

The Bangladesh Protest Movement Won Out Against Repression

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Mass protests in Bangladesh ousted Sheikh Hasina after state repression left hundreds dead. But an interim government headed by microcredit guru Muhammad Yunus can't be relied on to tackle the dire social problems facing the country's popular classes.

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After fifteen years in power, Bangladesh's prime minister, Sheikh Hasina, resigned and fled the country on August 5, chased out by young protesters. What started as a movement against quotas for civil-service employment evolved into a general upsurge against the autocratic rule of Hasina and her party, the Awami League (AL).

The situation changed within a period of five weeks, and the final victory was achieved at the cost of more than four hundred lives and several thousand injured and missing. The turn of events in this South Asian country evoked memories of Sri Lanka in 2022, or even the mass revolt that forced the president of the Philippines, Ferdinand Marcos, to flee the country in 1986 after two decades of autocratic rule.

On August 5, Hasina was given just forty-five minutes to resign and leave the country as hundreds of thousands of protesters came out on roads, ready to defy the curfew at any cost. Even a day before, she appeared to have been in denial that her time was up as prime minister. However, a tide of people's power swept her away like a powerful tsunami. The army chief facilitated her escape.

Full Circle

With Hasina's ouster, a full circle of AL politics has been completed. The most recent phase of consolidation for the League started with its victory in the 2008 elections, when the fourteen-party alliance it led won with a thumping majority of 263 seats out of 300. Though the party had been in power twice previously (1971-75 and 1996-2001), this was indeed a historic win.

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The parliamentary elections originally scheduled to take place in January 2007 had been suspended after months of political upheaval. Meanwhile, an army-backed caretaker government continued to rule, which evoked the specter of another military dictatorship, albeit in the form of a masquerade. In its first twenty years of existence, Bangladesh was either under direct military rule or administered by a military-backed government for nearly sixteen of those years.

The victory also marked AL's protracted consolidation of power. Seen as a secular force because of its historic roots and its leadership role in the liberation war, the party rode to power on the back of such nostalgia. Since 2007, a renewed civil society movement, backed by the AL, had intensified demands for the trial of war criminals who had collaborated with the army of West Pakistan.

The opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), which ruled between 2001 and 2006, participated in the elections in alliance with Jamaat-e-Islami, a radical Islamic group. Observers also saw the elections as a public rejection of radical Islamic ideals and a repudiation of religious politics.

Two Turning Points

We can identify the movement for the restoration of democracy in 1990 (popularly known as the 90's Antiauthoritarian Movement) after years of military rule as the first positive turning point in independent Bangladesh's history. Millions marched in the streets from November 1997, demanding the restoration of civilian rule.

The country was hijacked by military gangsters between 1982 and 1990, during the reign of the army chief, H. M. Ershad. His regime was a dark episode marked by murders and assaults, arbitrary arrests and detentions, corruption, and pillage, accompanied by the annihilation of democracy and democratic values. A popular upheaval ousted Ershad and paved the way for parliamentary democracy.

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The movement helped to create a new progressive consciousness, especially among the youth, as well as certain constitutional reforms. It served to delegitimize the army's grip over politics. Political parties reached a consensus about the future democratic trajectory of the nation — a consensus that was later violated. Both the AL and BNP greatly benefited from the perception that they were at the

forefront of these struggles.

The second major turning point was the 2013 movement, popularly known as the Shahbag movement, demanding the capital punishment of war criminals. The AL initially supported this mobilization as it served its own interests and goals. However, the Shahbag protesters started demanding a wider democratization of society and an end to socioeconomic injustices.

At first, the League tried to control the movement but was unable to do so. It then pulled out its party cadres and harassed the Shahbag leadership while promoting internal feuds within their ranks, paralyzing the struggle. The Bangladeshi left still continued with the Shahbag protests, but left organizations were small and had a limited impact on the country's political scene.

By 2014, the movement had lost its cutting edge. In the process, the country lost one of the biggest chances to bring about true democratization and address socioeconomic injustices under the pressure of self-organized movements from below. In the end, the Shahbag movement was smashed.

Crackdown on the Opposition

Having achieved this goal, AL went on to dismantle its political adversary, BNP. For the AL, Jamaat-e-Islami and other Islamic groups were also a factor to be reckoned with, but BNP was its immediate electoral opponent. The AL leadership soon realized that dissatisfaction with its record of misrule could benefit BNP electorally.

BNP leaders were arrested at random with charges slapped against them, unsettling the party. In addition, BNP had long received substantial support from the military. However, with the interest of the military establishment in civilian power now reduced, the party's strength diminished.

Its track record while in government between 2001 and 2006 had also been characterized by corruption and violent attacks on the opposition, including an attempt to kill Hasina with a grenade in 2004. This record discredited the party and contributed to its steady downfall when combined with the AL's merciless use of the state machinery against its rival. BNP had unsuccessfully attempted to manipulate the electoral system to cling on to power back in 2006, but the Awami League showed a superior grasp of such tactics.

