



Introduction: The effigy of Mujibur

Before the terrible struggle for Bangladesh's independence in 1971, the slogan *Joy Bangla*, which can be translated as *Hail Bengal*, was used to express the aspirations for independence of the historic Bengali region. This region had been a province of India during British colonial rule and later integrated into Pakistan in 1947 as East Pakistan. Years later, it is still the official slogan of the Awami League, the secular party that has ruled Bangladesh during its democratic periods, rivalling the powerful National League. Sheik Hasina, the prime minister who left the country on 8 August amidst strong protests, riots and hundreds of deaths and arrests, belonged to the Awami League.

Joy Bangla closed the speeches or documents of Sheikh Mujibur Rahamn, Hasina's father, founder of the Awami League and chief architect of Bangladesh's independence in 1971. He was assassinated on 15 August 1975 along with almost his entire family—Hasina and her sister Sheikh Rehana were then studying in the UK—and his collaborators, during a bloody coup d'état.

Protests against the prime minister, who has been in office since January 2009 and served as prime minister from 1996 to 2001, have been ongoing in Bangladesh since late 2023. The protests were led by the opposition National League, which alleged fraud in the elections in early 2024. But a question of quotas for access to the civil service was the straw that broke the camel's back of general social unrest, spurred on by a difficult economic situation. Demonstrations against Hasina's government began in the traditionally active student movement, which soon turned into riots and later into a full-fledged rebellion. In the clashes with the police, it is estimated that around 400 people were killed (France 24, 2024).

The condemnation of Hasina took a more violent turn after the prime minister, during a public address, called the protesters "razakars" or descendants of "razakars." But who was she referring to? The razakars were a pro-Pakistan paramilitary force, created in the then East Pakistan during the 1971 War of Independence. Hasina was therefore branding the protesters as collaborators with the Pakistanis and traitors to Bangladesh. This not only raised the level of the protests, increasing the number of participants and the violence, but they took the prime minister's words as a new slogan chanted on those: "*Tui ke? Ami ke? Razakar, razakar!*", translated as "Who are you? who am I? Razakar, razakar! This term has not been heard on the streets of Bangladesh for fifty years.



In the face of Hasina's bewilderment, who appealed to the general population and to compliance with the law, shouting "we are razakars!" became the provocation of a youth far removed from those times and with no clear awareness of its real meaning, but of the damage this message meant for the Awami League government and the prime minister, who eventually fled (Malhotra, 2022).

Later, his residence and several statues of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman were vandalised. Images of dozens of youths viciously tearing down or destroying statues, murals and other representations went viral on social media, especially in the capital, Dhaka, where the famous Raju Memorial, an iconic sculpture that stands on the site where Mujibur delivered a historic speech appealing for Bangladesh's freedom on 7 March 1971, was attacked (The Telegraph, 2024).



The bloody struggle for independence

With a land area of 147,570 square kilometres and a population of approximately 173 million, the People's Republic of Bangladesh is situated on the Bay of Bengal, almost entirely surrounded by India, except for a small southeastern strip bordering Myanmar. Located in the fertile terrain of the Ganges delta, its present borders were established with the second partition of Bengal in 1947, when this former province of the British *Raj* of India became part of the newly created Pakistan, under the name of East Pakistan. There is a Muslim majority, 89% of the total population, coexisting with smaller Hindu, Christian and Buddhist communities, in that order (World Bank Group, 2024).

At the request of this Muslim majority, in 1905 the British divided the province of Bengal into two zones, with Dhaka being the capital of the eastern zone and by far the most populous, now numbering more than 10 million people. When India gained independence in 1947, the former province was again split between the two countries, India in the western part and Pakistan in the eastern part. The main political powers were monopolised by the West Pakistani elite, to the detriment of the Bengali population itself.

In 1949, the Awami League was founded by Bengali nationalists, but it was under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman that it was to become the head of the Bangladeshi independence movement in the late 1960s.

In the 1970 elections, held jointly for both Pakistani territories, Mujibur won twice as many seats as the Pakistan People's Party candidate, then Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, but he formed a government without either the Awami League or Mujibur, who was also imprisoned. An initial guerrilla war then broke out against the Pakistani military presence, in which India would soon become involved in support of the independence fighters and which degenerated into open war in March 1971 when Pakistan launched Operation Searchlight, a military occupation of Bangladesh that led to the deaths of tens of thousands of civilians and the arrival of ten million refugees in India, in one of the greatest humanitarian catastrophes in living memory (Strategic Analysis, 2021).

