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POLITICAL UNREST AND DEMOCRACY IN BANGLADESH

M. Rashiduzzaman

Two focal demands dominated the 22-month confrontation, bitter impasse, widespread anti-government rioting, and for a period of time, strident non-cooperation movement during 1994-96 in Bangladesh. They were: (1) the resignation of Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia, and (2) her replacement by a nonpartisan caretaker government to supervise new elections and transfer of power to newly elected leaders. Both demands originated with the Awami League's (AL) allegations that the governing Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) had blatantly rigged a by-election in the district of Magura and that the AL could not hope for free and fair voting under a BNP-led government. But Khaleda refused to yield to what she perceived as unconstitutional opposition pressure and stayed to the end of her term despite the opposition's boycott of Parliament. The government held a general election in the middle of violent political unrest on February 15, 1996, without any nonpolitical interim executive to supervise it.

The protest intensified drastically after the election, which the BNP won easily—with all major opposition parties boycotting the polls—and Khaleda was inaugurated as the prime minister for a second term. But as the protests reached a climax, she acceded to opposition demands, and the 13th constitutional amendment establishing a caretaker government to supervise future elections was hurriedly approved by the newly elected Parliament to facilitate her resignation. Once the constitutional provision was in place, the Parliament elected in February was dissolved and Khaleda stepped down in March. A nonpolitical caretaker executive headed by former Chief Justice Habibur Rahman assumed authority under the amended Constitution, the second interregnum in five years entrusted with the supervision of an election and trans-

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fer of power. The caretaker government ordered a fresh general election for June 12, 1996. Despite numerous allegations of electoral fraud and irregularities, the second voting in about four months had a large turnout, and international and domestic observers upheld the polls as largely clean and generally peaceful. The AL emerged as the largest parliamentary group, though just shy of an absolute majority, and Sheikh Hasina Wajed became the new prime minister, steering her party into power after 21 years.[1] However, this nonpartisan interim authority for supervising elections was by no means a panacea, as allegations of electoral fraud by both parties continued during the campaign and by the losers after the vote. Many feared that the allegations and tensions between the AL and the BNP may again plunge the country into stalemate, destruction, and material loss.

Misgivings about the protracted unrest and political deadlock in Bangladesh centered on a number of related questions. Could *hartal* (the complete cessation of public activities during a political strike, which may be peaceful or violent), whose legitimacy as a political expression against despotism was not denied, coexist with an institutionalized democracy? Was it a short-cut to bring down a government and seek a transfer of power? What were the institution-decaying effects of *hartal*-driven political movements? Was the demand for a caretaker government an accessory to the agitational tactics that destabilized the institutional process? Could Bangladeshi civil society survive the political recalcitrance that divided the classic adversaries? Could the Bangladeshi bureaucracy claim to be nonaligned after it defied the government and openly sided with opposition-led agitation? Did the June election guarantee a stable democracy or trigger more discord? This article examines those questions in the wake of endemic political instability threatening democracy in Bangladesh.

Legacy of *Hartal* Politics

Hartal, a vehicle of opposition empowerment and the embodiment of Bangladesh politics, has polarized opinion and defied institutional norms and constitutional practices. No matter who was in power, no matter how fair was the poll, and no matter what form of constitution defined the authority, a determined opposition riding the crest of billowing *hartals* could bring down a government. On the one hand, *hartal* has mobilized public support and given political voice to the parties; on the other, it has represented uncompromising politics and demonstrated the hollowness of conventional party politics in Bangladesh. There is some form of *hartal* to match every political occasion

1. Sheikh Hasina Wajed, the Awami League leader, popularly known as Hasina (also as Sheikh Hasina), is the daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founding leader of Bangladesh, killed in the 1975 coup. Begum Khaleda Zia, also known as Khaleda, is leader of the BNP and widow of President (General) Ziaur Rahman, killed in an abortive coup in 1981.

in Bangladesh; in 1995-96, there were about 170 such incidents. A variety of non-party, interest group-inspired, or locally sustained *hartal* are also common, and from time to time, NGOs, labor unions, and religious organizations come alive with a wide range of protests. Khaleda, along with other leaders, used unrelenting pressures to oust President H. M. Ershad in 1990, but once she was in power and the political equation changed, her rivals lashed her with waves of strikes until she too was ousted from office.

