# Local Government Election: Review of UP Election of 2021



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# Analyzing the 2021 Union Parishad Elections in Bangladesh: An Examination of Democratic Challenges, Clientelism, and Emerging Dynamics in Local Governance

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# Abstract

The 2021 Union Parishad (UP) elections in Bangladesh represent a microcosm of the nation's ongoing struggle for democratic integrity within its local governance structures. This study delves into the various elements impacting UP elections, including the influence of money and muscle power, the rise of clientelism, and the shifting dynamics introduced by independent candidates and marginalized groups. Through the lens of the 2M (Money and Muscle) Framework, this research assesses the mechanisms by which financial resources and coercive power influence electoral outcomes, often undermining the democratic process. Additionally, this study examines the implications of a dominant-party system in fostering a culture of patronage and partyarchy, which hinders genuine political competition and voter agency at the grassroots level.

This paper offers a comprehensive review of literature on local governance in both Western and South Asian contexts, while highlighting the distinct political challenges in Bangladesh. By analyzing empirical data, media reports, and expert perspectives, this research sheds light on the specific incidents of violence, nomination trading, and

voter intimidation that characterized the 2021 UP elections. It further explores the gradual yet significant inclusion of women and transgender candidates, marking a step towards inclusivity despite persistent challenges. The research underscores the importance of electoral reforms aimed at limiting financial influence and coercive tactics within the electoral framework.

**Keywords:** Local Governance, Electoral Integrity, Money and Muscle Power, Clientelism, Partyarchy, Grassroots Democracy

## Introduction

Local government elections are a foundational element of democratic governance, enabling citizens to participate directly in decision-making and influencing the delivery of public services at the grassroots level. Globally, local elections serve as the mechanism for decentralized governance, legitimizing local authorities and embedding democratic norms within communities. Local governments, as the most immediate representation of governance, are often the primary point of contact between citizens and state institutions, placing them in a unique position to understand and address local needs. These elections promote transparency, improve service delivery, and foster social cohesion by empowering citizens to hold their leaders accountable (Shah & Shah, 2006; Cheema & Rondinelli, 2007).

In Bangladesh, the role of local government elections—specifically Union Parishad (UP) elections—extends beyond simple administrative management, as it becomes a critical element of national democratic practices. The Union Parishad, representing the lowest tier of local governance, holds significant responsibility for grassroots-level development initiatives and local administrative functions. In a country marked by a dense population and sociocultural diversity, local governance becomes particularly vital to accommodating community-specific needs and aspirations (Ahsan & Panday, 2016). UP elections mirror larger political dynamics in Bangladesh, reflecting patterns such as

electoral competition, voter behavior, and political violence, each emblematic of the national political landscape (Rahman, 2019).

The UP elections have long been viewed as an important platform for political inclusion, especially for marginalized groups like women and minorities. Bangladesh's constitutional emphasis on inclusivity and representation has led to incremental changes, such as reserved seats for women, which support the gradual integration of underrepresented communities into local governance (Jahan, 2002; Nizamuddin, 2008). Although such changes indicate progress, UP elections continue to face serious challenges, including electoral violence, corruption, and limited civic participation. These challenges render UP elections a critical lens through which to examine and improve the dynamics of local governance in Bangladesh (Hossain, 2018).

This study focuses specifically on the 2021 Union Parishad elections, with a particular emphasis on understanding the influence of money and muscle power in electoral processes. It seeks to address the rise in independent and rebel candidates, voter turnout dynamics, and issues related to inclusivity—particularly the participation of women and transgender candidates. Previous research has largely concentrated on broader governance and electoral themes within Bangladesh, leaving a significant gap in understanding the nuanced aspects of UP elections. This paper aims to fill that gap by leveraging secondary data exclusively from newspapers, focusing on reports, articles, and editorials that cover the complexities of the 2021 UP elections.

