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**Consolidation or Reversal of Democracy
A post-2018 Scenario in Bangladesh**

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Abstract

Bangladesh is at the crossroads. The last ten years witnessed measured positive developments in this important neighbour in matters of economy, education, health and institutionalisation of democracy. In this backdrop, the 11th General Elections to the Jatiya Sangshad will take place on December 30, 2018. This article tries to focus on the stakes of the ruling Bangladesh Awami League-led Grand Alliance and the opposition Jatiya Oikya Front headed by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and assess which one is likely to rule the country next five years. It attempts to answer a few critical questions as to if the ruling Grand Alliance return to power, as it is expected, what are the anticipated courses the country might follow and if it faces defeat, what will be a scenario in post-2018 Bangladesh. Will, the process of consolidation of democracy, get another five years to go in the right direction or will the BNP once again forge a coalition with the Jamaat-e-Islami, leading to the rise of Islamists? These are some of the difficult questions the article tried to address taking the help of historical events and antecedents.

Keywords

An overview of elections to the Jatiya Sangshad since 2001 the electioneering mood, Grand Alliance's campaign issues and strategies, Jatiya Oikya Front's 7-point demands and 11-point goals to be achieved after the polls, the Rohingya issue, the future – to which direction Bangladesh will move.

Introduction

Many of the developing and under-developing countries are struggling to establish democratic institutions and cultivate political modernisation and culture for several decades even after several decades of

independence. In South Asia, Bangladesh, Maldives, Myanmar, Pakistan and Sri Lanka are notable examples. Among these, Bangladesh is the youngest nation-state, which is limping on its road towards democracy through relentless struggle and ups and downs. For the last ten years, it has been trying to consolidate the gains of popular support for an elected government and showing signs of positive changes from Islamisation to modernisation. There has been marked economic growth, women empowerment, improvement in access to health and education, road infrastructure and communal situation. These are known facts and are in public domain made available by the credible data flashed by both domestic and international sources. At the same time, there are allegations about repression on the voice of dissent, and more particularly, on the main Opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and its leader, two-time Prime Minister, Begum Khaleda Zia. The BNP is now preparing itself to face the forthcoming elections in an extraordinary situation in which its President Begum Zia is lodged in jail and facing a ban for seven years to contest any public office. On the other hand, the present ruling party, the Bangladesh Awami League (AL) with all resources and confidence of decisive victory in two general elections – 2008 and 2013 – and the campaign spearheaded by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed has already placed itself in an advantageous position.

Elections may be considered as a game of uncertainty. It is believed that every election is played to reach the constitutional gateway to power. Therefore, it depends on how much resources one can garner and use to reach that stage. At the same time, there is no zero-sum-game in elections. Unexpected outcome sometimes shocks the contenders and also dispassionate observers. It is imperative to take stock of historical antecedents along with the current waves of developments to assess who will make the last laugh in after December 30, 2018.

The scenario since 1991

Bangladesh is holding the 11th general elections since its independence in the backdrop of a better political and economic environment. It might be useful to have an overview of the past elections since 1991. A massive and successful popular movement overthrew the military rule of General Hossain Mohammad Ershad, and the path to the restoration of democracy was on the anvil, a significant development since long years of the military rule and political instability in the post-Mujib era. The BNP scored the emphatic victory by securing 140 of 300 seats in the general elections of 1991 (Table 1).

Table 1
Results of the 1991 General Elections to Jatiya Sangshad

Party	Votes secured	%	Seats
Bangladesh Nationalist Party	10,507,549	30.8	140
Bangladesh Awami League	10,259,866	30.1	88
Jamaat-e-Islami	4,136,461	12.1	18
Jatiya Party*	4,063,537	11.9	35

Source: Dieter Nohlen *et al*, *Elections in Asia: A data handbook*, Volume I, p 537

*Jatiya Party was formed by Hossain Mohammad Ershad which include candidates of the Islamic National Unity Front

The BNP had to ally with the Jamaat-e-Islami to form the Government as it was short of eleven members. The striking point was although the Awami League (AL) remained far behind in terms of capturing of seats, its vote share was almost equal to the BNP. It suggested that there could be turn-the-table election fortunes in both the leading parties. Further, the alliance between the BNP and the Jamaat was a clear signal of the rise of Islamists in the political scenario of the country. It was a matter of concern for the minorities, as the hardcore religious

organisation had a pronounced objective to marginalise them. Its main objective was to transform Bangladesh into an Islamic state, a development that worried most of the democratic countries, including India.

