

Endgame in Bangladesh

With the [sentencing of former Bangladesh Prime Minister](#) and chairperson of the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) Begum Khaleda Zia to five years rigorous imprisonment in a corruption case, the country enters into uncharted waters.

For as long as most Bangladeshis have been alive, political power in the country has been more or less evenly divided between the Awami League (AL) and the BNP. But now, for the first time, it looks as though one of the parties is within striking distance of a blow that will take the other party out of contention permanently, thereby ushering in a new era in domestic politics.

BNP and AL traded terms in office from 1991, when the BNP came to power following the first elections after nearly a decade of military rule, with the AL coming to power in 1996 and the BNP returning in 2001.

But one could argue that the BNP sowed the seeds of its current political disenfranchisement with its misbegotten rule from 2001 to 2006. Not only did the BNP-led alliance government set new standards for corruption, which would see Bangladesh ranked the most corrupt country in the world for five years in a row by the anti-corruption watchdog Transparency International, but it presided over a time of unprecedented violence against the country's minority community and the political opposition. This included the assassination of two senior AL leaders and a grenade attack on an AL public meeting that killed 24 people and injured over 300, narrowly missing then opposition leader and current Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. For this, the son of Ms. Zia, Tarique Rahman, and then home minister Lutfozzaman Babar, among others, are currently on trial for murder.

Analysis: Is it the end of the road for Khaleda Zia?

The BNP's misrule came to an end when a military-backed caretaker government seized power on January 11, 2007. The party has spent the 11 years since then in the political wilderness. Eleven years is a long time to be out of power in politics.

Initially, the BNP was in no worse position than the AL, both of which were targeted by the military-backed regime. But when elections were held in December 2008, in which the AL saw a landslide victory, the BNP began its downward slide to political oblivion, as the AL was able to leverage the perquisites of office to rebuild itself into the dominant political force in the country. BNP then suffered the usual indignities and routine repression of a party in opposition in Bangladesh, but nothing out of the ordinary, and opinion polls and local elections in advance of the 2014 national elections showed that it was in a strong position, with every chance of returning to power.

However, this was when it all started to come undone for the party. The AL had amended the constitution to do away with the caretaker government provision for holding elections, fearful that this could be used as cover for another military takeover such as what happened in 2007. Instead of taking its chances with an election held under the AL, in which it may have triumphed, the BNP dug in its heels and refused to participate unless the caretaker government was reinstated. A solid majority of the country agreed with the BNP position, but the party was unable to muster the street power to force the government to capitulate or the army to step in.

Nor did the BNP help its cause by unleashing a series of bus burnings across the country to try to force the hand of the government, which not only did not work but also dramatically decreased its popularity with the public, and raised serious questions as to its own fitness for office.

The unsuccessful BNP boycott of the 2014 elections, which returned the AL to power in a massive landslide victory, was the real turning point in Bangladeshi politics. Ever since 2014, as the AL has gone from strength to strength, the BNP has withered to a shadow of its former self under the weight of severe government repression but also its own intrinsic shortcomings and contradictions.

The repression has been serious. Many senior BNP leaders have spent months incarcerated, decimating the party's organisational capacity. And with BNP cadres and local leaders often on the run or underground, the party's ability to mobilise has dwindled to almost zero.

However, the BNP needs little help from anyone else in its rush towards irrelevance, being unable to perform even the most basic functions of an opposition party. For all the ruling party's oppressiveness and authoritarianism, the BNP's record does not suggest that it would be any better.

The AL is coming to the end of its term in office in January 2019 and must hold new elections before then. It would dearly love to goad the BNP into boycotting the elections again, ensuring a second walkover in a row and also resulting in the party having its registration cancelled as per the election law. However, the international community, most significantly India, Bangladesh's most important neighbour and the AL's principal ally, has signalled a second election in a row without BNP would be harder to accept as legitimate.

The best-case scenario for the AL therefore is the participation of a weakened BNP in the election. BNP at full strength commanded by the former Prime Minister could still be dangerous, despite the party's diminished capability. BNP with Ms. Zia sidelined is a far less alarming prospect.

If Ms. Zia is not granted leave to appeal or her conviction is made final, she will find herself barred from taking part in the upcoming election, and the demolition of the BNP will be complete. However, if she is able to appeal her conviction and get out of jail on bail, she will still be able to contest in the upcoming election.

But the AL is betting that her conviction and incarceration will encourage her party persons to jump ship and make deals, thus weakening the BNP, if not persuade them to ditch Ms. Zia for good. Putting her behind bars, even temporarily, sends a strong signal as to where power resides, and can be expected to discourage BNP cadres and hasten the eventual collapse of the party as an effective opposition force.

Either way, it does not look likely that BNP will be in much of a position to mount a credible election challenge. While it might be too early to write the BNP's political obituary, it is difficult to see how it can come back from this.

The endgame in the decades-long struggle for supremacy between the AL and BNP is finally upon Bangladesh, and while the BNP may limp along until the end of the year, its days as a credible challenger to the AL appear to be all but finished.

The question that Bangladeshis are asking themselves now is: if the BNP is finished, then who — if anyone — will take its place and what would that mean for the future?

No one knows the answer.

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