



Bangladesh Forthcoming Elections

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Parliamentary elections are scheduled to be held on 29 December in Bangladesh and the political machinery is gearing up. On the one hand, optimism is high and the public has vowed to bring about change in a country riddled with problems. On the other hand, elections are being viewed with great scepticism because the country continues to be dominated by the same political leaders, political parties and agendas. It continues to cling to the past, refusing to accept new leadership or political thought. The elections will be fought on the same issues as ever and determined by the same party politics.

However, due to the massive political reform campaign initiated by the Election Commission, the rules of the game have changed, exuding the promise, therefore, of free and fair elections.

I THE ROAD SO FAR: ELECTORAL REFORMS & BEYOND

Working relentlessly, the Election Commission has succeeded in registering 80 million voters, with their photographs and fingerprints. The Representation of People (Amendment) Ordinance 2008 (RPO) has brought in a plethora of electoral reforms, which, despite protests from the political parties, have been implemented. For one, registration of political parties has been made mandatory, which requires them to not only produce a proof of the support they enjoy, but also democratise their own constitutions. According to the amended RPO, an existing political party would be eligible for registration if it had won at least one constituency in any parliamentary election since independence, or secured at least five percent of total votes in the

constituencies contested. A new political party would be eligible for registration if it had organisational committees in at least ten districts and 50 upazilas.

The political parties are also required to include elected members in their committees at all levels, a reverse of the personality-driven dictatorships that most of the political parties in Bangladesh have. In total, the Election Commission has declared 37 political parties eligible for elections out of the 107 political parties which had originally applied. Hundreds of candidates have been disqualified due to various reasons, a process which continues to this date.

After many discussions with political parties, where Awami League wanted elections as soon as possible while BNP insisted on delaying them, the date of 29 December was settled upon. This will be quickly followed by Upazilla (local administrative units) elections on 22 January, though several political parties are hoping to create more of a gap between the two elections.

However, some of the patterns of classic Bangladeshi politics are beginning to repeat. Violence has again erupted, though not similar in scale as in 2006. Nurul Islam, the leader of the Ganotantri Party, a left-wing ally of Awami League, was killed on 5 December. There were also reports of violence from many rural areas of the country. Several instances of RPO violations have come up, brought out by media, civil society or even opposing political parties. Given the reluctance of political parties to adhere to the RPO, the future of the electoral reforms remains in doubt. Not only did political parties aggressively protest against these reforms, they have also tried to circumvent the

registration criteria for many of their candidates. It remains to be seen whether the same stringent regulations will be followed in 2013 or even the 22 January Upazilla elections.

II KEY PLAYERS

Military

The military, which in Bangladesh is highly politicised, influences every facet of the country's politics. It has also played kingmaker in the country for a long time. However, in the case of the 2008 elections, the military is likely to stay away from politics. The infamous "minus-two" formula was implemented in order to diminish the influence of two major leaders in the country and create an alternative political scenario. All the major political leaders, including the two "battling begums," Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina, were arrested. Massive political arrests were made, a figure around 500,000, according to Human Rights Watch. New leaders were encouraged to take on the mantle of leadership of the two main political parties.

Yet, two years of de facto military-rule saw the "minus-two" formula become the "manage-two" formula and in the end, disintegrate to nothing.

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Academically, though, CTG must be appreciated for several landmark reforms it brought about, from Right to Information Ordinance to Right of People's Representation

Ordinance, even if the effect of these reforms are too subtle to compete with spiralling kerosene and rice prices. Thus, for a military just exiting discredited from the government, it is illogical to plunge right back in trying to influence results of an election that the world is watching.

Secondly, the military has another critical aspect to worry about- its corporate interests. Not only does the military own several cement factories, flour mills, hotels, real estate and banks, it had also used its influence during emergency to acquire new corporate units. This is definitely an Achilles heel for an organisation that can not be bullied by physical force.

