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Bangladesh: Polls on 30th December- the need to be seen to be credible:

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The Election Commission of Bangladesh announced the schedule for the National Elections. While the Polls will be held on 30th December, November 28th was fixed as the deadline for filing nomination papers. Scrutiny of papers will be on 2nd December and December 9th will be last date for withdrawals.

The Election Commission had originally announced December 23rd as the election date but postponed it by a week on the request of the opposition parties who wanted an extension of a month. According to the Constitution, the elections will have to be held on or before January 28th.

In the first week of November, talks were held between the Ruling Alliance and the opposition parties (Oikya Front) on the elections particularly on the demand of the opposition to have a “polls free Government”. Unfortunately, all the major issues and differences remained unsettled despite a week long talks. Yet the BNP leader Khaleda Zia gave her approval for participating in the elections as it was realized that non- participation in the last General elections had caused immense damage to the party.

Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, the Secretary General of the BNP said that though there is no atmosphere for a fair and free elections, they would yet go for the elections. Probably he was referring to the large- scale arrests of BNP activists in the last two weeks and the rejection of nomination papers of BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia for the three constituencies she had filed her nomination papers.

Khaleda Zia was ruled out of contesting the elections after the Supreme Court’s ruling on 28th November that upheld the verdict of a lower court that nobody sentenced to more than two years in jail or awaiting appeal can run for elections. She had filed nomination papers in three

constituencies- Bogura 6, Bogura 7 and Feni 1. Khaleda has still 33 cases pending against her.

Hasina is contesting from two constituencies- Gopalganj 3 and Rangpur 6.

Prejudiced as they are, the Western Countries appear to be sure that the elections may not be credible. A report to the House of Commons said that “though many observers expect the December 30 elections to be credible, the ‘playing field’ remains far from being level”. It added that there are fears that this could foment violence. This was an uncharitable observation as it is known that in the aftermath of last national elections, it was the BNP cadres and its JEI allies who created mayhem and many of the cases are still pending in the criminal courts!

On 11th November, the UN said that it gives priority to an inclusive, credible and transparent elections in Bangladesh. Since the BNP has decided to join the election fray, unlike the last one, it could be said that the current election is inclusive, though some of the opposition leaders have been barred from elections due to sentences in the criminal courts for which the Government is not responsible.

The European Union is sending a two person ‘expert mission’ to observe the elections. The US is sending 12 teams of Observers and has brazenly said that it would fund thousands of Domestic Observers to monitor the elections. This is indeed unfortunate as it is an open interference in the elections for which, the Hasina Government is responsible for conducting a fair and free election. Does it mean that it has no trust in Sheikh Hasina’s Government?

It is good that a noted Lawyer, Dr. Kamal Hossein is taking a leading role in forming a united opposition in the name of “Oikya Front” of which the BNP is a constituent. At one point it was thought that the smaller parties like the ones led by Dr. Hossein will not join hands with the BNP if the latter continues to hobnob with Islamist parties like JEI. This does not appear to be so now as the JEI has been allotted over 25 seats in this election and are said to be openly campaigning under their banner!

Not to be outdone, the Awami League which is a part of the 14- party alliance has forged ties with the conservative Islamist Groups like Hefajat-e-Islam. At least, here there is an ‘even playing field’!

The BNP has 60 new faces, mostly from former student leaders, family members of veterans and deceased party leaders. The Awami league has also introduced 50 new faces.

Both the Oikya Front and the Awam League are readying with their manifestos. While the details of the manifesto of the Awami League are not officially known, the one from the opposition Oikya Front is available. The manifesto has many good features and some notable points include

* Provision for an “Upper House” to the Parliament

* Appointment of an Ombudsman.

*No Member of Parliament to be a Prime Minister for more than two terms.

*. Post of Deputy Speaker and some heads of Parliamentary Standing Committees to be given to Opposition.

* Except for Armed Forces no age limit to get Government jobs.

The draft manifesto promises that the opinion and participation of defeated persons/parties will be ensured. Most interesting of all- of a situation that has plagued Bangladesh politics- the manifesto promises to refrain from 'revenge politics'!

Sheikh Hasina has a very heavy responsibility to ensure a 'level playing field" which is a must for the elections to be free and fair. The arbitrary and indiscriminate arrests of opposition activists do not help in projecting a level playing field. The order given to arrest people only with warrants is a good beginning, but it needs to be ensured that this is implemented. Photographs of families and relatives of those arrested looking sadly at the prison vans does not bring any credit to the Government and it would only enable the opposition to get the 'sympathy votes'

It is understood that it is not in Hasina's hands to let Khaleda contest the elections and no change of laws can be made at this late hour on the eve of election to amend electoral laws as is being demanded by the opposition. But this needs to be explained to the people.

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