

## **DEBATE**

### **INDIA-BANGLADESH RELATIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF RECENT ELECTIONS IN BANGLADESH**

Welcoming the successful completion of the eleventh Parliamentary elections in Bangladesh in December 2018, India warmly congratulated the people of Bangladesh for “reaffirming their faith in democracy, development and the vision of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.” Prime Minister Narendra Modi telephoned Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, and “expressed confidence that the partnership between India and Bangladesh will continue to flourish under her far-sighted leadership”. He also reiterated “the priority India attaches to Bangladesh as a neighbour, a close partner for regional development, security and cooperation, and a central pillar in India’s ‘Neighbourhood First’ policy”. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina thanked Prime Minister Modi for being “the first leader to call her following her election victory. She thanked India’s cooperative role in the development pursuit of Bangladesh.”<sup>1</sup>

Parliamentary elections in Bangladesh took place on December 30, 2018. Unlike the previous election in 2014, all major political parties participated. Some observers, specially the opposition parties, criticised the conduct of the elections, and described the results as ‘tainted’. The elections resulted in a ‘land slide’ victory for the Awami League, the ruling party led by Sheikh Hasina.

Unlike in the previous elections, India was not a major factor. India itself maintained a non-partisan attitude throughout the election period. The rhetoric from the Bangladeshi opposition, which used to be clearly ‘anti-India’, remained subdued this time.

India-Bangladesh relations have reached new heights in the last ten years. There have been various new partnerships and developmental projects between the two countries. The continuation of the Hasina government bodes well for the future of these relations.

What does Hasina’s third term mean for India? How will the domestic political situation in Bangladesh evolve? And, what would be its likely fallout on its relations with India? How is Bangladesh’s deft balancing of its relations with India as well as with other regional and international players likely to play out in the near future? There have been the usual implementation issues in various cooperative and developmental projects as well as legitimate concerns. How should India address these concerns?

These are some of the questions that were posed to some experts/strategic analysts. Their views are published, as such, as the 'Debate' in this edition of the Journal.<sup>2</sup>

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> [https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/30855/India\\_welcomes\\_the\\_successful\\_completion\\_of\\_the\\_Parliamentary\\_elections\\_in\\_Bangladesh](https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/30855/India_welcomes_the_successful_completion_of_the_Parliamentary_elections_in_Bangladesh)

<sup>2</sup> The Journal has published three earlier debates on India-Bangladesh Relations: in December 2011, December 2013, and September 2015, (Issue Numbers 6.4, 8.4 and 10.3 respectively). These are available at: <http://associationdiplomats.org/Publications/ifaj/Download.htm>



*(The views expressed by the authors are their own, and do not reflect the views of the Indian Foreign Affairs Journal, or that of the Association of Indian Diplomats)*

## ***Bangladesh-India Ties Poised For a Strategic Upgrade***

Pinak Ranjan Chakravarty\*

The 2018 Bangladesh General Election produced a decisive victory for the Sheikh Hasina-led Awami League (AL), securing an unprecedented third consecutive term for her as Prime Minister. Despite criticism of heavy-handed policies against a fragile opposition and other electoral malpractices, the AL's victory at the polls was a foregone conclusion. The opposition parties made a valiant, albeit, and a desperate attempt to form a joint unity front or a Bangladeshi *Mahagathbandhan*. The opposition's game plan failed to enthuse voters, and they only managed to win 7 seats in a 300-seat Parliament. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the main opposition party, was hobbled to such an extent that it had to seek a place under the umbrella of the joint unity front organised by the veteran jurist, Dr Kamal Hussain, a former Foreign Minister who fell out with Sheikh Hasina and quit the AL to form the *Ganoforum*. The *Bikalpadhara*, led by former President Badruddoza Chowdhury, first joined the joint unity front and then abandoned it, thus delivering a crucial blow to the opposition.

### **Opposition in Disarray**

The election also exposed the political bankruptcy of the BNP and allied parties. Left leaderless, with Begum Khaleda Zia in jail for several convictions on corruption charges, and her son, Tarique Rahman, deputy leader of the BNP, in exile in London, also convicted for corruption and murder charges, the BNP's descent into decline was inevitable. The venal governance of the BNP-JeI coalition, led by then Prime Minister Khaleda Zia and controlled by her son Tarique Rahman during 2001–2006, was also a substantive reason for voter rejection. Like most developing countries, the majority of Bangladeshi voters are young and aspirational. They voted overwhelmingly for the AL for the impressive economic progress the country has achieved under the stewardship of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her secular leaning policies. The AL's electoral victory is an emphatic rejection of the Islamist leaning and anti-Indian politics of the BNP and its principal ally, the Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI), which is widely regarded as a proxy for Pakistan.

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The JeI, the largest Islamist party, was debilitated by convictions and the hanging of most of its leaders on 1971 war crimes charges. The JeI was also banned as a political party by the Election Commission, because in its charter, it virtually disowned the Constitution of Bangladesh as man-made, and its own Charter asserted that all laws had to follow the God-given Sharia. The JeI put up 22 candidates using the BNP election symbol. Post-election, the JeI has faced further setbacks when its younger leadership either resigned, or were expelled from the party. This young leadership also blamed the elders in the party for failing to apologise for their heinous role as collaborators in the genocide committed by the Pakistan Army during the 1971 war of liberation. The older leadership of the JeI are still unwilling to atone for their role as Pakistani collaborators, their genocide, and their working against the independence of Bangladesh.

The AL's electoral triumph has raised questions about whether Bangladesh is heading towards a one-party dominated polity. It has raised memories of the pre-1975 one-party BAKSAL era when Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Sheikh Hasina's father, had abolished political parties, and introduced a one-party system at a time when newly-independent Bangladesh was wrecked by post Liberation War problems. The AL's margin of victory has given traction to persistent allegations of electoral malpractices, the hounding of the opposition with large scale arrests, ballot stuffing, and the intimidation of voters. Giving credence to these allegations were instances of opposition candidates withdrawing their candidature. While there have been reported instances of election malpractices, international observers have certified that the election was, by and large, free and fair, burying allegations of any large-scale manipulation.

### **Democracy Deficit**

In the post-election phase, Bangladesh faced the strange problem of convening a Parliament where there was no Opposition. The 5 BNP MPs refused to take oath as Parliamentarians, though 2 MPs belonging to the *Gonoforum* (Dr. Kamal Hossain's Party) have broken ranks, and recently taken oath as MPs. The boycott of Parliament by the losing Party and allies has been a recurring theme in Bangladesh. In 2014, when the BNP and allies boycotted elections in the mistaken belief that external pressure will make Prime Minister Hasina bow to their pre-conditions for holding elections, the Parliament functioned sans a real Opposition. There arose a bizarre situation when a section of the Jatiyo Party (and ally of the AL) headed by Raushan Ershad, functioned as

the Opposition. At the same time, a member of this party became a Cabinet Minister.

The same dilemma persists after the current round of elections. The Jatiyo Party, with 22 seats in Parliament, has declared that it will function as the Opposition, though it fought the election as an ally of the AL. The Jatiyo Party has no representative in the new Cabinet. Hence, two consecutive Parliaments will be without a viable Opposition. This situation is certainly not conducive for a healthy democracy. The blame for this state of affairs must be borne primarily by the BNP which misread the situation, and have landed in this predicament. The immature and poor leadership of Tarique Rahman is the main cause. The future of the BNP looks bleak unless it reinvents itself, with or without Tarique and his mother Khaleda. Time is running out for the BNP, and it is cornered. There is no indication that it can shake off the baleful influence of Tarique. Meanwhile, other political parties (like the *Bikalpadhara*) will most likely steadily gain traction and may well emerge as the 3<sup>rd</sup> major party, if the BNP sinks into terminal irrelevance.

### **The Bangladesh Economy**

The electoral victory of the AL owes much to the creditable performance of the Bangladesh economy. In the last two decades, under the leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Bangladesh has recorded remarkable economic progress, and it is now an “emerging tiger economy”. Prime Minister Hasina has also shown stern resolve in rolling back Islamic extremism that had started rearing its head again in Bangladesh. Her handling of the Rohingya refugee issue has earned her international acclaim, though it has led to some unhappiness in bilateral relations with India. Bangladesh expected India to back its stand, forgetting that India’s ties with Myanmar were also at stake. India had no choice but to balance its approach to the Rohingya refugee issue, given the emotive factor in Myanmar. Both countries are integral to India’s “Neighbourhood First” and “Act East” policies. India has, however, stepped up humanitarian aid to Bangladesh for dealing with the Rohingya refugees.

Bangladesh is now on track to overtake Pakistan’s GDP per capita this year. This is no mean feat for a country that was once the poorest in South Asia. It suffered from egregious exploitation by the governing elite based in Islamabad during the years it was East Pakistan. After its war of liberation and the aftermath of its emergence as Bangladesh, its economy and people were often battered by natural disasters, poverty, and famine. Bangladesh’s economy rebounded in the early years of this century and, by 2006, the GDP

growth rate started exceeding that of Pakistan by approximately 2.5 percent per annum. In the current year, Bangladesh's GDP growth rate is predicted to exceed that of India. With 1.1 percent growth rate in population (Pakistan's is 2.0 percent), Bangladesh's per capita income is growing faster, and hence the expectation that Bangladesh's per capita GDP will cross that of Pakistan very soon.

Bangladesh's economic transformation owes much to the grassroots social and economic empowerment of its female population. Leading NGOs like Nobel Laureate Professor Muhammad Yusuf-founded Grameen Bank, BRAC, and the government have led the movement to sustain social change among women, and given them economic instruments to take decisions in the personal and public domains. Bangladesh's average expectancy at 72 years has surpassed that of India - 68 years, and Pakistan's - 66 years. This is by any yardstick a phenomenal achievement. World Bank estimates that bank account holders are now making 34 percent transactions digitally (2017) and only around 10 percent of bank accounts are dormant (no transactions in 2016). These figures are better than South Asia's average of around 27 percent digital transactions. India's dormant bank accounts are around 48 percent.

Bangladesh has fought off the threat of mass starvation, and is close to self-sufficiency in food production for its 170 million population. According to the World Bank, per capita income has reached US\$ 1750, and people living below the poverty line (under US\$ 1.25 per day) has gone down to less than 9 percent of the population. Bangladesh will graduate out of its LDC status by 2024. While these are impressive figures, poverty, and the lack of jobs persist and remain push factors for Bangladeshis to look for work abroad, including in India, leading to illegal migration. Bangladesh's large Diaspora of around 2.5 million sends home US\$ 15–17 billion in remittances.

Another important economic driver of the Bangladesh's economy is the garment manufacturing sector which contributes around 80 percent of the country's exports. This sector has prospered because of favourable labour laws, the large size of the manufacturing units, and the overwhelming preponderance of female labour force. Bangladesh's garment sector has led in boosting exports by 15 percent in recent years, and is set to hit the target of US\$ 40 billion by 2020. In comparison, Pakistan's exports were valued at around US\$ 25 billion. The 1947 Industrial Disputes Act, enacted a few months before independence, was inherited by India and Pakistan. The latter repealed it in 1958, freeing the economy from the restrictions of this Act, which has deterred companies in India to increase employment. Bangladesh may have more favourable labour laws; but has a considerable distance to travel to

protect labour from occupational hazards at the workplace. The frequent break out of fires at garment manufacturing units and other workplaces have exposed poor regulatory governance, corroded by corruption, nepotism and growing inequality.

