

## **Democracy and Rule of Law in Bangladesh**

### **Background Note**

On 21 August 2004 a grenade attack at a political rally in Bangladesh killed at least 18 people. This was the latest in a series of explosions that have left more than 140 dead in the past five years. The explosion targeted the leading opposition Awami League and in particular Awami League leader Sheikh Hasina, who narrowly survived the attack which took place soon after she addressed about 20,000 people.

Formerly East Pakistan, Bangladesh came into being in 1971, when the two parts of Pakistan split after a bitter civil war that drew in neighbouring India. Bangladesh spent fifteen years under military rule and, although democracy was restored in 1990, the political scene remains volatile.

Today Bangladesh is ruled by a four-party coalition that includes two Islamic parties. Prime Minister Khaleda Zia came to power following a landslide election victory in October 2001 of the four-party alliance led by her Bangladesh Nationalist Party. Her government has pointed to successes in handling the economy and tackling environmental issues but it has struggled to deliver on its key election pledge of containing lawlessness and violence. In early 2004 Ms Zia came under mounting opposition pressure to call early elections, amid a background of general strikes and protests

Antagonism between the Awami League, which governed until July 2001, and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party runs deep.

Earlier in 2004 there were two attacks at the Hazrat Shahjalal shrine in the northern city of Sylhet. In May bombers struck again, killing three people and injuring British High Commissioner Anwar Choudhury. The 21 August blasts echoed a bomb attack in Sylhet on 7 August which the city's mayor, Badruddin Kamran, said was an attempt to assassinate him. Other blasts have rocked cinemas in Sylhet, Mymensingh and Satkhira.

There have been few clues as to who is responsible, but some fear the country is facing a concerted campaign of violence. In all but one of the bombings over the past five years, the police have failed to make any arrests.

On 26 August 2004 a delegation of the Heads of Mission of the European Union in Dhaka held a meeting with the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Bangladesh Mr. Morshed Khan to express the EU's worry over the recent attacks on opposition leader Sheikh Hasina and also over the increased number of violent attacks that stay unpunished. The Heads of Mission explained that the EU expects the Government of Bangladesh to start a thorough investigation in the recent attacks and bring those responsible to justice.