

By Dr. Abdul Ruff

It looks bright the land of Bangali language, Bangladesh, is beginning to breathe fresh air politically and the major political wings and the government are on compromise notes about the need to conduct the poll to put in place an elected government to run the country for the welfare of the people alone. The interim government in Bangladesh has called a parliamentary vote for Dec. 18 to end nearly two years of emergency rule, imposed after scheduled elections were delayed due to political violence. The interim government has announced that general elections will be held as planned on 18 December. It said it had decided to keep to the date after failing to persuade political parties to drop their differences over the schedule.

A total of 107 political parties had applied to the EC for registration. Meanwhile, the EC has declared 37 registered political parties eligible to contest the upcoming election. The number is significantly less than the previous elections because of the strict provision for political parties' registering with the EC. Ninety-six parties took part in the 2001 parliamentary polls. 13 November would be the deadline for nominations. Since January 2007, Bangladesh has been run by a military-backed interim government, which promised to curb corruption and hold free elections.

### **Gesture of goodwill**

To the credit of the caretaker government it should be said that the leaders political leaders have come together to wish each another well on the poll eve. Former Prime-ministers Sheikh Hasina and Begum Khaleda Zia, dubbed the "battling begums" for their long-running enmity, exchanged good wishes for the first time in 18 years at a military ceremony on 21 Nov Friday. Both Hasina and Khaleda last sat down together in 1990 while they jointly led a people's revolt to oust military ruler Hossain Mohammad Ershad. They shook hands, smiled and spoke during Armed Forces Day at the Dhaka army barracks and were applauded by guests, including top officials of the army-backed interim government. Armed Forces Day marks the founding of the Bangladesh Army after Bangladesh won independence from Pakistan in 1971.

### **Dilemma**

Bangladesh Election Commission is mulling to put back the already delayed national elections by 10 days provided former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)-led four-party alliance commits to participate. Election Commissioner Muhammed Sohul Hussain is not averse for a compromise shifting the poll Dec 18 to Dec 28 if the four-parties decide to participate. The Election Commission sat with Zia to work out details of the poll date. Hasina said the poll body should work out the details with Zia and there was no need for a separate meeting with her alliance. Awami League (AL) is in favor of polls. The interim government cancelled elections due to be held in January last year.

### **Rivals**

Bangladesh's former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia has now announced that her BNP will take part in next month's elections. She says her party will not boycott the 18 December vote as long as it is put back by 10 days. The government has already agreed to that in principle. Ms Zia had called on the caretaker government to delay elections by a month and lift its state of emergency, but it refused to do either.

Its main rival, the Awami League, has said it will take part in the vote. Hasina, who heads the Awami League, and Khaleda, leader of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), shape as the main candidates for the December vote, although Khaleda has called for a delay.

### **Legitimacy & Credible candidates**

Earlier, the BNP had threatened to boycott the poll unless emergency rule is lifted. The government also refused to suspend the state of emergency which was imposed in January 2007 after months of unrest. A BNP boycott would be a serious blow to the government's pledge that the elections will be the fairest in the country's history. Without the participation of former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's party, many would doubt its legitimacy. The BNP and its allies won a two-thirds majority in the last elections in 2001 and the party remains popular - but during the two-year rule of the caretaker government it has been seriously weakened.

Finding credible new candidates to fill their places is proving difficult. Khaleda and Hasina were both arrested last year for alleged corruption. They were released after a year in jail to persuade their parties to take part in the elections. Awami League leader Sheikh Hasina and BNP leader Khaleda Zia face rumblings of discontent against their leadership from within their respective parties. Now the two main parties, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and the AL, have resumed political activities.

Many of its leaders, including Khaleda Zia and her two sons, were accused of corruption and jailed. She was then freed on bail, but about 50 others are still behind bars. Bangladesh's other main party, the Awami League, was less affected by the anti-corruption drive, even though its leader Sheikh Hasina was also jailed for a while. It agreed to participate in the elections and has for some time been confident of winning.

### **Foreign Interference**

Last week, Sam Gejdenson, a former U.S. Congressman and board member of the Washington-based watchdog National Democratic Institute, called for the military to "refrain from intervening in the political and electoral process". The NDI suggested against deploying troops at polling centres. Bangladesh's Election Commission has dismissed calls by a U.S.-based electoral watchdog for the military to refrain from intervening in the country's political process. Election Commissioner Sakhawat Hossain responded saying: "NDI interfered in the country's internal affairs directly giving their statement about the electoral process. They have no right to make any comment

on our internal matters". Army chief General Moeen U. Ahmed has said the military would help in the efforts to restore democracy.

One still fails to grasp the policy line of the USA with its double-standards in its approach and statements. When India conducted the poll in Jammu Kashmir under military occupation, the USA did not make any objections to that. Not even the UN objected officially to that, even when its chief visited India recently on the poll eve. India added more troops from India to its contingents in Kashmir and deployed them street by street and at all polling stations.

### **Bangladesh: Where heading for?**

Bangladesh parliament currently has 345 members including 45 reserved seats for women, elected from single-member constituencies. The [Prime Minister](#), as the [head of government](#), forms the [cabinet](#) and runs the day-to-day affairs of state. While the Prime Minister is formally appointed by the [President](#), he or she must be an [MP](#) who commands the confidence of the majority of parliament. The President is the [head of state](#), a largely ceremonial post elected by the parliament.

