

**Refugee Review Tribunal
AUSTRALIA**

RRT RESEARCH RESPONSE

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This response was prepared by the Country Research Section of the Refugee Review Tribunal (RRT) after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the RRT within time constraints. This response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum.

Questions

- 1. Has the current military government reduced or stopped political targeting between Awami League, BNP, and associated minor parties?**
- 2. What is the current status of the Gono Forum? Do they have representation in Australia ?**
- 3. Are outspoken female activists, who promote increased human rights for Bangladesh women, targeted? If so, what happens to them?**
- 4. Are non conformist females in Bangladesh targeted? If so, what type of difficulties do they face?**

RESPONSE

- 1. Has the current military government reduced or stopped political targeting between Awami League, BNP, and associated minor parties?**

The sources consulted indicate that under the present caretaker government, which is backed by the military, all political activities have been banned in Bangladesh and political violence has ceased. However, sources agree that it is not possible to predict events over the next 18 months; the next elections are expected to be held at the end of 2008.

A May 2007 report by DFAT provided a comprehensive view of the current state of politics and political violence under the caretaker government, and is extracted in full below:

A. What is the current status and level of activity – formal and informal – of the political parties?

At the time of writing, all political activity is banned under the prevailing State of Emergency. The Caretaker Government has indicated it may partially lift the ban in May 2007 but whether this transpires remains to be seen. Many leaders and senior officials of the political parties have been arrested and corruption charges are being prepared against them. The parties themselves remain extant, although factionalised and the question of their future leadership remains unclear.

The Caretaker Government has announced its intention to hold elections in late 2008 but under new electoral laws which are still being framed, and are not expected to be announced until possibly June or July 2007. It is anticipated that the Election Commission will introduce electoral laws requiring the registration of all political parties, requiring greater transparency of political party finances, and banning those who have been convicted on corruption charges from running for public office.

Under the State of Emergency, all power is vested in the Caretaker Government, which is backed by the military. Political persecution of opponents has been practised by both the BNP and the Awami League (AL) in the past but this has ceased under the State of Emergency, which has deprived all parties of the machinery of state which they used corruptly for political persecution and personal vendettas conducted in the name of politics.

The student wings of all the political parties face the prospect of an outright ban on their activities.

B. In particular, what is the current situation of the Awami League and the BNP and its leaders, national and local?

The parties themselves remain in a state of flux, uncertain about the future political landscape in Bangladesh and their role in it, and the longer-term agenda of the military. The future of the party's leaders, Sheikh Hasina (AL) and Khaleda Zia (BNP), and the levels of patronage they commanded down through the levels of their parties, also remains unclear at this stage.

C. What is the post's prognosis for the evolution of the situation over the next 12-24 months?

The prognosis for the evolution of the situation over the next 1-2 years is also unclear. Given the uncertainty about the future of the parties, and their leaders, and the fact that events are still unfolding, this could well remain the situation for some time. The Caretaker Government has announced plans to hold elections towards the end of 2008. Both parties have publicly acknowledged they recognise they need to reform themselves but their willingness and commitment to doing so is likely to depend on the forthcoming electoral laws and the fates of their senior leaders and officials presently facing corruption charges.

The Caretaker Government is currently working on an agencies of good governance overhaul, including separating the executive from the judiciary, giving teeth to the Anti-Corruption Commission, reforming the Public Service Commission, and establishing a National Human Rights Commission. If these aims can be achieved, they would provide the basis for additional checks and balances in a system which has traditionally had a "winner takes all" mentality.

D. What are the roles presently of the police and army?

The disciplined services have provided full backing to the Caretaker Government and its objectives. They have also been actively pursuing a clean out of the corruption that has bedevilled Bangladesh.

E. What is the current level of political violence, including retaliation against opponents?

Politically motivated violence has all but disappeared under the Caretaker Government. A survey of popular attitudes conducted recently by The Asia Foundation in all districts of Bangladesh found that levels of criminality, particularly extortion which was often conducted with impunity by politically-connected individuals, have fallen dramatically, with former practitioners either arrested, detained, fled or gone underground. Much of the so-called political violence was common criminality being conducted under the guise of politics.

