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Bangladesh

Bangladesh (East Pakistan until 1971) is a Muslim-majority South Asian nation bordering India and Burma (Myanmar) on the Bay of Bengal. The world's eighth most populous country, with approximately 169 million people, it has a land area about the size of Iowa. Its democratic system has faced many serious challenges, including political violence, weak governance, corruption, poverty, demographic and environmental strains, and Islamist militancy. The United States and Bangladesh have partnered on various issues and worked together to promote shared interests, including advancing "a shared vision of a free, open, inclusive, peaceful, and secure Indo-Pacific region."

In August 2024, student-led protests in Bangladesh led to the ouster of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who had secured a fourth consecutive term in office in January 2024 parliamentary elections that were boycotted by major opposition parties and described by the U.S. Department of State as "not free or fair." Bangladesh is a parliamentary democracy that conducts regular elections, but analysts expressed concern that it was backsliding toward a hybrid regime combining elements of authoritarianism and democracy under Hasina and her Awami League (AL) party. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) functioned as the main opposition party during Hasina's tenure. The future of both parties and of Bangladesh's overall political landscape is now uncertain. An interim government headed by Muhammad Yunus, a Nobel Peace Prize-winning economist, is set to remain in place until new elections are held; no plans have been announced for that potential vote.

The interim government faces a range of challenges, including high inflation, high youth unemployment, and slowing growth—factors that contributed to dissatisfaction with Hasina's rule. The World Bank assesses that Bangladesh's economic growth rate fell from an estimated 7.1% in 2022 to 6% in 2023. The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) expects growth to decelerate further in light of the political situation and persistent inflation. Some experts have raised concerns that political instability may undermine Bangladesh's garment industry as international buyers seek alternative suppliers. Readymade garments accounted for 85% of Bangladesh's exports in 2023. The World Bank reported remittances to Bangladesh of \$21.5 billion in 2022.

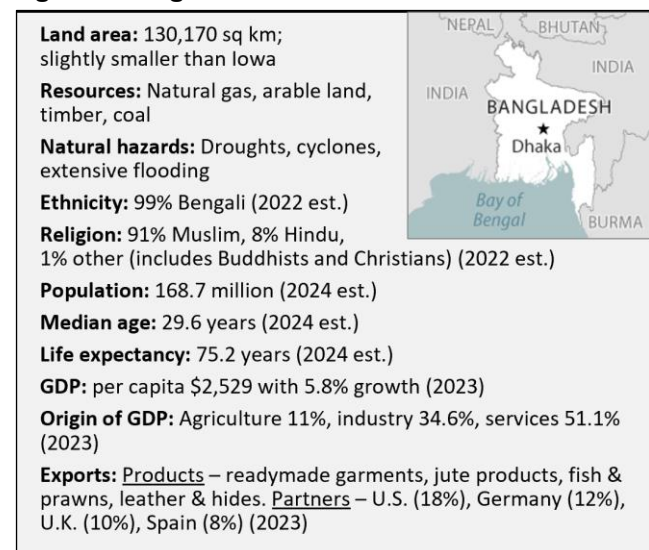
Relations with the United States

The United States has long-standing relations with Bangladesh, and is among its largest export markets and sources of foreign investment. The Obama, Trump, and Biden Administrations, and many Members of Congress, have focused on issues relating to Rohingya refugees from Burma, democracy, good governance, economic development, humanitarian concerns, labor rights, human rights, and counterterrorism. The United States and

Bangladesh hold annual bilateral Partnership Dialogues and Security Dialogues, and have developed a cooperative security relationship to meet shared concerns, including violent extremism and regional security.

In a September 2024 meeting with Yunus, Secretary of State Antony Blinken "underscored U.S. support and assistance for the Interim Government as it guides [Bangladesh] towards economic stability and highlighted the importance of reforms to ensure continued foreign direct investment." Blinken noted the importance of free and fair elections as well as the need for strong institutions to fight corruption and protect human rights. Some Members of Congress have urged the Biden Administration to seek accountability for Hasina government officials implicated in human rights violations that took place in response to the 2024 protests, including by imposing targeted sanctions. Some Members have expressed concern about violence targeting minority groups, including Hindus, in the immediate aftermath of Hasina's resignation.

Figure 1. Bangladesh in Brief



Sources: CIA World Factbook, World Bank, EIU.

Rohingya

The predominantly Muslim Rohingya have faced persecution in Buddhist-majority Burma for decades. Violent attacks by the Burmese military and others in 2017 and 2018 displaced over one million Rohingya in Burma's Rakhine state; most fled to Bangladesh. Approximately one million Rohingya currently reside in Bangladesh, testing the government's ability to provide adequate security, food, and sanitation. Bangladesh officials have criticized Burma for its failure to take steps to repatriate the Rohingya, whom the Burmese government views as non-citizens. Bangladesh began relocating Rohingya from existing camps in

Bangladesh to Bhashan Char, a remote island in the Bay of Bengal, in December 2020, despite warnings that the island is vulnerable to sea level rise and storm surges. According to U.N. figures, over 32,000 Rohingya refugees had been relocated to the island as of January 2024. In FY2023, the United States provided \$245 million in humanitarian assistance for Rohingya refugees from Burma, including in host communities in Bangladesh. Total U.S. assistance for the Rohingya since August 2017 exceeds \$2.2 billion.

