

Unpacking Bangladesh's 2014 Elections

A Clash of the "Warring Begums"

Pavlo Ignatiev

This work analyses events in the political life of Bangladesh after military rule. It focuses on the rise of the leaders of two influential parties – the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party – and the reasons for their animosity towards one another. I argue that both these political forces usually abide by a "winner-takes-all" principle and they are firmly against cooperation for the sake of the country. The polarisation of the political field, combined with natural calamities and a crisis in the textile industry, is propelling Bangladesh into an uncertain future.

Keywords: Bangladesh, India, political parties, elections, textile industry strikes

Introduction:

An Environmental and Economic Profile of Bangladesh

Bangladesh is a medium-sized country wedged between India and Myanmar within Asia's largest delta, the Ganges-Brahmaputra. More than 4095 km of Bangladesh's frontiers are shared with India and 350 km with Myanmar. Seven north-eastern Indian states – better known as the Seven Sisters – and their predominantly tribal and Christian populations of 42 million, can only access Bengal Bay through Myanmar or Bangladesh. Moreover, India controls 54 Bangladeshi rivers and uses their water for its own industrial and agricultural needs. The long and ill-protected border also provides ample opportunities for the smuggling of cows, food and consumer goods. In 2013, some 3.2 million Bangladeshi citizens resided in India on a permanent basis, sending home considerable remittances.¹ This, combined with the explosive



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issue of the presence of illegal Bangladeshi immigrants in eastern and north-eastern Indian states, has made official relations with Delhi a topic of extraordinary political importance. Ties with neighbouring Myanmar are also under constant strain because of the unresolved question of Rohingya refugees—stateless people of Muslim faith who are persecuted in Buddhist Myanmar and have fled from the Rakhine state to eastern Bangladesh. Most political parties maintain that the half-million Rohingyas must either be ignored or deported because they are creating an economic and security crisis in the Cox Bazaar area.²

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Given the huge population of 156 million living in Bangladesh's 144,000 sq km, local resources and climatic conditions are not conducive to providing support. The Bangladeshi economy is highly dependent on several export commodities, with the textile industry playing a leading role on top of remittances. The export of ready-made garments brings in more than \$25 billion (USD) annually and provides work for 4.5 million women in 4,500 factories, many of which were constructed illegally without fulfilling essential security requirements. These cheap goods are supplied to huge department stores in Western countries, and Bangladesh occupies second place behind China as an exporter of garments. Historically, the eastern regions of Bengal depended on sugar cane and jute, the "golden fibre," but huge areas of land were occupied with rice plants since the country's numerous citizens placed it among the world's top consumers of this staple food. The population explosion led to the fragmenting of the land into tiny allotments, making an economy of scale impossible and paving the way for micro-credits to millions of needy households. The upshot is that 35 million people are borrowers of small amounts of money from banks for the poor.³ In 1965, the country's workers began to dismantle huge ocean-going vessels on the beaches of Sitakunda near Chittagong. Today, more than 200 000 people are employed in this dangerous enterprise, and Bangladesh ranks second behind Pakistan in the annual number of dismantled ships. In 2012, 70 ship-breaking yards turned 260 ocean vessels weighing 3.1 million tonnes into scrap metal which was later supplied to the construction and metallurgy industries, meeting more than half of the country's steel requirements.⁴

The Bangladeshi land mass is criss-crossed by numerous rivers (of which the Ganges, the Brahmaputra and the Meghna are the most important) and predominantly flat except for the mountainous Sylhet district and Chittagong Hill tracts in the interior not far from the biggest port, Chittagong. The country is therefore extremely vulnerable

to typhoons and floods, and every year at least 20% of the area is submerged during the heavy monsoon rains. It is famous for its concrete shelters with wide roofs for rescue helicopters and lowered platforms for the cattle which dot the countryside, occupying fertile land in the coastal zone. Bangladesh also remains one of the main contributors to world ferry disasters, with a large number of these vessels colliding and capsizing during the rainy season. The overpopulated nation is highly dependent on river transportation, and these unfortunate events are connected with bad weather and the desire of ferry owners to boost earnings by offering room on boats to more people than they can carry. The country is also no stranger to black-outs due to its ill-developed electricity distribution network and natural calamities. In these conditions, remittances from Bangladeshi citizens in the Persian Gulf, India, Malaysia, the US and UK play an increasingly important role in economic development and substitute investments. In 2012-2013, Bangladeshi citizens received nearly \$15 billion (USD) from relatives employed abroad mainly as cheap blue-collar workers.⁵

