

Essay

The Geo-Strategics of Regime Change in Bangladesh

Veena Sikri

Awidely spread narrative describes the regime change in Bangladesh in August 2024 as the outcome of a ‘spontaneous students’ uprising.’ With the passage of time and a closer examination of the prevailing situation, it is clear that neither were the events surrounding the ouster of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina spontaneous, nor were they the handiwork of student groups in the normally understood sense of the term. On 24 September 2024, Chief Adviser Professor Muhammad Yunus, speaking at the Clinton Global Initiative in New York, publicly revealed that this regime change operation, far from being spontaneous, was “amazingly meticulously designed” and planned well in advance. “It is not just that it suddenly happened,” said Professor Yunus, as he introduced Mahfuz Alam to the audience as the “brains behind the whole revolution.” Mahfuz Alam is an Adviser in the interim regime that is currently in power in Bangladesh. He is also Special Assistant to Professor Yunus, and, despite his denials, is frequently described in the media and by many from Bangladesh as a longstanding member of the banned Hizbut Tahrir.

Was the regime change operation really led by students? It is true that in 2013, and later revived in 2018, there had been a students’ movement demanding reversal of the quota or reservation in government jobs for the children and grandchildren of the freedom fighters who had participated in the 1971 Liberation War that culminated in the creation of Bangladesh. Known as the Quota Reform Movement (QRM), this functioned through student coordinators from each of the participating universities. In 2018, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina accepted the QRM demands, and the quotas were abolished. On 5th June 2024, in response to a case filed in the High Court of Bangladesh, these quotas

Veena Sikri is a former High Commissioner of India to Bangladesh. She is also the Convener of South Asia Women's Network (SWAN), New Delhi.

National Security Vol. 7, No. 4, 2024

(October - December 2024) Page 237-250, ISSN 25-81-9658 (0)

©Vivekananda International Foundation

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.32381/NS.2024.07.04.1>

were restored. This is when the QRM re-started their peaceful, non-violent protests. When Sheikh Hasina's government filed an appeal in the Supreme Court against the High Court's decision (thereby seeking to once again abolish the quota system), some of the student groups, represented by their own lawyers, supported the Attorney General in his appeal. The Bangladesh Supreme Court's judgement on 21st July restricted all quotas to a maximum of 7 percent (as against the earlier reservations of well over fifty percent), including 5 percent for the children of freedom fighters. At this point, despite their anger and concern over the death of students in the firings that had commenced on 15th July, several students' groups placed a moratorium on their protests, preferring instead to submit a list of nine wide-ranging demands for discussion with Sheikh Hasina's government.

The violence that began on 15th July is said to have been initiated from the campus of Dhaka University, by students who started calling themselves *razakars*, a generic term for those who had opposed the Liberation War of 1971, and had fought alongside Pakistan. From this point on, the leadership of the student protests was taken over by the Jamaat-e-Islami and its students' wing, the Islami Chhatra Shibir. From now on there are hardly any references to the QRM. The 'meticulous design' begins to unfurl. Large-scale violence is unleashed on the streets of Dhaka, creating an anarchic situation with killings and targeted destruction of strategic civilian infrastructure. The police bear the brunt of the attack. The *Daily Star* reported on 5th August 2024 that 13 policemen, including the officer-in-charge were beaten to death by the mob in just one *thana* in Enayetpur, Sirajganj district. Around 400 *thanas* across Bangladesh are said to have been attacked, with policemen killed in the hundreds, even thousands. More than 12,000 arms were looted from these *thanas*, of which 10,000 are still missing. The demoralisation of the police forces has been so severe that even today there remain large gaps in their return to active service. The Awami League's students' wing, the Chhatra League, stepped in to oppose the Islami Chhatra Shibir. On 18th July the army was deployed in support of the civilian government, but their presence and participation in the maintenance of law and order was largely ineffective, perhaps by design. It was the army's collective decision that troops would not open fire on civilians to enforce curfew (conveyed to her on 5th August by the Chief of Army Staff - COAS) that sealed Sheikh Hasina's fate, forcing her to leave Dhaka.