Human Rights and Religious Freedom

The State Department's *2023 Country Report on Human Rights Practices* highlights a number of concerns, including "arbitrary or unlawful killings, including extrajudicial killings; enforced disappearance; torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment by the government." Under Hasina, security forces were rarely held accountable for such actions. Some Members of Congress, the Biden Administration, and some international human rights organizations have called on Yunus to pursue accountability for abuses. Bangladesh's constitution recognizes Islam as the state religion, but also upholds secular principles. Despite public espousal of tolerance, religious minorities face discrimination and violence.

Democracy

While observers had long categorized Bangladesh as a democratic country, some analysts argued that under Hasina Bangladesh was approaching, or had already become, a one-party state. The Hasina government had consolidated power through restrictions on freedom of expression and campaigns of threats and intimidation against the opposition, the media, and civil society figures. Hasina fled Bangladesh for India on August 5, 2024, after military leadership refused to enforce a nationwide lockdown in response to ongoing protests. Bangladesh's president dissolved parliament on August 6, and an interim government was sworn in on August 8, headed by Yunus, 84. Yunus has stated his intention to implement economic and governance reforms before new elections are held, and the army chief has publicly stated strong support for the interim government. The BNP and other political parties have urged speedy elections, potentially heralding tensions with the interim government. Some analysts have questioned whether the interim government has the authority to implement major policy decisions. Some scholars have raised questions about the constitutionality of the interim government, although the Appellate Division of Bangladesh's Supreme Court ruled that an interim government could be formed in the absence of parliament.

Demographic and Environmental Concerns

Bangladesh is among the world's most densely populated countries, and some analysts assess that growing demographic pressures and environmental problems may result in millions of displacements. World Bank data show that Bangladesh's population growth rate has slowed from an annual rate high of 3% in 1967 to 1.1% in 2021. Some projections indicate the population will peak at 193 million in 2053. The World Health Organization estimates that climate change may displace as many as one in seven Bangladeshis. If that happens, observers suggest many

Bangladeshis may migrate to already-overcrowded cities or to neighboring countries, such as India, straining social services and, perhaps, contributing to regional instability.

Islamist Extremism

The U.S. government generally views Bangladesh as a moderate voice in the Islamic world, but sporadic Islamist militancy in the country has concerned the governments of both the United States and Bangladesh. Both governments have historically identified a common interest in countering Islamist extremists. Both the Islamic State (IS) and Al Qaeda have been active in Bangladesh. A 2016 terrorist attack by IS-aligned militants killed over 20 people in Dhaka; fatalities included one American, along with several other foreigners. Other militant groups, such as the suspected IS-aligned Neo-Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh, have also been active. Bangladesh authorities largely have been effective in thwarting IS militants since the 2016 attack, the State Department assesses.

External Relations

Positioned at the intersection of India, the People's Republic of China (PRC, or China), Southeast Asia, and the Bay of Bengal, Bangladesh occupies a geo-strategically important location, and its foreign policy seeks to promote trade, economic development, and diplomatic linkages with a range of countries, including the United States and U.S. partners as well as Russia and China. Since independence, the country's authorities have expressed their foreign policy posture as "friendship to all, malice to none."

As a gateway to the Indian Ocean, the Bay of Bengal is an important part of China's Belt and Road Initiative, which emphasizes global infrastructure, energy projects, trade, and other linkages. Bangladesh-China ties expanded following the 2016 upgrading of the bilateral relationship to a "strategic partnership of cooperation." China has become Bangladesh's primary supplier of military equipment, including two submarines, maritime patrol vessels, tanks, and fighter jets. According to SIPRI data, China supplied roughly 72% of Bangladesh's weapons between 2010 and 2022. In 2023, a PRC state-owned entity completed construction of Bangladesh's first submarine base. In the wake of Hasina's ouster, China has engaged the interim government and parties across the political spectrum.

Some analysts previously argued that India was concerned Bangladesh's growing engagement with China under Hasina could impact the historically close Bangladesh-India relationship. Some view China's "encroachment" in India's neighborhood as a challenge to Indian interests. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi described Bangladesh as a significant pillar of India's "Neighborhood First" policy during a 2020 virtual summit with Hasina. In 2020, Bangladesh halted development of what would have been its first deep-sea port at Sonadia after India opposed China's involvement. Some analysts assess that India is now losing influence in Bangladesh in light of its perceived association with Hasina, while others argue that India will seek to maintain engagement with the interim government.

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