Through this examination, the paper contributes valuable insights into the role of money and muscle power, the effects of party-centric clientelism, and the representation of marginalized groups within local governance. These findings provide a foundation for understanding the challenges that UP elections present to Bangladesh's democratic system and for identifying potential areas of reform to strengthen local governance frameworks.

## Literature Review

The roots of local governance can be traced back to ancient civilizations, such as Greece and Rome, where municipal bodies governed specific territories (Ober, 1996). During the Medieval period, Europe saw the evolution of local governance through feudal systems that delegated authority to regional lords (Berman, 1983). In the 18th and 19th centuries, democratic principles began to shape modern local government, leading to the formation of municipalities and counties in countries like the United States (Krane, Rigos, & Hill, 2001).

In western countries like the United States, local governments operate under federalism, comprising counties, municipalities, and other entities (Bollens, 1957). The concept of "home rule" grants considerable autonomy, allowing for localized laws and regulations (Krane et al., 2001). The U.S. model underscores the importance of democratic governance at the community level (Zimmerman, 2016). On the other hand, UK's local government system varies across England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, each having distinct local governance arrangements (Wilson &

Game, 2011). The devolution of powers and the Localism Act 2011 has extended the autonomy of local authorities, emphasizing community rights and local decision-making (Copus, 2015; John, 2018). Local government in Australia comprises councils or shires and operates within a federal framework, varying across states and territories (Aulich et al., 2013). The local government's responsibilities include community services and environmental protection (Grant & Dollery, 2011). The debate over recognizing local government in the Australian Constitution highlights the critical role of local governance in connecting citizens with community-level processes (Chapman, 2013). While Western democracies like the U.S., U.K., and Australia show a strong inclination towards decentralization and autonomy, non-Western contexts like China present a more centralized approach.

China's unitary state framework establishes a hierarchical structure down to village levels (Burns, 2003). Local governments implement national laws and policies, but recent reforms have aimed at greater economic autonomy (Yan, 2019). The relationship between central and local governments reflects ongoing tension (Chien, 2013). Bangladesh was initially part of the greater India where local governance evolved from British colonial rule. Later, the democratization of local governance in India happened through constitutional amendments (Chand, 2006; Pal, 2013). The local governance structures in Pakistan and Bangladesh also mirror unique political trajectories (Cheema et al., 2006; Ahmed, 2000). Bangladesh's local government system reflects a transformation from bureaucratic control during the Pakistan era (1947-1971) to

decentralization and democratization post-independence (Ahmed & Ahmed, 2002). The Local Government Ordinance of 1976 and subsequent acts have continually shaped the local governance system, emphasizing citizens' engagement (Siddiqui, 2005; Siddiquee, 2010). The Bangladeshi experience epitomizes an ongoing struggle between central control and local autonomy (Hossain, 2013).

Local government elections are an essential facet of democratic governance, allowing for direct citizen participation in the selection of local representatives. The historical development of this concept can be traced back to various Western societies, emphasizing democratic values and local responsiveness (Ober, 1996; Krane, Rigos, & Hill, 2001). This pattern has subsequently influenced other regions, adapting to unique colonial legacies, cultural contexts, and national political systems.

The evolution of local government elections in Bangladesh reflects intricate intersections of historical, political, and social factors (Siddiquee, 2010). India's local governance structures, influenced by British colonial rule, resonate with Bangladesh's experience (Chand, 2006). India's 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments in 1992, which strengthened local governance, parallel Bangladesh's emphasis on democratic participation (Pal, 2013). Similarly, Pakistan's local government system, having shared historical roots with Bangladesh, presents comparable efforts and challenges in enhancing local autonomy (Cheema, Khwaja, & Qadir, 2006). Sri Lanka's local government election system, characterized by representative democracy and community participation, offers another South Asian comparison, highlighting the

complexities of decentralization and local development (Wickramasinghe, 2011).

