ELECTIONS AND POLITICS IN THE POST-ERSHAD ERA IN BANGLADESH

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In 1990 the resignation of President General Hossain Muhammad Ershad (henceforth Ershad) marked the fall of "dictatorship" and the beginning of "democracy" in Bangladesh. Since then, Bangladesh has had three national elections – February 1991, February 1996 and June 1996 – and each election seemed to be unique. However, once each election was over the post-election period followed a consistent pattern, i.e., while the opposition political party, that is, the minority seats winner in the Jatiyo Sangsad (National Assembly), claimed election to be "rigged and unfair", the party which formed the government, that is, the party which won the majority of the seats, declared the election to be "free and fair". Consequently, in the aftermath of the election the opposition party or parties became engaged mainly in bringing down the regime rather than anything else. Perhaps this is quite a common phenomenon in many other Third World countries as well. It raises an important question: Why is it so? It seems that this is due fact that complete democratic conditions, values, and procedures are distant ideals unattainable in these countries in view of various socio-political, economic and human factors.

Many scholars on elections believe that election is nothing but the constitutional gateway to power. It usually allows the clever and powerful people to make the masses yield power to them in an acceptable way. ¹ The elitist and pluralist liberal thinkers are very critical of elections in those systems. According to Mosca, an elitist thinker, "the representative is not elected by the voters, but as a rule, has himself elected by them." ² Joseph Schumpeter, also remarks, "the choice of the electorate does not flow from its initiative but is being shaped, and the shaping of it is an essential part of the democratic process." ³ According to Talcott Parsons, "competition does not exist between candidates" in these

² Quoted in Bottomore, Elites and Society, p. 5

160
elections. In a similar way, Anthony Downs points out that political parties in these systems "are analogous to entrepreneurs in a profit seeking economy. So as to attain their private ends, they formulate whatever policies they believe will gain the most votes just as entrepreneurs produce whatever products they believe will gain the most profit for the same reasons." Even Gramsci who extended Marx's views commented, "all that is necessary is to have ideological supremacy (or better supremacy of passions) on the chosen day, in order to win a majority which will govern for four or five years in spite of the fact that the mass of the electorate would dissociate itself from its legal expressions once passions have died down."

Consequently, the party or parties which are defeated in the election cannot accept the results of the election and begins to defeat the whole purpose of the election. It begins to mobilize the masses in the streets to bring about the fall of the government by any means. The ruling party, on the other hand, spends much of its time in meeting the strategies of the opposition because its survival in power becomes crucial in the post-electoral stage. The question is: does this apply in the case of Bangladesh? In order to answer this query, this paper will examine the last three elections of Bangladesh — February 1991, February 1996 and June 1996 elections. It is only through a detailed analysis of these elections that one can assess the post-electoral developments, and consequent failure of democracy in Bangladesh.

THE 1991 ELECTION

The Election:

Chief Justice Sahabuddin Ahmed, as the agreed candidate of the two principal opposition groups (headed by the Awami League [henceforth AL] and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party [henceforth BNP]), assumed the office of President of Bangladesh upon resignation of President Ershad on December 8, 1990. He was given the authority to temporarily rule the nation and to call the election for parliament as soon as possible. Accordingly, he declared an election to be held on February 27, 1991. It was clear that competition would revolve around two main political parties — the AL and the BNP. The just ousted ruling party of Ershad, the Jatiya Party (JP) was expected to be excluded from participating in the election. However, the Election Commission decided to allow all registered parties including JP to contest. There were many other small parties including

6 Antonio Gramsci, Passato e Presente (Turn: Einaudi, 1952), p. 158

161
Jamaat-I-Islam on the extreme right and the Communist led five-party Alliance on the extreme left which participated in the election. While the BNP contested all but one of the 300 general seats the AL contested for 263 seats and offered the nominations of 37 seats to its allied parties. The JP filed nominations for 270 seats and the Jamaat-I-Islam contested for 221 seats. Altogether 2,350 candidates from 76 parties including independents submitted their nominations. 7

During the election campaign the AL concentrated on five issues; first, the introduction of parliamentary system replacing the presidential system; second, to holding the trial of those who assassinated AL leader, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (Mujib), President of Bangladesh in August 1975; third, bringing back the socialist policies of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman; fourth, re-establishing secularism in Bangladesh as the party was dead-against the principle of integrating religion into politics; finally, introducing a democratic government free of military interference. The Awami League propagated the slogan of the liberation war, Joy Bangla (victory to Bengal).

