

Editor's Note

Whither Bangladesh?

On August 5th, 2024, Sheikh Hasina, the elected Prime Minister of Bangladesh was ousted in a swift move. This unexpected development sent shock waves through the region. The Bangladesh Army gave literally an hour to the prime minister to leave the country. With her life at grave risk, she boarded a helicopter and landed in India where she found shelter. Later, Sheikh Hasina said that she was minutes away from being killed. Her un-ceremonial departure from Bangladesh at short notice came after nearly a month-long street demonstrations by the students who were protesting against the quotas in jobs and education. The protests turned violent. On 8th August, Prof. Muhammad Yunus, a Nobel laureate, who was living in the West for several years, was sworn in as the Chief Adviser of the government. A team of advisors included several Islamist sympathisers and representatives of students. Interestingly, the Chief Advisor and other members of the government took oath under the existing Constitution, which has no provisions for an interim government. This has raised questions about the legitimacy of the new government. The unelected interim government has taken several steps to undo the legacy of the Father of the Nation, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. It has constituted several task forces including the one looking at framing a new constitution for the country. Normally such a task is done by a constituent assembly. There is as yet no agreement in the country about holding fresh elections.

Bangladesh is at a crossroads. It prided itself as a moderate, democratic Islamist country with a strong tradition of a tolerant Bengali culture. Since the interim government assumed power, Islamist elements are reasserting themselves. A democratically elected government has been overthrown. Large-scale violence and vicious attacks against the Hindu minority have erupted leading to global concern about the state of minorities in the country. Jamaat-e-Islami, a fundamentalist party and its student wing have become assertive and calling the shots. Pakistan, whose army had conducted genocide in East Pakistan in 1971, which eventually led to the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent country, has made a strong comeback in the country. Bangladesh's relations with India have deteriorated sharply since the interim government assumed power.

Several questions remain unanswered. Was the fall of the Sheikh Hasina government a result of student protests, as Muhammad Yunus would like the outside world to believe, or was it an externally sponsored regime change? Which direction is Bangladesh

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heading? Will the Islamists rule the country? What was the role of the army in the recent developments? When will the new elections be held? Will the Awami League be allowed to participate in the elections? What are the prospects of India-Bangladesh relations? Will the gains of the last fifteen years under Sheikh Hasina be undone?

The present issue of *National Security* is devoted to the analysis of the recent development in Bangladesh. Amb. Veena Sikri, a former Indian High Commissioner to Bangladesh questions the narrative that Sheikh Hasina's ouster was a student-led revolution and presents a critical analysis of the current political situation in Bangladesh. She warns that the present situation in Bangladesh, with the Islamist forces in control, poses a threat to stability, prosperity and democracy in Bangladesh. Amb. Pinak Ranjan Chakravarty, also a former High Commissioner who served in Dhaka during Sheikh Hasina's time, describes the change of regime in Bangladesh as a "setback" and a challenge to India's Neighbourhood First policy. Situating the developments in Bangladesh in an overall political context, Prof. Sujit Dutta assesses the legacy of Sheikh Hasina's 15-year rule in which Bangladesh was transformed positively. Persecution of minorities in Bangladesh has been continuing since 1947. Amb. Satish Chandra, former Deputy National Security Adviser, highlights the genocide in Bangladesh against the Hindu minority and goes into the factors why this has been for such a longtime. Drawing a parallel with the atrocities committed against the Hindus around the days of India's partition in 1947, Raghvendra Singh, a former secretary to the government of India, provides the historical background to the problem of the Hindu minority in Bangladesh. Security analyst Shantanu Mukharji in his essay gives a background to the numerous Bangladeshi Islamist groups and concludes that the deepening struggle between secularism and Islamism will define the future of Bangladesh in the coming years. Saudiptendu Ray records the event leading to the ouster of Sheikh Hasina and examines whether there was a connection between domestic developments and external factors. Dr. Anchita Borthakur builds a profile of the Chief Advisor Muhammad Yunus. Lauded all over the world for the establishment of Bangladesh Grameen Bank which provided microcredit and finance to the poorest sections of the society, Muhammad Yunus has been a controversial figure. Undoubtedly, he enjoys the support of the Western countries but his ability to bring back stability in the country in the present situation will be severely tested.

As Bangladesh faces an uncertain future, there is anxiety in India about the trajectory the country will take. The Hindu minority in Bangladesh are facing conflict and violence. This is causing deep concern in India. We hope that the articles in this issue will inform the readers about the developments in this important country.

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