TWENTY-FIRST NATIONAL PUBLIC PERCEPTION STUDY REPORT (NOVEMBER 2008)
Preliminary Report on Perceptions Regarding National Election Issues

I. Background and Methodology

In November 2008 the Election Working Group (EWG) completed a twenty-first rapid assessment of citizen perception of recent events. This preliminary report focuses on citizen perceptions on issues related to the national election.

The data reflect the situation in the last week of November 2008. The Asia Foundation and Data International Ltd. provided technical support. Conducted in 12 districts of the country (two in each of the six divisions), the perception study gathered impressions from a cross-section of ordinary citizens, civil society representatives, and local businesspersons through informal individual interviews in (i) each divisional headquarters and a proximate rural thana in the same district; and (ii) district headquarters of another randomly chosen district in each division and a proximate rural thana in the same district.[1] A formal questionnaire with a mix of quantitative and qualitative questions was administered.

The sample included 1,200 respondents—600 urban and 600 rural (Table 1).[2] The sample design includes 200 respondents in each division (100 urban and 100 rural). Fifty respondents were to be selected from each of the 24 selected areas in 12 selected districts of the six divisions. Half of the interviewees in each location were ordinary citizens and the other half (non-political) elites. Ordinary citizens included marginal or small farmers; daily agricultural and non-agricultural wage laborers; factory or shop employees; small businesspersons/traders; fishermen; roadside vendors; rickshaw/van pullers; housewives; nurses; or others. The (non-political) elite group included professionals such as teachers, lawyers, doctors and engineers; NGO officials; businesspersons (producers and traders); religious leaders; and medium or large farmers. Government officials, such as those in district or Upazila Nirbahi offices, were not interviewed; however, teachers in government schools, doctors in government clinics, and similarly placed individuals were eligible for inclusion in the respondent base.

The survey was conducted in 24 locations in the six divisions (two rural and two urban areas in two districts of each division), and estimates of various statistics were calculated for each of these 24 sample populations. The estimated statistics for the 12 urban locations of the 12 districts were then weighted by the respective urban populations of each district sampled to yield an

[1] The rural thana is chosen from the ones that are close by to the sadar upazila but are distinguished by a truly rural character.
[2] While the sample size for each district is not sufficiently large to provide a valid representation of citizen opinions for that district, the overall sample size for each group in the total sample can be taken as representative of the views of that group nationally.

estimate of national urban perceptions. Similarly, the estimated statistics for the 12 rural locations of the 12 districts were weighted by the respective rural populations of each district sampled to yield an estimate of national rural perceptions. The overall national urban and rural estimates were then weighted by the respective national urban and rural population proportions to yield unbiased estimates of national perceptions.

Table 1: The Sample

	Bangladesh-urban			Bangladesh-rural			Total		
	Numbers in Sample								
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Ordinary Citizens	181	119	300	184	116	300	365	235	600
Elite	189	111	300	184	116	300	373	227	600
Total	**370**	**230**	**600**	**368**	**232**	**600**	**738**	**462**	**1,200**
	Percentage Distrbution								
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Ordinary Citizens	30.2	19.8	50.0	30.7	19.3	50.0	30.4	19.6	50.0
Elite	31.5	18.5	50.0	30.7	19.3	50.0	31.1	18.9	50.0
Total	**61.7**	**38.3**	**100.0**	**61.3**	**38.7**	**100.0**	**61.5**	**38.5**	**100.0**

II. Citizens' Assessment of Personal Well-Being

Respondents were asked whether, taking account of the combination of social, political, and economic factors discussed over the course of the interview, they felt *personally* better off in November 2008 than they were under the last elected government. Respondents felt that that they are better off in terms of social and political considerations, but worse off economically.

Social and Political Situation: In reflecting on their social and political situation, about 65 percent of citizens in both groups indicated that they are better off. Approximately 21 percent of ordinary citizens and 12 percent of elites feel that they are worse off.[3]

Economic Situation: About 62 percent of ordinary citizens and 59 percent of elites think that they are worse off economically, while 16 percent of citizens in both groups feel that they are better off.[4]

Overall Assessment: In terms of an overall subjective assessment of their situation, taking all factors into account, about 34 percent of ordinary citizens and 39 percent of elites believe that they are better off. About 40 percent of ordinary citizens and 26 percent of elites believe that

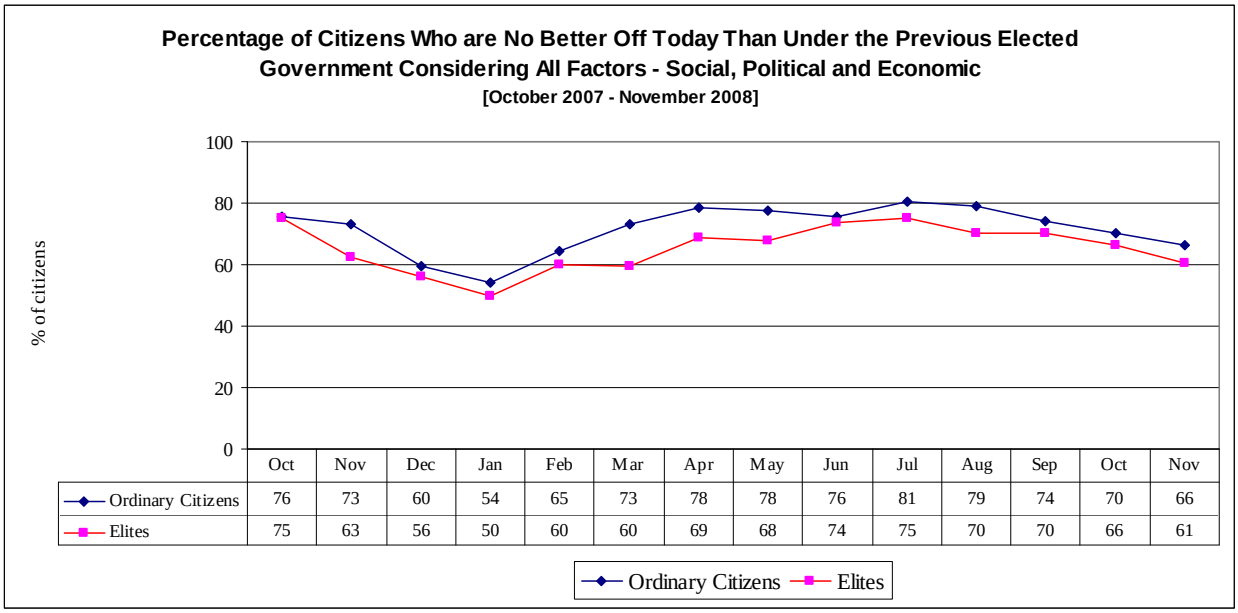
[3] As to rural-urban variations, 64.0 percent of ordinary citizens in rural areas and 61.8 percent in urban areas (not significantly different) say they are better off, while 21.0 percent of ordinary citizens in rural areas, about the same as 19.1 percent in urban areas consider themselves worse off. Also, 64.8 percent of elites in rural areas and 70.9 percent in urban areas (significantly higher) say they are better off, while 12.6 percent of elites in rural areas, about the same as 9.8 percent in urban areas consider themselves worse off.

[4] 4.9 percent of ordinary citizens in urban areas and 19.7 percent in rural areas (significantly higher) say they are better off. Also, 7.8 percent of elites in urban areas and 18.1 percent in rural areas (significantly higher) say they are better off. In addition, 83.8 percent of ordinary citizens in urban areas and 55.5 percent in rural areas (significantly lower) say they are worse off. Also, 66.1 percent of elites in urban areas and 57.4 percent in rural areas (significantly lower) say they are worse off.

they are worse off. Stated another way, in November 2008 about 66 percent of ordinary citizens think that they are *no better off* now compared to their situation under the last elected government, while 61 percent of elites hold the same view (Chart 1).

In terms of rural-urban differences in the overall assessment, in November 2008 78 percent of ordinary citizens in urban areas and 63 percent in rural areas (significantly lower) consider themselves no better off. Also, 67 percent of elites in urban areas and 59 percent in rural areas (significantly lower) consider themselves no better off. The results suggest that 22 months of CG governance has made little difference to the lives of citizens compared to the period under the previous elected government, with whatever benefits resulted from the changes instituted by the CG to date felt more fully by rural residents than by urban residents.

