

Bangladesh's Election: Exciting Times Ahead

Iftekhhar Ahmed Chowdhury

Summary

Bangladesh's national polls are due on 30 December 2018. These are likely to be the most exciting in the country's history. This brief explains why this may be the case.

Transformation of Bangladesh Polity

“This is my grandfather's axe”, so goes a saying; “my father changed the handle, and I changed the blade”. Obviously, nothing of the old tool actually remains. The case with the two major political parties in Bangladesh, the ruling Awami League (AL) and the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), are much the same. They have undergone major transformation over the decades, both in terms of composition and ideological predilections. The received wisdom that the former is secular, lower-middle class and pluralist, and the latter is pro-religion, upper-middle class and authoritarian, now seems overblown. Both have begun to conform to a pattern that actually distinguishes South Asian parties from those of the other Westminster model ones of the key fellow-Commonwealth countries. These political parties are ideologically driven, largely class-oriented and based on the identification of the membership with processes of economic production.

This phenomenon has led to two kinds of behaviour. One is the tendency to centre around a particular leader or his/her family. An example would be Sheikh Hasina, the daughter of Bangladesh's 'Father of the Nation' Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, assassinated in 1975 while president. The other is Begum Khaleda Zia, wife of the founder of the BNP, General Ziaur Rahman, also assassinated while president, in 1981. The respective families are poised to provide the next line of leadership. The second is that the lack of sharply distinct ideological differences between the parties enables politicians to cross over from one to the other easily and expediently, without doing serious damage to their essential convictions or moral ethics. This explains the recent shifts of allegiances as candidates are seen to rapidly change sides and go to where they perceive nominations to electoral seats more easily obtainable. The current opposition coalition, Jatiyo Oikko Front (National Unity Front), of which the BNP is the major part, is being led by Dr Kamal Hussain, a reputable, octogenarian Oxford-educated jurist, once an AL leader.

Heading Towards the Elections

There is a palpably febrile excitement in the air as the nation of 160 million, heads towards the polls, slated for 30 December 2018 - the first participatory elections in a whole decade, as in 2014, the BNP had boycotted them, alleging possible rigging. Out of political power is out of public mind, the BNP has learnt the hard way, and, therefore, seems bent on participating this time round, while trenchantly criticising the absence of a level-playing field. It points to partiality by the Election Commission and continued harassment by the

administrative machinery. Nonetheless, it sees the need to participate as critical, for the option would be total marginalisation. Hence, its willingness to accept the reality that its leader, Khaleda Zia, who is incarcerated, and the acting Chair, her son, Tarique Rahman, a fugitive from the law who is an exile in London, would be unable to contest the elections. It is, therefore, willing to play second fiddle to Dr Hussain as the leader.

The huge enthusiasm is reflected in the fact that there are 3,065 submissions for candidacy for 300 seats. Some parties, including the BNP, have nominated several candidates for a single seat. After the last date of withdrawal of nomination papers, it will be clear as to who the contestants in the field are. In formal terms, from the time of announcement of the Election Schedule till the date of the actual polls, formally, the governance, by and large, is transferred to the Election Commission. The Prime Minister and the Cabinet remain in office, as the caretaker system of the past has been scuttled by the huge parliamentary majority of the AL, but supposedly with the limited responsibility of day to day functions. These norms, however, seem to be honoured more in the breach than in observance, and any change of role is, at least, as of now, imperceptible. Campaigning will begin in earnest from 10 December 2018. Largely in response to opposition demands, the Election Commission will call out the army which is likely to be deployed as of 15 December 2018. This is for the opposition fears that the police will be subservient to the political master. However, that is likely to be neither fish, flesh, fowl nor good red herring, as the army's mandate would be one of a striking force only with no supervisory role. There will be foreign observers – 12 groups from the United States and many locals, though the European Union appears content to have only two persons follow the hustings.

So far, if morning truly shows the day, the elections are likely to be held without too much violence. And, importantly, the polls will be participatory. However, the proof of the pudding will be in the eating. It is not the announcement of the results but their acceptance all round, nationally and internationally, that would be key. Its level may be mathematically correlated to the perceived level of fairness. If all goes well, despite the possibility of many a slip between the cup and the lip, Bangladesh will receive full marks for its democratic evolution.

.....

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. The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.