



Bangladesh elections

old faces, new momentum

By Javier Delgado Rivera

AT THE END of 2008, the over-populated South Asian state of Bangladesh was featured in the worldwide headlines not for natural disasters, but because it held parliamentary elections. Since 1991, the political scene of this Muslim-dominated country has been cursed by the rampant corruption and confrontational politics that its two main political figures have been waging.

In January 2007, following the five years-term of shamefully tainted rule of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the military reacted to the politically motivated soaring violence that plagued the electoral trail by imposing a Caretaker Government (CTG), charged with clearing up the parties of corrupted policy-makers and organising credible elections.

After being postponed on several occasions, the balloon box was eventually placed in the streets last December 29th. Thanks to a strengthened Electoral Commission (EC) and the electoral reforms launched by the CTG, last month elections has been widely recognised as free and fair. They place as democratically elected prime minister the former premier Sheikh Hasina, chairwoman of the Awami League (AL) and daughter of the founding father and first president of the country.

First of all, this article examines how Bangladesh's dynastical politics - a phenomenon also rooted in Pakistan and India- have shaped the prospects of this nation, followed by an evaluation of the almost two years of debatable military-backed CTG and its significance in the country's major political parties. The paper finally tables the challenges the newly elected government will inexorably have to face.

Dynastical takeovers: The inflammatory template of Bangladesh rulers

Bangladesh is a young nation. After the II World War, the British Empire, pushed by independence movements, designed a hasty roadmap for the independence of India. Driven by Hindu and Muslim irreconcilable agendas, in 1947 it gave birth to two states: India proper and Pakistan.

Short-sightedly enough, the decolonisation scalpel delineated a Pakistan split up into two winds: West Pakistan -today simply Pakistan- and East Pakistan -current Bangladesh-, separated by India's 1,600 kilometres. Though both sides were united by their Muslim faith, there were also separated by language -West Pakistan's Urdu and East Pakistan's Bengali-, cultural contentions and by an increasing sense from the Bengalis of being left behind by a central government sitting several hundreds of kilometres away.

In 1970 a devastating cyclone hit the still called East Pakistan coast, what triggered a general sentiment of outrage after the perceived meagre assistance facilitated by West Pakistan. This is the exact moment in which the dynastical politics came into sight. Sheikh Mujib, father of the recently elected prime minister Sheikh Hasina and head of the Awami League (AL), -the very same party that achieved a landslide victory on the last elections- capitalised this dissatisfaction and led in 1971 to a cut-throat independence war that along with the military support of India, turned out into the independence of today's Bangladesh. Mujib was killed four years later. In 1981 the same dire end occurred to Ziaur Rahman, Bangladesh's democratically elected president and husband of today's opposition leader Khaleda Zia, who three years later, inherited the leadership of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP).

Ever since, these two women, Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia, have embarked the country in a circle of fiercely bitter politics, as both figures - alongside the parties they chair- withhold relatively

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opposing agendas and above all, display a deep-seated hatred at each other. Such a discord has driven Bangladesh's fate since 1991, when Khaleda Zia became prime minister after BNP's victory in this year's parliamentary elections. Years later, her nemesis and today again prime minister reached the premiership in 1996 to be defeated five years on by her predecessor, Khaleda Zia. The Awami League-BNP competition for power, coupled with their leaders' dictatorial command of their respective parties, must be blamed for years of violent protest, political motivated murders, devastating levels of corruption and the ill-administration of the country. As an example, the Hong Kong based Asian Human Rights Commission asserts that "the country has never had an independent judiciary, with many members of the judiciary being replaced each time of one of the two main competing political parties comes to power (1)."

Hasina's Awami League December elected ruling party is a secular force with a leftist leaning, in opposition to the Bangladesh Nationalist Party's Islamic tendencies and rightist orientation. During the BNP's 2001-2006 rule, along with its allied political parties, it was recriminated for backing Muslim religious extremists. This allegation coupled with the massive levels of corruption that took up its government, ruined the party's reputation among most Bangladeshis.

After the BNP's term in office, the temporal authority charged with organising the next elections was accused by the AL of openly favouring the BNP, what triggered nationwide protests. The army, never fully distanced from politics since it voluntarily left power in 1986, intervened in January 2006 to arguably clean up all the political class from its widespread corrupt elements and run trustworthy elections.

