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Prime Minister Sk. Hasina was very well aware that the BNP led opposition had constructed a well rehearsed strategy to demean her and her party, the Awami League (AL) one way or the other

If the January 5 polls to the 10th Jatiyo Sansad (Parliament) was postponed under opposition pressure, the government would have conceded moral, political and legal ground. It would be a loser even before polling. If the January 5 election date was adhered to, the opposition would boycott the same and the election would be one sided and projected as a farce. This is what exactly happened. Out of 300 seats, 153 were won uncontested. After the polls the Awami League won 232 seats, a two-third majority. The fractured Jatiyo Party led by Ms. Roushan Ershad won 32 seats. Polling was less than the curtailed expectation not only because of opposition boycott, but also for fear of violence. It was the bloodiest elections, with 24 killed on polling day. And over 500 died since January of last year due to opposition violence.

It is not that the ruling party supporters did not engage in violence. As a last resort, to counter the opposition's mindless attacks and arson, even Sk. Hasina urged supporters to come out and defend their turf. Admirably, Bangladesh's mainstream media generally took a neutral position. Neither Khaleda Zia nor Sk. Hasina were spared.

The government stuck to January 5 as the date for polling for pertinent reasons. According to the constitution, elections had to be held by January 24. The Election Commission (EC), a statutory body had set January 5 as the date. Huge preparations are required to conduct elections, including arranging for security. Even then, around one hundred polling stations were burnt by BNP-JEI cadres and workers.

Apart from the demand for a caretaker government, Begum Khaleda Zia demanded the polling date to be postponed. This was no compromise, no bargain, and was not acceptable to the Awami League as it would disturb the established constitutional and legal process.

Sk. Hasina and her government offered a compromise inviting opposition leaders to take up positions as ministers in the government, enabling a direct role in the election process and ensuring that no vote rigging was done. That, also, was not acceptable to Khaleda Zia. Sk. Hasina finally invited Khaleda for discussions to resolve the impasse. Even this was rejected by Begum Zia. A record of the entire conversation between Sk. Hasina and Begum Zia was published in the Bangladeshi print media. The churlishness of Begum Zia came out quite clearly.

A close study of the process suggests that the aim of Khaleda Zia and the opposition was to show up Sk. Hasina as a loser, politically weak, and Khaleda Zia as the winner and only leader. This was a very unfortunate strategy, and the BNP is still banking on that.

In terms of nationalist political pedigree Sk. Hasina's far supersedes Khaleda Zia's. Sk. Hasina's father, Bangabandhu Sk. Mujibur Rahman led the independence movement from the front. Had Pakistan's surrender on December 16, 1971 been delayed by a couple of days, Sk. Mujib, who was in a Pakistani jail death row for treason, would have been executed.

Begum Khaleda Zia's late husband, Zia-ur-Rehman, who was a Major in the Pak army in 1971 but fought in the liberation war against the Pak army, has a questionable history. His role in the August 15, 1975 coup by a group of Bangladeshi army officers demands deeper research. The coup executors assassinated Sk. Mujibur Rahman and his entire family, including his youngest child Russel, who was just 10 years old. Sk. Hasina and her younger sister Sk. Rehana, survived as they were abroad.

Major Zia rose in the ranks thanks to Sk. Mujib, who was in many ways a simple and trusting man. According to people close to the hierarchy at that time, Zia told Sk. Mujib that as long as he (Zia) was alive no one could harm a single hair of his (Mujib's). Through extra-judicial killings and coups Zia became the army chief and president of Bangladesh, and floated the BNP in 1978. He also legitimised the JEI which was banned soon after liberation for their anti-Bangladesh collaboration with the Pakistan army in 1971. Zia also tried to usurp Sk. Mujib's legacy as the declarer of "independence" thus claiming for himself the title of the "liberator".

Zia, as president, was assassinated in turn by another army officer, Maj. Gen. Manzoor, GOC 24 Inf. Division, Chittagong, in 1981. Manzoor and Zia began to clash frequently at meetings over the direction the country was taking. Manzoor strongly felt that Zia was reversing the

pledge and aspirations of the liberation war for which the country had paid so dearly. He was strongly against the legitimization of the JEI and its students' front, the Islamic Chaatra Sangho (later Shibir) the pro-Pak militia, who were responsible for the rape and killing of thousands of Bengali women and the massacre of Bengali men, including old men and children.

Since then, the JEI and its students' wing, the Islamic Chaatra Shibir, have flourished. In 2001-2006, in collaboration with the BNP they became the rulers of the nation they bloodily opposed. They also actively promoted religious fundamentalism and terrorism in partnership with BNP leaders.

