

Bangladesh's dynamic leap Sheikh Hasina's landmark fifth term



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The shifting dynamics raise some unsettling questions about the future of international stability and cooperation, as conflicting ideologies and interests come to the fore and jockey for position.

Sheikh Hasina, the longest-serving female head of government in the world, was sworn in for a fifth five-year term — her fourth straight term in office — following Bangladesh's general election on Jan. 7.¹

Hasina is the daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founder of Bangladesh, who led the country formerly known as East Pakistan to independence in 1971, following a bloody war of liberation. Along with most of his family, Rahman was assassinated in a military coup four years later — Hasina and her sister Sheikh Rehana were the only survivors.²

During Hasina's time in office as prime minister since 1996, Bangladesh has



Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is considered the founding leader of Bangladesh. Popularly known by the honorific prefix Bangabandhu ('Friend of Bengal'), he became the first President of Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan) on Apr. 11, 1971. Getty Images



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undergone an economic transformation deemed by international development experts to have been nothing short of miraculous.³

Bangladesh's geopolitical significance is on the rise, evidenced by its expanding strategic alliance with India and burgeoning economic ties with both China and the Arab world.^{4 5} The nation is also solidifying its position as the world's second-largest exporter of ready-made garments, with the EU as its primary market.⁶

With the US and its allies vying with China for influence in the South China Sea and the broader Indo-Pacific region, Bangladesh's geographical position is boosting a strategic significance emphasized by the development of a deep-water port in the Bay of Bengal, funded by Japan. This port not only bolsters Bangladesh's maritime capabilities, but also serves as a crucial link between South and Southeast Asia, enhancing Bangladesh's role as a pivotal player in regional connectivity and as a potential fulcrum in the balance

Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant at Ishwardi in Pabna, Bangladesh, under construction. The \$12.65bn mega project is largely financed by Russia and once completed it will become Bangladesh's first nuclear power plant. Shutterstock

of power within this dynamically evolving geopolitical landscape.⁷

The stark difference in the way the US and its Western allies have responded to the outcome of the Bangladesh general election, compared with the reaction of other countries, may well have an impact on how Washington is perceived in this increasingly pivotal South Asian country, and could potentially offer rivals the opening they have been looking for at a time when tensions in the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea are steadily increasing.

Privately, Bangladeshi officials say they are concerned and frustrated by what they see as a needlessly heavy-handed and biased American policy toward their country.

The election was a pivotal moment for Bangladesh, which, following concerns voiced by the opposition that it would not be a free and transparent electoral process, found itself placed under the microscope by the international community. The opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party,



which claimed it did not trust the process or the impartiality of the Election Commission, decided to boycott the election and, accordingly, did not field any candidates.⁸

Yet, despite the boycott, voter turnout was a respectable 40 percent, and the overwhelming consensus of election observers from over 40 countries, including from the Arab Parliament and Organization of Islamic Cooperation, was that the Election Commission had delivered a transparent voting process.^{9 10}

China and India immediately congratulated Hasina on her reelection and endorsed the legitimacy of the poll¹¹ — the two countries also happen to be major sources of funding for multiple infrastructure megaprojects that have become the hallmarks of Hasina's administration.^{12 13}

China's ambassador to Dhaka presented the prime minister with a replica of a traditional Bengali fishing boat,¹⁴ the electoral symbol of her Awami League party, and her Indian counterpart Narendra Modi, who has built a close working relationship with Hasina, remarked that India was "committed to further strengthen our enduring and people-centric partnership with Bangladesh."¹⁵

Russia, which is providing funding for Bangladesh's only nuclear power plant, currently under construction, also congratulated the prime minister.¹⁶

In stark contrast, the US Department of State declared that "the United States shares the view with other observers that these elections were not free or fair, and we regret that not all parties participated."¹⁷ Furthermore, US President Joe Biden's administration also passed limited sanctions on Bangladesh, and accused some in Hasina's administration of "undermining the democratic election process."¹⁸

The Biden administration is facing renewed criticism that it is making a major foreign policy mistake when it comes to a South Asian country that has emerged in recent years as a formidable economic force with ambitious aspirations.