In Bangladesh, the local government election system has undergone substantial transformation since the period of Pakistan (1947-1971), when governance was primarily characterized by bureaucratic control and limited democratic participation (Ahmed & Ahmed, 2002). Post-independence in 1971, efforts to democratize local governance led to the enactment of the Local Government Ordinance of 1976, emphasizing decentralization and local representation (Siddiqui, 2005). Despite these strides, challenges persist, such as political interference and corruption, which can hinder the effectiveness of local governance (Hossain, 2013).

Union Parishad (UP) elections in Bangladesh represent the grassroots level of democratic participation, forming the lowest tier of local government. Historically, UP elections have been a significant platform for local development and governance, and their functions directly impact the daily lives of citizens (Siddiqui, 2005). In a broad context, UP elections have been characterized by a relatively high level of voter participation compared to national elections (Hossain, 2010). As the lowest tier of local government in Bangladesh, Union Parishads are closer to the daily lives of citizens, and their functions directly impact local development and service delivery. This proximity often translates into higher voter interest and participation (Siddiqui, 2005). Political factors such as party alignment, candidate selection, and political mobilization have a significant impact on voter turnout (Khan & Ara, 2006).

Recent reforms in the electoral process, such as the introduction of Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) and voter education campaigns, have also contributed to changes in voter participation patterns (Ahmed, 2012). These interventions aimed to enhance transparency, accessibility, and efficiency in the electoral process, and some studies suggest a positive impact on voter turnout and confidence (Sultana, 2013). However, the UP elections have also faced challenges that may affect voter participation. Issues such as electoral violence, administrative irregularities, and political manipulation have been reported in various elections, potentially undermining voter confidence and participation (Siddiquee, 2010).

The occurrence of violence, intimidation, and coercion during the election process has emerged as a recurring pattern, posing serious threats to democratic governance and the rule of law at the local level. Several factors contribute to electoral violence in UP elections. A study by Bhuiyan (2010) underscores the intense competition for power and resources at the local level, often leading to conflicts and violent confrontations among rival political factions. Such competition is fueled by the perception that control over local government equates to access to valuable resources and patronage networks. The role of political parties, ministers and their influence on local candidates also contribute to the propensity for violence.

Although UP elections are supposed to be non-partisan, political parties have been found to actively engage in supporting candidates, thus importing the broader confrontational politics of the national level into local elections (Hossain, 2017). Furthermore, the lack of effective law

enforcement, coupled with instances of alleged collusion between political actors and local authorities, creates an environment conducive to impunity (Badiuzzaman & Cameron, 2019). Weak electoral oversight and a lack of accountability mechanisms often allow electoral malpractices and violence to occur unchecked. Efforts to curb electoral violence in UP elections have included legislative and administrative reforms, voter education, and increased security measures during the election period (Jahan, 2011).

An essential feature of the UP election system is the reservation of three seats exclusively for women in every Union Parishad. The Union Parishad is comprised of 13 members, including the chairman, nine general members, and three women members. Elections are held for each of these positions separately, and all are elected for a five-year term (Siddiqui, 2005). These seats are distributed across three wards, with one woman member representing each ward. The provision for women's seats was introduced to promote gender equality and ensure women's participation in local governance. Studies suggest that this system has indeed increased women's political participation at the local level, although challenges such as patriarchal attitudes and party influence persist (Panday, 2008).

There has been a recent uprise in rebel candidates from the ruling party, particularly the Awami League (AL), contesting Union Parishad (UP) elections in Bangladesh, has attracted attention and analysis from scholars. This issue has manifested in the context of the intense competition within the party for nominations, leading to internal

factionalism and rivalries. After the Awami League assumed its position in the government and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) boycotted the national and local elections, the dynamics of local elections, including UP elections, shifted considerably. In the absence of main opposition candidates, intra-party competition within the ruling party became more pronounced (Hasan, 2013).

Several factors have contributed to the emergence of rebel candidates. First, the oversupply of aspirants within the Awami League for limited positions of power at the local level has intensified competition and dissatisfaction among those who did not receive party nominations (Jahan & Shahan, 2017). This discontentment has sometimes led to party members contesting elections as independent candidates, defying the party's decisions and discipline.