Bangladesh is now giving a determined push to encourage manufacturing, IT, and the Pharmaceutical industry. It is in the process of implementing a network of 100 Special Economic Zones (SEZs). Exports of software and IT services could exceed US\$ 1 billion. The export of bulk drugs and generics are also on the rise. There is growing confidence that Bangladesh will soon compete with India in these two sectors.

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has designated Bangladesh as the fastest growing economy in the Asia-Pacific region, likely to achieve 8 percent (GDP) growth for the current fiscal year, given the continuing positive trend in exports and public investments. Substantial progress in the infrastructure sector - particularly the Padma multi-purpose bridge, the Dhaka Metro projects, and several Special Economic Zones (SEZs) opening up for investments - have added momentum to the economy. On the negative side are ease of doing business, poor banking regulations, and corruption.

### **Bilateral Relations**

Bilateral ties between India and Bangladesh have reached a high degree of maturity in the last decade. This has been possible because of political pragmatism and the positive approach by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, after she formed the government in 2009. This has been fully reciprocated by India during the governments headed Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Prime Minister Hasina's strategic decision to eschew seeking leverage via support to anti-Indian insurgent groups has proved to be a decisive step. Handing over ULFA leaders to India, and wiping out insurgent camps has injected a much-needed fillip to bilateral trust and confidence. In Bangladesh too, there is a growing consensus that anti-Indian policies of the past were damaging the country's interests, and harming its economic progress.

The previous BNP-JeI government, led by then Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, had taken its anti-India policy to such an extent that Bangladeshi intelligence agencies were collaborating with Pakistan to supply weapons to anti-India insurgent groups in India's north-eastern states. This policy was supported by Tarique Zia whose collateral motive was to make money by hook or crook. Pro-Pakistan JeI Ministers were willing collaborators in this conspiracy. The

intervention by the Army in early 2007 to restructure the Caretaker Administration set up by the Khaleda/Tarique Zia clique was a move welcomed by all. The Army-backed Caretaker Government subsequently organised a free and fair election. The Army's intervention, and the election organised thereafter, were necessary correctives for Bangladesh's polity.

Currently, bilateral ties have expanded into sectors like Cyberspace and Energy. Bangladesh is now at the core of India's "Neighbourhood Policy" and "Act East Policy". Bangladesh has a key role in BBIN and BIMSTEC. As the largest trading partner of India in South Asia, Bangladesh is also a key player in connectivity projects that will link both countries seamlessly, and bring in ASEAN countries into this connectivity paradigm in the near future.

The next phase in bilateral ties is becoming more granular as indicated by the following 4 agreements signed between the two countries.

1. MoU between the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) of India and The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) of Bangladesh
2. MoU between National Centre for Good Governance (NCGG), Mussoorie and Ministry of Public Administration (MOPA), Bangladesh on Training and Capacity building Programme for Bangladesh Civil Servants
3. MoU on Co-operation in the field of Medicinal Plants between National Medicinal Plant Board (NMPB), Ministry of AYUSH and Directorate General of health Services, Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, Bangladesh
4. MoU between Bangladesh Economic Zones Authority and Nidar Industrial Park Pune (Private) Limited, Hiranandani Group.

Bangladesh's exports to India are on track to hit US\$ 1 billion, and India's exports have reached US\$ 9 billion. These figures do not include the long tradition of informal trade which continues along the long and porous border. Items of daily necessity flow across the border, carried by people who do not have the resources of capacity to trade via the formal channel which is highly bureaucratized, ponderous, and prone to corruption. Hence, both governments have recognized that people-centric arrangements (like border *Haats*) can mitigate trans-border informal trade. It must be said, however, that border *Haats* are a drop in the ocean, given the scale of informal trade. The sad reality is that informal trade with its well organised channels, no paper work, and swift *hawala* payments can never compete with the highly bureaucratized formal trade channels.

Duty free and quota free entry of Bangladeshi products into India have helped in increasing exports. The next phase of the joint effort should concentrate on a strategic upgrade of border infrastructure via which much of the bilateral trade flows. The cost of trans-border business remains very high, with non-tariff barriers (NTBs) adding to other barriers. The BBIN Motor Vehicles Agreement is a concrete step towards transport integration. The SEZs for India will, hopefully, promote regional value chains and help Bangladeshi exports into India.

The asymmetry in the economies of the two countries is the major factor in the trade imbalance. More Indian investment flows into Bangladesh have to be encouraged. There are good opportunities in the power and energy sectors as reflected in the 13 agreements worth around US\$ 10 billion signed by Indian companies with Bangladeshi entities. The US\$ 8 billion Lines of Credit and Grants from India have sought to balance the aspect of trade imbalance. This also helps in building the hard infrastructure like railways, pipelines for the delivery of petroleum products, power plants, and also socially relevant projects like local medical clinics.

### **Future Cooperation and Challenges**

Bangladesh's geographical location makes it inevitable that its strategic policy choices will intersect with those of India. The government of Sheikh Hasina has made strategic choices that have given a huge boost to bilateral ties. As the two economies grow at a fast pace, and trade and economic linkages expand further, both countries will continue to hunger for investments. This is where China's role in Bangladesh can become a cause for concern. China is already the largest trading partner of Bangladesh, and the most important source of investment funds.

China's strategic interest in both Bangladesh and Myanmar is to seek access to the Bay of Bengal. While it has succeeded in getting access to the Arabian Sea in the west, with the CPEC in Pakistan, it is in the process of securing access via Myanmar economic corridor that connects China with the port of Kyaukpyu in the Rakhine province, from where the Rohingyas fled into Bangladesh. China has been eyeing Chittagong, the biggest port in Bangladesh, also for the same reason. While India has opposed China's BRI, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has welcomed the BRI, and even said that India could join the BRI and benefit. She has also stated that BCIM should also not worry India.

Bangladesh has, however, navigated very carefully while playing the China card by not getting into the debt trap diplomacy promoted by China in India's neighbourhood, and elsewhere in Africa. Bangladesh is clearly is playing the China card carefully, hoping to maximise benefits from both countries, without crossing strategic red lines that can vitiate bilateral ties with India. Prime Minister Hasina will, no doubt, leverage India's anxiety regarding China to optimise benefits and concessions for Bangladesh. Bangladesh, like other India's neighbours, seeks to balance its asymmetric ties with India by cosying up to China which now has the capacity to lure governments and seduce the elite with hard cash.

China is already the major supplier of military hardware to Bangladesh and Pakistan. It would be better to seek a balance in the defence domain. Hence, the quick utilisation of the US\$ 500 million Indian Line of Credit for the procurement of defence-related goods should be given high priority. River water sharing will remain a challenge that is unlikely to go away, given the increasingly bitter exchanges between the Central and State government leaders in the battle of the ballot.

While Bangladesh has taken effective steps against Islamic extremists, the Hasina government has also compromised on its secular credentials by extending concessions to Islamist organizations. The latter are increasingly demanding the introduction of the Sharia law, removing statues from public places, and removing stories and chapters written by Hindus in school books. Bangladesh can slide into Islamic extremism if governance is weak. The Rohingya refugee issue and illegal migration from Bangladesh into India will continue to strain bilateral ties. Both sides should avoid knee-jerk measures that can sour ties. It is high time the issue of migration is inscribed into the bilateral agenda for discussion.

Given the challenges of Climate Change, bilateral cooperation on environmental issues must receive a higher profile. The shared Sunderban region, recognised as a unique ecosystem, is the obvious domain for such cooperation. Bangladesh has recently adopted the Delta Plan 2100 which seeks to implement long-term strategies that include interventions for ensuring long term water and food security, economic growth, and environmental sustainability, thereby reducing vulnerability to natural disasters and building resilience to climate change.



## ***Sheikh Hasina's Fourth Term Implications for Indo-Bangladesh Relations***

Ashish Shukla\*

Electoral politics in Bangladesh have historically revolved around two mainstream political parties: the Awami League (AL) and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). The unicameral parliament of Bangladesh, known as *Jatiya Sangsad*, has 350 seats, of which 300 are open for electoral contest. The next 50 seats have been reserved for women, and are divided between the political parties using the proportional representation formula. On the democratic front, the nation has witnessed many ups and downs in its political and electoral process. It was in 1990 when a combined opposition consisting of Sheikh Hasina's Awami League, Begum Khaleda Zia's Bangladesh Nationalist Party, and the Jamaat-e-Islami, forced then President Hussain Muhammed Ershad to step down and hold elections under a caretaker government. Since then, barring a two-year gap during 2006–2008, Bangladesh has held regular, timely, inclusive, and participatory elections. The momentum was broken up in 2014 when the main opposition party (BNP), along with its 19 alliance partners, boycotted the 10th parliamentary elections over the issue of a non-political election time caretaker government.

In the 2014 elections, due to the opposition boycott, there was no voting in at least 153 constituencies. In the absence of opposition candidates, Sheikh Hasina's ruling Awami League secured 234 seats, followed by Ershad's Jatiya Party which bagged 34 seats. Unlike in 2014, the December 2018 elections were inclusive as well as participatory. The final voter turnout was reported to have been around 80 percent - 6 percent less than the 2008 elections and 30 percent more than the 2014 elections. As the preparation for the election was gaining momentum, a Dhaka Court, in February 2018, convicted BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia in the Zia Charitable Trust Graft Case, and sent her behind the bars. The BNP left no stone unturned to get Khaleda Zia out of jail. It launched a series of peaceful protests, and even threatened to boycott the election. However, later the party made up its mind to contest the election without its top leader. With election dates coming closer, the BNP along with other

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opposition parties cobbled together a National Unity Front (NUF), popularly known as *Jatiya Oikya Front* (JOF), to face the Grand Alliance led by Sheikh Hasina's ruling Awami League.

### **The Electoral Process and the People's Mandate**

There were remarkable differences in the way the two competing alliances approached the people during their electoral campaigns. The ruling coalition adopted a two-point programme which focussed on highlighting their achievements in economic and social sectors on the one hand, and exploiting Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's popularity and charisma on the other. It touched upon issues that affect the day-to-day life of the Bangladeshi people, and promised them a bright future ahead. In contrast, the *Jatiya Oikya Front* approached people with a list of complaints and allegations against the government and its way of functioning which included, *inter alia*, the muzzling of opposition voices, strangling democracy, misusing state machinery, and implicating opposition leaders in false cases, etc. Although the BNP contested this election in an adverse situation - which must be appreciated - it could not come up with any out-of-the-box thinking to influence the people. It nominated a number of controversial leaders, while ignoring dedicated and grass root leaders. There were also reports of electoral fraud on the part of the ruling dispensation to grab, come what may, a significant number of seats in the *Jatiya Sangsad*. The cumulative effect of all these were to reflect in the results.

