BANGLADESH’S POLITICAL TURMOIL, 2006-08: AN ANALYSIS
MARYAM MASTOOR

Introduction
Since independence Bangladesh has been a victim of continual political turmoil. It got bogged down in the power struggle between three powerhouses — the army and the two dynastic political parties, Awami League (AL) and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) kept the country in the down whirl. In the early years of independent Bangladesh the army and the AL were two main contenders in the power game. Afterwards in the nineties a feud between AL and BNP to acquire maximum power by undermining democratic values started. In 2007 this political conflict once again led to military intervention. Eventually the army seized power and installed a caretaker government which conducted elections on 29 December 2008 after two years of emergency rule.

Some people called it a new kind of governmental structure in which the army had not shown its physical presence and instead installed a caretaker government. The caretaker government assumed power by outlining two main objectives at hand: to reveal the corruption done by political parties and to conduct free and fair elections. But it stayed longer in power than allowed under

Maryam Mastoor is an Assistant Research Officer at the Institute of Regional Studies, Islamabad.
the Constitution which grants 90 days to the caretaker government for holding elections. This unique kind of political scene in Bangladesh after 11 January 2007 has invited analysts to ponder upon.

The present study attempts to analyse the political turmoil in Bangladesh after the military takeover in January 2007. It is divided into four main sections. The first will discuss theoretical matters pertaining to the theory of good governance in the context of Bangladesh politics. The second section will introduce the main political parties in Bangladesh and try to explain the governance dilemma during Khaleda Zia’s tenure (2001-2006) keeping in view the paradigm of good governance. It will also explain how lack of transparency, predictability and accountability led to a military intervention. The third section will focus on the policies of the caretaker government. The fourth will analyse the implications of the policies followed by the caretaker government which eventually rejuvenated the political institutions in the country. And finally, the conclusion.

**Theory of good governance**

The State functions on a paradigm of governance. If the governmental structure is consistent, justice is dispensed and institutions play their respective roles within the parameters of their domain, the state will flourish and prosper.

In the 1990’s international organizations like the United Nations (UN), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank (WB) introduced the term ‘good governance.’ The purpose was to render the countries observing good governance the benefits offered by these international organizations. Different institutions describe ‘good governance’ in various ways. The IMF considers covering of all aspects of the conduct of public affairs as good governance. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) considers ‘sustainable human development’ an indicator of good governance.(1)
However, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) has comprehensively explained the concept of good governance. It outlines its concept of governance by identifying four elements. These are: accountability, participation, predictability and transparency. Accountability stands for the responsibility of the State to make its officials answerable for their actions. Participation pertains to the involvement of the masses in developmental process of the State (which is achieved by undergoing an election process) whereas predictability means enforcement of law and order vis-à-vis governmental and societal affairs in the country. Transparency refers to availability of information to the general public about governmental actions.\(^2\)

The concept can be illustrated by a diagram:

**Four essentials of good governance**

![Diagram](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

**Source:** Author’s own

Hence, the purpose of good governance is to establish a thorough and healthy relationship between the State and society. The strength of this
relationship enables the State to progress in political, economic and social
dimensions.

In Bangladesh, however, the aforementioned elements remained missing
in establishing a sound governmental structure. Since independence the country
has been a victim of dynastic politics. The Awami League of Sheikh Mujib ur
Rehman formed the first democratic government in Bangladesh. He was well
equipped with the vigour to fight for independence which he won and became
Bangabandhu (father of the nation) of Bangladesh. But after independence he was
unable to lead owing to the fears he had of being ‘unsure’ of himself.\(^{(3)}\) This fear
compelled him, firstly, to heavily rely on India for his support and, secondly, to
follow undemocratic ways to establish his hold on the torn polity of Bangladesh.
For instance, he appointed a journalist who worked for Pakistani propaganda
machine as his press secretary, which was widely condemned by his fellows. He
removed him from that post under pressure of public opinion but later appointed
him to an ambassadorial post.\(^{(4)}\) This action of his clearly indicated that he was
not in favour of ‘participation’ by the public in governmental affairs.

He developed an impression that the country could not function without
him. He became stringent in ensuring that Bangladesh ran its governmental
system without political parties. On 7 June 1975, he established Bangladesh
Krishak Sramik Awami League (BAKSAL). It was an amalgam of Awami
League and Krishak Sramik of the late AKM Fazlul Haq, and Mujib’s way of
expressing his ‘One Party State.’\(^{(5)}\)

The despotic and undemocratic rule with no mechanism for accountability
and transparency led to a military coup by General Zia ur Rehman. And a new
kind of dictatorship was enforced. An overview of Bangladesh’s history tells us
that despite realization of mistakes committed by the founding party AL, both
BNP and AL lack democratic values within their organizational structures. Hence,
when they assume power they tend to transgress their authority by resorting to unlawful and undemocratic ways which often leads to a military takeover.

