

# Bangladesh: With protests intensifying, investors decry rivalry among political elite

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The rivalry between the Awami League government and the opposition political parties in Bangladesh reached a new height with the opposition's call for a three-day general strike on February 23. At least 6 were killed and more than 200 injured when rival groups clashed, mainly in the streets of the capital city, Dhaka.

This was the second general strike in the month of February, called by the opposition alliance of the Bangladesh National Party (BNP), Jatiya Party and Jamaat-e-Islami. The first strike was called from February 9 to 11 by the opposition in order to prevent nominations for 136 municipal councils (*poursava*), and demanding the sacking of the election commissioner, Abu Hena, accused of bias in conducting the elections.

During this strike six people were killed and scores injured when the Awami League and opposition members clashed. Anxious businessmen requested the government and the opposition arrive at a "compromise", as economic losses for each day of the strike amounted to US\$83 million.

But opposition BNP leader Khalida Zia-Ur Rahman, leading a mourning session February 14 for a party member killed during the strike, declared: "Economic losses cannot be recovered with this government in power."

Adding to the political tension, five people, including a leader of the Jatiya Samajatantrik Party (JSP), were killed and 20 others injured when unknown gunmen attacked an opposition rally on February 18.

A second three-day strike was called by the opposition from February 23 to 25, again demanding the cancellation of municipal council elections and the dismissal of the election commissioner. During this recent strike most Dhaka places of business, the stock exchange, schools and the main port at Chittagong were

forced to close. The Awami League organised "peace marches" to counter the opposition campaign.

While the opposition claimed a very low voter turnout in the council elections, the government stated that 80 percent of the population voted in some areas. Neither set of figures are thought to be reliable. The opposition alliance has now announced that if the government does not cancel the elections it will organise a movement to demand the resignation of the national government.

Last year Western diplomats and Bangladesh business organisations made several demands that the Awami League and the other parties compromise to avoid protest strikes. Although the economy was opened for international finance capital in the early 1990s, there has been little foreign investment in the country. Investors are deterred not only by the lack of infrastructure and the appalling low levels of literacy and skills, but they view the political infighting among the elite as disruptive to business. They also fear any movement by the Bangladeshi masses to voice their discontent.

On March 3 the European Union (EU) issued a statement warning that "lack of respect for elementary principles of democratic governance" was seriously hampering Bangladesh development prospects, and that the continuous turbulence has become a barrier to foreign trade and investments. The EU statement indicated that the "deteriorating political situation in the country" was a concern. Although the EU had arrived at an agreement on certain aid programs last month, the statement said that such programs could be threatened by the political instability. The EU is seeking more "peaceful" conditions for the exploitation of Bangladeshi labour and resources.

The government has been unable to stop the strikes.

However this is not due to any great support among the masses for the opposition. The BNP, the main opposition party led by Khalida Zia-Ur Rahman, was ousted in the parliamentary elections in 1996. The Jamaat-e-Islami is a fundamentalist organisation with a history of conspiring with Pakistani dictatorships during the "liberation struggle" in early 1970s. The Jatiya Party, the other party in the opposition alliance, was organised by former military dictator Mohammed Ershad, who was forced to resign as a result of popular mass agitation.

The Awami League government of Prime Minister Shiek Hasina Wajed, which came to power in 1996, continued the "economic liberalisation" dictated by the IMF for the benefit of international capital. Her government claims to be engaged in restoring the democracy destroyed by the military dictatorships which came to power following the assassination of her father Mujibur Rahman, who ruled as president from 1972 to 1975. But such utterances about democracy by the Bangladesh bourgeois parties mean nothing for the masses, who continue to live in aggravating misery.

An incident in Dhaka on February 27 exposed the miserable conditions of the poor. A devastating blaze, started by an oven fire, destroyed 5,000 shanties in three hours, rendering more than 20,000 homeless, killing eight and injuring many more. Seven of the eight persons killed were children. Rescue workers predicted the number of the dead would rise when the debris was cleared.

The latest ILO report on Bangladesh, released February 16, states that although the economic liberalisation in the country has raised the average per capita income, the poor have not benefited and the gap between poor and rich has widened: "The poorest 20 percent of households have not seen any improvement in living standards. By contrast the per capita income of the richest 20 percent of households has made considerable progress."

The average per capita income of 126 million people in Bangladesh is less than US\$300, according to the report. It further states: "One Bangladeshi out of four is officially estimated as poor. Over 60 percent of the population over age 15 is illiterate, while child labour is widespread despite the government's commendable efforts."

It has not explained why child labour is so

widespread if there were "commendable efforts" by the government to stop it. However, it has suggested more tariff reductions to "allow the country to exploit its exports and growth potentials" further.



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