

Bangladesh turmoil: The lengthening shadow of Jamaat-e-Islami, and what India needs to do

Bangladesh Political Crisis and Violence Explained: Veena Sikri, former High Commissioner of India to Bangladesh, helps make sense of what is happening in the neighbouring country.

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Supporters of Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) Acting Chairman Tarique Rahman shout slogans following his arrival

in Dhaka. (Photo: AP)

India Bangladesh Relations: Amid [days of violence in Bangladesh](#), the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) acting chairman Tarique Rahman returned to his country on December 25 after a 17-year exile. The chaos in Bangladesh has also seen strong anti-India rhetoric. **Veena Sikri**, former High Commissioner of India to Bangladesh, helps make sense of what is happening in the neighbouring country. She spoke to [Yashee](#).

What are the main forces driving the current turmoil in Bangladesh?

To understand what is happening in Bangladesh right now, we have to go back to July-August 2024. The events of that period have been called a “revolution”, a “spontaneous student uprising”, and so on, but the reality is more complex. It was a planned operation, with regime change as the goal.

In fact, Bangladesh’s chief adviser [Muhammad Yunus](#) himself said this was a planned operation, in New York last September. Speaking at the Clinton Global Initiative event, he introduced his special assistant Mahfuz Alam as the “brain behind the whole operation”. And the hard-right Jamaat-e-Islami, which has always been in league with Pakistan, was a major driving agent behind the operation.



Members of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Bajrang Dal protest against attacks on Hindus in Bangladesh in Lucknow. (Express Photo by Vishal Srivastav)

Now, the Jamaat-e-Islami is prevailing over the Yunus administration in a big way, and there are three streams that flow from this one fact.

First, they want to destroy not just the Awami League, but every representation of post-1971 order. Which is why, from August 5, 2024, icons and institutions linked to the Liberation War have been targeted.

The second is to clamp down on minorities and Islam-ise the country in a much more visible way. Not just Hindus, but Buddhists, Christians, Ahmadiyyas, all have come under attack, including allegations of killings, rape, destruction of businesses and property grab. The lynching of Dipu Chandra Das is the most recent barbaric incident, which has attracted international opprobrium.

The third stream flowing from the 2024 events has been the unravelling of the economy. The Yunus regime has shaken up the mutually beneficial economic cooperation with India built up

over decades under [Sheikh Hasina](#). So the Bangladesh economy, which had been growing at 6.5-7% a year for 15 years, is seeing a backward slide. Growth has halved, unemployment is rampant because factories are closing and there is no private investment, either domestic or foreign. Inflation is very high.

Here, it is important to remember that Jamaat-e-Islami activities are always accompanied by violence and unrest, because that is their method of establishing control. The two prominent strands have been mobocracy and control of the media.

In the past one year, there have been numerous instances of attacks on media houses or media personnel. Some have even been thrown into jail without trial. Only recently, the offices of *Prothom Alo* and *Daily Star* were attacked.

By mobocracy, I mean the surrounding of government offices, officials, judges, till the demands of the mob are met. Also, in every institution, such as the bureaucracy and the academia, Jamaat-approved people are getting appointments, edging out those already present.

In this scenario, Tarique Rahman has returned to his country, and is widely expected to win the upcoming polls. What role can Rahman play after a 17-year exile?

If the elections happen in the current climate, they will be neither free nor fair with Hasina's Awami League banned from contesting. Hasina's critics often talk of her crackdown against Rahman's mother, [Khaleda Zia](#), but she never banned the BNP from elections.

Bangladesh politics | 'I have a plan... a safe Bangladesh': BNP's Tarique Rahman in first public rally after returning home

Ironically, Hasina's detractors are now doing exactly what she has been accused of — enforced disappearances, violence, throwing people in jail without just cause. The more things change, the more they remain the same.

Rahman will initially see a huge outpouring of support. In part, that will be because his mother is very ill. But his election victory is by no means a foregone conclusion.

The BNP and the Jamaat have shared power in the past, but the Jamaat has always wanted pole position on its own, and in today's changed circumstances, that desire is much stronger.

I was India's High Commissioner to Bangladesh in 2003-06 when the BNP and the Jamaat ran the government. Even then, there were push and pulls, with the Jamaat seeking to assert itself and the more liberal faction of the BNP maintaining a distance from them. Those liberal voices are much weaker today. The Jamaat would much prefer stitching together an alliance of the smaller Islamist parties and winning what they can together, to rival the BNP.

When it comes to popularity of the BNP, throughout the last 15 months, the party has faced accusations of indulging in extortion at various levels. The Jamaat has very cleverly allowed them to do that and earn bad press.

Then there is the fact that more than half the BNP is strongly pro-Jamaat, ready to align with them. The welcome ceremony of Rahman is being organised by this faction. The liberal pro-1971 faction of BNP has been side-lined. Initially, when Awami League was banned, some in the BNP had protested. But increasingly, such voices have been silenced.

So Tarique Rahman coming back does not change the basic facts materially.

Anti-India rhetoric has been rising in Bangladesh. What should India look out for right now?

Even in 1971, there were around 20% of the people who were against the Liberation War and against India. Their presence and their anti-Indianism in Bangladesh has continued.

But alongside, there has been strong economic cooperation and people-to-people ties, with people from Bangladesh coming here for tourism, for medical treatment, for education.

India needs to do two things. First is to send out the message that we have goodwill towards the people of Bangladesh. New Delhi has already been doing that, by continuing aid and trade where possible and keeping communication channels open. Very recently, we have agreed to export one more tranche of 50,000 metric tonnes of rice to the country. New Delhi has shown great strategic restraint in dealing with the Dhaka regime. We have to keep talking to all the principal actors in the country.

Second is to insist on a free, fair and inclusive election, in which all parties, including Awami League, can participate, because only then can the people of Bangladesh truly exercise their choice. Without this, the current instability, violence and volatility will continue.

How important is the bilateral relationship for both India and Bangladesh?

For Bangladesh, India's cooperation has been a crucial part of their economic success story under Hasina. We have been the first responder whenever the country has been in need of aid. While the new regime is turning to Pakistan, China, and even Turkey, they can't replace what India has been able to provide thanks to proximity, competitive prices, and shared heritage and people-to-people ties.

For India, apart from the fact that we would like good relations with all neighbours, Bangladesh matters most for security. The two countries share a over 4,000-km, highly porous land as well as maritime border. In the past, we have seen terror operatives from Pakistan and insurgents from the Northeast use Bangladesh as a haven. The Hasina government had helped us crack down on that.

Since August 2024, the Pakistan State and army has gone far in establishing the pre-1971 command and control structure with Bangladesh. The Pakistan army seeks to embed itself with the Bangladesh army, even in the forward area near the India-Bangladesh border.

Any restricted elections that are not free, fair and inclusive will only worsen the already adverse situation.

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