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Asia in 2024: Fragile democracies amid global turmoil

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Filippo Boni
Diego Maiorano
Elena Valdameri

viella

A large, intricate mandala pattern is positioned on the right side of the page, extending from the middle section down to the bottom. It features complex, symmetrical geometric and floral designs in a dark brown color, partially overlapping the text and the publisher's name.

CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

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The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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BANGLADESH 2023-2024: FROM DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING
TO THE MONSOON REVOLUTION, TOWARDS DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION

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The years 2023-2024 marked a historical political shift for Bangladesh. Unrest initially emerged in 2023 in relation to the parliamentary elections scheduled for early 2024 grew to eventually turn into a full-fledged anti-establishment uprising. Dubbed the Monsoon Revolution, it resulted in the ousting of Prime Minister Hasina and the creation of an interim government headed by Nobel Laureate Mohammed Yunus. The country faced a difficult economic situation due to a looming balance of payment crisis aggravated by the negative externalities of Russia's war in Ukraine. Besides spiking inflation and unhealthy state of loans across the banking sector, these were record years due to an unprecedented dengue outbreak, whose severity was found to be linked to climate change. The Interim Government tried to restore law and order and tackle the rising cost of living, the most urgent problem weighting on Bangladeshi people, with mixed results. The regime change did not significantly alter the country's international relations, except in the case of India, where Hasina fled in exile. Relations with Myanmar remained strained due to the ongoing civil war in Myanmar's Rakhine State which spilled over into Bangladesh to various extents and kept the Rohingya refugee crisis stalled.

KEYWORDS – Bangladesh; democratic backsliding; Monsoon Revolution; Awami League; development narrative; interim government; Hasina; Yunus; Rohingya.

1. Introduction

This article analyzes the major developments occurred in Bangladesh in terms of domestic, economic, and foreign affairs in 2023-2024. Among numerous significant events, regime change was undoubtedly the most consequential. The year 2023 saw Bangladesh sinking deeper into the process of democratic backsliding. In the early 2020s, democratic institutions across Asia were subjected to different degrees of erosion as a result of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on domestic politics [Pugliese, Fischetti and Torri 2022]. From this point of view, the trajectory of Bangladesh appeared in line with regional trends. However, the autocratic nature of the Bangladeshi state had been manifest for more than a decade under the Awami

League (AL)-led governments, which had widely deployed repression of dissent, police brutality and forced disappearances, repeatedly denounced by national and international observers [Tieri 2021]. Overall, while formally maintaining «democracy» as its official denomination, Bangladesh moved alarmingly closer to a one-party system.

Among the many individuals and organizations identified by the AL Government through the years as threats to its rule hence persecuted by various means, there was Muhammad Yunus. An economist recognized as the father of micro-credit – a system extending small loans to rural people and credited for their effective upliftment from poverty – in 2006 Yunus received the Nobel Peace Prize. He founded Grameen Bank (*Rural Bank*) to provide micro-credit across the country, and Grameen Telecom, another social enterprise. In the latest years, Yunus was victim of judicial harassment at the hands of the AL Government, who implied him in more than 100 cases from corruption to violation of labour laws. In August 2023, an open letter signed by world leaders of the likes of former U.S. President Barack Obama, former U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and more than 100 Nobel laureates, urged the Bangladeshi Government to put an end to judicial harassment against Yunus [Alam 2023, 31 August]. These concerns were echoed in January 2024 in another letter to Hasina, this time signed by twelve US senators [*The Daily Star* 2024, 23 January]. The Bangladeshi Government dismissed these allegations and continued the political vendetta against the social entrepreneur. In an irony of fate, in the summer of 2024, it would be no one else but Yunus, as we shall see, to rise to head the country following Hasina's ousting.

2. Domestic affairs

2.1. *The violent run up to Bangladesh's 12th parliamentary elections*

Democratic backsliding kept manifesting also in violent repression of political opposition ['Bangladesh: violent autocratic crackdown' 2023, 26 November]. The year 2023 witnessed recurring clashes between the police and opposition political parties requesting Hasina to step down in favour of a caretaker government¹. In this political environment, in November 2023

1. In the mid-1990s, the provision for a caretaker government was introduced with a view to manage violence and frauds occurring in relation to parliamentary elections. In 2011, the AL government abolished the caretaker system by amending the Bangladeshi Constitution (15th amendment). Consequently, three general elections took place in 2014, 2018, and 2024 under the aegis of AL governments. In December 2024, the High Court of Bangladesh ruled to restore the provision of a non-partisan caretaker government. It is important to note that the Yunus government is not a caretaker government but an interim government, whose responsibilities are not limited to conducting a free and fair election.

Hasina called for elections to be held on 7 January 2024, further angering the opposition. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), Bangladesh's other main party and archenemy of AL, ordered his supporters to boycott them fearing they would be rigged and confirm Hasina for a fourth mandate. In late October 2023, clashes between BNP activists and the police intensified, culminating on the 28th in the death of a policeman and a BNP ward-level leader [*The Daily Star* 2023, 29 October]. Since then and until the January 2024 elections, BNP, Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI) and other opposition political parties called regular strikes (known as *hartal*).