Those who use *hartal* and other forms of protest in politics justify their actions in the name of democratic rights of the people because democratization requires public support. Politicians and student leaders were not generally afraid of being arrested or jailed during protests; in fact, they looked upon their agitational role as "political capital" for the future. By and large, the universities have been the centers of resistance in Bangladesh, with anti-government movements largely shaped by students who are sometimes influenced by politicized faculty preaching *hartal* and other forms of protest as worthy challenges to authority. The first successful popular agitation in the former East Pakistan was the 1952 language movement, which continued until the government was forced to recognize Bengali as one of the state languages of Pakistan. Among the earlier significant political movements were the 1956 Awami League-led demonstrations that brought down the coalition government of Abu Hossain Sarkar. Public protests were outlawed and activists went underground once martial law was imposed in 1958, but anti-Ayub Khan dissent fermented in the 1960s soon after limited civil rights and quasi-representative institutions were reinstated.

There was a lull in agitation with the outbreak of the 1965 India-Pakistan war but activity rebounded once the AL introduced its six-point autonomy demands in 1966. Opposition against the authoritarian Ayub regime culminated in the 1969 mass movements when strikes, *hartal*, violence, police actions, and curfews compelled President Ayub Khan to hand over power to General Yahya Khan, then the army chief. What began as anti-Ayub protests turned into a full-fledged independence struggle in 1971 when Yahya Khan, administering Pakistan under martial law, refused to transfer power to the AL, which had earlier won the majority in parliamentary elections. Elements of protest continued in post-independence Bangladesh but there was a period of "depoliticization" after the violent coup and counter-coups of 1975 that brought General Ziaur Rahman (commonly called Zia) into power. Few *hartal* were sustained because political groups were in disarray and the public was averse to agitation. During the Zia regime, periodic military uprisings were more dominant in Bangladesh but protests and mass movements returned in the late 1980s, forcing Ershad to relinquish power.

Students appeared to be the "shakers and movers" of *hartal*, but their primary contributions were building roadblocks, setting up checkpoints, picketing, damaging motor vehicles, and marching through the streets. Over the years, the anti-government protests created a distinct political class on college campuses that undermined the quality of education in Bangladesh. All the major parties used student groups as their power base and front organizations to spearhead political movements on their behalf, and those who were killed, injured, or arrested during periods of violence were frequently the student activists. However, in recent years the nature of participants in agitation has changed, although the political elite still leads them. Academically committed students, lawyer-politicians, teachers, doctors, and businessmen are less visible in the raw grass-roots uproar, but usually become more vocal when the government approaches its downfall. Prolonged strikes stifle political development and disrupt normal life, and most people feel like "hostages" in the hands of rival political groups. In the frequent eruptions of *hartal* in 1995-96, the rickshaw-wallas, scooter drivers, small shopkeepers, and garment manufacturers and their workers were reluctant to participate in protracted *hartal*. As a special concession from picketers, the rickshaw pullers frequently enjoyed the unusual privilege (people taunted this as an "amnesty") of operating their vehicles during the work stoppages.

It is an open secret in Bangladesh that paid "mercenary" demonstrators and armed activists, hired by both the opposition and pro-government groups, made up the "street mobs" and "foot soldiers" who drove processions, rallies, roadblocks, blockades, arson, violence, and other forms of civil disobedience. Even the *bustees* (shacks) and slums, the perpetual breeding ground for activists, no longer supplied purely voluntary political supporters. Dhaka and most other urban areas in Bangladesh teemed with hundreds of thousands of unemployed young men who were frequently recruited by political parties. To enforce a strike on a declared day of *hartal*, Dhaka city would be divided into several "strategic" sectors in which "people" were recruited to enforce work stoppages. To demonstrate *hartal* effectiveness, major business centers and communication arteries in the capital would be tightly controlled by the strikers.