A kaleidoscopic view of politics in Bangladesh

Bangladesh’s democracy has a chequered history. It has suffered multiple military coups in 1975, 1981, 1982, 1996 (an attempt)* and in 2006. This continual intervention by the military in politics has hindered the evolutionary growth of political institutions in the country. However, as mentioned earlier the military alone cannot be blamed for this undesirable situation.

Though the founding party, the AL started its rule with four basic principles of nationalism, secularism, socialism and democracy, yet the plight of contemporary Bangladesh is altogether contrary to what was intended. It is ironic to note that the other popular party which is predominant on the political scene of Bangladesh, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), was founded by Zia ur Rehman, an army chief who ruled the country as a military dictator from 1975-80. It is currently headed by his widow, Khaleda Zia. Ziaur Rehman in his first two broadcasts to the nation said that he was a ‘soldier’ and not a ‘politicians’ and his regime was ‘interim’ ‘non-partisan’ and ‘non-political’, and the main objective of his rule was to ‘restore democracy’ through free and fair elections. Later developments showed that manipulated elections were held in 1979 giving a landslide victory to BNP.

Another important political party is the Jatiya Party established by another military dictator, General Hossain Muhammad Ershad, who ruled the country from 1982 to 1990. General Ershad toppled the presidency of Abdul Sattar, a justice of the Supreme Court and leader of BNP who had assumed the president’s office after Gen Zia ur Rehman’s death. This party proclaimed Islam as the state

* A coup was attempted by army chief Lt. Abu Saleh Mohammad Nasim Bir Bikram during the tenure of caretaker government of Justice Habibur Rehman, which was eventually thwarted. (see Stanley A. Kochanek, Bangladesh in 1996 California: University of California Press, 1997).
religion by a constitutional amendment, undermining the founding principle of secularism. Gen Ershad’s dictatorship ended when political parties pressed hard for elections and brought the country to the verge of civil disobedience. Hence the elections of 1991 brought the BNP to power.

BNP’s rule was followed by the founding party, AL’s second stint in power that started in 1996. Interestingly, it was also established after surviving a coup attempt. Currently led by Sheikh Hasina Wajid, daughter of Sheikh Mujeeb ur Rehman, the AL ruled the country from 1996-2001. It again won a landslide victory in the 2008 general elections and is currently governing the country.

There are also some religion-based political parties that play alliance politics with major political parties of Bangladesh. Earlier, forming of religion-based political parties was banned, and the ban remained in effect until 1978. It was Zia ur Rehman who rescinded the constitutional provision of prohibiting the forming of religion-based political parties. Pertinent among these are Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami and Islamic Unity Front. However, these parties have never won the support of the masses. The elections of 1991, 1996, 2001 and 2008 indicated a massive decline in electoral votes for Islamic parties. These political parties have never won a majority of their own but get into power in alliance with major political parties.

Since independence of Bangladesh, all these political parties have failed to honour the mandate given them in elections so far. Their tenures have always been marred by despotic rule, rampant corruption and mismanagement. Since 1991, with the inception of the democratic era, the urge for acquisition of power has led to a tug-of-war between the two ‘Begums’ (Khaleda Zia of BNP and Sheikh Hasina of AL). Therefore, the political structure has always remained shaky.

The previous democratic government run by the BNP from 2001-2006 was ended by a unique kind of military takeover. The reason given by the military
establishment for the takeover was unbridled corruption and biased appointment of chief adviser prime minister who according to the Constitution is supposed to monitor the election process at the end of every governmental term. Once again, corrupt governance, despotic rule and misuse of power by the BNP in a bid to tighten its hold over the country led to a military intervention. How and why the BNP government fell will be discussed in the following pages.

**Corrupt governance**

The BNP with its grand alliance comprising Jamaat-e-Islami and Jatiya Party came into power with a majority vote in 2001. Echoing the voices of the masses the BNP-led coalition called for massive reforms in the country. However, the reality turned out to be different than promised. Rampant corruption, lack of effective governance, prolonged pitched battles between political opponents and rise in Islamic militancy led to the military intervention in January 2007.

