

Winning an election, but losing a country?

A closer look at Bangladesh's controversial general elections.

by Shehryar Fazli

- Despite an almost incapacitated opposition, the Awami League's moral authority was seriously tested on the streets in 2018.
- Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's victory is even more controversial than the 2014 election, which was boycotted by the main opposition, and was the arguably most discredited national poll in the country's history.
- PM Hasina's contract with the citizenry does not derive anymore from democratic legitimacy but from a Singapore-style guarantee of economic development and security.

◆ Bangladesh's 2014 election, boycotted by the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and won virtually uncontested by the ruling Awami League, was arguably the most discredited national poll in the country's history. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's victory last Sunday was even hollower.

Even with its chief Khaleda Zia serving a prison sentence for corruption, the BNP decided to contest the election under a broad anti-Awami League coalition, the Jatiya Oikya Front, headed by respected legal mind and former foreign and law minister Kamal Hossain. The coalition won seven out of 298 contested seats, while the Awami League returned to office with 288. Predictably, the opposition has rejected the results and called for fresh polls under a neutral caretaker, backed by credible – and once upon a time pro-Awami League – institutions like the Supreme Court Bar Association.

The crudeness of election day rigging, including intimidation of voters, expelling or blocking opposition polling agents from polling centers, and deputing returning and presiding officers with

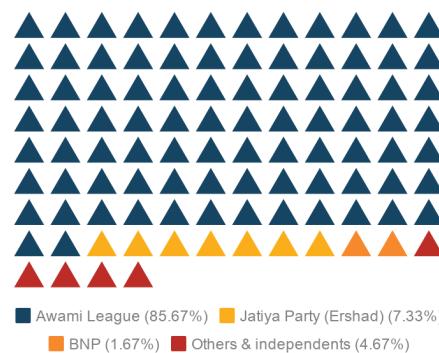
Awami League affiliations, among other tactics, took some observers by surprise. The weeks leading up to the election saw thousands of opposition party workers arrested and several opposition candidates disqualified. With the playing field tilted heavily towards another Awami League victory, the EU and U.S. declined to send observers. An unprecedented third consecutive term seemed inevitable, so a 'free' process on Sunday resulting in a bloc of opposition-controlled seats could have lent the Awami League's triumph the tiniest measure of plausibility. The combination of pre-poll and election day rigging, however, revealed a ruling party that was taking no chances.

With Bangladesh's zero-sum politics pushed to extremes in the last five years, Hasina seemed literally to see the election as a life or death contest. It is ironic, however, that after such a ferocious consolidation of power after her controversial 2014 victory, her grip would seem so fragile. That consolidation can be outlined roughly in three phases: first, the destruction of the Jamaat-i-Islami leadership through the highly politicized International Crimes Tribunals prosecuting individuals for atrocities in the 1971 war; a legal assault on the

BNP, culminating in Zia and her son and heir apparent Tarique Rahman's convictions in February 2018; and intimidation of the press and civil society at large. In between, there were two major security operations that ostensibly burnished Hasina's law and order credentials: the first was a counter-terrorism crackdown around the July 2016 attack in which alleged Islamic State affiliates macheted over 20 people to death, mostly foreigners, in Dhaka's popular Holey Bakery; the second, in 2018, a brutal anti-narcotics drive. Both were characterized by extra-judicial killings and enforced disappearances by the hundreds, including of opposition activists.

Despite an almost incapacitated opposition, the Awami League's moral authority was seriously tested on the streets in 2018. In the first half of the year, students agitated by the thousands on campuses for a repeal of a civil service quota system that benefitted those who fought for independence from Pakistan in 1971 and their descendants, which forced Hasina into (an albeit unimplemented) compromise. In the second half, after the late July death of two teens in a car accident in Dhaka, youth again took the streets, their calls for better road safety evolving into demands for more accountable governance. This time, the Awami League used rubber bullets and tear gas, including on schoolchildren who had joined the protests, and mass arrests, the most high profile of which was the respected photojournalist Shahidul Alam's. Amid domestic and international outcry, the government released Alam some four months later. This unrest in the body politic, driven by a politically unaffiliated and growing youth population, appears to be why the ruling party entered the campaign with such anxiety and heavy-handedness. That it

was facing a united opposition, coming together under the Jatoya Oikya Front in October, merely raised the stakes.



Seats won by political parties in Bangladesh Elections 2018

Where to from here? Given the country's violent political history, the seventeen dead on Sunday was so faint a statistic as to barely register. The government can, therefore, take refuge in its claims to have overseen a 'peaceful' election, in contrast to the hundreds who were killed in election-related violence in 2014 and 2015. The BNP and its Jatoya Oikya front allies will continue to call for fresh polls, under a neutral caretaker, with little traction. They are unlikely to resort to those earlier levels of violence, which cost them politically and saw too many of their leaders and activists in legal jeopardy.

In the short and maybe medium term, whatever pressure there is to bear will come from the international community. Dhaka's two most important Asian partners, India and China, will accept the Awami League's purported mandate. India's mistrust of the BNP, with its historic alliance with the Jamaat-i-Islami and a brief history of tolerating Indian militant groups on its soil, hasn't faded. Moreover, as Bangladesh deepens its relations with China, the Modi government will avoid antagonizing it, as long as political conflict doesn't descend into violence and instability on its border. Beijing, needless to say, cares for continuity and little for

democratic legitimacy in its relations with Dhaka. This leaves the West. Hasina's handling of the Rohingya refugee crisis since mid-2015 has won her wide international approval. Sunday's election is certain to deplete much of that goodwill. The US, UK and EU have all issued strong statements calling on the government to investigate rigging allegations. But whether the US and in particular the EU are willing to take principled action, for example threatening to suspend Bangladesh's preferential trade access to EU markets, which would hit a garment sector that fuels the country's growth, is an open question.

In the long term, it will be Bangladeshi society that will have to force a return to some basic rules of the democratic game. The liberal, secular civil constituencies that the Awami League is increasingly at odds with used to be the party's base, and ensured Hasina's survival against the military's efforts, during the so-called caretaker period of 2007-2008, to expel her from politics. The extent to which the prime minister has alienated that base is evident in the fact that the nominal leader of the opposition, Hossain, was once an Awami League icon and a key – if not the key – adviser to Bangladesh's founding leader

Mujib-ur-Rahman, Hasina's father. But if Hasina knows that she's been sawing away at the branch she's long sat on, she seems convinced that she'll land on a flowerbed. Her rule has become dictatorial, in that she appears to have a fixed position about her value to the country while knowing that the public is no longer flinging to her feet, if it ever did. Her contract with the citizenry does not derive anymore from an electoral mandate but from a Singapore-style guarantee of economic development and security. But this is based on the proposition that Bangladesh can continue to be ruled autocratically. The protests earlier this year showed how tenuous that proposition is.♦

Shehryar Fazli is a political and security affairs specialist. From 2008 to 2018 he was the Senior Analyst and Regional Editor for the South Asia region for the International Crisis Group. He is the author of the novel *Invitation* (2011), which was the runner-up for the 2011 Edinburgh International Festival's first book award.

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