The BNP, on the other hand, criticized the AL by pointing out that it was Mujib who abolished the parliamentary system and instituted presidential, one-party civilian authoritarian system in early 1975. It also accused the AL of being too closely associated with India. The BNP appeared as a pragmatic party with some fresh ideas for the development of the country. Thus in the election campaign, first, it emphasized the implementation of General Zia's (founder leader of the party) 19-point programme which included rural development, furthering industrialization and privatization, population planning, health care delivery, etc. Secondly, Khaleda Zia, widow of President Zia and the leader of the BNP, claimed to continue with “the faith in Almighty Allah” rather than bringing back secularism. She declared support for retaining Ershad’s declaration of Islam as the state religion of Bangladesh. Thirdly, the party argued for the continuation of the presidential system. Finally, it propagated the slogan of Bangladesh zindabad (long live Bangladesh) which appeared to be more nationalistic compared to the AL’s slogan of Joy Bangla which had an Indian tone. 8

The other political parties which participated in the election appealed to the masses according to their own manifestos. The JP campaigned for continuing with the programme of President Ershad which in substance had little difference with those of the BNP. Another major party was the Jamaat-I-Islam which plumped for an Islamic state and, to a degree used anti-Indian feelings as a rallying point. The other Islamic parties also campaigned for the introduction of an Islamic state and differed only in terms of the specifics of the future state.

The results of the elections demonstrated a victory of the BNP which won 140, short of a majority, but well ahead of any other party. The BNP boosted its

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nominal strength by winning 28 of 30 reserved seats for women which made 168 seats, a clear majority of the 330 seat Assembly. The remaining 2 women’s seats went in favour of the Jamaat in return for which it offered support to the BNP. The Awami League won 88 seats, the Jatiya Party 35, and the Jamaat 18. The rest were scattered among independents and small parties. The final distribution of seats is shown in Table 1.

Table 1
The Results of February 1991 Election

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parties/ Independents</th>
<th>No. of Candidates Nominated</th>
<th>No. of Seats won</th>
<th>Percentage of votes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>30.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awami League (AL)</td>
<td>264</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>30.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jatiya Party</td>
<td>272</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>11.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamaat-I-Islam</td>
<td>222</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>12.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BAKSAL</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh Communist Party</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islami Oikkya Jote</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh Workers Party</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Awami Party (Mujaffar)</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jatiyo Samajtantrik Dal (Siraj)</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Democratic Party</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ganatantri Party</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independents</td>
<td>424</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: adapted from Zillur Rahman Khan, “Parliamentary Democracy in Bangladesh”, Asian Survey, Vol. 37, No. 6 (June 1997), p. 582

According to the constitution of Bangladesh candidates can contest in more than one constituency. Consequently, several persons won more than one seat. Khaleda won all of the five seats she contested and Ershad also won five of the five seats that he contested. Hasina, leader of the AL, contested in 3 seats but won only one seat. Many prominent politicians lost their bids for election. Overall, the BNP and the AL won 31% and 28% respectively of the popular vote. The JP and Jamaat won 12% and 6% votes respectively.

A number of reasons contributed to the success of the BNP and the failure of the AL in the elections. First, Khaleda, leader of the BNP, built up a very popular image during the anti-Ershad movement in the 1980s. On the contrary, Hasina, leader of the AL, had built a foul reputation for her willingness to partici-

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pate in the 1986 election under the Ershad regime and also for being too close to India. Secondly, the BNP made an issue-oriented campaign rather than just attacking the opposition which attracted the youth, the urban middle class, rural farmers and the business community. On the other hand, the AL presented a picture of a party not fully unified and basing its campaign on a past associated with Mujib, not a past remembered with affection by all. It did not give any fresh ideas. Also Hasina launched personal attacks on Khaleda. The success of the BNP gave Khaleda an opportunity to form the government. Nevertheless, the “bad mouthing” or character assassinations of the opposition continued in the post-electoral period.

