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Premium

What explains the US visa 'threat' to Dhaka?

In her three terms in office, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's style of functioning has come to be seen as increasingly authoritarian. She has been a steadfast friend to India, and there is no doubt that New Delhi wants her to continue in power. There are indications, however, that the US could be more open to political change in Dhaka

Written by **Nirupama Subramanian**

Chennai | Updated: May 27, 2023 05:05 IST



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The new US visa policy announced by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken comes a month after Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina accused Washington DC of seeking to oust her government. (Left, ANI Photo by R Raveendran, right, AP photo)

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A new visa policy announced on May 24 by US Secretary of State Antony

Blinken “to support Bangladesh’s goal of holding free, fair and peaceful national elections” is a surprising new turn in the country’s relations with the United States.

It comes a month after Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina accused Washington DC of seeking to oust her government. It could also have an impact on **India’s diplomacy with Bangladesh.**

Blinken announced that under the new policy, which covers current and former Bangladeshi officials, members of ruling and opposition parties, law enforcement personnel, judiciary and security services, and their family members, US immigration authorities would be able to restrict issuance of visas to those who undermine the holding of a free and fair elections.

Secretary Antony Blinken @SecBlinken · [Follow](#)

Today, I announced a new visa policy to promote free and fair elections. Under this policy, we can impose visa restrictions on individuals and their immediate family members if they are responsible for, or complicit in, undermining the democratic election process in Bangladesh.

10:38 PM · May 24, 2023

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The US announcement has come in the midst of continuing opposition protests from last year, demanding that the elections be held under a caretaker government. The opposition has demanded a “neutral” Election Commission, alleging that the Hasina government could not be trusted to hold a free and fair process. The opposition also wants the withdrawal of what they claim are false cases against their leaders and cadres. Elections are likely to be held in January 2024.

Hasina’s authoritarian style

In her three terms in office, Prime Minister Hasina’s style of functioning has come to be seen as increasingly authoritarian.

Earlier, her crackdown on Islamists, banning the Jamaat-e-Islami as a political party, and setting up a court that convicted many of its members for collaborating with the Pakistan Army in 1971 and sentenced several to life terms in prison or death, won her plaudits.

But her crackdown on former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia’s Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), citing its links to Islamist parties and alleging corruption at the top, dealt a crippling blow to the Opposition. Zia is currently living in virtual house arrest after a suspended jail sentence for which she had to sign a good conduct agreement.

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However, the BNP has been organising itself for the coming election, and the Bangla street is bristling with political hostility and acrimony.

On May 23, BNP cadres took to the streets in Dhaka as trial began in another case — on new charges of alleged corruption — against Zia. Several BNP protesters were arrested after clashes with police who tried to prevent the march through the capital.

At a protest rally in Rajshahi district last week, a senior BNP leader said the opposition had only one demand: “to send Sheikh Hasina to the grave”. A police crackdown followed, and the leader was arrested for issuing a death threat to the Prime Minister.

Meanwhile, supporters of Hasina’s Awami League and other pro-government groups have kept the streets boiling with their own rallies and **protests against “anti-national” forces.**

The space for dissent and criticism has shrunk visibly in Bangladesh. Last year, the Hasina government brought in a draconian Digital Security Act, and a journalist of the Bangla-language Prothom Alo was jailed under this law in March this year.

Another Prothom Alo reporter had been detained and questioned for several days in May 2021. The Prime Minister has described the newspaper, founded by the

Ramon Magsaysay awardee Matiur Rahman, as anti-national, “which never wants stability in the country”.

US announcement welcomed by opposition

Not surprisingly, the Bangladesh opposition has viewed the US announcement as outside confirmation of its own fears, and has welcomed the new policy.

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“We welcome this decision of the US as it was made considering the concern of the people of Bangladesh over the (next general) election. I think this step will at least play a supporting role in holding the next polls in a fair and credible manner,” BNP standing committee member Amir Khasru Mahmud Chowdhury told journalists on Thursday.

