

Bangladesh in the Balance

The technocratic new administration that has run Bangladesh since January has set lofty goals, hoping to set the stage for free elections and to eradicate corruption. There are, however, serious concerns both as to the government's capacity to carry out its ambitious agenda and as to its sincerity. Supra-judicial measures to apprehend allegedly corrupt politicians and businessmen, as well as the looming presence of the army in the political background, continue to cause anxiety both in Bangladesh and in the international community. For the United States, improving the quality of governance is critical both to marginalizing extremists and to supporting development.

Political Showdown: The Bangladeshi constitution stipulates that at the end of a five-year term in office, the incumbent government must turn the reins over to a neutral caretaker government, with the main functions carried out by an advisory board headed by the most recently retired chief justice. This body must hold free and fair elections and maintain affairs



Police try to control angry demonstrators

Source: Associated Press (AP)

of state during the 90-day transition period between governments. This has been an ingenious device for holding elections in a highly confrontational political system.

Outgoing Bangladeshi governments have lost both elections since this system was created a decade ago. Both major parties have tried to set things up so as to ensure victory despite the caretaker government. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) government went further in 2004, changing the retirement age for judges so as to ensure a sympathetic chief adviser for approaching elections. The Awami League (AL) and its 16-party coalition accused the government of rigging the elections. Pouring fuel on the fire, the election commission stuck to its highly controversial plans for compiling voter rolls, despite an adverse Supreme Court ruling.

The parliament went out of office in October 2006, amid escalating agitation. The former chief justice, however, declined the position of chief adviser, which President Iajuddin Ahmed himself eventually took on. The president

appointed two BNP sympathizers to vacancies on the already contentious Election Commission and took other measures that badly undercut his credibility as neutral caretaker. In early January 2007, the AL and its allies pulled out of the election and threatened to close the country down in protest.

The Army Pulls Strings: On January 11, the president declared a State of Emergency and resigned from his post as chief adviser of the caretaker government. The next day, former Bangladesh Bank governor Fakhruddin Ahmed, a well-respected technocrat, was installed as the new chief adviser, heading a team with generally good reputations. The move was made under pressure from the army, and the word “coup” hung unspoken in the air. The gratitude with which much of the Bangladeshi public greeted the takeover—particularly in Dhaka, where the immediate difference in law and order was palpable—speaks both to the gravity of the threat averted and to Bangladeshis’ deep dissatisfaction with their elected officials.

On the Road to Elections: Ensuring free and fair elections is the main constitutional responsibility of the caretaker government. The caretaker government appointed a new Election Commission but also asserted that the elections would be indefinitely delayed. The Election Commission amended this, announcing a roadmap to parliamentary elections at the end of 2008. Benchmarks include compiling a complete and accurate voter list and redrawing unbalanced constituencies by June of next year. The commission also called for ending the caretaker government’s ban on political activity. While the delay sends an unfortunate message, this clearly stated timetable is both a practical and symbolic check on the government’s powers. It demonstrates serious intent to hold elections and creates space for accountability to the public in case of failure or deviance.

Rampage against Systemic Corruption: The new government has also launched a major anticorruption drive, going well beyond the normal operations of interim governments. Strongly encouraged by the army, the campaign was generally welcomed by the public in its early days.

Systemic corruption has seriously impeded government decisionmaking, aggravated by a confrontational political system and a heavily politicized judiciary and administrative structure. Bangladesh has been listed as the world's most corrupt country on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index five years in a row since 2000. The interim government's principal reform goal is to weed out crooked politicians and clean up the political process.

The caretaker government has arrested over 170 prominent politicians and businessmen, chiefly from the AL and BNP. Popular reaction has been mixed. Many of the arrests drew no outcry at all, but there is a growing tide of protest, both in Bangladesh and internationally, against the lack of due process. The interim government is ignoring normal requirements of Bangladeshi law, and the procedures for trying those arrested reportedly lack basic legal safeguards.

“Minus Two”—Trying to Reshape Politics: The



Former PM Sheikh Hasina is arrested

Source: Associated Press (AP)

government has also been trying to remove from politics the two women who have alternated as prime minister for the past 15 years, Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina. After a botched attempt to exile both leaders, it arrested Sheikh Hasina on an extortion charge, widely denounced in the press, and issued subpoenas to both leaders for financial statements. The government also arrested Khaleda Zia's elder son, widely referred to as the “crown prince” and believed to be a major power broker and source of corruption in the outgoing government.