Some salient results from the surveys conducted in February and March as follows:

- About 60 percent of respondents noted improved law and order was the predominant aspect of the current situation that provided assurances to the community;
- Almost 95 percent of respondents noted the virtual disappearance of politically patronised criminals in the community since the Caretaker Government assumed power, while 90 percent reported a decline in the incidence of criminal activities;
- Approximately 80 percent of respondents reported a considerable improvement in the behaviour and practice of the police

F. Who is in charge?

The Caretaker Government is presently running Bangladesh under the relevant provisions of the Constitution. It is being supported by the disciplined services (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2007, *DFAT Report 636: RRT Information Request BGD31628*, 3 May – Attachment 1).

An April 2007 RRT Research Response is attached which provides further comprehensive information on the current state of politics in Bangladesh. It draws on detailed reports from the International Crisis Group (ICG), *Jane's Intelligence Review*, *Stratfor* and others. The main subjects include:

- The history of the hostile relations between the two main parties, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the Awami League.
- The role played by the student wings of both parties, particularly in political violence.
- The events that led up to the installation of the caretaker government.
- The current outlook, with views from a range of sources including commentators and NGOs (RRT Country Research 2007, *Research Response BGD31671*, 20 April – Attachment 2).

A June 2007 report by the ICG provides this brief update of events in Bangladesh:

Bangladesh Awami League (AL) head Sheikh Hasina returned to Dhaka from London 7 May after caretaker government's efforts to exile her failed. Former PM and BNP President Khaleda Zia also resisted pressure to leave country. Ban on all political activity remains in place. Crackdown on corruption continued with arrests of senior politicians, including AL secretary general and BNP figures such as former interior minister Altaf Hossain Chowdhury. Government asked for army's help in cleaning up voter registration list, with reported 12 million duplicate or fake names, ahead of elections now pledged by end 2008, but Election Commission still unclear on process. 2006 Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus dropped plans to form new political party, citing poor public response. Army chief insisted that army not interested in involvement in politics and had already withdrawn from many local bases established in January emergency (International Crisis Group 2007, 'Crisiswatch, No. 46', ICG website, 1 June http://www.crisisgroup.org/library/documents/crisiswatch/cw_2007/cw46.pdf - Accessed 4 June 2007 – Attachment 3).

A recent article by Dr Anand Kumar of the South Asia Analysis Group suggests that the planned reforms of the caretaker government may be under threat from the events of recent weeks, but that so far it is holding to its reform agenda:

The political reform agenda suffered a setback when the caretaker government was forced to drop its plan of sending the chiefs of both political alliances in self-exile. The increasing

domestic and political criticism prompted this decision. Following this Shaikh Hasina was allowed to return to the country. Her return also caused a minor breach of the emergency law when nearly 20,000 of her supporters lined up on both sides of the street to welcome her. This spontaneous turn out of thousands of people indicated that people did not like the decision of the government to exile Shaikh Hasina.

Sensing the changed situation, Khaleda Zia also dropped her plan to leave the country. To increase control over her party, she appointed her brother Major (ret'd) Sayeed Iskandar as party vice-chairman. This decision of Khaleda only added fuel to the already brewing rebellion inside the party.

The reform agenda was also affected when the Nobel peace prize winner and microcredit pioneer Muhammad Yunus announced that lack of support had forced him to pull out of a plan to create a new corruption-free political party. The government now faces the prospect of trying to reshape Bangladesh politics without any obvious challenger to former premiers Zia and Sheikh Hasina, who held power alternately since 1991...

...A section thought that the failure of the caretaker government to exile former premiers Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina Wajed - whose bitter rivalry has been blamed for plunging the country into political chaos - has chastened it. The caretaker government however is unwilling to give up the reform agenda so easily. It has asked the political parties in Bangladesh to ensure they practice internal democracy before the country holds free and fair elections.

The main thrust of the proposed reforms is to end the dynastic leadership in the parties. It will also change the way these leaders rule when they are in power. These reforms are proposed targeting former prime ministers Sheikh Hasina and Begum Khaleda Zia. Hasina is the daughter of independence leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and Khaleda is the widow of former president General Ziaur Rahman.

