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SYMBOLIC COMPROMISES IN ELECTORAL ALLIANCES: A CASE STUDY OF THE 11TH PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION IN BANGLADESH

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Abstract

This study examines the role of symbolic politics in shaping electoral alliances during Bangladesh's 11th Parliamentary Election (2018), highlighting how parties navigate ideological differences through the strategic use of electoral symbols. Guided by coalition theory and symbolic interactionism, the research employs a qualitative case study approach, drawing on 26 semi-structured interviews with candidates, party leaders, voters, academics, journalists, and civil society representatives, alongside document analysis and media content review. Findings reveal that alliances were driven less by ideological cohesion and more by pragmatic strategies aimed at survival, broader acceptance, and vote-bank consolidation. The adoption of common electoral symbols, notably the "Boat" and the "Sheaf of Paddy," emerged as both a symbolic and strategic tool, facilitating alliance cohesion, enhancing voter recognition, and mediating ideological differences. Smaller or newly registered parties relied on shared symbols to gain recognition and legitimacy, while dominant parties leveraged them to consolidate support. By linking empirical evidence from Bangladesh to broader coalition theory, the study expands understanding of symbolic politics in emerging democracies, demonstrating how symbols serve as instruments of legitimacy, identity negotiation, and strategic coalition-building. This research, therefore, contributes to academic knowledge on electoral alliances by illustrating the interplay between symbolism, strategy, and democratic aspirations.

Keywords: Electoral alliances, Coalition politics, Common electoral symbols, Bangladesh politics, Strategic motivations.

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INTRODUCTION

Politics is generally conceptualized as the mechanism through which power is acquired, distributed, and exercised within a society (Heywood, 2013). Coalition formation, particularly in emerging democracies, reflects both structural constraints and strategic opportunities, where political actors engage in bargaining to maximize their survival, influence, and legitimacy (Riker, 1962). When multiple political parties collaborate and contest elections jointly, this phenomenon is identified as alliance politics. Such alliances are typically established through strategic coordination among parties seeking to consolidate their influence and strengthen their electoral positions. In competitive political environments, opposition parties frequently form alliances or coalitions before elections to counter the dominance of ruling parties.

Altman (2000) defines a political alliance as a collaborative arrangement in which parties or individuals unite to pursue shared objectives. These alliances often consist of parliamentary parties that agree on common goals while mobilizing collective resources and coordinating communication to achieve them. Similarly, Kapa (2008) describes a political alliance as a temporary coalition formed to attain a specific objective through joint action. Haq and Alam (2014) further note that such alliances enable parties to retain their individual identities and policies while pursuing collective strategic interests.

Coalitions also play a central role in government formation, especially when no single party secures a parliamentary majority. In such contexts, smaller parties join forces with larger ones to establish coalition governments, ensuring multi-party participation in governance (Malik & Malik, 2014). While coalition formation often involves strategic compromise, it can also emerge from ideological convergence or shared political narratives.

Bogaards (2014) highlights that opposition alliances may contribute to democratic consolidation, particularly when alliances become institutionalized mechanisms for political stability. However, his analysis relies primarily on secondary literature and focuses mainly on African political systems, limiting its applicability to the South Asian context. McMillan (2014) extends the discussion through an examination of coalition politics in India, emphasizing how power-sharing arrangements, ideological diversity, and institutional adaptation sustain democracy in plural societies.

In contrast, the present study bridges these theoretical and regional gaps by incorporating both primary and secondary data to analyze alliance politics in Bangladesh, a context characterized by strong party polarization and symbolic electoral competition. As Riaz (2016) observes, Bangladesh's post-independence politics has been dominated by a two-party system, yet electoral alliances have increasingly become central to political contestation.

This research builds upon coalition theory and the concept of symbolic legitimacy to explain how parties in Bangladesh's 11th Parliamentary Election (2018) formed alliances, adopted common election symbols, and negotiated ideological and strategic differences to secure electoral success. Accordingly, this study seeks to address the following research questions, 1) Why did political parties in Bangladesh's 11th Parliamentary Election (2018) adopt common electoral symbols?; 2) How did these alliances navigate ideological differences and balance symbolic identity with strategic pragmatism?; 3) In what ways did symbolic politics shape coalition-building, legitimacy, and voter mobilization?

