

Bangladesh convulsed by protests over coming election

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A fourteen-party coalition of Bangladesh's opposition parties, led by the Bangladesh Awami League (BAL), launched an indefinite agitation in all the country's major cities Sunday November 12 to press for the creation of "a congenial atmosphere for a free and fair election." The coalition's principal demand is the resignation of the current four-member Election Commission (EC) headed by Justice M. A. Aziz and the constitution of a new EC.

On Wednesday, the opposition parties announced that they will continue their campaign of demonstrations and rallies, but that they are temporarily suspending their blockade of all road and railway traffic "in view of public suffering." The blockade is slated to resume next Monday.

The opposition charges that the current EC-maintained voter-list has been rigged to the benefit of the Bangladesh National Party, which dominated the outgoing governmental coalition. The 93-million name voter list is said to contain as many as 13 million "fake" and "ghost" (deceased) voters.

Earlier this year, Aziz promised to clean up the voter list, but he now justifies the EC's failure to do so by saying that there was insufficient time.

Despite being under widespread pressure to resign for not having produced a credible voter list, Aziz has adamantly refused to step down.

The BAL accuses Aziz of being biased towards their bitter BNP rival—he was appointed by the BNP-led coalition—and doubts that he is able or willing to organize the parliamentary general elections scheduled for January 2007 in a non-partisan manner. Four other alliances of opposition parties are supporting the demand of the BAL and its allies for the removal of Justice Aziz and the reconstitution of the EC.

The Bangladeshi constitution requires that a Caretaker Government (CG) be formed consisting of a Chief Adviser and a 10-member advisory council, ninety days ahead of a general election, so as to prevent ruling parties from utilizing the advantage of office to rig election outcomes.

As stipulated, the BNP-led government recently stood aside in favor of an interim government. However, the composition of the CG has become a second major bone of contention between the opposition and the outgoing government.

During its first four days, the opposition movement paralyzed

daily life in Bangladesh's major cities, including the capital Dhaka and Chittagong, the southeastern port-city that handles about three quarter of the nation's sea-freight. As a result of the transport blockade and other protests virtually all shops, businesses, and schools and colleges were closed.

The police have met the agitations with gratuitous violence, dousing peaceful demonstrators with hot water, lobbing tear-gas grenades and beating up hundreds of people.

On Monday November 13, the police drove a van through a group of demonstrators in Dhaka killing two and injuring over 50. By the end of the second day of protests, the police were reported to have killed at least 5 people.

The opposition has also called for the resignation of President Iajuddin Ahmed from his self-appointed post as the Chief Adviser to the CG or head of the interim government, a role he assumed October 29. While Ahmed's move was enthusiastically endorsed by the BNP, the opposition BAL has accused him of usurping this office in undue haste without making a sincere effort at finding a person acceptable to it. The BAL also accuses Ahmed of being beholden to the BNP, since he became president with the BNP's support.

After Ahmed assumed the post of Chief Advisor it did not take him long to reveal his intentions.

On the day the agitations started he ordered the deployment of the army without consulting, as he was required to do by law, with any of the other 10 CG advisers. He abruptly withdrew the order after being challenged by the other advisers and after the military top brass had signaled that it was reluctant to assume responsibility for quelling the opposition movement.

The US has a long history of intervening in Bangladesh politics. In recent months, as the political crisis has deepened, there has been a steady stream of delegations from the US to Dhaka under the cover of supporting free elections, promoting "religious freedom" and other noble-sounding goals.

US Assistant Secretary of State Richard A. Boucher traveled to Bangladesh for a 2-day visit on November 12 and met with all of the major bourgeois politicians including Ms. Sheik Hasina, the head of the BAL, and Ms. Kahleda Zia, the outgoing prime minister and head of the BNP.

Boucher voiced disapproval of any move towards a military takeover. "The situation here is difficult," said Boucher, who

last visited the country in early August, “but the goal is free and fair elections. I don’t think military takeover does contribute to the goal. That will be a bad thing to do.”

India too is watching developments in Bangladesh with concern. There is no doubt that there is a measure of political coordination between India and the U.S. with respect to Bangladesh.

