



Security Nexus Perspectives

BANGLADESH: QUO VADIS—THE WAY FORWARD

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The government of Prime Minister (PM) Sheikh Hasina Wazed collapsed within minutes on 5 August 2024. The Bangladesh Army gave her 45 minutes to depart the country.¹ The Bangladesh government sought emergency permission to land the C-130J plane carrying the former Prime Minister in India, which the Indian government quickly granted.² Immediately following the departure, the Bangladeshi Army, led by Army Chief Waker-Uz-Zaman, created an interim government. Nobel laureate Dr. Muhammad Yunus will be leading a caretaker government.³

The extent to which Mr. Yunus will have the freedom to make his own decisions independently of the army will be sharply tested in the coming weeks.⁴ His top priority must be to bring law and order to the city and the countryside,⁵ for which he needs the cooperation and trust of law enforcement agencies. Police and other law enforcement agencies have largely abandoned their posts because of reprisal attacks from violent mobs. After Prime Minister Hasina's exit from the country, 76 police stations were set on fire, and "13 police officers, including an officer-in-charge, were beaten to death inside a police station."⁶ Students, citizen volunteers, and the military have assumed traffic and other routine tasks across Bangladesh, as police, fearing for their lives, have shed their uniforms.

¹ FP Staff, "'Request received at short notice': Jaishankar on Hasina's landing in India amid Bangladesh turmoil," *First Post*, August 6, 2024, <https://www.firstpost.com/india/request-received-at-short-notice-jaishankar-on-hasinas-landing-in-india-amid-bangladesh-turmoil-13801563.html>

² Mujib Mashal, Shayeza Walid, and Saif Hasnat, "Bangladesh's Leader Fled Just Ahead of an Angry Crowd, Urged by Family to Go," *New York Times*, August 6, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/06/world/asia/bangladesh-hasina-final-hours.html>

³ Mohiuddin Alamgir and Baharam Khan, "Yunus-led interim govt takes charge," *The Daily Star*, August 9th 2024, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/yunus-led-interim-govt-takes-charge-3672656>

⁴ Saif Hasnat, Shayeza Walid, and Anupreeta Das, "Nobel Laureate Tapped to Lead Interim Government in Bangladesh," *New York Times*, Aug. 6, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/06/world/asia/bangladesh-government.html>

⁵ Prothom Alo Staff, "My first task is to restore law and order: Yunus," 08 Aug 2024, <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/unf6asfayl>

⁶ Sushim Mukul, "Attacked and lynched by mobs, Bangladesh police stay away from duty," *India Today*, August 9th 2024, <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/bangladesh-sheikh-hasinas-escape-police-station-hit-reporting-duty-chaos-dhaka-officers-lynching-2579847-2024-08-09>

Bangladesh is in the throes of systematic violence across the country. Stores, offices, schools, and banks are closed; the Internet, which was shut down, is only slowly returning, and a widespread blackout of reportage is coming out of the country.⁷ Overall, the country has come to a near standstill. Widespread violence targeting the Hindu minorities, accounting for less than 10% of the country, is happening in every corner of the country. Violent clashes resulted in numerous deaths and significant property damage, including the destruction of historical sites and lynching.⁸

The proximate reason behind these protests and the overthrow of the Awami League government of Sheikh Hasina was the creation of quotas for government jobs that continue to preserve the elite status of the descendants of those who fought in the Bangladesh War of Independence in 1971. The same type of agitation has occurred previously; there were mass protests against the government of Sheikh Hasina in 2018, albeit on a smaller scale, and the government backed down from its decision to extend the reservation quota.⁹ However, the students detest the system of preferences and quotas because they view it as a system of “patronage built by the ruling party, of which the 30% quota” was the cornerstone of the Hasina government’s policy.¹⁰ They believe that many have obtained the coveted “freedom fighter” status falsely through bribery and forgery. Still, there are many other reasons as to why the violence has not subsided and why law enforcement has failed to respond to the destruction of property and targeted violence against Hindu minorities and former Awami League cadres, members of the judiciary, and police.¹¹

