

Another round of anti-government strikes and protests in Bangladesh

Nishathi Priyangika**26 April 2001**

At least two people are dead and 20 people have been wounded in the latest anti-government strikes and protests in Bangladesh this week. One person was killed by police gunfire and another activist from the ruling Awami League was shot dead while returning home from a pro-government rally at Feni, 150km southeast of Dhaka. Strikes on Monday shut schools, closed the stock exchanges in Dhaka and Chittagong and affected work at the Chittagong port.

The right-wing opposition Bangladesh National Party (BNP) and its allies have been agitating for months to force the government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to call national elections prior to the due date in July. In order to prop up its increasingly unpopular rule, the government has responded with its own rallies and police repression directed against the opposition.

The opposition action this week is the third in a series of 72-hour strikes, rallies and street demonstrations over the last month. The first, which began on March 31, resulted in 600 people being wounded in gang attacks and bombings as well as police shootings and beatings. Several hundred people were arrested. The second 72-hour strike ended on April 11 with one person dead and 150 injured in similar clashes. The government deployed about 7,000 police and para-military personnel to intimidate opposition protesters.

BNP leader Begum Khaleda Zia is calling on the prime minister to dissolve parliament and hand over power to a caretaker administration to enable national elections to be held in May. When the opposition first issued its demand in January, the government indicated it was prepared to call the election in May. But after the opposition insisted that the poll be held before March 30, the government withdrew the offer, saying that it would complete its full term.

The opposition's campaign appears to be losing ground. According to *Reuters*, the general strike called in the

midst of the protests in January had to be shortened from one day to five hours, due to a "lack of public support and growing dislike for disruptive actions." The strikes and protests this week appeared to have waned after Monday. The *Daily Star* commented that yesterday—the last day of the strike—"passed off almost peacefully" with fewer pickets and just an occasional bomb.

Khaleda is under strong pressure from sections of big business to call a halt to the anti-government agitation that costs an estimated \$US66 million for every strike day. The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association issued a press release, saying they were losing \$2 million a day and calling for an immediate end to the strikes. Previous attempts by big business to encourage a compromise between the two parties have been in vain. The opposition alliance has called more than 85 countrywide strikes in the four years since the BNP lost the 1996 elections to the Awami League.

The BNP indicated this week that it will not call further strikes during the school exam period and may limit itself to rallies and street marches in the lead up to the national elections. Clearly concerned about the reaction of business leaders, an unnamed BNP official told the *Daily Star*: "Although we are not scared of any threat from any quarters, we do not want major damage to the economy and sufferings of common men."

The BNP is, however, intent on maintaining a campaign to maximise its support when elections are finally held. Khaleda is seeking to exploit the growing hostility to the impact of the government's policies with demagogic promises to oppose corruption and defend democracy—the same slogans that were used by Hasina when she was in opposition and Khaleda was in power.

While there are no fundamental differences between the BNP and the Awami League, the BNP has been characterised by more strident anti-Indian chauvinism and appeals to communalist sentiment. Its Islamic

fundamentalist allies launched a campaign in February against a high court decision outlawing Islamic religious edicts, or *fatwas*, against women.

Cracks have since appeared in the opposition coalition, however. The BNP's main ally, the Jatiya Party of former military dictator Muhammad Ershad, broke from the alliance on April 17 and may be in the process of striking a deal with the government. Ershad was in alliance with the Awami League in 1996 but quickly left the government and joined the opposition. Two Islamic fundamentalist parties remain in coalition with the BNP—Jammat-e-Islami and Islami Oikya Jote. The BNP itself is the creation of another military ruler, Zia ur Rehman—Khaleda is his widow.

The reasons for the Awami League's unpopularity are not difficult to find. Hasina came to power promising to alleviate poverty and provide better living conditions and broad democratic rights, including freedom of the press. But over the last five years, living conditions have continued to worsen and the government has resorted to increasingly autocratic methods.

A recent Asian Development Bank report by economist Abdul Barakat from Dhaka University contained some devastating statistics on the degree of social polarisation in Bangladesh. While there are 3,000 multi-millionaires in Bangladesh, most of them created in recent years, 60 million people out of a total population of 127 million still live below the country's austere poverty line. About 30 million people live on less than one US dollar a day, 90 million people have no access to sanitation and 70 million cannot get modern health care.

Around 10 million children are suffering from malnutrition to varying degrees. Barkat wrote: "25 million people are now reeling under shadow of unemployment or underemployment and 20 million children of school-going age are not attending school due to abject poverty."

World Bank country director Fredrick Temple told foreign investors at a Chamber of Commerce meeting in January that "the problem is that the number of poor are growing at a faster pace than the number of poor going above the poverty line." It is, however, precisely the policies of economic restructuring promoted by the World Bank and IMF that are widening the gap between rich and poor.

Prime Minister Hasina continued the policy of the previous Khaleda government of opening up Bangladesh to foreign investors, offering to ensure "transparency and accountability". A number of US companies, in

particular, have signed agreements to exploit the huge natural gas deposits in Bangladesh.

Like the previous BNP government, the Awami league has responded to protests and opposition to its policies with increased repression. Under the pretext of fighting "terrorism," tens of thousands of people throughout the country have been arbitrarily detained under draconian new police powers passed last year in a new public security act. The US State Department reported that 134 people died in prison last year due to torture.

Hasina has already ruled out making any "big promises" for the next elections. She is relying on nationalist appeals to the heritage of the Awami League and its founder Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, her father, who was Bangladesh's first prime minister. At the same time, Hasina is manoeuvring with Ershad, her avowed political foe for the last four years, to see if a deal can be struck to help keep her government in office.

With the two main bourgeois parties increasingly discredited, Islamic fundamentalist parties are seeking to exploit the widespread disillusionment. Both the Jamaat-e-Islami, which currently has only three parliamentary seats, and the Islamic Oikya Jote, which has only one seat, have upped their demands on the BNP for a greater share of candidates in the upcoming elections. At the same time, Ershad, having split with the BNP, is seeking to woo the Islamic parties into a coalition with his Jatiya Party.

The intensity of the political manoeuvring, along with the strident and empty character of the political demagogic, stems from the fact that none of the parties are based on policies that in any way meet the aspirations of ordinary working people for decent living standards and basic democratic rights.



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