

# WebMemo



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## Bangladesh Election: Major Milestone for Democracy in South Asia

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Bangladeshis went to the polls on December 29 in record numbers and elected the secular Awami League party headed by former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed. Several international election observers declared the polls fair and peaceful, despite allegations of rigging by the Bangladeshi National Party (BNP), which ruled the country from 2001 to 2006.

After two years of military-backed emergency rule, the overwhelming vote in favor of a secular political party is a strong indicator that the world's fourth-largest Muslim country will continue forging a path toward democratic development, albeit in the face of tremendous challenges from poverty, natural disaster, Islamist extremism, and pervasive corruption. The U.S. should encourage the new government to both build bridges to the opposition and take a strong stand against Islamist extremists who have sought to make political inroads through violent intimidation and exploitation of weak institutions, corruption, and lack of good governance.

**Democracy Delayed.** The Awami League won over two-thirds of the 300 parliamentary seats, returning Sheikh Hasina as Prime Minister, a position she previously held from 1996 to 2001. For its part, the BNP won a mere 29 seats, prompting its leader to allege that the vote was rigged. The BNP apparently suffered from government bans on its preferred election candidates and recent divisions within the party. An Islamist party allied with the BNP, the Jamaat-e-Islami, also suffered a major setback, winning only two seats, compared to the 17 it grabbed in the last election.

The U.S.-based International Republican Institute (IRI), which deployed 65 election observers before and during the elections, determined in its preliminary assessment that the elections constituted a “major step forward in demonstrating the country’s commitment to strengthening democracy” and “yielded a result that accurately reflects the will of Bangladeshi voters.”<sup>1</sup> IRI also praised the interim government for creating a revised voter list, complete with photo identifications and containing 80 million new names.

In 2006, escalating political violence interrupted Bangladesh’s democratic process, forcing a postponement of elections originally scheduled for January 2007. While most Bangladeshis and international observers initially supported the decision to call off the January 2007 election in order to prevent a potential bloodbath, many worried that prolonged military intervention in the political process would permanently undermine the country’s democratic institutions. The interim government’s severe restrictions on political activities and efforts to target the country’s top politicians—Sheikh Hasina and Khaled Zia—as part of its anti-corruption drive also lacked public support. The interim government eventually dropped the corruption charges against

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Hasina and Zia and allowed them to lead their parties in last week's elections.

It is unclear whether the military will completely relinquish power now that elections have been held. One crucial indicator will be whether the current and retired military officers that were placed in key political positions over the last two years retain their government jobs when the Awami League takes over. There are signs that some military leaders believe the army should continue to have a direct role in governing the country.<sup>2</sup>

**Tougher on Extremism.** Sheikh Hasina is likely to take a tougher position toward Islamist extremists than Khalida Zia did during her tenure. Hasina survived an assassination attempt by Islamic extremists in August 2004 when a grenade was thrown at one of her political rallies, killing 20 of her supporters. The BNP had ruled from 2001 to 2006 in coalition with Islamist parties and had been reluctant to prosecute the perpetrators of political violence that had connections to radical Islamists. BNP coalition partner Jamaat-e-Islami apparently had ties to extremist leader Bangla Bhai, who promoted Islamic revolution in Bangladesh and was executed by the interim government in March 2007. In August 2005, widespread bombings conducted by the Jamaat-ul Mujahedeen Bangladesh (JMB)—whose stated goal is to impose strict Islamic rule—alarmed both domestic and international observers about the threat posed by local extremist groups. Just last week, Bangladeshi police arrested seven JMB-linked militants armed with grenades and explosives.

Indian leaders, increasingly concerned about Dhaka's response to Islamist extremists that also target India—especially its northeastern states that border Bangladesh—have welcomed Sheikh Hasina's victory. Harakat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HuJI), a terrorist organization founded by Pakistan-based leader

Fazlur Rehman with ties to al-Qaeda, apparently remains active in Bangladesh. India's new Home Minister P. Chidambaram recently told the Indian parliament that Bangladesh had a responsibility to control the HuJI.

**Recommendations for U.S. Policy.** The U.S. should support the newly elected democratic government but make clear that it is the new government's responsibility to prove it is capable of improving governance and rooting out corruption within its own ranks. Washington should work with other countries that played a key role in ensuring the elections were free and fair—such as the European Union countries, Australia, Japan, and India—to encourage the new government to build bridges to the political opposition and to avoid monopolizing state political and economic power. Washington must also encourage the new government to take a strong stand against Islamist extremists that have sought to exploit weak institutions, corruption, and lack of good governance to make political inroads and have used violence to intimidate opponents. Finally, Washington should encourage the BNP to honor the election results and play an appropriate role in Parliament in order to effectively address the nation's pressing challenges.

Successful polls are only the first step in achieving a functional democratic process. Unless the new government demonstrates a commitment to rooting out corruption, improving governance, and bolstering the economy, it risks creating an environment of instability, which would render it ineffective and provide an opening for new military intervention. With 40 percent of the Bangladeshi population still living on less than \$1 a day and amid new economic uncertainties created by the global economic downturn, the new government cannot afford to waste any time in implementing measures to revitalize the economy and in continuing the business and eco-

1. Press release, "IRI Preliminary Statement on Bangladesh's Parliamentary Elections," International Republican Institute, December 30, 2008, at <http://www.iri.org/newsreleases/2008-12-30-Bangladesh.asp> (January 5, 2009).
2. International Crisis Group, "Bangladesh: Elections and Beyond," Asia Briefing No.84, December 11, 2008, p. 11, at [http://www.crisisgroup.org/library/documents/asia/south\\_asia/b84\\_bangladesh\\_elections\\_and\\_beyond.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/library/documents/asia/south_asia/b84_bangladesh_elections_and_beyond.pdf) (January 5, 2009). See also "Bangladesh: Military Must not Dominate Civil Administration," Asian Human Rights Commission, August 29, 2008, at <http://www.ahrck.net/statements/mainfile.php/2008statements/1671/> (December 29, 2008).

conomic reforms begun under the interim government. The new government in Bangladesh must use this opportunity not to settle political scores, but to solidify gains in the democratic process and improve governance in order to support the Bang-

ladeshi people, revive the country's economy, and limit opportunities for radical Islamists.

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