The Political Context

Bangladesh became independent in 1971 after a bloody war with Pakistan. During those events, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, one of the leaders of the historic Six-point movement attained the status of a national hero. He went on to lead the country in different capacities until August 1975 when he was killed along with his wife, three sons, two daughters-in-law and servants in a coup organised by junior officers. After an epoch of revolts and military rule from 1975 until 1990, the country finally embarked on democratic development. Two political groups which had successfully organised mass protests against the dictator Hussain Muhammad Ershad came to prominence: the Awami League (the People's League) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). The leader of the first, Sheikh Hasina based her legitimacy on family connections (Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had been her father) and supported a policy of close relations with India along with the creation of a secular state. Zia Khaleda, the head of the BNP, was the widow of the charismatic general Zia Rahman, who had been a military hero in the independence movement and president of the country from 1977 to 1981; she defended the idea of an Islamic nation completely independent from India with close links to the Muslim world. Deep-seat-

ed and irreconcilable differences between these political programmes combined with personal animosities produced constant conflicts between the two influential political group leaders, whom people dubbed the “battling begums.” Former president Hussain Muhammad Ershad, who ruled the country *de facto* or directly from 1982 to 1990, received a lengthy prison term in 1991, but his Jatiya Party (National Party) remained the third most influential force with a moderate programme based on Bangladesh’s economic development.

Zia Khaleda became the country’s first woman prime minister in 1991. She was among the individuals responsible for the passing of the 12th constitutional amendment of 06 August 1991, which brought in a parliamentary form of government instead of a presidential system. Unfortunately, the period of Zia Khaleda’s rule until 1996 was fraught with serious political scandals. While these years saw advances in education and the introduction of a nationwide tree-planting programme, Bangladeshi society was engulfed by a serious religious conflict.⁶ In 1994, the popular writer Taslima Nasrin published her book *Shame*, which criticised the limited rights of women under Islam. She immediately faced death threats and was forced to leave the country. Periodic public riots also terrorised Hindu and Ahmadi religious minorities. In the same year, opposition parties boycotted parliament and began organising *hartals* (shutdowns) after unknown persons assaulted their activists with knives and batons. First staged by Mahatma Gandhi in historic Bengal, *hartals* can be defined as general strikes and shop closures intended to cripple the economy over a defined period—say for 24 or 72 hours. In Bangladesh, they are extremely violent and followed by the torching of trucks and buses, burnings of tyres on roads, erecting of stone barricades and street skirmishes. So-called soldiers of democracy are responsible for enforcing *hartals* with petrol bombs and ordinary weapons. Many local workers and schoolchildren stay home to avoid becoming the victims of this street violence.⁷

After another victory in the February 1996 elections, Zia Khaleda’s government had its legitimacy undermined following accusations of widespread ballot-rigging. Under pressure from international donors and the Awami League, she agreed to hold new elections, introducing a 13th constitutional amendment to set up a neutral caretaker government in order to organise a free and fair national electoral process over a 90-day period. The Awami League leader, Sheikh Hasina, was suddenly thrust into power as a result of this repeat campaign in June 1996.

After several days of incumbency, she agreed to free former president Ershad from prison on parole in exchange for his party's participation in a Æling coalition. Thanks to this political support and guidance, she introduced a foreign policy based on cooperation with regional neighbours.