Post-electoral Developments:

After the declaration of election results officially, President Ahmed invited Khaleda Zia, the leader of the BNP, to form the government. However, Hasina, leader of the AL, complained that the election was rigged and unfair, though the BNP including international observers claimed that the elections were free and fair. Khaleda Zia was sworn in as prime minister and proceeded to implement the programmes of the party. First, a constitutional amendment bill was put forward in the Assembly to transform the system from presidential to parliamentary, which was supported by the opposition parties as the AL plumped for a restoration of the parliamentary system. Although the BNP campaigned for the continuity of the presidential system in the election campaign, it brought the bill for a parliamentary system because it realized that “a parliamentary system would mean power in the House [BNP had a majority in the House] and not in the hands of a president whose role would become ceremonial if the changes were made.”

The politicians set the record of unity by passing the amendment to the constitution introducing parliamentary democracy in Bangladesh. With the passage of this bill, however, the honeymoon period of the BNP was over. The Awami League, the main opposition party, formed a troika with the other two opposition parties – the JP and the Jamaat – and started opposing every decision of the government. Sheikh Hasina, the opposition leader, said that “she would not allow the government to work peacefully even for a day.”

On the day of passing the annual budget in July 1992 the AL with its allies walked out of the Assembly. Then, on August 10, 1992, the opposition brought a vote of no confidence bill against the government. However, the bill was defeated as the BNP managed to have the support of 168 members of the Assembly. Being unsuccessful in its vote of no confidence the AL began to threaten to boycott the parliament. It asked the President to dissolve the parliament and

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164
hold fresh election under a caretaker neutral government. Prime minister Khaleda Zia, on the other hand, claimed that the provision for a caretaker government did not exist in the constitution. The political stand-off remained unsolved and the people from all walks of life were passing their days amidst endless anxiety. The two sides – the government and the opposition – were locked in an endless battle. Finally, British Commonwealth Secretary General’s emissary Sir Ninian Stephen came to Bangladesh to mediate a negotiated settlement of the political impasse, but failed to reach any consensus on the thorny question of a non-partisan caretaker government. Many other initiatives failed to break the deadlock. The opposition *troika* gave the deadline that if the demand for a caretaker government was not accepted by December 27, 1994 all opposition members of the parliament would resign en masse. The government was firm in its decision of considering a caretaker government to be unconstitutional. Consequently, on December 28, 1994 all opposition members resigned from the parliament and went to the streets to launch a protest against the government. The opposition *troika* called 24 hour, 72 hour, 96 hour and week-long strikes throughout the country to paralyse the government. The frequent general strikes, blockades and agitation brought disaster for the economy of the nation. Under the situation, on November 15, 1995, the President dissolved the parliament. Prime Minister Khaleda Zia declared that a last minute settlement was possible as the government was persisting on a solution of the current political impasse through the constitutional framework declared by the polls. She claimed that she had no other option than to dissolve parliament as the opposition refused to use the opportunity which would have enabled them to reach an honourable accord without violating the constitution. The Prime Minister said that there were bills for a caretaker government-tabled each by the Awami League, Jamaat and the Jatiya Party. None of the bills – differing from each other polls apart – was moved nor initiatives taken to push them through the usual parliamentary channel.

However, even the dissolution of parliament did not solve the problems because the opposition wanted a neutral caretaker government of un-elected persons, while the ruling party wanted to hold the polls within 90 days as prescribed by the constitution. Sheik Hasina and Khaleda Zia held several dialogues on the non-partisan caretaker government to hold the next general elections with participation of all political parties. On the one hand, Hasina said, “acceptance of the proposed non-party caretaker government is the only way to resolve the current political impasse,”12 Khaleda, on the other hand, said “let us sit discuss the issues relating to free and fair polling and your (Hasina’s) caretaker government issue would top the agenda for the dialogue.”13 However, Khaleda demanded that such a dialogue had be without any condition and within the constitutional framework. Meanwhile, the 90 day limit to hold the election according to the provision of the constitution was going to be over in the

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12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
political squabbles of both parties. Therefore, the Election Commission declared the national election to be held on February 15, 1996.