Success in restructuring Bangladesh's loyalty-based political system, however, entails more than eliminating the two leaders. Zia and Hasina, with all the weight of their family legacies, command strong followings. Removing them will be ineffective if it simply creates room for another to step in and perpetuate the same kind of politics. The key lies in eliminating the winner-takes-all system currently in place and guaranteeing accountability

at all levels of government. Another structural problem is the absence of meaningful self-government within the two major parties, something the interim government has urged them to remedy.

There was a flurry of interest in creating a third major political party including a short-lived exploratory campaign by Nobel Laureate Mohammed Yunus and some continuing interest by a group of senior politicians who had broken with one of the existing major parties. It is not yet clear what impact this may have.

Extremism on the Rise? After 30 years in the political wilderness, Islamic political parties have become increasingly active. Bangladesh's largest Islamic party, the Jamaat-i-Islami (JI), was a member of the BNP coalition during the last government. Other fundamentalist groups, including Jamaat-affiliated student group Shibir, have been involved in violence. The Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) carried out a series nation-wide bombing attacks. Six of its leading members were eventually convicted and executed, after the interim government had taken over. The presence of the JI in government inhibited the previous government's willingness to crack down on illegal activity. There is some concern that the government's anticorruption campaign may put so many politicians out of action that the political space for the religious parties, and perhaps for extremism, will be expanded.

What Role for the Army? Bangladesh has had two lengthy military-led governments in its 36 years of independence, but the army has stayed out of politics since the end of General Hussein Ershad's government in 1990. Many observers believe that the Bangladeshi army is reluctant to take office directly, in part because it fears jeopardizing its international peacekeeping work, which has been both a financial boon to army personnel and a boost to the country's and the army's prestige.

What is less clear is whether the current arrangement is tempting the army to seek a more permanent role. Although it has no representatives in any of the 45 government ministries, the army has been able to push its reform agenda behind a convenient buffer. It is noteworthy that no member of the armed forces has yet been accused or tried in the crusade against corruption, although it is widely believed that corruption pervades military ranks. The care that the army has taken to insulate itself from public censure suggests that while it supports elections, the army does not intend to remove itself completely from the government. Army Chief General Moeen U. Ahmed has, with the support of prominent politicians, called for the formation of a National Security Council, apparently

modeled on the one instituted some years ago in Pakistan. The proposed council would include the chiefs of the three branches of the armed forces and would ensure a permanent and constitutional place for the army in Bangladesh's politics.

Looking Ahead: If the interim government wants its actions to have an impact after elected government is restored, it urgently needs to bring the procedures for its anticorruption drive in line with basic requirements of due process. Otherwise, its actions will simply be rejected by the public and countermanded by the next government. This is becoming a significant international issue for Bangladesh as well.

More fundamentally, it needs to involve the country's politicians and other prominent opinion leaders in preparations for elections. Unless the major parties are given an opportunity to understand and contribute to the election procedures, the losers will once again reject the election results, and Dhaka will once again be embroiled in civil unrest.



Army takes over amid violence

Source: Associated Press (AP)

Finally, the interim government needs to be careful about making arbitrary decisions under cover of the state of emergency. The government has already incurred the disfavor of the urban lower classes by attempting to bulldoze thousands of illegal slum dwellings and cracking down on illegal street vendors. It is stoking discontent by eliminating fuel subsidies. The government needs to make tough decisions, but it also needs to ensure that decisions are accepted as legitimate. Otherwise, an elected government will simply overturn the measures as soon as it faces political trouble.

U.S. Interests: The United States has three key interests in play. It wants to eliminate extremists' use of Bangladesh as a sanctuary, a danger that has become more pronounced in recent years as the quality of governance declined in Bangladesh. The United States seeks to energize development in a country whose remarkable antipoverty achievements are at risk from corruption and the resulting ineffectiveness of recent elected governments. And it wants to preserve and expand Bangladesh's constructive international role, including substantial contributions to international peacekeeping.

The common theme, and consequently an overarching U.S. concern, is improved governance, without which all its interests will be jeopardized. Bangladesh's ability to continue its peacekeeping work would be at risk if the army became involved in civilian government activities over a longer period. U.S. attention to Bangladesh has been inconsistent during the past eight turbulent months. The United States needs to focus more steadily on keeping the interim government on a sound legal track and encouraging it to work with the other major political players to build a sustainable political system. U.S. economic aid has had a significant impact on Bangladesh, and future governments will want to make sure it remains available.

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