

Political turmoil continues in Bangladesh

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Despite domestic media claims that political tensions in Bangladesh have eased in recent weeks, nothing has been resolved in the protracted confrontation between the ruling Awami League and opposition Bangladesh National Party (BNP).

In early January, the BNP initiated an indefinite campaign of strikes, protests and transport blockades, marking one year since the 2014 election, which it boycotted. It has repeatedly called for the dissolution of parliament and fresh elections under a caretaker government—demands that the Awami League has repeatedly rejected.

The government has responded with a heavy-handed crackdown by police and the notorious Rapid Action Battalion (RAB). Dozens of opposition leaders and thousands of opposition activists have been arrested, forced into hiding and in some cases “disappeared.” The media has been targeted also, with arrests of journalists, closures of television stations and disruption of social media messaging.

BNP leader Khalida Zia was confined to her party headquarters from early January, before surrendering to the courts on April 5. Police padlocked the compound and prevented her from leaving. A special judge issued an arrest warrant in late February after Zia repeatedly failed to appear on charges of corruption.

Zia was bailed after last week’s court appearance but has been summoned to reappear in early May. Accused of embezzling \$US650,000 during her most recent term as prime minister from 2001 to 2006, she has denied the charges, declaring them to be politically motivated.

Speaking to district administration officials last weekend, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina indicated that there would be no let up in the police repression of opposition “arsonists,” saying: “They must face trial ... this is urgently needed for ensuring the security of public life and property.”

Hasina and Zia represent rival factions of the Bangladesh ruling class whose bitter antagonism is being deepened by a slowing economy and growing geo-

political tensions throughout Asia. Both parties are deeply hostile to the working class and rural masses and have used police-state measures to suppress opposition and resistance to their anti-working class policies.

The Awami League, which was installed in power in newly independent Bangladesh in 1972 as a result of India’s military intervention, accuses the BNP and other opposition parties of being backed by Pakistan. The BNP alleges that the Awami League is doing India’s bidding.

As opposition protests have appeared to wane, Prime Minister Hasina has exploited the political turmoil to try to consolidate her grip on power. She has targeted the Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI), a right-wing Islamist ally of the BNP, for carrying out war crimes when it sided with the Pakistani military during the 1971 secessionist struggles.

The government has set up a so-called International War Crime Tribunal (IWCT) to try a number of top JeI officials, as a means of diverting anti-government discontent. Last Saturday, JeI assistant secretary Muhammad Kamaruzzaman was executed after the Supreme Court turned down his appeal against the death sentence. Another JeI leader was previously hanged and five others are on death row awaiting the outcome of their appeals.

Growing concerns have been expressed in business circles in Bangladesh and internationally over the impact of the country’s continuing political crisis. Diplomats from more than a dozen countries, including the US, Japan, Germany and France, as well as the European Union, met opposition leader Zia last month to call for political reconciliation. On February 29, they met with and made a similar appeal to Foreign Minister Abul Hassan Mahmood Ali.

Last Sunday both the British-based *Financial Times* and the *New York Times* devoted lengthy articles to detailing the political fallout out from what the FT termed “a dangerous rivalry,” focusing in particular on the economic impact. A World Bank report released last weekend estimated that Bangladesh’s economy had lost \$2.2 billion, or about 1 percent of gross domestic product,

as a result of this year's political unrest.

The *New York Times* declared that the turmoil “has hurt the entire country: students whose schools shut down before examinations; farmers who watched their crops rot; tourist resorts reporting near-total vacancy.” But the newspaper's chief concern was the fate of the garment industry, which accounts for 80 percent of Bangladesh's exports. Big corporate retailers in the US and Europe, such as Walmart, Marks & Spencer and the Gap, make huge profits by manufacturing their popular brands in Bangladesh's cheap labour sweatshops.

The *Times* article highlighted the circumstances of garment manufacturer Shabbir Mahmood, who lost orders as a result of the unrest and incurred extra transport costs due to opposition blockades. He laid off workers in February and March after orders fell to half the capacity of his two plants and delayed opening a third factory. “Who will care?” he complained. “The government will not care.”

The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association has warned that exports could fall by 25 to 30 percent in May if the political turmoil continues. The worst affected will be garment workers, many of whom have already lost overtime, on which they rely to supplement their poverty-level wages of 6,000 taka, or about \$US77, a month. The situation is even bleaker if they lose their jobs. Many would be compelled to return to their villages, where the only work available is day labour at just 50 taka, or less than \$1, a day.

The potential for social unrest in the working class and rural masses is what is sparking concern among corporate retailers and international investors. It is also why Hasina's government is beefing up its police apparatus in preparation for struggles by workers, who have repeatedly demonstrated their determination to defend jobs and living standards.



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