The war, which lasted nine months, evolved into an Indo-Pakistani conflict and devastated the region, with brutal paramilitary militias such as the razakars, who fought alongside the Pakistani army (Pardo de Santayana, 2020). The final death toll exceeded 300,000, though the actual figures remain uncertain. Bangladesh ultimately gained independence when the Pakistani army surrendered in Dhaka in December 1971, and Mujibur was appointed the country's first president.

Bangladesh experienced a series of military coups, in the years that followed, including the one that led to Mujibur's assassination—along with most of his family—1975¹. Two years later, General Ziaur Rahman, a leading strategist in the war of independence and founder of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, was consolidated in power. Ziaur would re-establish democracy by opening the system to multi-party politics, but was also assassinated in 1981, ushering in another government under General Hossain Ershad, like Ziaur, another veteran of the war, who would remain in power until 1990. As a graphic illustration of the instability in post-independence Bangladesh, between 1975 and 2011 the country experienced twenty-nine military coups of varying scope (Janes, 2024).

¹ On Mujibur's murder and what it meant for his two surviving daughters, Hasina and Rehana, the documentary *Hasina: a daughter's tale* (dir. Piplu Khan), 2018.



A democracy with many nuances

International pressure and internal protests brought Bangladesh back on the path to parliamentary democracy in 1991, when Khaleda Zia, widow of Ziaur Rahman, led the Nationalist Party to victory in that year's general elections, defeating both Hossain Ershad and Sheikh Hasina, the proclaimed leader of the Awami League. Zia became the country's first woman leader, but she would have to govern with the support of the Islamic *Jamaat-e-Islami*. Hasina and the Awami League won the next elections in 1996 but would again be ousted from government by Zia and the Nationalist Party five years later. Thirty years after independence, Bangladesh remained trapped in persistent political instability, with the military establishment still overseeing the democratic process.



When Hasina returned as Prime Minister in 2006, the country was hit hard by an economic crisis, leading to widespread unrest. As today, a transitional government was appointed to prepare for elections that were supposed to tackle the same problems that the society of Bangladesh denounces today: the poor economic situation and corruption, to which was then added the threat of the jihadist presence in the country, materialised in bloody attacks (International Crisis Group, 2006). Hasina and the Awami League won the elections amid promises of regeneration and social measures, but for the first time their main rival, the Nationalist Party, boycotted the elections by not standing.

Hasina's government implemented measures to entrench the Awami League in power and, indeed, held power for the next eighteen years amidst electoral victories that were branded fraudulent and allegations of human rights abuses against Bangladeshi women, ethnic minorities, Rohingya refugees and members of the political opposition, who were harassed through the judicial system, such as Khaleda Zia herself, who was sentenced to seventeen years in prison for corruption in 2018, Rohingya refugees and members of the political opposition, all of whom suffered harassment through the judicial system, such

as Khaleda Zia herself, sentenced for corruption to seventeen years in prison in 2018, who was under house arrest until her release on 5 August last year, gravely ill (Dhaka Tribune, 2024). Hasina also cracked down on the anti-government narrative through the ambiguous 2018 Digital Security Act, which allowed people to be arrested for criticising the government, shutting down media, internet or websites without a warrant (The Daily Star, 2020).

By 2023, the poor economic situation and deteriorating democracy increased discontent and protests against Hasina and the Awami League. Increasingly reliant on international support—particularly from India and China—as well as on law enforcement and military approval (The Straits Times, 2024), Hasina sought another term in the January 2024 elections. At 76 years old, Hasina ran for a fourth term; however, the low voter turnout of 41% and another boycott by the Nationalist Party showed the disaffection of the people of Bangladesh towards her (Pandya, 2024).

Poverty and the ravages of climate change

Undoubtedly, the country's poor economic situation accelerated the discontent and rejection of Hasina's government. A staggering 80% of Bangladeshis survive on less than two dollars a day. On a large scale, the country's economy relies on the export of cheap, ready-made garments—accounting for 74.5% of total exports—a sector often associated with grim realities such as child labour exploitation. Meanwhile, Bangladesh is heavily dependent on imports of essential resources like oil and gas from China and India, which remain subject to fluctuating prices (World Bank Group, 2024).

Although Bangladesh went from being a state of perpetual famine and extreme poverty to some development during the early years of the Hasina government, moving the country away from the risk of food insecurity, since 2022, the global crisis as a result of the Ukraine war and rising commodity inflation impacted the country, but was also blamed on the corruption of the Hasina government (The Daily Star, 2024).



