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Issue Paper BANGLADESH POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE December 1996

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See original.

Source: EIU *Country Profile: Bangladesh 1995-96*, 23.

GLOSSARY

AL

Awami League

BCL

Bangladesh Chhatra League (Awami League student wing)

BDR

Bangladesh Rifles

BNP

Bangladesh Nationalist Party (Jatiyatabadi Dal)

BSEHR

Bangladesh Society for the Enforcement of Human Rights

CCHRB

Coordinating Council for Human Rights in Bangladesh

FEMA

Fair Election Monitoring Alliance

ICS

Islami Chhatra Shibir (Jamaat-e-Islami student wing)

JAGPA

Jatiya Ganatantrik Party

JCD

Jatiyabadi Chhatra Dal (BNP student wing)

JI

Jamaat-e-Islami

JP

Jatiya Party

JSD

Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal

LDF

Left Democratic Front

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper provides information on the political situation in Bangladesh between mid-December 1995 and mid-August 1996. For information on events prior to this period, please see the DIRB Question and Answer Series papers *Bangladesh: Chronology of Events January 1994-December 1995* (March 1996), and *Bangladesh: Political Parties and Political Violence* (May 1994). The latter document provides background information on the political system and the political parties.

2. POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE

2.1 Events Leading Up to the 15 February 1996 General Election

Following the 24 November 1995 dissolution of parliament in the context of a mass opposition boycott of parliament, Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) leader Prime Minister Khaleda Zia called a general election for 15 February 1996 (*Dhaka Courier* 5 Apr. 1996b, 16; IPS 16 Feb. 1996)^[1] While the election was called in accordance with constitutional provisions stipulating that elections must be held within 90 days of parliament being dissolved (*ibid.*), the main opposition parties, comprising the Awami League (AL), Jatiya Party (JP) and Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), opposed any elections while the BNP remained in office (EIU 1st Quarter 1996, 7; *Dhaka Courier* 5 Apr. 1996b, 16). They demanded that Prime Minister Zia step down and the elections be held under a caretaker government, and to this end, intensified their campaign of agitation and general strikes (*hartals*) (*ibid.*; EIU 1st Quarter 1996, 8). The strategy was similar to one the AL and BNP used to bring down the military regime of JP leader General Hossain Mohammad Ershad in 1990^[2] (IPS 6 Mar. 1996; *India Today* 15 Mar. 1996, 116).

According to figures provided by the Coordinating Council for Human Rights in Bangladesh (CCHRB), an umbrella group of more than 76 NGOs, 74 strikes were organized by opposition parties in 1995 (*India Abroad* 26 Jan. 1996, 13; *The Daily Star* 2 Jan. 1996). These strikes, which continued until the BNP government was replaced by a caretaker administration at the end of March 1996 (see subsection 2.4) (AFP 31 Mar. 1996b), were marked by political protests, transportation shutdowns, temporary business and school closures, and violent clashes between rival political party activists and between activists and security forces personnel (Reuters 8 Jan. 1996; *ibid.* 14 Feb. 1996; *The Bangladesh Observer* 16 Feb. 1996, 1, 12). General strikes were reportedly costing Bangladesh around \$80 million per day (*The Christian Science Monitor* 11 Mar. 1996), and according to one report, had become the symbol of Bangladesh's [translation] "economic and social paralysis" (*Journal de Genève et Gazette de Lausanne* 16 Feb. 1996).

Despite the political, social and economic havoc being caused by the opposition-led strikes in January and early February 1996, the government pushed ahead with its election schedule (AFP 18 Jan. 1996; *ibid.* 4 Feb. 1996; *ibid.* 17 Feb. 1996; Reuters 8 Jan. 1996; *ibid.* 12 Feb. 1996; *ibid.* 14 Feb. 1996). Stating that the country's constitution had no provision for the appointment of a caretaker administration, Prime Minister Zia rejected opposition demands and refused to surrender power (IPS 16 Feb. 1996; EIU 2nd Quarter 1996, 8). Meanwhile, dissension was growing within the BNP ranks (*The Bangladesh Observer* 25 Jan. 1996, 1, 12). Unhappy with the BNP central committee's 22 January 1996 expulsion of three Rajshahi BNP leaders, 276 BNP leaders resigned from the party on 24 January 1996 (*ibid.*).

In an effort to curb political violence in the run-up to the election, police, backed up by the army, navy and paramilitary Bangladesh Rifles (BDR), cracked down on possession of illegal firearms (WLUML 23 Jan. 1996; Reuters 28 Dec. 1995; EIU 1st Quarter 1996, 9), seizing up to 821 firearms and arresting as many as 8,621 people in late December 1995 (Radio Bangladesh Network 3 Jan. 1996; Reuters 28 Dec. 1995). According to Amnesty International, by mid to late February 1996 "tens of thousands" of suspected illegal arms holders had been detained, although most were released within "days or weeks" (AI May 1996, 4).

Notwithstanding the arms recovery drive, in the weeks preceding the election opposition activists set fire to a number of election offices and launched bomb attacks on government buildings, police vehicles and the homes of BNP members (Reuters 14 Feb. 1996; *The Bangladesh Observer* 8 Feb. 1996,

1, 12). Opposition activists also attacked several BNP candidates (*ibid.*; *Journal de Genève et Gazette de Lausanne* 16 Feb. 1996). According to Reuters, 16 people were killed and 500 injured in countrywide political violence during the first two weeks of February 1996 (Reuters 14 Feb. 1996).

2.2 The 15 February 1996 General Election

As a result of the opposition boycott, the 15 February 1996 election was only contested by the BNP and candidates from 41 "mostly unknown and non-existent" groups (*The Bangladesh Observer* 16 Feb. 1996, 1; *Keesing's* Feb. 1996, 40950). On election day 1,450 candidates contested 250 of the 300 seats in parliament; candidates in the remaining 50 seats ran unopposed (*ibid.*).

