New wave of political arrests in Bangladesh

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The military-backed interim government in Bangladesh instigated a new wave of arrests of top political and business figures last week in a bid to consolidate its grip over the country. In the name of "fighting corruption" and maintaining stability, the so-called caretaker regime headed by former central bank governor Fakhruddin Ahmed has assumed the character of a military dictatorship.

In the latest crackdown, police arrested Awami League general secretary Abdul Jalil and two former Nationalist Party (BNP) parliamentarians, Lutfozzaman Babar and M.A. Hashem, on May 21. The following day, former BNP ministers Altaf Hossain Chowdhury and Fazlur Rahaman, as well as former Awami ministers Sheikh Fazlul Karim Selim and Rafiqul Islam, were taken into custody. Mayors from both major parties and businessmen were also detained, including Abdul Awam Minto, a former president of the Bangladesh Federation of Commerce and Industry.

The Awami League and the BNP have been bitter rivals for power over the past decade and a half. In the lead-up to national elections that were due on January 22, the opposition Awami League and its allies staged huge protests, accusing the BNP of rigging the poll. Backed by the military, President Iajuddin Ahmed used the political turmoil as the pretext for appointing the interim regime. A state of emergency was imposed and in April national elections were postponed.

Fakhruddin Ahmed declared that elections may be possible before the end of 2008, but made any poll contingent on combating corruption, carrying out electoral reforms and restructuring the state apparatus and the judiciary. The anti-corruption drive has become the excuse for suppressing any opposition to the "interim" regime, which has taken control of all aspects of government in obvious breach of the constitution. The security forces have sweeping powers under the state of emergency.

The regime's adviser declared that only some of those detained last week were being held for alleged involvement in corruption. Others had been arrested for questioning about their knowledge of graft cases. A court ruled on May 22 that ex-minister Selim and businessman Minto could be held for three and four days respectively. It also handed out 30-day detention orders for former ministers Chowdhury, Rahaman and Islam.

Since the installation of the interim government in January, the security forces have rounded up at least 170 prominent political leaders, businessmen and government officials. According to the Bangladeshi human rights group Odhikar, 193,329 people were arrested and detained in the first four months of the government's "anti-corruption and anti-corruption drive." The organisation alleges that 96 people have died in custody.

The BBC reported on May 21 that Harris Chowdhury, a prominent figure in the BNP government, was jailed for three years by a special "fast track" anti-corruption court. Chowdhury was former BNP prime minister Khaleda Zia's political secretary from 2001 until October 2006, when the government's term ended. Two members of the Awami League have already been sentenced by the court, which was set up in early May. Chowdhury declared that he would appeal the verdict in the High Court.

The arrests are not limited to political figures. Police detained investigative journalist Tasneem Khalil late in the night of May 11. Khalil had acted as a consultant for the US-based Human Rights Watch and assisted in preparing the organisation's December 2006 report on torture and extra judicial murders by the country's security forces. HRW issued a statement calling for his immediate release and expressing concerns for his safety.

The interim government is also moving against

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former prime minister Zia and her Awami League rival Sheikh Hasina. Initially it attempted to exile the two women. Hasina was prevented from reentering Bangladesh after making a private visit to the US in April. She was eventually allowed to return under pressure from the US and Britain, but faces charges of graft over military purchases during her tenure as prime minister in 1996-2001.

The interim government attempted to exile Zia to Saudi Arabia but the Saudi embassy refused to grant a visa. The former prime minister is under virtual house arrest.

The regime shows no sign of holding elections or relinquishing power. Spokesman Syed Fahim Munan told the press last week that the administration was looking for ways to increase the number of "advisers"—currently 10 oversee 40 government ministries. In a separate statement, finance advisor Mirza Azizul announced that the budget would be released on June 7, but warned journalists there would be no post-budget discussion.

The country's army chief, Lieutenant General Moeen U Ahmed, who is regarded as the main power behind the interim regime, told newspaper editors on May 23 that a military takeover was "out of the question". He admitted that direct army control had been a temptation, "but we have resisted all temptations because we do not want to be involved in politics or run the government".

In reality, what exists is a de facto military dictatorship. The unconstitutional interim regime is not primarily aimed at the major political parties but at suppressing social unrest produced by the country's backward economy and widespread poverty. Despite their bitter rivalry, the BNP and Awami League shared the same essential program—to implement the demands of the World Bank and IMF for economic restructuring, which has produced a deepening social divide. The current military-backed government is no different.

The security forces have been called out already to suppress strikes and protests. On April 19 and again on April 21, several thousand workers from four factories burned tyres, blocked roads and clashed with police. They were demanding back pay for some 22,000 workers in the Khalishpur industrial zone in Khulna. About 250 workers were injured, 79 were arrested and another 2,500 were charged.

Daily Star reported on the country's growing social polarisation last November, stating: "Studies show that the income of half of the 14 crore (140 million) people decreased by the end of the alliance government's regime. On the other hand, the income of 30 percent people marked moderate increases and the top 20 percent made sharp increases."

Neither the current regime nor any of the major parties has answers to the country's deepening social crisis. That is the real motivation behind the resort to anti-democratic methods of rule.

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