In 1997, Bangladesh, became a co-founder of the Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand Economic Cooperation (BIMST-EC) regional group whose members were countries around the Bay of Bengal. The BIMST-EC Permanent Secretariat opened in Dhaka in 2014, and the organisation defined 14 areas of cooperation. Bangladesh became responsible for the issues of climate change, trade and investments.⁸ During the same year, Sheikh Hasina also helped to create an important organisation composed of the biggest Muslim countries. Named the Developing-8 (D-8), the group encompassed 60% of the population of the Islamic world with Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, Nigeria, Pakistan and Turkey as its members. Unfortunately, the participation of Bangladeshi leaders in D-8 activities was marred by scandals because of their strained relations with Pakistan and demands for unilateral duty-free access to the markets of member states.⁹ On the other hand, the ties with India were mended due to a historic treaty on the sharing of Ganges water in 1996.

In 1999, Bangladesh became a signatory of the Kunming Initiative intended to rebuild the old Stilwell Road between north-eastern India and southern China, which had been heavily used during ww11 as a life-line for Chinese guerrillas. This motorway is positioned to handle 25% of the trade between China and India. Bangladesh, situated between the two countries, is likely to see investments in its road infrastructure and ports.¹⁰ However, Hasina's government failed to pay significant attention to developments *within* Bangladesh. The exception was her signing of a peace accord with the representatives of the Chittagong area hill tribes in 1997. This accord envisaged broad autonomy for the region of five million people along with the resolution of land disputes between tribal people and Muslim settlers from the plains, withdrawal of some military bases and limits on the migration of impoverished Bangladeshis to Chittagong Hill tracts.¹¹

Unfortunately, an atmosphere of lawlessness persisted within Bangladesh. In 2000, the Public Safety (Special Provisions) Act was adopted, stipulating that special tribunals be created to deal with violent street crimes. The legislature specified harsh penalties for felonies including

hijacking, extortion, damage to automobiles, road blockades, kidnaping and terrorism. Special one-member tribunals were established to conduct speedy trials of accused persons, many of whom had been arrested during street protests and nationwide hartals. Controversially, the Act also cancelled the bail procedure for accused persons.¹²

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However the events that would give Bangladesh its nickname of “the chaotic democracy” happened during the second term of Zia Khaleda and her Islamist partners after she won the general election of October 2001. Her son, Tarique Rahman, became the second most powerful person in the country and the heir to Khaleda’s Bangladesh Nationalist Party. He also amassed a fortune very quickly with the help of several questionable deals. Immediately following Khaleda’s party victory, the representatives of Hindu and Buddhist minorities were targeted in public violence; members of the Awami League also suffered frequent assaults at the hands of street gangs loyal to the government.

And, the cult of Osama bin Laden was visible on the streets. In 2002, Islamists torched several movie theatres as symbols of Western civilisation. The date 15 August was declared a national holiday ostensibly as the anniversary of Zia Khaleda’s birth in 1945. This brought new friction to relations with the Opposition since Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the father of Bangladesh’s independence, had been killed without remorse on 15 August 1975, and the Opposition observed that date as a national day of mourning. In fact, Khaleda’s birth certificate revealed that she was born on 05 September.¹³ To add insult to injury, during an opposition rally in Dhaka on 21 August 2004, protesters against the assaults on Awami League workers in Sylhet were attacked by hand grenades, 13 of which exploded in the dense crowd. Some 24 demonstrators died and 500 were wounded, including Sheikh Hasina, who was left partially deaf.¹⁴

In 2004, the government unveiled an elite anti-crime and anti-terrorism Bangladeshi police unit consisting of 4525 personnel and known as the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB). The athletic squad members wore different types of weapons along with armour, black uniforms with RAB in gold lettering, bandanas and glasses; strikingly, their sniffer dogs were also black. Created to protect citizens against street crime, the squad soon became the main governmental force in the fight against opposition rallies; these officers did not hesitate to open fire or to kill indiscriminately.¹⁵ Taking systemic corruption into consideration, Zia Khaleda’s government also introduced an independent Anti-corruption

tion Commission (ACC) in order to appease international donors by investigating document forgeries, the embezzlement of state subsidies and loans, money laundering crimes, illegally amassed wealth and tax evasion among the representatives of the political elite. This special body was supposed to be independent and neutral but in reality its structure was defined by the government, which also financed the ACC's activities.¹⁶

