

A narrower field

The sentencing of former Bangladesh Prime Minister and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) leader Khaleda Zia to five years in jail is on charges of corruption. In public perception, however, Zia's incarceration paves the way for a further consolidation of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's vast political power. If the BNP leader is not allowed to participate in general elections scheduled for December this year, and her party boycotts the polls like it did five years ago in 2013, then Hasina and her Awami League party may accumulate such untrammelled power that, many feel, she may be tempted to transform Bangladesh into a state less democratic.

Of course, that day is still far away. But the fact remains that Hasina's reputation at home has rapidly deteriorated — from the brave courageous woman who returned home despite the fact that her family members, including her father, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rehman, were killed by the assassin's bullet in 1975. The nation was still so young, then, just born of a bloody war. But in the past five years, during her

second term as prime minister, Bangladeshis are angry that she has seemingly condoned nepotism, corruption and faction-fighting, and this has contributed to her growing unpopularity. By all accounts, she has not been able to let go of her terrible personal animosity against Zia. She believes the BNP is hand in glove with the Jamaat-i-Islami, several of whose members once colluded with the enemy, Pakistan, in the liberation war. Some of this may even be true. Hasina's enormous trauma and perhaps even a personal desire for revenge may be understandable. But for a prime minister to be seen to stake her country's future at the altar of hate can only diminish her — and drag her country down.

Hasina's inability to create the democratic space that will allow her opponent to be judged by the people of Bangladesh risks undermining the spirit of the liberation war in which most Bangladeshis — including Khaleda's husband, then Major Ziaur Rahman, who read the declaration of independence on behalf of Sheikh Mujib on March 27, 1971 — fought shoulder to shoulder with each other, against Pakistan. For Hasina, otherwise so brave in fighting both terrorists and radical Islamists, to be seen to be actively creating the conditions to bring Zia down, is to sow the seeds of a brittle state. The courts did well to convict Zia for corruption. But Bangladesh's prime minister needs to dig deeper into her reserves to build the sinews of a democratic and compassionate nation today.

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