The election, which took place amid widespread violence, drew few voters; only 10 to 15 per cent of the country's 50 million eligible voters cast ballots (*La lettre de Reporters sans frontières* Mar. 1996, 14; *Le Monde* 17 Feb. 1996; *India Today* 15 Mar. 1996, 115; EIU 2nd Quarter 1996, 9), in what AL leader Sheikh Hasina termed a "mock election" (Reuters 5 Feb. 1996). The BNP, led by Prime Minister Zia, received an absolute majority of seats (IPS 16 Feb. 1996; *India Today* 15 Mar. 1996, 115). Voting was postponed in about 1,000 of the 20,914 polling centres due to violence (*The Bangladesh Observer* 16 Feb. 1996, 1).

Opposition leaders reportedly described the election as "voterless" and "farical" (*The Hindu* 16 Feb. 1996), and one source described it as little more than a "constitutional exercise" (*ibid.*). The Fair Election Monitoring Alliance (FEMA), a foreign-funded umbrella group consisting of 130 to 170 Bangladeshi NGOs (*The Bangladesh Observer* 17 June 1996, 12; *ibid.* 17 Feb. 1996, 1; EIU 2nd Quarter 1996, 9), concluded that the election had not been free and fair (AFP 20 Feb. 1996; *The Bangladesh Observer* 17 Feb. 1996, 1)^[3] FEMA's preliminary report indicated that almost half of the election officials did not show up for work on polling day, and that there were voting delays and several instances of fraud and ballot stuffing (*ibid.*, 1, 12; AFP 17 Feb. 1996; *ibid.* 20 Feb. 1996).

Election day violence, which included arson attacks against election centres, kidnapping of election officials and bombings throughout the country, resulted in 16 to 23 people being killed (*The Economist* 24 Feb. 1996; *Hotline Newsletter* Feb.-Mar. 1996, 3). Dhaka was reportedly calmer than other cities, as residents generally respected the "people's curfew" imposed by the opposition and refrained from voting (*The Bangladesh Observer* 16 Feb. 1996, 1; *ibid.* 17 Feb. 1996, 12; *The Hindu* 16 Feb. 1996).

2.3 The Non-Cooperation Movement

The day following the election the main opposition parties announced a campaign of civil disobedience (*The Christian Science Monitor* 20 Feb. 1996; *Lanka Guardian* July 1996, 9), with 24 February 1996 beginning three consecutive days of "non-cooperation" with the new government, widely seen as lacking legitimacy (Reuters 19 Feb. 1996; *The Economist* 24 Feb. 1996). Supported by parties such as the Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD) and Jatiya Ganatantrik Party (JAGPA), the goal of the opposition non-cooperation campaign was to force the government to step down and call new elections under a caretaker government (Reuters 26 Feb. 1996; *The Bangladesh Observer* 26 Feb. 1996, 1; *Dhaka Courier* 1 Mar. 1996, 10-11). In essence it was a violent general strike that lasted five days, during which time government security forces arrested six senior opposition leaders (*The Bangladesh Observer* 28 Feb. 1996, 1; *Dhaka Courier* 1 Mar. 1996, 10-12; Reuters 29 Feb. 1996)^[4]. The 28 February 1996 arrest of Chittagong mayor Mohiuddin Ahmed Chowdhury, a respected AL and non-cooperation campaign leader, heightened political tension and sparked a series of violent incidents in the city (Reuters 29 Feb. 1996; Xinhua 18 Mar. 1996; *The Bangladesh Observer* 29 Feb. 1996, 1, 12). Chowdhury's supporters set fire to vehicles, banks, shops, a garment factory and government

buildings, and blocked roads linking Chittagong to Dhaka, Cox's Bazaar, Rangamati, Khagrachhari and Bandarban (ibid.; Reuters 29 Feb. 1996; HRW/A June 1996, 4). Chittagong opposition forces called a three-day strike and organized protest marches from all points in the city to the jail where the mayor was being detained (Reuters 2 Mar. 1996; *The Bangladesh Observer* 3 Mar. 1996, 1; ibid. 29 Feb. 1996, 1, 12). Overwhelmed by the opposition reaction, police reportedly retreated to their headquarters (ibid., 1); within hours the army and paramilitary troops were called in to restore order (ibid.; Reuters 29 Feb. 1996). Chowdhury was released from jail on 11 March 1996 (HRW/A June 1996, 4).

On 3 March 1996, after sustained pressure from the opposition parties and failed attempts to initiate a dialogue with them (Radio Bangladesh Network 19 Feb. 1996; Xinhua 4 Mar. 1996), Prime Minister Zia announced that the government was prepared to amend the constitution to allow for general elections under a "non-party" government (ibid.; IPS 6 Mar. 1996; *Hotline Newsletter* Feb.-Mar. 1996, 3). The proposal was rejected outright by the opposition, which, maintaining that the parliament was illegal, demanded Zia's prior resignation (ibid.; Xinhua 4 Mar. 1996; IPS 6 Mar. 1996).

On 9 March 1996 the main opposition parties launched an indefinite non-cooperation campaign, again demanding that Prime Minister Zia resign, the February election results be annulled, and fresh elections be held under a caretaker government (Reuters 17 Mar. 1996; *Hotline Newsletter* Feb.-Mar. 1996, 3). While Zia initially refused to resign and cancel the election results (Reuters 17 Mar. 1996; ibid. 16 Mar. 1996), she later agreed to resign on condition the opposition recognize the new parliament (IPS 21 Mar. 1996; *Keesing's* Mar. 1996, 41003). The opposition, however, continued to demand Zia's unconditional resignation (IPS 21 Mar. 1996).