According to *Prothom Alo* (28th August 2024), 341 individuals (protesters, Awami League activists, policemen and others) died between 16th July and 3rd August 2024. Between 4th and 28th August, information about another 417 deaths had been confirmed (*Prothom Alo*). *Daily Star* has reported that on 12th August 2024, the then Home Affairs

Adviser Brigadier Sakhawat Hossain questioned how civilians were seen carrying 7.62 mm rifles, a prohibited bore meant only for the use of police or Rapid Action Battalion (RAB). He asked for an investigation. Were these the rifles looted by mobs from police *thanas*? It is noteworthy that the very next day Brigadier Sakhawat Hossain was removed from his post. While the interim regime now claims that thousands have died in the July-August events, they have been unable to provide details about this, despite two visits by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) team to Dhaka for purposes of preparing a report on these very incidents. The decision by the interim regime to indemnify themselves and all “the students and people who actively took part in the mass uprising of July-August” against harassment or arrest has been sharply criticised within and outside Bangladesh. The Awami League sees a parallel between this and the similar indemnity given to the killers of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975.

Far from being a spontaneous students’ uprising, the events in Bangladesh in July-August 2024 were the result of a planned regime-change operation, targeting the ouster of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and simultaneously bringing to power the Islamists, headed by the Jamaat-e-Islami.

Far from being a spontaneous students’ uprising, the events in Bangladesh in July-August 2024 were the result of a planned regime-change operation, targeting the ouster of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and simultaneously bringing to power the Islamists, headed by the Jamaat-e-Islami. Many in Bangladesh and a broad cross-section of public opinion in India view this as a Jamaat-e-Islami led military coup against Sheikh Hasina, with the backing of the USA, the active support of Pakistan, and the tacit approval of China.

Formation and Functioning of an “Interim Government” in Bangladesh

The Chief Adviser Professor Muhammad Yunus and other Advisers were sworn in on 8th August, 2024, with the oath of allegiance to the 1972 Constitution of Bangladesh (as amended from time to time). However, this Constitution has no provision for an Interim Government. This has cast serious doubt on the legitimacy and constitutional validity of the present government/ regime.

Even though the Bangladesh High Court (on December 17th, 2024) restored the system of Caretaker Government (CTG), this Interim Government cannot be considered a CTG.

The regime led by Professor Muhammad Yunus has violated the mandated neutrality and non-party requirements of the CTG. The Jamaat-e-Islami is the power behind Chief Adviser Professor Muhammad Yunus, controlling every decision. Members of the Hizb-ut Tahrir, Islami Andolan Bangladesh, and Hefazat-e-Islam have been included as advisers. One of the advisers has tweeted (now deleted) about their desire to establish a Caliphate in Bangladesh based on Sharia law, and has even spoken about a civil war to achieve this goal. This further highlights the strongly Islamist ideological leanings and objectives of those who hold the reins of power in Bangladesh.

The self-appointed ‘student’ leaders, who now describe their collective as the Anti-Discrimination Student Movement (also known as Students Against Discrimination) and seek to form a new political party, have themselves publicly acknowledged the central role of the Islami Chhatra Shibir (students’ wing of the Jamaat-e-Islami) in leading the July-August movement for regime change. That the interim regime is ideologically motivated, driven by the values of the Jamaat-e-Islami, is revealed through every policy reversal, every personnel change they have manipulated in all sectors of governance. On 31st December, 2024, the Anti-Discrimination Student Movement, supported by the Islami Chhatra Shibir, sought to proclaim a new Republic. They put out a draft Proclamation to this effect, which would have de facto annulled the Bangladesh Constitution, and even put the post of President and Army Chief under a cloud. The interim regime itself was taken by surprise by this move. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) described this move by the students as ‘fascist.’ Finally, the Army intervened to say that there could be no such Proclamation. The interim regime first said they would draft a consensus proclamation by January 15, 2025, but have now called for further consultations.

The self-appointed ‘student’ leaders, who now describe their collective as the Anti-Discrimination Student Movement (also known as Students Against Discrimination) and seek to form a new political party, have themselves publicly acknowledged the central role of the Islami Chhatra Shibir (students’ wing of the Jamaat-e-Islami) in leading the July-August movement for regime change.

The interim regime is strongly advocating reforms before elections. Several reform commissions have been set up, which are now in the process of submitting their reports. There are Reform Commissions for the constitution, for electoral reforms, and for police reforms, among others. The Jamaat-e-Islami is the key protagonist of these reforms (to

be completed before elections), which they hope will boost their vote share far above the meagre amount of 5 to 10 percent they have received in almost every election they have participated in. Yet, reforms have never been a part of the CTG mandate, since this process can only be undertaken by an elected government. The Jamaat-e-Islami, together with the group of Islamist parties and organisations that they seek to bring together on one platform, are now fairly isolated in their quest for reforms before elections. The BNP headed by Begum Khaleda Zia and her son, both currently in London, is demanding that the elections be held by August 2025.

