

International Bangladesh Foundation

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PRESS RELEASE

London Seminar brings both BNP and the main opposition Awami League and other human rights organizations together to discuss forthcoming elections in Bangladesh & the protection of Hindu, Christian & Buddhist minorities

A seminar on Bangladesh titled '*The elections in Bangladesh: security, human rights and a level playing field*' was held last Saturday, 15 July at King's College, University of London. The conference was chaired by Lord Avebury, Vice-Chair of UK Human Rights Parliamentary Group and was sponsored by the All-Party Parliamentary Human Rights Group and organised by the International Bangladesh Foundation in collaboration with Liberation and other London based human rights organisations, British Members of both Houses of Parliament, Members of the European Parliament, university academics and faith leaders.

Lord Avebury in his opening remarks said, 'I hope we shall have a rational discussion leading to conclusions which may help Bangladesh to achieve the objectives we all share – democratic elections which allow the people to express their will freely, after hearing what the parties have got to offer, leading to a government which values and promotes the principle of equality. We are glad that the governing BNP and the opposition Awami League have been able to send representatives to participate in our discussions'.

'As you know, the elections in Bangladesh, due in January 2007, are of crucial importance to the future stability and cohesion of Bangladesh. They also have implications for the south Asia region, and for the UK, where the large Bangladeshi community has close ties with relatives and friends in their country of origin. Unfortunately, the last general election in October 2001 was contaminated by widespread violence and intimidation of ethnic and religious minorities, which continued for some time after polling day. So the first requirement for the coming poll is that security is maintained, both for the minorities whose members fear renewed attacks, and for the candidates and election workers'.

'In the light of the attempted political assassination of the Leader of the Opposition and the murder of Shah AMS Kibria, as well as other high profile terrorist activities including the killing of judges and the attempt on the life of our own High Commissioner, Anwar Chowdhury – crimes which have not been solved - there are legitimate fears that law and

order may not be upheld during the campaign. While two of the chief terrorists were arrested at the beginning of March, and there have been fewer incidents since then, violence and threats of violence are still undermining freedom, and everybody knows that you become a target if you express certain views’.

Bangladesh Government spokesperson, Bangladesh High Commission’s Fazal Kamal stated in his presentation at the seminar, ‘Three parliamentary elections have been held under the system of caretaker government and all of them have been unequivocally certified by both national and international election observers as free and fair. It should be evident that there is no cause for concern regarding the forthcoming elections especially because of two reasons: 1. A tried and tested basic structure---constitutional, institutional, administrative as well as physical---exists in the country to have free and fair elections; and 2. Two-way communications are ongoing between the government and the major opposition party to resolve issues raised by it through a process of discussions. What is more, the government is openly willing and ready to accommodate reasonable suggestions for reforms. But the process, it has to be reemphasized, must be via talks and not through coercion. In addition, responding to the demand of the opposition for reforms in the Election Commission and the NCG system, Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia had proposed the formation of a bipartisan committee, comprising members from the ruling coalition and the main opposition in Parliament to discuss and assess the Awami League's reform suggestions, and also to devise agreed procedures to implement any reform proposal. This modality as put forward by the Prime Minister was welcomed by the people, the media, and development partners as well as by the civil society’.

Mr Kamal further stated, ‘The opposition Awami League also responded positively to this suggestion albeit with some conditions. This process toward a formal dialogue is proceeding through agreed channels of communications and it is expected that the concerned political parties will succeed in resolving their differences before the resignation of the present government in late October. In this context, it ought to be emphasized that Bangladesh needs the support and appreciation, as opposed to unhelpful comments and undeserved criticism, of the international community in its endeavors to maintain, preserve and develop the ongoing democratic process’.

The seminar addressed the forthcoming election process and the protection of the religious minorities and opposition activists in Bangladesh, human rights violations in Bangladesh, and particularly the religious extremism, harassment and persecution of religious minorities, the conditions for free and fair elections, and arrangements for a level playing field.

Representatives of the Bangladesh Government, Fazal Kamal, Press Minister, Bangladesh High Commission, Mohammad Enamur Rahman Choudhury , Minister for Consular Affairs, Saida Muna Jasneem, Counsellor for Political Affairs and Barrister Jyotsna Miah, President of BNP-UK's women's wing and from the opposition, Saber Hossain Chowdhury, Organising Secretary, Bangladesh Awami League & Political Secretary to H E Sheikh Hasina, and Jeremy Corbyn MP, Vice-Chair, British-Bangladesh

Parliamentary Group, Dr Charles Tannock MEP, Conservative foreign affairs spokesman, Vice President Human Rights Sub-Committee European Parliament and Lesley Abdela, Vice President, Electoral Reform Society addressed the seminar.

Other panellists speakers who addressed the seminar were, Abdul Gaffar Choudhury, Columnist & political analyst, Barrister Jyotsna Miah, President, BNP(Bangladesh Nationalist Party)-UK's women's wing , Chris Blackburn, Intelligence Analyst, Dr Ahmed Ziauddin, European Bangladesh Forum, Brussels, Maggie Bowden, Liberation, Ina Hume, Vanishing Rites, Biswajit Chanda, SOAS, University of London, Gita Sahgal, Head of the Gender Unit, Amnesty International, Abbas Faiz, Amnesty International, Dr Iftikhar Iyyaz OBE, Ahmadiyya Muslim Association, Kumar Sivasish Roy, Jumma People's Network (JPN), Dr Charles Graves, Interfaith International Ben Rogers, Christian Solidarity Worldwide. Many others including Murad Quresahi, advisor to London Mayor, Ken Livingstone, Cllr Talat Karim, former Cllr M A Rahim, BNP President Kamor Uddin & Secretary M A Malik and AL leaders Sultan Shariff, Cllr Mustaq Qureshi took part in the debate.

The seminar ended with Lord Avebury proposing that, 'The allegations that the police, army, electoral machinery and local administration have been politicized should be investigated by the International Bangladesh Foundation, with the help of our allies here and in Bangladesh, and our findings submitted to the European Union and the Commonwealth Secretariat'

This proposal was endorsed by acclamation

He further said, 'if conditions exist for free and fair elections, and if not, how they are to be achieved. Now that the Chief Election Commissioner has said that he will comply with the Supreme Court's ruling after all and prepare a new register based on a house-to-house canvass, is there time for a provisional register to be published and corrections made in the 6 months before polling day? Local officials are saying that the time allowed for the canvass is inadequate. And if the Commissioner has lost public confidence by originally defying the court, is there any mechanism for replacing him?

'Assuming that a 'flawless' register can be prepared in time, as the Prime Minister says, will the caretaker administration be impartial, and will the parties be able to hold meetings, under protection of the police when necessary? Will they have access to the public broadcasting media, and on what terms? The arrangements for polling day, on which international observers habitually concentrate, is the end of a process which has already started'.

The seminar was chaired by Lord Avebury, Vice-Chair of UK Human Rights Parliamentary Group and sponsored by the All-Party Parliamentary Human Rights Group and organised by the International Bangladesh Foundation in collaboration with Liberation and other London based human rights organizations.

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