

Bangladesh Requires Not Petulance But Careful Handling - The Wire

Jawhar Sircar

In July-August last year, Indians were quite shocked at the scenes of street violence in Bangladesh, as police and armed forces strained to quell an unprecedented mass uprising against then prime minister Sheikh Hasina. What began as a students' protest against the reimposition of hated quotas for families of 'freedom fighters' (of the 1971 war of liberation) turned into a all-out battle between forces for and against Sheikh Hasina. Lakhs of angry protesters moved their target from 'quotas' to her autocratic governance – and dragged India in, for propping up her unpopular regime.

The last epithet was well earned, as many (if not most) Bangladeshis really believed in the narrative that Sheikh Hasina's continued rule – for 4 consecutive terms and 5 in all – was thanks to India's backing. No proof was adduced, but stories abounded of Indian officials posted in Bangladesh even 'deciding' Awami League's candidates and constantly interfering in the internal affairs of Bangladesh.

Sheikh Hasina's autocratic streak and subsequent ouster

There is no doubt that Bangladesh's last general elections in January 2024 had stripped 'legitimacy' off Hasina's government, since the biggest opposition party, the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) and others had boycotted it, on grounds of unfairness, intimidation and rigging. Though Hasina's Awami League (AL) swept 222 of the 300 seats and humiliated the only major opposition party, the Jatiyo Party, with just 11 seats, people had demonstrated their clear lack of faith in her. Even the large number of 63 independent candidates who won were viewed as proxies set up by her.

There was considerable international furore about the unfairness in the conduct of polls, before and after the elections, and western nations were vocal in their outright condemnation. In fact, the AL government's claim that 40 percent of voters had taken part (which is absurdly low) was ripped apart by others who quoted the Election Commissioner's initial statement that only 27 percent of voters had turned up.

The opposition parties declared a nationwide strike, but Hasina remained more unfazed than when she had been accused of rigging the earlier two elections. In short, people felt they had not 'legitimised' her continued rule– but India reacted as if this did not matter.

In all fairness, Sheikh Hasina's regime of 15 years at a stretch was marked by two positive developments, the first being its determination to uphold secularism – in a country where a large section of the 91 percent Muslim population demanded greater Islamisation. The other was economic progress, as she ensured a record average annual GDP growth of 6.3%, surpassing giant India in terms of Human Development Index in 2020 and also in per capita income in 2023.

Her government took exports from \$1.87 billion in 2009 to \$54.7 billion in 2022 and her massive infrastructure projects, including the 4.8 kilometre Jamuna Multipurpose Bridge, were surely feathers in her cap.

But everything else about her regime was negative – from open, multi-level and mammoth corruption to stashing ill-gotten gains abroad and from a brutally authoritarian regime, where arrests, police torture, long detentions without trial and disappearances of dissenters were common to the unchecked depredations on opponents by her stormtroopers, the Chhatra League.

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It was openly said in Bangladesh that all of this was supported by India (by the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) in 2009-2014 and the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) thereafter) and its ‘agents’. Observant visitors to Bangladesh like us could feel a nation-wide angst building up against India over the past decade, and even secular activists in Dhaka lashed out against her autocracy and “total sellout to India” – as in case of the one-sided Adani power deal.

Sadly, no remedial measures were visible on our side and it was believed that two lines of command were cooking India’s goose. An emboldened Hasina went from bad to worse, in tackling the agitation against her regime and a shocked nation was a burning volcano from 16th July – when TV and videos showed how Abu Sayed, a university student in Rangpur, bravely faced a volley of bullets before succumbing. In the consequent July Uprising, somewhere between 834 and 1581 people, including children, died.

No government could run under such circumstances and Hasina had to flee to India on August 5 2024 – even as a tsunami of angry citizens swept all over Parliament House, the secretariat and ransacked her residence.

