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Submitted by asiaadmin2 on Fri, 04/20/2018 - 09:17

Paper No. 6368

Dated 20-April-2018

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Ever since the Election Commission of Bangladesh announced local Corporation Polls in Khulna and Gazipur cities for 15 May, the political parties have now earnestly begun to prepare for the elections.

These elections are important for both the alliances led by the Awami League and the BNP as this will show their strength and certainly the trends for the coming national elections at the end of the year.

The Awami League has called it as the “semi finals” for the coming general elections while the opposition BNP has taken it as a challenge to prove their popularity by retaining the seats. It is a little intriguing that they demanded once again for deployment of the Army and avoid using the EVMs for the coming polls. This was not done in the previous municipal polls when they handsomely won. It would appear that they want to make these demands as a routine- that in case they lose they could blame the government for not acceding to their demands!

It is good that the BNP has decided to fight the local elections in Khulna and Gazipur without any fuss and preparing in right earnest. Their nominations had to be cleared from “London” which shows the importance they place on the elections. The JEI had taken application forms for the contest and had initially thought of fighting the elections as independents. They may still do so but with the acquiescence of the BNP alliance. What is to be noted here is that JEI which has considerable following with many violence prone activists cannot be weaned away from the BNP. Put differently, despite declarations to the contrary, the BNP will not let go the JEI from its hold!

In the absence of their top leaders with Khaleda in Jail and her son Tareque Rahman in exile in London, the BNP has many challenges.

First, is to keep the unity of the party and the twenty party alliance. So far the alliance has stood by the BNP leadership.

Second, is the movement to release Khaleda. Their Secretary General said that the party has decided to take part in the elections to intensify the ongoing movement to free Khaleda. This is a strange argument and the Party cannot go on simultaneously with the movement and prepare for the elections. The problem is that in the "Trust Cases" where Khaleda was convicted are straightforward ones based on documentary evidence-evidence of diverting funds received from abroad with no explanation given. Their demand for release on her medical conditions has also fallen through. The full-fledged medical board which examined her said that "her overall condition is not critical." The party may have to make do without the personal presence of their leader.

Thirdly, their top leadership is facing many cases that were registered when the party indulged in violence in the aftermath of the last general elections. Numerous corruption cases have also come up against eight of the top leadership. Four cases against two standing committee members, one Vice chairman and party chairpersons chief adviser are nearing the final stages and judgments may be pronounced very soon!

The party's activities are so far seen to be very defensive and yet in view of its inherent strength is expected to perform creditably.

The Awami league appears to be in a better position. Their chief asset is Sk. Hasina herself and her government.

First, is Hasina's stand on her religion. One should recall the statement she made a year ago- She said I quote- "Despite being a Muslim, we are Bengalis too and we should not forget that we have liberated our country after fighting against occupation forces as Bengalis. It is not that we can't be Muslims and being Bengalis.". The liberation struggle is still the minds of many people.

Second- is the way she has been handling the Rohingya crisis. Her approach to find a sustainable solution to the Rohingya problem, while maintaining friendly relations with Myanmar should be commended.

Third, she has the courage to take bold decisions without looking for vote banks! Her recent decision to scrap all quota in government appointments is one good example.

Fourth - is her relentless pursuit of extremists of all colours and the war crime trials. To her credit, there has been no major incidents recently involving JMB or neo JMB. Arrests are being regularly made on actionable intelligence. One major challenge of recent origin appears to be the increasing number of Female neo JMB Jihadists who have become active.

Last but not the least has been the excellent performance of Hasina's government in the field of economy. Though the World Bank has

projected a rise in GDP 6.5 to 6.6 percent for the current financial year, there is hope that it would finally be around 7 percent. Inflation is down to 5.4 percent from 6.1 of last year and per capita income has risen to 1752 US \$, a rise of 142 \$ from last year.

Recently, the United Nations Economic and Social Council's Policy Committee announced the eligibility of Bangladesh for graduation from the LDC (Least Developed Country) to that of a developing country after having achieved the three criteria of GNI (Gross National Income), HAI (Human Asset Index) and EVI (Economic Vulnerability Index).

It is said that 90 percent of households are getting electricity from 47 percent in 2009.

Though these may not have an immediate impact on the local elections or even the general elections, it has to be conceded that her government has made immense strides in socio economic development. What they need to do is to shed their overconfidence!

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