Among recently recruited elements in *hartal* politics were the local *mastans* (musclemen/goons), who extorted local shopkeepers, resorted to violence and terrorism, intimidated scooter drivers, damaged vehicles, and menaced people violating the strikes.[2] Those were the new "professional participants" in Bangladeshi street politics as well as in election campaigns of all the major parties. Extraction of resources through government contracts,

2. The festering *mastan* problem in Bangladesh's political economy eventually drew the attention of the intelligentsia who frequently criticized the leaders and parties for allegedly exploiting such elements to achieve their goals. See R. H. Khandker, "Economics of Mastani: A Light-Hearted Analysis," *Daily Star* (Dhaka), December 21, 1995. For a historical overview including the 1994-96 protests, see *Jai Jai Din*, 10 September 1996.

jobs, and permits as well as ransom and other forms of coercion were habitual practices among these unemployed young activists. With no strong or sustained loyalty to any particular group or persons, they commonly switched their support to the highest bidders. When the BNP left power, many of its alleged *mastans* reportedly turned themselves over to the new parties in government.

The huge public meetings addressed by quintessential Bangladeshi leaders like Fazlul Huq, H. S. Suhrawardy, Maulana Bhasani, and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s were seething energy fields where enthusiastic demonstrators, students, supportive teachers, curious journalists, politicized industrial workers, friendly shopkeepers, and party supporters mingled together. With exceptions, there is now less evidence of such a "spontaneous" rush to public meetings to listen to current leaders, few of whom are known for their oratory. "Blocs" of people now are brought from factories in the industrial outskirts of cities by buses and trucks commandeered for the mass rallies. In the 1996 election campaigns, many public meetings were bombed by crude incendiary devices, which were also used in recurrent *hartals* to frighten opponents, discourage motorists, intimidate rickshaw pullers, and disrupt rival gatherings.

As with earlier protests, the 1994-96 movements originated in Dhaka, the capital, but gradually moved to other cities and smaller towns and villages. In the process of their escalation, anti-government activity changed character in terms of militancy, participation, slogans, and symbols. By the time the protests unfolded in small towns and villages, they assumed local traits, the broader political issues receded into the background, and latent forces, factional and personal rivalries, and individual grievances became politicized, frequently leading to defiance and violence.

For two years, Bangladesh democracy was caught between a government whose credibility was questioned and an irresponsible opposition that stimulated the destabilizing street politics instead of working through the constitutional process.[3] As a result, public esteem for both the government and the opposition dwindled and politicians were viewed with cynicism. Intellectual permissiveness toward unfettered *hartal*, boycotts, and protests was a dangerous signal for democracy and institution-building. The tendentious political doctrine that "constitution was for the people but not the vice-versa" (a justification for using protests rather than constitutional means) was a retrograde

3. Numerous Bangladeshi and foreign journalists have written on the political standoff between the BNP government and the opposition. For an overview of the events in February and March 1996, see *Saptahik Manachitra*, a Bengali political weekly (Dhaka), 12 April 1996, and *Daily Inquilab* (Dhaka), 27 September 1996. For a summary and analysis of the 1995 anti-government movements, see Golam Hossain, "Bangladesh in 1995: Politics of Intransigence," *Asian Survey*, February 1996.

step for the civil society and democratic institutions. Anti-election resistance in February 1996 spread like an inferno throughout the country when as many as 200 vehicles were burned and damaged in a single day in Chittagong alone.[4] An indefinite non-cooperation movement started on March 9, which paralyzed the communication network in the country. People were killed, random bombings kept people off main roads, personal and public properties were destroyed, and business was lost on a massive scale.

The political pressure that pushed Khaleda out of power sowed the seeds of an unending cycle of confrontation between the opposition and government. Legislative boycotts and intermittent *hartal* are not the monopoly of a single group; any political faction or leader with a modicum of support can resort to demonstrations disrupting public life and defying authority. The BNP could now emulate the same tactics recently practiced by the AL, a matter of continuing concern to Hasina since she assumed office. Khaleda presented a 10-point demand in November 1996 and vowed to stay out of legislative sessions until it was met by the government. However, an agreement between the AL and the BNP was reached in January 1997 and the BNP MPs returned to Parliament.

