

## Bangladesh in 2018

### *Careening toward One-Woman Rule*

#### ABSTRACT

Sheikh Hasina stole victory in the December 2018 election by hobbling the opposition, stifling criticism, stacking the courts and election commission with her lackeys, using a “war on drugs” to target rivals, and co-opting Islamists. Meanwhile, a million immiserated Rohingyas, who fled Myanmar after a brutal crackdown, still languish in desolate camps.

**KEYWORDS:** Bangladesh general elections, yaba, Rohingya, Hefazat, International Crimes Tribunal

THIS WAS THE TENTH YEAR of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s rule. In December 2018, the first contested elections in nearly a decade were held. Hasina made every effort to ensure that she and her party, the Awami League (AL), retain power. She hobbled the Bangladesh National Party (BNP), led by her rival and former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, as well as its political ally, the Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh (JI-B), an Islamist political party. Hasina oversaw a massive crackdown on freedom of speech and the press through oppressive laws. She stacked the courts and the election commission with her sycophants, who happily barred her opponents from running. Khalida Zia, who is in jail on corruption charges, did not run. Hasina’s AL claimed 288 out of 300 seats in the parliament. Despite the massive deployment of security forces, at least 16 people died in electoral violence. Citing ballot stuffing and other malfeasance, the opposition is demanding a fresh election. Hasina will most certainly weather those charges, just as she did after her party’s win in the 2014 elections, which opposition parties boycotted, citing her bad faith.

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Hasina has used the guise of the International Crimes Tribunal, which was set up to prosecute collaborators in Pakistan's genocide in then-East Pakistan during the 1971 war, to prosecute members of the JI-B and BNP, which many observers believe is motivated more by Hasina's quest for power than by retributive justice for crimes past. To ensure that she is not seen as "anti-Islam," she has allied with Hefazat, a powerful Islamist group based in Chittagong. She has launched a killing spree in the guise of a "war on drugs" to eliminate political foes. And more than a year after fleeing state-sponsored ethnic cleansing in Myanmar, nearly a million hapless Rohingyas live in miserable conditions in a warren of refugee camps near the city of Cox's Bazar. Their fates are held hostage to the electoral strategies of Hasina and Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar's state counsellor, who faces re-election in 2020, as well as the strategic interests of India, China, and Russia.

#### **TAKING A PAGE FROM HER FATHER'S PLAYBOOK**

While the 2008 election which brought Hasina to power was deemed free and fair by international election observers, the 2014 election was a farce. Her government had dispensed with the practice of conducting elections under a caretaker government, as was done in the four previous elections (1991, 1996, 2001, and 2008). Doubting that Hasina's government would hold a free and fair election, the opposition boycotted it, which permitted the AL to take 50% of the seats in parliament without opposition. While the 2008 elections buoyed optimism about the prospects for democracy in the country, many now view Hasina as an autocrat interested in retaining power at any cost.

To avoid the fate of her father, who was assassinated in a military coup, Hasina has co-opted the state security apparatus, including the notoriously abusive Rapid Action Battalion, police, border guards, and civil service, as well as the 200,000-strong army. During her tenure, she has overseen the army's emergence as a major business stakeholder. The armed forces have significant stakes in diverse industries, including edibles, textiles, electronics, shipbuilding, manufacturing, travel, real estate, automobiles, financial services, power plants, and infrastructure projects, which, according to the BBC, amounted to billions of dollars' worth of private assets in 2010. (No more recent valuation is available.) Ironically, the business interests of the military

have flourished more under civilian control than under periods of dictatorship.<sup>1</sup>

Clearly, she has not always been successful in managing her relations with the armed forces. In 2012, the Bangladesh army announced that it foiled a “heinous conspiracy” instigated by Bangladeshi accomplices living abroad and involving 16 current and former officers “with extreme religious views.”<sup>2</sup> This event punctuated the tensions that had perdured between Hasina and the military since the 2009 mutiny of the Bangladesh Rifles, the 70,000-person paramilitary force which guards Bangladesh’s porous, partially riverine borders. Tensions were apparent even in May 2018, when Hasina inaugurated several perquisites for military members and their families in the Dhaka Cantonment. She told them she wants the country to be a servant of the people, rather than a ruler, and that she expects the army to work with “utmost sincerity in accomplishing their duty by keeping confidence in the senior leadership and maintaining mutual trust, sympathy, sense of brotherhood and responsibility, dutifulness and discipline.” At the same event, she stressed her own family ties to the army.<sup>3</sup>