Raging mobs set fire to Hindu homes, businesses, and temples in almost all districts of the country.¹² In one area, the attackers destroyed the house of a Hindu community leader and vandalized several other properties.¹³ Similarly, incidents of burning, looting, and sexual violence against women are being reported from almost all districts of Bangladesh, which is causing widespread fear and internal displacement and forcible acquisition of minority-owned property and land belonging to the Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian communities.¹⁴

⁷ Abhishek De, “Temples burnt, houses attacked: How Hindus have become soft targets in Bangladesh,” *India Today*, August 7th 2024, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/bangladesh-violence-hindus-minorities-attacked-temples-set-on-fire-2577703-2024-08-06>

⁸ Ruma Paul and Krishna N. Das, “Hindus in Bangladesh try to flee to India amid violence,” *Reuters*, August 8, 2024.

⁹ Siddhartha Roy, “Bangladesh’s Students Back on the Streets in Protest,” *The Diplomat*, April 14th, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/04/bangladeshs-students-back-on-the-streets-in-protest/>

¹⁰ *The Economist*, “Protests in Bangladesh put an end to a corrupt quota system,” April 21st, 2018, <https://www.economist.com/asia/2018/04/21/protests-in-bangladesh-put-an-end-to-a-corrupt-quota-system>

¹¹ Abhijeet Kumar New Delhi, “Protest, Bangladesh Protest, Students clash,” *Business Standard*, July 19, 2024, https://www.business-standard.com/world-news/know-all-about-bangladesh-s-violent-past-coups-amid-sheikh-hasina-s-ouster-124080600311_1.html

¹² *The Borderlens Desk*, “Nearly eight thousand Hindus at border to go to India amid ongoing violence in neighbor,” August 10th 2024, <https://www.borderlens.com/2024/08/10/nearly-eight-thousand-hindus-at-border-to-go-to-india-amid-ongoing-violence-in-neighbor/>

¹³ *The Business Post*, “Homes of 2 MPs, over 100 AL leaders vandalised in Lalmonirhat,” August 08, 2024, <https://businesspostbd.com/national/homes-of-2-mps-over-100-al-leaders-vandalised-in-lalmonirhat>; *The Daily Star*, “Hindu houses, businesses attacked in 27 districts,” August 6, 2024, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/hindu-houses-businesses-attacked-27-districts-3670226>

¹⁴ According to the Minority Rights Group, International NGO, currently Hindus account for 8.5% of the population followed by, Buddhist, 0.6 per cent, and Christian 0.3 per cent. <https://minorityrights.org/about-us/>; *The Daily Star*, “66 dead as city convulsed with violence,” August 6, 2024, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/66-dead-city-convulsed-violence-3670231>; *Hindustan*

Bangladesh is no stranger to violence; it was born in a crucible of enormous violence and war in 1971, and again in 1975, it saw gunmen assassinate the creator of modern Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the father of the now fleeing Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, in 1975 along with his entire family.¹⁵ Prime Minister Hasina and her sister escaped because they were studying abroad.¹⁶ Throughout the history of Bangladesh, the volatile mixture of ethnicity, politics, and religion has led to a cycle of paroxysms of violence and political change.¹⁷

The British colonists first partitioned the Bengal Province in 1905, but the partition was annulled in 1911 because of massive protests.¹⁸ Unfortunately, Bengal was partitioned again in 1947 on a religious basis, and it became East Pakistan.¹⁹ During the partition of India, massive violence occurred on a genocidal scale, with mass movements of refugees on both sides of the border. It saw another shift in its political shape in 1971, following violence and war, when East Pakistan became fully sovereign and transitioned into Bangladesh. After 1975, it witnessed at least 39 military coups and frequent instances of episodic violence.²⁰

During a nearly two-decade reign, Prime Minister Hasina brought a degree of order, focused on development, growth, and infrastructure, and steered the country to economic resurgence when its growth and GDP Per Capita income topped India.²¹ However, economic growth was not enough to stave the political winds of change that blew against her during the third term, when the government became increasingly authoritarian. The Prime Minister started to sideline the opposition completely and prevented most forms of formal opposition in the government and other government sectors.²² She also used law enforcement to crack down on opposition voices, increasing resentment.

