

The Caretaker Debate, 10th Jatiya Sangsad Elections and Recent Trends in Bangladesh Politics

Hasina Afruj Shanta

University of Chittagong, Bangladesh.

ABSTRACT

Bangladesh has been facing continues political turmoil since 1990 when, for the first time, Bangladesh first introduced Non-Party Caretaker Government system and from that time Bangladesh politics is moving around this issue. Both of the major parties, Awami League (AL) and Bangladesh Nationalist party (BNP) always tried to use this issue in their own interest. Same thing happened before the 10th Jatiya Sangsad Election, when, caretaker debate took the worst ever situation and spread like fire throughout Bangladesh. This paper describes and analyzes the debate over the caretaker system, 10th Jatiya Sangsad Election and the recent trend of Bangladesh politics as, some crucial questions have arisen about the present government system and government's perceived authoritarian tendencies.

Key Words: Bangladesh, Political, NPCG, Parliamentary Elections, Government.

Introduction

For quite some time, Bangladesh has been facing political uncertainty. In fact, it all started before the 10th Jatiya Sangsad/parliamentary election held on January 05, 2014 when the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), its alliance partners and many others wanted the election to be held under the NPCG and the ruling party, the Bangladesh Awami League (BAL), and its allies claimed the NPCG system constitutionally defunct. Thus, they stuck to the position that election will be held under the party government and the Election Commission (EC) will play its Constitutional role in conducting the election. Due to this difference, there grew further distrust between the two major political parties –the BNP and the BAL. Now, time has come when many Bangladeshis wonder if it will be possible to bring about political stability or to hold any inclusive, participatory and credible election in Bangladesh in near future. This critical situation of Bangladesh politics has invited analysts to ponder upon the future stability of Bangladesh politics.

This study attempts to analyze the 15th Constitutional Amendment, the Caretaker Debate, and the 10th Parliamentary Election and its aftermath. Since these issues are very much related with each other and they have serious impact on Bangladesh politics, I have tried to show this by discussing the post-2014 election political scenario of Bangladesh which may give us a hint about the future of Bangladesh politics.

Genesis, Features, and Impact of the 15th Constitutional Amendment and Caretaker Debate:

Genesis of the NPCG

Bangladesh has always been in the state of continuous political ups and downs and the caretaker debate has been a significant issue in Bangladesh politics since the early 1980s. The free and fair Jatiya Sangsad/parliamentary elections in 1991(5th Jatiya Sangsad/parliamentary elections) in Bangladesh under a caretaker government lent credence to the thesis that in many developing countries that are beset with endemic electoral irregularities, an NPCG can be useful in eradicating electoral irregularities, reestablishing public faith in the sanctity of electoral process, and ensuring acceptability of the election results even by the parties that fare badly in the contest (Hakim, 1993, p. 103). Such a caretaker government stays in power for a limited period of time until the Sangsad/parliamentary election is held and a new government is formed by the elected representatives. The chief responsibility of the caretaker government was to run the routine administrative jobs and take all necessary measures to hold a free and fair parliamentary election (Hakim, p. 10).

The issue of NPCG had come into prominence in Bangladesh in early 1994, particularly, after the alleged rigging by the BNP activists in the Magura-2 by-election in March 1994. This Magura-2 by election brought the issue of holding the Jatiya Sangsad elections under NPCG to the forefront of political discourse. It, in fact, made the then main opposition party, the BAL, extremely hostile to the then BNP government (Ahmed, 2004, p. 20). Because of the allegation of the degree of rigging, the parliamentary opposition parties decided not to participate in any election under the then BNP government and raised the demand for holding elections under NPCG despite its extreme intransigence against the opposition demand for NPCG terming it unconstitutional, non representative, and dangerous. After a series of talks, violent agitation by the opposition, resignation of the opposition members from the Sangsad, the BNP government eventually capitulated and swallowed the bitter pill of the opposition and accepted the opposition demand. It even had to hold virtually the one-party sixth Sangsad election on 15th February 1996 to incorporate the provision of the election-time NPCG to conduct Jatiya Sangsad election through the 13th amendment to the constitution. According to its provisions, the President was given the sole authority to appoint preferably the last retiring Chief Justice among several options who is qualified to be appointed as an adviser as the Chief Adviser, a post equivalent to the post of Prime Minister. The Chief Adviser appoints other advisers and they (the Council of Advisers) remained accountable to the President--the only elected representative and head of the state--for their activities. After the introduction of the provision of NPCG in the constitution through the 13th amendment, three

*The Caretaker Debate, 10th Jatiya Sangsad Elections and Recent Trends in
Bangladesh Politics*

general elections were held (in June 1996, October 2001, and December 2008) under NPCG.