General Waker-Uz-Zaman, the army chief, took charge and invited Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus to constitute an interim government, as its Chief Adviser. What followed was further mayhem, as the pent up rage against Hasina, her corrupt cabal, her party followers (including several Hindu leaders), collaborators, beneficiaries and storm-troopers as well as the colluding police establishment, burst out.

This anarchy that lasted several weeks was a fierce retaliation against Awami League leaders (many a Hindu) and against police and local authorities for collaborating with Hasina’s long and brutal regime. Some 400 police stations were attacked and many set on fire, as they metamorphosed into centres of repression and torture. Countless police personnel were manhandled and law and order just collapsed.

Little of the reality of Bangladesh because the thrust of the Indian narrative

India was finally ousted from its paramount position, which it had begun to view as its entitlement ever since the Liberation War of 1971. The Indian media reflected this foul mood, which in turn, prompted further irresponsible statements by motormouth politicians, including Md Yunus. Indian attention, including on social media, was directed at the attacks on Hindus (without examining whether they were political or religious) and focussed on sporadic violence at temples that a handful of Islamist extremists revelled in.

But, most omitted to report that the army stepped in thereafter, to haul up the miscreants over coals. Yunus was branded as an American stooge who benefited from a coup executed under the garb of a mass uprising, which the-then US establishment’s immediate positive response seemed to collaborate.

The world was soon shocked when Dhaka’s well-known economist, Debapriya Bhattacharya, submitted a shocking report that an average \$16 billion may have been illicitly siphoned out of

Bangladesh annually. during Hasina's 15-year rule. International media was all agog with speculation, but we heard not a word of this in India. So terrible is Hasina's reputation abroad that not a single country is reportedly willing to offer her refuge or asylum. Dhaka's interim government demands her return to face trial – especially after the revelations of her direct hand in killings and her merciless repression are out. In fact, her sanctuary in India is a very sore point among the common people in Bangladesh and may further tilt the scales against India.

Sheikh Mujib and his family were special targets of the Yunus brigade, that was packed with Razakars and others who had treacherously collaborated with the Pakistani army in its genocide in 1971. They had never accepted Bangladesh's cessation and were back in action, inviting Pakistan back. Indians were shocked and disgusted at the toppling and smashing of Mujib's statues and his house-museum at Dhanmondi, Dhaka.

[Also Read: Bangladesh: Sheikh Hasina is Out but Her Legacy of State-Sponsored Violence Will Linger Much Longer](#)

It is strange we knew so little of the reality of Bangladesh because the thrust of the Indian narrative, irrespective of which government was in power, is on its glorious liberation of Bangladesh (and gleeful amputation of Pakistan) followed by the installation of a secular democratic pro-India regime under Sheikh Mujib. Not a word was mentioned in India about the frightening degree of autocracy and corruption that marked much of Mujib's three and a half years' rule – which ultimately led to his assassination in August 1975.

In fact, on August 16, 1975, *The Guardian*, London labeled Mujib's death as "a toppled symbol of corruption and dictatorship." But no one in India was told of the mismanagement, hoarding and corruption under Mujib that led to the 1974 Bangladesh famine which killed an estimated 1.5 million people. Mujib's government reported just 27,000 deaths – but that itself is a shocking figure.

It pains a Mujib fan, [who was out protesting in Kolkata in 1969](#) for his release from Pakistani jail to lay bare the truth to help explain the public anger. The reinstatement of Mujib-worship by his daughter and his state-sponsored deification (that is also facing serious charges of corruption and defalcation of funds) was/is kosher to India – as his memory and the liberation war are intertwined with an everlasting acknowledgment of India's historic contribution. We need to update ourselves, and remember no country is ever in eternal debt to its liberator.

In fact, General Zia-ur-Rahman and others, who actually fought the war against the Pakistani army on the ground in 1971, amidst overwhelming odds, obviously did not like the marginalisation of their role by Mujib-obsessed India. When Zia's turn came, he stoked fierce pride and autonomy of Bangladeshis (which applies to all self-respecting nations) and reminded Muslims of their two centuries of ignominy under hegemonic Bengali Hindu upper-caste/class *bhadraloks*.