Khaleda Zia, her sons Tarique Rehman, Arafat Rehman Koko and her political secretary Harris Chowdhury, had been accused of high treason. A report published in the Dhaka-based *Daily Star* reveals that Harris Chowdhury was an ordinary car dealer who turned into a multi-millionaire during the five-year tenure of Khaleda Zia.\(^9\)

Tarique Rehman had been convicted by the United States government as well for taking bribe of $3 million from various international companies to award contracts in Bangladesh. Eventually, the US government called for assistance from the law ministry, finance ministry, attorney general's office and Bangladesh Bank to retrieve the bribe money.\(^{10}\) The annual report published by the Anti-Corruption Commission of Bangladesh (2007-2008) clearly accused the former government of patronizing corruption.

Not only the BNP, the Awami League too is accused of graft in various cases. One case pertains to buying a poorly equipped navy frigate at the cost of
100 million dollars during Sheikh Hasina’s tenure in 2001. She was also accused of breaching the procurement rules by purchasing MiG-29 fighter jets for 123 million dollars.\(^{(11)}\) Hence leaders of both parties were jailed and sent into exile on charges of corruption.

However, not only rampant corruption but the rise of Islamic militancy has also stoked chaos and disturbance. In the last two years of BNP rule the number of terror attacks escalated. The performance of government machinery in controlling and containing the menace was not satisfactory. It is believed that most terror attacks were politically motivated.

**Rise of Islamic militancy**

The most disastrous act of terror took place on 17 August 2005 when 500 bomb attacks took place simultaneously in 63 of Bangladesh's 64 districts killing two people and injuring at least 200. The targets were government and semi-government establishments, especially the offices of local bodies and court buildings.\(^{(12)}\)

On the other hand various terrorist attacks were targeted at secular forces and Awami League rallies in the last five-year tenure of Khaleda Zia. On 27 January 2005, a grenade attack claimed the lives of five AL activists during a rally. The dead included Bangladesh's leading intellectual and former finance minister Shah A.M.S. Kibria, who also served as foreign secretary, as an executive secretary of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), and was a sitting member of parliament.\(^{(13)}\) Sheikh Hasina herself was targeted in a bomb attack at her rally on 21 August 2005. She escaped unharmed.\(^{(14)}\)

Critics like Haroon Habib directly link the BNP government coalition with Islamic forces as being a major factor in the unbridled rise of Islamic extremism. He says: “The growing clout of Islamic hardliners and the Khaleda Zia
government's silence seem to have a direct link to the violence against opposition and secular targets in Bangladesh."

It seems that the militant forces did not want stability in Bangladesh; hence they attacked both opposition and governmental members. The notion that they were only against the secular forces therefore cannot be substantiated.

Besides, what eventually led to military takeover were the political battles between the AL and BNP. Both these parties showed immaturity by not settling their differences in a democratic way. They continued to bear down on each other by pursuing blame politics. The BNP government tried to intimidate the opposition which resulted in a drastic confrontational scenario. The prolonged stand-off added fuel to the fire.

**Political battles between the Begums**

The AL accused the BNP government of manipulation in administrative structure including judiciary and election commission, to get desired election results. Confrontation between the two parties flared up when the BNP government stepped down on 28 October 2006, on grounds of alleged manipulation of government machinery especially the biased nature of chief adviser (prime minister)’s appointment. These political riots left more than 40 killed.

Henceforth, the president, Iajuddin Ahmed, himself assumed the role of chief adviser as the former chief justice KM Hassan declined the offer owing to the opposition allegations of being biased. It is ironic to note that an abrupt decision of the BNP to raise the retirement age of judges made KM Hassan eligible to the post. The opposition parties did not trust him as he was once international affairs secretary of the BNP.

However, in such a situation the Constitution of Bangladesh provides for appointment of another retired chief justice who is “next before the last retired
chief justice.” The AL was sceptical of this decision but later it gave a chance to the president made an 11-points demand for reform in the election commission to ensure free and fair elections.

In November 2006 the AL resorted to more aggressive tactics to pressurize the caretaker government. For instance, on 12 November, the League along with its coalition partners began a traffic blockade to force the removal of controversial chief election commissioner K.M Aziz. Eventually, on 23 November the chief election commissioner stepped down and the blockade was lifted.\(^{(17)}\)

Later on the election commission announced the schedule of elections to be held on 22 January. All political parties owing to the trust deficit over the chief adviser and the election commission expressed their reservations on the election process. The AL decided to boycott the elections. Its activists set fire to the office of election commission and again a three-day traffic blockade was announced by the party. Many people were injured in clashes between the activists of the rival parties.\(^{(18)}\)

**Disputed role of chief adviser**

The role of the chief adviser-cum-president, Iajuddin Ahmed, was also seen with suspicion in this turmoil. According to a unique feature of Bangladesh’s Constitution, the government after completing its term hands over power to a caretaker government which is supposed to be headed by the former chief justice.\(^{*}\) The caretaker government is responsible for conducting elections within 90 days.