Given the prevailing political situation and ground realities, there was hardly any doubt about Sheikh Hasina's victory. However, the results surprised everyone, including the members and sympathisers of the Awami League. The ruling coalition won 288 out of 299 seats. The Awami League registered victory in 257 constituencies, whereas Ershad's *Jatiya Party* secured 22 seats. The opposition *Jatiya Oikya Front* got completely decimated and won only seven seats, of which BNP got five. The spectacular victory of the Awami League ensured the continuity of Sheikh Hasina as the Prime Minister of Bangladesh for the next five years. The Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi was the first head of government to congratulate Sheikh Hasina for a landslide victory. He made a telephone call to his Bangladeshi counterpart on December 31 to "convey his heartiest congratulations on the decisive results ... He expressed confidence that the partnership between India and Bangladesh will continue to flourish under her far-sighted leadership."<sup>1</sup>

The Awami League victory has a direct as well as positive bearing on the political stability and the socio-economic progress of Bangladesh. It is important to note that Bangladesh has achieved many milestones during the last decade. In March 2018, it fulfilled the United Nations criteria to be recognised as a developing country. In the Global Gender Gap Index 2018, Bangladesh ranked 48th whereas in South Asia it came first, distantly followed by Sri Lanka (100th), Nepal (105th), India (108th) Maldives (113th), Bhutan (122nd), and Pakistan (148th).<sup>2</sup> It has significantly reduced headcount poverty in the last decade, and outperformed even India in many areas, including child mortality rate and life expectancy. There are reports suggesting that, by 2020, Bangladesh would leave India behind in terms of per capita income.

### **Indo-Bangladesh Ties**

The basis of Indo-Bangladesh relations has historically been a shared socio-cultural-civilisational heritage, mutual respect, and genuine cooperation in a number of arenas. During Sheikh Hasina's two-day official (however informal) visit to West Bengal, Prime Minister Narendra Modi underlined the special relationship of India and Bangladesh by stating that, 'India and Bangladesh are two states, but our interests are linked by cooperation and coordination'. The two neighbours have often cooperated in coping with some common challenges, and took necessary measures to address each other's genuine concerns. Bangladesh figures prominently in India's scheme of things regarding its immediate as well as extended neighbourhood. This was categorically underlined recently by none other than the Minister of External Affairs, Ms. Shushma Swaraj who stated that "Bangladesh comes first in India's Neighbourhood First Policy." It is also the biggest trading partner of India in South Asia. The goodwill and warmth of this very special relationship is often showcased during the frequent high-level visits on either side. Comparatively better positioned in many respects, India in fact never shies away from taking asymmetrical responsibilities, and offering the required assistance to her friendly neighbour.

There is a general view in the country that, despite India playing an important role in the birth of Bangladesh in 1971, it could not fully utilise the potential to transform friendly relations into long term strategic partnerships. Many observers and analysts point out that the success of this special relationship is often dependent upon the kind of regime at the helm in Bangladesh. Due to the historical ties and close relations, the ruling Awami League is generally

considered pro-India, whereas the opposition BNP - because of its linkages with right wing forces at home and in the region - is believed to be somewhat less friendly towards India. It was during Sheikh Hasina's India visit in 2017 that Bangladesh publicly honoured martyred Indian soldiers, and accorded due recognition to India for its role in the liberation war. India reciprocated this good gesture by renaming a road in New Delhi in memory of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. It is important to note that, even in the wake of China's increasing presence in South Asia, Sheikh Hasina has so far been able to maintain an inherent empathy towards India. Chinese attempts to lure Bangladesh into its orbit of influence and drive it away from India have not been successful because the top Bangladeshi leader knows well the importance and reliability of India.

New Delhi too feels much more comfortable and confident whenever there is an Awami League government in power. In contrast, its experience in dealing with non-Awami League governments has not been very encouraging or helpful, especially when it comes to addressing some genuine Indian concerns. India faced a number of issues in its relationship with Bangladesh during Begum Khaleda Zia's last stint in power. It was the time when a neighbouring country's intelligence agency used Bangladeshi soil to foment trouble inside Indian territory. A number of insurgent groups, then active in India's Northeast - such as the People's Liberation Army (PLA), the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), the United National Liberation Front (UNLF), the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), the National-Socialist Council of Nagaland (Issac-Muivah), the All-Tripura Tiger Force, and National Liberation Front of Tripura (NIFT) - were given all sorts of help to continue their activities. India's repeated requests to take action against these groups and hand over their leaders often fell on deaf ears.

Indian concerns were genuinely addressed after Sheikh Hasina came to power in 2008. During her last two consecutive terms in office (2008–2018) Sheikh Hasina not only closed down various insurgent camps but a number of important rebel leaders, including the General Secretary of ULFA-Golap Baruah alias Anup Chetiya, were also handed over to India. This crippled the ability of the insurgent groups to create problems in India. Besides, in 2015, Bangladesh granted India the much-needed transit right to reach its north-eastern states through Bangladeshi territory. In early November 2015, a cargo vehicle from Kolkata passed through Bangladeshi territory to reach Agartala. This particular route has reduced the distance by over a thousand kilometres.

In September 2018, the Bangladeshi cabinet gave its approval to a deal for opening the Chittagong and Mongla ports for India so that it could transport freight to its north-eastern states. With the opening of these ports, India would have the options of transporting goods to its north-eastern states through four different routes: 1) Chittagong-Mongla-Agartala via Akhura; 2) Chittagong-Mongla-Sutarkandi via Sheola; 3) Chittagong-Mongla-Daouki via Tamabil; and 4) Chittagong/Mongla-Bibekbazar via Simantapur. Apart from this, Bangladesh has been cooperating with India on various regional connectivity initiatives which are at the heart of the latter's Act East Policy (AEP). Be it BBIN, BCIM, BIMSTEC, SAARC, or any other regional initiative, the two countries have been cooperating with each other for the larger public good.

On its part, India has successfully established itself as a reliable developmental partner and true friend of Bangladesh. It has always stood shoulder to shoulder with Bangladesh in the time of her need. Be it a natural disaster or any other emergency, India has been the first one to reach out to its neighbour with all sorts of help and assistance. In the wake of a growing Rohingya refugee crisis, India launched *Operation Insaniyat* to supply relief materials for 300,000 people. Although India's economic and developmental assistance to Bangladesh started immediately after 1971, grew exponentially in the past decade it. Starting in 2010 with US \$1 billion, India has so far extended the line of credit to Bangladesh to the tune of US \$8 billion. This is the biggest amount offered by India to any single country till date. Capacity building and the development of basic infrastructure is at the centre of these lines of credit that have been offered through the EXIM Bank of India. In the recent past, the two countries have also increased their military cooperation in terms of participation in training programmes, joint exercises, and coordinated naval patrols, etc.

### **Future Prospects**

With Sheikh Hasina getting the fourth term in office and third in a row, there exists a strong possibility of strengthening the bilateral ties and the friendship bond between the two neighbouring countries. Nothing could be better than the return of a trustworthy ally in a neighbouring country. Given the overall political stability, internal security situation, the level of socio-economic development in other South Asian countries, the League's steamroller victory is a positive and an encouraging development for India. There is marked

enthusiasm in both countries, especially among the industrial and business chambers of commerce that have high hopes of deepening trade and commercial ties in the future.

Attempts to strengthen and boost economic cooperation and the relationship started soon after the new government took charge. On February 8, 2019, the new Bangladeshi Foreign Minister, A. K. Abdul Momen, visited New Delhi and held discussions with his Indian counterpart, Ms. Sushma Swaraj, under the Joint Consultative Commission (JCC) framework. It was the fifth JCC meeting during which the two countries reaffirmed that their relationship goes far beyond a strategic partnership. The two Foreign Ministers discussed the whole range of issues of mutual interest, reviewed the bilateral cooperation, and noted with satisfaction that the two countries are working closer than ever before in every possible arena. As per the joint statement issued after the meeting, the two countries also signed three MoUs to further strengthen the existing multifaceted cooperation. These MoUs require India to train 1,800 Bangladeshi mid-career civil servants; the Indian AYUSH and Ministry of Health in Bangladesh to cooperate in the field of medicinal plants; and India's Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) and Anti-Corruption Commission of Bangladesh to step up cooperation in the fight against graft. An additional MoU was also signed between India's Hiranandani Group and the Economic Zones Authority of Bangladesh to facilitate investments in the Indian Economic Zone in Mongla. Following this, on March 11, 2019, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Bangladeshi counterpart Sheikh Hasina jointly unveiled e-plaques for a number of development projects in Bangladesh. Modi not only appreciated Sheikh Hasina's vision being the biggest inspiration for stronger connectivity between the two countries, he categorically reiterated Indian support for the ambitious development targets of Bangladesh and expressed confidence about growing bilateral ties.

### **Certain Concerns**

In order to smoothen out the relationship a little more and utilise the full potential, both countries need to address certain issues on a priority basis. Although, academics and analysts by and large appreciate the close cooperation between the two countries, some of them occasionally raise the issue of the slow utilisation of the lines of credits (US \$8 billion) offered by India. There is a feeling in some sections in Bangladesh that, in spite of having good people-

to-people relations and better inter-governmental cooperation, the Indian private sector is shying away from Bangladesh. Besides, there is a concern about the Teesta water sharing arrangement. In Bangladesh, Teesta is an emotional issue, and people in general and civil society in particular are disappointed with the non-conclusion of the agreement; they often feel let down by both the governments. In a nut-shell, if the two countries are able to address some of these concerns in time, the two countries would definitely forge a robust and multifaceted bilateral relationship.

**Notes :**

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<sup>1</sup> “India welcomes the successful completion of the Parliamentary elections in Bangladesh,” MEA Press Release, *Ministry of External Affairs*, December 31, 2018, [https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/30855/India\\_welcomes\\_the\\_successful\\_completion\\_of\\_the\\_Parliamentary\\_elections\\_in\\_Bangladesh](https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/30855/India_welcomes_the_successful_completion_of_the_Parliamentary_elections_in_Bangladesh)

<sup>2</sup> “The Global Gender Gap Report 2018”, World Economic Forum, Geneva, pp. 10–11.



## ***The Opposition in Bangladesh: Would need to reinvent its Politics***

Anand Kumar\*

Bangladesh successfully conducted its 11th parliamentary election towards the end of December 2018 in which the Sheikh Hasina led 14 party coalition (Grand alliance) emerged victorious. This victory brought Sheikh Hasina to power for the third consecutive term. This was unprecedented in the history of Bangladesh where two major political parties - the Awami League (AL) and the BNP - have been alternating in power. There were allegations of state repression against the opposition parties, and some even expressed concern that it would reduce the democracy in Bangladesh to one party state system. The misuse of state power during the electoral process is not uncommon in South Asia, and there may be an element of truth in the allegations of opposition parties in Bangladesh. However, it hardly explains their lacklustre performance. Actually, the continuous rejection of the BNP by the Bangladeshi people suggests that the main opposition party would have to put its own house in order and reinvent its politics if it wants to remain relevant as the old politics of extremism and chaos are no longer acceptable to the people.

These elections have given an overwhelming majority to the Awami League led alliance in the parliament (Jatiya Sangsad), and the opposition has been nearly wiped out. The ruling alliance has won 288 parliamentary seats in its best ever performance, whereas the main opposition alliance led by the BNP could get only seven seats. The opposition had fought election under the banner of Jatiya Oikya Front (National Unity Front) which was a conglomeration of 19 political parties. This disappointing performance of the BNP has raised questions about its future. BNP has not been in power since 2006 and, after the latest elections doubts are being expressed about whether it will ever regain its status as a major political force in the country.