The caretaker government also wants to strip the parties of their powerful and often militant student wings, which triggered immediate protests by Hasina's Awami League and Khaleda's Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). Both the BNP and Awami League bank heavily on the support of students and professional groups in this politically volatile south Asian country.

The government plans to implement democracy and financial transparency in the political parties. The Election Commission has proposed that parties register with it by submitting lists of their elected leaders. According to a senior Election Commission official, retired army Brigadier-General Sakhawat Hossain, these parties will have to complete elections to their central and grassroots committees in accordance with their constitutions before applying for registration. They will also have to disclose sources of funds. No political party would be allowed to contest national elections if it failed to register or complete the stipulated reforms (Kumar, Anand 2007, 'Bangladesh: Country prepares for political reforms', *South Asia Analysis Group: Paper No. 2248*, 15 May - Attachment 4).

2. What is the current status of the Gono Forum? Do they have representation in Australia?

The Gono Forum, also called the Gano Forum or People's Forum, is a small political party which broke away from the Awami League in 1993 but which has generally remained allied to it in various coalitions. The status of the Gono Forum in the current climate is uncertain, as is that of other political parties: recent news reports indicate that the party is still in existence,

is still led by Dr Kamal Hossain, and has been holding talks with various other parties and individuals with a view to forming a coalition for the next elections.

No reports have been found among available sources that indicate that the party has representation in Australia, although one report mentions a branch in the UK.

The 2007 edition of *Political Handbook of the World 2007* contains this description of the Gono Forum:

People's Forum (Gano Forum). The *Gano* Forum was launched in August 1993 by a breakaway Awami League faction that declared as its objectives “violence-free politics, economic progress at the grassroots, and basic amenities for all”. It initially absorbed the faction of the National Socialist Party (JSD) led by Shajahan Siraj. In 1997 a JSD-Siraj emerged from the Forum as a separate organization, but Siraj subsequently joined the BNP. The *Gano* Forum has been closely associated with the LDF [the Left Democratic Front, a group of leftist parties].

Leaders: Dr Kamal HOSSAIN (President), Pankaj BHATTACHARYA, Mostafa Mohsin MONTU, Mofizul Islam Khan KAMAL, Saifuddin Ahmed MANIK (General Secretary) (Banks, A, Muller, T et al 2007, *Political Handbook of the World 2007*, CSA Publications, p.98 – Attachment 5).

Reports from 2005-2006

Reports that predate the current caretaker government indicate that the Gono Forum was intending to join an alliance with the Awami League to compete in the elections which were going to be held in early 2007, and have now been postponed.

A June 2006 news item discusses the proposed “grand alliance”:

Gono Forum President Dr Kamal Hossain yesterday said the process of grand national consensus among Awami League (AL)-led 14-party coalition, Gono Forum, Bikalpa Dhara Bangladesh (BDB) and Bangladesh Tarikat Federation is underway as they will work together to defeat the BNP-Jamaat alliance in the next general elections.

“It is a good news for the nation that all progressive and pro-liberation forces are being united on the basis of the 14-party’s 23-point proposal. Now we are working to form a grand national consensus for safeguarding the democracy, people and nation from the grip of BNP-Jamaat-led four-party alliance government,” the Gono Forum President said at a meeting of party representatives at Engineers Institution in the capital (‘Dr Kamal hopeful of forming grand alliance against 4-party’ 2006, *Daily Star*, July <http://bdelections.wordpress.com/2006/07/14/dr-kamal-hopeful-of-forming-grand-alliance-against-4-party/> - Accessed 5 June 2007 – Attachment 6).

A December 2006 report states that the Gano Forum and another small party, the Workers Party, were negotiating with the Awami League on the number of seats they would get as part of the electoral alliance (‘Gano Forum, WP talk seats with AL’ 2006, *The New Nation*, 22 December <http://nation.ittefaq.com/artman/exec/view.cgi/60/33106> - Accessed 5 June 2007 – Attachment 7).

