

Bangladesh: At a Crossroads

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Bangladesh stands at a crossroads and the way to a new invigorated Bangladesh depends how the new political forces emerge and accept the environment, characterized by mutual tolerance and respect, rule of law and accountability to people.

Since January 12 last, Bangladesh has been undergoing through a path that is extraordinary and cathartic. The interim non-party care-taker government has been on a drive as far as possible to get rid of corrupt elements, muscle men and black money so that a new political level-playing field is created with a view to holding a multi-party fair free and credible election by December 2008.

The five-year term of elected coalition government of Bangladesh led by the centre-right party, Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) expired on October 28, 2006.

Prior to the expiry of the BNP government, Awami League objected to the appointment of the last retired Chief Justice on allegation of being once affiliated in the early 80s to the immediate-past ruling party, and alleged the under that person, holding of election would not be free and impartial. Under the circumstances, the retired Chief Justice refused to become the Chief Adviser for national interest.

The refusal of the last retired Chief Justice placed Bangladesh into a difficult constitutional position. There were no precedents earlier of such a situation.

The President became the Chief Adviser, allegedly ignoring some Constitutional provisions. He wore two hats—one of the President and the other of the Chief Adviser.

Opposition parties considered the action of the President unconstitutional and a writ petition was lodged at the Supreme Court but the then Chief Justice intervened and stopped the legal proceedings for time being. Opposition parties became more aggressive in their stance by this incident.

The political situation became darker than ever before and the opposition parties -18 of them declared boycotting the election in early January. The last ruling party insisted on the President and the Chief Adviser in holding the election within the stipulated period, January 22.

While the opposition parties pledged that they would not allow election to occur on January 22 on the allegation that all the factors on the ground in holding election were choreographed by the immediate-past ruling party to return to power and the election would not be free and fair.

It seemed that political parties were in a mood of confrontation on the streets and that the nation was on the brink of almost a civil war. Obviously the election could not be held peacefully under the circumstances.

The Second Care-Taker Government:

On 11th January late evening of this year, the President came to the national TV and addressed the nation. The President called the armed forces on the streets to keep peace and declared emergency in the country in terms of the Constitution. The President announced resignation from the post of the Chief Adviser, dismissed the Advisers.

On 12th January, the President appointed a new second care-taker government headed by Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed, the Chief Adviser. Fakhruddin was a former Bangladesh senior civil servant, worked in the World Bank for 20 years and after return, held the office of Governor of the Central Bank, (Bangladesh Bank).

Suspected corrupt former ministers, businessmen, former MPs and musclemen have been arrested and put on trial. Until today, about 160 politicians, and businessmen are behind the bars awaiting trial for allegation of corruption, tax evasion and extortion. A few of them have been found guilty and sentenced to long -term imprisonments.

Observers say that the government took a huge political risk when former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was arrested on 16th July on charges of extortion and corruption. On 3rd September, her political rival the immediate-past lady Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia was arrested on charges of corruption and misuse of power. Both the sons of Begum Khaleda Zia are also now behind the bars, on charges of extortion and corruption, awaiting trial.

Supporters of former Prime Ministers inside and outside the country protested their arrest and detention. They have been detained in houses, declared as sub-jail, in the premises of the Parliament building. The legality of their arrest is being contested in the Supreme Court.

Looking to the future:

Let me offer a few general observations.

The Election Commission has been entrusted with preparation of voter roll (eligible voting population of about 90 million) with photographs and finger prints. This will be a groundbreaking exercise and is scheduled to be completed by July next year. It is expected that local Council elections in the countryside may be held before the general election..

Major political parties are undertaking reforms, regardless of the detention of their chairpersons and other leaders. A section of political party members blame their leaders for creating this messy situation in the country.

Since convicted politicians sentenced to 2 years or more imprisonment under the Constitution (Article 66.d) cannot participate in elections for at least five years, coming months will tell how many politicians are barred from politics once their cases are disposed of by courts.

Bangladesh is going through a painful but necessary process. A process many Bangladeshis believe they had to have at some stage. In financial market metaphor, the country has been going through a “correction”.

How successful the correction will be depends on the people. Corruption and other ills of society cannot be removed by law or by force. Unless people are alert, vigilant and honest themselves, corruption or abuse of power cannot be totally eliminated.

Time will tell what kind of politician people elect next year and let us wait and see until then.

Personally I am optimistic for a bright future for Bangladesh because people in the past always fought against dictatorship and believe in a society that provides equal opportunity for all in an environment of liberal representative democracy.

Furthermore, I am encouraged by the fact that since 1991, despite endemic corruption and bad governance, economy grew at a minimum 5% per cent per year, largely because of innovative and imaginative private sector. Exports were increased by 15% each year. Hardworking farmers have given four bumper crops during the last decade.



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