

# WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 1559  
July 17, 2007

## Protecting Democracy in Bangladesh

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Yesterday's legal action against two former Bangladeshi prime ministers raises questions about the commitment of Dhaka's military-backed interim government to restoring democracy. Former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed was arrested on charges of extortion, and Khaleda Zia, prime minister from 1991 to 1996 and 2001 to 2006, was ordered to court on tax evasion charges. These actions came just one day after the interim government announced its road map for a return to democracy.<sup>1</sup> The U.S. should stress the importance of respect for individual liberties and due process of law as the interim government seeks to address the country's long-standing corruption problems. Washington should also encourage Dhaka to immediately lift its ban on political activity to demonstrate to Bangladeshis and the international community that it is committed to restoring democracy as soon as possible.

**Corruption and Democracy.** Bangladesh has been called one of the most corrupt nations in the world, and it had become increasingly apparent in recent years that corruption was weakening the country's democratic institutions and fostering an environment of political violence. In early January, the opposition Awami League announced its refusal to participate in elections, raising concerns that opening the polls would only provoke violence and chaos. With this backdrop, the international community initially welcomed the postponement of elections (originally scheduled for January 22, 2007) and the military's proclamation of a state of emergency.

Washington and many European capitals have since begun to grow impatient with the military's prolonged suspension of civil rights and delay in establishing an early election date. Over 170 major political figures (including the son of Khaleda Zia), businessmen, and cabinet ministers have been arrested on corruption charges over the last several months. Pressure from international capitals forced the interim government to backtrack on an attempt in April to exile both Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina.

Bangladeshis are increasingly skeptical of the interim government's intentions in light of its plan to delay elections by over a year and its continuing restrictions on political activity, which had been scheduled to end in early May. Although most Bangladeshis have been supportive of the effort to root out corruption, they seek signs that the interim government remains committed to restoring democracy and is not merely using anti-corruption efforts to pressure political opponents.

**Keeping the Islamists at Bay.** Another major concern is Islamists' growing presence in the country and the possibility that they will take advantage of weakened political institutions, poor governance, and growing frustration with corruption to increase

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
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Produced by the Asian Studies Center

Published by The Heritage Foundation  
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE  
Washington, DC 20002-4999  
(202) 546-4400 • [heritage.org](http://heritage.org)

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their influence in society. The U.S. has long valued Bangladesh as a moderate voice in the Muslim world. Widespread bombings in the country in August 2005 by extremists seeking to impose strict Islamic rule alarmed both domestic and international observers about the threat posed by local extremist groups. To its credit, the military-backed interim government has taken a tough line on extremism. In March of this year, it executed six extremists convicted in the August 2005 bombings.

The roughly equivalent political power of the two main political parties—Sheikh Hasina’s Awami League (AL) and Khaleda Zia’s Bangladesh National Party (BNP)—gave the relatively small Islamist parties a political voice disproportionate to their popular support.<sup>2</sup> The BNP had ruled from 2001 to 2006 in coalition with Islamist parties and had been reluctant to prosecute the perpetrators of political violence that had connections to radical Islamists. For instance, BNP coalition partner Jamaat-e-Islami apparently had ties to extremist leader Bangla Bhai, who promoted Islamic revolution in Bangladesh and was executed by the interim government in March.<sup>3</sup> Former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina survived an assassination attempt in August 2004 when a grenade was thrown at her delegation, killing 20 others. She accused the BNP–Jamaat alliance of involvement in the assassination attempt.

U.S. and Bangladeshi law enforcement agencies have cooperated closely on several cases related to domestic and international terrorism, according to the U.S. State Department. With U.S. technical assistance, Bangladesh drafted an improved anti-money laundering law and created a Financial Intelligence Unit in 2006. Still, there is concern that Bangladesh could serve as a base of support to various militant groups. Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HuJI), a terrorist organization founded by Pakistan-based leader Fazlur Rehman that has ties to al-Qaeda, apparently remains active in Bangladesh and may have established terrorist training camps in Bangladesh’s Chittagong Hill Tracts.<sup>4</sup>

**Press for a Return to Democracy.** The U.S. will need to follow developments in Bangladesh closely over the next several months to ensure that it charts a course back to democracy. Washington should coordinate closely with other European donors to ensure that they are conveying consistent messages to Dhaka on the importance of respecting civilian rights and democratic principles. For the present, Washington should insist that the suspension of political activity be lifted and that corruption cases be carried out expeditiously in accordance with due process.

—Lisa A. Curtis is Senior Research Fellow for South Asia in the Asian Studies Center at The Heritage Foundation.

1. “Bangladesh’s Stalled Elections Expected by End of 2008: Election Commissioner,” *The International Herald Tribune*, July 15, 2007, at [www.ihf.com/articles/ap/2007/07/15/asia/AS-POL-Bangladesh-Elections.php](http://www.ihf.com/articles/ap/2007/07/15/asia/AS-POL-Bangladesh-Elections.php).
2. Bruce Vaughn, “Islamist Extremism in Bangladesh,” Congressional Research Service Report No. RS22591, January 31, 2007, p. 1.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 5.