#### THE DECEMBER 30 POLL

Bangladesh’s 11th general election took place December 30, 2018. (The Election Commission had deferred it once at the insistence of opposition parties.) Few expected this election to be any freer or fairer than the previous one, in 2014. However, unlike in 2014, the opposition participated. Mustering the candidates was not easy, because the AL government did everything it could to disqualify opposition candidates. In October, Kamal Hossain, an 82-year-old secular icon in Bangladesh, surprised the country when he joined the 20-party opposition coalition (the Jatiya Oikya [National Unity] Front) led

1. Kamal Ahmed, “Bangladesh Army’s Advancing Business Interests,” BBC News, August 15, 2010, <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-10801268>>, accessed December 11, 2018; Ryan Smith, “The Trouble with Bangladesh’s Military,” *The Diplomat*, March 10, 2018, <<https://thediplomat.com/2018/03/the-trouble-with-bangladeshs-military/>>, accessed December 11, 2018.

2. “Bangladeshi Military ‘Foils Coup Plot,’” *The Guardian*, January 19, 2012, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jan/19/bangladeshi-military-foils-coup-plot>>, accessed December 11, 2018.

3. “Stay Alert to Face Internal, External Threats: PM to Army,” *Daily Star*, May 13, 2018, <<https://www.thedailystar.net/country/prime-minister-sheikh-hasina-asks-to-bangladesh-army-stay-alert-face-internal-external-threats-1575670>>, accessed December 11, 2018.

by the BNP. Hossain, an Oxford-educated international jurist who once served as foreign minister and was close to Hasina's father, explained that while he has had serious disagreements with the BNP and its penchant for communal politics, he felt that the coalition was crucial to restoring democracy in the country. With Zia unable to run from prison, Hossain provided a figure around which to mobilize voters.

With Hossain on board, the BNP announced a list of 298 candidates, of which it put up 238 while its allies in the Jatiya Oikya Front received 60. The AL-led alliance put forward 303 candidates for 300 seats, which meant that in three races, allies competed against each other and split the vote. Of these, 258 AL candidates and 16 alliance members ran under the party's symbol, while the Jatiya Party fielded 29 candidates using its own symbol. When the polls closed, and ballots were stuffed and counted, Hasina's AL took 288 seats of the 300. Hossain has also led the charges against Hasina's malfeasance in conducting the massively flawed election.

### STIFLING CRITICISM

Ahead of the elections, Hasina's government initiated a highly intrusive effort to surveil social media under Section 57 of the Information and Community Technology Act, passed by the previous BNP-led government of 2006. Over the past six years, Hasina's government has used this provision to arrest more than a thousand people for criticizing the government, politicians, and others in Hasina's fold on blogs, Facebook, and other social media, as well as newspapers. Despite wide criticism for the draconian use of this law to stifle freedom of expression and criticism of the government's corruption, authoritarianism, unfair electoral practices, and other malfeasance, in September 2018 the government passed an even more oppressive law, the Digital Security Act, intended to supersede Section 57.

The new law grants the government broad powers, including search or arrest with a court-issued warrant, based on the suspicion that a target is violating the law. It also mandates heavy fines and long jail sentences—up to 14 years and/or 10 million taka (US\$ 120,000)—for recording government officials secretly or for spreading “negative propaganda” about the 1971 war or Hasina's father, who is often referred to as “father of the nation.” Anyone found guilty of deliberately publishing materials defaming the state's image may be jailed for three years and fined Tk 300,000 (US\$ 3,580). These are in

addition to other measures intended to deter journalists from investigating the government's actions or the persons undertaking them.<sup>4</sup>

