

### DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE



#### Bangladesh's Electoral Landscape

As the political climate in Bangladesh heats up, our bimonthly aims to shed light on the upcoming election that will undoubtedly shape the Green-Red nation's future. As the citizens prepare to cast their votes, the country stands at a crucial crossroads, navigating a path that will determine its trajectory for the years to come.

Bangladesh has witnessed a significant evolution in its democratic journey over the years. The upcoming election serves as a testament to the resilience of its political system. As the electorate prepares to exercise its democratic right, it is imperative to reflect on the progress made and the challenges that lie ahead.

The electoral process in Bangladesh is not without its challenges. Issues such as electoral transparency, voter education, minority participation and ensuring a level playing field for all political parties demand careful consideration. However, these challenges also present opportunities for growth and improvement. A robust electoral process is essential for the consolidation and strengthening of democracy.

One of the key pillars of a thriving democracy is inclusivity. The upcoming election provides an opportunity to assess the representation of diverse voices within the political landscape. It is crucial to encourage the participation of women, religious minorities, tribes and marginalized communities to ensure that the government is truly reflective of the nation's rich tapestry.

As Bangladesh positions itself on the global stage, the electorate must carefully evaluate the economic vision presented by the competing political parties. A sustainable and inclusive economic agenda will play a pivotal role in ensuring the well-being and prosperity of the nation.

The political discourse during the election period should be characterized by respect, tolerance, communal harmony and a commitment to unity. This ensures that the democratic process serves as a unifying force rather than a source of division. The world is watching as Bangladesh prepares for its elections.

As Bangladesh gears up for its upcoming election, it is incumbent upon every citizen to participate actively in the democratic process. The choices made at the ballot box will shape the destiny of the nation. Let us embrace this opportunity with a sense of responsibility, envisioning a future where democracy, inclusivity and prosperity go hand in hand. Together, let people of the country navigate the crossroads and pave the way for a Bangladesh that is resilient, progressive, and united. Institute's this edition of "News Reel" is exclusively composed to discuss the key matters surrounding the Bangladesh's election.

– Arindam Mukherjee, Director, ISCS, India

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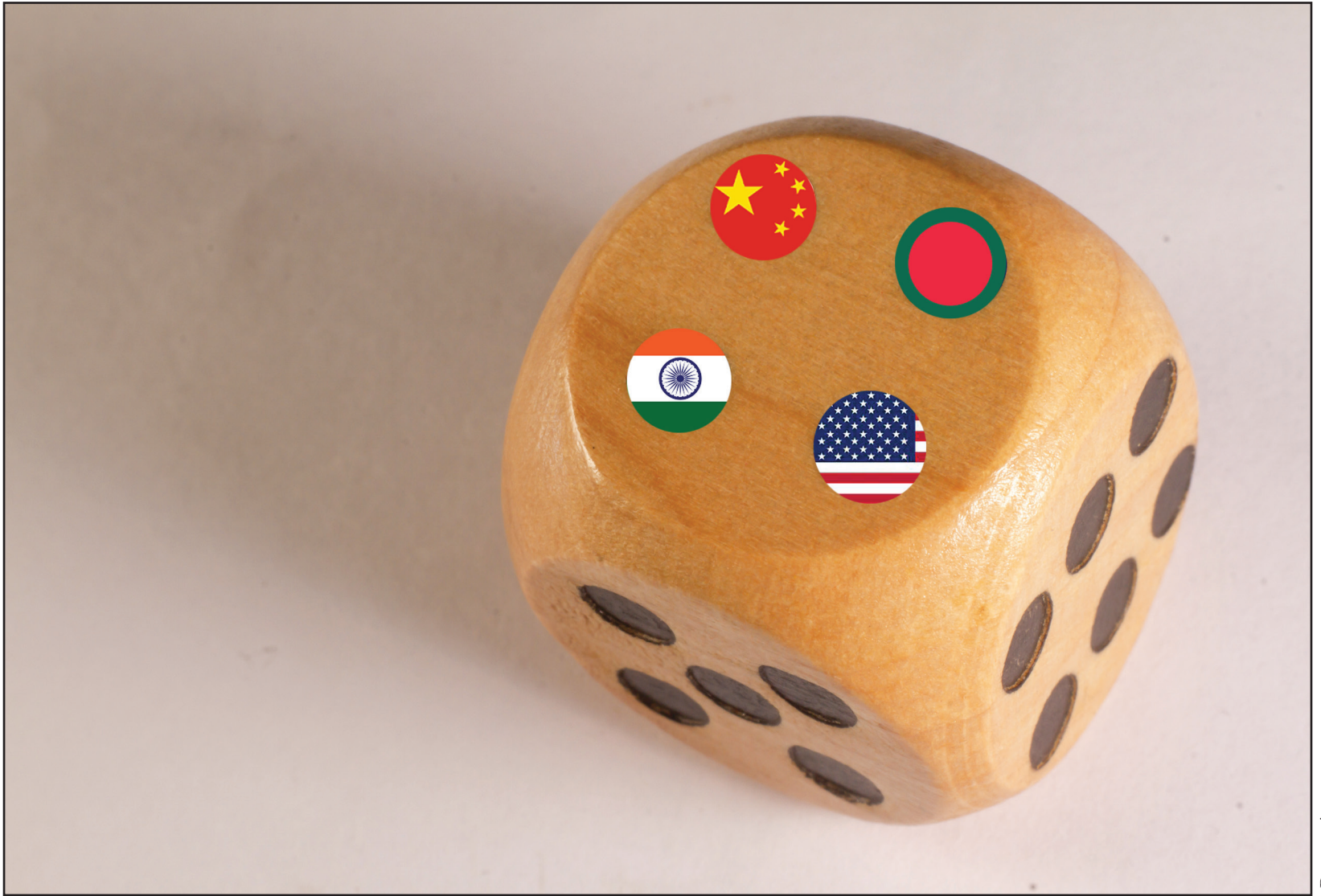
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Dreamstime

