



The Changing Political Dynamics in Bangladesh

*Dr Ashish Shukla**

Bangladesh has come a long way since its inception as an independent state in 1971. Although, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's Awami League (AL) recorded a landslide victory in the first general elections held in March 1973, establishing a healthy and competitive democratic system remained a distant dream for a long time to come. The democratically elected AL regime soon fell prey to a grave conspiracy at home. In an unfortunate development, Bangladesh lost its great leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on August 15, 1975 and the democratic experiment came to a grinding halt. In the next decade and a half, Bangladesh witnessed four authoritarian regimes under Khandakar Mushtaq Ahmad (August-November 1975), Justice Abu Sadaat Mohammad Sayem (November 1975-April 1977), Maj. Gen. Ziaur Rahman (April 1977-May 1981), and Lt. Gen. Hussain Muhammad Ershad (March 1982-December 1990).

By 1990, people got fed up with the dictatorial regime of the then President Hussain Muhammad Ershad. The opposition political parties and groups wanted to utilise the growing public anger against the President. Thus, they reorganised themselves and unified their efforts to bring down the Ershad regime. This was followed by general strikes, increasing protests and public rallies against the authoritarian rule which in the end forced President Ershad to make way for democratic politics. After his resignation, a neutral transitional government under Chief Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed took charge for three months. It restored civil liberties and conducted a largely free and fair election in February 1991.

Dozens of small and big political parties contested the 1991 election but Sheikh Hasina-led Awami League (AL) and Khaleda Zia-led Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) were the top two contenders. The 1991 election proved to be a watershed in the politics of Bangladesh as it not only restored the parliamentary system, but paved the way for a democratic political competition among various political parties. Since then these two mainstream parties have been competing with each other neck to neck on the political front. Unlike healthy democracies, the open

competition for political power in Bangladesh has highly politicised the society and given rise to divisions in society along party lines. This became more complicated when Islamic parties started gaining foothold.

Mainstream Parties in Election Mode

The next general elections in Bangladesh for the eleventh parliament are expected to take place between October 2018 to January 2019. Besides several small political parties registered with the Election Commission, the three mainstream political parties—the ruling Awami League, Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), and Jatiya Party (JP)—seem to be already in election mode. The other important and the biggest right-wing political party—Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami—is no longer in the fray, as the Election Commission deregistered the party after a court order cancelling its registration in 2013. This is not to suggest that the right-wing party would have no say in the upcoming general elections. A long-term BNP ally it is presently not part of BNP-led alliance, but the party would probably covertly work for its erstwhile partner.

The tussle between AL and BNP is growing day by day and is often manifest in the speeches and statements of its leaders. Both the parties are engaged in an unending series of allegations and counter-allegations. Hardly any day passes without a tussle between the top leadership of the two parties. Be it domestic issues affecting a large segment of the population or matters of foreign policy, the two parties often take diametrically opposite position. On relations with India, BNP is quite critical of AL and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. It made a hue and cry over Sheikh Hasina's recent India visit during which 11 agreements and 24 Memorandum of Understandings (MoUs) were signed including 4 much talked about MoUs under the defence category. The BNP chairperson not only termed the visit as a “failed one” but stated that Sheikh Hasina returned “empty-handed” from India. She even promised to review all the “anti-state” deals with India after coming back to power.

Formation of United National Alliance

In March 2017, Jatiya Party announced a new political alliance under the banner of *Jatiya Islamic Mohajot* with Abu Naser Wahed as its convener. The alliance is comprised of 34 parties. At the time of the launching of *Jatiya Islamic Mohajot*, Hussain Muhammad Ershad, the chairman of the Jatiya Party, also hinted of floating a grand alliance ahead of the next general elections and expressed the desire to provide leadership too. With his move, Ershad came out of the Awami League grand alliance which was formed in the run up to the previous general elections in 2014. This was followed by the announcement of a 58 party United National Alliance (UNA) on May 7, 2017 with Hussain Muhammad Ershad as Chairman and Ruhul Amin as its chief spokesperson.

