

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

AUGUST 6, 2024

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In a move that would have seemed unimaginable just a few weeks ago, Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina ended a decade and a half of uninterrupted rule on August 5, resigning her post and fleeing the country. The military, which has seized power in Bangladesh on several occasions, urged Hasina to leave as a popular nationwide uprising threatened to overwhelm security forces. In surreal scenes, protesters wandered through the rooms of the prime minister's residence in the capital, Dhaka, lounging on its furniture, posing for photos, and stealing. For now, reports suggest that Waker-uz-Zaman, the army chief, has taken the reins. He has pledged to form an interim government ahead of fresh elections, although how such a government will be put in place remains unclear.

Hasina's downfall closes an up-and-down chapter in Bangladeshi history. In recent decades, the country had been celebrated as a poster child of globalization and development, with the economy growing

briskly, incomes on the rise, and various social indicators moving in positive directions. And yet all the good news obscured abiding weaknesses, including widening economic disparities, high youth unemployment, and a turn to autocracy under Hasina and her party, the Awami League. Dissatisfaction with the government and economy fueled protests that erupted in Dhaka in early July before spreading around the country. As she has done in the past, Hasina suppressed the demonstrations ruthlessly. Security forces killed hundreds of people in just a few weeks, and charity groups were left to gather the unidentified bodies of protesters. Authorities cracked down again on a fresh wave of demonstrations in early August, killing 90 more people. But that carnage was the final straw. The public had had enough, and Bangladeshis flooded the streets, forcing Hasina's hasty evacuation via military helicopter to India.

The last few days in Bangladeshi politics will be fodder for scholars for years to come. They revealed the fundamentally brittle nature of Hasina's regime, which had seemed for so long adamant and impervious to opposition challenge but ended up collapsing in a matter of mere hours. Her exit also punctures the cult of personality she wove around her father, the country's founder whose mantle she claimed; amid the tumult of August 5, protesters burned the memorial museum Hasina had built for her father. But most important, the toppling of Hasina came at the hands of a force not seen before in Bangladesh: a mass grassroots movement unaffiliated with any party and yet capable of reshaping the country's political landscape. It is inspiring that genuine people power could do away with a seemingly invincible autocrat. But such an inchoate popular uprising also brings great uncertainties about the day after. Even as Bangladeshis celebrate the end of the Hasina regime, they may also have reason to worry about what is about to come.

A PRESSURE COOKER

Hasina, the daughter of the charismatic nationalist Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (called Mujib) who led the country's 1971 war of independence against Pakistan, was until her resignation the world's longest-serving

female head of state. *Time* and *Forbes* repeatedly named her one of the world's most powerful people. Also described as "Asia's iron lady" by *The Economist*, she often used that power for ill. Since she started her second stint as prime minister in 2009, Bangladesh has plummeted in various democracy indexes and measures of press freedom. Hasina presided over the removal of key democratic guardrails, the restriction of the independence of the judiciary, and a clampdown on civil society and the press. Bangladeshi opposition parties and young people tried to push back against these trends on several occasions, but Hasina's government met such demonstrations with heavy-handed force.

Hasina's growing authoritarianism coincided with a turn for the worse in the country's economy. In past decades, Bangladesh seemed to have achieved significant economic growth and was held up as a success story. But many economists now question the reliability of government-provided statistics that undergird these claims. And no matter what growth the country has achieved, its benefits remain concentrated at the top. The wealthiest ten percent of Bangladeshis receive over 41 percent of the country's total income, while the bottom ten percent receive just over one percent.

The popular uprising in July reflected the convergence of two strands of discontent. The first was disquiet among students about a quota system that reserved 56 percent of civil service jobs for particular groups of people, including 30 percent of all civil service jobs for descendants of veterans of the 1971 war of independence against Pakistan. The system, which Hasina had scrapped in 2018 after months of protests, was reinstated by the High Court in June. Exasperated students took to the streets, and their protests intensified after Hasina likened them to Razakars—a hated paramilitary force that supported the Pakistani army during the war of independence. This incendiary comment questioned their patriotism, infuriating students and drawing more to the streets. For them, the quota issue was merely the tip of an iceberg, a symbol of a system stacked against them. Youth unemployment has more than doubled since 2010, from around six percent to over 15 percent. More

than 40 percent of Bangladeshis between the ages of 15 and 24 are not studying, employed, or training for jobs. Those realities drove hundreds of thousands to join the movement. In response, the police, as well as students who backed the ruling party, attacked the demonstrators, further inflaming the situation.

The toppling of Hasina is a historic moment.