# INDIA, CHINA, USA: WHO IS WHO IN BANGLADESH

— Mohshin Habib★

To understand the current political atmosphere of Bangladesh and involvement of three big powers in its domestic politics, one needs to look back over the post-liberation period of the country. Renowned economist and former bureaucrat of Bangladesh late Akbar Ali khan wrote, “God cannot change the history, the historians can do it, and they do it frequently.” Nowadays, what we read, or know about the history of Bangladesh is somewhat distorted. The history of this country is often portrayed primarily through the lens of the local freedom fighters overshadowing the contributions of India. On the other page of the history, the roles of China and the United States have been fading away.

The country was liberated in 1971 with the support of India and the Soviet Union. At one point, on December 3,

India directly joined the armed struggle with the freedom fighters of Bangladesh against the Pakistan army to liberate the land. India even took the risk to face off China as the Chinese Premiere Zhou Enlai vowed to support Pakistan, militarily and internationally, against India and Bangladesh. Moreover, Indian government was worried that China was sponsoring pro-Chinese factions among the Bangladeshis that would, as the civil war dragged on, undermine fighting led by the Awami League.

During this period, the pro-liberation forces of Bangladesh, comprising mostly of students and minority Hindus, highly appreciated India's role in advancing their cause. Did all Bangladeshis, however, support the liberation war? Not at all; in reality, despite many overlooking the facts,



a significant number of Bangladeshis had sympathized with Pakistan due to their religious sentiments and for personal gain. It is a terrible truth that, from the very first month of its independence, a considerable part of the people in Bangladesh tend to forget India's contributions over time. As a result, a deep division appeared in Bangladeshi society, especially among the pro-liberation forces, even before Sheikh Mujibur Rahman returned from Pakistan's jail via London. A considerable number of freedom fighters began vandalizing and seizing properties, regardless of a person's allegiance—whether a razakar or a staunch liberation supporter. The use of weapons against fellow countrymen and the capturing of Hindu properties became prevalent.

In late December 1971, Tajuddin Ahmed, then Prime Minister of the exiled government, asked all armed freedom fighters to submit their weapons, but only a few responded. Bangabondhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman returned home on 10 January 1972, and formed a government with Awami League leaders. Although the Awami League was the largest political party, there were other parties that participated in the freedom fighting and they wanted to share the state power. Subsequently, a group of unrestrained influential freedom fighters forged a dissenting path against the new government, forming a political party named Jatiotabadi Shamajtantric Dal or JSD. From its inception, JSD took an anti-India stand. Meanwhile, Islamic forces sympathetic to Pakistan covertly began to rise and shook hand with the anti-Indian forces. Bangabondhu did not anticipate this situation.

However, the scenario changed abruptly after the assassination of Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on August 15, 1975. Eventually, military man Ziaur Rahman took control of the country and reversed all policies, including those related to foreign affairs. Domestically, he created a platform for all the anti-Indian, anti-Awami League forces by forming a political party named Bangladesh Nationalist Party or BNP. He invited all the pro-Pakistani leaders, who were not in the scene after independence, to join his newly formed political party and the cabinet. Historically, this force capitalized on anti-Indianism in Bangladesh. As I mentioned above, China was a die-hard opposer of the liberation of Bangladesh, and it recognized it later after the assassination of Prime Minister Mujib. On the other hand, Zia's regime was highly applauded by the USA and the Islamic States due to his shift from the India-Soviet Union bloc. After the killing of Zia, another military man, H M Ershad, eventually took control of the country and followed Zia's policies to the point. He ruled the country for 9 years. In 1990, two months after the main opposition parties, including BNP and

Awami League, began a new protest to obtain free elections and forced President Hossain Mohammad Ershad to resign. Since then, power has fluctuated between Khaleda Zia, the widow of Ziaur Rahman, and Sheikh Hasina, the daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founder of the country. Khaleda Zia held power as Prime Minister in 1991 and 2001, and Sheikh Hasina in 1996, 2008, 2013, and 2018.