When popular agitation forced Ershad to resign in 1990, Hasina and the AL were poised to take power, but the 1991 election, supervised by a caretaker executive and confirmed as a fair poll, returned the BNP to office with Khaleda as its leader. Hasina's party went to the opposition benches in Parliament but soon began a catalytic campaign against Khaleda for alleged vote fraud; gradually, constitutional logic was overwhelmed by *hartal*. Copious reports were published accusing the BNP of vote-rigging in a by-election, but after some investigation, the election commission denied any serious transgression. Yet the stalemate continued, and the accusations gained momentum with the two other leading opposition groups, the Jatiya Party (JP) and the Jamaat-e-Islam (JI), joining the AL offensive. All the opposition lawmakers boycotted the Parliament, and neither vigorous persuasion by diplomats and international mediators nor a high court ruling against the continuing boycott could bring the fractious leaders together.

Hartal, boycotts, and other forms of protest have been the cutting edge of Bangladeshi language movements, the independence struggle, and resistance to the military regimes, and these movements successfully wrested concessions from the ruling authority. In the past, major national campaigns and protests were followed by a sense of colossal achievement, and their leaders rode high for a time in a widely shared euphoria. No such emotional wave swept the country after Khaleda's resignation. She defended her actions in upholding the constitutional process, and she continued to draw large crowds

4. *Dainik Bangla* (Dhaka), 5 February 1996.

whenever she addressed public meetings. Contrary to what her political foes expected, the BNP—which won 114 of the 300 elected parliamentary seats in the June poll—did not go into hiding, nor was Khaleda condemned as the mother of all evils. No doubt the parliamentary victory and Hasina's ascent to the prime ministership was a remarkable achievement for the AL. However, the JP did not gain more seats than it held in 1991, and with only three members in the new Parliament, the JI's performance was disappointing.

What were the long term gains of the protests that pulverized the country for nearly two years? Mass movements spelled disaster when they became daily offensives against a constitutionally accountable government; and when an elected leadership was compelled to use force to keep itself in power, it usually forfeited the democratic character. The failed negotiations between the government and opposition threatened the democracy in Bangladesh, and democratic institution-building was the ultimate victim of prolonged and repeated political unrest. Khaleda's critics insisted that instead of hunkering down behind the protective fences of the Constitution, which only escalated the unrest, she should have stepped down earlier and ordered an election under a caretaker government as she was ultimately forced to do. Although she defended the February 15 election as a constitutional obligation to sustain a legitimate administration, people questioned the utility of an election in which no more than 10% of the voters participated and most opposition parties boycotted the "farcical poll."

With or without elections, Bangladesh has moved in and out of democracy with a record of one-party authoritarianism, assassinations, political upheavals, and military rule. Democratic ideals are generally acceptable in Bangladesh, but political actors more than once have changed the "playing field" through agitation when it suited them. Excluding extraordinary circumstances, *hartal*, rioting, boycotts, and demonstrations were a circumventing mechanism—a shortcut to power—that in the end amounted to a political filibuster impinging upon the development of democracy.

Civic Consequences of Political Unrest

The strikes, political strife, and the *hartal*-thumping activists scuttled the civil society's equilibrium. Over-articulation and politicization of grievances were unleased by the continual agitation, which weakened the institutions that held the civic community together. Leaders and their followers were ensnared in a vicious cycle of expectation and frustration. Manifestly, there were similarities between a post-revolutionary cataclysmic state and a post-*hartal* government pestered by students, demonstrators, and *mastans* demanding payoffs. From 1969 to 1996, instability, lawlessness, personal vengeance, and varying degrees of victimization followed every major instance of civil unrest in the former East Pakistan as well as independent Bangladesh. Since the 1971 independence movement, Bangladesh has been divided by guns and the cacophony of ideologues over which even Sheikh Mujibur Rahman failed to prevail. When they came to power in 1991 after massive anti-Ershad protests, BNP ministers and legislators were pressured for favors for months by students and other supporters; Awami League ministers got the same treatment from their supporters after gaining office in June 1996. No prominent leader or party in Bangladesh has been free from the taint of favoring activists who had committed criminal or violent offenses. Sometimes, student leaders wielded enough influence to establish the image of a parallel authority, dictating policies and offering protection to individuals or ethnic groups. At the peak of the 1969 anti-Ayub agitations, the vice-president of the Dhaka University Students Union became a kind of de facto "governor" of East Pakistan. Soon after the exiled government became a sovereign Bangladesh in 1972, four prominent student leaders gained so much ascendancy that people would refer to them as the "four Caliphs" of the new state. Many young agitators, having had a taste of political life, were reluctant to return to a passive role of obeying their elders and respecting established norms and institutions. Such rebelliousness contributed to Mujib's assumption of extraordinary powers in 1975.

