

ways to place their thumbs on the scale for the Awami League, her ruling party, by changing the ways elections are managed. Local and international observers have also found many irregularities in the staging of elections in the past decade. The popular uprising was neither organized nor steered by the opposition political parties, but Hasina resorted to the familiar narrative of blaming the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party and the Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami party for fomenting the protests. She insisted that "terrorists" had unleashed the violence. By blaming these groups, Hasina tried to cast the domestic crisis as a battle to protect a secular state from Islamist forces and thereby convince the West either to come to her aid or stay on the sidelines. But that gambit failed to convince either Bangladeshis or the country's outside partners.

Downfall of autocrat

The immediate events that precipitated Hasina's downfall began to unfold on August 3, when students held a massive rally in Dhaka that was

joined by hundreds of thousands of people from all levels of society. The rally was a testament to the fact that despite hundreds of deaths in the previous weeks, the government had not quelled the unrest. Protesters called for nothing less than Hasina's resignation. Initially, she and party leaders did not take the demands seriously, expecting that activists loyal to her, along with the police, would be able to suppress the latest agitation. But after the atrocities of recent weeks, the students called for a national march on Dhaka, which brought thousands more to the capital and forced Hasina to flee.

The speed with which Hasina went from being Bangladesh's longtime ruler to an exile is just incredible. It suggests that the regime was very brittle. Patronage networks among the bureaucracy and the military kept the regime afloat, but these beneficiaries' commitment to the regime was abysmally weak. Over the years, the country's power brokers became alienated from the public and entirely dependent on the coercive institutions of the state. They could not withstand the

challenge of the mass upsurge that threatened to overwhelm those institutions.

Hasina leaves not just with her reputation in tatters but with the cult of personality around her father, which she had assiduously cultivated, more or less wiped out. Hasina sought to make Mujib, who was assassinated in 1975, immortal in the minds of the people and emblematic of the valor of her rule and that of her party. But now with Hasina expelled, that cult of personality is shorn of its power and will not wield the same influence over Bangladeshi politics.

And yet amid the optimism that has greeted Hasina's downfall, there are several reasons to be concerned. The military now effectively runs the show, as it did between 2007 and 2008. It claims to care for the best interests of Bangladeshis, but it is really intent on ensuring that the state works to its benefit. Its interests are often inimical to the principles of accountability. The military would like to see much of the status quo maintained and will not countenance major reform; in the absence of such re-

form, Bangladesh may end up in the same place in a few years.

It is more than likely that in a few months, the military could manage to hold fresh elections, and a new elected civilian government could rise to power. But without more meaningful change, that may constitute a return to the past. The problem with the broad, amorphous force that has toppled Hasina is that it has yet to offer a clear vision of the future beyond calls for a new kind of political settlement. Bangladesh needs focused and decisive leadership to strengthen its democracy (quite possibly through constitutional reform), to cut through the networks of patronage through which the state operates, and to make sure the institutions work for the people. The energies of the popular movement may dissipate and fail to guide the country toward the change it needs. In a heroic effort, Bangladeshis brought down the Hasina regime. But what now will emerge from the rubble?

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Sheikh Hasina's downfall and exile of her own making



By Arafat Kabir

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OPINION

After weeks of anti-government protests, on August 5, Bangladesh's prime minister Sheikh Hasina stepped down and fled the country in a spectacular turn of events. Until the last moments of her rule, her grip on power seemed all but absolute even after the deaths of hundreds of students who hit the streets demanding reform of civil service job allocations first and then her resignation.

Hasina's stubborn refusal to compromise, overreliance on state violence, and deep patronage ties to a privileged clientele class had long disconnected her from the Bangladeshi public. She perhaps did not see the extent to which she had lost the support of the majority until the very end, leaving her with no choice but to flee the country. The collapse of her 16-year rule renders both a cautionary tale to dictators worldwide and a proof of the sheer willpower of a nation's disillusioned youth.



A mural of Bangladeshi prime minister Sheikh Hasina was vandalized by protesters a day after her resignation, in Dhaka on August 6, 2024.
● MOHAMMAD PONIR HOSSAIN/REUTERS

People vandalize a statue of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the father of Sheikh Hasina and the first leader of independent Bangladesh, in Dhaka on August 9, 2024.

