

Bangladesh government suppresses opposition protests

By Wimal Perera
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In the lead-up to national elections due by January, opposition parties led by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) called protests last Friday and strikes from Sunday to demand a caretaker government to oversee the polls.

The Awami League-led government responded with police repression. At least 15 people have been killed and more than 100 injured since Friday in violent clashes with police backed by paramilitary border guards and the country's notorious Rapid Action Battalion (RAB). Police attacked protesters with tear gas and batons, and fired live rounds.

BNP leader Khaleda Zia told a rally of more than 100,000 supporters in central Dhaka that there would be no election under Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. "We won't allow any one-party election," she said. "The election must include all parties and be conducted under a neutral caretaker government."

The Awami League has rejected the demand and proposed to appoint an interim government, headed by the prime minister and including parliamentarians from all parties.

Hasina has justified her proposal by pointing to the last experience of a caretaker government, appointed by the previous BNP administration in 2007, which opened the door for a military-backed regime that suspended the constitution. That regime carried out the demands of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for drastic pro-market restructuring.

After repeatedly delaying that election, the caretaker government was finally forced to hold a poll in December 2008. The Awami League and its allies won in a landslide, taking 260 seats in the 300-seat parliament. The government abolished the caretaker system in 2011 by introducing the 15th amendment to the constitution.

The Awami League and the BNP are bourgeois parties, representing rival factions of the ruling elite, both of which have ridden roughshod over basic democratic rights. The Awami League traces its roots to the formation of Bangladesh in 1972. It was installed in power, with the backing of India, in what had been East Pakistan following an armed uprising against rule from West Pakistan. The BNP was established by former army chief Lieutenant General Ziaur (Zia) Rahman, who headed a military-backed regime established after the assassination of Awami League leader Mujiber Rahman in 1975. Since the end of military rule in 1991, the BNP and Awami League have engaged in a bitter contest for power.

Despite its overwhelming win in the 2008 election, the Awami League is facing the prospect of defeat in the upcoming election. The Hasina government is widely discredited among workers and the urban and rural poor. In June and July, the Awami League lost local council elections in five major cities, including Chittagong, Sylhet and Gazipur, as voters registered their hostility to the government by voting BNP.

The Hasina government has compounded the social crisis facing millions of working people by implementing the IMF's demands for austerity. Cuts to price subsidies have driven up the cost of fuel, electricity and basic commodities.

The recent wave of strikes over wages and conditions in the Export Development Zones is a measure of the resentment and anger among the country's four million garment workers against the government, businesses and international retailers. Last November, 112 garment workers died in the Tazreen factory fires. In April, 1,127 people, mostly garment workers, were killed in the Rana Plaza building collapse.

Desperate to cling to power, the Awami League is

seeking to use the machinery of government to rig the election in its favour. In August, the country's supreme court barred the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) from taking part in the general election on the grounds that it was against secularism. The Islamist JI is a key BNP ally.

To undermine its rivals, the government has also reactivated trials of those accused of war crimes during the 1971 struggle for separation from Pakistan. Charges have been brought against people alleged to have collaborated in the Pakistani army's atrocities. A special tribunal has already handed down death sentences for several JI leaders and a BNP parliamentarian.

Hasina faces growing discontent among the Awami League's coalition partners. The Jatiya Party announced that it will stand independently in the election. Other coalition partners, including the Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal, Workers Party, Samyabadi Dal, and Communist Kendra, have called for parliament to be dissolved. The Awami League has refused to do so.

At a BNP rally last week, Zia declared that the government would be "illegal" from October 27—the date under which a caretaker would have been appointed, before the constitutional change. She appealed to government officials, the military and police not to carry out allegedly illegal orders and to cooperate with the opposition. In March, Zia made a thinly-veiled appeal for a military coup, calling on the army to end the "anarchy" in the country and "restore law and order."

Big business has expressed concerns that the "confrontational politics" of the two main parties will further destabilise the country. The Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry, has urged "the political parties to solve the political problems through discussions and shun the path of conflicts and violence."

Washington has also intervened in the political turmoil. US Ambassador Dan Mozena issued a statement calling on the government and opposition to settle their differences through dialogue and elections.

Teresa Kho, country director for the Asian Development Bank (ADB), warned that "political tension ... is not helpful for maintaining steady economic activities." The ADB lowered its economic forecast for the fiscal year 2013-14 to 5.8 percent, compared to the government's target of 7.2 percent.

The BNP is making a pitch to big business, vowing to continue the pro-market agenda of the Awami League. In its program, it promised to learn from its past mistakes and advance its Vision 2030 to make Bangladesh a "higher-middle income country by 2030." This is a blueprint for deepening the attacks on the living conditions of the working people in order to boost the country's "international competitiveness."

The BNP manifesto also makes an appeal to the US and Europe, foreshadowing a "special relationship" and plans "to get engaged in dynamic trade relationships with European and western countries." Signalling its readiness to work with India and the US, the BNP declares that it "would not allow any act of terrorism within the territory."

The social conditions facing the working class and poor are appalling. Nearly one-third of Bangladesh's 155 million people live below the poverty line, on less than \$US2 a day. Whether the BNP or the Awami League wins the election, the next government will continue to impose the burden of the economic crisis on working people and use police-state measures to suppress resistance.

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