

Bangladesh in 2019

Hasina Consolidates One-Woman Rule

ABSTRACT

After winning a third consecutive term as prime minister in the compromised December 2018 general election, Sheikh Hasina of the Awami League continues to consolidate one-woman rule. Throughout 2019, Hasina continued to persecute critics and opponents. Despite the deepening malaise of bad governance, Bangladesh has continued to enjoy impressive economic growth. But it remains haunted by the desperate Rohingya exodus from Myanmar, and the decades-old Bihari question.

KEYWORDS: Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina, economic growth, autocracy, Rohingya, Biharis

BANGLADESH: THE WORLD'S NEWEST AUTOCRACY?

Bangladesh was once regarded as the world's fifth-largest democracy, but it is increasingly viewed as an autocracy. The Germany-based Bertelsmann Foundation classified Bangladesh, along with Lebanon, Mozambique, Nicaragua, and Uganda, as the world's newest autocracies because they fail to meet the minimum requirements of functioning democracies. The deeply flawed general elections of December 2018 exacerbated concerns at home and abroad that Bangladesh's democracy is in retreat.

In those elections, Sheikh Hasina's Awami League (People's League, AL) and coalition partners secured 288 of the 300 seats in the parliament, bestowing on Hasina her third consecutive term as prime minister (in addition to an earlier term, in 1996–2001). But Human Rights Watch, among other observers, strongly criticized the conduct of the election. Before the election, it

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noted, the government deployed violence and intimidation of the opposition, attacked opposition events, and abused laws to limit free speech, while relentlessly harassing opposition party workers and even arresting them. There were reports of ballot stuffing, voter intimidation, prevention of voters from casting ballots, and AL occupation of voting locations, all of which compromised the electoral exercise. In response to the growing epidemic of *yaba* consumption and trafficking (*yaba* is a popular and inexpensive combination of caffeine and methamphetamine), her government launched a ruthless “war on drugs,” which oddly seemed to target only her political opponents. Journalists reported an environment of fear, as the government bullied and intimidated journalists through legal harassment and even disappearances. After the election, instead of investigating these irregularities, the government arrested journalists who had reported them.¹

In March 2019, months after these problematic general elections, elections for Bangladesh’s 492 *upazila parishads* began. (An *upazila* is a sub-district administrative unit, and the *parishad* is the elected local council that governs it.) Bangladesh’s election commissioner, reflecting on that exercise, lamented that voter enthusiasm was at a nadir and that the *upazila* elections were not inclusive, because the opposition parties did not participate in them.²

The only all-country opposition to the AL is the Bangladesh National Party (BNP), and it faces considerable challenges to remaining a serious electoral competitor. First, its leadership is under sustained assault by the government. Khaleda Zia, the 72-year-old leader of the BNP, entered politics in the 1970s after her husband, a military dictator, was assassinated. Both Hasina and Zia were arrested in 2007 on charges of corruption during the military-led government (2006–08). Since Hasina came to power in 2008, the charges against her have not been pursued. But Hasina has relentlessly prosecuted Zia and her son, Tarique Rahman. Rahman was convicted of trying to kill Hasina and is now living as a fugitive in London. He is the

1. Human Rights Watch, “Bangladesh: Election Abuses Need Independent Probe, Free Journalists Held for Reporting Vote Rigging,” January 2, 2019, <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/01/02/bangladesh-election-abuses-need-independent-probe>>.

2. “People’s Lack of Enthusiasm for Polls an Ominous Sign: EC Mahub,” *Daily Star*, June 19, 2019, <<http://103.16.74.140/politics/people-lack-enthusiasm-for-election-ominous-sign-1759384>>.

acting chief of the party since his mother was convicted and sentenced to five years' Imprisonment for corruption.

Second, the BNP struggles to remain an effective opposition, in part due to its own bad judgment, in addition to Hasina's relentless haranguing of the party, its candidates and its workers. The BNP boycotted the 2014 elections on the grounds that in 2011 the AL had jettisoned the long-revered institution of a caretaker government and thus was rigging the election in its favor. This decision permitted the AL to sweep the polls unopposed. The BNP's ex post facto efforts to mobilize street power against an ostensibly illegitimate government failed. While out of power at the center, the BNP contested various local elections, amid relentless AL harassment. Zia was imprisoned in February 2018 for embezzling money that was intended for an orphanage and was barred from running in the election herself. (She also faces more than 30 other charges relating to violence and/or corruption.) Despite knowing that the 2018 polls were not likely to be free or fair and the status of the party's leadership, the BNP participated in the 2018 elections as a part of the Jatiya Oikya Front (National Unity Front), which won just eight of the 300 seats.