Thirdly, international reaction is playing a factor in military's neutrality. Being the largest contributor to UN Peacekeeping Force, it earns a fair sum of monetized and non-monetized revenue from it. Keeping its international image as an apolitical institution is viewed as very important in the top hierarchy of the military.

On 11 December, the military declared that they would lift the emergency by 17 December, a decision that has come none too soon. The political prisoners, several thousands of which languish in jail, remain to be released. Journalists, who were threatened by the military, and many of whom were arrested, are yet to return to their desks. Extra-judicial killings, which had reached to double digits everyday during the emergency, are yet to stop. There is much to be done before the military can be considered to have given up its total control over the country and chance are that some of the control will be never given up. With devices like reinstated National Security Council and DGFI, it will definitely continue to have an influence on the civilian government. However, largely, it is expected to stay out of the way of democracy.

Awami League-led 14-party Alliance

Sheikh Hasin-led Awami League is a secular, progressive party with a leftist leaning. Leading an alliance of fourteen political parties, it is one of the two serious contenders in this election. Its political agenda largely revolves around political reforms and the economy. It has promised to bring more transparency in governance and support a constructive opposition in the parliament. It has also promised to bring in economic reforms to

tackle food prices, energy shortage and corruption in the country. It will ban religion in politics and aims at formulation of a charter of political behaviour. Its economic reform plan, which focuses on promoting SMEs and agricultural production, has been lauded by economists. Most significantly, the party provides concrete steps to achieve these aims and outlines its agenda with detailed specificity.

It is largely believed that Awami League in power will be a positive sign in the fight against rising religious extremism in the country. The party, established as secular, enjoys a lot of support from the minorities. However, the 2006 MoU that the party signed with Khelafat-e-Majlish has brought doubts in the mind of secularists in the country. This MoU promised Khelafat-e-Majlish that if AL came to power, it will make fatwa issued by clerics legal and pass a blasphemy law. Thus, even AL is not beyond petty politics, a thought to be kept in mind while analysing the political scenario.

Apart from the Awami League, only two parties in the alliance had won any seats in the 2001 elections. Most of the parties in the alliance are there for political support on the local level and as a show of force, more than to act as a real national political alliance. The only significant member of the alliance, other than AL, is Jatiya Party (Ershad.) With 14 seats won in the 2001 elections, this political party, led by a former military ruler of the country, is the fourth largest party of Bangladesh.

JP (E) has managed to get 48 seats to contest from in the coming elections, at least 20 more than what AL would have liked. Although many of these seats will be a battleground for JP (E) against BNP in a pro-BNP territory, any seats won in the extra constituencies would be another seat tilting the power balance towards Ershad in the alliance. Ershad, it seems, is hoping for enough seats to become an essential for the alliance to form the government. The only other support for AL can come from Liberal Democratic Party, formed out of BNP defectors in 2006. However, LDP's real political strength is yet to be seen.

Bangladesh Nationalist Party-led 4-party alliance

Khaleda Zia-led BNP is a right-wing party, with an inclination towards the Islamic majority. Its rule in 2001-2006, when BNP and its political allies were regularly accused of protecting and supporting religious extremists, has left the party with a

questionable reputation. The first four years of the party's rule in 2001-2006 saw Bangladesh ranked as the most corrupt country in the world and there were several accusations of the government itself being involved in criminal acts. However, it was also the time when the country saw its economy growing at a rapid pace, unlike CTG rule, when inflation skyrocketed and FDI dropped.

Awami League, with its secularist approach, is likely to appeal to the intelligentsia and the urban population. With a cleaner image than its opponent, it will also be able to appeal to middle-level towns and is likely to win the centre and north of centre regions of the country.

BNP released its agenda on 14 December, promising a crash programme of one hundred days to create temporary employment and deal with the existing domestic economic crisis. The manifesto lays emphasis on establishing a participatory parliament, working towards a responsible political climate, forging effective ties between the state and social forces, and building a competent and neutral administration.

