

DHAKA FRIDAY JANUARY 14, 2005

# Making Bangladesh safe for democracy

Our people's participation in elections has increased steadily from 34% in 1954 to nearly 75% in 2001. This unmistakably shows our commitment to the electoral process. A noticeable feature in the last two general elections was the ever increasing participation of women.



MUHAMMAD HABIBUR RAHMAN

OUR national liberation movement was launched in the name of democracy. Democracy and human rights were our campaign cries. We invoked them in the Preamble of the Constitution. Our younger generation expects that our inherited laws and traditions be adjusted to contemporary conditions, we avoid conflict with provisions of the International Human Rights Bill and provide effective remedies in cases of serious derogation of human rights.

Sheikh Mujib, the founding-father of the country, initially attempted to run a parliamentary style democracy, but faced armed resistance from various factions of leftists and trade union groups. By the Fourth Amendment of the Constitution he introduced one-party system and called it as the second revolution for the amelioration of the have-nots. He is reported to have told Chief Justice Abu Sadat Syaem in February /March, 1975 that the Fourth Amendment was a temporary measure and that he would, in course of time, restore the Constitution as it was before that amendment. Unfortunately, he had not had the luck of Julius

Niyere whom he, it appears, tried to emulate. He was assassinated along with almost all of his extended family by a group of junior military officers on August 15, 1975.

On 15 August 1975 Khandker Mushtaq Ahmed took over full powers of the Government and adopted the name of "President" suspending the relevant provisions of the Constitution. On 6 November 1975, he handed over the office of President to Chief Justice Abu Sadat Syaem who also assumed the powers of Chief Martial Law Administrator. Parliament was dissolved. Soon Syaem was replaced by Ziaur Rahman, the Deputy Chief Martial Law Administrator.

Ziaur Rahman tried to unify and strengthen the military and the civil administration. By redefining socialism to mean "economic and social justice" and by deleting the provision of acquisition of property "without compensation" he made it clear that he would follow a capitalist path. For emphasizing the Muslim identity of the people and bringing Bangladesh closer to Islamic bloc countries "secularism" was dropped as a state principle and was substituted with "absolute trust and faith in Almighty Allah." The amendment also inserted a statement that the "state shall endeavour to consolidate, preserve, and strengthen fraternal relations among Muslim countries based on Islamic solidarity". The nomenclature was changed from "Bangalee" to "Bangladeshi" to make it more state-oriented. By substituting the term "struggle for national liberation" by "war for national independence" more emphasis was laid on war than on

national movement for self-determination.

Zia was assassinated on 30, May 1981 by a group of army officers. The then chief of staff General Ershad demanded an institutionalised role for the army in governance of the country. The newly elected President Sattar initially rejected the notion, but under pressure agreed to set up a national security council with the President, Vice-President, Prime Minister and the three services chiefs as members of the council. On 24, March 1982 Ershad took over power, declared martial law, suspended the Constitution and became the Chief Martial Law Administrator. A series of elections -- local government elections in 1984, a national referendum in 1985, a parliamentary and a presidential election in 1986 and another parliamentary election in 1988 -- were held. These elections lacked credibility failed to give any legitimacy to the regime.

