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India-Bangladesh: What if the BNP returns?

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by Aparupa Bhattacharjee and Sourina Bej

Bangladesh is gearing up for its general election in December, this year. With its two main political parties—the BNP and AL (Awami League) led by Begum Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina respectively hedging against each other—the election will be decisive in determining the future of bi-party politics in the country along with shaping the roadmap for Bangladesh in the region. After holding power for two consecutive terms an anti-incumbency wave could be identified against the Awami League. The electoral ground is fertile for the Bangladesh Nationalist Party chief, Khaleda Zia, to come out of her political hibernation and contest the election. But the imprisonment of the BNP (Bangladesh Nationalist Party) chairperson, Khaleda Zia, on corruption charges just before the country entered the voting phase has raised two questions. First, how will the arrest of BNP chief impact the electoral future and bi-party politics in Bangladesh? Is this verdict a death-knell for the party? Secondly, would this election result affect the current India-Bangladesh relations?

Bangladesh Electoral Politics: The political significance of BNP

Elected two times in 1991 and 2001, the BNP has since drawn its electoral strength from its ideological leanings on Islamist groups and its principle of “preserving the values of the Bangladesh through the teaching of Islam”. The political use of Islam, exploitation of factionalism and reintegration of core religious groups like Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen, Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh, Harkat-ul-Jihad Islami (HUJI), Hizbul Tahrir and Hizbul Tawhid has kept the grass-root support for the BNP formidable. The party has often been criticised for patronising groups like JMB/JMJB and HUJI which were engaged in various terrorist activities through-out the country. Against such Rightist ideology, the AL has gone on to

represent the Centrist and liberal standing in the political fabric of the country. Ever since, the *politik* has alternated between the two Begums representing two vivid moods of the Bangladeshi electorate. Thus on February 8, 2018, when Khaleda Zia was convicted by a Special Court 5 for embezzling approximately 2.10 crore Taka along with five of her BNP cadres and her son, Tarique Rehman, (the Vice-Chairman of the party), a question looms large on whether the BNP will be able to even contest the elections, leave alone enlarging its chances of returning as the ruling party.

With this, for the first time a new era in the domestic politics of Bangladesh emerges, where along with the political battle a legal battle will determine the existence of one party as against the return of another.

The verdict was against the Zia Foundation Trust Orphanage, a case filed by the Anti-Corruption Commission. The Special Court has sentenced Khaleda to a five-year prison-term. As per the Bangladeshi electoral laws, a person convicted for more than two years is barred from contesting any election for the next five years. In this context, the absence of the Chairperson and the Vice-Chairperson has left the party leaderless. Does this mean the BNP will be forced to boycott this year's election similar to 2014? The answer appears to be a no, for the following reasons.

Firstly, the BNP's 2014 election boycott was a wrong decision as it led the AL to come back to power uncontested. The BNP's demand to participate in the election only under a neutral government has led the party to stay out of the political frontline for nearly a decade. The 2014 election for Bangladesh was free but not fair. According to several analysts, if the BNP had contested in 2014, it would have won. Hence the mistakes of the past have not only cost the BNP its political base but also the confidence of the electorate. This is not something the BNP would want to repeat in this election.

Secondly, the current corruption case is not the only legal charge against the BNP leader. Apart from the current legal quagmire, Khaleda has been fighting 36 more legal wars. Not only her but even her son, presently in exile in London, has 15 cases registered against him. In Bangladesh, it is nothing new for legal cases being registered against the leaders. Even Sheikh Hasina has 15 cases pending against her. And in 2010, while she was in power, a corruption case against her was dropped. Hence it is of little surprise that the Zia Trust case under Zia's family has been blamed on political manoeuvring. This aspect is not only stressed by the BNP but is also something that most voters believe, as vengeance is the endgame that both the Begums have been playing against each other.

Third, the aspect of political manoeuvring is further compounded by the fact that the judgment has come from a special court. It is a commonly known fact that special courts in most of the South Asian countries are not trusted especially when it involves the political leaders. In addition, the fact that the special court is a lower court and its writ is limited makes one hopeful of the change in the final verdict for the Begum.

Will the BNP succeed against the AL?

The BNP is likely to contest the verdict in the High Court. Even if Begum Zia is detained, there is little reason to believe that it cannot contest the election. In fact this could favour the party. The 2014 election was largely criticised as a 'single-party' election with 230 of 300 seats being won by the AL. Hence if 2018 witnesses an all-party participation, in a 'free and fair' environment, the BNP could form a government with a majority. Thus Begum Zia's arrest is seen within the country as an act to deter her return. Her staying in jail and still contesting the election instead of boycotting will probably be seen by the voters as heroic and gain her the necessary sympathy votes.