There was an electoral turnabout in 1996, a reversal for the ruling BNP and the first taste of victory for Sheikh Hasina-led AL. Table 2 shows a marked improvement of the AL and decisive fall of the Jamaat. It is noteworthy that the AL-led Government started the process of improving its relationship with India which was at the lowest ebb since the assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rehman. There were positive signs of improvement in the Ganga water-sharing and the return of about 36 thousand Chakma refugees, who were languishing in different parts of India for a long period since the 1960s when the military government of General Ayub Khan uprooted them from the Chittagong Hill Tract.

Table 2
Results of the General Elections to the Jatiya Sangshad 1996*

Party	Votes secured	%	Seat
Bangladesh Awami League	15882792	37.44	144
Bangladesh Nationalist Party	14255986	33.60	116
Jatiya Party	6954981	16.40	32
Jamaat-e-Islami	3653013	8.61	3

Source: Bangladesh Election Commission, Statistical Report: 7th Jatiya Sangshad Election

* Several other parties were contesting the election but secured less than 1 per cent of votes.

The BNP came back to power for the second time in 2001 capturing 193 out of 300 seats of the parliament, and the AL faced an electoral disaster by losing 79 seats, despite the fact that difference between the

BNP and the AL vote share was a matter of 1.38 per cent. The most uneasy factor was the victory of the Jamaat in 17 parliamentary seats. Its vote share fell from 8.61 to 4.28, a visible decline by 4.33 per cent. Its pre-electoral alliance with the BNP led it to be a coalition partner in the Begum Zia's Government in which it secured two berths

Table 3
Results of the General Elections to the Jatiya Sangshad 2001

Parties	Votes secured	%	Seats
Bangladesh Nationalist Party	23,074,714	41.40	193
Bangladesh Awami League	22,310,276	40.02	62
Jatiya Party	4,023,962	7.22	14
Jamaat-e-Islami	2,385,361	4.28	17

Source: Bangladesh Election Commission, Statistical Report: 7th
Jatiya Sangshad Election

Despite the comfortable victory of the BNP over the ruling AL, it decided to forge a coalition Government by including Jamaat in the ministry. The fact remains that the Jamaat's support base started coming down from 12.1 per cent in 1991 to 4.28 in 2001. At the same time, it increased seats in the National Assembly 17. Under the new political dispensation, Begum Zia's decision to accommodate the Jamaat in the governance proved to be havoc for the religious minorities, more particularly the Hindus, who faced the wrath of the Islamist fanatics. There were series of attacks on them leading to migration of a large number of people to India. The attack on the Ahmediyas, Buddhists and the Hindus was not a new issue in Bangladesh. Although such incidences came down during the period of Sheikh Hasina's first tenure as the Prime Minister, Begum Zia's second stint witnessed large-scale violence against non-Muslims resulting the decline of the Hindu population from 9.20 per cent in 2001 to 8.96 in 2011. The decline is attributed to the anti-Hindu violence from 2001 to 2006. Besides, the Jamaat pressed the Government to adopt steps towards Islamisation in a big way. These became, among others,

taken up by the AL election issues in 2008, which enabled the party to garner massive support from not only the minorities but also all the democratic and secular-minded population leading to the return of Sheikh Hasina to return to power in 2008 elections. Table 4 shows the results of the elections and vote share of the leading political parties. The Grand Alliance forged by the AL with Jatiya Party, Jatiyo Samajtantrik Dal, Workers Party of Bangladesh and Liberal Democratic Party secured 263 out of 300 seats in the Jatiya Sangshad. The AL alone came out victorious in 230 constituencies. Table 5 presents a clear picture on the overwhelming support secured by the AL in all the six Divisions. Both Tables how the people punished both BNP and Jamaat for their dangerous anti-democratic and anti-secular politics. The BNP's share in the parliament was reduced drastically from 193 seats to meagre 30 and the Jamaat from 17 to 2.

