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Bangladesh new chapter

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A look at Bangladesh's new chapter

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HEARD ON ALL THINGS CONSIDERED

Diaa Hadid

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Bangladesh's army chief says he'll form an interim government after the long-serving prime minister fled the country amid outrage over violent crackdowns against students.

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Transcript

AILSAL CHANG, HOST:

Some call it an accidental revolution. Today in Bangladesh, the former prime minister fled her residence by helicopter while the army chief announced an interim government. Her departure came during mounting outrage after local media reported that security forces killed more than 300 people during weeks of protests. NPR's Diaa Hadid reports. And a warning - this story contains the sound of gunfire.

(SOUNDBITE OF BELL DINGING)

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: (Chanting in non-English language).

UNIDENTIFIED CROWD #1: (Chanting in non-English language).

DIAA HADID, BYLINE: Tens of thousands of protesters flooded to the streets of the capital, Dhaka, cheering, beeping. Some smash symbols of the former prime minister and her party.

(SOUNDBITE OF GLASS BREAKING)

HADID: They chanted, Sheikh Hasina's escaped.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: (Chanting in non-English language).

UNIDENTIFIED CROWD #1: (Chanting in non-English language).

HADID: And she had. The former prime minister and her sister fled Bangladesh by helicopter to neighboring India. It was a swift end for a woman who many Bangladeshis feared would never leave power after ruling for 15 years as prime minister, an end even more remarkable considering who she is - the daughter of the man who led Bangladesh to independence in its war of liberation in 1971. And yet?

GEOFFREY MACDONALD: This was an accidental revolution.

HADID: Geoffrey Macdonald is a South Asia expert at the U.S. Institute of Peace, a think tank. He calls it that because the protesters, largely students, had modest aims when they began in early July. They demanded the government reduce the quotas of civil service jobs given to descendants of war veterans. They accused the ruling party of doling out those jobs to their cronies.

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UNIDENTIFIED CROWD #2: (Chanting in non-English language).

HADID: Loyalists of the ruling party attacked the students. So did police. It quickly turned deadly and snowballed into a movement to oust the prime minister, Sheikh Hasina. One man, Abu Sayed, became a symbol of the protests after he was filmed flinging his arms open, bearing his chest to security forces who shot him dead.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "AWAAZ UTHA")

HANNAN HOSSAIN SHIMUL: (Rapping in Bengali).

HADID: One rapper made a song about the incident, and that became the soundtrack of the protest.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "AWAAZ UTHA")

SHIMUL: (Rapping in Bengali).

HADID: And as they continued, the government announced a shoot-on-site curfew. They cut the internet and severed connections to the outside world. That eased up, but the protests didn't. They flared up again on Sunday, and more than 90 people were killed. These were the deadliest protests in the country's history. And it seems the protesters had enough. Tens of thousands of people flooded the capital, Dhaka, vowing to storm the prime minister's residence. Bangladesh's military chief, General Waker-uz-Zaman, called for calm in a live press conference. Then he announced that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina resigned.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

WAKER-UZ-ZAMAN: (Speaking Bengali).

HADID: Even as he spoke, protesters had already rushed into the prime minister's house. Others ran to the streets in joy, like Sara Begum.

SARA BEGUM: (Speaking Bengali).

HADID: She says, "I'm so happy she's gone."

Macdonald, from the U.S. Institute of Peace, says the country is at a juncture.

MACDONALD: It's a massive and stunning turning point in the country's politics.

HADID: Macdonald says from here, the army chief has to toe a careful line. He needs to stay in power long enough to bring back security and form an interim government that has legitimacy. Too long, and he'll outstay his welcome. But a rapid transfer of power to a government without legitimacy might exacerbate chaos. And the question of justice is key. If Bangladeshis feel the army isn't investigating the deaths of protesters, the people who overthrew the government might take justice into their own hands again.

Diaa Hadid, NPR News, New Delhi.

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