

BNP in a bind: On Khaleda Zia conviction

The [sentencing of former Bangladesh Prime Minister Khaleda Zia](#) to five years of rigorous imprisonment by a special judge's court in Dhaka on charges of corruption has upended politics in an election year. Her arrest and possible disqualification from contesting — unless higher courts decide otherwise — has created a political crisis for her Bangladesh Nationalist Party, and equally a challenging opportunity for the ruling Awami League. The BNP is entirely dependent for leadership on the Zia family. With Ms. Zia's son Tarique Rahman, who has been named the acting chairperson of the party, in exile in London after being convicted in another corruption case in 2016, the BNP is caught in a bind. Elections are scheduled for December 2018, and even before Ms. Zia's conviction the party was struggling. The BNP had boycotted the previous elections in 2014, practically allowing the Awami League a walkover. It was, in hindsight, a questionable strategy. Since 2014 the BNP has suffered significant erosion in its organisation. Besides Ms. Zia being embroiled in dozens of corruption cases, party activists have also been hauled up in several cases. Ms. Zia is expected to appeal the judgment, and could be eligible to contest elections after release on bail — but the conviction will weigh heavily on her party's fortunes.

Endgame in Bangladesh

Bangladeshis will hope the BNP gets its act together, because the withdrawal of the party from the electoral fray has not been beneficial for democracy. While it did not make tactical sense for the BNP to boycott polls in 2014, the consequent victory by walkover did not help the Awami League to assert its legitimacy. In what is effectively a two-party polity, the absence of the BNP as an opposition within Parliament had externalised dissent and led right-wing forces to up their intimidatory tactics to attack liberal, secular voices. Since the end of dictatorship in 1990, Bangladesh alternated between Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's Awami League and Ms. Zia's BNP, with short interregnums of army and judicial rule, till the League's re-election in 2014. The two parties have battled in a vituperative game, each trying its best to muzzle the other while in power and the party in opposition preferring the street to the legislature to make its presence felt. Attempts to build a third force or project a different set of leaders from among these two leading parties have so far come to naught. Keeping this in mind, the Awami League government should be cautious about being seen to be interfering in the judicial process in Ms. Zia's cases. If Ms. Zia is allowed to contest elections, pending her appeal to a higher court, the Awami League should welcome the contest.

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