

Bangladeshis vote for 1st time in 7 years

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DHAKA, Bangladesh (AP) — Former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's political alliance took the lead early Tuesday in elections aimed at restoring democracy to the troubled South Asian nation, officials and media reports said.

The English-language *Daily Star* newspaper reported early Tuesday that the alliance led by Hasina's Bangladesh Awami League party won 153 seats in the 300-seat parliament.

The main opponent led by Hasina's archrival Khaleda Zia, also a former prime minister, has won 18 seats in the parliament, the newspaper said.

Television stations ATN Bangla and Ekushey TV also reported that Hasina's alliance was well ahead. The media organizations say they obtain early results from election officials at vote counting stations.

The Election Commission indicated that Hasina's party and allies had taken a lead, but it didn't provide any other details.

The two women have traded power before. Zia was elected prime minister in 1991, Hasina in 1996, and Zia again in 2001.

H.T. Imam, an aide to Hasina, welcomed the reports, saying he expected the alliance would form the next government.

"We are happy with the latest news we have in hand," Imam told the Associated Press. "It's the people's victory."

Zia's party late Monday alleged there were irregularities and forgery in the voting processes but would not comment on the initial results.

Ruhul Kabir Rizvi Ahmed, a close aide to Zia, said at a news briefing that Zia would formally react to the outcome of the results later Tuesday when a final result is expected.

Tens of millions of voters cast their votes Monday as the country held the first election in seven years after two years of emergency rule.

Security was tight and voting was the most peaceful in decades — a stark contrast to the failed elections of 2007, which dissolved into street riots and prompted a military-backed interim government to take over.

Voter turnout was high, with about 70 percent of the 81 million eligible voters casting ballots, said election official Humayun Kabir.

"I'm here to choose the right person to lead our country," said S.A. Quader, a 57-year-old businessman who voted in Dhaka. "I'm confident the election will be free and fair."

But with no fresh faces in the contest, many fear the vote will just mean a return to the corruption, mismanagement and paralyzing protests of previous attempts at democracy.

Both of the leading candidates, Zia and Hasina, face corruption charges. The two, both heirs to Bangladeshi political dynasties, have traded power back and forth for 15 years in successive governments.

“Apparently parliamentary democracy is on the march again,” said Mizanur Rahman Shelley, a political analyst and head of Center for Development Research of Bangladesh. “But doubt remains whether it solves the old problems.”

Both leading parties campaigned on similar platforms of reducing corruption and controlling inflation. One of the few policy differences is that Hasina’s party is seen as relatively secular and liberal, while Zia has allies among Islamic fundamentalists.

During the back and forth between Zia and Hasina, a well-worn pattern emerged: One party wins the election, and the other spends the term leading strikes and protests to make impoverished nation of 150 million ungovernable.

More than 650,000 police officers and soldiers had been deployed across the country in a bid to prevent voter fraud and the violence that marred the last attempt at a national vote.

To prevent cheating this time around, the interim government compiled a new electoral roll including voters’ photographs. Some 200,000 election observers, including more than 2,000 foreign ones, monitored voting nationwide.

Last year, both Zia and Hasina were jailed on corruption charges, which they dismissed as politically motivated. They were freed on bail and reassumed positions as the heads of their respective parties, the two largest in the country.