

BANGLADESH 2018: SHEIKH HASINA'S TRIUMPH

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Bangladesh's parliamentary elections, held on 30 December 2018, saw Sheikh Hasina's landslide victory. Hasina's fourth term and third consecutive mandate was a sign of undisputable continuity.

Throughout the year the government continued an intensive anticorruption campaign, started when the Awami League came back to power in 2009. As a result, at the beginning of 2018 the Bangladesh National Party's leader and former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia along with a number of party members were jailed.

The main opposition party was facing an unprecedented crisis, which did not necessarily depend on the government's anticorruption activity.

The economy continued to perform well and foreign policy took a more articulated shape, beyond a not always easy balance between India and China.

The Rohingya emergency alleviated, as the refugees' influx to Bangladesh significantly reduced, but hundreds of thousands of refugees were still living in camps and their future looked uncertain.

1. Introduction

At Bangladesh parliamentary elections held on 30 December 2018 Sheikh Hasina's Awami League won a landslide victory. On the one hand, the arrest of the incumbent prime minister's rival, Khaleda Zia, and of several other Bangladesh National Party (BNP) members silenced the opposition.¹ On the other hand, Bangladeshi voters apparently appreciated the government's capacity to foster economic growth and guarantee security. The allegations of voting irregularities were not enough to explain the Awami League's impressive victory, whose real reasons should be carefully analysed.

Sheikh Hasina aims to appear a secular leader and the champion of Bangladesh's development and democratization. However, her government has used an iron fist against the opposition and adopted controversial measures aimed at discouraging political dissent. Rather than a

1. 'Bangladesh court orders arrest of Khalida Zia for arson attack', *Economic Times*, 2 January 2018; 'Khaleda Zia jailed for five years in corruption case', *Al Jazeera*, 8 February 2008; 'Ex-Bangladesh PM Khaleda Zia Gets 7 Years In Jail In Corruption Case', *NDTV*, 29 October 2018; 'Khaleda Zia sentenced to 7 years in another graft case', *Economic Times*, 29 October 2018.

democracy, Bangladesh under the Awami League's rule appears to be a «hybrid regime», namely a state which, in spite of the existence of democratic structures such as elections, is fundamentally authoritarian. However, it is worth stressing that this kind of political system is increasingly catching on in Asia as the ideal formula to ensure political stability and economic development.²

Bangladesh's economic growth is considered, indeed, as the effect of political stability and the main factor of the government's broad consensus.

As far as foreign policy is concerned, Bangladesh continued to carry out a regional policy in balance between its two powerful neighbours, India and China.

The Rohingya crisis, sparked in 2017,³ received much less attention from domestic and international media, but, although alleviated in 2018, still persisted. Whereas the refugees' influx diminished, an estimated 693,000 Rohingya were still in Bangladesh in April 2018⁴ and only a few of them accepted the proposal of a safe return to Myanmar at the end of the year.⁵

2. *The government's iron fist against the BNP*

In 2018 the BNP faced the worst leadership crisis in its history. On 2 January 2018 the court ordered Khaleda Zia's arrest as the instigator of the bomb attack on a bus that killed eight people during anti-government protests in Comilla in 2015.⁶

Just the day before, the prosecutors demanded the death sentence for Zia's son and BNP leader Tarique Rahman,⁷ who lives in exile in London, and for four other people for their alleged involvement in cases of murder and bomb attacks. Rahman is also accused of masterminding an attack in

2. 'Democracy decaying in Bangladesh', *East Asia Forum*, 6 March 2018. See also Nisha Sharmeen Ali, 'Bangladesh: Democracy Stumbles', *The Diplomat*, 6 December 2013.

3. On the Rohingya crisis in Bangladesh, Marzia Casolari, 'Bangladesh 2017: The Rohingya's carnage', *Asia Maior 2017*, pp. 245-266.

4. 'Rohingya crisis' (https://www.unicef.org/emergencies/bangladesh_100945.html).

5. Anna Ellis-Petersen, Shaikh Azizur Rahman, Michael Safi, 'Bangladesh admits no Rohingya willing to take repatriation offer', *The Guardian*, 15 November 2018.

6. 'Bangladesh court orders arrest of Khalida Zia for arson attack', *The Economic Times*, 2 January 2018. Regarding the BNP involvement in 2015 riots and the bus attacks, see Marzia Casolari, 'Bangladesh 2015: The Emergence of Radical Islam', *Asia Maior 2015*, pp. 313 and 315-316.

7. The party named Tarique Rahman its acting chairman the day after Khaleda Zia's arrest: 'Bangladesh opposition names Zia's son acting head', *Daily Mail*, 9 February 2018.

2004, when ten grenades were thrown on a peaceful rally organised by the Awami League, then in opposition.⁸

Khaleda Zia is facing several charges in different courts for stirring up the protracted violent protests of 2015, where 125 people were killed, and for publicly expressing doubts regarding the casualty figures of the 1971 Liberation War against Pakistan.