The UNA is believed to be the biggest political alliance of the country, as the ruling Awami League-led alliance is comprised of 14 parties while the Bangladesh Nationalist Party-led alliance has 19 parties within its fold. The UNA is actually a combination of two political parties—Jatiya Party and Bangladesh Islami Front—and two political alliances—*Jatiya Islami Mahajot* and Bangladesh National Alliance. In his speech, the UNA Chairman stated that “We have come

together because we hold the same political ideology, Islamic values, sense of nationality and respect for all religious communities in the country. We will not allow any party or group to join who stand against independent Bangladesh.”¹ He further added that “The main aim of the alliance is to build a modern Bangladesh by ensuring the rule of law and people’s basic rights.”² The ruling AL has kept mum over this development, while the BNP strongly reacted to it. The senior joint secretary of the BNP, Ruhul Kabir, termed the UNA as a B-team of the ruling dispensation and stated that the alliance was mere eyewash to mislead the people of Bangladesh.³

Awami League’s Strategy

The ruling coalition is banking primarily on the achievements of the government and popularity of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, thus, focussing on a strategy for proper publicity of its work. The ruling Awami League does not want to take chances and is moving cautiously but steadily in preparation for the upcoming general elections. In January 2017, Sheikh Hasina directed the advisory council of the Awami League to form sector-wise unit so that the election manifesto could be prepared in time. There have been attempts to resolve differences among various factions of the party at the grass-root level. It is also learnt that following the declaration of a general amnesty to the expelled leaders, a letter was sent to various district level leaders on March 2, 2017 informing them that the expulsions in future would be done by only the central leadership of the party.⁴ Awami League has also identified BNP and Jamaat dominated/influenced areas which Sheikh Hasina herself would visit before the election. The campaign to touch the targeted areas began with Prime Minister’s visit to Bogra, Lakshmipur, Magura, and Faridpur in March 2017.

Of late, the AL has also made attempts to woo Islamic organisations and pressure groups to increase its vote share. On April 11, Sheikh Hasina met *Hefazat-e-Islami* chief Allama Shah Ahmed Shafi and many other representative of the pressure group at her residence in Dhaka. During the meeting she almost endorsed their demand of removing the statue of Greek goddess of justice called *Themis* installed in the premises of the apex court of the country. Reportedly, the Prime Minister said that she personally did not like the setting up of the statue on the Supreme Court premises. Hasina even agreed to recognise the degrees of thousands of *Qwami* Madrassas run by the group. These were not empty promises. Soon, the nation witnessed the removal of the statue⁵ and recognition of *Qwami* Madrassas degrees.

BNP’s Preparations

Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) boycotted the previous election on the issue of a neutral, election-time caretaker government to which the ruling Awami League did not agree. This made the 2014 general election controversial and there were questions about the legitimacy of the new government formed under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina. For BNP, it later turned out to be a complete loss of voice in *Jatiya Sangsad*. Many BNP leaders privately acknowledge that not contesting election was a mistake. Although, BNP never ever hinted of diluting its demand for re-introducing the caretaker government system, but this time the party seems to be thinking in practical terms too. The recent developments suggest that the party is getting itself ready to

contest the next parliamentary elections. The party, at present, is busy in the monumental task of reorganising itself and preparing the manifesto. At the same time, it is mobilising public opinion in favour of its demand and putting pressure on the AL to accept its demand for an election-time caretaker government.

The BNP strategy, as it appears, is to launch the movement for the restoration of the system of caretaker government and its electoral campaign together. There is no talk of boycotting the electoral exercise this time. In mid April 2017, BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir stated that “We have already started completing groundwork for the election. Our party’s research unit is working to work out plans and strategies for it with the suggestions of the experts of relevant fields.”⁶ Not long after this open acceptance, on May 3 BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia herself stated that the party would contest the next election under a neutral government.⁷ This was followed by the release of Vision 2030 document on May 10. Through the Vision 2030 document, BNP has set the target to achieve “the objectives of making Bangladesh a happy, prosperous, modern and self-respecting nation through uprooting the obstacles that thwart people’s genius, effort, enthusiasm and initiative.” The document underlines BNP’s priorities in several areas including democracy, nation building, good governance, defence, foreign policy, terrorism, economy, education, information & communication technology, media, local government, agriculture, health, climate change, water resources, energy, industry, and connectivity.

