 July 2015, 2). Sources indicate that BNP supporters were urged to disrupt road, rail and river transport (BBC 5 Jan. 2015; *The Economist* 2 Feb. 2015). Sources describe the blockades as being country-wide (ibid.; Odhikar 1 July 2015, 2). According to sources, the blockades were an attempt to force AL leader Sheikh Hasina to hold new elections (BBC 19 Mar. 2015; AFP 5 Jan. 2015). Sources state that the blockades lasted approximately three months (*Dhaka Courier* 9 July 2015; *Jane's Intelligence Review* 2 July 2015; *The Diplomat* 22 May 2015). According to the 2015 Odhikar monitoring report, the blockades were suspended on 29 March 2015 so that the city elections in Dhaka and Chittagong could be held on 28 April 2015 (1 July 2015, 2).

Sources state that over 100 people have been killed since the blockades (*The New York Times* 9 Apr. 2015; *The Economist* 5 Mar. 2015; Reuters 26 Apr. 2015); and "hundreds" injured (ibid.). *The Economist* reports that most of those who died were "killed by firebombs thrown by the opposition and many [were] shot by police" (5 Mar. 2015). Sources report that the attacks were against vehicles during the transport blockades (Reuters 26 Apr. 2015; *Prothom Alo* 12 July 2015). Amnesty International (AI) reports that BNP-led opposition supporters threw petrol bombs at buses and vehicles, resulting in the deaths of two dozen people and injury to hundreds of others (AI 29 Jan. 2015). Bangladesh newspaper, the *Independent*, reports that the BNP held a press conference at which the party spokesperson denied BNP involvement in the "petrol bomb attacks and incidents of sabotage" and said that the party "demand[s] an investigation under the supervision of the [UN] to identify the real culprits" (*The Independent* 12 July 2015).

4.2 Dhaka and Chittagong City Corporation 2015 Elections

According to sources, the BNP-backed mayoral candidates in the cities of Dhaka and Chittagong boycotted the April 2015 city council elections (Xinhua News Agency 28 Apr. 2015; Reuters 28 Apr. 2015; *The Wall Street Journal* 29 Apr. 2015), due to allegations of fraud, intimidation, and voter-rigging (ibid.). *The Wall Street Journal* reports that the BNP announced its withdrawal from the elections while balloting was taking place, "citing polling irregularities" (ibid.).

5. Treatment of BNP Members by Authorities

5.1 Pre and Post-2014 Elections

According to Freedom House, "harassment of the opposition" by the ruling AL party was "widespread in 2014," and included "preemptive detention and limitations placed on political activities" (28 Jan. 2015). Reporting in February 2015, the *Economist* states that "more than 10,000 opposition activists" have been arrested (2 Feb. 2015).

Sources report the following instances of treatment of BNP members by the authorities, before and after the 2014 elections:

- According to Human Rights Watch, in November 2013, several BNP members, including BNP standing committee members, a BNP executive committee member, the organizing secretary of BNP's central committee in Chittagong, BNP Joint Secretary General, and BNP head Khaleda Zia's special assistant were arrested; charged with various crimes related to inciting violence; and later released on bail (Human Rights Watch Apr. 2014, 50-54).
- On 27 November 2013, BNP politicians Saiful Islam Hiru and Humayuan Kabir Pervez disappeared; according to Human Rights Watch, they were reportedly last seen being "forcibly transferred to a RAB [Rapid Action Battalion] vehicle" (ibid., 47).
- According to Human Rights Watch, on 26 December 2013, a number of BNP members were reportedly arrested, including two who were charged with "vandalism and torching vehicles"; all were later released (ibid., 53-55).
- According to Human Rights Watch, on 30 December 2013, a "local BNP leader [was] killed by security forces" in an alleged "gunfight between the security forces and Jamaat-Shibir members in the Satkhira district," however, relatives claim that he had been detained by security forces earlier that day (ibid., 36).
- According to Odhikar, between 1 January 2014 and 30 June 2014, 12 "leaders-activists" of the BNP were among 108 people from several political parties who were killed "extra-judicially" (Odhikar 1 July 2014, 4).
- Election-related violence between November and January 2014 documented by Odhikar indicates that eight BNP and Jamaat activists were shot "during a clash with police at Ramnagar Government Primary School polling center"; among them was a Jubo Dal activist who died from his injuries (ibid., 16).
- On 7 January 2014, eight BNP politicians were arrested by police, including the BNP Vice-Chair, who was detained after giving a press conference announcing new demonstrations (Human Rights Watch Apr. 2014, 5).
- Also on 7 January 2014, a Jubo Dal activist was apprehended by a group of men claiming to be police and transferred to a police station (Odhikar 1 July 2014, 8). Odhikar reports that the activist was shot in the leg, detained and later released on bail (ibid., 8-9).
- On 27 January 2014, a local leader of a BNP student wing was killed by police in Satkhira district (Odhikar 1 July 2014, 4; Human Rights Watch Apr. 2014, 28) in what the authorities claimed was a gunfight that occurred during an operation to "arrest his accomplices and recover weapons" (ibid.).
- On 30 January 2014, a leader of Jubo Dal was killed in Fazilpur village, Feni district (ibid., 24). Human Rights Watch reports that authorities claimed the individual was killed during "an attack on the security forces" who had detained him, while witnesses reported that there was no such attack and that he was killed in a house close to his home (ibid., 24-25).
- Also on 30 January 2014, a BNP leader in Noakhali district was killed by police during what officials claimed was a gunfight that occurred during an operation to recover weapons from the individual's home (ibid., 27).
- On 5 February 2014, a BNP leader in Laximpur district was apprehended by individuals identifying themselves as "members of the Detective Branch of the Bangladesh Police" (ibid., 43). His family was unaware of his whereabouts as of 9 February 2014 (ibid.).
- BBC reported in January 2015 that "[d]ozens of BNP workers have disappeared" since the 2014 elections (BBC 6 Jan. 2015). The source reports that the government denies involvement in the disappearances (ibid.).