This second opposition-led non-cooperation campaign received support from the JSD, JAGPA, Islami Oikya Jote and Left Democratic Front (LDF) (*The Bangladesh Observer* 18 Mar. 1996, 1; ibid. 23 Mar. 1996, 1), an alliance of nine leftist parties (*India Abroad* 17 May 1996, 26), and was later joined by numerous civil servants and government officials, including 19 at the senior level, as well as businessmen, professionals, cultural activists, students, workers and peasants (ibid.; *India Today* 30 Apr. 1996, 120; *The Globe and Mail* 24 June 1996; *The Bangladesh Observer* 1 Apr. 1996, 1; *Asian Survey* July 1996, 721).

According to the *Dhaka Courier*, the three-week campaign was marked by "violence and lawlessness" throughout the country (Dhaka Courier 29 Mar. 1996c, 13). *The Bangladesh Observer* reported "innumerable" bombings, arson attacks and armed clashes between opposition and pro-government camps during the first nine days of the campaign (The Bangladesh Observer 18 Mar. 1996, 1). Several people were killed or injured during these incidents (*Dhaka Courier* 15 Mar. 1996, 11). Opposition forces stepped up the campaign on 18 March 1996 by launching a "mass curfew" in Chittagong city (Xinhua 18 Mar. 1996). In Dhaka the following day, an opposition-led protest march against the opening of parliament resulted in clashes with police and over 200 people injured (*The Bangladesh Observer* 20 Mar. 1996, 1; *The Times* 20 Mar. 1996). Invoking the need to "restore normalcy and maintain law and order," on 20 March 1996 the government deployed troops in Dhaka and Chittagong, whose port had been closed for 12 days as a result of the non-cooperation movement (IPS 21 Mar. 1996; *The Bangladesh Observer* 21 Mar. 1996, 1). Violence during the campaign's second week included bomb explosions and "gunfights" between BNP and AL activists in Dhaka, and between their Jatiyabadi Chhatra Dal (JCD) and Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) student wing activists in Chittagong (*Dhaka Courier* 22 Mar. 1996b, 12). According to the *Dhaka Courier*, seven people were killed and approximately 800 injured in these incidents (ibid.).

On 23 March 1996, following a massive "citizens rally," the opposition parties staged a sit-in

outside the government secretariat in the capital (Reuters 25 Mar. 1996; *Dhaka Courier* 29 Mar. 1996c, 13). A number of bombs exploded in Dhaka that day, injuring several people (ibid.; Reuters 25 Mar. 1996). The sit-in continued the following day, despite an attempt by the security forces to break it up early in the morning by firing tear gas and rubber bullets at sleeping protestors (*Dhaka Courier* 29 Mar. 1996c, 13).

The opposition eased its campaign in the third week, allowing banks and businesses to operate "for limited hours" in order to minimize the damage to Bangladesh's social and economic life (ibid. 22 Mar. 1996a, 11). It suspended the campaign on 26-27 March 1996 to mark the 25th anniversary of Bangladesh's independence (*The Bangladesh Observer* 29 Mar. 1996, 1; *Dhaka Courier* 29 Mar. 1996a, 6), and ended it on 30 March 1996, having successfully forced Prime Minister Zia to resign (see subsection 2.4) (ibid.; *The Economist* 6-12 Apr. 1996, 37).

2.4 The Caretaker Government

On 21 March 1996, in the midst of the opposition non-cooperation campaign, the Constitution (Thirteenth Amendment) Bill was tabled in parliament (Reuters 22 Mar. 1996; *Dhaka Courier* 29 Mar. 1996b, 12; *The Bangladesh Observer* 22 Mar. 1996, 1). Among the bill's provisions was that an 11-member caretaker government led by a chief advisor be appointed by and accountable to the president during the transition period, that the caretaker government carry out routine administrative functions only, and that general elections be held within 90 days of dissolution of parliament (ibid.; *Dhaka Courier* 29 Mar. 1996b, 12).

The constitutional amendment bill was passed by parliament on 26 March 1996 (*Keesing's* Mar. 1996, 41003; *The Bangladesh Observer* 28 Mar. 1996, 1). On 30 March 1996, Prime Minister Zia stepped down, parliament was dissolved and former Chief Justice Mohammed Habibur Rahman sworn in as chief advisor of the caretaker government (ibid. 31 Mar. 1996, 1; Reuters 17 Apr. 1996; AFP 31 Mar. 1996a; *Dhaka Courier* 5 Apr. 1996b, 16). This marked the end of two years of opposition party agitation to bring down the BNP government (AFP 31 Mar. 1996b; *Keesing's* Mar. 1996, 41003). The opposition extended its support to the caretaker government and began preparations for a June 1996 general election (*The Economist* 6-12 Apr. 1996, 37-38; EIU 2nd Quarter 1996, 4).

In April 1996 the caretaker government undertook several administrative changes to "promote confidence in the impartiality of senior civil servants" (EIU 3rd Quarter 1996, 9; Reuters 17 Apr. 1996; *Dhaka Courier* 19 Apr. 1996, 11). These changes included transfer of the defence portfolio to President Biswas, a move criticized by the AL because of his BNP connections (*India Abroad* 26 Apr. 1996, 18; EIU 3rd Quarter 1996, 8), but also the transfer or removal of BNP political appointees from key administrative and security positions (ibid., 9; *Dhaka Courier* 19 Apr. 1996, 11).

