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Thursday, February 04, 2016



Elections in Bangladesh: Signs Democracy or Tyranny?

Last Tuesday on April 28 Bangladesh has held mayoral elections in two most populated cities of the country. The Election Commission has declared three ruling party Awami League (AL) supported candidates winners in the election while the main opposition party Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) at about 11 am of the Election Day declared its decision to boycott it. This is not the first time that BNP has boycotted elections in Bangladesh. It boycotted the last parliamentary elections which were held in January 2104 and AL won more than half the parliamentary seats uncontested. Earlier AL led coalition came to power following a heavily rigged parliamentary elections held in 2008. In fact, due to the heavy rigging of ballots, BNP decided to boycott the election in 2008.

All available evidences suggest that BNP and its component parties have acted within the democratic norms: After the 2008 elections they complained to legal authorities about irregularities but the ruling coalition evaded them. After the 2014 election too it complained about conduct of the Election Commission. In fact, under a national consensus agreed upon by all political parties following the downfall of the military dictator of 1980s General Ershad, all elections were supposed to have been conducted under a neutral caretaker government, but the ruling party has flouted that agreement. The BNP led opposition waited one complete year for the government's response, but nothing followed. Instead BNP supporters were targeted for repression by ruling party thugs. Many of their workers were abducted by plain clothed police and were killed "when trying to run away from the police custody," also some died in "cross-firing" and some simply disappeared. Therefore, exactly after one year from BNP organized countrywide protests and strikes. Bangladesh began to lose millions of dollars daily because of the strikes; business activities came almost to stand still.

International Community's Response

The International community took notice of the crisis and many foreign diplomats met the BNP leader and urged her to stop the protest and join the democratic process. Meanwhile mayoral elections approached and the opposition agreed to contest. But this time not only the workers but the top leader of the opposition came under attack. She was fired upon, her vehicle was crippled. After three attempts on her life and some of her body guards severely injured, the opposition leader gave up the idea of campaigning in public. In spite of such violent acts by the government sponsored thugs the opposition didn't abandon the idea of contesting the elections. On the Election Day by 11am all opposition poling agents were violently thrown out of polling booths and it became clear that the election wouldn't be fair, vote rigging couldn't be stopped; the opposition decided to boycott. Noting the consequences the US ambassador to Bangladesh tweeted, "Winning at any cost is no victory at all." Earlier an AL leader had declared, "We know how to win elections." The UN Secretary General called the prime minister and demanded a neutral investigation of the election. The US, the EU, the Asian Human Rights Commission and many other international bodies expressed similar views.

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Islamists Targeted

The AL led government from the very beginning of their current term in office adopted the policy of divide and rule. In order to break the opposition alliance one of its main components – Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami (BJI) – was targeted: A controversial War Crime Tribunal was constituted and false cases were brought against most BJI leaders. Encouraged by Sisi-led military coup in Egypt in mid 2013, the government in Bangladesh seemed to sense that the international community wouldn't react severely if the Islamists were eliminated from the political process. In December BJI leader Abdul Qadir Molla was executed and Muhammad Kamaruzzaman last month. However, such a brutal act couldn't go totally unnoticed by the international community. Still the government ignored messages of clemency from international figures such as the UN Secretary General and the US Secretary of State. In fact, the prime minister boastfully claimed that she had "the courage" to ignore those calls. What is source of such false courage? One may find partial answer in some segments of the international press. [One Wall Street Journal article](#) shamelessly came in support of the government's action by criticizing objections raised by the international community. Should the Islamists be denied any space in the democratic process? Should the Islamists be pushed to extremism? The international community needs to find an answer to these critical questions.

Other Targets

The government of Bangladesh is worried not only about the Islamists, but also of the country's armed forces. This is because the country has witnessed a very irritated armed force reacting violently to tyrannical rule immediately after independence in 1971. In 1975 the country's founding father was killed along with many of his family members in a violent military coup. It took several years for the country to stabilize following a number of coups and counter coups. However, in 2007 the military staged a coup paving the way for the current government in power. Many observers believe that the military was encouraged by a neighboring country which was not happy with the BNP-led government. Then in February 2009 in a dramatic Bangladesh (BDR) revolt 57 officers were killed (many more than 9 month long war of independence in 1971) giving a clear signal to the armed forces about any possible uprising against the current government. The government conducted a sham inquiry of the 2009 "revolt" which was heavily criticized by international legal and human right bodies. Interestingly the government has not conducted an inquiry into Rana Plaza disaster that occurred more than two years ago.

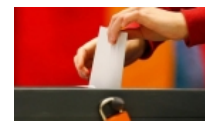
What is the Way Out?

The international community can't give up caring for Bangladesh – a nation of more than 160 million people with a huge diaspora around the world – only because the ruling government wouldn't pay attention to international legal and humanitarian concerns. Not with words alone, the international community must come up with action. The international community must identify sources of support for the current government. Is it the neighboring "big brother" known as the "largest democracy in the world?" India has received huge concessions from the current government of Bangladesh and it must be held responsible for what is happening there. Also the UN must immediately stop accepting international peace keeping services from the government of Bangladesh. Troops that are not able to keep peace in their home country must not be entrusted in keeping peace in another country. The international community may also devise many other mechanisms to bring pressure on the government. "If there is a will, there is a way," they say. The international community must demonstrate its will.

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