

Bangladesh's election

The tenacity of hope

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Against all the evidence of past experience, Bangladesh's voters enjoy a moment of optimism after a pretty clean election and a decisive result

AFP



IT WENT better than anyone dared hope. On December 29th Bangladesh held its first general election for seven years. It was well-attended, with a 70% turnout, well-organised, largely peaceful and, despite some vote-buying and other malpractice, far cleaner than its predecessors. It produced an astonishing, massive landslide for the alliance led by the Awami League of Sheikh Hasina Wajed (pictured above), prime minister from 1996-2001, and daughter of the country's murdered independence leader.

Yet, as always, the voting was the easy part. After two years under an army-backed "caretaker" government, the return to democratic rule is unlikely to be smooth. The army staged an unannounced coup in January 2007 amid street violence ahead of a scheduled election that the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), in power from 1991-96 and 2001-06, was rigging. Both the BNP, led by Khaleda Zia, widow of an assassinated former general and president, and the Awami League had run corrupt, inept governments.

The two parties had debased the country's politics into a Punch-and-Judy show of non-cooperation and vindictive retaliation. The army hoped to purge them, jailing both Sheikh Hasina and Mrs Zia for a year on corruption charges, along with some of their senior henchmen, and trying in vain to send the two "begums" into exile. But the parties and their leaders proved to have stubborn roots, and the army had to relent. The begums were freed and Bangladeshi politics has resumed its five-yearly anti-incumbency cycle.

The election, however, was something of a triumph. The voters' list had been shorn of 11m "ghosts", and 81m genuine voters registered, with their photographs. The campaign saw far less violence than in the past. The spread of mobile phones, many with cameras, produced an army of unofficial campaign monitors, alert to any violation. On polling day the mood in Dhaka was calm, proud and even jolly.

Countless lamp-posts, telegraph poles and trees had been draped with lines of string festooned with small, tattered black-and-white election flyers (an unintended if predictable consequence of a ban on colour posters and wall-pasting). At polling stations long segregated queues, with many women in their finest saris, waited patiently to vote. Ballot boxes were translucent (in 2001, 111 polling stations recorded more votes than voters). Foreign observers were impressed.

For one-third of voters this was their first election. A further 23% had the vote just once before, in 2001. The BNP-led coalition that won then proved unusually venal and incompetent even by local standards. Voters punished it severely. The BNP's share of the 300 seats contested has fallen from 193 to around 27. It seems also to have been hurt by its alliance with Islamist parties, the largest of which, Jamaat-e-Islami, was reduced from 17 seats to just two. This will be welcomed by those worried about the spread of radical Islam in Bangladesh. Just before the election, seven members of a banned extremist group were arrested, and a large cache of explosives seized. A vast majority of Bangladesh's more than 150m people are Muslims. But the BNP's calls to voters to shun the more secular League in order to protect Islam seem to have backfired.

The League now finds itself with a huge parliamentary majority—some 230 seats on its own (up from 62) with a further 30-odd won by its allies. The BNP, more of whose leaders were targets of the interim government's anti-corruption drive, and which had said only cheating could make it lose the election, is likely to cry foul. There is a risk of a traditional response: mass protests; general strikes; and a boycott of parliament. That is why some neutrals hoped for a close result.

So huge is the BNP's defeat, however, that its protests will hardly be credible. A bigger danger may be that the scale of the victory goes to Sheikh Hasina's head and makes her high-handed. During the campaign, she promised a new bipartisan approach, offering the opposition the chairs of some parliamentary committees. She might now be tempted to renege. Her long, bitter feud with Mrs Zia has not abated. The army forced the begums to meet at an Army Day reception in November. They managed to exchange courtesies, but not to make eye contact.

Nevertheless, optimists hope that the relative peace of the two-year interregnum, the chastening experience of detention and the enthusiasm the election itself generated might make it hard for the parties to return to their bad old winner-take-all ways. And they know that the army will be looking over their shoulders.

Asked what they wanted from a new government, most voters—of whom some 45% live on less than a dollar a day—had a simple answer: cheaper food. In this one respect, the government may be in luck. A good rice harvest and lower international prices for fuel and other commodities have already dented inflation. But in the current global slump, Bangladesh's economic growth is also expected to fall, from about 6.2% in 2008.

On past form, Bangladesh's voters might expect their new government to devote itself not to their welfare but to persecuting its rivals and looting the public purse. During the campaign, Sheikh Hasina pushed the fashionable slogan of "change". The result is the clearest possible endorsement of that call. One 80-year-old, voting for the first time, saw the result as Bangladesh's brightest day since the assassination of Sheikh Hasina's father in 1975. With such hopes invested in her, she is almost bound to disappoint.