

Opinion – The Path Forward for Bangladesh

Written by Mubashar Hasan

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MUBASHAR HASAN, JAN 23 2025

On August 5, 2024, Sheikh Hasina, Bangladesh's Prime Minister, fled the country to neighboring India against the backdrop of three weeks of intense mass protest. Before fleeing, under Hasina's shoot to kill order, Bangladeshi security forces killed over 1000 mostly young Bangladeshi, blinded over 400 and injured hundreds. An interim government led by Nobel Laureate Dr. Muhammad Yunus is now running the country with an aim to transfer the power to an elected political government after carrying out reforms. Hasina's fall demonstrates that in a state where people were marginalized, as evidenced by a series of one-sided rigged elections in 2013, 2018 and 2024, and gross human rights violations, the protests marked a turning point.

Within this meta narrative of people and power, there are micro-narratives that explains how Hasina's authoritarian edifice was built over the years. This included fostering a state led culture of fear, institutionalization of torture and severe human rights violations such as extra judicial killings, enforced disappearances, perpetuating massive scale corruption, regional politics, geopolitics and underestimating the democratic resilience of the people. Yet, if one were to isolate the single most critical factor that forced Hasina to flee it would be peoples' resilience to gross human rights violations. The fall of Hasina's authoritarian government in Bangladesh can then be seen as a quest for human rights and dignity.

According to a conservative estimate, at least 2500 Bangladeshis were extra-judicially killed between 2009–2022 and over 700 Bangladeshis were forcefully disappeared in chains of illegal secret prisons. Despite this, to the outside world, Hasina's government was often portrayed as a beacon of economic growth. A journal called *Innovations: Technology, Governance, Globalization*, published by MIT press dedicated a special issue on Bangladesh in 2021. The journal featured a lead propaganda essay written by Hasina and pushed the reality of human rights violations by Hasina and her government under the rug. While some parts of the Western civil society were diluted with Hasina's economic growth narrative, some were not. Organizations like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International persistently campaigned and lobbied the US government, and they succeeded. In 2021, the Biden administration invoked the Magnitsky act to levy sanctions on RAB, and several of its top officials.

The true extent of Hasina's use of torture and human rights violations is yet to be fully known. An interim report published by the newly established commission on the inquiry into the enforced disappearances was released to a select journalist and researchers including this writer. The commission members visited illegal and legal detention centers at the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI), the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), the Detective Branch and The Counterterrorism and Transnational Crime Unit (CTTCU) of Police, and the National Security Intelligence (NSI). It provides a chilling account of the systematic torture and killing of victims subjected to enforced disappearances in Bangladesh. Victims were subjected to brutal physical and psychological harm in both civil and military-run facilities. These included soundproof chambers and use of specialized instruments, such as electrocution devices on sensitive body parts. Victims reported extreme acts of cruelty, such as lips being sewn together without anesthesia, beatings with blunt objects, and forced mutilations. In civil facilities, torture was normalized, occurring in shared spaces where officers continued their routine tasks amidst the screams of detainees, while military-controlled facilities displayed a more calculated infrastructure for inflicting suffering.

The report also underpinned how Hasina's government eliminated evidence and killed many victims of enforced disappearance. Victims were frequently shot in the head, with their bodies disposed of in rivers, weighted with

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cement bags to ensure they sank. Other methods included staging deaths as accidents by placing bodies on railway tracks or pushing victims into traffic. These killings were part of a systemic and coordinated effort involving multiple security agencies. In some cases, executions were used as initiation rites for new personnel, underscoring the institutional acceptance of such atrocities. This paints a grim picture of a system designed to silence dissent, instill fear, and evade accountability, perpetuating a cycle of human rights abuses and impunity. It is against this backdrop student protests began in June 2024.

The protest was premised upon revising the quota system reserved for the public service jobs. A substantial number – 30% of the intake into the government – was reserved for the children of Bangladesh's liberation war which took place in 1971. Students argued that this is a discriminatory system, designed to intake people tied with the former ruling party Awami League (AL). Hasina called the students *Razakars* – a derogatory term to refer to those who collaborated with Pakistani soldiers and acted against the independence of Bangladesh. This rhetoric pushed students to be more resilient, and Hasina retaliated with brute force. Six students were killed in one day. Among them was Abu Sayed, an English Department Student in a university in Rangpur, who on social media videos and photos was seen spreading his arms in defiance of police advancement.

Hasina announced a curfew and deployed the army in addition to other security forces. UN insignia vehicles were seen on the streets and used against the protestors, which prompted international condemnation. Bangladesh is one of the largest contributors in the UN peace keeping operations. Under international pressure, and sensing their participation in the UN peacekeeping mission could be in jeopardy, the army stopped participating in Hasina's campaign. This boosted the confidence of the protestors who later turned their quota reform movement into a one-point demand movement – that being the resignation of Hasina.

Bangladesh needs to perform two tasks diligently to ensure a smooth transition to democracy. First, while Yunus has established six reform commissions looking at various sectors of the state, including the constitution, security sector reform was not included. Though Yunus's own commission on enforced disappearance has revealed some dark and inhuman practices, no initiative has been taken to address these agencies. An elected government therefore must carry out these reforms so that proper parliamentary and judicial oversight is in place to make security and intelligence agencies more accountable for their actions. Second, Yunus has held Bangladesh together in a serious moment of crisis, but a government without a formal public mandate is not viable and an election should be called soon. A survey by the Open Society Barometer (OSB) by the Open Society Foundation revealed strong support for civil and political rights for Bangladesh with 82% valuing human rights and 79% demanding government accountability for rights abuse. And, support for democracy has been consistently strong.

Abroad, the abrupt fall of Hasina holds special insights for the international community, which had seemed divided in prior years. On one hand was the US with its firm support for democracy and human rights. On the other hand, India, France and most European countries supported Hasina implicitly, or explicitly. In the time ahead, the international community must align with the democratic aspirations held by the people of Bangladesh, rather than prioritizing strategic alliances that overlook these fundamental concerns.

About the author:

Mubashar Hasan is a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow at the Department of Languages and Culture, University Oslo, and an adjunct research fellow at the Humanitarian and Development Research Initiative (HADRI), at Western Sydney University. His books include, *Islam and Politics in Bangladesh: The followers of Ummah* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), *Narratives of Bangladesh* (Prothoma Prokashoni, 2020), and *Masks of Authoritarianism Hegemony, Power and Public Life in Bangladesh* (Palgrave Macmillan 2022) In 2021, Griffith Business School, Griffith University, awarded him with outstanding international alumnus award.

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