

Zia undecided as government, Hasina, diplomats urge early poll

Foreign envoys have lent support to a call by Bangladesh's caretaker government, endorsed by most political parties, urging former prime minister Khaleda Zia and her Islamist allies to participate in the Dec 18 parliamentary poll.

There was still no last word Thursday from Zia and the Islamists, who attacked the military-backed government and the Election Commission, but stopped short of announcing a poll boycott.

The call for an early election gained momentum in the light of political turmoil that a mass agitation threatened by Zia could generate.

The ninth general election was called off in January last year after such turmoil.

Officials of Zia-led Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the Jamaat-e-Islami (Jel), were huddled in talks after their ultimatum to the government expired Wednesday evening but were undecided on the poll, media reports said.

They claimed that they had not been consulted and that the government was trying to keep them out of the poll.

However, the government made the announcement late Wednesday evening after what The Daily Star called 'a desperate scramble for talks', that it would not postpone the election as demanded by Zia and her allies.

The call by the government and election commission received full backing of Zia's principal rival Sheikh Hasina, who called for election on Dec 18 'with participation of all.'

While Dec 18 remained unchanged as the date for polling, the Election Commission Thursday rearranged the timetables for scrutiny of nominations and last date for withdrawals for both the parliamentary and 'upazila' (sub-district) elections, Star Online said.

According to the new schedule, the nomination papers for the parliamentary election will be scrutinised on Nov 25 and 26 and the deadline for withdrawal of nominations is Dec 1.

Should Zia and her BNP stay out, it is likely that the Islamists may remain in the poll fray, The Daily Star said quoting political sources.

To meet such an eventuality, Hasina and her allies were contemplating to contest as rivals to deny political space to the Islamists.

The ploy, The Daily Star said, was to deny the Islamists the scope to garner the BNP's share of the vote.

As for the diplomatic corps, French envoy Charley Causeret, who met Hasina, said: 'Elections are an internal matter of Bangladesh. I should not make any comment. But what I can say about the election is that the sooner, the better.'

'We believe the people of Bangladesh want a free and fair election with the fullest possible participation,' said a spokesperson for the British High Commission reacting to the latest pre-election development.

Envoys of six Arab nations called on Zia, but refused to take a public stand on the timing of the poll, saying it was Bangladesh's internal matter.

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