



Bangladesh

Bangladesh (formerly 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 163 million people living in a land area about the size of Iowa. It is a relatively poor nation suffering 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.

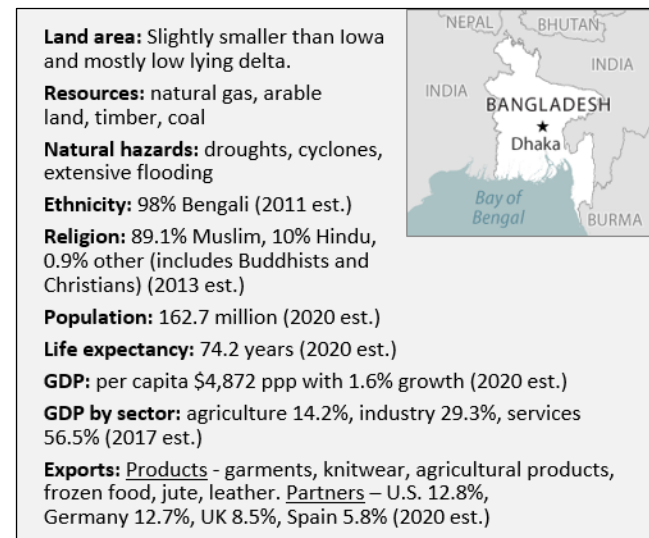
Bangladesh is a parliamentary democracy. The currently-ruling Awami League (AL) and the main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) dominate national politics. When in opposition, both parties have at times used demonstrations, labor strikes, and transport blockades, as well as the ballot box 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 and embezzlement in 2018 and imprisoned, then released in March 2020 for six months due to poor health.

The Coronavirus pandemic is having a significant economic as well as health impact on Bangladesh. The country's economy is projected to grow by 1.6% in 2020, down from 8.2% in 2019, due to increasing unemployment resulting from the nationwide lockdown implemented to thwart the spread of the Coronavirus. Overseas remittances, which normally account for about 7% of Bangladesh's GDP, are expected to decrease significantly.

Relations with the United States

The United States has long-standing and supportive relations with Bangladesh, and 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 on issues relating to Rohingya refugees, economic development, humanitarian concerns, labor rights, human rights, good governance, and counterterrorism. The rise of Islamist militancy has been a cause of concern for the United States, as well as for Bangladesh's government. Despite a robust governmental response, terrorist attacks remain a threat to political stability in Bangladesh. The United States and Bangladesh hold annual bilateral Partnership Dialogues and Security Dialogues, and have developed a cooperative relationship over the years to meet shared concerns. The United States is among Bangladesh's largest export markets. The United States became the fourth-largest investor in Bangladesh in 2019 while China emerged as the leading foreign investor in Bangladesh. Many Members of Congress contend that

Figure 1. Bangladesh in Brief



Source: CIA World Factbook, Economist Intelligence Unit.

supporting democracy, rule of law, and human rights in the Indo-Pacific region, including in Bangladesh, is critical to advancing U.S. interests.

Rohingya

Approximately one million ethnic Rohingya facing persecution in Burma have fled to Bangladesh, putting immense pressure on local communities and testing the Dhaka government's ability to provide adequate security, food, and sanitation. The predominantly Muslim Rohingya have faced persecution in Buddhist-majority Burma for years. 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 low-lying remote island in the Bay of Bengal. Human rights advocates have pointed out that the isolated island lacks services and is vulnerable to sea level rise and storm surges.

Human Rights and Religious Freedom

Many analysts and policymakers contend that human rights and religious freedom are under threat in Bangladesh. In 2020 the Department of State highlighted a number of concerns with Bangladesh, including "unlawful or arbitrary killings; forced disappearance; torture; arbitrary or unlawful detentions by the government or on its behalf, [and stated] There were reports of widespread impunity for security force abuses." There reportedly were an estimated 300 "crossfire" killings, a euphemism for extrajudicial killings, in Bangladesh in 2019. Security forces are rarely held accountable for such deaths. The constitution of Bangladesh recognizes Islam as the state religion, but Bangladesh also officially upholds principles of secularism. Despite

government espousal of tolerance, religious minorities face considerable discrimination and violence.

Democracy

Bangladesh has long been viewed as a democratic, Muslim-majority nation. However, many observers called the most recent election a turning point in Bangladesh's democracy, with some now arguing that Bangladesh is moving toward, or has already become, a one-party state. According to Human Rights Watch, authorities have jailed members of the opposition, violated freedom of speech, and suppressed those that are critical of the ruling Awami League. The State Department's 2019 Country Report on Human Rights Practices described the 2018 election as "not considered free and fair and was marred by reported irregularities."

Amnesty International has described Bangladesh's 2018 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 national corruption, ranked Bangladesh 146 out of 180 countries in 2019, and Bangladesh dropped to 151 out of 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index in 2020. Freedom House described Bangladesh as "partly free" in its 2020 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 may result in thousands, perhaps millions, of people being displaced in coming years. According to one report, as many as one in seven Bangladeshis may be displaced by climate change. While World Bank data shows that Bangladesh's population growth rate has fallen from 3.2% in 1967, it continued to grow by 1% in 2018. According to some population projections, Bangladesh's population will peak at 193 million in 2053. If that does happen, many of these people likely will move to already overcrowded cities or to neighboring countries, such as India, leading to further strains on social services and, perhaps, regional instability. Bangladesh is currently one of the most densely populated countries.

Islamist Extremism

The U.S. and Bangladeshi governments see a common interest in working to counter Islamist extremists and their ideology. Both the Islamic State (IS) and Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) have been active in Bangladesh. 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 Bangladesh authorities have reportedly been largely effective in

thwarting the activities of the Islamic State in Bangladesh since the 2016 Holey Artisan attack. That said, several police were injured in attacks in Dhaka in 2019 by the Neo-Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (Neo-JMB).

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. 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." Prime Minister Hasina traveled to China in July 2019 in an effort to further strengthen bilateral cooperation in power, investment, culture, tourism, and technology. By one account, China's investments in Bangladesh now total an estimated \$38 billion.

Some in India view these developments with increasing concern, and consider Chinese "encroachment" in India's immediate neighborhood as a serious challenge to its own interests. China has become Bangladesh's primary supplier of military equipment, including two submarines, maritime patrol vessels, tanks, fighter jets, and trainer aircraft. Bangladesh reportedly is China's second-largest arms export destination (after Pakistan) and accounts for 20% of China's arms sales. Bangladesh and China signed a Defense Cooperation Agreement in 2002. Bangladesh was part of the proposed Bangladesh-China-India Myanmar (BCIM) corridor, which was one of six potential Belt and Road Initiative 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. Bangladesh and China reportedly continue to work together to develop connectivity between Chittagong, Bangladesh, and Kunming, China.

Bangladesh also continues to develop ties with India and Japan. India and China appear to many to be competing for influence in Bangladesh. India played a key role in Bangladesh's 1971 "liberation" from Pakistan, and Bangladesh-India relations improved after the conclusion of a 2015 land Boundary Agreement. Prime Minister Hasina and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi moved forward with a number of pacts and projects deepening bilateral cooperation following Hasina's visit to New Delhi in October 2019. 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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