The former prime minister and her son were also facing several charges of graft.⁹ On 8 February 2018 Khaleda Zia was sentenced to five years imprisonment charged with embezzling about Tk 21 million (approximately US\$ 252,000). The sum came from foreign donations intended for a charity named after Ziaur Rahman, Bangladesh's former president and Khaleda's husband, and it was supposed to be employed to finance an orphanage. The crime was committed under Khaleda Zia's tenure as prime minister, between 2001 and 2006.¹⁰

This sentence was considered politically motivated, aimed at preventing Khaled Zia from challenging Sheikh Hasina in the elections and at silencing the BNP.¹¹ However the case was filed by the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) in 2008, when the nonelected nonpartisan caretaker government - whose members neither represented any political party, nor were allowed to contest the elections - was in power, tasked with preparing that year's elections. It is also worth noting that the case took ten years to close.¹²

Apparently, the Zia Orphanage Trust case was just the tip of the iceberg, since the sum for which Khaleda and her son had been convicted was only a small part of the suspected wealth accumulated by Khaleda Zia's eldest son, often from invisible income sources, during the two decades of his mother's political engagement.¹³

Corruption is a rampant problem in Bangladesh and the Zia Orphanage case was the occasion for the government to demonstrate to the country

8. Hasina barely escaped the attack, but sustained permanent partial hearing loss. 'Bangladesh court orders arrest'; 'Bangladesh prosecutors seek death for opposition leader's son', *Gulf Times*, 1 January 2018; 'Bangladesh court hands life sentence to acting opposition party chief over 2004 blasts', *Reuters*, 10 October 2018. In the attack 24 people lost their lives and about 300 were injured.

9. 'Khaleda Zia jailed'; 'Ex-Bangladesh PM Khaleda Zia Gets 7 Years', *NDTV*, 29 October 2018; 'Khaleda Zia sentenced to 7 years'; Marzia Casolari, 'Bangladesh 2014: Old Patterns, New Trends', *Asia Major* 2014, pp. 227.

10. 'Bangladesh Parliamentary Election December 2018', *GlobalSecurity.org*, without date; 'Khaleda Zia jailed'.

11. 'Khaleda Zia jailed'; 'Bangladesh opposition parties including BNP to contest election', *Reuters*, 11 November 2018; Smruti S. Pattanaik, 'Can Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) Overcome the Leadership Crisis?', *Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA)*, 15 February 2018; 'The conviction of Khaleda Zia hobbles Bangladesh's opposition', *The Economist*, 8 February 2018, online edition.

12. 'BNP in crisis, not country: Quader', *The Daily Star*, 9 February 2018; 'On corruption and Punishment', *Daily Sun*, 10 February 2018.

13. *Ibid.*

that it was taking the problem seriously and putting in practice the principle «equal justice for all»,¹⁴ irrespective of political affiliation or social position. Of course, in doing this, the Sheikh Hasina-led government was also able to thwart the opposition. In fact, under Bangladesh's Constitution anyone jailed for more than two years cannot contest an election for five years.¹⁵ This conveniently excluded Khaleda Zia from the 2018 election. The BNP then considered boycotting the vote, as it did in 2014.¹⁶

After rejecting the decision of the lower court to free Khaleda Zia on bail for four months on 19 March 2018, in May the Supreme Court reconsidered this response, after Zia's lawyers requested her release for health reasons.¹⁷ This decision was a wise compromise with the opposition, since it could open the door to the BNP's participation in the elections.¹⁸ In fact, had the BNP boycotted the general election for the second time, its registration with the Election Commission would have been cancelled, preventing it from contesting any further parliamentary polls.¹⁹ The ruling party was concerned about another boycott, which could have taken the country back to the 2013 unrest and affected its stability, with great damage to Bangladesh's economy.²⁰

14. *Ibid.* Corruption is a devastating problem in Bangladesh and the government passed several laws to address it, especially after 2004, when the ACC was established. Public servants found to be guilty of corruption are punished under the Government Servants (Discipline and Appeal) Rules, 1976, under Section 161 of the Penal Code, 1860 and under the Prevention of Corruption Act (PCA), 1947. Section 5 of the PCA establishes that «if a public servant is found in possession of pecuniary resources or property in excess of his own or her declared sources of income and he or she fails to submit to the court a satisfactory explanation for the possession of such property, the person may be sentenced to a prison term extending up to seven years, and the property may be confiscated by the State». A list of relevant Bangladeshi Law on corruption is in 'Business ethics and anticorruption laws: Bangladesh' (www.northonrosefulbright.com). Regarding anti-corruption laws and the role of ACC, see Marzia Casolari, 'Bangladesh 2014', pp. 226-227. What the Bangladeshi government did in 2018 was upholding existing laws.

15. 'Khaleda Zia jailed for five years'; 'Bangladesh prime minister denies'; Smriti S. Pattanaik, 'Can Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) Overcome the Leadership Crisis?'

16. 'Bangladesh ex-PM gets bail; party to consider poll boycott', *Reuters*, 12 March 2018.

17. 'Bangladesh Parliamentary Election'; Bangladesh court orders release of opposition leader Khaleda Zia', *The New Indian Express*, 16 May 2018.

18. 'Bangladesh ex-PM gets bail'.

19. 'Will BNP contest polls without Khaleda?', *Dhaka Tribune*, 8 August 2018.

20. 'Bangladesh ex-PM gets bail'. Regarding 2014 riots and their consequences, see Marzia Casolari, 'Bangladesh in fiamme: dallo scontro politico alla guerriglia urbana', *Asia Maior 2013*, pp. 167-180.

3. The 2018 parliamentary elections

The 11th parliamentary elections were held as scheduled before the end of 2018 and took place on 30 December, in spite of Khaleda Zia's objections and the BNP's attempts to postpone the date.²¹

The coalition led by the ruling Awami League obtained 96% of the vote and 288 of the 298 seats of Bangladesh's one chamber parliament.²² Voter turnout was 80%.²³

The date of the polls was announced only on 8 November. Initially it was scheduled for 23 December, but on 12 November it was postponed to 30 December.²⁴ The opposition demanded to defer the polls by a month and wanted a caretaker government to administer the election process, but the government refused any postponement and rejected the request of a caretaker government as unconstitutional.²⁵

21. 'Elections will not wait for anyone', *The Daily Star*, 6 January 2018.