As mentioned earlier, to avert the crisis, President Iajuddin Ahmed took over the post of chief adviser himself for conducting elections as early as possible. As chief adviser he took some controversial and unilateral decisions which resulted in resignation of his four out of ten advisers (ministers). For instance, on

\(^{*}\) See Article 58C(3) of the Constitution.

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9 December 2007 he deployed the armed forces to handle a political demonstration disregarding objections by his council of advisers.\(^{(19)}\)

Various political parties were sceptical of him on grounds of his long association with the BNP leadership. In the earlier term of Khaleda Zia (1991-96), Iajuddin Ahmed served as the head of Public Service Commission from 1991 to 1993 and in 2002 was appoint vice-chancellor of the State University of Bangladesh and later the same year he became unopposed president of the country.\(^{(20)}\)

Hence the AL’s bias accusations against Iajuddin Ahmed may sound genuine given his long working relationship with the BNP government. The AL, though wary of Iajuddin, at first accepted the holding of elections on 22 January 2007 but later on 3 January it reversed the decision of participating in the polls. This step aggravated the crisis and worsened the law and order situation.

**Declaration of emergency**

On 11 January 2007 the president declared a state of emergency in Bangladesh and a night-time curfew was imposed. Before the declaration international observers like the United Nations and European Union also pulled out from the election scene, on grounds of their mistrust.\(^{(21)}\) The same day president Iajuddin resigned from the post of chief adviser.

On 12 January Dr. Fakhruddin, an ex-governor of the Central Bank of Bangladesh and a former World Bank bureaucrat, was sworn in the new chief adviser and installed his team of advisers. He was known as a mild-tempered, academically sound, and a resourceful person equipped in all manners to steer the country through the turbulence.\(^{(22)}\)

The development, though abrupt, was welcomed domestically and internationally. The AL welcomed the newly installed government while the BNP was perplexed in the new situation. The Jatiya Party of Gen Ershad also
appreciated the change. The rebel group of BNP and Liberal Democratic Party also hailed the establishment of the caretaker government.\(^{(23)}\)

The international community, including the United States, United Kingdom, India and China, viewed the regime change as a positive modification. Though it considered the proclamation of emergency as an ‘unfortunate’ move, it was presumed that it would settle the anarchic situation of the country.\(^{(24)}\)

On the domestic front, a massive crackdown was started by the interim government against both major political parties. In the first two weeks of the newly installed government, some 12,000 political activists were held by the Bangladesh Rifles, Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), joint forces of the army and the police on grounds of corruption.\(^{(25)}\) This emergency was not stringent, as the curfew was lifted within 24 hours and there was no explicit arrangement of control on the media, they were free to report and document the changes brought in by the caretaker government.

Despite the civilian face of the government, it was a glaring fact that this sudden change was sponsored by the army. Some analysts suggest that the army pressed Iajuddin to resign as the chief adviser. It can be said that it played the midwife in giving birth to the new caretaker government.

This manoeuvring by the army was accepted by the new chief adviser, Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed, in an interview given to *The Time* magazine in March 2007. Answering a question regarding the military backing for his government he clearly stated: “Certainly, the military is backing my government. It's called upon to aid the civil administration in times of emergency—natural or man-made. That's not unknown in many [other] countries.”\(^{(26)}\)

It can be concluded that though the emergency rule was designed by the army yet they preferred to stay behind the scenes. The caretaker, non-party government was installed with the avowed purpose to bring about structural ‘reforms for strengthening the democratic institutions.’ It was tasked with
activating the accountability mechanism, restructuring the election commission, de-politicizing the judiciary and creating a conducive environment for free and fair elections. A comprehensive reform agenda was promulgated in effect put its real objective of organizing elections within 90 days at the backburner.

**The term of the caretaker government, 2007-08**

Initially the appointment of Dr. Fakhruddin as the chief adviser injected a new spirit in the ailing political system of Bangladesh. The non-party government launched a ruthless campaign against the corrupt elite of the previous administration. His government remained steadfast in breaking the institutional bond of the bureaucratic elite with the BNP. This institutional hegemony over other institutions of the country weakened the administrative structure leading to induction of corrupt elite in the executive. Hence a massive accountability mechanism was activated.

