

Free-trader to head new government in Bangladesh

by Susan B. Maitra and Ramtanu Maitra

In a free and fair election, held on Feb. 27 after almost a decade, the Bangladeshi Nationalist Party (BNP), formed in 1979 by the assassinated President Ziaur Rahman and now led by his wife and former beauty queen, Begum Khaleda Zia, has emerged as the single-largest party. The BNP captured 140 of the 295 seats in a 300-member parliament. Although the BNP has not secured the needed absolute majority, let alone the two-thirds majority required to make constitutional amendments, it is quite certain that it will secure the support of the Islamic religious party, Jamaat-e-Islami (18 seats), and other small parties, to form a new government under the prime ministership of Begum Khaleda Zia.

The single biggest loser in the elections is the Awami League, which won only 84 seats. The Awami League had been in the front line of the successful liberation of Bangladesh from Pakistan in 1971 under the leadership of the late Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, victim of assassination. The party was later dissolved in 1975 by Sheikh Mujib himself, when he switched from a multi-party democracy to a one-party system with the formation of the Bangladesh-Krishak-Sramik Awami League (BAKSAL). The party was restored in 1976 and is now in the hands of Sheikh Mujib's daughter, Sheikh Hasina Wazed, one of the two members of Sheikh Mujib's family who escaped the massacre of the family by Army men in 1978.

Behind the BNP's success

While the defeat of the Awami League in the elections has surprised most, it is evident that the BNP's victory was not overwhelming. In fact, both parties polled almost exactly the same percentage of votes nationwide. While the BNP ruled the roost in densely populated urban centers, it came out second-best behind the Awami League in the vast, but less densely populated, rural Bangladesh. Nonetheless, although many issues under debate remain unresolved, the vote results are indicative of the changing political milieu in Bangladesh.

Two factors, in particular, have helped Begum Zia to emerge as the leader of the largest parliamentary party: her constant association with the military and her promotion of

Bangladeshi nationalism—the factors which, ironically, political observers considered would in fact reduce Begum Zia's chances. It is often said that Begum Zia, who is the wife of an Army general, and who still resides within a military cantonment, is a “puppet” of the military, and for this reason alone, she would be rejected by the people. Whether or not such an accusation is credible, there is no doubt that a sea-change has taken place within Bangladeshi minds about the military in recent days.

Army Chief Lt. Gen. Nuruddin Khan, an appointee of President Gen. Hossain Mohammed Ershad, drew admiration from the people for his unhesitating and unbiased actions in the midst of the violent street demonstrations in early December last year that toppled President Ershad. By ordering the Army back to the barracks, Lt. Gen. Nuruddin Khan avoided an otherwise certain bloodbath and signaled that the Army cannot be used to prop up an unpopular President. In addition, the Army Chief's action showed a clear change of policy within the army leadership, which had, over the years, seized, or tried to seize, every opportunity to grab power. Lt. Gen. Nuruddin Khan has greatly restored the Army's image, tarnished as it had been by ambitious generals.

The second issue, debate over which is far from settled, is the tussle for supremacy between the promoters of *Bangladeshi* nationalism on the one side, and *Bengali* nationalism on the other.

Bengali nationalism, which is often associated with the Awami League, identifies the culture of Bangladesh with what is known as Bengali culture, a mixture of Hindu and Muslim culture grown up over the centuries within the confines of the entire Bengal area. The concept of Bangladesh as a nation was actually formed around the Bengali language in the early 1950s. Although the concept was by no means a concrete one, Bengali students violently opposed imposition of the Urdu language by the West Pakistani leaders to replace Bengali. The upsurge that followed was heavily tinged with expressions of Bengali culture, evoking the deeds and heroics of Bengali nationals against oppressive British rulers. The students who died in those violent clashes are considered martyrs and are remembered even today with as much zeal as before.

Bangladeshi nationalism, which is associated with the BNP, cannot accept that concept of culture in totality. Although many of Bengali culture's customs and traditions have been accepted without a hitch, proponents of Bangladeshi nationalism view Bengali culture as merely the Hindu-dominated culture of Bengal, and hence, pro-India. In addition, Sheikh Hasina's long stay in India following her father's assassination has provided her opponents an opportunity to claim that the Awami League is somehow a creature of India.

