

Parliamentary elections, scheduled to take place on January 22, 2007, were postponed January 11 when President Iajuddin Ahmed resigned from his position as Chief Advisor of the Caretaker Government, declared a state of emergency and imposed a curfew. Polls were expected to elect 300 members to the 9th 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).

Announcement of Boycott by Grand Alliance

On January 3, 2007, Sheikh Hasina, leader of the Awami League (AL), held a press conference and announced that the 14-party “Grand Alliance” opposition would not contest the parliamentary elections scheduled for January 22. At the press conference, Sheikh Hasina was joined by the president of the Jatiya Party (JP), Hossain Mohammad (HM) Ershad, and president of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), Dr AQM Badrudozza Chowdhury. The Grand Alliance stated three reasons for the boycott: the voters list; the partisan manner in which the Chief Advisor to the Caretaker Government and President, Dr. Professor Iajuddin Ahmed, was performing his duties; and the partisan bias of the Election Commission (EC).

Withdrawal of Nominations

As January 3 was also the final day for the withdrawal of nominations, candidates from the Grand Alliance withdrew their nominations filed with both the EC in Dhaka and District Election Commission offices throughout the country. As a result, a number of candidates, including the former Prime Minister, Begum Khaleda Zia, her son Tareque Rahman, the Ameer of Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh, Motiur Rahman Nizami, and the former Finance Minister, Saifur Rahman, were deemed elected unopposed; however, candidates cannot be elected until the results of all constituencies have been tallied and the successful candidates have been sworn in by the Speaker of Parliament.

Agitation Program

The Grand Alliance also announced a series of agitation programs beginning with a siege of Bangababhan (President’s Residence) on January 5, a nationwide blockade on January 7-8, and a series of street demonstrations on January 9. Many of these demonstrations were met with resistance from the law enforcement agencies, which sparked violent clashes throughout the country. The Grand Alliance has recently announced further agitation programs beginning on January 14, which will include another siege of Bangababhan (January 14 & 15); a countrywide blockade (January 17 & 18);

and a 3-day *hartal* (general strike) (January 20-22).

Declaration of State of Emergency & Resignation of President as Chief Advisor

On the evening of January 11, 2007, the President and Chief Advisor of the Caretaker Government, Dr. Iajuddin Ahmed, addressed the nation and stated that he was resigning his position as Chief Advisor and postponing the parliamentary elections scheduled for January 22, 2007. In addition, the President declared a State of Emergency, imposed a nightly curfew from 11:00pm – 5:00am, and temporarily appointed one of the Advisors selected in October 2006, (Retd) Justice Fazlul Haque, to the interim Chief Advisor position. The nine remaining advisors to the Caretaker Government submitted their letters of resignation.

The State of Emergency was implemented under the President's emergency powers, which can remain in place for up to 120 days with a renewal if necessary. The Emergency Power Ordinance allows the government to:

- Stop publications - printing of newspapers and books and any news or information detrimental to public safety;
- Control, disrupt, or block any message or news through postal service, radio, telegram, telex, fax, internet and telephone;
- Restrict activities hampering Bangladesh's relations with foreign countries;
- Suspend the activities of political parties, trade unions and clubs;

- Protect law and order and keep economic activities unhindered; and
- Ensure an uninterrupted supply of essentials.

Violators of the emergency powers can receive capital punishment, a life term or 14 years jail sentence.

Appointment of New Chief Advisor and Caretaker Government

On January 12, 2007, Mr. Fakhruddin Ahmed, a former Governor of the Central Bank of Bangladesh, was sworn in as Chief Advisor to the Caretaker Government. Shortly before he was sworn in, the nightly curfew was lifted. Representatives of the AL, JP and LDP attended the swearing-in ceremony. The former Prime Minister and President of the BNP, Begum Khaledia Zia, and the Ameer of Jamaat-e-Islami, Moitur Rahman Nizami, did not attend the ceremony.

On January 13, five Advisors to the Caretaker Government were sworn in. They are:

- Barrister Mainul Hosein, Owner/Editor of the Daily Ittefaq (Bangla Daily Newspaper);
- Dr. Mirza Azizul Islam, former Regulator of the Bangladesh Stock Exchange;
- Maj Gen (Retd) MA Matin, former Anti-Corruption Bureau Official;
- Mr. Tapan Chowdhury, Head of Square Group of Industries Group; and
- Mrs. Geeteara Safiya Choudhury, head of ADCOM, the largest Advertising Agency in Bangladesh.

The Advisors' portfolios are the following:

- Chief Advisor Fakhruddin took charge of the Cabinet Division, Establishment Ministry, Home Affairs and the Election Commission Secretariat.
- Barrister Mainul Hosein has been assigned the Ministries of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs, Jatiya Sangsad (National Parliament) Secretariat, the Housing and Public Works & Land Ministries.
- Dr. Mirza Azizul Islam took charge of the Ministries of Finance and Planning, Commerce, and Post and Telecommunications.
- Mr. MA Matin has been assigned the Ministries of Communications, Shipping, Civil Aviation and Tourism, and Liberation War Affairs.
- Mr Tapan Chowdhury took the reins in the Ministries of Power, Energy & Mineral Resources, Food & Disaster Management, Science & Information Communication Technology and Youth & Sports.
- Ms. Geeteara Safiya Choudhury took charge of the Ministries of Industries, Textiles & Jute, Social Welfare and Women & Children's Affairs.

Bangladesh Election Commission

After the announcement by the President that the polls would be indefinitely postponed, the Election Commission ceased all work pertaining to the polls. The acting Chief Election Commissioner, Justice Mahfuzur Rahman met with the new Chief Advisor to discuss the electoral process and the Election Commission has called the political parties for talks on the new elections. Due to the state of emergency, all by-elections and local government elections have been postponed.

Parliamentary Election Schedule

To date, no date has yet been set for future elections.

NDI Activities

Long Term Observation Mission

The long-term observer (LTO) teams traveled back to Dhaka January 2 for a mid-term status report and debrief. After the announcement of the boycott by the Grand Alliance NDI staff decided to deploy seven of the LTO teams back to previous locations, namely Chittagong, Cox's Bazar, Rajshahi, Comilla, Sylhet, Mymensingh and Tangail. These teams were asked to focus their observation efforts on monitoring the political and security situation in those areas in light of the recent announcement. It was decided not to deploy three LTO teams back to Rangpur, Barisal and Jessore/Khulna due to the potential for violent political unrest. Due to the declaration of the state of emergency and the suspension of the elections, all teams were called back to Dhaka on January 14 and 15.

Short Term Observation Mission

In light of the announcement of the Grand Alliance to boycott the elections, NDI suspended its plans to conduct a short term Election Observation Mission. In a joint press release, both NDI and IRI stated: “NDI and IRI have concluded that an international observer mission would be unable to make a positive contribution to the process because all of

the major parties are not participating in the elections. IRI and NDI are also concerned about the impact the current political environment may have on the ability of the international observers to safely and effectively observe the elections. NDI and IRI do not plan to issue a statement on Election Day activities.”