Crisis over the Formation of the NPCG and the Rise of the Quasi-Military Emergency Regime (2007-2008)

In 2006, political conflict began with the question of appointment of the Chief Advisor of the NPCG. Controversy surrounding the caretaker government provision became very intense when the BNP led 4-Party alliance government (2001-2006) raised the retirement age for the Supreme Court judges from 65 to 67 in 2004 throughout the 14th Constitutional amendment. Although it was recommended during immediate-past BAL government and apparently innocent in nature, this decision allowed the then Chief Justice K. M Hasan to be eligible to become the Chief Advisor of the caretaker government as he then would have been the last retiring Chief Justice. But, the opposition parties led by BAL waged a violent agitation movement saying that, they would not accept Justice K.M. Hasan as Chief Advisor as he was involved in BNP politics in the past (Manik, 2011). Eventually, under violent and deadly agitation, K.M. Hasan declined to be the Chief Advisor and the President, Professor Iajuddin Ahmed, took over the role and responsibility of the Chief Advisor of the NPCG on the pretext of the failure of the major parties to agree upon a “common candidate” from among five options provided in the 13th amendment of the constitution that guided the formation, nature, duration and functions of the NPCG. However, other major parties excepting the BNP-led 4-party alliance were disappointed with this decision, though in public, they accepted President Iajuddin Ahmed’s self-appointment as the Chief Advisor with a very high degree of reservation. This controversy about caretaker government eventually led to the “disguised or quasi-military coup by the then Chief of Army Staff (CAS) General Moeen U. Ahmed, who, with the support and positive approval from several quarters – like India, the “Tuesday Group” composed of several westerns top diplomats in Dhaka who used to meet together every Tuesday to discuss Bangladeshi internal politics, the US, AL-led 14-party alliance, various civil society groups of notable citizens like the Center for Policy Dialogue(CPD), Transparency International Bangladesh(TIB), the TV channels like the Channel I and the ATN Bangla, etc., editors of the two influential News Papers-*The Daily Star* and *Prothom Alo*, Mr. Mahfuz Anam, Mr. Motiur Rahman, personalities like the Nobel Laureate Professor Muhammad Yunus and many others, removed President Iajuddin Ahmed from his additional responsibilities as the Chief Advisor and installed the former World Bank economist and Bangladesh Bank Governor during the BNP-led 4-party alliance government (2001-2006), Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed, merely a titular Chief Advisor of the NPCG. General Moeen U. Ahmed also forced President Iajuddin to declare the State of Emergency in the country through a dictate dtelevised speech. The

Emergency Regime of Fakhruddin Ahmed, controlled by the military and propped up by the Indo-West bloc, and their Civil Society Allies protégées remains a constitutional imposter. The Regime during January 2007-December 2008 is thus rightly termed as the Emergency Regime of the “three Ahmeds” (General Moeen U. Ahmed, Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed, and President Dr. Iajuddin Ahmed). This government had no time or hurry to focus on holding general elections, and hand over power to the elected representatives. It, instead, adopted an open-ended and wide-ranging “reform” agenda and had attempted to restructure the political order in the name of giving democracy firmer roots in Bangladesh and appeared to be in power for as long as it would have taken to implement these reform agendas. It tried to do so not by establishing the rule of law, following due process, protecting and upholding human rights, allowing peaceful political activity and strengthening the democratic and political institutions of the state, but by directly intervening in the political process and political parties by obsessively pursuing its ill-motivated and ill-fated “minus-two” formula. The main agenda behind this was to “depoliticize” Bangladesh politics. They actually engaged themselves in the “Politics of anti-Politics”—an old practice of the military rulers in many countries (*New Age*, 2008, January 11). For this purpose, it reconstructed and utilized two major institutions, namely, the Anti-Corruption Commission (DUDOK) and Election Commission (EC). All these were filled in with former and regular military officials. Moreover, the Emergency Regime also created a special body named the Corruption Eradication Cell headed by a vitriolic anti-BNP active military officer, General Masud Uddin Chowdhury. Other military officers in active service were involved in the so-called anti-corruption drive. The purpose was, however, very clear and that is mainly to crush and destroy the BNP, weaken the BAL, remove Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina, the two most charismatic leaders of the most popular parties from the politics and, as mentioned before, to “depoliticize” Bangladesh.