The mixed legacy of the Caretaker Government (CTG)

The army-installed Caretaker Government was widely welcomed by the corruption-exhausted Bangladeshi society. The police-like enterprise of the Interim Administration required taking a series of tough actions that soon started sparking a latent dissatisfaction among sectors of the population. First of all, though the elections were

scheduled to take place within six months from the establishment of the CTG, they were repeatedly postponed. In the meantime, and as stressed by the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development, the CTG "began to militarize public institutions. (2)" But what probably upset Bangladeshis the most was the state of emergency put in place by the Caretaker Government. Under the rules of emergency, the right of assembly was suspended and according to the Asian Human Rights Commission extrajudicial killings, "illegal arrests, arbitrary detentions, ill-treatment and torture in police custody were commonplace and constituted the means through which the authorities exerted their control (3)."

In principle, the CTG did take these measures to ensure its massive anti-corruption campaign would not face any legal or bureaucratic obstacle in its pursuing to wipe out the country of unprincipled politicians, regardless of their political affiliations. Along with thousands of figures, such a determination brought the CTG to jail Zia and Hasina. By incarcerating both figures, the CTG seemingly achieved its 'minus two' policy of getting rid of the two major political forces' leaders, and like the political analyst Sandeep Bhardwaj underlines, at the same time "encouraging new personalities to take on the mantle of leadership of these parties (4)." But the CTG miscalculated the factual weight of the two, as both the AL and BNP decided not to participate in the elections without their leaders.

The Interim Government found itself embedded in an unintended political deadlock. If it was to retain any legitimacy into the eyes of its 150 million people, a quick and win-win move was to be done. In the end, the CTG released the two women, while keeping behind bars a sizable number of other high-profile politicians.

Few analysts would question the assertion that electoral reform will be the most plausible legacy (with permission of the Right of Information law) of the Interim Government. A rejuvenated Electoral Commission (EC) tightened the registration process of political parties that among other measures were required to democratise their own chapters by prohibiting them to, in words of the think tank International Crisis Group, "contradict the state's constitution, as membership



Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon (second from left) holds talks with the members of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party. Location: Dhaka, Bangladesh Date: 02 November 2008. UN Photo/Mark Garten

cannot be based exclusively on religion, race, caste, language or sex. (5)" The EC has also been broadly praised by the technical improvements brought about to boost fairness in the polls. Remarkable is the fact that the new electoral roll -the list of voters registered in a particular area-, implemented by the CTG, took out 12.7 million fake names by, among other features, issuing voter ID cards with photos.

The best possible end: December peaceful and fair elections

The emergency rule dismantled the BNP's structure to a larger extent than other major parties. The BNP's traditional strategy of attracting the dissatisfied Bangladeshi masses by integrating into its electoral coalition Islamic parties -like the Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh (JIB)- together with the "BNP's calls to voters to shun the more secular League in order to protect Islam, seem to have backfired (6)," as highlighted by the prestigious *The Economist*.

The leftist and secularist AL-led coalition of fourteen parties, conscious of the rock-bottom popularity of the BNP after its flawed last term, barely criticised the unlawful acts committed by the CTG, voicing its willingness to contest the polls as soon as possible.

During the electoral trial violence did blow up, yet in a much lesser scale than in any previous polls. Even though, the leader of the Ganotantri Party, a left-wing ally of the Awami League, was killed. Eventually and after not baseless fears of further postponement and maintenance of the emergency state (lifted a few days before the polls), 7 years from the last parliamentary elections, Bangladeshis cast their vote.

Last December 29th, peacefully-held elections led to an AL impressive landslide victory in a healthy 75 percent turnout. It

obtained 230 parliamentary seats -out of 300-, plus further 32 seats won by AL's allies, granting the Awami League-led 'Grand Coalition' a comfortable majority in the next five-years term. The BNP-led four party coalition only got a laconic 30 seats- a humiliating outcome considering that the BNP won the previous 2001 elections with a relaxed 193 seats majority.

The government of the 1001 challenges

On a political level, Hasina's main commitment is to democratise a parliament that has usually been abused by the time ruling party (including its own) and subsequently, boycotted by the opposition. To the eyes of many, it has meant that the country has never been ruled under effective democratic patterns. In a meeting held with a UN visiting team early January and as it was published in the Bangladeshi newspaper *The Daily Star*, Hasina gave away some clues of how the AL plans to make the parliament more accountable, asserting that "the post of deputy speaker as well as some chairmanship of parliamentary standing committees will be given to the opposition (7)."