The elections and their aftermath represented the culmination of the authoritarian tendencies of the Bangladeshi state. Despite protracted protests and use of violence against protesters in the months preceding the elections, these took place on 7 January 2024, boycotted by main opposition parties and alliances such as BNP, JeI, and Ganatantra Mancho,² and amid widespread allegations of foul play by the ruling party, voiced also by international observers (such as intergovernmental organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), foreign press). For example, Ghulam Mohammed Quader, the chairman of Jatiyo Party (JP), which resolved to run for the elections at the very last moment, claimed that the AL had coerced its party to do so to provide a semblance of fair competition [*The Business Standard* 2024, 1 November]. Similar allegations were advanced regarding a set of new parties mostly comprising of former BNP politicians and popularly known as «King's Parties»,³ who would have been put up by state intelligence for the purpose of the 2024 elections. According to Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB), the election was neither free nor inclusive [*The Business Standard* 2024, 17 January]. Similar to 2014 and 2018, results favourable to the incumbent party were ensured through connivance by the bureaucracy and law enforcement agencies [Riaz 2024, 18 January]. AL alone managed to secure 223 parliamentary seats, while independent candidates, who were primarily AL-affiliated, won 62 seats. JP won only 11 seats, while Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal, Bangladesh Workers Party and Bangladesh Kalyan Party one seat each [Riaz 2024, 18 January]. The then-Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Kazi Habibul Awal declared that the January general election had been successful although not fully participatory [*The Business Standard* 2024, 18 January]. In a press briefing, the CEC claimed that the voter turnout had been 28% but soon after increased the figure to 40%, apparently prodded by his colleagues, thus causing controversy [Riaz 2024, 11 January]. Amid widespread domestic and international criticism,

2. A coalition of various minor parties headed by well-known public figures. It did not include BNP and JeI but similarly boycotted the elections.

3. The idea behind the name was that the party leader is the party itself. The so-called King's Parties emerged from the effort of the AL to have well-known ex-BNP leaders forming new political parties running for the elections, so to give an appearance of competitiveness to the latter.

in January 2024 Hasina was sworn in as Bangladesh's PM for the fourth consecutive time [*Daily Star* 2024, 12 January].

2.2. *From new anti-quota protests to the Monsoon Revolution*⁴

In the summer of 2024, new protests emerged, this time in relation to the «quota system» regulating public employment in the country. Based on the quota system, more than 50% of available jobs are reserved for vulnerable categories: women 10%; ethnic minorities 5%; native of underdeveloped areas 10%; children and grandchildren of independence war freedom fighters 30% [Prakash 2024, 25 July]. These quotas had already been object of controversy: in 2018, a massive student protest forced the AL Government to take the decision of eliminating them. However, on 5 June 2024, the Supreme Court of Bangladesh overturned the Government's decision, practically reinstalling the quota system. This sparked a new wave of protests among students. These protests saw the participation of both female and male students in large numbers. Initially they involved university students, but since mid-July other students as well. In particular, protesters alleged that the 10% quota for underdeveloped areas were unnecessary more than 50 years after Bangladesh's independence, and that the 30% quota for children/grandchildren of 1971 war veterans was exploited by the AL Government to fill the high bureaucracy with party loyalists. Although Bangladesh has figured among the world's fastest-growing economies for a decade, the uneven character of economic growth and ensuing inequality became cause of frustration within the country, especially among young adults. Around 18 million young Bangladeshis are unemployed, and university graduates face more difficulty in securing a job compared to less educated peers [Ethirajan & Ritchie 2024, 6 August]. The problem of jobless growth is not unique to Bangladesh but common across South Asia: it has emerged as a key political issue in India as well [Maiorano and Khattri 2024, pp. 260-271]. Meanwhile, also university teachers who had been enrolled on a new national pay scheme took to the streets, adding to the tension which had built up in public universities [Curtis 2025, 23 January].

Tension kept rising in July. Student protests – the student front had organized under the leadership of the Anti-Discrimination Student Movement (ADSM) – had been non-violent so far. The AL tried repeatedly to discredit their cause, first by framing it as an anti-national endeavour – for example, by referring to the students as *razakars*, a term used for those who sided with West Pakistan against Bangladeshi independence in 1971. Later on, in August, it tried to depict the protesting students as a proxy of Islamic extremists, thus proceeding to ban JeI and its student wing, Islami Chhatra Shibir [Foyez 2024, 1 August].

4. Also referred to as July Revolution, July Uprising, Gen Z Revolution.

On 15 July 2024, a peaceful protest by Dhaka University students met with violent attacks perpetrated by non-identified individuals. Similar episodes were recorded across the country, featuring as attackers the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), a student union affiliated with AL [New Age 2024, 16 July]. Another threshold moment was the killing of Aby Sayed, a 25-years old Rangpur Begum Rokeya University student whom the police shot dead from a distance of merely 15 metres, the whole event captured on video and circulated widely across media. The government gave the police a «shoot-on-sight» order to quell protests, deployed the Army and shut down internet access for 10 days [Allen 2024, 2 August]. The police conducted nighttime raids to arrest those involved in the student protests. Amid this climate, on 19 July, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, expressed deep concern and called for the violence to end and respect for international human rights standards – a plea he reiterated on 4 August. Meanwhile, on 21 July, the Supreme Court scrapped most of the quotas, rendering the selection for 93% of the government jobs merit-based. Initially the BNP and other opposition parties and coalitions declared solidarity with those protesting against the quota system reforms but denied to have any direct role in the protests. However, law enforcement agencies arrested opposition leaders belonging to the BNP and other parties based on their alleged involvement in violence related to the quota movement [New Age 2024, 22 July]. In September 2024, BNP secretary general Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir claimed that at least 422 people affiliated with the BNP had died while being involved in the July-August uprising [ProthomAlo 2024, 15 September].

The tipping point of the uprising came on 3-5 August. On 3 August, students and crowds from Dhaka and nearby areas started gathering in the Central Shaheed Minar in the capital city, calling for the Government's resignation [Abbas 2024, 3 August]. A simultaneous press release by the Chief of Army Staff, General Waker-Uz-Zaman, signalled that the Army distanced itself from the ongoing crackdown against protesters carried out by the Government through the police, thus further boosting the protesters' resolution. The ADSM announced a «Long March to Dhaka» to take place the next day, 4 August, to fulfil the resignation demand. On 5 August, Hasina fled to India⁵ on a helicopter, prompting General Waker-Uz-Zaman to take charge, gather with various political parties, and brief the nation about the sudden regime change. In this way, a number of processes which had unravelled in Bangladesh for more than a decade – steadily growing discontent against AL's authoritarian policies, pervasive political polarization, and youth's status anxiety amid widespread unemployment – all coalesced into the end Hasina's AL rule, which had lasted uninterrupted since 2009.