In October 2018, the government created a nine-member monitoring cell to “detect rumors” and other content on Facebook and other social media platforms that “threatens communal harmony, disturbs state security, or embarrasses the state.” According to Tarana Halim, the state minister for post and telecommunication, the initiative was not intended to police content but to ensure that citizens have the “right information only.”<sup>5</sup> While the government asserts that these regulations are required for security, given the rise of Islamist militancy in recent decades, critics observe that Hasina's government uses them not to enhance national security but to target political rivals, journalists, Internet commentators, and broadcasters.<sup>6</sup>

The government made heavy use of these regulations in August, when students assembled en masse in Dhaka, ostensibly to protest road safety after two teenagers were killed by a speeding bus on July 29. Shahidul Alam, a 63-year-old internationally renowned photographer, was arrested because of his candid explanation of the riots on Al Jazeera television. He said that while the students claimed they want to press the government on road safety, in reality, “the looting of the banks and the gagging of the media” and widespread “extrajudicial killings, disappearings, bribery and corruption” were the actual reasons behind the public discontent and that the two teenagers' deaths provided a convenient pretext. He also cited Hasina's various failed promises, and claimed that the government knows it will lose a free and fair election and that it was brutally attacking protesters as a bid to cling to power. Retribution through his arrest was swift. However, due to his national and international stature, protests broke out demanding his release, and the international community similarly pressed the government. He was finally released on bail after 100 days in jail. Others detained have not been so lucky. Many families are forced to wonder interminably about the whereabouts of loved ones.<sup>7</sup>

4. Human Rights Watch, “Bangladesh: Crackdown on Social Media,” October 19, 2018, <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/10/19/bangladesh-crackdown-social-media>>, accessed December 11, 2018; Faisal Mahmud, “Bangladesh Enacts New Law That Could Silence Dissenters,” *The Diplomat*, October, 10, 2018, <<https://thediplomat.com/2018/10/bangladesh-enacts-new-law-that-could-silence-dissenters/>>, accessed December 11, 2018.

5. Human Rights Watch, “Bangladesh.”

6. Human Rights Watch, “Bangladesh”; Mahmud, “Bangladesh Enacts New Law.”

7. Qumr Ahmed, “Why Did Bangladesh Arrest Shahidul Alam?” *Al Jazeera*, August 9, 2018, <<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/bangladesh-arrest-shahidul-alam-180809112820231.html>>, accessed December 11, 2018.

## A FAUSTIAN BARGAIN WITH HEFAZAT

In May 2013, a relatively new Islamist group known as Hefazat-e-Islam (Hefazat) nearly brought down Hasina's government when it occupied the Dhaka financial district for 12 hours demanding the death penalty for so-called blasphemous bloggers. By the time the police finished clearing operations late in the evening, at least 39 activists were dead. But given her dogged persecution of JI-B and the right-of-center BNP, Hasina saw an opportunity to co-opt Hefazat, which would defang a potent political threat while burnishing her Islamist credentials. After the show of force, Hefazat was able to secure its demands through negotiations with Hasina. When Hefazat rallied in November 2018, it was in cooperation with the government. During the rally, the group bestowed on Hasina the title Mother of Qawmi, because she recognized a degree offered by the *qawmi* (non-government) madrassahs as the equivalent of an MA in Islamic Studies and Arabic. In some ways, this was a clever move: nearly 1.4 million students study in the *qawmi* madrassahs. By recognizing this degree, Hasina offers a means of mainstreaming these students in the formal employment sector by allowing them to compete for jobs in the public and private sector.

In a further effort to “moderate” Islamist elements, Hasina persuaded Hefazat to teach the state-sanctioned curriculum in the *qawmi* madrassas in exchange for several changes in the textbooks used in Bangladesh: excluding many secular and Hindu references while including many more Islamic references. Many Bangladeshis were furious that treasured writers had been removed and took umbrage at some of the Islamic content. Defenders of the revisions assert that they were “a small price to pay for modernizing the madrasas’ curriculum.”<sup>8</sup> But many warn that the authorities’ negotiations with Hefazat are a harbinger of greater Islamism in the future.<sup>9</sup>

8. K. Anis Ahmed, “Bangladesh’s Creeping Islamism,” *New York Times*, February 3, 2017, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/03/opinion/bangladeshs-creeping-islamism.html>>, accessed December 31, 2018.