In addition, the country is particularly sensitive to the ravages of climate change. By 2030, an estimated 150 million Bangladeshis will be living below sea level, making it one of the most at-risk countries globally for climate-induced humanitarian crises (Nawaz, 2021). The two main reasons are extreme rainfall during the monsoon season and the rapid melting of the Himalayan snowpack, which overflows riverbeds, with increasingly recurrent and damaging episodes, such as the May-August 2024 floods, the worst in many years with a hundred deaths and thousands affected (Kabir, 2024).

The student movement: Hasina's fall

Following her controversial victory in January 2024, Hasina embarked on an international tour, attending the Munich Security Conference in February, where she spoke on a panel on climate change and met with various leaders. On 22 June, she travelled to New Delhi to meet with Prime Minister Modi and then to Beijing to meet with President Xi Jinping. Shortly before that, on 5 June, the Bangladeshi Supreme Court legalised a system of quotas for 30 per cent of civil service posts reserved for descendants of fighters in the 1971 war of independence, which was equivalent to reserving them for Awami League members.

In July, the first protests against this measure were launched by university students at the state-run University of Dhaka, who saw their chances of working in the administration curtailed. The protests degenerated into pitched clashes as the police cracked down hard with the help of the Chhatra League, the student wing of the Awami League. With the violence unleashed and hundreds killed and arrested, Hasina asked army Chief General Waker-uz-Zaman to mobilise the armed forces against the protesters, which he refused. Deprived of military support and at risk of being overthrown, she resigned and fled to India on 5 August.

President Mohammed Shahabuddin dissolved Parliament and announced the formation of an interim government, while the army took control of the country until the arrival of the man chosen to preside it, the economist and Nobel Prize winner Muhammad Yunus, himself a victim of Hasina's repression, was named Chief Advisor to a 25-member council consisting of civil society representatives and student associations, it being relevant that there are none from a political party, not even the National Party. However, the worst came later with attacks against the Hindu and Christian minorities, as well as people linked to the Awami League, attacks that have not ceased and have resulted in dozens of deaths (Corraya, 2024).



The international community and Bangladesh

Bangladesh has had a traditionally assertive and non-alliance foreign policy, respecting Sheikh Mujibur's premise of non-alignment: "friendship to all, malice to none". Foreign policy during Hasina's long rule respected multilateralism. For instance, Bangladesh's 'Indo-Pacific Outlook', published in 2023, highlighted key principles such as non-interference in the internal affairs of other states and the peaceful resolution of international conflicts, in accordance with international law and the principles of the United Nations (Bangladesh Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023).



India on one arm, China on the other

For India, Bangladesh poses a challenge with a shared history and 4096 kilometres of a loosely controlled border, making irregular migration and cross-border criminal activities a security concern. In addition, there are concerns about attacks on the Bangladeshi Hindu community, especially at a time when India has a *Hindutva* nationalist government

and there is a risk of a massive influx of Bangladeshi refugees to India fleeing persecution (Ghosh, 2024).

India has remained expectant in the wake of Hasina's flight to this powerful neighbour, and there is a good personal rapport between the prime minister and Narendra Modi. In 2015, the two had put an end to the centuries-old Indo-Bangladesh border disputes and official visits back and forth were common over the past decade. Indeed, Hasina was one of the few foreign leaders present at Modi's inauguration for his third term on 9 June.

Under Modi, India revived a more ambitious policy of engagement with Bangladesh to counter China's presence. Approaches in Indian foreign policy such as *Neighbourhood first* placed Bangladesh as one of the priority countries for building strong trade, economic and political relations, embodied in initiatives such as the Bay of Bengal and the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal connectivity initiative (Kaura and Rani, 2020). The two countries were in negotiations for an economic partnership agreement, the use of the Indian rupee as the currency in Bangladesh, and greater connectivity with the development of high-speed rail and port infrastructure (Firstpost, 2023). However, the political turmoil of August disrupted these projects, even temporarily halting cargo movement from India to Bangladesh's key ports in Chittagong and Mongla.



The Hasina era has also been marked by the influence of China, which has become Bangladesh's main trading partner, ahead of India, something that has also occurred in

the defence market, as since 2018, China has also been Bangladesh's main arms and equipment seller, accounting for 74% of total sales, while joint military exercises are also common. In addition, a fully Chinese-built submarine base was inaugurated in Pekua in 2023, which is the largest in South Asia and was christened, quite symbolically for understanding the current Sino-Bangladeshi relations, as BNS Sheikh Hasina (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2024).