India leans towards the BAL-led opposition, as relations between India and Bangladesh under the Khaleda Zia government turned increasingly hostile with the two armed forces recurrently exchanging fire along the border.

The Times of India reported on November 14 that Foreign Ministry officials “have veered to the assessment that India would have to take a lead in mobilising international opinion, Washington in particular, to address what is turning out be a worrisome situation in New Delhi’s immediate neighbourhood.”

Both Washington and New Delhi have expressed concern about the rise of Islamic fundamentalist terrorist groups in Bangladesh. But unlike New Delhi, Washington repeatedly expressed confidence in the outgoing BNP government.

There is little doubt that President Ahmed has sought to bend if not outright break the constitution by assuming the role of head of the CG. Although the constitution does grant a sitting president the right to assume the role of the chief adviser to the CG, this is supposed to be done only as a last resort after having exhausted all efforts to find other persons as prescribed by the constitution.

Moreover, Ahmed has sought to monopolize the reins of power within the CG, by taking in his own hands a dozen ministries in the CG in addition to his offices of President and the Chief Adviser.

The BAL and BNP are longstanding bitter political rivals. The BAL’s roots lie in the original Awami League, which led the agitation for independence from Pakistan. It was founded by the Sheik Mujibur Rahman, the father of the current leader of the BAL, Ms. Sheik Hasina. The BNP is supported by the Stalinist rump Communist Party of Bangladesh and several bourgeois secular-liberal groupings.

The BAL bases its politics on Bangladeshi- and Banglachaunism. (Bangla or Bengali is the country’s principal language.) While it poses as a party of the left or of the people, it has no compunction in obediently implementing, as it did during its rule from 1996-2001, privatizations, cuts in social spending and other regressive neo-liberal policies to woo foreign investors.

The BNP was founded in October 1978 by the Bangladesh dictator General Ziaur Rahman—husband of BNP leader Ms. Khaleda Zia. The BNP has a long history of cultivating Islamic fundamentalism. It was General Ziaur Rahman who codified Islam in the Bangladeshi constitution.

During a term in government that began in 1991, the BNP used Islamic fundamentalists groups to target opponents

including from the rival BAL, NGO’s and leftist movements.

Following the 2001 elections the BNP formed a coalition with several reactionary Islamic Parties including the Jammat-e-Islam and Islamic Oikya Jote.

The Jammat-e-Islam dates back to before the formation of Bangladesh and assisted the violent suppression of the Bangladesh independence agitation by forming paramilitary forces that worked in consort with the Pakistani Military.

The BNP has either directly or indirectly created the atmosphere for a wave of violence that has targeted government opponents. In August 2004 there was a brutal grenade attack during a mass BAL rally that killed at least 20 and injured several hundred. BAL leader Ms. Sheikh Hasina barely escaped with her life. (See: Attack on Bangladesh opposition rally heightens political tensions)

Both the current BNP-led government and the 1996-2001 BAL-led government have implemented the economic dictates of the so-called “Donor Community” comprising 16 bilateral and 7 multilateral institutions, the most prominent of which are the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank (WB), and the Asian Development Bank (ADB).

Under the guise of efficiently channeling “aid”, a euphemism for loans and meager grants, the “donors” maintain a permanent presence of management consultants and foreign bureaucrats in Bangladesh who dictate government policies.

The result has been a social catastrophe for the majority of Bangladesh’s 140 million people, with 83 percent living on less than \$2 per day. The workers in the garment industry—that produces Bangladesh’s most prominent export—work and live in the most abysmal conditions. Wages are as low as US 15 cents per hour and a “normal” work day is 13 hours.

No matter which of the two main bourgeois political parties wins the upcoming elections, it will make no difference in the living conditions of the majority. Both the BNP and BAL are thoroughly corrupt bourgeois parties that in the face of mass opposition have imposed regressive socio-economic policies.

Only an independent political movement of Bangladesh workers uniting with their class brethren across South Asia and internationally can put an end to the social tragedy that is Bangladesh.



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