Bitter political feud between the government and opposition in Bangladesh

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9 March 2000

Ongoing anti-government strikes, protests and agitation in Bangladesh organised by the conservative four-party opposition alliance led by the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) point to chronic political instability and breakdown for which neither the government, the opposition nor big business have any solution.

* On March 4, about 50 people were injured in a clash in Sylhet between the opposition All-Party Action Committee (APAC) and Awami League activists. Shots were fired and homemade bombs exploded before the police used tear gas and fired warning shots to break up the groups. The conflict erupted over the visit of the Bangladesh Foreign Minister Abdus Samad Azad to the area, which had been opposed by the APAC.

* On February 28, the opposition organised a countrywide strike against the newly enacted Public Security Act, which provides the police with sweeping new powers and has already been used against the government's political opponents. Traffic was brought to a halt in the country's main cities. Schools and most businesses were closed. Large numbers of police and soldiers were deployed in the capital of Dhaka and the country's major port of Chittagong.

* On February 15, the opposition alliance called a three-day hartal—street protests combined with strikes. Three people died and scores were injured, including a number of female garment workers, during clashes between government and opposition supporters.

* On February 2, at least one person was killed and more than 90 were injured as a result of bomb explosions and clashes during a 36-hour anti-government strike. The dead man was a BNP activist who was killed when one of the party's offices was bombed. Dhaka's streets were mostly empty and the country's two stock exchanges in Dhaka and Chittagong were closed, as were many schools, offices and banks.

These protests are just the latest in an escalating campaign since the Awami League government headed by Prime Minister Sheik Hasina Wajed came to power after the 1996 elections. Over the last four years the opposition has staged 55 major strikes and many more partial strikes against the government over issues ranging from a demand for voter identity cards to calls for corruption investigations. Last June the opposition began a total boycott of the parliament and by the end of last year it had announced that it was going to focus its campaign on one point: forcing the government to resign. Elections are not due until next year.

Opposition leader and BNP chief Begum Khalida Zia has rejected any form of compromise with the government. In an interview with the *BBC* on February 19, she stated that “only a general election could save the nation from the present political crisis” and ruled out “any dialogue with the government”.

According to Bangladeshi media reports, BNP leader Khalida Zia is seeking a hearing from the Western countries. In late February she met with foreign diplomats to denounce the government's human rights record and intends to do the same when she meets with President Clinton during his visit to the country on March 20.

The bitter feud between the government and opposition has continued despite pressure from sections of big business to reach a compromise and end the strikes and protests. Businessmen attending a conference in January called on the government and opposition to consider “the adverse impact their politics towards the country's economy and business” and called for the political leaders to “de-link” business from politics. According to some estimates $100 million a day is being lost in the manufacturing and export sectors during national strikes.

The US ambassador to Bangladesh John Holzman last November echoed the sentiments of foreign investors and local businessmen when he said: “I think major political parties should establish sufficient common ground to work together and achieve reforms to make more progress in Bangladesh.” The US administration is clearly concerned about the potential not only for the rift to worsen in Bangladesh but also for it to intensify political instability throughout the Indian subcontinent.

But the dispute shows no signs of abating. The ferocity of the struggle between the two rival ruling cliques for the levers of state power is itself a measure of the depth of the country's economic and social crisis.

The Awami League led by Sheik Mujibur Rehman, the current Prime Minister's father, formed the first government in independent Bangladesh in 1972 after the intervention of the Indian army in what was then East Pakistan. Amid continuing

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economic and political instability, the Awami League government has ousted in a military coup in 1975 and Mujibur and other prominent party members were killed.

For the next 15 years, the country was dominated by a succession of military dictatorships until General Ershad was forced to step down in 1990 amid widespread opposition protests. All four opposition parties are connected either to the previous military dictatorships or to Islamic groups. The BNP is headed by the widow of former military ruler Zia ur Rehman. The Jatiya Party (JP) was formed by Ershad. The alliance also includes the two Islamic fundamentalist parties—the Jamaat-I-Islami and the Islamic Jote.

The Awami League came to power in the 1996 elections for the first time since Mujibur Rehman was ousted. The very fact that the opposition parties have been able to mobilise substantial protests against the government indicates that it has been completely incapable of solving even the most basic social problems confronting the impoverished masses of Bangladesh.

Like the previous BNP-led government led by the present opposition leader Begum Khalida Zia, Prime Minister Hasina Wajed has responded to the continuing protests with a series of increasingly repressive measures including the Public Security Act. Last year her government instigated charges against a number of opposition leaders accusing them of direct involvement in the murder of Sheik Mujibur Rehman and his associates over two decades ago.

Like the BJP in India and Islamic fundamentalists in Pakistan, the BNP opposition has responded by whipping up a mixture of chauvinism and religious fundamentalism. When the government began discussions with India over allowing the transit of Indian goods to the north-eastern Indian states via Bangladesh, Khalida Zia denounced it for “turning the country in to a market for Indian goods.” Ershad attacked the Awami League for allowing the country is being “grabbed by another country [India]”. All of the opposition parties counterpose their calls for a greater Islamisation of the Bangladeshi state to Awami League's program, which pays lip service to Bangladesh as a secular, multi-linguistic democracy.

Both the government and opposition are committed to implementing the demands of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for the opening up and restructuring of the Bangladesh economy to attract foreign investment. Ershad began the process of economic restructuring in 1989, which was continued when the BNP came to power in 1991 and by the Awami League after 1996.

In a 1998 report, the World Bank noted that the government and opposition were at each other's throats and this was having “a chilling effect on [economic] reforms”. It then added that “the two parties' development policies are similar” and that “the BNP has initiated policies, such as privatisation”.

At the heart of the political crisis in Bangladesh is the fact that neither the Awami League nor the BNP-led opposition are able to alleviate the poverty and suffering of tens of millions of people. Furthermore the economic policies implemented on behalf of the IMF and international finance capital will only deepen the social chasm between the wealthy ruling elites and the vast majority of Bangladeshi workers, small farmers, traders and unemployed who are struggling to survive from day to day.

According to the government's own Bureau of Statistics, half the population lives below the official poverty line. The World Food Organisation representative in Bangladesh, Dr. Werner Keine, has produced a report showing that 30 million people—27 million in rural areas and three million in the cities live from hand to mouth in what he called “ultra poverty”. Another report detailed the pressures on the rural poor to work under slave labour conditions in the country's garment factories or to resort to prostitution.

On the other side of the equation, a report on the 1996 elections entitled *Governance and Electoral Process in Bangladesh* provided details of the social milieu from which the country's politicians are largely drawn. The author Aziz-ud-Din Ahamed commented: “‘There were 186 multi-millionaires in the last assembly,' one of the candidates contesting the June 1996 elections in Bangladesh told me. ‘And the number might go up to 200 in the new one.' Another candidate that I interviewed said the Sangsad Parisad (People's Assembly) had turned in to a Dacca Club, or an institution monopolised by the rich. The comments succinctly underline the predominant role money has come to play in contemporary Bangladesh politics... In Bangladesh the middle class represented by professionals like lawyers of rural origin has of late been squeezed out to give place to rich businessmen, industrialists or individuals with questionable means of income.”

For all their wrangling, both the government and opposition share an overriding concern in diverting the attention of the Bangladeshi masses from this gaping social divide and above all in preventing any conscious political struggle by the working class for its own class interests.

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