But, for a variety of factors, they were neither able to liquidate the political career of either Begum Khaleda Zia or Sheikh Hasina nor were they able in spite of their frantic efforts, to form a “King’s Party” as political alternative to the BNP and the Bangladesh Awami League. The direct intervention in politics and political parties cost the Emergency Regime people’s faith in its ability to deliver and hold a free fair and participatory general election (*New Age*, 2008). Eventually, the Emergency Regime of the “three Ahmeds” was compelled to hold the 9th Jatiya Sangsad elections on 29 December, 2008. In that election the Awami League and its 14-party Grand Alliance came to power with a three-fourth majority. With this electoral victory, Sheikh Hasina came to power for the second time.

*The Caretaker Debate, 10th Jatiya Sangsad Elections and Recent Trends in
Bangladesh Politics*

The Context of the 15th Amendment and Abolition of the NPCG System

During the 2nd Hasina government, once again, some controversy arose over the issue of the NPCG. The activities of the Emergency Regime of the “three Ahmeds” under the façade of the caretaker government created new controversy over the caretaker government system. Questions arose whether the system should be abolished or reformed. The matter was taken to the court challenging the legality of the NPCG system (Manik, 2011). Since it tempted the party in power to promote or not to promote judges on political consideration to ensure the latter’s favored person to become Chief Adviser of the next caretaker government (Manik, 2011), and taking some other factors into account, the highest court of the country declared the NPCG system illegal. Accordingly, using the court verdict, the Awami League took the position that the elections should from now on be held under party government because the NPCG may abuse its power and mandate and take unlawful and autocratic measures as it did during 2007-2008. Sheikh Hasina declared that no unelected persons should be allowed to run the country even for a small period. This is against the fundamental principles of democracy and representative government. The NPCG is non-elected body and hence it should be abolished (Anam, 2011). One must not forget that Sheikh Hasina expressed her reservation about the NPCG system immediately after her crushing defeat in the 2001 (8th) Jatiya Sangsad election. She began to criticize the NPCG system and proposed drastic reform of the NPCG system. She haplessly moaned that she fought for the NPCG system to ensure impartial and free and fair elections but the NPCG in 2001 worked against herself and her party violating the mandates of the NPCG enshrined in the 13th amendment. So, she was contemplating for long for either “reform” or “dissolution” on the NPCG system. Sheikh Hasina was now armed with the verdict of the Highest Court declaring the 13th amendment and hence the NPCG illegal.

On the other hand, the opposition BNP and its allies took the position that they would not participate in any election without the NPCG system. After a series of changes, including repeal of the provision for holding national elections under a NPCG amid vehement protest from the BNP-led opposition, the AL-dominated Jatiya Sangsad/parliament passed the 15th constitutional amendment bill on 30th of June 2011 (Liton, 2011). As the AL-led government held more than the required two-thirds majority to amend the Constitution in the 345-seat parliament, they easily and smoothly passed it (Liton, 2011). According to the 15th Constitutional Amendment bill, elections would be held under the elected party government within 90 days before the parliament is dissolved. Parliament will stay, but it can’t hold any session during these 90 day election period (Liton, 2011). It meant that the incumbent AL-led government was going to stay in power during the 10th Jatiya Sangsad election due in January 2014. Thus, the 15th amendment made the

NPCG system illegal throwing the entire political situation in to a deep and prolonged uncertainty and a crisis over the holding of the next general elections scheduled to be held in January 2014 and the elections to be held for longtime to come.