The opposition alliance has alleged that the absence of a level playing field during the elections put them in a disadvantageous position. This was bound to be so as their main campaigner, Begum Khaleda Zia, was languishing in jail

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in a corruption case since February 2018. Her son, Tarique Rahman who is also the acting chairman of the party, is living in exile in London for the last ten years. He was sentenced for life by a Bangladesh court in October 2018, over a 2004 assassination attempt on Sheikh Hasina. This assassination attempt took place in Dhaka during a rally of the Awami League in which more than 24 people were killed, and many injured. Sheikh Hasina herself was grievously injured. Some other BNP leaders are also either in jail or in hiding. The party denies any wrongdoing, and says that all the charges are politically motivated; but people in general are not convinced. This has made the party lose its significant support base.

In any case, unlike the Awami league, the BNP has never been a mass based party. It has always been a party of retired army officers, bureaucrats, and other elites of Bangladesh. This has made the party a collection of disparate elements - leftists dissatisfied with the nationalism of the Awami League; rightists looking for an Islamist revival; opportunists; and Pakistan-era establishment figures sidelined by the new rulers of independent Bangladesh.

The party also lacks a clear ideology to weave together these disparate elements. Generally, the political parties in Bangladesh have some kind of ideology. For instance, the Awami League has a liberal, secular, and nationalist ideology which is mostly derived from the pre-eminent role it played in the Liberation War. The BNP has no such legacy to capitalise on and to transform it into a coherent and attractive ideology. The absence of any particular ideology reduces the attractiveness of the BNP as an opposition force.

The BNP had boycotted the last election in January 2014 which had made the Awami League's return to power quite easy. This decision was later regretted by its leaders. As a result of being in power for last 10 years, the Awami League has managed to increase its mass base tremendously. On the other hand, the BNP has fallen into disarray as both its top leaders Begum Zia and Tarique Rahman are facing legal problems.

Another major force in the opposition camp was the Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI). The Jamaat wielded real street power which came in handy for the BNP. The Jamaat had been a cadre based party which became very powerful when it was part of the BNP led ruling coalition. In fact, there was a tremendous resurgence of extremism in Bangladesh during this period. Bangladesh gained notoriety for the extremist violence taking place in the country. The response of the BNP was to deny this. A number of BNP leaders were hand in glove with terrorist organisations, like the Harkat-ul-Jihad al-Islami (HuJI). The

HuJI chief Mufti Hannan openly claimed that he had the protection of a top BNP leader.

The BNP had sought to put pressure on the Awami League government in 2013 to create a caretaker government for conducting elections with the help of the Jamaat. To achieve this objective, they organized general strikes and street protests. However, when the Hasina government did not agree to their demands, they continued with the unrest and burnt buses, threw bombs, and caused major disruptions in public life. In the senseless violence nearly 150 people were killed. At least 18 people were killed on election-day itself. The suffering caused to people turned them against the main opposition party, and eroded its support base.

The war crime trials in Bangladesh have further affected the political fortunes of the BNP. In these trials, a number of senior Jamaat leaders have been convicted and hanged. The Jamaat-e-Islami as a political party has been banned. The prosecution of Jamaat leaders continues even after the 11th parliamentary elections. On 29 March 2019, a Bangladesh court sentenced five more men to death in absentia for the atrocities perpetrated during the war in 1971. Four of the accused were connected to the Jamaat-e-Islami, the largest Islamist party in Bangladesh; and one person is related to the country's main opposition party, the BNP.

The prosecution of the Jamaat leaders has weakened Jamaat-e-Islami as a political party; but this does not mean that the Islamists in Bangladesh are getting weakened. Unfortunately, the Islamisation of Bangladeshi society is going on unhindered. Now their influence is such that no major political party wants to ignore them. A firebrand Islamist, Fazlul Haq Aminee, had claimed in March, 2005 that no political party in Bangladesh would be able to come to power at the national level without the support from the Madrassas or Islamic schools spread across Bangladesh. These schools have at least 1.4 million students that follow the Deobandi tradition, which has a conservative interpretation of Islam. His predictions seem to have come true as both the major political parties of Bangladesh tried to woo the Islamists in the run-up to 2018 elections. They believed that the support of Islamists would help garner votes.

The BNP joined the Jatiya Oikyo Front (JOF) in the 2018 general elections, under the leadership of Kamal Hossain. Some had expected that this would make the BNP abandon its long-time Islamist ally, the Jamaat-e-Islami. However, this did not happen, and the BNP nominated 22 Jamaat-linked politicians to contest the elections from its platform as the Jamaat was banned as a political party.

Interestingly, the ruling Awami League - generally perceived as secular in India and Western countries - got the backing from the Hefazat-i-Islam. Of the 70 Islamist parties in Bangladesh, more than 60 are close to the ruling party and its key ally, the Jatiya Party, headed by General Ershad.<sup>1</sup> The Jatiya Party, however, has become the main opposition party after the elections. Surprisingly, the BNP, which many perceive as more sympathetic to Islamists, has only five within its fold. Presently, it might seem that this is a marriage of convenience between the Awami League and the Islamists; but this is also leading to a gradual ideological shift within the Awami League. For religious parties, like the Hefazat-i-Islam, an alliance with the ruling party is proving beneficial as they are getting more room to mobilise the masses.

The BNP agreed to participate peacefully in the 2018 elections but could not regain popular support. Most of its leaders were either behind bars or in hiding. The political campaign of the party was hardly visible on the eve of elections. Moreover, the suffering of its leaders did not cause any outpouring of public sympathy for the BNP. It is true that the BNP could have done better had their star campaigners been around, and taken active part in the electioneering. The public, however, appeared disinterested in their cause as they did not expect them to work for their welfare. Any extra support for them would have been the result of their anger at the incumbent government.

The BNP has failed to remain relevant in the domestic politics of Bangladesh. It has not been able to associate itself with any major mass mobilization taking place in the country in recent times. The Shahbag movement in February 2013 kept the BNP at arm's length because of its association with the Jamaat. This movement was meant to restore secular principles in the Bangladeshi polity on which the original Bangladeshi state was formed.

The other major movement was started by the Hifazat-e Islam which is a coalition of a dozen or so Islamist organisations. This movement wanted to alter the country's secular political culture. Both these conflicting movements drew support from thousands of Bangladeshis. This started a major national debate in the country on the very core values and principles of the state.

However, the BNP could not find a place in both these movement. The BNP was also missing from other youth mobilizations taking place in the country since 2015. There was a "No VAT on Education" movement which

protested against a government tax on private university education. The quota reform movement was launched for broader intake in government jobs. And finally, there was a road safety movement. The BNP failed to play a role in these protests and could not position itself in the ensuing debates.

It is widely believed that the Hasina government has come back to power riding on the economic miracle that Bangladesh has seen during her regime. For the last many years, Bangladesh has been growing at a rate of over 7 percent. This has tripled the income of the people; exports have soared; and the country is doing well on every measure of the human development indicator. Moreover, Hasina has now promised to raise the minimum wages of garment industry workers. The garment industry is the most important industry of Bangladesh, and the second largest in the world after China. It gets 83 percent of export revenues for the country. Bangladesh now also plans to diversify its economy by starting the manufacturing of electronic items.

The economic success of Bangladesh has allowed the country to make remarkable progress in poverty alleviation prior to the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) deadline of 2015. It has over performed on multiple social indicators, such as education, health, and fertility. According to the assessment of the United Nations (UN), Bangladesh has achieved so much progress that it can now easily graduate from being a “least developed country” to being a “developing country”. This has created a very positive image of the Awami League in the minds of the Bangladeshi people. On the other hand, the BNP has intense desire to come to power, but has no vision for the country. In a democracy, it is useful to change the political elite at regular intervals; but when the opposition parties fail to bring anything constructive to the table, change for the sake of change does not motivate people.

The BNP raised two important issues in the run-up to the 2018 elections. It wanted release of its leader Khaleda Zia from prison, and it also wanted reform in the election system. Unfortunately, both these issues failed to strike a chord with the Bangladeshi people. The imprisonment of Khaleda Zia could not become an emotive issue as she was seen as a corrupt politician. The Bangladeshi people also did not believe that after coming to power the BNP can fix the problematic election system of the country or improve governance.

However, this does not mean that the opposition has no chance in the politics of Bangladesh. Bangladesh is still a country with high unemployment, growing inequality, lopsided industrial development, and a refugee crisis. The support of the important sections of the population - like the army, the

bureaucracy, the police, and the “deep state” - is conditional for the Hasina government on the country doing well. Any major shortfall on economic performance or a major political faux-pas can easily weaken the present government.

The electorate of Bangladesh is composed of the nationalists, socialists, Islamists, and the minorities. It is always a challenge for any government to keep a disparate collection of people under one umbrella for a very long time. The shortcomings of the ruling party can be exploited by an opposition movement provided it offers some real solutions to the grievances of the public. For this, the opposition has to be focused, imaginative, and goal oriented.

Bangladesh is today in search of an opposition party which can present itself as a credible alternative to the Awami League, and can take the country forward. The present opposition led by General Ershad does not fit the bill. The Bangladeshi people doubt that the Jatiyo Party will be able to perform the job of a forceful opposition. The Jatiyo Party has never been taken seriously by political observers in Bangladesh primarily because of its lack of popular appeal and its inability to offer credible political programmes in parliament or outside. The BNP, on the other hand, is in disarray and facing numerous problems. It is important for Bangladesh that this opposition space is occupied by a progressive force or else the vacuum could be used by the Islamists for their own rise. This will present a major problem for the neighbouring countries like India.

The main opposition alliance of Bangladesh would like to hide behind the allegation of state repression for its failure during the elections. In reality, it failed because of its old and unimaginative leadership, its inability to present an inspiring agenda, and its incapability of carving out a new path for the country. It is hardly surprising that all pre-poll surveys showed a massive lead for the Awami League in the elections. The people of Bangladesh are unwilling to give up their peace and growing income for the chaos they had seen during the regime of the BNP led four party alliance. This is actually the time for the opposition alliance in Bangladesh to introspect, and give up the negative and extremist politics of past which the people of Bangladesh have rejected. They have to recast their politics to meet the expectations of the Bangladeshi people who have voted for Bangladesh remaining a secular and peaceful country, moving in the direction of becoming a middle income country in the near future.

In the past, the India-Bangladesh relationship has seen ups and downs, primarily depending on the political party in power in Bangladesh. The Awami League has been generally friendly towards India, and bilateral relationship between the two countries has been smooth whenever the party has been in power. On the other hand, whenever the BNP had been in power, bilateral relations between India and Bangladesh experienced many obstacles. The BNP has always espoused anti-India rhetoric leading to the party's anti-India foreign policies. The party has allowed anti-India elements to freely voice their opinion against India in Bangladesh. During the rule of the BNP-led alliance in Bangladesh, a number of insurgent and terrorist groups active in India's Northeast were running their training camps in Bangladesh. Bangladesh under the BNP also became a place from where a number of Islamist and Jihadi groups were operating. Some of these Jihadi groups were active inside Bangladesh but groups like HuJI were carrying out terror activities inside India. To India's advantage, after two consecutive terms of Awami League in power, deterioration in bilateral relationship witnessed under the BNP is history now. However, the gains made in bilateral relationship can be undone in no time if BNP, Jamaat or any other force with similar inclination comes to power in Bangladesh.

Change of governments is a constant feature of democracies. Whenever people feel dissatisfied with the gap between the promise and delivery of the party in power they can vote out the ruling party by giving chance to the opposition. In such circumstances, it is important that the space available to the opposition is occupied by a progressive force.

