

Why can't India accept Bangladeshis toppled Sheikh Hasina?



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The most striking feature of Indian foreign minister S Jaishankar's statement at the Lok Sabha on August 6 was the complete absence of the Awami League government's egregious violation of human rights, and the killings of over 400 people (as documented so far), including youth, since July 16.

He began setting up a context for the people's uprising saying that there had been "considerable tensions, deep divides and growing polarisation in Bangladesh politics" since the January election. "This underlying foundation aggravated a student agitation that started in June this year," he continued. "There was growing violence, including attacks on public buildings and infrastructure, as well as traffic and rail obstructions. The violence continued through the month of July."

While there was dissatisfaction over the 2024 election—as well as the previous two elections—the quota reform protests did not really have much to do with that. It began as merely a student movement asking for reforms in the existing quota system in public service recruitment, which turned into an anti-government movement much later due to the government's brutal crackdown on protesters.

Jaishankar's statement does not even hint that Sheikh Hasina's government reacted with overwhelmingly excessive force against students, and police opened fire on protesters with live rounds, killing more than 400 people in the span of 23 days. The ruling party unleashed its student cadres, the Chhatra League, armed with machetes and firearms, on the unarmed protesters. It was only after then that attacks on public buildings began, which no one condoned.

Jaishankar went on to note that "Despite a Supreme Court judgement on 21 July, there was no let-up in the public agitation." He added, "Various decisions and actions taken thereafter only exacerbated the situation. The agitation at this stage coalesced around a one-point agenda, that is that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina should step down."

Since the Indian foreign minister glosses over the former government's brutality, it appears to paint the democratic movement behind Sheikh Hasina's fall with a nefarious intention from its genesis—which fits into the Awami League's narrative—that this was a movement fomented by the BNP, Jamaat or even external forces such as the

WINKERS AWEIGH!

police—even ones that were recorded, like Abu Sayed's. The "step down" demand came to the fore on August 3. It was certainly not soon after the court verdict, when the situation was still reversible had Hasina wished to apologise and reconcile. But that was simply out of the question for an increasingly egotistical autocrat.

Jaishankar then jumps to August 4, when he says, "Events took a very serious turn." It did

army refused. Hasina was finally convinced to leave. It was a revolution spearheaded by students that succeeded in toppling a dictatorial regime of 15 years.

The fact that the BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami took advantage of what turned into an anti-government campaign and publicly supported it was public knowledge. But entire communities—civilians from all walks of life—came out in support of the

in place, minorities became an unfortunate target. The Daily Star reported violence against Hindu homes and businesses in 27 districts on August 5. These crimes must be investigated as the police are getting back on duty.

Hasina's Awami League consciously colluded with the religious fundamentalists, placating them and pandering to them to keep them at bay, only to make sure that Hasina remained at the helm without too much trouble from the right. It was the Awami League government that changed school textbooks, took out pieces by Hindu authors to replace them with stories and poems by unknown Muslim authors. Pictures and drawings were changed exactly as demanded. Besides restoring democracy, reviving the truly secular mindset of the masses is another uphill task that Bangladesh will have to undertake, now that Awami League is gone.

But, back to Jaishankar's statement: the blatant disregard for brewing tension among Bangladeshis, Awami League's intolerance for dissent and telltale signs of the Hasina regime turning into a classic autocrat shows a rather myopic and oversimplified Indian take of what is happening in Bangladesh. Jaishankar's articulate and witty tete-a-tetes with journalists or at discussion panels around the world convincingly demonstrates that he does not lack the calibre to appreciate these nuances. One wonders, then, if he had not been properly briefed by his aides on what actually happened in Bangladesh.

Just as this is an opportunity for Bangladesh to rebuild its future free from Awami League's clutches, it is also an opportunity for India to do some introspection. Bangladesh has just witnessed a people's uprising toppling a dictator—which will be a classic textbook case of the fall of an autocratic regime like Ceausescu or Marcos. And yet India remains extremely apprehensive about what is to come. India built relations with Awami League instead of Bangladesh. The Indian establishment has been more than happy to support Awami League for expedience despite its faults, and in the process alienated the people of the country. Today, with the ouster of Hasina and the Awami League, India is quite naturally seeing more than its fair share of criticism and dip in popularity.