22. 'Bangladesh's Sheikh Hasina set for landslide win as opposition demands new vote', *Dawn*, 30 December 2018; 'Bangladesh PM Hasina wins thumping victory in elections opposition reject as «farical»', *The Guardian*, 31 December 2018.

23. 'Bangladesh PM Hasina wins thumping victory', *ibid.*

24. 'Polls now on December 30', *The Daily Star*, 13 November 2018.

25. 'Bangladesh election campaign begins without an opposition candidate to challenge Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina', *South China Morning Post*, 10 December 2018; 'Bangladesh opposition parties including BNP'. The first caretaker government was introduced in Bangladesh to ensure free and fair parliamentary elections during the delicate transition from Hussain Muhammad Ershad's authoritarian government to democracy in 1991. It was adopted as a permanent arrangement by the Thirteenth Amendment of the Constitution, under opposition pressure during the BNP government. The caretaker government should be a non-political and non-partisan government, but it is a difficult task in any country to find neutral people to take up such government responsibilities in sensitive moments for the nation. The Thirteenth Amendment identified the president in charge as responsible for the caretaker government. This arrangement has at least two problems: the first is that a president is never a neutral person, but is the expression of a political party and has his own political persuasion; the second problem is that according to the Thirteenth Amendment 11 advisers are responsible only to the president, while the latter has absolute control over the defence forces. These are the features of a presidential and not a parliamentary form of government. The Thirteenth Amendment conferred absolute powers on the president. Considering that in 2007 the caretaker government was backed by the military and it took more than a year to finalise the electoral process, in Bangladesh there is a serious risk that, paradoxically, a caretaker government instead of being non-partisan, becomes dictatorial. It is therefore understandable why in 2011 the Awami League's government introduced the Fifteenth Amendment, aimed at eliminating the Thirteenth Amendment and, accordingly, the caretaker government system. Regarding the caretaker government in Bangladesh, see Shahjahan Hafez Bhuiyan, 'The Caretaker Government in Bangladesh: An Appraisal of its Formation', *Politics, Administration, and Change*, No. 40, July-December 2003, pp. 33-51. About the elimination of the caretaker government, see Marzia Casolari, 'Bangladesh. Crescita economica e mutamenti sociali in un paese «nuovo»: un bilancio', *Asia Maior 2011*, pp. 234-235.

Before the election, the Awami League formed a coalition, the Grand Alliance, which included 14 parties with liberal democratic and leftist leanings, some of them belonging to liberal political Islam²⁶ and others with liberal-democratic and republican leanings. A number of hard-core leftist parties²⁷ (including the Communist Party of Bangladesh), the Trinamool BNP,²⁸ founded in November 2018 by a group of BNP's dissidents, and the Jatiya Party of former military dictator Hussain Muhammad Ershad joined this heterogeneous coalition as well.²⁹ Paradoxically, the Jatiya Party joined the Awami League's camp, although it was in opposition in the parliament.³⁰

The BNP participated in the election with a coalition of 20 parties.³¹ It included the United National Alliance (UNA) and the Jatiya Oikya Prokriya, or Jatiya Oikya Front (National Unity Front). Rather than proper parties, they were blocks of parties or conglomerate parties, formed by 58 and 20 bodies respectively.³²

The Jamaat-e-Islami, the BNP's historical ally, did not contest the elections, since its status as a political party was revoked in 2013.³³

From the ideological point of view, there was no meaningful difference between the two camps: the BNP-led coalition was certainly more

26. 'Awami League to form new grand alliance', *Dhaka Tribune*, 23 October 2018. Some of the Islamic parties within the coalition are the Islamic Front Bangladesh, the Zaker Party and the Sammilita Jote, that share the ideals of what can be defined as liberal political Islam and oppose the Jamaat e-Islami (JI) as the BNP's main ally and for being responsible for the 1971 massacre. To know more about these parties, see 'Islamist party prefers AL-led alliance over JaPa', *Dhaka Tribune*, 4 May 2017; Anwar A. Khan, 'Sammilita Sangskritik Jote: A magnificent cultural organization for Bangladesh', *The Asian Age*, part 1-3, 24 and 31 July, 2 August 2018; further information can be found at the party's website: <http://zakerpartybd.com>.

27. They are Ganatantrik Andolan, the Ganatantrik Jote and the newly founded Bam Ganatantrik Jote, the Jago Dal, the Ekamot Andolon, the Krishak Sramik Janata League: 'Awami League to form'. Unfortunately, at present it is not possible to describe the features and reconstruct the history of Bangladesh's political parties, due to lack of available sources and information. The existing literature focuses on political and electoral processes, rather than tracing the history of Bangladesh's party system or describing their programmes.

28. 'Nazmul Huda's Trinamool BNP, eight other parties «joining» Awami League-led coalition', *bdnews24.com*, 19 July 2018.

29. 'Awami League to form'.

30. The Jatiya Party joined a coalition led by the Awami League also in the 2008 election: 'Mega alliance in the making', *The Daily Star*, 14 November 2018.

31. 'BNP-led 20-Party Alliance to participate in the election', *Dhaka Tribune*, 11 November 2018.

32. 'BNP confirms more of its candidates as it shares nominations for seats with allies', *bdnews24.com*, 22 August 2018; 'Politics may see new polarization', *The Daily Star*, 21 October 2018; 'Bangladesh opposition parties including BNP'.