Chart 1



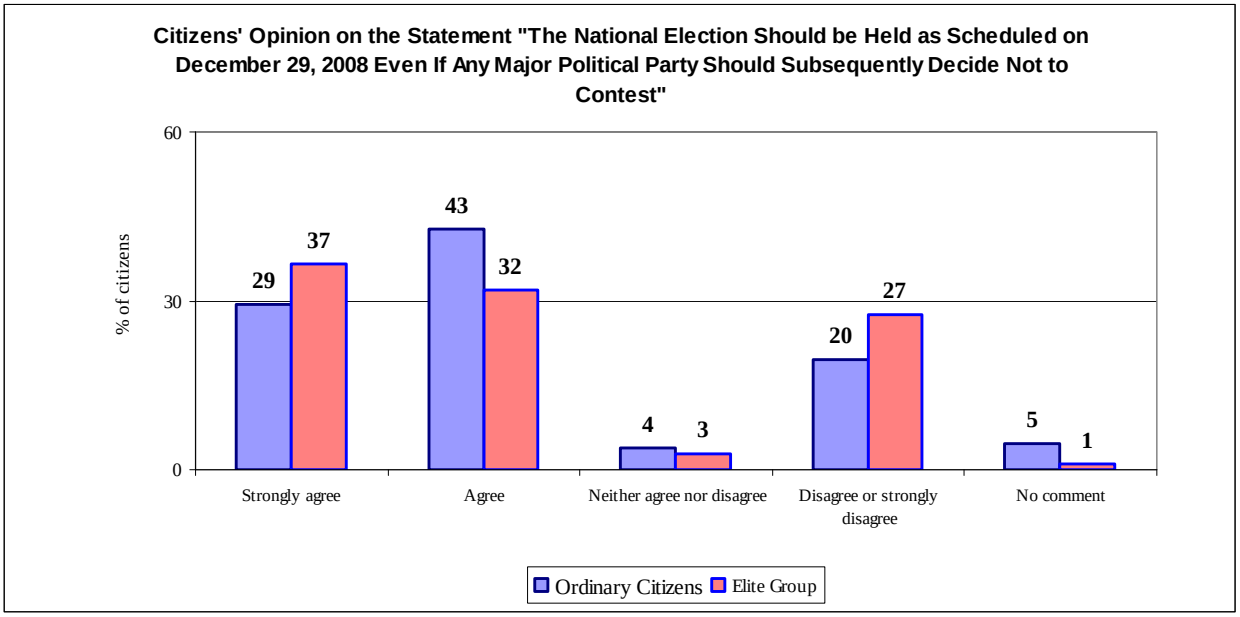
	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov
Ordinary Citizens	76	73	60	54	65	73	78	78	76	81	79	74	70	66
Elites	75	63	56	50	60	60	69	68	74	75	70	70	66	61

III. National Parliamentary Election 2008

The national parliamentary election is scheduled to be held on December 29, 2008. One major party had previously threatened to boycott the election if certain conditions it insisted were not met by the Bangladesh Election Commission (BEC). The matter has since been resolved, but the prospect of subsequent threats of a similar nature cannot be overruled. What is the public opinion on this? Should the national election be held as scheduled on December 29, 2008 even if any major political party should subsequently decide not to contest?

About 72 percent of ordinary citizens and 69 percent of elites consider that the election should be held on the scheduled date no matter what (Chart 2). This amounts to a strong rejection of any attempt by any quarter to postpone the election in the face of the previous universal demand of people and the political parties that the election be held as soon as possible and a democratically elected government returned to the country.

Chart 2



In fact, one rescheduling of the election had already been done; the election was earlier scheduled to be held on December 18, 2008, but was postponed to December 29 by the BEC to partially accommodate the demand of one major party but with consensus of all major parties. Is the public happy with this rescheduling? The survey sought public opinion on this. About 75 percent of ordinary citizens and 80 percent of elites agreed or strongly agreed with the decision of the BEC to reschedule the national election date to ensure participation by the major political parties (Chart 3).

One matter of discord between the BEC and all major political parties was the timing of the upazila election, originally scheduled for December 22, 2008. To resolve this conflict and ensure that the major parties did not use this as an excuse to threaten another election boycott, the BEC postponed the date of the upazila elections to January 22, 2009. Public opinion on this is quite clear, as the survey reveals. About 72 percent of ordinary citizens and 75 percent of elites support or strongly support the decision of the BEC to reschedule the upazila election date to ensure participation by the major political parties in the national election (Chart 4).[5] The implication is that a majority of citizens want all major parties to contest the national election, but are not supportive of the BEC's making any further compromises on the election date under any circumstances.

Another point of contention between the CG and the political parties relates to the withdrawal of the state of emergency. The national consensus appears to be that the election cannot be held under a state of emergency, and its withdrawal at some point is required to allow campaigning by the political parties. At the same time, opinion is divided as to when the state of emergency should be withdrawn. The survey reveals that 44 percent of ordinary citizens and 52 percent of elites believe that the state of emergency should be lifted immediately to allow campaigning by the political parties; however, over 40 percent of citizens in both groups disagree or strongly

[5] There are no significant rural-urban variations in this perception for both ordinary citizens and elites.

disagree, while the remaining have no strong opinion either way (Chart 5).[6] These perceptions are about the same in rural and urban areas for both groups of citizens. These citizens are possibly enjoying the peaceful situation prevailing in a pre-election period and attribute it to the existence of a state of emergency and, because of it, the ability of authorities to enforce electoral rules of conduct. The law and order situation continues to be good, and candidates and their supporters are not being threatened by political adversaries.