In 2019, Zia's lawyers argued that her health had declined while she had been in solitary confinement since February 2018. In April, after a long legal battle, she was transferred from the Old Dhaka Central Jail to Sheikh Mujib Medical University, where she remains as of this writing. With her health faltering and with the AL relentlessly prosecuting her and Tarique Rahman, questions linger about her successor and the fate of the BNP if she passes away.

Third, Hasina continues to wield the controversial International Crimes Tribunal to harass her opponents in the BNP and its ally, Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami (Islamic Congress of Bangladesh, BJI). Hasina established the tribunal in 2010. In late October 2019, Bangladesh's Supreme Court upheld the death sentence of 67-year-old A. T. M. Azharul Islam, a member of BJI, who was sentenced to death in 2014 for rape, murder, and genocide during the 1971 war. This ruling means that he will probably become the sixth BJI leader to go to the gallows for allegedly participating in atrocities during that conflict. Since its inception, the court has sentenced dozens of people to death, including a BNP former minister; the BJI's supreme leader was hanged in 2016. The Azharul verdict is especially controversial because Azharul was only 18 during the conflict, which suggests that he could not have significantly

aided the Pakistani army. At the time of his conviction, he was the secretary-general of BJI, and he is the last of its prominent leaders to face such prosecution for war crimes.³

HASINA: RIDING THE TIGER OF ISLAMISM?

While Hasina continues her relentless war on BJI, with apparent popular support, she has also worked to co-opt other Islamist organizations. Her most important partner is Hifazat-e-Islam (Protectorate of Islam, HI), an ultra-conservative Islamist group based in Bangladesh's Qaumi madrassas. Ironically, HI came to the fore in May 2013, when it mobilized thousands of protesters, chanting "hang the atheist bloggers." The group demanded that Hasina implement its Thirteen-Point Agenda, which included execution of these bloggers and the enactment of a blasphemy law. Those riots left hundreds dead and threatened to bring down the Hasina government. Hasina moved quickly to co-opt HI as her Islamists of choice, both to quell allegations that she and her party are anti-Islam and pro-India and to ensure that the organization not undertake destabilizing activities.

THE ECONOMY

While democratic governance in Bangladesh continues to deteriorate under Hasina, during her tenure Bangladesh has also enjoyed admirable economic development, with an average GDP growth of 6.5%. According to the World Bank, poverty fell from over 44% in 1991 to under 15% in 2016. At the same time, life expectancy, literacy, and per capita food production expanded, while the fertility rate continued to decline. Collectively, these policies have allowed more than 25 million people to escape poverty in the past 15 years.

By 2015, Bangladesh had become a lower-middle-income country. In 2018, it fulfilled the three criteria to graduate from the UN's list of least developed countries. Having made enormous progress toward the Millennium Development Goals, it is now working toward the Sustainable Development Goals. About 90% of this poverty reduction occurred in Bangladesh's rural areas.

3. "Bangladesh Upholds Death Sentence of Islamist Chief Azharul Islam," *Al Jazeera*, October 31, 2019, <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/10/bangladesh-upholds-death-sentence-islamist-chief-azharul-islam-191031065534312.html>>.

Poverty reduction in urban areas has been more difficult, which is worrisome, given that Bangladesh is rapidly urbanizing.⁴

Over the past year, Bangladesh's strong growth was led by record remittances and rising exports. According to the World Bank, in fiscal year 2019, remittances grew by 9.8%, to a record US\$ 16.4 billion. At the same time, new export growth was buoyed by garment exports. Net foreign direct investment expanded by nearly 43%, and private consumption increased by 5%. Still, the World Bank warned of uncertainty in the global market and specifically identified the financial sector as a risk. It urged the government to undertake financial-sector reforms, including revenue mobilization, and to improve the country's infrastructure.