5. Whether Hasina's move qualified or not as an official resignation was object of controversy.

2.3. *The Yunus Interim Government*

After Hasina was overthrown, Bangladeshi President Mohammed Shahabuddin ordered the release of BNP chairperson Khaleda Zia, jailed in 2018 and in house arrest since 2020 [*Dhaka Tribune* 2024, 6 August].⁶ He also dissolved the Parliament, leaving the country without a government for two days [*BBC* 2024, 6 August]. On 8 August, in line with the request vocally advanced by the student front, Muhammad Yunus formed an interim government in the role of Chief Adviser while President Shahabuddin administered his oath. The Interim Government soon received widespread criticism because most cabinet members (advisers) had little political experience, including Chief Adviser Yunus and members of the student front who had raised to the rank of advisers. Others alleged that the Government was too small – although its members doubled since it first took office. The new government was faced with two immediate challenges. One was maintaining law and order, which had been problematic for months but further deteriorated after the regime fell, as the police was unable to function due to low morale while across the country mobs attacked police stations in retaliation to police brutality. According to Bangladesh Police Headquarters, 44 police personnel were killed during the violence [*BdNews24* 2024, 19 August]. The situation slowly improved, but had not yet returned to normalcy at the time of writing (early 2025). Data by the Bangladesh Police showed that in the four months following the advent of the Interim Government across Bangladesh there was a surge in criminal activities, including murders, robberies, and kidnappings [*Dhaka Tribune* 2025, 10 January]. The deteriorating law and order situation impacted the country's prisons as well. After the government fell, at least 2,241 inmates, including 88 on death row, managed to escape and a large number of them were yet to be found as of late 2024 [Bhattacharjee & Khan 2024, 11 September]. A number of top inmates condemned for terror crimes were released on bail and became again active [*ProthomAlo* 2024, 11 October]. Faced with this law-and-order crisis, the Army stepped in, coordinating with law enforcement agencies – the police, the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), the Rapid Battalion (RAB). Besides, since September, the Army's commissioned officers were authorized by the Interim Government to act as executive magistrates. Even months after the regime change, agitations did not abate. The streets of Dhaka became theatre to recurring protests by garment workers, rickshaw drivers, students, doctors, paramedics, railway staff, and retired police personnel, each seeking their specific demands.

6. It is widely maintained that the corruption case based on which Zia was jailed was fabricated by the AL Government to weaken the BNP, its main political opposition. Hasina and Zia and their parties are divided by competition lasted a lifetime. Later on in August the Interim Government lifted the ban against Jel.

The other urgent problem to be tackled was keeping the price of basic food commodities (potatoes, edible oil, sugar, and onions) at bay. Their rise made the cost of life unbearable for middle-lower classes. Prices remained high despite intervention, causing further criticism against the Interim Government, until they started dropping in mid-December [Halder 2024, 15 November].

Another challenge was determining the number of casualties and ensuring proper treatment and support for those who had been injured or lost a family member in the Revolution. These measures acquired also political relevance since the protesters, especially the student front, had emerged as a key political stakeholder. The Government pledged that those injured would receive free lifetime care at government hospitals. It also established the *July Shaheed Smriti Foundation* to deliver financial support to families of injured people and martyrs of the Revolution [*The Daily Star* 2024, 15 November].

The violence which accompanied the regime change claimed victims on both sides of the political divide. Expectedly, following the downfall of the AL government, people and places associated with the party, including the party office and leaders' residences and businesses, were targeted by violent mobs [*The Daily Star* 2024, 5 August]. These attacks continued into early 2025, when more AL leaders' houses were smashed and torched, including Hasina's family home [*The Daily Star* 2025, 6 February].

In the history of Bangladeshi politics, attacks against religious minorities have often accompanied power transitions [Guhathakurta 2016]. In the first days after the fall of Hasina, some attacks on Hindus took place in various locations while the police was not operational. As a consequence, communal and minority violence emerged as yet another issue triggered by the political churning of July-August. International and Indian media reported of various attacks against Hindu individuals and places of worship from across the country: according to the Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council there were more than 2,000 attacks on Hindus between 4 August and the year-end [*Voice of America* 2024, 1 November]. These events were explained as a manifestation of anti-India sentiment due to the fact that Hasina had fled to India. On multiple occasions, the Indian Government raised concerns about the status of minority – including Hindus – in Bangladesh and called upon the Interim Government to ensure their protection [Government of India 2024, 19 December]. Sheikh Hasina, exiled in India, attempted to extract political gains from this situation by accusing Yunus of carrying out a genocide against religious minorities and heading a fascist regime [*The Tribune* 2024, 10 December]. However, others claimed that the seemingly communal violence was actually politically motivated, as the targets had been associated with the AL regime. Some Bangladeshi public figures like Chief Adviser's Press Secretary Shafiqul Alam claimed that Bangladesh is portrayed unfairly in international media

[*Dhaka Tribune* 2024, 7 December]. Also the BBC fact-checking report found that most Hindu temple attacks were false news [Wakefield & Menon 2024, 18 August]. It is not unlikely that India, traditionally close to Hasina's Government, was behind the spreading of fake news with a view to discredit the regime change: according to the Bangladeshi fact-checking initiative *Rumor Scanner*, around 72% of social media sites spreading misinformation about Bangladesh are from India [ProthomAlo 2024, 11 December]. In October 2024, the peaceful celebration of Durga Puja, the main religious festival for Bengali Hindus, sent a reassuring message regarding the status of religious harmony in the country.