The 2007 Amnesty International report on Bangladesh mentions a bomb blast in 2006 involving the Gono Forum:

On 31 October, a bomb attack took place in Rajshahi aimed at several opposition parties, including Gono Forum. They claimed it was carried out by the Bangladesh Islamichatra Shibir cadres, the youth wing of the Jamaat-e-Islami party. On 15 November, eight people were reportedly wounded when a series of small bombs exploded near the offices of the Awami League. No one was known to have been brought to justice. Amnesty International 2007, *Amnesty International Report 2007: Bangladesh* <http://thereport.amnesty.org/eng/Regions/Asia-Pacific/Bangladesh> - Accessed 5 June 2007 – Attachment 8).

An August 2006 report quotes Dr Kamal addressing a student group

Gano Forum president Dr Kamal Hossain on Friday said the people must free the country from the grip of what he termed ‘the hyena-like BNP-Jamaat-led alliance’ through the upcoming general election.

The ruling coalition has been backing corruption in every sector and the ‘hyena’ sucking blood of the people, he told the opening session of a council of the Jatiya Chhatra Dhara, the forum’s student wing, at the Moni Singh-Farhad Memorial Hall in the city.

The Gano Forum chief was optimistic that, after the election slated for January, a pro-people government would come to power through a victory of the 14-party opposition combine. Terming the student workers the vanguards of the opposition movement, he said, ‘The next few months until the election you must work hard to mobilise people in favour of the opposition alliance.’

‘You must go door to door and made the people aware of the 4-party alliance misrule,’ Kamal elaborated.

‘We defeated the politics of communalism in the War of Independence. But those forces have returned back with religion-based politics. These devilish forces are the partners of the ruling alliance and we must defeat them in the next election,’ he emphasised.

He further said, ‘The BNP-Jamaat-led alliance government has introduced a sick politics in the country, favouring the use of arms and black money, and we want a reversal to that.’

Gano Forum Dhaka City president Mostofa Mohsin Montu and central leaders Abul Kasem and Habibur Rahman also addressed the session, chaired by Chhatra Dhara president Monjur Ahmed.

A close door council session followed the inauguration. Hundreds of student leaders from across the country took part in the council (Saha, Moloy 2006, ‘Use polls to get rid of “hyena” government’, *New Age International*, 5 August

<http://www.newagebd.com/2006/aug/05/nat.html> - Accessed 5 June 2007 – Attachment 9).

A 2005 report mentions that “religious zealots” had pronounced a fatwa on Dr Kamal calling him an “apostate” (‘Leaders for unity against religious zealots’ 2005, *New Age International*, 13 January <http://www.newagebd.com/2005/jan/13/nat.html> - Accessed 5 June 2007 – Attachment 10).

Another 2005 report mentions that the “youth front” of the Gano Forum is called the “Juba Gano Forum” (‘Kamal’s call for people’s unity to resume positive politics’ 2005, *News From Bangladesh*, 2 June <http://www.bangladesh-web.com/news/view.php?hidDate=2005-06-02&hidType=POL&hidRecord=00000000000000000046982> – Accessed 5 June 2007 – Attachment 11).

Reports from 2007

Recent news reports indicate that Dr Kamal Hossain is currently involved in various meetings and forums with the intent of forming a new party or coalition to contest the next elections when they are held.

A May 2007 report states that Dr Hossain attended a meeting of Bangladeshi expatriates in London which was presided over by “London Gono Forum leader Mokabbir Khan”. Dr Hossain stated that the current caretaker government was “constitutionally valid” and that the nation was uniting against “corruption, terrorism, black money and dishonest politics” (‘CG tenure valid constitutionally until new govt takes over’ 2007, BangladeshNews.com.bd website, 1 May <http://www.bangladeshnews.com.bd/2007/05/01/cg-tenure-valid-constitutionally-until-new-govt-takes-over/> - Accessed 5 June 2007 – Attachment 12).

A recent report indicates that the Gono Forum has differences of opinion with its former ally the Awami league:

Differences have emerged among the allies of the maha jote (grand alliance) over the demand for early elections and the prevailing situation. On one hand the leader of the grand alliance Sheikh Hasina has called for speedy holding of the election, while the other allies are in no hurry for the polls. And, again, the role of Gono Forum leader Dr. Kamal Hossain has complicated matters between the Eleven Party and the 14-Party alliance. So it looks as if the grand alliance may face problems once the emergency is lifted and the date for the election is announced (Dutta, B. 2007, ‘Differences in grand alliance on poll issue’, *PROBE News Magazine* Vol 5 Issue 49, 1 June <http://www.probenewsmagazine.com/index.php?index=2&contentId=2274&PHPSESSID=d%3Fref%3D3b.org> – Accessed 5 June 2007 – Attachment 13).