THE FEBRUARY 1996 ELECTION

The Election:

As soon as the elections date was declared the BNP began to get ready to participate in the election, but the AL started rallying the masses against the election because it would not be held under a neutral caretaker government. In other words, the AL and as well as the Jamaat and the JP boycotted the election. Besides the BNP, there were some other minor parties like the Freedom Party which submitted the nomination of their candidates. The campaign period was very short. The BNP mainly repeated its old programmes and promised to implement them further. The Freedom Party demanded return to the Presidential system and wanted to make sure that the AL could never come to power. The election was held on the scheduled date. The boycott of the main opposition parties to the election was, however, reflected through a call for a nation-wide hartal (general strikes) on the day of election. In the election, obviously the BNP had a sweeping victory as the main rival, the AL, did not submit any nominations; it won 289 of the 300 seats. The Freedom Party won 1 and Independents won 10 seats (see Table 2). In fact, there was no competition since the major opposition parties did not contest the election.

Table 2

The Results of February 1996 Election

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parties/Independents</th>
<th>No. of Candidates Nominated</th>
<th>No. of seats won</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>289</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom Party</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independents</td>
<td>424</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Post-electoral Developments:

Once the election was over, the President invited Khaleda Zia, leader of the BNP, to form the government. The opposition troika – the AL, the Jamaat and the JP – responded by calling a three day hartal on February 24, followed by a 36 hour hartal and a decision to launch an indefinite non-cooperation movement throughout the country from March 9, 1996 until their demand for new election under a neutral caretaker government was met. The non-stop hartals brought a disaster for the country; banks, ports, factories and shops were closed;
there were no transportation and communication from one place to another. In
the midst of such a chaos Prime Minister called the session of the parliament on
March 19, 1996. This was the first and the last session of the Sixth Parliament
in Bangladesh. The AL responded by staging violent protests. The government
deployed army in order to restore law and order. With the growing economic
and political crises various social groups became very concerned and in
a desperate effort to end the crisis. On March 11, 1996, nearly 500 businessmen
met under the auspices of the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Com­
merce and Industry (FBCCI) and issued a 48 hour ultimatum to the President to
invalidate the February elections. They also set a date for free and fair elections
under a neutral caretaker government. On March 16 teachers, doctors, journalists, lawyers, trade unions and NGOs joined the business community in public
rallies demanding the resignation of the government, the dissolution of parlia­
ment and a fresh election under a neutral caretaker government.

Despite the heavy pressure of the opposition political parties as well as the
support of almost all social groups from the society Prime Minister Khaleda re­
fused to yield. The crisis, however, reached a climax on March 25, when the
civil servants including the top ranking officers called for an indefinite strike of
all government employees. Faced by an open revolt of the government employ­
ees the BNP government passed the 13th amendment to the constitution provid­
ing for the creation of an interim government to conduct all future elections in
the country. Then she dissolved the parliament in the hope of neutralizing the
opposition and retaining a role in the formation of caretaker government. Under
the constitutional authority, President Abdur Rahman Biswas appointed former
Chief Justice Habibur Rahman as chief adviser of a caretaker government on
March 30, 1996, and transferred all executive powers except defence to him.
The new caretaker government announced that the elections would be held on
June 12, 1996. The two-year nightmare had finally come to an end with both
sides claiming victory. Zillur Khan comments, “a total work stoppage by profes­
ional-occupational people including a powerful segment of the bureaucratic
leadership, together with a rapidly growing opposition mass movement of non­
co-operation and civil-disobedience, quickened the time sequence between the
dissolution of parliament, the resignation of the prime minister, the formation of
a neutral caretaker government, and a caretaker government-organized general
election held June 12 – 19.”

