

INDIA’S ‘PUSH-IN’ POLICY

What is the message for Bangladesh?



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In a region already riddled with border disputes, demographic anxieties, and geopolitical tensions, India has added a controversial new chapter to its neighbourhood diplomacy. Over the past few weeks, New Delhi has unleashed a wave of “push-in” operations, forcibly expelling alleged illegal migrants—mostly Bangla-speaking Muslims—into Bangladesh, without due process, verification or diplomatic coordination. These actions are not just inhumane or unlawful; they are a clear violation of international norms, aimed at pressuring Dhaka and reasserting regional dominance at a time when Delhi’s Kashmir calculus lies in tatters. How else would you describe the situation when poor, vulnerable people were flown across states and dropped at the border of a sovereign nation? In any other global context, this would have made headlines: mass deportations without trial, detentions without court appearances, and midnight border dumps of children, women, and even Rohingya refugees protected under UNHCR mandates.

But when it comes to India, global outrage has a strange habit of taking a sabbatical. Let us connect the dots. Despite its muscular rhetoric, Delhi’s realpolitik ambitions are facing diminishing returns. Having failed to assert itself against Pakistan, and amid increasing tensions with China, it seems India now sees Bangladesh as the safer punching bag—the soft target next door.

Push-in operations are not just about a few hundred unfortunates being kicked across the barbed wires. They are political signals—of frustration and control. It is a continuation of a pattern, an imperial hangover dressed as a “regional security policy.”

The absurdity of India’s push-in narrative lies in its shifting justifications. According to Indian sources, the “illegal migrants” being expelled are Bangladeshis. Yet, several media reports suggest that among those detained in Rajasthan, Gujarat, and Tripura are Indian Bangla-speaking Muslims—some allegedly with valid Aadhaar cards, voter IDs, and decades-long residence records. In many cases, entire families were picked up in random raids, herded into detention centres, and dispatched to border areas, as though they were disposable items in a political experiment.

Consider the grotesque irony: India, a country that has hosted Tibetan refugees, Sri

Lankan Tamils, and Afghans, is now unable—or perhaps unwilling—to distinguish between its own marginalised citizens and foreign nationals. Bangla-speaking Muslims from West Bengal and Assam have been allegedly rounded up alongside suspected Bangladeshis. This is not immigration enforcement; it is demographic profiling, cloaked in the BJP’s nationalist jargon.

One such detainee, Obaidul Khandaker from Cooch Behar, testified to the BBC that he showed his Indian identity documents, only to be told they needed “verification.” After 10 days in detention—with barely any food, no legal hearing, and no information to his family—he returned home to find his house looted and his power line cut. He says he will never again work in India’s western states. So we ask: is this the “vishwaguru” that India claims itself to be?

Intelligence reports warn that India’s push-in game bears eerie similarities to Myanmar’s infamous ethnic cleansing of the Rohingyas. Like the generals in Naypyidaw, Delhi seems to believe that forcibly transferring “unwanted” populations into a neighbouring country will help clean up its demographic and security problems. In fact, at least five Rohingya refugees with verified UNHCR cards from India were among those recently pushed into Bangladesh. Some

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were blindfolded, airlifted from Gujarat, and dumped near border char lands in Shyamnagar, ill and injured.

It also speaks volumes about India’s evolving security doctrine, which no longer sees soft power and cooperation as tools of



VISUAL: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

influence in South Asia. Today it’s push-in, forcibly into its neighbour. Tomorrow it may be “push-out” of bilateral trade deals, water treaties, and transit arrangements.

The 4,096-km Bangladesh-India border is already among the most militarised in the world, with more than 3,200 km fenced. One would assume such a landscape was meant to prevent illegal crossings. Instead, it’s now a human conveyor belt where the Indian Border Security Force (BSF) plays the role of a forceful usher, marching off detainees and dumping them unannounced on Bangladeshi soil.

Between May 4 and May 15 alone, 370 people were pushed into Bangladesh, including minors, pregnant women, and elderly individuals. Some were tortured, according to a report by *The Daily Star*. Others arrived barefoot, starved, and terrified. These actions are in clear violation of international conventions, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and

Political Rights—both of which India is a signatory to.

