



January 3, 2014

RETURN OF THE BASKET CASE

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Bangladesh rarely registers in the minds of most Americans, but U.S. policymakers would be well advised to devote some urgent attention to the country. As things stand now, general elections scheduled for Jan. 5 look virtually guaranteed to leave a trail of bitter division, wide-scale violence, and chaos in their wake. That's a surefire recipe for disaster — especially in the world's third most populous Muslim-majority nation.

Born of civil war in 1971, Bangladesh's early history was plagued by cycles of political violence and heavy-handed military intervention. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger once derisively labeled it the „basket case“ of South Asia. But while chronic instability continues to plague other poor countries, Bangladesh over the past 25 years has made remarkable progress in establishing civil government and democratic norms. One of the keys to its success was the creation of an institution known as the poll-time caretaker government — a neutral cabinet of

technocrats seated 90 days before national elections with the sole purpose of ensuring a free and fair ballot. Under this system, Bangladesh witnessed multiple democratic transitions over two decades, while turning itself into a center of low-cost global manufacturing where living standards have steadily risen, infant mortality has fallen, and the status of women has improved dramatically.

Now, however, that progress has been put at great peril.

Kissinger's basket case looks set to return. The cause, not surprisingly, is politics — particularly, the aftermath of the unilateral decision in 2011 by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her ruling Awami League (AL) party to abolish the caretaker government system from the Constitution. The reckless maneuver has created a violent impasse between the Awami League and its main political opposition about how to hold credible elections, prompting statements of concern in recent weeks from Washington, the European Union, the United Na-

tions, even China — which almost never takes a position on the internal politics of other states.

Hasina has ignored the expressions of worry and refused to relinquish power to a neutral government to oversee the Jan. 5 elections. Instead, she formed an „all-party“ election-time government in late November that is comprised mostly of members of her immediate past cabinet. AL losses in local elections since 2011 gave Hasina a strong incentive to retain control over the national ballot to ensure her party emerges victorious over more conservative and Islamist foes.

Fearing the AL will rig the 2014 vote, opposition parties have responded with huge protests. Ensuing clashes with security forces have triggered Bangladesh's worst pre-election turmoil in almost two decades, leaving more than 100 protesters dead and the main opposition party's leader under virtual house arrest. This past weekend, the government shut down transportation into Bangladesh's capital and arrested hundreds, inclu-

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ding senior opposition leaders, as part of a wider coordinated effort to block an opposition rally from being held.

Further stoking tensions, the government has orchestrated war crimes trials against leaders of Bangladesh's main Islamist party and its allies for sins allegedly committed 40 years ago during the country's founding. Seven opposition leaders have been sentenced to death or executed as part of a campaign that international observers have criticized for lacking due process. During the 1971 war of independence, heinous crimes were

committed against the Bangladeshi people. Local collaborators should stand trial as is appropriate for any war criminal throughout the world, but not by a kangaroo court that makes a mockery of the judicial system. The precedent set by the lack of internationally acceptable judicial process in these trials means there is no telling what will come next in the AL government's push against its political opponents.

The country's largest opposition party, the Bangladesh National Party (BNP), has announced that it will boycott the elections. It has also re-

jected participation in the all-party interim government under Hasina's control — condemning it as a wholly inadequate substitute for a caretaker government, designed with the sole purpose of providing political cover for the AL's manipulation of the balloting.

Without the BNP's participation, the elections are almost certain to be viewed as a sham, lacking all legitimacy. Indeed, a survey of Bangladeshis had projected an overwhelming defeat for the AL if elections were held freely with all parties participating. Instead, Bangladesh has now been



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treated to the farce of 154 candidates already being officially certified as victors because they're running unopposed — securing an AL majority in the 300-seat parliament even before a single vote has been cast. Not surprisingly, in their own vote of no confidence, both the United States and the European Union have declined to send election observers.

This is a slow-motion train wreck that everyone can see coming. The democratic process is about to take a major hit in one of the world's largest Muslim-majority countries, where poverty remains endemic and radical Islamists lurk in the wings to exploit any opportunities that may arise. A fuse has been lit — and if it's allowed to go off it will almost certainly result in an explosion of ever-worsening protests, violence, and instability.

In an effort to avert the coming disaster, the United States, European Union, and United Nations have repeatedly encouraged the AL and BNP to engage in dialogue to resolve the crisis. Yet they have consistently stopped short of calling for the establishment of a neutral poll-time government — the only vehicle with a proven track record of ensuring sustainable elections. Officials in Washington may fear that voicing

support for a caretaker government would be seen as an endorsement of the BNP, and could hurt relations with an AL-led government if it prevails. But this wait-and-see approach has forfeited significant international leverage to shape a peaceful, credible electoral process that is capable of garnering legitimacy both in Bangladesh and abroad.

Though very late in the game, it's time for the international community to voice support for a clear and proven method for continuing Bangladesh's democratic elections. The world must denounce the coming electoral travesty in Bangladesh and call for the immediate installation of a neutral poll-time government that can ensure free, fair, credible, and inclusive elections. Bangladeshis themselves are calling out for this: a survey shows that almost 80 percent of the public supports elections administered by the non-political caretaker system, far more than the 28 percent who planned to vote for the AL that rejected the neutral poll-time government.

Time is running dangerously short. But aggressive diplomacy, led by Washington, still stands a chance of avoiding the worst-case outcome and helping Bangladesh's citizens sal-

vage the legitimacy of a democratic process that they've struggled hard to achieve. Though success is by no means guaranteed, the alternative to trying appears grim, indeed. If ever there was a time to exhaust the capacity for preventive diplomacy, this is it. With so much of the rest of the Islamic world descending into turmoil, now is not the time to stand on the sidelines as one of the world's largest Muslim countries slips inexorably into chaos.