

Bangladesh Political Crisis and India's Options

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Bangladesh is in deep political crisis. The January 5 national elections have been conducted and there have been allegations against the Commission and the Chief Election Commissioner, Kazi Rakiuddin Ahmed of partisan (his son has been an uncontested winner in these polls). The turnout has been low. Moreover, during the run-up to the elections and during the polls itself, there has been substantial loss of life and damage to public and personal property. The polity and state institutions have been smothered to a great extent. The political impasse is likely to continue as the Opposition 18-party alliance led by Begum Khaleda Zia with strong cadre-based support from the Jamaat Party, which has been fighting the Bangladesh National Party's (BNP) battle on the streets and mohallahs with the help of sister groups like Hephazat-e-Islam, is unlikely to relent.

There is a significant difference between the earlier political struggles between the Awami League (AL) and the BNP with its anti-AL forces to the no-holds-barred political contest now. The anti-AL political forces, particularly the core Islamists of the Jamaat Party are apprehensive that a gradual political transformation of Bangladesh to a more secular political-social orientation will damage their fundamental political interests of Islamising the nation. On earlier occasions, from the late seventies, the political contests were more for direct control of state power. Now there are wider implications. The political outcome of upheavals and churning towards some degree of democratisation in the Islamic countries in the past two years may have also had their impact on the Jamaat and its allies.

In the wake of the current situation, New Delhi is understood to have tacitly conveyed its sympathies with the secular AL and its 16-party 'Aykyojot' (Alliance). India signaled its intention by not deferring President Pranab Mukherjee's March 2013 state visit to Bangladesh even when the BNP was orchestrating its nationwide agitation against the Sheikh Hasina government for conducting the war crimes' trials. Similarly the current instability did not deter the foreign secretary Sujatha Singh visiting Dacca last month. In

midst of all the chaos, India has officially taken a prudent stance that it is ready to do business with any government in Dacca including a military-backed government.

The political, economic and even social conditions in Bangladesh have not really been stable over the years. The continuing political instability does not augur well for its citizens as well as for the neighbouring countries particularly India. The socio-political and security of the eastern and north-eastern India, will invariably get affected in different ways as a fall-out of the turmoil in Bangladesh.

India may have to maintain a two-pronged approach. At the governmental level, it will have to offer economic benefits and cooperation over a range of areas including some degree of military assistance so that Dacca does not attempt to hurt India's basic interests. However, a regime which is communally oriented and anti-India may have to be dealt on a reciprocal basis but without hurting the basic economic interests of that nation. Alienation of the common people, particularly its rural folk, can have a lasting impact and hence should be avoided. The communal Islamist forces have their political base more in the urbanized areas of Bangladesh and the AL still holds substantial sway in the rural agrarian areas.

The political parties in India have unfortunately not contributed much towards improving India-Bangladesh relations, particularly by not strengthening the democratic forces in Bangladesh. Even during the formation of Bangladesh, it was Indira Gandhi's statecraft that capitalised on the internal dynamics of Pakistan, which set in motion the initial political trends in Bangladesh. None of the political parties in India have tried to effectively develop fraternal relations with like-minded parties and intelligentsia of Bangladesh. A moderating influence on Bangladesh's polity could have been possible through such relationships. Without an effective countering of the Islamist forces neither political stability can be expected in Bangladesh nor the threats to internal security and economy of India's north east can be satisfactorily prevented.

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