

Bangladesh elections open up new political opportunities

by Ramtanu Maitra and Susan Maitra

The success of Bangladesh's Awami League party in the June 12 elections for the 300-member national parliament (Jatiya Sansad), indicates that the ghost of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founder of the Awami League and the first President of Bangladesh, is being finally exorcised. The Awami League victory may, for the first time in the 25-year history of this bitterly fractured nation, hold the possibility of putting in place a less confrontational political process.

The Awami League, led by Sheikh Mujib's gritty daughter, Sheikh Hasina Wazed, fell short of an absolute majority by only five seats, but its total of 146 seats makes it the largest party in the Jatiya Sansad. President Abdur Rahman Biswas, a former chief justice who became President in October 1991, following the collapse of the martial law regime of President H.M. Ershad, has asked the Awami League leader to form the government. It is likely that the Jatiya Party, headed by the now-imprisoned Ershad, will also join the government, with its 31 seats. Another 30 seats reserved for women, who are selected by a vote of the parliament, should give the League an absolute majority.

Kissinger's heavy hand

The father of Sheikh Hasina Wazed, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, led the Bangladesh Liberation War and was known as the "Father of the Nation." He was gunned down in his Presidential residence, along with 15 members of his family, by a group of middle-level Army officers in 1975. Sixteen years of military rule, and then five years of democracy under Begum Khaled Zia, widow of slain Army general President Ziaur Rahman and leader of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), were haunted constantly by the ghost of Sheikh Mujib.

A trade union leader turned national hero, Sheikh Mujib was a socialist and had become close politically to the Soviet Union and Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, in his struggle for independence from Pakistan. He promised a socialist Bangladesh. His three-and-a-half years of rule, however, were replete with nepotism and corruption.

Washington, having succumbed to the geopolitical spell of Henry Kissinger's foreign policy, was eager to break the "unholy alliance" between Bangladesh and the "Indo-Soviet axis." Kissinger, who had opened Beijing's door for President

Nixon, saw an opportunity in Sheikh Mujib's growing unpopularity. His determination to push Dhaka under Beijing's influence to create a crisis within the "Indo-Soviet axis" led to strained relations between Washington and both Delhi and Dhaka.

Kissinger identified both Mrs. Gandhi and Sheikh Mujib as obstacles to his geopolitical designs for the region. There are accusations, even coming from Kissinger's deputy in the National Security Council, Roger Morris, that Kissinger was involved in ordering the assassination of Sheikh Mujib, with whom he made known his differences at a press conference in Dhaka a few days before Sheikh Mujib and his family were brutally mowed down.

Sheikh Hasina Wazed, one of the two survivors of Sheikh Mujib's immediate family, stayed back in India for six years under the unofficial protection of Delhi, and of Mrs. Gandhi, in particular. Meanwhile, in Bangladesh, the Army under President Ziaur Rahman's rule (following a number of short-lived and bloody coups), was clinically "eliminating" the closest associates of Sheikh Mujib. With President Ziaur Rahman at the helm, Kissinger succeeded in pushing Dhaka onto Beijing's lap. Bangladesh became increasingly dependent on China for arms and security. To further vitiate the Indo-Bangladesh relations, a campaign was unleashed to malign Sheikh Mujib, implying that he had been bent on "selling out" his country to India.

All these years, following her decision to return to Bangladesh and assume leadership of the Awami League party, Sheikh Hasina had been battling this ghost and losing.

In 1982, President Ziaur Rahman was murdered. His death elevated the pro-Pakistan Army chief Gen. Hussain Mohammad Ershad, to power.

The Awami League, tainted by politicians who had played a dubious role during Sheikh Mujib's failed rule, was regarded by the majority as a pro-India and anti-Islam party. These labels were so pervasive, that the killers of Sheikh Mujib and his family, two colonels with deep contacts to the United States, Pakistan, and Arab capitals, were able to set up a political party in the late-1980s in the heart of Bangladesh. One of the killers even contested a Presidential election.

Awami League's new image

This year the Awami League began presenting a new image. A number of liberation war heroes, some of whom had become top military brass, had joined the party and were contesting elections. The list included such names as Nurul Haq, first chief of the Bangladesh Navy; Maj. Gen. K.M. Saifullah, the first Army chief of independent Bangladesh; Maj. Gen. S. Badruzzaman, former Director General of Bangladesh Rifles; and Air Vice-Marshal A.K. Khondker, the first chief of the Bangladesh Air Force.

