

Bangladesh's Accidental Revolutionaries Topple Sheikh Hasina — What's Next?

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The government's fall is a testament to its poor handling of the protest movement and political dissent.
- Bangladesh is entering a dangerous and uncertain period that presents a series of challenges.
- While Hasina's fall impacts India the most, both China and the U.S. have interests at stake.



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Bangladesh has experienced its most consequential political event in at least two decades. On June 6, one day after Bangladesh's high court reinstated the country's job quota system that favored descendants of the 1971 liberation war, about [500 students](#) gathered at Dhaka University to demand its repeal. Two months later, on August 5, Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who had governed for 15 years, abdicated power and [fled](#) the country as a coalition of Bangladeshi students, political opponents and ordinary citizens marched on her residence to demand her resignation. As the prime minister departed for [India](#), the head of the army announced his plan to form an [interim government](#) in a televised address.

USIP's Geoffrey Macdonald explains how the protest movement toppled the government, what happens next and how this tumult could impact Bangladesh's relations with India, China and the United States.

How did a student-led protest movement result in the collapse of Bangladesh's government?

Macdonald: The Hasina government's precipitous fall is a testament to its egregiously poor handling of the protest movement and her overall legacy of increasingly autocratic response to political dissent. Despite the government's decision to appeal the quota verdict — effectively siding with the students — the prime minister [demeaned](#) the protest movement and her party [sanctioned](#) its student wing's violence against protesters. When clashes between the police, ruling party supporters and protesters turned [deadly](#), the government [refused](#) to take steps toward substantive accountability. The protester's dissent and the subsequent repressive government response are emblematic of Hasina's long rule, one that featured little space for political opposition and increasingly illiberal governance.

At various points, the government had options to placate the protesters, but chose defiance and to crackdown instead, resulting in at least [300 deaths](#). The Awami League (AL) appeared unable to grasp the long-standing deeper grievances that the movement represented. The government's rhetoric and actions unleashed Bangladesh's most potent and irrepressible political force: its university students. Over the weekend, the government declared another [nationwide curfew](#) after the police and ruling party's student wing members killed [dozens](#) more protesters. After standing by the government during weeks of protests, the army balked, refusing to enforce the curfew with violence. With the police already overrun, Hasina had no choice but to flee.

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“The government had options to placate the protesters, but chose defiance and to crackdown instead, resulting in at least 300 deaths.”

In his address to the nation, the army chief said Bangladesh had entered a “[revolutionary period](#).” When Bangladesh’s students first took to the streets in June, it is unlikely any of them believed they were starting a political revolution, but their earlier modest demands for reforming the job quota system — and the government’s violent response — sparked a broad-based movement that grew over time among a frustrated populace that had not seen their voices reflected in the flawed national elections in January 2024. Seizing the protest’s momentum, Bangladesh’s young accidental revolutionaries expanded their demands to systemic change, ultimately toppling the longest-serving prime minister in the country’s history.

What happens now?

Macdonald: Despite initial scenes of jubilation in the streets, Bangladesh is entering a dangerous and uncertain period that presents a series of challenges.

The first challenge will be preventing violence. Early news reports after Hasina’s fall indicate public deep-seated rage against the former ruling party, with reports of former AL ministers’ homes and businesses being attacked, pro-government TV stations and other symbols of AL power lit [afire](#), and members of the Hindu minority — historically supporters of the AL — being [targeted](#).

In the next days and weeks, Bangladesh is likely to convulse in further retributive violence against AL members, party supporters, religious minorities and state officials who abused their authority, particularly law enforcement. With the police now [boycotting duty](#) and widely unpopular, the army will need to play a key role in preventing chaos.

The second challenge will be forming an inclusive and credible interim government. The composition of the interim government and who leads it will shape its legitimacy and its stabilizing effect. The prime minister’s resignation was the only demand that unified the anti-government protest movement. With that achieved, divisions will now emerge. Some student leaders have [rejected](#) an army-backed administration and are proposing names for an interim government, including Nobel Peace Prize winner and Grameen Bank founder [Mohammad Yunus](#) as chief advisor.