The tense atmosphere inside the country was aggravated by the conflict with India, which had persistently accused Bangladesh of harbouring terrorists from the seven north-eastern states. Those accusations became more frequent after 2003 when the Indian and Bhutanese armies banished rebels from southern Bhutan during Operation All Clear and those rebels had to evacuate the remnants of their forces to neighbouring Bangladesh. In 1989, the Indian government began to construct a security fence close to the border and it intensified this work during Zia Khaleda's rule. The government also went ahead with a policy of deporting illegal migrants originating from its eastern neighbour. Officials in Delhi claimed that the border barrier was needed to stop infiltration by terrorists and smugglers, but many Bangladeshis were outraged about the denial of opportunities to smuggle goods and cross the border in search of jobs. India's mass media also criticised Bangladesh's Islamist parties harshly for attempting to create an Islamic state; it discussed plans to divert water from the transboundary rivers. But the real outrage in Dhaka was due to the killing by Indian border guards of more than 1000 Bangladesh citizens and torture of another 1000 who had tried to cross the border between 2000 and 2014. The problem was exacerbated by the presence of 162 enclaves in India and Bangladesh where 51 000 people of questionable status resided.¹⁷

After clashes on the streets between activists from the two biggest parties in early 2007, the military temporarily took power into its own hands, and together with an interim government led by Fakhraddin Ahmed, these generals initiated a policy known widely as Minus Two. Its aim was to remove the warring begums from politics and create a third alternative political force. As a result, both former prime ministers and 160 prominent politicians were detained along with thousands of activists. However, the representatives of military circles had no intention of becoming the new rulers of the impoverished country facing dire economic problems. For one thing, they were afraid of los-

ing their lucrative jobs in UN peace-keeping forces: it is known that Bangladesh contributes more troops to peace-keeping missions than any other member state except for Pakistan. In 2013, for example, 1830 police officers and 6605 soldiers were Bangladeshi representatives.¹⁸ As the country's main external donors, the EU, Japan and the US also put pressure on the military government to force the gradual restoration of democracy. Especially insistent on this plan was India, whose political elite feared that these events could facilitate the rise to power of radical Islamists.

The result was that the interim Ålers chose to prepare Bangladesh for exemplary parliamentary elections and then exit politics. The names of tens of millions of dead individuals along with duplicate entries and errors were removed from the electoral roll; military personnel digitally photographed 81 million voters for special electronic voter ID cards with fingerprints. They also introduced a new code of conduct for political parties which guaranteed the equality of all participants. On 17 December 2008, normal life was restored and the army finally returned to its barracks.¹⁹

This campaign, which culminated in general elections on 29 December 2008, was prepared for carefully by the Awami League. The party's activists unveiled their revolutionary Vision-2021, a programme intended to turn Bangladesh into a middle-income country by 2021 by encouraging investment, social equality, infrastÅcture development and the IT industry. In contrast, the BNP was in chaos after the suppression of thousands of its members by the interim government, which had successfully split this political force into two parts: one pro-military and the other pro-Hasina. The populace was also eager to see cÅcial changes after years of volatile Islamist Åle amid rampant corÅption and souring relations with neighbouring India. This was especially tÅe for new voters, who represented 31% of all participants in the elections. The news that 13 million deceased citizens had been listed on the electoral roll was a serious blow to the Åling party and Zia's allies. Citizens were also shocked by the gross violations of human rights committed by RAB personnel and demanded that those responsible be brought to justice. Ordinary Bangladeshis likened the RAB to a Latin American death squad in South Asia due to its growing impunity and infringements of human rights. Under BNP Åle, Bangladesh had also become one of the most corÅpt countries in the world. All of these factors influenced voting behaviour and brought a cÅshing defeat to

Zia Khaleda's party and her Islamist partners. In January 2009, Sheikh Hasina became the head of the government with overwhelming support from parliament where her party had gained a huge majority.²⁰

