

# After the downfall of Bangladesh's Iron Lady: it's time for dialogue

by Subrata Banarjee

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Student protests in Bangladesh's capital city, Dhaka

*Photo Credit: Nur A Alam Nuhas/The Daily Campus*

After days of civil unrest and the eventual downfall of Bangladesh's "Iron Lady", Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, on 5 August 2024, Bangladeshi people are now seeking a political system that better upholds and promotes their socio-economic rights.

After Hasina's resignation, the Bangladeshi military intervened to form an interim government in consultation with President Mohammed Shahabuddin to ensure a smooth transition to a new democratic government. The military consulted with various political parties, civil society, and representatives of the student protest groups. On 7 August, Nobel Laureate **Professor Muhammad Yunus** agreed to **lead the interim government**. However, between now and the formation of a new government, a number of things could go wrong unless the interim government addresses the underlying issues leading to this political crisis.

How Bangladeshi society effectively navigates towards an inclusive, rights-based approach to development will be shaped by an ongoing dialogue between the interim government, students, and civil society about the fair distribution of government resources across all ethnic and cultural groups.

The current wave of unrest started months ago with public university teachers demanding the axing of **the new Prottoy pension scheme** which would reduce the retirement income of newly recruited staff. By 1 July, other university staff had joined teaching staff on strike, effectively cancelling classes for all public university students across the country. Commenting on the situation, **the prime minister said**, "let them become tired, then I will say something".

Against this background, a court decision restoring controversial government employment quotas was released at a time when youth unemployment is a key concern. Regarding university graduates, the most reputable statistics organisation, the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, reported that **28% of new graduates were unemployed in 2022**, with 20% of graduates waiting two years to find a job and 15%

of them continuing to be unemployed for more two years after graduation.

The affirmative action policy that began in 1972 was that 30% of government jobs would be filled by marginalised groups including family members of 1971 Bangladesh freedom fighters – over time **the quota rose to 56%**. In 2018, due to mass youth protests, the quota was scrapped by the government. However, in late June this year, the **High Court reinstated the policy**, sparking large public protests against Hasina's administration.

Despite protests against the decision of the High Court being held in a peaceful manner, Hasina largely ignored the students' concerns about the negative impacts of the policy such as the undermining of merit-based recruitment. Hasina instead responded with culturally offensive language, saying, "if the grandchildren of freedom fighters won't get it, then will the grandchildren of Razakars?" This linked concerned students to **an East Pakistani paramilitary group** active during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. Students were furious and continued to protest more intensely afterwards.

In hindsight, the situation could have been resolved through dialogue with the students. However, when Hasina finally opened a dialogue on 3 August; it was already too late. **Over 300 people**, including students, children, police, and civilians, lost their lives across the country during the protests, while thousands were injured and arrested.

Had the government refrained from using force, there could still have been room for a peaceful resolution of the issues. As the days progressed, opposing political groups, including the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and their allies, started joining the protests. The casualties continued to increase as government law enforcement agencies **failed to prevent clashes**.

However, preventing violence of this kind should not be solely the responsibility of law enforcement agencies. The government must take a whole-of-society approach with civil society organisations and political parties, in particular, holding the greatest responsibility.

Hasina was one of the world's longest-serving female leaders. She first became Prime Minister after her Awami League party emerged victorious in the 1996 elections. She regained power in 2009 and played a crucial role in achieving notable economic growth, promoting gender equality, increasing literacy, and making significant progress in major infrastructure projects such as the metropolitan rail network, highways and rural electrification. She presided over one of Bangladesh's largest construction projects, **the Padma Bridge**, which cost roughly \$3.87 billion

and connected 21 districts in southwest Bangladesh to Dhaka by road and rail, reducing the travel distance by 100 km for 27% of Bangladeshis and markedly increasing business opportunities for the region.

Bangladesh has been recognised as the fastest-growing economy in the Asia-Pacific region by the Asian Development Bank in recent years, raising millions of people out of poverty, as well as increasing food security and foreign reserves. The country was striving to become a developed nation by 2041 and has made strides in improving its socio-economic indicators. However, **despite efforts to reduce imports**, Bangladesh's foreign currency reserves recently dropped by **\$1.3 billion in one month**, signalling mounting financial strain. The central bank released data showing that as of July 31, reserves were \$20.48 billion, down from \$21.78 billion a month earlier.

Although praised for revitalising a struggling economy, Hasina had faced mounting criticism both domestically and internationally. Allegations of curbing freedom of speech, corruption among various ministers, and concerns about the fairness of the last two elections had raised serious questions about her leadership.

Now, after her downfall, what should we expect from whoever takes control? Or rather, what is the most important step they could take to restore the functioning of society?

Public violence has continued between various ethnic and political groups. Of particular concern are the attacks on the homes and temples of minority communities despite attempts by the army to intervene. Addressing the immediate conflict is one thing, but finding practical, long-term solutions to its root causes will be hard. Much depends on the achievement of better socio-economic outcomes.

Bangladesh already suffers from a lack of respect for inclusivity and human rights, especially rights relating to equality of access to socio-economic opportunities. While it may take time to strengthen democratic institutions, a commitment to strengthening community-based dialogue on socio-economic policy questions would be important to build confidence in the government.

The students' demand for dialogue should be heeded: a genuine community engagement process would go a long way toward avoiding further civil unrest and violence.

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