



## 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 165 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 serious challenges, including political violence, weak governance, poverty, demographic and environmental strains, and Islamist militancy.


Bangladesh is a parliamentary democracy. The ruling Awami League (AL) and 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. AL Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who has held office since 2009, won her third consecutive term in December 2018. The next parliamentary elections are due in 2023. BNP leader and former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia was convicted of graft and embezzlement in 2018 and imprisoned. She was released for six months in March 2020 due to poor health.

The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic is having a significant impact on Bangladesh. The country's economy is projected to grow by 5.2% in 2020, down from 8.2% in 2019, due to increasing unemployment resulting from the nationwide lockdown implemented to thwart the spread of COVID-19. Overseas remittances in 2020 have done much to help the economy. Bangladesh reportedly purchased 30 million doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine and has begun administering vaccinations.

### 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 from Burma, 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 it is 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. At the 2019 Partnership Dialogue the two governments "reaffirmed their enduring partnership, highlighting close cooperation on security, development, humanitarian

Figure 1. Bangladesh in Brief

<p><b>Land area:</b> Slightly smaller than Iowa and mostly low lying delta.</p> <p><b>Resources:</b> natural gas, arable land, timber, coal</p> <p><b>Natural hazards:</b> droughts, cyclones, extensive flooding</p> <p><b>Ethnicity:</b> 98% Bengali (2011 est.)</p> <p><b>Religion:</b> 89.1% Muslim, 10% Hindu, 0.9% other (includes Buddhists and Christians) (2013 est.)</p> <p><b>Population:</b> 165 million (2020 est.)</p> <p><b>Life expectancy:</b> 74.2 years (2020 est.)</p> <p><b>GDP:</b> per capita \$5,161 ppp with 5.2% growth (2020 est.)</p> <p><b>GDP by sector:</b> agriculture 14.2%, industry 29.3%, services 56.5% (2017 est.)</p> <p><b>Exports:</b> Products - garments, knitwear, agricultural products, frozen food, jute, leather. Partners - U.S. 12.8%, Germany 12.7%, UK 8.5%, Spain 5.8% (2020 est.)</p>	
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Source: CIA World Factbook, Economist Intelligence Unit, media.

assistance and disaster relief, and counterterrorism." The United States also recognizes Bangladesh's role as one of the world's largest contributors of troops to U.N. peacekeeping operations. The United States is among Bangladesh's largest export markets and became the fourth-largest investor in Bangladesh in 2018, while China emerged as the leading foreign investor in Bangladesh. Many Members of Congress contend that 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. Hopes for repatriation of the Rohingya to Burma were reportedly further diminished by the February 2021 military coup in Burma. Bangladesh began relocating Rohingya from existing camps in Bangladesh to Bhashan Char, a low-lying remote island in the Bay of Bengal, in December 2020. Bangladesh reportedly plans to relocate 100,000 Rohingya to Bhansar Char. Human rights advocates warn that the isolated island 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, 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 2019. Security forces are rarely held accountable for such deaths. The constitution 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 by observers 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 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<sup>th</sup> out of 180 countries in 2019, and Bangladesh dropped to 151<sup>st</sup> in the World Press Freedom Index in 2020. Freedom House described Bangladesh as “partly free” in its 2020 report.

## Demographic and Environmental Concerns

Bangladesh is one of the most densely populated countries, and many analysts believe that growing demographic pressures and environmental problems—including those linked to climate change—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 show that Bangladesh’s population growth rate has fallen from 3.2% in 1967, it continued to grow by 1% in 2019. According to some 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.

## 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 and Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent have been active in Bangladesh. A 2016 terrorist attack killed over 20 people at Dhaka’s Holey Artisan Bakery. 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, Harkat-ul-Jihad-al Islami Bangladesh, and Ansarullah Bangla Team operate 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.

## External Relations

The Bay of Bengal region has been a focus of China’s Belt and Road Initiative, which emphasizes infrastructure and energy projects, trade, transit, and other linkages throughout the region. Bangladesh-China ties improved significantly following President Xi Jinping’s 2016 visit to Dhaka. During the visit, President Xi and Prime Minister Hasina agreed to upgrade the bilateral relationship to a “strategic partnership of cooperation.” Hasina traveled to China in July 2019 to further strengthen bilateral cooperation. Some in India view Bangladesh’s ties with China with concern, and consider Chinese “encroachment” in India’s neighborhood as a challenge to India’s interests. China has become Bangladesh’s primary supplier of military equipment, recently including two submarines, maritime patrol vessels, tanks, and fighter jets. Bangladesh and China signed a Defense Cooperation Agreement in 2002.

Bangladesh also continues to develop ties with India and Japan. India and China appear to compete 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. Modi described Bangladesh as a significant pillar of India’s “Neighborhood First” policy during a 2020 virtual summit with Hasina. Meanwhile, Japan has signed agreements with Bangladesh financing infrastructure projects, including the Jamuna Railway Bridge and a mass transit system in Dhaka. Some observers say Japan may also be seeking to counter deepening Chinese influence in the region.

In 2020, Bangladesh called off the development of what would have been its first deep-sea port at Sonadia on the Bay of Bengal, a project under consideration since 2006. China had reportedly agreed to build and provide loans for the port, but India opposed China’s involvement. Instead, a deep-sea port will now be built at Matarbari, reportedly with Japanese assistance. Such a port could become a regional trade hub for landlocked Nepal, Bhutan, and northeast India. Some observers see the move as reflecting Bangladesh’s desire to balance its relations with external partners.

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