In addition, the Bangladeshi voters are unhappy with the way in which the AL is dealing with domestic issues such as: growing unemployment, undue support to radical Islamist groups like Hefazat-e-Islam, handling of the Rohingya crisis and others. Therefore in this election the voters are desperate for an alternative. Bangladesh has a tradition of anti-incumbency. Since 1990 its electorate has not returned the same government to power for two consecutive terms with an exception in January 2014. Hence given the two-party nature of the Bangladesh politics with power tussle and political vendetta as significant features, the BNP is a likely alternative.

The political uncertainty within Bangladesh will also bear an impact on the India-Bangladesh relations. The two parties of Bangladesh have maintained drastically different worldviews and followed different foreign policies when in power. While the Awami League since Mujibur Rahman has sought and maintained bonhomie with India, the US; the BNP has explored a relationship with Pakistan China and Saudi Arabia during its tenure. Thus India's relations with Bangladesh have time and again oscillated the balance between the two Begums, depending on who is in power. In the current scenario, if Khaleda Zia comes to power, a policy readjust-ment would become crucial.

India-Bangladesh: Should India

look beyond AL?

Over the past decade, Bangladesh's economy has been growing at 7.1 per cent with less trade deficit. With Dhaka emerging as the world's second largest garment exporter, its trade relations have expanded exponentially under the Awami League. With an expanding trade, there has been a simultaneous emergence of a pool of Bangladeshi businessmen and industrialists in Parliament. This indicates that more and more businessmen have started dominating major foreign policy and economic decision-making in Bangladesh. An alignment of trade interests with the different countries has emerged. Hence even though Indian corporations such as Airtel, Reliance are contributing to Bangladesh's economy, over the past few years, China has emerged as the largest trading partner of Bangladesh, replacing India. In the 2012 financial year, bilateral trade between China and Bangladesh was at \$ 8.5 billion. In 2015, when China sanctioned a \$ 24-billion credit line to Dhaka, New Delhi offered \$ 2 billion. In addition India is often accused of imposing tariff and non-tariff barriers on Bangladeshi goods. These factors have led to the building-up of an anti-India lobby in Bangladesh's economic community. But Hasina has been prudent to balance both Indian and Chinese interest in the country.

Keeping this economic scenario in context, in the current electoral turmoil, if the BNP manages to contest and come to power, then the party, which is known to take anti-India positions like its opposition to the Ganga-water sharing treaty, would have to be taken seriously by India. And New Delhi would have to continue manoeuvring Dhaka's business community for more steady economic relations. Furthermore for deeper electoral gains, the BNP could use the China card, rely on foreign support and sway the anti-India sentiment which could prove difficult for India to balance in the future.

Secondly, the BJP's win in the North-Eastern States of Tripura, Meghalaya and Assam bordering Bangladesh, could put the question of Bangladeshi immigration issue back in the bilateral dialogue between India and Bangladesh. The BJP's handling of the immigration issue could stoke communal violence fraying the borders. Skirmishes in the relations have occurred in the past due to the Indian political leaders' outright statements on the issue. With a viable scope for the BNP coming to power a problematic North-East could mean a destabilising Bangladesh; hence India should guard against politicising the already sensitive issue.

Lastly, Dhaka has agreed to link India's mainland with its North-East through Bangladesh, thereby letting its Act East Policy overcome the geographical trap and allowing access to South-East Asia. As part of it, Bangladesh has been pursuing to set up the BCIM (Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar) economic corridor which also figured in the joint statement following the Chinese Prime Minister's visit to India. Bangladesh wants China to develop its Chittagong port and even build a deep sea port at Sonadia. Moreover, the BCIM intends to link Kolkata with Kunming through Bangladesh and Myanmar. The BCIM might contribute to

the economic progress of Bangladesh, but will also increase China's presence. With this trans-national economic interest and connectivity projects in operation, working with the BNP will be an important step that India might have to consider.

As India's support for Hasina continues it could be too soon to write off Khaleda from the political battleground of Bangladesh and with Khaleda, it would be interesting and important to see how India maintains the bi-party balance.

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The authors are Research Associates, National Institute of Advanced Studies, Indian Institute of Science campus, Bengaluru.

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