More importantly, India’s actions shred the very spirit of neighbourly cooperation. India did not consult Dhaka. It did not provide proper documentation. And when approached through diplomatic channels, its Ministry of External Affairs replied with radial silence. India has not even confirmed whether those expelled are verified Bangladeshis. India’s Ministry of Home Affairs, under whose directive the detentions have intensified post-Pahalgam attack, has yet to clarify why Bangalee Muslims from West Bengal and Assam were caught in this dragnet. Instead, Rajasthan Law Minister Jogaram Patel publicly bragged about flying “Bangladeshis” to Kolkata.

Meanwhile, Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, who has a history of making inflammatory anti-Muslim statements, has endorsed a “pushback mechanism” to “check infiltration.”

Dhaka must not remain silent. The

Bangladesh foreign ministry’s timid letter to New Delhi, regarding India’s attempt to push in people into Bangladesh, is hardly adequate. What we need is vocal, strategic, and multilateral diplomacy. We must raise this issue at the UN, UNHCR, and other international human rights forums. Bangladesh must also demand clarity on these operations from India. The government should document and archive each push-in case, and explore legal avenues to hold India accountable.

Additionally, the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) must enhance surveillance and refuse entry to any individual not processed through bilateral mechanisms. Bangladesh should not be made the dumping ground for India’s communal anxieties. Let it be said clearly: if India wants to be the regional leader it claims to be, it must first stop such disruptive actions. Friendship cannot be built on fear, nor can neighbourhood policy be guided by electoral calculations or RSS paranoia.

Debunking the Rohingya crisis, Bangladesh’s role, and the ASEAN summit



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The balance may be shifting. Resolving the Rohingya crisis is being swayed by more external winds than internal thrusts. Dynamics such as Bamar treatment of the Rohingya, humanitarian care of the evicted Rakhine persons, and Bangladesh-Myanmar discussions on repatriating the displaced persons from Cox’s Bazar camps have been overtaken by Myanmar’s 2021 *coup d’etat* and its civil war consequences, regional spillovers thickening across Southeast Asia, and an independent resurgence of “democracy” inside Bangladesh, splashing externally.

In reverse order, Bangladesh Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus is more cited globally today not so much for his trademark microfinance contributions as his democracy-salvaging attempts since the historic ouster of the Awami League regime through a student-led democratic uprising last year. In comparison to Bangladesh’s efforts in reviving democracy, Myanmar’s deficiency of democracy has emerged more despairingly.

Democracy is a reform movement in deficient countries. The other side of this movement defends the status quo to keep narratives in the same ballpark. Bamars, the largest ethnic group in Myanmar, who represent that “other” Rohingya side, controlled all of Myanmar from Naypyidaw through the Tatmadaw armed forces. Under today’s civil war, reportedly, less than one quarter remains in their hands. The National Unity Government (NUG), a mixed group, influences the rest. Its reformers, the National League for Democracy (NLD), a party of former Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi, replaced military rule with

“democracy” in 2015 and won again in 2020. After a stuttering start, her party was ousted in the February 2021 coup, after the Rohingya malaise spilled over into Bangladesh.

Other NUG members include discriminated ethnic groups in the northeast, north, and northwest. Because of that discrimination, they defend the status quo (their histories, identities, and interests), but support the reformers to evict General Min Aung Hlaing, the coup leader and current State Administration Council chairman. This gap between the local and provincial priorities and the overarching national priority—such as democracy—matters. These ethnic groups include the United League of Arakan (ULA) and its armed faction, the Arakan Army (AA), along Bangladesh and India’s eastern borders; Kachin Independence Army (KIA) along China’s southern border; Karen National Union (KNU) along Thailand’s border; and Ta’ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) and Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), both of which function mostly out of Shan state along China’s southern border, among others.

Rakhine, the Rohingya home, stands divided between ULA/AA and the Arakan Liberation Party (ALP). The ALP military faction, Arakan Liberation Army (ALA), often collaborates with Naypyidaw’s State Administration Council and clashes with the ULA/AA along the Bangladesh borders. They subject the Rohingya people to crossfires in such locations as Buthidaung and Maungdaw, and signal the increasing need for negotiations rather than battleground exchanges to sort local problems.