Sources noted little difference between the campaign platforms of the BNP and the AL, with both parties declaring their preference for liberal economic policies (*Libération* 12 June 1996, 10; *The New York Times* 14 June 1996, A3; Reuters 26 May 1996). In its 21-point election platform the AL pledged to alleviate poverty, restore law and order, and fight corruption and "terrorism" (Xinhua 19 Apr. 1996; *The Daily Star* 7 Apr. 1996; *The Morning Sun* 11 May 1996), while BNP leader Khaleda Zia promised to maintain "development, reforms and welfare programs" (Reuters 11 May 1996; *The Daily Star* 19 May 1996). One source reported that despite the political parties' promise to fight "terrorism," "not one has included control of arms of its campus wing as a political goal" (*Hotline Newsletter* Apr.-May 1996, 2).

In keeping with its general mandate to pave the way toward a "free and fair" election by restoring law and order (UPI 4 Apr. 1996; *Dhaka Courier* 5 Apr. 1996a, 8), the caretaker government launched

an illegal arms recovery drive in early April 1996 (ibid.; AFP 7 May 1996; *The Bangladesh Observer* 10 June 1996a, 1; ibid. 25 June 1996b, 3). Raids were carried out in several cities, including Dhaka, and especially on university campuses, where many student activists carried arms (*Dhaka Courier* 5 Apr. 1996a, 8; AFP 5 Apr. 1996). According to one report, by election day over 4,500 illegal arms had been recovered and 43,000 people arrested in their connection (EIU 3rd Quarter 1996, 9).

Political violence continued in the aftermath of the BNP government's resignation (*Janakantha* 4 Apr. 1996; Xinhua 1 Apr. 1996). The Xinhua News Agency reported that on 31 March 1996, at least four people were killed and over 120 wounded in armed clashes involving BNP, AL and JP activists in the northern districts of Rangpur, Thakurgaon, Rajshahi and Sirajganj, and in the southern districts of Jhenidah, Jessore, Comilla and Chittagong (ibid.). According to UPI, 90 people, including at least 46 JCD activists, were arrested in four police sweeps in different areas of Bangladesh on 3 April 1996 (UPI 4 Apr. 1996). In Sirajganj, north of Dhaka, BNP members staged a half-day general strike to protest the arrest of a BNP youth leader, and in Pabna BNP members clashed with police and set fire to four vehicles (ibid.). On 9 April 1996, opposition activists in Chittagong attacked a massive BNP rally being addressed by former prime minister Khaleda Zia (Reuters 9 Apr. 1996; *The Bangladesh Observer* 10 Apr. 1996, 1). Approximately five people were killed and 150 injured as violence spread across the city (ibid.; Reuters 9 Apr. 1996). On 23 April 1996 in Khulna, three BNP members were injured and a Jubo Dal (BNP youth wing) leader killed as they returned from a party meeting (*The Bangladesh Observer* 24 Apr. 1996, 1). The BNP accused AL and JP members of killing the youth wing leader (ibid.). Separate BNP and JP rallies in Satkania, Chittagong District, on 11 May 1996 led to clashes between rival activists that resulted in the death of one Islami Chhatra Shibir (ICS) student wing member, and 50 to 100 people injured (ibid. 14 May 1996, 12; ibid. 15 May 1996, 12).

In late May 1996, political tension rose over a military coup attempt triggered by President Biswas' forced retirement of two senior army officers (AFP 20 May 1996; *The Bangladesh Observer* 21 May 1996, 1, 12). The president charged the two officers with "violation of army rule[s], moral deviation, communication with different political parties, and activities to create feud[s] and faction[s] among the members of the Army" (ibid., 12). Sources report that military personnel had been in contact with the AL during the election campaign, although the AL denied this allegation (ibid.; ibid. 26 May 1996, 1, 10; *Jai Jai Din* 28 May 1996; *The Christian Science Monitor* 12 June 1996). Unhappy with the president's resignation order, army chief Lieutenant-General Abu Saleh Muhammad Nasim reportedly ordered his troops to march on Dhaka on 20 May 1996 (AFP 20 May 1996; *The Bangladesh Observer* 21 May 1996, 1; *FEER* 30 May 1996, 16). In response the president forced Nasim to resign, detained Nasim and six other army officers, sent in his own troops to protect the presidential palace and other government buildings (AFP 20 May 1996; Reuters 26 May 1996; *The Bangladesh Observer* 21 May 1996, 1, 12; ibid. 26 May 1996, 1, 10; *India Abroad* 21 June 1996, 17; ibid. 24 May 1996, 19; *FEER* 30 May 1996, 16), and named Major-General Muhammad Mahbubur Rahman the new army chief of staff (*The Bangladesh Observer* 22 May 1996, 1; *Keesing's* May 1996, 41095)^[5] The seven army officers were released from prison on 14 June 1996 and dismissed from the military the next day (*India Abroad* 21 June 1996, 17; *Keesing's* June 1996, 41143).

While the incident had highlighted divisions within the army (AFP 9 June 1996; *Dhaka Courier* 24 May 1996, 6-7), no armed confrontation took place and by 21 May 1996, the troops had been withdrawn and the government was claiming that normalcy had been restored (ibid., 6; *The Christian Science Monitor* 12 June 1996). Meanwhile, AL leader Sheikh Hasina accused President Biswas, a BNP member, of political manoeuvring in order to undermine the electoral process (*The Bangladesh Observer* 24 May 1996, 1; *FEER* 30 May 1996, 16; Reuters 26 May 1996).

Political violence between BNP and AL supporters escalated in the weeks preceding the election (Xinhua 10 June 1996). Figures provided by five human rights organizations indicate that between 31 May and 10 June 1996 there were 39 clashes between BNP and AL activists in which 14 people were killed and 295 injured (Xinhua 10 June 1996). Violent incidents occurred in areas such as Chittagong city, Feni and Sandwip thana in Chittagong District (*The Bangladesh Observer* 3 June 1996, 1, 12; *ibid.* 10 June 1996b, 12). There were incidents of intraparty violence as well, as BNP and AL leaders nominated new "winnable" candidates over veteran party supporters (*Jai Jai Din* 14 May 1996; *India Abroad* 31 May 1996a, 19).