The JEI has been banned as a political party by the Election Commission following a high court order. A political party's constitution is obliged to adhere to the nation's constitution and the Election Commission guidelines that flow from there. The JEI demands Sharia Law which is prohibited in the constitution, thus challenging the very concept of Bangladesh.

The JEI was born as a pan-Pakistan Islamic institution, and was a brainchild of Islamic cleric Ala Moududi. It is an amalgamation of Deobandhi, Wahabi and Salafi thought. In recent years, the Bangladesh JEI or Jamaat have made strategic changes in their fight. They have created an upper level of western educated lawyers, technocrats, doctors and journalists who project a moderate Islamic character. Being religious is no crime or affront. On the other hand they have their core party cadres and workers who promote a rigid Islamic vision wherein a continuous religious war or jihad must be prosecuted against the not-believers or *Kafirs*. The very thought of this strategic approach should wake up people all over the world.

There is an often heard argument that the religious parties may make a noise but win very few seats in elections. That may be true. But the religious havoc they create at the lower end of the society is unacceptable.

The genesis of religious extremism in Pakistan is the Jamaat. The Pakistan state, both civilian and military rulers used them in many forms, including as carriers of foreign policy against India. They are suffering now more than India is. A genie was let out from the bottle to devour the enemy. The genie is hungry and if the masters cannot give them food, they will eat the masters.

Such a challenge is now looming over Bangladesh. A fertile ground is being created for the Al Qaeda and its associates by the Jamaat-BNP partnership. The Al Qaeda made one attempt, albeit a small one, in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in end 2008 assisted by the JEI.

Western countries led by the United States are trying to get the two warring sides to the table, to discuss the issue threadbare according to the relevant laws and the constitution and come to an agreement so that matters of the state can go forward unhindered.

The government led by Sk. Hasina expected the situation and declared in advance that if talks could bring about a satisfactory solution, the parliament could be dismissed and fresh elections held with all political parties participating. That position stands, but elections had to be

held as per the constitution.

The opposition alliance led by the BNP and its chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia are also veering to the proposal of talks, but still remain unclear whether their earlier position not to compromise on the caretaker government issue, and Sk. Hasina remaining prime minister once the date of elections is declared, still stand.

It is well known that both Sk. Hasina and Khaleda Zia have supported and opposed the caretaker government system depending upon whether they led the government or were in the opposition. This only suggests that the caretaker government system, as it entails today, is flawed.

The shortcomings of the caretaker system were revealed when the system was put into action to hold elections to the 9th parliament after the BNP-JEI coalition government completed its term. The system is directed to hold elections within 90 days of the dissolution of parliament. Two spells of emergency were declared under which all political activities were banned. There were serious differences over selection of neutral members of the caretaker government and the Chief Advisor, who acts as the prime minister.

The army came into play, and a coup was averted following intervention from western countries and the UN Secretary General. It would be recalled that both Sk. Hasina and Khaleda Zia were put in jail on corruption charges. Elections were finally held on December 29, 2008 by a reformed Election Commission under a new caretaker government. In a subsequent probe both the caretaker government and the Army Chief Gen. Moen U. Ahmed were indicted.

The Awami league government has kept the army out of politics, but Khaleda Zia on more than one occasion called on the armed forces to come out of their barracks and oust the government, that is, stage a coup. To Khaleda and her team anything is acceptable if Sk. Hasina can be dethroned. There is the major issue of JEI. It does not qualify as a political party as per the laws. Very recently, the JEI has launched a propaganda that it is a moderate Islamic political party, law abiding, never did anything illegal, and promises full protection and freedom of religion to the minorities (read Hindus). It is unbelievable how the JEI could come up with such a self promotion. And if they have, it must have been a well deliberated and conscious decision with expensive professional advice.

The JEI has two priorities at the moment. The first is to obliterate 1971 from history. They have succeeded to an extent, but agony cannot be wiped out. They still hope to get their leaders who are charged and sentenced for crimes against humanity, dismissed with help from the BNP and friends abroad. The other is to bury all evidence of their links with religious terrorism.

The western countries have a daunting task ahead. For a successful compromise the Awami League may be pressured to come down on the caretaker government question. Will the pressure extend to another amendment of the constitution and Election Commission rules to allow the JEI with its unchanged constitution to be recognized as a legitimate political party?

The coming days are critical for Bangladesh and its inclusive democracy. If that is destroyed, the world including the west, will have a heavy price to pay.

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