14 Stanley A. Kochanek, “The Rise of Interest Politics in Bangladesh”, Asian Survey,
Vol. 36, No. 7 (July 1996), pp. 704-722
15 Zillur Khan, “Parliamentary Democracy”, op. cit. p. 580

167
THE JUNE 1996 ELECTION

The Election:

The June 1996 election is one of the most significant elections in the history of Bangladesh as it took place under a neutral caretaker government. On June 12, national election was held in Bangladesh for the second time in less than four months. The nomination papers for 2,572 candidates were approved by the Election Commission and 80-approved political parties registered for the election. However, only four parties – the AL, BNP, JP and the Jamaat – contested all 300 seats and the main contest was between the BNP and the AL. While the political parties were getting ready for campaigning for the election, there was an attempted coup d’etat by the military. On May 12, President Biswas fired General Abu Saleh Mohammad Nasim, Chief of the Staff of the Army, because he refused to carry out the order of the President to retire two of his generals who were alleged to be consorting with political parties in violation of military rules. Nasim not only refused to dismiss these generals, but also ordered troops from outside Dhaka to march on the capital. Consequently, President Biswas dismissed Nasim and appointed a new Chief of Staff, mobilized loyal soldiers in Dhaka to surround the President’s palace, and ordered the Dhaka units to stop the troops marching toward the capital. The attempted coup d’etat failed and Dhaka returned to normal. The political parties went back to their election campaign.

In the election campaign, the main contesting parties propagated their future plans and programmes. The BNP proclaimed that Bangladesh had a golden time during the BNP regimes. Khaleda Zia reiterated that her government took all the steps, like Malaysia, Singapore and South Korea, to develop the economy of Bangladesh, however, the AL’s call for a total of 170 days of strikes prevented the successful implementation of these programmes. She attacked the AL as antidemocratic, politically incompetent, and a pro-Indian stooge. She reminded the people of her achievements, such as increasing the age limit for government jobs from 25 to 30 years, increased rate of salaries and pensions, etc. On the contrary, Hasina, leader of the AL, sought to diffuse the BNP attack by apologizing for any mistakes made by her father’s government during 1972 – 75 and declaring that she would not renew the 25-year treaty of friendship and cooperation with India. In fact, she tried to show her humbleness and promised to ensure the independence of the judiciary, free the media, eliminate terrorism on university campuses, provide financial assistance to farmers, end corruption and nepotism, repeal all repressive laws, eliminate political interference in the administration, and secure a fare share of Ganges water from India. In order to

please the Islamists she performed her omra haj (temporary pilgrimage) and covered her whole body with a veil and in her public speeches she quoted from the Quran and cited stories from the Hadiths (sayings of the Prophet). The JP mainly propagated the achievements of Ershad during nine years of his rule. The Jamaat appealed to the masses to vote for their candidates because they would establish the rule of honest people according to Quranic principles. All the political parties supported decentralization of the administration. Finally, the election took place on the appointed day and voter turnout reached a record high of 73.19% of eligible voters. Although no party won an absolute majority, the AL emerged as the largest single party, winning 135 seats and 37.47% of the vote. The BNP was the second with 104 seats and 33.34% of the vote. The JP got 29 seats and 16.10% of the vote. The major setback was for the Jamaat which won only 3 seats while it won 18 seats in 1991 election. The leftist party also suffered a heavy defeat. One independent candidate won but joined the AL immediately after the election. Due to electoral irregularities, the Election Commission ordered re-polling in 27 constituencies, after which the AL ended up with 147 seats, the BNP a total of 116, the JP 32, the Jamaat 3 and the others 2 seats (see Table 3).