As with Indian, China reacted cautiously to the overthrow of the Hasina government and the Awami League. Likewise, maritime shipments to Chittagong en route to China experienced delays. Notably, on 10 July, less than a month before her resignation, Hasina had met with Xi Jinping to strengthen bilateral ties between the two countries, as China remains the main investor in infrastructure projects and the telecommunications sector in Bangladesh (Islam, 2024).

United States and Japan

On 24 September, the chief senior adviser, Muhammad Yunus, met with President Biden, offering US support for Bangladesh's transition process. Previously, bilateral relations had been characterised by strategic ambiguity, with Bangladesh maintaining its non-aligned stance. This was evident in its restrained position on major global conflicts, such as the Middle East crisis and the war in Ukraine. In the UN vote of March 2022, Bangladesh abstained from condemning and sanctioning Russia, while continuing to withhold recognition of Israel and unequivocally condemning the plight of the Palestinian people (Memri, 2023).

Bangladesh's multilateral foreign policy, as seen from the West, was reflected in its firm commitment to the peace processes of global conflicts, with Bangladesh being the fourth country in the world with the most troops deployed in various UN missions, with more than five thousand troops participating in several of them, which is also a means of financing and modernising its armed forces (Korobi, 2024).

Where Bangladesh has come under most pressure from the US is with its position in the Indo-Pacific and its tensions, especially its proximity to China, which views the country with a certain amount of expectation and caution. The US, Australian and UK governments were quick to remind Hasina in early 2024 of her obligation to respect

human rights in Bangladesh, which did not prevent them from recognising her victory despite allegations of repression and fraud.

Another sticking point vis-à-vis the US concerns Bangladesh's need for international financing to mitigate its poor economic situation. One avenue has been to negotiate a loan from the International Monetary Fund with the supposed aim of investing it in mitigating damage from climate change-related events. In 2023, a loan of 4.9 billion dollars was approved, and now there is debate over its repayment, with no cuts for the already hard-hit population of Bangladesh and no debt repayment to China (International Monetary Fund, 2024).

For these reasons, Bangladesh does not pose as a key interlocutor in the region for the US, which does not cite the country in its Indo-Pacific Strategy of February 2022. Thus, Hasina's government seemed to initiate steps towards greater closeness when Washington publicly expressed concern about Chinese influence in the country (Anwar *et al.*, 2022). Following her departure to India, Hasina indirectly accused the US government of being behind her overthrow by refusing days earlier to authorise the establishment of a US airbase on the island of St. Martin in the middle of the Bay of Bengal (Naym Pieal, 2024).

Japan should also be mentioned, as it is one of its largest foreign investors, particularly in connectivity and industrial infrastructure projects. During Hasina's visit to Tokyo in April 2023, a bilateral security partnership was also established between the two countries, including the transfer of some technology from Japan that was not disclosed. The most tangible example of the importance of Japan's presence in Bangladesh is the construction of the Matarbari deepwater port, a project initially awarded to a Chinese company but awarded to a Japanese company after protests from the US and India (Mahmud, 2023).



The awkward neighbour: Myanmar

Bangladesh also shares historical ties with another neighbouring country: Myanmar, which is currently mired in a severe crisis and ravaged by civil war. The cultural and social connections are strong, but Myanmar has become increasingly problematic as fighting between the rebel alliance and the military junta's army has been raging for the past four years in the border region of Rakhine in Burma. On a border no less porous than that of India, hundreds of fighters from both sides, rebels or deserters, take refuge or force their way into Bangladesh. This has resulted in looting and killings in nearby villages, forcing the already overstretched Bangladeshi military, grappling with internal instability, to mobilise against this growing threat (Center for Bangladesh and Global Affairs, 2024).



It should be remembered that Bangladesh is home to more than a million Rohingya refugees fleeing persecution in Myanmar. These refugees live in sprawling, unsanitary camps that teeter on the edge of a humanitarian disaster, the most notable being Cox's Bazar, which alone houses nearly a million people. This adds pressure on Bangladesh's border guards and armed forces, unable to deal with the flood that has degenerated into a huge focus of poverty, exclusion, human rights abuses and criminal activity around these camps. The situation of the Rohingya refugees has been denounced by several UN offices and human rights organisations and investigated by the International Criminal Court (International Criminal Court, 2024).

Conclusions: *Quo vadis* Bangladesh?