Abolition of the NPCG System: Reactions and Fallouts

The 9th Jatiya Sangsad/Parliament, in the pretext of a majority verdict of the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court that declared the 13th amendment unconstitutional, amended the constitution removing the provision of the NPCG from the constitution and thus ensued apparently an unsolvable debate over the nature and form of election-time government in Bangladesh. With minimum sense of Bangladesh politics, one could read that Sheikh Hasina was elated with the verdict. Indeed, there were very good reasons for Sheikh Hasina to be delighted with the abolition of the NPCG system given her experience in the 8th Sangsad elections in October 2001 which she lost for which she squarely blamed the President of the country, NPCG, and the EC.

As the Supreme Court declared the NPCG illegal, it was not possible to retain that system. So, the Jatiya Sangsad/parliament formed a Sub-Committee to find out what to do about the NPCG system and possible new system to conduct possible future national elections. The Sub-Committee started dialogue and discussion on this matter. Public perception was that the government party, the AL, did not take into consideration the other parts of the verdict where the judges observed that the next two elections might be held under the NPCG if the Jatiya Sangsad wanted to avoid political crisis. Supreme Court verdict also mentioned that former Chief Justice or any other Supreme Court judge should not be chosen as heads of the NPCGs, if in case the system was kept for another two Jatiya Sangsad elections (Sarker, 2011). In this situation, while the AL, quite understandably, wanted to follow the judgment of the Supreme Court, the BNP declared that it would not take part in any election without NPCG and under the party government. Regarding the debate about the NPCG system, the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said that, unelected people will never again be given the opportunity to assume power and destroy democracy (*The Daily Star*, 2011, June 29). Here, it should be mentioned that the AL and its leader and the then opposition leader Sheikh Hasina pioneered and spearheaded the violent and destructive agitation movement for introducing the non-partisan caretaker system in the constitution in early 1990s. Her bitter rival the then Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, initially vehemently opposed it (Sarker, 2011). It seems that the party in opposition wants the election to be held under the caretaker government and the ruling party wants election to be held under party government (Kabir, 1999).

The verdict regarding the NPCG issue triggered mixed response. The ruling AL-led government did not wait for the release of full text of the Supreme Court verdict, which was the main justification of the amendment (Anam, 2011). The

***The Caretaker Debate, 10th Jatiya Sangsad Elections and Recent Trends in
Bangladesh Politics***

ruling party's hasty handling of the caretaker issue is patently inexplicable when it had more than two years to go before the 10th Jatiya Sangsad election (*The Daily Star*, 2011, June 30).ⁱ Khandker Mahbub Hossain, the then President of the Supreme Court Bar Association termed the verdict "self contradictory". He said, that, on the one hand, the Court termed the caretaker government system unconstitutional and undemocratic, yet, on the other hand, it suggested for holding the next two elections under caretaker government (Sarker, 2011). Naturally, the ruling Awami League-led Grand Alliance welcomed the Supreme Court verdict that declared the provision for the caretaker government illegal and unconstitutional (Tusher, 2011). So, when Sheikh Hasina announced that the caretaker government should be abolished through the 15th amendment to the constitution, there were some negative reactions. Many suggested that the AL itself fought for the NPCG system, and how can it now want to get rid of it? Many also opined that the politicians cannot be trusted with something as important as an election. Thus, when the whole country was wondering as to how the next general election was going to be held or what will be the future of the NPCG system, the 9th Jatiya Sangsad passed the 15th Constitutional amendment bill that, among many major changes, abolished the NPCG system in the pretext of the verdict of the highest court of the country. Though NPCG system was abolished through 15th Constitutional amendment yet, some people strongly believe it is not impossible to hold a free and fair election under party government in Bangladesh but it would take time to create such an environment where a free and fair election can be held under any party government.

The 10th Jatiya Sangsad Elections: From Protest to Uncertainty?

