

## Endgame for Bi-party Dichotomy in Bangladesh

### What is the issue?

\n\n

\n

- Former Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Begum Khaleda Zia has been sentenced to five years rigorous imprisonment in a corruption case.

\n

- As she continues to hold the reigns of the Bangladesh National Party (BNP), the verdict is bound to severely affect its credibility as an alternative.

\n

\n\n

### What is the political history?

\n\n

\n

- Since secession in 1971, Bangladesh's polity has been more or less evenly divided between the Awami League (AL) and the BNP.

\n

- They've mostly traded office after every election since 1991.

\n

- **Bad Reputation** - BNP sowed the seeds of its current political disenfranchisement with its irresponsible governance from 2001 to 2006.

\n

- BNP-led alliance was openly corruption, leading 'Transparency International' to rank Bangladesh as the most corrupt country for five years in a row.

\n

- It presided over a time of unprecedented violence against the country's minority community and the political opposition.

\n

- This included the assassination of two senior AL leaders and a grenade attack on an AL public meeting that killed 24 people and injured over 300.

\n

- Notably, the current PM Sheikh Hasina, had narrowly survived the attack and Ms. Zia's son is one of the accused facing trial in the case.

\n

- The BNP's misrule came to an end when a military-backed caretaker government seized power in January 2007.

\n

- **The Opposition Years** - When elections were held in December 2008, AL saw a landslide victory, and the BNP began its downward slide.

\n

- During its tenure, the AL succeeded in leveraging the perquisites of office to rebuild itself into the dominant political force in the country.

\n

- Simultaneously, the BNP suffered the usual indignities and routine repression of opposition, which is common in Bangladesh.

\n

- But despite this, aided by anti-incumbency, the BNP was still a very strong contender when elections were called in 2013.

\n

\n\n

## **How did the current mesh unfold?**

\n\n

\n

- **Unsuccessful Revolt** - The AL had amended the constitution to do away with the caretaker government provision for holding elections, in 2013.

\n

- This was done as there was a fearful that this could be used as cover for another military takeover, like the one in 2007.

\n

- As opinion polls indicated a decent popularity for the BNP, there was every possibility of it returning to power through elections.

\n

- But instead, BNP resorted to street protests to restore the caretaker government provision and made it a precondition for electoral participation.

\n

- While a solid majority of the country agreed with the BNP's position, it still failed to either force the government to capitulate or the army to step in.

\n

- Contrarily, BNP protests got increasingly violent, which blotted its public popularity and also raised serious questions as to its own fitness for office.

\n

\n\n

\n

- **Recent Trends** - The BNP boycott of the 2014 elections, saw AL retaining power with a massive victory and subsequently consolidating its strangle hold.

\n

- Contrarily, BNP has withered continuously since, partly due to severe government repression and partly due to its own intrinsic shortcomings.  
\n
- Many senior BNP leaders have been arrested for long terms and local leaders and cadre are on the run or have gone underground.  
\n
- Also, recently, BNP chairperson, Ms.Khalela Zia has also been convicted by the supreme court for corruption, and has been sentenced to 5 years in jail.  
\n
- This has decimated the party's organisational capacity and its ability to mobilise resources, and it is almost 11 years since it was in power.  
\n
- All these factors gives rise to the perception that the bi-party dichotomy in Bangladesh is coming to an end with AL emerging as the sole primary pole.  
\n

\n\n

### **How does the future look?**

\n\n

- **2019 elections** - The term for AL will end in 2019 and elections must be called before then, which might possibly see another walkover from the BNP.  
\n
- This will likely strengthen the AL and also result in the BNP seeing a elationtion of its registration as per the election law.  
\n
- But this might rise legitimacy problems internationally and would also not be to the liking of India, which is AL's principle international ally.  
\n
- Hence, the best-case scenario for the AL would be securing the participation of a weakened BNP in the election, possibly without Ms. Zia.  
\n
- **Possible scenarios** - Ms.Zia's current conviction would automatically disqualify her, unless her appeal seeking 'Special Leave' is accepted.  
\n
- If the appeal is granted and she subsequently gets a bail from prison, she will be able to contest the elections, albeit with a taint of corruption.  
\n
- Defection of the second rung leadership of BNP due to Zia's unpopularity or a revealing against her from within are hence real possibilities.  
\n
- Hence, the jailing of Ms. Zia even temporarily will be a body blow to the BNP, which in any case does not look like a credible challenger for 2019.

\n

- While a resurrection by BNP form here looks difficult, it can't be written off completely, as the opposition space is without perceivable contenders.

\n

\n\n

\n\n

**Source: The Hindu**

\n