Chart 3

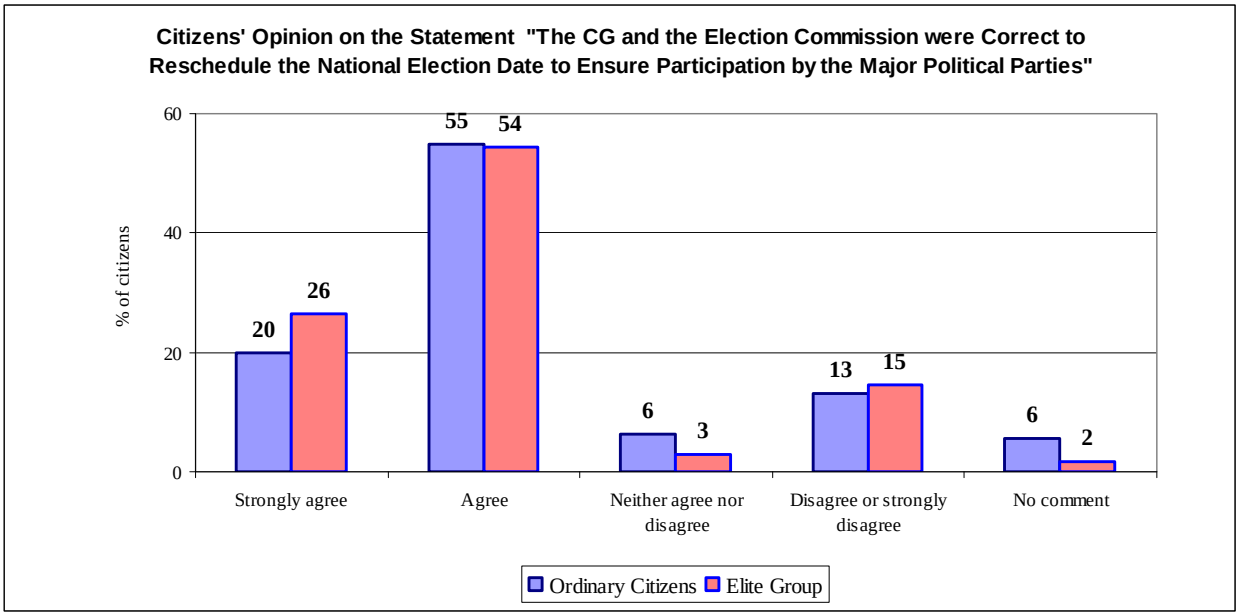
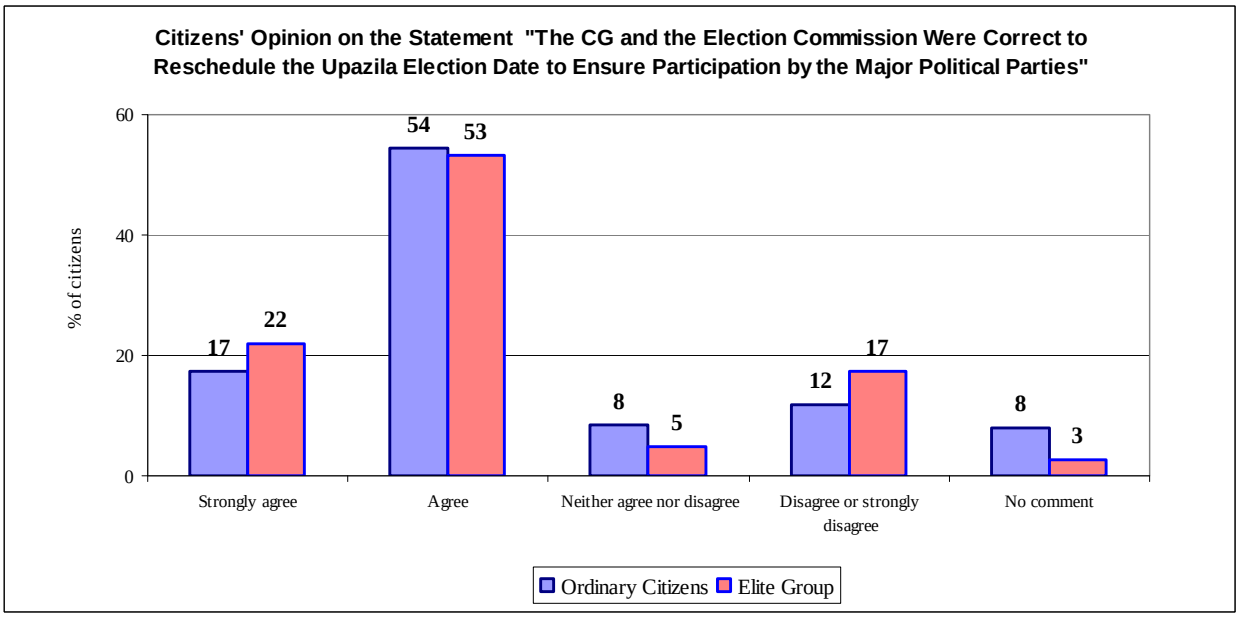
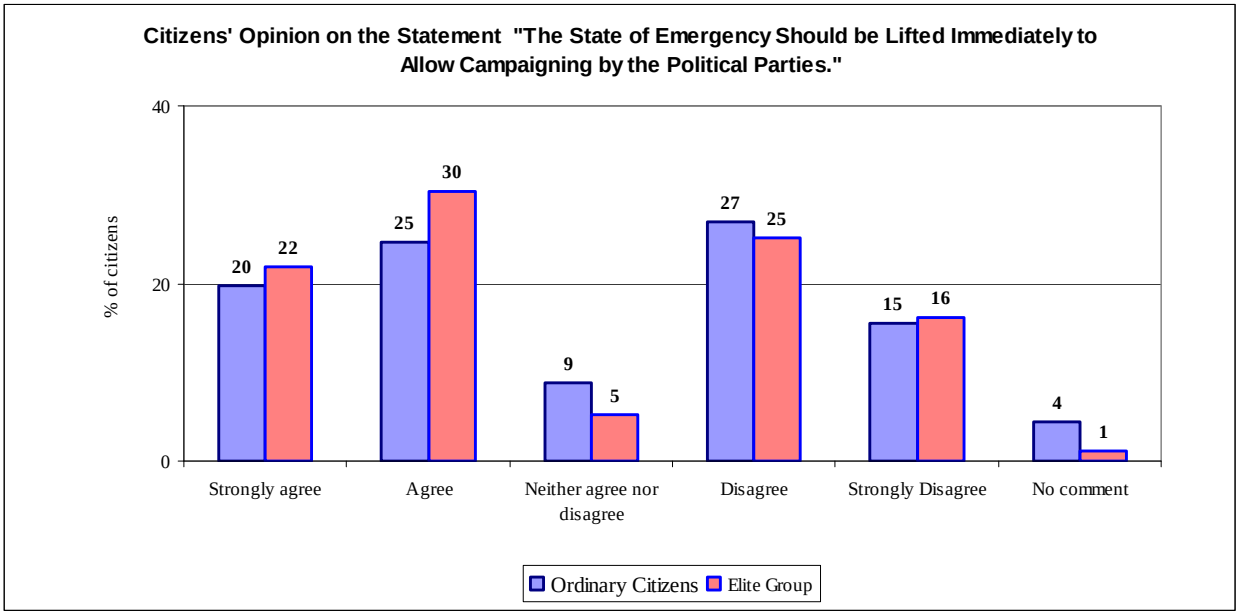


Chart 4



[6] The CG has since announced that the state of emergency will be lifted from December 17, 2008.

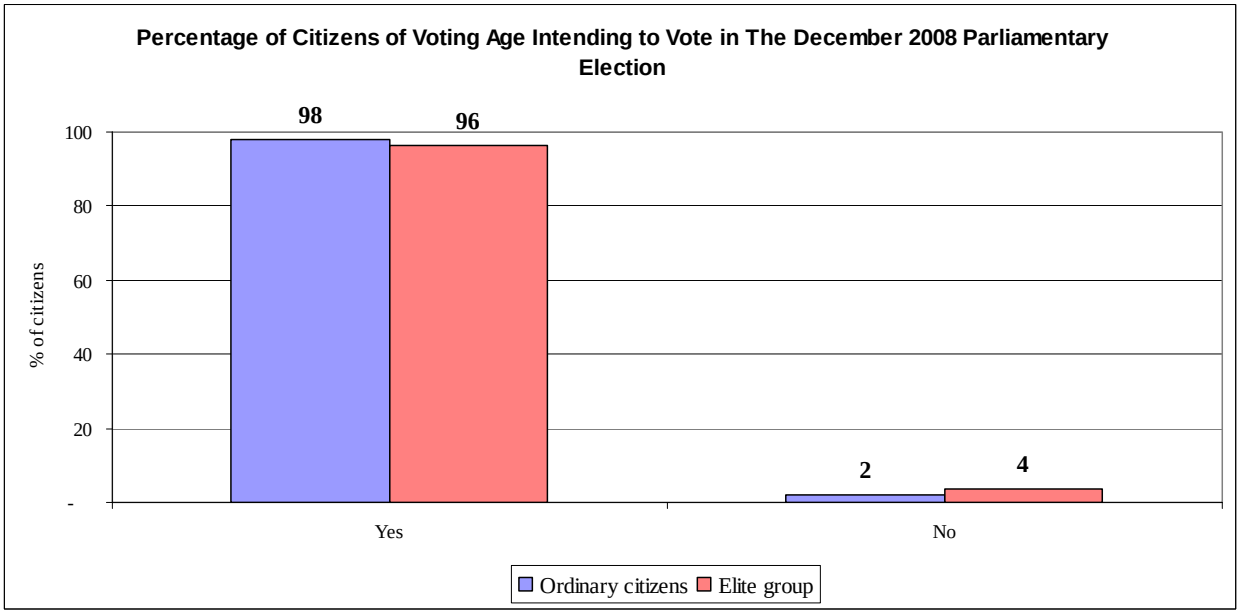
Chart 5



Expected Voter Turnout

Almost all respondents of voting age state that they intend to vote in December 29 parliamentary election scheduled (Chart 6).

