

Bangladeshi government cracks down on opposition protests

By Wimal Perera
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The Bangladeshi government yesterday deployed tens of thousands of police and members of the notorious paramilitary Rapid Action Battalions (RAB) in Dhaka to suppress the so-called March for Democracy called by the opposition Bangladesh National Party (BNP).

The security forces used tear gas and rubber bullets against opposition activists who assembled at various points in the capital in preparation to march to the BNP headquarters. At least one opposition activist was killed—Mansur Pradhania who died from bullet wounds. Hundreds were arrested.

Police set up barricades around the home of BNP leader Begum Khalida Zia and prevented her from leaving to drive to the party headquarters to attend the rally.

The opposition BNP and its allies are boycotting national elections scheduled for January 5 and are demanding that the ruling Awami League-led coalition quit office and appoint a caretaker government to conduct the election.

As a result of the boycott, the election commission has already announced that the Awami League has won 127 out of 154 uncontested seats, leaving just 146 seats to be decided at the poll. The result, however, will be widely regarded as illegitimate and will only deepen the country's political crisis.

Speaking to the media, Zia declared: "This is an illegitimate government that operates in autocratic ways. They have taken away the people's right to vote and I call on Bangladeshis to rise up and save our democracy." The opposition parties plan to continue the protests daily up until January 5.

There is no doubt that the deeply unpopular Awami League government is using anti-democratic methods to cling to power. However, Zia's claims to be a

champion of democracy are an utter fraud. When in office, Zia and the BNP have been just as ruthless in dealing with any opposition as the present government.

The BNP was formed by Zia ur Rehman, the country's first military dictator. During its last term of office from 2001 to 2006, the BNP was closely associated with the Islamist parties—JeI and Islami Oikyo Jote (IOJ) that also have connections in the military. The BNP government was responsible for establishing the RAB in 2004 to suppress protests by workers, students and peasants.

The Awami League won a landslide victory in the December 2008 election after a military-backed caretaker government was forced to call a poll. But like the BNP, the new government implemented the directives of big business and foreign investors for austerity measures and the suppression of workers' demands for higher wages and better conditions, particularly in the country's key garment export industry.

Speaking at an election rally last Thursday, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina accused the opposition of political violence and declared that she would put Zia on trial for terrorism. "The opposition leader will be charged with giving orders for killing and burning people to death," she said.

At the instigation of the government, a tribunal has been established to investigate allegations of war crimes carried out by groups aligned with the Pakistani military's brutal suppression the 1971 mass uprising that led to the secession of East Pakistan and formation of Bangladesh.

On December 12, Abdul Quader Mollah, a leader of the opposition Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI), was executed after being convicted of rape and murder. While the JeI, which is aligned with the BNP, was undoubtedly

responsible for terrible crimes, the Awami League is cynically exploiting the issue to weaken the opposition. Last year, the High Court banned the JeI on the grounds that its Islamist program contravened the country's constitution.

The government has now detained the leader of the Jatiya Party, Hussein Muhammad Ershad, since December 12, after he announced that his party would withdraw its nominations for the election. Ershad, a former military dictator, had been an ally of the Awami League. His decision to boycott the poll further undermined its legitimacy.

Yesterday's protests follow a month of opposition-led demonstrations, general shutdowns and strikes that have led to violent confrontations between the opposition and the security forces and pro-government thugs. At least 100 people have been killed.

Sections of the media have urged an end to the political crisis. An editorial in the *Dhaka Tribune* editorial yesterday declared: "Denying permission to the opposition to hold their March for Democracy was a mistake." The *Daily Star* editorial called on the government to "postpone the January 5 election in the larger interest of the nation's future."

Big business is concerned about the impact on the economy. Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry President Kazi Akram Uddin Ahmed stated: "We had seen a positive growth in investment for the last two years, but the latest confrontational political situation broke the continuity." The Board of Investment reported that investment for January–November 2013 was down 60 percent year-on-year.

As well as concerns about the economic consequences, there are also fears in ruling circles about the eruption of social unrest as the gulf between rich and poor deepens.

The proportion of the population below the poverty line of \$US1.25 per day was 43 percent on average between 2006 and 2011. The literacy rate for the age group 11–44 years is just 53.7 percent. Some 60 percent of the country's urban population and 75 percent of the rural population do not have access to basic healthcare.

According to a UNICEF report, 41 percent of children under the age of five suffer from moderate to

severe stunting, an indicator of chronic malnutrition. The country has one of the highest malnutrition rates in the world.

Since independence in 1972, the Awami League and the BNP have held office alternatively, except for 15 years in which the military imposed its rule. Each has used the levers of office to benefit their business cronies and patronage networks. Their record in office is a stark demonstration of the inability of any section of the capitalist class to address the burning social problems and democratic aspirations of the working class and rural poor.

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