

POLITICAL ISLAM & THE ELECTIONS IN BANGLADESH

Frances Harrison

June 2013

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Postscript: After completing this report, Golam Azam the former leader of Jamaat-e-Islam, was sentenced to 90 years in prison for crimes against humanity and the party, Jamaat-e-Islami, declared unconstitutional and barred from contesting elections.

Introduction

This publication is intended as a briefing paper for visiting journalists, election observers and others. It focuses on political Islam in Bangladesh in the run up to the tenth general elections.

It comes at a time when the world's third largest Muslim country is in crisis over its identity - should Bangladeshi politics be steered predominately by Islam or Bengali secularism? Many describe this as a make-or-break struggle for the heart of the nation, still to be resolved forty years on. The pending elections are adding an extra degree of urgency to these debates. All agree this vote is of the utmost importance for the country's future. Recent months have seen the opposing ideologies spilling on to the streets. Tens of thousands of teenage boys from Deobandi madrasa occupied parts of the capital, in response to young secular Bangladeshis, in what's known as the Shahbagh movement, calling for tougher action against war criminals and Islamists.

So uncertain and fluid is the situation that it's possible elections won't happen on time at the end of this year. Much hinges on finding an alternative for the abolished caretaker government system. When I asked newspaper editors, academics, and analysts if the polls would take place on schedule, they repeatedly called this "the million dollar question". Asked what the percentage chances were of timely polls, one journalist thought for a while and then just said it was between zero and one hundred.

Several Bangladeshis confided they had never been so worried about Islamists gaining ground because of the confrontation between the two main political leaders.

"They are creating a Frankenstein's monster in the Islamic fundamentalists and they can see it but they are still addicted," is how one observer described the power struggle between Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her rival, the opposition leader, Khaleda Zia. Again and again, commentators repeated that both ladies would prefer the army to come to power than their rival. However, nobody believed the military actually wanted to seize power.

The ongoing war crimes trial is adding extra pressure to the situation because it's come to be perceived by a significant section of Islamists as in conflict with their religion. Some liberal Bangladeshis believe the Awami League has failed to articulate a counter-argument, despite the government's control of many mosques and the state media.

A key unknown is whether some of the convicted Jamaat-e-Islami war criminals will be hanged before the elections and what the impact might be on the already volatile political situation. One Jamaat-e-Islami member described the current state as the lull before the storm. Executions could lead to a groundswell of popular support for the Awami League among those Bangladeshis who feel those responsible for terrible crimes have never faced justice. However it's a huge gamble because executions could push Jamaat-e-Islami to violent extremism and destabilise the whole country. In March 2013 a police official confirmed large areas of the country were no-go areas for his men during the protests after the sentencing of one of the accused in the war crimes trial.

Many analysts see strong international pressure as the only way to force a compromise between the feuding political leaders. The possibility exists of deals between the governing party and potential breakaway factions of the various opposition parties because so much is at stake.

For all the discussion in this report of instability and violent attacks on women and minorities, it's also important to remember the inherent tolerance at the heart of Bangladeshi culture and society, be it secularists or Islamists. It's worth valuing the freedom that still exists, despite the many serious risks that journalists, human rights activists and politicians face on a daily basis.

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