DHAKA'S FAILED ANTI-GRAFT DRIVE

Next, a face-saving exit

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LAST month, when the military-backed government in Dhaka announced that national polls would be held on Dec 18, the news was hailed by many as a major breakthrough. But it also appears to signal the failure of one of the most determined efforts in Bangladeshi history to clean up the nation's corrupt and highly personalised political system.

The current government seized power on Jan 12 last year following protracted violence as the nation prepared to hold general elections. Frustrated by years of squabbling between the conservative Bangladesh National Party (BNP) and the left-leaning Awami League (AL), the public initially welcomed the military's move. The interim government rounded up dozens of politicians and businessmen in an anti-corruption campaign. It also cracked down on Islamic extremists.

But despite these moves, it has become clear in recent months that the military-backed leadership has been unable to alter the political landscape in any fundamental way. Last month's developments suggest that the military has abandoned the reform effort and is simply looking for a face-saving exit.

Speaking to The Straits Times, Mr Shahidul Islam, a research associate with the Institute of South Asian Studies at the National University of Singapore, agreed: “They have already given up.”

Petty corruption “has increased in amount and intensity despite the anti-graft drive”, local Transparency International representative Mozaffar Ahmed told AFP last month.

More serious, perhaps, has been the failure of the government to undermine the influence of former prime ministers Sheikh Hasina of the AL and Khaleda Zia of the BNP. The two leaders, who alternated as prime minister for 15 years after the end of military rule in 1990, are widely regarded as responsible for the personalised nature of the country's politics.

With both women facing dozens of charges of corruption and abuse of power, it seemed at first that the new government would succeed. But it has become increasingly clear that their respective parties are remaining solidly behind them. Both were recently released from detention in order to ensure the participation of the AL and the BNP in the December elections.

A key reason for the failure of the military-backed government’s reform efforts has been its declining popularity in the face of rising inflation. The cost of food grain imports has quadrupled over the last 12 months. Annual consumer price inflation in July hit a six-month high after the government raised fuel prices between 34 and 37.5 per cent in order to offset rising subsidy bills.

The country has also been experiencing a decline in foreign investor interest. According to the United Nation’s World Investment Report, foreign direct investment fell by 16 per cent last year. Analysts have attributed the fall to a combination of political uncertainty and unreliable electricity supplies. Labour unrest has also been rising.

The caretaker government says it wants to continue with the state of emergency until the general election to “retain control” over the old problems of money and muscle power during polling. But this policy may soon be discarded.

“They (the current government) are now trying to work out a sort of compromise with these two ladies,” notes Mr Shahidul. History suggests that whoever wins power in the December elections is likely to extract revenge on the nation's current leaders, thus the government's need to fashion a safe exit strategy.

Previous plans of the interim government involved using electoral laws to prevent corrupt individuals associated with the major parties from standing in local polls, thus reforming the parties from within while, at the same time, weakening their stranglehold on local government. But the August municipal elections, in which candidates associated with the AL swept the polls, showed that this was simply not practicable.

“It’s Hobson’s choice,” said Mr Shahidul, referring to the fact that there is no viable alternative to the AL and the BNP. He does, however, see some reason for hope. The military-backed government’s anti-corruption drive has raised awareness of the problem among voters.

“This information will help people choose who is the least corrupt.” For now, however, Bangladesh’s reformers appear to have given up.

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