The second source of discontent, which brought thousands of ordinary citizens to the streets, was a deep-seated sense of economic and political disenfranchisement. In recent years, price hikes on essential commodities, such as electricity, have hurt average Bangladeshis. Meanwhile, citizens have seen corruption among government officials proceed unabated as the government ordered a proliferation of large vanity infrastructure projects. Bangladeshis and international observers, including the World Bank, are convinced that these large building projects have enabled no small amount of graft as their costs skyrocketed beyond initial estimates. For instance, the Padma Bridge southeast of Dhaka cost twice its original budget. At the same time, citizens felt increasingly unable to influence the country's direction. The last plausibly free and fair election was held in 2008. Since then, Hasina and her allies have found ways to place their thumbs on the scale for the Awami League, her ruling party, by changing the ways elections are managed. Local and international observers have also found many irregularities in the staging of elections in the past decade.

The authorities could also just resort to brute repression. Media reports indicate that the government detained and tortured student leaders who spearheaded the recent movement for reforming the quota system. International human rights organizations had gathered evidence that police and other paramilitary forces used AK-47 assault rifles to disperse protesters, in contravention of the Geneva Conventions, to which Bangladesh is a signatory. The government relaxed daytime curfews, allowed offices to reopen, and gradually restored intercity transportation, but those measures could not mask the fact that Bangladesh had witnessed an enormous massacre.

The popular uprising was neither organized nor steered by the opposition political parties, but Hasina resorted to the familiar narrative of blaming the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party and the Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami party for fomenting the protests. She insisted that “terrorists” had unleashed the violence. By blaming these groups, Hasina tried to cast the domestic crisis as a battle to protect a secular state from Islamist forces and thereby convince the West either to come to her aid or stay on the sidelines. But that gambit failed to convince either Bangladeshis or the country’s outside partners.

THE DOWNFALL OF THE AUTOCRAT

The immediate events that precipitated Hasina’s downfall began to unfold on August 3, when students held a massive rally in Dhaka that was joined by hundreds of thousands of people from all levels of society. The rally was a testament to the fact that despite hundreds of deaths in the previous weeks, the government had not quelled the unrest. Protesters called for nothing less than Hasina’s resignation. Initially, she and party leaders did not take the demands seriously, expecting that activists loyal to her, along with the police, would be able to suppress the latest agitation. But after the atrocities of recent weeks, the students called for a national march on Dhaka, which brought thousands more to the capital and forced Hasina to flee.

The speed with which Hasina went from being Bangladesh’s longtime ruler to an exile is just incredible. It suggests that the regime was very brittle. Patronage networks among the bureaucracy and the military kept the regime afloat, but these beneficiaries’ commitment to the regime was abysmally weak. Over the years, the country’s power brokers became alienated from the public and entirely dependent on the coercive institutions of the state. They could not withstand the challenge of the mass upsurge that threatened to overwhelm those institutions.

Hasina leaves not just with her reputation in tatters but with the cult of personality around her father, which she had assiduously cultivated, more or less wiped out. Hasina sought to make Mujib, who was assassinated in 1975, immortal in the minds of the people and emblematic of the valor of

her rule and that of her party. But now with Hasina expelled, that cult of personality is shorn of its power and will not wield the same influence over Bangladeshi politics.



Writing the names of slain protesters on a wall in the prime minister's residence, Dhaka, Bangladesh, August 2024

Mohammad Ponir Hossain / Reuters

What is most remarkable about the end of the Hasina regime is how it came about. Bangladesh is no stranger to political upheaval or mass demonstrations. In large part, however, political contestation in recent decades has been the matter of parties mobilizing against one another—chiefly, the Awami League and its main rival, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party. That dynamic was not present in the recent protests. Instead, out of seemingly nowhere, a grassroots movement primarily of young people rose up to occupy the center stage of Bangladeshi politics. Millions mobilized in opposition to the government, a scale of uprising that no political party could facilitate. The toppling of Hasina is a historic moment, further evidence that even the most implacable ruler can stave off a discontented people for only so long.

And yet amid the optimism that has greeted Hasina's downfall, there are several reasons to be concerned. The military now effectively runs the show, as it did between 2007 and 2008. It claims to care for the best interests of Bangladeshis, but it is really intent on ensuring that the state works to its benefit. Its interests are often inimical to the principles of accountability. The military would like to see much of the status quo maintained and will not countenance major reform; in the absence of such reform, Bangladesh may end up in the same place in a few years.

It is more than likely that in a few months, the military could manage to hold fresh elections, and a new elected civilian government could rise to power. But without more meaningful change, that may constitute a return to the past. The problem with the broad, amorphous force that has toppled Hasina is that it has yet to offer a clear vision of the future beyond calls for a new kind of political settlement. Bangladesh needs focused and decisive leadership to strengthen its democracy (quite possibly through constitutional reform), to cut through the networks of patronage through which the state operates, and to make sure the institutions work for the people. The energies of the popular movement may dissipate and fail to guide the country toward the change it needs. In a heroic effort, Bangladeshis brought down the Hasina regime. But what now will emerge from the rubble?