By addressing these questions, the study contributes to the broader understanding of coalition politics in emerging democracies, offering a nuanced perspective on how symbolic legitimacy interacts with strategic coalition formation in shaping democratic competition in South Asia

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to explore the ideological and strategic dimensions of electoral alliances in Bangladesh's 11th Parliamentary Election. A qualitative design is particularly appropriate for examining the intricate socio-political negotiations, symbolic compromises, and alliance dynamics that are not readily quantifiable. The case study method facilitates an in-depth understanding of how and why political parties engage in alliance politics and adopt a common election symbol by combining in-depth interviews with candidates and voters and key informant interviews with party leaders, academics, journalists, analysts, and civil society representatives.

Data Collection Methods

To ensure data richness and triangulation, the study employed two primary qualitative techniques: in-depth interviews (IDIs) with alliance candidates and voters, and key informant interviews (KIIs) with party leaders, academics, journalists, analysts, and civil society representatives. A total of 26 interviews were conducted, of which 9 were IDIs and 17 were KIIs, as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Participants by Interview Type

Stakeholder Group	Method	Number of Participants
Alliance Candidates	In-depth Interviews (IDI)	4
Voters	In-depth Interviews (IDI)	5
Party Leaders and Activists	Key Informant Interviews (KII)	5
Academics	Key Informant Interviews (KII)	3
Journalists	Key Informant Interviews (KII)	3
Political Analysts	Key Informant Interviews (KII)	3
Civil Society Representatives	Key Informant Interviews (KII)	3
Total		26

These interviews provided nuanced insights into ideological orientations, symbolic compromises, grassroots perceptions, and strategic considerations.

Document Analysis: Party manifestos, alliance agreements, and relevant Election Commission documents were reviewed to capture formal commitments, policy narratives, and institutional frameworks shaping electoral alliances.

Media Content Review: National newspapers, television reports, and online platforms were analyzed to assess public discourse surrounding alliance formation, campaign strategies, and the symbolic politics of the 2018 National Parliamentary Election in Bangladesh.

Sampling Strategy

The study utilized purposive sampling, a non-probability technique where participants were selected based on their relevance to the research objectives. Contextual knowledge, prior field experience, and professional judgment were applied to identify individuals capable of providing rich and detailed accounts of electoral alliance practices.

To complement this, snowball sampling was also employed. Initial interviewees referred additional key informants, which proved particularly effective in accessing politically active individuals who were otherwise difficult to reach.

Ensuring Adequate Coverage

Interviews continued until thematic saturation was achieved, ensuring that the 26 participants adequately represented the perspectives of all relevant stakeholder groups. This approach enabled the study to capture diverse insights while maintaining a clear focus on the research objectives.

Ethical Considerations and Reliability

All interviews were conducted under strict ethical standards. Participants were fully informed about the purpose of the research and their voluntary participation. Informed consent was obtained prior to each interview, and confidentiality was strictly maintained by anonymizing all personal identifiers.

To ensure reliability and credibility, data from multiple sources- interviews, documents, and media reports were triangulated. The cross-verification of information helped minimize bias and enhance the validity of interpretations.

Limitations

Given the political sensitivity surrounding electoral issues in Bangladesh, some respondents were cautious in sharing critical opinions, which may have limited the depth of certain narratives. Additionally, access to high-ranking political leaders was constrained due to time and security considerations. However, these limitations were mitigated by including a diverse range of stakeholders, ensuring a balanced and credible representation of alliance politics.

RESULTS

Overview of the 2014 and 2018 Parliamentary Elections

The 10th National Parliamentary Election in Bangladesh was held on January 5, 2014. The main opposition alliance, led by Khaleda Zia of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), boycotted the election, demanding the reinstatement of the caretaker government system. As a result, the ruling Awami League won 234 out of 300 seats, including 153 seats where candidates from the Grand Alliance (Mohajote) were elected unopposed. Media outlets widely described the election as controversial, raising questions about its legitimacy. Following the results, the Grand Alliance formed the government under Sheikh Hasina, while the Jatiya Party, led by Rowshan Ershad, assumed the role of the opposition.

In May 2017, the Election Commission prepared a roadmap for the 11th National Parliamentary Election. On December 30, 2018, the 11th parliamentary election was held with 39 registered parties contesting.

Alliance Formation and Use of Common Symbols

Although each party had its own electoral symbol, approximately 20 parties within alliances chose to forgo individual symbols in favor of the two dominant symbols: the "Boat" (Nouka) of the Awami League and the "Sheaf of Paddy" (Dhaner Shish) of the BNP. According to Bangladesh's electoral laws, alliances can contest under a single symbol, but such polarization between two dominant symbols was unprecedented.

Table 2: Electoral Alliances, Political Parties, Number of Candidates, and Symbols Used in Bangladesh's 11th Parliamentary Election

Alliance	Political party	No. of Candidates	Symbol used
Grand Alliance (Mohajote)	Bangladesh Awami League	258	Boat
	Workers Party of Bangladesh	05	
	Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JASAD - Inu)	03	
	JASAD (Ambia)	01	
	Jatiya Party (JP - Manju)	01	
	Tariqat Federation	02	
	Bikalpa Dhara Bangladesh	03	
Jatiya Oikya Front	Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)	242	Sheaf of Paddy
	Gono Forum	07	
	Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD-Rob)	04	
	Nagorik Oikko	04	
	Krishak Sramik Janata League	04	
20-Party Alliance	Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)	04	Sheaf of Paddy
	Jamiat Ulama-e-Islam	03	
	Khelafat Majlis	02	
	Bangladesh Kalyan Party	01	
	Bangladesh Jatiya Party (BJP)	01	
	National People's Party (NPP)	01	
	People's Party of Bangladesh (PPB)	01	
	Jatiya Party (Kazi Zafar)	02	
	Bangladesh Labour Party	01	
	Bangladesh Jamat-e-Islami	22	
Gono Oikya	Bangladesh Muslim League	22	Lantern
	National Democratic Movement (NDM)	41	

Note: The table has been compiled by the author using information reported in Prothom Alo and The Daily Star (2018).

Ideological Compromise and Strategic Coordination

Interviews and document analysis revealed that adopting a common symbol was both a pragmatic and symbolic strategy:

- Ideological compromise: Parties with varying ideological orientations temporarily set aside differences to unite under one symbol.
- Voter mobilization: A single symbol helped reduce voter confusion, creating a sense of unity and recognizable identity at the grassroots level.
- Coalition pragmatism: The single symbol reduced the independent visibility of smaller parties, as they were overshadowed by the dominant party's symbol.

These findings suggest that symbolic politics played a central role in facilitating alliance cohesion without erasing individual party identities.

The 11th Parliamentary Election highlights the interdependence of symbolic legitimacy and pragmatic coalition-building in emerging democracies. Key insights include:

1. Symbolic Unification: Common electoral symbols allowed alliances to project unity despite ideological diversity.
2. Vote-Bank Consolidation: The recognizable symbols helped consolidate support across different voter segments.
3. Ideological Compromise: Alliances managed differences through negotiation and strategic alignment around symbolic representation.

Overall, the empirical evidence underscores that in Bangladesh's electoral context, symbolic politics is not merely decorative but a strategic tool that shapes coalition formation, legitimacy, and electoral success.

DISCUSSION

Purpose of Forming Alliances and Using Common Symbols

In democratic systems, political leaders are chosen through electoral processes to assume the responsibilities of governance. The responsibility of these elected individuals is to pursue the greatest welfare of the public. Voters choose their preferred candidates with the expectation that those elected will work for the nation's betterment. In this context, it can be said that one of the primary objectives of elections and politics is to ensure public interest.

However, in recent times, the scope of elections cannot be understood solely in terms of public welfare. Especially when parties with differing ideologies form alliances to contest elections, it becomes essential to investigate their underlying objectives. Understanding why such alliances are formed reveals how effectively public interest is being served in national politics. Moreover, it provides a deeper understanding of the evolution and dynamics of Bangladesh's political landscape.

Acquisition of Power

In its broadest conception, politics encompasses the totality of national governance processes, including decision-making, policy implementation, and institutional oversight (Heywood, 2013). More narrowly, however, politics fundamentally represents a contest for power, wherein elections serve as the central arena for competing claims to authority. Victory in electoral contests confers not only formal legitimacy but also tangible political authority upon the elected representatives (Lijphart, 1999). In fragmented party systems, alliances become critical for smaller parties seeking access to power structures they cannot achieve independently (Mitra, 2006). Coalition formation constitutes a key strategic mechanism in this contest, allowing parties to consolidate influence and enhance their prospects of success (Sartori, 1976).