The Army in Bangladesh has also tasted power. In fact, the country has been ruled for a considerable length of time by the Army. However, under present circumstances it looks unlikely that the army would try to directly take over the reins of power, which can trigger political instability. The Army has tremendous interest in the UN peacekeeping operations. Bangladesh is a leading troop contributor to the UN peacekeeping forces. An Army takeover would not be appreciated by the international community and could result in international sanctions on the Army. The Army generals and their rank and file who are benefiting from the UN peacekeeping operations would not like an international condemnation. In Bangladesh, before Sheikh Hasina came to power in January 2009, the Army had tried to foist a civilian government and preferred backseat driving. But an Army-propped civilian government will not be desirable either for Bangladesh or for India-Bangladesh relationship.

There is no credible political opposition in Bangladesh today. The leader of the opposition alliance, Kamal Hossain, is too old to provide any long-term alternative to the ruling alliance. Moreover, there is no real change in the politics of the BNP and the Jamaat. Their silence towards India in the run-up to the elections was only tactical. The next five years are going to be crucial as Bangladesh looks for credible opposition force and the Awami League looks for a new leadership. These two developments will determine the future of Indo-Bangladesh relations which is presently witnessing a golden phase.

**Notes :**

<sup>1</sup> Ali Riaz, "Why Bangladesh's mainstream parties rely on Islamists," at <https://www.dw.com/en/why-bangladeshs-mainstream-parties-rely-on-islamists/a-46801270>



## ***India-Bangladesh Relations: Engaging a Dynamic Neighbour***

Sreeradha Datta\*

Today, India and Bangladesh share a relationship that appears to be one of the best in course of their history. For India, this relationship is increasingly important and undoubtedly special. It is a partnership that spans various layers, and encompasses social, economic, cultural, security as well as many other aspects that touch the lives of a vast majority of the population. For Bangladesh, India has been an important developmental partner, especially in the past decade. However, the relationship between the two countries is largely perceived as a relationship that Awami League (AL), one of the major political parties of Bangladesh, shares with India. Therein lies the problem and dilemma of this bilateral relationship.

While the Awami League, led by Sheikh Hasina, represents the secular ethos that India traditionally relates to, the alternative posed by other political parties in Bangladesh does not offer much of a choice to India. Typically, for the last several decades, since the introduction of the 1991 multiparty democracy, the Awami League, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the *Jatiya* Party, and the *Jamaat Islami* have been the only few other serious contenders for the electoral vote. The *Jamaat Islami* - the religious political party that now stands banned - has never seen any significant gains in terms of the seats in the *Jatiya Sangsad* (JS) (national parliament), other than in 2006 when they won the 4 seats that gave them a ministerial berth. While the *Jatiya* Party has always held its own core constituency in Rangpur, it was the BNP led by Khaleda Zia, and the Awami League (AL) under Sheikh Hasina that managed to share the vote almost equally in terms of percentage, with the coalition partners on each side lending them some additional numbers.

Historically, the BNP was born in the barracks nurtured by the military leader Ziaur Rahman, lending it a character that India did not necessarily relate to. Subsequent developments in their close association with the Islamic groups and perceived anti-India activities moved them further from India. Similarly, the *Jatiya* Party led by Muhammad Ershad - the last military leader

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to have ruled Bangladesh - did not find much common ground with India. While the *Jamaat* does not exist as a political party post the constitutional amendment introduced by Sheikh Hasina during her previous term, these religious political leaders also never enjoyed any fruitful interaction with Indian political leaders.

Thus, the political party that India has maintained regular interaction with for a long time has been the Awami League. The historical friendship between India and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman apart - and irrespective of the political party in power in New Delhi - all have viewed the Awami League positively in New Delhi. The same is not true for Dhaka. The last government formed by BNP in 2001, was rather disappointing for India. While India had hoped they would be able to work closely, including by investing in bilateral energy cooperation, it did not materialise. Bilateral relationship between India and Bangladesh dipped to its lowest point due to the security concerns that emanated from Bangladeshi soil during the years of Khaleda Zia's government. Indeed, Bangladesh also witnessed its first large scale terror attack, reflecting a deteriorating security situation during this period.

Awami League was ushered in with huge electoral margins in December 2008. The breakthrough in the India-Bangladesh relationship began with the signing of bilateral framework for cooperation agreement. It signalled a new dawn for the two neighbours in 2011. There has been no looking back since then, and India and Bangladesh have moved from strength to strength. Beginning with the first US\$ 1 billion credit line to Bangladesh for a range of projects - including railway infrastructure, the supply of locomotives and passenger coaches, the rehabilitation of the Saidpur railway workshop, the procurement of buses, and dredging projects - India and Bangladesh have converged in many other areas. The agreement also included the purchase of double-decker buses from India, the setting up of a power grid between India and Bangladesh, and the establishment of state-run standards and testing institute facilities in Bangladesh by India. This was the largest credit loan that India has offered to any state in the neighbourhood or outside, and this figure presently stands at nearly US\$ 8 billion. More importantly, India undertook several domestic initiatives, dovetailing them with cross border connectivity and infrastructural developments that Bangladesh had commenced.

Bangladeshi leadership has, in the intervening period, also established strong links with other regional and extra regional players, namely China, USA, and Europe. With a growing economy and on its way to achieving a

middle income nation status, Bangladesh is extremely well poised in the South Asian region.

The problem, however, lies in domestic developments. Holding a huge majority of seats in the parliament, the Awami League led government was able to push through many changes, including constitutional ones and even removing the provision for a Caretaker Government (CG) to supervise the elections. The 15th Constitutional Amendment Bill (June 2011) abolished the CG system as established under the 13th Amendment. Interestingly, the Supreme Court had also provided for the system to remain in practice for the two ensuing JS elections for the sake of the 'safety of the state and its people'. When the Awami League government decided to go ahead with the 2014 election without the CG system, the opposition led by the BNP decided to boycott the elections on the ground that there was no level playing field possible without the CG. With a walkover of 153 seats, the ruling Awami League secured an overwhelming majority of over 230 seats, with a voter turnout of barely 25 percent. The ground conditions were no different this time, although the Opposition did not abstain from the elections. But, with Khaleda Zia imprisoned and her son unable to return to Bangladesh - given the graft charges against him, the BNP was unable to prop-up another credible leader.

The 11th Jatiya Sangsad election in 2018 saw the 16 member coalition led by Sheikh Hasina garnering 288 seats of the 300 elected member parliament, with 258 seats for the Awami League (AL), with its partner Jatiya Party managing 20 seats. Even when the AL was given a walk over in 2014, it had only received 234 seats. The opposition alliance that brought together the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and a *Jatiya Oikya* front (United National) could just manage six seats. As events unfolded in the months prior to these elections, it was evident that the biggest factor that was going to work for the Awami League was the lack of a strong opposition. A win for the Awami league was on the cards but the landslide winning of 258 seats by the Awami League and the reported 96 percentage support did raise eyebrows - both in Bangladesh and outside.

This apart, a series of political developments in Bangladesh resulted in Sheikh Hasina being accused of using authoritarian ways. Specific terror attacks saw a series of hard measures for removing militants, even involving extra judicial measures. The Awami League's association with Hefazat-e-Islam - a strident Islamic grouping also came under criticism. Despite Sheikh Hasina's electoral pitch to the contrary, corruption issues continue to shadow Bangladesh, and the refusal of the World Bank to fund the Padma multipurpose

project is one of the many instances that continue to reflect this aspect. The lack of credible opposition leadership has indeed resulted in Sheikh Hasina to assume unchallenged powers.

So what does Sheikh Hasina's third term mean for India? In the short term, it augurs well for India. However, long term implications will be complex. Arguably, the projects that have been unrolled in Bangladesh with Indian assistance will be operational within the next few years, offering huge benefits to the people. This is especially true in the transport corridor between India and Bangladesh that has become operational in some sectors. Once completed, this transport network system would become part of the larger network in the region. The June 2015 signing of bilateral agreements has paved the way for the development of a regional multimodal transport network that will increase trade, people-to-people contact, and enable the development of economic corridors. The bilateral transport corridor at present encompasses train, buses, and water routes.

While train services resumed between Kolkata and Dhaka through the *Maitree* Express in 2008, the *Bandhan* Express launched in 2018 connected the busy route of Petrapole and Benapole on two sides. India has also supported building a second, one km long Bhairab Bridge (US\$ 75m) and the Titas Bridge (US\$ 25m) that has been able to start train movement between the main Chittagong to the Dhaka Trunk rail line. The roadways have seen similar development, with the Kolkata-Dhaka-Agartala and Dhaka-Shillong-Guwahati bus services (started in 2015) now having buses plying on the Dhaka-Kolkata, Dhaka-Shillong-Guwahati, and Dhaka-Khulna-Kolkata routes, while the Royal Coach plies on the Dhaka-Agartala route.

The use of waterways and maritime routes has seen substantial improvement in recent times. Last year, India and Bangladesh signed three bilateral memoranda of understanding (25 October 2018) with the Bangladesh Government to strengthen inland water transportation which goes beyond the India-Bangladesh Protocol on Inland Water. The maritime network is becoming robust, and with Bangladesh's recent approval for India to use the Chittagong and Mongla sea ports for transporting goods to and from its land-locked north-eastern states, this will have several implications for bilateral and regional trade. In fact, for the first time, the India and Bangladesh trade movement has seen a major increase. After years of discussion and negotiations, the first land and air transshipment between the neighbours finally took place towards end of 2018. The first bonded container (with 4.41 tonnes cargo from Bangladesh) moved through the Benapole land border into India through the Petrapole border to head towards Kolkata

airport for air freight to Europe. This first instance of GPS enabled trucks moving across the border, allowed officials from both India and Bangladesh to monitor progress in real time. This will no doubt change the contours of bilateral and regional trade also.

However, while this and other infrastructural developments in Bangladesh will ensure several benefits to the people, the close association of India with the Awami League will have several ramifications on state-to-state relations. Irrespective of the reality, the perception about the Indian role in Bangladeshi politics has and will continue to affect public opinion. A sizable proportion of Bangladeshis continue to harbour misgivings about India blindly supporting the Awami League. This has naturally affected the individual popularity of Sheikh Hasina.

As we have seen in the past, despite India going an extra mile to closely engage with Bangladesh, Bangladeshis - especially its political elite, academics and the media, continue to express concern about the outstanding bilateral issues. In Bangladesh vis-à-vis India, there has been a tendency to focus on the unresolved issues rather than on the positive aspects that have grown between the two neighbours; and every dialogue has resonated this misgiving. The present mood in Dhaka, especially, is a reminder of the political differences that exists amongst Bangladeshis themselves, and which spills over into India.

India has been very closely associated with the Awami League for a variety of reasons and, thus it inevitably faces the brunt of the anti-Awami sentiments that may grow in days ahead. While a large section of Bangladesh appreciates the growing cooperation with India, much of it gets blunted given the sharp political polarisation in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh has joined the Belt Road Initiative launched by China. India's concern regarding China is not unknown to Dhaka; but China has been a close developmental partner of Bangladesh for a long time, and their growing engagement is one of the *fait accompli* that India is faced with. While no government in Dhaka can ignore India - given the geographical proximity and the shared history and cultural traditions - the new generation of youth on both sides, not bogged down by history, could think differently.

