

The poisonous politics of Bangladesh

Reversion to type

Bangladesh's economy is becoming ever healthier; its politics are heading in the opposite direction

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THE election of December 2008 seemed to mark a watershed for Bangladesh. In the fairest poll in the country's four-decade history, the Awami League, led by Sheikh Hasina (pictured), swept to power in a landslide, on a wave of national optimism. The hope was that she would use her party's popularity to strengthen democratic institutions and pursue national reconciliation, putting an end to a vicious cycle of winner-takes-all politics between the League and its rival, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). The fear was that she would use its huge mandate for partisan advantage.



The hope has been largely dashed, the fear almost fully borne out (see [Banyan](http://www.economist.com/node/21525908) (<http://www.economist.com/node/21525908>)). This week yet more corruption charges were filed against Sheikh Hasina's nemesis, the BNP's leader, Khaleda Zia, and an arrest warrant issued for her exiled son, Tarique Rahman. As prime minister, most recently from 2001-06, Mrs Zia presided over a brutal kleptocracy. But Sheikh Hasina, too, faced 13 charges, including extortion and conspiracy to murder, from one of her previous stints in power. Ditching the cases against League leaders while proceeding with those against the Zias looks like Bangladeshi politics as usual: the family vendetta disguised as a two-party system.

Sheikh Hasina is the daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Bangladesh's independence hero, murdered in 1975. Mrs Zia is the widow of another former president, assassinated in 1981. The two main parties have adopted their leaders' limitless mutual animosity. The BNP has reacted to its rout in 2008 petulantly, boycotting parliament and taking to the streets. And the League's promise of magnanimity has been overshadowed by brazen attempts to entrench its rule.

The most scandalous is its railroading through in June of a constitutional amendment. Like Sri Lanka's president, Mahinda Rajapaksa, did last year, Sheikh Hasina has used the forms of parliamentary democracy to undermine the substance. Among other changes, the amendment does away with the caretaker administrations that oversaw elections in the hope of ensuring a modicum of fairness. It is hard to imagine the BNP taking part in elections under the new arrangements—the lack of trust between the parties that inspired the caretaker system persists. Bizarrely, but in keeping with a growing intolerance in Bangladesh, it is seditious even to criticise the new charter.

Public debate is also constrained by the growing personality cult that Sheikh Hasina is building around Sheikh Mujib, “the greatest Bengali of the millennium”. His portrait is ubiquitous, including on new banknotes issued this week. It is not healthy when one party identifies itself so closely with the nation. In the same vein, war-crimes trials due to start shortly over some of the atrocities perpetrated during Bangladesh's war of independence from Pakistan risk becoming seen as exercises in partisan spite. It did not help that this month a leading British defence lawyer was refused entry to Bangladesh.

Singh, when you're winning

That politics should remain so personal and so poisonous is absurd at a time of great promise for Bangladesh, a country of 160m people, most of them poor. The government remains fairly popular. The economy is doing well, with its booming garment-export business. Bangladesh is on good terms with both China and, especially, India (though the government is touchy about this—see our [Letters](http://www.economist.com/node/21525809) (<http://www.economist.com/node/21525809>) pages). Manmohan Singh, India's prime minister, is due to visit early next month to sign a series of agreements formalising closer co-operation. It would be good if he and Bangladesh's many other friends abroad could show that their friendship is with the country, not just one party, and make clear that allowing democratic freedoms to flourish is a source not of weakness, but of strength.

From the print edition: Leaders