The core purpose of all major electoral coalitions in Bangladesh, whether the Grand Alliance (Mohajote), the 20-party alliance, or the National Unity Front, has been the same: achieving electoral victory to get power. Both large and small parties within these alliances share this aim. As a result, alliance members often not only unify organizationally but also contest under a common symbol. This alliance strategy serves two primary objectives:

1. Wider Acceptance
2. Expanded Vote Base

The pursuit of broader acceptance through symbolic strategy was articulated by a candidate from the smaller Islamist party, Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam Bangladesh, who remarked in a mid-2019 interview:

"We contested three constituencies under the BNP's 'sheaf of paddy' symbol to gain broader acceptance."

From a theoretical perspective, this illustrates symbolic interactionism, as the shared symbol mediates voter perception and conveys acceptability. Simultaneously, political realism explains that the primary aim remains strategic: consolidating influence and maximizing electoral success, irrespective of ideological alignment.

By aligning with the widely recognized paddy sheaf symbol, associated with the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, founded by Ziaur Rahman in 1978 and carrying deep historical resonance, the smaller party sought greater acceptability among voters. This practice is common across alliance partners aiming to leverage the legitimacy of bigger parties. Political analyst Dr. Maruf Mallick similarly noted in a mid-2019 interview:

“Small parties are interested in contesting under the two major symbols solely to access power; the use of a single symbol is to achieve that end.”

In the Bangladeshi political context, smaller parties often lack visibility and public support relative to larger parties, and they have struggled to create their own identities. Rather than investing time in long-term groundwork, their immediate priority becomes attaining power quickly, often through alliance-driven strategies.

Meanwhile, larger parties benefit from such coalitions in both expanding their vote-bank growth and enhancing their governance opportunities. As one candidate representing a major party- the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) within the Jatiya Oikya Front- explained in a mid-2019 interview:

“We formed the alliance to strengthen our position in the political arena.”

The primary objective of the anti-government coalition in contesting elections under a common symbol was to expand its vote bank. However, this strategy was not exclusive to the BNP; one of the central motivations behind the formation of the Grand Alliance (Mohajote) by the Awami League was likewise to secure electoral victory through the augmentation of its vote base. Observing the effectiveness of the BNP's coalition strategy prior to the 11th national parliamentary elections, the Awami League forged an alliance with leftist parties and subsequently achieved success through the formation of the Grand Alliance (Rounaq, 2018).

Consolidation of Pro-Liberation Forces

A distinctive objective of the Grand Alliance (Mohajote), rare among other electoral alliances, is the unification of pro-liberation or pro-independence forces. In the 2018 election, the Awami League allied with several leftist parties rooted in socialist ideology, even though the Awami League itself bases its philosophy on democracy. Despite these ideological differences, both the alliance's candidates and party workers have emphasized the importance of uniting the pro-liberation front. For instance, in a mid-2020 interview, an Awami League candidate stated:

“One of the main objectives of forming this alliance was to unite pro-liberation forces under a single platform.”

Here, the effort to consolidate the pro-liberation stream of political energy serves not only as an electoral strategy but also as a political ideology. This objective is clearly reflected in statements made by Sheikh Hasina and other senior leaders of the Grand Alliance. They view the

forces of independence as essential for national welfare and development. Consequently, the narrative of allying is centered on the liberation-centered ethos of the state.

This strategic emphasis underlines the alliance's dual purpose: it appeals to the electorate's emotional connection to independence, while also positioning the alliance as the rightful custodian of the liberation legacy.

Here, symbolic politics intersects with ideology: the liberation-centered ethos not only appeals emotionally to voters but also positions the alliance as the legitimate custodian of the country's independence legacy. This dual function highlights how electoral strategy and political symbolism are intertwined.

The Movement for the Restoration of Democracy

Historically, the democratic forces during the 1980s organized alliances to challenge the authoritarian regime of General Ershad, ultimately contributing to his resignation and the re-establishment of parliamentary democracy (Uddin, 2006). The formation of electoral coalitions such as the Jatiya Oikya Front and the 20 Party Alliance can be understood as part of a broader movement aimed at restoring democracy in Bangladesh.

