

The Power Shift in Dhaka and the Changing Geopolitics

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Introduction

Bangladesh is at a crossroads. The ousting of Sheikh Hasina has left the country with socioeconomic challenges and is also posturing a shifting geopolitical landscape. The country with the shifting alliances is on a new trajectory and will lead to the redefining of South Asia's strategic culture and power balance.

Sheikh Hasina's Government: Progress and Controversies

Sheikh Hasina, the daughter of Bangladesh's founding father, Sheikh Mujib Ur Rehman, served as the Prime Minister of Bangladesh for multiple terms, from 1996 to 2001 and then in 2009 until her resignation in August 2024. Her tenure was credited with substantial economic growth and some initial achievements, including the Ganges Water Treaty and the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord. However, her government was also highly criticised for increasing authoritarianism, with allegations of human rights violations, suppression of dissent, and electoral malpractice.¹

Students Protests: From Reforms to Revolt

In July 2024, massive student-led protests erupted over a controversial job quota system. Under this system, 30 per cent of the jobs were reserved for the children and grandchildren of 'freedom fighters', those who participated in the 1971 liberation war of Bangladesh.² The movement against the quota system gained momentum during the 1990s. Early protests were occasional with the highlighted frustration among students and locals against reservations in the civil/public service jobs. Sheikh Hasina initially scrapped the quota system in

2018.³ However, it was reinstated by the Supreme Court on 5 June 2024, declaring the government's decision as unconstitutional, illegal, and ineffective. This caused the resurfacing of protests. On 1 July 2024, students from several universities blocked the major roads demanding for removal of the quota system. On 7 July 2024, Bangladeshi Journalist and Student, Md Rafid Hussain, revealed that for more than 12 years, questions for Bangladesh Civil Service and other government jobs exams have consistently been compromised with regular leakage of questions.⁴ On 14 July, the High Court released its decision to retain the 30 per cent quota for descendants of 'freedom fighters'. On the same day, Sheikh Hasina declared the protesters as Razakars, a term used to refer to people who collaborated with the Pakistani military during the Bangladesh struggle for liberation. This further worsened the situation and prompted the student leaders and protesters to broaden their demands. The government imposed a curfew and deployed forces against the protesters to control the situation.⁵ Outrage grew as a video of Abu Sayeed, an early victim of violence, went viral.⁶ The government suspended the internet services leaving 170 million people without online access. Over 300 people were killed including women and children, and thousands were injured or went missing during the unrest.⁷ The government's refusal to address protester's demands and the imposition of measures like internet blackouts, curfews, and military deployment fueled the public outrage. Violence intensified with the heavy-handed response to the protests by the government, finally culminating in Hasina's resignation and her subsequent flight to India on 5 August 2024.⁸

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Interim Government: Reforms and Public Response

On 6 August 2024, student representatives held extensive talks with President Waker-uz-Zaman and high military officials, ultimately persuading them to appoint Yunus as Interim head. Three days after Hasina's ousting, an interim administration led by Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus took office on 8 August 2024. For the first time under Muhammad Yunus, Bangladesh saw the most diverse government with a cabinet comprising former generals, academics, bureaucrats, civil society leaders, and student activists.⁹

The interim government has embarked on an ambitious reform agenda aimed at restoring institutional independence and governance efficiency. Acknowledging the deep politicisation of key institutions under the previous government, the interim government has prioritised judicial, administrative, and security sector reforms. In the judiciary, measures have already been taken to eliminate political influence. Notably, former Chief Justice, Obaidul Hassan resigned amid the protests, and Syed Refaat Ahmed, a widely respected jurist, has been appointed as the new Chief Justice. Unjust cases against the protest leaders have been dropped, while broader judicial reforms are being introduced to enhance transparency such as removing executive control over judicial promotions and transfers. The bureaucracy, historically marred by inefficiency and political favoritism, is also undergoing a restructuring. High-level appointments have been reshuffled, replacing officials associated with the previous administration. The government announced 400 promotions in three phases in August and has replaced nearly all 64 deputy commissioners. At the local level, 850 AL-affiliated elected officials were dismissed in mid-August, and replaced with appointed administrators.¹⁰

The security sector presents one of the most significant challenges, particularly in depoliticising the police force which has become a source of state repression. Over the years, the force was heavily populated with AL supporters, particularly members

of the party's notorious student wing, the Chhatra League. On 17 September, the interim government granted the army magistracy powers for two months. This decision has sparked controversy but the government defended it as necessary to counter subversive acts. Senior police officers implicated in past abuses under Hasina's administration have been removed, but the public trust in law enforcement remained fragile. Further security reforms are anticipated based on recommendations from the newly established police commission. While adjustments are also being considered for other security agencies such as the Rapid Action Battalion and the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI), significant changes in these military-dominated institutions are unlikely. While the Army Chief has replaced the heads of these agencies and compelled several former officials to retire, there has been little public debate on preventing future abuses.¹¹

Meanwhile, the interim government is preparing for credible elections by overhauling the electoral system. On 5 September, all five commission members resigned, and efforts are underway to ensure free and fair polls through institutional reforms. Key discussions revolved around whether to retain first past the post voting, with the critics arguing that shifting to the proportional system would create space for a wider range of political parties. It remains uncertain whether proportional representation will be implemented for the next elections, as it may face resistance from political parties like the BNP and require constitutional reforms.