Second, the perceived importance of holding local elected office as a gateway to resources, influence, and upward political mobility has further driven members to defy party decisions and contest elections as rebel candidates (Siddiqui & Uddin, 2016). These candidates often have strong local bases of support and utilize personal networks and resources to wage competitive electoral campaigns. The phenomenon of rebel candidates has posed significant challenges for the Awami League and the broader political system. It has led to internal fragmentation and discord within the party, weakening party cohesion and discipline (Rahman, 2015). Additionally, the presence of rebel candidates has, at times, led to violence and conflict during elections, tarnishing the electoral process's credibility and integrity (Siddiqui & Uddin, 2016).

Adding to that, BNP's boycott of national and local elections, as a protest against what it perceived to be unfair electoral processes has made their candidates contest elections as independent candidates since, they could not officially represent the party or use its symbol (Hossain, 2016). This political maneuver created several challenges and opportunities for these candidates. On one hand, the absence of formal party support and the inability to use the party's symbol may have weakened their electoral prospects, as they could not fully leverage the BNP's organizational machinery, branding, and loyal voter base (Sharker, 2015).

On the other hand, the independent status allowed some candidates to craft personalized electoral strategies, building coalitions, and appealing to voters beyond traditional party lines (Khan, 2017). For some, this may have provided a unique opportunity to redefine their political identities and broaden their appeal, although the effectiveness of these strategies varied across different constituencies and candidates (Chowdhury, 2016). The tension between individual electoral interests and party directives, coupled with the broader context of political polarization, boycotts, and contentious politics, illustrates the complexities of electoral behavior in Bangladesh's local governance (Ahmed, 2018).

This research deeply investigates on the recent Union Parishad election of 2021 and attempts to identify the changes in pattern of local government elections in Bangladesh with the present factors like rising number of independent candidates, absence of previous opposition party, representation of women and transgender, political conflict and voter turnouts.

**Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative research design, relying solely on secondary data to provide an in-depth understanding of the Union Parishad (UP) elections of 2021 in Bangladesh. Given the focus on capturing the dynamics of electoral violence, voter participation, political influence, and inclusivity, secondary sources—primarily newspaper reports, editorials, and articles—serve as the foundation of this analysis.

*Research Design*

A qualitative, descriptive research approach has been utilized to analyze the patterns and implications of UP election practices. This design is appropriate for uncovering the nuanced interactions between political actors, exploring the complexities of electoral manipulation, and highlighting issues such as candidate intimidation, financial inducements, and patron-client relationships in a non-experimental setting.

*Data Sources*

Secondary data were collected exclusively from credible national newspapers, including Prothom Alo, The Daily Star, and other reputable sources that provide both national coverage and region-specific insights. These sources offered comprehensive reporting on incidents, trends, and public reactions related to the 2021 UP elections. Newspaper reports, editorial columns, and opinion articles were systematically reviewed to identify themes of electoral violence, manipulation, clientelism, party

influence, and inclusivity.

## *Data Collection and Analysis*

Data Collection: Content analysis was employed to systematically review newspaper reports, capturing recurring themes such as electoral violence, the role of independent and rebel candidates, transparency issues, and the participation of marginalized groups (e.g., women and transgender candidates).

Data Analysis: Collected data were analyzed through thematic coding to classify relevant incidents, opinions, and insights into categories aligned with the research questions. This thematic approach allowed for an organized examination of key topics, such as the influence of money and muscle power (the "2M Framework"), the effects of clientelism and party hierarchy (partyarchy), and the socio-political barriers faced by women and transgender candidates.

## *Scope and Limitations*

Given the reliance on secondary data, this study is limited to the perspectives and events documented by major national newspapers, which may reflect certain reporting biases. Moreover, the absence of primary data means that firsthand insights from election officials, candidates, or voters were not obtained, potentially limiting the study's depth in certain

areas. Despite these limitations, the secondary data from well-regarded sources provided a robust foundation to examine the 2021 UP elections comprehensively.

