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## Bangladesh

Ongoing political turmoil in Bangladesh has plunged the nation into a political-security crisis. According to some observers, current circumstance has the potential to undermine its democratic government. Analysts point to continued rivalry between Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina of the Awami League (AL) and Khaleda Zia of the Bangladesh National Party (BNP). The BNP is seeking to regain power and has held a series of street protests and transport blockades demanding that a new election be held under a caretaker government. Trials against Islamist leaders for their role in atrocities committed in the 1971 war of independence are also politically destabilizing as are signs of ongoing Islamist militancy. Numerous demographic and environmental stresses also weaken the nation's resilience. Some observers believe the military may once again step in.

### Background

Bangladesh (the former East Pakistan) is a Muslim-majority nation in South Asia, bordering the Bay of Bengal, dominated by low-lying riparian zones. It is the world's eighth-largest country by population, with over 160 million people housed in a land mass about the size of Iowa.

Bangladesh is under threat from a combination of political violence, corruption, weak governance, poverty, demographic and environmental stress, and Islamist militancy. There is concern that influence of Islamist extremists could increase despite their being vigorously pursued by Bangladesh authorities.

The Bangladesh National Party and the Awami League dominate Bangladeshi politics. When in opposition, both parties have sought to regain control of the government by bringing pressure through demonstrations, labor strikes, and transport blockades. The current Hasina AL government came to power in 2009 with a strong majority in parliament. It has moved forward with a war crimes tribunal to prosecute atrocities from the 1971 war of independence from Pakistan.

Demographic pressure and environmental problems, which experts say are likely exacerbated by climate change, increasingly are problems for Bangladesh. A growing population, when combined with limited economic resilience and constraints on the extent to which agricultural output can be expanded, could prove to be challenging in the future. There are questions regarding Bangladesh's future food security. Despite self-sufficiency in rice, Bangladesh has an overall food deficit and is reportedly losing up to 1% of its arable land each year due to climate change and urbanization.

Unequal treatment of women, human trafficking, and violence toward minorities persist as do concerns over worker's rights abuses and worker safety in Bangladesh. Working conditions in Bangladesh received widespread international attention in the aftermath of the Rana Plaza factory collapse that killed over 1,000 workers. Such factory disasters there have increased global and U.S. concerns about its labor rights regime.

### Bangladesh in Brief

**Land area:** 130,168 sq kilometers, almost the size of Iowa

**Climate:** tropical

**Geography:** Most of the country is low-lying delta

**Resources:** Natural gas, arable land, timber, coal

**Natural hazards:** droughts, cyclones, extensive flooding

**Ethnicity:** 98% Bengali

**Religion:** 89.5% Muslim, 9.6% Hindu

**Population:** 166 million with 1.6% growth 2014 est.

**Life expectancy:** 71 years 2014 est.

**GDP per capita:** \$3,400 2014 est.

**GDP growth:** 6.3% 2015 est.

**GDP by sector:** Agriculture 15.1%, industry 26.5%, services 58.3% 2014 est.

**Population below the poverty line:** 31.5% 2010 est.

**Sources:** State Department, CIA World Factbook, Economist intelligence Unit.

### Current Situation

Bangladesh again appears to some observers to be entering a period of increased political instability that could further erode democracy in the country and create opportunities for Islamists if there is a breakdown in order. Some observers believe a breakdown in order resulting from the ongoing political impasse could also lead the military again to intervene. Violence on the street appears to be escalating. The State Department is "gravely concerned" by the ongoing unrest.

A number of BNP and Islamist Jamaat-i-Islami Party leaders have been arrested under the International Crimes Tribunals (ICT) Act and accused of war crimes dating back to Bangladesh's war of independence from Pakistan in 1971. While accounts differ widely, there is general consensus that approximately one million people died during the 1971 war that was fought between independence forces in then-East Pakistan, with assistance from India, and the Pakistani army that was largely composed of troops from then-West Pakistan but had some support from within

East Pakistan. The BNP and Jamaat have opposed the ongoing trials and view them as a move by the AL to further consolidate its political advantage. The U.S. government supports “bringing to justice those who committed atrocities in the 1971 Bangladesh War of Independence” and believes that the ICT process “must be fair and transparent.”