The assumption underlying the working of the Interim Government was that national and economic rebuilding had to be preceded by a comprehensive, careful and impartial house-cleaning. In the interest of peace and economic sustainability, each deal and transaction made by the AL Government had to be subject to scrutiny and justice against crimes perpetrated under the regime had to be delivered. To this purpose, the Government formed over 15 reform commissions, the six major ones concerning the Constitution, the electoral system, the police, the judiciary, public administration, and corruption. The *National Consensus Commission*, chaired by Yunus himself, intended to negotiate with political parties and other relevant stakeholders the reform agenda based on their recommendations. Importantly, the to-be-set agenda included the timeline of the next national election, whose date had not been set yet as of late 2024. In his address to the nation on Victory Day (16 December) 2024, Yunus declared that polls were likely to be held in late 2025 in case of minimal reforms, or in mid-2026 in case of more substantial ones. As a consequence, the nature of the reforms and the elections timeline remained a major cause of debate among parties and students, who in the meantime decided to form a new political party.⁷

Among the recent past which the Interim Government subjected to careful scrutiny through the appointment of ad-hoc commissions, there are also the enforced disappearances of opposition politicians, activists, journalists, and intellectuals which took place in AL-ruled Bangladesh since 2009. Upon the invitation of the Interim Government, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) commenced an independent fact-finding investigation on human rights violations during July and August 2024. The final OHCHR report published in February 2025 stated that the former Bangladeshi Government, security and intelligence services, along with groups affiliated with AL, had been involved in serious human rights violations, and estimated that as many as 1,400 people could have been killed between 1 July and 15 August in relation to

7. ADSM and Jatiya Nagorik Committee (the latter being a platform constituted by young professionals) committed to launch a political party by the end of February 2025.

those [OHCHR 2025, 12 February]. In October 2024 and again in January 2025, Bangladesh's International Criminal Tribunal (ICT) issued an arrest warrant against Hasina's alleged involvement in «crimes against humanity» during July-August 2024 [*The Business Standard* 2025, 6 January]. Many of Hasina's ex-ministers ended behind bars facing trials.

3. *The economic situation*

3.1. *Macroeconomic instability and spiking inflation*

In 2023 the Bangladeshi economy was faced by various challenges. Some among them – like the unhealthy state of loans across the banking sector and a looming balance of payment crisis – derived from previous crises and structural vulnerabilities of the country's economy. Due to its limited diversification, Bangladesh long relied on remittances and garment exports for its foreign reserves, thus remaining highly susceptible to foreign exchange crises. In 2023, Russia's war in Ukraine caused an increase in energy and food prices and disrupted supply chains and export demands. Consequently, Bangladesh's difficult post-pandemic recovery was halted and its balance of payment deficit widened. To avoid further reduction in foreign exchange reserves, the Government of Bangladesh intervened by delaying foreign currency payments by state-owned companies and subjecting the repatriation of fund by foreign businesses active in the country to approval by the Bangladesh Bank. Additionally, in February 2023, it obtained from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) US\$ 3.7 billion loans (US\$ 3.3 billion under the *Extended Credit Facility/Extended Fund Facility* and US\$ 1.4 billion under the *Resilience and Sustainability Facility*, to be disbursed over 42 months), aimed at supporting the country's macroeconomic stability and overall economic recovery [IMF 2023, 12 December].⁸

Furthermore, in 2023 the value of non-performing loans across the banking sector kept rising, casting further doubts on the regulatory role played by the Bangladesh Bank [*Dhaka Tribune* 2024, 13 February]. The unhealthy state of credit in the country and widespread nature of untenable practices had already caused indignation and concern in 2022, brought to surface in a large «loan scandal» revolving around the Islami bank [Tieri 2023, p. 288]. An enquiry into Bangladesh economy later promoted by the Interim Government would reveal banking as the country's most corrupt sector (more on this below).

8. Following the ousting of Hasina, the IMF has confirmed commitment to the loans previously pledged and partially disbursed [*Devdiscourse News* 2024, 6 August].

3.2. *Record dengue epidemic: the emerging health implications of climate change*

Between 2022 and 2023, a large dengue⁹ outbreak occurred, with Dhaka and Chittagong – the most urbanized and densely populated areas of the country – emerging as hotspots [Subarna and al-Saiyan 2024]. This was the worst Bangladeshi outbreak on record by both extension and number of casualties, reaching its peak in 2023 and then extending into 2024 (although with lower infection and mortality rates) [Hasan *et al.* 2025]. While unprecedented in its might, the epidemic was linked to a threat well-known to Bangladesh: climate change. It was found that shifting monsoon patterns and hotter temperatures, along with uncontrolled urbanization, supported mosquito breeding, contributing to determine timing and severity of this outbreak. Bangladesh is noted as one of the most vulnerable countries to climate change. While coastal erosion, freshwater salinization, and «climate migration» are widely known consequences of climate change [‘Climate Risk Profile: Bangladesh’ 2024], the dengue crisis drew attention to its serious health implications. It also exposed the unpreparedness of the national health system, which the Covid-19 pandemic had already put under strain, and deep disparities among Bangladeshis accessing health services [Hasan *et al.* 2025].