Bangladesh came into existence in 1971 as India wanted to split Pakistan into two and control the emergent Bangladesh and use it against Pakistan- both are Islamic republics. However, Bangladesh realizing the Indian hidden agenda for the region, began pursuing independent policies that irritated India. The borders of present-day Bangladesh were established with the [partition of Bengal](#) and [India](#) in 1947, when the region became the [eastern wing](#) of the newly-formed [Pakistan](#). However, it was separated from the [western wing](#) by 1,600 kilometers across India. Political and linguistic discrimination as well as economic neglect led to popular agitations against [West Pakistan](#), which led to the [war for independence](#) in 1971 and the establishment of Bangladesh, with the help of [India](#). However, the new state had to endure famines, natural disasters and widespread poverty, as well as political turmoil and [military coups](#). The restoration of democracy in 1991 has been followed by relative stability and economic progress.

Bangladesh is among the most densely populated countries in the world and has a high poverty rate. The government is a parliamentary democracy with [Islam](#) as the state religion; however, political rule has been suspended under emergency law since January 11, 2007. Bangladesh is a member of the [Commonwealth of Nations](#), [SAARC](#), [BIMSTEC](#), the [OIC](#), and the [D-8](#). As the World Bank notes in its July 2005 Country Brief, the country has made significant progress in human development in the areas of [literacy](#), gender parity in schooling and reduction of population growth. In 1974 Bangladesh joined both the [Commonwealth of Nations](#) and the [United Nations](#) and has since been elected to serve two terms on the [Security Council](#) in 1978-1979 and 2000-2001. In the 1980s, Bangladesh played a lead role in founding the [South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation](#) (SAARC) in order to expand relations with other South Asian states. Since the founding of SAARC 1985, a Bangladeshi has held the post of Secretary General on two occasions.

The country has a long-running reputation for political animosity and deep-seated corruption. The current caretaker administration, backed by the military, has pledged to eradicate corruption. Many analysts say the government is determined to destroy the political power of the two women as part of its drive for political reform. By the time the state of emergency was declared in January, the public had also become fed up with the constant bickering and street-fighting between the two main political parties.

The former prime ministers and leaders of the two main parties, Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina are released now. Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina have dominated Bangladeshi politics for many years. Both have alternated as prime minister since 1991. They are bitter rivals and barely speak to each other. Their mutual loathing is reflected among their respective sets of supporters. As a result, political life has been marked by, at best, ceaseless bickering. Released now from jails, they were in custody, charged with extorting money when they were in power. Khaleda Zia has been charged with corruption in relation to the choice of who should run two state-run container depots during her second term in office as prime minister. Earlier this year she was charged with tax evasion. Sheikh Hasina faces a new charge of taking illegal payments of some \$435,000 from an electricity company. She is already under investigation for extortion and murder. Both leaders deny any wrongdoing.

### **Post-script**

The caretaker government had elections would be held only once it had rid the country of corruption, but it is under compulsion by the political wings to go for polls on account of rising prices, which is universal now. The government as well the EC has pledged that the elections will be the fairest in the country's history. The new date of polling may well be Dec 28, after the date decided earlier, Dec 18, became a subject of bargaining between the caretaker government on one side and Zia's Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) on the other. Awami League chief Hasina had insisted on the earlier date, but has now accepted a ten-day deferment to ensure an all-in poll exercise. Khaleda Zia's decision to take part removes the last major obstacle to the polls being free, fair and credible, though the BNP is revving up for the parliamentary polls now that its chairperson has formally announced the four-party alliance would join the election if it is held on December 28. However since there is still time for poll preparations, either date should not be the real issue now.

With major political hurdles - the poll date controversy and a meeting between two principal contenders for power, former Prime Ministers Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia - removed from its path, as the first step towards the poll, Bangladesh appears to be well on its way to have its delayed ninth general election this year-end. Notwithstanding the poll date fixation, the poll is final. The BNP and its allies met Election Commission officials on Friday and reiterated Khaleda's demand that the poll be delayed until Dec. 28.

Both parties have been preoccupied with preparation of lists of candidates to contest the elections. They are share seats with their allies. Zia has earmarked 50 seats for her allies, a conglomerate of Islamist parties led by the Jamaat-e-Islami. BNP high-command has already prepared a list of prospective candidates for around 200 constituencies. Although it is advantageous for Awami League which has won the recent local polls, poll fortunes could shift depending on the course of the campaign. The BNP remains popular but has become weak and divided during the past two years. But if one takes into account the contributions made by these two leaders, both on foreign and domestic affairs, the BNP takes a front seat. Whether this means Khaleda Zia is more likely to be elected prime minister for a fourth time is doubtful. Recent Presidential poll Maldives clearly illustrates that election outcomes cannot be predicted perfectly even by the voters themselves. Both parties said it is imperative to lift the state of emergency to make the upcoming election credible. BNP said as a pro-election party it wants to contest in the poll, but an atmosphere conducive to holding a credible election has not yet been created as the military backed caretaker government has not yet met any of its seven demands.

Poll campaign as well as the polling would chart out the political struggle among the parties to capture power in Bangladesh. Bangladesh has a tradition of the loser not accepting the poll verdict, taking to the streets and boycotting parliament. Hopefully, Bangladesh will go to polls in a free atmosphere without emergency rule. Also, hopefully, Bangladesh leaders would strive for a corruption free society for which the nation has undergone turmoil and even lost several lives. Bangladesh has to evolve itself as a model Islamic society. World is looking forward to seeing a strong, prosperous Bangladesh.