Candidates and party activists from these alliances consistently highlighted that their collaboration and decision to adopt a shared electoral symbol were not merely tactical choices, but expressions of a collective struggle against what they perceived as the absence of meaningful democratic governance. They repeatedly characterized the January 5, 2014, parliamentary election as a failure and a "voter-less" process, arguing that it exemplified the authoritarian tendency of the incumbent government. In a mid-2020 interview, a senior candidate from the Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD–Rob) remarked:

"The main objective of the coalition election was to end the system of enforced rule by the Awami League, to return politics to its normal course, and to re-establish democracy. In short, the National Unity Front (Jatiya Oikya Front) was formed only for democracy."

Similarly, a political activist from the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) reinforced this emphasis on democracy, stating in a mid-2020 interview:

"Our main goal was to restore democracy in the country; the formation of the alliance had only this objective. I believe the Awami League has established an authoritarian system, and we aim to bring back democracy. Here, the restoration of democracy takes precedence over ideological differences."

The same concern was echoed by an academic, who explained that one of the key motivations behind the formation of the Jatiya Oikya Front was to reinvigorate the democratic movement in Bangladesh (Author Interview, 2020). His perspective reflects the political trajectory of the BNP following the 2014 election. In that election, the BNP refused to participate under the ruling Awami League and instead demanded the establishment of a neutral caretaker government to guarantee a credible electoral process. As a result, despite being one of the two major political parties, the BNP failed to secure parliamentary representation. In the subsequent 2018 election, the party strategically joined the Jatiya Oikya Front, aligning itself with a broader coalition aimed at restoring democratic governance. This decision was consistent with the alliance's declared objectives: to pressure the government into holding free and fair elections and to bring democracy back to the political system.

In this regard, a supporter of the Krishak Sramik Janata League expressed in a mid-2020 interview:

“Although we came together from different parties and ideological backgrounds, our principal aim is the same: the establishment of democracy in the country.”

He further argued that the government under the Awami League represented a system devoid of democracy. For him, the alliance was a positive initiative to free the country from this undemocratic situation and re-establish democratic governance. At the same time, he supported the idea of contesting under a single electoral symbol, emphasizing the wide recognition of the “sheaf of paddy” as a unifying tool.

Beyond these democracy-driven alliances, coalition-building also involved actors whose participation was shaped less by ideology than by political survival. A significant political event in the lead-up to the 2018 election was the disqualification of Jamaat-e-Islami. The High Court declared the party’s registration illegal in light of its historical opposition to the Liberation War, and five years later, the Election Commission issued a gazette notification cancelling its registration. Despite this, Jamaat contested the election as part of the 20 Party Alliance, with BNP’s tacit support. As one Jamaat-affiliated respondent explained in a mid-2020 interview:

“The Election Commission cancelled our registration unjustly. Under these circumstances, we had no other option but to join the alliance with the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP).”

This reveals that Jamaat perceived its alliance not as a strategic choice, but as a compelled move for political survival. To retain electoral competitiveness, the BNP allowed Jamaat candidates to contest under its “sheaf of paddy” symbol, thereby consolidating the opposition vote bank.

However, this vote-bank-driven strategy was not unique to the BNP. The ruling Awami League also pursued a coalition strategy, forming the Grand Alliance with several left-leaning parties. Observing the BNP’s attempt to consolidate votes under a single symbol, the Awami League sought to secure electoral dominance through a similar tactic, ultimately ensuring its electoral victory (Rounaq, 2018).

Taken together, these interviews and political developments underscore that the restoration of democracy was not merely a rhetorical claim but a unifying thread that brought together parties of diverse ideological orientations. While strategic considerations such as vote-bank consolidation and symbolic recognition played an important role, the overarching narrative of these coalitions revolved around resisting authoritarian tendencies and reasserting the primacy of democratic governance in Bangladesh.

Analytically, this aligns with political realism, where parties navigate structural constraints imposed by authoritarian governance. Simultaneously, the symbolic adoption of recognized electoral symbols communicates collective legitimacy and reinforces the democratic narrative.

Participation in the Election (Newly Registered Parties)

In the 11th National Parliamentary Election, several newly registered and unregistered political parties took part in the electoral process. As of 2019, including the newly registered party NDM (National Democratic Movement), the total number of registered political parties with the Election

Commission stood at 40. According to the Political Party Registration Office, to qualify for registration, a political party must fulfill at least one of the following three conditions: it must have secured at least one parliamentary seat in any election held after the country's independence; or it must have participated in any national election and received at least 5 percent of the total votes cast in a constituency; or it must maintain an active office with functional district committees in at least 21 administrative districts and demonstrate documented support from a minimum of 200 voters in at least 100 upazilas or metropolitan police precincts.