3.3. *Trade*

The last year of Hasina’s tenure recorded some positive developments in terms of international trade. Bangladesh and India pledged to commence the negotiations for the *Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement* (CEPA) and operationalize two Special Economic Zones (SEZs) «offered by Bangladesh to India in Mongla and Mirsharai» [Government of India 2024, 22 June]. This occurred in June 2024, during Hasina’s visit to New Delhi. It remains to be seen whether the pledges will find prompt implementation, also in light of the political upheavals which occurred in the months following the declaration. In fact, in October 2024, the Interim Government expressed interest in joining the China-led *Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership* (RCEP) [The Daily Star 2024, 17 October]. Bangladesh would benefit from mechanisms such as CEPA and RCEP while coping with the loss of privileges attached to Least Developed Country (LDC) status, which it will leave behind upon its 2026 graduation. The 2024 WTO Ministerial Conference (March, Abu Dhabi), however, deliberated for Bangladesh to continue enjoying duty benefits for 3 more years after graduation [The Daily Star 2024, 3 March]. Bangladesh remained involved in negotiations with the EU to obtain preferential market access under the EU’s Generalized

9. Dengue is a viral fever transmitted by mosquito bite common in tropical and subtropical climates.

System of Preferences Plus (GSP+) program, which requires fulfilment of environmental and labour sustainability conditions and is the second-best preferential tier offered by the EU to vulnerable trading partners after the one currently enjoyed by Bangladesh [‘Bangladeshi Exports to the European Union’ 2024, August]. Ready-made garments continued dominating Bangladeshi exports – accounting for a whopping 82% of the country’s export revenue in 2022/23-2023/24 – including exports to the EU [‘Export Performance’ 2024]. Besides, Bangladesh surpassed China for the first time as Europe’s top knitwear supplier [*The Daily Star* 2023, 18 December].

However, while remaining the pillar of Bangladesh’s exports and GDP, the garment sector remained also lacking in reforms and workers’ rights protection. In November 2023, the Government of Bangladesh (Bangladesh Labour and Employment Ministry) announced a raise in the monthly minimum wage of garment factory workers to BD₹ 12,500 (about US\$ 104; it was BD₹ 8,000 since 2018) [Kashyap 2024, 16 November]. The amount was less than half of what the unions asked for enabling workers cope with spiking inflation, which reached 9.9% in 2023 according to the World Bank [‘Inflation data: Bangladesh’ 2024]. In July 2024, protesting workers incurred in police violence and black-listing, suffering continued violation of their labour rights [Abdulla 2024, 30 July].

3.4. *An emerging counter-narrative to Bangladesh’s «success story»*

For many years, the ever expanding and export-driven ready-made garment (RMG) industry as well as large infrastructural projects most often realized through foreign aid constituted the pillars of the mainstream narrative surrounding the Bangladeshi nation, its development trajectory, and its leadership emanating from the ruling AL. This narrative about Bangladesh’s success story was effectively mainstreamed across policy circles, including internationally. For example, while the AL was still in power, the year 2023 recorded further progress in a number of infrastructure projects. Among them, there was the tunnel under the Karnaphuli river named after «father of the nation»¹⁰ and Hasina’s father Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, built on loan by a Chinese company and inaugurated by the PM in October. Undoubtedly, the tunnel had potential to significantly advance connectivity for both the Chattogram hub (located to its north) and southern areas connected to it, already home to various EPZs and industrial zones, and for Bangladesh’s overall links with neighbouring countries through the Asian Highway

10. Even the status of Mujibur Rahman as «father of the nation» could not escape the political churning ignited by the Monsoon Revolution. On 5 February 2025, as a reaction to a message broadcasted by Hasina from exile, mobs vandalized, bulldozed, and set fire to Mujibur’s residence, where he was assassinated in 1975. [Laskar 2025, 6 February]

Network¹¹ [Suman 2023, 28 October]. At the same time, like in the case of similar «mega-projects» previously pursued, its completion was unanimously saluted by both the Government of Bangladesh and the national press as yet another milestone in Bangladesh's development success story under the AL leadership, thus serving to support the party's legitimacy. This was true of other projects as well. Among them there was also the first segment of the Dhaka Elevated Expressway, Bangladesh's first expressway promising to ease the capital's notorious traffic problem, which was opened to traffic in September 2023, inaugurated by PM Hasina [*The Daily Star* 2023, 2 September]. Developments were also recorded in Rooppur, a locality 160 kms north-west of Dhaka were Bangladesh' first nuclear power plant was under construction, built by Russia's state-owned Rosatom with participation of Indian firms through a 90% Russian loan. Following the sanctions imposed on Russia as a consequence of its war in Ukraine, the Russian foreign minister visited Dhaka in September 2023 to confirm commitment to the completion of the project [Bhattacharjee 2024, 23 December] and in October Bangladesh received from Russia the first uranium shipment for the plant [*Aljazeera* 2023, 6 October].

However, after Hasina's ousting, the narrative around AL's development delivery – including through infrastructure mega-projects like the abovementioned – was subject for the first time to serious scrutiny through inquiries conducted by the commissions appointed by the Interim Government. For example, in December 2024, the *Anti-Corruption Commission* commenced an investigation into alleged embezzlement of US\$ 5 billion by Hasina and her family members in relation to the mentioned Rooppur power plant, following allegations of corruption advanced by various politicians [*Business Standard* 2024, 24 December]. Earlier in December, the White Paper Committee headed by eminent Bangladeshi economist Debapriya Bhattacharya released the draft *White Paper State of the Bangladesh Economy: Dissection of a Development Narrative*. The report denounced the pervasiveness of crony capitalism under the AL and the manipulated nature of data used by the party across decades to buttress Bangladesh's «development success story». Banking, infrastructure, energy, and information technology were exposed as the country's most corrupt sectors. The report also called for the Interim Government to declare its plans and account for its activities with clarity [Mavis 2024, 2 December].

In addition to subjecting agreements and projects undertaken by the AL Governments to scrutiny, the Interim Government targeted macro-economic stability, including galloping inflation. It also reorganized the Board of Directors of Bangladesh Bank and restructured those of various

11. The Asian Highway Network or Great Asian Highway is a project aiming to boost connectivity in Asia via the development of the continent's highway network. The Asian Highway Network partners are Asian countries and the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP).

state-owned banks. Nonetheless, due to the volatile circumstances of its appointment, the short tenure invested upon it, and the challenge of keeping together a diverse set of political partners, the Yunus Government received widespread criticism, especially for its inability to deal with continuing turmoil in the garment sector and the rising cost of living weighting heavy on middle and lower classes.