The interim regime has been unable to control law and order in Bangladesh, even though this should be its principal task and responsibility. This regime has arrested thousands of individuals, very often on murder charges. In addition to the Awami League, Hindus and other religious minorities, and members of the media have been targeted in a very focused manner. The Bangladesh economy is headed for the doldrums after 15 years of steady economic growth of 6 to 8 percent per annum. Rampant inflation and joblessness are causing many in Bangladesh to lament that the situation was better earlier (under Sheikh Hasina)! The interim regime led by Professor Yunus is being seen as committing exactly the same misdemeanors (gagging the media, curbing political activity, random arrests with fake or wildly exaggerated charges, manipulating the judiciary et al.) of which the ‘fascist’ Sheikh Hasina has been accused. It is particularly disturbing to see those imprisoned for terrorist activities, even heads of terrorist groups, being released from imprisonment, either forcibly by the mobs, or on parole, or through reversal of earlier judgments.

The Bangladesh economy is headed for the doldrums after 15 years of steady economic growth of 6 to 8 percent per annum.

The Role of the Bangladesh Army

Post-1971, the Bangladesh army has had a decisive, even critical, role in every major event, be it the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975, the two military dictatorships (Zia-ur-Rahman, Ershad) spanning 15 years from 1975 to 1990, the two-year long army backed CTG (2007-08), and the two reported mutinies : 2009 within the BDR (Bangladesh Rifles), and 2011 by a group of radicalised army officers in favour of greater Islamisation, both of which were essentially meant to destabilise Sheikh Hasina’s government. The growing radicalisation of the Bangladesh army is a matter of serious concern. It is estimated that by the end of the BNP-Jamaat government’s term in 2006,

as much as 35 percent of all recruitment into the army was from the Islamist elements of society, compared to around 5 to 10 percent earlier.

Sheikh Hasina did her best to win the support of the armed forces, including by granting them more cantonments with huge addition of land resources, raising three full infantry divisions, ensuring much greater economic participation by the army through the Bangladesh Army Welfare Trust and the Sena Kalyan Sangstha, combined with a massive modernisation drive involving technologically superior acquisitions for the army, navy and air force. As a result, there is active discussion about the emergence of two factions within the Bangladesh army, one that is pro-Islamist, and the other pro-Awami League.

There can be little doubt that the Bangladesh army under COAS General Waqar uz-Zaman, a relative of PM Sheikh Hasina who was appointed on 23rd June 2024, played a decisive role in the ouster of Sheikh Hasina on 5th August 2024. The COAS is now playing a balancing role : keeping in touch with India's COAS, and with USA, as well as the pro-Islamist factions. In October 2024, the COAS was on an 11-day official visit to USA and Canada, and in January 2025, there has been talk of an impending visit to India. The COAS is known to be a deeply religious person, so he is grudgingly being accepted by the Islamist sections of the Bangladesh army. Nonetheless, there have been moves within the army to replace him, and he has stayed on only with the tacit support of the USA.

There can be little doubt that the Bangladesh army under COAS General Waqar uz-Zaman, a relative of PM Sheikh Hasina who was appointed on 23rd June 2024, played a decisive role in the ouster of Sheikh Hasina on 5th August 2024.

By mid-September 2024, in view of the steadily deteriorating law and order situation across the country, magistracy and police powers have been given to the army. Nonetheless, they are not exerting themselves on this front, hamstrung by the threat reiterated by the USA during the COAS's recent visit, that any army personnel found committing human rights violations would be debarred from participating in UN Peacekeeping Operations.

Today the army remains the last point of authority and stability in an otherwise chaotic Bangladesh. It would be in the best interests of the army and the nation if free, fair and inclusive elections can be held at the earliest, without allowing any of the major changes that the interim regime led by Professor Muhammad Yunus is seeking to bring in. The insistence on reforms before elections actually casts doubt on the ability of the interim regime to organise free, fair and inclusive elections.

