Endgame for Bi-party Dichotomy in Bangladesh

What is the issue?

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- Former Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Begum Khaleda Zia has been sentenced to five years rigorous imprisonment in a corruption case.
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- As she continues to hold the reigns of the Bangladesh National Party (BNP), the verdict is bound to severely affect its credibility as an alternative.
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What is the political history?

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- Since secession in 1971, Bangladesh's polity has been more or less evenly divided between the Awami League (AL) and the BNP.
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- They've mostly traded office after every election since 1991.
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- **Bad Reputation -** BNP sowed the seeds of its current political disenfranchisement with its irresponsible governance from 2001 to 2006.
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- BNP-led alliance was openly corruption, leading 'Transparency International' to rank Bangladesh as the most corrupt country for five years in a row.
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- It presided over a time of unprecedented violence against the country's minority community and the political opposition.
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- This included the assassination of two senior AL leaders and a grenade attack on an AL public meeting that killed 24 people and injured over 300.
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- Notably, the current PM Sheikh Hasina, had narrowly survived the attack and Ms. Zia's son is one of the accused facing trial in the case.
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- The BNP's misrule came to an end when a military-backed caretaker government seized power in January 2007.

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- **The Opposition Years -** When elections were held in December 2008, AL saw a landslide victory, and the BNP began its downward slide.
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- During its tenure, the AL succeeded in leveraging the perquisites of office to rebuild itself into the dominant political force in the country.
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- Simultaneously, the BNP suffered the usual indignities and routine repression of opposition, which is common in Bangladesh.
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- But despite this, aided by anti-incumbency, the BNP was still a very strong contender when elections were called in 2013.
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How did the current mesh unfold?

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- **Unsuccessful Revolt -** The AL had amended the constitution to do away with the caretaker government provision for holding elections, in 2013.
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- This was done as there was a fearful that this could be used as cover for another military takeover, like the one in 2007.
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- As opinion polls indicated a decent popularity for the BNP, there was every possibility of it returning to power through elections.
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- But instead, BNP resorted to street protests to restore the caretaker government provision and made it a precondition for electoral participation.
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- While a solid majority of the country agreed with the BNP's position, it still failed to either force the government to capitulate or the army to step in.
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- Contrarily, BNP protests got increasingly violent, which blotted its public popularity and also raised serious questions as to its own fitness for office.
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- **Recent Trends -** The BNP boycott of the 2014 elections, saw AL retaining power with a massive victory and subsequently consolidating its strangle hold.
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- Contrarily, BNP has withered continuously since, partly due to severe government repression and partly due to its own intrinsic shortcomings.
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- Many senior BNP leaders have been arrested for long terms and local leaders and cadre are on the run or have gone underground.
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- Also, recently, BNP chairperson, Ms.Khalela Zia has also been convinced by the supreme court for corruption, and has been sentenced to 5 years in jail.
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- This has decimated the party's organisational capacity and its ability to mobilise resources, and it is almost 11 years since it was in power.
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- All these factors gives rise to the perception that the bi-party dichotomy in Bangaladesh is coming to an end with AL emerging as the sole primary pole.
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How does the future look?

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- **2019 elections -** The term for AL will end in 2019 and elections must be called before then, which might possibly see another walkover from the BNP.
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- This will likely strengthen the AL and also result in the BNP seeing a elationtion of its registration as per the election law.
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- But this might rise legitimacy problems internationally and would also not be to the liking of India, which is AL's principle international ally.
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- Hence, the best-case scenario for the AL would be securing the participation of a weakened BNP in the election, possibly without Ms. Zia.
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- **Possible scenarios -** Ms.Zia's current conviction would automatically disqualify her, unless her appeal seeking 'Special Leave' is accepted.
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- If the appeal is granted and she subsequently gets a bail from prision, she will be able to contest the elections, albeit with a taint of corruption.
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- Defection of the second rung leadership of BNP due to Zia's unpopularity or a reveolting against her from within are hence real possibilities.
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- Hence, the jailing of Ms. Zia even temporarily will be a body blow to the BNP, which in any case does not look like a credible challenger for 2019.

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- While a resurrection by BNP form here looks difficult, it can’t be written off completely, as the opposition space is without perceivable contenders.
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Source: The Hindu

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