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Bangladesh under Awami League Rule

At first, the period of Awami League rule from 2009 to 2014 brought some economic successes. These were largely due to the improved relations with Bangladesh's biggest neighbour, India, which surrounds the country on three sides. In 2009, the two countries agreed that the Seven Sisters should be provided with direct access to the Bay of Bengal, and in 2010, that agreement came into force. As a result, the travel distance from the north-east to Bengal's ports was theoretically reduced from 1750 to only 75 kilometres. But the out-dated Bangladeshi roads and railways were not suited to supporting the heavy traffic of Indian goods. To remedy the problem, these partners agreed in the same year that India would provide \$US1 billion in credit to be used to develop rail infrastructure between the mentioned states and Bangladesh's border districts as well as to purchase locomotives and carriages, procure buses and execute dredging projects on trans-boundary rivers. In 2011, India removed duties on all Bangladeshi goods except for 25 alcohol and tobacco items with the goal of addressing the huge trade deficit caused by the diversified export of Indian enterprises and the need of the local textile industry to import massive volumes of cotton and silk. Sheikh Hasina's government also launched a campaign against terrorists from north-east India who were active in Bangladeshi territory. Consequently, the security situation improved dramatically in the region, and several high-ranking rebels from Assam were deported at the demand of Manmohan Singh.²¹ In 2013, both sides signed an extradition treaty concerning persons implicated in serious crimes along with a more liberal visa agreement allowing for multiple-entry tourist and medical visas with validity of one year.²²

The government also decided to introduce a programme called *Digital Bangladesh* drawing on relevant experience in southern India. In 2009, the company Telephone Shipla Sangsta launched its Doel laptop with a retail price of only \$130 (USD) for distribution to state departments and schools. Electronic books were bought en masse for school children since the overpopulated country lacked forests and it was very expensive to print books in Bangladesh. Internet connections also be-

came available in Aral areas. Sheikh Hasina declared the IT sector an engine of growth and ordered the opening of computer training centres and Internet cafes in all districts while the import of computer hardware and software was simultaneously made duty-free. The country today has plans to capitalise on its young and low-cost workforce familiar with technical English in order to create an IT hub offering the cheapest services in the world.²³

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The government also tried to address the problem of frequent power outages. One response was the development of Bangladesh's first nuclear power plant, which will feature two 1,000 megawatt reactors and a high safety threshold and be built by Rosatom, a Russian nuclear energy corporation. The plant will be located in Rooppur (Pabna) 160 km to the north-west of Dhaka and should help to save money on expensive gas. The project, which was started in 2013, will be operational by the beginning of the next decade.²⁴ In 2012, new oil reserves were discovered in the northern region of Sylhet, well-known for its tea gardens. Sheikh Hasina also agreed to buy electricity from India. To this end, a special transmission line will link India's eastern electrical grid to Bangladesh's western grid. Those measures are very important because 50% of the population does not have access to electricity and many textile factories rely mainly on costly power generators.²⁵

On the other hand, this era of Awami League rule was accompanied by gross human rights violations. On 25-26 February 2009, a group of border guards known as Bangladesh Rifles tried to stage a mutiny when they occupied their own headquarters and killed 57 high-ranking officers and scores of other innocent people. Their demands to the government were purely economic and job-related: an increase in their salaries and the length of vacations. Wanting to avoid large-scale bloodshed in Dhaka only months into her rule, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina negotiated the surrender of these guards over 33 hours, promising the majority of them an amnesty. However, in 2013, 152 rebel soldiers were sentenced to death while hundreds of others faced life imprisonment. The Bangladesh Rifles were renamed the Border Guard of Bangladesh in a move to erase the memory of these deplorable events. The exceptional cruelty of these sentences signalled to other violent offenders that they too would be punished mercilessly. It was also intended to appease the country's generals as the high-ranking personnel of the Bangladesh Rifles had traditionally been recruited from among the ranks of army officers.²⁶