Table 4
Results of the General Elections to the Jatiya Sangshad, 2008

Alliance	Parties	Votes secured	%	Seats	Increase
Five Party Grand Alliance	Bangladesh Awami League	33,887,451	49.0	230	+168
	Jatiya Party	4,867,377	7.0%	27	+16
Four Party Alliance	Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal	429,773	0.6%	3	+2
	Workers Party of Bangladesh	214,440	0.3%	2	+1
	Liberal Democratic Party	161,372	0.2%	1	±0
	Bangladesh Nationalist Party	22,963,836	33.2%	30	-163
	Jamaat-e-Islami	3,186,384	4.6%	2	-15
	Bangladesh Jatiya Party	95,158	0.1%	1	-4
	Islami Oikya Jote	-	-	-	-
Independent and others		3,366,858	4.9%	4	-2
Total		69,172,649	99.99%	300	

Source: Bangladesh Election Commission

Table 5
Party-wise vote share in 2008 General Elections

Division	BAL	BNP	JP	JSD	Jamaat	BWP	BJP	LDP	IND	Total
Barisal	16	2	2	0	0	0	1	0	0	21
Chittagong	32	18	2	2	2	0	0	1	1	58
Dhaka	87	0	5	0	0	1	0	0	1	94
Rajshahi	48	8	14	0	0	1	0	0	1	72
Khulna	30	2	2	1	0	0	0	0	1	36
Sylhet	17	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	19
Total	230	30	27	3	2	2	1	1	4	300

Source: Bangladesh Election Commission

It was a remarkable electoral achievement of AL and more particularly of Sheikh Hasina to secure a decisive popular mandate after a terrible crackdown on Awami workers and leaders for two years under the military-backed caretaker government, known to for its strong pro-BNP position. The AL's victory is a record of Sheikh Hasina's relentless campaign against religious fanaticism and for democracy and secularism. The principal components of the foundation of Bangladesh. On the other hand, the Jamaat's dismal performance is a clear testimony to popular rejection of its communal and violent politics. It is a clear proof before the rest of the world that the people as a whole are not fundamentalists and followers of religious extremism. Similarly, BNP's experiments with an unholy and unnecessary alliance with the retrogressive and fundamentalist party proved to be very costly. Its decline was phenomenal.

There was more or less almost same kind of repetition of results in January 2014. The tenure of the 9th Jatiya Sangshad expired January 24, 2014, as per the provisions of Article 123(2)(a) which lays down a

condition to holding the general election between October 26, 2013, to January 24, 2014, i.e. within 90 days before the expiry of tenure of the Jatiya Sangshad. In compliance with the provision, the Bangladesh Election Commission announced on October 25, 2013, that the elections to the 10th Jatiya Sangshad would be held on January 5, 2014. Most of the Opposition parties boycotted the elections on the ground that there was widespread violence committed on their workers and leaders. An 18 party alliance led by Begum Zia demanded the resignation of Sheikh Hasina's Government and the transfer of power to a caretaker one which would hold the elections. It argued that under the current atmosphere of chaos, a free and fair election was not possible. The Government requested the Opposition for dialogue and offered to have an interim-election-government in which all the leading parties would be accommodated. The offer was turned down. Eventually, the elections to the 10th Jatiya Sangshad was held amidst boycott and violence. Several countries, including the United States, the United Kingdom, the European Union came down heavily on the way the polls were conducted. The AL was assured of the repetition of its performance in 2008. The Opposition boycott led to the capture of 127 out of 154 uncontested seats by the AL. In this one-sided game, the results were obvious, a victory for the AL-led alliance. Despite the boycott call, the poll percentage was 51.37 which undoubtedly was not abysmally low. Table 6 gives the details of 2014 election results and bears the proof that the ruling party continues to enjoy the solid support because the boycott call was ineffective and fiasco. On the other hand, the BNP's decision to boycott was a self-inflicted injury which pushed it to an irreversible position. Critical observers believe that the BNP was certain about its disastrous performance, which it wanted to avoid by a taking a negative stand.

