

ISAS Brief

No. 313 – 20 January 2014

469A Bukit Timah Road
#07-01, Tower Block, Singapore 259770
Tel: 6516 6179 / 6516 4239
Fax: 6776 7505 / 6314 5447
Email: isasec@nus.edu.sg
Website: www.isas.nus.edu.sg



Bangladesh: Slow Settling of Post-Poll Dust

Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury¹

Any swirling dust will eventually settle, and the storm that the elections of 5 January 2014 generated in Bangladesh is already beginning to subside. The polls saw a level of violence never witnessed on such occasions before. The main opposition, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) boycotted the hustings (a decision they might rue) as their demand of an apolitical government to host the event was ignored. They took to the streets, and the Jamaat-e-Islami, banned from participation in the polls for its extreme religious predilections, acting as their sword-arm. Voter turn- out was abysmally low for a Bangladeshi election. The absence of any international observers lent credence to its questionable credibility. In any case, 153 candidates of a Parliament of 300 members were already returned uncontested. Not much contest was confronted by the remaining candidates. The Awami League under the stewardship of Sheikh Hasina romped home to victory amidst the expressed despair of many, including of most western powers, who viewed the results as neither fish, flesh, fowl nor good red herring. But the

¹ Dr Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury is Principal Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. He is a former Foreign Advisor (Foreign Minister) of Bangladesh, and he can be contacted at isasiac@nus.edu.sg. Opinions expressed in this paper, based on research by the author, do not necessarily reflect the views of ISAS.

general perception was that the polls were held within the parameters of the Constitution, and well in consonance with the letter, if not the spirit, of the law.

In wise haste, Hasina had her cabinet sworn in, and the government installed. She could not afford to leave a vacuum that would appear inviting to the unwanted. Indian support was quick in forthcoming, which buttressed her external position significantly. She calculated, correctly perhaps, that despite their demurring, even the western governments would eventually come round, for Bangladesh is too large and important a country, for its government to be sidelined for long. Russia, eager to receive payments for vast armouries sold came quickly on board. China, anxious to prevent India from obtaining too much of a leeway, followed suit. Hasina assessed that her challenges were largely domestic, and was eager to begin to work as soon as possible.

Her new cabinet named on Sunday 12 January was obviously chosen with some thought. Since corruption and poor governance were the main criticisms directed at her last government, she excluded those with poor reputation on either count. She avoided the temptation to experiment with new faces, and opted for tried and tested hands. Under normal circumstances, several of them could have been seen as threats to her leadership, but by now she was certain that as she was the main architect of the strategy that enabled the Awami League to return to power, for now she was unassailable. She followed the maxim of keeping friends close, and potential rivals even closer!

Having appointed a government, it was necessary to locate an Opposition in the Parliament. The choice fell upon the Jatiyo Party (JP) whose unpredictable leader former President Hussain Muhammed Ershad staged a 'high drama', now deciding for the polls, and now deciding against. Finally he was incarcerated in the Combined Military Hospital ostensibly for health issues, but puzzlingly spending much time playing golf. He would like to have it believe that elections were forced upon him. Anyhow his party bagged 32 seats, and agreed to sit in opposition, provided they were given some ministerial posts as well. So, one saw a weird rewriting of the Westminster Parliamentary model, with the same party occupying Opposition and Treasury (Government) benches. Ershad, having been President once, deemed it inappropriate to be seen to hold the much lesser office of Leader of Opposition, left it to his wife, Begum Roushan Ershad, now the third lady in Bangladesh's female-dominated high level political equation. One thing was certain.

Unlike at Westminster, where one speaks of 'Her Majesty's *Loyal* Opposition, this Opposition was going to be downright friendly, bordering on chumminess!

Meanwhile the *real* Opposition, the BNP, was in utter disarray. At one go they had lost, not only the chance to govern the country, but also the perks of the formal Parliamentary opposition. They were now literally thrown to the streets! The *andolan* or political movement they had generated, owing at least in equal measure to public disaffection with the AL than to the support for the BNP was petering out, and losing steam. Political oxygen seemed to have been sucked out of the movement. An '*andolan-fatigue*' was setting in. The masses were exhausted from weeks of *hartals* (strikes) and *aborodhs* (siege of cities) and unwilling to further contribute with life and limbs to any process, that would no longer be able to dislodge the Awami League from government. If the AL rule was inevitable, the sentiment was growing that they might as well 'relax and enjoy'.

The BNP's 'Acting' General Secretary (he was not even named a 'permanent' incumbent) was thought to be playing 'hide and seek' by a person no less than Begum Zia's son and heir-apparent. According to the latter, the party official was seen to be too concerned with concealing himself from police and public view than on leading the camp. It is now possible that there will be changes in the party hierarchy.

In a 'battle-plan' of questionable ethics, the government had locked up in prison most of the BNP leadership, and the rump that was left outside failed to muster the necessary following, even from among the converted! A sombre Begum Zia held a press conference, trenchantly criticised the manner of the polls, but offered no Plan 'B', merely asking for a 'dialogue' with the government. Foreign diplomats repeated dutifully, and some even enthusiastically, calls from their capitals for a 're-election' which would be more participatory and credible, but necessarily were constrained to go back to doing business-as-usual with the government. Also, there was a limit to which the BNP could be seen to be dependent on foreign diplomats without some political costs at home, which at this point in time they could ill-afford.

It is possible that Hasina might ultimately agree to a mid-term election. The AL is generally known to be a 'pro-polls' party, with grass-root orientations, and would very much like to refurbish its democratic image, which may have recently taken a serious beating. Its secular

image has earned it plaudits abroad, and it would be unwise for it to continue to ignore international public opinion for too long. In fact such support, under normal circumstances, should be a significant pillar of strength for it. Hence it cannot forever oppose going to the people for a strengthened mandate, which many of their own leadership would deem necessary.

But not just yet. They are not in a hurry to enter into a dialogue with the opponents just now, especially when the latter are unable to bring to bear overwhelming pressure to do so. There was much work to be done before yet another election could happen. Law and order would need to be restored. The energy situation would have to be improved. Trade markets would require to be reopened. Dealings with powerful foreign capitals would have to be resumed. A sense of general contentment would need to be created. Overall peace must prevail. Only then would the government be happy to seek to renew their mandate. They have the luxury of choosing their own time, which will naturally be what favours them, rather than their opponents. The AL is in no mood to hand over the government to the BNP on a platter. Their guiding *mantra* obviously is, all is fair in love and war, *and in politics!*

.....