

WikiLeaks Taken over by 'conspiracies'

STAR REPORT

Conspiracy theories swirled in Bangladesh in the wake of popular frustration with the prevailing political dynamics during the final months of the last BNP-Jamaat coalition government.

A classified cable of the US embassy in Dhaka, sent to Washington on May 31, 2006, detailed conspiracy rumours regarding "alleged moves to subvert or substantially change the electoral process".

Patricia A Butenis, the then US ambassador, wrote that the least far-fetched theory might be that incumbent premier Khaleda Zia would, as an insurance policy against defeat in the next general elections, engineer her ascent to the presidency before the polls.

Butenis wrote, "...Bangladeshis sound us out about most civilian 'third force' scenarios to save Bangladesh from the 'two ladies'..." She was referring to BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia and Awami League President Sheikh Hasina.

Most of the theories were related to the elections expected in January 2007.

According to the cable, AL leaders "offered three scenarios", and the first one was BNP winning the election by massive rigging, with or without AL participation.

AL was worried that its archrival BNP, alarmed by private polling showing an AL landslide, would find a pretext to postpone elections by months, if not longer, to give it time to recover from its political woes, like rising prices and power shortages.

Saber Hossain Chowdhury, Hasina's then political secretary, speculated that JMB [Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh] terrorism could conveniently resume during the caretaker government to plunge the country into fear, and justify delay or radical changes to the constitution, Butenis wrote.

AL also feared that BNP might force the then president Iajuddin Ahmed to resign and replace him with Khaleda, either to ensure election rigging, as insurance against retribution after an AL election victory, or as a part of a switch to a presidential-style of government, the cable said.

"For months, there has been speculation that Zia would move to the presidency after the election to make way for her son [Tarique Rahman] to become prime minister."

Butenis said in the cable that Hasina, after garment factory riots the previous week, publicly asserted that the then president Iajuddin Ahmed's departure for medical treatment in Singapore "stemmed from a conspiracy to depose him so that Zia could become president now to 'engineer' BNP's re-election, presumably by using her authority to BNP advantage as commander-in-chief during the caretaker government".

"The BNP, the AL notes, forced B Chowdhury to resign the presidency in 2002 apparently on a trivial matter, and could easily oblige Ahmed, ostensibly on health grounds, to step down," the cable read.

The then prime minister Khaleda Zia's parliamentary affairs adviser SQ Chowdhury had long championed a presidential system and argued that Bangladeshi democracy had evolved beyond the need for a caretaker system, it added.

On BNP's own conspiracy theories, "beyond the AL and India permutations", Butenis wrote that the then state minister for home Lutfozzaman Babar told a US diplomatic personnel that an increasingly restive civil society, particularly efforts by micro-credit pioneer Muhammad Yunus and a local NGO to promote "clean candidates" in the election could force the BNP-led government to resign if it got "green light" from the international community.

Babar was worried that the international community might be fed up with corruption and poor governance, and "mistakenly decide that a non-BNP government would best serve its interests".

Butenis informed Washington that the international community, and especially the US government, appeared in several rumours. Proponents of a "third force" solution often said US government support was critical to their success.

"Some AL leaders, including probably Sheikh Hasina, suspect the US backs BNP because of its successes against JMB, while some BNP and especially JI [Jamaat-e-Islami] members think the US backs the AL because of Indian influence and a shared 'anti-Muslim' agenda," the cable said.

Delay in releasing information about the then president Iajuddin Ahmed's hospitalisation in Dhaka, coinciding with heightened tensions over the garment factory riots, fuelled rumours for 36 hours in business and political circles that Iajuddin was dead, it added.

Indian think-tank

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keeping the years of distrust in mind, the achievements have been no less spectacular," he added.

Behuria said the last minute refusal of Mamata Banerjee to approve of the Teesta deal and be part of the Indian PM's entourage must have been a huge embarrassment for Manmohan Singh.

