

Bangladesh: from despot to neoliberal leader

Friday 22 November 2024, by [DHAR Sushovan](#) (Date first published: 19 November 2024).

On August 5, Sheikh Hasina Wajed, the prime minister of Bangladesh for the last 15 years, had to resign and run from the country after being driven out by student protesters. The student movement began with demands to end the quota (the allocation of many government jobs to the descendants of freedom fighters). But it gave way to a broader rebellion against the Awami League (AL), led by Sheikh Hasina, and her despotic government. The students achieved this victory after a fierce struggle, which saw more than 400 people killed and numerous others injured or reported missing. The turn of events in the South Asian country brings back memories of Sri Lanka in 2022 or even the popular uprising that chased from office Ferdinand Marcos, the President of the Philippines, following 20 years of autocratic rule.

No bullets or batons could deter the students who simply marched on, ready to take on any challenge. When Sheikh Hasina called the army to defend her, it dared not stand against the people. And her house of cards came tumbling down.

Two turning points

The first significant turning point in the history of independent Bangladesh was the movement for democracy in 1990 against the military dictatorship. Between 1982 and 1990, military gangsters took control, a government characterised by killings, random imprisonments, bribery, and looting, along with the destruction of democracy and democratic principles. This led to millions of people taking to the streets to demand the return of civilian rule, removing them from power and allowing for the establishment of parliamentary democracy. The movement delegitimised military rule and the army's control of politics. Political parties agreed on the nation's democratic direction, although this was ultimately disregarded as events progressed. Both AL and BNP were prominent in these conflicts and greatly profited from them.

The 2013 movement, also called the Shahbag movement, is the second significant turning point. It called for the execution of war criminals. At first, AL backed the movement because it aligned with its goals. However, it later encountered challenges when the movement called for greater societal democratisation and an end to socioeconomic inequality. It attempted to control the movement but was unsuccessful. It then withdrew party members, intimidated the leaders, encouraged discord among them, and generally debilitated the struggle.

Shahbag protests by the Left persisted, but their small scale and minimal influence in national politics caused the movement to lose momentum by 2014. This resulted in a missed opportunity for democratisation and addressing socioeconomic injustices through grassroots efforts. In the end, the movement was crushed.

AL then moved forward to dismantle its political rival, the BNP. For AL, although Jamaat-e-Islami and other Islamic organisations were factors as well, the BNP was its primary electoral opponent. And AL leaders were starting to see that discontent and disagreement with their misrule could help

the BNP at the polls.

The crackdown on the opposition



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Random arrests of BNP leaders led to charges being filed against them. As a result, the BNP withdrew from the 2014 elections, citing unfair conditions. It demanded Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's resignation to make way for a "non-party" and "impartial" chief executive to oversee the polls. This handed power to AL on a platter, with 153 candidates out of 300 elected uncontested. This election and its aftermath marked the beginning of a profound democratic deficit, setting the path for the current degeneration.

Since then, a conscious and consistent dismantling of the BNP has taken place, blocking its political activities across the country. Thousands of court cases were filed against the leaders and active members of the party, ranging from corruption to murder charges. It has never been able to recover. In addition, after 2014, they resorted to violence, giving AL a golden chance to target them. Khaleda Zia, the two-time Prime Minister, was sent to jail in February 2018 on charges of corruption. BNP's fortunes sank further.

Meanwhile, the Left, which was engaged with popular movements, was also harassed and repressed. The leadership of the movement to stop the development of the Rampal power station was charged with false cases and physically intimidated. Workers' movements met a similar fate.

By the end of 2018, the AL was in perfect control of the bureaucracy and the judiciary. Even the army, traditionally seen as a big backer of BNP, was bought over.

The results of the 2018 elections surpassed even the most optimistic AL expectations. It won 288 of the 299 seats in the country's parliament. The period between 2018 and 2023 established AL as the ultimate arbiter of Bangladesh's politics and society. The January 2024 elections were a sham, with the entire opposition absent from the electoral arena. This pushed the resistance into the extra-parliamentary arena. With Hasina's exit, her party will find it almost impossible to maintain its hegemony in the nation's politics.

Awami League's rightward march

With the BNP's decline, Islamic forces openly participated in the electoral arena as active organisations. And AL compromised with its historic secular credentials and built a tacit alliance with Hefazat-e-Islam, a radical Islamic outfit that was responsible for attacks on, and murder of, secular bloggers. The AL regime also granted concessions to Islamic forces.

Bangladesh's struggle with democracy has been tragic since the birth of the nation. Popular

movements have time and again contested autocratic structures, only to find the fruits of their labour devoured by a new autocrat. Sheikh Hasina and her entourage are the latest incarnation. Are they going to be the last?

The interim government

Three days passed with no government after Hasina left Bangladesh. Then, the Nobel Peace Prize-winning economist Muhammad Yunus was sworn in as the head of Bangladesh's interim government. Officially called the Chief Advisor, Yunus will lead a 17-member team consisting of retired bureaucrats and military officers, NGO personalities, advocates, academics, and others. It also includes a couple of student leaders who led the rebellion. The diversity, including multi-religious and multi-ethnic, looks impressive, even though it doesn't include any representatives of the workers and masses. Can it break the current impasse and pave the way for a democratisation of the country? Can it fulfil popular aspirations? Only time will tell!

For Yunus, this is his first success in politics, after earlier unsuccessful attempts. While there's huge expectation around him, his role as the apex financial predator should be kept in mind. Far from being a panacea for fighting rural poverty, his ill-fated micro-credit scheme imposed additional burdens on the rural poor, including severe indebtedness. Meanwhile, his advocacy of extreme forms of neoliberalism made him a darling of Western governments and the World Bank.

