

ISAS Brief

No. 84 – Date: 17 September 2008

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Return of the Two *Begums*: A ‘Hobson’s Choice’ for Bangladesh?

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After an 18-month roller coaster ride, Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia, the two former Prime Ministers and heads of the two major political parties in Bangladesh, the Bangladesh Awami League (BAL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) respectively, have returned to the country’s political scene. The caretaker government that took over on 11 January 2007, with a strong military backing and an overwhelming support from the masses, has finally given up its “minus-two formula” and other political reform packages, realising the ineluctable reality that it is ultimately these two *Begums* who hold the key to lead (or mislead) the nation.

The comeback of these two matriarchs is no less dramatic than the return of the King in the famous movie “The Lord of the Rings”. This cult movie divulges how even the least of us can change the world through courage, commitment and determination. But the reality for the common people in Bangladesh is far from fiction. For the country’s 150 million people, it is rather a “Hobson’s choice”.¹

The interim government is apparently looking for a safe exit strategy, leaving the country in the hand in either of the two *Begums*. Apprehensions over the parliament pools and a potential army take over are fast fading, and it is highly likely that a new democratically-elected government will take over the helm of the country by early 2009, if not earlier.

A Tale of Three Regimes: Have All of Them Failed?

The fundamental question is whether the return of the so-called “illiberal democracies”,² led by Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia, will be able to solve the country’s prolonged political malaise? If not, then what are the alternative forms of governance available for the country? Did either the cantonment or the caretaker governments deliver any better results than the

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¹ The phrase is believed to be originated from Thomas Hobson (1544-1630), a livery stable owner in Cambridge, England, who, in order to rotate the use of his horses, offered customers the choice of either taking the horse in the stall nearest to the door or taking none at all.

² The term is owed to Fareed Zakaria, a noted political and foreign policy analyst. For details, see “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy,” *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 1997.

illiberal democracies? To comprehend these questions, it is worth looking at the brief history of the different forms of regimes that the nation has witnessed to date.

Since its inception in 1971, Bangladesh has been ruled mainly by military and democratically-elected governments. But neither the military nor the illiberal democracies have been able to fulfill the Bangladeshi people's expectations. A few caretaker governments, *inter alia*, have also governed the nation, albeit their tenure, except the current caretaker government, has been short-lived due to constitutional obligations.³

The poor performance of the military rulers and less than impressive developments during the Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina's regimes gave the Bangladeshi people the belief that they would perhaps be better off under a non-partisan plain-clothed government. After all, the three successive apolitical caretaker governments in 1991, 1996 and 2001 with their 90-day tenure, had captured the Bangladeshi people's hearts and minds. But the fourth caretaker government (2006-07) lost its credibility and collapsed eventually, as it was highly politicised by the then- BNP government.

When the army-backed non-partisan new caretaker government took over in January 2007, it received widespread support, both at home and abroad. This is because the three successive governments since the fall of the military government in 1990 failed to deliver any roadmap to the nation. The political leaders' involvement in widespread corruption and politicisation of almost all the institutions had caused much frustration among masses. Moreover, the two major political parties' bitter rivalries kept the country in permanent turmoil.

As a result, the current interim government's reform agenda received overwhelming support from the people. There was also no hue and cry when it decided to extend its tenure beyond 90 days. It has been 18 months since the apolitical caretaker government took over the country. However, it has achieved mixed results. It implemented some important institutional reforms that were not possible under the so-called democratic governments, due to political considerations. But it suffered on the economic front. In a sense, this was rather unfortunate as the caretaker government's assumption of power coincided with mounting fears of a food price spiral in global markets and high energy prices. Another important reason for its economic failure was its inability to gain the confidence of businesses and investors, and this can be traced to the uncertainty over its tenure. Further, the interim government, which consists of 10 advisers, has been overseeing 42 ministries. This is humanly impossible, given the magnitude of the challenges facing the country.

On the whole, the 18-month long tenure of the current interim government has not totally proven that a non-partisan plain-clothed government can do a better job for the country, as compared to the other forms of governments in Bangladesh.

³ In the parlance of institutional government, a caretaker government is one which normally takes care of the state administration for an interim period until the regular new government is formed. (Banglapedia, available at www.banglapedia.net/). Article 58B [under chapter IIA] of the Bangladesh Constitution legitimises the caretaker government. The tenure of a caretaker government is generally three months. The current army-backed interim government which took over in January 2007 has extended its tenure to beyond the length set by the Bangladesh Constitution and there are some controversies about the nature of the government.

Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia: A ‘Hobson’s Choice’?

The sad truth for Bangladesh is that, regardless of how bad the leadership of the BAL and the BNP may be, it is highly likely that the two parties will remain on Bangladesh’s political scene in the near future. If the long due parliament elections are held by the end of this year, it is expected that either the BAL or the BNP will return to power. This means that one of the two *Begums* could come back to power soon. What does it mean for the Bangladesh people? For them, it is really a Hobson’s choice – they either accept an illiberal democracy (led by Khaleda Zia or Sheikh Hasina) or have nothing at all.

The acute dilemma for the masses is that there is no “third power” in Bangladesh politics that they could support and vote into power. There have been several attempts to initiate a third front in Bangladesh politics to break the political monopoly of the BNP and the BAL. There has also been an attempt to reform the major political parties. However, nothing has worked for the interim authority.

Routine fair and free elections have failed to institutionalise democracy in Bangladesh. The business people who dominate in Bangladesh politics are mainly responsible for the malfunctioning of the parliament. After being elected into power, they use the mandate given to them by the people for their own personal gains rather than to look after the needs of the people. The country’s major institutions have also been routinely politicised. The “winners take all” policy often creates conflicts of interest between the BNP and the BAL. All these issues have been responsible for the current sad state of affairs in Bangladesh, a country which held so much promise for its people but which has failed to deliver on all fronts – socio-political and economic.

Two Silver Linings

The key question now is whether the BAL and BNP will learn some lessons from history. If the past is any guide, there is very little hope, really.

However, there are two silver linings. First, the current interim government’s sweep against political corruption may help the Bangladeshi people judge the candidates during elections according to their corruption records⁴ *inter alia* and this may keep the politicians in some sort of check. The second silver lining is the presence of a strong anti-incumbency factor that exists in Bangladesh’s politics. Indeed, it was this main consideration that prompted the then-BNP government to politicise the fourth caretaker administration. As the gap between performance and promises remains wide, people normally oust the immediate past government in parliamentary elections. As such, one can hope that the major political parties will learn from their past mistakes and help to refine the country’s political system.

For the best interest and betterment of Bangladesh’s 150 million people, the speed of change should be much faster than the current pace, if change is going to take place at all, and it should happen in the short run. After all, as famously observed by great economist John Maynard Keynes, “we are all dead in the long run”.

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⁴ The Anti Corruption Commission of Bangladesh has disclosed the corruption records of the top political leaders of BNP and BAL, among others.