The January 2024 elections were a watershed moment in Bangladesh politics. The opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) decided to boycott the elections. BNP's coalition partner,

Times, "Hindu homes, temples 'targeted and looted' in Bangladesh after Sheikh Hasina ouster, says minority group," August 06, 2024, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/hindu-homes-temples-targeted-and-looted-in-bangladesh-after-sheikh-hasina-ouster-says-minority-group-101722954794938.html>

¹⁵ Lorraine Boissoneault, "The Genocide the U.S. Can't Remember, But Bangladesh Can't Forget," *The Smithsonian Magazine*, December 16, 2016, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/genocide-us-cant-remember-bangladesh-cant-forget-180961490/>

¹⁶ ANI, "Sheikh Hasina recounts horrors of her family's massacre in 1975; lived secretly in Delhi's Pandara Road," *Times of India*, September 4th 2022, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/south-asia/sheikh-hasina-recounts-horrors-of-her-family-s-massacre-in-1975-lived-secretly-in-delhi-pandara-road/articleshow/93979163.cms>

¹⁷ Ali Riaz, *Bangladesh: A Political History Since Independence*, I.B. Tauris, London, UK, 2016; Willem van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh*, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2020.

¹⁸ F. A. Eustis II and Z. H. Zaidi, "King, Viceroy and Cabinet: The Modification of the Partition of Bengal, 1911," *History-Journal of the Historical Association*, Vol. 49, No. 166 (1964), pp. 171-184, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24405055>

¹⁹ Jayanta Sengupta, Rituparna Roy, Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *The Long History of Partition in Bengal: Event, Memory, Representations*, Taylor and Francis, New York, NY 2024; Nitish Sengupta, *Bengal Divided*, Random House, New Delhi, India, 2012.

²⁰ Mohammad Jazib, "Military Coups in Bangladesh till 2024," *Jagran Josh*, Aug 7, 2024, <https://www.jagranjosh.com/general-knowledge/military-coups-in-bangladesh-1722855785-1>

²¹ *The Economist*, "Five books and a documentary explain a large and fascinating South Asian country," January 5th 2024, <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-reads/2024/01/05/what-to-read-and-watch-about-bangladesh>

²² *The Economist*, "Bangladesh's prime minister, Sheikh Hasina, wins a fifth term," Jan 8th 2024, <https://www.economist.com/asia/2024/01/08/bangladeshs-prime-minister-sheikh-hasina-wins-a-fifth-term>

Jammat-i-Islami, could not compete because it was banned and barred from competing in elections by the Bangladesh courts in 2013, and the courts did not remove the ban despite a petition before the 2024 elections. Prime Minister Hasina's Awami League party won 222 of 299 seats in the Bangladesh Parliament in early January 2024, winning her fourth consecutive term.²³ She has continuously held the position of Prime Minister since January 2009 until her eviction in August 2024. Previously, she held the Prime Minister position from June 1996 to July 2001. Overall, she has been a central figure in Bangladeshi politics for over 35 years. After winning her spot for the fourth consecutive term, she immediately formed a government and continued her focus on economic and infrastructure development. Although the government defended its record and the conduct of the elections, there were widespread complaints about the sanctity and legality of the elections, and several incidents of violence marred the polls.²⁴

In mid-July, PM Hasina cut short her visit to Beijing and returned home, which only sparked rumors of a rift in relations between Beijing and Dhaka over the financial aid package. Then, protests began in Dhaka and spread all around the country over the quota system for the much-coveted government jobs for the descendants of the Bangladesh War of Independence in 1971. Thirty percent of the quota for government jobs was reserved for direct descendants of the Bangladesh War of Independence, ten percent for women, and ten percent for specific underrepresented districts.

