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Ali Riaz

Despite Bangladesh's slide toward a one-party autocracy, "the current trajectory is not destiny."

By **Shannon Tiezzi**

Bangladesh's ruling Awami League (AL), under Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, has cemented a fourth consecutive term in power – but not because of widespread popular support. Instead, the election on January 7 was heavily stage-managed, with true opposition parties targeted with arrests while “dummy” candidates were brought in to give the veneer of competition. As a result, the AL once again will govern with an untouchable supermajority.

In the eyes of many analysts, Bangladesh's transition to one-party rule is now complete.

The Diplomat's Shannon Tiezzi interviewed Ali Riaz, a distinguished professor of political science at Illinois State University and author of the book “Pathways for Autocratization: The Tumultuous Journey of

Bangladeshi Politics,” about Hasina’s grip on power, the international reaction, and the future of Bangladesh’s much-diminished democracy.

So far, the “public reactions to this state-managed saga have been remarkably muted,” said Riaz, who is also a nonresident senior fellow of Atlantic Council and the president of the American Institute of Bangladesh Studies. That may be because the Bangladeshi public long ago became resigned to such a result.

But despite the dark times, Riaz emphasized that the future of Bangladesh’s politics is still being written: “If the opposition can realize that the country is now entering the era of one-party rule, it is incumbent on them to come together to face it. The current trajectory is not destiny.”

Bangladesh’s general election took place on January 7. As expected, the ruling Awami League won re-election in a landslide – largely due to a crackdown on the opposition that sparked an electoral boycott. Voter turnout was low; officially 40 percent but rumored to be in the 20s. How is the Bangladeshi public reacting to the polls?

Public reactions to this state-managed saga have been remarkably muted. Although in private interactions citizens are expressing discontent and frustrations, there has not been any public outrage yet.

Three factors can be attributed to the absence of any robust reactions. First, this was not unanticipated. Since October 28, the chain of events had given a clear impression to the public that the election will be as such. Subsequent machinations laid bare the hollowness of the process. In some respects, this is typical where autocracy rises – the debilitation of rights is so incremental that the citizens accept them in a resigning mood.

Second, is the fear of being persecuted. The culture of fear has permeated society; the nature of persecution that we witnessed – arresting children for their fathers’ involvement with the opposition party, families being threatened, custodial death – has sent a clear message.

Third is the absence of unity among opposition parties. While 16 political parties boycotted the election, they failed to come to a single platform. In a similar vein, public perception is that there is not a single charismatic leader who can rally everyone together.

Bangladesh’s election was the subject of much interest from the governments of foreign powers like the United States – which enacted sanctions to encourage a free and fair election – India, and China. How have these governments responded to the events of election day?

The reactions from the trio of India, China, and Russia were predictable. They welcomed the victory of Sheikh Hasina. Among them, China’s statement is the most forceful and indicative of what is to come. It has

promised to “uplift the China-Bangladesh Strategic Partnership of Cooperation to a new height.”

The reactions from the Western countries have been mild criticisms. The U.S., which has expressed the strongest sentiment among them, has described the election “not free and fair,” but its statement also stated U.S. commitment “to partnering with Bangladesh to advance our shared vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific, to supporting human rights and civil society in Bangladesh, and to deepening our people-to-people and economic ties.”

The United Kingdom underscored that the election did not meet the fundamental elements of the democratic process, such as “credible, open, and fair competition” and “respect for human rights, rule of law and due process.”

Canada expressed “disappointment that this electoral process has fallen short of the principles of democracy.”

The strongest condemnation came from the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk, who called upon the government to “independently, thoroughly, and effectively investigate” the incidents of violence against the opposition and “violations and irregularities during the campaign and on election day.” The point made by Türk is worth mentioning; he said, “The future of all Bangladeshis is at stake.”

What do you make of these statements, especially the ones from the Western countries?

The statement from China deserves to be read very carefully. The statement is not only a note of felicitation, or a standard congratulatory message, but has more to it. The statement said, “China will firmly support Bangladesh in safeguarding national sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity, and in opposing external interference.” This echoes its earlier statements, but clearly refers to the United States’ and other countries’ insistence on the erosion of democracy and human rights in Bangladesh.

As for the Western countries’ reactions, the essential point is that they seem to have accepted this as a *fait accompli*. Barring a dramatic turn, this is an acceptance of Bangladesh’s transformation into a one-party autocracy. This is deeply disturbing to see that the Western democratic nations are leaving democracy behind, once again. This will not only damage the standing of the U.S. in Bangladesh, but also throughout South Asia, which will facilitate the further rise of rise of China.