Table 6

Results of the General Elections to the Jatiya Sangshad, 2014

Parties	Total Votes	%	Seats	Increase
Bangladesh Awami League	36,173,883	79.14	234	+1
Jatiya Party (Ershad)	5,167,698	11.31	34	+10
Workers Party of Bangladesh	939,581	2.06	6	+4
Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal	798,644	1.75	5	+2
Jatiya Party (Manju)		0.3	2	+2
Bangladesh Tarikat Federation		0.3	2	+2
Bangladesh Nationalist Front		0.3	1	+1
Independents		4.7	15	+13
Total	47,262,168	100	300	0

Source: Bangladesh Election Commission

The day after the result, Sheikh Hasina asserted that the BNP-led boycott should “not mean there will be a question of legitimacy. People participated in the poll, and other parties participated.” At the same time, she offered Begum Zia a role in a new government. Her statement was noteworthy:

Look, I tried my best, I told you, I offered ministry, I offered to share power with our opposition. I have done as much as I can do but they didn't respond. Now if they realise that they made a mistake in not participating in the election, perhaps then they may come forward to discuss with us or make an offer. If they come forward to discuss with us, they have to leave all these terrorist activities behind because what they are doing it is killing people, killing police, killing innocent people.

Her reconciliatory statement, as expected, was rejected by the BNP. Badly battered in the electoral battlefield in 2014, the BNP had no option

but to wait till the 11th parliamentary elections, scheduled to be held in 2018.

The electioneering mood

Bangladesh Election Commission announced on November 11, 2018, that the elections to the 11th Jatiya Sangshad had been scheduled for December 23. However, within three days it postponed the date to December 30. The Opposition wanted at least 30 days of postponement. Therefore, the Jatiya Oikya Front, an alliance of the BNP and several other parties, rejected the revised schedule, saying that the polls should have been deferred by a month. To refer to its leader ASM Abdur Rab might be relevant. He said, "We will not budge on our demand for deferral of the polls by a month. We will announce the next course of the programme if our demand is not met." He argued that the schedule was guided by an evil intention. Most of the foreign diplomats will be away from Dhaka because of the Christmas celebration. With many of the diplomats away from Dhaka, there will be no international observer to monitor the forthcoming election. Consequently, as the Opposition fears, the process of holding the polls will not be free and fair. The leader of the Jatiya Oikya Front, Kamal Hossain, arranged a meeting with the foreign diplomats on October 17, 2018 to brief them about the uneasy political situation in the country in which, the former Prime Minister, Begum Khaleda Zia was put in jail and was debarred from taking part in the elections. Consequently, as Hossain claimed a free and democratic election could not be thought.

The cases against Begum Khaleda Zia

As many as 34 cases were filed against Begum Khaleda Zia. Some of which are:

(1) Orphanage Trust Graft Case

The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) filed the case on September 2, 2007, with Tejgaon police against Begum

Khaleda Zia along with former BNP Minister Motiur Rahman Nizami and eleven others. They were accused of indulging corruption by awarding a contract to Global Agro Trade (Pvt) Company Ltd for container management at inland depots in Dhaka and Chittagong. It was alleged that said "graft" led to the loss of more than Taka 1,000 crore.

(2) NIKO Graft case

The trial court took up the 'Niko graft' case in December 2007 on the basis of a case filed by the ACC in which it was alleged that the former Prime Minister and some others abused power to award a gas exploration to a Canadian firm named NIKO when the BNP was power in 2001-2006.

(3) Baraoukuria coalmine case

The case, filed by the ACC was filed in February 2008, known as the Barapukuria coalmine graft case, is being heard in the Special Judge's Court-2 of Dhaka. Shahbagh police accused 16 persons, including Begum Khaleda Zia and some of her former cabinet colleagues saying that there was an involvement of Taka 159 crore kickbacks on this case in which the lowest bidder was ignored, and the contract was awarded to the highest one.

(4) Darussalam police state case

It relates to nine arson cases under Darussalam police. It was alleged that during the non-stop blockade call given by the BNP-led 20-party alliance in January, February and March in 2015 there were instances of damaging and torching vehicles, assaulting police officers who were performing their law and order duties at Balurmat in Gabtoli and Mazar Road areas. The

Party President Begum Zia and her colleagues were slapped with criminal charges for the arson and assault. These nine cases are pending with the Dhaka Metropolitan Sessions Judge's Court.

(5) Jatrabari police station cases

Three more cases of arson were filed with Jatrabari police against Begum Khaleda and others for killing and injuring people by hurling petrol bombs at a bus during the non-stop blockade in January 2015. The cases are pending with the Dhaka Metropolitan Sessions Judge's Court. However, trial proceedings of the cases have been stayed by the High Court.