Chart 6

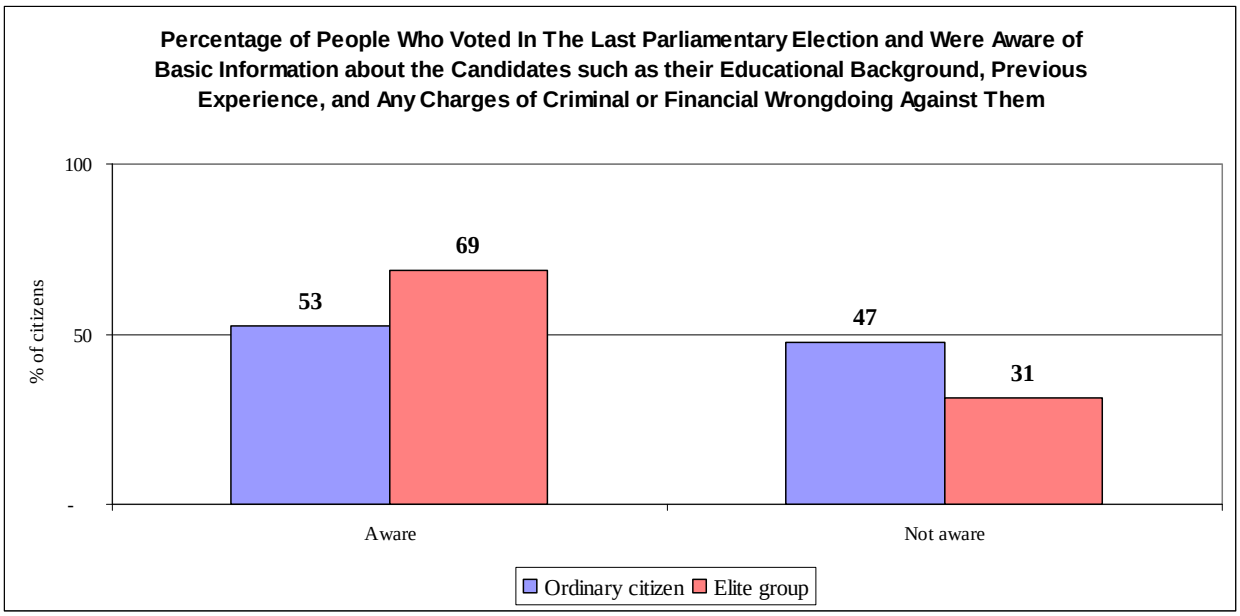


Voters' Knowledge of Candidates' Backgrounds

For informed voting it is important that voters have reasonable background knowledge of candidates, including their educational background, previous experience, and any charges of criminal or financial wrongdoing against them. Did people who voted in the 2001 parliamentary

election have any awareness of such traits prior to voting? It appears that 53 percent of ordinary citizens and 69 percent of elites who voted in the last election knew something about the candidates' background traits (Chart 7). However, about 50 percent of ordinary citizens and one-third of elites had no knowledge of candidates' backgrounds and qualifications when they voted during the last election. The situation was significantly worse in urban areas than in rural.[7]

Chart 7



Voters' Knowledge of Candidates' Plans

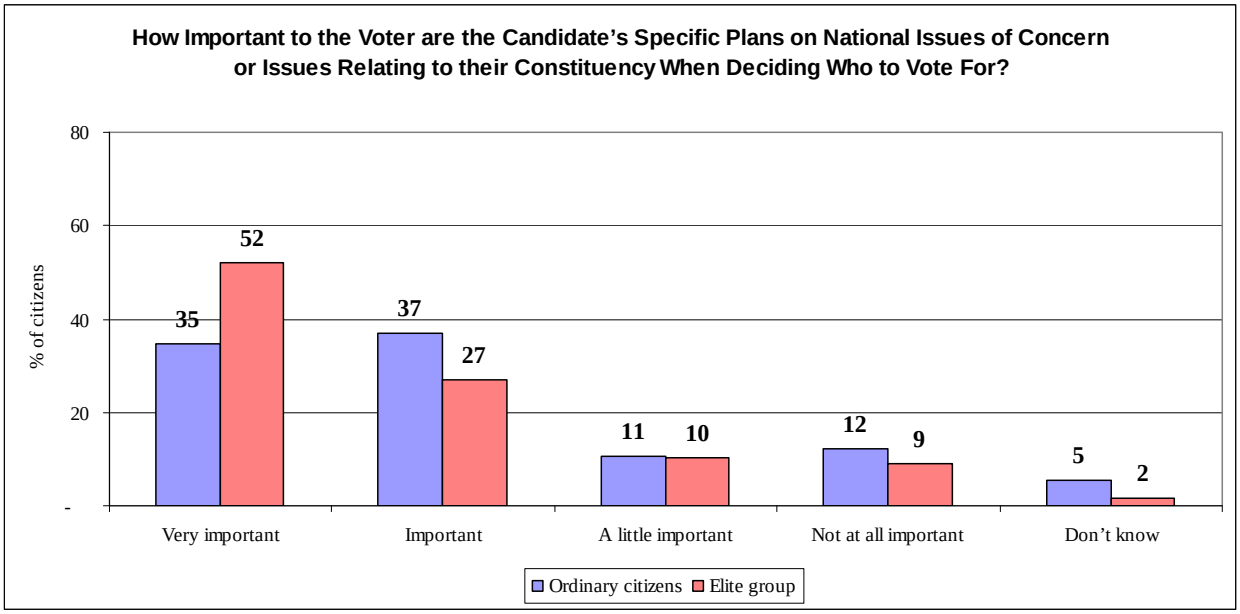
About 70 percent of ordinary citizens and 80 percent of elites consider it important or very important to know about the candidates' (or their parties') specific plans on national issues of concern or issues relating to their constituency when deciding who to vote for (Chart 8). In fact, over one-third of ordinary citizens and over 50 percent of elites consider this very important. Both ordinary citizens and elites in urban areas are significantly more conscious of this need for information compared to rural citizens.[8] From previous monthly perception surveys implemented by the Foundation and EWG, it has been observed that in the upcoming election, people have great expectations from their elected representatives regarding such broad issues as increasing national food supplies and reducing prices of food and other essentials; taking effective anti-corruption measures; ensuring continued improvement in the law and order situation; providing quality public services to the people (such as health, education, and general administrative services); introducing fundamental development and governance reforms; and revitalizing the economy through infrastructural improvements (for example, roads and bridges construction or improvement and provision of electrical service), adequate and timely supplies of agricultural

[7] 54.6 percent of ordinary citizens in rural areas were aware of candidates' backgrounds prior to voting, while 45.8 percent in urban areas (significantly lower) had such knowledge. 71.2 percent of elites in rural areas were aware of candidates' backgrounds prior to voting, while 60.9 percent in urban areas (significantly lower) had such knowledge.

[8] A significantly higher percentage of ordinary citizens in urban areas (78 percent) compared to rural (70 percent), and urban elites (84 percent) compared to rural (77 percent) want to make their voting decision based on knowledge of candidates' specific plans on national issues of concern or issues relating to their constituency.

inputs, and an improved business climate for rapid industrial and business growth in the private sector. Given these expectations, it is important that people hear from candidates about their (and their parties') specific plans to address these and other issues at both national and local levels, so that informed judgments can be made about which candidates are more suitable. Candidates must go beyond supporting broad party manifestos; they must commit themselves to their constituencies by providing specific agendas and modalities for change. The more specific the delineation of issues by candidates, the better voters will be equipped to make correct voting choices and insist on accountability from their elected representatives in the future.