The caretaker administration that took over from Khaleda had to deal with a polarized civic climate in which lawlessness continued throughout the country. Repeated government demands for the surrender of illegal arms were of no avail, and violence took a toll before as well as after the election when Hasina faced the same problem of maintaining law and order. Jockeying for influence and favor by party followers, terrorism, campus violence between opposing student groups, and a mood of defiance by rival factions were grave challenges for the new prime minister. Blaming the government, even with trumped-up charges, was "good" politics and had generally been perceived as a liberal and progressive bent of mind ever since an earlier liberal leadership in the universities nurtured the beginnings of opposition in the former East Pakistan. But many had pursued their agitational goals with an evangelical fervor, and the bellicose rhetoric that developed left deep scars on personal and group relationships.

Can Bangladesh civil society survive the prolonged unrest, or will it gravitate toward fragmentation and decline? Questions are raised about the credibility of future elections, bureaucratic disobedience, a poor economy, deteriorating public morale, and an endemic sense of popular insecurity. Different assumptions and solutions abound for the future but the civil society has been resilient in surviving political instability, civil war, and protracted periods of *hartal* and may do so again. Social networks and civic institutions, disrupted and bypassed by militancy and gridlock, can be revitalized. Numerous non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have gained strength in

Bangladesh despite political instability, although some became targets of losing parties and leaders who accused them of supporting the AL.

An encouraging sign was the buoyancy in Bangladesh civil society that came alive after every *hartal* when people rushed to bazaars, visited relatives and friends, and quickly got back to the normal rhythm of life. To the amazement of many, a robust election campaign took off in April 1996 even before the date of the poll was formally announced. As a social habit, rival elites and political actors met and interacted as friends, colleagues, businessmen, and members of extended families. Ordinary Bangladeshis displayed a mature disposition by urging both the ruling BNP and the opposition to compromise and save the nation from further chaos. When Khaleda finally agreed to resign, nearly 63% of the sampled respondents of a survey felt that the country had been saved from an impending civil war.[5]

Politicized Bureaucracy

When the anti-government protests reached a boiling point in March 1996, a Dhaka-based diplomat commented that since key bureaucrats abstained from work and many openly changed their loyalty to the opposition, it was only a question of time before the BNP cabinet was obliged to quit. Maligned for its perceived sloth and inefficiency, the Bangladeshi bureaucracy is a politicized institution, and in the *hartal*-dominated political culture, government officers are not immune to polarizing agitation. The political proclivities of public officials in the former East Pakistan were evident from the time of the 1952 language movements, when Bengali-speaking civil servants supported the popular demand for making Bengali one of the state languages in Pakistan. When the six-point autonomy demands unfolded in the form of a separatist movement, the Ayub regime tried to crush it by implicating several civil servants and military officials in treason charges in the so called Agartala Conspiracy Case. At the time of sweeping anti-Ayub protests in 1969, senior Bengali-speaking officers were known to have discreetly helped Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his AL press their demands. Once the war of independence was set in motion in 1971, thousands of civil servants and military personnel abandoned their jobs and fled to India, which openly supported Bangladesh independence. Many of those who stayed back covertly supported the *mukti bahini* (freedom fighters), while numerous civil and military officials were killed or jailed by the Pakistan army. In Pakistan's embassies abroad, most diplomats from East Pakistan defected to the cause of Bangladesh; without the critical support of the bureaucrats, it is doubtful the independence movement would have received the widespread international recognition that it did.

5. *Bangladesh Observer*, (Dhaka), 3 March 1996.