Sheikh Hasina also decided that the time was ripe to destroy the most important ally of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party: Jamaat-e-Islami. In 2010, her government launched a process targeting collaborationists with Pakistan during the 1971 civil war and establishing the Bangladesh International Crimes Tribunal (ICT). The prime minister noted that three million civilians had died after the leaders of Jamaat-e-Islami and affiliated political forces created death squads of *razakars* (volunteers) to hunt down pro-independence journalists, university lecturers, political activists and members of the Hindu minority in eastern Pakistan. There was, however, a problem with this process: the civil war had taken place some 42 years ago earlier, and many key witnesses were already dead. The problem was aggravated by the fact that some of the accused were extremely old and for humanitarian reasons simply unable to stand trial.

These ICT proceedings continue to be very controversial. Islamists in Bangladesh have claimed that the process has nothing to do with the delivery of justice and is intended to destroy Jamaat-e-Islami and the opposition “compromise” movement in general. They have also threatened to take steps against judges and witnesses in these trials after their own return to power.²⁷

The ICT has already sentenced eight well-known people to death. They include all prominent leaders of the main Islamist party and an influential member of parliament, who belongs to BNP ranks. At the same time, the ICT has outlawed Jamaat-e-Islami because of its de-stActive role in the civil war. This has led to increased violence on the streets and the radicalising of opponents who have sworn they will avenge their “martyrs.”²⁸ Relations with Pakistan, which has accused Sheikh Hasina of Åbbing salt into historic wounds, have also deteriorated. Pakistani politicians do not understand why these dormant issues are being promoted so vigorously now – some 42 years later – by the Awami League. They also question the claim that there were three million victims of the civil war within Pakistan. In general, these trials have done a lot of damage to ties between the countries.²⁹

In 2010, five military officers responsible for killing Mujibur Rahman during the “majors’ revolt” of 1975, were hanged in Dhaka. Their trial had been initiated in 1996, but later, as prime minister, Zia Khaleda had done everything in her power to stop the hearings and let these individuals escape abroad. The independence hero had been assassinated along with his family and servants (some 14 people in total), except for

two of his daughters: Sheikh Hasina and her younger sister, Sheikh Rehana, who were in Germany at the time. Six other officers responsible for these assassinations were also hiding abroad, and Bangladesh asked Interpol and law-enforcement agencies to assist with their capture.³⁰

Over the last few years, the country has also seen frequent “disappearances” of opposition party politicians. Since the beginning of 2010, more than 100 people have gone missing, many of them BNP members. Opposition leader Zia Khaleda has blamed RAB members for these atrocities, noting that following harsh international criticism, the number of street killings by this squad has gone down while “disappearances” are on the rise. Despite the negative publicity, Sheikh Hasina is not in any hurry to disband this notorious unit: on the contrary, she has decided to create a new military police branch to fight river pirates and contrabandists in coastal areas.³¹

Some of these measures have also targeted Zia Khaleda personally. In November 2010, the government confiscated the home on Shahid Mansuor Street in the capital where she lived for 38 years after receiving the property from the state as a presidential widow. Also in 2010, a decision was taken to rename Zia Rahman International Airport in honour of Sufi cleric Hazrat Shahjalal and to change the name of the University of Rahman in Barisal to Barisal University.³² In the summer of 2011, a court imposed a lengthy prison sentence on Khaleda’s son Arafat Rahman for illegally transferring money out of the country. As a result, he was forced into hiding in Bangkok and later fled to Malaysia.³³ Tarik Rahman, another of the begum’s sons and the second most important politician in the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, is also facing a number of extortion charges in Bangladeshi courts. The authorities allowed him to fly to London in September 2008 after he agreed to leave his senior position as secretary-general of the BNP.³⁴ All in all, there have been so many cases brought against Khaleda and her family members that they spend all their time preparing for hearings.

