

## **Political turmoil in Bangladesh: impact on relations with India**

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On August 6, 2024, Indian Minister of External Affairs, Dr S Jaishankar informed the parliament that the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Ms Sheikh Hasina, had requested approval to come ‘for the moment’<sup>1</sup> to India. Given our long-standing friendship with that country, India obliged.

### **The Issue**

In its live coverage, *Aljazeera* on 5 August depicted the historic event in Bangladesh as follows"

“Thousands of people storm Hasina’s official residence in Dhaka amid scenes of jubilation in the streets. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina resigns and flees Bangladesh after weeks of deadly unrest. Local media reports in India say an aircraft with Hasina on board lands at Hindon airbase near New Delhi. The head of the army says an interim government will be formed and pledges justice for those who have been killed. General Waker-uz-Zaman urges protesters to stop the unrest amid reports of vandalism.”

Anti-Hasina regime protests were widespread. Devastating attacks on public buildings and infrastructure occurred. Authorities in Bangladesh countered this with curfews, shoot-at-sight measures, and shutting down the internet. Radical and lumpen elements joined those fighting on both sides, aggravating the resulting casualties and destruction. In response to students' demands, the Bangladesh Supreme Court ruled at the end of July to limit the quota system and allow 93% of jobs on merit. But things did not calm down. There have been reports of over 400 people dead and many more injured.<sup>2</sup> in these protests. On 05 August, the ‘people’s power’ prevailed, apparently assisted substantially, and the Prime Minister had to flee Bangladesh.

### **Hate India**

Notwithstanding cordial relations between India and Awami League Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, India is widely perceived in Bangladesh as having propped up Hasina's rule. Hasina and her secular Awami League party, in turn, are viewed as having been more sympathetic to the country's Hindu minority – which makes up 10 per cent of the population – than the nation's other major political forces, such as the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the *Jamaat-e-Islami*. Activists from the BNP and Jama’at – which both faced severe curbs under Hasina’s rule”

“They (extremists) destroyed everything – everything I had worked for. It was as if we were nothing – our lives didn’t matter,” Krishna, a small-scale farmer, told *Aljazeera*. "They smashed our windows, destroyed our furniture, and began looting everything of value. They took the money, little jewellery and anything they could find, even the kitchen utensils," said Krishna a small-scale farmer to the correspondent of *Aljazeera*.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Battle of the Begums**

After the 1971 war with West Pakistan, the Awami League headed by Sheikh Mujib-ur-Rahman came to power in the then East Pakistan, renamed Bangladesh. On August 15, 1975, Sheikh Mujib, also known affectionately as Bangabandhu, and the first president of independent Bangladesh, was assassinated along with his wife and three sons by a group of army personnel who had staged a coup and stormed the

president's residence. Following a succession of additional coups and counter-coups, General Zia-ur-Rahman ultimately assumed power on November 7, 1975<sup>4</sup>.

After President Zia-ur-Raman's assassination by a group of army men in 1981, his wife Khalida Zia became the President of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) in 1989. Two years later she won the election and became the first woman prime minister of Bangladesh. In the 2001 election, the BNP returned to power in coalition with three Islamist parties. Her term was marked by violence. On August 17, 2005, 469 bomb blasts took place in 63 locations across Bangladesh.

Mrs. Zia has also been reported to have extended patronage to one Siddique ul-Islam alias Bangla Bhai "pivotal in forming the militant outfit *Jama'at-ul Mujahideen Bangladesh* (JMB).<sup>5</sup> She also created an anti-crime Rapid Action Battalion police unit, which came under heavy criticism for alleged extrajudicial killings.<sup>6</sup>

The feud between the two female political personalities in Bangladesh is called "the Battle of the Begums"---- Begum being the title of honourable woman in Islamic culture. The feud dates back to 1975 when Sheikh Hasina's father Mujib was assassinated along with his wife and three sons by a group of army men. Begum Khalida Zia's husband, Zia-ur-Rahman was the then Deputy Army chief of Bangladesh: the Awami League pointed finger of accusation towards him for the assassination of Bangabandhu. Three months later Zia became the President.