Under the Representation of the People Order (RPO), fulfilling any one of these three criteria qualifies a party for registration and participation in elections. In addition to registered parties, some unregistered parties also contested in the election. For instance, despite its registration being canceled, Jamaat-e-Islami participated in the election as a component of the 20-party alliance.

Some newly registered parties faced challenges in obtaining their own electoral symbols due to the timing of their registration. As a result, they had no choice but to contest the election under a symbol allocated to their alliance. For example, as a newly registered party under the Gono Oikya Jote, the National Democratic Movement (NDM) could not use its original election symbol, the Lion, and instead contested under the Lantern (hurricane) symbol of the Muslim League. In a mid-2020 interview, NDM candidate M.R. Masum (Netrakona-05) explained,

“The primary reason we used the hurricane lamp symbol through our alliance was because our party was newly registered with the Election Commission. We did not receive our party symbol before the election, so we had to contest under the Muslim League’s symbol.”

Analyzing Masum’s statement, it becomes clear that, for new parties like NDM, the act of participating in the election took precedence over contesting under their own party symbol.

This reveals the dual nature of alliances: while some actors prioritize collective objectives, others pursue personal gain. Structurally, smaller parties rely on major parties’ symbols to gain recognition and legitimacy, indicating that alliance politics is simultaneously shaped by individual motivations and institutional constraints.

Pursuit of Personal Interests

Although politics is broadly associated with public interest, personal interests are often intertwined with it in various ways. This observation is evident from the statements of candidates representing the political parties examined in this study.

In a mid-2020 interview, a candidate from the Awami League stated,

“In alliance politics, although the smaller partner parties may not benefit significantly, a few individuals within those parties do.”

Regarding the issue of personal gain, a political activist from the Awami League noted in a mid-2020 interview,

“The alliance between the Workers Party and the Grand Alliance (Mohajote) served the personal interest of Rashed Khan Menon. He easily became a Member of Parliament. It was as if he won the electoral battle by placing his gun on someone else’s shoulder.”

These statements suggest that many candidates participated in the election under a common symbol primarily to serve personal interests. In such cases, personal gain emerged as more important than party strategy or public interest.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that electoral alliances in Bangladesh, particularly during the 11th Parliamentary Election of 2018, were shaped less by ideological cohesion and more by pragmatic strategies of survival, wider acceptance, and consolidation. The widespread use of common electoral symbols, most notably the “Boat” and the “Sheaf of Paddy” - illustrates a distinct pattern of symbolic compromise, through which parties traded ideological identity for enhanced visibility, acceptability, and access to political power. For smaller or newly registered parties, these shared symbols provided essential political recognition and a survival pathway, while for dominant parties such as the Awami League and the BNP, they served as instruments for vote-bank expansion and organizational consolidation.

Beyond electoral strategy, these symbolic compromises reveal the deeper logic of coalition politics in Bangladesh, where symbolism and pragmatism operate as interdependent forces. The consolidation of pro-liberation narratives by the Grand Alliance (Mohajote) and the opposition’s portrayal of alliances as movements for democratic restoration illustrate how symbolic strategies for wider acceptance function as both a moral claim and a political resource. This fusion of ideological narrative with strategic calculation underscores a broader transformation in Bangladesh’s democratic culture, one where alliances act not only as electoral mechanisms but also as performative spaces for negotiating identity and acceptability.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the comparative understanding of coalition institutionalization and symbolic politics in transitional democracies. Drawing on perspectives from symbolic interactionism and political realism, it demonstrates that alliances are more than instruments of vote aggregation; they are also sites where meaning, power, and acceptability are continuously constructed and contested. By linking empirical evidence from Bangladesh to broader theoretical debates, the study enhances our understanding of how symbolic strategies for wider acceptance complement institutional weakness, enabling political actors to sustain influence within fragile democratic environments.

Looking ahead, future research could expand on these findings by exploring the long-term consequences of symbolic compromise on party identity, voter trust, and democratic consolidation. Comparative analyses across South Asian democracies- such as India, Pakistan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka could reveal whether similar mechanisms of symbolic negotiation shape coalition politics in comparable transitional contexts. Ultimately, the study highlights that the endurance of democracy depends not only on institutional structures but also on the symbolic meanings that unite political actors and citizens.

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