Sheikh Hasina has also declared war on Muhammad Yunus, who won the Nobel prize in 2006 for his revolutionary work on microfinance and was the first citizen of Bangladesh and just the third person from the Bengal area to receive this distinction after the poet Rabindranath Tagore (the author of the Indian and Bangladeshi national anthems) and economist Amartya Kumar Sen. In 1974, this scientist formulated his theory of microcredit influenced by a visit to the countryside where he witnessed widespread poverty among rural women.

With assistance from the state, in 1983, he created the Grameen Bank (*grameen* means “village” or “village” in the Bangla language) in order to distribute microcredits among these women. This financial institution is now an Asian leader in micro-based banking; it has 8.3 million borrowers of small amounts and enjoys high rate of credit return. After the military takeover, members of the interim government urged Yunus to create his own political party in 2007 as an alternative to the parties of two begums, but he refused.

Nonetheless, Sheikh Hasina viewed him as a potentially dangerous political rival who was popular among village women. During her earlier term, she had held out hopes that the Norwegian Nobel Peace Prize Committee would honour her for signing a peace treaty with Chittagong Hill tract tribes; in the final count, however, it was Yunus who took the prestigious prize. Under pressure from Hasina, the then 72-year-old scientist was forced to leave Grameen Bank in 2011. He has become a favourite target of governmental newspapers for his “exploiting” of poor people in the countryside.³⁵

A Crisis in the Textile Industry

Despite the numerous trials and an atmosphere of persecution, Sheikh Hasina has remained relatively popular with the Bangladeshi people. Unfortunately for her government, however, the country’s main hard currency earner, the textile industry has come under increased scrutiny. This sphere of economic activity was created from scratch in 1978 when the Daewoo conglomerate agreed to invest money in a first clothing factory, Desh Garments. Daewoo also provided technical training to 130 Bangladeshi workers in response to the Multifibre Arrangement that limited the export of garments from South Korea to developed countries. Soon other factories followed.³⁶ Bangladesh was chosen as a location because it offered the cheapest labour force in the world composed of compliant village women workers whose calm behaviour contrasted with the trade-unionised violence of militant Korean workers. To satisfy growing demand, many factories were erected in haste with textile materials usually stored together with dyers on the premises. This caused many fires and also made it easier for sacked workers to commit arson.

The textile business was profitable due to the extremely low wages and large amount of overtime work performed by women workers.

This profit came, moreover, in spite of the need to import silk and cotton from China and India and buy sophisticated machinery in developed countries. Nevertheless, lax security led to many accidents. The government itself failed to pay attention to these events because elite political representatives were the owners of successful factories.

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In April 2013, the biggest of these catastrophes took place with the collapse of Rana Plaza, a building on the outskirts of Dhaka that had housed five garment-producing units; at least 1135 people were killed. In response, the US government suspended duty-free benefits for Bangladesh, triggering a major economic crisis in the country. With more than 317 million people, the US market is the top destination for Bangladeshi textile goods.³⁷ In spite of public criticism and calls to limit production orders of “bloodied” garments, European customers elected to inspect factories and pay for the enhancement of their security. To aggravate the situation, the workers decided to demand a rise in the minimum industry wage from \$36 to \$100 (USD) per month, and in September 2013, they organised nationwide strikes aiming to attract worldwide attention to their plight. The people with the lowest wages work at least 10 hours six days per week and may only rest on the premises of the 4500 factories where they are given very basic food such as a bowl of the cheapest rice and fish from polluted rivers. Even so, the government firmly rejects all calls for a wage rise above \$68 (USD) per month (which would be a 77% hike) given that the competitive wage is the main draw of the chaotic industry.³⁸

Preparations for the 2014 Elections

An amendment passed by pro-Awami League deputies in June 2011 removed the caretaker government which had been defended and lobbied for so strongly by the same party in 1996. In place of this respected institution, Sheikh Hasina established an interim state body composed of the leaders of loyalist parties and decided to appoint herself as its head. She argued that only politicians who had been elected as people’s representatives had the right to rule the country for the temporary period of the electoral campaign; nevertheless, she invited members of the Opposition to take up any other ministerial post they wanted, including as Minister of the Interior. To protest ballot-rigging during the election and capitalise on acute difficulties in the textile industry, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party organised a nationwide civil

disobedience campaign in the autumn and winter of 2013. This step was supported by BNP's electoral ally Jamaat-e-Islami, which had been banned from participating in the elections after the Supreme Court declared its registration illegal in August 2013. The party's activists hoped to stall the trials and executions of their leaders so that their former coalition partners could return to power and free them.³⁹