Khasru said the US had acknowledged worries in Bangladesh about the national election, the New Age reported, pointing out that it was a Bangladesh-specific policy.

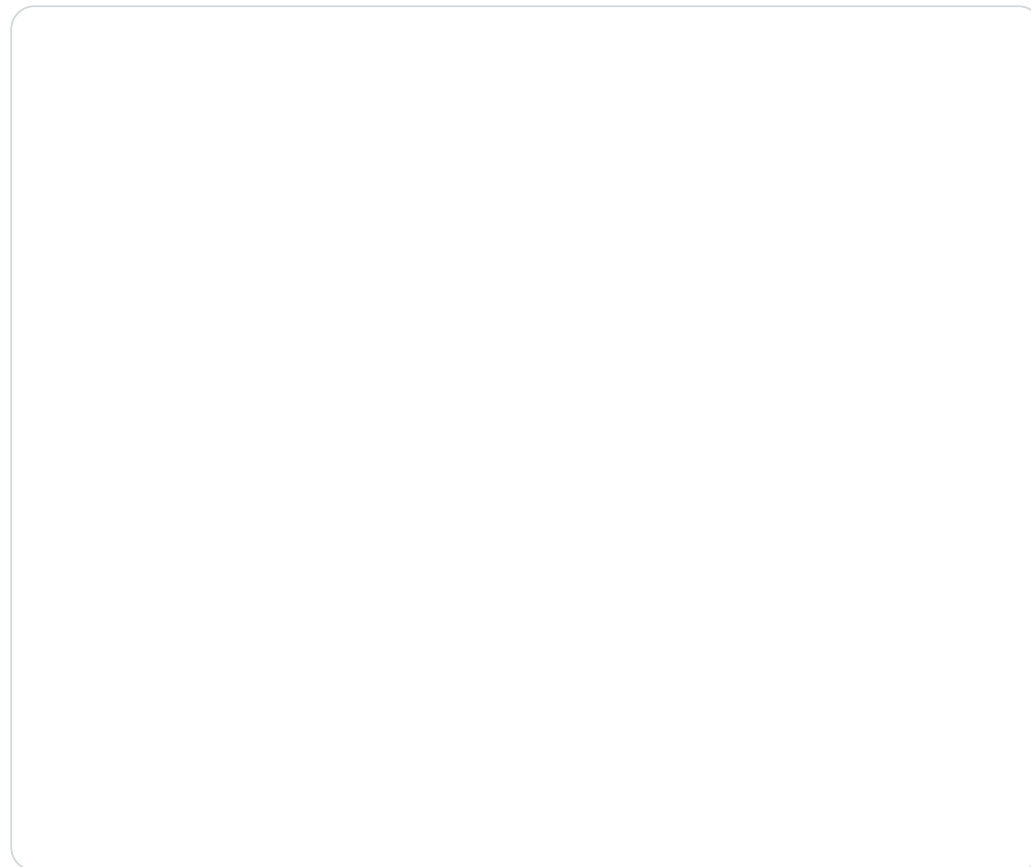
Khasru, who is also the chairman of the BNP’s foreign affairs committee, said the policy was a “big message” to the government “to stop election manipulation”.

Not anti-government, says the US

In clarifications issued soon after the announcement, however, the US State Department said the actions were not targeted against the Hasina government or the Awami League. On Thursday afternoon, US Ambassador to Dhaka Peter Haas met representatives of both ruling and opposition parties to explain the new policy.

U.S. Embassy Dhaka @usembassydhaka · [Follow](#)

“We support free and fair elections. The new visa policy to restrict visas to those who undermine the democratic process applies to everyone.” Ambassador Peter Haas met today with representatives of the [#AwamiLeague](#), [#BangladeshNationalistParty](#), and [#JatiyaParty](#).



2:52 PM · May 25, 2023



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US officials have also denied that the new policy was announced in retaliation against the government's decision, announced on May 14, to curtail Haas's security detail, and revealed that the government had been taken into confidence about the decision days earlier, on May 3.