Khaleda Zia followed the same path that her husband Zia laid. During her terms, India felt highly unsecured as many terrorists infiltrated into India and Indian rebels took resort inside Bangladesh with direct assistance of the Bangladeshi then government. After Khaleda Zia's first term, Awami League won 1996 national election and Sheikh Hasina formed government that followed foreign policy based on her father's policy and naturally India became a friend again. When the power twisted in 2001, government of Khaleda Zia took the same policy to hurt India's stability. Many rebels of India, including Anup Chetia and Arabinda Rajkhowa, used Bangladesh as sanctuary with direct support of the Khaleda Zia's government machineries. These Indian problems had been cleared by the Hasina government.

This was the very short background of today's fallout. The 12th parliamentary elections in Bangladesh are scheduled to be held in January, 2024. The situation today is very complex and it is not possible to explain everything by writing an article. Three big powers India, China, and the United States have all risen to safeguard their respective interests. With increasingly assertive behaviour by China in the Indian Ocean region, both India and USA share the interest to push it back to uphold democratic values. China is historically the big brother of Pakistan, the most notorious country to cherish the insurgents in Bangladesh and India. Although China has no political influence in the Bangladesh society, it has invested heavily in Bangladesh through its billions of dollars projects. Over the past seven-eight-years, Bangladesh has experienced China's high interest in improving economic and defence cooperation. In 2016, Bangladesh became a part of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The Awami League government prioritized 17 projects, encompassing the construction of power plants, railway lines, roads, a river tunnel, the modernization of ports, and the development of information and communication technologies. Additionally, Bangladesh's defence ties with China have strengthened, with China representing 74 percent of Bangladesh's arms imports during the 2015-2019 period. Aware people of Bangladesh envisage that to control the local market and safeguard the investment, China has deep understanding with Pakistan intelligence ISI to work on their behalf in Bangladesh. But at the same time, China wants Sheikh

Hasina to remain in power for their interest related with investments and marketing, especially for defence sales. This is one of the main points that Biden administration wants to see Sheikh Hasina ousted. In 2021, Biden administration did not invite Bangladesh to its democratic summit. When United States expressed its interest to see Bangladesh under the line of Indo-Pacific Strategy, China directly threatened Bangladesh with severe consequences. China's Ambassador to Bangladeshi Li Jiming said in Dhaka, "Obviously, it will not be a good idea for Bangladesh to participate in this small club of four (Quad) because it will substantially damage our bilateral relationship." Bangladesh eventually published its own Indo-Pacific Strategy, one promised upon non-alignment, indicating that it is not ready to take sides with the U.S.

On the other hand, India and Bangladesh are now enjoying unprecedented connectivity. Recently, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina jointly inaugurated the Agartala-Akhaura railway line, the Khulna-Mongla port line and unit II of the Maitree Super Thermal Power Plant. India and Bangladesh together solved long standing corridor dispute in 2015. It was impossible without ardent willingness of Narendra Modi and Sheikh Hasina. It is a ground reality in Bangladesh that, though India backed the Liberation War of 1971 and has been trying to cooperate in every field, for which the Awami League is grateful, anti-India sentiment is widespread in the country—despite ongoing economic support.