The reservation law that seemed to privilege government backers to solidify the ruling party's grip on power incensed student critics. Protests that began peacefully gradually turned violent. The Bangladesh Supreme Court significantly scaled back the reservation limits on July 21, 2024, to about seven percent, but the protesters returned to the streets and continued their fierce agitation. As many as 500 people may have perished during the protest movements to oust Prime Minister Hasina, and the subsequent violence targeting specific groups and individuals in the post-Hasina will only increase this number.²⁵

So, what is the way forward for Bangladesh? It just held an election earlier this year in January, and having another election at a time of extreme violence and chaos would be a tall order. The primary and urgent task before Mr. Muhammad Yunus is to take full control of the law and order situation across the country and prevent acts of grotesque violence both against the religious minorities and against the opposition party members.²⁶ The second job is to bring the perpetrators of this mass violence to justice, not only the violence that occurred after Prime Minister Hasina's exit from office

²³ Krutika Pathi, "Hasina re-elected for fourth term in controversial boycotted Bangladeshi election," PBS News, January 9th, 2024, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/hasina-re-elected-for-fourth-term-in-controversial-boycotted-bangladeshi-election#:~:text=Her%20Awami%20League%20party%20won,leaders%20in%20the%20nation's%20history>.

²⁴ The Associated Press, "Prime minister wins overwhelming majority in Bangladesh as opposition boycotts vote," *National Public Radio (NPR)*, January 7, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/2024/01/07/1223348342/voters-cast-ballots-bangladesh-election-violence-opposition-boycott>

²⁵ Hindustan Times, "Bangladesh crisis: 232 killed since Sheikh Hasina fled to India; Hindus protest over violence," August 10, 2024, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/bangladesh-crisis-august-10-232-killed-since-sheikh-hasina-fled-to-india-hindus-protest-over-violence-top-updates-101723248633481.html>

²⁶ The Economist, "Bangladesh has ousted an autocrat. Now for the hard part," August 8th 2024, <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2024/08/08/bangladesh-has-ousted-an-autocrat-now-for-the-hard-part>

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but also the violence employed against the student protesters.²⁷ The third job would be to reform the police and judiciary so that it is not prone to the vagaries of which political party is in power. This would be a tall order for an interim government to do, but that is something worthy of doing.

The education system requires reform to create opportunities for the young and counter the growing radicalism of Bangladeshi society. Mr. Yunus has to thank *Jammat-i-Islami* and *Islami Chhatra Shibir*—the student wing of the *Jammat* party, for coming to power—but he has to ensure the country does not slide into increasing radicalism and extremism. The newly appointed Bangladesh government’s Council of Advisors must also sustain their external relations not only with their immediate neighbors, India and Myanmar, but also with other major powers, namely China, Russia, Japan, and the United States. Lastly, and most importantly, it is necessary to nurture the economy, which has been the engine of growth for Bangladesh for the last decade, and distribute its wealth in an equitable manner.

The focus should especially be on ameliorating youth unemployment, which was the trigger that brought down the Hasina government. Bangladesh’s economy has significantly slowed, with real Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth falling to 4.8 percent in the first half of 2024 alone. Therefore, there are plenty of challenges ahead of the new interim government of Bangladesh. It has to manage the aspirations of its citizens and control extremism, radicalism, and lawlessness.



The views expressed in this article are the author’s alone, and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the DKI APCSS or the United States Government.

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²⁷ The Economist, “Bangladesh has achieved its second liberation, says Muhammad Yunus,” August 6th 2024, <https://www.economist.com/by-invitation/2024/08/06/bangladesh-has-achieved-its-second-liberation-says-muhammad-yunus>