

# 'Hard, tense time ahead'

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swapping places with it, has been running for decades. The outside world rarely pays attention because nothing seems to change.

Recently, though, the squabbling has turned into a crisis, which threatens to make life still worse for the 170m poor Muslims who suffer under one of the world's worst governments. Since Bangladesh's political leaders show no interest in their fate, outsiders need to do so.

When Sheikh Hasina, leader of the Awami League and current prime minister, and Khaleda Zia, leader of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), alternated in power in the 1990s, things were pretty bad, but in the past decade they have got worse. The administration Mrs Zia headed from 2001 to 2006 was a brutal kleptocracy. It was followed by army-backed unelected technocrats. Then in 2008 the Awami League swept to power in a landslide victory. The League has 229 of 300 parliamentary seats compared with 31 for Mrs Zia's BNP. Sheikh Hasina has used this mandate to consolidate power and hound her enemies, real and imagined.

There has been a spate of mysterious disappearances. This month 33 senior members of the opposition were arrested on charges of vandalism and arson. A war-crimes tribunal to investigate the atrocities in Bangladesh's war of independence in 1971 some of the bloodiest in modern history now looks like an attempt to discredit the BNP and its Islamist allies. And the hounding of Mohammad Yunus, a pioneer of microfinance, creator of the Grameen Bank and a Nobel laureate, is seen as payback for his temerity in 2007 in trying to launch a "third force" in politics. Meanwhile, journalists and activists face intimidation and worse, and the vibrant NGOs that keep the spirit of democracy alive worry that proposed legislation would leave them at the mercy of government whims.

Last year the League did away with the provision that caretaker administrations should oversee elections. The arrangement was not ideal. In January 2007 protests led by the League, convinced that the BNP would rig an election, led to a coup. But without some assurance of fair play the BNP will boycott the next election, due in 2014. So there is the prospect of yet more protests, which in Bangladesh often take the form of crippling strikes. There is also the real prospect of utter political paralysis, risking even worse turmoil on the streets.

**THE ONLY VOICE IN DHAKA**  
The outside world is trying to do its bit. The World Bank has scrapped a deal to pay for a big bridge because of its suspicions of corruption. EU members have denounced the treatment of Mr Yunus and the harassment of activists. Hillary Clinton flew to Dhaka this month to stand by Mr Yunus.

But the government seems unmoved. In a snub to Mrs Clinton, it announced a review into ownership of Grameen, a move to take over (and probably destroy) the bank. The only country to have much influence in Dhaka is India. Until recently the regional superpower tolerated Sheikh Hasina's excesses, in part because Bangladesh has cracked down on Islamists. India now seems to be hedging its bets between the two parties. But if it still wants to have a functioning democracy next door, it needs to speak out far louder in favour of it.

## POLITICS IN BANGLADESH: BANGED ABOUT

The prime minister sets the country on a dangerous path

Inching through the crowded streets of Bangladesh's capital brings both exhilaration and frustration. Dhaka's garishly painted tricycle rickshaws, battered buses, occasional goats and luxury cars somehow all manage to creep onward. Drivers skilled at furious honking are also masters of compromise and smiles.

If only the bitter politicians could prove so deaf. Some 18 months before a general election, Bangladesh suffers street protests. Opposition leaders are sent to jail, and disappearances

and murders are widely blamed on an old rivalry for power. A confrontation over the next poll will be overseen, and whether it will be fair is already so strident that some observers doubt a contested one will be held at all. Meanwhile, Bangladeshis fret over prices of food and fuel, chronic power cuts and broken promises of new roads.

As the leader of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), Khaleda Zia, tells it, all lies at the government's door. She ticks off a list of wicked acts she blames on her antagonist in an ancient rivalry, the prime minister, Sheikh Hasina. A young BNP politician abducted a month ago and very probably murdered. Two others killed earlier. Some 33 opposition figures, including senior MPs, dumped in jail this month over a trumped-up case of arson. In all, she says, 3,000 BNP members have been arrested. "It is to intimidate, to create a sense of fear."

There is plenty more darkness about. In recent months Bangladesh has endured a spate of other mysterious killings. Saudi diplomat shot dead; a trade union activist tortured and murdered; a pair of journalists butchered after investigating corruption. This correspondent was trailed in Dhaka by a pair of secret-service men on a motorbike. A rumour of a bizarre coup attempt, in January, was used by the government to get closer political control over the army.

One of the country's best known figures, Muhammad Yunus of Grameen Bank, has been harassed for some time. An increasingly paranoid Mrs Hasina sees him as a political threat. This month in Dhaka Hillary Clinton, America's secretary of state, met the Nobel laureate and assured him of her support. It brought no relief. Ministers snipe at him, and the government has just ordered yet another official review of his bank.

"We are very worried that the commission has been formed and terms of reference include ownership," says Mr Yunus. In effect, the government is seeking ways to grab Grameen, which is 97%-owned by its poor members, many of them women. Officials are also bent on settling scores with Mr Yunus, who oversees an ungainly charitable empire that includes a telecoms company as well as the bank. Over a lavish dinner, a group of government spies brags of having a thick file of allegations ready against the "money-monger".

