

Bangladeshi regime arrests former prime minister

Wimal Perera
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In a further crackdown on its political opponents, the military-backed “interim” regime in Bangladesh arrested and jailed former prime minister and Awami League leader Sheikh Hasina Wajed on July 16. Hasina faces charges of extortion and complicity in murder.

The arrest was a huge operation involving more than 1,000 uniformed and plainclothes personnel from the police, military and intelligence agencies. The security forces cordoned off the area surrounding her residence around 4.45 a.m. but did not arrest Hasina until some three hours later. She was brought before a court where she was denied bail. On July 19, she was issued with a notice by the Anti Corruption Commission (ACC) to submit statements of her finances and assets.

Anticipating an eruption of protests over the politically-motivated arrest, the interim government led by former central bank governor Fakhruddin Ahmed deployed more than 15,000 troops in the capital Dhaka. Additional forces were mobilised in the countrywide. Hundreds of demonstrators defied emergency regulations and clashed in Dhaka with police, who baton charged and fired upon the protests.

According to the government’s legal adviser Moinul Hosein, 13 cases have been filed against Hasina. The arrest was based on a case filed on June 13 by a “common citizen,” Azam J Chowdhury, managing director of East Coast Trading Ltd, who accused her of extorting 29.6 million Taka (\$US441,000) in relation to building a power station.

Bangladesh is notorious for corruption at all levels of government. However, the jailing of Hasina has nothing to do with her alleged involvement in extortion. The interim government, which is increasingly functioning as a military-backed junta, is determined to suppress any potential political challenge from Hasina or her rival Khaleda Zia, leader of the Bangladesh

National Party (BNP). Zia was prime minister until last October when she stepped down in preparation for fresh national elections.

Amid widespread Awami League protests, Bangladesh President Iajuddin Ahmed postponed elections that were due on January 22, appointed an interim caretaker government led by Fakhurddin Ahmed and declared a state of emergency. In April, the regime put off elections until next year and proclaimed that its priority would be a far-reaching anti-corruption drive. Army chief, Lieutenant General Moeen U Ahmed, has vociferously supported the administration’s claim that it has to “clean up the country” before any election.

On the pretext of stamping out corruption, the regime has arrested political leaders, senior bureaucrats and businessman. On July 19, the ACC served notice on Khaleda Zia to submit statements of her wealth. Others accused of corruption include seven leaders of the Awami League, eight from the BNP and two from Jamaat-e-Islami. Jamaat-e-Islami was a partner in the previous BNP-led coalition government.

In April, the Fakhurddin administration tried to exile Hasina and Zia, but had to back down after criticisms by the US and Britain. Hasina, who had been abroad, was finally allowed back into the country. Zia, who had been ordered to go into exile, was allowed to stay. Now the regime is seeking to silence any opposition with a round of high-level arrests.

At the same time, the military is seeking to boost its political powers. In early July, the army chief, president and government head met to consider a proposal to establish a national security council (NSC). A legal adviser told the media the plan did not mean military involvement in politics. In the same breath, however, he declared: “Members of the armed forces have both

love of and responsibility for the country. So they haven't allowed the political leaders to do anything at their whim."

Just before Hasina's arrest, General Moeen U Ahmed said there was a need to "correct the constitution" after a new parliament was in place. According to the Bangladeshi press, the military is considering changing the constitution along Turkish lines—that is, to provide the armed forces with powers to oversee the government and parliament.

Hasina's arrest has not drawn international condemnation. The US, UK and Germany have simply called for proper legal procedures to be followed. This tacit backing for the detention is one more sign that the major powers are quite content with the Bangladeshi regime, its suppression of political opposition and implementation of market reforms.

The "interim" government is not restricting itself to a caretaker role. Its three-year economic program includes the closure of four state-owned jute mills with the loss of 6,000 jobs. By the end of the year, another 8,000 workers will be retrenched from 18 state-run mills, some of which will be privatised. The workforce is expected to be casualised to further cut labour costs.

The regime also decided to raise prices for fertiliser, gas, electricity and fuel but backed down in the face of widespread public opposition. The price of urea would have increased by more than 50 percent. On July 4, rice farmers, angered over the failure to provide enough fertiliser, attacked several government offices and beat up officials at Nachole in Chapainawabganj.

Successive BNP and Awami League Party governments also implemented the demands of the IMF and World Banks for economic restructuring. Their bitter rivalry was not over fundamental political differences but was aimed largely at diverting widespread popular discontent over the social impact of their economic policies. The current government is resorting to outright repression.

Rather than mobilising opposition, the Awami League and the BNP have been seeking to accommodate to the new regime. On July 21, acting Awami League president Zillur Rahman, while demanding the unconditional release of Hasina, thanked General Moeen U Ahmed for restoring her father Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as "Father of the Nation". Rahman reassured the media that the Awami

League would follow "a legal course, not street agitation, to secure her [Hasina's] release".

The support bases of the traditional ruling parties have significantly eroded over the past two decades. Neither the Awami League nor the BNP want to unleash a popular, political movement that may slip out of their control. Whatever the divisions within the ruling elite, there is unanimity that the program of economic restructuring has to be implemented and any opposition from working people suppressed.



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