4. *Foreign relations*

4.1. *Bangladesh-US relations*

Bangladesh's relations with the US experienced ups and downs under Hasina's last premiership, but improved following its sudden end. The US remained the country's single largest export market, its main FDI source, and a significant development partner. Several visits by American high-level delegations underscored Bangladesh's geopolitical significance in the Indo-Pacific region. However, due to democratic backsliding, in 2023 Bangladesh was excluded from Biden's *Summit for Democracy* for the second time [The Daily Star 2023, 15 February]. In the same year, the US imposed visa restrictions on Bangladeshi citizens implicated in violation of democratic rights in the run up to the 2024 elections [Mahmud 2023, 23 September]. Also, in government circles there were speculations that the US may use its *Presidential Memorandum on Advancing Worker Empowerment, Rights, and High Labor Standards Globally* released on 16 November 2023 by the Biden administration to interfere in Bangladeshi domestic politics [BSS News 2023, 30 November]. Furthermore, then-PM Hasina's allegation that the US planned to take over St Martin Island (belonging to Bangladesh), an allegation denied by the US Government, contributed to increase bilateral tensions. After her ousting, Hasina blamed her fall on the US, claiming she could have remained in power if she had handed over St Martin Island and the Bay of Bengal to America [Dhaka Tribune 2024, 11 August]. Dhaka's concerns and caution vis-à-vis Washington were confirmed by its decision not to sign the *Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement* (ACSA) and the *General Security of Military Information Agreement* (GSOMIA) with the US prior to the January 2024 elections [ProthomAlo 2023, 10 August].

US involvement in the Bangladesh election issue confirmed that Washington had a clear interest in political stability in South Asia, a key component of the broader Indo-Pacific macro-region. This was evident in US Ambassador Peter Haas' active engagement with multiple stakeholders in relation to the Bangladesh elections, including the Bangladesh Election Commission. At the same time, US involvement revealed certain limitations in US-India cooperation in the Indian Ocean region. The high-level 2+2 *Ministerial Dialogue* (November 2024) reflected that Washington and New Delhi had different approaches to the political turmoil in connection to

the 2024 Bangladesh polls [Sajen 2024, 13 November]. US commitment to promote free and fair elections in the country did not go as far as to bypass India, a regional ally for the US with a shared ambition to counter China in South Asia.

Nevertheless, these difficulties did not reflect on Bangladesh-US dialogues, which went on, as demonstrated by the 7th US-Bangladesh *Trade & Investment Cooperation Forum Agreement* (TICFA) Council meeting and the 9th *Bangladesh-US Security Dialogue* (both in September 2023).

Despite concerns over violation of democratic rights voiced in the run up to the January 2024 polls, following elections Biden confirmed America's commitment to Bangladesh as an economic and strategic partner in the Indo-Pacific [*Dhaka Tribune* 2024, 4 February]. Yet another turn of events occurred in May 2024, when the US imposed sanctions on former Bangladesh Army Chief General (ret'd) Aziz Ahmed and his family for corruption and criminal activities in Bangladesh under Section 7031(c) of the annual Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act [*The Daily Star* 24, 22 May].

Bilateral relations improved following the advent of the Yunus-led Government. Yunus declared he looked forward to receiving US support to rebuild Bangladesh and implement reforms [*The Daily Star* 2024, 15 September]. In a meeting with Yunus on the side of the UN General Assembly in New York, Biden committed to fully support the new executive [*Dhaka Tribune* 2024, 24 September]. Donald Trump's return to the White House in January 2025 did not appear to usher major changes for bilateral relations. The Interim Government welcomed Trump as the new US president and expressed its keenness to work together [*The Daily Star* 2025, 20 January].

4.2. Bangladesh-China relations

Throughout the political upheavals of 2023-2024, Bangladesh-China relations remained stable and positive, eased by China's non-interference in partners' domestic affairs, which allows Beijing to promptly adapt to changes of political leadership [Hossain 2024, 9 October]. China was confirmed as Bangladesh's largest trading partner (imports to Bangladesh) for the 12th year in a row, and its key weapon supplier (72%) [Yuan 2024, 16 August]. However, trade imbalance remained a concern as Bangladesh export accounted for less than 3% of the US\$ 25 billion China-Bangladesh trade [Palma 2024, 10 July]. China signalled its willingness to establish an FTA with Bangladesh by 2026 [*The Financial Express* 2023, 9 November]. In 2023 and 2024, Sheikh Hasina and Xi Jinping had two bilateral meetings, one on the sides of the 15th BRICS Summit in August 2023, and another during Bangladesh's PM visit to China in July 2024, proof to stable relations entertained during the AL era.

Bangladesh remained actively involved in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI is a framework launched by the Chinese government

in 2013 whereby China partners with governments and international organisations across the world to promote through loans and joint ventures large development projects, primarily connectivity and energy infrastructure [Marzano and Tieri 2022; Torri 2024, pp. XVI-XX]. The BRI has been object of international scrutiny in relation to debt sustainability and in Bangladesh it also featured prominently in AL's development goals agenda, of which infrastructural mega-projects constituted the milestones [Tieri 2022]. The Padma Bridge Rail Link Project was initially set for completion in June 2024 but later the timeline was extended to June 2025 [Ahmed 2024, 5 October]. Since the Interim Government took office the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Tunnel came under serious criticism as the tunnel was making a loss of over BDT 27 lakhs a day [Suman & Byron 2024, 27 October]. Towards the end of Hasina's premiership, Bangladesh had difficulties balancing India and China, particularly in relation to the Teesta River project. While both powers wanted to execute the Teesta's comprehensive management and restoration, Hasina appeared to prefer India over China. Nonetheless, in July 2024, Dhaka and Beijing established a Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership [Government of Bangladesh 2024, 11 July].