The army might have its own ideas on the final list. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), Jamaat-i-Islami (JI), and other opposition parties will try to shape the direction of the movement, but many students and young people reject these parties as well. The BNP itself is riven with latent factions and rivalries that will likely surface without the AL as a unifying adversary. Finally, prominent civil society figures will jockey for influence. Bangladesh’s much larger neighbors, India and China, will also seek to influence the outcome in their own favor. Given these competing groups, there is a danger that the interim government ultimately excludes the very youth voices who drove this revolution.

The third challenge will be balancing the need for institutional reform with holding new elections. Bangladesh’s political institutions have atrophied. The election commission, police, judiciary and other key institutions lack public trust given their perceived collaboration with Hasina’s long rule. The caretaker government system that undergirded past peaceful transitions of power no longer exists. Moreover, the AL’s sudden departure leaves a gaping hole in the country’s politics that many new, reform-minded actors do not yet have the organizational capacity to fill.

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Free and fair elections are unequivocally needed to establish legitimate governance, but they are only one component of democracy. Moving too quickly toward polls would likely only empower

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existing and entrenched political actors that have fewer incentives to pursue structural reforms. The interim government will need to be strategic and prudent in the sequencing and pacing of enacting institutional reforms, rebuilding public trust, and holding new elections, all while managing a flailing economy. This balance will be key to restoring political stability and transitioning to full civilian rule.

What does this mean for Bangladesh's relationships with key international actors?

Macdonald: Bangladesh's domestic tumult is likely to draw significant attention from the region's geopolitical competitors. Hasina's fall impacts India the most. India has [key interests](#) in trade, infrastructure connectivity and security in Bangladesh, with which it shares a long border. Delhi has [invested](#) heavily in its alliance with the AL, consistently defending it against international criticism. For India, the political opposition parties — specifically the BNP and JI — are unacceptable alternatives (and potentially close to Pakistan), which led India to stand by Hasina despite roiling protests.

The BNP has historically been hostile toward Indian influence in Bangladesh and recently embraced an ["India Out"](#) social media movement after January's parliamentary elections. If the BNP emerges as Bangladesh's next ruling party, it will likely shift the country's approach to India. However, the economic importance of Bangladesh's biggest neighbor will likely prevent dramatic changes to its foreign policy. India has made strategic and structural investments in Bangladesh that make it difficult for any future government to turn away from India.

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Like India, China also fostered a strong connection with Hasina. Although China was not ideologically committed to the AL, it saw benefits in the political stability under Hasina and her receptiveness to Chinese trade and investment. China will likely find it easier than India to build a relationship with a post-Hasina government but is likely concerned by the revival of a political opposition that often condemned the AL government for subservience to both India and China. Western governments will no doubt closely watch how China attempts to exert its influence in Bangladesh's new political landscape.

For the United States, Bangladesh's political rupture presents challenges and opportunities. During the January parliamentary election cycle, the United States was a vocal critic of the AL's democracy and human rights record. Nevertheless, the Hasina government was seen as a responsible balancer between India and China, a reliable partner on security issues and an effective steward of Bangladesh's economic growth.

The AL's collapse resets Bangladesh's politics, but it is unclear what direction the new path will lead. Bangladesh has strong [undercurrents](#) of political violence, illiberalism and extremism that could rise during a period of prolonged political instability. But the country also has an untapped reserve of civic and political talent among young people, activists, artists and intellectuals who were stifled during the AL's dominance.

The United States can encourage dialogue between democratic stakeholders and support international and domestic non-governmental organizations to help Bangladesh's next generation of leaders develop the skills needed to shape their country's future. Additionally, the United States remains popular among Bangladesh's citizens and newly ascendant political class, which creates the potential to forge strong ties with whatever government comes next. The challenge will be to find a path forward that safeguards the democratic ideals that youth protesters seek but also promotes stability that is necessary for Bangladesh's continued economic and political development.

PHOTO: Sheikh Hasina, then the prime minister of Bangladesh, in her office in Dhaka on June 11, 2023. (Atul Loke/The New York Times)

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s).

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