

Bangladesh government has to decide - poll or agitation

Elections or mass agitation - only a last minute compromise could halt Bangladesh's swing between the two extremes with former prime minister Khaleda Zia's deadline for accepting her demands ending Wednesday evening.

Zia and her Islamist allies have threatened to boycott the Dec 18 elections. Their demands include a two-month deferment of the already delayed poll to facilitate the return of Muslims who have gone on Haj and return only in the third week of January.

The government's renewed scramble for reaching an all party consensus about the parliamentary poll date failed to produce any result Tuesday as the Zia-led Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) stuck to its demand for postponing the poll at least until mid-January next year while the Awami League-led alliance refused to accept any date past the year end.

Instructed by Chief Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed, who performs prime ministerial functions, a delegation of five government advisers met a team of BNP representatives led by Zia and then with a delegation of the Awami League (AL)-led coalition and Jatiya Party (Ershad) led by another former prime minister, Sheikh Hasina.

The talks proved inconclusive, raising the spectre of a mass movement - the very reason the poll was postponed in January last year leading to the imposition of a national emergency, political analysts said.

The New Age newspaper said in an editorial: 'We must point out that the remaining demand of the alliance, i.e. for fresh election schedule 'to allow Haj pilgrims to cast their ballots', smacks of cheap populist stunt. First of all, the Haj pilgrims totalling 40,000 or so constitute a minute percentage of the total voting population.

'Second, given that they come from different constituencies, their absence is highly unlikely to have any significant impact on the polls results. It makes little sense, therefore, to press for deferring elections just on this ground.'

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