Reversal of all Values and Policies of the 1971 Liberation War, including Policy towards Pakistan

Ever since the disastrous outcome (for Pakistan) in the 1971 Liberation War, where they lost the eastern wing of their nation with the formation of Bangladesh, every new member of the Pakistan defence forces (officer and soldier) takes an oath that he will avenge 1971. After 53 years, with the ouster of Sheikh Hasina on August 5, 2024, Pakistan is leaving no stone unturned to finally exact full revenge. In July/August 2024, Pakistan was the major conduit in the regime-change operation in Bangladesh, and Pakistan's partner within Bangladesh was the Jamaat-e-Islami—the same alignment of forces as in 1971!

The history of the 1971 Liberation War is already being re-written, beginning with school textbooks for primary and secondary students i.e., Sheikh Mujibur Rahman can no longer be described as the Father of the Nation, and Zia-ur-Rahman (rather than Sheikh Mujib) is credited with declaring independence for Bangladesh on March 26, 1971. The role of the Indian Army has been considerably watered down. On 18 August 2024, while addressing the Third Voice of the Global South Summit, Professor Yunus described the events of August 2024 in Bangladesh as the “second revolution.” In a media interview with the *VOA's* Bengali service, he was asked why Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's home-cum-museum in Dhanmondi had been burnt down by ‘students.’ His answer was that a ‘reset button’ has been pressed, conveying that the history of the 1971 Liberation War was no longer relevant.

The history of the 1971 Liberation War is already being re-written, beginning with school textbooks for primary and secondary students i.e., Sheikh Mujibur Rahman can no longer be described as the Father of the Nation, and Zia-ur-Rahman (rather than Sheikh Mujib) is credited with declaring independence for Bangladesh on March 26, 1971.

In just over 150 days since Sheikh Hasina's ouster, every major policy guideline on relations with Pakistan has been reversed, with a speed that has shocked everyone : (a) the virtual ban on trade, especially cargo vessels plying between ports in Bangladesh and Pakistan has been lifted, (b) the executive order mandating physical checks of all goods arriving from Pakistan has been removed, (c) the visa restrictions, mandating Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), Bangladesh, clearance before any visa can be issued to a Pakistan national, no longer exist, (d) the ban on accepting Pakistan nationals as students in universities across Bangladesh has been lifted, (e) there have already been two meetings

between Professor Muhammad Yunus and Pakistan PM Shahbaz Sharif, most recently in Cairo during the D-8 Summit. Both sides called for a strategic partnership, even though Professor Yunus also called for resolution of outstanding issues of 1971, (f) Bangladesh and Pakistan have agreed to cooperate on military training and acquisitions. Beginning February 2025 Pakistan would send four teams headed by Major Generals for training the Bangladesh army. Pakistan Deputy PM and Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar plans to visit Dhaka in February 2025, (g) In January 2025, a senior Lieutenant General, the Principal Staff Officer of the Armed Forces Division of Bangladesh was in Rawalpindi, where he expressed his 'deep admiration' for the Pakistan army's 'fight against terrorism.' He also expressed interest in acquiring the JF-17 Thunder fighter jets jointly developed by Pakistan and China. Pakistan now refers to Bangladesh as a brother country, a 'long lost brother'. Pakistani defence analyst Ikram Sehgal has described this new relationship as between "two countries, one nation."

Reports coming out of Dhaka in December 2024 convey that the second cargo ship from Pakistan that docked in Chattogram (Chittagong) was carrying strong explosives with Cambodian markings (likely to be of Chinese origin). There are also unverified reports that 37 Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) cadres got off this ship, and have been let in without any records or paperwork. The reports that Pakistan's ISI is closely involved with the radicalisation of the Rohingyas living in the camps in Cox's Bazaar (Bangladesh), through their support for Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) and the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO), further adds to the security concerns arising out of the present situation.

This fast-paced evolution and elevation of the hitherto moribund relations between Bangladesh and Pakistan have considerably enhanced the security threat for India.