Public response to the interim government economic policies remains fractionated. While some applaud the push for financial stabilization and transparency, others question the sustainability of these steps. The business community remained polarized, with the garment industry specifically bearing the brunt of inflation and political instability. Opposition leaders criticise the measures for making the country overly reliant on international financial institutions and call for locally driven reforms. While the interim government has taken positive steps, the persistent challenges stress the urgency of

continued focus on comprehensive economic reforms.

Geopolitical implications

The removal of Sheikh Hasina has significantly strained India-Bangladesh relations, with significant geopolitical consequences for India and potential openings for Pakistan to strengthen ties with Bangladesh. Sheikh Hasina's administration was characterised by her strong partnership with India, often at the expense of Bangladesh's diplomatic engagement with other key countries. Her departure, coupled with the growing public resentment towards India, signals a geopolitical shift in the region.

India's geopolitical challenges are compounded by Hasina's ousting, given her government's strong alignment with New Delhi. India had invested heavily in Bangladesh economically and politically, including joint projects like the Rooppur Nuclear Plant, and Katihar-Parbatipur-Bornagar (765 kV electricity transmission line 2025: Under Construction) and power transmission agreements.¹² These projects are still incomplete, and statements from the interim government's cautious engagement raise concerns despite assurances from Finance Adviser Salehuddin Ahmed that India-funded projects would proceed. The growing wave of anti-India rhetoric and sentiments, as highlighted by Jamaat-e-Islami Ameer Shafiq-ur-Rehman's critique of India's past actions, including accusations of causing floods, signals growing estrangement. Additionally, India's isolation in the region is exacerbated as neighboring countries like Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bhutan are drifting away from its sphere of influence, making Bangladesh's current trajectory a significant blow to India's regional clout.

Pakistan, on the other hand, views the current transition as an opportunity to mend and reset ties with Bangladesh. Historically fraught relations fueled partly due to Sheikh Hasina's use of the UN platform to propagate exaggerated claims about the 1971 war, can now be revisited. Pakistan's High Commissioner in Bangladesh, Syed Ahmed,

met with the Bangladeshi interim government on 27 August 2024 to discuss fostering better bilateral relations. There is talk of exploring avenues for diplomatic, economic, military, and cultural collaboration, including easing the visa process, scholarship programs, and negotiating a free trade agreement. These initiatives seek to rebuild relations positively.

Pakistan's prime Minister, Shehbaz Sharif met with Bangladesh's Chief Advisor Muhammad Yunus on September 25, 2024, during the 79th UNGA session in New York. This was the first official discussion since Yunus took office following Hasina's resignation. Both leaders emphasized the necessity for enhanced cooperation across bilateral, regional, and multilateral platforms. Shehbaz Sharif highlighted the longstanding historical, cultural, and fraternal ties between the two countries, emphasising the importance of people-to-people exchanges and expanded collaboration in various sectors. He also invited Professor Yunus to visit Pakistan to further strengthen regional cooperation.

Bangladesh occupies a crucial position in South Asia's geopolitical landscape as it navigates its relationship with major powers like China and the US. China is reinforcing its regional presence by investments in Bangladesh's infrastructure like Chittagong Port and a naval base in Cox's Bazar. Meanwhile, the United States, Bangladesh's key investor and export market, closely monitors the developments specifically regarding St. Martin's Island which holds a vital position in regional trade and security. Such robust partnerships and engagements led Bangladesh to leverage its regional autonomy amid India's declining influence. Bangladesh's strategic maneuvering in these power dynamics will shape its regional position in the coming years.

Conclusion

Sheikh Hasina's departure has significantly altered the South Asian geopolitics, reducing India's influence in the region, while enhancing space for Bangladesh to seek new partnerships. This shifting dynamic presents Pakistan with an opportunity to

redefine its ties with Bangladesh, filling the space created by India's waning influence. Active diplomatic engagements such as bilateral foreign minister visits, military collaboration, and people-to-people engagement could pave the way for deeper cooperation. Simultaneously, India's declining

influence highlights its diplomatic missteps. Yet, the success of these developments will depend on the interim government's policies, the geopolitical maneuvers of China and the US, and Pakistan's ability to seize this moment by engaging effectively on the diplomatic front.

Notes and References

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