Earlier this month, the [US announced the same policy in Nigeria](#).

In Dhaka, Haas is seen as a “very active” diplomat. In December, when opposition protests were at a peak, Haas visited the family of a BNP politician who has been missing since 2013. His family alleges he is one among many victims of enforced disappearances.

The **US imposed sanctions on the Rapid Action Battalion**, an elite anti-terrorism paramilitary accused of rights violations, including disappearances in 2021.

Fraught relations between US and Bangladesh

Though the sanctions were a low point, the mutual unhappiness in the US-Bangladesh relationship has been no secret for some years. To the extent that Prime Minister Hasina even said in Parliament in April that the US was seeking regime change in Bangladesh.

“They are trying to eliminate democracy and introduce a government that will not have a democratic existence,” she said.

Her remarks came after a senior State Department official remarked during a visit to Bangladesh that a decline in democracy in a country always “limited” the US’s ability to cooperate with that country. He said his government had conveyed its concern over democratic erosion, and also about the two previous elections in Bangladesh to the Hasina government.

Coming after all this, Sheikh Hasina’s week-long visit to Washington at the end of April to mark 50 years of diplomatic ties with the US, included no big ticket meetings.

In a statement on Thursday, the Bangladesh Ministry of Foreign Affairs put out a restrained response to the US policy, which was apparently communicated to it on May 3, when Hasina was in the US.

“Bangladesh would like to view this announcement in the broader context of its government’s unequivocal commitment to holding free and fair elections at all levels for upholding the country’s democratic process. However, Bangladesh expects that such visa policy will not be applied arbitrarily in a non-objective manner,” the Foreign Ministry said.

In fact, Dhaka's options are limited.

The US is the biggest destination for Bangladesh's garment exports, and Bangladesh is the third largest exporter of garments to the US after China and Vietnam. The industry is the backbone of the country's economic growth. A GSP-Plus status with the US and Europe for its readymade garment exports is crucial when Bangladesh graduates out of the least developed country category in 2026. Dhaka is lobbying hard for this.

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(The European Commission's website describes the EU's Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus (GSP+) as giving "developing countries a special incentive to pursue sustainable development and good governance", in return for which "the EU cuts its import duties to zero on more than two thirds of the tariff lines of their exports".)

Earlier this month, the Hasina government, which has a close relationship with China but is also aware of its limitations, brought out Bangladesh's first Indo-Pacific Outlook, committing to a vision of "a free, open, peaceful, secure, and inclusive Indo-Pacific for the shared prosperity for all".

This language was pleasing to the US, and one US official told a Bangla news outlet that there were a "lot of synergies between our two documents, our strategy, and your (Bangladesh's) outlook".

India has been silent on the developments

The US position on the Bangladesh elections could complicate India's diplomacy in Bangladesh. New Delhi, which is in no doubt that it wants Sheikh Hasina back in power in Dhaka, may prefer to keep silent on the linking of the US visa policy in Bangladesh to free and fair elections in the country.

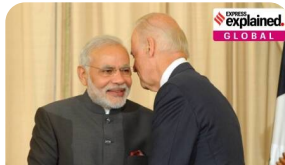
India's preference for a leader who has acted on its security concerns swiftly, has not won Hasina any points in her own country. While the Prime Minister is hailed in India for putting aside her own political concerns over the Modi government's

Hindutva and invective targeting Bangladeshis to solidify the friendship, at home, she is seen as having given away too much — land transit rights to the Northeastern states, security assurances, a favourable coal power deal to an Adani company — when **Bangladesh itself has been awaiting Teesta waters for a dozen years.**

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Over the last few years, the US and India were seen as acting in tandem in Bangladesh, especially as their security objectives converged. The visa policy is a sign that this may be changing. The US is the top foreign investor in Bangladesh. A post-Afghanistan US, with new priorities, seems more open than India to political change in Dhaka.

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