This fast-paced evolution and elevation of the hitherto moribund relations between Bangladesh and Pakistan have considerably enhanced the security threat for India. This is strongly reminiscent of the situation that prevailed in Bangladesh between 2001 and 2006 when Begum Khaleda Zia was PM with Jamaat-e-Islami as the principal alliance partner. Pakistan would route their terrorists (LeT, JeM) through Dhaka. They would enter Bangladesh without any papers (based on prior arrangements with the immigration authorities), and then make their way to India through the porous border. In those years, almost every terrorist incident in India had a Bangladeshi footprint. Pakistan, through the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), worked hard to weaponise the illegal immigrants from Bangladesh living across India, radicalising them, creating sleeper cells across the

country, to be activated at the right time. The present is now a recreation of the earlier situation, judging from the December 2024 arrest in Kerala of a group of terrorists, one of whom was from Bangladesh, affiliated to Al Qaeda and the Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT).

Violent Attacks on Hindus and other Religious Minorities across Bangladesh

Among the prime targets of the Islamist regime now holding the reins of power in Bangladesh is the destruction of the secular and pluralistic ethos of Bangladesh. As soon as Sheikh Hasina left Bangladesh on the afternoon of 5th August 2024, unending waves of violence, including killings, abductions and rape, forced conversions, wanton destruction and burning of homes and business establishments, illegal occupation of land and other properties, desecration and vandalisation of places of worship, were unleashed on the 15 million strong Hindus, Buddhist, Christian and other religious minorities, in almost every district of Bangladesh. The Shia and Ahmadiyya communities were also not spared. The Indian Cultural Centre in Dhaka was burnt to the ground on the first day itself.

The agenda of the Islamists is to terrorise and drive the religious minority population out of Bangladesh. Significantly, Hindus and other minority communities across Bangladesh are stoutly resisting such attempts. They are seeking protection of their rights as citizens of Bangladesh, as assured through the nation's Constitution. Representatives of the Hindus and other minority communities have participated in the thousands in rallies across the country, in Dhaka, Chattogram and Rangpur. Chinmoy Krishna Das, formerly with the globally renowned ISKCON, together with his colleagues in the Sanatani Jagran Jote (organiser of these rallies) have put forward an 8-point demand on behalf of the religious minorities of Bangladesh, seeking the enactment of a minority protection law in Bangladesh, with a ministry for the protection of minorities, a special tribunal for trial of cases of minority persecution, including compensation and rehabilitation of victims, a law to recover and protect temples (Debottar), proper enforcement of the Vested Property Return Act, and upgradation of the existing (separate) Hindu, Buddhist and Christian Welfare Trusts to Foundations. The Yunus administration has chosen to completely ignore these demands, without giving any kind of response whatsoever. The media in Bangladesh has not been allowed to write about these demands. Chinmoy Krishna Das has been arrested on charges of sedition, denied bail, and his lawyers are facing intimidation in their efforts to defend him in court. The Indian and international media's extensive coverage of the plight of the religious minorities is being dismissed as 'sheer propaganda.'

The attacks on minorities in Bangladesh have aroused deep concern in India, which has a long border with Bangladesh. Apart from the purely humanitarian aspects, there

is the danger that the volatile situation in Bangladesh could spill across borders, disrupt communal harmony and create law and order problems in India. Prime Minister Modi, in his 8th August message of felicitations to Chief Adviser Professor Muhammad Yunus, conveyed his hope for an early return to normalcy, ensuring the safety and protection of Hindus and all other minority communities. Although the Chief Adviser assured Prime Minister Modi that his government would prioritise the protection, safety and security of Hindus and all minorities of Bangladesh, the attacks on religious minorities have continued unabated.

On 9th December in Dhaka, the Foreign Secretary of India conveyed India's serious concern over the attacks on minorities. The very next day, despite its earlier denials, the interim administration of Bangladesh acknowledged 88 incidents of violence against minorities, leading to the arrest of 70 people. This is a very small proportion of the total attacks. The leading Bangladesh newspaper *Prothom Alo* published a report (before the media was gagged) based on field visits, that at least 1608 such incidents took place between 5th and 20th August, 2024. The Bangladesh Hindu, Buddhist and Christian Oikyo Jote gave the number of attacks during this period as well over 2000. There is no evidence of any serious effort to control these attacks, other than this token action (on 10th December) against the miscreants, which has not in any way deterred or stopped the Islamists from continuing, almost unhindered, their genocidal attacks, amounting to ethnic cleansing. It is unacceptable, even barbaric, to justify these attacks on the grounds of political affiliation, claiming that the Hindus and other religious minorities are close to the Awami League. Is Bangladesh no longer a secular country?

On 9th December in Dhaka, the Foreign Secretary of India conveyed India's serious concern over the attacks on minorities.

