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ASIA

Investigation Sought Into Bangladesh Politicians' Wealth

Activists Point to Officials' Assets Ballooning During Administration's Years in Power

By **SYED ZAIN AL-MAHMOOD**

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DHAKA, Bangladesh—Anticorruption activists on Friday called for an investigation into revelations that some of Bangladesh's leading politicians significantly increased their wealth during the current government's five years in power, raising the pressure on Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's beleaguered administration.

A group of human-rights activists and anticorruption campaigners, called Sushasoner Jonno Nagorik, demanded an investigation into the ballooning in the value of assets held by some ministers and members of Parliament from the ruling Awami League.

Details of politicians' personal wealth came out earlier this month, as those running for Parliament in elections set for Jan. 5 had to declare their assets to the country's Election Commission. The fact that some of them have become wealthy has outraged many in this poor South Asian country, where the per capita annual income is around \$1,000.

The declarations of wealth, submitted by the candidates themselves, reveal that the personal fortunes of many leaders of the Awami League have climbed, sometimes more than a hundredfold, when compared with similar declarations submitted ahead of the last elections in 2008.

"The affidavits and tax statements [submitted to the election commission] show that at least 48 candidates who have served in important positions have seen a 582% rise in income on average," said Badiul Alam Majumdar, the general secretary of Sushasoner Jonno Nagorik.

The wealth is symptomatic of a system where politics is used to make money, said Iftekharuzzaman, executive director of Transparency International Bangladesh, who goes by just one name.

"That winner-takes-all mentality is at the root of the current political crisis," he said. "No one wants to give up power because it's so profitable."

The shock over the growing wealth of some politicians—local news outlets are calling it the "rags-to-riches scandal"—is the latest controversy to hit the government since Ms. Hasina came to power in early 2009.

Bangladesh has been racked by political violence since last month, as the opposition has tried to force the government to step down and hold elections under a neutral caretaker administration.

Ms. Hasina has refused and has overseen an intensifying crackdown on opposition parties. Opposition groups have called a series of blockades of roads, ports and railways, bringing the country to a virtual standstill.

Despite the country's instability, Ms. Hasina's party has all but secured re-election in parliamentary polls in January. More than half the ruling party's candidates have already been declared winners without a contest, due to an opposition boycott.

The personal-wealth affidavits, published on the Election Commission website, show that many ministers and ruling party leaders have improved their financial positions in the last five years.

Abdul Mannan Khan, former minister for housing and public works, declared assets of more than 113 million takas (\$1.4 million) for himself and his wife. The couple declared assets of one million takas in 2008.

Mohiuddin Khan Alamgir, a former home minister, declared a cash balance of more than 30 million takas. He had 500,000 takas in 2008, according to his earlier wealth statement.

Mahbubur Rahman, former minister for water resources, declared that he now owns 2,865 acres of land, up from 20 acres in 2008.

Mr. Khan and Mr. Rahman didn't return email and telephone messages seeking comment. Mr. Alamgir said last week that he had liabilities against his assets; he didn't elaborate. He said he had paid taxes on his income.

Members of Parliament get a salary of 27,500 takas (\$350) a month and an annual allowance of 300,000 takas for transportation and other expenses.

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