Since the tenure of the 9th parliament was to expire on 24 January 2014, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and its alliance of 18 opposition parties demanded for a free and fair election under a non-partisan interim government. But, as we have noted earlier, the AL did not pay any heed to their demand. Thus, the BNP-led 18 party alliance called "March for Democracy" rally, frequent general strikes, and blockades to foil the election bid and also boycotted the election. Indeed, it built a violent agitation movement to foil the elections that the AL-led 14-party alliance was determined to hold under its command in the pretext of the provision of the 15th amendment to the constitution under any circumstance. Efforts for compromise for the formation of a non-partisan election-time government for holding elections produced nothing and conflict between the two sides raged on. The basic line was drawn between the two sides. The BNP-led 18-party alliance took the position that for a free and fair election under some form of non-partisan government was a must as they suspected that, otherwise, then (by the end of 2013) an apparently unpopular AL-led government would use the state machineries to rig the polls and declare itself victorious. On the other hand, the

AL-led 14-party alliance openly accused the BNP-led 18-party alliance's demand for election under some form of non-partisan government as unconstitutional. It also maintained that the BNP-led alliance's main purpose was to protect its partner the Jammats' War criminals as well as to obstruct the process of de-communalizing and re-secularizing, India-friendly, and developmental policies of the AL-led government. Thus, there was hardly any common ground where the two could meet. Thus, their differences led to violent activities by both sides; one side for elections under some form of non-partisan government, the other to hold elections under the party government in name of upholding the constitution and to prevent the BNP-led communal, terrorist, militant, anti-liberation, pro-western forces from coming to power. It should be mentioned that although the European Union, the United States and the Western powers, supported the BNP-led alliance's demand for a free and fair elections (*The Daily Star*, 2014, January 7), they were not sure and were ambivalent about the BNP-led alliance's commitment and ability to fight against the "Islamist terrorism". India, on the other hand, puts its total weight behind the AL's scheme of elections under party government to keep it in power in its own interest which the AL government during 2009-2014 has served exceedingly well. The then foreign Secretary of India, Ms. Sujata Singh, had to rush to Dhaka and gave the green signal to the AL government to go ahead with elections even if that meant going it alone without any major party joining the election. She was also able to trick and twist the arms of the Jatiya Party to join the elections (*The Daily Star*, 2013, December 5). At one stage, Hasina hinted to the Western diplomats that this election was going to be held for constitutional obligation and an inclusive election would be arranged as soon as possible after this election. She, to her credit, also offered the BNP for discussion on coming up with a formation of an election time government system within the Constitution. She also offered the BNP some posts in the Cabinet. But, the BNP-led 4-party alliance, then flying high, on the heels of their victory in all four City Corporation elections just before the 10th Jatiya Sangsad Elections. Moreover, the BNP-led 4-party alliance suspected that by accepting the AL-led government's offer to join the discussion and Cabinet would mean accepting the election under the Party government according to the 15th Constitutional amendment and allow the AL to use government machineries to manipulate the election in its favor.

Eventually, in the midst of unprecedented violence, the 10th Jatiya Sangsad election was held on 05 January 2014 which, for all practical purposes, lacked participation and contestation-the two main conditions of a democratic election. Only 12 parties (most of which belong to the AL-led Grand Alliance) among all registered parties in Bangladesh participated in the 10th Jatiya Sangsad/parliamentary election (*The Daily Star*, 2014, January 5). Opposition activists torched and ransacked many polling stations in their attempts to foil the election. Of the total 300 general seats, the Awami League won 232 seats, Jatiya Party 33, Workers Party 6, Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal 5, Jatiyo Party (Manjoo) 1, (All of these parties are components of the AL-led ruling 14-party alliance.) of the

The Caretaker Debate, 10th Jatiya Sangsad Elections and Recent Trends in Bangladesh Politics

remaining seats Bangladesh Nationalist Front got 1, Independents won 13 seats and others got 03 seats (*The Daily Star*, 2014, January 7). Astonishingly, 153 seats were won by ruling party candidates uncontested. As a result of the abstention of the opposition from the election and violence by the opposition, official voter turnout was just 30% (*The Daily Star*, 2014 January 7), but the actual number was supposed to be much lower than that. In the 10th Jatiya Sangsad election, voting was suspended in 539 centers, no voter showed up in 41 centers. Around 18 people were killed and more than 300 injured on the Election Day (*The Daily Star*, 2014, January 6). Of all the elections held in Bangladesh, it was perhaps the deadliest election and the country had never seen such a weak and comical opposition party in the parliament. The opposition Jatiya Party itself was a partner of the AL-led Grand Alliance and interesting two of its leaders became Cabinet members of the AL-led government as MPs belonging to the opposition bench.