While there is no altruism in global politics, India's efforts to draw Bangladesh into the regional framework are viewed through a different lens. As times change, Bangladesh has been able to position itself differently, and is poised to be a critical partner for both South Asian states as well as extra regional powers. Dhaka has been able to overcome its inherent dependency

on India and, given its growing economic status, has acquired a confidence that India needs to understand and engage with it accordingly. Moving away from the erstwhile one sided bilateral tie, the partnership is now based on mutual need and necessity, and the political leadership on both sides will have to reflect this evolving situation in the future trajectory of the bilateral relationship between the two countries.

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## ***India-Bangladesh Relations: Past Cannot be Taken for Granted***

Aparupa Bhattacharjee\*

The 11th Bangladesh Parliamentary election in December 2018 witnessed the return of the Awami League (AL) and Sheikh Hasina as the Prime Minister for a third consecutive term. This election was marred by electoral violence and accusations of poll rigging. The electoral process witnessed multiple controversies right from the beginning. Khaleda Zia, the main opposition leader of the Bangladesh National Party (BNP), was imprisoned on charges of corruption. During the middle of 2018, there were street protests led by the youth, mainly students, demanding road safety laws. National and International media expressed apprehension on the threats to the freedom of expression. These events, happening just before the elections, had exerted enormous pressure on the popularity of the AL government. There was even some fear that there could be an anti-incumbency wave.

However, the AL coalition won 288 out of 300 seats; the BNP, the main opposition winning only seven seats. The new government, formed in 2019, had initially received a lukewarm response at the international level. However, India had spontaneously welcomed the return of the AL and Sheikh Hasina. Given its geographic proximity and strategic location, Bangladesh is extremely important to India. The Awami League, being one of New Delhi's oldest allies in its immediate neighbourhood, further underlined New Delhi's warm welcome towards the new government.

Given the delicate internal situation within Bangladesh, many questions arise. How will the domestic political situation evolve? What will be the implications of Bangladesh's internal situation in Dhaka's relations towards India? How effectively will Bangladesh balance its relations with India as well as other regional and international players in the near future? What will determine the trajectory of the India-Bangladesh relationship?

2019 will be crucial for Bangladesh, as the AL has formed the government for a third consecutive term. Concerns around the bloody 2018 election and the apparent stifling of the opposition against Sheikh Hasina will need to be seriously addressed by the new government. The Opposition had condemned

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the election as ‘farcical’ stating that the run-up to the counting day was marred with violence and vote rigging. Notably, 47 candidates from the main Opposition alliances withdrew before the polling closed.

There is some apprehension in the country that the 2018 elections might have pushed Bangladesh towards a one-party rule – which has in turn generated concerns about the possible growth of an authoritarian form of government in future. The timing of imprisonment of Sheikh Hasina’s long-term rival, Khaleda Zia, just prior to the elections has added to these concerns. Furthermore, the reports about hundreds of BNP leaders being arrested on the day of Khaleda Zia’s verdict have strengthened the stifling-of-the-Opposition discourse in Bangladesh. The arrests of its leaders and their subsequent poor showing at the polls have substantially weakened the BNP, once the strongest opponent to the AL. Today, the BNP is just a shadow, making the AL the most powerful political force within the Bangladesh Parliament.

The second biggest challenge for the AL in 2019 would be to earn political and public trust within Bangladesh. Thanks to the absence of any strong Opposition, electoral violence, and accusations of rigging, there is an increasing mistrust in the government at the public level - as was shown during the public protests in 2018. The massive protest, although triggered by the issues of road safety, was an expression of public anger against the Government. However, the continued high economic growth under the Hasina government in Bangladesh has helped in maintenance of overall stability.

So, for the new government, the biggest challenge still would be to address the issue of the rule of law and good governance effectively, and earn public trust. The Hasina government cannot take its win in the 2018 elections for granted in the future. Besides the aforementioned, the following issues will have to be a priority for Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to gain legitimacy and establish a stable government.

### **Human Rights Issues**

The year 2018 saw multiple student protests, the arrest of sizable number of social activists and journalists, and alleged disappearances. Sheikh Hasina’s Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Act was seen as autocratic. The new Digital Security Act passed in 2018 has imposed further restrictions on the already diminishing role of the press in the country.

Addressing the above issues relating to human rights and the freedom of expression would be an important challenge for Sheikh Hasina in 2019. Especially given the youth bulge and their demand for jobs, the AL needs to firmly address the aspirations of the youth and challenges arising from the youth unrest.

### **Better Economy**

Set against the stable polity of 10 years, Bangladesh has profited in terms of economic, social and infrastructure progress. In 2018, Bangladesh was able to steadily achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) targets in a broad range of areas. However, though the economy has been expanding, the benefits have not trickled down, and vast inequalities persist. While poverty has slowed down in recent years, Bangladesh has simultaneously become a country with expanding numbers of the ultra-wealthy people. The new government will have to look at bridging the growing rich-poor gap, financial scandals, and patronage politics which have overshadowed the country's past development records for decades.

### **Rohingya Crisis**

Since 2017, the Rohingya influx from the Rakhine province of Myanmar has become a major issue within Bangladesh. Bangladesh was unsuccessful in mounting the necessary diplomatic pressures on the issue internationally. With China and India both being non-committal on the issue, Sheikh Hasina concluded a bilateral "arrangement" with Naypyidaw to repatriate the refugees. However, the deal has been facing numerous obstacles, including the actual logistics and conditions for repatriation. For the new government, addressing the Rohingya issue both with Myanmar and within should be an immediate priority.

### **Balancing India and China**

Another pivotal task for the AL government will be to balance its relationship between India and China. India has been an ally of the AL since its inception. However, despite the closeness, there are several challenges that will impact this relationship, like the Teesta water issue and the rise of anti-India sentiment among the people, especially the youth in Bangladesh. On the other hand, Bangladesh needs Chinese investments, especially for infrastructural development. However, it would like to avoid the Sri Lankan experience of any Chinese debt trap. The AL government has to deal smartly with its biggest investor.

### **Major Achievements**

Despite these problems, the Awami League has been able to turn the tide and win popular sentiments. During the last three terms, there have been substantial achievements by the AL. In areas like economy, infrastructure, and legal space for the religious minorities, the AL government has made crucial contributions.

In the economic sphere, the GDP of Bangladesh grew at 7.86 percent. According to a United Nations report titled 'World Economic Situation and Prospects', Bangladesh will be the third fastest growing economy in the world in 2019. Sheikh Hasina will have to sustain the current GDP growth rates and, at the same time, reduce the inflation rate and the gross inequality rate. In 2008, Sheikh Hasina came to power with her manifesto: 'Charter for Change - Vision 2021. This Vision contributed to the AL's landslide victory, and Sheikh Hasina took definitive steps to achieve this. She initiated the construction of the Padma Bridge without any funding from the World Bank. Her tenure has also witnessed a rise in Foreign Direct Investments in Bangladesh. According to data from the Bangladesh Bank, the central bank, there was a rise of FDI worth US\$ 961 million in 2008–09. It further increased to US\$ 2,607 million during 2017-18. Prime Minister Hasina's government has also initiated the 'One-Stop Service Act' to facilitate quick service to investors without any hassles. The AL government also established the Bangladesh Economic Zones Authority and the Bangladesh Investment Development Authority to encourage the right environment for investments.

### **Bangladesh-India Relations under the AL**

The Awami League has been an important ally for India. The bilateral relationship has significantly improved between the two countries, and there has been result-oriented cooperation on traditional and new areas. There is a widespread expectation that the return of the AL would further cement the relationship between the two countries. However, India and AL cannot take their past experience for granted. Under successive AL governments, New Delhi has dramatically improved relations with Dhaka, but there are also challenges that need to be dealt with.

For India, three key factors have played a role in shaping its relationship with Bangladesh: Firstly, a non-communal government which would also help combat inter-border terrorism and also be more open to any kind of negotiation.

Secondly, the China factor - India is well aware of the inflow of Chinese investment in Bangladesh, which is also part of (China's) Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). But India is hopeful that the AL government will make an effort to balance both China and India cautiously - which was never expected of the BNP. Thirdly, for India, a business-friendly government - which the AL has proved to be in its previous tenure - is pivotal. Hence, India's enthusiastic welcome to AL is not surprising, as in the above three aspects, it is known that the AL government will work favourably with India.

Additionally, in her previous tenure, Sheikh Hasina initiated several projects for better interconnectivity with India. For example, in 2015, the Dhaka-Kolkata-Agartala and the Dhaka-Shillong-Guwahati bus services were started. In 2016, Bangladesh launched coastal shipping to allow river vessels to carry cargo to India. There is also an upcoming plan for new bus services connecting Khulna-Kolkata and Jessore-Kolkata. Both countries are also taking initiatives to revive traditional rail routes to enhance the travel of passengers and the transportation of goods. Hence, Sheikh Hasina's win has led to the prospect of a more stable long-term relationship between the two countries.

### **Challenges**

Besides the above mentioned factors of bonhomie, there are issues of contention between the two countries which may cause tension as the AL starts its third consecutive term. The challenges could be grouped under three categories: bilateral, regional and international.

The sharing of the Teesta waters, especially during the lean season, will remain a tricky issue. The negotiations regarding the sharing of the Teesta river waters have been going on between the two countries since 1983. The Teesta River originates in Sikkim and flows through West Bengal before entering Bangladesh; its waters are crucial for the rice cultivating farmers of both the countries. As of now, India claims a share of 55 percent of the river's water; however, Bangladesh demands for 50 percent of the share, especially in the dry season. In 2011, an interim deal that was supposed to be signed wherein India was to receive 42.5 percent of the Teesta's waters, while Bangladesh would get 37.5 percent. However, this bill was not signed due to the opposition of the Chief Minister of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee.

Again in 2017, there was an attempt by the Narendra Modi government to re-discuss the bill; but West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee stood in the way. This issue seems to be in a state of deadlock, even though the

Centre is interested to negotiate with Bangladesh. However, in India, water is a state issue, and so it is difficult to surpass the West Bengal Chief Minister's stand on the matter. Whether there will be a solution to this problem is now left to time and future discussions.

The slow progress in various bilateral projects - that may be due to genuine reasons has been a factor exploited by the detractors. India and Bangladesh need to work together to address this serious issue/perception.

There are also serious concerns in Bangladesh about the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in Assam. Though the elections have shelved the issue temporarily, it could resurface in 2019. Most importantly, the above seems to have affected relations at the popular level. Although India has been downplaying the NRC issue, some damage has already been done to popular feelings.

Internationally, China and the BRI will pose a serious challenge between India and Bangladesh. Firstly, as mentioned above, Bangladesh is part of the BRI, but India is not. Growing Chinese investment and influence has the capability to hamper the bond between New Delhi and Dhaka.

As New Delhi watched the 2018 elections closely in Bangladesh, Dhaka will also be watching the 2019 elections in India. The two Governments cannot rest on their earlier laurels and past taken for granted, but need to address past and emerging issues with vigour.