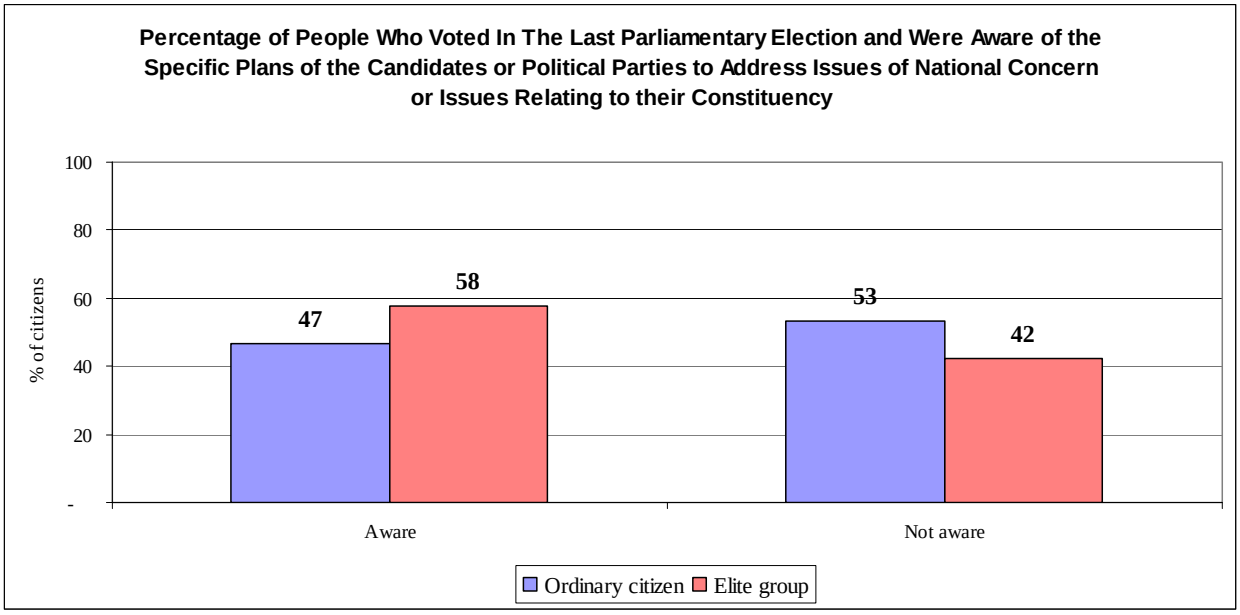
Chart 8



What is the record to date? In the last parliamentary election, more than 50 percent of ordinary citizens had no knowledge of candidates' (or their parties') specific plans to address issues of national concern or issues relating to the candidates' constituencies (Chart 9). This could be because candidates relied on the assumption that most ordinary citizens vote along party lines and hence they did not bother to make their specific position known to voters. Similarly, they may have announced their plans through media or forums that were largely inaccessible to ordinary citizens, or concentrated on convincing only leading elites in the expectation that these elites in turn would influence ordinary citizens simply by announcing their support for particular candidates. The latter hypotheses are substantiated by the survey findings that a significantly higher percentage of elites (57.9 percent) compared to ordinary citizens (46.6 percent) had some knowledge of candidates' action plans.[9]

[9] Rural area elites claim to have more knowledge of candidates' plans than urban elites (59.5 percent in rural areas, significantly higher than 52.7 percent in urban). There is no significant rural-urban difference in perception of ordinary citizens in this respect.

Chart 9



In the present circumstances—increased awareness of citizens about the widespread corruption indulged in by political leaders, the existence of a new voters' list with photographs in which citizens have tremendous confidence, an expectation that vote rigging would is less likely to occur in the upcoming election, and the relative safety and security from threats that citizens are enjoying through the lead-up to the election—do citizens feel effective in getting candidates or political parties to tell them their specific plans to address national issues of concern or issues relating to individual constituencies? It is observed that in spite of these favorable circumstances, more than 50 percent of ordinary citizens and more than one-third of elites feel that they would still be totally ineffective (Chart 10).[10] However, 25 percent of ordinary citizens and one-third of elites believe that they would be effective or very effective in forcing candidates to reveal specific plans; this confidence may be because they are confident that they vote freely in these circumstances, without harassment from any quarter, or because they consider that candidates would be worried about the threat of the "no vote" that has been introduced for the first time in Bangladesh elections.[11]

***Can Citizens Influence Elected Representatives To Deliver On Their Promises*?**

It is one thing to have knowledge of the post-election action plans or manifestos of candidates and political parties; quite another to ensure that they execute those plans after being elected. People have been frustrated by the failed promises of elected candidates and winning parties in the past and are skeptic in general about their ability to ensure compliance from their elected

[10] Rural area residents are observed to have more confidence in this respect than urban residents. About 62.5 percent of ordinary citizens in urban areas believe that they would be totally ineffective in getting candidates to reveal their plans, significantly higher than 49.0 percent in rural areas. Also, about 45.8 percent of urban elites believe that they would be totally ineffective, significantly higher than 35.7 percent in rural areas.

[11] In terms of thinking that they would be effective or very effective, ordinary citizens in rural and urban areas have the same perceptions (22.7 percent in urban areas and 26.9 percent in rural area, not significantly different). Rural elites are, however, much more confident about their effectiveness in getting a response from candidates than urban elites (21.1 percent of elites in urban areas and 37.2 percent in rural, significantly higher).

representatives. About 60 percent of ordinary citizens and 50 percent of elites believe that they have no influence at all over whether an elected representative fulfills his or her specific plans to address national issues of concern (Chart 11). This pessimism is about the same in rural and urban areas for ordinary citizens, but significantly higher in urban areas for elites (60.9 percent of elites in urban areas, 49.3 percent in rural). Constant vigilance is required during the period between elections to ensure that elected representatives fulfill their pre-election commitments. To the extent these commitments are not met, and to the extent voters cannot bring pressure to bear on their elected representatives to perform as they promised, the principles of sound democratic governance are not upheld.

Chart 10

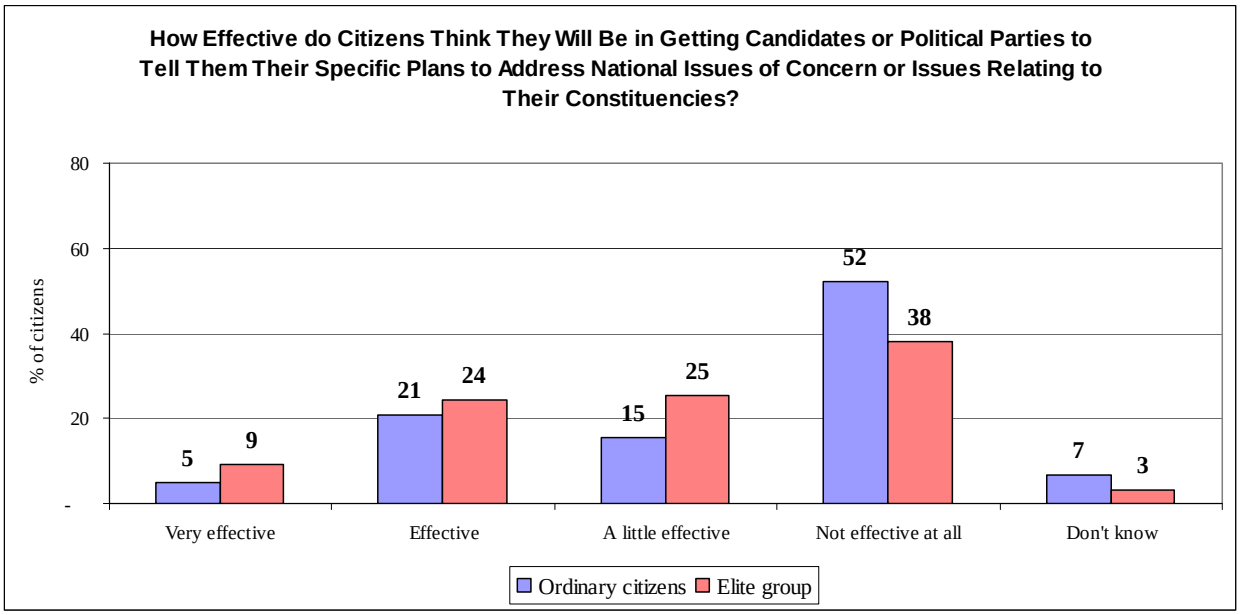
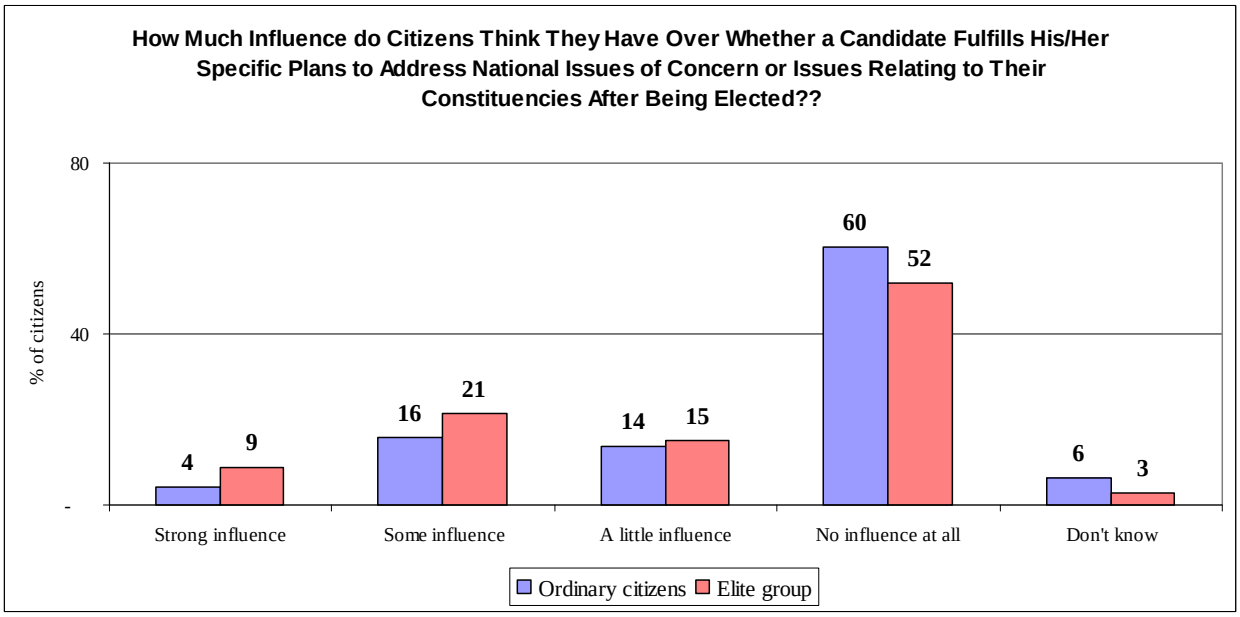


