

Bangladesh crackdown

WHILE Bangladesh will go to the polls on Sunday to elect a new government, it will not be much of a contest, as the ruling Awami League has made short work of the opposition. Sadly, Prime Minister Hasina Wajed's administration has managed to decimate all opposition forces, while also going after critical voices in the media and civil society. While Nobel laureate and globally acclaimed economist Muhammad Yunus has long been in the bad books of the AL, he was convicted on Monday for "violating labour laws" at his telecom firm. Dr Yunus, who faces over 100 cases, denies the charges, and many observers feel the conviction is the result of the banker's earlier political ambitions. Meanwhile, the crackdown on the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, the main opposition force, has been relentless. The party's workers and supporters have been picked up by the thousands, while many are in hiding, fearful that the security apparatus will scoop them up. The BNP had called for a caretaker set-up to oversee the polls, and upon the government's rejection of the proposal the party decided to sit out the contest. Foreign governments as well as neutral observers, including UN officials, have raised concerns about the crackdown, but this has failed to have any effect on PM Wajed's administration.

The situation in Bangladesh is reflective of the larger threat to democracy in the region. We in Pakistan are, of course, familiar with the tactics being unleashed by the state in Bangladesh, and similar questions of legitimacy have been raised about our own electoral exercise next month. Meanwhile, India, which goes to the polls in a few months, is also suffering from a democratic deficit, as the BJP's majoritarian Hindutva juggernaut has repeatedly mauled the secular democratic ethos in that country. Coming back to Bangladesh, the country had begun to traverse the democratic path after a long period of military rule ended in the early 1990s. But sadly, as the AL's tussle with the BNP escalated over the decades, Bangladesh today is standing on the brink of turning into a one-party state. While it may be too late to salvage the upcoming election, Ms Wajed and her party need to reconsider their methods, as heavy-handed crackdowns on all opposition forces will retard the growth of Bangladeshi democracy in the long run, and increase fissures in society.

The Downward Spiral of Democracy in Bangladesh.

The elections in Bangladesh (next Sunday) do not feel like a contest as Awami League (AL) has been sternly handling its competitors. Its Prime Minister has dealt with her opposition and criticism strongly. Be it Muhammad Yunus or Bangladesh Nationalist Party, everybody is facing consequence of their political motivations. The world platforms and global public opinion have highlighted the repercussions of repressive politics of states on democracy but democracy seems to be declining in over the whole region. India, Pakistan and Bangladesh are using same tactics to silence the free voices of opposition. By continuing its repressive tactics, Bangladesh will end up as a one-party state, and it will be detrimental to democracy of Bangla-

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social divide:

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