So the Bangladeshi nonpolitical civil service, a much envied British institutional legacy based on consensus and mutual trust between bureaucrats and politicians, was in deep trouble now that pride in an impartial and politically nonaligned service was all but a myth. On the eve of Khaleda's resignation, thousands of civil servants of different cadres and ranks joined the opposition movement against the government and were welcomed by the AL, the JP, and the JI. Many of them participated in the Awami League-sponsored *Janatar Mancha* (people's forum) where they openly criticized the government.[6] In truth, the multi-layered bureaucracy in Bangladesh has not been a monolith, and alienation and schism came to the fore in the early years of independence. Controversies over different cadres, different requirements, job expectations, salaries, and promotions divided the bureaucracy, and discontent simmered for a number of years. At the height of the 1996 noncooperation movement, Secretariat employees asked the president to restore normalcy immediately in the country; the Republic Officers Coordination Council, hitherto an unknown organization of government employees, led the rebellion against Khaleda; and 37 secretaries gave the president a six-point demand that included the appointment of a caretaker government.[7]

Many observers were disturbed by the swaggering conduct of their public officials, who were expected to remain above party politics. Most donor agencies were concerned about bureaucratic participation in political agitation; they had earlier asked for administrative reforms but did not press hard because of the sensitive nature of the issue. Angry with the bureaucratic face-off, BNP Secretary-General A. S. Talukder said that the "partisan" officials could not be trusted to conduct a free and fair election.[8] After losing the June elections, BNP leaders accused the AL of ballot-rigging in collaboration with the officials supervising the polls. But the AL was supportive of the bureaucrats who had joined the opposition campaign, and a few senior officers who went against Khaleda were rewarded with important positions under Hasina's cabinet. The new AL government also established a greater sway over the bureaucracy through massive transfers of officials.

The Caretaker Government: Institutional Achievement or Incentive for More Agitation?

Authorized by provisions of the 13th constitutional amendment, the chief advisor (with the status of a prime minister) and 10 advisors (with the benefits and privileges of cabinet ministers) constituted the caretaker cabinet whose

6. See *Daily Janakantha* (Dhaka), 31 March 1996.
7. *Bangladesh Observer*, 26 March 1996, and *Daily Janakantha*, 27 March 1996.
8. *Daily Inquilab* (Dhaka), 26 April 1996.

main responsibility was to conduct a free, fair, and peaceful poll in cooperation with Bangladesh election authorities. During that specified period, the advisors carried out routine executive duties without venturing into major policy initiatives. Hasina termed the caretaker government the "democratic triumph" of 120 million people, but the "victory" had come through months of agitation, chaos, and widespread violence. The anticipated voting, supervised by a nonpolitical authority, generated a new wave of optimism for the AL; for the JP, it renewed hopes for the release of its leader Ershad from jail (he was later released on bail); and the JI claimed that the idea of a caretaker government originated with its senior leaders and justified their action in boycotting Parliament.

With a stopgap neutral executive replacing the BNP government, the opposition parties no longer had a common enemy to attack and no burning issue except the election; their earlier solidarity now waned as each party followed its own electoral goals. The demand for a caretaker government was a well thought-out strategy that brought definite advantages to Hasina. First, the BNP leaders lost public visibility, legitimacy, and influence as soon as they were out of office; second, the pro-opposition press and the liberal intelligentsia continued a negative campaign against the BNP administration and many glorified the caretaker authority; and third, for BNP leaders and their supporters, Khaleda's resignation had a traumatic effect that contributed to their electoral defeat.

Could the caretaker government satisfy all the contenders for power; was it the middle path bridging the brawling leaders and facilitating a smooth succession; was the nonpartisan executive accepted as neutral? Not while the political leaders were unwilling to cooperate with the advisory cabinet; not when the parties nurtured their respective armed gangs; and certainly not when one party charged that the caretaker advisors "tilted" toward the other. The first burst of anger came from Khaleda, who claimed that the chief advisor was not impartial in dealing with the BNP.[9] To allay fears of bureaucratic bias against the BNP, the chief advisor asserted that civil servants could not support any group except an elected government, but his impartiality was questioned for not taking any action against civil servants who had openly sided with the opposition during the March upheaval.[10] The BNP continued to challenge the caretaker government's neutrality and utility, although its own legislators had earlier created such an entity as a permanent electoral supervision and power transfer device.