A few weeks before the vote, opinion polls showed that the ruling BNP was on a losing track. President Biswas, allegedly goaded by former Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia, set in motion certain highly dangerous policies to make it impossible to hold elections. He ordered Army chief Lt. Gen. Abu Saleh Mohammad Nasim to retire Maj. Gen. G.B. Morshed Khan, GOC Bogra Division, and Brig. Miran Hamidur Rahman, deputy director general of the paramilitary force, Bangladesh Rifles (BDR).

When the Army chief refused to follow his orders, President Biswas sacked General Nasim and made a nationwide broadcast, accusing Nasim of "disobeying orders, breaking Army discipline, and resorting to rebellion." Biswas claimed that the two senior Army officers, while serving in the military, were getting involved with one political party—the Awami League.

Fixing for a fight, Nasim's supporters emptied some cantonments and began moving toward Dhaka. President Biswas, having appointed Maj. Gen. Mahbur Rahman as the new Army chief, prepared for the confrontation. The confrontation, however, did not take place. For reasons which are not clear, in the next 12 hours, Nasim called it quits and handed over power to his successor.

General Nasim's gesture not to push Bangladesh to the point of no return was welcomed domestically and internationally. A number of major donor nations, including the United States, Japan, and the United Kingdom, had conveyed to the Army that a coup would dry up the foreign aid tap, and Bangladesh, which depends so heavily on foreign donors and is presently alarmingly short of foreign exchange reserves, would be facing a major financial crisis if the Army took over. Perhaps this threat, and the pressure from the Awami League leaders as well, made the general turn back. Nonetheless, it was not General Nasim, but the combination of Begum Zia and President Biswas that had created the crisis, hoping to force a cancellation of the elections.

Regional economic opportunities

Despite the electoral success, which could be very short-lived in a country which is crying out for economic improvement, Sheikh Hasina will require a new positive agenda. Besides healing the wounds politically, the new government will have to deal with its economy. The agenda for Sheikh Hasina would be to integrate Bangladesh's economy more with South

Asia, and place less emphasis on the free trade-based globalization. Bangladesh, which is presently undergoing another round of foreign exchange starvation, has remained highly vulnerable to the diktats of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the donor countries, which demand that Bangladesh toe the fiscal discipline line. It is time to get out of that arrangement, and a new beginning needs to be made in the regional direction.

There are openings, and Sheikh Hasina should not hesitate to seize those opportunities with both hands. A recent South Asia Forum in Delhi brought together a number of professionals from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal. This group was discussing such far-reaching proposals as a common power grid and gas pipelines that would help feed more than a billion people.

At the same time, the sharing of the Ganges riverwater between India and Bangladesh has been a permanent source of irritation. Bangladesh claims that India, having concluded the deal when Bangladesh was still a part of Pakistan, has cheated Bangladesh of its rightful share of the Ganges water. The lack of adequate amount of water in channels fed by the Ganges has dried up the northern provinces of Bangladesh, Dhaka authorities claim. There is no doubt that the issue has been vitiated by the designed deterioration of the Indo-Bangladesh relations and can be settled amicably when both give up their pre-determined positions. This should be on Sheikh Hasina's agenda as well.

It is widely acknowledged that a gamut of secessionist movements in northeast India, aided and backed by London and its geopolitical allies, continues because of mainland India's limited access to that part of the country. In fact, the secessionist movements, and the large amount of narcotics and weapons that come into India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal, is an offshoot of the way the British had partitioned the subcontinent in 1947. The hilly terrains of northeast India, which make railroad-building extremely expensive and also difficult, have added further to the infrastructural woes.

Sheikh Hasina must note that India is now seriously contemplating using riverways to activate industrial and commercial activities in the difficult terrains of India's northeast. Such a proposal would come to fruition only if Bangladesh participates in the give-and-take between the regional nations on an infrastructural development course for the common use of all the nations in that general area.

In addition, it is no secret that both Bangladesh and India are getting socially, politically, and culturally affected by the large influx of heroin from the Golden Triangle coming into Bangladesh and India through Myanmar (Burma) and Nepal. Drug trafficking has generated vast amounts of money, which, in turn, has found its way into every level of the society, corrupting millions. Narco-traffickers are also financing the militant secessionists both in India and Bangladesh. This is also an area in which Bangladesh and India could both benefit through cooperation.