## Bangladesh-U.S. Relations

The United States has long-standing supportive relations with Bangladesh and views Bangladesh as a moderate voice in the Islamic world. Washington provides economic assistance to Dhaka and engages Bangladesh through an annual Partnership Dialogue, and on security matters through an annual Security Dialogue. U.S. interests in Bangladesh are rooted in its being a secular and pluralist democracy and its status as a moderate Muslim-majority nation that makes a contribution to counterterrorism as well as regional and global security. The Bangladesh-U.S. Partnership Dialogue seeks to improve the ties between the two nations through cooperation in a number of areas.

Bangladesh and the United States see a common interest in working to counter extremist Islamists and their ideology. The two countries signed an October 2013 Counterterrorism Cooperation Initiative. The United States and Bangladesh also share an interest in supporting international peacekeeping operations. As part of its commitment to strengthen Bangladesh’s maritime security capabilities in the Bay of Bengal the U.S. transferred the U.S. Coast Guard cutter *Jarvis* to Bangladesh in October 2013.

The third U.S.-Bangladesh Dialogue on Security Issues was held on April 22, 2015. Issues discussed included “maritime security, counterterrorism, disaster risk management, peacekeeping, law enforcement, nonproliferation, joint military exercises and exchanges and other security issues.” Following the dialogue Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Thomas Kelly stated “... we see Bangladesh as a regional model in terms of counterterror cooperation.”

### U.S. Foreign Assistance (\$s in thousands)

	FY2014 Actual	FY2015 est.	FY2016 Request
DA	81,578	*	92,923
FMF	2,500	*	2,000
GH	79,500	*	71,200
IMET	996	*	1,500
INCLE	2,600	*	2,000
NADR	3,350	*	3,260
PL 480	34,527	*	36,000
Total	205,051	*	208,883

**Source:** U.S. State Department, “Bangladesh,” Budget Justification Foreign Operations, Annex: Regional Perspectives, 2014, 2015.

## Islamist Militancy

There are signs that transnational terror networks with connections in Bangladesh remain. An accidental bomb explosion in the Burdwan District of West Bengal India on October 2, 2014, killed two members of Jamaat Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and wounded another. Members of JMB reportedly have been infiltrating from Bangladesh into border districts in India to make contact with sympathizers in several madrasas where they have allegedly been engaged in recruitment and fundraising activities. JMB also reportedly sought to recruit 150 men to carry out attacks and sent approximately 50 improvised explosives to Dhaka and Assam before the Burdwan explosion led police to the house where they found the wives of two of the JMB operatives. Literature recovered by police at the house reportedly links the group with Al Qaeda.

## Bangladesh in a Regional Context

Positioned at a geopolitically important intersection between South Asia, China, and Southeast Asia, Bangladesh is a nation of strategic importance not only to the South Asian sub-region but the larger geopolitical context of Asia as a whole. Bangladesh is. Bangladesh’s foreign policy seeks to promote trade and economic development. It is a member of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and values close ties with Muslim states while remaining a relatively moderate nation. It is a member of the South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC).

Under the AL, Bangladesh is seeking to develop closer ties with India and China on a range of issues. The prospect for political tensions with India remains over illegal immigration to India from Bangladesh and over the sharing of cross border water resources. By some estimates, there are as many as 10 million-20 million illegal Bangladeshi immigrants in India. During a meeting with Prime Minister Modi in 2014, Sheikh Hasina emphasized that Bangladesh would not be used as a base for extremism.

Some Bangladeshi commentators believe that the nation should pursue closer ties to China. China also reportedly has plans to help Bangladesh build a deep sea port at Sonadia near Cox’s Bazar. The opening of Burma holds the prospect of further connectivity between South Asia and Southeast Asia. China has become involved in other large scale development projects in Bangladesh such as the Padma Multi-purpose Bridge, which is one of Bangladesh’s largest infrastructure projects.

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