"This was also quite an emotive issue for Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina of Bangladesh and she was under pressure to act tough. However, the final outcome of the visit in the shape of the boundary demarcation agreement shows that there is more to India-Bangladesh relationship than river waters and transit," he noted.

He said more and more people in India today believe that the country has to find a way of addressing the concerns of its neighbours and invite them to participate in its own growth story and India's decision to allow duty-free access to 46 textile items signifies the new mindset in New Delhi in this regard.

"There is also a strong constituency in Bangladesh which now realises that any effort to stall the process will harm Bangladesh more than India," said Behuria.

He admitted that two major agreements on Teesta and transit could have lent further legitimacy to the process of normalisation and silenced the critics in both the countries. "However, Behuria said it has to be acknowledged that the leaders of the two countries were able to scale the boundaries of distrust and make significant moves on trade and border related issues.

Jalil, Bhuiyan played game

Briefed press about near-consensus to break impasse over caretaker govt chief, confided no-progress to diplomats

STAR REPORT

After several rounds of electoral talks in 2006, two senior leaders of Awami League and BNP assured the people of headway in breaking political impasse, but at the same time confided in foreign diplomats that they made no substantive progress.

Even immediately after beginning of the parleys, both the leaders told diplomats privately that they were pessimistic about any prospect for a rapprochement.

Several US embassy cables posted on WikiLeaks focus on the talks that began at the Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban on October 5, 2006 between the then BNP Secretary General Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan and AL General Secretary Abdul Jalil.

In a cable, then chargé d'affaires of US embassy in Dhaka Geeta Pasi on October 16, 2006, the day Bhuiyan and Jalil held their fifth round of talks, wrote both leaders had said at a press conference that they had made progress, and were "hopeful of a positive outcome".

"Jalil claimed a consensus had been reached. The next step, they agreed, is to discuss the talks at the party level after PM Zia [Khaleda Zia] returns on October 21 and Awami League president Hasina returns on October 22 or 23," the US diplomat wrote in her cable.

Khaleda left for Saudi Arabia on October 14 and Sheikh Hasina for the US on October 12.

The cable further said in a subsequent private conversation, Bhuiyan told them that there had in fact been no substantive progress beyond a further clarification on the parties' stance.

"Everything depends on the two leaders [Khaleda and Hasina], he [Bhuiyan] said 'and neither of them left any guidelines for concessions,'" said the cable.

In a separate conversation Jalil confirmed there was no agreement on anything "concrete", the US diplomat said.



Abdul Jalil

"There continues to be a huge gap between what BNP and AL leaders say publicly and privately about the talks."

In another cable about the fourth round of talks held on October 10, the US chargé d'affaires wrote: "The key issue of who heads the next caretaker regime, there is little sign of flexibility from either side."

Leaders of AL and BNP privately downplayed prospects for a breakthrough, she added.

"The Awami League sees the dialogue as a pressure tactic against the ruling party... Hard-line AL Presidium member Sheikh Salim [Selim], a cousin of Hasina's, told us Jalil's upbeat public stance is designed to 'encourage' the voters and put onus on the BNP for any breakdown," Pasi wrote.

The US diplomat said Harris Chowdhury, the then PM Khaleda Zia's political secretary, confirmed them on October 10 that Khaleda and Bhuiyan had not recently met to discuss the dialogue with AL.

He, however, stressed that "accepting the opposition demand to drop Hasina [Justice KM Hasan] is out of the question", the cable said.

After Khaleda and Hasina returned home, Mannan and Jalil held their sixth



Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan

round of talks on October 23.

Beginning amid high hopes, the Bhuiyan-Jalil dialogue was a total failure.

Also, the then US ambassador Patricia A Butenis wrote on October 27, 2006 in another cable titled "New party launched; dialogue ends; rumour abound" that formation of a new political party -- Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) by some BNP leaders -- took the BNP aback as it was already struggling with internal divisions.

