

# Essay on Coalitions in Politics

A coalition in politics is an alliance among political parties which is formed to cooperate in joint action. Coalitions can be conceptualized as games where one party entails significant benefits for the other party. One aspect that is worth considering in this context is that a political system based on coalitions 'fuses' the electoral arrangement where two or more parties join their support for a common candidate, whereby initiating a process to 'pool' votes.

In economics, the term coalition has a somewhat 'translucent' meaning a group of companies that create mutual trust between themselves in order to generate increased profits. I say translucent because the repercussions following this type of entrepreneurial coalitions are not cent percent predictable. In political science, the term coalition has an innate meaning (in terms of both interests and ideas) and this branch of social science uses the 'game theory' to analyze formations, functions and even fragmentations of any type of coalitions. The theory attempts to mathematically capture agents' rational response in strategic situations where an individual's success in terms of making 'efficient' choices (and consequently, maximizing their utility) is dependent on the choices of other actors. The two major political parties of the country the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party have formed coalitions with two 'masters of minors', the Jatiya Party and Jamaat-e-Islami. So how rational are our political leaders? The answer will vary according to the vantage point one takes in explaining his or her answer.

These two parties' position in the electoral system has traditionally had a strong effect on the overall outcome of the elections. However, given the proliferation of other political parties in the country, from a long-term perspective, their roles may come under pressure. It

is worth recalling here that the two major political parties have ruled the country, at least once, without needing to form coalitions with other parties the BNP in 1991 and the Awami League in 1996.

Although political parties form coalitions for many and varied reasons, the most common purpose is to either combat a common threat or to take advantage of a certain opportunity, and for the 2001 elections, the BNP felt that it needed Jamaat on board in order to win the majority of constituencies. Was this a rational response from the BNP? Despite the controversies surrounding the outcome of the last elections, it would be difficult to argue that Khaleda Zia was not rational in forming an alliance with Jamaat (and 3 other parties), since she did end up, in economics terminology, maximizing her utility (by winning the election). Taking the same cue, the BNP has formed coalitions once again in the run-up to the now approaching national elections, but how much of this will bear the desired fruits for the party in the medium to long term is not only a matter of debate for analysts but also a concern for the BNP itself.

Similarly, the Awami League's coalition with fourteen parties alongside three other parties, although it may prove to be beneficial in the immediate term, considering the medium to long term scenarios, this may turn out to be not so favorable for the party. It is worth mentioning here that the Awami League is a new player in this political game of coalitions.

The Awami League has been perceived to be the frontrunner in the current elections; however, the issue concerning the country's next president (whether HM Ershad or someone else) is now a 'spicy' topic for the citizens and this could (perhaps) be by virtue of the fact that inter-political activities of the country have not been attracting the same volume of audience as it used to in the 1990s (particularly following the country's transition from an

authoritarian state to a democratically elected government).

One would not be wrong to take the matter further and affirm that the anti-corruption drive by the caretaker government during the last couple of years had injected some momentum to this area of political science (coalition-based politics) whereby both the major political parties of the country are now keener to endorse their support for other political parties' candidates. I may not be wrong to say that whenever the country went through a political transition, it entailed a 'spill-over' effect in other areas.

A coalition among parties should not be perceived as a covenant amongst themselves and hence, there is an inherent risk involved in this type of 'friendship'. To collate or not to collate is a matter of rational response from the respective political parties and the cohesiveness of the country's coalitions will be put under test following the relocation of one of the leader's office to the new Chief Advisor's Office. Not only this, satisfying the 'friends' may prove not as easy as initially planned which may ultimately create a political caveat within the newly elected government. As-long-as interests continue to undermine ideas and dominate the spectrum of coalition politics, the latter will be safe.

Is the time raw for the Awami League and the BNP to set aside their prolonged feud and concentrate on their interests (although, from a scholar's perspective, ideas would be preferred) to form a 'majestic' coalition? We may not be in a position to confirm that but perhaps time will show it.