Forced Resignations in the Judiciary, Election Commission, Academia, et al

Mobocracy or mob justice has been the favoured methodology for bringing in the changes desired by the Jamaat-e-Islami. Among the first targets, soon after the swearing in of the Interim Government on 8th August, was the judiciary. Senior judges were surrounded by unruly mobs, claiming to be students, and these *gheraos* lasted till they submitted their respective resignations. The same happened with the members of the Election Commission on 5th September 2024, and on varying dates with Vice Chancellors of leading universities, and even with professors considered to be 'inconvenient.' Professors from the religious minorities were special targets for such treatment, as were

Hindu teachers in schools across the country. Recruitments made to the police over the last 12 to 18 months have been cancelled, and this has affected about 1500 individuals from the religious minorities. These massive changes have demoralised large sections of the population, and have generated uncertainty leading to a complete paralysis in decision-making. The replacements in these posts have been almost entirely selected by the Jamaat-e-Islami. This is quite outside the mandate of any interim government or CTG, and will certainly have a negative impact on the conduct and outcome of the process of free, fair and inclusive elections.

Extradition Request for Sheikh Hasina

The Interim Government has sent a diplomatic Note Verbale to the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), requesting the extradition of Sheikh Hasina. MEA has confirmed receipt, saying they have nothing more to add. The Government of India has no intention of extraditing Sheikh Hasina, and the Interim Government in Bangladesh is well aware of this. This drama of requesting extradition without completing any of the required legal paperwork, not even providing the grounds for issue of the arrest warrant for Sheikh Hasina by Bangladesh's International Crimes Tribunal, is meant for domestic consumption, to demonstrate the seriousness of their intent on this issue. They will use India's lack of response to further intensify the vicious anti-India campaign that is being relentlessly waged for more than a year now, in the build-up to the regime change operation and after.

India's Concerns

Bangladesh is important for India from a geostrategic perspective, going beyond the bilateral relationship, extending to India's Act East policy, relations with Myanmar, and maritime security in the Bay of Bengal. Each of the issues discussed above has its adverse fallout for India, on connectivity to India's Northeast, security along India's 4000 km land border with Bangladesh, and the increased threat of terrorist activity throughout India. India and Bangladesh share a rich civilisational heritage, including our strong linguistic and cultural affinities. It is only natural that there is intense interest across India, especially in the neighbouring states, on the events in Bangladesh. Family and ethnic linkages across boundaries ensures that authentic, firsthand feedback comes to India, which cannot be dismissed as propaganda, no matter how hard anyone tries. Bangladesh, too, has its own vulnerabilities in its relationship with India, which cannot be denied or obliterated.

India attaches the highest importance to maintaining its good relations with Bangladesh, based on friendship, trust and mutual benefit. Bangladesh has been the most important beneficiary of India's Neighbourhood First foreign policy. First under the army-backed CTG in 2007-08, and certainly under Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's stewardship (2009-24), India has welcomed the greater appreciation of India's security concerns regarding the presence of Northeast insurgent groups on Bangladesh's territory, as well as the anti-Indian terrorist activities spawned by several radical fundamentalist groups seeking to spread their tentacles from Bangladesh into India. This has meant that for the last 15 to 17 years, India's Northeast has been increasingly peaceful, bringing development and prosperity to this region. India and Bangladesh have been able to resolve the most contentious bilateral issues, including the land and maritime boundaries, with exchange of enclaves. India has created a unique grid-based power supply mechanism with Bangladesh, Bangladesh receives free access to Indian markets, and the Bangladesh economy has grown steadily at 6 to 8 percent a year, taking them out of the Least Developed Countries (LDC) category. Every project, be it for connectivity or high-visibility community development, is of direct benefit equally for the people of Bangladesh and India. These mutual benefits have emerged from the shared perceptions of our respective governments, and can continue, as long as both sides show the resolve to work towards this goal.

India attaches the highest importance to maintaining its good relations with Bangladesh, based on friendship, trust and mutual benefit. Bangladesh has been the most important beneficiary of India's Neighbourhood First foreign policy.

