

Awami League wins Bangladeshi elections amid mass opposition boycott

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The ruling Awami League (AL) won the 12th national parliamentary elections in Bangladesh last Sunday in a “landslide win” with 222 out of 298 seats it contested amid a massive boycott by opposition parliamentary parties, including the right-wing Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP).

Awami League chief Sheikh Hasina, 76, will continue as prime minister for her fourth term, following her election victory in 2009. Opposition parties have rejected the results and are demanding fresh polls.

AL coalition allies, such as the Jatiya Party of the now deceased General Hussain Ershad, won 11 seats, with the Stalinist Workers Party of Bangladesh and the Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal securing one each. Various independent candidates won 62 seats.

So far more than a dozen people have died in election-related violence, including four killed in an arson attack on a passenger train on January 5. Two were killed, dozens injured, and property damaged in post-election clashes.

On January 9, Hasina addressed visitors to her Dhaka official residence bragging that election would “be written in golden letters in the history of Bangladesh,” and claiming it was a “free and fair” ballot. The results make clear, however, that she was rejected by a majority of voters, particularly the youth. Only 41.8 percent of the 119.6 million registered eligible voters participated in the national ballot. By contrast, there was an 80.2 percent turnout in the 2018 elections.

According to the *Daily Star*, the Dhaka district, which contains the country’s largest concentration of workers and urban poor, saw the lowest voter turnout with only 25 percent casting a ballot. Only 13 percent of eligible voters participated in the Dhaka-15 constituency and 17 percent in the Dhaka-17 constituency.

The highest participant rates were recorded in constituencies contested by Hasina and her relatives.

Hasina’s seat in Gopalganj-3 recorded the highest rate at 87 percent; with 83.20 percent voting in the Gopalganj-2 constituency, where her cousin Sheikh Selim stood. Two seats contested by relatives in the Bagerhat area had the next highest turnouts.

The Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA), the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry and the Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Industry immediately applauded Hasina on her “victory.”

BKMEA executive president Mohammad Hatem congratulated Hasina for winning her fourth consecutive tenure “on behalf of our industry.” However, editorials in major Bangladeshi newspapers, nervous about the rising discontent of working people and rural toilers towards the political establishment, criticised her handling of the election.

The *New Age* on January 10 described the election as “not-participatory, non-inclusive and unrepresentative” and noted that it was no different from the 2018 and 2014 elections, which were “mired in electoral fraud.”

A *Daily Star* editorial on January 9 raised concern about the rising loss of confidence among youth in Bangladesh’s electoral system and the censorship measures implemented by the Hasina regime. “Repressive laws and practices by the government have constricted the space for expressing opinions freely, so much so that, according to a recent survey, around 72 percent of the country’s youth feel unsafe to freely voice their opinions on social media platforms like Facebook,” the newspaper said.

The newspaper reported that the US had described the virtually opposition-less election as “not free or fair” and that the UK said the standards of democratic elections “were not consistently met during the election period.” The European Union regretted the non-participation of all major parties in the ballot. However, China, Japan, India,

Russia, Sri Lanka and some Middle Eastern countries, including Saudi Arabia congratulated Hasina.

Along with the opposition BNP, other parties boycotting included the Islamic fundamentalist Jamaat-e-Islami, as well as various Stalinist parties—the Communist Party of Bangladesh, the Socialist Party of Bangladesh and the Revolutionary Communist League—and other organisations.

These parties held protests calling for the resignation of Hasina and her government and for the elections to be conducted under an independent caretaker government. Hasina rejected these demands while resorting to various anti-democratic measures. This included violence attacks on opposition parties across the country by security forces, aided by ruling party thugs, in the months leading up to the election.

UN Human Rights Chief Volker Türk told the media that around 25,000 opposition supporters have been arrested, including key party leaders, since October 28. At least 10 of them reportedly died or were killed in custody in the last two months. He told the *Daily Star* that many human rights activists have fled the country or been forced into hiding, and dozens of suspected enforced disappearance cases have been reported.

The BNP says that over 20,000 of its leaders, members and activists remain in jail with at least nine facing the death sentence and 925 confronting harsh jail terms. Human Rights Watch reported that on November 3 Hasina had told her “party supporters that if they catch anyone committing arson to ‘throw [them] into the same fire.’”

Two years after coming to power in January 2009, the Hasina government changed the constitution to abolish the legal requirement to appoint an independent caretaker government to run national elections. Hasina’s anti-democratic move was upheld by the Supreme Court.

While the garment and other cheap labour factories have made massive profits under Hasina’s almost 15-year tenure, the country faces a deepening economic crisis, intensified by the first waves of the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact of the US-NATO proxy war in Ukraine against Russia.

The *Business Post* reported that Bangladesh’s foreign exchange reserves have plunged from a record high of \$US40.7 billion in August 2021 to \$21.7 billion on January 3. The country’s external debt climbed to \$97 billion at the end of 2022, a 265 percent increase since 2010 and debt repayments, including interest, have increased a six-fold during the same period.

In January 2023, Hasina negotiated a \$4.7 billion loan with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) that included the implementation of draconian austerity measures.

Her government’s attempts to impose this worsening crisis on the working class and the rural masses has fueled mass anti-government discontent.

Food inflation in Bangladesh has remained at over 12 percent during the past few months. According to a recent Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 22 percent of the country’s households face moderate food insecurity and 1 percent confront severe food insecurity.

A weeks-long strike in November by tens of thousands of garment workers demanding a three-fold increase in monthly wages to 23,000 taka (\$US208) to compensate for inflation and worsening living conditions was brutally suppressed by security forces. Four workers were killed and over 100 others wounded. The new Hasina government will intensify its repressive measures in an attempt to suppress all opposition by working people to its brutal IMF dictates.

While the BNP, with the assistance of the Stalinist parties and trade unions, have called for new elections, hoping to exploit the growing mass opposition, they oppose any independent mobilisation of the working class against the Hasina regime. The BNP and its allies have no progressive alternative to the government’s big-business policies or the IMF’s dictates. If elected they would impose the same austerity attacks.

The working class in Bangladesh need to break with all bourgeois parties, including the BNP, Islamic fundamentalists and Stalinists, mobilise independently, rally the rural poor, and overthrow capitalist rule. What is needed is a government of workers and peasants committed to socialist policies as part of the broader struggle for socialism in South Asia and internationally. What is crucial is the building of a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International to provide revolutionary leadership for the working class.



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