

# ISAS Brief

No. 304 – 28 November 2013

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## Bangladesh: Unfolding Drama of Deadly Politics

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On 25 November the Chief Election Commissioner of Bangladesh, Kazi Rakibuddin Ahmad, announced the election schedule for the nation's 10<sup>th</sup> Parliament. The polls, he stated, are to be held on 5 January 2014. He urged calm on both contending sides, the Awami League (AL)-led government of Sheikh Hasina and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)-led opposition of Khaleda Zia. The bitterness of their rivalry has been legendary. The politicians' disregard for his appeal was instantaneous. The BNP which had earlier warned that it would react to such an announcement with a siege of the capital Dhaka was true to its word. So was the government which had vowed to put down any unruly behaviour with an iron hand. The unsurprising result was a spiralling violence with no end to it in sight. In this, the religious right-wing Jamaat-e-Islami was on hand, fighting with its back to the wall as many of its leaders are in condemned cells, awaiting execution ordered by the war-crimes trial court.

There is a backdrop to this formidably daunting political landscape of Bangladesh. The AL and the BNP have been at loggerheads for months. The AL has used its overwhelming parliamentary majority to scrap the system of caretaker government which has held elections in Bangladesh over the last decade-and-a-half. The BNP wants it back, fearing that polls held under the AL watch would be rigged. Minimally, it wants Hasina to step down and hand over the post of prime minister to someone else. Hasina is loath to oblige. Both leaders have a relationship that would make Kilkenny cats appear as chums. A recent telephone conversation between the two, the first such, as has been reported, in over two decades, reflected their intense mutual acrimony.

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However in an attempt to make her position a little more palatable, Hasina tempered a bit with the composition of her cabinet. She dropped some old ministers, and chose some new ones. The new ones were mostly from within her original political alliance. She, at least at a stated level, extended an invitation to the BNP to join this poll-time 'multi-party' government in order to render it 'all-party' (in line with her promise), but the BNP's rejection of her overture was prompt and peremptory. (Though, it could be complicating if the BNP accepted the offer, and proposed the inclusion as an interim Minister of the London-based Tarique Rahman, Khaleda's son and heir-apparent, as some elements in the media wondered). Hasina found a surprise partner in former President Hussain Mohammed Ershad, to bring whom down in 1991, Hasina and Khaleda had, most ironically, waged a common struggle. Ershad, who had earlier been a trenchant critic of Hasina, would have had his credibility take a huge hit, had he not already built a reputation for saying one thing and doing quite another.

An interesting emerging feature is the potential role of the President, Advocate Abdul Hamid. Normally he is a figurehead who only acts on the prime minister's advice. This constitutional constraint notwithstanding, Khaleda called on him with a formal delegation urging his intervention. This was followed by similar visit on him by six prominent citizens, led by Kamal Hussain, an internationally acclaimed lawyer who is also credited with being one of the original proponents of the Constitution. They stated to him that a 'non-inclusive' election on 5 January, without the BNP, would not be credible, and would not end the turmoil. A point arises: would someone of the legal accomplishment of Kamal Hussain see the President, if the latter's hands were truly tied? At least one thing is established, The President, who is viewed as the guardian of the Republic, can obviously be a conduit between the two opposing camps. This could be heartening, given the total lack of such contact, with positive potentials for the future, though as of now, the President is not known, at least publicly, to take any initiative. Is he the one needed to cut the proverbial Gordian Knot?

In the meantime amidst the destructive fury his announcement caused in the opposition quarters, the Chief Election Commissioner stepped back somewhat within twenty-four hours, and declared that, should the protagonists reach an agreement the schedule could be adjusted. The Parliament's tenure completes on 24 January 2014, when the body becomes automatically dissolved, and the Constitution requires that polls be held within 90 days of such dissolution. The CEC could take advantage of this provision to move the date from 5 January to anytime before 24 April. Obviously he would do it if there is an understanding between the two major parties, or if he feels such an agreement is just beyond the rim of the saucer, and a postponement would thus facilitate it.

Diplomats, as they are wont to often do in Bangladesh politics, sometimes to the chagrin of some sections of the public opinion, waded in on this occasion also. Most concerned are of course, the Indians, the immediate neighbours, and the Americans, who have global strategic interests which include Bangladesh and the Bay of Bengal. The Indians are reportedly comfortable with the Awami League, but have also been carefully nurturing links with the BNP just in case. The Americans are in the forefront of pressing for an 'inclusive election' (which in current political parlance means the participation of the BNP), and several ranking visitors from Washington have recently met both sides in Dhaka to underscore this. The same

is the case with the European Union. The Chinese traditionally had maintained a '*panchsheel*' distance [of non-interference], but this time the Ambassador broke silence to support political amity. The Saudis are said to be close to Jamaat, but fight shy of public utterances.

So is Bangladesh hurtling towards a train-wreck? Despite the obvious negative politics, Bangladesh has many positive sides to it as well. The World Bank has, therefore, spoken of a 'Bangladesh paradox'. Economically, it has grown steadily at around 5.5 per cent to six per cent for years. It is the world's second largest garment exporter earning over US\$19 billion in this trade. Its performance in social indices is often better than India's in some sectors. Its vibrant civil society has been the source of many ideas, including many connected to poverty alleviation. The majority of its 160 million people practise Islam of a syncretic kind.

In ways, therefore, Bangladesh can be a model for many in the developing world to emulate. It would be a great pity, were that country be allowed to slide into anarchy. The responsibility to prevent this from happening, to avert the train-wreck, rests squarely on the shoulder of the Bangladeshi people. Bangladesh possesses vast intellectual resources. Of what use would these be if they cannot be pressed into the nation's service when it needs them most? The nation's greatest challenge is to make tolerance and reason exciting. The Bangladeshis have the capacity to be able to do it. But they may need their hands to be held by the international community, including the United Nations.

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