Many Bangladeshi officials believe Washington is unfairly singling out Bangladesh, despite the election having passed off without serious violence or interference in the Election Commission's neutrality.

"The international observers witnessed

voting from 8 a.m. until polls closed at 4 p.m.," said Alexander Gray, an American analyst and one of the election observers on the ground in Dhaka.

"Talking to voters in the polling stations we observed, we found that they did not face any obstacles in voting. We did not hear or see reports or indications of voter intimidation by any entity, party, or candidate. We observed, particularly outside of Dhaka, positive indications of significant voter turnout," he said.

Ahead of the Jan. 7 election, 17 Bangladesh-US elected officials, as well as human rights, social and professional organizations, sent a letter to Biden asking him to reconsider his administration's stance on Bangladesh.

"We humbly request you to change the current course of action to ensure a violence-free secular democratic future for Bangladesh," the letter read. "The US policy must consider the widespread militant activities that were committed by the organizations under the direct patronization of BNP-Jamaat."

At a public rally in December 2023, Hasina labeled the BNP a "terrorist" party, and described its ally the Islamist group Jamaat-e-Islami as "a party of war criminals."¹⁹

According to Pentagon officials, the US-India defense partnership has reached a "transformative stage,"²⁰ and Biden has described the relationship between the two countries as being one of the most consequential for the 21st century.²¹ Yet, Bangladesh, which as recently as 2005 fought off a terror insurgency led by Jamaat e-Islami, which sought to establish a base of operations to launch cross-border attacks into eastern India,²² seems to have been relegated to the margins of the Biden administration's South Asia policy.

In the run-up to the election, Russia attempted to capitalize on the US State Department's criticism of Bangladesh, and publicly accused the American ambassador of interfering in Bangladesh's internal affairs — a move that received wide coverage in Bangladeshi media.²³

Bangladesh is the second-largest economy in South Asia. With a gross domestic product of roughly \$2,800 per capita, up from just under \$500 in 2005,²⁴ it has officially graduated from US designation as a "least developed country" into a developing

country.²⁵ According to independent economic data, Bangladesh is on course to become an upper middle-income country (the criteria requiring at least \$4,000 GDP per capita) by 2031.²⁶ Bangladesh, once labeled a “basket case” by former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger,²⁷ has roared back in the past 15 years as Hasina, the Muslim world’s only female leader, has embarked on a massive economic development program that has been hailed by development experts worldwide as a model for how developing countries can sustainably lift millions out of poverty.²⁸

Today, the World Bank officially recognizes Bangladesh as one of the fastest-growing economies in South Asia.²⁹ Experts also cite secular social changes pushed by Hasina as an important driver of Bangladesh’s economic transformation.³⁰ Recently, she unveiled an ambitious development strategy and vision for the country called “Smart Bangladesh,” aimed at achieving broad-based national progress by 2041.³¹

Hasina’s transformation of Bangladesh has not been achieved without personal cost. She has survived at least 19 assassination attempts, and her administration has faced numerous terrorist attacks while cracking down on extremist ideologies, and taking action against a broad network that supports and propagates terror.³²

Under Hasina’s stewardship, Bangladesh has carefully navigated geopolitical waters between major and emerging powers, and grown to become an important strategic partner with India, while expanding cooperation with ASEAN states, particularly Japan and South Korea.

In a bid to demonstrate transparency in governance and adherence to the core promise of improving the lives of the citizens of the eighth-largest country in the world, and one of the most densely populated, Hasina’s administration published a comprehensive 100-page manifesto that establishes specific benchmarks toward Bangladesh’s “Vision 2041,” with its goals of “cultural emancipation; non-communal, progressive, inclusive, and economically developed Smart Bangladesh.”³³

Hasina has said that her foreign policy is guided by the need to balance competing interests and is an ode to her late father’s dictum: “Friendship to all, malice toward

none.”³⁴ This doctrine reflects Bangladesh’s strategic position in global diplomacy, affirming its willingness to deepen ties with China, while simultaneously deepening relationships with key international players, including the US, UK, EU, Japan, and Canada. Supporters of the Bangladeshi PM believe that Western policymakers have not fully grasped the real security threat that the country still faces, and Bangladesh has recently said that it expects counterterror cooperation with India to grow.³⁵

