



Bangladesh: street battles push Awami League one step closer to power ? but is it a real alternative for the working class and poor?

Wed, 17/01/2007 - 23:00

Over the last few months Bangladesh has experienced serious political unrest, with a nationwide general strike culminating in a huge street blockade of the capital Dhaka. This was organised by the coalition led by the main opposition party, the Awami League (AL). The aim was to postpone the upcoming elections, create a new voter list and install a new electoral commission. These mass mobilisations were met not only with violent police repression but also by a counter-mobilisation by its main rival the Bangladeshi national Party (BNP) which had been in power from 2001 until last year before it gave way, as the constitution demanded, to an interim government tasked with preparing the elections.

The increasing violence and clashes of the street protests across Bangladesh reflect the mass, popular base of the movement led by the Awami League. The response of the state was the Declaration of a State of Emergency, and the unleashing of the police and the paramilitary forces of the Rapid Action Battalion to smash the blockades. All demonstrations have been banned, and any public display of protest met with rubber bullets and tear gas.

Under the Bangladeshi constitution, at the end of its time in office the ruling party must hand over power to a 'neutral' interim government, which must oversee the conduct of the elections, update the electoral register and so on. The appointing of the interim electoral commission usually heralds a period of massive demonstrations and protests as the neutrality of the election officers is challenged by the opposition. This was one of the main objectives of the Awami League's demonstrations. They claimed that the BNP had rigged the election process in order to stay in power.

The appointment last year of the original head of the Election Commission Secretariat MK Hasan was met with large and often violent demonstrations which resulted in the deaths of several people as police broke up the protests. He was seen as being too close to the BNP, but his replacement by President Iajuddin Ahmed led to only a temporary reprieve. The Awami League claimed that Ahmed too was tainted with close ties to the BNP, and demonstrations once more took off across the country with renewed intensity. Instead the AL wanted a retired former chief justice Mahmudul Amin Chowdhury appointed to the role of election chief. Chowdhury was a relative of one of the late leaders of the AL.

Upon being drafted onto the electoral commission body in October, Ahmed was quoted as saying that Bangladesh had 'stepped back from the brink' by allowing him to restore order and faith in the election process. But the masses made him eat his words as they responded to the Awami League's call and mobilised on the streets in even greater numbers, forcing the government into a corner. The AL announced an election boycott at the same time as maintaining its blockades in Dhaka and several other cities. This pressure was too much for the interim government. In a game of 'who-will-blink-first' it blinked and surrendered.

Fearing that the mobilisations might turn into more insurrectionary activity in the event of the collapse of the interim government, President Ahmed declared a state of emergency, imposed a curfew and cleared the streets of protestors. The media broadcasts were shut down, meaning that even his resignation speech from the ECS was not transmitted by radio or television. Nine out of ten of the Interim Government ministers resigned and the election has been postponed without fixing a date, but 'months' has been mentioned).

The two rival blocs

Politics in Bangladesh are dominated by the two major parties at the head of coalitions. The BNP can be characterised as a rightwing party, supported by big business. It was founded by prominent military figures before becoming a civilian party. The BNP is supported by both the US imperialists and the hegemonic regional power India. The BNP has attracted several militant Islamist organisations to its side, some of which have been accused of provoking and organising political and religious violence against rivals and the Hindu minority.

That the BNP represents the forces of the right and some of the most reactionary forces in Bangladeshi politics, is beyond doubt, but it would be an error for workers and youth to look to the Awami League as a credible left wing alternative. Both the BNP and the AL are effectively electoral machines for leading personalities, Zia in the case of the BNP and Hasina for the AL. This creates a system of patronage and nepotism which is inherently alienating to even the loyal party activists

The Awami League is also a bourgeois party, but with a mass base in the poorest sections of the Bangladeshi working class and peasants. It passes for a left wing, secular organisation, with elements of reformist socialist policies aimed at alleviating some of the worst conditions for the poorest in Bangladesh. It held power during the crisis created by the 1997 Asian economic meltdown. However its corruption in office and its inability take substantive measures to alleviate the huge poverty and unemployment unleashed by the crisis on the poor saw it rapidly lose popular support. The AL government and the party used repressive measures and thuggery against its opponents. There were reports of Bangladeshi journalists being brutally attacked for criticising Awami League politicians. In 2001 it was thrown out of power by a landslide election victory for the BNP.

But the Awami League used its years in opposition to rebuild its relationship with the impoverished masses, to the degree that once again it was able to mount militant direct action and mass protests to back up its political demands. Several of its MPs were badly injured in September 2006 during the first rounds of street protests over the election situation after riot police attacked their demonstration. They are utilising a similar series of tactics that they employed in 1996, when an AL-threatened boycott forced an election under more favourable conditions for them, for instance after the voters lists have been updated.