## *Ethical Considerations*

All data were used responsibly, with a commitment to preserving the context and integrity of the original sources. Accurate citations and attributions were maintained throughout the research process, ensuring transparency and honoring the intellectual property rights of the news outlets.

## Theoretical Framework

Local government elections, particularly the Union Parishad (UP) elections in Bangladesh, play a vital role in grassroots democracy, yet they are often compromised by the pervasive influences of money and muscle power. In this study, we introduce and propose the term "2M Framework" to encapsulate the dual impact of financial resources and coercive force on electoral outcomes and local governance. This framework, an original construct within this research, highlights how economic strength and physical dominance reinforce entrenched power structures, transforming what should be democratic processes into mechanisms of control and influence.

Drawing from the analytical insights of Milan Vaishnav and Shantanu Majumder on South Asian electoral dynamics, the 2M

Framework provides a structured approach to analyzing the nuanced ways in which financial inducements and intimidation tactics shape voter behavior in UP elections. Voter choices and turnout are often swayed by these powerful forces, with financial incentives skewing perceived benefits, while intimidation increases the costs associated with supporting non-dominant candidates.

Further theoretical support comes from Tore Hansen's rational choice theory, which suggests that voters calculate participation based on costs and benefits. In the context of UP elections, however, the 2M Framework complicates this calculation. Here, money influences the 'benefit' through clientelistic networks, while muscle power raises the 'cost' through intimidation, coercion, and physical threats. Voter autonomy, therefore, is often compromised, leading to outcomes that may not authentically reflect the electorate's will.

Moreover, the 2M Framework also encompasses the impacts of clientelism and partyarchy as analyzed by Sarker and Nawaz, particularly within Bangladesh's political landscape. Dominant-party influence and patron-client relationships further embed financial and coercive dynamics into local governance, limiting democratic expression. These systems foster dependencies on powerful candidates and parties, thereby perpetuating cycles of influence that prioritize loyalty and resources over true democratic participation.

In essence, the 2M Framework offers a new perspective on the underlying factors that compromise local government elections in developing democracies like Bangladesh. By conceptualizing this term,

this research seeks to contribute a unique analytical tool for understanding how financial and coercive powers converge to challenge the integrity of grassroots electoral processes. This framework lays a foundation for assessing how the UP elections reflect or deviate from democratic ideals, shedding light on systemic issues within local governance structures.

## Findings

### *Money and Muscle Power*

The 2021 Union Parishad (UP) elections saw multiple incidents of violence, reflecting the role of muscle power in controlling local electoral outcomes. In Banshkhali's Saral union, a clash between supporters of two female candidates led to injuries and a temporary suspension of voting, underscoring how minor disputes can escalate into physical altercations, disrupting the electoral process (The Daily Star, 2022b). Similar violence occurred in Gournadi upazila of Barishal, where clashes between supporters of rival candidates resulted in fatalities (Prothom Alo, 2021d). These incidents illustrate how physical force is used to exert dominance in elections, a phenomenon integral to the muscle component of the 2M Framework.

Further demonstrating the impact of violence on voter behavior, a confrontation between supporters of Awami League candidates in Magura left several people dead, highlighting how electoral violence serves as a tool for establishing local supremacy (Prothom Alo, 2021h). Additionally, the assassination of Nethoai Marma, a ruling Awami League candidate,

underscores how the stakes of local elections drive actors to extreme measures to eliminate competition (Prothom Alo, 2021i). Such events illustrate the role of muscle power in electoral dynamics, emphasizing the coercive environment that shapes voter turnout and candidate strategies.

### *Clientelism and Partyarchy*

Clientelism and partyarchy were prevalent in the election process, with various allegations of undue influence by party leaders. For example, Mujibul Haque Chowdhury, an Awami League candidate, allegedly expressed confidence that he could ensure a win by controlling manual stamping on ballots. Despite denying this claim, the incident illustrates how political influence can manipulate election results (Prothom Alo, 2022c; The Daily Star, 2022a). Additionally, Awami League leader Siddiqur Rahman's threats against those opposing the party's symbol suggest the deep entrenchment of partisan loyalties and the lengths some leaders will go to secure their candidates' victories (Prothom Alo, 2021b).

