

Remarkable downfall of Bangladesh's iron lady

How grassroots uprising toppled Sheikh Hasina



People gather around the residence of the Bangladesh prime minister in Dhaka, Bangladesh, on August 5, 2024.
● AFP



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OPINION

In a move that would have seemed unimaginable just a few weeks ago, Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina ended a decade and a half of uninterrupted rule on August 5, resigning her post and fleeing the country. The military, which has seized power in Bangladesh on several occasions, urged Hasina to leave as a popular nationwide uprising threatened to overwhelm security forces. In surreal scenes, protesters wandered through the rooms of the prime minister's residence in the capital, Dhaka, lounging on its furniture, posing for photos, and stealing. For now, reports suggest that Waker-uz-Zaman, the army chief, has taken the reins. He has pledged to form an interim government ahead of fresh elections, although how such a government will be put in place remains unclear.

Hasina's downfall closes an up-and-down chapter in Bangladeshi history. In recent decades, the country has been celebrated as a poster child of globalization and development, with the economy growing briskly, incomes on the rise, and various social indicators moving in positive directions. And yet all the good news obscured abiding weaknesses, including widening economic disparities, high youth unemployment, and a turn to autocracy under Hasina and her party, the Awami League. Dissatisfaction with the government and economy fueled protests that erupted in Dhaka in early July before spreading around the country. As she has done in the past, Hasina suppressed the demonstrations ruthlessly. Security forces killed hundreds of people in just a few weeks, and charity groups were left to gather the unidentified bodies of protesters. Authorities cracked down again on a fresh wave of demonstrations in early August, killing 90 more people. But that carnage was the final straw. The public had had enough, and Bangladeshis flooded the streets, forcing Hasina's hasty evacuation via military helicopter to India. The last few days in Bangladeshi politics will be fodder for scholars for years to come. They revealed the fundamentally brittle nature of Hasina's regime, which had seemed for so long adamant and impervious to opposition challenge but ended up collapsing in a matter of mere hours. Her exit also punctures the cult of personality she wove around her father, the country's founder whose mantle she claimed; amid the tumult of August 5, protesters burned the memorial museum Hasina had built for her father. But most importantly, the toppling of Hasina came at the hands of a force not seen before in Bangladesh: a mass grassroots movement unaffiliated with any party and yet capable of reshaping the country's political landscape. It is inspiring that genuine people power could do away with a seemingly invincible autocrat. But such an inchoate popular uprising also brings great uncertainties about the day after. Even as Bangladeshis celebrate the end of the Hasina regime, they may also have reason to worry about what is about to come.

Pressure cooker

Hasina, the daughter of the charismatic nationalist Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (called Mujib) who led the country's 1971 war of independence against Pakistan, was until her resignation the world's longest-serving female head of state. Time and Forbes repeatedly named her one of the world's most powerful people. Also described as "Asia's iron lady" by The Economist, she often used that power for the ill. Since she started her second stint as prime minister in 2009, Bangladesh has plummeted in various democracy indexes and measures of press freedom. Hasina presided over the removal of key democratic guardrails, the restriction of the independence of the judiciary, and a clampdown on civil society and the press. Bangladeshi opposition parties and young people tried to push back against these trends on several occasions, but Hasina's government met such demonstrations with heavy-handed force. Hasina's growing authoritarianism coincided with a turn for the worse in the country's economy. In past decades, Bangladesh seemed to have achieved significant economic growth and was held up as a success story. But many economists now question the reliability of government-provided statistics that undergird these claims. And no matter what growth the country has achieved, its benefits remain concentrated at the top. The wealthiest 10 percent of Bangladeshis receives over 41 percent of the country's total income,



Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus (C) takes the oath of office as the head of Bangladesh's new interim government during a ceremony administered by President Mohammed Shahabuddin (L) in Dhaka on August 8, 2024.
● MUNIR UZ ZAMAN/AFP

while the bottom 10 percent receives just over one percent. The popular uprising in July reflected the convergence of two strands of discontent. The first was disquiet among students about a quota system that reserved 56 percent of civil service jobs for particular groups of people, including 30 percent of all civil service jobs for descendants of veter-

ans of the 1971 war of independence against Pakistan. The system, which Hasina had scrapped in 2018 after months of protests, was reinstated by the High Court in June. Exasperated students took to the streets, and their protests intensified after Hasina likened them to Razakars — a hated paramilitary force that supported the Pakistani army during the war of independence. This incen-

diary comment questioned their patriotism, infuriating students and drawing more to the streets. For them, the quota issue was merely the tip of an iceberg, a symbol of a system stacked against them. Youth unemployment has more than doubled since 2010, from around six percent to over 15 percent. More than 40 percent of Bangladeshis between the ages of 15 and 24 are not studying, employed, or training for jobs. Those realities drove hundreds of thousands to join the movement. In response, the police, as well as students who backed the ruling party, attacked the demonstrators, further inflaming the situation. The second source of discontent, which brought thousands of ordinary citizens to the streets, was a deep-seated sense of economic and political disenfranchisement. In recent years, price hikes on essential commodities, such as electricity, have hurt average Bangladeshis. Meanwhile, citizens have seen corruption among government officials proceed unabated as the government ordered a proliferation of large vanity infrastructure projects. Bangladeshis and international observers, including the World Bank, are convinced that these large building projects have enabled no small amount of graft as their costs skyrocketed beyond initial estimates. For instance, the Padma Bridge southeast of Dhaka cost twice its original budget. At the same time, citizens felt increasingly unable to influence the country's direction. The last plausibly free and fair election was held in 2008. Since then, Hasina and her allies have found