

# ISAS Brief

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## Painful Polls and Dhaka's Dilemmas

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The elections that were completed in Bangladesh on 5 January 2014 exacted a heavy toll, not just in lives and limbs – though there were plenty of that as well – but in terms of costs to Bangladesh's reputation as a pluralist and democratic polity. I say 'completed' because the process began sometime ago, when in the face of the refusal of the principal opposition, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), led by Begum Khaleda Zia, to participate in the polls, the Awami League (AL) government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina won in a canter, indeed in a gallop, in what was a 'walk-over' (in cricketing parlance), starting with the uncontested election of 153 candidates to a Parliament of 300. The numbers were sufficient for Hasina and her allies to form government. Khaleda's decision to boycott the polls flowed from a deep distrust of her opponent, under whose aegis she felt the elections would not be free and fair. Hence her insistence that Hasina resign and polls be held under a neutral government.

Given the high stakes involved, Hasina was most reluctant to oblige, unwilling to hand the government over to her arch-rival on a silver salver, which some analysts had opined would

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be the case if she had given in to the demand. Bangladesh's foreign partners, including the United States, the European Union, Japan and even China, had hoped for 'inclusive' elections, meaning, with the BNP participating. India, whose government seemed to be more favourably disposed towards the AL, indicated, through its Foreign Secretary, its comfort with a situation of 'most parties participating'. To underscore their disapproval of the process western governments as well as the United Nations and the Commonwealth Secretariat did not send any 'election observers' as was customary.

The BNP vowed not only to stay away from the polls themselves but also to keep others away. Their principal ally had been the Jamaat-i-Islam (JI), whose members were disqualified from the elections for their ultra-religious predilections, and some of whom were on the 'death row' following war crimes trials (with one already executed). In the ensuing violence, the JI functioned as the 'sword-arm' of the BNP buttressing its power on the streets. The opposition strategy comprised the blockade of Dhaka ('aborodh'), almost continuously over the past month, and occasional localised strikes ('hartals') in Dhaka as well as in the outlying districts. These saw uprooting of railway-lines, laying of felled trees on highways, and lobbing of Molotov cocktails at trucks and buses with horrendous consequences such as scores of fatal burn-injuries. The law-enforcing agencies, including the police, Rapid Action Battalion (a kind of joint-force), and the paramilitary Border Guards retaliated, often by shooting, resulting in mounting casualties. The result was the lead-up to the election day and the election itself were the bloodiest in the nation's history.

The government also displayed very little margin of tolerance. Apart from aforementioned police actions in the field, most opposition leaders were locked up in prison. Khaleda was confined to her home in the suburb of Gulshan, and not permitted to leave the premises to attend political events. The most senior person in the pecking order after her, the Acting Secretary General of the party, Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, went into hiding to avoid arrest, perhaps with her consent but much to the chagrin of her son and heir-apparent, Tarique Rahman, in exile in London. The latter made this known through a leaked telephone conversation with Shamsher Mobin Chowdhury, a BNP Vice Chairman, in Dhaka.

The role of the military through the hustings was unsurprisingly puzzling. Called out to assist civil powers as is wont at such times, it deployed in each district, but did little else in common cause with the police. Not a shot was fired by the military in anger, and vis-à-vis the populace its reputation remained impeccably untarnished. It is a good situation to be in with

an eye to the future, but as of now, it does not appear keen on assuming wider responsibilities with regard to governance, willingly or otherwise. Against all this backdrop Hasina seems set to form government, indeed eager to do so, perhaps lest anything should happen during any period of vacuum. This could happen in a very short time. The new cabinet may be sworn in as early as next Sunday, 12 January.

Foreign friends, however, have been less than enthusiastic both politically with regard to the ‘non-inclusive’ elections, as well as with regard to the manner in which they were held. Also, with the abysmally low voter turn-out! All except India that is, and even from there, the cheery phone call from Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was lacking. There was no stream of the customary telegraphic congratulations from other capitals. Instead one by one, the United Nations, the Commonwealth, the United States, the United Kingdom, Japan, Canada, France, Germany, and even China, normally an ‘all-weather friend’ of all regimes in Bangladesh, expressed ‘disappointment’ at what had transpired.

The Muslim leaders were eerily silent. There were divergent views among countries which normally shared common perceptions with regard to Dhaka; for instance, there was said to be much day- light between New Delhi and Washington (Imaginative and far-fetched journalism even linked differences over Bangladesh to the arrest and handcuffing of a senior Indian Consul in New York on charges of underpaying her household-helper!). For a nation much linked to the international system politically, culturally, intellectually, economically and emotionally, as Bangladeshis tend to be, this can be most depressing! For a Bangladeshi *bhadralok* (‘gentleman’) a US or European visa is not just a status symbol but also a conduit to education and livelihood! If at some stage the European Union stops dealing with the government in Dhaka for whatever reasons, the consequences would be disastrous in terms of trade and aid, Bangladesh’s principal sources of sustenance. What emanated from the outside world was a sense of ‘unfinished business’ with regard to the electoral process. There is already talk of mid-term polls, suggestions to that effect coming from even some Ministers, without mentioning when these are likely to be. The painful polls of 5 January may have created huge dilemmas for Dhaka.

So what is to be done now? What is the way out of this imbroglio? There appears to be no option but negotiations between the two principal protagonists, the AL and the BNP. In many ways the parties represent the two elements or streams that make up the common Bangladeshi, the ‘Bengaliness’ and the ‘Muslimness’, and their conflict is also one between

these two identities, often in the same individual, reacting differently to different stimuli. Societal stability requires the two to be in equilibrium, and when such balance is disturbed, violence ensues. This phenomenon needs to be combated institutionally, and till such time as this is successfully done, attempts at democracy run the risk of being perceived as a chimera! For starters, these two schools must arrive at a set of understanding. The failed initiative that the UN official Oscar Fernandez Taranko undertook when he was able to bring the parties to the water, but not make them drink, should be resumed. If necessary, the Secretary General Ban Ki-moon himself should be associated, and his own 'good offices' brought to bear directly upon the crisis.

One advantage the AL might have achieved in holding the polls under Hasina's aegis is that they brought to fruition their pre-poll commitments. Now that phase is over. The decision of the BNP not to contest might be seen by some as its having erred in judgment, but even that chapter should now be closed. A good beginning would be the eschewing of violence by all concerned. This point has been forcefully made by western diplomats, even by those who say they would prefer a re-polling. It is not easy, nor perhaps desirable, to have an elected government brought down from the streets, however flawed the perceived process that led to its formation.

Yet the question of legitimacy is important enough in itself to warrant serious consideration. Also, the possible erosion of all past economic and social achievements of this developing country, some of which have earned plaudits from all across the world, exacerbated by the violence and various types of 'work-stoppage', lends substantial urgency to the situation. The Secretary General's good offices could lead to the creation of a National Government, blessed by the two main leaders, and agreed to by both (this would facilitate any Constitutional amendments that may be needed to be made) with the Armed Forces helping to hold the next set of polls ensuring that these are free, fair, credible and participatory. This need not be precluded by the formation of a government by Hasina at this time, as that would perhaps be a necessary extension of the current electoral process, which may be allowed to run its course (which should mollify the AL for now). This will also among other things provide for a cushion between two governments, and a soft landing for the one that is deprived of office. An understanding on 'proportional representation' in parliament, rather than 'first past the post' system which implies 'winner take all', during the pendency of the National Government could also be effected and would surely positively impact on the

engagement of both sides, While this is only a scenario, it is one that flows from an idea, an idea whose time may have come, but unless seized upon soon, alas, may be gone!

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