India had acted vigorously to stop the U.S. from taking any effective measure to stop the sham election or push Hasina to changer her course.

But as Bangladesh faces more economic hardship India will be sidelined, and China is likely to take the centerstage.

Officially, the Awami League was joined in the election by nearly two dozen other parties. However, many of these were dismissed as “King’s parties” purposefully propped up by the AL to make the election appear more competitive – and thus more legitimate. Can you explain the role of the other parties that did participate in the polls?

The parties that joined the election had practically no role at all. This was not surprising considering their record of popular votes in previous elections. There were four new parties, so these had no records. Of the remainder, 20 of them bagged less than 1 percent of votes each in the 2018 election, and 19 of them had less than 1 percent of votes in the 2008 election.

Besides, many of these parties practically begged to have their share of seats divvied up by the regime. The government cajoled and coerced them to join to provide a veneer of a participatory election. Once these parties filed nominations, they became irrelevant to the regime.

Now some of these parties and their leaders are crying foul, alleging that the election was rigged, etc. It sounds quite pathetic!

The biggest opposition party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), boycotted the elections due to the expectation that the polls would be neither free nor fair. The BNP will now be shut out of Parliament once again, after similarly boycotting the 2014 election and earning just seven seats in 2018, an election widely derided as rigged. With no legislative power and thousands of its leaders and supporters facing criminal charges, what does the BNP’s future look like?

Undoubtedly, the BNP will face a hard time in the coming days. But not because they will remain outside Parliament; the party was out of Parliament after 2014, and had only seven members in the last Parliament, as you have mentioned.

Its future is going to be difficult, but not because it does not have public support. In fact, the rallies organized by the BNP between the summer of 2022 and October 28, 2023, were well attended and showed growing public support. Despite the all-out efforts of the government, the party remained united. Its call, along with other opposition parties, was heeded by the public. In these respects, their position has been vindicated.

But the party leaders and activists’ plight will be aggravated because they are likely to face harsher actions by the regime. The “ghost cases” – legal cases with no merit, relating to years-old alleged offenses – will continue, and more will be convicted as we have seen before the election.

In one sense, the future of the BNP is intrinsically connected to the political landscape of the country. There are apprehensions that the party may be banned or pushed to the underground through serious persecution. But the election is not the end of Bangladesh's politics. If the opposition can realize that the country is now entering the era of one-party rule, it is incumbent on them to come together to face it. The current trajectory is not destiny. Despite all the adversities and its shortcomings, the BNP remains the most formidable party to lead that movement.

Jamaat-e-Islami is officially banned from taking part in elections, but it is still active in other ways – including holding massive rallies to demonstrate its support. What role did Islamist parties like the Jamaat play in this year's elections, despite being relegated to the sidelines?

Let's start with the point that the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) is one of the two most prominent Islamist parties in Bangladesh; the other which commands significant public support is the Bangladesh Islami Andolon. Both remained outside the electoral process, although JI couldn't join even if it had wanted.

There are 11 Islamist parties registered with the Election Commission (EC), including the Bangladesh Islami Andolon. Of these, seven joined the election; four boycotted. Interestingly, those with relatively more support boycotted. Although the Hefazat-e-Islam is not a political party, it remained completely quiet through the process.

As such, Islamists did play a part. The ruling party's cooptation of and patronage to the Islamists, mostly more conservative ones in the past years, didn't provide much advantage to it.

Sheikh Hasina has cemented a fourth consecutive term, thanks to the heavy-handed management of the election. But Hasina cannot cheat time – she will turn 77 this year. Who are the potential successors to Hasina as AL leader and prime minister?

The very question is an acknowledgement of a personalistic system of governance. In democracy, even those which are seriously flawed, no one thinks of asking this question. Personalist autocracies around the world always have succession problem. On the one hand, the leader in question does not want to have a clear heir apparent, because it undermines his/her unparalleled standing as the only leader who can deliver, while on the other hand the leader does not want to leave his/her legacy at risk. Often succession questions are a taboo subject, especially within the ruling circle.

There are, however, instances of orchestrated peaceful exits; Kazakhstan and Cambodia come to mind. They offer two different models. As for Sheikh Hasina, there is no obvious heir apparent. Her grip over the party has precluded rise of anyone from the rank and file. That leads to pointing at her family. Her sister, Sheikh Rehana (68), who has remained by her side since Hasina came to power in 2009, without holding any official position, is viewed by some as the possible successor as much as her son Sajeeb Wazed (52) and daughter Saima Wazed (51) have been mentioned.

But an important question is how will the succession come?

The Author

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