

International Reactions to the Parliamentary Elections in Bangladesh

Rupak Bhattacharjee

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The largely boycotted January 5 Bangladesh election has generated wide attention in the international community. The international reactions to the parliamentary elections assume significance since Bangladesh heavily depends on a number of developed countries and global organisations for development assistance, loans and trade concessions. But the tenth *Jatiya Sangsad* election has not succeeded to evoke positive response from them largely due to its non-participatory and violent nature.

A total of 390 candidates, predominantly from the ruling Awami League (AL) and its allies contested for 147 seats. The remaining 153 seats were uncontested as 27 political parties, including the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) – led 18 party alliance boycotted the polls. As expected, the AL gained three fourth majority winning more than 230 out of total 300 parliamentary seats. The Election Commission (EC) claimed a 40% voter turnout whereas the local media reports indicate it varied between 20% and 30%.

The European Union (EU), Commonwealth, the US, the UK and many other nations had refused to send election observers. However, a South Asia- based electoral management group, Forum for Election Management Bodies – South Asia, has observed that the elections had been conducted “smoothly” and “quite peacefully”. One of its members said they noticed “good” turnout in some polling booths while in some others it was “not so high”. The voting was low in the northern and western strongholds of the BNP and Jamaat-e Islami where polling booths had been torched and poll officials and ruling party activists attacked. But in other regions of the country such as greater Chittagong, Dhaka and Barisal, high turnout was recorded.

The fear of violence at polling stations had kept away many voters despite the EC sending a text message to the voters – “Please go to cast your vote without any fear and hassle”. On the polling day, more than twenty persons, including security personnel, poll officials and ruling party activists were killed and 200 polling stations set on fire. It was also reported that some BNP and Jamaat supporters and anti-social elements associated with them “physically prevented voters from reaching” several polling booths.

All these aspects have been severely criticised by the foreign nations particularly in the west and major international forums. The US, which is the largest trading partner and a key ally of Bangladesh on counter-terrorism and global security, has clearly spoken about its disappointment

over the low turnout and violence-marred elections. In a statement, the US State Department said the just-concluded elections did “not appear to be credibly express the will of the people”. It also called for fresh elections “as soon as possible”. However, the US pledged to continue its alliance with the Sheikh Hasina government.

Meanwhile, a member of the US House Committee on Foreign Affairs said that the election was not credible “especially because so many seats were uncontested or only had token opposition”. The member justified the US decision of not sending observers by saying “obviously you do not need to have an observer at a polling place to see that”.

France has called on political parties in Bangladesh to resume dialogue and demonstrate “calm and restraint” to preserve the country’s democratic institutions. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in a statement, “France is closely monitoring the situation in Bangladesh, following the holding of elections marked by violence and very low voter turnout”.

Germany said that the January 5 election was an “extremely poor reflection of electorate’s will”. United Kingdom’s Foreign Office Minister Baroness Sayeeda Hussain Warsi, who visited Dhaka prior to the elections and tried to persuade the squabbling political elites of Bangladesh to reach an agreement, noted that the polls held “in accordance with Bangladesh’s Constitution”. But she added that the UK believes “the mark of a mature, credible election that express the genuine will of the voters”.

The EU that provides duty-free access for nearly 60% of Bangladesh’s booming garment industry products had repeatedly urged all political parties to create congenial environment for transparent, inclusive and credible elections. A statement issued by the office of EU’s Foreign Policy Chief Catherine Aston expressed regret that such conditions did not materialise and that the people of Bangladesh were not given an opportunity to express fully their democratic choice in the recently held elections.

The secretary of Commonwealth too depreciated the “limited levels of participation and low voter turnout” while the UN Secretary General, Ben Ki-moon, expressed deep concern over the massive election violence which he termed “unacceptable”. He also stated that election was not “all-inclusive”. He reiterated that the UN would continue to support Bangladesh’s democratic process “in accordance with the principles of inclusiveness, non-violence and dialogue”.

Japan, the largest bilateral development partner of Bangladesh, said that the elections did not represent people’s aspiration.

Unlike the major global powers which termed the polls “non-representative”, India – the closest regional ally of Bangladesh, recognised Sheikh Hasina’s victory despite a “record low voter turnout” and supported her in staking claim to form the next government. India said the January 5 elections had been a “constitutional requirement” and part of the internal and constitutional process of Bangladesh. The MEA pointed out the Sheikh Hasina government had done everything according to the book and made reconciliatory offers to the opposition which were turned down.

The MEA officials noted that there was nothing unconstitutional or illegal about the elections. This has been India's traditional position on Bangladesh and its unhappiness with some Western countries and NGOs lending support to certain groups. External Affairs Minister Salman Khurshid has stressed on this point by saying "while the US is at some distance from Bangladesh, we are right next to it". However, India's latest position might complicate matters as in the recent years, it has been trying to appear as "even-handed" and build a working relationship with the BNP supremo Khaleda Zia who is known to keep distance from Bangladesh's giant neighbour because of her domestic political compulsions.

Like India, Russia too approved the elections and thrown its lot with the beleaguered AL government at a time when Hasina has been desperately seeking international support. In sharp contrast to the position of the US, Russia's Foreign Ministry in a statement regretted that principal opposition parties boycotted the elections. The statement said, "We hope that the authorities and the opposition will not go beyond the Constitution in order to ensure stability and strengthen democratic institutions in the country...Russia confirms that it is ready to continue constructive partnership with a government, which will be formed soon".

Russia's endorsement is crucial since it was a strategic ally of Bangladesh during its war of independence in 1971. Besides, Hasina in her bid to woo the armed forces that made repeated forays into the power structure and remained one of the most organised and corporate conscious functional group of Bangladesh assured to procure Russian military hardware for them.

Another major arms supplier of Bangladesh since the late 1970's has been China. As the US and others, China did not debunk the polls and called for political stability in Bangladesh through dialogue and negotiations expressing concerns over the political situation. Hasina is reportedly contemplating her first foreign visit to Beijing soon.

Some Asian countries namely Nepal, Vietnam and Cambodia have already recognised Hasina's victory and sent congratulatory messages on her assuming the office for third time.

Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the IDSA or of the Government of India.