



Bangladesh

Bangladesh (the former East Pakistan) is a Muslim-majority nation in South Asia, bordering India and Burma on the Bay of Bengal. It is the world's eighth most populous country, with approximately 165 million people living in a land area about the size of Iowa. It is a relatively poor nation and suffers from high levels of corruption. In recent years, its democratic system has faced an array of challenges, including political violence, weak governance, poverty, demographic and environmental strains, and Islamist militancy.

The currently ruling Awami League (AL) and the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) dominate Bangladeshi politics. When in opposition, both parties have at times used demonstrations, labor strikes, and transport blockades, as well as at the ballot box to regain control of government. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has been in office since 2009. Her AL party won its third consecutive term in December 2018. The next parliamentary elections are due in 2023. Former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia of the BNP was convicted of graft in February 2018 and given a five-year sentence. The BNP is a key component of the opposition Jatiya Oikya Front, which rejected the 2018 election results citing irregularities. The BNP chose to join parliament after the 2018 election. Over the past two decades, a number of local Islamist extremist groups have emerged, and several have conducted terrorist attacks. Despite a strong government response, terrorist attacks remain a threat to political stability in Bangladesh. Bangladesh's economy is projected to grow by over 7% annually in real terms over the next several years.

Relations with the United States

The United States has long-standing and supportive relations with Bangladesh, and Washington generally views Bangladesh as a moderate voice in the Islamic world. In relations with Dhaka, recent U.S. administrations, along with many Members of Congress, have focused especially on issues relating to ethnic Rohingya, economic development, humanitarian concerns, labor rights, human rights, good governance, and counterterrorism. In recent years, the rise of Islamist militancy has been a cause of concern for the United States, as well as for Bangladesh's government. The two nations hold an annual Partnership Dialogue and a Security Dialogue, and have developed a cooperative relationship over the years to meet shared concerns. The United States is one of Bangladesh's largest export markets and is also the largest source of foreign direct investment in Bangladesh.

Many Members of Congress believe that supporting democracy, rule of law, and human rights in the Indo-Pacific region is critical to advancing U.S. interests. H.Res. 160, "Expressing concern about the threat posed to democracy and human rights by theocratic groups operating

in South Asia," referred to the House Foreign Affairs Committee in February 2019, and S.Res. 34, "A resolution expressing the sense of the Senate that the Governments of Burma and Bangladesh ensure the safe, dignified, voluntary, and sustainable return of the Rohingya refugees," referred to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in January 2019, are two examples of Congressional interest in Bangladesh.

Rohingya

Approximately one million ethnic Rohingya fleeing persecution in Burma have fled to Bangladesh, putting immense pressure on local communities and testing the central government's ability to provide adequate security, food, and sanitation. The predominantly Muslim Rohingya have faced persecution in Buddhist-majority Burma for years—especially in Burma's Rakhine State. Burma views the Rohingya as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. Bangladesh has criticized Burma for failure to take meaningful steps to repatriate the Rohingya. Bangladesh reportedly has plans to relocate over 100,000 Rohingya to Bhashan Char, a remote island in the Bay of Bengal.

Land area: Slightly smaller than Iowa and mostly low lying delta.

Resources: natural gas, arable land, timber, coal

Natural hazards: droughts, cyclones, extensive flooding

Ethnicity: 98% Bengali (2011 est.)

Religion: 89.1% Muslim, 10% Hindu, 0.9% other (includes Buddhists and Christians) (2013 est.)

Population: 164.7 million with 1.02% growth (2018 est.)

Life expectancy: 73.7 years (2018 est.)

GDP: per capita \$4,551 ppp with 7.5% growth (2019 projection)

GDP by sector: agriculture 14.2%, industry 29.3%, services 56.5% (2017 est.)

Exports: Products - garments, knitwear, agricultural products, frozen food, jute, leather. Partners - Germany 12.9%, U.S. 12.2%, United Kingdom 8.7%, Spain 5.3%, France 5.1% (2017)



Source: CIA World Factbook, Economist Intelligence Unit.

Human Rights and Religious Freedom

Many analysts and policymakers contend that human rights and religious freedom are under threat in Bangladesh. The Department of State's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2018* highlights a number of concerns with Bangladesh including "unlawful or arbitrary killings; forced disappearance; torture; [and] arbitrary or unlawful detentions by the government or on its behalf.... There were reports of widespread impunity for security force abuses." According to the Dhaka-based human rights group Ain O Salish Kendra, extrajudicial killings, abductions, and enforced disappearances continued in Bangladesh in 2018,

with a record 446 deaths by “crossfire” or in police custody, up from 162 in 2017. Counter narcotics operations are apparently leading to a large percentage of the deaths. Political violence reportedly accounted for 67 deaths and 7,287 injuries in 701 incidents in 2018. “Cross fires” and other police actions reportedly killed 51 people between January 1 and March 14, 2019. A harsh government crackdown on road safety protests following a July 2018 incident where two young Bangladesh pedestrians were killed demonstrates what appears to be increasingly heavy-handed government responses to arguably legitimate citizen grievances. The constitution of Bangladesh recognizes Islam as the state religion, but Bangladesh has also officially upheld principles of secularism. Despite government espousal of tolerance, religious minorities face considerable discrimination and even violence.

