

## **A Polity of Perpetual Politics: Election Season in Bangladesh**

Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury

### **Summary**

*As per constitutional obligation, Bangladesh will hold elections in less than three months. The essay analyses the tactics and the strategies adopted by relevant actors in the lead-up to the elections.*

### **Polity of Perpetual Politics**

As a nation, Bangladesh has acquired the reputation of being a polity of perpetual politics. A relevant question would be how much of it is instinctive or how much of it is intellectual, or if it is truly deserved.

In pre-1947 Bengal, the people kept the British wary with their vibrant politics. In today's Bangladesh, the tradition is being continued with great enthusiasm and, oftentimes, volatility and even violence. Once again, Bangladesh is in the cusp of an election season. The country is agog with eager anticipation. If the polls can be held peacefully and with acceptable credibility, in terms of fairness and participation, then that country can be said to be well on the path of a model democracy. At this point of time, though, it is at a crossroads; and, hence, enveloped in a modicum of uncertainty.

There is said to be a broad dichotomy that divides the Bangladeshi nation. The Bangladeshi ethos is said to comprise two preponderant values – 'Bengaliness' and 'Muslimness'. The received wisdom is that the ruling Awami League (AL), led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, is representative of the former, and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), headed by the currently incarcerated Begum Khaleda Zia, of the latter. Smaller parties exist but most are allied to one or the other of the two. Both the AL and the BNP have alternated in power in the recent past, though Hasina's AL has been in office over the last two parliamentary terms. This has spanned across a decade. The BNP boycotted the last elections in January 2014, fearing that they might be rigged. The event was preceded by considerable violence which the AL alleged was engineered by the BNP. The boycotting turned out to be a costly miscalculation. The AL not only managed to exercise unchallenged power following a walk-over victory, but also consolidated it, by fair means and foul. As the next elections draws close, the BNP is in disarray and leaderless. Zia is in prison on corruption charges, and her son, Tarek Zia, who is the Acting Chair, in exile in London.

### **New Opposition Leadership**

To fill this awning gap in the leadership, in steps an octogenarian and internationally-renowned Oxford educated lawyer, Dr Kamal Hussain. He was a freedom-fighter during the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971 who was also a trusted lieutenant at that time of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the Father of the Nation, and also Hasina's father. However, over the decades, due to exigencies of politics, the relationship between Hasina

and Hussain soured. He left the AL decades ago and founded a separate political party called the Gono Forum.

In a move widely seen as an application of a variant of the the 'Malaysian model' (in which an ageing Tun Mahathir bin Mohamad lent his name and leadership to another party with a much larger voter-base), Hussain was accepted at the helm of a combined opposition which has been named 'Jatiyo Oikyo Front' (roughly translated as the 'National United Front'). As a political tactic, the BNP, even though it is the largest opposition party, consented to play second fiddle to him in terms of the leadership of this coalition. The calculation was Hussain would have votaries who admire his talents and the BNP would provide the requisite votes!

The choice of a party-outsider like Hussain is seen as a clever strategic ploy. Normally, the AL is viewed as close to India, which has been traditionally cautious about perceived 'Islamism' in the BNP ranks. However, Hussain's secular image provides the new front, comprising the BNP and some others, a shield. Hussain, given his connections, is also said to be in the good books of the West, particularly of United States' Ambassador Marcia Bernicott.

Despite the many achievements of the AL-led government in the fields of development, the opposition points to follies of poor governance, as reflected in failures in banking management, police repression and some legislations such as the new digital act which they see as constraining free speech and human rights. The opposition front believes that anti-incumbency tendencies of the electorate will go in its favour. As distinct from the pre-2014 episode, the BNP has decided to abjure violence and try win the polls peacefully. The prognosis thus is the lead-on to the polls looks to be peaceful. It is also likely to be a pull devil-pull baker contest in which the results may go down to the wire. Whether calm will sustain in the post-poll period could depend on how the sides accept the outcome. Most Bangladeshis, who take pride in their political consciousness and often appear to be in a state of perpetual politics, are keeping their fingers crossed.

.....

Dr Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury is Principal Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS). He is a former Foreign Advisor (Foreign Minister) of Bangladesh. He can be contacted at [isasiac@nus.edu.sg](mailto:isasiac@nus.edu.sg). The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.