The composition of the interim government is evidence of how a steady erosion of democratic institutions in Bangladesh has created a deep hatred for existing political parties. The same goes for the army. Hence, there is support for Yunus, a personality apparently perceived as someone rising above partisan politics and being able to lead the nation towards development. The fact that he was harassed by Hasina attracted sympathy for him.

Economic decline

Bangladesh, a poster boy of neoliberal reforms, has recently experienced economic difficulties. The country was severely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, as were Sri Lanka and Pakistan. Its GDP growth is now forecast to fall below 6% this year and next. Previously, the country had enjoyed steady growth of 6-8%. The value of the currency, the *taka*, has plummeted against the US dollar, foreign debt repayment is rising due to loans for Bangladesh's many iconic megaprojects, and some sectors of the banking sector look unstable.

How will Mr. Yunus resolve this crisis? A fervent supporter of market fundamentalism and neoliberal capitalism, he will resort to the IMF for a bailout, with the full knowledge that severe austerity measures will be the price. Commentaries on the current political unrest have focused on the tyranny of Sheikh Hasina's government. But they have either completely ignored or largely downplayed the deterioration of the key economic indicators leading to the crisis.

If it was the quota system that triggered the rebellion, the underlying causes are linked to deeper political and economic problems. Bangladesh faces chronic unemployment, with 40% of people aged between 15 and 24 out of work and out of school.

Can the country's economy continue to grow if it maintains its strong focus on garment manufacturing, exploiting an abundant workforce and low wages? Especially given that the impending IMF austerity measures will recreate harsher conditions once again, forcing people out into the streets after this immediate euphoria.

The two principal political forces in the arena, BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami, are anxiously looking at early elections to lay their hands on power. The latter appears to be very strongly organised, with

active networks across the country, and will certainly not let this chance pass.

The way forward

The July uprising was successful, with the participation of a myriad of social forces. Just like any other struggle against autocratic regimes, the popular aspirations were for liberty and freedom but were largely expressed in vague and abstract terms. It was not a movement guided by sharp ideological positions. The students protested for reforms, but state repression ignited a mass uprising involving wide swathes of the Bangladeshi working and middle classes. The students have won the trust of the people and will have to chart a way forward.

The fate of the July events will lead to a positive outcome if workers are able to assume a leading role. Overcoming communal, ethnic and other divisions, the working class, other working people, oppressed groups and their allies must fight to gain a seat at the table, and also to win real gains in wages, working conditions and social protection. They have to win the fight for climate justice, as Bangladesh is immensely vulnerable to the impact of climate change. One thing is for sure: even with the best possible parliamentary transition, neither the caretaker government nor any future governments will be able to resolve any of the challenges without a massive push-back against capitalism itself.

Gaining ground on democratic rights, socioeconomic justice, and climate justice will require the full weight of the organised working class because the forces of capital will pull in the opposite direction. Students began the revolution; working people will have to make sure it succeeds. Herein lies the biggest challenge for the Left in Bangladesh.

Whither the Left?

The organised Left is extremely weak. Two major parties, the Bangladesh Workers' Party and a faction of the Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JASAD), were part of the Hasina government and are complicit in its crimes. It's true that other left-wing organisations, including the Communist Party of Bangladesh, were on the streets, resulting in a few of their members being killed and many others injured. But their weight in Bangladeshi politics is extremely small. Once a powerful force, the Left is now a shadow of its former self.



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It's hard to imagine that, in fact, the Left played a key role in the language movement of 1952 and the mass uprising of 1969. At the time, it also had an unrivalled influence on peasant and worker mobilisations. However, its influence waned after the 1960s, partly as a result of the Sino-Soviet conflict, which led to divisions between supporters of Moscow and Peking. While Chinese influence forced part of the population to actively oppose the war of liberation, Soviet influence led others to blindly follow Bangladesh's first president, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and his authoritarian policies. Groups opposing the authoritarian regime were constantly persecuted. Thousands of left-wing workers were killed, and organisational spaces such as trade unions and student associations became sites of violent attacks, a trend that continued under military rule.

Historically, the Bangladeshi Left has depended on external support from Moscow or Beijing. Instead of creating independent organisations and unifying with other sections of the Left in the 1980s, they put their strength and efforts at the service of the Awami League (led by Sheikh Hasina) or the BNP (led by Khaleda Zia), prioritising their agendas over those of the Left itself.

In fact, throughout Bangladesh's history, leaders – from Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to Ziaur Rahman, H. M. Ershad, Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina – have been able to secure the unconditional support of one left-wing party or another. At present, the former Left is probably larger than the active Left. The largest part is trapped in parliamentary cretinism, while other smaller organisations are more NGOs than political organisations.

In this process, questions of capitalist exploitation or issues such as gender or ethnic discrimination are conveniently forgotten. The only positive thing to be said about the Left is that it has remained steadfastly opposed to any form of religious fundamentalism or sectarian violence. Today, Bangladesh needs a strong new anti-capitalist Left, whose vision of socialism goes beyond the bureaucratic 'actually existing socialisms' of the 20th century. A new Left that has the capacity to take on issues like the current democratic crisis, the emergence of reactionary forces, the rise in state violence, the expanding inequality, and the climate crisis and capitalism. The Left must reinvent itself, reorganise and unify against all forms of bourgeois domination. An essential condition for this would be to build an independent identity and a clear, determined vision combined with creative politics. The new Left is more necessary today than ever.

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