

Bangladesh opposition reject 'farcical' general election and demand new vote

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Dozens of candidates pull out, claiming ruling Awami League rigged country's first contested election in a decade.

The leader of Bangladesh's opposition alliance has described Sunday's general election as farcical, saying any outcome would be rejected and demanding that a new vote be held.

At least 17 people were killed during voting in the country's first contested elections in a decade. Dozens of candidates pulled out of the contest on the day, claiming the ruling Awami League had rigged the vote to secure a record third consecutive term for the prime minister, Sheikh Hasina.

"We call upon the election commission to declare this farcical election void and demand a fresh election under a neutral government," said Kamal Hossain, who coordinates an alliance of opposition parties that was hoping to unseat Hasina.

The opposition alliance would hold a meeting on Monday to decide its next move, Hossain said at a news conference a few hours after voting closed. Early results showed Hasina's party heading for a large majority.

Members of opposing parties clashed throughout election day, which followed a violent seven-week campaign marred by attacks on candidates and journalists and the mass arrest of opposition activists.

At least eight people died in scuffles between party workers, and police shot another three, including an opposition activist who allegedly tried to attack a polling station in the southern town of Bashkhali. A member of an auxiliary security force was also killed by activists from the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist party (BNP), police alleged.

Salahuddin Ahmed, a BNP candidate from Dhaka, was stabbed while he was moving around in his constituency. Police said the circumstances of the attack were not yet clear.

The electorate of more than 100 million voters, a third of them younger than 30, were asked to deliver its verdict on the decade-long rule of Hasina, 71, who has overseen record economic growth but undermined the country's democratic institutions. The result is expected by Monday morning.

The capital Dhaka was largely deserted after many workers returned to their villages to cast their votes and vehicles were banned for everyone except journalists and election observers. About 600,000 security personnel were deployed across the country to maintain order.

Authorities shut down 3G and 4G phone services to contain the spread of what they called propaganda. Opposition activists said the measure also prevented them from reporting any irregularities in voting.

"I'm getting text messages of forged voting, illegal ballot stuffing from this morning every single minute," Hossain said earlier in the day. "This is an absolute disgrace to our democracy."

The Guardian was denied access to three polling stations in Dhaka about 30 minutes after voting closed at 4pm, told by presiding officers that the ballots had already been counted.

Bangladesh's election commission told Reuters it was investigating allegations of vote-rigging coming from across the country. "Allegations are coming from across the country and those are under investigation," said SM Asaduzzaman, a spokesman for the commission. "If we get any confirmation from our own channels then measures will be taken as per rules."

Hasina's son, Sajeeb Wazed, said the election had passed off largely peacefully except for a few isolated incidents. "Yet opposition increase false allegations of irregularities," he wrote on Twitter. "Trying controversy as opinion polls show landslide for governing party."

Opposition groups said the campaign leading up to Sunday had been the most repressed in the country's 47-year history. They claim more than 8,200 people opposed to Hasina were arrested and more than 12,000 injured.

Hasina is already Bangladesh's longest-serving prime minister. A credible win would indicate voters are willing to tolerate the erosion of public institutions and their civil rights in exchange for relative political stability and economic growth that has led to a tripling in the country's annual GDP.

Hasina, most of whose family were killed in a military coup in 1974, has argued that human rights are a peripheral concern to most Bangladeshis and that rural people in particular are more concerned about food and jobs, which she says her government has delivered.

"I believe that people will cast their votes in favour of Awami League to continue the pace of development," Hasina told reporters in Dhaka after casting her vote. She has said warnings of rampant human rights abuses issued by groups such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch are exaggerations intended to draw funding.

Shahedul Anam Khan, a retired brigadier general and opinion columnist, wrote: "Democracy and development [have been] made to appear mutually exclusive, with the ruling party members and MPs going to the extent of rooting for development at the cost of democracy."

Despite healthy economic numbers, analysts say inequality has widened and labour surveys show 35% of people aged between 20 and 29 are not working or studying. The Centre for Policy Dialogue, a thinktank, says corruption during Hasina's term has cost the country more than \$2.5bn.

Opposition groups have formed an alliance headed by Hossain, 82, an Oxford-educated lawyer who helped write the constitution and was a close associate of Hasina's father, Mujibur Rahman.

Hossain said Hasina had changed while in power. "The urge for power can make someone who's human into something less than human," he told the Associated Press in an interview.

He has had to distance himself from some elements of the coalition, including former members of Jamaat-e-Islami, an Islamist party banned from contesting the polls since 2013, after the high court declared its beliefs were contrary to the secularist principles of the constitution.

The BNP, the most powerful force in the coalition, was accused of perpetrating human rights abuses during its most recent five-year term in power, which ended in 2009. Rights groups, however, say Hasina's clampdown on dissent has been more systematic and effective. The BNP's leader, Khaleda

Zia, is in prison after being convicted twice this year of corruption.

The BNP's secretary general, Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, said on Sunday that a win for the opposition was inevitable if the election was free and fair.

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P.S.

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https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/dec/30/bangladesh-election-polls-open-after-campaign-marred-by-violence?CMP=share_btn_fb

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