Table 3
The Results of June 1996 Election

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parties/Independents</th>
<th>No. of Candidates Nominated</th>
<th>No. of Seats won</th>
<th>percentage of Votes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Awami League (AL)</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>37.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jatiya Party (JP)</td>
<td>293</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>16.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamaat-I-Islam</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islami Oikkya Jote</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jatio Samajtantrik Dal (JSD - Rob)</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh Communist Party</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workers Party</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom Party</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ganatantri Party</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Awami Party (Mujaffar)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independents</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Government of Bangladesh, Election Commission, 1996

A number of reasons contributed to the success of the AL and the failure of the BNP in the election. First, Khaleda already lost her popularity by 1996 due to her uncompromising stand against the idea of caretaker government of the opposition. In addition, her insistence on holding the February 15 election exhausted the party, tarnished its image due to widespread charges of rigging, and
unified the opposition. On the contrary, Hasina earned the popularity before the election by appealing to the nation for apologizing the AL for their past mistakes during 1972 – 75. Secondly, the AL’s demand for caretaker government was a well thought out strategy that brought definite advantage to Hasina because the idea was supported by the press, professionals and intelligentsia. Furthermore, the AL campaigned during the election in more practical terms that is Hasina promised some positive issues for implementation if she got into power. All these led to her victory in the election but she had to respond as usual to the charges of the opposition in the post-electoral stage.

Post-electoral Developments:

Within a month of the election results the President invited Hasina, the leader of the AL and the majority party, to form the government. However, just as the AL had refused to accept its defeat in 1991 elections, the BNP refused to accept its defeat in 1996 and charged that the election had been rigged. The formation of the government by the AL was possible because the JP announced its unconditional support for the AL. While Khaleda Zia sent a message congratulating Hasina on becoming Prime Minister, she continued to believe the election had been rigged. The BNP refused an offer by the AL to join a government of “national consensus”, and charged Hasina with attempting to create a new version of the notorious Bangladesh Krishak (Peasants) Shramik (Workers) Awami League (BAKSAL), the one party dictatorship erected by her father in 1975.

While the election results disappointed Khaleda, Hasina and her party saw the two-year movement against the BNP and its victory in the June election as a return to power of the “nation’s rightful rulers.” The AL government announced it would reinstate all the dreams of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Hasina’s father. Hasina, as Prime Minister, ordered pictures of Mujib to be placed in all government offices, declared the day he was assassinated, August 15, as a national day of mourning, and vowed to bring justice for all those responsible for killing her father, mother, brothers and other members of the family. The Jatiyo Sangsad repealed the Indemnity Ordinance, which had banned the trial of those who killed his father in 1975. The government proceeded quickly to arrest the coup leaders. On the other hand, Khaleda attempted to develop a viable strategy to topple the government. She was following the example set by the AL during the period of the BNP rule, that is demonstrations, hartals, and move-

19 Ibid.
ment politics in the streets accompanied by walkout and boycotts of parliament that would ultimately lead to the resignation of opposition MPs and a call for new elections. However, she required a strong issue to be successful. In the early months of 1997 the opportune moment for the opposition came, when the government failed to respond satisfactorily to a host of civic and economic problems: power outages, a growing mosquito menace in Dhaka, a sluggish economy, and the collapse of the Dhaka stock market. Khaleda Zia insisted that a government which could not meet the ordinary problems of the citizens, had no right to rule and should resign. The Jamaat-I-Islam which supported the AL during anti-BNP movement now joined the BNP which called its first hartal on March 23, 1997 to protest the government’s pro-Indian policies and the failure to revive the economy, end the power crisis and acute water shortages. On July 3, 1997 the BNP called its second hartal to protest government policies and it was followed on July 15 by a sunrise to sunset hartal organized by Jamaat-I-Islam. The unrest of July gradually began to grow, and by September an anti-government movement started to take shape as a group of smaller opposition parties on the right joined forces with the BNP. The strength of the opposition increased further when the Jatiya Party withdrew its support of the government. The BNP had called a series of agitational programmes to demand pay increases for public employees and to protest against sharp price increases in fuel and power, law and order problems, the repression of party workers, a halting economy, and the government’s pro-Indian policies. The government’s response, however, added fuel to the fire of BNP protests by banning street demonstrations, removing a floating bailey bridge to the tomb of General Ziaur Rahman (founder of the BNP, former President of Bangladesh, and husband of Khaleda), and talk of changing the name of Zia International Airport in Dhaka, which had been named in honour of the late BNP leader. The opposition responded by declaring hartals after hartals. Khaleda declared that she would bring down the government by March 1998. It was not only in the streets that the BNP used the same tactics as the AL, it also practised the same in the session of the parliament, that is walkouts and boycotts of parliament. The BNP alleged that the opposition members were not free to speak in the Assembly. It put forward a 14-point charter of demands that had to be met before it could return. These demands included a government pledge that no major decision would be taken without the approval of the parliament, neutral conduct of business in the Assembly, impartiality of state-run radio and television, withdrawal of false cases against opposition MPs, fair prices for agricultural products, reduction of fuel prices and effective steps to stop the repression of women, etc. Meanwhile, the government signed the Chittagong Hill Tracts Accord with the Shanti Bahini (peace corps) which gave a hot issue to the opposition to strengthen its

