



Bangladeshi elections: the last woman standing

by Gerald Stang

The elections in Bangladesh on 5 January were marred by a low turnout, sporadic violence and an opposition boycott. The results have been widely condemned as illegitimate and are seen as a serious setback for democracy in the country.

For much of the last 23 years, Bangladesh has been controlled by democratically elected governments. When the military took power in 2007 to end a political standoff between the country's two largest political factions, there was widespread scepticism over the military's claims that democracy would quickly be restored. True to its word, however, the military stepped aside to allow free and (reasonably) fair elections in 2008, with current Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's Awami League winning 49% of the vote amidst a massive 85% turnout.

This week's national elections, however, were boycotted by all leading opposition parties in a political atmosphere characterised by violent gridlock. Dozens of people were killed in the weeks leading up to the elections. Neither the EU nor the US sent any observers as it has been clear for months that the elections were unlikely to be fair. In 2011, Prime Minister Hasina scrapped the constitutional requirement that elections be overseen by a caretaker government, claiming that the outgoing government – hers – could properly oversee the elections. In Bangladesh's overheated political climate, no opposition party was willing to trust the government, leading to more than two years of increasing political turbulence which involved strikes, attacks on campaign workers, and political violence on all sides.

A tale of two countries

The leading opposition party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) refused to put up candidates for the recent elections, while the third most popular party, the Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami, was banned from participating. Khaleda Zia, Prime Minister Hasina's bitter political rival – and leader of the BNP – is currently under house arrest. Bangladesh's two 'battling begums' have been locked in an acrimonious feud for much of the last twenty years, with each having spent time as prime minister and as leader of the opposition. Each is the heir of a family political dynasty which, like the Bhuttos in Pakistan or the Gandhis in India, has managed to retain strong public support over the course of several decades. While in opposition, both have shown a tendency toward using civil disobedience, strikes and street protests as their preferred method of playing the role. They and their parties have long expressed support for democracy, but their intense dislike of each other has prevented an agreement between them that might temper the tone of national politics. Through their well-established political parties, they have constructed a major divide in the country which not only splits the electorate, but transcends party politics and extends into other Bangladeshi institutions.

Many media groups, for example, are affiliated to varying degrees with one or the other of the two squabbling political dynasties. While Dhaka had enjoyed a relatively free media scene in recent years, in 2013 Prime Minister Hasina began to resort more openly to locking up media figures and shutting TV stations that

were not aligned with her party. Some of these moves were made with the declared intent of protecting the country's secular political life from a rising Islamist movement. Though Bangladesh has not been plagued by the levels of Islamist violence seen in Pakistan, genuine worries remain about the issue of domestic extremism.

The December execution of the assistant secretary-general of the opposition Jamaat-e-Islami party, convicted of committing atrocities during the 1971 war of independence from Pakistan, was the result of the first conviction by the International Crimes Tribunal set up by the Hasina government in 2010. Protests by Jamaat-e-Islami supporters, upset about the perceived bias of the tribunal, greatly contributed to the already tense political environment. The Jamaat-e-Islami had opposed Bangladeshi independence during the war, but has long since adjusted to life in independent Bangladesh, and claims that these trials, taking place decades later, are nothing more than political witch hunts. As in many Islamist parties across the Islamic world, the Jamaat-e-Islami remains lukewarm toward the concept of liberal democracy. This has led to fears that if they were allowed a bigger role in politics, they may disrupt the whole democratic system – though cracking down on them, as Prime Minister Hasina has done, carries the possibility of pushing their more radical supporters underground – and in more extreme directions.

The challenge of development

The emergence of a rising Islamist movement is not the only change occurring in Bangladeshi society. Although the country is only 43 years old, relatively few Bangladeshis remember its birth as nearly half of its population is under the age of 20. The World Bank has calculated that Bangladeshi fertility rates, which stood at 6.4 children per women in 1980 (almost the same as that of its estranged twin Pakistan), had dropped to 2.2 by 2010, lower than India's and far below Pakistan's still unsustainable 3.4. While the demographic benefits of these falling fertility rates for densely populated Bangladesh will take years to materialise, the relatively high economic growth rates for the last decade – at or above 6% per annum – have raised hopes for poverty reduction and economic development.

Bangladesh has long been struggling to distance itself from the pack of the world's poorest countries huddled around the bottom of the development ladder. While not a resource-rich country, Bangladesh has been producing increasing amounts of gas in recent decades, seen by some as an opportunity to generate export earnings. However, the country has, for

the most part, reserved its gas supplies for domestic use, foregoing potential sales income by banning gas exports to India. Many Bangladeshis opposed exports because of worries over national security and the fear that any earnings would be squandered through corruption and inefficiency, rather than be used to improve the conditions of the population at large.

Instead of gas exports, much of the economic growth in recent years has been due to expansion of the country's garment industry, which accounts for nearly all of Bangladesh's exports to the EU, its largest trading partner. While the industry has indeed created millions of jobs and brought in important international investment, the terrible working conditions that many are subjected to in the country's sweatshops have increasingly become the object of international scrutiny. The collapse of the Rana Plaza garment factory in early 2013 killed more than 1,100 workers and prompted calls for safer working conditions and more accountability for global retailers that buy clothing manufactured in Bangladesh. While an overreliance on one dominant export industry may seem like a risky economic strategy, major impediments to greater regional cooperation have prevented Bangladesh from taking more advantage of the massive Indian market next door.

The EU has sought to support Bangladeshi efforts at economic diversification, including by letting in almost all Bangladeshi exports tariff-free under the 'Everything but Arms' initiative. The Union is a major donor, with €400 million allocated over the 2007-2013 period to poverty reduction, good governance initiatives and economic development. The EU has also sought to support regional cooperation mechanisms in the hope that they might help facilitate improved economic and political ties. Groupings such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), however, have been unable to play a major role in helping Bangladesh and India overcome the obstacles related to water, immigration, and security that have long plagued their relations. These regional political challenges, unfortunately, continue to be largely impenetrable for international partners, and Bangladeshi domestic politics often frustrates outsiders to a considerable degree. Following the elections, EU High Representative Catherine Ashton noted the need for Bangladesh to overcome the political gridlock and to hold 'transparent, inclusive and credible elections.' The current political standoff, however, appears unlikely to be resolved quickly. As Western governments respond to this week's election-related turmoil, it will be important to work within the limits of what is possible and to patiently show support for renewed national dialogue and the application of shared democratic values.

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