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## ***Indo-Bangladesh Relations to Deepen During Hasina's Third Term***

Joyeeta Bhattacharjee\*

Sheikh Hasina's victory in the 2018 parliamentary election has made her the first Prime Minister to form a government for a third consecutive time in Bangladesh. Sheikh Hasina won the 2009 and the 2014 elections also. The return of Sheikh Hasina to power is a welcome development for India, and India-Bangladesh relationship is likely to deepen further during her present term.

India-Bangladesh relations grew significantly in Sheikh Hasina's last two terms. Her Awami League led government has been credited for the upward swing in this relationship. After her victory in the 2009 election, Sheikh Hasina declared improving relationship with India as her priority. In this regard, she visited India in 2010 and 2017 respectively. India reciprocated by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visiting Bangladesh in 2011, and his successor, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, visiting in 2015. Bangladesh now occupies a pivotal position in India's Neighbourhood First policy, and is a partner in its flagship Act East Policy. Given the track record of improvements in the bilateral relationship during her previous terms, it can be assumed that Sheikh Hasina's third term will be sustaining the momentum and bonhomie in the relationship.

In spite of a good beginning, India and Bangladesh relations over the decades have not been smooth and have actually faced many pitfalls. India supported Bangladesh's freedom struggle, and its army fought alongside the freedom fighters against the Pakistani occupational forces during Bangladesh's liberation war in 1971. The death of Mujibur Rahman, the leader of the country's freedom struggle and the father of Sheikh Hasina, changed the dynamics of the relationship shortly after the country's independence. Mujibur Rahman was assassinated in a military coup in 1975. The military dictators who assumed power after assassination of Mujibur Rahman pursued a foreign policy that favoured distancing the country from India. Soon, India - once considered a friend - was looked upon with suspicion and mistrust. Many of the political parties, as the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) which formed the government after democracy was reintroduced in 1991, maintained

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reservations regarding the country's relationship with India. In 1991, democracy was re-established by ousting the military dictator, Hussain Muhammad Ershad, following a mass movement in which the Awami League and its rival BNP actively participated. However, the policies of the two political parties towards India differed.

Prior to the 2009 election, the Awami League and the BNP alternately held power in Bangladesh. The BNP formed governments in 1991–96 and 2001–06, and the Awami League led by Sheikh Hasina was in power from 1996–2001. During the BNP tenures, the bilateral relationship between India and Bangladesh was not pleasant, and touched rock bottom during its term from 2001-06. It made some progress during the Awami League's term 1996-2001. The signing of the Ganges Water Treaty was a major success in this period. The Awami League government also promised to give transit facilities to India for transporting goods to its north-eastern states via Bangladesh's territory. This was, however, stalled following protests by the Opposition.

The India-Bangladesh relationship tends to fluctuate with the change of the party in power in Bangladesh. But Sheikh Hasina's consecutive victory has brought stability to the relationship. Primarily, the achievement of Sheikh Hasina lies in the restoration of trust between the two countries which was missing for a long time. Earlier, the Indian-Bangladesh relationship was mired in suspicion and mistrust.

Bangladesh's reluctance in responding to India's repeated request to act against the some insurgent groups active in its soil was a major irritant between the two countries. In the past, Bangladesh denied the existence of any such groups on its soil. Sheikh Hasina's action against such groups was effective in building confidence between the two countries. In 2009, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina pledged not to allow her country's territory to be used by groups inimical to India's interests. In consonance with her words, Bangladesh acted against the groups which were operating in the country. Many leaders of the north-eastern insurgent groups - like the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) - were arrested with Bangladesh's help. Sheikh Hasina's initiative in responding to India's security concerns was the turning point in the relationship.

The improved India-Bangladesh relations have resulted in the resolution of long-standing issues, and the exploration of new areas for cooperation. The peaceful resolution of land and maritime boundary disputes pending for a long time has strengthened the relationship. Besides, India and Bangladesh are

cooperating in a variety of areas, including security, defence, trade and commerce, connectivity, energy, science and technology, space, etc.

On its part, India took care to understand Bangladesh's genuine interests and concerns, and accordingly initiated measures to strengthen the relationship. Recognising Bangladesh's interest to become a major connectivity hub, India pledged to provide around US\$ 8 billion as a line of credit for improving its infrastructure. Today, Bangladesh is one of the biggest recipients of India's developmental assistance. Again, responding to Bangladesh's plea to reduce trade imbalance, India has taken appropriate measures - like providing duty-free access to many Bangladeshi products to its markets. Additionally, India is encouraging companies to invest in Bangladesh, and is also upgrading border infrastructure to address the issue of non-tariff barriers which have been identified as a barrier for the growth of trade, etc.

Besides, in an effort to reduce the death of Bangladeshi nationals on the border - an issue which Bangladesh repeatedly raises - India has introduced/ issued non-lethal weapons to the Border Security Force (BSF) stationed on the border with Bangladesh. Again, India has simplified the visa process by undertaking measures like the opening of new visa centres outside Dhaka; providing long-term visas to businesses and people above the 65 years of age, etc. Visas were a major point of concern for the people of Bangladesh, and was perceived as an obstacle to people-to-people connectivity.

It is expected that the India-Bangladesh relationship will evolve from being friends to partners in Sheikh Hasina's third term. The two countries are likely to take steps to enhance cooperation in different areas, including fighting terrorism; enhancing regional connectivity; strengthening regional organisation like BIMSTEC etc. Optimism is running high about the future of the bilateral relationship.

However, given the past history of the relationship, scepticism still persists about the future. Since politics in Bangladesh has been a determining factor deciding the future of the bilateral relationship, an examination of the evolution of the domestic political situation in Bangladesh is necessary.

Though Bangladesh has a multi-party political system; the Awami League and the BNP have dominated the political landscape of the country since 1991. Politics in Bangladesh have transformed in the past few years, especially after the 2014 elections. Following the BNP's boycott of the 2014 poll, the Awami League emerged as the sole political force in the country since there was no credible Opposition in the parliament. The position of the party has strengthened further after the 2018 election, in which the Awami League and

its allies have won 288 seats out of 300, resulting in AL emerging as the only non-challengeable political force in Bangladesh.

Unlike in the 2014 election, the BNP participated in the 2018 election; but it could hardly give a reasonable challenge to the Awami League. The reason for the BNP's debacle in the election is essentially the leadership vacuum due to the arrest of its leader, Begum Khaleda Zia - following her conviction in a corruption case in February 2018. Tarique Rahman, Khaleda's son and her chosen heir, was unable to take the lead as he was convicted in corruption cases and was thus ineligible to fight elections. Besides, he has been living in London for a decade, which also prevents him from effectively leading the party on the ground. The lack of leadership has made the future of the party uncertain. The BNP, however, complained of irregularities in the elections, and cited that as a reason for its poor performance. Thus today, politically, Sheikh Hasina faces no major challenges.

Historically, the army has been a frequent disrupter of democracy in Bangladesh. Sheikh Hasina faces no major challenge from the army too - which does have a record of ousting elected governments. Experience from the recent past suggests that the Bangladesh army has undergone a significant transformation from its initial years. Over the years, there has been a rise in professionalism in the army, and it is reluctant to meddle with the country's politics. Post 1991, there has been only one instance of the army's intervention in the country's politics. Between 2007-2008, a military-backed caretaker government ruled Bangladesh. The intervention, however, was made out of necessity rather than choice.

In January 2007, Bangladesh was in a state of deadlock due to differences between the Awami League and the BNP over the formation of the caretaker government, which was to oversee the election. The law and order situation deteriorated as violent clashes broke out between the cadres of the Awami League and the BNP, and Bangladesh was in chaos. Given the situation, the caretaker government declined to conduct the election, and there was no legitimate government. A state of emergency was promulgated, and the army had to intervene to break the impasse. A military-backed caretaker government was formed, and it remained in power for two years. The military-backed caretaker government worked especially for organising the election, and relinquished power after the election in December 2008. In the past two terms of Sheikh Hasina, there have been some efforts to provoke the army by radical groups. The army has remained disinterested, and has not broken the chain of command. Further, Prime Minister Hasina claimed to have developed

a good rapport with the Army. Her recent drive for defence modernisation is seen as a measure to maintain good relations with the army.

Sheikh Hasina's third term victory is a mandate in support of development, and the expectations of the people are high. Any fall from that expectation might lead to major public dissatisfaction, and give an agenda to the opposition to launch a mass public protest that might threaten the stability of the government. The potential for the emergence of such a situation arises because of popular claims of governance deficit and corruption in the country. Atrocities by Awami League activities have been an issue of resentment among the people, and they are now demanding action. Sheikh Hasina's failure in controlling the Awami League's cadres might trigger the discontent of the people. In 2018, the death of a student by a speeding bus in Dhaka city led to a mass protest demanding road safety. The deft handling of the situation by Sheikh Hasina helped in preventing the protest from turning into a mass anti-government movement. During the election campaign, Sheikh Hasina sought vote on the platform of good governance and prosperity. Hopefully, Sheikh Hasina will work on delivering her electoral promise, and address the concerns of the people.

Given the political situation in Bangladesh, it can be assumed that Sheikh Hasina will complete her 5 year term, and India and Bangladesh ties will not be disturbed. Traditionally, the India-Bangladesh relationship has grown during the Awami League's rule. Still, the reliance on individual political parties shaping the nature India and Bangladesh ties have been detrimental to its growth. The Awami League is criticised by the Opposition for favouring India - though the party has been quite conscious of these criticisms in dealing with India, so as to avoid any political backlash.

For a robust growth in India Bangladesh relations, there is also a need for India to continue to tackle the fall out of negativity in its popular image - as projected by the detractors. India has already initiated some efforts in this regard. The BNP chairperson Khaleda Zia was invited to India, and was given a warm welcome in 2012. There is some scepticism about the impact of such efforts as Khaleda Zia declined to meet Indian President Pranab Mukherjee during his visit to Bangladesh in 2013.

The December 2018 election saw hardly any negative comments about India being made by major political parties. Political observers of Bangladesh suggest that political parties have realised the importance of maintaining a friendly relationship with India, and all of them feel the advantage of having good ties with India.

Discussions about Sheikh Hasina's third term and the future of the India-Bangladesh relationship demand the mention of Bangladesh's relationship with China, the Asian power 'competing' with India in expanding its influence in South Asia. China is Bangladesh's biggest trading partner, and even enjoys a working military relationship. There is a section in Bangladesh which sees its relations with China as a counter balance to India; the country which they believe is the big brother in the neighbourhood. Sheikh Hasina does not endorse such a view. Rather, she wants to maintain good relationships with both China and India, and reap the benefits from the rising prosperity of the two Asian powers and has been credited for maintaining a balanced relationship with India and China.

Often Sheikh Hasina reiterates her intention of maintaining a peaceful relationship with neighbours. She feels a good relationship with neighbours is imperative for the development and prosperity of her country. Sheikh Hasina's awareness of India's interests are best illustrated by Bangladesh's refusal to Chinese funding to Sonadia deep sea port as the condition laid by China would have hampered Indian interests.

The Awami League government is working on enhancing its ties with various countries globally, and special emphasis is being given on building ties with Saudi Arabia. The government is constructing mosques across the country with Saudi funding, and many social and political observers in Bangladesh fear this might adversely impact Bangladeshi society. Any resultant promotion of radical religious beliefs could adversely affect the liberal religious beliefs of the country. Considering the geographical proximity as well as the social, cultural, and familial bonds that the India and Bangladesh share, such a social transformation will certainly have ramifications for India. Many observers, internally and externally, hope that Sheikh Hasina will take note of these concerns, and work on retaining the existing liberal social fabric of the country.

