

ISAS Brief

No. 331 – 13 June 2014

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Bangladesh: Six Months after the Elections

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The Awami-League led Government of Sheikh Hasina in Bangladesh received a new lease of life in the elections of 5 January 2014. Opinion polls were predicting a sweep by the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), but the latter boycotted the elections, somewhat inexplicably, on the argument that these could not be held ‘freely and fairly’ under an incumbent Awami League-led coalition. Unsurprisingly, Hasina’s Awami League won by a walk-over. Consequently, the BNP lost its chance of being either in government or in opposition, a double whammy. Nor has its threats to bring the Hasina Government down from the streets come to pass, since somewhat exhausted from the excitement of last year’s political turmoil, the weary Bangladeshi, who tends to be politically hyperactive, seems to have chosen to divert attention to other aspects of life. So Hasina, who began rather tentatively, gradually has been able to consolidate her position and that of her party. Barring unforeseen events, she seems set to be there for the long haul. Initially Western governments were strong in their demands for fresh elections. But their voices, unable to find resonance in

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the governmental quarters or generate massive international support, began to weaken and fade.

Aware that allegations of corruption had given her government a bad name, Hasina sought to make a fresh beginning. She dropped some controversial politicians from her cabinet, and inducted some new ones, including senior leaders with experience of party organisation. She resolved the problem of having an opposition in the Parliament by persuading the all-too-willing Jatiyo Party of the inscrutable and unpredictable H M Ershad (and his wife, Raushan) to play a collaborative role of being in the opposition with the reward of some ministerial position, a most novel innovation of Westminster model of governance. The government has just presented a somewhat ambitious budget, which critics have called unrealistic, but which follows the maxim that man's reach must exceed his grasp, or what else are the heavens for?

For instance, the GDP growth rate was pitched at 7.3% in the Financial Year commencing 1 July. After last years' political commotion "the economy is back at its robust best", declared Finance Minister Abul Maal A Muhith. In the unlikely event that this should come to pass, this will be the highest target achieved since Bangladesh's separation from Pakistan in 1971. The International Monetary Fund has proffered a more modest prediction of 6.3%, and the end result is likely to be somewhere in between. The fact is Bangladesh has, over years, maintained a steady growth rate of around 6%, boosted by its burgeoning garment exports and buttressed by remittances from expatriate labourers abroad. But both these sectors are under some strains recently. Garment importers, particularly Europeans, look askance as Bangladesh's compliance of global safety standards for its largely female garment workers, and the expatriate labour market in the Middle East for a variety of reasons, is shrinking. But remarkable resilience has tended to mark Bangladeshi economy traditionally, so the hopes do blend with experience.

One issue that continues to raise concern is law and order. The media is awash with news of killings and disappearances. Some of these are political in nature, and law enforcing agencies are either simply overwhelmed or unwilling to make much headway in cracking the crimes. The alleged involvement of a number of Rapid Action Battalion officers in the murder of seven political personalities in the town of Narayanganj was the source of considerable embarrassment to the government. There is obviously a marked deterioration of values all round. One thing that is under control is terrorism. Examples of violent extremism are rare. The tolerant predilection of the Bangladeshi was evident when reaction to pro-*Hindutva*

statements from the BJP leaderships from across the border in recent times was rare, even though Islam has preponderant adherents among the people.

Foreign policy, given Western recalcitrance to embrace the election results, was a bit of a challenge to start with. The difficulties were compounded by the electoral disaster experienced by the Indian National Congress in May, and the instalment of Narendra Modi in power. Dhaka's apprehensions were exacerbated by Modi's campaign remarks directed against, if not Bangladesh, but so-called illegal Bangladeshi settlers in India. But, on coming to power, Modi held out the olive branch to all neighbours, and Hasina was quick to grasp it. Though through an unfortunate scheduling quirk, she could not attend the inaugural having had to go to Japan on an economics-motivated trip, much warmth was exchanged between her and Modi, and now India's Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj is tipped to visit Dhaka.

Of course, when Sushma Swaraj arrives, both she and her hosts will have their work cut out for them. There are several apples of discord between the two countries. These include the sharing of the waters of the Teesta (unresolved to date because of the negative position of West Bengal's Mamata Banerjee), as well as other common rivers, the question of enclaves that has bedevilled relations for decades, shootings of Bangladeshis at the borders by Indian Border Defence Forces *et al.* The problem is, given Modi's huge majority, he will be expected to deliver on some of the promises of the previous Congress government. The negotiations will also be an acid test for the Bangladesh Government, whose clout vis-à-vis New Delhi, is limited. The Bangladeshi public will be eager, indeed, impatient to see results, naturally in its favour. The Indian side may be unable, or unwilling, to comply. In the talks that take place, therefore, Dhaka's stakes will be higher.

Hasina did not lose too much time in mourning the loss of Western camaraderie, but turned quickly to Russia, with whom she had signed a US\$ 2 billion arms deal last year, and to China, which she visited, and to whom she held out the delicious prospects of juicy contracts, including that of a deep-sea port near Chittagong. She would also like to befriend India, and there are some signs that this may well be within the realm of possibility.

So it seems that Bangladesh is poised to muddle through in the months ahead. It is at an equilibrium, which though structurally and technically unstable, may continue to hold through sheer inertia. It is a major developing country of 160 million, a status that it enjoys, and will clearly continue to do so in the months ahead.

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