5.2 2015 Blockades

According to a *New York Times* article published in April 2015, "dozens of BNP officials and activists" have been arrested since the January 2015 election and opposition "campaign of political strikes and transport blockades" (9 Apr. 2015).

According to the July 2015 Odhikar monitoring report, during the 2015 blockades there were "incidents of enforced disappearance, extrajudicial killings, shooting in the legs and torture" and that "most of the victims ... were activists of the BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami" (Odhikar 1 July 2015, 3). The same source further states that between January and June 2015, of 104 people killed "extra-judicially," 19 were "leader-activists" of the BNP (ibid., 9).

Further and corroborating information about the treatment of BNP members surrounding the 2015 blockades could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

5.3 Treatment of BNP Leaders

Sources state that many BNP leaders have been detained or charged in relation to the pre-election violence (AFP 5 Jan. 2015; *The Economist* 2 Feb. 2015; *The Guardian* 6 Jan. 2014), including charges of "fomenting violence" (ibid.). Freedom House similarly reports that charges have been filed against "senior BNP members" (28 Jan. 2015). According to Human Rights Watch, "many" of the victims of human rights violations it documented in its April 2014 monitoring report were "leaders and activists belonging to BNP, Jamaat, or their student wings," having documented the killing of 11 opposition leaders and activists by security forces during and after the 5 January elections: 4 from the BNP and 7 linked to Jamaat (Human Rights Watch Apr. 2014, 23-24). The same source further states that "in some cases the authorities appeared to target the victims because of suspected involvement in specific crimes [and] [i]n other cases, however, security forces appeared to seek out influential opposition district and sub-district-level leaders who might have been able to mobilize people to protest against the government" (ibid.).

According to sources, BNP leader Khaleda Zia was prevented from leaving her home in the days surrounding the 2014 elections (Freedom House 28 Jan. 2015; *The Wall Street Journal* 5 Jan. 2015; Human Rights Watch Apr. 2014, 55). Human Rights Watch states that Zia was unable to attend a rally on 26 December 2013 and was not allowed to leave until after the 5 January 2014 election (ibid.). In January 2015, surrounding the anniversary of the 2014 elections, she was again confined, this time to her office (AFP 5 Jan. 2015; BBC 5 Jan. 2015; *The Economist* 5 Mar. 2015). Sources indicate that Zia is facing charges dating back to 2007 for corruption charges related to the awarding of business contracts while the BNP was in government (The Canadian Press 5 Aug. 2015; AFP 5 Aug. 2015). Additional sources state that she is facing charges of instigating violence in relation to the 2015 blockades (Reuters 26 Apr. 2015; *Prothom Alo* 12 July 2015). According to the *Daily Star*, a Bangladeshi newspaper, she and "37 others, mostly her party men," have been charged with murder in relation to their "alleged involvement in a petrol bomb attack on a bus in the capital's Jatrabari" in January 2015 (16 May 2015).

Sources state that BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir was arrested in January 2015 (BBC 6 Jan. 2015; VOA 6 Jan. 2015; *Dhaka Tribune* 15 July 2015). According to the BBC, he was arrested on charges of "arson, bombings and vandalism" (6 Jan. 2015). According to the *Dhaka Tribune*, he was released on bail six months after his arrest, in July 2015 (15 July 2015).

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.

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