The last major terror attack committed by Jamaat-e-Islami was in 2016, when a cafe in central Dhaka was attacked and several foreigners were taken hostage and killed.³⁶

But on Oct. 28, a mob backed by radicals affiliated with the terror group attacked and killed a policeman and torched almost 200 cars, buses, and businesses. Bangladeshi citizens were injured, some suffering horrific burns, as extremists set buses alight to force the closure of roads and schools.³⁷ It was a grim reminder of the type of attacks that were happening on an almost daily basis 20 years ago.^{38 39 40 41} Ensuring that those days do not return has been a cornerstone of Hasina’s appeal to the broader public.

In the wake of its criticism of the election, and its implied questioning of the legitimacy of the government, Washington must now ask itself whether it prizes stability in Bangladesh, and by extension South Asia, or if it prefers to continue down a path that is increasingly straining relations with Bangladeshi officials and civil society.

When Hasina visited Brussels in November, she made clear that her country was not going to “take sides” when it came to a contest of influence between Europe and China.⁴² A foreign policy underpinned by strategic balance has managed to date to benefit Bangladesh economically, with key export markets in the West,⁴³ investments from Japan and South Korea helping Bangladesh build critical infrastructure,⁴⁴ and the award of almost \$23 billion of contracts to Chinese construction companies that have been key players in Bangladesh’s growth.⁴⁵

According to international development observers, Hasina’s reforms have done a great deal to empower women and have practically eradicated mass hunger, while significantly reducing abject poverty.⁴⁶



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Three Bangladeshi policemen look into the back garden of an upscale cafe in Dhaka. In 2016 a bloody siege ended with the death of 20 foreign hostages in a terrifying escalation of a campaign of attacks by Islamist extremists.
AFP

The prime minister's administration has fought to uphold a uniquely secular constitution, and safeguard the rights and freedoms of Bangladesh's religious minorities, such as the thriving Hindu, Buddhist and Christian communities.⁴⁷ Bangladesh has also significantly invested in improving the lives of over a million Rohingya refugees, whom Bangladesh calls its guests — all of whom fled a brutal ethnic-cleansing campaign in Myanmar.⁴⁸

Recently, tens of thousands of displaced families were relocated to a newly opened facility on Bhasan Char Island, where they are living in clean shelters, women are provided training in critical job skills, children are in school, and health care is offered free of charge.⁴⁹ This is a massive humanitarian undertaking at a time when Myanmar is slowly disintegrating into a failed state, with competing military groups threatening serious security consequences for the subcontinent.⁵⁰

Meanwhile, Bangladeshi technocrats working on meeting the country's Sustainable Development Goals say that the nation's future is linked to enhancing trade with the international community, rather than being a recipient of foreign aid.⁵¹ According to UN data, Bangladesh is well ahead of schedule in meeting key SDG

benchmarks,⁵² and further expanding development into the countryside is a key goal outlined in Hasina's Vision 2041.

Bangladesh will also continue to play an important role for the security of India's restive northeast frontier,⁵³ and defense and security cooperation between the two countries can be expected only to increase as Hasina solidifies her rule.

Despite US criticism of the recent general election, the prime minister remains open to improved relations with Washington. When asked about US-Bangladesh relations in a press conference following her election victory, she replied: "I am not vengeful (but) very open-minded and liberal. Rather it is good, I can listen and learn from criticism."

Her foreign policy, she added, was based on the principle "friendship to all, enmity to none," and she joked that when she met Biden on the sidelines of the G20 summit in India in September, he took a selfie with her and her daughter, Saima Wazed.⁵⁴

Washington's criticism of Bangladesh's election may not leave a lasting mark, but could well prove to be an unnecessary obstacle in bolstering the moderate states in South Asia that share a common vision for prosperity and stand as a bulwark against the proliferation of extremism in the region.

FOOTNOTES

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