2.5 The 12 June 1996 General Election

The 12 June 1996 general election was contested by about 2,750 candidates; while most were representatives of 81 political parties, there were also "scores" of independents (Reuters 8 June 1996; AFP 9 June 1996; *The Christian Science Monitor* 12 June 1996; *The Bangladesh Observer* 25 June 1996b, 3; *Hotline Newsletter* Apr.-May 1996, 3). The AL, BNP, JP and JI fielded candidates in all 300 constituencies (*Dhaka Courier* 10 May 1996, 8; Xinhua 30 May 1996), with the party leaders contesting a maximum of five seats permitted under electoral rules (Reuters 11 May 1996). The AL fielded eleven religious or ethnic minority candidates, while the BNP ran five (*India Abroad* 31 May 1996b, 19).

The election, which resulted in an AL victory, contrasted with the previous poll in three important respects: first, it was unanimously considered "free and fair" by election monitors, including 150-200 foreign observers, over 25,000 FEMA representatives and members of the Bangladesh Society for the Enforcement of Human Rights (BSEHR), an independent observer group (*The Bangladesh Observer* 15 June 1996a, 1, 12; *ibid.* 19 June 1996b, 12; *ibid.* 21 June 1996, 1, 12; Xinhua 24 June 1996; Reuters 5 July 1996); second, there was relatively little violence, although voting in 122 polling stations in 27 constituencies was postponed because of violent incidents and irregularities (*The Bangladesh Observer* 14 June 1996a, 1; *Le Monde* 15 June 1996; Xinhua 17 June 1996); and third, it was marked by a voter turnout of 73 per cent, with women voting in large numbers (*The New York Times* 14 June 1996, A3; *Le Monde* 15 June 1996; AFP 18 June 1996; Xinhua 24 June 1996; *The Bangladesh Observer* 2 July 1996, 10; EIU 3rd Quarter 1996, 13). *The New York Times* reported that in some areas up to 80 per cent of eligible women voters cast ballots (*The New York Times* 14 June 1996, A3)^[6] Sources attribute the high turnout of women voters to a concerted effort by human rights groups and NGOs to make women more aware of their political rights (AFP 18 June 1996; Reuters 5 July 1996).

Preliminary election results indicated that the AL captured 133 seats, the BNP 104 and the JP 29 (Xinhua 17 June 1996; *Le Monde* 15 June 1996), while the JI and Islami Oikya Jote obtained only two seats and one seat respectively (*ibid.*). According to one report, the JI's poor showing was a "message from voters against religious extremism" (AFP 18 June 1996).

The 19 June 1996 repolling in 122 election centres in 27 constituencies, including several constituencies in the districts of Comilla, Chandpur, Chittagong and Sylhet (*The Bangladesh Observer* 19 June 1996a, 1), produced 11 more seats for the AL, 9 for the BNP and 2 for the JP (*Dhaka Courier* 21 June 1996, 8).

In addition to the 300 seats filled by direct public election, there are 30 reserved seats for women that are filled by indirect election in the Bangladeshi parliament (AFP 4 July 1996; *The Bangladesh Observer* 25 June 1996a, 3). On 2 July 1996 the new members elected 27 AL and 3 JP members to these seats (*ibid.* 3 July 1996, 1), giving the AL an absolute majority in parliament (AFP 4 July 1996; DPA 4 July 1996; *The Globe and Mail* 5 July 1996, A8; *Dhaka Courier* 12 July 1996a, 7).

2.6 Events Following the 12 June 1996 General Election

After her election victory, Prime Minister Hasina vowed to "improve law and order and ensure peace and security of the people" (Xinhua 24 June 1996). To this end she announced that she would form a government based on "national consensus," which she asked opposition BNP leader Khaleda Zia to join (AFP 30 June 1996; IPS 30 July 1996). Zia rejected the prime minister's invitation, reportedly referring to it as a "camouflaged attempt" to set up a one-party government (IPS 30 July 1996). The BNP also accused the AL of vote rigging, ballot stuffing and violence in some Chittagong constituencies (*The Bangladesh Observer* 14 June 1996a, 1).

Following the election imprisoned JP leader Hossain Mohammad Ershad offered his "unconditional" support to the AL, although not without criticism from within his own party (ibid. 24 June 1996, 1; *The Globe and Mail* 24 June 1996, A8; Xinhua 24 June 1996; *Dhaka Courier* 5 July 1996b, 14). The JP had unsuccessfully sought Ershad's release from prison during the election campaign (Xinhua 28 Apr. 1996), but on 23 June 1996 Ershad was paroled for four hours to take his oath as a member of parliament (*The Bangladesh Observer* 24 June 1996, 1; *The Globe and Mail* 24 June 1996, A8). Ershad was also paroled on 14 July 1996 to take part in the opening session of parliament (DPA 14 July 1996; *Libération* 15 July 1996, 9; *La Presse* 15 July 1996, A8; *Asiaweek* 26 July 1996, 25), angering fellow inmates at Dhaka Central Jail, who demanded that they too be released (UPI 15 July 1996). Ershad has reportedly been transferred from prison to a police-guarded government residence in Dhaka (DPA 14 July 1996; *Asiaweek* 26 July 1996, 25). According to some analysts, Ershad's support for the new AL government facilitated his release (DPA 14 July 1996; *Keesing's* June 1996, 41142).