Chart 11

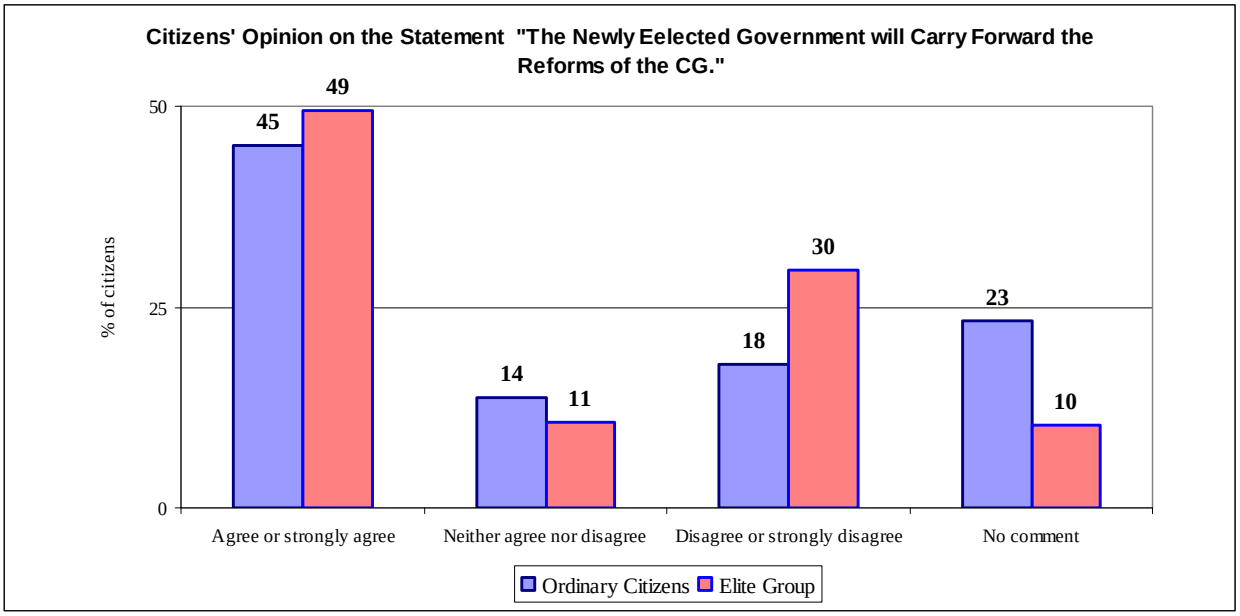


IV. Some Leading Election Issues

A. *Will the newly elected government carry forward the reforms of the CG*?

During its two-years in power, the CG had implemented such basic reforms as the separation of the judiciary from the executive, made the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) an effective organization which could identify and publicize the wrongdoings of many leading and influential political leaders, businessmen and bureaucrats, streamlined the Public Service Commission, introduced and implemented some electoral reforms, and improved the general quality and timeliness of public services. People who consider these as good achievements would like such positive steps to continue in every sphere under the next elected government—including reforms in the education and health sectors, police reform, and enforcement of transparent procurement policies. While many people may believe that these reform measures should continue apace, the question is whether they believe the reforms will actually continue, since the record of past elected governments is dismal in this respect. The survey reveals that approximately 50 percent of citizens in both groups believe that the newly elected government will carry forward the reforms of the CG (Chart 12). It would appear that these citizens believe that some fundamental changes have happened in the attitude of politicians given the lessons they have learned from the CG regime. Others are not so sure. About 20 percent of ordinary citizens and one-third of elites do not believe that the elected government will continue the reform process; the remaining are uncertain about what will happen.[12]

Chart 12



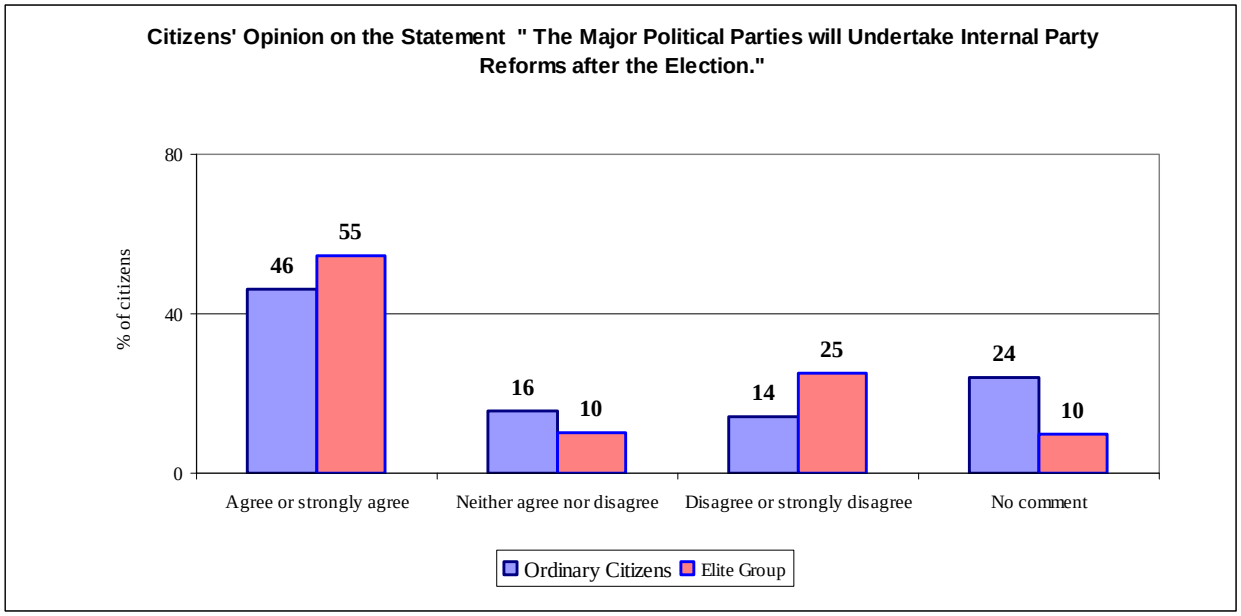
B. *Will the major political parties undertake internal party reforms after the election*?

Many voices were raised during the last two years on the question of the major political parties undertaking internal party reforms. At one stage, some senior political leaders of both the major

[12] Disagreement (or strong disagreement) with the statement is significantly higher among rural elites; but the difference in perception in this respect between ordinary citizens in rural and urban areas is not significant.

parties suggested packages of internal party reform, but these reformist initiatives were not warmly received by other senior leaders. This may not necessarily mean that internal party reform will not happen after the election, as those who resisted party reform may simply not have liked the idea of being pushed hastily into reforms under the pressure of an unelected caretaker government. With that pressure off at this stage, citizens may be looking to contesting parties to indicate whether they are contemplating internal party reforms and the nature of the reforms. Approximately 50 percent of citizens in both groups agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that the major political parties will indeed undertake internal party reforms after the election (Chart 13).[13] The other 50 percent remain skeptical or unsure on the basis of the parties' past record and the fact that none of the parties had yet to announce a clear agenda for internal party reform.