It is really high time that Jaishankar asked his aides, or whoever is in charge of setting the Bangladesh agenda, how India backed itself to such a corner that it cannot join in the jubilation of a nation or empathise with our celebrations. He should ask how it is that India fails to see the new regime as a result of the mass people's uprising that it was, and why it needs to distort it by labelling it as the machinations of Pakistan, China or the US. Why is it that when we are relieved to have rid ourselves of a dictator, India is apprehensive that the djinn is out of the bottle?



PHOTO: AFP

Protesters wave Bangladesh's national flag as they celebrate at Shahbag area, near Dhaka university in Dhaka on August 5, 2024.

US. This is far removed from the reality of the Bangladeshi public sentiment. Sheikh Hasina's government murdered so many people before meeting the quota demands. There was a nationwide internet blackout for five days. The student movement had nine demands before the hearing and verdict, including an apology from the ousted prime minister and resignation of former ministers, including Obaidul Quader and Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal, for abusing law enforcement.

On the surface, the government said it was open to negotiations with students, yet there were block raids during the nights where law enforcers came hunting for students. More than 11,000 people were arrested in just two weeks. Innocent children were put in jails and framed for murders committed by the

indeed. Awami League had by then decided to unleash its full force onto the protesters, who took to the streets despite the curfew, only to face the police baby-sitting armed goons of the Awami League. Violence shook the nation; the death toll kept climbing to nearly 100 people—the highest and deadliest ever for a single-day protest in the nation's history. Public anger only mounted; student protesters called for a "March to Dhaka" on August 5. In response, hundreds of thousands took to the streets in Dhaka and other surrounding towns ready to converge on Shahbag.

That was when the law enforcers realised the situation was beyond salvation and counselled Sheikh Hasina to leave. Initially, she reportedly refused and urged for using even more force to subdue the crowd. The

campaigners; the nation stood united against the ruling party. Hospitals gave free medical support, and general people donated to their common funds for food and water. Everyone sympathised with the protesters who were braving bullets on the streets and torture in the jail cells. Six coordinators were detained by the police and confined at the detective bureau against their will for several days without any regard for law or their rights.

What followed after she left her official residence was an outpouring of pent-up hatred for anything and everything linked to Hasina and the Awami League. Desecration of Sheikh Mujib's statues and murals and even his residence in Dhanmondi was heart-wrenching and hurt millions of Bangladeshis.

With the police gone and no law and order

Debunking the conspiracy theories surrounding Sheikh Hasina's fall

After Bangladesh's 'Iron Lady' Sheikh Hasina was ousted, a number of conspiracy theories have emerged regarding international players. Michael Kuggelman, director of the South Asia Institute at the Wilson Center, addresses these speculations in an exclusive interview with Ramisa Rob of The Daily Star.

How would you describe the overall response of the international community? The watchword is concern: about stability risks, a weakened economy, and an uncertain political transition. I don't want to overstate the international community's sense of worry, however; this crisis in Bangladesh was an internal one after all—there are multiple wars and other major crises playing out around the world. But Bangladesh is a significant player, especially because of its economy, and many global capitals have substantive partnerships with Dhaka, especially commercial ones. The US, China, Russia and India will all have strong incentives to engage and to maintain influence. Dhaka will welcome this engagement—even though it will face the same conundrum that the Hasina government did of being a nonaligned state amid intensifying great power rivalry. Ultimately, I don't think Bangladesh's status as a battleground for great power competition will change.

How is the US viewing India giving refuge to Sheikh Hasina after her ouster? Hasina taking refuge in India makes perfect sense, given that she had no closer friend than India, and especially the Narendra Modi government. I suspect the US isn't thrilled about India hosting her for a long period. At the end of the day, if India wants to build new relationships in Dhaka—and it surely does—it should have a strong interest in not giving Hasina a long-term home in India.

There has been mixed signals regarding India's response to the fall of Sheikh Hasina. How do you view it? No country was more upset to see Hasina fall than India. We all know that New Delhi had put all its eggs in the Hasina and Awami League basket for years, and that it couldn't accept any alternative to her party. India has long bought into Hasina's argument that

"she was the only thing standing between a secular and moderate Bangladesh and a nation that is destabilising by Islamists." At the same time, no country's security interests are more impacted by Hasina's ouster than India. New Delhi's concerns—from threats to the Bangladeshi Hindu community to potential new surges of refugees crossing the border—are real and understandable.

But despite all this, India's foreign policy is pragmatic and agile. It will want to adjust to Bangladesh's dramatic new political reality. It will try to reach out to the country's new leaders. Trade, border security, great power competition—it has many compelling reasons to form a workable relationship with post-Hasina Bangladesh.