**Activation of accountability mechanism**

An Anti-corruption campaign was launched which tightened the noose around the neck of the corrupt elite in political and economic sectors. The anti-corruption commission (ACC) was reorganized with this objective. In the month of February 2007 alone 1,585 people were arrested by the police and RAB.(27)

Senior politicians like Nazmul Huda and Salahuddin Quader Chowdery were arrested on charges of corruption. Both were aides of former prime minister Khaleda Zia. Most of the leaders were arrested under the Special Powers Act, according to which anyone could be detained for a month while charges were to be framed by the police afterwards.(28)

In the beginning, it was planned by the caretaker government to not only punish the corrupt politicians but also to eliminate them from the political scene of Bangladesh. A ‘minus two formula’ was devised to get rid of the two ‘Begums.’ Subsequently, a plan to exile Khaleda Zia to Saudi Arabia was
formulated and Sheikh Hasina was not allowed to enter her home territory on her way back from the United States in April 2007. However, both the plans failed. The BNP leader was released in September 2008 and the AL leader returned to Dhaka to a tumultuous welcome.

Despite the extraordinary show of public support to the AL leader on her arrival back home the caretaker government did not spare the bigwigs of Bangladesh’s politics from charges of corruption. On 16 July 2007 Sheikh Hasina was arrested on charges of extortion and taking bribes from businessmen. Former prime minister Khaleda Zia was arrested on 3 September on charges of misuse of power and corruption. She was also accused of nepotism. Extortion and corruption cases against her sons, Tarique Rehman and Arafat Rehman Koko, were filed. For instance, during a raid by a military-led joint force on Tarique’s residence, a great deal of relief material donated to the prime minister’s relief fund for the disaster-hit people was recovered.

Later developments further proved the entrenched mindset of Khaleda Zia. In May 2007 she again revitalized the dynastic politics by elevating Sayeed Sikandar Mirza, her younger brother and an unknown figure, to the vice-presidency of the party — a decision she revoked later considering public criticism.

On the other hand the AL remained cautious during this period. No controversial announcement was made which could damage its credibility. Consequently, pressing hard on AL by the caretaker government aroused more public sympathy for the party. A ‘general perception prevailed in public’ that the arrest of Sheikh Hasina on her way back home in April 2007 was a desperate move by the caretaker government to prevent the AL, the ‘most popular party,’ from participating in the elections scheduled for 2008.

It was also reported in the press that political leaders were terrified and intimidated by an utmost show of power by the caretaker government. For
instance, Sheikh Hasina was arrested with 1,000 security forces personnel, besieging her home, was taken to the court in the early morning and then was confined in a ‘sub-jai.’ Independent observers called it a mere show of political harassment.

Nevertheless, the caretaker government tried hard to eradicate the deep-rooted corruption from politics but the way it was done eventually lost the support of the masses in its early days. The vibrant welcome of the AL leader can be seen in this context. Both the parties have strong roots in Bangladesh; therefore it is almost impossible to wipe out either from the political scene of the country.

However, if a system of good governance is established properly and accountability organs remain vigilant, any political party in power would work efficiently. The caretaker government tried hard to improve the system of governance. Its most significant work in this regard was to restructure the election commission.

**Restructuring the Election Commission**

The first pledge of the caretaker government was to restructure the Election Commission for ensuring free and fair elections. In January that problem was partly solved when all the five election commissioners resigned at the request of the president. Thus, the basic objection of the AL pertaining to biased nature of election commissioners was addressed.

Moreover, the Election Commission was restructured after inducting three new members. A former secretary Shamsul Huda and another former bureaucrat Mohammad Sohul Hussain were appointed new election commissioners. A retired army officer, Brig Gen M. Sakhawat Hossain, was appointed as the third election commissioner. The later appointment was unique in its nature as earlier appointment of any armyman as election commissioner was out of the question.
The biggest point of feud between the AL and BNP in 2006 was bogus electoral rolls. Hence, a new electoral list was prepared with 12.7 million fake entries removed. The election commission prepared the new list with the help of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the army. This time around the electoral rolls are acclaimed internationally as being accurate and genuine.\(^{(35)}\)

The EC also launched an ambitious registration programme and introduced strict rules of registration for political parties. On 7 October 2008, an amendment was made in the People’s Representation Order (PRO) that the political parties would have to submit their rectified constitution to the election commission within six months of the first sitting of the ninth parliament. Some parties had to change some provisions in their charter to get registered with the election commission. For instance, the JP amended its manifesto by adding a provision that no individual can be the chairman of the party for more than two years.\(^{(36)}\)

The Jamaat-e-Islami changed 12 to 13 sections in its constitution. One important amendment was to replace the phrase ‘establishing the rule of Allah’ with ‘establishing a fair and just Islamic society.’\(^{(37)}\) BNP scrapped the provision for front organizations and included a section to let non Muslims become its members.\(^{(38)}\)