(6) Sedition case

Supreme Court lawyer Momtaz Uddin Ahmed on January 25, 2016, filed a sedition case against Begum Khaleda Zia for her highly objectionable remarks on the martyrs of the Liberation War. The case is pending with the Dhaka Metropolitan Sessions Judge's Court. Later on, the trial proceedings have been stayed by the HC.

As already stated, there are as many as 34 cases were filed against the former Prime Minister, Begum Khaleda Zia since 2008. Some of these relate to extremely derogatory remarks against Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rehman, are of grave nature. It will be extremely difficult for her to get relief in the latest judicial verdict awarding her a ten-year jail term together with the bar to contest her any elections for seven years.

In the face of these developments, the BNP and for that the Jatiya Oikya Front to offer any formidable challenge to the ruling AL and its Grand Alliance. Table 7 shows the latest alliance and counter-alliance arrangements on the eve of the forthcoming General Elections to the Jatiya Sangshad.

Table 7
Alliances and counter-alliances for 2019 elections

Alliances	Leaders	Alliance partners	Seats won 2014
Grand Alliance	Sheikh Hasina	Bangladesh Awami League Jatiya Party (Ershad) Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal Workers Party of Bangladesh Jatiya Party (Manju) Bangladesh Tarikat Federation Bangladesh Nationalist Front Bikalpa Dhara Bangladesh	250 (Grand Alliance) 34 (United National Alliance) Did not participate in 2014 national polls
Jatiya Oikya Front Left Democratic Alliance	Kamal Hossain 8 Left parties No declared leader	Bangladesh Nationalist Party Jatiya Oikya Prokriya Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal Nagarik Oikya Dal Krishak Sramik Janata League Liberal Democratic Party Kalyan Party Bangladesh Jatiya Party Bangladesh Khelafat Majlish Jatiya Ganatantrik Party Bangladesh Muslim League Jamiat-e-Ulama-e-Islam Bangladesh Communist Party of Bangladesh Revolutionary Workers Party Gonoshonghoti Andolon United Communist League of Bangladesh Gantantrik Biplobi Andolon Samajtantrik Andolon	Did not contest in 2014 elections

Source: a compilation of news of *The Daily Star* and *Pratham Alo*

As the date for the national polls is approaching, the AI-led Grand Alliance has spearheaded the electioneering vigorously with a high degree of confidence and in the backdrop of the troubles faced by the Opposition. The BNP leader Begum has been sentenced a ten-year jail term by the High Court on the charge of misuse of fund and abuse of power during her second term (2001-2006). She was held guilty of collecting and spending Taka 6.52 crore for different purposes, including buying 42 kathas of land in the capital to set up a Charitable Trust after her late husband's name. Further, she has been debarred from contesting any election. The 20-party Jatiya Oikya Front led by Kamal Hossain in which the BNP was a part is facing an insurmountable crisis in the absence of a credible leader to lead the Opposition.

There is another setback to the BNP-led Opposition. Earlier, Hossain Mohammad Ershad had declared that his Jatiya Party would be a part of the Jatiya Oikya Front to fight against the AL-led Grand Alliance. Now, he decided to go with the AL. The media assessment is that Hossain foresaw the inevitable results of the 2019 elections and wanted to be with the side of the victors.

Although initially the Jatiya Oikya Front, in which the BNP is also a partner, wanted to boycott the elections of 2019, Kamal Hossain, the founder leader of Gono Forum persuaded all the leaders of the Front not to commit the same mistake of 2014. He urged them to offer a tough fight against the AL and the Grand Alliance, come what may, in order to register its protest against the way the ruling party has been running the country. It may be mentioned that Hossain (b April 20, 1937) is the head of Kamal Hossain Law Associates, Dhaka, a former Law Minister in the first cabinet of Sheikh Mujibur Rehman (1972-1975). He was

imprisoned in West Pakistan along with Bangabandhu. Known as the 'Conscience of the Nation', he differed with Sheikh Hasina over her decision to sack Muhammad Yunus in 2011 from the Board of Grameen Bank. Later on, he took up the issue of human rights violations during the ten-year rule of Sheikh Hasina. He has become a rallying point for Opposition's preparation for the forthcoming elections. He drafted 7-point demands of the Front and sent it to the Prime Minister, and demanded a dialogue on it, which, of course, Sheikh Hasina agreed. Accordingly, the Front led by Hossain sat for a dialogue with the leaders of the AL-led by the Prime Minister on November 1, 2018, in a 'cordial atmosphere' in which the seven-point demands were discussed. There was no positive outcome to the satisfaction of the other side the table. The only positive aspect was that it was for the first time in 25 years a dialogue between the ruling party and its alliance on the one hand and the Opposition took place. The second significant point was that it opened up the possibility of holding such dialogues in future. After the meeting, Hossain, while briefing the media, said that the Prime Minister made a long speech which did not spell out any 'specific solution' to the demands. It is relevant to state the demands put forward by the Jatiya Oikya Front; these are:

