

In Bangladesh's sham election, the only real contest is geopolitical

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With the victory of Sheikh Hasina's Awami League a foregone conclusion, the big question is how India, China, Europe and the United States will be configured in relation to Bangladesh

On 7 January, Bangladesh's prime minister, Sheikh Hasina, is set to claim re-election in what some observers have called "staged polling", the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) has termed a "dummy election" and *The Economist* has described as a "farce". Desperate to avoid a genuine democratic exercise, Hasina's government has preemptively removed its only real challenger from the field. More than twenty thousand BNP activists are behind bars, as are key BNP leaders, and the opposition party has decided to boycott the election rather than contest an unfair vote.

The farce is best explained with the facts. For the 300 directly elected seats in Bangladesh's parliament, the ruling Awami League has official nominees in 263 constituencies. In addition, it also has 269 party members standing as "independent" candidates, meaning there are two or sometimes even more Awami League candidates in many places - and that's not counting the candidates of other parties allied to the Awami League under the Moha-joth, or Grand Alliance.

All these characterisations of the election have come weeks before the actual voting. Post-poll controversies about electoral integrity, malpractice and irregularities are nothing new in Bangladesh. But attracting so much censure before a single vote is cast is quite an exception.

Led by the United States, some Western nations have been insisting that Bangladesh hold an inclusive and democratic election. In September, the US government announced that it was imposing visa restrictions on "Bangladeshi individuals responsible for, or complicit in, undermining the democratic election process in Bangladesh" - and there are fears of stronger sanctions to follow. The reason for such pressure was to avoid a repetition of Bangladesh's two last elections, both widely criticised as neither free nor fair. Both were held under the administration of the Awami League government after Hasina unilaterally abolished a constitutional provision that mandated the formation of a non-party caretaker government to oversee elections. This system, first tried successfully in 1991 as Bangladesh transitioned out of military rule, was written into the constitution in 1996 after Hasina, then in the opposition, herself mounted a two-year agitation demanding it. The amendment that abolished the caretaker system caused enormous controversy, and was never put to a referendum as required under the constitution at the time. Hasina, using her massive majority in parliament, also removed the referendum requirement for constitutional changes by the same amendment. She has been in power ever since.

Most of the parties not allied with the Awami League have been demanding restoration of the caretaker system. This led them to boycott the 2014 parliamentary election, when Hasina's party secured its second consecutive term by winning more than half of seats uncontested. Perhaps feeling

embarrassed, she initially promised to hold another election as soon as an amicable solution to the opposition's grievances could be agreed. But she backtracked quickly from this pledge after India and China gave her their strong endorsement, in contrast to the discomfort expressed by other international powers.

In 2018, despite the Awami League's refusal to budge on a caretaker government, the BNP and other opposition groups decided to take part in the election after a series of talks with Hasina where she pledged full neutrality and fairness in conducting the vote. But thousands of opposition activists were soon arrested or detained, opposition parties were denied permission to hold meetings, and there were reports of election agents being abducted and opposition candidates being confined at home. In the end, widespread ballot-stuffing aided by civil servants and the police helped the Awami League and its allies win 293 out of 300 seats.

Such widespread disenfranchisement and fraud caused unease particularly among Western nations, which called for independent investigations into alleged irregularities. The outcome was especially embarrassing for them as they had had some role behind the scenes in persuading the BNP to take part in the election. What messages there were from their capitals to Hasina on her re-election were notably muted. But India and China gave their firm support to Hasina again.

The 2024 election seems set in many ways to be a rerun of the old drama, with many of the actors repeating the same roles and parts. As early as in 2022, US pressure rattled Hasina's government so much that her foreign minister, A K Abdul Momen, sought New Delhi's help to lobby in favour of a continued Awami League government. Delhi has done this in two ways. First, it has been opposing, through public statements, any other country making statements or taking measures that might bolster Hasina's opponents. Second, it has raised the issue at the highest bilateral levels with the United States, explaining how continuity of the current regime would help India, an increasingly close ally of Washington DC, on both the security and economic fronts.

