
Looking for an exit

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THE two big political parties in Bangladesh are loth to accept what lawyers say is now only months away: the conviction on corruption charges of the jailed former prime ministers, Khaleda Zia of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Sheikh Hasina of the Awami League. This would bar the two rivals, who have dominated Bangladeshi politics since 1991, from the election the army-backed government promises for December.

The parties, both personality cults centred on the jailed leaders, are acting tough. Late last month the Awami League said it would not join election talks with the government unless Sheikh Hasina was released unconditionally. The BNP followed suit—and also reunited, as a dissident faction miraculously rediscovered its love for Mrs Zia. Both parties threatened popular movements to free their leaders.

<http://www.asiaobserver.com/images/fbfiles/images/g.jpg>

The army's response was swift. Since May 30th it has arrested nearly 12,000 local strongmen and politicians—a pre-emptive strike to break the organisational backbone of the parties ahead of local-government elections due in July. The latest arrests followed the detention of more leading politicians last month. They included Motiur Rahman Nizami, the head of the third-largest party, Jamaat-e-Islami. Some 100 members of the last parliament are now either in jail or on the run.

The local non-party elections are seen as a test for the parliamentary polls. The army, still the country's most popular institution, appears determined to bulldoze both through at any cost. But the unelected government's problems are multiplying: poverty has risen sharply in the past few years because of spiralling food prices, a Dhaka-based think-tank said this week. High oil prices, labour unrest, a severe energy crisis and the country's inability to forge closer economic ties with its huge neighbour, India, add to the woes.

The last time Bangladeshis had the chance to vote out a government was in 2001. But some soldiers despise what now appears a hasty rush to the exit. These dissenters, however, were sidelined in a shuffle this week. General Masud Uddin Chowdhury, the main adversary of the army chief, General Moeen U Ahmed, was in effect demoted for the second time since he led the coup that ousted the squabbling politicians in January 2007. The move consolidates General Moeen's power and, for now, removes the threat of a coup within the army. He has vowed to hold within the two years elections for which foreign governments have seemed ready to tolerate the suspension of democracy.

But the exit might be blocked. The parties remain unreformed. Their senior leaders say in private that it would be political suicide to come out openly against their still popular leaders. The army must hope that once the two women have been convicted, their parties will defy them and take part in the elections. Unless they do so and the army lifts the state of emergency, foreign observers are unlikely to lend legitimacy to the elections.

A desperate hunt is on for someone to fill the void. One diplomat recalls a "bizarre" meeting with Mohammad Ershad, a 78-year-old former dictator, who toured embassies a month ago, saying he had the army's blessing to lead a disparate coalition including the anti-Khaleda BNP faction. There is even talk that Mohammad Yunus, a famed microfinancier, might throw his hat back in the ring, after an aborted attempt to launch a party last year. The most sensible solution may be a national-unity government following the election. But that would require both the two big parties to disobey their feudal leaders and to share power. It is hard to say which is the longer shot.

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