On democratic front, BNP aims to curtail the “monolithic executive authority of the Prime Minister” by balancing it through “appropriate constitutional amendment.” It further talks about restoring the provision of Referendum and repealing “Special Powers Act 1974.” On economic front, BNP has set the target of transforming Bangladesh into a modern, democratic and high-middle income country with per capita income of \$5000. The document has set high targets for BNP to achieve if it comes to power following the next election. To some extent, the Vision 2030 document appears to be a mini-manifesto underlining the promises of the party in the run up to the elections. However, BNP leaders have repeatedly emphasised the distinctiveness of the vision document. They have termed it as a road map for the next 13 years.⁸ The ruling AL leadership has criticised BNP’s vision document on many grounds including plagiarism.

The next step of the BNP is aimed of releasing its proposal for an election-time government. As per reports, Khaleda Zia will disclose the detailed proposal regarding a neutral election-time government after *Eid-ul-Fitr*. Among many other points, it is learnt that the said proposal recommends a consensus based selection of the head of the poll-time administration who could be from a political party, civil society or from a professional group.⁹

Conclusion

The tussle between the two most important players in Bangladeshi politics is evident. Given the prevailing situation and preparations of various political parties, the main contest is going to be between ruling Awami League and Bangladesh Nationalist Party. Jaitya Party-led alliance and

Islamic political parties and pressures groups such as Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami and Hefazat-e-Islam too would play a role in determining the outcome of the election results. There are 12 registered Islamic parties and many pressure groups that are active in the country. Most of them support the right wing BNP. We have yet to see the tangible results of Awami League's courting of some of these parties and pressure groups.

The good thing about the changing political dynamics in Bangladesh is that it is proceeding in the right direction. In this context, BNP's willingness and its preparation for the next general elections is a good move which should be appreciated. However, one should also be mindful of BNP's increasingly changing stances. It seems to be gradually stiffening its stand over the election time neutral government. On June 18, Khaleda Zia stated that after Eid-ul-Fitr she might take to the streets to protest peacefully against the ruling dispensation. Given the Jamaat-BNP nexus, it is difficult to assume that the protest would not turn violent in case ruling party does not agree to some of the key demands of the BNP-led alliance. Much would depend on how the ruling AL dispensation responds to BNP's activities in the coming months.

** Dr Ashish Shukla, Research Fellow, Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi.
Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.*

Endnotes

¹ Miazee, Manik (2017), "Ershad announces 58-party alliance," Dhaka Tribune, May 7, 2017, available at <http://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/politics/2017/05/07/japa-announces-58-party-alliance/>

² "Jatiya Party floats new alliance with 58 parties," May 7, 2017, available at <http://en.ntvbd.com/bangladesh/56217/Jatiya-Party-floats-new-alliance-with-58-parties>

³ "BNP brands JaPa alliance as 'Al's B team'," The Daily Observer, May 8, 2017, available at <http://www.observerbd.com/details.php?id=72635>

⁴ Hossain, Anwar (2017), "3 strategies behind Hasina's early election campaign," Prothom Alo, March 24, 2017, available at <http://en.prothom-alo.com/bangladesh/news/143231/3-strategies-behind-Hasina-s-early-election>

⁵ The statue was first removed but the next day re-installed at the annex building of Supreme Court.

⁶ "BNP getting ready both for movement and election," The Independent, April 14, 2017, available at <http://www.theindependentbd.com/post/9011>

⁷ "BNP to join polls under neutral govt: Khaleda," The Independent, May 3, 2017, available at <http://www.theindependentbd.com/post/92914>

⁸ Miazee, Manik (2017), "BNP: Vision 2030 not an election manifesto," Dhaka Tribune, May 13, 2017, available at <http://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/politics/2017/05/13/bnp-vision-2030-not-manifesto/>

⁹ Azad, Rafiqul Islam (2017), "BNP firm on poll-time govt demand," The Independent, May 19, 2017, available at <http://www.theindependentbd.com/post/95266>