

## The solitary prisoner

Finally, after legal proceedings dragging on for close to a decade, judgment has been delivered in the graft case against former Bangladesh Prime Minister Khaleda Zia. The authorities did not lose a moment in carting her off to prison within minutes of the judgment being pronounced. She was driven to the old and now abandoned Dhaka central jail. In all likelihood, at least until a bail petition is moved on her behalf by her lawyers, she will be the only inmate in the red building built in the British era and which has in its time been home to such prominent Bengali politicians as Bangladesh's founding father Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The prison remains notorious for the murder, in 1975, of four national leaders who led the country's government-in-exile during its war against Pakistan in 1971.

The irony for Begum Zia, who has twice been head of government, is that she is in prison not because of any political reason but because her conviction came on the heels of a corruption case filed against her, her elder son and others in 2008, by the military-backed caretaker government then in office. The charges in the case related to defalcation of money from the Zia Orphanage Trust, a body set up by Begum Zia when she was in power. Once the Awami League returned to power in the general election of December 2008, it made it clear that proceedings in the case would continue. Indeed, even as cases filed against politicians of the ruling party were quashed, and it was given out that the cases were politically motivated, those against Zia's Bangladesh Nationalist Party were kept going.

Last Thursday, Khaleda Zia had a sentence of five years in prison slapped on her. Others involved in the case, including her exiled elder son Tarique Rahman, were sentenced to ten years' imprisonment each. Tarique Rahman has been living in London since he was forced out of the country by the caretaker government led by Fakhruddin Ahmed in 2008. He has clearly opted for a life abroad owing to the many cases filed against him in Dhaka.

Now that Begum Zia is in prison, a whole series of questions has come up with regard to the state of national politics in the days ahead. Of course, BNP activists and workers have so far been unable to mount any agitation in light of their leader's conviction on corruption charges. But, given that this happens to be an election year, the BNP chairperson's incarceration raises serious questions about the future of her party, which remains, along with the ruling Awami League, powerful, owing to its mass appeal. The senior figures of the party have, of course, decided that the leadership of the BNP will now be exercised by Tarique Rahman. That decision ignores the larger reality, which is that Rahman remains in exile and is therefore in a position that will not allow him to exercise day-to-day control over the party. Making matters worse for the party is that Tarique Rahman, too, has been sentenced to a prison term along with his mother in the orphanage case. For the BNP to remain in the hands of a mother-son duo judged corrupt by the judiciary does not reflect well on the party.

The degree to which the judgment on Khaleda Zia will affect the fortunes of the ruling Awami League is also a huge question today. In recent months, the government has stumbled in some very important areas, notably in the banking sector and education. Two banks — Farmers Bank and Janata Bank — are in deep trouble as a result of the mismanagement which has characterised their working. In both instances, individuals with pronounced loyalty to the Awami League have presided over the fortunes of the banks.

None of these bad administrators has been brought to justice, which raises a good number of questions about the much-touted rule of law that the government claims is underpinning the socio-political system. Education has been badly wounded by the endless leaks of questions all the way from primary schools to examinations for the country's civil service. Despite demands for a change

at the ministry, the minister for education has not resigned or been asked to resign.

Meanwhile, demands are being made for an inclusive election this year. In a subtle way, the argument from those making such demands is that the election at the end of this year must not be a repeat of the last one in January 2014, when the BNP boycotted the ballot and as many as 153 individuals were elected to parliament unopposed. This time round, conditions promise to be different, with the BNP seemingly determined not to repeat the mistake it made nearly five years ago. The leading figures of the Awami League have publicly made it known that they would like the BNP to join the election, but in the conditions now arising out of the sentencing of the BNP's leader to a five-year prison term (her lawyers will appeal, though), the waters have become muddied somewhat. And the fact cannot be ignored that the BNP has persisted with its demand for what it calls an election-time interim government to oversee the voting. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her Awami League have predictably dismissed the suggestion.

Between now and December, it is reasonable to assume Bangladesh will go through much convulsion. The incarceration of Khaleda Zia is not the end of the story. It could well be the beginning of a new act in the drama of Bangladesh's tortuous politics.

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