

Bangladeshi government cracks down on opposition rally

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Despite a government crackdown, tens of thousands of people participated in a protest rally called by the Bangladesh National Party (BNP)-led opposition last Monday in the capital of Dhaka, underscoring the growing popular discontent with the Awami League (AL)-led administration.

Police estimated that about 100,000 people took part in the protest, angered by the government's decision last year to scrap the non-partisan caretaker system for overseeing elections. The rally had been organised for months by the right-wing BNP and the Islamic fundamentalist Jamaat-e-Islami to demand that the government step down and hold new elections under a caretaker government. Elections are not due until 2014.

The security forces were heavily mobilised. Six helicopters patrolled the skies and 25,000 members of the notorious Rapid Action Battalion and Border Guard Bangladesh were deployed. Anticipating mass arrests, the government organised 10 mobile courts.

The government took extraordinary measures to prevent people from coming to the "Let's go to Dhaka" rally from outside the capital. According to the *Daily Star*, police superintendents received a 19-point directive ordering them to detain opposition activists and requisition their vehicles.

Between March 8 and 10, almost 6,500 people were arrested. AL thugs, armed with sticks, also checked houses in some areas, searching for visitors. Hotels were asked not to accept any guests.

Entry points to Dhaka via roads and rivers were blocked and pro-government transport unions stopped

long-distance buses. Boats were prevented from anchoring at terminals, stranding tens of thousands of ordinary people. Those who dared break the forced stoppages were assaulted.

One AL MP told the *Daily Star* on Sunday: "We will remain on stand-by in all lanes and by-lanes of our constituencies," to stop the BNP. Speaking at a rally last Sunday, AL general secretary Syed Ashraful Islam branded the BNP protest a "conspiracy and subversive activity."

In reality, more than three years after securing a landslide victory—winning 231 seats in the 260-seat parliament in December 2008—the AL-led alliance resorted to violence because it faces widespread popular unrest.

Inflation is in double digits, with prices soaring for essential food items, including rice, pulse, fish, eggs, fruits, edible oil and packaged milk, as well as rents, transport fares, clothing prices and household costs. Electricity prices have also risen, and the curtailing of subsidies had made living difficult. The currency, the taka, was devalued by 21 percent against the US dollar during the past year, aggravating inflation.

The government had hoped to boost industrial development, especially in the garment industry, through pro-market reforms to attract foreign investment. But this strategy has been undermined by the continuing global economic breakdown. Garment exports, which account for 80 percent of total exports, have been hit by the eurozone debt crisis, falling by 8 percent in February from the previous month.

Business leaders are worried that the confrontation between the AL and BNP will further intensify the economic woes. Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industries (FBCCI) vice president Jashim Uddin warned the *New Nation* on Saturday: “The national economy will face a serious setback if political turmoil spreads all over the country.”

Exporters Association of Bangladesh president Abdus Salam Murshedy called for “greater cooperation between the major political parties.” Saria Sadiq, a former executive member of the Foreign Investors Chamber of Industries, said the tense situation was having a negative impact on economy and would “ruin the confidence of the foreign investors.”

Knowing that the government is in a weak position, the BNP has called a nationwide general strike on March 29. BNP leader Khaleda Zia told Monday’s rally that unless the government reinstated the caretaker system to run the country during election periods by June, “we will announce a series of protests across the country.”

Differences between the government and opposition have sharpened on foreign policy. The Awami League has sought to boost revenue by collecting fees to grant overland access between the Indian subcontinent and South East Asia. The Indian government, however, has refused to share the water of Teesta River, which flows through the Indian state of West Bengal before entering Bangladesh.

The BNP has criticised the government’s closer relations with India in chauvinist terms, depicting any agreement with New Delhi as a betrayal of the nation.

Islamic fundamentalists have also been angered by the trials conducted by the government to prosecute war crimes committed during the 1971 war of secession from Pakistan. Golam Azam, the former leader of the Islamic fundamentalist Jamaat-e-Islami, and others have been charged with conducting genocide in support of the Pakistani military.

The right-wing BNP and the Islamists are seeking to exploit the rising disaffection with the government and

divert it in a reactionary nationalist direction.

The crackdown on the opposition protest is a serious warning to the working masses. Despite the sharp clashes between the AL and the BNP, both agree on implementing pro-market reforms at the expense of workers and the poor. Any movement of the working class for decent living standards and basic democratic rights will be met by even greater violence.



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