Table 1:

Number of the Opposition Members in the Jatiya Sangsad (1991-2014)

Jatiya Sangsad	Number of the Opposition MPs in the Sangsad
1991(5 th)	147
1996(7 th)	120
2001(8 th)	77
2008(9 th)	34
2014(10 th)	33

Sources: Compiled from various newspaper reports.

As a result of opposition boycott, the EU, the US, the Commonwealth, the Russian Federation refused to send their observers to monitor the Sangsad election. They all appealed for inclusive and participatory elections. *The New York Times* termed the polls “a bizarre election” due to the lack of competition. UN Secretary General Ban-ki-Moon, called upon the political parties for meaningful dialogue. Common Wealth, a voluntary association of 53 independent countries, also termed the 10th Jatiya Sangsad/parliamentary elections in Bangladesh “disappointing”. “United Kingdom believed that the real feature of a mature, functioning democracy is peaceful, creditable elections that express the genuine will of the voters” as remarked by the UK foreign office minister Baroness Warsi (*The Daily Star*, 2014, January 7). The United Kingdom and Canada were also disappointed that voters in more than half of the constituencies did not have the opportunity to express their will at the ballot box and with very low voter turnout in most other constituencies (*New Age*, 2014, January 7).

Although most of the international community expressed their disappointment over the election, India expressed a different view saying that the elections in Bangladesh held on January 05 was a constitutional requirement and they were a matter of the internal and constitutional process of Bangladesh (*New Age*, 2014, January 7).

Post-Election Political Scenario: BNP's Late Realization and the Confident AL

The 10th Jatiya Sangsad/Parliament election was held under an uncertain situation and that's why a wide spread violence and loss of lives and limbs took place just before, during, and after that election. The BNP-led alliance demanded cancellation of 05 January's "farcical elections" and announced a fresh round of 48-hour general strike on 6 January along with the blockade to presshome their demand for fresh elections (*New Age*, 2014, January 6). To control the situation, the AL-led alliance took an extremely hard line against the BNP and its allies by extensive arrests and killing of opposition leaders and activists throughout the country. BNP Chairperson, Begum Khaleda Zia, said that some 302 BNP leaders or activists and its allies were killed or made disappeared and some 29,262 supporters were arrested across the country from 26 December 2013 to 27 January 2014 covering the period before, during and after the 10th Jatiya Sangsad elections held on 05 January 2014. They blamed the security forces and ruling party activists for these killings. The ruling party itself also claimed that at least nine of its leaders were killed most likely by the supporters of the opposition since 06 January, the day after the 10th Sangsad election (Chowdhury, 2014).

This election was without the participation of any major party, an election without contestation. So, the international community raised question about its neutrality and credibility and urged for immediate dialogue for fresh and credible polls. A generally convincing point for Hasina was that the vote was constitutionally correct and it was necessary to continue the country's constitutional process and prevent any "evil force" from seizing the state power. Hasina was able to convince the people that she was right to go ahead with the polls without BNP and its allies (Hossain, 2015, October 23). The AL also gave some signals that there might soon be an interim election which would be inclusive and participatory. After the election, the BNP also gave some signals that it was ready to a negotiated settlement through dialogue and was not going to mount any violent movement. The BNP participated in the Upazila election which followed the Jatiya Sansad/parliamentary elections (Jahan, 2014). Meanwhile, with a "resounding victory", Hasina further consolidated her hold on to power and faced no major hurdle in getting the international community's approval for her as the elected Prime Minister of Bangladesh. Khaleda Zia found herself out and much of it due to the tactical errors she made in the belief that external forces would help her in achieving her goal to convince Hasina to quit power before the elections to allow a neutral caretaker administration to supervise the polls (Hossain, 2015, November 20). But, no such thing happened as the BNP hoped for, nor did the international community force the AL to hold another participatory election. They rather were happy to do business as usual with the Hasina government. In such a situation of government repression and political frustration and depression, on 05 January 2015 when BNP was refused permission to organize a rally in Gazipur to

***The Caretaker Debate, 10th Jatiya Sangsad Elections and Recent Trends in
Bangladesh Politics***

mark the first anniversary of the 10th Jatiya Sangsad election, Begum Khaleda Zia announced a non-stop blockade program to unseat Hasina's government. After 92 days of violent agitation, Khaleda Zia understood her tactical error. The government, on the other hand, could convince a large section of the nation that the BNP-Jammat alliance is doing nothing but killing innocent citizens and destroying the economy (*Hussain*, 2015 November 20). The government proved its mastery in exploiting the issue in further settling itself down. A confident AL government announced the elections for three major City Corporations -- Dhaka (South), Dhaka (North), and Chittagong putting the beleaguered BNP into a further dilemma and at the same time allowing it an opportunity to save faces and get out of embarrassment resulting from virtually ineffective Blockade Program.

