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Bangladesh: Mayoral Elections in Rangpur- Its Significance:

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The Mayoral election held for the Rangpur City Corporation on 21st December was the first of the four Municipal elections that are to take place before the General Elections and should normally indicate the trends in voting between the two major parties- the Awami League led by Sheikh Hasina and the BNP led by Khaleda Zia. The only election that was held before was the Mayoral elections on March 30, 2017 to Comilla where the BNP won handsomely. o

In the present elections, the Jatiya Party Mayoral candidate Moitafizar Rahman Mustafa won a crushing victory, polling 160,489 votes as against 62,400 votes by the Awami League and the BNP was a poor third with 35,136 votes. The voter turnout was 74.3 percent- a fairly high percentage. Among the councillors, 14 of the Awami League, 7 of the BNP and 2 of the JP got elected. It is said that both the major parties- the Awami League and the BNP were stunned by the unexpected results. Traditionally, Rangpur is a strong hold of the JP and it was expected that the JP would sail through but the margin of victory was truly stunning!

Significance of Rangpur City Elections:

The Rangpur City Corporation was significant on many counts. Briefly these were

* With the national general elections one year away and with the major parties putting in all their efforts in the city elections, it was thought, that it would be a precursor to the general elections to be held a year later.

* The election was held with the Shiekh Hasina heading the government and the JP conceded that it was a free and fair election. This is to

be seen in the demand of the BNP that the National election should be held under a neutral government and not with a government headed by Hasina,

* Though the BNP complained that this mayoral election was not held in a free and fair manner, the general impression was that it was really free and fair. The BNP showed itself as a “bad loser”

* The Army was not deployed but was available as against the demand of the BNP that Army should be deployed and given magisterial powers to arrest etc. in the coming General elections.

* Use of EVM was made in certain wards on an experimental basis and these machines functioned well. There were no complaints!

The Coming General Elections:

Article 123 (3) of the Constitution stipulates that the next General Elections should be held within 90 days of the dissolution of the parliament- here the tenth Parliament. This means that the elections to the eleventh parliament should be held between October 31, 2018 and Jan 28 2019. The present Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has indicated that the elections will be held most probably by next December.

The present Constitution stipulates that the incumbent PM will remain in office till the national polls and till the next Prime Minister is elected. So, Hasina could stay on in office as Prime Minister during the elections and as her party has said that she would help the Election Commissioner in conducting a free and fair polls. She will be constitutionally correct in rejecting the demands of the BNP to step down before the elections.

It is estimated that there will be an addition of 2.30 crores of voters this time than the one held in 2008 and it is indeed a significant increase. Traditionally, the voting pattern between the two main parties the AL and the BNP are even and therefore the choice of the new voters will be decisive.

The Crucial Issue in Conducting the Elections:

The Election Commission had invited the representatives of the political parties to discuss on the issues relating to the conduct of the elections. There are differences between the two major parties - the Awami League and the BNP in the conduct of the elections, but the most serious and crucial one appears to be whether the elections should be held under a neutral government in what they call “Polls time Supportive Government”- which perhaps means non partisan government. But the Awami league insists that it should be held as per the constitution- meaning that Hasina’s government will be in power while conducting elections.

There are other differences too like the deployment of the Army and giving them powers of arrest as demanded by the BNP while the Awami League wants the Army to be kept as Strike Forces in aid of civil power as in existing laws (the Elections Commission thinks that it can be deployed), use of the Electronic Voting machines, fresh demarcation of the constituencies as per pre 2008 elections (the BNP wants change in the configuration of constituencies while AL is against) etc. But these are surmountable ones and could be resolved but it is certainly going to be tough to resolve the crucial issue as to who leads the government during the elections?

An Inclusive Election?

Whatever be the outcome of the discussions the Election Commission has with the parties, it looks that unlike the previous election, this time it will be an “All Inclusive Election.” The BNP has learnt its lesson and has realised that by its bad decision of staying away from the previous elections it has left its cadres disorganised and frustrated. It is said that seven of the twenty parties that formed an alliance with BNP are also planning to stay away from the alliance.

One would expect that BNP not to indulge in rhetoric and quietly accept the realities and get ready for elections. By its postures and various statements to the contrary, it is leaving its cadres confused and bewildered. Consider the following:

* On 9th November 2017, Moudud Ahmed the standing Committee member of the BNP said that the BNP will participate in the upcoming Parliamentary elections. He added that the Awami League government will be forced to compromise on the BNP’s stand for holding general election under a “supportive government.”

* Khaleda in the court made a statement that cases have been filed against her to make her ineligible for the elections and keep her away from politics! . This means that she intends to participate in the elections.

* On 13Th November 2017, Khaleda declared that there would be no polls under Hasina and elections should be under a non partisan and neutral government.

* On 22nd November 2017, Khaleda in her meeting with the advisory council of the party said that her party would not take part in the next general elections without a neutral poll free government.

* On 25th December, she again said that “it will not be possible to hold a free and fair general election if PM Sheikh Hasina remains in power.”

* Moudud Ahmad said on 1st January that if the incumbent government pays no heed to the demand of an election under a non partisan

government, his party would have no alternative but to go for a movement. (It is quite some time since the party has openly had any movement of significance. Many of its leaders are still going to court and defending themselves for all the violent acts perpetrated in the name of protests since the last election.)

* On 3rd Jan, Khaleda said categorically that her party would contest the national elections but the polls must be held under an interim non partisan administration.

Conclusion:

It looks that despite all the rhetoric, BNP will participate in the next elections under the present incumbent government as PM Sheikh Hasina is not going to relent on this issue while on other issues like use of Army, EVMs but not on reconfiguration of the electoral constituencies, she perhaps would.

Both the parties are now seen to be actively engaged in preparing the elections. The BNP has started to organise and activate its leaders and cadres. The Awami league on the other hand is yet to start. I get the impression that Awami league is over confident in view of the fine performance of its government so far but I am afraid that this over confidence itself may be its undoing if they are not careful.

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