

Electoral commissioners quit after court ruling in Bangladesh

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On January 31, Bangladesh's acting electoral commission chief Mahfuzur Rahman and his four deputies resigned, paving the way for the country's caretaker government to appoint new commission members as demanded by the main alliance of opposition parties.

The resignations followed a ruling the previous day by the High Court division of Bangladesh's Supreme Court ordering the electoral commission to suspend all its activities for three months.

The High Court asked the electoral commission to explain within three weeks the legality of holding any election before the introduction of a transparent ballot box and voter identity card. The court also asked the electoral commission to explain "why the existing electoral roll should not be declared illegal" as it was prepared without complying with Supreme Court directives.

The main opposition alliance of 14 parties, led by former prime minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed's Awami League (AL), has been agitating for electoral reforms to ensure that parliamentary elections scheduled originally for January 22 wouldn't be rigged in favour of the alliance of four parties led by former PM Khaleda Zia's Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), whose five-year term of office expired last October.

The 58-year-old Wajed is the eldest daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who served as Bangladesh's first president following its successful war of independence from Pakistan in 1971. He was assassinated by a group of junior army officers in 1975.

Wajed served as Bangladesh's prime minister in 1996-2001. The BNP and its allies won the October 2001 general election, with 41% of the popular vote to the AL's 40%.

The AL has refused to participate in any election supervised by Rahman and his team, whom it accused of being biased in favour of the BNP. President Iajuddin Ahmed had appointed Rahman and his predecessor, M.A. Aziz, on the recommendation of Zia's government.

Since October, the AL-led coalition has organised repeated street protests to back up its demand for reform of the electoral commission. Attacks on the protests by government supporters have resulted in at least 45 people being killed in the past three months and hundreds injured.

On November 26, the leaders of the Jatiya Party (Ershad), Liberal Democratic Party, Zaker Party, a faction of the Islamic Oikya Jote, and the Islamic Front Bangladesh joined with 11 leaders of the 14-party opposition alliance in filing three writs with the High Court against Ahmed's assumption of the post of "chief adviser" (i.e., head) of the caretaker government, as well as Rahman's move to call a general election without adequately addressing problems with the electoral roll.

On December 18, most of the parties in the original 14-party alliance joined with the other five parties to form a "grand alliance" in a bid to win the forthcoming general election.

The Communist Party of Bangladesh, a member of the 14-party alliance, refused to join the grand

alliance arguing that one or more of the new partners were “forces of evil”.

On January 3, the grand alliance announced that it would boycott the January 22 elections. The boycott by such an influential bloc would have discredited the legitimacy of the elections.

Eight days later, Ahmed declared a state of emergency, but also announced that he would step down from the position of the caretaker government’s chief adviser and that the general election would be postponed indefinitely. Ahmed appointed as chief adviser Dr Fakhruddin Ahmed, a former World Bank official.

Though it purportedly advocated socialist policies in the early 1970s and has continued to command a certain mass base among the workers and peasants, the AL is a party serving the interests of Bangladesh’s capitalist class.

The 61-year-old Zia was PM from 1991 to 1996, and is the widow of former president Ziaur Rahman, killed in an abortive military coup in Chittagong in May 1981.

Under her government, Bangladesh, one of the poorest countries in the world, has been plagued by a rise of Islamist militancy, terrorism (Islamist groups set off around 500 bombs in 2005), continued official corruption, a rise in attacks on minority groups (such as Hindus) and an increasingly explosive political environment.

In July 2005, she invited the leader of the Jatiya Party (Ershad), Hussain Mohammed Ershad, who was Bangladesh’s military dictator in 1982-90, to join her ruling coalition. The JP(E) won 14 seats in the 300-member parliament in the October 2001 elections.

However, this move attracted opposition not only from within the BNP’s main governing partner, Jamaat-e-Islami, but also from within the BNP itself.

In 1990, the BNP and the AL had joined forces to oust Ershad from power and restore an elected civilian government.

As late as last November, Zia was reportedly still trying to get Ershad into the BNP-led coalition. However, Wajed managed to bring Ershad and his party into the AL’s “grand alliance”, launched on December 18.

On December 23, the AL reportedly signed a five-point agreement with the Khelafat Majlish, an Islamist party, in an attempt to bring it into the AL-led grand alliance. According to a December 29 South Asia Analysis Group commentary, the AL has promised that if it wins government certified Islamic clerics will have the right to issue fatwas (Islamic edicts) and it will bar any law that goes against “Koranic values”.

However, on December 26, the Supreme Court’s appellate division rejected an appeal by Ershad to have a two-year jail sentence on corruption charges and ordered him to surrender to a lower court, thus disqualifying him from standing in the 2007 general election.

P.S.

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