



## Opinion

<https://www.newagebd.net/post/opinion/276619/does-the-bnp-leadership-get-it>

<https://epaper.newagebd.net/21-09-2025/8>

### Does the BNP leadership get it?

by Md Mahmudul Hasan 21 September, 2025, 00:00



ONE of my earliest childhood memories is walking with my elder brother in our village market and experiencing an overwhelming sadness that radiated all around. It was May 30, 1981 — the day when President Ziaur Rahman was brutally assassinated in Chattogram. Entire Bangladesh was seized by the horror of his death. The enormity of shock and a sense of great loss that the sad news triggered were evident on people's faces.

The radio — the main source of instant information in those days — broke the news and was buzzing with Islamic recitals. My brother and I were holding hands and going from one shop to another in the bazar unnoticed. We found everyone listening to the radio and processing the grief. Truly, it was a day of national mourning and a day when people from all walks of life were united by sorrow.

I have never witnessed a day of such collective grief and mourning in our country since then.

The grief visited upon our family in an equal manner. Life came to a sudden halt because of the death of Ziaur Rahman. From that day on, I knew that my parents and others in the family as well as many of our near and distant relatives had great sympathy for the martyred president.

Among all our extended family members, my *nana* (maternal grandfather) was perhaps more indulgent in his fondness for the Zia family and in his support for the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). During the last years of his life in the 1990s, he

used to read all news stories involving BNP chairperson Khaleda Zia that were printed in the newspaper made available in the family. This led some of my cousins to make mischievous jokes behind his back.

During the 1991 general elections, I followed some of my maternal cousins to nanibari — as we call our maternal grandparents' home. Nana was also part of the convoy that went from Dhaka to the village. We gathered to celebrate and enjoy the first taste of electoral democracy after the country had suffered from a democratic deficit during the Ershad regime in the 1980s.

I was not of voting age, but since nana was quite old and had chronic eyesight problems I accompanied him to the polling centre at the village primary school. The polling officer — who knew nana — allowed me to enter the balloting-room with him. Nana was looking for BNP's electoral symbol on the ballot paper and said to me, '*Dhaner shish-ta koi re*' (where is the sheaf of paddy?). I helped him find it and he got his job done.

Partly because of my family background and partly because of the distasteful Awami League politics I always had a soft spot in my heart for BNP. During political conversations with my friends, a debate on the comparative merit of Awami League and BNP creeps in quite often. Friends and acquaintances argue that there is virtually no difference in the conduct and comportment of these two major political groups.

I always disagreed and tended to maintain that BNP and Chhatra Dal people were much better than their counterparts in Awami League and its student wing, Chhatra League. As my argument went, at least BNP people profess to prioritise our country and do not put it up for sale in the interest of a neighbouring country (I am not sure if I can make such a claim now).

In most cases, my friends and I went our separate ways unconvinced by each other's counterarguments. Deep inside, I always believed that BNP was relatively better than Awami League. That is not to say that I was dismissive of the corruption and abuse of power allegedly perpetrated by BNP leaders, especially when they were in power. Like many others, I was aware of the bad elements within the party. However, when comparing it with Awami League, BNP was always in my good books.

My inclination to defend BNP continued up until the end of Sheikh Hasina's mafia-style autocracy. During her fifteen-and-a-half-year misrule, innumerable BNP people were subjected to horrendous human rights abuses including extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances. Like members of other opposition parties, thousands of BNP activists went into hiding within the country or sought to protect themselves from oppression through concealment of identity. Thus, many of them were internally displaced within Bangladesh or fled to other countries. All such stories of atrocities garnered huge public sympathy for BNP and its affiliates during the Hasina regime.

Unfortunately, soon after Hasina fell and fled on August 5, 2025, it didn't take long for BNP people to change their tune and for the people of Bangladesh to change their mind about BNP. The bad apples within the party rushed to replace their Awami

counterparts in hooliganism and greed for power and ill-gotten wealth. Upon the scandalous end of Awami misrule, many BNP people who were victims of Hasina's autocracy themselves became oppressors in no time.

For example, in the absence of Awami reprobate criminals, businesses and other financial institutions in many parts of Bangladesh experienced no respite from *chandabaji* (money extortion). This is because soon after Hasina was ousted and the Awami extortionists became inactive or left their localities to avoid public wrath for their misdeeds, BNP men stepped in and became hell-bent on extorting money in equal or more extreme form.

Upon the fall of Hasina and her cronies, BNP people seemed euphoric and thought that they were on course to come to power. The attitude they have exhibited towards the people of Bangladesh suggests that, in the absence of Awami League, the only party that can rule Bangladesh is BNP.

More than a year on since Hasina's fall, it is now clear that BNP misread the sentiment of the public. People of Bangladesh, especially the youth, laid down their lives or were ready to risk their lives and limbs not simply to remove Hasina from power. They launched the July uprising to break the corrupt system that had been in place during much of the time since the birth of our country in 1971.

For decades we were deceived by slogans or in the name of this or that *chetona* (spirit). Dominant political groups sought to make us oblivious to our real problems. Our country was being plundered by successive governments to different extents; our lives became cheap; thugs of various student organisations forced students to live in serfdom at the country's universities; women, especially female university students, had no safety and were sexually harassed and exploited; and the list goes on and on.

The way BNP and Chhatra Dal people have been behaving in post-Hasina Bangladesh has made it clear that they are fixated on perpetuating and exploiting the old system to their advantage. This realisation is more pronounced among our students who are alarmed to see Chhatra Dal members exhibiting symptoms that marked the behaviour of Chhatra League thugs. Therefore, Chhatra Dal's debacle in the student union elections at Dhaka and Jahangirnagar Universities came as no surprise to me.

If BNP follows in the footsteps of Awami League, I don't think I will ever feel encouraged to defend the political party for which my nana voted. What is more, if BNP leaders fail to read the writing on the wall, it will augur ill for them and for the future of our country.

*Dr Md Mahmudul Hasan is Professor in the Department of English Language and Literature, International Islamic University Malaysia.*