

## Upcoming Bangladesh General Elections & Its Impact on Regional Geopolitics

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### Background.

India's eastern neighbour Bangladesh is all set to undergo the general elections for the formation of a new government in January 2024. It's an interesting development and can have an impact on the relations between India as well as on regional geopolitics. Bangladesh has been enjoying a free and fair elections from 1991 because the then Bangladesh National Party (BNP) government led by Khaleda Zia passed the 13th amendment to the constitution of Bangladesh in 1996 which required the Jatiya Sangsad (Parliament) and the Cabinet to be dissolved 90 days prior to a general election, and the state to be administered by a neutral interim caretaker government.<sup>[1]</sup>

The 2008 Bangladesh general election, which gave the Awami League a landslide victory, was the last free and fair election in Bangladesh umpired by a non-partisan, neutral caretaker government. After that in 2014, the Awami League Party led by PM Sheikh Hasina brought the 15th amendment to the constitution, thereby removing the neutral caretaker government provision for general elections. This was opposed by the BNP and they boycotted subsequent elections held in 2014 thereby giving the ruling Awami League a clear win.<sup>[2]</sup> The 2018 elections were deemed to be rigged by the Awami League, thereby giving an impression to the international community that Bangladesh is slowly turning into an authoritarian regime in the garb of democracy. All this greatly impacts the relationship of Bangladesh with the West, which in fact is not good from India's perspective.

### US-Bangladesh ties depend on free & fair elections.

Bangladesh is an important state from the US' point of view in the Indo-Pacific region. It has a strategic location in the Bay of Bengal and is growing economically. Bangladesh is becoming the largest exporter of garments to the western market; hence, the US would like to replace the labour availability potential of China with that of Bangladesh. But this entire proposal takes a back seat because of clash between US policy of promotion of democratic values and human rights aspects and how Bangladesh is perceived internationally. In December 2021, Washington sanctioned Bangladesh's elite security force the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) over alleged extrajudicial killings and other human rights violations. The Biden administration denied Bangladesh an invitation to its 2021 and 2023 global democracy summits. And in May 2023, the United States announced it would refuse visas to any Bangladesh national implicated in "Undermining the democratic election process in Bangladesh".<sup>[3]</sup> All these sanctions also influence the UK, EU, Japan and other Western nations with their allies to monitor the upcoming elections.

It is noteworthy to mention here that Bangladesh as a nation has developed economically in the past few years due to assistance from the US, EU, Japan etc. The QUAD summits have regularly emphasised the importance of Bangladesh. The US is still the largest trading partner of Bangladesh. Last year, Bangladesh was successful in obtaining a 4.7 billion USD loan from the

IMF to support its economy.[\[4\]](#) Hence for Bangladesh to grow economically it's essential to have good relations with the West. Otherwise with the sanctions, the Sheikh Hasina led government will look northwards to China for its economic development can be detrimental for Indian or US interests.

### **Unfair elections and Chinese interests.**

If the ruling Awami League government again decides to conduct the elections without a credible opposition, it will increase the US pressure and sanctions, which can lead the Awami government to shift to China for its development aspirations. China, already, is trying to develop a close relationship with the Bangladesh military, which has been sanctioned by the US. Recently, the Chinese embassy in Bangladesh made a statement on the occasion of the 96th anniversary of the PLA. It said that the both Chinese and Bangladesh military will continually strengthen solidarity and cooperation on the basis of fruitful results, work together to meet challenges and jointly write a new chapter in deepening China-Bangladesh friendship and maintaining world peace.[\[5\]](#)

This statement reveals the idea that even if the Bangladesh military is sanctioned by the US in the event of perceived unfair elections, the Chinese government will provide all necessary weapons platforms, equipment, arms etc to maintain the strength of the Bangladesh military. The Chinese have already sold naval ships and aircraft to Bangladesh. Also, similar to the cooperation provided to the Myanmar Junta after the coup in 2021, the Chinese seem ready to provide all help to the Bangladesh government in case Awami League makes a comeback. They can also veto any US or Western lead proposal in the UNSC with regards to the elections. The Sheikh Hasina government is already opposed to the US statements and is countering the American narrative on its own. PM Hasina having said that there was no use worrying about visas and sanctions. She pointed out that Dhaka would not depend on others, adding, "It's no use worrying about who will not issue us visas or who will impose sanctions on us".[\[6\]](#) This can signal that Bangladesh is ready to forge new partnerships.

### **Bangladesh elections & its impact on India:**

Being a close neighbour, India will be keenly watching the elections of Bangladesh, having vital interests in Bangladesh. The ruling Awami League has been more or less friendly towards India, who, is involved in various infrastructure projects in Bangladesh. Recently, the Adani Group has commenced the operation of 1600 MW Ultra Super Critical Thermal Power Plant in Godda, which is India's first transnational power project.[\[7\]](#) Also, three major infrastructural projects will be launched by the Bangladesh PM during her upcoming trip to India for the G20 Summit. These are Maitree Super Thermal Power Plant-2, Khulna-Mongla Port Railway Link, Akhaura and Agartala Railway link.[\[8\]](#) While the Chinese have shown interest in developing the Mongla port (Bangladesh) in January.[\[9\]](#)

Apart from the infrastructure development, India also has security concerns in Bangladesh. For example, the illegal immigration of Rohingya migrants in Assam, West Bengal and Tripura is a major concern for India's national security. In the last few months, the Rohingyas have been found to be using the Assam corridor to infiltrate into Indian territory.[\[10\]](#) The Hasina

government is very particular about the deportation of illegal Rohingya immigrants from Bangladesh to Myanmar and embraces Indian concerns. In 2022, Sheikh Hasina had said India could do a lot to help her country deal with the issue of Rohingya refugees.<sup>[11]</sup> She was particularly interested in India taking a lead role in using its diplomatic clout to influence Myanmar, ASEAN and the US to find a solution for the Rohingya issue.

In addition, India also needs Bangladesh' support in tackling radicalisation and terrorism emanating from its territory. Just recently, a suspected Al-Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) terrorist wanted by India was arrested in Bangladesh.<sup>[12]</sup> But this position may change if the BNP government comes to power because the Khaleda Zia party has certain animosity towards India and they feel India unnecessarily interferes in their internal matters. They can also use the Rohingya migrants as a weapon to destabilise the Indian borders.

### Conclusion:

Based on the above developing scenario, it can be said that the upcoming general elections in Bangladesh have huge relevance in regional geopolitics as well as India's interests and security.

### Endnotes:

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[2] Anish Mishra, *Ibid*.

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[9] *ANI*, Ibid.

[10] "Assam STF cracks down on illegal Rohingya immigrants, arrests 8 persons", *ANI*, 31 July 2023,

<https://www.aninews.in/news/national/general-news/assam-stf-cracks-down-on-illegal-rohingya-immigrants-arrests-8-persons20230731181155/>

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**Ajay Kumar Das is a Independent Scholar of International Affairs & Security Studies**

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