

# Political parties need to take greater responsibility for Pakistani and Bangladeshi clan politicking in order to protect our democracy

By Democratic Audit UK

*Recent controversies in local elections in Tower Hamlets and the General Election in Bradford West have highlighted the issue of voter fraud and the behaviour of 'biraderi' (Pakistani and Bangladeshi 'clan') networks. Eleanor Hill argues that political parties have a responsibility to act in order to prevent potential future controversies.*



Credit: [Tim Green](#), CC BY 2.0

As the dust settles on the recent Elections it is time to reflect on the role of the biraderis, kinship networks prominent in the Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities, which kept appearing throughout this long campaign. In February, the media reported on the Bradford West selection process where [Amina Ali](#) stepped down just three days after being selected amidst allegations that the selection process had been corrupted. In March, 130 Labour Party members, all but seven of which were Asian, were excluded from voting in the selection process in [Halifax](#) after allegations that the same person had recruited most of these members and their membership fees were being paid on the same credit card. In April, we heard about [postal vote fraud](#) fears in some wards in Pendle with a large Asian population, not the first time postal vote fraud has been alleged in this [seat](#).

In the same month [Lutfur Rahman](#) was found guilty of vote rigging in Tower Hamlets in the 2014 mayoral election, and the allegations continued into May with [concern](#) about postal vote fraud in the borough in the lead up to the General Election. The recent [report](#) from the Electoral Commission has highlighted the role biraderis play in perpetuating electoral fraud across England. Even though the allegations of corruption against the UNITE union in [Falkirk](#) in 2013 demonstrate that biraderis are just one example of community network which may engage in shady politicking, in this blog I will argue that the way in which the mainstream political parties enable biraderi engagement with candidate selection and local campaigning are particularly worrying for the quality of our democracy. I will argue that the parties must work harder to contain, and not encourage, this type of politics.

The recent [research](#) conducted for the Electoral Commission has shown that the influence of biraderi networks may be deemed necessary in order to overcome discrimination within local political parties and to be selected. In the face of perceived racism and discrimination within local parties, ethnic minority candidates find that the only way to gain selection is to call on the support of the biraderi. Local parties are flooded with biraderi members and, as was alleged in Halifax, one individual often recruits members and may also pay their membership fees. The individuals recruited are there for one reason: to vote for the biraderi favoured candidate.

In the Bradford West Labour Party the degree of influence that the biraderis hold became apparent this year when Amina Ali was selected as the original parliamentary candidate. It is thought that the biraderis [selected](#) Ali because they were angry that the local party had excluded their preferred candidate, Shakeela Lal, from the shortlist and they did not want to give their votes to either of the other two local candidates. This seat has had a history of local anger at Labour party selection, the previous one resulting in the shock victory of the Respect candidate [George Galloway](#) in 2012.

In areas vulnerable to biraderi politicking, the presence and activity of the local political parties is limited. Parties are failing to campaign in these areas and to have any direct contact with voters. Instead, biraderi networks have been encouraged to carry out the campaigning responsibilities of local parties who have assumed that they can mobilise an 'Asian block vote'. The biraderis have carried out important functions such as mobilising turnout, providing information about when, where and how to vote and translating literature for voters. However, as a result, biraderi elders have become 'middle-men' between political parties and local voters. In some areas political parties, historically the Labour Party but increasingly other parties, have become reliant on these 'middle-men' and they have essentially delegated their local campaigning responsibilities to them. In these areas, it is not political parties that are campaigning and canvassing in the Asian community, but the biraderi networks.

This delegation of responsibilities from political parties to biraderi networks is bad for democracy. In the candidate selection process it can lead to candidates being selected purely based on how many people they managed to get into the selection meeting, not on any particular skill or interest in politics. As the Electoral Commission [report](#) shows this also leads to elected politicians feeling that they have to provide a 24 hour service to those who have voted for them. Moreover, as was shown in Bradford West, the biraderi networks can deliberately subvert the candidate selection process in a way that weakens the local party. Biraderi politicking can also lead to electoral fraud as the line between votes cast on the basis of community and ethnic loyalties and vote coercion becomes blurred. Biraderis are hierarchical and patriarchal, led by male elders. This means that there is little space for the views and interests of women and young people and that women and young people are particularly vulnerable to pressure. In their role as middle-men, the elders may coerce members of their biraderi to vote for the biraderi favoured candidate.

Voters could be pressured into voting for the biraderi favoured candidate out of a sense of duty. After all, the biraderi is a key source of welfare, housing and even income for many Pakistanis and Bangladeshis living in the UK. Voters may fear the repercussions of not voting for the biraderi favoured candidate, leaving them with little choice but to vote for the candidate they are instructed to vote for by their elders. Other voters may find that their vote is stolen from them through personation by post, proxy or in the polling station. Either way, voters, particularly women and young people, are being denied the opportunity to cast a secret ballot independent from the influence of others. Meanwhile, in exchange for delivering votes, elders receive favours. These favours may take the form of political office or money for particular community projects. They may also take the form of status, being seen as a 'community leader'. This is an extreme form of patronage politics. In their role as middle-men, biraderi elders are simultaneously clients receiving rewards from their political patrons for the votes they deliver, and patrons continuing to provide welfare and support to the biraderi members who conform in elections.

Parties have to take three steps to tackle the role of the biraderis and protect our democracy. Firstly, political parties must stop assuming that through biraderi elders they can mobilise an 'Asian bloc vote'. They need to start seeing voters as individuals who should be canvassed individually to ensure that their views are heard. Secondly, in the candidate selection process it must be ensured that measures are put in place to tackle the sort of discrimination in local parties that may make the use of biraderi networks a necessity for selection. Finally, political parties need to take more responsibility for the campaigning process, ensuring that their campaigners are aware of rules around things like handling postal ballots.

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