● MOHAMMAD PONIR HOSSAIN/REUTERS



The irony is that Hasina herself rode the wave of young people's support when she led the Awami League party in contesting the 2008 elections, which it won with a landslide.

During her first term, she capitalised on youth sentiments in order to go after political leaders accused of committing war crimes during Bangladesh's war of independence in 1971. She started executing opposition leaders while sparing the guilty of the same sin in her party. In 2013, she ordered a brutal crackdown on a sit-in by religious school students, whom she had labelled radical Islamists, resulting in dozens of deaths.

In hindsight, that should have been a warning sign to the Bangladeshi public. But they chose to keep faith in Hasina, who promised shiny new infrastructure and more employment.

She did not spare any opportunity to trumpet her family tragedy and attacks on her life. Her family, including her father, Mujibur Rahman, the founder of the nation, was slain in a military coup in 1975. That she had no one but the people of Bangladesh to serve became her rallying cry; and it was too raw, too powerful to defy.

Drawing on the wellspring of family lores and legacy, she relentlessly assailed her detractors, often calling them spawns of "razakars", a derogatory term used to describe the abettors of the Pakistani military during the war of independence. Last month, she resorted to her time-tested rhetoric again, which provoked outrage among the protesters and demanded for an apology from her. She, of course, found it too beneath her to apologise for or even acknowledge the harm her words had caused.

Hasina's refusal to listen to what people wanted stemmed from her long-held belief in her own political invincibility. As the scion of Bangladesh's

founding father, she had cultivated an image of herself as an unassailable, almost deity-like figure — the undisputed daughter of democracy.

Compromising, in her mind, would have been an unthinkable sign of weakness that could have undermined the cult of personality she had built around herself over her 15 years in power. Even as her grip on the country slipped, Hasina remained convinced that her legacy and the loyalty of her core supporters would ultimately shield her from having to make such a humbling concession.

Hasina's fall from disgrace is of her making only. In pursuit of total power, she alienated her allies both at home and abroad. She went after those she held grudges against, from the ailing former prime minister Khaleda Zia to the nation's only Nobel Laureate, Professor Muhammad Yunus, putting them under house arrest.

Countless political activists, writers, and intellectuals were either imprisoned or disappeared during what can justifiably be called a "reign of terror". Even sympathisers who attempted to offer her good-faith counsel were not spared from her wrath. Under Hasina's leadership, Bangladesh was once seen as a model for those countries struggling to straddle competing powers in their neighbourhoods. But that balancing act imploded, too, as she fully entrenched into India's orbit, unnerving China.

Western countries also grew frustrated with Hasina's flagrant violation of democratic and human rights principles. The United States started to show its displeasure with her government, sanctioning in 2023 government officials found responsible for impeding the democratic process or involved in corruption.

But a defiant Hasina wore the American reprimand as a badge of honour and repeatedly mocked Washington for falling short on issues like public safety. Her bloody crackdown on the student protests from their start only deepened the diplomatic rift.

Hasina assumed excessive force would do its work as it had done before. But she could not fathom the depth of discontent among the people over myriad issues, over the system of which she was the face. Student protests soon morphed into a mass movement, a Generation Z revolution.

Hasina was inclined to apply even more force in a desperate attempt to cling to power, but her closest advisers warned against it, fearing the potential for even greater bloodshed. Her own son later revealed that she did not want to leave, but ultimately decided to do so on the insistence of her family, perhaps saving her from an even more humiliating end.

Indeed, her authoritarian rule had alienated not just the public, but also key international allies, and fleeing the country to India was her best option.

Sheikh Hasina's precipitous downfall in Bangladesh represents a pivotal moment, not just for the country, but for the broader global struggle between democracy and authoritarianism. The Bangladeshi youth have delivered a striking rebuke to those seeking to snuff the democratic aspirations of the people. Their victory serves as a powerful rejoinder to dictators who believe their grip on power is unassailable.

As the world watches the unfolding events in Bangladesh, leaders across the globe must heed this cautionary tale. The lesson is clear: Underestimate the power of your citizens at your own peril.

This triumph for democracy in Bangladesh offers a glimmer of hope at a time when the forces of autocracy appear to be on the march. The Bangladeshi youth have proven that even the most entrenched of dictators are vulnerable to the collective power of a mobilised citizenry. Their struggle has demonstrated that the human thirst for freedom and self-determination is a potent force, even against the most formidable political machines.

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