

Prothom Alo English

<https://en.prothomalo.com/opinion/fmr5oq3ptk>

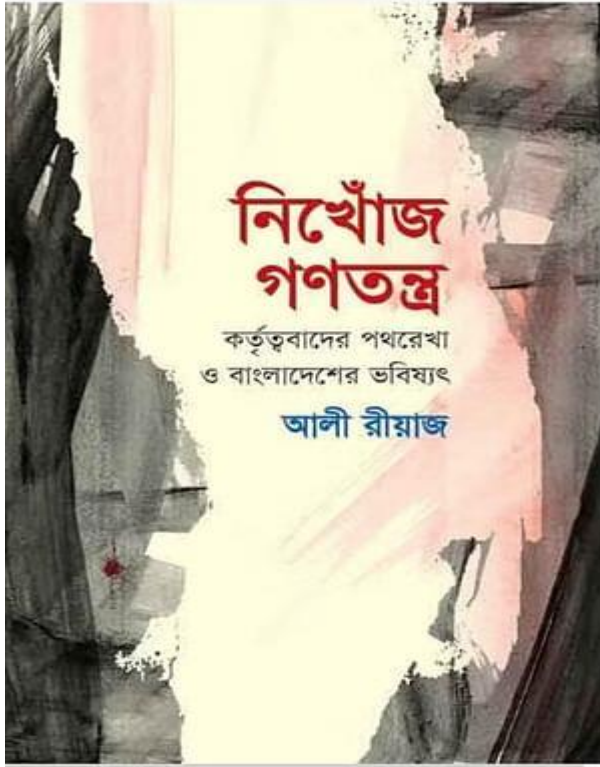
[Opinion](#)

Book review

Contemporary Bangladesh politics and *Ali Riaz's Nikhoj Gonotonra*

Md Mahmudul Hasan

Published: 02 Feb 2023, 21: 19



Some time ago a Dhaka-based cultural artist obtained a nomination paper from the ruling party Bangladesh Awami League to contest in a parliamentary by-election. Interestingly, the way it was reported in the media suggested she had already won the ticket to parliament. Although eventually she didn't get the nomination, it does show how the absence of democracy allows such expectations. All this tells us volumes about the state of democracy in present-day Bangladesh.

As regards parliamentary elections in the country, it is almost certain that ruling party candidates will make it to parliament even without competing for peoples' votes. Nomination from the ruling party and loyalty to it, are more important than the support and confidence of the electorate. Hence, once electoral candidates of the ruling party become members of parliament (MPs) or ministers, they remain beholden to the party, not to the people of their constituency or the country; and they serve the interests of the former, not the latter.

Bangladesh's last general election in 2018 was not fair in any sense of the word and suggesting otherwise perhaps would be comical and tragic in equal measure. Since the government in Dhaka purportedly didn't come to power through democratic means, it may feel threatened whenever the opposition parties want to organise big rallies in the city. For example, from 12 October to 3 December last year, the opposition BNP held massive rallies in nine divisional cities. Despite inexplicable, bizarre transport strikes supposedly orchestrated by the government to thwart them, all nine rallies were marked by the attendance of large crowds of people. The 10th and last rally of the BNP – the climax in that series – was held in Dhaka on 10 December 2022. It was equally successful but faced greater hostility and non-cooperation from the government.

Why do opposition rallies in Dhaka arouse heightened discomfort for the government?

Coincidentally, on the day of the BNP's Dhaka rally, I had an experience at a social event which may shed some light on this question at a micro level.

I visited a family in Kuala Lumpur. A father and his toddler son were there as guests. Right after entering the house, the toddler snatched some toys that belonged to a toddler of the host family. Now whenever the host child neared his guest counterpart (the usurper of toys) – even without the intention to reclaim his property – the guest child screamed and wanted his father to hit the host toddler. This drama continued for a couple of hours and kept the whole house astir.

I leave it to the reader to interpret and relate the behaviour of the guest toddler in the above story to that of the current political situation in Bangladesh.

As the behaviour of the government suggests, democracy in Bangladesh has disappeared and elections have lost all their democratic content as well as their appeal to the people. General elections in Bangladesh in 1991, 1996, 2001 and 2008 were held under the caretaker government system and were largely acceptable. In the 1990s, the Awami League as an opposition party successfully fought for the restoration of the caretaker government and

came to power through the 1996 election held under such a system. Unfortunately, the same Awami League – now the ruling party – abolished it in 2011. That heralded an electoral breakdown at the expense of democratic freedoms and institutions, as a result of which staged elections – such as those in 2014 and 2018 – have now become routine.

In *Nikhoj Gonotontra: Kortrittabder Pothrekha o Bangladesher Bhobhiswat* (Missing Democracy: A Roadmap of Authoritarianism and the Future of Bangladesh [Dhaka: Prothoma Prokashon, 2021]), Ali Riaz provides an account of the systematic destruction of democratic rights and principles in contemporary Bangladesh. Through centralizing power and choking the democratic system, the government seems to have launched what Ali Riaz terms “a pandemic of repression” in the country.

Semantically, the first word – *nikhoj* – in the title of Ali Riaz’s book also implies ‘enforced disappearance’ and reminds readers of innumerable instances of such enforced disappearances which many Bangladeshis have faced in the last decade or so.

Nikhoj Gonotontra provides a detailed account of the progressive erosion of democracy, civil liberties and the rule of law in Bangladesh under the current government. As a result, state repression against members of opposition parties has become the norm. For years it has been the only response of the government to public dissent or to the growing democratic challenge from opposition parties.

Ali Riaz puts forward recommendations and considerations that may need to be taken into account to restore democracy and human rights in Bangladesh. The book is informed by the author’s decades-long research and study into the political trajectory of the countries in South Asia, especially Bangladesh. I highly recommend it to anyone who is professionally or otherwise interested in contemporary Bangladeshi politics.

** Dr Md. Mahmudul Hasan teaches English and postcolonial literature at International Islamic University Malaysia. Email: mmhasan@iium.edu.my*