With the full political, economic, and social impact of former Prime Minister Hasina's downfall yet to be measured—and as the interim government led by Yunus still attempts to quell ongoing violence—Bangladesh's medium-term future hinges on the upcoming elections. However, the role of its historic political organisations, the Awami League and

the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, remains uncertain. Some news reports even speak of Hasina's return to the country or that of her son, Saajeb Wazed, as the new leader of the Awami League. Other sources, however, speculate that Hasina may be charged with crimes against humanity in court (Dhaka Tribune, 2024b).

Yunus has hinted that the elections, originally planned for November, could be postponed until democratic institutions, including the judiciary, media and security services, are reformed. In addition, the caretaker government has faced problems in the functioning of the administration due to the departure, resignation or dismissal of hundreds of Awami League members, which has led to the collapse of governance.

On the economic front the situation remains dire, strained by external debt obligations to the International Monetary Fund, India and China. An election campaign under such conditions could be marred by violence, and even after the vote, a weak, minority government—or one not recognised by the Bangladeshi public, particularly if the Awami League is barred from participating—could emerge. The current military leadership, which ousted Hasina, has made the creation of the interim transitional government possible, but perhaps if a continued climate of violence and instability persists it could be expected to take power directly, harking back to unpleasant old times.

Violence in Bangladesh could also increase from long-standing threats from terrorist and insurgent groups. The legitimisation of the country's main Islamic party, the Jamaat-e-Islami, outlawed in 2009 by the Hasina government's Anti-Terrorism Act, has raised concerns, as there are still dormant cells of jihadist groups such as the Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen in Bangladesh in the northern and western parts of the country (Rizve, 2024).

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ANNEX

Chronology of conflict in Bangladesh

DATE	EVENTS
1947	After independence from India, Bangladesh became the largely Muslim province of East Bengal, also called East Pakistan, under West Pakistan.
1949	Founding of the pro-independence Awami League party

1966	Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, leader of the Awami League, drafts the six points of the Bangladeshi independence movement.
1970	Legislative elections in Pakistan, which Sheikh Mujibur wins, but is removed from the government, formed without the Awami League.
1971	Sheikh Mujibur delivers his historic freedom speech. 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War breaks out between March and December 1971, with India supporting the pro-independence forces against the defeated Pakistani forces.
1972	The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh is promulgated.
1974	Pakistan recognises Bangladesh in the Shimla Accord.
1975	On 15 August Sheikh Mujibur is assassinated. General Ziaur Rahman becomes president of the country.
1977	Formation of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, founded by Ziaur Rhaman, which will win the presidential election.
1981	On 30 May, Ziaur Rhaman is assassinated. General Ershad assumes power after a bloodless coup.
1991	The Nationalist Party wins the elections. Khaleda Zia becomes the first woman prime minister in the country's history.
1996	In the elections, the Bangladesh Awami League wins with Sheikh Hasina as the new prime minister.
2001	Khaleda Zia's Nationalist Party wins the elections.

2005	The terrorist group Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen simultaneously detonates 500 bombs in 300 locations across the country.
2006	Grameen Bank and Muhammad Yunus are awarded the Nobel Prize. Peace Hasina's Awami League wins elections, will remain in power until 2024.
2007	Sheikh Hasina is arrested for extortion and released on bail. Soon after, Khaleda Zia is arrested for corruption and sentenced to jail and then house arrest.
2015	India and Bangladesh sign a pact to end their 40-year border demarcation dispute.
2017	Rohingya refugee crisis: more than 700,000 people flee from Myanmar to Bangladesh in just four months.
2022	Construction begins on the <i>Sheikh Hasina NSB</i> in Pekua with Chinese participation. Bangladesh is listed as one of the world's most vulnerable countries to climate change and agrees to a \$4.5 billion loan with the International Monetary Fund.
2024	Hasina resigns as prime minister and flees to India after months of fierce protests with hundreds of deaths and arrests. Muhammad Yunus is appointed chief adviser to the next interim government.

Geopolitical indicators for Bangladesh

Area: 147 570 km ² .	
GDP: 453.85 (USD billion)	
GDP structure	Agriculture: 11,20
	Industry: 37.56

	Services: 51.24
GDP per capita: USD 2138	
GDP growth rate: 5.8%.	
Trade relations (exports): 69.50 (USD billion).	
Trade relations (Imports): 52.34 (USD billion).	
Population: 174 987	
Population growth rate 0.99 %.	
Ethnic groups: Bengali 98 %, other 2 %.	
Religions: Sunni Islam (98 %), Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity (2 %).	
Literacy rate of the population: 72.9%.	
Population below the poverty line: 24.3%.	
GINI Index: 57.6	
Military expenditure as % of GDP: 7.7%.	