

ISAS Brief

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Political Transformation in Bangladesh: From Despair to Hope?

In early February 2018, a special court in Dhaka, Bangladesh, sentenced former Bangladeshi Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia and other accused in an orphanage corruption case to rigorous imprisonment. The verdict is important for the state of national politics in Bangladesh. This brief highlights the implications of the judicial ruling on political developments Bangladesh.

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Introduction

On 8 February 2018, former Bangladesh's Prime Minister, Begum Khaleda Zia, Chairperson of Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), was sentenced to five years rigorous imprisonment by a special court in Dhaka. The sentencing immediately raised the issue of political uncertainty in the country, ahead of the upcoming national elections. Bangladesh has a politically-divided citizenry and, at times, a tempestuous political landscape. It would be important to understand the implications of the judicial ruling on politics in Bangladesh. Will the recent events usher a new era in the politics of Bangladesh?

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The Judgement between Hope and Despair

The Anti-Corruption Commission of Bangladesh had filed a case in July 2008, accusing Khaleda Zia, her son, Tarique Rahman, and four others of misappropriating funds that had come from a foreign bank as grants for orphans in the country. The judges pronounced the verdict after a long trial, which could, of course, be appealed in a higher court.

The history of political rivalry in Bangladesh has certainly amplified the interest in the post-judgement political developments in Bangladesh. Political power in Bangladesh has traditionally been divided between the Awami League (AL) and the BNP. Moreover, due to a political culture of ‘winner takes all’ and confrontational political style of both parties, Bangladeshi institutions seem to suffer from the issue of credibility. Manipulating investigations for political gains is widespread in South Asia and Bangladesh is certainly not an exception. Another common perception in South Asia is that political heavyweights can avoid the consequences of breaking the law and of violating public trust. With the growth of a new middle class and with that, rising aspirations and a call for greater accountability, the political landscape in South Asia is undergoing change. Similarly, Bangladesh’s politics is also going through an evolution.

While the ruling party in Bangladesh, the AL, claimed that justice was being done, the BNP called it a naked expression of ‘tailored’ justice.² Addressing a public rally at Bangbandhu Udyan in Dhaka after the verdict, Bangladesh’s Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said, “The throne of Almighty Allah gets shaken when one carries out repression against people. Those who burnt people to death face such consequences. And that justice is being done.”³ She added that, “[T]here would be no place for corrupt, patrons of militancy and terrorism and looters of orphans’ money on Bangladesh soil”.⁴ The BNP and Begum Zia, however, are alleging it as a case of political vendetta.

² “Let the law follow its own course”, *The Daily Observer*, 9 February 2018, <http://www.observerbd.com/details.php?id=121349>. Accessed on 13 February 2018.

³ “Where’s she now? Asks Hasina about Khaleda, seeks vote at a rally in Barisal”, *The Daily Star*, 8 February 2018. <http://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/khaleda-zia-corruption-verdict-wheres-she-now-1531975>. Accessed on 13 February 2018.

⁴ *Ibid.*

While this brief does not venture to explore the merits of these allegations and counter-allegations, it is suffice to state that the key institutions, including the bureaucracy and the judiciary, have often been politicised in Bangladesh. During the BNP rule from 2001 to 2006, Bangladesh ranked as the most corrupt country in the world for five consecutive years by the anti-corruption watchdog Transparency International. Bangladesh witnessed a rise of radicalism, and record violence against political opponents and the country's minority community.

The judgement against Khaleda Zia has, therefore, broken the myth that political heavyweights could avoid the consequences of breaking the law and of violating public trust. It is an important development and sends a strong message in Bangladesh that powerful politicians can be punished for corruption. It is also a reflection of the changing nature of politics in South Asia, with growing expectations of responsibility and transparency from politicians. The verdict is a manifestation of the strengthening of institutions and the rule of law. Such decisions strengthen the belief that justice may be delayed due to political manipulations but it would ultimately prevail.

Implication for Bangladesh Politics

What could be the implications of this judgment on Bangladesh politics? First and foremost, the sentence could prevent Zia and Tarique Rahman from contesting the general elections scheduled for later this year. The BNP did not contest the 2014 elections and Tarique Rahman was very instrumental in that decision. Despite strong views within the party in favour of participation, Zia and her son decided to stay out of the elections. They thought that they could take to the streets and topple the government through extra-parliamentary means. However, they failed miserably. After Zia's imprisonment, her party has decided that the leadership of the BNP will now be exercised by Tarique Rahman, who is in exile. Coincidentally, he has also been sentenced to 10 years of imprisonment. This transfer of power from mother to son could pose a serious challenge to the BNP in the upcoming elections. It could further weaken the party and damage its reputation of being a credible challenger to the AL in the elections. It could, perhaps, also be detrimental to the future of the party.

The AL, on the other hand, has strengthened its hold over many institutions and, economically, Bangladesh has improved its situation in last few years. While there are allegations of settling political scores as well as some resentments among the people against the current government, the AL could take political advantage of the current development and perhaps work on addressing developmental challenges facing the country. In the absence of credible opposition, it would be easier for the ruling party to create the impression of introducing transparency, strengthen institutions and bring inclusive development. While there are some genuine concerns that a free hand to the AL in the national elections could further blur the line between public and partisan interests, such developments could also become a turning point and could bring a new era of political stability in Bangladesh. Certainly, Bangladesh's political parties need to quickly change and adapt with rising aspirations and expectations of the society.

Unlike Pakistan, the military in Bangladesh is more inclusive and the military officers do not necessarily only represent the elites. Bangladesh's military has largely worked as a balancer in politics and it would be important to observe how the military positions itself in the whole electoral process. There are no indications of a potential military involvement in the upcoming national elections. Such a scenario is only likely if the current political landscape creates extraordinary security challenges for the state. Based on the current situation, this is not likely to be the case though.

Finally, the countries in the region and major external powers are also eyeing the political developments in the region. Perhaps, a quiet diplomatic approach, where the friends of Bangladesh could work away from media glare, with the political parties and civil society, would be helpful in shaping a conducive political environment for a free and fair election process.

Conclusion

The political stability and accountability of the political parties could usher a new era in politics in Bangladesh and it could reinvigorate the political institutions. By keeping power within the family, the BNP has seemed to ignore the reality of a changing Bangladesh society. This could potentially lead to it becoming irrelevant to the Bangladesh polity and it would further

strengthen the AL. The injection of the elements of accountability and transparency could usher clean and healthy politics in Bangladesh. There seems to be hope in Bangladesh. However, it is still early days. Only time will tell which way the politics in Bangladesh would navigate.

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