

# What options for Bangladesh?

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LSE's **David Lewis** maps alternative outcomes of the standoff between the government and opposition in Bangladesh.

The political standoff between the Awami League (AL) government and opposition Bangladesh National Party (BNP) seems to have come to a head. A BNP-led alliance of 18 political parties has rejected a schedule calling for general elections on 5 January 2014. The BNP dismissed the election schedule announcement as a 'unilateral' move and continues to call for the restoration of the old caretaker government system to provide neutral oversight of the polls. The party maintains that the AL will rig the elections if it is allowed to remain in power until polling day. For its part, the AL maintains that caretaker governments can also be biased (it abolished the 13<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment requiring the establishment of a caretaker government in 2011 following allegations that the BNP crowded an interim set-up with supporters in 2006).



On 26 November, the BNP called for a 48-hour-long strike, which then spilled into the first week of December. Election-related violence has been escalating since the opposition protests began—Election Commission offices in multiple locations have been attacked, and numerous AL offices vandalised. At least 18 people were killed on the first two days of the strike.

The opposition has also called for a countrywide blockade of rail, roads and waterways. On 4 December, at least three people were killed and more than 40 injured when opposition activists derailed a train in northern Bangladesh. According to media reports, voters who were previously sympathetic to the BNP's position are beginning to tire of the electoral violence and strike-related disruptions.

What options does Bangladesh have in this scenario? It is always unwise to try to predict the future, but there would seem to be three main possibilities.

- The first is business as usual. Confrontational politics of this kind has long defined the country's democracy, and face-offs have been regular features of elections since the end of the military era in 1990. At the last minute, the BNP and its allies may agree to take part in the election, having further enhanced their reputation with their core supporters by taking such a hard-line stance. Despite likely vote rigging, the BNP and its allies could win, given the fact that the BNP did very well in municipal elections earlier this year. Each of Bangladesh's general elections since 1991, generally considered free and fair by observers, have returned

the opposition to power.

- The second option is that the election goes ahead without the participation of the main opposition. This would no doubt return the AL to power, but this new government would be regarded as having very little legitimacy, either nationally or internationally. This would return Bangladesh to the dark days of General H.M. Ershad's military government of the 1980s, during which several unsuccessful attempts were made to hold elections that would create political legitimacy for his regime, and which were boycotted by most credible parties. The political turmoil and instability would continue, and the political and economic consequences would be severe.
- The third, equally worrying option, is a repeat of 2006 when the army stepped in to create a 'military-backed caretaker government' to sort out the mess and oversee elections. While some sections of society initially welcomed the intervention as a means of returning the country to stability, cleaning up corruption, and safeguarding the democratic system from two political parties that seemed hell-bent on destroying it, concerns quickly grew about the army's motives. Eighteen months after an intervention widely seen as a 'soft coup', elections were eventually held.

None of these possible outcomes offer much hope to the citizens of a country that has managed to achieve a healthy and surprising – albeit still precarious – level of economic success in recent years, but whose political institutions and democratic processes, while doggedly committed to democracy, remain widely seen as unfit for purpose. Nor will it help Bangladesh's international reputation.

#### **About the Author**

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