Can the workers trust the Awami League?

While many farmers and poor workers are attracted to the Awami League party, it is not a socialist organisation that can realise their desires and hopes for a better life. This is due both to its lack of a revolutionary programme and a strategy of class struggle to smash the power of capitalism and landlordism in Bangladesh.

The climb down by the Electoral Commission was a major victory for the AL. It achieved all of its demands and is now in position to do well at the elections. But the struggle by the AL is not so much a struggle for democracy as an attempt to manipulate the elections through an extra parliamentary show of strength.

The Bangladeshi elite capitulated to the demands of the AL, ensuring that the situation was stabilised and did not grow into something qualitatively more radical. In return the AL demobilised its protests demonstrating that they too wish to stabilise the country. For all their street militancy the goal of the leaders of the movement was parliamentary office.

If they are elected will their rule be qualitatively different from that of the BNP? Experience shows that although they have introduced some measures to combat the effects of globalisation and capitalist exploitation in Bangladesh, they have been unable to introduce really radical measures to break the power of the foreign multinationals and banks and thus decisively improve the conditions of the masses. The next world recession would undoubtedly find them willing to unload its effects on the backs of the poor as it did in the late 1990s.

The struggle for democracy and socialism in Bangladesh

As long as the AL keeps its hold on the masses a horrible political cycle will continue in Bangladesh, one that fails to

deliver any real change. This consists of the corruption of the new government, the ineffectiveness of parliament to check this, and then the disappointment of the masses, followed by populist mobilisations by the opposition on the streets which bring the government to near-collapse, and finally the army called in to maintain 'order' on the streets during the bitter struggle over the next election process. The workers and peasants of Bangladesh need to break out of this cycle.

To do that, the working class must come onto the political scene as an independently organised force if the ongoing poverty and economic misery of the majority is to be reversed. The Workers Party of Bangladesh and the Communist party of Bangladesh not only have a deep rooted Islamophobic political approach which alienates Muslims workers in Bangladesh, they also play second fiddle to the Awami League, subordinating the struggle for socialism to a parliamentary electoral alliance and popular front government.

Only a revolutionary party can really rally the forces in Bangladesh that will be able to fight against poverty and the international policies of the imperialists which further immiserate the masses. Workers, farmers and youth have no interest in preserving the capitalist system in Bangladesh and the continued power games of the existing parties. They should organise to build a new revolutionary party, one that fights for the interests of the poorest and most oppressed sections in Bangladesh, not for the personal ambitions of one family of politicians. This could mobilise millions due to the deep cynicism of many Bangladeshis for the mainstream parties, Awami League included: Bangladesh has one of the lowest ranking on the Transparency International index of public perceptions of corruption.

A new political organisation armed with a bold political programme and based on directly accountable leaders developed from the masses' struggle, could not only clear out the old corrupt elites but smash the inherently corrupt political structures they rest on. Armed with a revolutionary action programme a new party could lead the workers and toiling masses to resolving the woes of the crisis-ridden Bangladesh economy in their own interests once and for all, by tackling the capitalist system that causes these crises.

Such a programme must break the country's subordination to imperialism, combat Bangladeshi and Indian big capital as well, declare war on the big landowners and call the rural poor to an agrarian revolution. It must deal with the terrible crisis of the country's 'bourgeois democracy' by calling for a sovereign constituent assembly to sweep away the corrupt alternation between the left and right wings of the bourgeoisie. The workers and peasants should force the Constituent Assembly to strip the big landowners and capitalist of their property, to launch a massive programme of public works aimed at creating a modern infrastructure - drainage and flood defence, electrification, housing, school and hospital building - in short to meet the burning needs of the masses.

The present situation shows the potential for a revolutionary struggle for power by the working class. The bourgeois class is divided, the state is weakened and convulsed with internal strife and the social forces exist that can be mobilised on the streets in a struggle against the government. The heroic struggles of workers, the dockers, the women workers in the textile industry, all indicate that the working class can and will fight. The main problem is not the will of the masses to struggle but a crisis of the leadership at a trade union and political level. The trade unions need independence of all capitalist parties and the working class needs to build a new, revolutionary party.

Any such party in Bangladesh should immediately set out to find co-thinkers in India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, to establish with them a common organisation across the subcontinent to fight for a socialist federation of the subcontinent. This task must also be set within the context of fighting for new, Fifth International across the globe, an urgent task for revolutionaries, youth and workers today in every country.

Source URL: <http://fifthinternational.org/content/bangladesh-street-battles-push-awami-league-one-step-closer-power-%E2%80%93-it-real-alternative-work>