HEADING FAST, NOWHERE

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A demand raised by some eminent citizens on December 28 has infuriated Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. The next day, she has slammed the eminent citizens for the demand of postponement of the January 5 parliamentary election in which her ruling Awami League is set to get a two-third majority. And after January 5, she will be sworn in as the prime minister again. As the opposition has boycotted the vote, there is no risk of defeat for Hasina.

It was expected that Hasina would react sharply to the demand for postponement of the election. "These eminent citizens benefited the most during the era of undemocratic and unconstitutional system in the past...the key players of the 1/11 have again become vocal these days."

Hasina's statement is not factually correct. The eminent citizens who have raised the demand were not benefited most during the past Fakhruddin Ahmed-led caretaker government that was installed following the 1/11 changeover in 2007. Everyone knows that the changeover has enormously benefited Hasina and her AL. The changeover prevented the then caretaker government-led by Iajuddin Ahmed from holding the general election scheduled for January 22, 2007. If it were held, her archrival Khaleda Zia would have assumed the office of the Prime Minister again.

The changeover took place in a grave political turmoil caused by violent street agitation waged by the AL-led alliance to resist the election. And after the changeover, it was the Fakhruddin Ahmed-led caretaker government that held the ninth parliamentary election on December 29, 2008 in which the AL won a landslide, and Hasina was sworn in as the Prime Minister.

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The way the Prime Minister has blasted the eminent citizens however has questioned her democratic norms and values. She has been claiming to uphold the democratic process in one hand, and on the other she has been trying to gag freedom of speech, a fundamental element needed to form a democratic society. When the premier was blasting the eminent citizens on Sunday, law enforcers were on the streets with the only aim to resist BNP-led opposition men to take to the streets with the demand for the cancellation of the January 5 polls. In face of the brute force, the opposition men were unable to take part in the 'March for Democracy' programme on December 29. Opposition Leader Khaleda Zia also had to bear the brunt. She was kept confined at her Gulshan residence and was not allowed to go to her party's central office in Nayapaltan, the venue for the marchers to get together. Obstructed by the police, Khaleda reacted furiously. To a female police officer, she said, "Which district you hail from? Gopali [Gopalganj, home district of her rival Hasina]? The name of Gopalganj district will be changed ... Gopalganj will cease to exist."

Thanks to the mushrooming of private satellite television channels, people watched how she launched a fierce verbal attack to her archrival Hasina and some law enforcers. This only exposed intolerance and undemocratic side of her leadership.

Finally, Khaleda Zia could not march to her party office. So she announced to continue the 'March for Democracy' on December 30. The second day also ended up with the same fate. The main reason for the march to Dhaka was to mount pressure on the government to postpone the January 5 election and to pave the way for holding of