

Bangladeshi president postpones election and imposes state of emergency

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In a desperate bid to end weeks of political turmoil, Bangladesh's president Iajuddin Ahmed announced last Thursday that he was postponing national elections due on January 22, imposing a state of emergency and stepping aside as head of the interim caretaker government.

The president had been the target of weeks of protests by opposition parties, which accused him of being a stooge of the ruling Bangladesh National Party (BNP). The main opposition party—the Awami League—had demanded that Iajuddin Ahmed step aside and the election be postponed to enable the drawing up of accurate electoral rolls. According to the opposition, the current list contains more than 10 million fake or deceased voters.

On Friday, the president swore in former central bank governor Fakhruddin Ahmed as the new head of the interim government to hold power until after the election. At this stage, it is not clear when the poll will be held or whether the postponement is strictly constitutional. The BNP-led government stepped aside in October, at the end of its five-year term, paving the way for elections within 90 days as required by the country's constitution.

Following the announcement of a state of emergency, the security forces immediately clamped a curfew and strict media censorship on the country. Amid widespread criticism and open flouting by newspapers of the ban on political news, both measures were eased. The information ministry is, however, still urging the media not to write anything provocative.

Since November, the country has been wracked by mass opposition protests and transport blockades over alleged electoral corruption. At least 45 people have been killed in violent clashes with police and security forces. On January 3, the Awami League and its allies announced their intention to proceed with a poll boycott, opening up the prospect of continuing political upheaval.

A three-day blockade last week cut off Dhaka, the country's capital of 10 million people, from the rest of the country and prevented most exports from leaving the port of Chittagong. Protesters in Dhaka also attempted to lay siege

to the presidential residence. The president provocatively called out the military and gave the army sweeping powers of arrest. Hundreds of opposition activists were locked up.

With less than two weeks to go to the poll, the European Union and the US scrapped or scaled back plans to send election monitoring teams. Last Thursday the UN announced that it was suspending technical assistance for the election. Later the same day, the president made his decision to step aside.

There is no doubt that the BNP and its allies were preparing to try and rig the election. But the posturing of the Awami League and other opposition parties as principled defenders of democracy is absurd. The election boycott was simply a tactical manoeuvre aimed at forcing elections under more advantageous conditions, or laying the basis for a legal challenge after the poll. The opposition announced a boycott then called it off on December 24, only to reimpose it on January 3.

One of the Awami League's allies is the Janata Party led by former military dictator General Hossain Mohammad Ershad, who took power in a coup in 1982 and ruled until 1990 riding roughshod over basic democratic rights. In fact, the exclusion of Ershad from the election may well have motivated the opposition's decision to reimpose the boycott. Election officials, accused by the opposition of being BNP stooges, barred Ershad from running, citing ongoing court cases relating to 10-year-old corruption charges.

At the ceremony last Friday to swear in the new interim government head, Awami League leader Sheikh Hasina and other opposition party leaders were all present, but the BNP's Khaleda Zia was pointedly not present. Her absence may well indicate that the crisis is far from over.

There is widespread alienation among voters from all the major parties. The BNP's apparent resort to rigging the voter roll, stacking the Electoral Commission and military provocations is due to fears of a voter backlash against its failure to address the country's deepening social crisis. Equally, the Awami League's focus on the BNP's corruption is a useful diversion from its own previous

failures in office.

Despite the bitter rivalry between Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia, the parties have virtually the same policies. Zia was prime minister from 1991 and 1996 and from 2001 to 2006. Hasina held the post from 1996 to 2001. These governments have implemented the demands of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank for market reforms that led to the increased exploitation of the working class and growing social inequality.

A survey conducted last June and reported in the *Daily Star* found that only 23 percent of people intended to vote for the Awami League and 16 percent for the BNP. A huge 53 percent said they did not know which party they would support. In a corresponding survey in 1999, the Awami League received 39 percent, the BNP 30 percent and only 11 percent were undecided.

Political analyst and former MP, Nazim Kamran Choudhury, commented that the voters were “disenchanted with the whole political system.” He continued: “For the first time in our history, with elections less than six months away, more than half of the voters are undecided, i.e., not sure who to vote for. This indeed is an indictment of our political parties.”

Behind this alienation is a deepening social divide. Between 1999 and 2004, the percentage of national income controlled by the poorest 10 percent of the population declined from 1.7 percent to 1.5 percent. Over the same period, the richest 10 percent increased its share from 33.9 percent to 36.5 percent. Thus the income differential between the poorest and the richest deciles increased from 20 times in 1999 to 25 times in 2004. The corresponding figure for 1995-96 was 16 times.

According to the 2004 Poverty Monitoring Survey Report from the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), the poorest Bangladeshi households experienced an absolute decline in income. The results indicated that the real income of poor households decreased by 3.56 percent from 1999 to 2004, while that of the “non-poor” rose by 13.36 percent.

Any decline in income is devastating for the average Bangladeshi. According to the World Bank, 82.8 percent of the population live on less than \$US2 per day and 36 percent live on less than \$1 per day. Some 48 percent of children under five are underweight and 43 percent have stunted growth. The BBS survey showed that 42.1 percent of the population was not receiving the basic Food Energy Intake (FEI) in 2004.

Widespread rural poverty has forced many to move to cities such as Dhaka and Chittagong in search of work. The number of landless people in rural areas has increased from 28 percent in 1972 to around 50 percent today. In the last

decade, the slums of Dhaka have swelled from 1.5 million to 3.4 million people.

The free market policies of the Awami League and BNP have been designed to attract foreign investment to exploit the country’s cheap labour. In particular, the output of Bangladesh’s textile factories, which pay the lowest wages in the world, has increased by five or six times over the past 15 years. Eighty percent of Bangladesh’s export income now derives from textile and garments, shipped mainly to the US and Europe.

Exploitation in the country’s sweatshops is intensifying, as Bangladesh faces competition from China and India, particularly since the end of the international multi-fibre agreement on export quotas at the start of 2005. One indicator is the industrial death toll—hundreds of workers have been killed over the past three years in factory fires and building collapses.

Another indicator is the increased use of child labour. A survey conducted by UNICEF and the Bangladesh Ministry of Labor and Manpower released in 2004 found that there are 7 million child workers in Bangladesh, including a large number in hazardous industries. One fifth of the total workforce consists of children aged 15 or under.

The BBS and International Labor Organisation surveyed children aged 5 to 17 working in the five worst industries—welding, auto workshops, road transport, battery recharging and recycling—and street children. It found that 149,000 children in these sectors worked an average of nine hours a day. The majority of those questioned said they worked six or seven days a week for little or no wages. Children recharging and filling batteries had an average monthly wage of 313 taka (\$US5.30). Street children earned an average monthly wage of just 288 taka (\$US4.85) by collecting old paper, street selling, shining shoes, portering or begging. Those in the transport sector received an average 1,417 taka (\$US24) a month.

All the major parties in Bangladesh are responsible for this worsening social crisis. Whenever the election is held and whatever the outcome, the next government will continue to implement economic policies for the benefit of business at the expense of working people.



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