Instances of forgery, such as allegations against an Awami League candidate in Shariatpur, and incidents of violence against journalists documenting illegal voting practices, further emphasize the role of clientelistic networks in shaping electoral outcomes (Prothom Alo, 2023q; Prothom Alo, 2021k). These findings align with the partyarchy model within the 2M Framework, highlighting the pervasive influence of ruling parties in shaping local electoral landscapes.

*Inclusivity and Transparency Efforts*

The participation of transgender candidates, like Nazrul Islam Ritu, and women in the UP elections signifies a gradual shift towards inclusivity in local governance (Saha, 2021). Ritu's success, despite facing harassment, represents a positive development in the UP electoral process, though incidents of violence against female supporters reveal the continued gender-based challenges candidates face (Prothom Alo, 2023i).

In contrast, the UP-Chairman's transparency initiative in Gopalganj stands out as a model of accountability. By publicly presenting financial records, the chairman emphasized democratic engagement and fiscal responsibility, a practice rare in local governance (Ahmed, 2023). This example reflects a commitment to transparency, which, while exceptional, demonstrates the potential for fostering trust and enhancing democratic norms at the grassroots level.

**Discussion**

*Money and Muscle Power in Electoral Dynamics*

The empirical data underscores how muscle power disrupts electoral integrity, corroborating the 2M Framework's relevance to the UP elections. The fatal altercations, such as those in Gournadi and Magura, reflect the high stakes and willingness of political actors to employ violence, instilling fear among voters and discouraging opposition support. This aligns with the muscle component of the 2M Framework, where coercive power is not merely incidental but a calculated strategy to

influence outcomes. Such incidents also reveal the limitations of institutional mechanisms to ensure voter safety and uphold democratic norms.

### *Clientelism, Partyarchy, and the Role of Ruling Parties*

The influence of clientelism and partyarchy is evident in the extent to which ruling party candidates leveraged their positions to secure electoral advantage. The allegations against Mujibul Haque Chowdhury and the recurring instances of partisan coercion illustrate how patronage networks and party-centric dynamics distort electoral competition. By fostering dependency on political loyalty over merit, these practices erode the democratic framework of local governance, challenging the principles of fairness and transparency. This dimension of the 2M Framework highlights how economic and partisan influences undermine democratic choices in favor of entrenched power structures.

### *Inclusivity and Transparency as Pathways for Reform*

While inclusivity in the UP elections is growing, with participation from women and transgender individuals, electoral violence reveals the vulnerabilities these groups face. Nazrul Islam Ritu's success as a transgender candidate marks a positive milestone; however, the harassment faced by other female candidates and their supporters underscores the barriers that remain. Greater institutional protections and community support are essential to encourage such participation meaningfully.

Transparency efforts, exemplified by the Gopalganj UP Chairman's financial disclosures, offer a potential model for democratic reform within local governance. Public engagement in financial accountability practices can foster trust and enhance electoral integrity. Emphasizing transparency could help counterbalance the influence of the 2M dynamics by promoting a culture of accountability and responsiveness in local governance, paving the way for a more equitable and democratic electoral landscape.

**Conclusion**

The analysis of the 2021 Union Parishad elections in Bangladesh, through the lens of the 2M Framework, reveals the complex interplay between money, muscle power, clientelism, and party-centric influence in shaping electoral outcomes. The findings underscore how these forces compromise voter autonomy, democratic integrity, and fair representation at the local level. While instances of inclusivity and transparency provide hope for gradual reform, the persistence of violent and coercive tactics highlights the need for stronger institutional safeguards to protect democratic principles in local governance. Embracing transparency and nurturing inclusive practices could gradually diminish the hold of the 2M dynamics, fostering a path toward more resilient and representative democratic processes at the grassroots.

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