On 22 July 1996, Shahabuddin Ahmed was elected "unopposed" to replace President Biswas when his five-year term ended on 8 October 1996 (AFP 23 July 1996; ibid. 12 Aug. 1996; ibid. 19 Aug. 1996). A former Supreme Court chief justice and acting president in the 1990 transitional government, Ahmed is not affiliated to any political party (ibid. 23 July 1996; *Keesing's* July 1996, 41194). Although Ahmed's election was widely approved of in the media and by BNP and JP leaders (AFP 23 July 1996), Supreme Court lawyer and leader of the right-wing Muslim Millar Party, Abu Bakar Siddiqi, filed a petition challenging the legality of the appointment (ibid. 19 Aug. 1996; ibid. 12 Aug. 1996). The basis of Siddiqi's claim was that the constitution prohibits former judges from occupying any "office of profit" (ibid.; AFP 19 Aug. 1996), but a Dhaka high court, after a three-day hearing, ruled that the presidency was "not an office of profit" and Siddiqi not an "aggrieved party," and therefore Ahmed's appointment was constitutional (ibid.).

There were scattered incidents of violence involving the AL and BNP, and their student wings, in Dhaka, Chittagong, Narayanganj, Tongi, Sirajganj, Jhenidah, Rajshahi, Moulvibazar and Cox's Bazar in the days following the general election (*The Bangladesh Observer* 14 June 1996b, 1, 12; ibid. 15 June 1996b, 1, 12; ibid. 19 June 1996c, 1). Reports indicate that the law and order situation continued to deteriorate in July, due in part to an increase in hijackings, lootings and robberies in different parts of the country (ibid. 18 July 1996, 11; *Dhaka Courier* 12 July 1996b, 5).

At a press conference on 12 August 1996, BNP secretary-general Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan blamed the AL for several attacks on BNP workers since the 12 June 1996 election, and demanded a judicial inquiry into the incidents (*The Bangladesh Observer* 13 Aug. 1996b, 1). He warned that the BNP would resort to "street agitation" if violence against its members continued (ibid., 12). In an 18 August 1996 memorandum to the government, the BNP alleged that since early July 1996 about 50 BNP members had been killed, thousands wounded and hundreds arrested or forcibly displaced after their homes had been ransacked and set afire in the districts of Jessore, Kushtia, Khulna, Bagerhat, Narayanganj, Munshiganj, Jhenidah, Feni, Patuakhali and Chittagong (ibid. 19 Aug. 1996, 1).

On 6 August 1996, the AL government announced a three-day amnesty to illegal arms holders who turned in their weapons to the police (Reuters 10 Aug. 1996). After fewer than 70 of the estimated 100,000 illegal arms in the country were surrendered, however, the amnesty was extended for another three days (ibid.). According to a Xinhua report, the security forces recovered 2,092 arms and arrested 1,110 "armed terrorists" between 23 June and 1 November 1996 (Xinhua 1 Nov. 1996).

In an effort to meet its campaign promise to fight corruption, the AL government has rescinded a 1992 BNP measure prohibiting the Bureau of Anti-Corruption from investigating allegations of corruption and filing charges against leading figures in the public and private sectors (*Dhaka Courier* 5 July 1996a, 11). The new government has also established an Anti-Corruption Council to monitor the bureau's work and approve cases involving substantial allegations of corruption against senior government officials (ibid.).

On 12 August 1996 the government announced a major shake-up in the army and police forces (*The Bangladesh Observer* 13 Aug. 1996a; DPA 12 Aug. 1996), appointing "loyal generals to key positions," including to head up the military intelligence organization (ibid.).

Soon after her election victory Prime Minister Hasina announced her intention to bring to trial former army officers who assassinated her father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and seven other family members during the August 1975 military coup (AFP 15 Aug. 1996; *Dhaka Courier* 30 Aug. 1996a, 9; *The Economist* 26 Oct. 1996; Reuters 4 Nov. 1996). The coup leaders were granted immunity from prosecution under the 1975 Indemnity Ordinance (AFP 10 Nov. 1996; ibid. 15 Aug. 1996; *Dhaka Courier* 25 Oct. 1996, 19; *The Economist* 26 Oct. 1996; *Dhaka Courier* 30 Aug. 1996a, 9), but Bangladeshi legal experts have been charged with drafting a bill to repeal the ordinance (ibid.; AFP 10 Nov. 1996). Coup leader Colonel Abdur Rashid and a number of other military officers involved in the killing left Bangladesh shortly after Sheikh Hasina came to power in June (ibid. 15 Aug. 1996; Reuters 4 Nov. 1996), but on 2 November 1996 police arrested Rashid's wife, Zobaida Rashid, at her home in Dhaka (ibid.). Seven to twelve army officers, including retired Major Farooq Rahman and former information minister Taheruddin Thakur, were also arrested between August and early November 1996 in connection with the killings (ibid.; *The Economist* 26 Oct. 1996; Reuters 3 Oct. 1996). Farooq Rahman and two other retired colonels, Shahriar Rashid and Major Khairuzzaman, had reportedly planned to assassinate Sheikh Hasina while she visited her father's grave at Tungipara village, in southern Bangladesh, on 15 August 1996^[7] (AFP 15 Aug. 1996).

On 2 September 1996 parliament passed the Law Commission Bill 1996, which is intended to strengthen the legal system and adapt it to current social and economic conditions (*The Bangladesh Observer* 3 Sept. 1996a, 1, 12). The act provides for the establishment of a permanent three-member commission to reform existing laws and develop new ones (ibid.).