1. To ensure a fair election, a non-partisan government must be formed through discussion with all political parties, after the resignation of the incumbent government and dissolution of [the] parliament. Release of political prisoners, including that of Khaleda Zia, must be ensured, and that of false cases filed against opposition activists must be withdrawn.

2. Election Commission must be formed with qualified personnel, and electronic voting machines (EVMs) must not use in the next election.
3. Level playing field during election time must be ensured.
4. False cases filed against students and journalists must be withdrawn, and laws, such as Digital Security Act must be scrapped.
5. Army personnel, with magistracy powers, must be deployed during the election.
6. Foreign domestic observers must be present during [the] election time, and media professionals must be allowed to perform their duties without any restrictions.
7. The trial of all cases filed against political personalities must be postponed from the announcement of the polls, till the declaration of the election results. New cases must not be filed against those political personalities during this time.

[This is unedited version of the 7-point demand of the Jatiya Oikya Front as it was uploaded on the internet.]

Simultaneously, the Jatiya Oikya Front announced its eleven-point goals to be achieved, if elected to power.

The 11-point goals

1. Establishing good governance by bringing balance of power in parliament, government, president, prime minister with an aim

to build a Bangladesh with the spirit of Liberation War to and the authoritarian regime, and decentralising the administration

2. Amending the Constitution, including Article 70, for forming a constitutional commission to appoint impartial and honest officials to the important positions in constitutional bodies. [Article 70 deals with the vacation of seats in the parliament owing to resignation or removal, etc.]
3. Ensuring freedom and power of the judiciary
4. Ensuring necessary initiative for modernising the Anti-Corruption Commission and bringing the corrupts to book
5. Ensuring an investment-friendly environment, creating jobs and establishing merit as the only baseline for recruitment in government jobs
6. Ensuring the security of the people, their property and fundamental rights and women empowerment
7. Investment infrastructural reform for freeing the public administration, police and local government from corruption and grouping
8. Establishing discipline in the financial institutions, including Bangladesh Bank, and ensuring financial growth focussed on the proper use of national resources, fair distribution public welfare

9. Building a national consensus against militancy, terrorism and communalism, and generating positive, creative and balanced political environment by ending of vengeance and negativity
10. Adopting a 'friendship with all and enmity with none' foreign policy
11. Ensuring advance training, modern technology and equipment to the armed forces to strengthen and modernise them.

Needless to state that some of the 'goals' as stated in points 2, 7,8 and 10 remain ambiguous, and appear to be too utopian to be translated into reality. Further, some of the partners of the Jatiya Oikya, more particularly, the Jamaat, have clear and pronounced communal agenda. Bangladesh cannot free itself from the spectre of communalism in the presence of communal parties and Islamic militants.

[This is the unedited version of the 11-point goals of the Front as appeared on the internet.]

Campaign strategy

It is expected that the manifestoes of the ruling AL and the Opposition Jatiya Oikya Front headed by the BNP will be brought out by December 15, 2018, fifteen days before the polls. The AL informed the media that its manifesto would focus on the issues of development and plans to take a significant stride towards the development of Bangladesh in all fronts. It is reportedly preparing a document vision document entitled "Looking Forward" which will incorporate ideas of a "Perspective Plan" for the Government for 2021-2041. It will highlight the achievements of the AL-led Government in the last ten years in the different sector of the national life, more particularly, law and order, gender justice, reproductive

health, economic growth, education, foreign relations and trade, harmonious interfaith relationship, sports, power and energy and climate change. It is reported that the AL has been consulting with other partners in order to reach a consensus on the major issues. The convenor of the Grand Alliance, Abdur Razzaque in for the media reported that the manifesto, as well as the “Looking Forward” document, would be released on December 12 or 13.