Since the Interim Government took over, Dhaka-Beijing relations proved very positive. In August 2024, while meeting the Chinese Ambassador to Bangladesh, Yunus invited China to relocate solar panel factories to Bangladesh and auspicated closer economic relations between the two countries [*The Business Standard* 2024, 25 August]. In September 2024, the Government also requested China to lower the interest rates on existing Chinese loans from 2 or 3% to 1%, and to extend the 20-years repayment period to 30 years [Bayron & Habib 2024, 13 September]. A key intervention by the Interim Government was to subject all deals previously closed by the AL to review, including foreign-funded projects, so to discontinue those deemed unnecessary or unfeasible [Saif 2024, 12 September]. In September 2024, China sent a medical team to Dhaka to treat individuals injured during the July-August uprising as a symbol of enduring friendship between the two countries [Hasib 2024, 22 September]. Beijing's interest to maintain stable links with Dhaka after the AL downfall was confirmed when Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi called on Yunus on the sides of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in New York and expressed a desire to strengthen commercial and economic relations.

4.3. *Bangladesh-India relations*

Overall, relations with India saw a shift from the AL's openly pro-India policy to a more cautious engagement by the Interim Government. In 2023, Bangladesh and India decided to use the Indian rupee to carry out bilateral trade transactions to bypass the US dollar [Uddin 2023, 9 July]. However, trading in Indian currency did not perform according to expectations [Hasan 2024, 28 February]. Bangladesh also started to allow India to use

the Chattogram and Mongla ports for transit and cargo transshipment based on the *Agreement on the use of Chattogram and Mongla Ports for Movement of Goods to and from India* signed in 2018 [Laskar 2023, 26 April]. Hasina's visit to India in June 2024 saw the signing of a railway connectivity MoU based on which the two countries would use one another's railways to operate passenger and freight trains to boost cross-border connectivity with Nepal and Bhutan [The Daily Star 2024, 29 June]. The positive state of bilateral relations was visible when India invited Hasina as a guest at the G-20 summit held in New Delhi in September 2023. Later on, Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar cited India-Bangladesh relations as exemplary [Hasib 2023, 17 December]. In turn, Bangladesh publicly took India's side when the latter's relations with Canada underwent turmoil in relation to the killing on Canadian soil of Canadian citizen and Khalistani advocate Hardeep Singh Nijjar, in which Indian intelligence was allegedly implicated [Dhaka Tribune 2023, 29 September]. According to Obaidul Quader, former minister of road transport and bridges of Bangladesh, India stood by the AL during Bangladesh's January 2024 elections [Bhattacharjee 2024, 28 January]. However, since the national election of January 2024, the «India Out» campaign calling for a boycott of India-made products – constituting a large sections of consumer goods in Bangladesh – gained momentum in the country [Voice of America 2024, 21 February].

Since Hasina fled to India, a major shift occurred in Dhaka-New Delhi relations. The main element of friction was Hasina's exile itself, regarding which Dhaka handed over to Delhi a formal request for extradition in December 2024. Furthermore, the Interim Government took a stronger stand regarding the long-standing problem of border killings, i.e. killings occurring on the Indo-Bangladeshi border at the hands of Indian and Bangladeshi border patrols, which see Bangladeshi victims outnumbering Indian ones. Bangladeshi Home Adviser Lt Gen (retd) Jahangir Alam Chowdhury condemned the approach to the border pursued during the AL rule as too accommodating and instructed the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) «not to show back at the border», i.e. to react resolutely to all excesses by India's Border Security Force (BSF) [Daily Observer 2024, 8 September]. According to Bangladeshi human rights NGO Odhikar, 588 Bangladeshis were killed along the border between 2009 and 2024 [Dhaka Tribune 2025, 7 January].

The deterioration in bilateral relations was evident in various aspects. It halted the construction of a diesel pipeline extension under the India-Bangladesh Friendship pipeline [The Business Standard 2024, 2 September] as well as of other road and rails projects [The Daily Star 2024, 25 September]. However, the Interim Government declared its intention to continue projects undertaken under Indian lines of credit (LoC) [The Daily Star 2024, 11 September]. India, on the other hand, stopped issuing visas for Bangladeshi citizens except for medical or emergency reasons [Dhaka Tribune 2023, 30 September]. Foreign Adviser Touhid Hossain called for re-

viewing all active MoUs with India to reassess Bangladesh's interest, arguing that the so-called golden era of Bangladesh-India relations had involved just the two Governments and not the people of the two countries [*The Financial Express* 2024, 2 September]. In September 2024, Dhaka strongly protested after Indian Home Minister Amit Shah commented that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) – India's ruling party, to whom Shah belonged – would free Jharkhand (an eastern Indian state) from Rohingya and Bangladeshi infiltrators and hang them [*The Business Standard* 2024, 23 September]. All these developments prompted leading Bangladeshi political analyst Shafqat Munir to argue that in the aftermath of the regime change India failed to understand Bangladesh's new reality [Munir 2024, 9 September]. However, during a meeting occurred in August 2024 between India's High Commissioner to Bangladesh Pranay Verma and Bangladesh's Chief Adviser Yunus, and in another meeting between Indian External Affairs Minister Jaishankar and Bangladeshi Foreign Adviser Touhid Hossain in occasion of the UNGA in September, the Indian side expressed interest in maintaining relations cordial despite differences. In December 2024, Indian Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri's day-long visit to Dhaka, which included meetings with the Chief Adviser and top foreign affairs figures, served to ease some of the tension which had developed between the two governments.