9. *Daily Sangbad*, 19 May 1996.

10. *Janatar Dak*, a pro-BNP Bengali political weekly (Dhaka), 2 June 1996. See also Rezaul Karim, "The Election Debacle of the BNP," *Daily Star*, 21 June 1996.

To many observers, the interim authority was a dyarchy, one half of which functioned under the chief advisor and the other under the President's Office, which controlled the Defense Ministry.[11] It was soon clear that the neutral cabinet did not enjoy unbridled authority over all spheres of administration, although general executive power, with which the president did not interfere, rested with the chief advisor.[12] AL's murmuring over the Defense Ministry peaked when President Abdur Rahman Biswas accused the army chief and several other generals of planning a mutiny; he quickly removed them from office, put them under house arrest, and later dismissed them. The opposition had enthusiastically sought a nonpolitical interim administration, but once that provisional executive was instituted, its credibility came under fire and the advisory ministers were unable to mobilize the disparate political groups. It became an impossible challenge to satisfy all the political groups, for whoever lost the poll would blame the caretaker executive. Since the interim neutral executive was now a constitutional requirement for overseeing general elections, called either at the end of a regular official term or because of an earlier dissolution of Parliament, opposition parties might be tempted to launch anti-government unrest to seek a quicker transfer of power. In that event, the much heralded caretaker executive brought into being by spectacular mass movements will only exacerbate unrest in Bangladesh.

The June 12 Poll and Stirrings of New Unrest

For many, the June election offered relief from political disorder, an end to a quandary, and a hope for a stable government under a changed leadership. Significantly, the *hartal*-fatigued voters turned out in record numbers; from students to rickshaw-wallas, from rich to poor, the voters were interested and involved in the June election, and women voted in larger numbers than ever before. The Bangladesh Election Commission estimated voter turnout at 73%. To bring her party back to power, Hasina moved from the left to the political center. The AL won 146 of the 300 elected legislative seats and easily formed a government with some help from smaller parties. Khaleda grudgingly accepted the AL victory but pressed the rigging charges, and mutual recriminations continued after Hasina became prime minister. The BNP insisted that the earlier February election was the "constitutionally correct" poll that had been rejected by the opposition movement, but ironically that voting had legitimatized the caretaker government which, in turn, supervised the June poll. February 15, 1997, was observed by the BNP as "democracy protection day" while the AL decried it as "democracy killing day."

11. *Daily Janakantha*, 25 April 1996.

12. *Robbar*, a Bengali political weekly (Dhaka), 2 June 1996.

With two cabinet positions given to the JP and the JSD (Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal), respectively, the AL-led government was a left-center, left, and center-right coalition. Hasina was conciliatory, declaring that she would run the country according to a "national consensus."[13] But the BNP rebuffed her offer to join the government, implying that the AL was out to destroy the opposition in order to make the country a single party state as it had tried to do in 1975. Many wondered if Hasina's moves were meant to outflank any possible BNP compact with smaller parties to launch an anti-government movement.

Widespread violence and dawn to dusk *hartal* have created a disaffection against politicians who disrupt public life. A renewed cycle of non-cooperation will destabilize and weaken the AL government, although Hasina now enjoys a comfortable parliamentary majority as a result of the AL's gains in the 30 women's seats (indirectly elected by the new legislators) and the by-elections. Prominent BNP leaders continued to charge that there was an "unprecedented and preplanned vote rigging" following Khaleda's warning that the election authority would be held responsible for the consequences if results from the disputed constituencies were finalized without repolling.[14] Later, the BNP also found fault with the 15 by-elections held in the autumn, but many doubted the party's ability to launch a full-fledged political assault so soon after the AL had come to power, as there was a backlash against continued civil unrest.

The new government brought corruption charges against BNP leaders and their relatives, which were viewed as a political vendetta against the defeated party. More important, the police moves to disarm and arrest BNP *mastans* and neutralize the pro-BNP student leaders were taken as deliberate partisan harassment offering fresh grounds for confrontation. Khaleda complained that the AL government became the inquisitor of BNP grass-roots supporters.[15] This was followed by sporadic walkouts and boycotts in Parliament and local strikes, demonstrations, and student unrest.