There are many conspiracy theories regarding US interference. Can you debunk them from the US perspective?

First, it's significant that other than Hasina and her family, and some die-hard Awami League supporters, Bangladeshis themselves are not embracing the conspiracy theory about a US—or any external—hand in her ouster. It's mostly an Indian narrative. That's a telling sign right there.

The tricky thing about conspiracy theories is they're often hard to disprove conclusively—and especially when they involve allegations such as covert "CIA" activities, for example. But they're also hard to prove conclusively. The onus is on those that make such allegations to make a plausible case for why they should be viewed as true. And there's nothing plausible about this idea of a US hand.

Abroad, the US is dealing with a world on fire. At home, it's dealing with an intense presidential election campaign. Bangladesh is not exactly foremost on its mind. It's true the Chief Adviser Dr Muhammad Yunus has many supporters and admirers in the US, and those that believe the baseless allegation

of a US hand in Hasina's ouster will use his appointment as head of the interim government as a data point to try to validate their view. But it's hard to imagine how he can be working against Bangladesh's interests given that he commands considerable levels of support there, that he took leadership of the interim government only when requested by the student protest leaders (and presumably the army had no issue with it), and given that he has pledged to pursue democracy and across-the-board reform.



Michael Kuggelman

The US tends to look at Bangladesh through the lens of great power competition, and that means that while it will welcome Yunus as the head of the interim government, it will worry about the implications of a new government that may be poised to take the country even closer to China. Assuming stability returns to Bangladesh, we will see Washington pick up where it left off with a focus on trade, climate change, and strategic cooperation. Let's not forget that soon after Hasina began her ill-

fated final term, President Joe Biden sent a letter to her that spoke of beginning a new era in relations, one focused on a variety of issues. And I'm quite confident that if Washington becomes concerned again about rights and democracy in Bangladesh, it won't hold back from voicing its concerns. Such a move would hopefully shatter another misconception about US policy in Bangladesh—that it favours non-Awami League parties and entities.

What's especially painful about all these allegations of a foreign hand is that they deny agency to the scores of young and brave Bangladeshis who waged a massive campaign for change, and in many cases lost their lives in the process.

There have been communal attacks against Hindus in Bangladesh and many cases of persecution since August 5. What do you make of this communal violence? Unfortunately, religious violence is a longstanding reality in South Asia. Sometimes it is inspired by pure hate, at other times by broader political factors. It appears that the attacks on the Hindu community in Bangladesh in recent days have mostly been part of a wave of revenge acts against anyone considered to be a Hasina supporter. But this issue definitely needs more investigation to get a better sense of the scale of these attacks and what is driving them.

We're seeing some fake news—debunked by reputable fact-checker sites—about attacks on minorities. But there are still attacks taking place. This is one of the many dangerous things about this fake news: it distracts attention from the attacks that are actually happening. No one can afford to be complacent, or in denial.

For the interim government, stopping the attacks begins with restoring law and order. And that involves getting the police back out on the streets. This is an understandably

sensitive issue, given that the police were on the frontlines of the vicious crackdown on peaceful protesters, but you can't restore law and order without law enforcement. With many police members now starting to return to work, that should help. More will need to be done by the interim government, including taking legal actions against those behind the attacks, and engaging with the affected communities to ensure they're getting the protection they need.

There is a theory on social media that Bangladesh will become the next Afghanistan. As an expert on South Asia, do you think there exists a serious threat that Bangladesh will become an Islamist country?

I wholly reject this notion that Bangladesh could become the next Afghanistan. Even the most casual observer of Bangladesh knows that it's a country with robust—albeit flawed—institutions, a strong state writ that extends across the country, and also a tradition of moderate Islam. Yes, there are influential religious groups like Jamaat and Hefazat that excel with mobilisation, and there have been terror groups like JMB. But these entities don't influence politics and society to the extent that you see in Afghanistan, or Pakistan for that matter. This is another case where many in India are falling prey to the Awami League narrative that a Bangladesh without Hasina and her party can only mean the unleashing of Islamist forces that will destabilise the country. Ultimately, these false narratives are inflating and exaggerating the notion of an Islamist threat, which risks heightening volatilities in Bangladesh at an especially sensitive time.

What happened in Bangladesh was a mass democratic uprising. As far as I know, that is the fact. I hope the world views it that way as well.