A total of 73 candidates, including 23 independents, ran in 15 constituencies in the 5 September 1996 by-elections (ibid. 4 Sept. 1996, 1, 12). The AL captured eight seats, the BNP and JP three seats each, and an independent obtained one seat (AFP 7 Sept. 1996; *The Bangladesh Observer* 6 Sept. 1996, 1, 12). Despite tight security (ibid. 4 Sept. 1996, 1, 12; TASS 5 Sept. 1996), two people were killed and over 150 injured in election-related clashes between AL and BNP activists in Chandnaish thana, Chittagong District (ibid.; *The Bangladesh Observer* 5 Sept. 1996, 1, 12). Although FEMA considered the polls "overall free, fair and peaceful," the BNP accused the AL of "massive rigging" (AFP 7 Sept. 1996), and on 10 September 1996 unsuccessfully attempted to "lay siege" to the election commission office in Dhaka to force the chief election commissioner's resignation (Xinhua 10 Sept. 1996).

Prime ministerial advisor and AL leader Suronjit Sengupta captured another seat for the AL in a heavy-turnout by-election in Habiganj District on 15 October 1996, this time boycotted by the BNP (DPA 16 Oct. 1996). While no major incidents of violence were reported on election day (ibid.), AL candidate Obaidul Haque Babul, a cousin of Minister for Commerce and Industry Tofael Ahmed, was reportedly killed by "armed miscreants" at Pallabi four days before the poll (*The Bangladesh Observer* 13 Oct. 1996, 12).

Political violence involving rival political parties and their student wings has intensified since August 1996 (AFP 22 Aug. 1996; DPA 25 Aug. 1996). "Anti-government" students clashed with police and transport workers in the northern city of Bogra in late August in a confrontation that began when a student was run over by a bus (ibid.; *Dhaka Courier* 30 Aug. 1996b, 7); eight people were killed and more than 270 injured in four days of rioting (DPA 25 Aug. 1996). While BNP and JI MPs criticized the government for failing to stop police excesses (*Dhaka Courier* 30 Aug. 1996b, 7), Prime Minister Hasina, during a visit to the city on 25 August 1996, accused the BNP of "deliberately trying to destabilize the political situation" after its June 1996 election loss (DPA 25 Aug. 1996). According to the *Dhaka Courier*, the "politicization" of what began as a routine matter showed that the opposition was "capable of plunging the nation into chaos on any pretext" (*Dhaka Courier* 30 Aug. 1996b, 7).

On 19 September 1996 JCD activists leaving the home of former deputy health minister and BNP member Serajul Haq in Jamalpur reportedly attacked a procession of BCL activists (*The Bangladesh Observer* 20 Sept. 1996b, 1). The BCL members retaliated by ransacking and throwing stones at Haq's residence (ibid.). On 26 September 1996 between 20 and 45 people, including three policemen, were injured in Barisal in a clash involving JCD and BCL activists (Xinhua 27 Sept. 1996; *The Bangladesh Observer* 27 Sept. 1996, 1, 12). The clash occurred after JCD activists attacked a BCL procession (ibid.).

Violent clashes between JCD and BCL activists have also been reported at various universities and colleges. For example, at Dhaka University in late August 1996 BCL and JCD activists clashed with each other and with police for three days, resulting in 45 people injured, 29 arrests, the resignations of four senior university administrators including Vice-Chancellor Emajuddin Ahmad, and the suspension of classes (AFP 1 Sept. 1996; DPA 25 Aug. 1996; AFP 22 Aug. 1996). BNP MPs reportedly walked out of parliament to protest police actions on the campus (ibid.). On 1 September 1996, JCD acting president Nasiruddin Ahmed Pintu was arrested in Dhaka and given a 30-day detention order, which sparked violent protests around Dhaka University by members of BNP "front organisations" (*The Bangladesh Observer* 3 Sept. 1996b, 1, 12; ibid. 2 Sept. 1996, 1). JCD and BCL student activists at the university reportedly signed a "peace agreement" on 5 September 1996 (Xinhua 6 Sept. 1996). Sources report clashes between JCD and BCL activists at Osmani Medical College in Sylhet on 27 August 1996 (*The Bangladesh Observer* 28 Aug. 1996, 1), and at an agricultural university in Mymensingh on 9-10 November 1996 (DPA 10 Nov. 1996).

About five students were injured in two days of violent confrontations between BCL and ICS activists at Chittagong University on 18-19 September 1996 (*The Bangladesh Observer* 19 Sept. 1996, 1); both parties blamed the other for the incident (ibid.; ibid. 20 Sept. 1996a, 1, 12). A clash between BCL and ICS activists at the Islamic university in Kushtia on 25-26 September resulted in about 100 people injured and the university being closed indefinitely (Xinhua 27 Sept. 1996).

NOTES

[1] Opposition-led agitation forced the government to postpone the elections at least twice (*Dhaka Courier* 5 Apr. 1996b, 16; Reuters 9 Jan. 1996; *Asian Survey* July 1996, 720; EIU 1st Quarter 1996, 9). [\[back\]](#)

[2] In 1991 Ershad was sentenced to 23 years in prison on charges of corruption and possession of illegal firearms (IPS 5 Feb. 1996; *India Abroad* 10 May 1996, 18). In 1995 his 10-year sentence for the illegal arms charge was dropped, reducing his jail sentence to 13 years for corruption (*ibid.*; AFP 4 July 1996). [\[back\]](#)

[3] Established in 1995, FEMA is a "national coalition of leading Bangladeshi NGOs, citizens' groups, professional bodies, different clubs and individuals" (SEHD 1995, 177). Sri Lankan Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) member of parliament Neelan Tiruchelvam, who was a South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) observer during the 12 June 1996 general election, has described FEMA as "one of the largest and probably the most effectively organised domestic election observation group in any part of the sub-continent" (*Lanka Guardian* July 1996, 9). [\[back\]](#)