"The timing of the LDP announcement will likely leave the BNP feeling more threatened as it leaves office, and more determined to see Hasina appointed as chief adviser," Butenis wrote.

The alliances led by the two major parties were locked in a row in 2006 as the then BNP-Jamaat coalition government raised the retirement age of the Supreme Court judges to ensure Hasina become the chief adviser to the next caretaker administration that would oversee the general polls.

Justice Hasan, however, declined to be the chief adviser when the time came and the then president Iajuddin Ahmed appointed himself as chief adviser.

1/11 was inevitable

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Even in early January, the diplomats separately met the two top leaders and warned them about their political future and possibilities that they might be forced into exile abroad following military intervention. They suggested the two take bold steps to break the impasse and avert any such scenarios.

Bitter political rivalry and a non-compromising stance emanating from a desperate attempt to win the parliamentary polls were evident in a number of cables the American embassy sent to Washington at that time.

In the January 11 morning dispatch, Butenis wrote, "With both sides entrenched in their respective positions, frustration among civic and business leaders continues to fuel public speculation over ways to involve the military and circumvent the BNP and AL. Even activists among the two parties continue to seek support for solutions that could sideline 'the two ladies'."

In the night came the state of emergency, with none of the two budging from their position. President Iajuddin Ahmed was forced to step down as chief adviser along with his 10 colleagues in the caretaker government, which he had been leading for about two and a half months.

An army-backed new regime with Fakhruddin Ahmed, a former central bank governor, as the head started a two-year eventful journey, which would give the AL and BNP chiefs tough time, even pressing them to quit politics and leave the country.

Five days before the political changeover, Butenis and the then British high commissioner Anwar Chowdhury apprised Hasina of approaches made to them by prominent AL members, supposedly backed by a

faction of BNP, advocating political scenarios that included forcing Hasina and Khaleda into exile abroad and a possible military intervention, said a US embassy cable on January 7, 2007.

The AL chief largely dismissed the reports, the cable read. "Hasina was not troubled by military involvement, either directly or under a state of emergency. If the military can intervene and make things okay, that would be good," she said.

On advice from BNP, the Iajuddin-led caretaker government was pushing with all its might towards the parliamentary elections slated for January 22 even after pullout by AL-led grand alliance.

"Asked how she would respond if (Khaleda) Zia reached out to her to find a solution, Hasina said she would reject any such overtures from Zia," the cable said.

The two envoys described a possible scenario suggested by some in the BNP under which elections would be held with the understanding that new elections would be called within 12 months. "Hasina dismissed the proposal out-of-hand, saying she would sooner support a solution involving the military than one that returned the BNP to power."

The two diplomats met Khaleda Zia the next day and told her about the approaches by some politicians advocating scenarios to send her and Hasina into political exile with backing from the military.

"Although acknowledging some dissent within the party, Zia bristled at suggestions the military would take action against her or act extra-constitutionally," Butenis said in a cable on January 9.

Like Hasina, she rejected discussions with her rival

before the scheduled elections and suggestions of making a bold political gesture of compromise.

"Instead, she reiterated the BNP position that elections must go forward but offered once returned to office to implement election reforms and hold new elections within 12-15 months.

"Zia reacted as anticipated, rejecting out of hand the suggestion that 'her' army would be disloyal, though surprisingly admitting to some dissension in the BNP ranks," wrote the US ambassador.

She also wrote that BNP was rather taken aback "by the negative reaction of the US and other countries to their one-sided election plan".

While the opposition was agitating on the streets demanding the then chief election commissioner Aziz's resignation, Butenis met Khaleda Zia on November 1 and raised the opposition's demand. "Not possible," Khaleda replied.

"Hasina, [Khaleda] Zia complained, had ignored Zia's demand in 2001 as the then-opposition leader for the resignation of Chief Election Commissioner [MA] Syed, so why should she accommodate Hasina now?" Butenis wrote to Washington the next day.