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171
The BNP refused to return to the parliament unless the Accord was declared void because the Accord posed a threat to nation’s sovereignty. The other opposition parties also joined the movement. An opposition alliance led by the BNP undertook a “motor-march” from Dhaka to the Chittagong Hill Tract to protest the Accord. The government held several dialogues with the BNP and finally convinced the opposition to return to parliament. The BNP has returned to parliament vowing to continue its anti-government agitation both inside and outside Parliament. However, it has not been successful yet in bringing down the government. The AL regime is, on the other hand, looking forward to complete its term in 2001.

CONCLUSION

It is evident that the greatest tragedy of Bangladesh and perhaps most of the Third World countries is that due to the arrogance, cowardice, and selfishness of the politicians the political institutions like elections which are conducive for the growth of democracy and establishment of democratic traditions are never allowed to develop. Bangladesh began its journey of democracy in 1971, but within four years a last nail in the coffin of democracy was put by the regime, when Mujib transformed Bangladesh into presidential and one-party system in 1975. This was followed by a military regime headed by General Ziaur Rahman who later civilianized the regime and ruled the nation under a democratic facade for five years until his assassination in 1981. For the second time martial law was imposed in 1982 by General Ershad who ruled the country for almost a decade until his fall in 1990. Under the disguise of civilian rule he also offered two national elections, but none of experiments satisfied the aspirations of the people for a freely elected democratic government. In this way the democratic institution building process was halted, meandered, strayed and deviated again and again in Bangladesh.

Upon the fall of Ershad in 1990 a full pledged democratic process began again and Bangladesh returned to parliamentary democracy in 1991. However, it appears that elections and electoral politics have never been healthy and smooth due to the lack of tolerance of the opposition on the one hand and the stubbornness of the government, on the other. In the last three elections each party blamed the other after the announcement of the election results, and politics in the streets took over from politics in parliament. Because of the lack of

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22 Tribal peoples in Chittagong Hill Tracts had been struggling for autonomy since 1950 and after the independence of Bangladesh an organization called *Shanti Bahini* was formed by the freedom fighters who led the insurgency movement in the area. The Hasina government made an agreement in 1997 giving them partial autonomy. For details of the agreement see Syed Serajul Islam, “The Tribes of Chittagong Hill Tracts”, *Asian Culture Quarterly*, Vol. 24, No. 39 (Autumn, 1996).

23 *Daily Star*, June 12, 1998
tolerance and narrow-mindedness of the politicians Bangladesh is constantly and continuously in turmoil and the meagre resources of the state instead of being channelled towards the welfare of the masses are wasted by both government and opposition in useless confrontation between them. Although they claim that the interest of the people is very near and dear to them their actions betray their words. They waste their precious time and energy on trying to bring each other down, the nation being the ultimate loser in the process.

Thus, the future of democracy in Bangladesh is very uncertain. The trend of en masse resignation of the members of parliament and the continuous hartals and blockades against the elected government have created a threat to the growth of a nascent democracy. The famous French political philosopher, Jean Rousseau, once said, “man is born free but everywhere in chains.” Perhaps this statement can be adapted to the prevailing situation in Bangladesh in a slightly modified form – people of Bangladesh are born free but they are everywhere in the chains of politicians and in order to make the people free politicians need mutual accommodation and understanding.