## ENGINE TROUBLE

The list of gripes against the government is long. Corruption is pervasive enough for donors to be alarmed. The World Bank has scrapped funding for a bridge over the Padma river. Japan, the largest single giver of aid, has just sent its deputy prime minister to Dhaka to demand a clean-up. In a case of recent graft, a railway minister, who quit after police found sacks of cash in his aide's car, was suddenly cleared by an internal inquiry of any corruption and reinstated to the cabinet.

The BNP leader said the country was now in a "critical juncture" and added that the US government and Amnesty International reports on human rights conditions in the country proved that the BNP was right in pointing out government's use of security forces and judiciary to repress the opposition.

Most telling would be a shift in India's attitude. Long a close ally of Sheikh Hasina's Awami League, cheering her crackdown on Islamic extremists and insurgents from India's north-east, and being open to more trade, India's ruling Congress party may now, sensibly, be hedging its bets. Pranab Mukherjee, India's finance minister, called on Mrs Zia recently, inviting her back to Delhi. Mrs Zia chuckles that she will go after Delhi's summer heat is past. She also calls the neighbour a "friend", a possible hint of change in a party that often sees popularity by bashing India.

As Sheikh Hasina looks ever more strident, people may start tiptoeing away from her. Not every ill in Bangladesh can be laid at the prime minister's door.

Although she did mess with the constitution, scrapping arrangements she had previously insisted on in opposition for a neutral caretaker to run the government for three years.

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months before election day, she now appears to want to keep her options open, possibly in order to be better able to skew the outcome of the next election. Meanwhile, Mrs Zia's party orders street protests and hunger strikes, and threatens angry mass rallies in June. The sad result is that politics grows more polarised and confrontational.

Still, Mrs Hasina is not quite the all-powerful bogeywoman her bitterest opponents suggest. Certainly she seems set on cracking down on civil groups, for example with a new bill to put non-government organisations more firmly under political control. But it is hard to see how the murders and attacks on activists and journalists help her government, other than to spread a general sense of intimidation.

The opposition, too, has a reputation for thuggery, corruption and intimidation, and does not bother much to hide it. A veteran leader of the BNP says that, should his party boycott the next election, 20 days of street protests by BNP supporters would then be followed by violent attacks by his party workers on their rivals.

The shame of it all is how little heed the squabbling politicians pay to what should matter more: keeping the economy growing and reducing poverty further. In the face of electricity shortages, blocked roads and land disputes, the Bangladesh economy has been doing remarkably well. Its clothing industry has the potential to generate over \$40 billion a year from exports, according to McKinsey, a consultancy.

Indicators of well-being have been improving. If annual economic growth of over 6% is sustained, a country that not long ago was a byword for poverty can contemplate reaching middle-income levels in barely a decade. But that needs single-minded focus by the government on dealing with the country's economic bottlenecks and social needs. Instead, like Dhaka's wretched roads, politics looks jammed. Uncertainty leading up to the next election, and growing anxiety among diplomats and foreign observers of Bangladesh, suggest a hard, tense time ahead. More than anyone, blame the driver.

## No talks

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assumed power) conspiracy have become active again taking the advantage of the misrule and failure of the government.

"We hope the government will take initiative to hold talks to ensure peaceful transfer of power and to find a way to resolve all the problems through discussion," Tariqul Islam, member of BNP standing committee, said at a press briefing at the party's Nayapaltan office in the capital.

Replies to the former posts and telecommunications minister said any talks should start outside parliament first and then it can be held inside the House. "You have seen such process in 1996," he told reporters.

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# Water crisis

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problem of the area would be gone once those become operational.

About charging extra by tanker drivers, Taqsem said they had been taking action and they would be able to take punitive actions had they got complaints against individual drivers.

Taposh Dhar, a resident of Mostofa Road near Green Road, said they have been getting smelly water for the last six months and had to fetch water from a Wasa pump in Farmgate every day. The pump is around half-a-kilometre away.

"My four-year-old daughter Kristi had diarrhoea twice in a week as we stopped fetching water from the pump for about 15 days last month and used the supply water instead."

Everyday several hundred people go to the pump to take water, she said.

Managing Director of Dhaka Wasa Taqsem said due to some illegal water connections, water in the pipeline get contaminated during the dry season since water pressure in the pipes remain low then.

According to Wasa, the demand for water in the city was 225 crore to 230 crore litres a day but Wasa could pump 205 crore to 210 crore litres per day.

However, the supply drops during severe load-shedding and severe power cuts in the summer have become usual. According to Bangladesh Power Development Board, the demand-supply shortfall for electricity in the capital was around 400 MW on Wednesday.

The number of deep tube wells in the capital is 618. While the number of generators is around 400, including mobile and reserve generators.

Apart from them, there are around 205 pumps with dual electric connections. However, an official of Wasa said during severe load-shedding, especially in the summer, more often than not both connections of the dual-connection pumps suffer power cuts.