Thus from 1990 to 2006, the two Begums of Bangladesh alternated in power. The tradition has been carried down to 5 August 2024, with the difference that after the ouster of Sheikh Hasina, the power remains in the hands of the interim caretaker Muhammad Yunus, whose continuance appears fragile because of massive anti-administration demonstrations by the Islamic students' organizations. Discussing the protestors' demand for the resignation of Sheikh Hasina, the Prime Minister, and *the Hindu* wrote that "the government (of Sheikh Hasina) alleged that the and BNP were behind the agitation."<sup>7</sup>

### **Religious extremism**

Foreign sources have acknowledged that religious extremists have become a cause of social discord. Testifying before the Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific<sup>2015</sup>, Prof Ali Riaz of Illinois State University said, "The opposition parties, particularly the major opposition, BNP, has either participated or encouraged violence as a principal means to press its demands for a free national election. The nature and scope of violence has changed for the worse." He concluded that non-state actors take advantage of the situation and pursue their radical agenda. He said that Islamist militant groups such as *Ansarullah Bangla Team* or *Harakatul-Jihad-i Islam* find opportunities when the state's security apparatuses lose their focus.<sup>8</sup>

But the more vivid picture of religious extremism in Bangladesh was presented to the Congressional subcommittee by Jay Kansara, Director, of Government Relations, and Hindu American Foundation, who had earlier visited Bangladesh. We present some excerpts from his testimony relating to the role of the then-banned *Jama'at-i-Islami* of Bangladesh. He said that Bangladesh has been engulfed by political turmoil and large-scale violence since 2013. While the Awami League government has contributed to this unrest through its repressive policies, the primary responsibility for the violence and instability specifically targeting minorities falls upon the main opposition party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, and its largest coalition partner, the *Jama'at-e-Islami*. He added: "In late January of 2013 after the International Crimes Tribunal began announcing convictions of high-level *Jama'at-i-Islami* officials,

supporters of these organizations engaged in large-scale violence and rioting that plagued Bangladesh for several weeks in a campaign of intimidation directed specifically toward Hindus.<sup>9</sup>

### **The irritants**

Seek and hide is perhaps the apt term for defining Indo-Bangladesh relations in the post-independence period of Bangla history.

Notwithstanding the parameters along which Sheikh Hasina chartered her domestic policy, there is undoubtedly a bright side to her relations with India during her three tenure as Prime Minister of Bangladesh.

During the premiership of Sheikh Hasina (2009 – 2024), India-Bangladesh relations were exceptionally cordial. India extended its support in several fields to strengthen the economy of Bangladesh or contribute to the modernization of its infrastructure. Teen Bighha Corridor agreement resolved the four-decade-old boundaries dispute. Through a power supply agreement, India began exporting 500 MW of power to Bangladesh daily.

During Prime Minister Modi's state visit to Bangladesh in June 2015 as many as 22 agreements were signed by two sides. India extended a US\$2 billion line of credit to Bangladesh & pledged US\$5 billion worth of investments. India's Reliance Power agreed to invest US\$3 billion to set up a 3,000 MW LNG-based power plant (the single largest foreign investment ever made in Bangladesh). Adani Power expressed willingness to set up a 1600 MW coal-fired power plant for US\$1.5 billion.<sup>10</sup> The two countries signed 22 agreements on maritime safety cooperation and curbing human trafficking and fake Indian currency.<sup>11</sup>

During the period under discussion, cooperation between the two countries touched upon a variety of areas, some of these being energy, economy, resolution of border disputes and Farakka Barrage, Covid-19 pandemic cooperation, scholarships, cement sector, tourism, India's support to inclusion of Bangladesh in the UN in 1972, defence, line of credit and annual aid etc. This is a long list but owing to space constraints we eschew their detail.

### **Estrangement**

The crux of this essay is how come all this healthy cooperation which had contributed to the economic development of Bangladesh suddenly crumbled on August 5, 2024, when millions of Bangladeshis poured onto the streets, attacked the prime minister's residence, brought about a collapse of law and order and forced the prime minister Sheikh Hasina to flee her country and seek asylum in India.