Bangladesh must create about two million good jobs each year to accommodate young adults entering the labor force. The government must also further invest in human capital, both to ensure that the workforce remains competitive and to achieve higher labor productivity, which is necessary for Bangladesh to diversify its economy from reliance on the garment sector and remittances. The World Bank also noted that graduates of tertiary education struggle to find jobs, while hirers of labor struggle to fill high-skill positions.⁵

BIHARIS: SEEKING RECOGNITION FROM THEIR REFUGEE CAMPS

While the Rohingya in Bangladesh garner significant media attention, few remember Bangladesh's "stranded Biharis." These Muslims migrated from Bihar in what is now northeastern India to what became East Pakistan during the partition of 1947 and is now Bangladesh. At the time, what mattered was their shared Muslim identity, but as West Pakistan's extractive and abusive policies toward the Bengali majority in East Pakistan intensified, Bengali identity became more salient than religious identity. Since the emergence of Bangladesh in 1971, the 400,000 or so Biharis have lived politically and economically precarious lives in about 60 communities, which while generally squalid are misleadingly called "camps."

4. "Bangladesh Poverty Assessment," International Bank for Reconstruction and Development and World Bank, October 2019, <<http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/793121572582830383/pdf/Bangladesh-Poverty-Assessment-Facing-Old-and-New-Frontiers-in-Poverty-Reduction.pdf>>.

5. "World Bank: Bangladesh Economy Continues Robust Growth with Rising Exports and Remittances," October 10, 2019, <<https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2019/10/10/world-bank-bangladesh-economy-continues-robust-growth-with-rising-exports-and-remittances>>.

While they are considered citizens due to a landmark high court ruling in 2008, Biharis can only use their IDs to vote. But they cannot apply for a passport. Their children cannot attend schools outside their congested camps, nor can they obtain legal employment beyond the confines of these ghettos. In February 2019, Hasina made a speech from Geneva Camp in which she announced that her government is “looking for land to build flats for the trapped Biharis so they too can live decently.” But Biharis do not want to continue living in Bihari ghettos; they want a chance to integrate and participate fully as citizens in the only country they have ever known.⁶

THE NEVER-ENDING ROHINGYA TRAGEDY

Since 2017, over 1.1 million Rohingya have taken refuge in a warren of camps near the coastal city of Cox’s Bazar after the government of Myanmar engaged in ethnic cleansing following terrorist attacks by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, an ethnic militia fighting the Myanmar junta. While Bangladesh insists that Myanmar undertake reforms that would facilitate a voluntary return, this is very unlikely: the Rohingya demand that they be granted citizenship and that they be identified as one of the country’s recognized ethnicities, but Myanmar refuses to recognize them as an indigenous ethnic group and contends that there is a process to gain citizenship nonetheless. To date, all efforts to repatriate the Rohingya have failed, with Dhaka and Naypyidaw blaming each other.

Hasina has long refused to permit the Rohingya to disperse across Bangladesh, which would relieve much of the pressure on the communities and ecologies of Cox’s Bazar. It would also reduce the “eyesore” value of the camps and thus decrease international pressure on Myanmar. Dispersal would also increase the likelihood that the Rohingya, who speak a dialect of Bengali, would be able to integrate in Bangladesh. To minimize the economic prospects for the Rohingya in Bangladesh, who have never mobilized for Islamist ends, Hasina has refused to allow any of the children to receive meaningful education and has let her partners, HI, run madrassas in the camps for the children, despite the orthodox Islam HI espouses.

6. Rahat Rafe, “The Neglected ‘Bihari’ Community in Bangladesh,” DW.com, October 14, 2019, <<https://www.dw.com/en/the-neglected-bihari-community-in-bangladesh/a-50824994>>.

With few prospects for other countries to take in the Rohingya, and desiring to relieve some of the pressure on cramped Cox's Bazar but also to limit the opportunity for the Rohingya to integrate among Bangladeshis, Hasina's government has invested US\$ 272 million to make an island (Bhasan Char) livable for the refugees. The government would like to relocate up to 100,000 Rohingya to this cyclone-prone island 19 miles from mainland Bangladesh, but there are questions about its safety, and the Rohingya are reluctant to relocate.⁷

7. Arafatul Islam and Naomi Conrad, "Inside Bangladesh's Isolated 'Rohingya island'," *DW.com*, September 9, 2019, <<https://www.dw.com/en/inside-bangladeshs-isolated-rohingya-island/g-50354863>>.