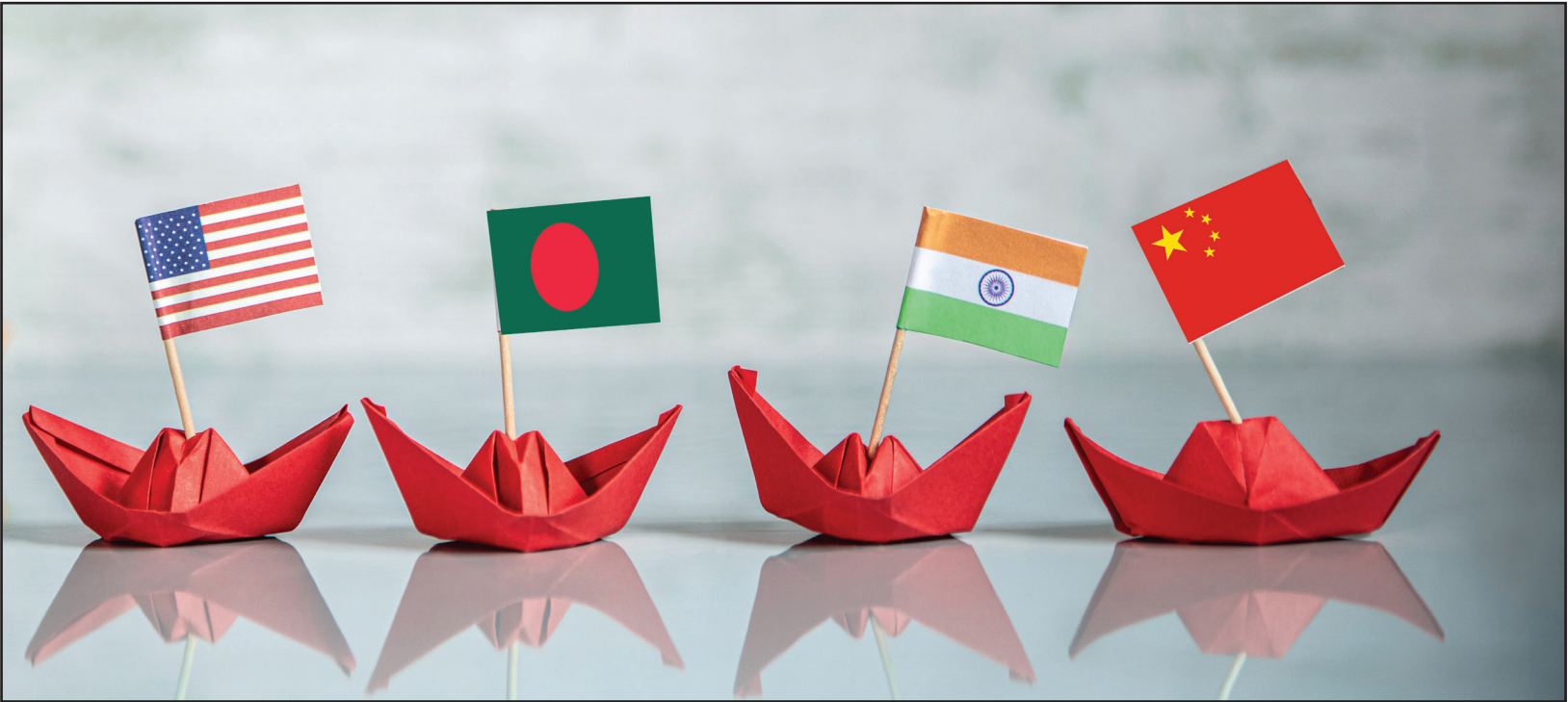
It is now clear that USA did not like Bangladesh's position. The Western powers now want to place somehow an election

that could defeat Hasina's party. But India differs. The first priority of India is regional security that Hasina from her part has done remarkably successfully.

Archbishop emeritus Desmond Tutu, who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984 for his opposition to South Africa's despotic apartheid regime, said, "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse, and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality." The neutrality USA seeking in Bangladesh is officially correct. But the ground reality is totally different. USA does not care about the rising of extremism in the region. It is well-known to many that to establish so-called democracy, USA has interfered in dozens of countries where domestic instabilities replaced prosperities and normal lives.

However, India needs to take care of one of its most important neighbours. Geographically, Bangladesh is like navel of India. If the temperature of this country remains high, India's health will also be contaminated. So till now, India's message is crystal clear. During the 2+2 ministerial talks between India and USA, the External affairs minister of India S Jaishankar made it clear that the election in Bangladesh is their internal matter and it is for the people of Bangladesh to decide their future.

China has no commitment to Bangladesh except for its own gain; there is no consideration for social and cultural values either. If another party forms a government, China will shake hands before anybody else. However, India has no such option. India is an integral part of Bangladesh's divided culture, tradition, sentiment, and politics.



Dreamstime

★ Author and Journalist





Dreamstime

# WHERE IS BANGLADESH HEADING TO?

— Gazi Nasiruddin Ahmed ★

The national elections are just around the corner, coming up in a month on January 7th next year. But it's a tense time. One of the two main political groups in Bangladesh have called for a boycott of this election. The BNP, which leans towards the right, heads this movement, bringing together some ultra conservative Muslim parties along with a mix of moderate and leftist ones. It's a clash that echoes through Bangladesh's political history, especially between the center-left Awami League and the center-right BNP.

Their animosity started with a bloodshed. It was marked by the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the revered leader of Bangladesh's struggle for independence, back in 1975. After Mujib's assassination,

a series of military uprisings led to the imposition of martial law by General Ziaur Rahman, appointed as Chief of the Army, igniting unending hostility between the two political factions.

General Zia sought to counter the growing influence of secular nationalism by advocating for a more inclusive Islamic nationalism. He crafted a political alliance that united disparate groups on the right and left, including Islamic fundamentalists and extremist far-left organizations, with the common goal of curbing the secular ideology championed by the Awami League.

During the Cold War era, General Zia's regime garnered the support of the US and its allies, while the

Soviet Union backed the Awami League, the driving force behind Bangladesh's liberation movement. Regionally, the Awami League received active cooperation from neighboring India throughout the 1971 Liberation War. Apart from the US, the General Zia-led Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), a major anti-Awami League platform, received overall support from military-ruled Pakistan and its ally Saudi Arabia.

