

Parties up in arms against Bangladesh's new poll law

Bangladesh's political parties have opposed the new election law that stipulates compulsory registration, provides for a 'no vote' and bans them from having front organisations and offices outside the country.

The Representation of the People (Amendment) Ordinance, promulgated on Tuesday and made public Thursday, also authorises the Election Commission to cancel an election, or the candidature of a person for violation of election laws or its code of conduct.

Many of the provisions are unprecedented and political parties say the military-backed interim government, which does not have a popular mandate, has no authority to introduce them.

Major political parties, including the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), have opposed the amendments, saying they could not accept any such changes in the electoral law made under the state of emergency - in force since January last year.

They said the government had made the changes in the electoral law 'only to obstruct the furtherance of the political and democratic process', New Age newspaper said.

All political parties have separate youth, women, labour and other wings, and the bigger ones have branches abroad.

The new law says that no person, not listed in the electoral roll of any constituency, can contest the general elections.

The constitution, however, says any person who is a citizen of the country can contest the general elections.

The poll body failed to register many voters, including the estimated 160,000 Urdu-speaking non-Bengalis, despite a court directive in May to grant them citizenship and ensure that they be enrolled as voters.

The ordinance amends the law enacted after Bangladesh's emergence in 1971.

It also bars a person holding any office of profit in the service of the republic or of a statutory public authority from contesting general elections. Anybody who is holding or has resigned or retired as chief executive of any NGO cannot contest either unless a period of three years has elapsed.

According to the order, no person convicted as a war criminal by any national or international court or tribunal will be allowed to contest the polls.

This is an emotional issue in Bangladesh as thousands were killed during the 1971 freedom movement and leaders of that era are in active politics now.

Parties say they were consulted, but their suggestions have been ignored.

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