

Bangladesh opposition leader jailed for five years on corruption charges

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Former prime minister and current head of the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), Khaleda Zia, was convicted and sentenced to five years jail this month after a special court found her guilty of corruption. She was imprisoned on February 8.

Zia was accused of embezzling nearly 21 million taka (\$US250,000) in foreign donations meant for an orphanage trust established when she was prime minister from 2001 to 2006. The trust was named after her late husband and former Bangladesh President Ziaur Rahman. Her son, Tarique Rahman, the current BNP vice-chairman, received a 10-year sentence.

Although Zia has been detained many times during her 35-year political career, this is the first time she has been convicted. Early this week she lodged a High Court appeal, but faces dozens of other charges.

Dhaka University law professor Asif Nazrul told the media it was a “controversial verdict” and many people in Bangladesh viewed it as a way of “demonising a political opponent.”

The conviction is a clear attempt by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s Awami League government to bar Zia from contesting December’s general elections. According to Bangladesh law, anyone convicted of an offence with a sentence of more than two years cannot contest elections. By removing her main rival from the elections, Hasina hopes to secure her government a third consecutive term.

More than 5,000 police officers were mobilised in Dhaka on the day of Zia’s conviction. They violently attacked thousands of BNP supporters who rallied near the court. Ain o Salish Kendra, a Dhaka-based human rights group, reported that more than 1,780 people, including several BNP leaders, were arrested. The police operation was a clear indication that Hasina’s government is not going to tolerate any dissent over the

sentence.

Before the last general elections in January 2014, the BNP called for the ballot to be conducted under a “neutral caretaker” government. When the Awami League administration rejected this, the BNP boycotted the elections and engaged in protests.

The BNP-led demonstrations were marked by vandalism, arson and firebombing of vehicles and property, killing more than 120 people and injuring hundreds more.

While the Awami League secured a two-thirds parliamentary majority, the protests impacted heavily on Bangladesh businesses. According to the Centre for Policy Dialogue, a think tank, gross domestic product fell by 0.55 percent, or 49 billion Taka (\$US630 million), between January and March 2014. Some estimates claim that the total damage, including the informal sector, was around 1.25 trillion Taka.

The brutal repression unleashed by Hasani’s government was another demonstration that her administration would stop at nothing to implement its austerity measures and pro-market reforms.

The government’s main target is not the BNP, the ruling elite’s other major political faction, but the working class, especially garment workers, and the rural poor.

By suppressing her rivals in the ruling elite, Hasina is attempting to strengthen her hand to combat the growing opposition of workers to low wages, slave labour conditions and declining living standards.

Bangladesh is a cheap labour platform for the international apparel industry. According to the US-based *Forbes* magazine, a Bangladeshi garment worker earns \$0.13 an hour, compared to \$7,283 an hour (pre-tax) for one of the top 350 US clothing company chief executive officers.

A recent Center for Policy Dialogue report noted that the income share of the poorest 5 percent of households in Bangladesh dropped to 0.23 percent in 2016, down from 0.78 percent in 2010. The income share of the wealthiest 5 percent of households increased to 27.89 percent in 2016, up from 24.61 percent in 2010.

The Bangladesh capitalist class, which depends heavily on foreign remittances from expatriate workers and export income, fears a slowdown in the global economy, ongoing military conflict in the Middle East and a slump in global oil prices. A majority of Bangladeshi expatriate workers are employed in the Middle East.

Another indication of the Hasina government's increasing repression is the growing number of people being "disappeared." According to human rights organisations and the media, over 90 people disappeared in 2016 and 48 in the first five months of last year. In April 2017, a senior Rapid Action Bureau officer admitted during a secretly-recorded interview with Swedish Radio that the counter-terrorism police and military unit routinely pick up people, kill them and dispose of the bodies.

The government is banking on US and Indian support for its suppression of the BNP. Commenting on Zia's conviction, a US State Department spokesperson called on the government to "guarantee a fair trial" and defend "the right of all individuals to freely express their political views, without fear of reprisal." This amounts to a tacit endorsement of the repression.

India's ruling elites prefer an Awami League administration, rather than a BNP-led government. New Delhi recently signed various trade deals as part of its efforts to undermine Chinese political and economic influence in Bangladesh (see: "India strengthens its relations with Bangladesh"). Historically the Indian ruling class has been close to the Awami League, having supported its campaign for separation from Pakistan in 1971. The BNP consistently uses anti-Indian chauvinism to divert mass anger into nationalist channels.



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