In 1981, after the assassination of General Zia in another military coup, the outward appearance of politics did not change much, but the balance of power in regional politics shifted. The new military ruler, General HM Ershad, received India's support. The attack on secular nationalism of the Awami League, which was intense in the late 1970s, became largely inactive during the Ershad era. However, unpopular Ershad tried to prolong his rule by declaring Islam the state religion and was somewhat successful. However, he did not last long. In the face of intense student protests, General Ershad was forced to resign after losing the support of the army.

While Bangladesh's national integrity remained intact during the one and half decade of Zia and Ershad's regimes, the fundamental political principles that laid the foundation for an independent Bangladesh seemed to drift apart. Institutions like democracy, human rights, elections, the judiciary, and parliamentary politics were inactive during this period.

Although there are allegations that the Awami League, which was committed to these political ideals, failed to initiate the establishment of democratic institutions in a professional manner immediately after independence in 1971. One of the main reasons for this can be identified as the party's aspiration to establish a socialist economy. Although the post-independence civil war situation is also no less responsible for this. However, it's necessary to question the efficiency and professionalism in the conduct of elections back then. The general election held under the first Awami League government was a monopoly. The ruling party won more than 290 of the 300 seats in it. Although Awami League's victory party was inevitable in the polls held immediately after independence, the extremely high margin raised the question of whether it was fair.

There was no overall credibility of every national and local election held in Bangladesh from 1971 to 1990. As I said earlier, the post-independence civil war situation, the assassination of the architect of the nation with his

family, and two consecutive military governments for fifteen years did not help to build democracy and its ancillary systems in Bangladesh, but rather hindered the development of the culture of building democracy. It can be said that the practice of freedom of speech, human rights, rule of law, and the opportunity to choose leadership without fear or influence did not take shape in this Muslim-majority country.

Now, let's look at the time when the opportunity to choose the people's representatives in elections began after the fall of the military governments. The fall of General Ershad also marked the end of the Cold War. The global politics of the US-Soviet rivalry effectively came to an end. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the US emerged as the sole superpower, and it had an impact on the politics of Bangladesh as well. However, there was no need for the strong influence of the superpower of global politics in a poor state in South Asia at that time. The power of regional politics was the big regulator.

The 1991 general election, held under an interim government after the fall of Ershad's military regime, was seen as credible by the people. The center-right BNP and its ally, fundamentalist Jamaat-e-Islami, won the election. However, a main political force at the time, the Awami League, had accused the election of rigging. They cited the example of winning more popular votes but fewer parliamentary seats as justification. The Awami League claimed that Pakistan's intelligence agency ISI had influenced the election through the Bangladesh Army. About 20 years later, the then ISI chief testified in a Pakistani court that he had provided money to the BNP for the election. It is also worth mentioning that the BNP, founded by Ziaur Rahman, was a coalition of the Islamic nationalist Muslim League and China-backed leftists. There is sufficient reason to believe that the full support of the US, Pakistan, and China helped the BNP and its ally Jamaat-e-Islami to come to power.

After the BNP came into power in 1991, there was a rise in the activism of civil society in the country's politics. The formation of a political party by Dr. Kamal Hossain, an internationally recognized and Oxford-educated politician who left the Awami League, created a platform for the civil society to organize. At the inauguration ceremony of that political party, Dr. Muhammad Yunus, known as the darling of the West, delivered a longwritten speech at a political event for the first time. In a few years, US-funded organizations and NGOs gained power to raise their voices in politics.



Two media outlets, which were gradually becoming influential, started advocating for their policies.

Center-left Awami League made changes to its party charter. By replacing the phrase "socialist economy" with "market economy" and "secularism" with "non-communality," it shook off its communist image. At the time, the party raised the demand for a government composed of civil society representatives during the election, citing irregularities and rigging in polls held under the BNP government. The demand garnered support from the US-backed civil society. The Awami League, a party with strong organizational base, then made the demand popular and forced the BNP to accept it.

In 1996, the Awami League's demand led to a heated election under an interim government formed with representatives of civil society, and the Awami League returned to power for the first time in 21 years. The Prime Minister was Sheikh Hasina, the daughter of the Father of the Nation, who survived the 1975 assassinations because she and her younger sister were abroad on that day.

This is exactly how a direct influence of the US was started to be seen in Bangladeshi politics since the early 1990s. However, the powerful Bangladesh Army was still dominated by Pakistani-trained generals. Sheikh Hasina's move to not secure interests of the West without question led to a fall out with the civil society and the army. As a result, she lost power in the 2001 election held under a similar interim government.

Sheik Hasina and the Awami League alleged that the polls-time administration composed of civil society representatives was biased against them. It harassed and persecuted leaders and activists through the army; Awami League supporters were directly and indirectly obstructed from voting.

The BNP, which won that election, amended the law to appoint a BNP-supported judge as the head of the upcoming interim government. The Awami League launched a violent movement against it, which resulted in a military-installed interim government with civil society representatives with the support of the West.

