

Bangladeshi court bans Islamic party from elections

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14 August 2013

A Bangladesh High Court has struck out the registration of Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), a long-standing, right-wing Islamist party, effectively banning it from contesting the national elections due to be held next January.

The ban was imposed amid a nationalist campaign by the ruling Awami League, exploiting JI's war atrocities in 1971 when the party opposed separation from Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh. The Awami League's campaign is a desperate attempt to divert the mounting opposition among working people toward its pro-business measures.

The pretext for the court's verdict, delivered on August 1, was that JI's aims undermine Bangladesh's constitution. Tania Amir, a lawyer for the Tariqat Federation, which filed the case against JI, said JI was a religious-based communal party. JI acknowledged "the absolute power of God," which was against the constitution.

The case against JI began in 2009 after the previous military caretaker government, accepted the party's electoral registration. In Bangladesh it is mandatory for political parties to register to contest elections. The electoral ban, however, will not prohibit JI from engaging in political and other activities.

The Supreme Court, the country's highest court, last week rejected JI's plea for a stay order on the High Court ruling. A *Daily Star* editorial on August 3 described the court order as a "landmark decision." The editorial said JI "belittled" the constitution, failed to "recognise the plenary power of parliament in making laws" and discriminated against women.

The electoral ban imposed by the highly politicised Bangladeshi judiciary has nothing to do with opposing religious fundamentalism, defending democratic rights or promoting secularism. The Awami League has

supported the case by the Tariqat Federation, itself a religious-based organisation for the Sufi Islamic sect, for its own reactionary purposes.

It is true that JI committed war crimes, joining the brutal Pakistani military repression in 1971. Its armed wing, Al-Badr, carried out atrocities—various estimates put the number killed at between 700,000 and 3 million. Thousands of women were raped and over 10 million people were forced to flee to India.

The Awami League, however, has a history of collaborating with communal organisations. In 1996, it allied with JI in general elections. Last year, its local leaders and members are accused of participating in anti-Buddhist violence.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's government's launched the war crimes cases against JI as part of her campaign to portray the Awami League as the party that created and defended the Bangladeshi state. The government activated the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) with draconian laws to prosecute war criminals.

Early this year, the government backed the "Shahbagh" movement, in which tens of thousands of university students and middle class youth participated, opposing Islamic fundamentalism. While those involved demonstrated their hostility to fundamentalism, the Awami League has used the movement to justify anti-democratic measures.

The "Shahbagh" demanded the banning of JI and other extremist groups involved in atrocities and called for those responsible for war crimes to be liable to capital punishment. The government exploited the campaign to pass laws to strengthen the ICT, empowering it to deliver death sentences retrospectively.

The government is facing an increasing political crisis. The Awami League came to power in 2009 by

exploiting the hostility to the military caretaker government. However, it has been thoroughly discredited because of its endless attacks on the living and social conditions of workers and the rural and urban poor. The government is also immersed in corruption scandals. In June and July, it was defeated in a series of local council elections, including in the Chittagong municipality—the country’s main economic and commercial hub.

The April 24 collapse of the Rana Plaza building, killing 1,133 apparel workers, starkly exposed the complicity of successive Bangladeshi governments, including the current one, in the brutal exploitative conditions in the garment industry. Garment factory workers have repeatedly protested to demand increases to their wages, which are among the lowest in the world.

Social conditions are appalling. More than a third of the country’s 150 million people live in dire poverty. The cost of living has doubled since 2000, deepening the misery. Youth unemployment is increasing and 50 percent of students leave school before finishing grade five. As part of its International Monetary Fund (IMF)-backed pro-market “reforms,” the government cut education, health and transport spending by 64 percent last year.

The Awami League has introduced new anti-democratic laws, including amendments to anti-terrorism laws in June, permitting Internet material to be used as evidence. To curb protests, the government has unleashed the police and the notorious Rapid Action Battalion. According to Human Rights Watch, these forces killed about 150 people in violent attacks on protesters and opposition political activists between February and July.

Communal tensions are likely to worsen, with JI calling for general shutdowns, including shop closures, on August 13 and 14. Discredited by its right-wing communal politics, JI only won two seats in the 2009 elections, obtaining just 4 percent of the vote.

The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the main right-wing opposition party, has opposed the electoral ban on JI, which is a member of its 18-party opposition alliance. The BNP’s coalition with JI, like the Awami League’s previous alignment with JI, is part of a continuing record of the Bangladeshi capitalist class resorting to communalism to divide the working class

in periods of crisis.

In 1971, JI was banned because of its backing for Pakistan military repression. In 1976, the ban was lifted as military dictator Zia ur Rahman sought to inflame fundamentalism to defend his discredited rule. The ban was reimposed in 1996 after the collapse of military rule, then lifted again by the military caretaker regime in 2009.

Bangladesh’s ruling elite, particularly big business, is hostile to JI’s frequent protests. Their concern is that JI’s actions have worsened the country’s political instability, cutting across plans to increase foreign investment.

Nevertheless, the BNP has maintained its support for JI, once again exploiting communalism in its bid to divert attention from its own record in government in attacking democratic rights and the living conditions of workers and the poor. None of the capitalist parties can address any of the social problems or basic democratic rights of the masses.



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