The growing ULA/AA empowerment gives

it greater intra-NUG salience. It has evicted Naypyidaw military forces across Rakhine and finds support from the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC). Bangladesh unofficially satisfies two ULA/AA conditions for a Rohingya solution: recognition of the ULA/AA, and mobilisation of UN-based global support.

NUG’s “reformer” claim is, however, tainted. The 2017 Rohingya eviction was an NLD

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decision to let China complete its economic corridor across Rakhine and Kyaukphyu port in the Bay of Bengal. Such evictions go back to 1785 for ethnic discrimination, not geopolitics.

Resolving a national crisis, such as Hlaing eviction and Rohingya repatriation without fixing local fissures, weakens any Rohingya solution. Without exogenous platforms and management, this may be impossible given the depth of local distrust. If Myanmar’s democracy is to work, attention must shift from one Nobel Prize winner, Aung San Suu Kyi, the 2017 eviction perpetrator, to another, Yunus, whose “democracy” bonds extend to Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim. The Malaysian politician visited Prof Yunus on October 4, 2024, and will host/chair the 46th ASEAN annual summit

on May 26-27. That summit’s theme of “Inclusivity and Sustainability” cannot but prioritise the Rohingya issue.

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Democracy is not a new ASEAN issue since the 2008 ASEAN Charter’s preamble emphasised “democracy, law, and good governance.” Article 1 targets “strengthening democracy,” and Article 2 “democracy principles.” Even right after Gen Hlaing’s February 2021 coup, ASEAN prepared a five-point consensus to end violence, begin dialogue, not only appoint a special ASEAN envoy to Myanmar but also visit Myanmar, and provide humanitarian assistance. Myanmar’s civil war made it irrelevant.

Ever since 2021, ASEAN summits have treated the Rohingya issue. Cambodia’s Prime Minister Hun Sen emotionally posted the Rohingya issue when he hosted/chaired the 2022 summit, but his meeting with only Hlaing offended NUG leaders. Indonesia’s President Joko Widodo organised many meetings and supplied lots of humanitarian aid, but could not convert sentiments into substance at the 2023 summit. The same thing happened in Laos in January 2024 when the country’s foreign minister met Hlaing. Opening that closed Rohingya door becomes more urgent constantly.

Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim faces similar clouds this year. A harsher global context awaits him: a new US administration’s tariff policies have

deepened ASEAN trade relations with China, widened Myanmar’s own policy options and doors, and with India preoccupied in Kashmir, China faces less Southeast Asian constraints. So, the obvious question arises: why break Myanmar’s status quo? After all, Myanmar’s top foreign investors (particularly China, India, and Japan) remain better off with the status quo. China influences ethnic NUG partners, because of those groups overlapping China’s borders, since the country itself remains a stranger to democracy, to push Myanmar in that direction. In short, Malaysia’s ASEAN summit this month would toss between these ill winds and the hopes that the vanguards of democracy that Anwar and Yunus symbolise. Riddled with mines, those remain the only salvaging elements for a Rohingya resolution. Without intra- and inter-boundary dialogues, no resolution seems feasible, including any “humanitarian corridor,” and when displacement camps only grow, creating such passages misses a crucial beat.

Yunus mobilised another exogenous platform for a Rohingya solution: the UN. Its outgoing secretary-general, António Guterres, not only visited Dhaka, but also shared iftar with nearly 100,000 Rohingyas in the Kutupalong camp in March, giving the neglected Rohingya what they most deserve: inclusiveness internationally, on an equal footing, not out of “noblesse oblige.”

Bangladesh’s exogenous reputation depends upon its endogenous treatment of its own election. Squaring the Rohingya circle fortifies two other global wishes: reformers, particularly the expressive youths who voted in 75 countries in 2024 (the most ever in any one year), shifting to negotiations via more streetside protests; and historically discriminated/persecuted groups replacing survival instincts with betterment. Peace, after all, is the springboard of reforms, and the postulated target of all conflicts, meaning zero-sum insulated approaches beg for collaborative, inclusive, and external counterparts—a shift too historically unprecedented to instantly change the ballgame.