That administration ruled the country for two years in an unconstitutional way. After losing public support and endangering the economy, it gave an election and stepped

down. During that time, almost all of the country's politicians were jailed on charges of corruption. The Awami League, which won the election by a landslide, amended the constitution to abolish the participation of civil society in polls-time administration. It argued that unelected members of administration were busy in protecting the interests of the West. In modern state theory, which is called neo-colonial rule.

However, the two national elections held under the Sheikh Hasina administration did not gain public acceptance. In one of these elections, Awami League's main political rival, the BNP and their allies including Jamaat, tried to prevent the election by violent means. In the other, that is, the latest national election, the BNP, despite participating after forming an alliance, faced a huge defeat. It is alleged that the administration has been biased in this election. Even from the Awami League, there has been no strong claim that the election has been free and fair.

In this context, the incumbent government is under strong pressure from the US and its allies to hold a free and fair election. There are talks that the US wants to keep Bangladesh in its camp in a possible conflict with China under its Indo-Pacific strategy. Therefore, they want to overthrow Sheikh Hasina administration to bring their loyal government to power. Meanwhile, China and Russia have openly expressed their support for Sheikh Hasina by issuing statements against US activities.

So, what's the stance of India—the most influential nation in Bangladesh's political landscape now? Despite claiming it's an internal matter for Bangladesh, a shift in power in Dhaka will undoubtedly send shockwaves through New Delhi. Analysts in Dhaka think that India wants to understand whether the Awami League's growing economic dependence on China will morph into political subservience. Additionally, India harbors concerns about the Awami League's opponents' past policies towards it, believing them detrimental to regional security. Considering these, Dhaka-based analysts believe New Delhi will not endorse Washington's attempt to topple the Dhaka regime.

In this context of geopolitics, I believe that Dhaka will not deviate from the India-Pacific outlook that it has announced. Bangladesh will be comfortable in the role of a buffer state in the US-China or India-China conflict.

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Dreamstime

# POLITICAL CONFRONTATION OVER THE ISSUE OF CARETAKER GOVERNMENT IN BANGLADESH

— Snehangshu Bhattacharjee\*

Bangladesh since its birth had held eleven parliamentary elections of them the first, second, third, fourth and sixth, ninth, tenth and eleventh election were held under party governments and three elections fifth, seventh and eighth were under the non partisan national caretaker government (NCG). The most important reason for the introduction of the system of NCG was the assumption that only under this very system, elections can be held in a free, fair and neutral manner.

The demand for the national caretaker government was not new in Bangladesh. It was Jamaat-i-Islami who first introduced the idea of National caretaker government in 1983, but the idea was not supported by the main oppositions such as BNP, AL and left front.

After the widespread malpractices in the 1986 election, in the year 1987 three multi-party alliances signed an agreement that they would not take part in any elections under any Ershad government. They suspected that elections under a military government would never be free and fair. The fourth Parliamentary election, which was held in 1988, was boycotted by the three multi-party alliances of Bangladesh. Subsequently, All-Party Students Unity (APSU) was formed in October 1990, affiliated with the main opposition alliances. APSU exerted extreme pressure upon the Ershad government to resign, with a view of restoring democracy in the country through fair polls. The three opposition alliances demanded for the creation of a neutral caretaker government. Amid this movement, Shahabuddin Ahmed, the chief justice of Bangladesh took over the position of Acting President.



The opposition parties appointed him to lead the National caretaker government and the election was held in a peaceful manner.

The issue of the national caretaker government, which mostly remained dormant in the first three years of BNP rule, came into prominence in early 1994 particularly after the alleged rigging by BNP in the Magura by-election on 20th March 1994 which brought the issue of holding elections under an NCG to the forefront. The opposition parties of Bangladesh which included Awami League and Jatiya party demanded the installation of the caretaker government and initiated an anti-government agitation. In the meantime, in 24th November 1995 BNP dissolved the parliament and went for the election. Amid tremendous violence, elections to the sixth parliament were held on 15th February 1996 in which none of the main opposition parties took part. In a one-sided election, BNP won a landslide victory. However, in the context of the oppositions' boycott, elections to the sixth parliament caused a serious legitimacy crisis for the BNP government. The opposition considered the sixth parliament as illegitimate and demanded its immediate dissolution. Despite the heavy pressure of the opposition and political parties backed by the support of various social groups, the Prime Minister refused to yield. The crisis, however, reached a climax on 25th March, when the civil servants, including top ranking officers, called for an indefinite strike of all government employees. Faced by an open revolt of government employees, the BNP government decided to move in the sixth parliament, a constitutional amendment bill providing for the holding of parliamentary elections under the non-party caretaker government in the future. On 26th March 1996; the parliament passed the 13th amendment bill which was signed by the President on 28th March 1996. Thus, the non-party caretaker government gained the constitutional status in Bangladesh. In late March, 1996 following a sustained campaign of strikes and a non-cooperation movement by her political rivals, Begum Zia stepped down. In June 1996 a new election date was announced and the Parliament was dissolved. On 3 April, 1996 a caretaker government headed by former Chief Justice Mohammad Habibur Rahman was sworn in. The caretaker government supervised the election and in this election Awami League emerged victorious.