Until November, only 22 political parties could register with the Election Commission and 47 were rejected as they could not fulfil the criteria for registration. According to new rules it was also provided that the registered political party would nominate one candidate for each constituency and those who fail to get nomination from the parties will not be allowed to contest as independent candidates. Earlier, candidates failing to get political party nomination used to contest as independent contestants.\(^{(39)}\)
Under the PRO it was provided that *upazilla* elections would precede parliamentary elections. Political parties rejected this provision terming it extra-constitutional because the caretaker government did not have the mandate to legislate. The CTG also took some impressive measures to mend the third pillar of governance, the judiciary.

**Judiciary reforms**

On 1 November 2007 the CTG amended the Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC) to separate the judiciary from the executive. Under this amendment, the magistrate courts came under the authority of the higher court rather than the executive. It was clearly pursuant to Article 22 of the Constitution of Bangladesh which states that “The State shall ensure the separation of the judiciary from the executive organs of the state.”

Under the new arrangement, the magistrates, to be known as “judicial magistrates,” are to be directly accountable to the judicial courts for their proceedings. It is presumed to ensure justice without delay.

Furthermore, a Truth and Accountability Commission was established on 3 August 2008 under a presidential ordinance promulgated on 8 June. It was formed on the pattern of Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa that followed the end to apartheid there. The purpose behind this move was to encourage people to admit their corruption.

However, the outcome of this commission was not up to expectations. The chairman of the commission himself admitted that only the lower ranking employees responded. Interestingly, this commission was challenged in the court under Article 58- D of the Constitution which does not allow the caretaker government to take policy decisions. Hence the establishment of this commission was taken as an extra-constitutional step by the caretaker government and raised the question of transgression use of powers.
Unchecked use of powers by the CTG

Despite reforms conducted by the caretaker government, the chaotic conditions of Bangladesh could not be improved. Unchecked use of powers by the caretaker government in political, economic and social spheres stirred up public dissatisfaction which paved the way for the political leadership to assert its right to run the state affairs.

The caretaker government was backed by the military as the above quoted statement of Fakhruddin Ahmed clearly indicates. The executive, judiciary and the legislative all came under the directives of the military-fabricated caretaker government. The absolute powers exercised by it shook the entire governmental structure from state functioning to societal stability. Dissatisfaction among the masses grew with political uncertainty, economic shortcomings and increasing human rights abuses.

Political uncertainty

Owing to the massive crackdown on politicians, ban on indoor politics and no announcement of elections by the caretaker government, political uncertainty prevailed in Bangladesh. Amid crackdown on Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina, a rift within their respective parties started. The BNP leader expelled her secretary general Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan and joint secretary general Ashraf Hossain from the party for their alleged conspiracies to break up the organization. Bhuyan and 130 key party leaders rejected the decision. (44)

On the other hand key leaders in the Awami League like Amir Hussain Amu, Abdur Razzak, Tofael Ahmed and Suranjit Sen Gupta became critical of the party leadership. They demanded an end to dynastic politics and corruption, unlimited use of powers, and called for inner party democracy. (45) But later on these skirmishes in the AL and BNP were rooted out. Some analysts believe that these rifts within BNP and AL were ‘sponsored’ to implement the ‘minus two
formula’. For instance, political analyst Fazle Rashid clearly accused the caretaker government of involvement in “seeking split and purge” in the political parties.\(^{(46)}\)

Moreover, it is also believed that the decision of Dr Younus, founder of Grameen Bank and Nobel Peace Prize winner, to form a political party, Nagorik Shakti (Citizen’s Party), was also motivated by the forces working against the political leadership of Begum Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina. Later on demonstrations in April 2007 against the emergency rule showed support of the masses for the AL and BNP. Hence on 3 May 2007 Dr. Younus decided to withdraw from the political battlefield. He was considered an answer to the economic problems of Bangladesh but the public disapproval of his entering the political scene left the caretaker government alone to fight the economic problems.

**Economic slump**

The ambitious anti-corruption campaign against the alleged businessmen in the country slowed down the economic activities. More importantly, confidence of the business community at both domestic and international levels had decreased owing to political instability. The galloping prices further exacerbated the situation. According to Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, “the overall inflation in Bangladesh was 8.25 per cent on a twelve-month annual average (2006) and 10.6 per cent on a point to point basis in October 2007 whereas food inflation hit 11.73 per cent the same year.\(^{(47)}\)

In June 2008 the prices of food commodities rose 12.3 per cent.\(^{(48)}\) Support of the masses for the caretaker government declined sharply with the rise in food prices. Moreover, foreign direct investments in 2007 also declined to 3.4 per cent from 4.5 per cent in 2006.\(^{(49)}\) The fiscal deficit also widened to 4.7 per cent of GDP in 2008 from 3.2 per cent in 2007.\(^{(50)}\) The economic slump together with y
human rights abuses contributed hugely to the public disapproval for the caretaker government.