India remains committed to upholding the values and the strength of her engagement with Bangladesh, focused at all times on strong people-to-people ties. On 22nd August 2024, when India's High Commissioner in Dhaka made his introductory call on Chief Adviser Professor Muhammad Yunus, he reiterated India's "commitment to working with Bangladesh to fulfil the shared aspirations of the peoples of India and Bangladesh for peace, security and development." On 24th September, 2024, India's External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar met Bangladesh Foreign Affairs Adviser Md Touhid Hossain in New York on the sidelines of the UNGA. On 9th December 2024, India's Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri visited Dhaka for consultations with his Bangladesh counterpart. During this visit he also met Professor Muhammad Yunus and the Foreign Affairs Adviser. At every level India continues to show its interest in maintaining and building upon the strong bilateral relationship with Bangladesh that has evolved right from the days of our shared participation in the 1971 Liberation War.

On bilateral relations with India, the interim regime under Professor Yunus has missed no opportunity to deride and heap scorn on almost every aspect of the hitherto robust cooperation, including agreements concluded with Sheikh Hasina's government. The effort seems to be to put brakes on or halt even simple interactions like the scheduled visit to India by members of the Bangladesh judiciary, or participation by Bangladesh in the 150-years celebration of the Indian Meteorological Department (IMD) which has served all nations of the Indian subcontinent. Every effort is being made to seek new suppliers for the myriad essential commodities that are traded from India to Bangladesh. Important bilateral agreements on border management are being called into question, creating unwarranted stoppages of routine fencing work at several points along the border. Routine biannual meetings of the Director Generals (DGs) of our respective border guarding forces (the Border Security Force -BSF and Border Guard Bangladesh -BGB) have been held up. There is no restraint on the frequent public threats (within Bangladesh) to annex portions of Indian territory! India is dismayed, but has shown enormous patience and restraint in the face of this barrage.

On bilateral relations with India, the interim regime under Professor Yunus has missed no opportunity to deride and heap scorn on almost every aspect of the hitherto robust cooperation, including agreements concluded with Sheikh Hasina's government.

Although the chaos and stridency in Bangladesh has not settled down even as it nears the six-month mark of the August takeover, the attempt to vilify India as the root cause of all the difficulties in Bangladesh is wearing thin, and is losing conviction with the people. The uncertainty and instability in Bangladesh pose a direct threat to India's security along the 4000 km land border, with the potential to spillover and adversely affect internal stability, especially in West Bengal and the Northeastern states. India has every reason to feel concerned.

Free, fair and inclusive elections are in the best interests of stability and democracy in Bangladesh, and these should be held at the earliest opportunity. Elections are inevitable, and indeed necessary to resolve the present impasse. There is huge ground support for this across all political parties in Bangladesh, other than the Jamaat-e-Islami and their fellow Islamists. Elections cannot be held under intimidation, or in a situation where the religious minorities are facing persecution. So it is important that all the conditions be considered that would ensure free, fair and inclusive elections.

The Islamists' ploy to demand reforms before elections is tactical, to delay the elections as much as possible, thereby allowing them to consolidate their own support. The very

insistence of the interim regime on reforms before elections is leading many observers to increasingly question the legitimacy and constitutional validity of this regime. Reforms can only be brought in by a newly elected government. The massive changes brought in by the interim regime through mob-rule are against all constitutional and democratic norms. It is painful to see the extent to which the interim regime seeks to control and gag the media, including through the takeover of media board rooms, dismissing journalists and cancelling their press accreditation, together with the arrest and incarceration of hundreds of journalists, including on trumped up charges of murder. All this casts serious doubt on the interim regime's capacity to govern, leave alone supervise free, fair and inclusive elections.

The Islamists' ploy to demand reforms before elections is tactical, to delay the elections as much as possible, thereby allowing them to consolidate their own support.

Equally, the interim regime's efforts to seek full control of all the levers of economic power have created havoc in the Bangladesh economy, sending it into free fall.

Elections should be held under the present constitution of Bangladesh. The interim regime has no mandate to adopt or incorporate any changes in the constitution. Indeed, there is a strong case for reversing the major changes made by the Interim Government that fall outside the mandate of a CTG. This includes all the forced resignations and subsequent appointment of judges, election commission members, vice-chancellors and others. The Awami League and all other political parties registered with the Election Commission should be given a free hand to participate in the elections. The efforts by the interim regime to somehow ban the Awami League are being resisted by all major political parties, especially the BNP.

In the ultimate analysis, it is the army that needs to take back control and consider the constitutional options before it, in order that free, fair and inclusive elections may be held urgently under a neutral, non-party CTG.