On 15th July, 2001 the third caretaker government was formed and the former Chief Justice, Justice Latifur Rahman, took over charge as the Chief Adviser. The caretaker government discharged its prime duty of holding the eighth parliamentary election on 1st October 2001, and continued in office till 10th October 2001 when the new elected BNP government led by Begum Khaleda Zia assumed state power.

In 2004, the BNP deliberately changed the constitution to increase the retirement age of Supreme Court judges from 65 to 67 years. BNP leadership increased the retirement age to

ensure that KM Hasan, a former party secretary of the BNP who sat on the Supreme Court as a judge, would become the head of the next caretaker government.

After the completion of the tenure of the BNP government in October 2006 there was a great disagreement over the formation of caretaker government and violence engulfed the country including the capital city Dhaka. In such volatile situation former chief justice of Bangladesh K M Hasan declared his unwillingness to become the chief adviser of the next caretaker government. Subsequently, the President of the Republic, Professor Dr. Iajuddin Ahmed himself took over the charge of the chief adviser and constituted the council of advisers. The date of the ninth parliamentary elections was fixed on 22nd January, 2007. However, apprehensions and doubts on the holding of free and fair polls continued unabated, and during this time a dialogue on electoral reforms between the two major contending political parties, BNP and Awami League, failed which led to massive violence and clash all over the country. Faced with such grave crisis, President Iajuddin Ahmed declared a state of emergency on 1st January 2007 and the proposed elections were cancelled. He subsequently stepped down from the post of chief adviser, and another caretaker government led by Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed was formed. The new caretaker government declared a road map for holding the above polls by December 2008 and embarked upon a number of reform measures. Ultimately, on 29th December 2008 the ninth parliamentary elections were held and the caretaker government of Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed continued in office till 3rd January 2009 when the grand alliance led by Sheikh Hasina assumed the state power and formed the cabinet.

In the year 2011, Bangladesh Supreme court had declared constitutional provision that mandated an elected government to transfer power to an unelected non-partisan caretaker administration to oversee a new parliamentary election on completion of its term as illegal. Though in the same verdict the highest court said the voided system might be practiced for another two parliamentary terms for the sake of safety of the state and its people. The court also asked the parliament to amend the constitution to make sure that former chief justices or any other Supreme Court judges were not chosen as heads of caretaker governments in case the system is kept for another two parliamentary elections.

Soon after the judgment in 2011, Awami league led government of Bangladesh through the 15th constitutional amendment abolished the provision of the caretaker government. In 2013 the politics of Bangladesh started boiling over the issue of the 15th constitutional amendment that had abolished the provision of the national caretaker government in the country. Public protests and street battles involving party activists and government security forces escalated and by the time elections were held in 2014 political violence had

caused more than 300 deaths. In the run-up to the polls, security forces arrested several high-ranking BNP leaders on charges of instigating violence during the party's anti-government rallies. Several other opposition activists went into hiding in order to avoid harassment and detention, and Khaleda Zia, chairperson of the BNP, was put under de facto house arrest. The BNP boycotted the 2014 national election. In 2018 again the issue of the caretaker government again came up in the political discourse of the country with BNP demanding the installation of the above mentioned system which would supervise the electoral process of the country. Though their demand was not fulfilled this time, BNP participated in the election and faced a huge electoral defeat. Since then BNP had constantly demanded the installation of the caretaker government and they have not participated in any local or national level election stating that the installation of a caretaker government was the precondition of their participation in the election process of the country.

The issue of installation of caretaker government had always been an issue of contestation in Bangladesh. The idea of caretaker government emerged as a remedy to the deep distrust against the electoral system led by the authoritarian regime of Ershad. Though the caretaker government had been initially thought to be a temporary setup yet it got constitutional legitimacy through the thirteenth constitutional amendment. However if we look at the history of the caretaker government we would find that the ruling party had tried to influence the caretaker government like in 2004 the endeavor of BNP to install a party loyalist as a head of the caretaker government created a deep political crisis within the country with the opposition Awami League leading the anti-government protest over this issue. Bangladesh supreme court verdict leading to

abolition of the thirteenth constitutional amendment and the system of caretaker government had been an area of intense political diatribe. The present opposition parties of Bangladesh quoting the Supreme Court verdict opined that the verdict mentioned that the caretaker government system was not declared void instantly but "prospectively", in other words, after the holding of next two subsequent elections. According to them the unilateral passage of the 15th amendment in a "majoritarian" manner, by the AL-led alliance in 2011, in essence transformed the constitution into a weapon that destroyed the political settlement reached in 1996 through the introduction of the caretaker provision by the 13th amendment.

