

## Bangladesh: Changing the Guard

**Begum Khaleda Zia scored a dramatic victory in the October 1 elections in Bangladesh, winning a historic two-thirds majority in parliament and continuing Bangladesh's 10-year pattern of changing the party in power with each election. Other countries and the business community will welcome early hints at a more flexible policy on natural gas, but not statements about renegotiating a water agreement with India. Outside observers will be watching most closely, however, for signs of Zia's approach to governance. The Awami League has reacted bitterly to its defeat, and dysfunctional relations between the government and the opposition are likely to continue.**

**A turbulent election:** Bangladesh had been in preelection mode for close to two years, with frequent political work stoppages and growing policy paralysis as the end of the previous government's five-year term approached. Once Shaikh Hasina's Awami League government handed over power to a caretaker government—a constitutional requirement originally introduced five years earlier, when Shaikh Hasina was in the opposition—politicking went into high gear.



*BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia takes oath of office*

The election commission and the caretaker government took early measures to ensure that the campaign and the election could proceed unhindered, and earned the criticism of both the government and the opposition. Violence marred the rest of the campaign. Elections have become a major social event in Bangladesh, with rural voters, especially women, turning out in their best clothes and waiting many hours in line to

participate. This time too, estimates of voter participation clustered around 75 percent.

A variety of domestic and international observers gave the election fairly high marks. The Election Commissioner acted firmly and decisively in ruling on requests for a recount or revote, and repolling was required in some 100 polling booths. All things considered, however, the election itself came off remarkably smoothly.

**The issues:** The policy differences between the two major parties—the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, led by Begum Khaleda Zia, and the Awami League, under Shaikh Hasina Wajed—are actually quite small. The Awami League tends to be a bit further to the left than the BNP, and is historically friendlier to India. However, the real issues in the October elections concerned personalities and governance. As early as a year and a half before the election, political observers across the Bangladeshi spectrum agreed that the government's weakest point was the increasing lawlessness around the country, aggravated by the abuse of police power. Corruption, capricious decision-making, and perceived ineffectiveness were also liabilities.

**The strategy, and the numbers:** The BNP romped home with 191 seats out of a total of 300 elected seats; together with its allies, it won a total of 215. (These totals may still undergo minor changes owing to by-elections.) In addition, 30 indirectly elected women's seats in the parliament will go to the majority, further expanding the BNP majority. The Awami League was left with only 62 seats, its weakest performance in any election the international community has looked on as a fair one. The lion's share of the rest went to the Jatiyo Party of former president H. M. Ershad and are likely to be part of the opposition.

In Bangladesh's first-past-the-post system, the actual vote totals were much closer than this lopsided division of seats. The BNP had started the election with a considerable disadvantage. Its erstwhile ally, the Jatiyo Party, had split, and the largest of the resulting groups was unwilling to campaign with the BNP. Begum Zia turned to an unlikely ally—the Jamaat-e-Islami, an Islamic religious party whose orthodox views and traditional opposition to Bangladeshi separation from Pakistan had made it a very poor vote getter. What the Jamaat lacked in voter appeal, however, it apparently made up for with a small number of dedicated workers. The BNP and

its allies garnered 46 percent of the total votes. They had succeeded in combining the anti-Awami League vote in most of the country, accounting for their enormous victory.

The Awami League, on the other hand, actually increased its share of the total votes cast, from 37 percent in 1996 to 40 percent. The combination of its vulnerability on the law and order issue and the BNP's more successful coalition building, however, led to a dramatic defeat. One analyst calculated that the Awami League lost 85 constituencies that it had won in 1996.

**The new government:** The new government is large, with 27 ministers and a similar number of ministers of state. Begum Zia has retained charge of several of the most important ministries, including Defense, Power, and Energy and Mineral Resources. This is a familiar arrangement, but also one that tends to slow down decisionmaking. The government contains some familiar faces—Saifur Rahman, who performed creditably as finance minister in the early 1990s, is back in his old job; Dr. Badruddoza Choudhury, a close political associate of Begum Zia, is foreign minister; Moudud Ahmed, who served in previous governments under Ershad, is back as minister of constitutional affairs. For the first time, two Jamaat-e-Islami representatives are in the government, as ministers of agriculture and of social welfare. The latter portfolio could become controversial if the new minister uses it as a way to extend the reach of the hard-line religious network of social institutions.

**Early signs:** The early indications of the new government's approach to policy are mixed. On the plus side, the chances are good that the government will move to allow gas exports. The new finance minister has said, "No resource is a resource as such if it remains under the soil and is not properly utilized." Although the government has yet to make a formal decision, the issue of gas exports is now overtly under discussion, and at least one of the major players has signaled a predisposition in favor of exports. More disturbing are the indications that the new team wants to reevaluate the Indo-Bangladesh agreement on the Ganges Waters, a sensitive issue in Bangladesh. The new government is unlikely to be able to improve on the terms of the current agreement, and attempting to roll back existing agreements will complicate its relations with India and other countries.

The early indications of the new team's approach to governance are also contradictory. The government's arrest of the son of one of the new ministers on election violence charges is an encouraging sign that it is willing to discipline its own members. On the other hand, the transfer of a number of key generals into and out of sensitive positions less than three weeks after the new government took office is a disturbing reminder of the politicization that afflicts the upper ranks of the army.

The Awami League reacted harshly to its electoral defeat and still argues that it was the result of rigged elections. Despite earlier threats not to do so, its members have taken their oath as parliamentarians. The rank and file clearly has no stomach at this point for an extended campaign of strikes and demonstrations. This is good news, but it may not last. The Awami League has not accepted the legitimacy of the new government. The fact that the government has changed hands in each of the last three elections should give hope to the opposition that its turn will come again. Unfortunately, in Bangladeshi politics, the opposition tends to be marginalized, and therefore takes its protests into the streets. Nor is there any sign that the Awami League will change its leadership after this defeat. The political struggle is all the more bitter for being politicized.

**What lies ahead:** The BNP government now has an opportunity to put its stamp on policy, governance, and the country's foreign relations. On economic issues, the faster it moves, the better its chances of being able to capitalize on improved economic performance when the next polls arrive. Decisive action is more urgent because Bangladesh's garment exports, which comprise more than 70 percent of its total foreign exchange earnings, have taken a beating through the combined effects of weakening economies in the West and new U.S. tariff preferences for Bangladesh's competitors in Africa and the Caribbean. The new government's first move, an effort to persuade the United States to give Bangladesh the same preferential treatment on garments, is a long shot, and will at best require many months of lobbying effort. Regardless of whether this effort succeeds, Bangladesh urgently needs to focus on diversifying its exports and encouraging a broader range of rural and semirural industries.

Governance issues, such as the integrity of government, the proper use of police authority, and the efficiency of government services, will be harder to tackle, and ultimately even more important. These are issues where all recent governments have fallen down badly. Bangladesh has a unique array of talented NGO leaders whose assistance and stature can help in this effort.

If it fails, however, the BNP is likely to face an even more cynical and disgusted electorate when the next election comes around. Analysis of how the BNP won this election conveys an uncomfortable lesson. In the past two elections, the opposition party has been more successful than the government at coalition building, and has therefore won the election. To overcome this disability and run successfully on its record, the BNP will need to behave differently in office from its predecessors—including its own previous tenure. It is a challenge the new government should start taking up now.

Teresita C. Schaffer

South Asia Monitor is published by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a private, tax-exempt institution focusing on international public policy issues. Its research is nonpartisan and nonproprietary.

CSIS does not take specific public policy positions. Accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this publication should be understood to be solely those of the author.  
© 2001 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies