

Bangladesh government continues repression against opposition

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Facing mounting popular discontent over rising living costs and unemployment, the Awami League-led government has unleashed a violent police crackdown against the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)-led alliance, which has stepped up a series of protests to demand that the government stand aside.

After being largely silent for a year, the 18-party opposition coalition has revived its demand for the Awami League to make way for a military-supervised “caretaker” government before elections due later this year. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s ruling 14-party “Grand Alliance” government abolished the caretaker system last June. The BNP is also demanding the release of 154 opposition figures.

The BNP staged a 36-hour countrywide hartal—a general strike and closure of shops—last week. It was the 15th day of shutdowns called by the opposition since January 31, affecting business, factories and educational institutions.

Heavy security was deployed in Dhaka, the capital. Around 90 people have been killed, mainly in police shootings, since January 21, but the real figure is likely to be higher. The BNP alleges that over 400 people have been arrested, and more than 300 injured, in clashes with security forces.

Big business groups have expressed alarm. Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI) president Kazi Akram Uddin Ahmed said: “I have never seen such violent shut-downs before in my life.” The FBCCI called an “emergency meeting” to urge Hasina and BNP leader Khaleda Zia “to initiate talks.”

The *Daily Star* editorial on March 21 stated: “We have reached a political impasse where things have gone nowhere except from bad to worse.” The *Financial Express* warned that, “continuous ‘hartals’

might lead investors, and foreign buyers of Bangladesh-made products, to shift their investments and orders respectively to other countries like Myanmar, Cambodia and Vietnam.”

The masses have become increasingly alienated from the Awami League-led government, because of its failure to solve any aspect of the social crisis, especially for young people. In this country of 150 million, poverty is hovering at 35 percent, the cost of living has more than doubled since 2000, youth male unemployment is on the rise and nearly 50 percent of primary school students drop out before they complete fifth grade. Over the past year alone, education, medical treatment and transportation costs rose by 6.42 percent.

Increasingly, the government has faced workers’ protests, especially among the super-exploited garment workers. It is also immersed in corruption scandals, and the World Bank recently cancelled a loan for the biggest infrastructure project, the Padma Bridge.

Last year, facing objections from big business and the major powers, including the US, opposition leader Zia abandoned the agitation for the restoration of the caretaker government system. But the BNP now fears losing ground to its biggest ally, the Islamic fundamentalist Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI). JeI has been mounting protests against war crime charges and the death sentence imposed on a JeI leader, Abdul Quader Mollah, over the JeI’s part in the 1971 atrocities orchestrated by the Pakistani military against Bangladesh’s secession from Pakistan.

The BNP suffered a humiliating defeat at the last national elections in 2008, getting only 29 seats in the 300-seat parliament, and JeI was reduced to just 3 seats. The BNP, based on reactionary Islamist layers and military figures, has been identified with the US in the

past and has been careful not to antagonise Washington by too openly identifying with JeI.

But the BNP and JeI are exploiting social discontent, seeking to divert it in the direction of Islamic communalism. Working together, they have participated in recent attacks on Hindu community property. The *Daily Star* of March 11 reported that several hundred JeI and BNP activists set ablaze eight houses and broke into ten shops of Hindus in the small village in Dhopapara. According to *New Age* on March 16, “47 temples and at least 700 Hindu houses had either been torched or vandalised.”

These communal attacks underscore the reactionary nature of the BNP-led alliance, which has no difference with the government’s pro-market policies. They blame the minority Hindu and Buddhist communities for the country’s worsening social crisis.

For its part, the Awami League administration has encouraged protests by students and youth that started in Shahbagh, a Dhaka locality, on February 5, demanding death sentences for Mollah and other Islamists found guilty of 1971 war crimes. The decision to impose the death sentences has nothing to do with justice for the victims of the 1971 atrocities, but is a desperate bid by the government to undermine the opposition parties and hold onto power.

Police state measures are being used more broadly. The *New Nation* on March 12 noted in its editorial: “In Dhaka, young people are being picked up arbitrarily from roads and lanes with nothing to suggest that they were engaged in violent [protest] activities.” It added: “[T]he scene all over the country is markedly one of severe oppression by the police.”

In a thinly-veiled warning that police measures could extend to the BNP leadership, Hasina last week warned that Khaleda would be put on trial unless she stopped “bloodshed.”

In office since 2008, the Awami League has itself been involved in communal violence. According to media reports, its local leaders were involved in anti-Buddhist riots in Ramu last year. The Awami League’s student organisation, the Bangladesh Chhatra League, is openly engaged in political violence to terrorise students, and has been accused of at least one murder.

Despite the sharp clashes between them, the major parties agree on implementing the program of pro-market restructuring, at the expense of the working

class, and siding with Washington’s military provocations in Asia and globally. Both have in the past used police state measures to suppress any opposition to their agenda by the working class. They will do so again, whichever alliance wins the next election.



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