

With Khaleda in jail, Hasina becomes even stronger

“I will be back. There is no need to cry. Do not worry and be strong,” said Khaleda Zia to her relatives this morning as she left for the Anti-Corruption Court in Dhaka, which has now sentenced the former prime minister and opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) chief five years in jail, for misappropriation of funds.

Zia's son, Tarique Rahman, has also been sentenced to ten years in prison in the same case in which mother and son were accused of embezzling \$252,000, or 21 million taka, in foreign donations meant for the Zia Orphanage Trust. The authorities accused her of setting up the Trust just before the donations started flowing in.

Khaleda's imprisonment will not allow her to contest the elections in Bangladesh slated for December and is likely to inflame the infamous rivalry with her longtime opponent and prime minister Sheikh Hasina.

The BNP had refused to contest the last general elections in 2013 as well, thereby allowing Hasina to rule the roost for the last five years. But this time the BNP was all set to contest and believed it would reap the advantage of Hasina's falling popularity.

In fact, it was also being whispered – loudly – in Dhaka that if elections were to be held in Bangladesh today, Hasina's Awami League would lose.

Nevertheless, it's unlikely that the BNP will contest if their main leader is in jail. Khaleda Zia's number two man in the party, BNP secretary general Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir is a gentle, bhadralok sort of guy and Zia's imprisonment may be the perfect opportunity for the BNP to break away from the dark shadows that have clung to her since the new country was formed in 1971, and start a new chapter.

Read | [Former Bangladesh PM Khaleda Zia gets 5 years jail in corruption case](#)

But of course, that's unlikely to happen. The fierce dynastic loyalties that verge on tribalism are well-known in South Asia and there is no better example of this self-damage than the contest between Bangladesh's main political parties, both of whom are run by women.

No wonder then that Dhaka's authorities had virtually put the city under siege this morning, in the hours before the sentencing. Schools had taken the day off, as had public and private transport. Police and paramilitary patrolled the streets in anticipation of violence.

It is not a coincidence that Sheikh Hasina inaugurated a new cantonment at Patuakhali in the south-western coastal district which is named after her – the 'Sheikh Hasina Cantonment'.

Bangladeshis say they are fed up with the aggrandizement of power in Hasina's hands, even though they acknowledge in the same breath that Khaleda Zia's time in power was really a proxy for her son Tarique Rahman, who had unleashed a reign of terror in Bangladesh when his mother was prime minister from 2001-2006.

Tarique is currently in exile in London.

The BNP's absence from the political scene for another five years will not only serve as a body blow to the party's influence across Bangladesh, it is also likely to emasculate its ideological ally, the Jamiat-i- Islami. Hasina looks set to become stronger and even more powerful, much in the

manner of her idol [Indira Gandhi](#).

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