

# Social explosion looms in Bangladesh

K. Ratnayake

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Bangladesh opposition parties staged a hunger strike on December 2 in Dhaka in which thousands participated. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) of Begum Khaleda Zia, together with smaller opposition parties, is demanding dissolution of the Awami League government and an early general election. The BNP lost power in the June 1996 elections and is bidding for a comeback.

The BNP is seeking to exploit discontent among the masses over the rapid erosion of living standards, extreme poverty and unemployment. BNP leader Zia, addressing the hunger strikers, accused the government of 'miserably failing to contain soaring prices of essentials and hiding the truth from the public'.

Bangladesh has been rocked by frequent strikes called by the opposition. A three-day strike beginning November 9 forced businesses, ports and the stock exchange to close. According to government figures the strikes have caused losses to the economy of US\$83 million (4 billion takas) each day. Businessmen are pressing the opposition to 'find alternative methods, instead of calling strikes'.

Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed stated at a November 16 press conference that her Awami League would not call general strikes in the future, and promised general elections in the year 2000, one year ahead of schedule.

Seizing on the prime minister's no-strike call, the Dhaka-based foreign diplomatic missions and donor agency chiefs held talks with Ms. Zia, the leader of the main opposition party, urging her to match Wajed's action. Ms. Zia replied with a conditional 'yes', saying 'future actions will depend upon government actions'. After the discussions the US ambassador said, 'It is good and great.' The British ambassador said, 'It is good, but we have to watch the opposition's reactions.'

The prime minister's no-strike call is aimed at averting the growing mass unrest and satisfying the

needs of international finance capital. Her announcement on early elections is a manoeuvre to diffuse the tense political situation and strengthen the hand of her regime. For the same purpose, she is seeking political advantage from the trial of the murder of her father and the first prime minister of independent Bangladesh, Mujibur Rahman. She has also organised another trial on the killing of four other 'heroes of liberation'.

On November 8, the District and Sessions Judge of Dhaka, the capital city, gave his verdict on the case relating to the assassination of Mujibur Rahman on August 15, 1975. The courts convicted 15 out of 19 accused and issued death sentences. Fourteen of the accused have fled and Prime Minister Wajed appealed to other countries to extradite the convicted.

The other pending trial is for those accused of the killing of four national leaders inside Dhaka central jail on November 3, 1975. Two of the accused are from the BNP and another accused is from the Jatiya Party, party of the former military dictator Ershad.

Though the strikes were called by the right-wing bourgeois parties, workers, students and other sections of the oppressed have come out to show their anger against the worsening living conditions. A country-wide famine is developing following major floods in August which claimed more than 1,500 lives and rendered 30 million homeless.

In Bangladesh one-third or 35.6 percent of the labour force is unemployed. Life expectancy in the poverty-ridden country is 56 years. Sixty-three percent of the population cannot read or write. According to a report of one non-governmental organisation, 200,000 children have been smuggled across the country's borders for prostitution and slavery.

According to World Bank figures annual per capita income is US\$270 and 53 percent of the people live below the poverty line. Bangladesh was ranked as a

least developed country and Bangladesh workers are among the lowest paid in the world.

However, in the course of the past five years only US\$1.4 billion in direct foreign investments were attracted to Bangladesh. The main concern of foreign investors is the explosive political situation in the country and the factional clashes between rival cliques of the bourgeois parties. A recent World Bank report warned, 'Overall business conditions remain fragile due to political disturbances, slackening of industrial reforms, poor governance and slow pace of reforms in recent years.'

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