Given that BNP also continues to retain its old allies, Jamaat-e-Islami and Islami Okiye Jote, it is clear that BNP will continue to be influenced by their religion-driven, orthodox agendas. With BNP in power, communalism and Islamic radicalism in the country is likely to survive, if not prosper. Unlike AI, BNP enjoys support of much stronger political allies. Three of its allies had obtained seats in the 2001 elections and its principle ally, Jamaat-e-Islami, is the third largest party in the country. Also, given the long history of the alliance, it is not as likely to break apart, as we have seen in the case of 14-party grand alliance.

However, this strength also has its disadvantages for BNP. Unlike AL, which refused JP (E) more seats to contest in the elections, BNP is weaker on negotiating with its allies. Indeed, as the seat distribution plan has come up for the alliance, Jamaat-e-Islami and IOJ have managed to wrangle away more seats from BNP than would have been advisable for the lead party

III

ELECTIONS: ADVANTAGE AWAMI LEAGUE?

The political winds seem to be favouring Awami League. The municipal elections of August 2008 saw Awami League win with a sweeping majority. The party won all four city corporations and eight of the nine municipalities that went to the polls, including Rajshahi, a traditional strong point of BNP. Awami League, with its secularist approach, is likely to appeal to the intelligentsia and the urban population. With a cleaner image than its opponent, it will also be able to appeal to middle-level towns and is likely to win the centre and north of centre regions of the country, which, though traditionally pro-AL, was stolen away by BNP in 2001. It continues to maintain superiority in south of the centre and in the southeastern regions of Bangladesh, where the minority support will be more vehement for it.

On the other hand, two years of emergency rule has allowed BNP to put a distance between itself and its 2001-2006 rule, which was unpopular with the public. In the last three elections, BNP has never failed to secure at least one-third of parliament seats. It enjoys a loyalty base far larger than AL and has controlled west and southeast of centre of Bangladesh for all of the last three elections. BNP will also be able to capture more of the rural areas, where a campaign targeted at spiralling food and oil cost is likely to have a larger impact than AL's political reform programme.

The future of religious parties, allied with BNP, is more confusing. Though these parties never commanded a large popularity in Bangladesh, they have maintained and expanded their loyalty base through the years. The rise of communalism and radicalism in the country, which was supported by these parties during 2001-2006, is likely to pay-off. However, the Election Commission's denial of candidature to the top leadership of Jamaat-e-Islami and IOJ has put a dent in this plan. It is likely that these parties will retain their power with perhaps little change.

The election mood in Bangladesh indicates an inclination towards Awami League. But it is unlikely that any of the two parties, BNP or AL, will be able to gain the country with a sweeping majority. If JP (E) can't deliver, AL will have to look outside its alliance for support, which will most likely be from

the huge pool of independent candidates. There is always a possibility of JP (E), which is largely ideologically neutral, to break off with AL and seek an alliance with BNP (especially if Ershad is not granted the presidency.) It will pit AL against three of the country's four major parties. Even with the maximum number of seats it will contest, AL may not be able to gain the necessary majority to form the government, leaving the political situation of the country in an indeterminate state.

IV

CONCLUSIONS

The fact of the matter remains that much of Bangladesh politics is still played out in back rooms, with questionable deals. It is very difficult to predict the result of elections in a country where the past seven years have seen so much chaos and confusion.

Looking at the future, one may remain optimistic in the knowledge that barring any unforeseen incidents, 2008 Bangladesh elections will be the fairest that the country has seen yet. The elected government will truly be the people's choice, a statement that doesn't hold true for most of the previous governments. Yet, the fact remains that the options in front of public remain the same as before, with changes in composition perhaps, but hardly any change in the central characters.

The biggest concern remains the newly-elected government undoing the political reforms brought about for this election. It is hoped that this election doesn't result in a traditional "winner-takes-all" situation. A country with a history of the government trying everything to suppress opposition, it will do well for Bangladesh to have a strong opposition. However, a weak government will not be effective in a country in dire need to check economic crisis, rampant corruption and rising radicalism.

With all measure in place, all one can hope for is the best possible way forward.



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