**Human rights abuses**

Detentions, extrajudicial killings and torture of political workers worsened the situation. According to a report by the Asian Legal Resource Centre (ALRC), almost 500,000 persons were detained in the years 2007 and 2008. Two alleged underground political workers, Abdur Rashid Malitha, Alias Tapan Malitha and Ms Nasima Akhtar were killed by RAB during the caretaker government’s rule. These cases remained pending without proper investigation during the CTG tenure.\(^{51}\)

On 20 August 2007, a student was beaten up by the police for obstructing their view at a soccer match. This incident sparked violent demonstrations. One protester was killed by the law-enforcing agencies. The protesters demanded the closure of an army camp in the Dhaka University. Journalists also were not spared by the law-enforcing agencies. According to Human Rights Watch, several journalists were arrested and beaten up while reporting protest demonstrations.\(^{52}\)

Sophie Richardson, Asia Advocacy Director at Human Rights Watch, linked the protests to the ongoing repression under the emergency rule, and said that the government’s heavy handed response to these protests, “is like oil on a fire.”\(^{53}\) Besides the prolonged emergency rule the unconstitutional status of the caretaker government fuelled the public wrath against the military-backed establishment.

**Unconstitutional status of caretaker govt**

Though it is provided in the Constitution that elections must be held within 90 days of the dissolution of parliament, yet instead of creating an environment for elections the caretaker government started an ambitious anti-corruption campaign. The following allegations were levelled challenging the validity of the caretaker government,
- Elections were not held within the period laid down in the constitution.
- The people could not be deprived of their right to vote for more than 90 days as provided in the Constitution.
- Absence of members of parliament (MPs) for more than 90 days is unconstitutional.
- The mandate given to the caretaker government by the Constitution was only for ninety days, and
- The President did not consult major political parties before appointing the chief adviser as provided in the Constitution.\(^{(54)}\)

The unconstitutional status of the caretaker government hampered its advocacy of a corruption-free environment, transparency and welfare of the people. Ousting Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia from politics, charging them with a number of graft cases and inciting ‘others’ in the AL and BNP to assume leadership, all moves turned against the caretaker government and the charisma of these two ladies remained intact.

In mid-2008 the caretaker government however changed its approach towards the political leadership of the country and started a series of negotiations with the two parties for ending political uncertainty.

**The return of the Begums**

On 11 September 2008, the caretaker government freed Khaleda Zia on bail after a year of imprisonment. After her release she called for Jatiya Sangsad (JS — parliament) polls to be held in the first place and announced that her son Tarique Rehman would stay out of politics for two to three years.\(^{(55)}\) It is believed that Khaleda’s sudden announcement of keeping her son out of politics was an outcome of ‘understanding’ between her party and the caretaker government.
Khaleda Zia’s release also cleared legal hurdles blocking Hasina Wajid’s return from the United States. Despite ambitious slogans and concerted efforts made by the caretaker government to oust Hasina Wajid and Khaleda Zia from politics by first trying to exile them and then trying to split their parties, it turned out that they continued to attract the support of the masses.

In September 2008, the caretaker government invited both leaders for a dialogue on elections, supposed to be held on 18 December 2008. Earlier, the BNP refused to participate in elections and demanded revoking the PRO.\textsuperscript{56} On the other hand the AL also declared that it would not take part in elections unless the emergency was withdrawn and Sheikh Hasina was ‘permanently’ and ‘unconditionally’ released.\textsuperscript{57}

The much-awaited dialogue was conducted informally on 22 November 2008 on the occasion of the reception day held by the Armed Forces at the Dhaka Cantonment. Both leaders met after 16 years and exchanged greetings.\textsuperscript{58} Sheikh Hasina announced the same day that all issues with the BNP were resolved, and declared that now it was the government’s turn to settle issues with the BNP, which was insisting upon holding elections on 28 December instead of 18th of the same month.\textsuperscript{59}