Sheikh Hasina has pledged to transform Bangladesh, and work for its development. Bangladesh is seeking help from India to achieve this goal. As a neighbour, India should provide the necessary support to Bangladesh in achieving this goal. Emphasis should be given to the timely delivery of the various projects promised to the country. Cooperation between India and Bangladesh will not only help in the development of the two countries but also contribute to the growth of peace and prosperity in South Asia.



## ***Indo-Bangladesh Ties: Smooth Sailing on the Bilateral Front***

Smruti S Pattanaik\*

Bangladesh's national elections, held in December 2018, saw the ruling Awami League (AL) voted back to power, with the Opposition completely vanquished, the latter only winning 6 seats in the 300 members *Jatiyo Sangsad* (National Parliament). As in the past, the absence of an effective Opposition in Parliament and also the organisational weakness of the main opposition party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), is likely to continue. Thus, the third term of the AL will see its rule without much challenge to its domestic and foreign policies. This would also result in continuity in India-Bangladesh relations. At the same time, it should be noted that Bangladesh is strengthening its relations with China in its quest to follow its foreign policy dictum: 'friendship towards all, malice towards none' which remains its guiding principle in external relations. Except for Prime Minister Hasina's statement advising India to join the BRI soon after winning the election - much to the displeasure of Delhi - there have been no major hiccups on the foreign policy front between the two countries. As such, there is a mutual expectation of smooth sailing on the bilateral front.

However, the larger question is whether the emergence of a single party rule and the complete decimation of the Opposition in Bangladesh will have any negative effect on India-Bangladesh relations. What does the future hold? The AL has shared a close relationship with India for many historical reasons. Thus, from the Indian perspective, the AL's return to power is welcome, especially if one takes into account the various bilateral milestones between India and Bangladesh which could showcase it as a model relationship.

### **India and the Election**

Unlike in the past, India was not an electoral issue in Bangladesh this time. The main opposition party, the BNP as also its allies, did not seriously raise any bilateral issues vis-à-vis India during the campaign. There were no slogans of the past like, 'sovereignty is under threat'. The reasons for this absence could be two fold. One, the BNP Chairperson, Begum Khaleda Zia, has been

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incarcerated in jail without bail, and has been convicted in two corruption cases. As a result, she could not campaign in the 2018 election. It was she who always used to raise the Indian bogey, and other members of the party used to take cue from her. The BNP agenda was focused on freeing the Chairperson from jail. Politically, it reiterated its old demand of reinstating a neutral, caretaker government. The party also spent much of its energy in defending its alliance with the Jamaat-e-Islami - the religious party that contested on the BNP election symbol. The BNP also depended on the credibility of the Okiyo Front leader, Kamal Hossain, to win the election. Hossain focussed on issues of 'democracy' and representation.

Secondly, the BNP was expecting India to facilitate free and fair elections and use its relationship with the ruling AL to get a level political space. Some senior members of the BNP visited India prior to the election to seek New Delhi's support, and to convince India about the party's commitment to furthering bilateral relations. The BNP leaders did not want to make any statement that could annoy India. Several promises were made to India that emphasised the continuation of the present connectivity projects; there was also an assurance that the BNP would not do anything that would compromise India's security. In a nutshell, there would be no repetition of the past.

However, India was sceptical of the BNP's promises since it continued its alliance with the Jamaat-e-Islami which many in India perceive as not India friendly, and of having links with extremist militant jihadi organisations - or at least ideologically inspiring them. In the past, the BNP has refrained from making any statement on the transit routes to India, though some BNP intellectuals participated in the protests against the Ramphal power plant. India also kept itself away from the election, and was careful not to issue any statement on the election process, and maintaining a distance from the political parties. In fact, many in Bangladesh were surprised that India did not issue any statement; some from the Opposition even complained that, as a largest democracy, India should ensure free and fair elections, and censure Sheikh Hasina in her efforts to deny political space to the Opposition. Some opposition leaders did blame India for supporting an election process which they considered flawed and designed to elect only the ruling party, but these were a few. Some Western countries were critical of the manner in which the election was conducted. India was the first country to congratulate Prime Minister Hasina on her re-election. In a press release, India's Ministry of External Affairs stated, "India warmly congratulates the people of Bangladesh for reaffirming their faith in democracy, development,

and the vision of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.” It also “reiterated the priority India attaches to Bangladesh as a neighbour, a close partner for regional development, security and cooperation, and a central pillar in India’s ‘Neighbourhood First’ policy.”

### **India-Bangladesh Relations in Perspective**

In the past ten years, since Sheikh Hasina was elected to power in December 2008, India has built a robust relationship with Bangladesh, and partnered with Dhaka on several developmental initiatives that have been tailor-made for boosting the economy. New Delhi is no more concerned about security threats from the East. The handing over of Indian insurgents from the North East was, perhaps, a major landmark in India-Bangladesh security cooperation which has been steadily built over the common vision pertaining to threats emanating from radical Islamist terrorists such as the Jamaatul Mujahedin Bangladesh (JMB) and its ilk. Therefore, it was not surprising that the two countries cooperated closely in investigating the Burdwan blast issue, shared intelligence, and jointly interrogated and investigated the cross border linkages of the accused. The ratification of 1974 Land Boundary Agreement and the settlement of the maritime boundary helped the relationship to flourish further. Thus, the Awami League scripted narrative of ‘zero tolerance’ for terrorism; had many takers in India even though its first poll promise of creating a regional task force on terrorism did not materialise. In fact, the handing over of some Indian insurgents was such a landmark that New Delhi was willing to traverse the extra distance to accommodate Dhaka. However, India could not fulfil its commitment on the Teesta waters which has remained a major bilateral irritant, thanks to the politics in the state of West Bengal.

In contrast, many in India often recall the BNP regime, between 2001 and 2006, as a threat to India which undermined India’s security, and argue that the party cannot be trusted. India shed some of its misgivings and tried to build a relationship with the BNP when it invited Begum Zia to visit India in 2012 as the Opposition leader, and even laid out the red carpet for her. The absence of the BNP in the 9th Jatiyo Sangsad election in 2014 did not leave much room for official engagement, as the Jatiyo Party assumed the role of official opposition, in place of the BNP. The destructive politics that BNP displayed in the 2015 hartals against the first anniversary of 2014 election in which more than 70 people were burnt alive and the role played by its alliance partner, the JeI, in orchestrating mayhem in the streets of Dhaka, again revealed the BNP’s penchant for acquiring power at any cost. Although this is an

attribute not exclusive to the BNP. Begum Zia's decision not to meet the President of India (citing the bandh call by Jamaat) made India realise that the BNP's agenda is different. Moreover, while effort was made to reach out to the BNP and persuade it to participate in the 2014 election, BNP's stance on the election and its decision to remain adamant on its demands made it clear that the party's agenda is set with different persuasions. Like in the past elections, India was supportive of a multiparty participatory parliamentary election in Bangladesh. India indeed tried to develop ties with the entire political spectrum while engaging closely with the ruling party within the framework of government-to-government relations.

India has extended several credit lines of nearly US\$8 billion, and would like the continuation of these projects irrespective of the regime in power. Several of these are infrastructure projects, and are likely to boost both trade and transit when they are fully operationalised. It would also like the continuation of capacity building exercises, especially training. The two countries have joint anti-terror military exercise (called the Sampriti series) as well as a multilateral Naval exercise named International Multilateral Maritime Search and Rescue Exercise (IMMSAREX) held under the aegis of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium and the joint Coordinated Patrol (CORPAT) which is a coordinated patrol by the border guarding forces of the two countries on the border point identified as vulnerable by both the countries. The two countries also cooperated in the investigation of, and shared intelligence on, the Burdwan blast.

These are some unprecedented developments in the bilateral relationship. Many in India shudder at the prospect of BNP and its allies returning to power, especially taking into account the experience of the 2001–2006 period in which Bangladesh, while dismissing the presence of Indian insurgents, nurtured them in safe heavens. During this period Bangladesh also witnessed country-wide bomb blasts, suicide bombings, ten truckloads of arms being off-loaded in Chittagong, and the strengthening of religious radicals. India does not want a repetition of any of these that will have implications for its security. Bangladesh-India relations have come a long way since then.

### **What Does the Future Hold?**

What does Sheikh Hasina's re-election mean for India and India-Bangladesh relations? There is no doubt that, currently, the relationship is at an all time high, and both countries are taking steps to strengthen it further. Also, in the past ten years, the relationship has been institutionalised. For example, the

two countries meet at the level of the Foreign and Home Ministries; there are meetings between the Indian Border Security Force and the Border Guard Bangladesh; there are high level visits between the armed forces of the two countries; and, there are meetings between the District Commissioners posted in border areas. All these indicate an institutionalisation that would provide further stability to the bilateral ties.

In the next few years, there is a possibility of a robust road transit network that would be in place as some projects are nearing completion. The next step would be to expand trade by a seamless movement of goods through multimodal transit within a sub-regional framework. After the election, Bhutan is attempting to ratify the BBIN MVA, which is yet to get endorsed by the second chamber of the parliament. Energy cooperation is another area that holds potential for bilateral relations. Cross border electricity trade is a new reality and, with the joining of Nepal and Bhutan, initiatives of cross border grid connectivity transcending the region hold bigger promises.

Two issues of major significance could challenge the bilateral relations between India and Bangladesh. Prime Minister Hasina has expressed her frustration at India's inability to put pressure on Myanmar to take back the Rohingya refugees, notwithstanding India's own 'operation insaniyat' which is providing essential commodities to the refugees living in Bangladesh camps. The expectation from India to play a constructive role in resolving the refugee crisis is immense. India is also building 200 houses in the Rakhine state for the Rohingyas. Its capacity to play a more effective and visible role is curtailed by the presence of China in this part of the world. India also has significant cross border security cooperation with Myanmar which has recently transitioned to democracy, but with the military holding sway. However, India's own stand on the Rohingya refugees living in India has disappointed many Bangladeshis. At the same time, the National Registration of Citizens (NRC) in Assam has brought back the old politics over 'illegal migration' from Bangladesh, raising concerns in Dhaka. This has raised several questions regarding India's stance on the issue. This is a sensitive issue for both countries. Though New Delhi has kept Dhaka informed, missing names of people on the NRC register could be a significant irritant in future ties.

The continuing problem regarding the Teesta waters - which is yet to be resolved - is another issue that raises several questions in the India-Bangladesh relationship. This issue needs to be settled. The issue of a transit fee and the location of the Ramphal power plant made India extremely unpopular in Bangladesh as some civil society members raised the issue trying to portray

that these decisions were dictated by India. Compared to the past, the list of bilateral differences is small; but they, nevertheless, have the potential to test the bilateral ties in the future if they are not resolved and allowed to fester. Though several connectivity projects are in place facilitating people-to-people relationships and India grants the largest number of visas to Bangladeshis, many continue to see India from an ideological prism.

China will remain an important factor in Bangladesh. It would be prudent for India to focus on the timely delivery of various projects, and work for mutual benefit rather than be over concerned about China's presence. The Awami League's continuation in power will only strengthen bilateral relations, while the domestic politics in Bangladesh is unlikely to impact India-Bangladesh relations at the moment.

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