

Dhaka polls on schedule, Zia and Islamists may boycott

Bangladesh was on a political precipice Wednesday with prospects of a mass agitation breaking out after the caretaker government's talks with former prime minister Khaleda Zia and her Islamist allies failed. The government said the already delayed polls would be held as scheduled Dec 18.

The deadline that Zia had set for the government to accept her demands ended Wednesday with no solution in sight. Zia and her allies had threatened a mass agitation if their demands were not met.

Their demands included a two-month deferment of the polls to facilitate the return of Muslims who have gone on Haj and return only in the third week of January.

The military-backed interim government, while saying that the talks with Zia had failed and that the election would be held on schedule, appealed to all parties to participate to make the exercise an all-in affair.

Commerce Advisor (minister) and principal interlocutor of the government Hossain Zillur Rahman said at the end of the parleys: 'Despite every means of communication and highest level of efforts, the Election Commission and the government could not reach a consensus with both alliances.

'Under the circumstances, the government and the EC would earnestly wish that all political parties would participate in the elections according to the schedule for the sake of greater national interest and sustainable democracy.'

The government, meanwhile, also began preparing contingency plans, cancelling leave of police force and asking all personnel to report on duty to prevent any untoward incidents.

The police headquarters issued the orders, as the last date for filing the nomination for the national elections ends Thursday and a major political camp took an implicit stance of staying away if its demands were not met by the deadline, the United News of Bangladesh (UNB) news agency said.

The government's renewed scramble for reaching an all-party consensus about the parliamentary poll date had failed to produce any result Tuesday as well 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 yearend.

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 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.

Bangladesh's ninth general election was called off amidst political turmoil in Jan 11 last year and a state of emergency was imposed that continues.

Zia's rival Sheikh Hasina had then boycotted the poll.

As for Zia's demand, The New Age newspaper Wednesday 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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