



TOP STORIES / WORLD / ASIA

ELECTIONS

'Uncertainty' looms over Bangladeshi elections

General elections in Bangladesh are set to be held before the end of January. But South Asia expert Ali Riaz explains in a DW interview it is quite likely that opposition parties will boycott the upcoming poll.



DW: What is the current state of affairs in the run-up to general elections in Bangladesh?

Ali Riaz: The situation can be described as uncertain and volatile. There is a growing concern as to whether the election, scheduled to be held between October 27, 2013 and January 24, 2014, will actually take place. Both the ruling party and the opposition have taken very inflexible positions and are unwilling to make any compromise.

Why is the government refusing to allow a caretaker government to conduct the elections?

The government's position is that a caretaker government is not permissible under the present constitution after the 15th amendment. The ruling party argues that in a parliamentary system, the election is held under the government elected in the previous election.

Unfortunately, their interpretation of the democratic norm is flawed. But the constitution, which was amended in June 2011, allows the present government to be in power while an election is being conducted. The ruling Awami League party and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina insist that the caretaker government is an unelected system and it's against the spirit of democracy.

Is the political situation deteriorating in Bangladesh?

If we are to judge by the street agitation, it has slightly improved in the past month as the opposition has refrained from calling general strikes or staging major demonstrations. But the impasse has not been resolved. If a compromise on the issue of the caretaker government is not reached by October 27, I am afraid there could be widespread violence.



Riaz believes an independent election commission should hold the elections

What impact could the controversial [death] sentences handed down by the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) have on the elections?

The verdicts of the ICT will have little direct impact on the voters' choice, particularly the independent voters; albeit the ruling party is expecting that the outcome will be looked at as a major success of their tenure.

The establishment of the ICT and the trials of those who had committed war crimes during the 1971 war of independence was an electoral promise of the Awami League party.

The party had lost support among its base and these verdicts may help bring some of the old voters back to the fold. However, the ICT, and particularly these sentences have served as a rallying

point for Islamists. They will try to make use of what they view as unjustified and harsh verdicts against their political allies to bring out their base.

Do you think the elections will be free and fair, especially if the current government conducts the elections?

I am afraid the elections might not be free and fair under a partisan government. There is a strong perception among citizens that it may adversely affect the outcome. Opinion polls have shown that almost 80 percent of the population would like to see the election held under a caretaker government (CTG).

The CTG system was incorporated into the constitution because of the lack of trust among the major political parties with each other and also because of the absence of independent institutions such as an election commission and the ability of the local administration to remain neutral during the election.

Unfortunately, nothing has changed since then. Until a strong, independent election commission is established, which earns the respect and support of all political parties and the voters, there should be an impartial caretaker government which conducts the elections. Non-partisan caretaker system is not a long-term solution, but in the short term it has become a necessity.

DW RECOMMENDS

Growing polarization ahead of Bangladeshi elections

Divisive court rulings, an election ban and major disagreements over who should oversee the upcoming poll - growing political tensions in Bangladesh are raising concerns about the South Asian nation's democratic future. (05.09.2013)

Tensions rise in Bangladesh after ban on Jamaat

Violence in Bangladesh 'likely to continue'

Islamist leader brought to justice for war crimes

What role could the banned party Jamaat-e-Islami and its followers play in the upcoming elections?

The JI has not been banned yet. The High Court has simply ruled that its registration with the election commission should be cancelled. The JI's request for a stay order has been rejected. But it will have the opportunity to appeal.

This process is expected to continue in coming months. If a political compromise is reached with the major opposition party, BNP, the decision might not be forthcoming. If the JI is barred from the upcoming election, the BNP may decide to boycott the election. However, if the JI is unable to participate, its followers will rally around the BNP.

How big is the chance of opposition parties boycotting the elections in January?

The likelihood of the opposition parties, particularly the BNP, participating in the poll depends on some sort of concession from the ruling party on the form of the government during the election. If the BNP fails to extract any concessions and the

election is held under a government headed by Sheikh Hasina, I don't think the BNP and the JI will participate.

If they decide to boycott, many smaller parties will follow suit. The Jatiya Party (JP) led by General Ersahd may very well join the bandwagon. Since July 2011, the BNP has made the CTG their primary demand. The BNP feels that an election under the Awami League-led government is bound to be rigged.

Ali Riaz is a public policy scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington D.C.

The interview was conducted by Gabriel Domínguez.

Date 05.09.2013

Author Gabriel Domínguez

Keywords Bangladesh, elections, Bangladesh elections, Dhaka, Jamaat-e-Islami, Hifazat-e-Islam, blasphemy, Hasina, Sheikh Hasina, Awami League, 1971 war crimes, anti Islam bloggers, Bangladesh bloggers

Share [Send](#) [Facebook](#) [Twitter](#) [Google+](#) [More](#)

Feedback: [Send us an e-mail.](#) Please include your name and country in your reply.

Print [Print this page](#)

Permalink <http://dw.de/p/19cd0>

RELATED CONTENT



Bangladesh crisis 'fast approaching point of no return' 10.02.2015

With no side willing to back down, the political crisis in Bangladesh is worsening. Analyst Samina Ahmed tells DW there is an increased risk of military intervention as political battle lines become ever more entrenched.



Bangladesh's government 'seeking to marginalize' the opposition 03.02.2015

Fire bombs, trains derailments, street protests – Bangladesh is witnessing a surge in political violence which has killed 50 people. DW speaks to analyst Jasmin Lorch about how the government is reacting to the turmoil.



Opposition leader destabilizing the country: Bangladesh PM 05.01.2015

Bangladesh's PM Sheikh Hasina has accused the detained opposition leader Khaleda Zia of creating "anarchy" in the country. At least four protesters have been killed during nationwide anti-government protests.