

Bangladesh's volatile politics

The battling begums

The pendulum swings away from Sheikh Hasina and her government

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AHEAD of the festival of Eid-al-Fitr on August 9th-11th, the two quarrelling heads of Bangladesh's political dynasties exchanged greetings cards. But the outward signs of peace between the prime minister, Sheikh Hasina of the Awami League, and the opposition leader, Khaleda Zia of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), mean little. A European diplomat says he has just sent two cables to his capital. The first discusses the growing chances of the League's defeat in elections due by next January. The second is about the dynastic succession plans of the battling begums.



All aboard the election train

One political party is likely to be missing at the coming election. On August 1st the High Court ruled that the country's biggest religious party, the Jamaat-e-Islami, is unfit to contest national polls because its charter puts God above democratic process. The court has cancelled Jamaat's registration. A few months ago this might have sealed victory for the League, for Jamaat has been a crucial vote-winning ally for BNP.

Yet growing numbers now doubt whether the League can win a second consecutive term, and not only because no elected government has ever done so in Bangladesh. In early 2013 judgments by a flawed but popular court, investigating crimes committed by current Jamaat members during Bangladesh's war of independence from Pakistan in 1971, seemed to boost the nominally secular League, which revived the tribunal. Nearly all the leaders of Jamaat are likely to be sentenced, probably to death, by election day.

In response, the opposition framed the trials as a struggle between anti-Islamist forces and the pious. That paved the way for marches on Dhaka, the capital, by Hefazat-e-Islam, an Islamic splinter group with fundamentalist demands. The second time they marched, security forces killed up to 50 of them. The message young men took back to their villages was that thousands had been slaughtered. Across the country, the effect on the government's popularity has been devastating.

Ever since, the BNP has been in the ascendant. It thrashed the League in mayoral elections in June and July, notably in Gazipur in the industrial belt, hitherto one of the League's safest constituencies.

In an attempt to reverse its fortunes, the government plans to raise wages for 4m garment workers, who are angry at its failure to make factories safe and to compensate relatives of more than 1,100 killed in a ghastly factory collapse in May. A wage rise could sway many voters, but factory bosses are likely to resist a deal. A push against party corruption would also boost Sheikh Hasina's popularity. A good third of her MPs dare not visit their fiefs for fear of being lynched for treating their constituencies as cash tills. Yet no precedent exists for firing miscreants, and appointing credible candidates would probably split the party. As a last resort, Sheikh Hasina's son and heir apparent, Sajeeb Wazed, was handed around for three weeks in July before flying back to the United States. At this point, he looks like a non-starter.

His dynastic counterpart, Tarique Rahman, Mrs Zia's son, is wilier. He would jump on a plane from London tomorrow. His mother is in poor health and keen to pass power to her first-born. But he faces charges of corruption and money laundering in Bangladesh: Mr Rahman was instrumental in ensuring that the BNP's last stint in power was a glorious plunder. He would go straight to jail unless the League agrees in the coming weeks to pass control of the country's institutions to a caretaker government for the elections, a sticking-point that could trigger a constitutional crisis.

The League will fight bitterly. But if it loses an election, the BNP would rehabilitate its disgraced heir and its Jamaat allies (at least, those not executed by then). Once a party is in power in Bangladesh it is the unalterable tradition to declare nearly everything decreed by your opponents to be null and void.

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