On the other hand the ruling Awami League had said that caretaker government was abolished due to the verdict delivered by the Supreme Court. They rejected the opposition statement that the Supreme Court had asked to retain the caretaker system for next two parliamentary elections in its verdict and it was a mere observation of the highest judiciary.

As the 12th national election is inching forward the opposition parties have raised their demand of the installation of the caretaker government spearheaded by BNP and adequately supported by Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh, Islamic Andolon Bangladesh other some other smaller parties. The demand shows that Bangladesh still have not been able to create a trustworthy electoral system as a result the notion of caretaker government always come up in the political discourse of nation. Opposition parties in Bangladesh always suspect that the election would be manipulated by the ruling party in their favour giving no level playing field for the opposition parties.



Dreamstime

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### Akhaura-Agartala cross-border rail link inaugurated

Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated the 12.24km Akhaura-Agartala cross-border rail link, fostering trade, business, tourism, and people-to-people contact. The project, costing INR 392.52 crore, includes a 6.78km dual gauge rail line in Bangladesh and 5.46km in Tripura. Cargo trains will run initially, with passenger trains to follow. The leaders also inaugurated the Khulna-Mongla Port Rail Line, enhancing trade opportunities, and Unit-II of the Maitree Super Thermal Power Plant, addressing Bangladesh's power demand. The rail link connects Mongla Port to the broad-gauge railway network, facilitating economic growth in the southwestern region. The Maitree Super Thermal Power Plant will contribute to Bangladesh's energy security.





### EAM Dr. Jaishankar describe India-Bangladesh ties as 'model relationship'

Indian External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar praised the "model relationship" between India and Bangladesh, emphasizing its importance in regional cooperation, security, and shared prosperity. During a discussion in London, Jaishankar cited the successful resolution of territorial disputes, including land and maritime boundaries, as examples of diplomatic achievements. The EAM also acknowledged the transformative changes over the past decade, citing the inauguration of two rail lines and a power plant connecting India and Bangladesh. The strategic use of Bangladeshi ports for India's northeast and the mutual benefits of energy supplies through pipelines further exemplify the depth of the relationship. Jaishankar also acknowledged Bangladesh's economic progress since 1971, emphasizing the positive trajectory of the once less developed part of Pakistan, now Bangladesh. Overall, he portrayed India-Bangladesh relations as a standout model in the Indian subcontinent.

### Rakhine villages of Kalapara celebrate Prabarana Purnima

The Rakhine villages in Kalapara upazila, Patuakhali district, celebrated Prabarana Purnima, a significant Buddhist festival, with joy and festivity. The festivities were held between 29-31st October, involving various rituals and celebrations. Prabarana Purnima commemorates the day when Gautama Buddha started his teachings. The festivities included prayers, religious discussions, bell ringing, and the distribution of cakes. Temples were adorned with lights, and security measures ensured a peaceful celebration. In Srimangal Buddhist Vihara, devotees lit 1,000 candles, and the day culminated with the release of colorful lanterns, attracting tourists and locals. The festival, marked by traditional dishes and the Fanush (sky lantern) event, is considered the most significant religious celebration for Buddhists in the region.



*The Burmese style Buddhist temple in Bandarban, Bangladesh*

### Bangladesh Embassy organise education fair in Yangon

The Bangladesh Embassy in Yangon organized the inaugural "Bangladesh Education Fair" on December 03, showcasing opportunities for higher education in Bangladesh. The event featured prominent Bangladeshi universities like BSMRAU, AIUB, AUST, and NSU. Ambassador of Bangladesh Dr. Md Monwar Hossain emphasized Dhaka's economic growth and commitment to becoming a developed country by 2041, highlighting the focus on developing human resources. The fair aimed to strengthen bilateral relations and facilitate people-to-people contact. A seminar on "Affordable & Quality Education for all" was conducted, addressing the participating students' inquiries about courses and admission requirements. The initiative is part of the "Campus Connect" program fostering collaborations between educational institutions in Myanmar and Bangladesh.





# DARPAN-III

## ROUND TABLE DISCUSSION ON

### RECONCEPTUALIZE SECURITY IN SILIGURI CORRIDORS

18th November 2023 at Taj Chia Kutir, Kurseong

The Darpan-III was organized by The Institute of Social and Cultural Studies (ISCS) – a discussion series that follows a Chatham house guidelines on 18th November, 2023 at Taj Chia Kutir, Kurseong on ‘Reconceptualize Security in Siliguri Corridors’. The discussion that stretched right since morning upto evening in true sense rolled out a platform for eminent academicians, researchers, policy makers, former IPS, former National Security Advisor and tech experts to exchange exclusive ideas on trade, economy, regional and transnational security issues, business and technology between

the distinguished panelists and filled up audiences comprising of elected government representatives, regional stakeholders, senior officials from Eastern Command of Indian Army, Border Security Force and MoRT, who represented the existing demography of the region in context to security, trade trends & investments, multiple connectivity tunnels bridging the region with parts of the country and adjacent countries along with technological measures to prevent, detect and respond to various security threats.

