

Political Turmoil in Bangladesh Likely to Continue

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February 19, 2014

Bangladesh has been facing political turbulence for more than a year now. To press the demand for the installation of a non-partisan interim administration to supervise elections, the opposition parties have made the task of governance difficult for the Awami League (AL) through continued agitations, strikes and blockades.

The January 5 election has not found acceptance at the domestic and international levels as it does not help resolving the ongoing political standoff. In the absence of opposition parties, the AL has managed an easy victory winning nearly three fourth of total parliamentary seats. Sheikh Hasina claimed her party's victory as "legitimate" because in some quarters questions were raised regarding the legality of the parliament.

Following the announcement of poll verdict, Hasina urged her arch rival Khaleda Zia to shun the path of violence and sever ties with anti-liberation forces like Jamaat-e-Islami. She has indicated her government's willingness to sit for a dialogue with the opposition for conducting future elections. She said, "A solution can be reached on the next elections only through talks. For that, everyone will have to have restraints, tolerance and stop political violence of all sorts."

The opposition boycott has undoubtedly undermined the credibility of the elections in which only 20 %-- 30% voters turned up amid large-scale violence. It may be noted that in the February 1996 elections with Khaleda as the prime minister, which the then opposition party AL boycotted, the turnout was recorded a meagre 26%. It is an irony that the AL as the main opposition party had been spearheading a countrywide agitation demanding the establishment of a caretaker administration. In 1996, the question of legality was not raised as the parliament passed the Thirteenth Constitutional Amendment incorporating the provision of caretaker system. Some Bangladeshi political observers argue that the new parliament may be "controversial" from oppositions' viewpoints since they stayed away from the elections by dubbing it "farical" but in no way could be termed "illegal". Iftekharruzaman, Executive Director of Transparency International Bangladesh, has remarked, "Although the elections were constitutional and legal, it is questionable on a political and ethical perspective".

A much needed resolution of the current political turmoil has eluded Bangladesh since the two major political formations refuse to budge from their stated positions. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) - led 18 party alliance fears that elections held under a partisan government could easily be manipulated. They believe that given Bangladesh's distinct political culture and electoral history; only a non-partisan administration could ensure a free, fair and peaceful election.

The ruling AL has turned down the opposition demand calling it “unconstitutional” and “illogical”. The party leadership argues that the system has failed in the past. The caretaker provision was scrapped in June 2011 through Fifteenth Constitutional Amendment. The AL that suffered most under prolonged military rule perceives that the old power-bastion of civil-military bureaucratic clique would revisit Bangladesh taking advantage of the prevailing political uncertainty. Hasina said, “.....we amended the Constitution to make sure that those will be in power for whom people will cast their votes. We have sealed the scope of grabbing power illegally”.

Bangladesh has witnessed several bloody coups and revolts since 1975 that not only jolted the polity but also made political instability endemic to an over-populated and impoverished country. Against the backdrop of a similar messy state of affairs in 2007, the military intervened and installed a proxy civilian government which became highly controversial at the end due to its apparent political agenda.

Immediately after the assumption of office, the Hasina government had to confront a gory mutiny staged by a group of disgruntled Bangladesh Rifles personnel at their headquarters in February 2009. Another attempt made in December 2011, by a section of army officers affiliated to a radical Islamic outfit called Hizb-ut- Tahrir was foiled by the government forces. All these factors have made the AL skeptical about the armed forces – the key architect of the post-1975 Bangladesh polity.

The present AL government is different from the one that governed Bangladesh during 1996-2001. The party was voted to power in 1996 after spending long twenty one years in political wilderness. The fractured verdict of June 1996 elections did not encourage the party leadership to modify the aberrations of the successive military regimes. However, the landslide victory of the December 2008 elections emboldened Hasina to affect a few important changes in the polity and fully assert civilian supremacy. The Fifteenth Amendment has also made staging military coup treason. The incumbent chiefs of Army, Navy, Air Force and reformed Bangladesh Border Guards have been sworn not to interfere in politics.

Despite such efforts, political volatility persisted all along as both the major political parties – the AL and the BNP, engaged in a bitter struggle to attain power, have seldom tried to reach consensus on the country’s fundamental issues. The deep personal enmity between the two begums has further complicated the present political crisis.

The BNP has urged the government to arrange for dialogue. The AL says the BNP must snap ties with the Jamaat before engaging in negotiation. But Khaleda has made it clear that her party is not ready to discard its alliance partner at this stage. The AL suspects Khaleda’s latest call for dialogue is a ploy to buy time to regroup for launching fresh anti-government agitation and the party has not attached much importance to it. According to the local media reports, BNP’s decision to back off from tougher movement is basically aimed at ensuring the immediate release of detained party leaders rather than a genuine effort to engage in dialogue.

Both the government and opposition leaders made statements in favour of dialogue largely due to the pressure of the international community which wants a negotiated settlement of the vexed caretaker issue at the earliest. The uncompromising attitude of the two leaders is the main hurdle

to initiate concrete steps for resolving the ongoing political impasse. Many Bangladeshis feel that it would take at least another year to reach an agreement.

Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the IDSA or of the Government of India.