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Bangladesh stares at anarchy

By Anshuman Rawat

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With no end in sight to political turmoil rooted in historic conflicts and sectarianism, Bangladesh is edging closer each day to chaos.

The overwhelming victory of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's Awami League (AL) in January 5 parliamentary elections did little to ease the tense situation.

Terming the current government "illegal", the Begum Khalida Zia led Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the country's largest opposition party, has vowed to unseat the government "with a popular movement".

Because of a mass boycott of the poll by all major opposition parties, 153 of the 232 seats won by the Awami League in the recent elections were uncontested. The opposition had demanded that the vote was held under a neutral caretaker government - a condition ended due to a constitutional amendment forced through in 2011 by Hasina's administration.

Hundreds of people died across Bangladesh in political violence in the run-up to the latest polls, with normal life ended by blockades of roads, railways and waterways and the closure of shops, schools and offices by the opposition. A reported 20 people died on the day of the vote and more than 100 polling stations were torched by violent mobs.

The election-related mayhem came close on the heels of violence related to an ongoing tribunal

International Crimes Tribunal which is investigating "war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide" committed by the Pakistan army and their local collaborators during the 1971 war of independence.

The ICT drew international headlines in February 2013 when the Shahbagh movement - named after a major intersection in Dhaka where thousands of people gathered in a protest - demanded the execution of all those convicted by the ICT and the creation of a secular Bangladesh.

Most collaborators implicated in the trial belong to the second largest opposition party, Jamaat-e-Islami. Because the ICT plans to prosecuting JeT leaders for war crimes in 1971, Islamists have also been on the rampage across the nation.

On May 5, thousands of madrassa teachers, students and sympathizers laid siege to Dhaka in support of the Hefazat-e-Islam ("Protectors of Islam"), a radical Islamic movement that demands, among other things, a ban on the public mixing of men and women and the criminalization of "*kafirs*" (non-believers). This led to violent clashes between protesters and security forces, resulting in many deaths.

Meanwhile, convictions against Jamaat leaders led the Bangladesh Supreme Court on August 1 2013 to declare the registration of the party illegal - effectively barring it from contesting elections.

The mayhem hit its nadir on December 12 when one of the Jamaat leaders, Abdul Qader Mollah, was hanged being sentenced to death by the ICT. Mollah, known as the "Butcher of Mirpur", who supported his party's stand against the creation of Bangladesh, was accused of colluding with the Pakistani military in a killing and raping spree of Bengalis over an eight-month period.

While the Shahbagh and Hefazat protests did not give birth to the current election violence, they add to the deadly mix of historical and sectarian fault lines that are currently simmering in Bangladesh. These have turned the country into a free-for-all battlefield of politico-ideologies.

The first, most direct consequence of the strife has been on the economy. Bangladesh's GDP growth shrunk to 6% last year, down from 6.7% in 2011 - and is expected to contract further because of the prevailing state of affairs.

A good part of the slowdown was caused because of the impact the violence has had on Bangladesh's garment industry. Making 80% of the country's total exports, garment exports stood at US\$21.5 billion in 2013, up steeply from \$9.2 billion six years ago.

But orders are now declining quickly from world markets - diverted to mainly India and some portions to China and Pakistan - mostly because of non-timely delivery by Bangladesh factories whose trucks were stuck on highways for days because of the violence. Many fear that the displaced orders may now never return to Bangladesh.

Four million people are employed with Bangladesh Garment Manufactures and Exporters

Association member companies, of which 80% are women, and a majority of whom belong to the "disadvantaged" sections of the society.

That is sure to slow down, if not halt, a commendable run of poverty reduction in the previous decade, which saw the percentage of poor people in this eighth most populous country in the world reduce to 32% in 2010 from an enormous 58% in 1990-91.

The turmoil is also going to worsen Bangladesh's standing on critical matters such as Generalized System of Preferences (a US government program that provides preferential duty-free entry for up to 5,000 products) and continued (garment) orders from and lower import duties in Europe, which is especially stringent in matters concerning freedom of speech and politics, and human rights of workers.

With men in uniform being stretched to their limit internally, the country's ability to send military forces for United Nations peacekeeping operations too are likely to be affected - putting at risk significant foreign currency revenue.

Unfortunately, nothing of that is stopping the key players from holding back.

Yet the government is not releasing its iron grip on its opponents. Apart from Khalida Zia's virtual house arrest, Mohammad Hossain Ershad, a former army general who had come to power in 1982 after a bloodless coup and who now leads the third-biggest party, Jatiyo, too is under restraining orders in an army hospital since he announced of joining the latest poll boycott.

Also, the Sheikh Hasina government is also being accused of harassing media and civil society members. As per a Human Rights Watch (HRW) report, "[T]he government shut down opposition media early in 2013 and continues to target human rights advocacy groups and arrest prominent activists."

Or, in other words, from politics, economy and human rights to the human development index, every marker of the nation's well-being is under severe stress.