

ASIA

Antigovernment protesters in Bangladesh succeed getting the prime minister to resign

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NPR's Leila Fadel talks to Bangladeshi politics expert Ali Riaz, a professor at Illinois State, about the resignation of Bangladesh's longest-serving female head of government, Sheikh Hasina.

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Transcript

LEILA FADEL, HOST:

We're going to dive a little deeper into this developing story now. Ali Riaz is a professor at Illinois State University and an expert on Bangladeshi politics, and he's on the line to help us make sense of this news. Good morning.

ALI RIAZ: Good morning.

FADEL: So it's hard to overstate how big a deal this is. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina secured her fourth term earlier this year in an election that the U.S. has said was not free and fair. What does this mean for Bangladesh?

RIAZ: This is a new beginning, because over the last 14 years, what we have seen is a very personalistic autocracy, Bangladesh led from democracy. And now this is an opportunity for Bangladesh to rebuild its institutions. And most importantly, it is a victory of the people power. It clearly showed that arrogance and autocracy does not stand at the end of the day when people rise up. So in all intents and purposes, this is a historic moment in the history of Bangladesh, which came in to be in 1971. This is a turning point. I cannot overstate, you know, the significance of this moment.

FADEL: Now, it's also a moment of uncertainty. Without a head of state, what happens now? Who leads? I mean, it's a big thing to say to rebuild civil society and democratic institutions.

RIAZ: According to Bangladesh Constitution, head of the state is the president, but he's not an executive presidency. What they're trying to do now, all the political parties and those who are on the street, the demonstrators, who are primarily led by the students, now they're having negotiation, conversation among themselves, to have an interim government, which would be headed by whatever the name they put it. It would be an interim arrangement equivalent to prime minister and the cabinet. This is a fluid moment, absolutely. Negotiations are going on. But it would be a national government bringing various representation from various sectors of the society, political and civil society and the students.

FADEL: Were you surprised to hear she resigned? I mean, she seemed intent on cracking down on the protests and her opponents, cutting off internet,

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using violence, curfews. Did this come as a surprise?

RIAZ: I'm not surprised that at the end of the day, she had to fled or the situation changed dramatically in this fashion. Surprise part is that it happened so fast, despite the fact that over the past 24 hours, I've been expecting this to happen within this time period. But I'm relieved. I'm relieved in the sense that there was no bloodshed at the end of the day - so many people have already died over the past week - and people are celebrating. So saving the lives and the injuries and the sufferings, I'm relieved to see that one. And of course, it appears that she's hellbent on clinging onto the power. But, you know, eventually she had to leave, and she did leave, the power.

FADEL: Now, what role did the Bangladeshi military play here? I mean, we heard the news reportedly from a military official. Does that mean the military has stopped backing her?

RIAZ: It appeared to me the military has given her a window to exit. Now military is playing the mediator role, bringing all political parties and steering this process in the sense that they would like to have a government which represents various sectors of the society. So their role at this point is basically as a mediator remaining in the center of it, but they're not taking it over. I mean, as of now, it's not a military coup.

FADEL: Professor Ali Riaz is a professor of politics at Illinois State University. Thank you so much for your time.

RIAZ: Thank you.

(SOUNDBITE OF SZA SONG, "SATURN")

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