

Military-backed regime in Bangladesh postpones elections for 18 months

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In what can only be interpreted as a step toward a military dictatorship, the caretaker government in Bangladesh announced on April 5 that national and local elections would be postponed for at least 18 months until the end of 2008. The decision, which obviously breaches the country's constitution, puts an unelected regime and its military backers in charge for an indefinite period.

President Iajuddin Ahmed installed the caretaker government on January 11 to defuse a deep political crisis provoked by weeks of mass protests by the opposition Awami League (AL) and its allies against the alleged rigging of elections due on January 22. The president stood aside as head of the previous caretaker government, installed former Central Bank chief Fakhruddin Ahmed in his place and imposed a state of emergency.

Constitutionally, a poll should have been held within 90 days of the previous Bangladesh National Party (BNP)-led government stepping aside last October after the end of its five-year term. Now the caretaker regime has assumed power in its own right, with Fakhruddin Ahmed and eight advisors supervising all ministries and government functions.

In a televised address on April 12, Fakhruddin Ahmed said he had "firm faith" that an election would be possible before the end of 2008. He declared the priorities to be "election reforms, combating corruption, the depoliticisation of the administration, the independence of the judiciary and other issues relating to the national economy".

Appealing to the widespread popular disgust with the major parties, Ahmed declared: "Our mission is clear—we want to quickly bring the corrupt, abusers of power and other hardened offenders to justice under the law of the land so that the society, the country and the

people get rid of their black claws." This anti-corruption drive is the pretext for the security forces, which have extensive powers under the continuing state of emergency, to suppress political opposition.

The army, which is assuming a prominent political role, strongly backed the decision to postpone elections. Army chief, Lieutenant General Moeen Uddin Ahmed told a conference of the International Political Science Association in Dhaka on April 2 that the interim government would build a "new brand of democracy to overcome the country's chronic poor governance".

"We do not want to go back to an 'elective democracy' where corruption becomes all pervasive, governance suffers in terms of insecurity and violation of rights, and where political criminalisation threatens the very survival and integrity of the state," the general declared. In an appeal to business, he declared that poor governance was responsible for holding the country back economically.

Commenting on the speech, an editorial in the *Daily Star* concluded: "[T]he army chief General Moeen Uddin Ahmed has confirmed that he is actually calling the shots as the real power behind the government." The caretaker government includes two retired major generals and a former police chief. The election commission (EC) includes a military officer for the first time—retired Brigadier General M. Sakhawat. The chairman of the powerful anti-corruption commission is a retired army chief, Lieutenant General Hasan Mashhud Chowdhury.

In the guise of ending corruption, the regime has cracked down on political parties. BNP leader Khaleda Zia has been put under virtual house arrest. On April 11, police filed murder charges against Awami League leader Sheikh Hasina Wajed over the killing of four people who were beaten to death during political

violence in Dhaka last October. Hasina, who was visiting relatives in the US, vehemently denied the allegations.

The military has detained more than 160 political leaders, businessmen and former officials since January. These include former BNP minister Mirza Abbas and ex-Awami League minister, Mosharraf Hossain. Khaleda's son and joint BNP secretary general, Tareque Rahman, is facing several charges, including extorting \$US147,000 from a construction company.

Certainly, corruption is endemic in Bangladesh. Transparency International last year rated Bangladesh as the most corrupt state in the world for the fifth consecutive year. The caretaker government's concern, however, is not for the plight of the ordinary people, but rather to appeal to foreign investors who regard institutionalised corruption as a barrier to profits.

The regime has carried out sweeping repressive measures. As of early April, the security forces have rounded up more than 100,000 people, many of whom are being held without charge. Over 60,000 soldiers and policemen with special powers have been deployed for the task. According to the human rights organisation Odhikar, about 50 people have died in detention between January 12 and March 12.

Under the state of emergency, the rights to appeal for bail and seek redress from a higher court have been suspended. After January 11, all outdoor political events—including public rallies, street protests, roadblocks and strikes—were banned. On March 11, the government banned indoor political events as well. On March 15, it ordered the closure of seven private TV channels, declaring they had not obtained certificates to uplink, downlink or receive programs from abroad.

The government is also expected to promulgate its "Anti-Terrorism Ordinance 2007". Already in draft form, this ordinance sweepingly defines "terrorist acts" to include threats to the sovereignty, unity, integrity or security of Bangladesh as well as damaging public or private property and hindering the supply of materials essential for people's life. Penalties can include life imprisonment and the death sentence.

No section of the ruling elite—the judiciary, the media or the major parties—has seriously challenged the postponement of elections or the regime's anti-democratic methods. The country was under a military

dictatorship throughout the 1980s until the army was compelled by mass discontent to call elections. The Awami League and the BNP have alternated in power for the past 17 years. For all their bitter rivalry, both parties have imposed a pro-business program that has generated deepening social inequality and widespread alienation.

Neither the BNP nor the Awami League is prepared to mobilise the masses against the military-backed regime, fearing such a movement would spiral out of control. Both parties have in effect accepted the postponement of elections. Awami League general secretary Abdul Jalil declared that his party "welcomes this timeframe". He simply called for an end to the ban on political activities, to enable discussion with the election commission on the reforms and other poll-related issues.

The main target of the regime's anti-democratic measures is the working class and the poor. Last May, thousands of garment workers protested against poor pay and working conditions and were brutally suppressed by security forces. During the demonstrations, 150 factories were ransacked and scores of vehicles were damaged. The garment industry is the country's main export earner.

The military-backed government is preparing to accelerate market reforms. All services at the port of Chittagong, which handles 80 percent of the country's foreign trade, are listed to be privatised. The Rupali Bank—the country's biggest state bank—is also to be sold off. Agreements have been signed with the Asian Development Bank and World Bank to privatise the country's railway system.

Not surprisingly, business leaders and foreign investors have in effect backed the new anti-democratic regime. Western governments have issued muted criticisms and appealed for elections as soon as possible, but there have been no strident denunciations. Democratic rights only become an issue when a regime becomes an obstacle to the vital strategic and economic interests of the major powers.



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