Democracy

Bangladesh has long been viewed as a democratic, Muslim-majority nation. Many observers called the most recent election a turning point in Bangladesh’s democracy, with some now of the opinion that Bangladesh is moving toward, or has already become, a one-party state. According to Human Rights Watch, government authorities have jailed members of the opposition, violated freedom of speech, and suppressed those that are critical of the ruling Awami League.

Amnesty International has described Bangladesh’s new Digital Security Act as an “attack on freedom of expression,” adding that “vague and overly broad provisions of the new law could be used to intimidate and imprison journalists and social media users, silence dissent and carry out invasive forms of surveillance.” Transparency International, which measures levels of corruption, ranked Bangladesh 149 out of 180 countries in 2018, and Bangladesh dropped from 146th to 150th out of 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index in 2019. Freedom House described Bangladesh as “partly free” in its 2018 report.

Demographic and Environmental Concerns

Many analysts believe that demographic pressures and environmental problems—including those linked to climate change—increasingly are challenges for Bangladesh, and that they may result in thousands, perhaps millions, of people being displaced in future years. If that does happen, many of these people likely will move to crowded cities or to neighboring countries, such as India, leading to further strains on social services and, perhaps, regional instability. Bangladesh is one of the most densely populated countries on earth and its population is projected to grow from approximately 165 million to around 200 million by 2050.

Islamist Extremism

The U.S. and Bangladeshi governments see a common interest in working to counter Islamist extremists and their ideology. The Islamic State (IS) and Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) have been active in Bangladesh in recent years. One terrorist attack killed over 20 people at Dhaka’s Holey Artisan Bakery in July 2016. The bakery

was a popular site with expatriates, and several foreigners were killed, including nine Italians, seven Japanese, one U.S. citizen, and one Indian. Other militant groups, such as Jama’atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), Harkat-ul-Jihad-al Islami Bangladesh (HUJI-B), and Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT) have operated in the country.

The China Factor

Bangladesh has pursued closer ties with China in recent years. Some analysts point to the Bay of Bengal region’s growing importance for China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which emphasizes infrastructure and energy projects, trade, transit, and other linkages throughout the region and beyond. Approximately 22% of Bangladesh’s merchandise imports come from China. Bangladesh-China ties improved significantly with President Xi Jinping’s 2016 visit to Bangladesh. During the visit, President Xi and Prime Minister Hasina agreed to upgrade the bilateral relationship to a “strategic partnership of cooperation” and reportedly signed 27 agreements totaling \$13.6 billion. By one account, announced infrastructure financing and investment by China in Bangladesh now totals over \$30 billion and is of increasing concern to the Indian government, which views Chinese “encroachment” in its immediate neighborhood as a serious challenge to its own interests. China has become Bangladesh’s primary supplier of military equipment, including two submarines and jet trainer aircraft. Recent China-Bangladesh deals include China’s investment of 50% in a \$2.4 billion coal-fired power plant and a feasibility study for a joint venture to build a railway line around Dhaka.

Bangladesh was part of the proposed Bangladesh-China-India Myanmar (BCIM) corridor, which was one of six potential BRI Corridors. The BCIM group has, however, struggled with internal conflicts, including between China and India. China and Burma signed a Memorandum of Understanding for a China-Myanmar Economic Corridor in July 2018. The BCIM corridor is reportedly not part of a recent list of BRI corridors, though the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor is. The full implications of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor for the BCIM concept are as yet unclear.

Bangladesh has also been further developing ties with India and Japan. Some analysts view India and China as competing for influence in Bangladesh. Bangladesh-India relations improved after a 2015 land Boundary Agreement. India, which played a key role in Bangladesh’s 1971 “liberation,” extended lines of credit to Bangladesh for infrastructure, power projects and defense hardware worth \$5 billion during a 2017 visit by Prime Minister Hasina to Delhi. Japan has also signed agreements with Bangladesh financing several infrastructure projects, including the Jamuna Railway Bridge and a mass transit system in Dhaka. According to some observers, Japan may be trying to “counter the deepening Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean Region.”

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