A recent hartal by opposition parties was one of the most violent in Bangladeshi history. After activists began to torch tacks of textile goods travelling from Dhaka to the main port area of Chittagong, the majority of drivers decided not to go to work. The minibus and passenger bus sector suffered the same fate after people were burned alive because of petrol bombs. Railway links between the capital and Chittagong and north-eastern Sylhet were also cut off when opposition activists removed train tracks or placed rocks on top of them. During the 48 days of hartals in 2013, a total of 290 people were killed.⁴⁰ Many foreign investors incurred huge losses, including well-known Chinese and Korean entrepreneurs. Despite these circumstances, Sheikh Hasina decided to go ahead with general elections on 05 January 2014.

It was at this point that Hussain Muhammad Ershad, the head of the Jatiya Party, the Awami League's traditional and main coalition partner in government, abruptly declared the atmosphere in the country non-conducive to elections and announced his political party would not take part. Only a few months earlier, many observers had believed that Jatiya would participate in the electoral process in order to ensure its legality (since Bangladesh Nationalist Party and Jamaat-e-Islami were both boycotting the elections) and later serve as the main "Opposition." In that "dual" capacity, the party could delegate its representatives to the government and simultaneously criticise the shortcomings of the ruling coalition.⁴¹ But the abrupt U-turn by the former dictator, Ershad, endangered this plan and made representatives of the Awami League furious. Ershad's decision came as a big surprise to Sheikh Hasina, and in December 2014, she sent in troops and RAB soldiers, who surrounded his house in the Baridhara neighbourhood of Dhaka and convoyed him to a military hospital for "treatment." By isolating Jatiya's 83-year old leader, the prime minister intended to force Jatiya into the election campaign, and she succeeded.⁴² Ershad lost influence in his own political party because of his inconsistent position and constant shifting between sides; his party contributed three delegates as ministers to

Sheikh Hasina's cabinet. Today the party leaders criticise the Awami League publicly while continuing to support it informally in parliament.⁴³

On the other hand, the EU, the Commonwealth of Nations and the US did not provide representatives to monitor the elections, thereby signalling that they did not consider the process democratic or transparent. Against the background of a small voter turnout, the Awami League held 232 of the 300 elected seats and it formed a government on its own terms. Even so, a new wave of violence is expected and the country is in grave danger of international isolation.⁴⁴ Without political stability, it is impossible to raise the per capita income, which at \$1190 (USD) is considered extremely modest.⁴⁵ If as a small and overpopulated country Bangladesh wants to be successful, it should open up free economic zones to lure foreign investors from India and China with a combination of cheap gas and abundant workforce. In 2013, the export of Bangladeshi commodities did not exceed \$30.1 billion (USD) with ready-made garments providing 81% of this sum. Only an inclusive process of national reconciliation can change this grim picture.⁴⁶

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Conclusion

The democratisation of Bangladesh has not brought desirable results though the military regime, a common enemy of both influential political parties – the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party – has disappeared. The relations between Zia Khaleda and Sheikh Hasina are fuelled by personal enmity and the two usually accuse each other of wrongdoings in public. To date, the side which has been victorious in elections has behaved according to the ancient principle of “winner takes all,” using all law enforcement agencies to destroy its opponents. This has led to increased parliamentary fighting and the extensive use of hartals designed to cripple the economy, which depends on the export of garments and uninter-rupted operation of ports. Bangladesh remains a country on the brink. This situation will not change unless the ruling elite and the Opposition, represented by two influential dynasties, learn to co-exist peacefully despite the racial differences in their political programmes and their bitter history of confrontation.



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