The City Corporation elections were held on 28 April 2015 and then the country went ahead with municipality polls on 30 December 2015. The elections were marred by extraordinary levels of rigging, obstructing the opposition parties and all conceivable sorts of irregularities. In protest, and to vindicate its point that no election under the AL government can be free, fair, credible and participatory and withdraw its candidates in the midway of the elections. While their point was well made, people wanted the opposition candidates to be in the race until the last moment. The BNP, after boycotting the last general election and withdrawing candidates in the midway from contestation in three major city corporations, it then decided to join the municipal polls as they realized their mistake of withdrawing candidates from the city corporation elections. They tried to reach out to people and grass roots leaders so that they could make their presence visible on the political field. It seems that the BNP was trying to be smart in dealing with election issues this time, but it has so far failed to resolve the question of its relationship with Bangladesh Jammat-e-Islami, a party which is facing its worst time following the trial of its key leaders for their crime against humanity during the Bangladesh War of Liberation in 1971 (*Rahman*, 2015). Most of the accused are the former and present top leaders of the Jammat-e-Islami and almost all of the accused, with rare exceptions, have been found guilty by the Court. Court sentenced death penalty to most of them and some of them are still in the process to be disposed of. Political analysts think that this was the most opportune moment for Begum Khaleda Zia and the BNP to choose a more progressive path by distancing her party from this tainted image of the Jamaat for its past misdeeds. Most of them have apparently lost their weight and might because of their wrong political decisions and approach (*Rahman*, 2015). During this trial and execution process, Hasina's government has faced numerous obstacles, international pressure to stop the trial or reform the ICT and the trial laws. But, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was determined to keep her pledge to bring the war criminals to justice as promised in the AL-led 14-party alliance's 2008 election manifesto and she has handled everything very smoothly with determination and ruthlessness despite several international groups' appeal to the Bangladesh authority not to go ahead

with the executions. Now, Bangladeshis have accepted the reality that Sheikh Hasina and her alliance would govern the country for a full five-year term until 2019 (Hossain, 2015, November 20). The presence of BNP in the political field has been weakened surprisingly. There is virtually no political program of the BNP that can cause any concern for the government or woo the people. Now, it becomes hard for the party to reorganize itself. Although it still is quite possible, that will require patient organizational works, time, clearing its position on some issues and to stick to its moderate centrist plank. With the gradual loss of strength of the BNP, the ruling AL has emerged as the single dominant political force in the country. The media, the street, buy business conglomerates and billboards are dominated of the AL. Other political parties are not visible now. When there is no effective opposition in politics, democracy loses not only its beauty but its existence comes into question, and gradually becomes dysfunctional leading toward authoritarianism (Rahman, 2016).

Conclusion

What Lies Ahead?

Authoritarian Developmental or Democratic Developmental Future?

The BNP-led opposition alliances ineffective blockade program in the first three months of 2015 lost its steam and practically imploded. The program was totally ignored by the people. The BNP-led alliance took notice of it and chose to take part in the City Corporation elections and practically ended the already ineffective blockade program. The City Corporation Election was followed by the Municipality and Union Parishad elections. The BNP and its allies, perhaps assessing and realizing their tactical mistakes and organizational weakness in the free of activities of the AL activists and the use of state coercive apparatus, chose to join all these elections. Although, they withdrew from the City Corporation elections at noon on the election day, perhaps to highlight the “farcical” nature of the elections, which were in reality marked by all sorts of irregularities, still that did not give the BNP and its allies much political dividend. That lesson kept the BNP and its allies in the election races in both the Municipality and Union Parishad elections in spite of the fact that irregularities and violence of all conceivable sorts were perpetuated by the AL, the government, and the EC. High degree of irregularities featured these elections. Still, the BNP stuck to its decision to stay in such kind of “elections” from a number of calculations such as to energize demoralized, inactive and “on the run” leaders and activists, to reorganize the organization and a practical breathing space to plan for future. Another motive of the BNP was to show and prove that no credible, free, fair and inclusive elections could be held under the AL government and to try to prove right its decision not to join the 10th Sangsad elections.

