

Whither Bangladesh and the Bay of Bengal?

By Dr. Vibhanshu Shekhar

In less than two months of student protests, Bangladesh, a [partly free democracy](#), has plunged into a phase of serious political uncertainty that has not been seen since 2007 when the then Bangladeshi army chief launched a [military coup](#). The Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, has fled to India, leaving behind a country plagued by [violence, lawlessness, and vandalism](#). A new interim government has taken shape, led by [Mohammad Yunus](#), a Nobel Peace Prize winner for revolutionizing Bangladesh's rural banking system. The [17-member interim government](#) is comprised largely of technocrats, military officials, activists, and leaders of the student movement.

Dr. Vibhanshu Shekhar, Adjunct Professor at American University, explores the phase of serious political uncertainty that enmeshes Bangladesh and its implications for the dynamics of the Bay of Bengal sub-region.

The Interim government has its tasks cut out for it. In addition to the immediate job of restoring order and peace in the country and holding the elections, the interim government will have to attend to the country's fractured democratic processes, [flagging economy](#), [frightened minorities](#), and overall acrimonious socio-political environment. The Hasina government had, over time, hollowed out the country's governance structures by operating in an authoritarian manner and undermining political institutions. While Mohammad Yunus called upon Bangladeshi citizens to "make the country wonderful for future generations," the son of the deposed Prime Minister termed Bangladesh the "next Pakistan."

The fall of Sheikh Hasina and the formation of an interim government has raised questions regarding the future of the country's democratic order. Will the country be able to build peace in the near future, or will it continue to be rocked by the politics of hate, such as the killings of Awami League leaders in post-Hasina Bangladesh? The public retribution against Awami League leaders is likely to generate violent pushback, driving the country further towards chaos. Awami League supporters have already begun [street protests punctuated by instances of arson](#). The civil order continues to be poor as law enforcement agents are still unwilling to return to their posts. Military forces patrolling the streets do little to provide an assurance of peace in the country.

Another important question relates to the fate of the electoral processes in the country. The interim government has not announced a timeline for fresh elections. What will happen to the party politics once elections are announced? Will the interim government allow the Awami League and its leader, Sheikh Hasina, to participate in the elections? More importantly, what will Sheikh Hasina's fate be if she returns to Bangladesh once the elections are announced? The position that Hasina should face trial upon her return is gaining traction among the interim government members. Will Sheikh Hasina meet the same fate that she meted out to her opposition leader, Begum Khaleda Zia, house arrest, or will she, like her father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, face death?

Bangladesh's prospects get murkier when one begins to think of the country's political situation beyond the immediate future. Will the newly elected government pander to the divisive politics of its predecessor or push the country towards a post-Hasina consensus and healing? What will the role of the military be in the politics of the country, and will the Islamist forces continue to play by the rules of the game when they gain greater political space? The Hasina government kept the military in check and curbed the rise of Islamic militancy within the country.

The turmoil in Bangladesh risks transforming the Bay of Bengal sub-region into an arch of unrest encompassing a deadly mix of inter-ethnic conflicts, irredentism, transnational crimes, Islamic militancy, and ethnic cleansing. There is a continuing uptick of authoritarianism in Thailand, where the government is muffling popular voices by banning political parties, such as the [Move Forward party](#). The [civil war in Myanmar](#) is going on with no sign of peace and conciliation. India's Northeastern states have seen fresh episodes of [inter-ethnic conflicts](#) and [increasing tension](#) along the India-China border. With this bout of uncertainty in Bangladesh, the existing inter-ethnic tensions and conflicts in the Bay of Bengal region are likely to intensify.

An unstable Bay of Bengal risks undoing what Bangladesh and the subregion have achieved over the years. At stake are the peace and prosperity for both Bangladesh and the subregion. Bangladesh, the "basket case of the 1970s," has emerged as a [middle-income country](#) with the goal of becoming an upper-middle-income country by 2031. The country has reduced the level of poverty and promises to continue its upward economic trajectory with a robust young workforce.

In addition, Bangladesh has [acted as the fulcrum](#) for various sub-regional initiatives, such as [BIMSTEC](#) (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral, Technical, and Economic Cooperation) and the BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal) initiative. While the BIMSTEC is negotiating a sub-regional FTA, the BBIN has focused primarily on energy cooperation and infrastructural connectivity. These initiatives are likely to languish in the face of either political uncertainty or unwilling leadership.

More importantly, disorder in Bangladesh poses a risk to India's strategic interests, specifically [the internal security of its Northeastern states](#). This threat may prompt India to return to a security-centric approach that previously impeded the opening of the border. India has already taken various measures to minimize the spillover of the current Bangladesh crisis, such as increasing surveillance along the border and restricting the [night-time movement of people](#) in the border areas. It is also prohibiting any influx of refugees to its border regions with Bangladesh. The forthcoming [visit of India's Foreign Secretary to Bangladesh](#) in December 2024 may provide an important opportunity for Dhaka and New Delhi to iron out a host of issues pertaining to both bilateral relations and the future of the Bay of Bengal region.

A volatile Bangladesh and the Bay of Bengal are not in the interests of either neighboring countries or principal powers like the United States and China. Therefore, the interests of the principal stakeholders lie in the restoration of peace and the facilitation of a successful democratic transition in the country. The imperilment of Bangladesh and Myanmar are warning signs that neither India, the United States, nor China can afford to ignore.

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