

## Implications of the Regime Change in Bangladesh

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### Introduction

On the 5th of Aug 2024, Sheikh Hasina Wazed, the erstwhile Prime Minister (PM) of Bangladesh who served as the PM of the India's eastern neighbour, resigned from the office she had held since 2009 in acrimonious circumstances and fled to India. Hasina left behind a country that saw riots erupt in the same fashion as the ones seen in Sri Lanka. In both instances, there is a congruity in the manner of the riots erupting, following a breakdown of the law-and-order situation in the respective countries. Both nations saw the breaching of the security cordon of the residence of the head of state and occupation of the house. This Strategic Perspective is written with a view to bring out the situation, as it unfolded, in Bangladesh while providing a backdrop of the country's meddling in the affairs of northeast India and the implications to the region. At the same time, the wrinkle of the United State (US) has been used to provide a more holistic understanding of the ground realities of a nation undergoing a massive churn.

The situation in Bangladesh deteriorated rapidly following a protest against the Bangladesh Government's policy of providing reservation in public employment to the family members of the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. The protests which originally began as student protests in Jul 2024 for the reformation of the quota system paused after the Supreme Court scrapped most of the quotas on 21 Jul 2024. The public outcry resumed in the past week on the platform of demanding an apology from the then incumbent PM for the excessive use of force by the establishment, restoration of the internet and the reopening of schools and colleges. Within the space of a few days, the protests spiraled into a demand for the ouster of PM Sheikh Hasina. The amount of mobilisation seen on the streets of Dhaka points to a well-thought out and planned activity rather than an organic protest arising out of frustration owing to government policies. The Hasina government denied the charge of the excessive force and the then PM even stated, "Those who are carrying out violence are not students but terrorists who are out to destabilise the nation".<sup>[1]</sup>

The pressure on the erstwhile government resulted in the shock resignation of PM Sheikh Hasina and her subsequent flight to India. Reports had earlier emerged that she had fled to the closest Indian city to Dhaka which happened to be Agartala on a helicopter. However, Abhijit Iyler Mitra, geopolitical analyst working for the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, and Aditya Raj Kaul, Executive Editor of the TV9 Network both confirmed via X that it was a decoy. PM Hasina had been in the Bangladesh Air Force C-130. Further claiming that the Army Chief of Bangladesh, General Waker-Uz-Zaman, postponed his speech three times to ensure that Hasina got out safely while ensuring that he was not seen as helping her.<sup>[2]</sup> General Zaman would later finally address the nation where he stated that an interim government will be formed.<sup>[3]</sup> Hasina finally landed at the Hindon Air Base around half past five in the evening.<sup>[4]</sup>

On the Indian front, PM Modi presided over a Cabinet Committee on Security where the External Affairs Minister, S Jaishankar, briefed the PM on the situation in Bangladesh. The National Security Advisor, Ajit Doval, met Sheikh Hasina for an hour-long meeting at the Hindon Air Base.

### Implications for India

Sheikh Hasina's ouster, though unexpected, creates certain problems for India. The former PM, in the past, has had a hardline stance against the Islamic radicals within her country.<sup>[5],[6]</sup> PM Hasina was seen as a pro-India candidate, her absence has put India in a tight spot diplomatically.<sup>[7]</sup>

Moreover, Bangladesh in the past has provided a safe haven and launchpad for the cross-border terrorism in the Northeast Region of India (NER). The region has seen a growth in jihadi groups and fundamentalist political outfits, especially in parts of lower Assam where there is a significant population of illegal Bangladeshi migrants. The Directorate General of Forces Intelligence of Bangladesh and the Inter-Services Intelligence of Pakistan are believed to be active in fomenting terrorist activities in Northeast India. Proof of the Bangladeshi connection and the support that the Northeast insurgent groups get in its territory was revealed in 2007 by Julius Dorphang, the surrendered chairman of the Hynniewtre National Liberation Council (HNLC), the militant organisation that aims to free Meghalaya from the alleged 'Indian Occupation'. Dorphang was the founder of the Hynniewtre Achik Liberation Council (HALC) in 1992 along with John Kharkrang and Cheristerfield Thangkhiew, which waged a war against the Indian state for a separate Khasiland. In 1995, all three leaders met in Dhaka and subsequently renamed the HALC as the HNLC.<sup>[8]</sup>

In the past, Bangladesh outside of harbouring insurgent camps and leaders has also served a transit for weapons in insurgency operations against India. Ex PM Hasina's political outlook had been to curb such militancy outfits. And New Delhi's security co-operation with Sheikh Hasina led Bangladesh Awami League resulted in the curtailing of the aforementioned forces, leading to a fall in the belligerence in the NER. However, a pro-Pakistan government is expected to ascend to power in her absence, which will allow insurgents to take root again. It is doubly concerning for India as Manipur has been burning for more than a year. If a pro-Pakistan Islamist government does come to power, it may not bode well for India.<sup>[9]</sup>

At the same time, the US conundrum cannot be ignored. Sheikh Hasina, in May 2024, had stated that some Western Nations (without specifically naming any) had joined hands with Kuki-Chin National Front and several regional insurgency groups, including the United Liberation Front of Assam in an attempt to carve out a "A Christian state like East Timor". She further stated, during the course of the meeting, that she had been offered by a 'White Man' a 'Hassle-Free' election on the condition that she allow a foreign power to establish an air base on Bangladesh's soil. Though she did not mention the nationality of the purported 'White Man', it is an open secret the US has been wanting to establish a base of operations on the St. Martin Island situated on the southernmost tip of Bangladesh.<sup>[10]</sup> Moreover, Rashed Khan Menon, President of the Workers Party of Bangladesh, had alleged in Jun 2023 that the US is after St. Martin's Island and that the new US visa policy is part of a strategy for 'Regime Change'.<sup>[11]</sup> The reality of American interest in Bangladesh may or may not be different. However, what cannot be denied is the fact that the erstwhile power brokers had been operating under the assumption of Washington's interference in Dhaka's affairs.

## **Conclusion**

The situation unfolding in Bangladesh promises to be of utmost strategic importance for India. Bangladesh's history of providing underhanded support to the insurgent groups in India coupled with the situation already unfolding in Manipur has put the country in dire straits both geopolitically and diplomatically. It is the history of coups, and make no mistake, it is one, despite the outward appearance of a resignation on the part of PM Hasina, that the new power

is quite the opposite of the dislodged one. If this trend holds true, then India is bound to be surrounded on two sides by radical Islamist powers and China on the third. In such a case, the NER will become a major zone of strategic contestation considering China's 'Five Finger' Policy and the history of Bangladesh supporting insurgency against India. Furthermore, the US' intentions regarding Dhaka shall become apparent in the coming days. If and when Washington establishes an air base in Bangladesh, it shall be of utmost importance for the Indian Government to monitor the situation especially considering the claims made by Sheikh Hasina also point to an interference in Indian affairs.

It would then become a matter of New Delhi needing to deftly monitor the chicanes of the international politics to ensure that not only Indian interests are not harmed but are furthered in the coming months.

The political upheaval in Bangladesh, marked by Sheikh Hasina's sudden resignation, presents both opportunities and challenges for India. The potential rise of a pro-Pakistan government and the implications of US strategic interests could reshape the regional security environment. India must stay vigilant and adapt its diplomatic and security strategies to safeguard its interests and navigate the evolving geopolitical landscape effectively. Monitoring developments closely and strengthening regional partnerships will be crucial in addressing the emerging challenges.

## Endnotes

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