Many causes are attributed to the emergence of this chaotic situation. The notable thing is that with the collapse of the Awami League government in Dhaka, huge anti-India protest rallies were brought out on the streets of Dhaka chanting anti-India slogans. The Hindu minority community which is 10 per cent of Bangladesh's total population brought out massive rallies demanding action against rioters, who vandalised Hindu temples, looted their houses and let loose a reign of terror on them. Authorities unleashed state power against them.

The continued attacks on the Hindus and other minorities became very alarming. It prompted Prime Minister Narendra Modi to urge Prof Mohammad Yunus, the head of the interim government, to ensure their safety and protection while extending his best wishes. The primary concern was about 19000 Indian

nationals, including 9000 students, some of whom have since returned. Unfortunately, the violence is continuing.<sup>12</sup> India has been focusing on two concerns in particular. One is the safety of minority communities and their religious or cultural symbols and the second is ensuring normal relations between the two neighbouring countries which have so many things in common.

### **Damage control**

As a damage control measure, India took the initiative of sending a delegation under Vikram Misri, the foreign secretary to Dhaka. He met with his Bangladesh counterpart and also the leader of the interim government Muhammad Yunus. In a press release, the Indian External Ministry highlighted the meeting.<sup>13</sup>

Foreign Secretary, Vikram Misri met with his Bangladesh counterpart and the leader of the interim government of Bangladesh. He reiterated India's willingness to build a positive and constructive relationship with Bangladesh, based on mutual trust and respect and mutual sensitivity to each other's concerns and interests. He emphasized that India's development cooperation and multifaceted engagements with Bangladesh are all geared towards the benefit of the people of Bangladesh.

During the Foreign Office Consultations, both sides comprehensively discussed political and security matters, border management, trade, commerce and connectivity, water, power and energy sectors, development cooperation, consular, cultural and people-to-people ties. They also exchanged views on sub-regional, regional and multilateral issues. They agreed to enhance consultations and cooperation to advance regional integration, including under the members of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) framework.

### **Conclusion**

India and Bangladesh have deep and long cultural, social, religious, political and historical relations. India has played a historical role in Bangladesh winning its status as a free and sovereign state in 1971. They have a long border and shared water channels. They also share the strategic waters of the Bay of Bengal. Both have accepted democracy and secularism as the political frame for their societies. Irritations occur between the two neighbours but these are resolved through bilateral talks. The present crisis should be overcome through talks and by creating goodwill. We expect both countries to understand the highly sensitive strategic geography of the region and take care that big or small powers with vested interests are kept away from creating a cleavage in their age-old fraternal relationship. The two governments must give no room to religious extremism.

## End Notes

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<sup>1</sup> *The Diplomat*, December 13, 2024

<sup>2</sup> Centre for Land Warfare Analysis, Aug 16, 2024

<sup>3</sup> 'Our lives don't matter', by Mahdi Hasan Maroof on *Aljazeera* on 12 December 2024A.

<sup>4</sup> *Times of India*, August 6, 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Bangladesh turmoil .... *The Hindu*, August 11, 2024

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. [thehindu.com/news/international/Bangladesh-turmoil-what-is-the-Bangladesh-nationalist-party-the main-opposition](https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/Bangladesh-turmoil-what-is-the-Bangladesh-nationalist-party-the-main-opposition)

<sup>8</sup> House Hearing, (114 Congress) Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific, Committee on Foreign Affairs, p32 et seq.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> Haroon Habib in 'Adani Reliance ..... ' *The Hindu*, 13 April 2017

<sup>11</sup> Modi announces ..... ' *The Hindu*, 17 April 2017

<sup>12</sup> 'Centre for Warfare Analysis' | India – Bangladesh Relations: Navigating The Turmoil, Lt Gen P S Rajeshwar, August 16, 2024

<sup>13</sup> EAM, Media Centre, 9 December 2024