

Bangladesh: Getting Ready For Elections: The BNP's Dilemma

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It is now getting clear that towards the end of this year, Bangladesh will be having general elections. Both the main parties the Awami League and the BNP have begun preparations for the elections.

But recently, Khaleda Zia gave a curious direction to the party cadres to prepare for the elections and also prepare for a 'movement'. Certainly both cannot be done together. Either the party meekly participates in the polls held with the present government in charge or go all out for a movement to prevent the conduct of the polls. The cadres are said to be confused. In trying to do both simultaneously, the party may fall between the stools. It is also doubtful whether the party in its current condition can start a major nation wide movement to prevent the elections!

In the same breath, Khaleda declared that they would "surely" join the election, but it has to be held under a neutral and non party government! It has also called for a dialogue on the issue. It is uncertain whether the Awami League would relent for a dialogue and even if it happens, it looks that the Awami League led government may not relent on the issue of conducting the elections while in power as provided for in the Constitution.

The Awami League is aware that the BNP has no choice but to contest the elections if the party has to remain relevant. The Awami League is also aware that the BNP has not had any major movement in the last year and a half and any such movement on a large scale will not be tolerated either by the government or by the people, despite the fact the BNP's connections with the violence prone JEI is still in tact.

It is now realised by the leaders of the BNP and more so by the rank and file that they had made a mistake in boycotting the 2014 elections.

By indulging in violence and arson (in one instance a bus was burnt with all passengers inside!) to prevent the lawfully elected Government, the party ended up with innumerable cases in the courts some of which are still pending. The leaders had to spend most of their time in going to the courts and the prisons in connection with the cases.

Some BNP leaders have said that the present movement to get a neutral free government will be “peaceful.” With the Jamaat cadres in tow, any movement by the BNP will end up in violence and instead of achieving its objective of getting a polls free neutral government, the senior leaders of the party may end up in being jailed on the eve of elections. This will be unfortunate as the party has a good chance of a creditable showing in the next elections.

It looks that BNP has to find some decent and adequate excuse to participate in the next elections as the present government is in no mood to change the constitutional provisions relating to the conduct of the elections.

In her address to the nation, Sheikh Hasina spelled out very clearly her government’s stand on the next elections. Unlike Khaleda she was forthright and decisive. She said

- * General election will be held in line with the Constitutional provisions.
- * Elections will be held towards the end of 2018.
- * How the election is to be conducted is clearly stated in the Constitution (meaning no deviation to suit the demands of the BNP is acceptable)
- * An Election time Government will be formed under the Constitution which will provide all out cooperation to the Election Commission to conduct the elections.
- * The Election Commission was constituted in a fair manner and has earned people’s confidence through conducting some local government elections, including one or two city corporations in a fair manner.
- * some vested quarters might try to create anarchy in the country centering on the next elections.

Sheikh Hasina in the same address to the nation listed the achievements of her government particularly in its economy and in containing terrorism and militancy. She said that her country is determined to cross the middle income group by 2021 and a developed and prosperous one by 2041.

Indeed Hasina's government has made impressive strides in economy with the growth rate of 7.28 percent in 2017 proving the estimates of international agencies wrong and surpassing the official yearly target of 7.2 percent! With this historical growth its GDP size stood at nearly \$250 billion and the per capita income has increased to \$1610 last year from \$1465. It has proved Kissinger wrong and has never been a "basket case".

Bangladesh has made an impressive socio economic progress and it is now 44th largest world economy and 33rd in terms of purchasing power.

The Government's relentless pursuit against terrorism is also yielding results. The recent raid on January 2nd of a raid against 'Neo JMB' in Chittagong led to arrests and recovery of suicide vests and hand grenades is a case in point.

A confrontation on a relatively minor issue like a poll free government should not affect general stability and economic progress of the country. If the opposition could succeed in the recent mayoral elections - one in Comilla and another in Rangpur when the present government is in power, it should also be possible to conduct the general elections in a free and fair manner.

The BNP has to review its position and not go for a confrontation. This is in its own interest and in the interest of the country.

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[bangladesh](#) ^[1]

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[Bangladesh Economy](#) ^[3]

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[Papers](#) ^[5]

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[Bangladesh](#) ^[6]

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[Political](#) ^[7]

[Economy](#) ^[8]

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