A couple of days ago, Hasina gave CA Iajuddin an ultimatum to prove himself neutral by fulfilling an 11-point opposition demand, which included removal of the CEC and three election commissioners by November 3.

"The question remains whether Hasina's demands are designed to produce failure and justify a quick return to the streets or whether they are subject to modification, especially if Ahmed does well in other key

areas," the envoy wrote on October 31.

According to the embassy cables, AL was convinced that it had won a major victory as Justice Hasan, who was blamed to be biased towards BNP, declined to head the caretaker government.

But BNP, which was shaken by the number of defections to newly floated Liberal Democratic Party, got the upper hand on October 29 when BNP-elected President Iajuddin Ahmed took over as the chief adviser.

While some advisers of the caretaker government were trying to "find light at the end of tunnel" to solve the crisis, Butenis urged Khaleda on December 10, to be flexible to prevent the electoral process from unravelling over two relatively technical points.

"In response, Zia recalled alleged Awami League perfidy when it was in power, and repeated the view that in the end the Awami League will join, not boycott, the election," Butenis wrote.

With her demands unmet, Hasina announced that the grand alliance would boycott the January 22 polls, citing the CG had failed to ensure the conditions necessary for a free and fair election. She also announced fresh agitation programmes to press for a new election schedule and the resignation of Iajuddin Ahmed as CA.

"Publicly, the AL points to the disqualification of former President Ershad, leader of alliance partner Jatiya Party, as the precipitating factor. Privately, many AL supporters admit the alliance is unprepared to contest the elections as scheduled and has run out of time to prepare and campaign," the ambassador observed in another cable on January 3.

Justice Hasan lost interest

He was looking for alternatives to say no to CA's job

STAR REPORT

With electoral talks between AL and BNP limping, former chief justice KM Hasan had told the US ambassador that he would "seriously consider" declining to head the caretaker government if a constitutional alternative could be found.

A US embassy cable leaked on August 30 by whistleblower website WikiLeaks revealed this.

Politics took a violent turn centring Justice Hasan's possible takeover as the chief adviser of the next caretaker government with AL and its allies labelling him biased to BNP. After the then government had raised the retirement age of Supreme Court judges from 65 to 67, Hasan became the first option to head the CG as the last retired chief justice.

On October 22, 2006, the then US ambassador Patricia A Butenis met Justice Hasan, who was supposed to be sworn in as the chief adviser of the caretaker government at the end of the BNP-led government's tenure in the same month, at his request.

"Hasan feared declining to serve as the chief adviser could create an even larger crisis without resolving the alternative," Butenis wrote.

The leaked cable sent to Washington on October 23 said the US ambassador noted that Justice Hasan's appointment had become personal for Sheikh Hasina who was unlikely to yield on this issue.

The cable said the Australian and the Canadian high commissioners told the US ambassador that they met Justice Hasan separately at his invitation, reviewed the challenges facing him and advised him to do what he thought best for his country.

The two high commissioners described Hasan as ill prepared, isolated and not confident, adding that he told them he was having difficulty recruiting people to man a 10-member cabinet.

He also said he wanted to know the US views, Butenis added.

In another diplomatic cable dispatched to Washington on October 27, the US ambassador, however, wrote: "Hasan remains torn over whether to accept the appointment according to diplomats who have spoken with him."

"He remains concerned that his refusal to serve, absent political agreement on an alternative, would cause worse political turmoil," she wrote.

Another US embassy cable said AL indicated to the US and the UK diplomats in late September 2006 that it would agree to replace Justice Hasan with Justice Mahmudul Amin Chowdhury.

The AL-led opposition demonstrated in the streets for long refusing to accept Justice Hasan as CA of the caretaker government labelling him "biased to BNP".

At the beginning of October, the then ruling BNP Secretary General Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan and AL General Secretary Abdul Jalil began talks to resolve the crisis centring Justice Hasan. They could not reach any agreement and the failure saw intensified street agitation and political turmoil.