33. 'Jamaat e-Islami stripped of right to contest Bangladesh elections', *bdnews24.com*, 29 October 2018; 'Bangladeshi court bans Islamist party from elections', *The Guardian*, 1 August 2013.

conservative, since it included Islamic radical parties like the Jamaat-e-Islami, the Khelafat Majlish and the Jamiyate Ulamaye Islam, that advocated the Islamisation of the state. But the same coalition included also parties like the Krishak Sramik Janata League (Peasants' and Workers' People's League), presided by Kader Siddique, who fought the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971 as a militant of the Mukti Bahini, the guerilla freedom fighters.³⁴

To give an example of the contradictions of the Bangladeshi political scene, the Jatiya Oikya Front was formed by four main parties: the Gono Forum (also spelled Gano Forum), which originated from a split of the Awami League;³⁵ the Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD), with socialist ideals; the already-mentioned Krishak Sramik Janata League; the Nagorik Oikya, founded in 2012 by Mahmudur Rahman Manna, former organizer secretary of the Awami League.³⁶

The Jatiya Oikya Front and the Gono Forum were founded by Kamal Hossain (aged 82). One of the nation's founding fathers and a member of the Bangladesh Constituent Assembly, he was considered the champion of secular democracy in Bangladesh.³⁷

The Khelafat Majlish, for instance, in 2006 allied with the Awami League³⁸. Paradoxically, now these parties sit on opposite sides in the parliament.

The political situation in Bangladesh has traditionally been contradictory and fluctuating, with parties shifting very easily from one camp to the other. As already pointed out, most leaders of the main parties now allied with the BNP in the past have been linked to the Awami League.

Titled «Bangladesh on march towards poverty», the 2018 electoral manifesto of the Awami League was based on the party's declaration at the national conference in 2016; «building a developed and digital Bangladesh» was its vision. Development was indeed the key subject of the Awami League electoral campaign: building up the blue economy, developing information and technology, fostering youth education and fighting malnutrition were its key objectives. The party pledged to carry out mega infrastructural projects, develop energy and mineral sectors, and improve youth employment. Freedom from poverty, terrorism, political extremism and corruption were its long term goals. More concretely, the party promised to create jobs for 10 million youths, to increase the GDP rate of growth from 7.8% to 10%, to bring the poverty rate from 22% to zero by 2041, to take measures to protect the

34. 'Valour of three teenage freedom fighters', *The Daily Star*, 26 March 2018. Kader Siddique was 15 when he fought in the Liberation War.

35. 'Two decades of Gono Forum', *Probenews*, 4 February 2012.

36. 'Nagorik Oikya is now a political party', *The Daily Star*, 2 June 2017.

37. 'In Bangladesh, a Secular Icon and the Centre-Right Opposition Join Hands', *The Wire*, 14 October 2018.

38. 'Hasina warns of plot against AL', *New Age*, 24 June 2007.

minorities and formulate a media friendly law, aimed at preventing the misuse of information and promoting a journalism «loyal to social liabilities».³⁹

The BNP's electoral manifesto focused on politics, justice, development and social equality. Strengthening democracy, protecting freedom of speech and expression and ensuring the independence of the judiciary were the key issues, but there was no reference to the economy. The party promised to scrap what it defined «the black laws», like the Digital Security Act, the Special Powers Act and the Official Secrets Act. Unfortunately, the BNP had already made the promise to scrap the Special Powers Act in 2001 and, when it was in power, did not maintain its promise.⁴⁰ The BNP pledged to stop extrajudicial killings, a practice that began under its government, in 2001-2006. It also promised freedom of speech, expression and information, although it was the BNP government which enacted the Information Technology Act in 2006, containing a clause that seriously compromised the freedom of information.⁴¹

The pre-electoral period was very tense: since the announcement of the ballot, on 8 November and up to the election day, the official death toll was 21. Activists of both sides complained of attacks on supporters and candidates. Only in the capital the voting was largely peaceful, due to the massive deployment of security.⁴²

Violence marred the election day, when at least 17 people were killed in clashes between the police, BNP's and Awami League's supporters, in spite of tight security measures and 600,000 troops deployed across the country.⁴³

When the results of the elections were declared, controversy broke out. The opposition accused the ruling party of vote rigging, reporting stuffed ballots and intimidations in 221 of 300 polling stations. The BNP branded the polls as «farcical» and urged the Election Commission to void the results. Khaleda Zia announced that the five elected BNP members would not take the oath.⁴⁴ On the other side, though the polls were still not closed the opposition declared it would reject the results of the elections.⁴⁵

39. 'Awami League finalizes election manifesto', *Dhaka Tribune*, 24 November 2018; 'AL vows to make media friendly law', *bssnews.net*, 18 December 2018; 'Election pledges: Awami League manifesto. View our mistakes with kindness', *The Daily Star*, 19 December 2018.

40. 'Election pledges: BNP manifesto. No black laws, no revenge', *The Daily Star*, 19 December 2018.

41. *Ibid.* Section 57 of the Act provides for the punishment of a maximum jail term of 14 years for the deliberate publication and transmission in printed or electronic form of false or obscene material. But an authoritarian government can use a similar provision to limit the freedom of the press, as actually happened in Bangladesh, during both governments: 'The trap of Section 57', *The Daily Star*, 7 July 2017.

42. 'Bangladesh's Sheikh Hasina set for landslide win'.

43. *Ibid.*; 'Bangladesh PM Hasina wins thumping victory'.

44. 'Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to form new cabinet', *China Daily*, 3 January 2019.