Chart 13



Citizens' skepticism about the political parties undertaking internal party reforms after the election was intensified after the recent release on bail of most political leaders who were arrested for alleged corruption. About 15 percent of ordinary citizens and one-third of elites consider that the releases will have a negative impact on the prospect of political party reform. About 69 and 45 percent of elites remain uncertain about the impact. Those citizens who anticipate a negative impact cite the following bases for their belief:

- Senior party leaders, particularly the ones who were arrested for corruption and are now being released on bail, are not reform minded; they will use their strong influence within their parties to impede reforms in order to safeguard their personal interests and retain their power; reforms will just stand in the way of continued corruption and will not serve the interests of dishonest and incompetent party members; their release will consequently block honest party leaders from initiating party reform.
- Political parties do not want reforms as these would make it difficult to run their parties; released political leaders comprise a large proportion of the effective party leadership and

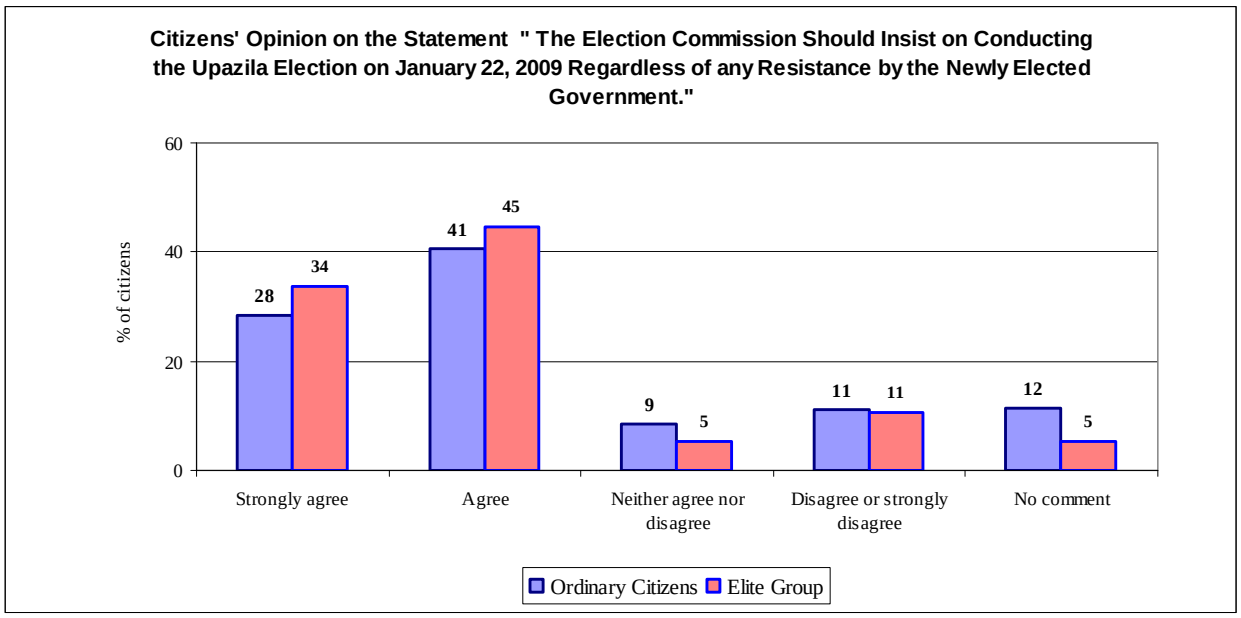
[13] Significant rural-urban differences in this perception are not observed for citizens in both groups.

will be compelled to block reforms in the party's interests, otherwise they might themselves be forced to quit by vested interests within the party.

C. *Should the Election Commission insist on conducting the upazila election as scheduled on January 22, 2009, regardless of any resistance by the newly elected government*?

The BEC is an independent body whose decisions should be honored by the political government in power. The BEC recently announced that it would conduct the upazila election on January 22, 2009; it was even prepared to hold it on the earlier scheduled date of December 22, 2008. If the elected government is in power at that time, the question in people's minds is whether it would allow the BEC to hold the election as scheduled, or defer the elections to some future date. The survey sought citizens' views on this matter. About 70 percent of ordinary citizens and 80 percent of elites agree or strongly agree with the statement that the BEC, as an independent body, should insist on conducting the upazila election on January 22, 2009 regardless of any resistance by the newly elected government (Chart 14).[14] This view is uniformly held by ordinary citizens and elites in both urban and rural areas. None of the political parties have, however, made any public declaration to date on what their position is on this issue.

Chart 14



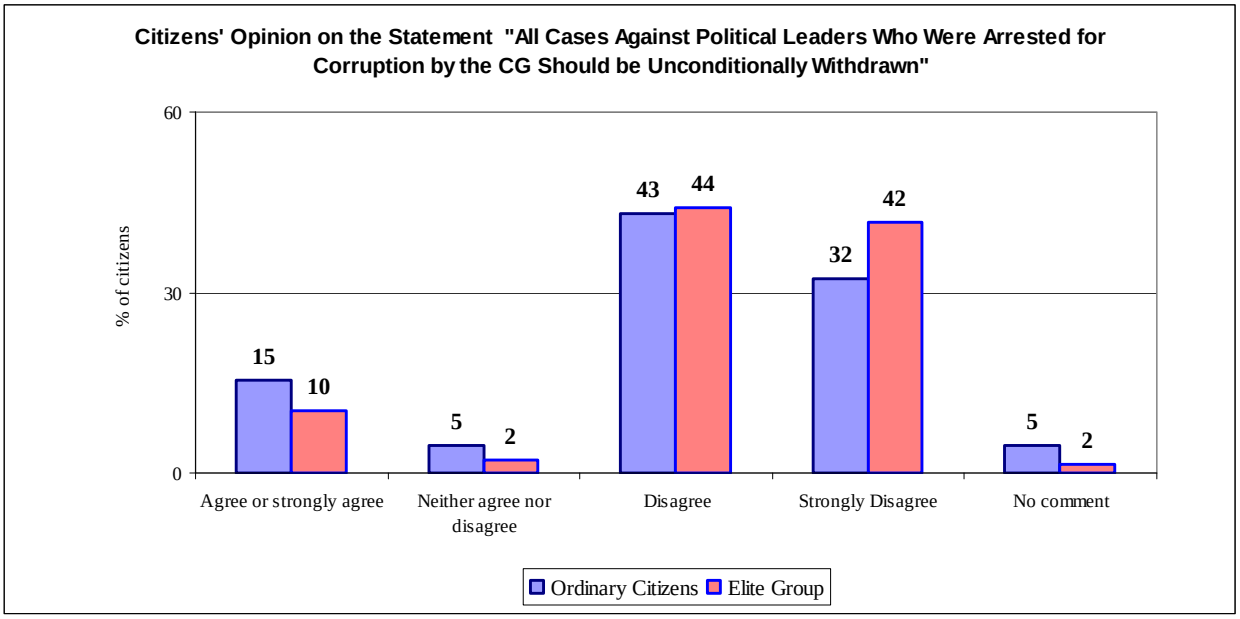
D. *Should all cases against political leaders who were arrested for corruption by the CG be unconditionally withdrawn*?

About 75 percent of ordinary citizens and 86 percent of elites disagree or strongly disagree with this notion (Chart 15). There are no significant rural-urban differences in citizens' perceptions on this point. People clearly want the cases against the alleged corrupt political leaders to be completed, and due punishment given to those found guilty as charged. If the cases are withdrawn, these same persons would again vie for political office and assume power,

[14] In fact, 28 percent of ordinary citizens and 34 percent of elites strongly agree with the statement.

undermining public confidence in the justice system. The position of the contesting political parties on this issue has not been made known to voters.