In the wake of growing political violence, Justice Hasan on October 28 in a statement said he decided to stay away from performing his constitutionally mandated responsibility as the CA in the interest of the people.

After Hasan's decision, AL proposed to the president two names -- Justice Mahmudul Amin Chowdhury and Justice Hamidul Haque -- for CA in line with the constitutional alternatives to Justice Hasan.

But BNP refused to accept any of them heading the caretaker government.

Earlier during the electoral talks, BNP proposed that the then chief election commissioner MA Aziz could be another option. AL rejected the proposal as it had been demanding resignation of Aziz as the CEC.

"When Justice Hasan stepped aside, Awami League stood tall, convinced it had won a major victory through 'people power' on the streets," Butenis said in the cable.

But the political momentum swung dramatically from Awami League to Bangladesh Nationalist Party in just 24 hours as Iajuddin Ahmed appointed himself as the CA.

"BNP regained the initiative, and its confidence, by elevating Iajuddin Ahmed to chief adviser and manoeuvring the opposition AL, at least temporarily, back into the electoral process," The US ambassador wrote.

"At the reception following Ahmed's swearing in, Khaleda Zia beamed at the ambassador: 'What do you think of our choice?'"

10TH ANNIVERSARY OF 9/11

No sign of terrorist plot yet

Says US intelligence agencies

AP, Washington

US intelligence agencies have found no evidence that al-Qaeda has sneaked any terrorists into the country for a strike coinciding with the 10th anniversary of the Sept 11 attacks, senior officials said Saturday.

But authorities kept a high alert as investigators looked for proof of a plot possibly timed to disrupt events planned Sunday in Washington or New York.

Since late Wednesday, counterterrorism officials have chased a tip that al-Qaeda may have sent three men to the US on a mission to detonate a car bomb in either city. At least two of those men could be US citizens, according to the tip.

No intelligence supported that tip as of Saturday, and officials continued to question the validity of the initial information.

While such tips are com-



Justice KM Hasan

mon among intelligence agencies, this one received more attention, and government officials chose to speak publicly about it, because of the connection to the anniversary of the worst terrorist attack in US history.

Al-Qaeda long has hoped to strike again on the anniversary.

At the FBI field office in Washington, assistant director James McJunkin described the tip and the response as routine. The US already had bolstered security nationwide before the upcoming anniversary and anticipated an increase in tips.

President Barack Obama met with his national security team Saturday, but the White House released no new information about possible threats. A statement said that counterterrorism efforts were working well and would not ease in the weeks and months ahead.

No attacks on US troops before pullout

Urges Iraqi radical leader

AFP, Najaf

Shiite radical leader Moqtada Sadr has ordered his followers not to launch any attacks on US troops before the completion of their pullout from Iraq scheduled for the end of the year.

"In order that Iraq can recover its independence through the withdrawal of the invaders from our territory, I judge it indispensable to halt all armed resistance operations

until the complete withdrawal of the occupying forces," Sadr said in a statement received by AFP yesterday.

"If the pullout is completed and there is no longer a single US soldier on our territory, the military operations will end definitively but if that is not the case and Iraq remains in a state of dependency, they will resume with great vigour," Sadr said.

The new US Army chief warned on Thursday against

leaving too large a force in Iraq after a year-end deadline, saying too many boots on the ground could feed the perception of an American "occupation."

Some US lawmakers have criticised that number of soldiers and say senior officers favour a larger force of at least 10,000, which would include a unit deployed in northern Iraq to defuse Arab-Kurdish tensions.

But Odierno told reporters the United States had to carefully balance how many troops were needed to assist Iraqi forces while scaling back the American profile in a country where anti-US sentiment still runs high.

"I will say when I was leaving Iraq a year ago, I always felt we had to be careful about leaving too many people in Iraq," said Odierno, who took over as army chief of staff on Wednesday.