



Political crisis in Bangladesh: January 2015 update

Standard Note: SN06696

Last updated: 21 January 2015

Author: Jon Lunn

Section International Affairs and Defence Section

The political scene in Bangladesh remains as turbulent as ever.

The main opposition parties, the Bangladeshi National Party (BNP), led by Khaleda Zia, and Jamaat e Islami (Jel) have been calling without avail for fresh parliamentary elections since they boycotted those that took place in January 2014, in which the Awami League (AL), led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, won an overwhelming victory. Their dispute centres on the fact that Zia wanted the 2014 elections to take place under the auspices of a neutral caretaker government, whereas Hasina instituted an all-party interim cabinet instead.

In recent weeks, the hostilities between the 'battling Begums' have further intensified. Khaleda Zia called for mass demonstrations on 5 January under the banner, "Murder of Democracy Day", to mark the first anniversary of the 2014 elections.

The AL government responded by banning demonstrations. Zia then called for an indefinite blockade of roads, railways and waterways leading into Dhaka, the capital. This began on 5 January and remains in effect.

On 16 January, the BNP and Jel called for a dawn to dusk *hartal*, or 'stay at home' protest. The League responded with counter-demonstrations across the country on 17 and 18 January.

The protests have led to at least ten deaths. One BNP leader has been shot and wounded. Khaleda Zia was confined to her Dhaka office between 3 and 19 January. The authorities claimed that it was done for her own security. Zia is also on trial for corruption.

The UK and US governments have expressed their concern over the ongoing violence, as has the EU. Meanwhile, the controversial International Crimes Tribunal has continued to try individuals accused of serious human rights violations during the 1971 war of independence.

Contents

1	Background: flawed January 2014 elections	2
2	2014: political impasse	2
3	2015: renewed protests	3
4	Trials of political opponents and critics	3
5	UK dimensions	5
6	Conclusion	5

1 Background: flawed January 2014 elections¹

An extremely flawed general election took place on in January 2014. The main opposition parties, the Bangladeshi National Party (BNP), led by Khaleda Zia, and Jamaat e Islami (Jel) both boycotted it, giving the ruling Awami League (AL), led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, an overwhelming victory. The government claimed a turn-out of 48% but others assessed it to have been much lower than that.

The BNP had called upon the AL to revert to previous pre-election procedure and install a neutral caretaker government ahead of the election to supervise the polls. Instead, the AL formed an all-party interim cabinet to perform this task. It invited the main political opposition parties to join the cabinet, but they refused to do so.

The run up to the election from October 2013 onwards was characterised by strikes and escalating violence, with significant casualties. Following the election, the unrest continued for several weeks. [Human Rights Watch](#) criticised the authorities' use of excessive force, including extrajudicial killings of opposition supporters.

Western donors refused to endorse the election outcome on the grounds that it did not reflect the will of the people of Bangladesh. They called for fresh elections once the political stand-off was resolved. Sheikh Hasina initially hinted at new elections but over the course of 2014 abandoned such talk.

2 2014: political impasse

While the political impasse remained unresolved, street protests subsided for a period after the elections. The BNP decided to contest local elections, which were held between February and May 2014, winning the largest share of the vote in the initial two rounds, but falling behind the AL in subsequent rounds. The political opposition alleged rigging.

In March 2014, the political temperature rose again when a special anti-corruption court indicted Khaleda Zia for corruption during her tenure as prime minister between 2001 and 2006. Her son and political heir, BNP senior vice-chairman Tarique Rehman, who is living in exile in London, was also indicted for corruption.²

Khaleda Zia threatened a resumption of street protests in retaliation. In April 2014, the BNP said that the party was preparing to launch a campaign to force the AL out of power should the trial of Khaleda Zia proceed. Government representatives talked in terms of banning both the BNP and Jel for their roles in war crimes committed during the 1971 independence war.

Another source of disagreement between the BNP and the AL emerged in May, following the alleged murder at the end of April of seven people by the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), a controversial anti-terrorism force which has been accused of human rights abuses in the past. The BNP called for the RAB to be dissolved. The AL replied that the 2001-6 BNP government was a strong supporter of the RAB.

