

BATTLE FOR DHAKA

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Demands by the [Opposition in Bangladesh for the resignation](#) of the Chief Election Commissioner just four days ahead of the December 30 parliamentary election reflect the bitter divisions that have undermined the credibility of government agencies. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party, the main constituent of the Opposition Jatiya Oikya Front, claims that 9,200 of its activists have been arrested since the election schedule was announced. The country has seen a spike in political violence, mainly targeting the Opposition. The government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina denies the allegations and blames the BNP for violence. Last week, Mahbub Talukdar, an election commissioner, said there was no level playing field between the ruling Awami League and the Opposition. In a report published on December 22, Human Rights Watch said that "arrests and other repressive measures... have contributed to a climate of fear". Ever since democracy was restored in 1990-91, election seasons have been tumultuous. In the past when the BNP was in power, it had refused to step down after its tenure ended. In 1996, the Awami League led mass movements for elections, while in 2006 a military-backed caretaker government postponed the election, which was finally held in December 2008. Since then, Ms. Hasina has held power.

This time, she is seeking re-election with a formidable record in government. During the last 10 years the economy has seen a relatively high growth rate, hitting 7.8% last fiscal. Bangladesh also improved on social indicators over the past decade. While the Sheikh Hasina government takes credit for this as well as its tough stand on Islamist militancy, it faces criticism for its authoritarian turn. The passing of the Digital Security Bill and the crackdown on student protests in Dhaka drew flak even from Awami League supporters. On the other side, the Opposition is trying to channel the resentment towards the government. Khaleda Zia, BNP leader and a former Prime Minister, is disqualified from contesting as she is in prison for corruption, and the Opposition has brought in Kamal Hossain, a jurist who was a minister in Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's government, to lead the alliance. But the Opposition's tacit alliance with the Jamaat-e-Islami, the militant Islamist party whose registration with the Election Commission was revoked after a 2013 court ruling, has been alarming. BNP workers too have been involved in violent incidents. For the Awami League, the election should have been an opportunity to break with the history of violence and seek the mandate based on its performance. But its increasing tendency to use force against the Opposition and the violence by its party activists have already marred the election process.

The Congress must strengthen its democratic processes while choosing CMs

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