45. 'Bangladesh PM Hasina wins thumping victory'.

In spite of the opposition's claims, the Election Commission reported only a few allegations of irregularities.⁴⁶ Hasina denied the allegations, defining the election «totally free and independent» and rejected the call for a fresh vote, requested by the opposition.⁴⁷

The 71 year old Sheikh Hasina secured a record fourth term and third consecutive mandate, ushering in a new phase of stability.

The elected members of parliament were sworn in on 3 January, while Prime Minister Hasina was expected to form the new cabinet by 10 January 2019.⁴⁸

4. *The reasons of the Awami League's success and the BNP's crisis*

Domestic and international media criticised the Awami League and Sheikh Hasina for being increasingly authoritarian and intolerant of dissent, for cracking down on the opposition with objectionable means and for human rights abuse. They labelled Bangladesh as a «one party democracy».⁴⁹ The prosecution of Khaleda Zia and her son was considered as the main cause of the BNP's crisis and defeat.⁵⁰

However, explaining the landslide election results in favour of the Awami League only as the result of vote-rigging, intimidation and repression would be simplistic. This is not to deny all these factors, but they alone are not enough to understand what was going on in Bangladesh. Similarly, explaining the BNP's leadership crisis only on the basis of its chiefs' troubles with the law is also simplistic.

Defining Bangladesh as a «one party democracy» is inappropriate: Bangladesh parliamentary politics are based on a multiparty system; the point is

46. 'Bangladesh's Sheikh Hasina set for landslide win'; 'Bangladesh prime minister denies accusations of rigged vote', *The Washington Post*, 31 December 2018; 'Bangladesh PM Hasina wins thumping victory', *ibid.*

47. 'Bangladesh PM Hasina wins thumping victory', *ibid.*

48. 'Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to form new cabinet'.

49. 'Why Bangladesh's landslide election result is bad for its democracy', *The Washington Post*, 31 December 2018.

50. 'Bangladesh ex-PM gets bail', *ibid.*; 'Bangladesh's Sheikh Hasina set for landslide win'; 'Bangladesh PM Hasina wins thumping victory'; 'Bangladesh Elections: Choice of «Lesser of Two Evils», Voters Say', *The New York Times*, 29 December 2018; 'Bangladesh elections 2018: What you need to know', *Al Jazeera*, 29 December 2018; 'Bangladesh Votes Today, Sheikh Hasina Seeks Fourth Term As Prime Minister', *NDTV*, 30 December 2018; 'Why Bangladesh's landslide election result is bad', *ibid.*; 'Bangladesh elections: Sheikh Hasina's party wins large majority amid accusations of vote-rigging', *The Independent*, 31 December 2018; 'A disputed election and a dangerous new era for Bangladesh' politics', *CNN*, 1 January 2019. A bitter comment came also from the British government, through the Foreign and Commonwealth minister Mark Field: 'Minister for Asia statement on Bangladesh elections', www.gov.uk, 1 January 2019.

rather how parties form alliances.⁵¹ The reasons of the Awami League's success and the BNP's failure lie with their respective capacity to attract political allies. From the pre-election dynamic it was clear that the Awami League's formula, almost entirely based on the country's development and economic growth, was much more attractive than the BNP's. The Awami League proved to be more capable to represent the interests of Bangladeshi economic sectors. It is no coincidence, in fact, that three of Bangladesh's biggest tycoons were connected to the Awami League. The first one, Syed Abul Hossain, has been a member of Bangladeshi parliament since 1991 and served as minister of the State Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives between 2009 and 2012.⁵² Hossain is the founder of SAHCO International Ltd, a company that has worked since 1975 in infrastructural works, industrial and urban development, trading, construction, information technology and telecommunication, power, land and water management.⁵³

The second tycoon, Salman Fazlur Rahman, is vice chairman of the Beximco Group (Bangladesh Export Import Company Limited). Founded in 1970, Beximco is the largest conglomerate in Bangladesh and one of the largest textile producers in Asia, listed on the London Stock Exchange. The brand has investments across a wide range of other fields, including marine food, construction, information and communication technology, hotel management and trading.⁵⁴ Rahman is also the president of the Association of Television Channel Owners (ATCO).⁵⁵ From 2009 to the present, Rahman has been serving as the private sector development affairs adviser to Awami League President and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina; this in spite of previous charges of corruption and fraud, in 1996 and 2007, which put him in jail for one year between 2007 and 2008, when he was granted bail.⁵⁶

The third tycoon, Sajeeb Wazed, Harvard-educated son of Sheikh Hasina, is the president of the US-based Wazed Consulting Inc. and honorary, unpaid ICT prime minister's adviser.⁵⁷

51. Rounaq Jahan, 'Political Parties, Movements, Elections and Democracy in Bangladesh', Gyantapas Abdur Razzaq Distinguished Lecture, 27 January 2018.

52. 'Abul Hossain: Allegations against me were completely lies', *Dhaka Tribune*, 12 February 2017.

53. See the official site of SAHCO International Ltd, at www.sahco.biz

54. 'All to know about Salman F Rahman', *Corporate Bangladesh*, 4 January 2018. See also Beximco's official site: www.beximcoltd.com. Besides being listed among the world's billionaires, Rahman is described also as a visionary and a philanthropist.

55. 'Salman F Rahman new ATCO president', *The Independent*, 22 May 2017.

56. 'All to know about Salman F Rahman'; 'Salman F. Rahman remains Sheikh Hasina's adviser', *bdnews24.com*, 6 November 2016; 'Salman Rahman freed on bail', *The Daily Star*, 28 August 2008; 'Bangladesh's Other Banking Scam', *The New York Times*, 11 April 2016.