9. Shantanu Mukharji, “Bangladesh Polls: Why Awami League Cosying up to Islamic Fundamentalist Hefazat-E-Islam Is Raising Eyebrows,” *DailyO*, November 19, 2018, <<https://www.dailyo.in/politics/bangladesh-polls-why-awami-league-s-growing-warmth-towards-islamic-fundamentalist-hefazat-e-islam-is-raising-eyebrows/story/1/27829.html>>, accessed December 11, 2018); Faisal Mahmud, “Bangladesh’s Ruling ‘Secular’ Awami League Strengthens Ties with Islamist Parties,” *Asia Times*, December 7, 2018, <<http://www.atimes.com/article/bangladeshs-ruling-secular-awami-league-strengthens-ties-with-islamist-parties>>, accessed December 11, 2018.

By the end of 2018, Hasina surprised pundits when she successfully lured 63 of 70 Islamist parties away from their traditional ally, the BNP. (Only 10 of those parties are registered by the Election Commission and thus able to put up candidates. JI-B, the largest Islamist party, is not allowed to run; however, some JI-B candidates will run as either BNP candidates or independents.) Hasina has also been able to forge strategic ties with clerics.

#### WAR ON DRUGS OR WAR ON THE OPPOSITION?

Bangladesh has been overtaken by a cheap pink pill, a drug called *yaba*—a mixture of caffeine and methamphetamine, originally introduced to the region during World War II to enhance troop performance. The strong stimulant has become extremely popular across the region, including in Myanmar, which is the source of the drug in Bangladesh. While the Hasina government has accused the hapless Rohingya of being the main source of the drug, officials from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime report that the Rohingya are bringing in only minimal amounts; most of the product is smuggled in by cartels with strong ties to the security forces in Myanmar and Bangladesh. In May 2018, Hasina launched a vigorous Duterte-style war on drugs, relying heavily on extrajudicial killings and arrests, with little regard for due process. Per one account, by July 157 persons had been gunned down in faked encounters, and more than 14,000 had been arrested, straining Bangladesh's overcrowded prison system. The international community has been critical of these abuses, which the government denies. Critics fear that the policy is simply another ruse to prosecute political rivals. One journalist noted that the drug became popular in 2009, under Hasina's tenure, and alleged that AL leaders are major players in the drug's trade, while not one of the encounter victims has been tied to AL. Even when a report by the Department of Narcotics Control was leaked to the press naming an AL member of parliament from Teknaf as a gatekeeper of the stock from Myanmar, the government dragged its feet in acting against him. This was in stark contrast to the alacrity with which it operated against the others.<sup>10</sup>

10. Ikhtisad Ahmed, "Opinion: Bangladesh's So-Called War on Drugs Is Merely a Cover for an Extrajudicial Killing Spree," *Scroll.in*, June 19, 2018, <<https://scroll.in/article/882121/opinion-bangladeshs-so-called-war-on-drugs-is-a-merely-a-cover-for-an-extrajudicial-killing-spree>>, accessed December 11, 2018; Tom Miles, "U.N. Urges Bangladesh to Halt Killings of Suspected Drug Offenders," Reuters, June 6, 2018, <<https://in.reuters.com/article/bangladesh-drugs/u-n-urges>>.

