

Khaleda Zia invites Ershad to join alliance

Dhaka - Bangladesh Prime Minister Khaleda Zia has invited former president Hussain Muhammad Ershad, her one-time rival, to join her alliance in a major effort at political realignment ahead of parliamentary elections due next year.

Reporting the 'exclusive' meeting at the Prime Minister's Office between the two, the Daily Star newspaper said that Ershad promised that he would not join the rival alliance led by former prime minister Sheikh Hasina of the Awami League, or any other grouping opposed to Zia's four-party alliance ruling the country.

Ershad, who met Zia on Sunday with his wife Roushan, a lawmaker, told media later that he had met the prime minister for 'solely personal reasons', which included a dispute over a house that had been allotted to him when he was in power.

Media reports said Zia agreed to take care of the house dispute, asking him in return not to join any rival alliance.

Both Zia and Hasina had combined forces - the only time so far - to oust Ershad through a mass movement in 1990. Ershad came to power in 1982 in a politico-military move and remains the country's longest-serving ruler. Ershad's ouster paved the way for parliamentary elections in 1991.

Political analysts say that a political pact between Zia and Ershad, or even Ershad's neutrality, could weigh the political balance against the Awami League and the 14-party opposition combine, and be in favour of Zia and her alliance that includes the Islamists led by Jamaat-e-Islami.

Although lacking in personal charisma, Ershad, a former army chief, enjoys personal popularity and has kept getting re-elected from more than one parliamentary constituency, despite years of incarceration on charges of corruption.

Ershad's Jatiyo Party has 14 lawmakers in the 300-member Jatiyo Sangsad (National Assembly).

A highly placed source in the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), speaking on condition of anonymity, told The Daily Star newspaper that Zia's eldest son Tarique Rahman, also BNP joint secretary general, and the prime minister's Political Secretary M. Harris Chowdhury were present at the meeting on Sunday that lasted till evening.

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