It has been found that the AL has gone ahead with a massive campaign strategy to attract the voters. Hasan Mahmud, the convenor of the publicity sub-committee of the Party, reported on November 30 that it would make full use of use print, online and electronic media to reach out to the voters. A country-wide plan has been prepared to organise cultural and social programmes involving artists and the youth to focus on two vitally important aspects – the performance of the Government in the ten-year rule and its road ahead to consolidate the gains of positive developments by taking new programmes and action plans. It has been highlighting the success of the Government in achieving GDP growth by 7.11 per cent in 2018 and bringing down inflation to less than 7 per cent – all these relate to the overall positive performance of the Government. The Party will provide each candidate with four CDs, each will contain four different materials. The first will be a documentary on the performance of the government in last ten years, the second five patriotic songs, the third on development activities and the fourth on acts on violence and crimes committed by the BNP and the Jamaat.

Similarly, the electronic media will be extensively used to take the campaign to the masses. The office of the President of the AL has already completed the training programme of the campaigners and

polling agents to be deployed in all 300 constituencies on December 12.

In other words, the campaign and its strategy have vigorously been taken off to make it possible for the ruling party to return to power for the third term.

As against it, the Opposition BNP and for that matter, the Jatiya Oikya Front have been conspicuous by their slow and sluggish efforts to offer a formidable threat to the ruling party. It plans to hold the first rally on December 2, in Sylhet in which all the alliance partners are expected to join. It is interesting to find that the Jamaat will stay away from it, for reasons not formally revealed. It appears that it has differences with the leaders of the Jatiyo Oikya Front. It does not agree to the stand of the Front on the communal issue. It stands for the establishment of an Islamic State, and enforcement of the Sharia laws in Bangladesh is well-known. After Sylhet, the Front is likely to organise rallies in other divisions and cities. Its main issue is “restoring democracy”, as Kamal Hossain told the media on December 1. He said, “there is no alternative to participatory election to forming a legitimate government”. He believes that the Front will “work as a turning point to restore voting rights of [the] people. We have taken up several programmes to mobilise public response in the country.” It is intriguing that there is no official statement from the Front about the programmes, which suggests that the Front is yet to formulate any aggressive electioneering campaign, while its opponent ruling Grand Alliance has started a highly motivated campaign plan. Under such circumstances, one ponders as in 2008; the BNP-led alliance will not be able to turn the table in its favour.

Mere meeting foreign diplomats to explain the current situation in Bangladesh is not enough to inflict electoral damage to the ruling alliance. So also meeting media persons cannot be expected to garner votes massively. The Front's call for "Unity of the Nation" is a normative slogan and does not seem to have a killing instinct. Mahmudur Rahman Manna, Convenor of Nagorik Oikya, one of the constituents of the Jatiya Oikya, feels confident when he says, "The Unity is now in shape, and there is a need to extend its voice and message among the people". The Front is not in a position to explain why the leaders are unable to rope in the minorities as a support base and why they are yet to disabuse the fear and apprehension of the minorities of a systematic attack on them after the polls.

Meanwhile, the AL and its alliance partners have started to cover each village, town and even small pockets to reach out the voters and achieve a greater degree of success in explaining why the Grand Alliance needs to stay in power till 2024 and beyond. On the other hand, the Jatiya Oikya Front's yet to take off a campaign to restore democracy and call for undefined 'Unity' is unlikely to withstand the massive campaign of the AL-led ruling party.

The Rohingya issue

One of the grave crises Bangladesh in recent years is the Rohingya refugees of more than ten million taking shelter in the wake of killing and repression committed by Government of Myanmar. The issue is not likely to get resolved in foreseeable years. It has figured in the campaigns of the parties on the eve of the general elections and is likely to influence the outcome of the election results. The Government has been raising the issue in international forums for a speedy solution.

