

Amid widespread violence, Bangladesh's ruling party re-elected

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The national election was held yesterday in Bangladesh amid widespread violence mainly instigated by the ruling Awami League which was determined to return to power for a third consecutive term by suppressing the opposition parties.

More than 100 million voters were to elect 299 representatives to parliament. According to unofficial results reported last night, the Grand Coalition led by the Awami League was heading for a "landslide win." The full official results are due to be released this afternoon.

The opposition Bangladesh National Party (BNP) and its allies in the National Unity Front (NUF) have condemned the election as "farcical" and demanded a "fresh election under non-partisan administration." Prime Minister Sheik Hasina Wajed has already rejected the request.

By yesterday evening, 17 people had been killed in election-related violence by Awami League and BNP supporters, while thousands were injured. Last Thursday, the BNP-led alliance alleged that eight of their activists had been killed, 12,588 injured, and 9,202 arrested.

A collective of 16 human rights organisations, including the Asian Human Rights Commission and the Asian Network for Free Elections, issued a statement on Saturday accusing the government of conducting the election under a "restrictive electoral environment" and "cracking down on civil society, the opposition and the media."

From Saturday, the government deployed about 600,000 security personnel including soldiers across the country to intimidate political opponents and voters. In what was tantamount to censorship, the government deliberately slowed 3G and 4G internet services, saying it was a measure to counter "false propaganda."

The crackdown on political opponents underscores Prime Minister Hasina's nervousness about the growing opposition to her government. The Awami League won the 2014 election in a "landslide" as its chief rival, the BNP, which is also notorious for thuggery and violence when in power, boycotted the election.

The BNP decided to participate in this election in a bid to retain its voter base. Its leader and former prime minister, Khalida Zia, has been charged and jailed for 17 years over graft, thus disqualifying her from contesting the election. Many BNP leaders have also been jailed or are living in exile.

Leaders of the Islamic fundamentalist Jamaat e Islami, a BNP ally, have been tried for war crimes during the 1971 secessionist uprising against Pakistan. The party has been banned and several of its leaders hanged. Awami League's campaign against war crimes is mainly aimed at whipping up nationalist sentiment and suppressing political opposition.

The Hasina government has also increasingly attacked media freedoms. In October, it passed a new "Digital Security Act" under the pretext of strengthening defamation laws. In reality, the legislation is to suppress criticism and dissenting views and silence the media.

Police arrested photojournalist Shahidul Alam in August for exposing police violence against students in an interview with Al Jazeera and was released only after a local and international outcry.

Hasina and her ministers have ridiculed criticism over the government's human rights record. In a recent interview with the *New York Times*, she said: "If I can provide food, jobs and health care, that is human rights... What the opposition is saying, or civil society or your NGOs—I don't bother with that."

Hasina has above all suppressed strikes and protests by workers in order to attract foreign investors. Big business has praised the government for driving sound “economic growth” during its decade of rule.

Analysts cite the increases in Gross Domestic Product growth from 5.57 percent for the 2009-2010 financial year to 7.28 percent in 2016-2017, in per capita GDP from \$US500 to nearly \$1,800, and in export income from \$16 billion to \$35 billion. In its election manifesto, the Awami League promised to increase growth to 9 percent and turn the country into a middle-income economy by 2024.

The economic growth, however, has only benefited a small wealthy elite, including the politicians. The Centre for Policy Dialogue, a prominent think-tank, said the top 5 percent of income earners took home 121 times more income than the bottom 5 percent of the population in 2016.

The Awami League government has faced growing opposition and unrest over deteriorating living conditions from workers, teachers, youth and students.

Strikes of garment workers erupted sporadically since early December over demands for a rise in monthly wages of 16,000 taka or \$190, as compared to the government’s recommended increase of 8,000 taka. Workers in 20 factories in Mirpur and Gazipur and adjoining districts have stopped work.

Secretary General of IndustriALL Bangladesh Council Salahuddin Shapon declared: “Along with the government, we the trade union leaders also requested workers not to hold any demonstration before national polls, but unrest continues in the sector.”

The government and trade unions fear a major eruption of protests among the country’s four million garment workers and other sections of the working class.

In June, thousands of teachers held protests demanding the nationalisation of non-government educational institutions and for pay to be determined by the government salary scheme.

In July, students and youth held protests against unemployment and the reactionary quota system for recruiting employees for the state sector jobs. Though the overall official unemployment rate is about 4 percent, youth joblessness stands at 11 percent.

The election was also intertwined with the growing rivalry between the US and China throughout the Indo-

Pacific region. Despite nominal expressions of concern about election violence, the US and its strategic partner India have backed the Awami League government as a means of undermining Chinese influence.

An article in the *Dhaka Tribune* entitled “Why India prefers Hasina in Office” reported that India’s ambassador Harsh Vardean Shringla had met with political leaders even while claiming to have nothing to do with the election.

The newspaper pointed out that the Indian government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi had provided Dhaka with \$9 billion in credit and aid in a bid to undercut China. The Hindu supremacist Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the parent organisation of Modi’s Bharatiya Janatha Party, recently praised Hasina as India’s “most trusted and tested ally.”

For its part, Beijing has offered Bangladesh \$30 billion for infrastructure investment as part of its massive “Belt and Road Initiative” plans to integrate Eurasia more closely with China and undermine American influence.

The new Awami League government will inevitably face a worsening crisis as it is drawn more closely into the cauldron of geo-political rivalry on the one hand, and resorts to increasingly autocratic methods of rule, on the other, to try to crush rising discontent and opposition from working people.



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