BNP withdrew from the 2014 elections on the grounds that they were being held under unfair conditions. It demanded Hasina's resignation as prime minister to make way for an "impartial," "non-party" figure to oversee the polls. This abdication simply handed power to the AL on a platter, with 153 candidates out of 300 being elected without a contest.

The AL went on to block BNP political activities across the country, with thousands of court cases filed against the leaders and activists of the party, ranging from corruption to murder charges. The party was unable to recover in the face of these multipronged attacks, and resorted to violence after 2014, merely giving the League an opportunity to target it further. Two-time BNP prime minister Khaleda Zia was jailed on corruption charges in February 2018.

Shifting Right

At the same time, the left-wing forces engaged in popular movements also faced harassment and repression. The state targeted leaders of the Rampal movement with trumped-up cases and physical intimidation, and workers' movements endured a similar fate.

Bangladeshi Islamists used to lend their support to BNP at election time. However, with BNP in decline, those forces began participating in the electoral arena in their own right. Meanwhile, the AL compromised its historic secular credentials by forming a tacit alliance with Hefazat-e-Islam, a radical Islamist group that was responsible for the murder of secular bloggers.

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The AL-led political front included several conservative Islamist parties. In addition, Hasina's government granted certain concessions to Islamist forces, such as the recognition of Qawmi madrasas, religious schools with a conservative curriculum that are not regulated by the government. These schools focus solely on religious teachings, entrapping students from poorer sections of the population in mystical religious dogmas. All these developments took place despite AL's claim to be the supreme savior of the minority Hindu religious community in Bangladesh.

The AL increasingly took hold of the state administration through the appointment process and brought the media and the intelligentsia under control through a mixture of inducements and coercion. By the end of 2018, the AL had a firm grip over the bureaucracy, the judiciary, and even the army, traditionally seen as a major backer of BNP.

The [results of the 2018 elections](#) surpassed even the League's most optimistic expectations, with its candidates winning 288 of the 300 seats in contention. The next election in January 2024 was a sham, with the whole opposition absent from the vote. This pushed the resistance into the extra-parliamentary arena, culminating in the protests that ousted Hasina.

The Interim Government

Three days after Hasina's departure, the economist Muhammad Yunus, the 2006 winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, was sworn in as the head of Bangladesh's interim government. Officially called the "chief advisor," Yunus will lead a seventeen-person team consisting of retired bureaucrats and military officers, NGO personalities, lawyers, academics, and others, along with a couple of student leaders involved in the rebellion. The team is diverse in terms of the background of its members as well as on ethnic and religious grounds, although it does not contain any working-class representatives.

The steady erosion of democratic institutions in Bangladesh has generated profound hatred for the existing political parties. Yunus was a suitable figure to head the interim government as a well-known personality who projects the image of rising above partisan politics while promoting national development. He had also been harassed by Hasina's government and was nearly forced to leave the country, which increased sympathy for him.

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For Yunus, this venture comes after previous unsuccessful attempts to enter the political field. While there are great expectations now attached to him, we should keep in mind his previous role as a promoter of microcredit schemes. Far from representing a cure for rural poverty, these schemes merely imposed additional burdens on the poor. His zealous advocacy of neoliberal policies made Yunus a darling of Western governments and the World Bank.

With the AL discredited, the two main political forces left standing, BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami, are hoping that early elections will bring them to power. The latter force in particular appears to be very well-organized, with activist networks across the country, and will certainly not want to let go of this chance.

The July uprising was successful with a wide range of social forces taking part. As with other struggles against autocratic regimes, the popular aspiration was for freedom, largely expressed in rather vague and abstract terms. In other words, it was not a movement guided by sharply defined ideological positions.

The students initially protested for reform of the quota system, but state repression ignited a mass uprising involving wide swaths of the Bangladeshi working and middle classes, which ended in the upsurge that swept away Hasina. The students have won the trust of the people and will have to chart a way forward.

One can certainly hope that the spirit of the student movement will help foster a much clearer consciousness about the nature of a transformational agenda. Apart from demands for democratic elections and the rule of law, the main items on that agenda will include economic gains like higher wages and better social protections, as well as action on climate justice — Bangladesh is immensely vulnerable to the impact of climate change. The caretaker government or its likely successors cannot be relied on to address any of these challenges.

In the long run, the July events will only lead to a positive outcome if the working class and other oppressed groups are able to take a leading role, overcoming religious and ethnic divisions in Bangladeshi society. While students may have begun the revolution, working people will have to make sure it succeeds. Herein lies the biggest challenge for the Left in Bangladesh.

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P.S.

• Jacobin. 08.14.2024:
<https://jacobin.com/2024/08/bangladesh-protest-movement-hasina-yunus>

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