57. 'Joy appointed as honorary ICT adviser to PM', *Prothom Alo*, 20 November 2014; 'Joy reappointed as PM's honorary ICT adviser', *Dhaka Tribune*, 15 January 2019.

The above are just examples of the strict connection between politics and business in Bangladesh. Over the years, patronage has replaced ideology as a means of building consensus.⁵⁸ Patron-client relations continue to be the «cornerstone»⁵⁹ of politics and society in Bangladesh, but they do not represent a mechanism to «further the interests of the party in power» anymore.⁶⁰ Rather, the opposite is true. Today, to take power the parties must further the interests of economic players. In recent years, the Awami League has been able to do that better than its rivals.

Besides these factors, there are other reasons of the BNP's crisis, intrinsic to the party's story. Patronage is the main cause of the BNP's crisis, although it is endemic amongst all parties. The BNP became eager to grab state power and resources, which it succeeded in doing by building up an extensive patron-client network. However this was a process that could not but increase corruption, in its extreme forms: criminalisation and political violence.⁶¹

Tarique Rahman's case is a typical example: he was prosecuted for political murder and is believed to be the most corrupt politician in Bangladesh, blamed also by his party fellows for being responsible for the BNP's political disaster.⁶²

58. But not in the way described by David Lewis. See his, *Bangladesh. Politics, Economy and Civil Society*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011, pp. 90-108.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 99.

60. *Ibid.*, p. 107.

61. Rounaq Jahan, 'Political Parties in Bangladesh', *CPD-CMI Working Paper*, 8 August 2014, pp. 2 and 59. CPD and CMI are Center for Policy Dialogue, Dhaka, and Chr. Michelsen Institute, Bergen, Norway, respectively.

62. 'Tarique Rahman's unending hunger – he wants money from everyone', *Blitz*, 21 December 2018. It is very complex to reconstruct the intricate system of corruption managed by the Zia family and its entourage. The period 2001-2006, when Khaleda Zia was in power, is considered the darkest period in Bangladesh's history. Arafat Rahman Koko, Khaleda's youngest son, was charged for laundering approximately US\$ 2 million, including US\$ 180,000 from Siemens, through US and Singapore bank accounts. Both brothers were arrested in 2007. Siemens admitted to having bribed also the minister of Telecommunications Aminul Haque, in charge between 2001 and 2006. Haque was sentenced in 2007 to 31 years of prison for supporting the Jama'ul Mujahideen Bangladesh, responsible for the elimination of political opponents: David Montero, 'Bangladesh. Following the Siemens Bribery Trail', *jbs*, 1 April 2009. Also the FBI investigated bribery and money laundering activities of Tarique Rahman and BNP's vice-chairman Giasuddin Al Mamun, who received US\$ 750,000 from Nirman Construction Ltd. and from the Chinese Harbin Engineering Company. Tarique Rahman was sentenced to seven years imprisonment and a fine of Tk 200 million in 2016. These are just the main corruption cases involving the Rahman brothers, a number of other cases involved Khaleda Zia and several BNP politicians: 'Corruption of Zia Family and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)', *Bangladesh Awami League*, ([http://www.albd.org/articles/news/31472/Corruption-of-Zia-Family-and-Bangladesh-Nationalist-Party-\(BNP\)](http://www.albd.org/articles/news/31472/Corruption-of-Zia-Family-and-Bangladesh-Nationalist-Party-(BNP))), 6 February 2018.

According to the American Embassy in Dhaka

His [Tarique Rahman's] theft of millions of dollars in public money has undermined political stability in this moderate Muslim-majority nation and subverted U.S. attempt to foster a stable democratic government, a key objective in this strategically important region. [...] Embassy Dhaka has three key priorities for Bangladesh: democratisation, development, and denial of space for terrorists. Tarique's audaciously corrupt activities jeopardize all three. [...] In short, much of what is wrong in Bangladesh can be blamed on Tarique and his cronies.⁶³

On the basis of these considerations, the American Embassy suggested suspending Tarique Rahman's visa for the United States.⁶⁴ *

In the year under review, BNP appeared to be in the midst of the worst crisis in its history, second only to the one caused by Ziaur Rahman's assassination (30 May 1981), with its charismatic leader, Khaleda Zia, in jail and many of its senior leaders facing criminal charges. The acting chairman, Tarique Rahman, from his London exile, could not easily lead the party, which was left drifting.⁶⁵

5. *The economy*

In 2017-2018 Bangladesh's economy grew 7.86%, overcoming the provisional estimate of 7.65%. Industry grew 12.06%, the services 6.39% and agriculture 4.19%.⁶⁶ In 2018 Bangladesh's GDP surpassed Pakistan's and is likely to surpass India's by 2020.⁶⁷ Since Bangladesh's economy start-

63. Telegram from the American Embassy in Dhaka to the Secretary of State, 8 November 2018 (https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08DHAKA1143_a.html). The document contains an extensive and very detailed description of the crimes committed by Tarique Rahman, the multi-million «ill-gotten» wealth he accumulated, his habit of frequently demanding bribes from businessmen in connection with government procurements, his «systematic pattern of extortion», also involving foreign firms, and the manipulation of judicial process.

64. *Ibid.*

65. Smruti S. Pattanaik, 'Can Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) Overcome the Leadership Crisis?'

66. 'GDP growth reaches 7.86pc in final count', *The Daily Star*, 19 September 2018.