In August and September 2014, the government took a range of steps that critics viewed as curtailing human rights in Bangladesh. It approved a policy on broadcasting which many felt threatened freedom of expression and introduced a bill in parliament that would penalise civil

¹ Sections 1-3 draw extensively on the International Crisis Group's [monthly summary of events](#) in Bangladesh.

² He faces a range of other charges.

society groups which receive foreign funding. Parliament also passed a law that restored parliament's power to impeach Supreme Court judges.

In September and October 2014, up to 100 members of the BNP and Jamaat e Islami, including a number of leadership figures, were charged with involvement in violence during the run-up to the January 2014 elections.

In October 2014, India informed the government in Bangladesh that it had uncovered a plot by the Islamic terrorist group Jamatul Mujahedin Bangladesh (JMB) to assassinate Sheikh Hasina and overthrow the AL government. A number of JMB militants were subsequently arrested in Bangladesh. There were also arrests of members of another terrorist group, Harkatul Jihad al-Islami, in November.

3 2015: renewed protests

During the last quarter of 2014, levels of street protest rose again. However, Khaleda Zia complained that the turn-outs were insufficient to challenge the government. She called for a concerted effort to increase the degree of mobilisation to mark the first anniversary of the controversial 2014 elections on 5 January 2015, which she said should be called "Murder of Democracy Day".

The AL government responded by banning demonstrations on that day. This ban triggered renewed opposition demands for new elections under a neutral caretaker government and a call for an indefinite blockade of roads, railways and waterways leading into Dhaka. This began on 5 January and remains in effect.

When street protests occurred on 5 January in Dhaka and a number of smaller towns, the authorities cracked down; at least ten protesters were killed in clashes with the police. Other opposition leaders were arrested and one, the BNP's Reaz Rehman, was shot and wounded. A gagging order was also issued against Tarique Rehman, banning the media from publishing statements by him.

The chairman of Ekushey Television, Bangladesh's oldest private TV channel, was arrested shortly after the channel had broadcast a speech by Rehman.

Khaleda Zia was confined to her Dhaka office between 3 and 19 January. The authorities claimed that it was done for her own security.

The UK and US governments have expressed their concern over the ongoing violence, as has the EU. On 14 January, the British High Commissioner to Bangladesh, Robert Gibson, [called](#) on all parties to show restraint and choose dialogue over confrontation.

On 16 January, the political opposition called for a dawn to dusk 'stay at home', or *hartal*. The AL responded with counter-demonstrations across the country on 17 and 18 January.

4 Trials of political opponents and critics

Khaleda Zia's trial for corruption has not yet got under way in earnest. However, in November 2014, what appeared to be the last legal challenge to it going ahead was dismissed by the Supreme Court.

The [International Crimes Tribunal](#) (ICT), a controversial domestic court established in 2010 by Sheikh Hasina's government to bring to justice those alleged to have committed war crimes, in collusion with the Pakistani army, during Bangladesh's 1971 war of independence,

has continued to hear cases and issue verdicts over the last year or so. The BNP and Jel continue to argue that the ICT is politicised and being manipulated by the AL.

International human rights groups and other commentators have expressed concerns about the ICT. Defence lawyers have called for changes to be made to its procedures to bring it into in line with international standards. These calls have not been heeded.

In December 2014, the ICT found a British journalist, David Bergman, [guilty in absentia](#) of contempt of court in connection with a critical article he had written about it. The journalist received a symbolic punishment, including a small fine. Other media outlets and civil society groups have also been accused of contempt of court by the Tribunal. Such actions have been [criticised](#) for having a major 'chilling effect' on freedom of expression in Bangladesh.

In November 2013, the joint British and Bangladeshi national Chowdhury Mueen Uddin was sentenced to death *in absentia* for war crimes. Uddin, who lives in Britain, maintains his innocence.

There are [calls](#) within Bangladesh for the extradition of Tarique Rehman so that he can stand trial.

In the same month, 152 members of the security forces were sentenced to death for a two-day mutiny over pay in 2009.

