



Endgame for Bi-party Dichotomy in Bangladesh

What is the issue?

\n\n

\n

- Former Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Begum Khaleda Zia has been sentenced to five years rigorous imprisonment in a corruption case.
- As she continues to hold the reigns of the Bangladesh National Party (BNP), the verdict is bound to severely affect its credibility as an alternative.

\n

\n\n

What is the political history?

\n\n

\n

- Since secession in 1971, Bangladesh's polity has been more or less evenly divided between the Awami League (AL) and the BNP.
- They've mostly traded office after every election since 1991.
- **Bad Reputation** - BNP sowed the seeds of its current political disenfranchisement with its irresponsible governance from 2001 to 2006.
- BNP-led alliance was openly corrupt, leading 'Transparency International' to rank Bangladesh as the most corrupt country for five years in a row.
- It presided over a time of unprecedented violence against the country's minority community and the political opposition.
- This included the assassination of two senior AL leaders and a grenade attack on an AL public meeting that killed 24 people and injured over 300.
- Notably, the current PM Sheikh Hasina, had narrowly survived the attack

and Ms. Zia's son is one of the accused facing trial in the case.

\n

- The BNP's misrule came to an end when a military-backed caretaker government seized power in January 2007.

\n

- **The Opposition Years** - When elections were held in December 2008, AL saw a landslide victory, and the BNP began its downward slide.

\n

- During its tenure, the AL succeeded in leveraging the perquisites of office to rebuild itself into the dominant political force in the country.

\n

- Simultaneously, the BNP suffered the usual indignities and routine repression of opposition, which is common in Bangladesh.

\n

- But despite this, aided by anti-incumbency, the BNP was still a very strong contender when elections were called in 2013.

\n

\n\n

How did the current mesh unfold?

\n\n

\n

- **Unsuccessful Revolt** - The AL had amended the constitution to do away with the caretaker government provision for holding elections, in 2013.

\n

- This was done as there was a fearful that this could be used as cover for another military takeover, like the one in 2007.

\n

- As opinion polls indicated a decent popularity for the BNP, there was every possibility of it returning to power through elections.

\n

- But instead, BNP resorted to street protests to restore the caretaker government provision and made it a precondition for electoral participation.

\n

- While a solid majority of the country agreed with the BNP's position, it still failed to either force the government to capitulate or the army to step in.

\n

- Contrarily, BNP protests got increasingly violent, which blotted its public popularity and also raised serious questions as to its own fitness for office.

\n

\n\n

\n

- **Recent Trends** - The BNP boycott of the 2014 elections, saw AL retaining power with a massive victory and subsequently consolidating its strangle hold.
\n
- Contrarily, BNP has withered continuously since, partly due to severe government repression and partly due to its own intrinsic shortcomings.
\n
- Many senior BNP leaders have been arrested for long terms and local leaders and cadre are on the run or have gone underground.
\n
- Also, recently, BNP chairperson, Ms.Khalela Zia has also been convinced by the supreme court for corruption, and has been sentenced to 5 years in jail.
\n
- This has decimated the party's organisational capacity and its ability to mobilise resources, and it is almost 11 years since it was in power.
\n
- All these factors gives rise to the perception that the bi-party dichotomy in Bangaladesh is coming to an end with AL emerging as the sole primary pole.
\n

\n\n

How does the future look?

\n\n

- **2019 elections** - The term for AL will end in 2019 and elections must be called before then, which might possibly see another walkover from the BNP.
\n
- This will likely strengthen the AL and also result in the BNP seeing a elationtion of its registration as per the election law.
\n
- But this might rise legitimacy problems internationally and would also not be to the liking of India, which is AL's principle international ally.
\n
- Hence, the best-case scenario for the AL would be securing the participation of a weakened BNP in the election, possibly without Ms. Zia.
\n
- **Possible scenarios** - Ms.Zia's current conviction would automatically disqualify her, unless her appeal seeking 'Special Leave' is accepted.
\n
- If the appeal is granted and she subsequently gets a bail from prision, she will be able to contest the elections, albeit with a taint of corruption.
\n
- Defection of the second rung leadership of BNP due to Zia's unpopularity or

a revolting against her from within are hence real possibilities.

\n

- Hence, the jailing of Ms. Zia even temporarily will be a body blow to the BNP, which in any case does not look like a credible challenger for 2019.

\n

- While a resurrection by BNP form here looks difficult, it can't be written off completely, as the opposition space is without perceivable contenders.

\n

\n\n

\n\n

Source: The Hindu

\n



IAS PARLIAMENT

Information is Empowering

A Shankar IAS Academy Initiative