

Sham election deepens Bangladesh political crisis

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7 January 2014

The Bangladesh election held on Sunday was a political farce marked by a very low voter turnout and unprecedented violence. At least 16 people died on Sunday alone due to police shootings and bloody clashes between the two main bourgeois parties, the ruling Awami League (AL) and the opposition Bangladesh National Party (BNP) that boycotted the poll. The election has set the stage for a worsening political crisis.

The election commission has announced no final figures for voter turnout. However, the media, citing election monitoring groups, reported that on average just 25 percent of the electorate voted. The figure is marginally higher than the record low of 21 percent in 1996 when the Awami League then in opposition, staged a boycott. The turnout in the last general election in 2008 was 83 percent.

The government-appointed election commission acknowledged that no election took place at 570 polling stations but claimed that polling was fair in 97 percent of constituencies. Prior to the election, opposition mobs set fire to at least 200 polling booths. Hundreds of opposition activists have been arrested. BNP leader Khalida Zia has been under house arrest since December 26.

As a result of the BNP boycott, the election result was a foregone conclusion. Before the polling day, the ruling alliance “won” 153 uncontested seats in the 300-member parliament. Out of 147 contested seats, the Awami League gained another 104 seats in the Sunday election while the others went to its allies.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina dismissed any suggestion that her next government would lack legitimacy as a result of the boycott and low turnout. “People participated in the poll and other parties participated,” she baldly declared. Blaming the

opposition for the violence, she said: “If they come forward to discuss with us, they have to leave these terrorist activities behind.”

The opposition had called for the election to be held under a neutral caretaker government, a demand that the government rejected. Hasina has pointed to the previous caretaker government appointed by the BNP in early 2007, which with the backing of the military, held power until late 2008 when it finally called fresh elections.

After coming to power in a landslide, the Awami League changed the constitution to abolish the need to appoint a caretaker government. In May 2011, the Supreme Court upheld the constitutional amendment but declared that the next two elections could be held under a caretaker administration. Confronted with a plunge in support for her government, Hasina simply ignored the court ruling.

The government has sought to weaken the opposition through a crackdown on Jamaat e Islami (JeI), the country’s largest Islamist party, which was the BNP’s main ally. The Awami League supported a case brought in the High Court last year that resulted in the banning of the JeI on the grounds that its program contravened the country’s secular constitution.

The government has also waged a campaign to put JeI leaders on trial for their alleged crimes in collaboration with the Pakistani army during the 1971 uprising in East Pakistan that led to creation of Bangladesh. Several JeI leaders have been convicted and sentenced to death by the country’s misnamed International Crimes Tribunal. Last month, senior JeI leader Abdul Quader Mollah was executed.

The Awami League’s claim to be upholding the “secular fabric” of Bangladeshi society is simply a political manoeuvre—the party had no political qualms

about allying itself with the JeI in the 1996 general elections.

BNP vice chairman Shamsheer Mobin Chowdhry condemned Sunday's poll, saying: "This so-called election has been clearly rejected by the people." Yesterday, the BNP called for another 48-hour strike to demand the government annul the results, resign and call a fresh election under a caretaker administration.

The BNP's posturing as a defender of democracy is a sham. In office, the BNP, which has close links with sections of the military, has resorted to anti-democratic methods, including police repression and ballot rigging, just as ruthlessly as the Awami League.

The standoff between the government and opposition will lead to a deepening political crisis, raising concerns in ruling circles. The *Daily Star*, which is sympathetic to the Awami League, commented yesterday: "AL has won a predictable and hollow victory which gives it neither a mandate nor an ethical standing to govern effectively."

The Awami League and BNP represent different sections of the Bangladeshi bourgeoisie, whose rivalry is deepening amid a slowing economy and growing uncertainty produced by the worsening global economic slump. Both parties are deeply hostile to any independent movement of the working class and rural masses and have not hesitated to use police state measures to suppress any opposition.

The political rivalry is also being fuelled by geo-political tensions. The Awami League, which was installed in power in independent Bangladesh in 1972 following India's military intervention, accuses the BNP of receiving backing from Pakistan, including from its notorious military agency, the Inter Service Intelligence (ISI). The BNP in response denounces the Awami League and Hasina for selling out the country's sovereignty to India.

India has sought to use its ties with the Awami League to counter both Pakistan and China, which has increased trade and military relations with Bangladesh over the past decade. In comments yesterday, Indian external affairs ministry spokesperson Syed Akbaruddin uncritically defended the Sunday's election, simply saying that it was "a constitutional requirement."

The US is also concerned to undermine Chinese influence in Bangladesh as part of its broader "pivot to

Asia" aimed at countering Beijing diplomatically and encircling China militarily.

In a lengthy report last month, Lisa Curtis and Maneeza Hossain from the right-wing think tank, the Heritage Foundation, pointed out: "China is slowly building up ties to Bangladesh and competing with India for dominance in the region. China is Bangladesh's top supplier of military equipment and biggest trading partner. Trade between Bangladesh and China surpassed \$8 billion in 2012."

The report noted that Bangladesh's relations with India had improved under the Awami League and advised that the US should "facilitate strong India-Bangladesh ties since New Delhi's influence in the country will help blunt the growing Chinese presence." It also called for greater US naval contact and cooperation to further counter China.

While the US has called for an end to the worsening political confrontation in Bangladesh, its own machinations both directly and indirectly, by backing India, will only intensify the crisis.



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