



The Uprisings in Bangladesh Are a Test for India

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The large protests that have occurred in Bangladesh in recent weeks in the wake of economic decisions by the Bangladeshi government have implications for India's position in the region. The internal instability in Bangladesh brings new political and geopolitical challenges to India.

While the Middle East is at peak tension amid fears of a slide into regional war, the Indian subcontinent is emerging as another focus of global instability.

Bangladesh, India's northeastern neighbor, has been in turmoil for several weeks now. A series of economic decisions by the government aimed at imposing quotas on public service jobs ignited broad social protests. The government's crackdown on the protests in the capital city of Dhaka, which included shutting down the internet, imposing a curfew and deploying the army on the streets, only made the situation worse.

After weeks of demonstrations and protests, the prime minister for the past 15 years, Sheikh Hasina, announced her resignation and, according to rumors, fled the country. Bangladesh is now ruled by a transitional government. The departure of Hasina, who was seen as a close ally of India, is a serious blow to the Modi government. It poses a question mark, and perhaps even a threat, to India's interests in terms of both domestic and foreign policy.

India and its little sister to the northeast, Bangladesh

To understand the complexity of recent events and their potential impact on India's geopolitical and domestic political interests, we must first review the history of relations between the two countries. The roots of the birth of

Bangladesh lie in the division of British India in 1947 into two independent countries, India and Pakistan. Bangladesh, on the other side of India, was East Pakistan, but its connection to the mother country was loose and the Bengali people were alienated from the central government in Pakistan. As a result of this alienation and accompanying claims of neglect, a bloody struggle developed between Bangladesh and Pakistan that eventually led to the independence of Bangladesh in 1971.

The struggle of the Bengali rebels against the Pakistani army and the widespread genocide carried out during the war led at the time to an intervention by India that expressed its interests. India feared that the violence and instability in Bangladesh would bring millions of Bengali refugees to its territory, and it saw the conflict as an opportunity to challenge its rival Pakistan. India therefore decided to help the Bengali rebels.

After assisting Bangladesh on its path to independence, the relationship between the two countries remained strong, and India came to be considered a key supporter of Bangladesh on the world stage. However, this does not mean their relations are without complexities. There are a variety of controversial issues between them, including border disputes and struggles over water resources. These disputes are even more significant in view of the fact that Bangladesh, the eighth-most densely populated country in the world, has complex social and economic challenges of its own.

A tradition of economic corruption and democratic erosion

It was against this background that the riots took place, and they now pose a complicated geopolitical and political challenge to India. In early August, the government of Bangladesh imposed a quota designating 30% of jobs in the public sector for military veterans and families of fighters in the War of Independence. Although the Supreme Court later reduced the quota, the decision provoked public outrage as it was seen as detrimental to the chances of advancement for young people and students.

The public took to the streets, directing their anger at 15-year prime minister Sheikh Hasina. The government and its supporters resorted to severe violence against the protesters, which made the situation significantly worse. The country saw scenes of violent conflict in which hundreds of protesters were killed. The government also temporarily cut off the internet and telephony, imposed a curfew, and sent the army into the streets. These extreme measures only intensified public anger.

The public service job quota was the last straw to a public whose anger and resentment had been building up for years in the face of government corruption

and weakening democracy in Bangladesh. While under Hasina, Bangladesh experienced GDP growth, this did not translate into economic wellbeing for many Bangladeshis. A lack of opportunities, high unemployment rates especially among young people, and rising inflation were constant sources of tension between the public and the government.

Public outrage was compounded by the fact that the Awami League, the ruling party, boasted of a zero-tolerance policy towards corruption but was itself mired in numerous money-laundering, bribery and nepotism scandals. In addition, over the more than 15 years of rule by the Awami League, democracy in Bangladesh was eroded, with election procedures becoming highly dubious. At the same time, the regime suppressed and arrested political opponents, opposition members and human rights activists, and forbade the publication of criticism of the government. Satire and posts on social networks became grounds for arrest.

As part of the suppression of democracy in the country, Hasina labeled her supporters the descendants of the country's liberators and blackened her opponents as traitors from the old war with Pakistan. She based her power on two main pillars: tireless suppression of the opposition and the establishment of a support network based on patronage and favors.