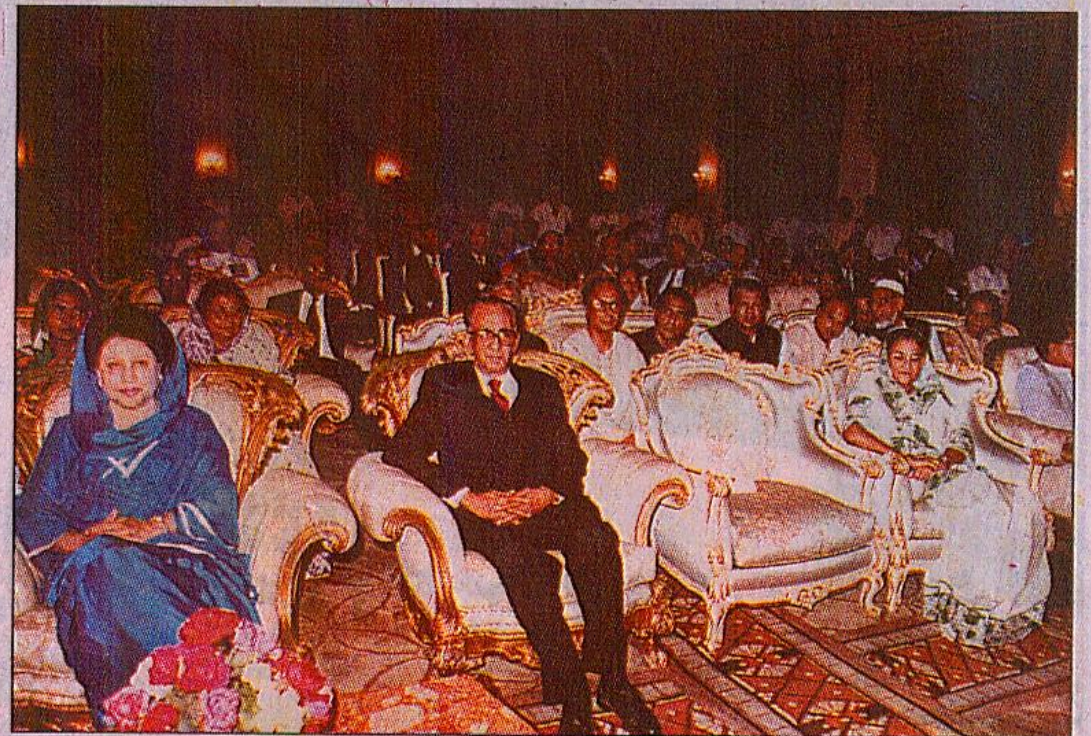
Ershad tried to strengthen his rural support and made the Upazilas (sub-districts) the focus of local government. Development funds spent in the rural areas failed to counter the opposition of the various groups in urban areas. The power and privileges enjoyed by the military alienated many. The civil servants resented the lateral entry of military officials into civilian ranks. The business community was envious of military officials who thanks to their contact with the regime -- turned overnight into successful entrepreneurs. Allegation of corruption was a major grievance against the Ershad regime. Who thanks to their contacts with the regime.

Despite their major policy differences the BNP led by Ziaur Rahman's widow, Khaleda Zia, and the Awami League, led by Sheikh Mujib's daughter, Sheikh Hasina, got united in their demand for restoration of democratic rule. Their movement gained momentum in 1987. It was further intensified in 1990 by the student wings of the BNP and the Awami League. Senior leaders of the military withdrew their support for Ershad and decided to protect the institution from the growing anti-military sentiment of the people. Ershad resigned on December 4, 1990.

Political freedoms were restored and the restrictions on the press were removed. Within ninety days the neutral caretaker government of Chief Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed was able to organize a parliamentary election.

Both BNP and the Awami League worked together for passing a constitutional amendment providing for a parliamentary form of government. They soon clashed, often violently, over several municipal and parliamentary by-elections. In March 1994, the Awami League refused to accept the results of the parliamentary by-election in Magura and demanded resignation of the government and a fresh national election to be held under a neutral caretaker government. A mission sent by the Commonwealth Secretariat, Dhaka based ambassadors, as well as a local eminent persons' group failed in their mediation efforts. Khaleda Zia dissolved the parliament in December 1995.

The confrontation between the Awami League and the BNP



reached a crisis point with the election of February 1996.

Khaleda Zia claimed that she saved democracy by making a constitutional amendment to provide for elections under a caretaker government. Sheikh Hasina argued that by forcing Khaleda Zia to accept the notion of a neutral caretaker government she had strengthened the democratization process.

The election held in June 1996 by the caretaker government was hailed as free and fair by all national and international observers. The BNP complained of vote rigging, but ultimately accepted the election results. Power was transferred peacefully to the Awami League. Several

retired officers from the military and civil service and prominent businessmen contested and won the election on Awami League tickets. The new Awami League looked quite similar to the BNP. In 1996, a thirty-year Ganges water sharing treaty was signed with India, and in 1997 a peace accord was signed with the rebels in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The BNP remained vehemently opposed to the treaty and the accord. There was no agreement about ground rules for expressing dissent. Alleging government suppression of its workers, the BNP repeatedly boycotted parliamentary session, engaged in street demonstrations and prolonged strikes.

