

Bangladeshi government appeals for military backing

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15 February 2014

Speaking last Sunday at the armed forces headquarters in the capital Dhaka, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina called on top military officers to safeguard the new government's rule. Issued in the presence of Chief of Army Staff General Iqbal Karim Bhuiyan, her appeal indicates that the government will rely on the security forces and repression to shore up its position amid the ongoing political crisis following the January 5 general election.

The government's immediate target is the official opposition, including the right-wing Bangladesh National Party (BNP) and the Islamic fundamentalist Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI), which boycotted the election. However, its main concern is the rising discontent in the working class, notably among garment workers, over deteriorating living and working conditions.

The BNP-led opposition coalition's boycott left the Awami League and its coalition partners holding office for the next five years. The government deployed the military, police and party mobs to crush opposition protests before and during the election, resulting in hundreds of deaths.

Praising the security forces for crushing the protests, Hasina, who is the defence minister, called on the armed forces to "remain vigilant and be ready to face any threat and uphold the democratic trend and the constitution."

Hasina invoked the support given to the military by previous Awami League governments. Speaking of the "massive initiatives" to develop the military as a modern force since the 1971 separation from Pakistan, Hasina spelled out government plans to further expand the armed forces and increase the numbers of officers. She avoided any mention of the past coups and dictatorships imposed by the military.

Similarly, on February 5, Hasina addressed the 34th

national rally of the Ansar and Village Defence Party (VDP)—forces affiliated to the armed services and responsible for internal security. She asked the VDP to "resist BNP and Jamaat-Shibir [JeI's student wing] and their cohorts as they were responsible for militancy, terrorism and communalism." She urged them to "stay alert so that anti-democratic communal forces and the BNP-Jamaat-Shibir can no longer destabilise the country."

Nervous about the fragile political situation and rising social tensions, the Hasina government is bogusly justifying the use of repression as fighting "anti-democratic forces" and communalism.

Even the corporate media that backs Hasina's rule voiced concerns. The *Daily Star* wrote: "To repose in the military the task of protecting democracy is a misplaced idea that stimulates several questions. First, who will decide that democracy is in danger? Is it for the army to do so? And should it be in danger, what mechanism does the army have to uphold democracy?"

The truth is that Hasina's purpose is not to defend democracy but to shore up the government, and capitalist rule, using anti-democratic methods.

On February 2, the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL)—the Awami League's student wing—with the help of the police, brutally attacked a 5,000-strong student protest at Rajshahi University. The protest was organised against a two-to-five-fold fee increase and the introduction of evening courses on a commercial basis. More than 100 students were injured in the attack, with at least 20 hit by bullets.

When media photos appeared of BCL leaders brandishing hand guns, Hasina justified the violence, declaring: "One has the right to self-defence if attacked." She insisted that not all those wielding guns were BCL members. The police did nothing to stop the

BCL mobs, and made no arrests.

On January 30, judges sentenced to death 14 people, including JeI leader Motiur Rahman Nizami, for allegedly smuggling arms to the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) in 2004. The ULFA is fighting for a separate state of Assam, which is part of India. Others facing execution include Lotfuzzaman Babar, the then home minister, and ULFA leader Paresh Baruah, who is India's most wanted man. These death sentences are part of the Hasina government's own whipping up of communalism and its bid to enlist India's support.

New Delhi, which regards the BNP as anti-Indian and pro-Chinese, is backing Hasina against international and domestic criticism of the elections. China, which does not want to strain relations with Bangladesh, has also accepted the Awami League administration as legitimate.

The US, however, is applying concerted pressure on Hasina, exploiting the election crisis. Last Tuesday, at a US Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing, Nisha Desai Biswal, the assistant secretary of state for South and Central Asia, reiterated Washington's call for new elections in Bangladesh. Biswal also depicted the US as worried about the plight of garment workers, urging the Hasina government to take more steps to address safety conditions in the clothing factories.

Washington has no concern for garment workers or democracy. As Biswal indicated in her speech, Bangladesh is of "strategic importance" to the US. Washington wants to undermine Dhaka's economic, trade and defence relations with China, as part the Obama administration's "re-balancing" to Asia in order to isolate and militarily encircle China.

The US ambassador to Dhaka, Dan Mozena, held a one-hour meeting with BNP leader Khalida Zia this week. Mozena told reporters he conveyed Biswal's presentation in Washington and said: "The US interaction with the sitting government is not business as usual." However, he added that the US would "continue to engage with this government in support of all our programs for the people of Bangladesh."

Mozena said US aid to Bangladesh would continue on a case by case basis. In other words, the Obama administration is both simultaneously appeasing and ratcheting up the pressure on the Hasina government to bring it into line with Washington's geo-strategic

interests.

In recent weeks, the BNP has advanced its own pitch for Western backing by distancing itself from JeI, which has been a long-time ally, because the US and other Western powers have expressed concerns about the Islamists.

On January 16, the European Union parliament passed a resolution urging the BNP to cut its ties with JeI and Hefajat-e-Islam, another fundamentalist organisation, and ban political parties associated with "terrorist acts." Of course, the major powers, including the US, are not averse to collaborating with fundamentalist forces in order to push their own strategic interests, as shown by their sponsorship of Islamist militias in Libya and Syria.

The BNP has also promised to stop the anti-government protests, which Washington has criticised for adversely affecting business activity. The BNP's Mahbubur Rahman told *New Age* that his party's ideology and policies were different from JeI, and the relations with it were "strategic, not permanent."

Despite the Hasina government's efforts to consolidate its power, the social unrest and political crisis continue. This is exacerbated by Washington's efforts to exploit the turmoil for its own purposes as it seeks to undermine China's economic and political influence in the region.



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