A cycle of bickering also prevailed over the nation's "fatherhood" and national identity about which neither the AL nor the BNP was willing to back down, and none of the parties would hesitate to take to the streets to argue the issue. To the Awami League, the Bengali language had primacy over Bangalee nationalism, and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was the undisputed founder

13. *Daily Inquilab*, 14 June 1996. For an analysis of the Awami League's "consensus government," see Mahfuz Anam, "Government of National Consensus: Some Thoughts," *Daily Star*, 16 July 1996. A minister of the new administration also explained "consensus government" in an interview published in *Kagoz*, a Bengali weekly (Dhaka), 12 July 1996.

14. *Daily Inquilab*, 14 June 1996; *Daily Ittefaq* (Dhaka), 16 June 1996. BNP accused AL of a "vote-coup" with bureaucratic connivance. *Janatar Dak*, 23 June 1996.

15. *Daily Star*, 1 July 1996.

of the nation. The BNP, on the other hand, upheld General Ziaur Rahman as the "proclaimer" of Bangladesh liberation, as he was believed to be the one who as a major, at the beginning of the 1971 Pakistani military crackdown (when Sheikh Mujib was under arrest), formally called for independence from a radio station, presumably in Chittagong. When he took power in 1975, Zia mandated that all citizens of the country be known as Bangladeshis, not Bangalees, ostensibly to draw a distinction between Bangladesh citizens and the Bengali-speaking nationals of India.

The broad spectrum of conservative Muslim and right wing religious groups believes that Bangladesh should derive its basic national identity from its Muslim and Islamic heritage, a view not acceptable to secular parties like the AL. Many feared that India, their powerful and predominantly Hindu neighbor, cherished designs to turn Bangladesh into a vassal state to which the secular leaders and their liberal accomplices would acquiesce. There was also the old nagging question of sharing Ganges water, so important to Bangladesh's agriculture, irrigation, and river transportation. Since Hasina came to power, a flurry of diplomatic activities culminated in a water agreement but it was criticized as an unequal treaty forced upon Bangladesh. A rumor persisted that New Delhi expected a transit facility through Bangladesh to reach eastern Indian territories, and it was reported that Hasina wanted to join the subregional cooperation group consisting of Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, and the contiguous Indian states.[16] Khaleda seized upon these reports to denounce the alleged covert move to offer a corridor through Bangladesh territory and join the proposed four-nation grouping. Both the BNP and the Jamaat felt that such moves would threaten national sovereignty, and anti-AL forces could launch an emotionally charged agitation against the Hasina government if it identifies too much with India.

Another provocative source of confrontation haunting many political as well as military leaders involved the arrests, investigations, and anticipated trials of the suspected killers (and some of their political associates) of Sheikh Mujib in the 1975 coup led by a faction of disaffected military officers. It was feared that the investigations could lead to a trail of "uncomfortable discoveries" and turn into a political witch hunt in the atmosphere of inexorable rivalry between the AL and BNP. To facilitate the trial of Mujib's professed (and suspected) murderers, the Indemnity Ordinance Repeal Act was passed in November 1996 and later upheld by the Bangladesh High Court. Both BNP and Jamaat lawmakers abstained during the vote on that legislation for which the AL accused them of "siding" with "Mujib killers."

16. WWW.dhaka-bangladesh.com, 23 January 1997.

Conclusion

By provoking nationwide unrest and widespread violence against public and private properties, by goading a civilian bureaucratic revolt against the government, and by invoking the "spirit of the 1971 liberation struggle" to bolster what was for all intents and purposes a partisan movement in 1994-96, the politicians of Bangladesh have set up dangerous precedents for future governance and institutional development. The fear is that future impasse between the government and opposition will produce action in the streets as in the past. There is an unmistakable realization that Bangladesh has had too much of *hartal* and polemics, too much anti-government agitation, too much unyielding partisanship, and too many party supporters claiming privileges outside the law. The time has come to accept a constitutional system, institutional structure, professional rectitude, and broader political responsibility.