

## International

# Bangladesh opposition goes underground as threats grow

**DHAKA:** Subrata Chowdhury, an opposition candidate in the looming Bangladesh election, is too scared to leave his party office as campaign deaths and threats mount. The Dhaka lawyer should be out on the streets handing out leaflets on meet-and-greets. But he says it is too dangerous while his party insists authorities are doing nothing to protect candidates.

paigning and more than 8,700 activists, including 14 candidates, have been detained in the past month.

## Terrified voters

The opposition says its rallies have been broken up by police firing pellet guns and tear gas, terrifying voters turning out to show solidarity with the beleaguered movement. Candidates like Chowdhury, trying to boost their visibility, have been threatened on the campaign trail by ruling Awami League followers wielding metal bars. Two Awami League followers have also been killed in fights with the opposition.

Police have denied interfering in rallies or harassing opposition campaigners and authorities say those detained in recent weeks — which opposition figures say are in the thousands — had outstanding warrants for their arrest. Obaidul Quader, general secretary of the Awami League, said the party did not tell its workers to attack opponents. “I won’t say all (the allegations) are false. But... we did not give any order,” he said. The Election Commission says it has taken steps to ensure a level playing field — despite the overwhelming number of opposition candidates disqualified. But alarm has been growing as the poll looms.

## One-sided race

Rights groups and government critics warn the election is not shaping up to be free or fair in the country of 160 million. “Members and supporters of the main opposition parties have been arrested, killed, even disappeared, creating an atmosphere of fear and repression that is not consistent with credible elections,” said Brad Adams, Asia director for New York-based Human Rights Watch.

There are fears of a repeat of the one-sided 2014 national election — when the BNP boycotted



**DHAKA:** In this photo taken on December 16, 2018 a man walks past a wall with images of Bangladeshi founding father Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (L) and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wazed (R) as general election campaigns take place. — AFP

the vote, letting Hasina walk into office unchallenged. Since then, Hasina and her party have been accused of drifting toward authoritarianism, silencing dissent and the press by using an onerous digital-security law. Critics, notably award-winning photojournalist Shahidul Alam, were jailed for making “provocative” statements.

The opposition’s veteran opposition leader Khaleda Zia was handed another stiff jail term in November, ensuring she was kept out of the race. The browbeating has left voters wondering if there is an alternative to the governing party. “It’s a one-sided poll so far. The opposition is too afraid to campaign,” said Rezaur Rahman, a voter from West Nakhhalpara in the capital Dhaka. The streets of

West Nakhhalpara are plastered with images of the incumbent, a ruling party minister whose supporters have staged noisy parades. His challenger — head of an opposition youth league — remains all but invisible.

“I doubt the opposition is even contesting the polls,” said one shopkeeper, who declined to be named for fear of retribution. “I haven’t seen any of his posters or leaflets. No one came to me seeking a vote for him.” Opposition candidates say the odds are stacked against them. “They claim the people are with them. Then why aren’t they letting everyone campaign freely?” asked BNP candidate Afroza Abbas, whose motorcade was attacked last week. — AFP



‘We were attacked by ruling party men’

“We were attacked by ruling party men as we tried to hang these posters,” said Chowdhury in his glum headquarters amid stacks of unused flyers and banners. “The police were just silent spectators, or actively supported them.” At least six people have been killed in campaign clashes between Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s ruling Awami League and the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP).

Election authorities have deployed more than 20,000 paramilitary personnel across the country to boost security ahead of the December 30 vote. Army troops are due to join them. But the BNP is not reassured. It says at least four party activists have been killed — including one who fell to his death from a Dhaka rooftop last week in suspicious circumstances — and thousands hurt in the past week. The party claims that 152 out of 300 opposition candidates have been attacked while cam-

## US envoy doubts Taliban’s desire for Afghan peace

**KABUL:** US peace envoy Zalmay Khalilzad raised doubts yesterday about the Taliban’s desire to end the 17-year war, after the militants refused to meet with a Kabul-backed negotiating team. While he was certain the Afghan government wanted to stop the conflict, Khalilzad told Arriana News that he questioned whether the Taliban were “genuinely seeking peace”.

“We have to wait and see their forthcoming steps,” Khalilzad said according to a translation of the interview provided by the US embassy in Kabul. Khalilzad’s remarks to Afghan media following his latest face-to-face meeting with the Taliban echoed those expressed privately by some Western diplomats in the capital. Saudi Arabia and Pakistan also attended the talks in Abu Dhabi earlier this week, which the United Arab Emirates hailed as “positive for all parties concerned”. But the Taliban would not meet with a 12-person Afghan delegation, Khalilzad said, describing the decision as “wrong”. —AFP

## DR Congo election panel ‘may postpone vote’

**KINSHASA:** Elections in Democratic Republic of Congo — due to take place on Sunday — may be postponed for a week, a senior electoral official has told AFP, after electronic voting machines were destroyed in a suspected arson attack on a warehouse last week. The official, from the Independent National Election Commission (CENI), speaking on condition of anonymity, said on Wednesday that both the presidential and legislative polls could be delayed.

President Joseph Kabila is scheduled to step down after nearly 18 years in power following the elections — which are already two years overdue. Nearly 8,000 of some 10,000 voting terminals for the capital Kinshasa were destroyed in the warehouse blaze last Wednesday, according to CENI. Around 11 percent of the country’s 44 million registered voters live in the city.

Opposition candidates last week suggested the government could have been behind the fire, to use as a pretext to again delay the vote. A “seven-day postponement” is being discussed, the CENI official said on Wednesday, as efforts are made to obtain replacement machines. “We are not going to ask for anyone’s opinion, even that of the head of state,” the source insisted, adding that a formal decision may be announced yesterday. CENI head Corneille Nangaa is considering that matter and will hold a press conference on Thursday in Kinshasa, a spokesman for the election commission said.

## ‘Extremists are prepared’

The possible election postponement comes as problems have piled up ahead of the December 23 vote, with violence at electoral

rallies, inter-ethnic conflict, militia attacks in the east and an Ebola outbreak. Electoral campaigning began on November 22, since when at least six people have died in violence, according to Congolese rights NGO Acaj. The authorities deny that there have been any deaths linked to the campaign.

The governor of Kinshasa on Wednesday announced a ban on all public rallies due to security concerns — as opposition hopeful Martin Fayulu said he had been blocked from entering the city. “Extremists are prepared and are preparing for confrontations in the streets of the city of Kinshasa during election campaigning,” governor Andre Kimbuta said in a statement. The ban applies to “all presidential candidates, without exception,” Kimbuta said, giving no details as to how long the measure would last. Fayulu had been due to hold a meeting in the city. The opposition candidate said on Twitter that the government had “prevented (him) from returning” to Kinshasa and that his motorcade had been attacked in Masinimba, east of the capital. “What are they afraid of?” he asked. Police blocked the N1 highway on the city’s outskirts, which Fayulu’s motorcade would have used, and fired teargas to disperse several hundred supporters who had come to greet him, an AFP reporter saw. Fayulu has repeatedly accused the authorities of trying to thwart regional campaign appearances in the sprawling country.

More than 40 million people are eligible to cast their vote on Sunday. The elections are a huge challenge for DRC, which has never known a peaceful transition of power since it gained independence from Belgium in 1960. Kabila, 47, came to power after his father was assassinated in 2001. He is at the helm of a government that critics say is notorious for corruption, incompetence and rights abuse. Kabila should have stepped down as president at the end of 2016 when he reached a two-term limit. He stayed on, invoking a caretaker clause in the constitution, but at the cost of protests that were bloodily repressed. —AFP