The India-Bangladesh relationship has hit new heights in almost all respects over Hasina's tenure in Dhaka and Narendra Modi's decade in power in New Delhi. Bilateral trade has taken an impressive leap - Indian exports to Bangladesh have tripled, though the balance of trade has also widened in India's favour. Cooperation now even extends to Bangladesh procuring arms from India, after decades of China dominating its defence imports.

India's media and analysts, too, have been relaying their government's narrative, and criticising the United States for calling for a free, fair and democratic election in Bangladesh. They have termed this an unwarranted intervention in another country's affairs - conveniently forgetting how Modi urged US voters to pick Donald Trump over Joe Biden in the 2020 US presidential election with the slogan "*Abki baar, Trump sarkaar*".

China has also built closer relations with Bangladesh under Hasina, and has been voicing similar views to India's in relation to the upcoming election. This is a rare point of agreement for New Delhi and Beijing, which are otherwise bitter regional rivals. China began building a special relationship with Hasina by extending a much-needed line of credit for the construction of the Padma Bridge, a long-awaited and badly needed piece of infrastructure. This came at a crucial moment, when the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and the Islamic Development Bank pulled their financing commitments for the project alleging corruption. Since then, China has also been enthusiastically financing a number of other infrastructure "mega projects". During a state visit in 2016, the Chinese president, Xi Jinping, committed USD 20 billion in loans for key projects, in addition to deals worth more than USD 13 billion signed between Chinese and Bangladeshi firms. China's exports to Bangladesh have reached an annual value of over USD 24 billion, though its imports from the country remain at just around USD 1 billion.

Dhaka's increased reliance on Chinese financing of its infrastructure projects has been a cause of concern for India for quite some time. New Delhi's main worry is about China getting a firm footing in Bangladesh. It has followed with particular concern Dhaka's procurement of two refurbished Chinese submarines and construction of a billion-dollar base for them in Kutubdia, in Bangladesh's south-east. Though Hasina has so far balanced her geopolitical relationships with both China and India, New Delhi has argued that the American insistence on democracy and human rights in Bangladesh may ultimately push her firmly into China's fold, harming the wider Indo-Pacific strategy that is at the core of the deepening US-India partnership.

The Biden administration, however, remains unconvinced, insisting that Hasina's prolonged suppression of dissent and denial of democratic practices poses the greater threat to long-term stability for the region. Its announcement of visa restrictions, which came three months before the scheduled election, is in keeping with this. Businesses in Bangladesh and companies abroad that deal with the country have already raised the alarm about possible post-election economic sanctions similar to what the United States has imposed on Zimbabwe. Hasina herself has warned of an alleged plot by the BNP and some foreign powers to engineer a famine.

Many have pointed out that another major global player, the European Union, has taken a somewhat softer approach to the election, and has not been as vocal as the United States. There has been some speculation that the commercial interests of two of the EU's major constituents have played a role: France and Germany are involved in inking a huge deal for the purchase of Airbus jets by Bangladesh's state-owned airline, Biman. But a recent European Parliament resolution demanding a fair and inclusive election and a stop to the persecution of the opposition in Bangladesh signals that overlooking a large-scale controversy would be difficult for the European Commission, the executive arm of the EU.

Adding even more intrigue to the geopolitical puzzle is Russia's increasing interest in Bangladesh's affairs. The country's economic engagement with Bangladesh remained low until it agreed to finance and build a USD 12.5 billion nuclear power project expected to be commissioned in the first part of 2024. With relations between the United States and Russia at rock-bottom after the latter's invasion of Ukraine, Moscow's official spokesperson has directly accused Washington of planning an "Arab Spring-like unrest" in Bangladesh after the 7 January election.

The world's major geopolitical players, with diverse and often competing individual interests, have made Bangladesh's coming election a kind of battle of their own. India's stance is quite unique and paradoxical as it is aligned with China, its geopolitical rival, instead of its most crucial ally, the United States. But can these countries opposing any accountability for the unfair and unfree election rescue Bangladesh from possible US economic sanction, either as alternative export destinations for Bangladesh's vital garments industry or as sources of investment in the future?

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