In January 2014, the leader of Jel, Motiur Rahman Nizami, was sentenced to death (along with 13 others) for arms smuggling to Assam separatists by a separate court in Chittagong. Then, in October 2014, he was sentenced to death by the ICT for his involvement in war crimes in 1971.

In September 2014, Bangladesh's Supreme Court commuted to life imprisonment a death sentence imposed by the ICT on Jel leader Delwar Hossein Sayeedi in February 2013. Sayeedi had been convicted of crimes against humanity.

Another Jel leader, Mir Quasem Ali, was sentenced to death in November 2014.

In December 2013, Jel leader Abdul Quader Mollah was executed after being found guilty of committing war crimes during the 1971 liberation war. He had originally been sentenced to life imprisonment in the previous February, but massive street protests against the verdict led to it being reconsidered and replaced by the death sentence.

So far, Mollah is the only person to have been executed. The next, should the authorities decide to proceed with more executions, could be Muhammed Kamaruzzman, a Jel leader who was sentenced to death in May 2013 for war crimes and whose final appeal was rejected by the Supreme Court in November 2014. Human Rights Watch has [called](#) for his execution to be halted.

Two leading members of the BNP have also been found guilty of war crimes. In October 2013, the ICT sentenced Salahuddin Quader Chowdhury to death. In the same month, Abdul Alim received the same sentence. However, Alim [died in prison](#) in 2014 before the sentence could be carried out.

In November 2014, Bangladesh was elected a member of the UN Human Rights Council.

5 UK dimensions

In January 2013, Baroness Warsi [responded](#) to the ICT's first verdict, in which the death penalty was imposed, by saying that the British government supported efforts to bring the perpetrators of atrocities to justice but strongly opposed the death penalty in principle; she added that the government hoped that the ICT would address the concerns expressed by international rights groups and lawyers about its proceedings.

As already stated, the ICT has indicted Chowdhury Mueen-Uddin, who has joint British and Bangladeshi nationality, for war crimes. He denies the charges and claims that he not would receive a fair trial before the ICT.

There has been some [confusion](#) over whether there is an [extradition treaty](#) between the UK and Bangladesh.

Bangladesh is on the list of 'part 2 countries' under the [Extradition Act 2003](#), as it is covered by the [London Scheme for extradition within the Commonwealth](#). This means that Bangladesh can make an extradition request to the UK authorities (the Serious Organised Crime Agency, SOCA) – but it does not necessarily mean that the UK will actually extradite. The UK does not extradite people who could be, will be or have been sentenced to death. Extradition becomes possible only if assurances are received that the sentence will not be carried out.

It is not known whether the UK has received a request for the extradition of Chowdhury Mueen Uddin. There is no evidence that it has done so for Tarique Rehman.

For a January 2015 summary of DFID's activities in Bangladesh, see: [DFID in Bangladesh winter update 2014/15](#)

6 Conclusion

Bangladesh has a history of turbulent alternation between the AL and the BNP – with the army, which has always played a political role and is traditionally hostile to the AL, periodically acting as a "[circuit breaker](#)" by seizing power.

The AL won a resounding three-quarters majority in 2008 elections, following two years of a military-backed caretaker government, leading some to hope that Bangladesh could make the break with its political past. But with Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia – who have been called the '[battling Begums](#)' – perpetually at loggerheads, this opportunity has been squandered. Whatever position is taken on the judicial merits of the International Crimes Tribunal, few would contest that its operations have exacerbated the political conflict between the two women.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has been widely accused of [playing fast and loose](#) with democracy. But the sincerity of Khaleda Zia's commitment to democracy is also being questioned by many analysts. Some wonder whether she may actually be hoping that her current strategy forces the army to intervene once again and oust the AL government. As yet, there is no sign of this happening. Perhaps understandably, given just how treacherous the waters are, Western donors have held back from imposing sanctions of any kind.

Despite the almost constant political turmoil, Bangladesh's [economy](#) continues to perform remarkably well. While there remain many challenges ahead, good progress has also been made on [social development](#).