67. World Economic Forum, *This is what you need to know about Bangladesh's remarkable economic rise*, April 2018; 'At current rates, Bangladesh could top India's per capita income by 2020', *Business Standard*, 28 May 2018; 'Bangladesh may surpass India in three years', *The Financial Express*, 30 May 2018; 'Why is Bangladesh's economy booming?', *livemint*, 25 April 2018.

ed to rise in 2006, its GDP growth has exceeded Pakistan's of about 2.5% per year, while Bangladesh's population growth is 1.1% per year, compared to Pakistan's 2.5%.⁶⁸

Bangladesh's poverty rate stands at 21.8% and extreme poverty at 11.3%, against 23.1% and 12.1% respectively, in 2017; the government is expecting to bring it to zero by 2030. Per capita income in 2018 was US\$ 1,751.⁶⁹

Today Bangladesh's economy is among the fastest growing economies in the developing world, underpinned by strong domestic demand and structural transformation, aiming to create more and better jobs, boost private investment, diversify exports, build human capital, and create a business-friendly environment.⁷⁰

In spite of the recovery in garment exports and remittances, the deficit has increased because of the rise in imports. Account and fiscal deficits are expected to increase, although the risks of external and public debt distress are low. Inflation is expected to accelerate due to the increase of global commodity prices.⁷¹

Commenting on the election results, most media connected Hasina's victory to the country's impressive economic growth, relating it to political stability, which they described as fruit of authoritarian and repressive methods.⁷² Bangladesh's economic rise is therefore generally considered as the most meaningful result of an authoritarian and stable political system.

However, a more likely cause of Bangladesh's remarkable economic growth appears to be the progressive social policies carried out in recent years, namely education, of girls in particular, healthcare and female empowerment.⁷³

At the moment of writing, Bangladesh's integration in the global financial chain and supply markets is still limited; therefore the country does not appear to be totally immune from the effects of possible disruptive events, like negative financial market trends, increased trade protectionism, escalating geopolitical tensions, volatility in oil prices. These factors can have negative effects on global economic growth and, consequently, on Bangladesh's export prospects.⁷⁴

68. 'This is what you need to know'; 'Why is Bangladesh's economy booming?'

69. 'GDP growth reaches 7.86pc'.

70. The World Bank, *Bangladesh Development Update. Powering the economy efficiently*, 1 October 2018, p. VII.

71. *Ibid.*, pp. VII and IX.

72. 'Bangladesh election: Sheikh Hasina heads for tainted victory', *The Guardian*, 27 December 2018; 'Bangladesh election: PM Sheikh Hasina wins landslide in disputed vote', *BBC News*, 31 December 2018; 'Bangladesh's Sheikh Hasina set for landslide win'; 'Bangladesh PM Hasina wins thumping victory'; 'Bangladesh prime minister denies accusations'.

73. 'This is what you need to know'; 'Why is Bangladesh's economy booming?'

74. The World Bank, *Bangladesh Development Update*, pp. 22-23.

In order to reduce possible downward risks, the top policy priorities remain creating more and better jobs by enhancing private investment, building human capital, diversifying exports, improving financial and economic governance and enhancing infrastructural investment, especially in electricity supply, since energy efficiency is an essential condition for industrial growth.⁷⁵

6. Foreign policy

As noted by the analyst Ishrat Hossain of the University of Oxford: «As the strategic rivalry between India and China intensifies, Bangladesh increasingly finds itself embroiled in a great game along the Indian Ocean».⁷⁶ The escalation of India-China rivalry in the region has made Bangladesh a key battleground and has shaped Narendra Modi's foreign policy initiatives, like «Act East» and «Neighbourhood First».⁷⁷ Although the former is being labelled as the «old Look East wine put in a new bottle»,⁷⁸ it contains some innovations, introduced by the «Modi Doctrine».

The ambitious projects of the Indian prime minister aim to integrate South Asia with both Western Asia and Eastern Africa.⁷⁹ As the whole of South Asia is included in this frame, Bangladesh plays a key role in this geopolitical design.

The «Neighbourhood First» policy gives topmost priority to India's relations with neighbouring countries. India is aware that if it does not improve its relations with its neighbours, it will pave the way to China's growing influence in the region.⁸⁰

Bangladesh's relations with India warmed up when Sheikh Hasina came to power in 2009 and intensified after Narendra Modi's rise in 2014.⁸¹ Narendra Modi warmly welcomed Sheikh Hasina's electoral victory.⁸² In his

75. *Ibid.*, pp. VII, IX, 26-33.

76. Ishrat Hossain, 'Bangladesh balances between big brothers China and India', *East Asia Forum*, 6 June 2018.

77. *Ibid.*

78. *Ibid.*

79. Sudhanshu Tripathi, 'Why India is switching from a Look East to an Act East policy', *Asia Times*, 15 June 2017.

80. Vinay Kaura, 'Grading India's Neighbourhood Diplomacy', *The Diplomat*, 1 January 2018.

81. For an overview of Bangladesh-India relations in Modi's era, see Marzia Casolari, 'Bangladesh 2014', pp. 230-233; Marzia Casolari, 'Bangladesh 2015', pp. 336-338; Marzia Casolari, 'Bangladesh 2016', pp. 293-295; Marzia Casolari, 'Bangladesh 2017', pp. 261-262.

