

Bangladesh: Another election, another fait accompli

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As Bangladesh is set to hold its 12th parliamentary polls on January 7, many questions are being raised on the nature of the upcoming elections. Multiparty elections returned to Bangladesh in 1991 after 15 years of military rule. The periodic elections delivered an anti-incumbency verdict after every five years, except for the last 15 years. Sheikh Hasina led her Awami League and its allies to win an overwhelming majority in Jatiya Sangsad, the national parliament of the country, in December 2008. She has held on to her position ever since.

With Sheikh Hasina as the prime minister, Bangladesh has witnessed political stability, huge infrastructural development and sustained economic growth for the better part of the past 15 years, only to stumble in the last year. It was one of the fastest-growing economies after China and India in Asia. However, recent concerns over the economy prompted Bangladesh to seek a \$4.7 billion loan package from the International Monetary Fund. It is now struggling with an inflation rate of 9.92 per cent, with food inflation touching nearly 13 per cent. For a nation that had a foreign reserve of \$41.8 billion in June 2022, its drop to less than \$23 billion a year later points to the making of a serious economic crisis. Despite the lack of liquidity in the banks, plagued by burgeoning non-performing loans, and apparent economic and fiscal mismanagement, the leaders ironically continue to focus on the rather piquant political situation.

The last two elections have seen Awami League (AL) consolidating itself while its arch-rival Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) led by Khaleda Zia has remained in the margins of the electoral landscape. Given the deep mistrust that exists in the polity of Bangladesh, the BNP refused to take part in the 2014 elections because it was held with the AL continuing to be in power. To circumvent this lack of faith in the incumbent government, Bangladesh earlier had caretaker governments led by a non-political person to assist the election commission in holding free and fair polls. But it was also not beyond manipulation as was evident in 2006. In 2018, the BNP agreed to join the elections, but the polls were marred by violence and allegations of rigging and the Awami League ended up winning almost 75 per cent of the votes.

A fait accompli again?

JATIYA SANGSAD

(National Parliament of Bangladesh)

Total Seats: 350

Elected (directly by people): **300**

Reserved for Women: **50**
(Elected through proportional representation by directly elected MPs)

12th General Election to Jatiya Sangsad

Date of Polling: January 7, 2024
No of constituencies going to polls: 299*

*Polling was postponed in one of the 300 constituencies due to the death of a candidate.

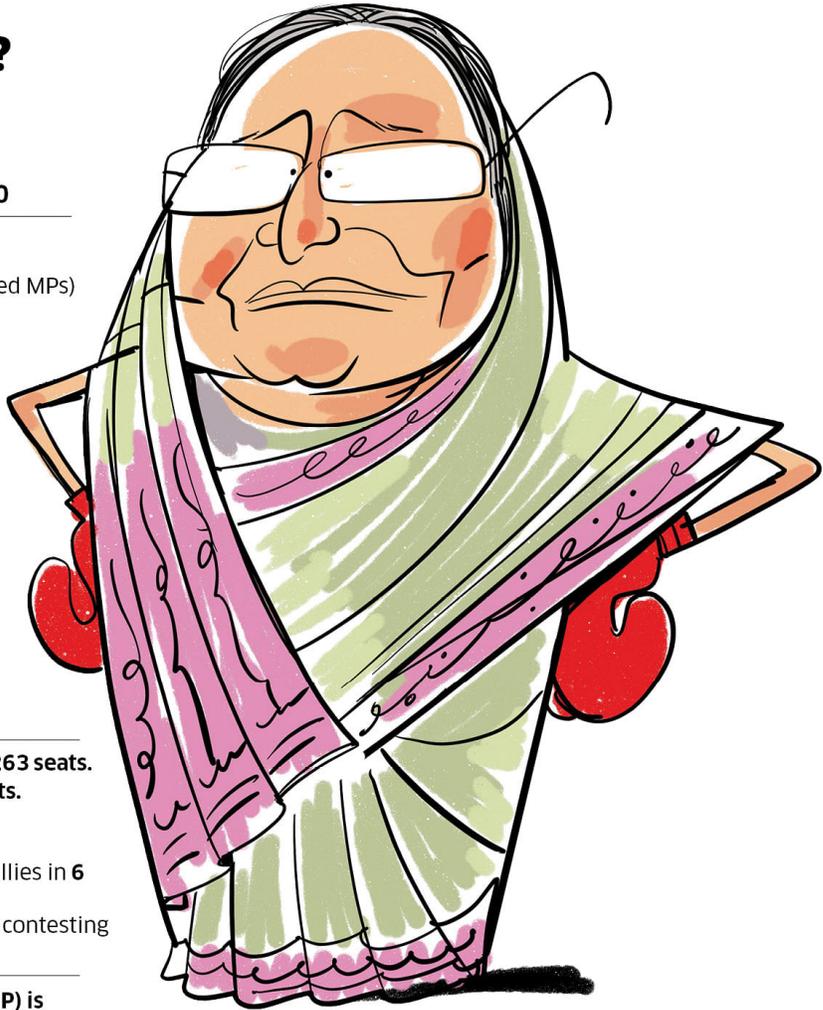
Number of Voters: 119.6 million
New Voters: 15.4 million