Rejecting Bengali culture as such, the proponents of Bangladeshi nationalism have moved towards combining parts of Bengali culture with Islam to give a definable identity to Bangladesh's culture. The ad-mix is not only liked by BNP supporters, but it provides a platform for pro-Islam religious parties to interact with the BNP. Besides, those in Bangladesh who fear Indian hegemonism in the region, not an insignificant number, find the platform more likeable.

Both these factors have helped Begum Zia win a large number of seats in urban areas. The urban elite, still afraid that the military will move in if an "anti-military" government comes to power, likes Begum Zia's rapport with the military. At the same time, the strongest anti-India voices within the Bangladeshi elite can be found in large numbers in the urban centers. Many of these urbanites have benefited from the vast sums of money that come in as aid from western countries, as well as from both Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. While the beneficiaries of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) are trained to be anti-India, the beneficiaries of West Asian funds are both anti-India as well as pro-Islam.

What free trade?

In addition, Begum Khaleda Zia, whose exposure to foreign affairs is less than adequate, has campaigned for "free trade." In Bangladesh's economic context, this can only mean looting of the country's raw materials and its cheap labor by other nations, under the auspices of the World Bank/IMF austerity dictates. Since Bangladesh has an extremely weak industrial infrastructure, and an almost self-sufficient agriculture, promotion of a free trade regime will bankrupt the country further. With Bangladesh about 85% dependent on foreign grants for developmental work of any kind, it is unclear what kind of leverage Begum Zia has to protect her nation's interests if Bangladesh is forced to practice free trade.

Nonetheless, Begum Zia's utterances have pleased the United States. The U.S. ambassador to Dhaka, William B. Milam, told the acting Bangladesh President that "as a gesture of goodwill," the United States had decided to waive a \$300 million loan. Again, if Begum Zia can accommodate the Jamaat, which in its manifesto has called for establishment of a "true Islamic state," in her Cabinet, it is likely that some financial help would also come in from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states.

Gaviria, Bush side with narco-terrorism

by Andrea Olivieri

The latest estimate of damage caused so far this year to Colombia's transportation, communications, and power grids, and to the mining, oil, agriculture, industry, and trade sectors by the rampaging FARC and ELN "narco-guerrillas," stands at \$400 million and climbing, according to a Feb. 26 report issued by the Development Ministry. That same day, a combined FARC-ELN commando squad dynamited an electrical tower in the Pacific port city of Buenaventura, knocking out all electricity for 280,000 people, and hit a petroleum storage facility in Santander department. Elsewhere that week, a cement factory was assaulted, the country's major oil pipeline dynamited yet again, and dozens of farm tractors, passenger buses, cargo boats, and tractor-trailer trucks blown up or burned in lightning assaults across the country.

And yet, on Feb. 25, President César Gaviria's "peace adviser" Jesús Antonio Bejarano told the media that his government had agreed to hold "informal" talks with those very narco-terrorist groups, in order to bring them into the "political process" in the same way the M-19 and EPL terrorists were amnestied before them. Gaviria's highly touted "peace initiative" includes not only full legal pardon for both the FARC-ELN's previous and ongoing acts of subversion—including sabotage, kidnaping, and murder—but would also grant them government protection, political party status, financial rewards, and as many as a dozen seats among the 70 delegates in the Constituent Assembly now engaged in writing a new national constitution.

Washington gives its imprimatur

The Colombian government's official submission to dual-power rule with Moscow's narco-terrorists has already received the seal of approval from the Bush administration. During a five-day visit to the United States Feb. 23-27, Gaviria expounded at great length on his "peace" initiatives, both toward the cocaine cartels and their narco-terrorist guerrilla associates. Despite certain skepticism among U.S. law enforcement layers regarding Gaviria's decision to abandon repression in favor of U.S.-modeled plea-bargaining, President Bush called Gaviria's initiatives "courageous" and "heroic," and promised full cooperation—including signing a treaty with Gaviria pledging to supply Colombia's notori-