82. 'PM Modi congratulates Sheikh Hasina on landslide victory in Bangladesh elections', *India Today*, 31 December 2018; 'Delhi congratulates Dhaka for «successful elections»', *Dhaka Tribune*, 31 December 2018.

message to the Bangladeshi prime minister, Modi reiterated the importance India attaches to Bangladesh as a close partner for regional cooperation and as the central pillar of India's «Neighbourhood First» policy. However, in spite of bilateral cordial relations, the agreement on the sharing of the Teesta River waters is yet to be signed.⁸³

In April 2018 the Bangladeshi prime minister visited India: the Indian government used this occasion to announce a new credit line of US\$ 4.5 billion for Bangladesh and US\$ 500 million for Bangladesh's purchase of Indian defence hardware.⁸⁴

Bangladesh plays a key role in India's counterterrorism strategy.⁸⁵ The first joint training exercise at the transnational level under BIMSTEC-Milex 2018 took place in Pune (10-16 September 2018), with the participation of troops of all member states, except Nepal and Thailand, which sent observers.⁸⁶

Bangladesh is also the gateway for India's regional initiatives, namely the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC).⁸⁷ At the 4th BIMSTEC summit, held in Kathmandu on 30 and 31 August 2018, a MoU was signed on the establishment of the BIMSTEC Grid Interconnection to enhance energy cooperation among the seven member states.⁸⁸

From being the keystone of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in South Asia, recently Bangladesh has become the second largest importer of Chinese arms after Pakistan.⁸⁹ A huge contract for the supply of 23 Hogdu K-8W training aircraft to the Bangladesh Air Force was signed in Dhaka on 20 June. The amount of the deal was more than US\$ 200 million.⁹⁰

As far as the BRI is concerned, of the three planned mega projects, only the Payra coal power plant is under construction, while the Dhaka-Jessore railway and the Karnaphuli underwater tunnel are in the project phase.⁹¹

Bangladesh's foreign policy has been evolving: its engagement goes beyond relations with the traditional partners (India, China, Japan, UK,

83. Vinay Kaura, 'Grading India's Neighborhood Diplomacy'; Marzia Casolari, Bangladesh 2017, pp. 261-262.

84. Vinay Kaura, 'Grading India's Neighbourhood Diplomacy'.

85. *Ibid.*

86. 'MILEX-18: First military exercise of BIMSTEC countries held in Pune', *GKToday*, 11 September 2018 'Bimstec Milex 2018: Camaraderie, counter-terrorism operations on strong footing', *Hindustan Times*, 19 September 2018. The BIMSTEC countries include Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Nepal and Bhutan.

87. *Ibid.*

88. '4th BIMSTEC Summit concludes', *Economic Times*, 31 August 2018; Nazia Hussain, 'Can BIMSTEC Finally Become Relevant?', *The Diplomat*, 2 November 2018.

89. Ishrat Hossain, 'Bangladesh balances between big brothers'.

90. 'Bangladesh New Military Deal With China', *The Diplomat*, 27 June 2018.

91. Ishrat Hossain, 'Bangladesh balances between big brothers'.

US and Russia) and beyond its participation in the regional integration through SAARC, BIMSTEC, BBI, SASEC (South Asia Subregional Economic Cooperation) and BCIM (Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar corridor). Recently Bangladesh has been looking at the European Union to increase economic ties, develop cooperation for democratisation programmes and enhance partnerships in areas of environment protection.⁹²

Multilateralism within the UN system has remained the pillar of Bangladesh's foreign policy.⁹³

7. *The aftermaths of the Rohingya crisis*

Considering the tremendous impact of the Rohingya crisis on Bangladesh in 2017,⁹⁴ the aftermath of the crisis in 2018 cannot be glossed over. At the end of May 2018 the UN struck a deal with Myanmar, allowing hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh to return to Myanmar safely and by choice. Conditional for the finalisation of the agreement had been the acceptance by Myanmar of the concession of citizenship and human rights for the refugees returning to Myanmar. However, the deal did not guarantee freedom of movement outside the Rakhine state. Refugees' representatives and human rights organisations argued that the agreement still failed to ensure basic rights for the Rohingya.⁹⁵

In October the UN overturned its decision, with the discovery that the genocide against the Rohingya was still ongoing in Myanmar, although Bangladesh and Myanmar had already agreed to start the repatriation process.⁹⁶

Fortunately, the Bangladeshi government was totally committed to the principle of non-refoulement⁹⁷ and pledged to adhere to the principle of

92. 'FM outlines new priorities in Bangladesh foreign policy to face changing world', *bdnews24.com*, 10 January 2018.

93. *Ibid.*

94. Marzia Casolari, 'Bangladesh 2017', pp. 246-258.

95. Poppy McPerson & Zeba Siddiqui, 'Secret U.N.-Myanmar deal on Rohingya offers no guarantees on citizenship', *Reuters*, 29 March 2018.

96. Anna Ellis-Petersen & Shaikh Azizur Rahman, 'Rohingyas to be repatriated despite UN genocide warning', *The Guardian*, 30 October 2018.

97. The principle of non-refoulement prohibits States from transferring or removing individuals from their jurisdiction or effective control when there are substantial grounds for believing that the person would be at risk of irreparable harm upon return, including persecution, torture, ill-treatment or other serious human rights violations. United Nations, Human Rights, Office of the high commissioner, *The principle of non-refoulement under international human rights law*, without date (<https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Migration/GlobalCompactMigration/The-PrincipleNon-RefoulementUnderInternationalHumanRightsLaw.pdf>).

voluntary repatriation only. The result was that, in spite of the preparations by the Bangladeshi authorities for a safe return, no Rohingya refugee accepted to go back to Myanmar.⁹⁸

98. Anna Ellis-Petersen & Shaikh Azizur Rahman, 'Rohingyas to be repatriated despite UN genocide warning'.