## Furnace oil

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against its storage capacity for furnace oil of 35,200 tonnes. Its daily production of furnace oil is 1,000 tonnes.

The SAOCL, 50 percent stake of which is owned by Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC), totally stopped selling furnace oil five days back while the three other companies have cut sale significantly.

The move by the oil distributors prompted the BPC to write to the managing directors of Padma, Meghna and Jamuna, directing them to keep the marketing of furnace oil normal.

The letter has also been seen by The Daily Star.

The ERL, a subsidiary of the BPC, says it cannot stop the production of furnace oil in the face of falling demand, but can cut down daily production by 200-300 tonnes.

If the production of furnace oil is stopped, then ERL's entire production cycle of 15 different petroleum products from crude oil including diesel, petrol, octane and kerosene will be disrupted, officials at the ERL said.

At present, the BPC in its different depots has furnace oil more than its capacity. "The stock increased as the power stations have recently cut down their purchase amount," said BPC Director (marketing) Nurul Islam.

Another official of the BPC said under the circumstances, the ERL would have to go slow in production, as its storage capacity for furnace oil was almost full.

It could not be known why the SAOCL stopped selling furnace oil, the BPC official said, even though the company does not fuel to power plants.

Rab on May 20 seized 11 tank lorries and an oil tanker loaded with 3.40 lakh litres (around 290 tonnes) of furnace oil when it was being hauled for black market. A part of that consignment was released from a Padma Oil depot.

On the day, Padma Oil's local sale of furnace oil was 72 tonnes, Meghna sold 84 tonnes and Jamuna 117 tonnes. The SAOCL completely stopped selling furnace oil the same day.

On Thursday, Padma's sale dropped to 18 tonnes while Jamuna's dropped to 15 tonnes.

The ERL plays a vital role in supplying around 40 percent of the country's current petroleum products' demand and thus maintains stability in the petroleum products' market of the country. It sometimes becomes the only source available in the face of disruption in import.

Ziaur Rahman, managing director of Bay Footwear,

# Polytechnic students

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demonstrations at different polytechnic institutes across the country, said a ministry handout.

The agitation of the students began from Chittagong Polytechnic Institute on Wednesday after the students took to the street on the port city following the rumour.

Several demonstrations also took place in other polytechnic institutes during the last two days across the country in this connection.

Bogra, Dinajpur, Gopalganj and Magura Polytechnic Institutes remained closed for the last two days following the students' agitation.

The Chandradighi Polytechnic Institute authorities at Gopalganj yesterday declared the institute closed for an indefinite period following demonstration by the students on Thursday.

Intuition of Diploma Engineers General Secretary Shamsur Rahman in a statement yesterday urged the students in all polytechnic institutes not to get confused by any rumour.

"We have directed leaders

and activists of our association at district level to talk with the students and convey them the correct information," Rahman told The Daily Star last night.

Bangladesh Polytechnic Teachers' Parishad President Fakir Md Abdul Mannan said,

"We do not know anything about the government's decision of changing the status of diploma engineers. I

cannot understand on which ground the students are demonstrating."

Jakir Hossain Sagar, a student of electrical engineering department at Dhaka Polytechnic Institute, said they were trying to communicate with the students of other polytechnic institutes, and get them convinced.

RANGPUR CLASH

The clash at Rangpur

the ministry's Additional Secretary Mohammad Atoar Rahman, has been asked to submit its report within seven working days.

Another handout of the ministry said the government has no plan to change the status of diploma engineers to class-three officials.

The disgruntled students hurled bricks at police when the law enforcers tried to evict them from in front of the exam halls where recruitment test for the post of sub-assistant food inspector was scheduled to resume at 10:30am, witnesses said.

During the two-hour-long clashes that began at 10:30am, the students also attacked Nababganj police camp and vandalised seven vehicles including a police van, reports our Rangpur correspondent.

Police fired at least 40 rounds of tear shells and charged truncheons to disperse the agitators.

BM Enamul Haque, deputy commissioner of Rangpur, told The Daily Star the recruitment test started one hour behind the schedule.

"Normal situation is now prevailing inside the polytechnic institute," he added.

A large number of riot police have been deployed at the institute to avert any untoward incident, the SP added.

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Sheikh Fazl Hossain Fahim, nephew of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, has been made its director.

"Fahim will be our guide here and act as a mentor," Subrata said.

About the housing project, he said they would not build any concrete jungle; rather they would provide the people with a "complete lifestyle".

"In Dhaka, only houses have been built, not lifestyle. Everyone bought lands and built vertical buildings, thus turning it into a concrete jungle."

He also said they want to work with the people who are involved in the housing sector.

"We'll complement but not compete with the existing businesses. We want to work together."

The Sahara chairman said during his three-day visit he had several meetings with the top officials of Bangladesh Bank and Board of Investment (Bol) and placed a number of investment proposals for at least 10 sectors in Bangladesh.

So far, total investment in Bangladesh by different Indian investors is only \$600 million, said the Indian business tycoon.

Subrata Roy said they also have