India had strained relations under him, his successor, General Ershad and then Begum Zia – for they not only harboured anti-Indian terrorists, played upon Islamic sentiments and brotherhood, and hardly acknowledged India's role in the formation of their nation. Incidentally, these 'anti-India' regimes are still remembered in Bangladesh for developing rural infrastructure and taking millions out of poverty.

It is no wonder that India went overboard once Hasina was back in 1996 (till 2001) and then finally in 2009. This is at the root of the current anti-India wave among many (not all) Bangladeshis and Yunus's constant fulminations against India are calculated to force India to retaliate. He can then bellow up the flames against the big bullying neighbour.

India must realise that we are at the point of losing the only friend in the neighbourhood

India must realise that we are at the point of losing the only friend in the neighbourhood, so one does not really need to react to every virulent prattling of a viscerally anti-Hasina (and by association, anti-Indian) ambitious professor in temporary charge. General Waker keeps publicly ticking off Md Yunus and has warned him not to cross the red line. He has also openly pressurised him to bring forward the election date.

We are just five months away from the day when the voters in Bangladesh will decide who they want to rule for the next five years. Let Yunus not distract us and whenever we hear of Hindus living under terror in Bangladesh (where my kith and kin are in constant touch), let us remember the plight of minorities in India for eleven years. Radical religious groups burst out in sporadic violence, until governmental authorities (irrespective of where their sympathies lie) reign them in. It's the same in both countries so let us not adopt a more wounded look.

In the last 13 months, Yunus's 'magic' is missing and his rhetoric is no substitute. The sheen is off his lifetime work and his Nobel. The election chessboard is not yet set but with the banning of the centre-left AL, it is likely that Khaleda Zia's BNP and/or Ershad's Jatiyo Party would be pushed a bit from their present centre-right position, to fill the gap.

The Jatiyo Party is currently struggling with its traditionally-violent internal dissent, external opposition, and legal issues. including murder cases. Zia's BNP has the largest base, but Begum Zia is not fit to fight, and her son-heir, Tarique Rahman, is yet to return to Bangladesh to take charge. General Secretary Mirza Fakhrul manages the BNP adroitly, but the numerous charges of extortion by its members and bloody internecine wars among its factions within are weighing it down.

The radical Islamic right does have a sway over masses but has never scored well at the hustings. They feel their time has come, but then, Yunus himself has thrown his hat into the ring with his new NCP (National Citizens Party). Its underlying fundamentalism has to counter the frustrations of unfulfilled expectations of the people. It is a heavy cross he will have to carry as he enters the electoral arena with big-talking unelected student leaders, unschooled in ground-level mass politics.

The radical right space is thus over-crowded with the Jamaat-i-Islam (the oldest, but never managed to win more than a handful of seats) being confronted by a front of 5 Qaumi Madrasa-based Islamic parties, led by the Bangladesh Khilafat Majlis. The picture would be clearer in the coming months. Quite a lot depends on how successful non-political radical Jihadi groups, like Hizb ut-Tahrir, the Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh and Jama'atul Ansar Fil Hindal Sharqiya are in whipped up anti India, anti Hindu sentiments as the chief electoral plank.

The chance of the Islamic right coming to power are still dim and it may be prudent for India to adjust itself with the new reality and let bygones be bygones where the BNP and Jatiyo Party are concerned. We may do well to play down the Hasina-fixation and remember that our petulance at the provocative statements and actions of Mohamed Muizzu, the new President of Maldives, had aggravated the situation, until better sense dawned.

India needs more patience and tact with Bangladesh— where a large section is still sentimental about India — to score a splendid Maldives-style diplomatic success there, as well.

Jawhar Sircar is a former Rajya Sabha MP of the Trinamool Congress. He was earlier Secretary, Government of India, and CEO of Prasar Bharati.