

Issue No. 2, December 31, 2006

Bangladesh 2007 Elections

*Parliamentary Elections are scheduled to take place on January 22, 2007, to elect 300 members to the 9<sup>th</sup> Jatiya Sangsad (National Parliament) for a five year term. The five-year tenure of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)-led four party alliance ceased at midnight on October 27, 2006 and was marked by two days of intense violence between party activists from the four party alliance and the main opposition party, the Awami League (AL). On October 29, the President, Dr Professor Iajuddin Ahmed, was sworn in as Chief Advisor of the Caretaker Government and 10 Advisors were sworn in on the evening of October 31. The AL did not attend the Swearing-In ceremony of the Chief Advisor. AL Party President, Sheikh Hasina said they would wait and see if the Chief Advisor addressed their concerns.*

## **Fourteen Party Alliance Hartal on 21 December, 2007**

The 14 Party Alliance, which includes the Awami League (AL), Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the Jatiya Party (JP), called a *hartal* (general strike) on December 21, 2006. This was the original final date for filing nominations. Due to the *hartal*, however, the date was moved to December 24, 2006. This *hartal* saw many violent clashes throughout the country between activists of the parties and the law enforcement agencies. For the first time in 16 years, the army was used to tackle the violence. Two former advisors to the Caretaker Government expressed concern over the army being involved in

subduing political programs. Despite the strike and the army's deployment, the four party alliance (BNP/Jamaat-e-Islami) candidates submitted their nominations in a number of constituencies to election officials.

## **Decision by 14 Party Alliance to contest 22 January 2007 Polls**

The 14 Party Alliance announced that they would contest the Parliamentary Elections scheduled for January 22, 2007. The LDP and the JP entered into an agreement with the AL to give responsibility to Sheikh Hasina to make the decision regarding participating in the upcoming elections.

## **Election Commission**

The final date for submitting nominations was changed again to December 26, 2006. The Acting Chief Election Commissioner (CEC), Justice Mahfuzur Rahman, expressed hope that the elections will be free, fair, neutral and acceptable. Election Commissioner Mr. SM Zacharia went 'on leave' December 21, 2006 due to one of the 'demands' of the AL in connection with reform of the Election Commission. The AL alleges that Mr. Zacharia is partial towards the BNP. The highest number of nominations in Bangladesh history was recorded at 4,146, as parties failed to finalize candidates. Of these nominations, 3,882 were found valid by the Election Commission. Several

aspiring candidates of various political parties were disqualified on grounds of allegedly defaulting on loans.

### **Sedition Charges Against Prominent Lawyers**

Following the vandalism that occurred at the Supreme Court premises on November 30, 2006, sedition charges were filed against a number of people including senior lawyers, Dr. Kamal Hossain, Barrister Rokanuddin Mahmud and Barrister Amir ul-Islam. The vandalism occurred after a number of political parties, including the Awami League and the LDP, challenged the appointment of the President as Chief Advisor, citing that the Constitutional provisions for the appointment to the position were not followed. A ruling on this petition was due on November 30, but the Chief Justice directed the High Court Judges hearing the case to cease with immediate effect. Investigators, however, found no evidence of sedition against these individuals.

### **Two day blockade by 14 party alliance**

In light of the decision to disqualify the president of the JP, Hossain Mohammad (HM) Ershad, from contesting the forthcoming elections, and due to the High Court decision to uphold an earlier verdict finding him guilty of bribery charges dating back to his time as President of Bangladesh,<sup>1</sup> the 14 Party

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<sup>1</sup> Under Article 66 (2) (d) of the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh a person shall be disqualified for election, or from being a member of Parliament, if they have been sentenced to imprisonment for a term of not less than two years, unless a period of five years has elapsed since their release. Former President Ershad was sentenced to two years imprisonment in December 2006 after the High Court rejected

Alliance has announced a fresh agitation on January 7, 2007. This agitation will be a two day country-wide blockade.

### **Political Party Updates**

#### **Awami League (AL)**

The AL has been severely criticized for entering into a political alliance with Khalefat-e-Majlis, which is allegedly an Islamic fundamentalist group. Many feel this decision goes against the founding secular principles of the AL and the spirit of the War of Liberation. The accord sparked widespread condemnation including criticism from within the party. In addition, allies of the AL threatened to leave the alliance unless the pact is scrapped. In defense of the move, Sheikh Hasina claimed that secularism includes opinions from a broad spectrum. The Parliamentary Board of the party is re-thinking nominations in a number of constituencies in the face of growing dissent from party activists over candidate selections.

#### **Four Party Alliance led by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)**

Begum Khaleda Zia, Chairperson of the BNP, kicked off the party's election campaign in Sylhet. There is speculation about a split in the Four Party Alliance as the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) has submitted nominations papers in over 150 constituencies, having failed to obtain their desired 60 seats from negotiations with the BNP. In fact, the BNP has only agreed to give JI 35 seats in a new parliament. Due to this disagreement, JI is threatening to proceed with their

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his appeal to an earlier verdict sentencing him to prison on the bribery charges.

nominations if no agreement can be reached. Within the BNP, as with the AL, there is growing dissent over controversial nominations.

### **Jatiya Party (JP)**

The president of JP, HM Ershad, was disqualified from contesting in all five constituencies where he submitted nomination papers.<sup>2</sup> Violence erupted in the northern districts (JP stronghold) as party activists protest the cancellation of Ershad's nominations. Begum Raushan Ershad, the former wife of HM Ershad, and a number of party officials have joined the BNP Alliance. President Ershad has lodged an appeal with the Chief Election Commission and the JP is threatening to boycott the election if this appeal is not upheld.

### **Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)**

The LDP has still not made a decision if they will contest the January polls. LDP leaders have stated that they will contest the elections if a fair environment is created. They are unhappy with the decision of the AL to enter into a pact with Khelafat and also at the distribution of seats for the LDP within the alliance.

### **NDI Activities**

The remaining long-term observers (LTO's) have now arrived in Dhaka – making a total of 10 LTO teams that are deployed throughout Bangladesh. The LTO's observed the nomination process in a number of districts and are continuing their meetings with representatives of the political parties,

election officials, law enforcing agencies, civil society organizations and NGOs.

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<sup>2</sup> Candidates can run in up to five constituencies. However, it is mainly the party leaders who contest in up to five constituencies.