

## Bangladesh into poll gear despite boycott by parties

Bangladesh has begun to get into the election mode with the announcement of civic polls slated for Aug 4, despite a boycott by major political parties who want early parliamentary elections.

Political analysts explain this process as a seeming contradiction in the public posture of the parties seeking to pressurise the government, while galvanising the party cadres to keep them from feeling frustrated and keeping the powder dry in case a compromise is reached.

The past record of boycotts has been one of parties fielding their candidates unofficially so that the political space is not yielded to the rivals.

In doing so, they would be making optimum use of the relaxation in curbs on political activity that the government has afforded them temporarily to facilitate the elections.

While the party leaderships are tuned to a boycott, the country is gearing up for the polls after the Election Commission announced a timetable last week for municipal corporations and municipalities, The Daily Star noted Monday.

A hundred aspirants, whose political affiliations were not clear, returned 'disappointed' in Sylhet, north-eastern Bangladesh, when told that the nomination papers for the elections had not arrived from the Election Commission.

The boycotting parties are seeking to make the best use of a situation in which they are handicapped. Sheikh Hasina of the Awami League (AL) is in the US for medical treatment. Khaleda Zia, and her sons, of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) are in jail and so is Jamaat-e-Islami's chief Motiur Rahman Nizami.

The BNP-led four-party coalition has already threatened to resist the local government polls while the AL has demanded withdrawal of the schedule and holding of the parliamentary election first.

The government's attempt to weaken the boycott came Sunday in the form of an assurance from Home Affairs Advisor M.A. Matin that there would be 'no major offensive' to nab those involved in corruption.

Over 200 national leaders and many more at lower level leaders are languishing in jail on graft charges. Many have been tried and convicted.

The grassroots level leaders of all major political parties, especially the AL and the BNP, have, however, already started campaigns for the local government polls despite opposition from their high commands.

Talking to The Daily Star, many grassroots level leaders of the BNP said they would take part in the polls no matter what the party decides.

Many AL leaders said the grassroots level leaders would take part in the local body election under a different banner if the party does not formally take part in it.

The BNP might come up with its formal stance shortly after consulting with chairperson Zia. The consultations are held through lawyers whenever Zia is brought to the special court for trial.

The boycotting parties say the interim government of Chief Advisor Fakhruddin Ahmed is bound under the constitution only to hold elections to parliament.

However, senior politician and legal luminary, Kamal Hossain, who is known to advise the present government, said Sunday that there was no legal or constitutional bar on the government holding civic polls.

Meanwhile, the Jatiya Party (JP) of former president H.M. Ershad, the only major party to welcome the civic polls, has asked party men 'to elect honest and potential candidates'.

Ershad told a rally in Rangpur, his political bastion in northern Bangladesh, that the BNP-led four-party alliance would not be able to resist the local government elections because it had become the demand of the people of the country.

'People will foil their attempt to resist the local government elections,' Ershad was quoted as saying.

The AL has said the civic polls could jeopardise the parliamentary polls. But Chief Advisor Ahmed told an Asian Development Bank (ADB) delegation last Saturday that the government would keep its promise of holding the general elections in the third week of December.

These polls, he said, would be 'free from black money and muscle power'.

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