4.4. *Bangladesh-Myanmar relations*

Two issues continued dominating Bangladesh's relations with Myanmar: the civil war unfolding between Myanmar's junta and the Arakan Army in Myanmar's Rakhine State on the one hand, and the Rohingya refugee crisis on the other. The civil war in Myanmar not only hindered the Rohingya repatriation process but also presented the risk of the conflict spilling over into Bangladesh [Fumagalli 2024]. In March 2023, a government delegation from Myanmar visited the Rohingya camp in Cox's Bazar under the bilateral pilot project underway, to verify returnees who had crossed the border into Bangladesh and then stayed over as a refugee [*Aljazeera* 2023, 15 March]. Under this pilot project, around 12,000 Rohingyas were supposed to be repatriated in 2023. However, cyclone Hamoon (October 2023) and the Myanmar civil war disrupted the process [Palma & Molla 2024, 29 January]. The civil war gave rise to tensions along the border in Naikhongchhari upazila of Bandarban district and Ukhiya upazila in Cox's Bazar district, spreading fear among Bangladeshi locals. Also, gunfire from Myanmar reached Bangladeshi boats, seriously disrupting communications between Teknaf upazila and Saint Martin Island in Bangladesh. Amid fighting in the Rakhine State, Myanmar's Border Guard Police (BGP), Army, and immigration officials crossed the border to take shelter in Bangladesh on numerous occasions. The recent influx of another 80,000 Rohingyas since August 2024 seeking shelter in Bangladesh caused concern to the Bangladeshi Government, as the country already hosted over one million Rohing-

ya refugees, whose exodus begun in 1978 and intensified since 2017 [*The Daily Star* 2025, 27 January]. Dhaka called upon Naypyidaw to ensure that its internal conflict does not reverberate onto Bangladesh [*The Daily Star* 2024, 10 November]. Since the Arakan Army took control of 271-kilometres border on the Myanmar side, the Bangladesh Home Adviser declared that Dhaka was continuing communication with both the Myanmar Government and the Arakan Army.

4.5. *Bangladesh's regional diplomacy*¹²

Bangladesh continued seeing its «regional diplomacy» in the broader Indo-Pacific region as an important tool to navigate power competition. In April 2023, Dhaka announced its 15-points Indo-Pacific outlook, emphasizing its commitment to a free, open, peaceful, secure, and inclusive Indo-Pacific and its impartiality vis-à-vis existing geopolitical tussles [*Prothom-Alo* 2023, 25 April]. However, experts considered Bangladesh's Indo-Pacific outlook to lack depth [Muniruzzaman 2023, 28 April].

Japan has been an important extra-regional partner in Bangladesh's diplomacy during both the Hasina regime and the Interim Government. Hasina's visit to Japan in early 2023 boosted cooperation in numerous areas such as agriculture, metro-rail, industrial up-gradation, ship-recycling, customs, intellectual property, defence, ICT and cyber security [*New Age* 2023, 9 May]. Japan also identified Bangladesh as one of the four countries with whom to deepen military ties under the Official Security Assistance (OSA) [Hasib 2023, 26 August]. After the regime change in Bangladesh, Japan remained a committed partner [*The Daily Star* 2024, 20 August]. The Interim Government's Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (Ec-nec), tasked with the review of large infrastructural projects, in relation to the Matarbari deep-sea port expressed a preference for a partnership with Japan rather than India or China, in a clear attempt to avoid taking sides in the context of Sino-Indian geopolitical competition in the Bay of Bengal.

In May 2023, then-Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen saw closer cooperation with the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) as beneficial to Bangladeshi interests [*The Business Standard* 2023, 25 May]. Similarly, Yunus placed emphasis on bolstering ties with South Asian countries like Nepal, Maldives, Pakistan, and Bhutan and on reviving the SAARC, for which Bangladesh, given its position, could serve as a bridge to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) [*Dhaka Tribune* 2024, 28 August]. The Interim Government defined the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) as an

12. In Bangladesh, the concept of «regional diplomacy» includes regional (South Asian) countries, regional groupings (e.g. the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)), and extra-regional countries located immediately beyond the boundaries of South Asia, such as Malaysia and the Gulf countries.

important mechanism for addressing environmental, climate, and youth issues at the regional level [*New Age* 2024, 28 October]. A landmark moments of Bangladesh's regional diplomacy occurred when United Arab Emirates President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed, upon request of Yunus, pardoned 57 Bangladeshi nationals who had been jailed for protesting against the AL Government during the July-August uprising while in the Gulf country, where political protests are illegal [*Dhaka Tribune* 2024, 3 September]. Bangladesh also received Malaysia's full support for national reforms called for by the Yunus Government during Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's short visit to Dhaka in October 2024 [*BdNews24* 2024, 5 October].

5. Conclusion

Of all the events which took place in relation to Bangladesh's domestic, economic, and foreign policy affairs in the years under review, the political upheavals of 2023 which then culminated in the 2024 Monsoon Revolution towered above all for their significance. Their implications can hardly be overstated: with Hasina's fleeing in exile and the formation of the Interim Government headed by Yunus, one of the many intellectuals and policy makers persecuted by the AL regime, a political phase in the history of the country ended and another one opened to the possibility of democratic restoration, fight against rampant corruption, and more equitable growth. Post-Revolution Bangladesh entered into this new phase with much of its population's hearts filled with hope and counting of widespread international support. At the same time, many challenges lied ahead. The new Government was faced with the difficult task of keeping morale and consensus high after having inherited a dire economic situation and the task of juggling a volatile political coalition. On the other hand, the Bangladeshi people and especially the youth who was at the forefront of the Revolution were faced with the challenge to tame tendencies to political polarization and extremism, so inherent to contemporary Bangladeshi political culture, and so dangerous for its prospects of peace and prosperity.

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