Consequently, the Election Commission announced that parliamentary and upazilla elections would be held on 29 December 2008 and 22 January 2009, respectively. However, some analysts allege that before elections some arrangements were made by the caretaker government to bring the AL to power. Khaleda Zia was imprisoned as well as her two sons, Tarique Rehman and Arafat Rehman Koko. An editorial in the Dhaka weekly \textit{Holiday} mentions brutal torture inflicted on one son which rendered him invalid.\textsuperscript{60} The London-based \textit{Economist} wrote that in comparison to AL, the BNP was hit harder in the army’s anti-corruption campaign.\textsuperscript{61} According to another political analyst, Sadeq Khan, the
BNP was ‘badly mauled’ during the state of emergency and remained disrupted in poll-preparedness.\(^{(62)}\)

Though it was widely accepted that the caretaker government remained harsh on BNP, it is also evident that the party was all set to rig the polls in 2007. Some analysts believe that had the BNP won the elections neither the AL nor the army would have accepted the results. Interestingly, Begum Khaleda Zia herself apologized to the nation for the ‘mistakes’ she committed during her tenure and vowed to shun the ‘politics of vengeance’ and to work together for the country.\(^{(63)}\)

Nevertheless, the rapprochement between the two leaders is a positive outcome of the prolonged emergency rule. The politicians showed maturity by extending the hand of cooperation to each other, and survived the unrestricted and extensively powerful rule of the military backed government emerging as popular as ever. It is also significant to note that this time around the masses asserted themselves and forced the military-supported regime to bring the Begums back in the political arena of Bangladesh.

The elections

The Awami League won the general elections and assumed power with absolute majority. It bagged 262 seats in a House of 299. This time the turnout was also significantly high — 87 per cent of the registered voters cast their votes in the ninth parliamentary polls. As expected, the BNP could get only 32 seats.\(^{(64)}\)

Popular support brought the AL to power for the second time. Earlier, it had ruled the country from 1996 to 2001.

Sheikh Hasina in her address to the nation vowed to address the issue of inflation and poverty. She also called for cooperation from her rival, Khaleda Zia to steer the country on the road to progress and prosperity.\(^{(65)}\)

The international community also accepted the results and expressed satisfaction on the impartiality
of the caretaker government and the election commission in conducting the polls. The elections were smooth and peaceful.

**Concluding reflections**

Bangladesh after going through a unique and harsh military-backed governance experience is once again set on the track of democracy. The elections have cleared the way for the AL to embark upon a new and challenging journey of governance. It has appeared this time as a more seasoned, consistent and resourceful political party. It seems that this time Sheikh Hasina has learned from the sobering experience under the military-backed regime. She played her cards tactfully against the myopic designs of the caretaker government aimed at ousting her out of the party and the political scene of Bangladesh.

Nevertheless, it seems that the BNP has also learned from the harrowing experience. It has reformed its constitution and eliminated the dynastic element from the party by announcing Tarique Rehman’s exit from politics for two to three years. Khaleda Zia has in her recent speeches acknowledged the mistakes committed by her during the five-year BNP tenure and vowed to become a better politician in future.

The two years of caretaker government’s rule show that the charisma of the two ladies cannot be obliterated from the political scene of Bangladesh. Massive popular support brought them back to the political stage and it became inevitable for the military-backed government to vacate the leadership role for politicians. There was a profound realization among the masses that a military-backed set-up despite its slogans of reform and welfare is in no way an answer to their problems.

It also became evident that good governance can only be observed under the rule of democratically elected leadership. Participation of the people is imperative for good governance.
Though the caretaker government particularly observed transparency and accountability, yet the lack of public participation led to its drastic failure. Its unconstitutional status made it more vulnerable to criticism. It was quite ironic to note that the caretaker government which vehemently pursued its anti-corruption campaign was itself unlawful in its existence.

Skyrocketing prices of food commodities, prolonged state of emergency, economic shortfalls and human rights abuses under the unchecked rule fuelled the public rage which finally paved the way for elections.

On the other hand, there were some positive outcomes of the caretaker rule as well. It made politicians realize that there must be a functioning democracy within their parties. It became a glaring lesson for the political parties that they must not follow despotic tactics to gain maximum power if they wish to avert a military takeover. Absence of good governance and presence of despotic tendencies in politicians makes a state vulnerable to military intervention.

However, history shows that politicians never learn from their past experiences and they always try to maximize their power by resorting to unconstitutional measures to prolong their tenure. But one can hope that the present AL government would in its current tenure ensure all four essential elements of governance — transparency, predictability, accountability and public participation.

In a nutshell, it can be said that if the politicians earnestly work within the framework of their respective power, strengthen other institutions of the country and ensure good governance their country will never suffer the misfortune of a military takeover.
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*The Hindu*, Delhi, 22 November 2008.


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