Another recent report indicates that the caretaker government is attempting to form a new political group, and that Dr Hossain was one of the leaders it has approached:

In fact, Dr. Fakruddin Ahmed took the oath of office with the goal to hold a free and fair election ‘within the shortest possible time’. Although 120 days have passed, the political parties have not been allowed yet to resume their activities or campaigning. Instead, the military-backed government is reportedly manipulating breaking up the major political parties of the country namely, the Awami League (AL) and the BNP. **Initially it tried to capitalize the popularity of Nobel Laureate Professor Mohammed Yunus to float a new political party. Since that failed now they are reportedly trying with Dr. Kamal Hossain, a former Foreign Minister. Dr. Hossain is a reputed jurist but he lacks organizing ability. His Gono Forum did not flourish due to organizational weaknesses.** Moreover, Sheikh Hasina, the leader of the largest and oldest grass root political party of Bangladesh is back in the country now and her popular support mushroomed due to government’s ill conceived policies and manipulated cases against her. Now it has become difficult for the AL leaders who were thinking of breaking away from the party, to try for setting up a new party. Therefore, the military generals led by Law Advisor Mainul Hossain have one option; to form the new party with the supporters of the BNP and the LDP, the breakaway faction of the BNP (‘Election in Bangladesh, or military backed administration loses credibility’ 2007, *The Weekly Durdesh*, 11 May <http://www.durdesh.net/news/Article583.html> - Accessed 5 June 2007 – Attachment 14).

A June 2007 report discusses Dr Hossain’s recent appearance on a television show, where he claimed to be attempting to rally the “sane politicians” behind him in order to “free politics from the control of terrorists and black money holders” (‘Gano Forum president seeks to free

politics from money and muscle power' 2007, *United News of Bangladesh Limited*, 3 June – Attachment 15).

Another June 2007 report states that a number of politicians from different sides, including Dr Hossain, met to discuss the formation of a new political movement. Dr Hossain urged politicians with a “clean image” to unite and support their platform (‘New political forum takes shape in Bangladesh’ 2007, *BBC Monitoring South Asia*, 4 June – Attachment 16).

3. Are outspoken female activists, who promote increased human rights for Bangladesh women, targeted? If so, what happens to them?

A recent RRT Research Response examined women’s rights movements in Bangladesh, and their treatment. Drawing on a wide range of material including reports from NGOs, governments and the media, it states that Bangladesh has a long history of women’s organisations, women’s wings of political parties, and groups dedicated to improving women’s welfare, most of which operate without difficulty. On occasion there have been threats against outspoken women by religious fundamentalists, and some isolated instances of violence (RRT Country Research 2007, *Research Response BGD31728*, 21 May – Attachment 17).

Question 1 of a 2006 RRT Research Response provides further material on women’s rights groups and their treatment by Islamic fundamentalists (RRT Country Research 2006, *Research Response BGD30397*, 7 August – Attachment 18).

4. Are non conformist females in Bangladesh targeted? If so, what type of difficulties do they face?

Three RRT Research Responses are of relevance to this question.

Question 2 of a 2006 response examines the treatment of Tasleema Nasreen, an outspoken feminist writer who wrote articles criticising Islam, and who was subject to threats by Islamist groups. She alienated much of the feminist movement as well by her extreme views which they felt had alienated ordinary Bangladeshis (RRT Country Research 2006, *Research Response BGD30397*, 7 August – Attachment 18).

Questions 1, 2, 6 and 7 of a 2006 response examine domestic violence, protection and support organisations for women (RRT Country Research 2006, *Research Response BGD30121*, 19 May – Attachment 19).

A 2004 response looks at the general situation of those who express independent views in Bangladesh (RRT Country Research 2004, *Research Response BGD17033*, 12 October – Attachment 20).

List of Sources Consulted

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