

Bangladesh to set election date as opposition cries foul

Bangladeshi authorities were set to announce later on Thursday a date for general elections despite the opposition crying foul and threatening protests.

Chief Election Commissioner Nurul Huda will address the nation live at 7pm local time to announce the date, spokesman S.M. Asaduzzaman told.

The vote in the South Asian country of 165 million people is likely to be held in late December although the opposition wants it pushed back to March.

The opposition also wants parliament to be dissolved first and for a neutral caretaker government to take office, but Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has rejected the demands.

The opposition, including the main Bangladesh Nationalist Party, fears the election will be rigged if Hasina remains in power while the vote is held.

The BNP boycotted the last elections in 2014 over fears its would be rigged by Hasina. A majority of parliamentary seats were then won by Hasina's party unopposed.

The boycott triggered widespread violence across the country, leaving dozens of people dead and hundreds of voting booths vandalised.

The ruling Awami League party and main opposition alliance, the Jatiya Oikya Front, held two rounds of discussions at Hasina's residence in the past week.

But they appeared to end in failure with the deputy leader of the ruling party Obaidul Quader telling reporters that dissolving parliament was unconstitutional.

“There is no scope to go beyond the constitution. We’ve conveyed that clearly,” he said.

The opposition would not say that the talks had ended in failure but they stressed their struggle would continue. They also want the election commission to defer its announcement.

“We are still in movement,” opposition spokesman Fakhrul Islam Alamgir said.

They have threatened street protests and marches in major cities and in front of the commission.

The 2014 violence prompted a massive crackdown by Hasina’s government, which arrested thousands of BNP officials and confined BNP leader Khaleda Zia at her home for weeks.

In recent months, the BNP’s strength was further weakened after Zia was convicted and sentenced to 10 and seven years in jail in two separate cases of corruption.

Her eldest son and heir apparent Tarique Rahman, who lives in exile in London, was also sentenced to life in prison over a 2004 grenade attack targeting Hasina.

Analysts say despite the rejection of its key demand by Hasina and amid mounting fears of a rigged polls, BNP has no choice but to participate in the election.

A no-show could result in cancellation of its party registration, they say.