## ROHINGYA: CAUGHT IN THE CROSSFIRE

As of the end of 2018, nearly a million Rohingya still live in cramped refugee camps in Cox's Bazar on the southeast coast of Bangladesh. The vast majority fled from Myanmar following a brutal state crackdown (deemed genocide by the United Nations) in response to attacks by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army in 2017. Throughout 2018, they endured poor conditions in the camps, made worse by the monsoon and the massive defoliation that occurred as trees were felled to construct the camps that developed spontaneously as Rohingya rushed in. Hasina has resisted dispersing them for political reasons, even though doing so would take considerable pressure off the host community. In another sop to Hafazat, she has let it open thousands of madrassahs in the camps while denying the youth conventional educational opportunities. There is little hope that Myanmar will do anything to enable the Rohingya's safe return to Myanmar: the military's actions to uproot them has popular support and Myanmar's state counsellor, Aung San Suu Kyi, faces re-election in 2020. At the same time, India and China are competing for access to Myanmar's ports and transit corridors. And Russia and China are both interested in their long-standing defense supply relationship with Naypyidaw. Moreover, India, Russia, and China are all accused to varying degrees of maltreating their own Muslim populations. As a consequence, these three important actors undermine American efforts to pressure the government to permit repatriation or to hold the military to account for its crimes.

## THE ECONOMY

Despite domestic political turmoil, Bangladesh' economy has been a consistent bright spot, a point AL candidates made during the contentious elections. (In 2015, with its growing middle class, Bangladesh attained "lower-middle income" status, according to the World Bank.) Bangladesh's economy has grown an average of about 6% annually since 2005. In 2017, growth was 7.3%, more than neighboring India or Pakistan. In large measure, this growth has been driven by expatriate labor remittances, which reached US\$ 13.5 billion in fiscal year 2017, and exports from its US\$ 28 billion ready-made-garments

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bangladesh-to-halt-killings-of-suspected-drug-offenders-idINKCN1J225W>, accessed December 11, 2018; Siddhartha Roy, "Bangladesh's Crossfire Doctrine," *The Diplomat*, July 3, 2018, <<https://thediplomat.com/2018/07/bangladeshs-crossfire-doctrine/>>, accessed December 11, 2018.



industry, which is second in overall value only to China's. Garments are not strategic exports, and the health of this industry depends on the willingness of countries to continue buying garments made in Bangladesh, despite its history of unsafe worker conditions. The government continues to invest in major infrastructure projects, with a particular focus on projects to reduce Bangladesh's painfully long transportation times. Bangladesh also sustains the interest of China, which eyes access to the Bay of Bengal as a part of its Belt and Road Initiative, as well as of Japan and of India, which has invested heavily in Bangladesh as a part of its efforts to improve connectivity with its northeastern states.

Another driver of Bangladesh's growth is its human capital. Notably, Bangladesh continues to do better than India or Pakistan in several aspects of human development, such as child mortality, child literacy, and life expectancy. The garment industry is dominated by female employees who come from rural areas, which has galvanized important social and cultural changes. Despite this impressive growth, the government has not prioritized resource mobilization. Tax revenues are a paltry 10% of GDP. Nor has the government done much to address the perduring problem of non-performing loans offered by state-controlled banks. Despite Bangladesh's interest in foreign investment and incentives for the same, the country received a paltry US\$ 2.6 billion in foreign direct investment in the 2017/18 fiscal year.<sup>11</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

Hasina has masterfully employed a suite of policies to undermine and eliminate her opponents and to silence the burgeoning opposition to her rule despite a strong economy, all the while co-opting the Islamists and throwing sops to the security forces. Meanwhile, the misery of the Rohingya is compounded due to the domestic politics of Bangladesh and Myanmar and the larger strategic interests of the major regional players. In the end, Hasina may well succeed in making Bangladesh a one-party country, if not a one-woman country. However, if history is any guide, her victory will be transient and will end in tragedy.

11. "Bangladesh—Market Overview," Export.gov, December 12, 2018, <[https://www.export.gov/article?series=aopt000000PAtGAAW&type=Country\\_Commercial\\_\\_kav](https://www.export.gov/article?series=aopt000000PAtGAAW&type=Country_Commercial__kav)>, accessed December 31, 2018; Thomas Kohlmann, "Bangladesh: A Small Tiger Economy with Big Plans," *Deutsche Welle*, December 25, 2018, <<https://p.dw.com/p/3Acfn>>, accessed December 31, 2018; "Bangladesh Attaining Insufficient FDI for Achieving Sdgs on Time," *Daily Industry*, December 11, 2018, <<https://www.dailyindustry.news/bangladesh-attaining-insufficient-fdi-achieving-sdgs-time/>>, accessed December 31, 2018.