But those sources of support were increasingly undermined as the country's economy shrank. China's image as the architect of economic change has faded. An overreliance on the textile industry as the basis of the economy turned out to be unwise. Throughout the years of Hasina's tenure, social gaps increased, food prices soared and foreign exchange balances thinned.

The protests, the emerging political crisis and the general lack of order in the country also reignited ethnic-religious tensions. Following the protests, Islamist groups began attacking Hindus, who make up about 8% of the Bengali population. Media reports describe attacks on temples and lynchings of Hindu Bengalis. Some blamed the prime minister for the Muslim violence against Hindus, as she claimed that the student protestors were "Rajkar" - a term from the War of Independence that means "pro-Pakistani collaborators".

Throughout her rule, Hasina was concerned with strengthening her position through political contacts with Bangladesh's neighbors. During her term in office, the country grew closer to China and India in what appeared to be an effort to mend diplomatic fences and ensure that help was available from every side, should it be needed. Now relations with India are being tested.

The riots: A test for Bangladesh-India relations and regional geopolitics

Relations between India and Bangladesh in the last decade have seen both tensions and cooperation. On the one hand, the two countries have signed many agreements in the fields of economy, infrastructure and security, and their commercial ties have expanded significantly. India has become Bangladesh's largest trading partner, and Indian investment in Bangladesh has increased significantly. On the other hand, a number of disputes have arisen, including longstanding border issues that erupt into conflict from time to time and disagreements over the distribution of water resources from shared rivers.

The internal politics of both countries also have a constant influence on bilateral relations. In Bangladesh, which is mostly Muslim, anti-Indian sentiment has increased in recent years, mainly as a reaction to the policies of Narendra Modi's government towards India's Muslim minority. Interreligious violence in Bangladesh could cause a backlash in India, perhaps as a form of revenge, which would lead to an even more acute challenge in relations between the countries.

Into this delicate and complex fabric is woven a third dimension that complicates India's policy calculations: geopolitical developments on the Indian subcontinent in particular and in the Indo-Pacific space in general, primarily the strengthening of China. The growing competition between India and China is affecting relations between India and Bangladesh. Bangladesh is trying to maintain good relations with both in an effort to strengthen its economic interests. For its part, India wants good economic relations with Bangladesh and is striving to keep it in the Indian sphere of influence – but it is troubled by ethno-religious issues and, no less importantly, by the threat of Islamist terrorism spilling over from Bangladesh into India.

Instability in Bangladesh could harm economic development between the countries, increase the risk of terrorism, and lead to an increase in the influence of India's rivals, China and Pakistan, in the country - all of which are causes of considerable concern for Narendra Modi, who has sought to cultivate Bangladesh as a significant pro-India stronghold in the region. Indian intelligence hastened to announce that China and Pakistan are behind the radicalization and hot-bloodedness in Bangladesh. It is difficult to verify these claims, but they reflect the Indian perception that instability in Bangladesh is an expression of geopolitical changes in the region.

It is too early to determine whether the current developments in Bangladesh constitute a severe blow to India and its geopolitical ambitions, as the nature of Bangladesh's future government is not yet known. It is, however, very clear that these developments are a wake-up call for Modi to strengthen India's

position in the Indo-Pacific region and examine India's ability to “ride two horses at the same time”. India's current political position in the international system, according to which it strives to maintain relations with Russia and Iran as if they did not have relations with China, will become ever more challenging as that bloc develops.

The riots in Bangladesh might be a herald to India that it will have to make some difficult decisions about where it stands in the inter-power struggle. Up to now, Bangladesh has mainly been a potential sphere of influence against Pakistan, India's traditional rival. But now, India might have to consider its steps in Bangladesh not only from the perspective of relations with Pakistan, but also from the perspective of the effects its steps might have on its balance of power against China. If Bangladesh becomes another explosive center of tension in the Indo-Asian region along the lines of Myanmar and Afghanistan, India's policy towards it will have to weigh the consequences for internal Indian issues such as Hindu-Muslim conflict and foreign policy issues.

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