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দারুণ চকচকে  
বছরের পর বছর

বিশ্বের ২০টি দেশ রাঙিয়ে গাজীপুরে নিজস্ব বিশ্বমানের ফ্যাক্টরি নিয়ে  
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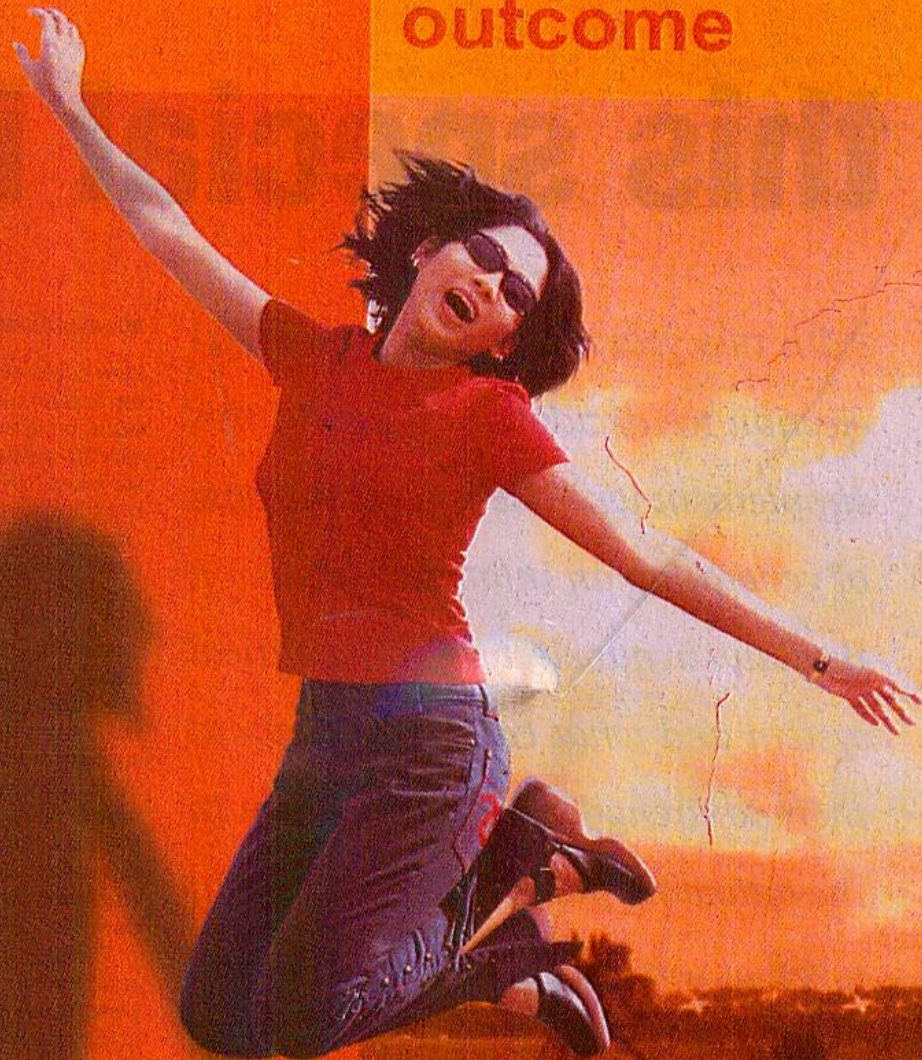
হেড অফিস: বাড়ী ৪৪৯ (তৃতীয় তলা), রোড ৩১, নিউ ডিওএইসএস, মহাখালি, ঢাকা-১২১২, ফোন ৮৮৫৯০২৯, ৯৮৯০২৮০  
ফ্যাক্টরি: প্লট ৩১৭ এবং ৭৫৭, বাবুদুলপুর, গাজীপুর  
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