Voting Booths: 2,61,912
Polling Centres: 42,103

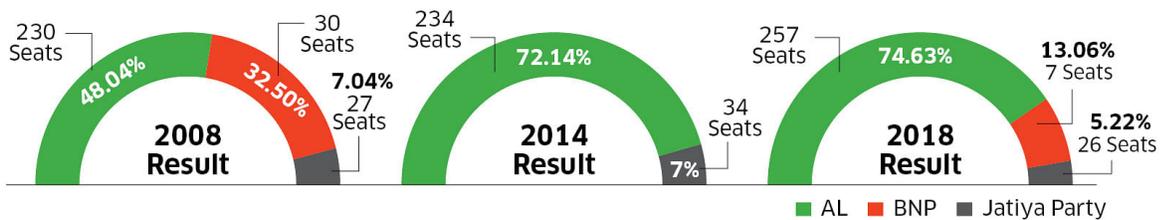
Number of Candidates: 1,896

- Ruling **Awami League (AL)** is contesting for **263 seats**.
- **Jatiya Party (JaPa)** is contesting for **283 seats**.
- **AL** is supporting the **JaPa** candidates in **26 constituencies**.
- **AL** is supporting the candidates of its other allies in **6 other constituencies**.
- **269 AL** leaders, including 28 sitting MPs, are contesting as independent candidates.

AL's arch-rival Bangladesh National Party (BNP) is boycotting the elections as its demand for holding polls under a caretaker government was rejected.



DH ILLUSTRATION: SAJITH KUMAR



Bangladesh National Party:

KHALEDA ZIA

Former Prime Minister
(Wife of former president Ziaur Rahman)

1st Term as PM: **1991-1996**

2nd Term as PM: **2001-2006**

- Khaleda Zia was accused and convicted in several corruption cases.
- She was sent to jail in February 2018, released in March 2020 due to her illness.

Son and Heir Apparent: **TARIQUE ZIA**

Awami League:

SHEIKH HASINA

Prime Minister
(Daughter of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman)

1st Term as PM: **1996-2001**

2nd Term as PM: **2009-2014**

3rd Term as PM: **2014-2019**

4th Term as PM: **2019-2024**

- **Sheikh Hasina** is the world's longest-serving woman head of government.
- She has also been the president of the AL since 1981.

Son and Heir Apparent: **SAJEEB WAZED**

There were heightened expectations of multiparty credible democratic elections this time around. But with the AL unwilling to concede to the BNP's demand of either bringing in the caretaker government or Sheikh Hasina stepping down and the High Court ruling that has kept the Jamaat-e-Islami out of elections, the electoral space remains dominated by the ruling party. While the AL is known for its secular credentials, in the face of rising radicalism, Hasina also had to engage with the Hefazat-e-Islam, a rather strident Islamic party. While as of now the Islamists have limited electoral appeal, their street power cannot be ignored. However, given the BNP's alliance with Jamaat and the extreme violence perpetrated by this political group in the past, the minorities continue to repose faith in Sheikh Hasina and her stewardship.

This time around, Sheikh Hasina, through 'a superstructure of fear', has carefully crafted an impression of a multiparty election. Some new political parties, referred to as the 'king's parties' by media, have been floated recently. The AL has declared an electoral alliance with the third-largest Jatiya Party and lured a handful of unknown BNP leaders into contesting the elections. It also propped up some of its leaders as independent candidates. The AL's election campaigns focused on the party's past achievements with the vision of a future, replete with rhetoric and emotional appeals. The BNP too, despite its sharp criticism of the government, did not offer any alternative vision for the nation. The BNP's self-defeating decision to stay away from the elections has disappointed and rendered rudderless a large number of its supporters, who are being denied adequate political choices.

Sreeradha Datta.

Credit: Special Arrangement

Not only has the AL used government machinery to suppress the opposition parties, but it has also trampled over the human rights of those who have not been aligned with it. As January 7 comes closer, the AL looks all set to be declared the winner. Unfortunately, Bangladeshis have once again been served with a fait accompli by their political leaders. The losers once again are the common citizens.

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