Chart 15

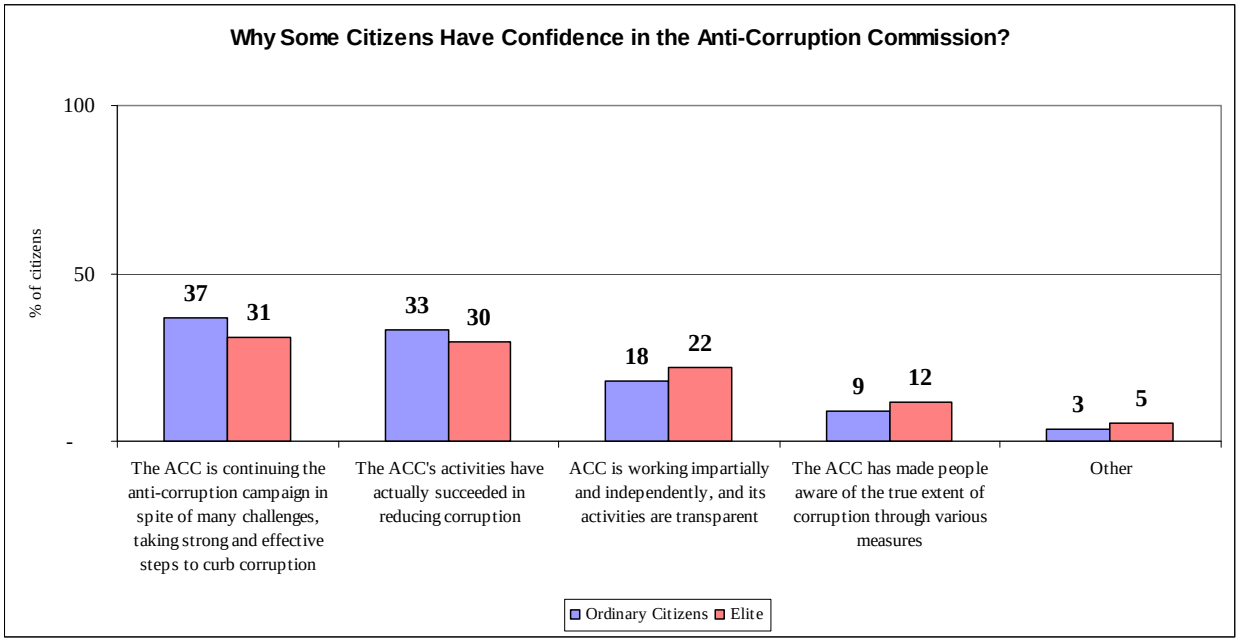


E. ***Will the new elected government continue the anti-corruption drive conducted by the ACC during the CG regime?***

The survey shows that in November 2008, over 60 percent of citizens in both groups have confidence in the ACC, down significantly from previous months mainly because of the doubts raised in people's minds as a result of the recent release on bail of most of the political, business and other leaders earlier arrested for alleged corruption. While the releases may have been necessary in the interests of getting the political parties to contest in the national election, the magnitude of support for the ACC indicates clearly that citizens want it to continue as an independent and effective body to reduce the level of corruption in the country. In fact, about 75 percent of people believe that corruption has decreased in their localities compared to the situation under the previous elected government. People attribute their confidence in the ACC to the following reasons (Chart 16):

- The ACC is doing good work, operating at its own pace and continuing the anti-corruption campaign in spite of many challenges, taking strong and effective steps to curb corruption, having corrupt people at all levels arrested and tried through due legal process, and confiscating the illegal wealth of those who have been convicted.
- The ACC's activities have actually succeeded in reducing corruption—the practice of taking bribes openly and without fear is less observed now, and a culture of honesty appears to be returning.
- ACC is working impartially and independently, and its activities are transparent.
- The ACC has made people aware of the true extent of corruption through various measures.

Chart 16

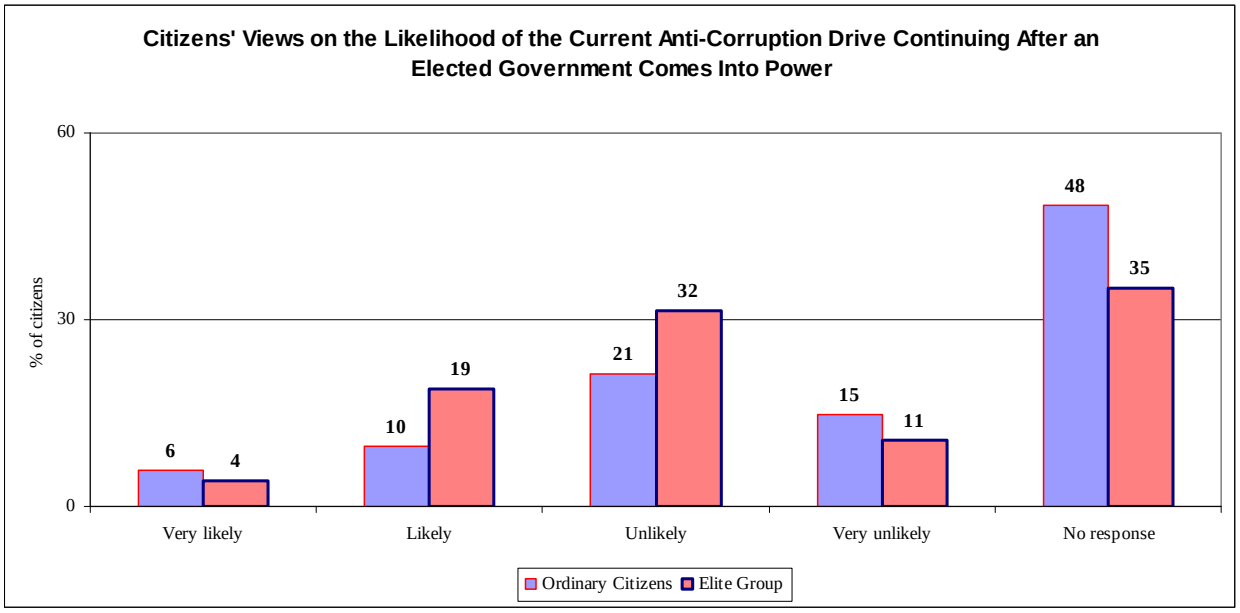


Given people's confidence in the ACC, a major election issue is whether the new elected government will continue the anti-corruption drive at its current level of intensity. What do people think? About 36 percent of ordinary citizens and 42 percent of elites believe that it is unlikely or very unlikely that the current anti-corruption drive will continue after the election when a new government comes into power (Chart 17). Only 15 and 23 percent of ordinary citizens and elites, respectively, consider it likely or very likely, while the remaining 48 and 35 percent of ordinary citizens and elite remain uncertain. Given this public perception, it is imperative that candidates explain the party position to the voters and the action that their parties would take—not least because most of the identified corrupt persons (now released on bail) are protagonists in their own parties. The survey shows that 55 percent of ordinary citizens and 70 percent of elites do not agree with recent judicial actions granting bail to senior political leaders accused of corruption. In addition, over one-third of ordinary citizens and over 50 percent of elites believe that the recent release of allegedly corrupt senior political leaders on bail will have a negative impact on the anti-corruption drive. They attribute the following reasons for their belief:

- The released political leaders will claim that they are innocent of all wrong-doing, and will be encouraged to continue, and even intensify, their corrupt practices without any fear, and this will encourage others to be corrupt as well, since the decisions of the ACC have already lost their bite.
- The ACC will not be able to work independently as its activities will be vulnerable to political interference; the released corrupt political leaders may seek revenge and take measures to restructure the ACC completely, or will influence it to render the campaign ineffective.
- The anti-corruption campaign has lost people's trust and confidence as the corrupt persons were released without proper trials and resolution of the cases, and the bail appears permanent since it appears that the released persons will never be tried; the assurance that

highly corrupt persons can escape punishment has been established and, in future, all activities of the ACC will be considered farcical and any anti-corruption drive will fail.

Chart 17



F. *Will the elected government be able to reduce the price of rice and other essential commodities*?

A problem central to the minds of citizens is the high price of rice and other essential foods which they believe the CG was unable to control, and which they expect the elected government will be better able to manage. The food price inflation rate had reached double digit figures by mid-2007, and reduced somewhat after that, but continuation at this level would still spell disaster to the vast majority of poor people that have limited capacity to make short-term adjustments in their living standards. The question that is paramount in the minds of voters is what exactly the parties plan to do to reduce the food inflation rate, rather than mere statements that they would reduce it.

In November, about 50 percent of citizens in both groups reported that the cost of essentials (food stuff, other essentials) has risen significantly in their villages/urban wards compared to the previous month (with more than 20 percent reporting significantly higher prices of rice). While about 65 percent of ordinary citizens and 72 percent of elites believe that an elected government will succeed in reducing food prices, at the time the survey was administered none of the parties had indicated the steps that they would take to reduce rice and other food prices.