

Nurturing and Destroying Democracy: The Two Sides of Bangladesh's Ousted Awami League

COMMENTARY — Aug 6, 2024



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina takes oath as the country's Prime Minister at the Bangabhaban in Dhaka, Bangladesh, January 11, 2024
Photo by Mohammad Ponir Hossain/Reuters



By Rafiq Dossani

The word "Awami," which derives from the Arabic noun "Awam," means "of the people" in Bangla. The word is found in many languages, including Azerbaijani, Farsi, Hindi, and Urdu. Despite its lofty connotations, its users in many countries live in what have been called "electoral autocracies," where leaders believe they can rule forever through a vote every four or five years and repression otherwise.

The collapse of Bangladesh's Awami League-led government illustrates the perils of pursuing this model. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina resigned and fled the country Monday amid widespread, violent protests seeking her ouster. The military was reported to be setting up an interim government.

At the turn of this century, the Awami League offered hope that a democratic government of the people could take hold in Bangladesh. To a significant extent, the responsibility for this lay with the ideals of Bangladesh's founder and the Awami League's leader at the time of the country's formation in 1971, Mujibur Rahman (father of Sheikh Hasina). Sheikh Mujib, as he was known, successfully fought Pakistan for control of the country and its governance.

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After a landslide victory in Bangladesh's first parliamentary elections, Sheikh Mujib assumed political control over a country in chaos that was hungry for democracy. To the surprise of his own people, and the world, he abandoned promises of honest and frugal governance, in favor of expensive populist policies and corruption. When populism failed, he chose repression as a means of controlling the inevitable dissent.

In 2001 the Awami League, then led by Sheikh Mujib's daughter, Sheikh Hasina, lost the elections and yielded power its chief rival, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). It appeared at the time that the country's democratic system was in good order despite the brutalities handed out by the Awami League to the BNP over the preceding five years. The impression that democracy was working was furthered in 2008, when the BNP accepted defeat, despite the significant human rights abuses it directed at the Awami League. Both times, brutalities against the opposition were explained away as the short-term costs of a maturing democracy.

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After the 2008 election, however, Hasina and the Awami League changed course. Returning to power with a substantial electoral mandate in 2008, she figured out the dials of governance without performance. The main prescription: Crush the opposition. Repeat every five years.

At a level not seen in earlier periods, the Awami government sought to subdue the BNP, jailing its leaders and violently cracking down on its supporters in advance of the 2014 national elections. Judicial independence had disappeared by then, too, a victim of [state control over judicial appointments and threats](#). The caretaker governance system established in 1996, which had ensured a nonpartisan government between elections, [was abolished in 2011](#).

The Awami League repeated its strong-arm strategy in 2018 and 2024. This seemed to be working when, in January, Hasina was reelected to another five-year term. Then, in July, student-led protests against job quotas broadened into a movement to oust Hasina and her increasingly authoritarian regime.

The immediate loser internationally from Hasina's ouster is India, whose current leadership embraced her as a long-term asset, granting territorial concessions and making Bangladesh the centerpiece of its regional ambitions. China, initially in the forefront of its rivalry with India in Bangladesh, lost political ground to India despite its massive investments under its Belt and Road Initiative.

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The United States, which for years documented the Hasina government's [human rights abuses](#) and described the January election as “not free or fair,” changed course somewhat with President Biden's February letter to Hasina noting his administration's wish to move on to the “[next chapter of the U.S.-Bangladesh partnership](#).”

Bangladesh is in for a difficult period ahead, given the turmoil, the desire of some of the public for revenge against the Awami League, and the uncertain role of the army, which has announced that it is, at least for the moment, taking over. Hasina, currently in India on what is undoubtedly her last “state visit,” will likely soon need fresh accommodation —Russia is the rumored destination.

Among the many elected leaders with autocratic tendencies who have sought to stay in power long after the people turned against them, Hasina and her Awami League must have seemed a model of longevity and success. Her ouster suggests otherwise.



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