[4] For information on the arrests of the other five leaders, please see the forthcoming DIRB Question and Answer Series paper, *Bangladesh: Human Rights Situation*. [\[back\]](#)

[5] Rahman was promoted to the rank of lieutenant-general on 3 June 1996 (Xinhua 3 June 1996). [\[back\]](#)

[6] For background information on women's voting behaviour in Bangladesh, please see Response to Information Request BGD21347.E of 6 October 1995. [\[back\]](#)

[7] The prime minister has declared 15 August "national mourning day" to mark the anniversary of her father's death (AFP 15 Aug. 1996). [\[back\]](#)

3. FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Some sources indicate that future political and economic stability depends largely on whether the BNP and AL leaders can overcome their personal differences (*The Economist* 3-9 Aug. 1996, 34; UPI 22 July 1996); another states that the AL government must "depoliticize the key Bangladeshi institutions of bureaucracy, army, police, media and even judiciary" (*India Abroad* 30 Aug. 1996, 2). One report speculates that if the prime minister "honors her pledge to govern by accommodation and with moderate economic policies, Bangladesh could emerge with stronger democratic institutions and economic conditions" (UPI 22 July 1996), but the Economist Intelligence Unit warns that "clashes between BNP and AL activists will remain a constant feature of life in Bangladesh" (EIU 3rd Quarter 1996, 4), and some independent analysts reportedly believe that instead of solving current problems, the "national consensus" government proposed by Sheikh Hasina will only create new ones (IPS 30 July 1996).

On 7 November 1996, after heated debates and parliamentary walk-outs, BNP leader Khaleda Zia urged party supporters to prepare for a "mass anti-government campaign" (AFP 10 Nov. 1996). Three days later the BNP began an indefinite boycott of parliament, claiming among other things that it had no voice in parliament, state-controlled television was censoring broadcasts of parliamentary proceedings, and the ruling AL was distorting the former BNP government's record (*ibid.*).

APPENDIX I: GOVERNMENT MINISTERS (as of 29 June 1996)

Sheikh Hasina Wajed	Prime Minister; Armed Forces Division; Cabinet Division; Special Affairs; Defence; Information; Planning; Environment and Forest; Jute; Textile; Civil Aviation and Tourism; Land; Labour and Manpower; Establishment; Health and Family Welfare
Abdus Samad Azad	Foreign Affairs
Mohammad Zillur Rahman	Local Government; Rural Development and Cooperatives
S.A.M.S. Kibria	Finance
A.S.H.K. Sadeque	Education, Primary and Mass Education Division; Science and Technology
Abdur Razzak	Water Resources

Tofael Ahmed	Commerce and Industry
LGen (ret) Nooruddin Khan	Power, Energy and Mineral Resources MGen (ret) Rafiqul
MGen (ret) Rafiqul Islam Bir Uttam	Home Affairs
Mohammad Nasim	Post and Telecommunications
Matia Choudhry	Agriculture; Food; Disaster Management and Relief
Anwar Hussain Manju (Jatiya Party)	Communications
Salahuddin Yousuf (JSD-Rab)	Health and Family Welfare A.S.M. Abdur Rab
	Shipping

Ministers of State:

Mozammel Hossain	Women and Children Affairs; Social Welfare
Obaidul Kader	Youth and Sports
Satish Chandra Ray	Fisheries and Livestock
A.H. Chowdhury Kaiser	Foreign Affairs
Sayed Abul Hossain	Local Government; Rural Development and Cooperatives
Mohammad Nurul Islam	Religious Affairs
Afsar Uddin Ahmed	Housing and Public Works
Abdul Matin Khasru	Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs
A.K. Faizul Haq	Jute
M.A. Mannan	Labour and Manpower
Rashed Mosharraf	Land
M.A. Sayeed	Information

Sources: *Keesing's* June 1996, p. 41142; Radio Bangladesh Network 23 June 1996.

APPENDIX II: NOTES ON SOURCES

Bangladeshi Media Sources:

Bangladeshi newspapers have flourished since restrictions on the media were lifted following General Ershad's ouster in 1990 (IPS 1 Apr. 1993). The number of newspapers and magazines has risen from about 100 in 1990 to over 1,000 in 1994, including 189 dailies (*ibid.*; *Europa* 1995, 497). According to an IPS report, the Bangladeshi press "is free but not fair. ...every newspaper is for or against one or other political party, and actively involved in jockeying for power" (IPS 1 Apr. 1993).

State advertising is a major source of revenue for Bangladeshi newspapers and periodicals (*Country Reports* 1995 1996, 1297; IPS 1 Apr. 1993). While one source states that the government has "no control" over the content of publications (*ibid.*), another indicates the government has withheld advertising and newsprint from publications it deems anti-government, causing some publications to exercise self-censorship (*Country Reports* 1995 1996, 1297).

With a circulation of 40,000 to 43,000 the Dhaka-based daily *The Bangladesh Observer* is reportedly the most read English-language newspaper in the country (IPS 1 Apr. 1993; *Europa* 1995, 498). An independent publication (Reuters 12 Apr. 1991; *The Courier-Journal* 8 Dec. 1990), it was founded in 1949 (*Europa* 1995, 498). The *Dhaka Courier*, a weekly, has a circulation of 18,000 (*ibid.*, 499).

Radio and television stations are owned and controlled by the government and reportage is generally biased in its favour (*Country Reports* 1995 1996, 1298).

Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML):

Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML) was founded by nine women representing different Muslim

countries and communities during a July 1984 international women's meeting on reproductive rights in Amsterdam. Its membership includes women both within and outside the Muslim world, and its objectives include sharing information on the impact of Muslim laws in different countries, and providing international support to women affected by these laws (WLUML 1996).

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