***The Caretaker Debate, 10th Jatiya Sangsad Elections and Recent Trends in
Bangladesh Politics***

On the other hand, reading such mind and motive of the BNP and its allies, the AL, the government apparatus, and the EC made all efforts to foil the purposes of the BNP's participation in these elections. Thus, these elections no longer remained "elections" any more. Ironically, however, by doing so, the AL proved the other claims of the BNP and by now everybody else agrees that credible, free and fair, participatory and inclusive elections could never be held under AL government. The AL itself from its hearts also agrees and many AL and Pro-AL commentators argue for this saying that "Democratic Deficit" should be accepted if we wanted peace and development. This is an old apology for authoritarian developmental model which suggests a dichotomous relationship between "Democracy" and "Development" for which sacrificing democracy can become necessary sometimes for economic development. Has the AL made up that decision that it wants development (basically oligopolistic model) first even with gross "deficit" in democracy. Can it be said that yes, it appears to be so? This was partly facilitated by government strategy to bring about the war crimes issue in the forefront of the political discourse putting the BNP and its allies (including the Jammāt-e-Islami) on the back foot and uncomfortable situation as they couldn't construct a counter-discourse on this issue. The BNP's undue, inflated trust on the external forces who, though want good, credible, elections, hesitated to go against India which supports the AL government, and they are also hesitant to and not sure still about the BNPs commitment as well ability to fight "Islamist terrorism" as vigorously as the Pro-Indian AL government has been doing. A half-hearted organizationally loose, politically confused BNP facilitated the AL to implement its agenda. It is however, too early to say whether the authoritarian trends can be stopped or not. A pliable media and a gang of oligopolistic super rich business groups linked with AL for benefit provides ideological justification and propaganda and financial sustenance of the "creeping" authoritarian system. It seems that this trend and emerging model still has some steams to run but can never be reached the final destination for the democracy and development loving people of Bangladesh. After all, Bangladesh was born among many issues out of demand and urge for democracy for themselves.

The AL, as the ruling party, has greater responsibility than other political parties. So, along with defending its position, it must cooperate with the other parties to ensure democracy. For living in political peace, political parties need to examine how they engage themselves in the reconciliation process and review and assess their attitudes, intentions, and actions. They will have to practice political peace through democratic and consent-based decisions making process with transparency and inclusiveness. Moreover, they must develop the mentality to do compromise because it is crucial for building good working relationship (Rahman, 2016, January 8). It has to be pointed out that it no longer is just a battle between the governing elites, political or otherwise; it has now become a question of survival of democratic political process in the country (*New Age*, 2014, January 7).

Thus, the government, the opposition, as well as the citizens must think with patience as to how to overcome this critical situation and must find a way out through dialogue and discussion among the parties not to let democracy to be abandoned and make up the “deficits” of democratic principles in every sphere of national life. Of course, if that is what all the socio-political forces in Bangladesh desire which cannot be said with full confidence at this stage of political history of Bangladesh where the AL and its secular allies give more value to development, fighting terrorists (Islamists), and their allies like BNP and the Jamaat, carrying on the trial of war criminals, implementing secular politics and meeting Indian concerns. Those goals, as the AL and its allies think must be achieved, if possible through democratic manner, but if needed, sacrificing some aspects of democracy (with “democratic deficit”) and through “soft” or “hard” authoritarian developmental model. But, one can certainly hope that the Awami League’s long tradition of struggle for democracy and desire for democratic system by of Bangladeshi people will eventually work as a guarantor of democratic continuity of democracy in Bangladesh.

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***The Caretaker Debate, 10th Jatiya Sangsad Elections and Recent Trends in
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Biographical Note

Hasina Afruj Shanta is Lecturer at Department of Political Science, University of Chittagong, Bangladesh. Currently, she is a Ph.D scholar in the Global Studies at Shanghai University, China.