But Hasina will hardly sit undisturbed in her throne. As the reader must have already anticipated, the army is unlikely to vanish overnight from Bangladesh's political scenario. It will make sure that the new parliament ratifies all the ordinances put in place during its self-imposed emergency, what will irremediably institutionalise certain say of the security forces in state affairs. Likewise, the army's corporative interests (it controls a number of banks, real estate and hotels) will be an area which, for the sake of the country's stability, the new civilian government should not confront with. Nevertheless and as far as these two requisites are met and the AL does not embark itself in the old habit of pocketing state's resources, the army has largely demonstrated its

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commitment in supporting a democratic government capable of putting the country on the development track.

The government will also need to deal with Islamic right-wing religious movements. The Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh (JIB), BNP's coalition main ally, along with other like-minded organisations, stretches their tentacles much beyond the political scene to, as the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies stresses, influence the society "through their student movements, social welfare organisations and quasi-religious establishments (8)." Thousands of intimidating fanatics are being indoctrinated in private madrasas than need to be scrutinised and regulated. In such an endeavour, the new government truly counts with the support of a vast majority of the society- the embarrassing setback suffered by the JIB in the polls (from 19 seats in 2001 elections to only two seats in 2008) is a rather conclusive message.

After the notorious failure of Zia to credibly lead the party back to run the country, the internal critics and challenges erupted during her time in jail must be reinforced to oust the twenty-four years of authoritative Zia's party chairship. Besides, an internally-driven anticorruption and antiradicalism purge must eventually clean the party up. It will indeed require time as well as a fierce party reshuffle, but once it is accomplished, a regenerated BNP will emerge as the strong political force that it used to be. It will mark a decisive turnaround in the country current political-imbalance, as an empowered BNP will powerfully try to move its agenda forward. It remains to be seen if it will restore to its old and pernicious practice of hysterically calling its supporters out to the streets, with the potential risk of uncontrollable violence that in Bangladesh it implies. Declarations as the BNP Vice-president MK Anwar in which he declares to the Daily Star that "if this government fails to make good on its electoral promises, we'll wage a movement against it with people on our side (9)" must be silenced once for all.

But MK Anwar may have made a point. The discontent of the population makes it naively susceptible to rosy pledges that could barely come true. It was a window of opportunity that the Awami League skilfully exploited. A supply of running water for the whole population by 2011, food sufficiency by 2013 and accommodation for the entire population by 2015 are certainly behind the honeymoon between the AL and its expanded pool of followers.

The new government's pledges will be even harder to fulfil as Bangladesh is inevitably facing the consequences of the global economic downturn in a country extensively poverty-stricken and astonishingly crowded. The good news are that, as stated by Charles Tannock, chief of the European Union's delegation of election observers to the Bangladeshi elections, the country is in a good position to "weather the global financial storm because its banks are not over-exposed and its garment industry focuses on the lower end of the market (10)." Most Bangladeshis' foremost concern is being able to afford their daily basic commodities. If the government is to live up to its pledges, electricity will need to be subsidised and, as it was already proposed in the AW's electoral manifesto, the existing agriculture policy should be revamped in order to increase food production.

Conclusion

Last December elections were the fairest in the thirty-seven years of Bangladesh's independence. The elected government is certainly the people's choice. This is not to say that Bangladeshis are to placidly accept any decision taken- quite the opposite. The expectations bar is set too high and therefore, a rapid sentiment of declining popularity will definitely affect most sections of the population. Whether it will trigger unrestrained protests or will stick to the just reborn democratic frame may well depend on the population

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perception that the current government is making everything in its hand to deliver and effectively implement a credible anti-corruption programme at all levels of government. Like the think-tank International Crisis Group put it, 'the polls are only the first step in the transition towards a functioning democracy (11).'

Following upaliza (local administrative units) elections on January 22nd, the country is now ready to undertake again the worthwhile though risky journey of democracy. The threats are still the same, but thanks to the CTG's heavy-handed regenerative drive, optimism is for once, the rule.

Javier Delgado Rivera,

Journalist with a focus on Asian politics.

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