

# Bangladesh: Awami League wins election landslide after military regime relinquishes power

Wimal Perera  
3 January 2009

A 17-party alliance led by the Awami League won national elections in Bangladesh on Monday with a landslide victory that expressed widespread popular opposition to the military-backed regime that has held power since early 2007.

The Awami League headed by former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina secured 231 seats. Two allies—the Jatiya Party led by the former military dictator H.M. Ershad and the Workers Party—gained 27 and 2 seats respectively, bringing the tally to 260 seats in the 300-seat parliament.

Voter turnout was a record 87 percent or 70.3 million out of the 81 million eligible voters. About one third of the voters were casting a ballot for the first time. There were long queues at many of the 35,000 polling booths.

The rival Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) of former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia was decimated, obtaining only 29 seats. Its ally, the Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI), won just 3 seats. While the BNP alleged widespread vote rigging, spokesman Khondaker Delwar Hossain told reporters on Thursday that the party would accept the outcome.

The extent of the victory shocked many political observers, including the Awami League leadership itself. Senior Awami League leader Abul Mal Abdul Muhith told the BBC: "We were certainly expecting victory, but perhaps not as big as this. This is clearly a major challenge for us; we have to deliver."

Far from being an endorsement of the Awami League, however, the result represents above all a massive repudiation of the previous military-backed regime, its brutal methods of repression and its failure to alleviate the country's widespread poverty. The groundswell of opposition has been compounded by the impact of the global

economic recession that threatens to send unemployment soaring.

The caretaker government was put in place with the support of the military in January 2007 amid mass Awami League protests over alleged rigging in national elections that were due to take place. Using the turmoil as the pretext, the regime overrode the constitution, imposed a state of emergency and in April 2007 postponed elections until the end of 2008.

Army head General Moeen Uddin Ahmed played a major role behind the scenes in determining the regime's policies. A number of retired generals and a former police chief were part of the caretaker government. Exploiting the disgust with both major parties, General Ahmed called for "a new brand of democracy to overcome the country's chronic poor governance."

What this "new brand of democracy" meant soon became clear. Under the guise of fighting corruption, the regime used the state of emergency to unleash a wave of repression against political parties, the media, intellectuals, students and workers. Tens of thousands of people were rounded up by the police, in particular by the paramilitary units of the Rapid Action Battalion. Human rights organisations have reported hundreds of extra-judicial killings.

The caretaker regime was openly pro-business, using its emergency powers to suppress repeated strikes in the country's garment industry. In April, thousands of workers went on strike over skyrocketing food prices and clashed with police in the capital Dhaka. In August, garment workers again took to the streets in defiance of emergency rule over arbitrary sackings.

The army-backed regime sought to consolidate its rule

through a policy that became known as the Minus Two formula—the removal of Hasina and her rival Khaleda from the political scene. Efforts were made to persuade their respective parties to dump their leaders. Corruption charges were filed against both women in an effort to force them to go into exile. The two were briefly jailed.

All of these moves proved to be a failure, not so much because of the opposition of the two parties which initially sought to accommodate to the regime, but because of the growing hostility of the masses, particularly over falling living standards. Facing protests and mounting calls for elections, the regime finally announced the poll. The state of emergency was only lifted on December 17 after the parties threatened to boycott the election.

During the campaign, the Awami League made a series of populist appeals, pledging to reduce poverty and unemployment, lower prices and uplift the rural poor. Recognising the high proportion of young voters, Hasina promised to build a "digital Bangladesh" and to improve training, education and job opportunities.

The Awami League was also able to capitalise on the BNP's associations with the military. The BNP was formed by Zia ur Rehman, country's first military dictator. During its last term of office from 2001 to 2006, the BNP was closely associated with the Islamist parties—JeI and Islami Oikyo Jote (IOJ) that also have connections in the military. The BNP government was responsible for establishing the notorious Rapid Action Battalion in 2004 to suppress protests by workers, students and peasants.

The reaction of the major powers to the election result has been low key. The US State Department simply noted that the "United States will continue to support the people of Bangladesh and its new government as they begin a new chapter in their country's history". The lack of any fanfare about the return of democracy to Bangladesh simply underscores the fact that Washington has tacitly supported the military regime and its repression for the past two years.

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was more effusive, declaring the Awami League victory as "historic" and "a landmark". Singh invited Hasina to come to India as soon as possible. New Delhi is no doubt eager to use the opportunity to forge closer relations with Bangladesh and advance its ambitions for regional dominance. In 1971, India backed the Awami League in the movement that led to the formation of Bangladesh through its secession from Pakistan.

Having won a landslide victory, the Awami League now faces high expectations from voters that it cannot possibly meet. Bangladesh remains one of the poorest countries in the world. According to the World Bank, 45 percent of the population lives below the poverty line of \$US1 a day. One third of the population is under the age of 15. The Dhaka-based Centre for Policy Dialogue (CDP) estimates unemployment at 45 percent.

The country is heavily dependent on garment exports and remittances from overseas workers. The World Bank recently cut its growth forecast for the 2008-2009 fiscal year to 5.7 percent—the lowest level in five years—and warned it may reach 5 percent. Two UN agencies—the Food and Agriculture Organisation and World Food Program—reported: "As a result of rising food prices and general inflation, more than half of the country's 145 million population is now food insecure and nearly one-third is understood as severely food insecure".

On the eve of the election, Centre for Policy Dialogue head Mustafizur Rahman told Agence France Presse: "Whoever, comes to power will face some of the toughest economic challenges we have seen in a decade. The world is heading towards a deep and prolonged economic recessions. And already it has slowly started to affect our exports and remittances—our main levers of growth."

At the same time, the military is likely to retain a prominent role in government. One retired senior general told the International Crisis Group in November: "It [the army] has been literally running the country and unable to train soldiers. It will be very difficult to take officers out of the government and place them back in the field." Under the caretaker regime, serving and retired officers held a broad range of posts at all levels of government, including key positions right at the top. Speculation continues that General Ahmed may seek the country's presidency.

Far from resolving the country's crisis, the elections have simply set the stage for deepening political turmoil.



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