



Sixth Council Meeting of BNP¹

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After a gap of seven years, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) held its Sixth Council meeting in March 2016. There was speculation that the BNP would take some important decisions regarding party structure and policies, but most of the things remained the same. The Sixth Council was also attended by a few foreign dignitaries: The British Parliament's Labour Party member, Simon Danczuk; European Union Parliament's former MP and Liberal Democrat Party member, Phil Bennion; and US politician, Alderman Geojon Moore. Alderman Moore delivered a welcome speech at the Council. Vijay Jolly, Convenor of Foreign Cell of India's ruling political party, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), sent the congratulatory message. Others who marked their presence at the Council were: Pakistan's High Commissioner to Bangladesh, Shuja Alam, and diplomatic representatives from Russia, Kuwait, India, Palestine, Maldives, Sri Lanka, China and Saudi Arabia.

Party Structure

Begum Khaleda Zia entered politics after the assassination of her husband and BNP founder, General Ziaur Rahman in 1981. After joining the party, she became the Vice-President of BNP within a year, and took charge of the party as an acting chairperson when the then President, Justice Abdus Sattar's health deteriorated. In 1984, she was elected, unopposed, as the President of the BNP, which she is holding since then. In 2016 also, as nobody opposed her candidature, she remained seated on the post of President of the BNP. Likewise, her elder son, Tarique Rahman too has been elected unopposed as the chairperson and senior vice chairman for the second

consecutive term. He joined the BNP as joint secretary general in 2004. After his arrest in 2007-08 during the emergency rule, he was slapped with various cases of corruption. To save himself, he went to London on parole for treatment, and had been living there since then. In 2009, he was promoted as the senior vice chairman of the party. He attends programmes in London. In 2015, the High Court had banned publication of his speech, in any form, because of charges of defamation and criminal cases filed against him for his speeches targeting Sheikh Mujibur Rehman. In one of his speech he said that that General Zia was the first President of Bangladesh, and Sheikh Mujibur Rehman was an ‘illegal Prime Minister’.

During the Council, the BNP adopted a policy of “one leader, one post” to avoid the duplication of roles. Those, who are, at current, holding more than one post, would be asked to relinquish their extra positions. But the party has given authority to the chairperson to give more than one post to a leader for a temporary period in the interest of the party. The BNP councillors had also approved proposals to form sub-committees on finance, health, education, foreign policy, climate change, environment, power and energy, women and children, and minority affairs. It was proposed that the number of Vice-chairmen in the party should be increased from 17 to 35. Khaleda Zia has been given a free hand to appoint any number of people in her council of advisers. It was proposed that in her absence, the senior vice chairman would perform all responsibilities of the chairperson. To change the gender equation of the BNP, an amendment was passed to ensure that one-tenth members of the committees would be women. The party’s target is to increase the number of women to 33 percent by 2020.

Policy Level Changes and Discussions

During the council, the BNP chief Khaleda Zia mentioned certain points from the yet to be finalised ‘Vision 2030’ document of her party. The BNP’s Vision 2030 has come seven years after Awami League’s “Vision 2021”. Some of the points unveiled by Chairperson were:

- If the BNP comes into power by 2041 her party’s aim would be to turn Bangladesh into a higher mid-income country by raising the per capita income from \$ 1316 to \$ 5,000.
- Her party wants to turn the country into a “rainbow nation” by forging unity among the people of different views and opinions.
- There is a need for a dialogue with other political groups to end election related violence.

- Her party would take necessary measures to create a bicameral parliament with country's experienced professionals, educationalists, intellectuals in the upper chamber of parliament. At the time of birth of Bangladesh as a state in 1971, 300 directly elected MPs represented a population of seventy-five million. The country's population has since then doubled, while the number of MPs has remained unchanged, which she found the most impractical and unworkable.
- Her party wants to create a balance of power to end the autocratic rule imbued with executive power in the disguise of parliamentary government.
- She mentioned the importance of three Gs, which are—good politics, good governance and good government.
- Once in power, they would make the constitutional and autonomous institutions, like the Election Commission, Public Service Commission, Human Rights Commission and Law Commission free from corruption, irregularities and politicization to ensure democratic and economic good governance.

In her speech Khaleda Zia accused the AL government of misdeeds in different sectors and indulging in corruption and terror acts, saying that terrorism, corruption and plundering have taken a severe shape. She also criticized the government for its failure to stop killings, enforced disappearances and to ensure freedom of press, control prices of essentials and protect human rights. The council also talked about setting up a Think-Tank to carry out research activities and organise seminars for the party, and train party leaders and activists. Its experts would be picked from various fields like science and technology, labour, agriculture and manpower development. They will be paid for the job.

Conclusion

The Council cleared the way for Khaleda Zia's son to be her successor. This family domination over a party is a normal phenomenon in Bangladesh. Both Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia assumed the leadership in their respective parties because of their relations with the patriarch, though their own contributions cannot be entirely denied. Now, they are passing the baton to their sons without any opposition. Theoretically, these family dominated parties in South Asia remain united because of leadership; the moment leadership passes to an 'outsider', there are

ample chances of splits in the party. Most of the members are loyal to a family more than their faith in the policies or politics of the party.

It was expected that the BNP would denounce religious violence in Bangladesh, but the chairperson made a general remark over the deteriorating political situation in the country. This may be because of her “closeness” to Jamat-i-Islami and other groups, alleged to be engaged in carrying out militant activities in Bangladesh. Also, there was anticipation that the Party would adopt an inclusive constitution, but it remained only a lip service. One has to wait for the publication of the document Vision-2030, to know BNP’s stand over the issue.

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The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.

Endnotes:

¹ In this piece published news from *Daily Star (Dhaka)*, *Daily Observer (Dhaka)* *Bangladesh Today (Dhaka)*, and *Prothom Alo(Dhaka)* have been used.