It has achieved some degree of success in securing external financial assistance towards temporary rehabilitation, distribution of food and medicines and in this way has been able to draw the global attention to the grave humanitarian crisis. The AL claims success in all these. However, the Jatiya Oikya has criticised the Prime Minister for her failure getting a decisive resolution passed in the Security Council. It is evident that the Chinese veto on the attempt to censure the Myanmar Government frustrated Bangladesh's move in the Security Council to adopt a resolution asking the Myanmar Government to stop the anti-Rohingya carnage, to ensure the return of the refugees to their land and secure a fair rehabilitation deal. Bangladeshi Buddhist groups in Cox's Bazaar and other places meanwhile joined the BNP in condemning the anti-Rohingya massacre and criticising Sheikh Hasina for not being able to find a durable solution to the crisis. It suggests that the minority Buddhists would cast votes in favour of the Jatiya Oikya Front. It appears to be a paradoxical setting in the backdrop of the anti-Buddhist attacks launched by the Jamaat and other Islamic militants from time to time. It is also paradoxical to find an unusual scenario of competition-cum-opposition to the positions taken by various political parties on the Rohingya issue. At any rate, even if the Buddhists vote en bloc and en masse in favour of the BNP-led alliance, it is not going to alter the political scenario altogether, because the minority Buddhists constitute only 0.06 per cent of the population of Bangladesh (Census 2011).

The efforts made by the Bangladesh Government in the matter of relief and rehabilitation have been much appreciated domestically and internationally. It has set up more than 14,000 camps, deployed security

forces to assist the distressed Rohingyas in various ways. It has been taking up a massive development of Thengar Char off the Noakhali coast in the Bay of Bengal to re-locate the Rohingya refugees. It may be mentioned that the Char was originally declared as a forest reserve of about 40 sq.km. Once the development works are completed, the Government expects to flow of adequate foreign funds. All these have drawn the attention of the international humanitarian and donor agencies to come forward to help the Bangladesh Government in handling the issue as far as possible. Consequently, these developments are going to lay an impact on the pro-Awami voting turnout.

Envisioning the future

After all, the election is a game of uncertainty. In the context of the Bangladesh elections 2019, the ruling front is likely to score an impressive victory in the 11th parliamentary elections. If it comes back to power for the third time, what could be the immediate and long-term impact on the domestic politics and also on Bangladesh's external relations? The process of consolidation of the AL will be a foregone conclusion. The Opposition will be in total array leading to a split into a number of units. The Jamaat will suffer all the more. It is unlikely to find the ruling AL taking a carefully drawn conciliatory approach towards its arch-rival the BNP. It means that like many of the South Asian countries, Bangladesh will experience yet another phase of politics of vengeance. A series of insurmountable legal hurdles will be awaiting for Begum Khaleda Zia, which does not augur well of an emergent country. There will be speedy progress on certain fronts, such as education, economy, ecology, law and order. In the external front, Bangladesh relation with

India is likely to improve all the more. At the same time, Dhaka will have to play a balancing role in managing the relations with both India and China.

If the results lead to an unexpected reversal of political fate of the ruling party and its alliance, the most immediate result will be the release of Begum Khaleda Zia from prison and her return to the seat of power. Politics of vengeance will follow it more vigorously. The BNP leader is not likely to take a conciliatory approach forgetting her sufferings and patching up all the differences. It will be followed by the re-emergence of the Jamaat, which will be bad news for all the minorities, who were at the receiving end during her tenure during 2001-2006. The BNP's pronounced anti-Indian rhetoric is well-known. Therefore, India will have to watch the situation in such a hostile scenario.

Why should we be interested in the forthcoming elections of Bangladesh? India, and more particularly India's Northeast have a stake in the polls of our immediate neighbour. Over the last ten years, India has invested a great deal to improve its relationship with Bangladesh, so also the Government of Bangladesh has shown its reciprocal gesture. The impact is felt in several fronts, insurgency-related problems, with the completion of the Chittagong Port, Northeast India will be directly connected with the Bay of Bengal, marking the beginning of a new era of international trade. The pending issue of trade and transit treaty, which is expected to boost the economy of the Northeast through an easy and less expensive network of connectivity, needs a peaceful and friendly Bangladesh. The return of the BNP-led Government is likely to upset all the positive gains of the current bilateral relations built up as a result of mutual understanding and hard works

for last ten years by both India and Bangladesh. The return of the Jamaat as a partner of the BNP-led Government will be a disaster not only to the secular and democratic people of Bangladesh but will give a new lease of life to the Islamist militants who have been almost crushed to the ground by the present Government. Therefore, the results of the forthcoming elections are going to determine to which way our neighbour is moving – towards consolidation of democracy and secularism or reversal to retrogressive Islamic fundamentalism. The second option is not only detrimental to international peace and order but also to the people of Bangladesh, which once again will be in political instability affecting its pace of development in many of the fronts over the years.

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