

# Bangladesh Uprising

**Situational Update**

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August 2024

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# Historical Background



# Historical Background

The People's Republic of Bangladesh is situated in the eastern hemisphere of the South Asian sub-continent, bordered by India on the west, north and east; a small border strip with Myanmar in the south-east; and by the Bay of Bengal on the south.

The partition of India and Pakistan following 'British Raj', led to the creation of new nations based on Muslim and non-Muslim majority areas. In six weeks, British Viscount Cyril Radcliffe defined the final borders of a new Pakistan: West Pakistan (present-day Pakistan) and 1,000 miles away, East Bengal (present-day Bangladesh).<sup>1</sup>

Bengalis remained under-represented in the civil and military services despite making up the largest ethnic group in the federation.<sup>2</sup>

The distance and difference in culture, language, and identity between the two regions, and the fact that West Pakistan held more political and economic power, led to strong tensions and eventually protest movements in East Bengal.<sup>3</sup>

The Bangladesh Independence Movement, led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman – the father of now-ousted Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina – called for federal democracy, full regional autonomy, and for East Bengal – by then known as 'East Pakistan' – to be recognised as Bangladesh.

The resulting liberation war in 1971 led to the independence of Bangladesh.



2



# Timeline of Key Political Events

2

# Timeline of Key Political Events

## December 2008

The Awami League wins the general election; Sheikh Hasina becomes prime minister for a second time.

## February 2009

The Bangladesh Rifles, a paramilitary force, revolts. More than 74 people are killed.

## June 2011

15th amendment to the constitution passed. Significant changes include removal of neutral caretaker governments. Opposition parties say keeping the caretaker system is essential for free and fair elections.

## February 2013

Mass protests in Shahbagh, Dhaka, after verdicts delivered by International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) – a domestic court set up to prosecute those responsible for crimes during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. Police and security forces execute and injure protestors.

## October 2013

The Rana Plaza building collapses, killing more than 1,000 people and highlighting the lack of safety in the garment industry - the mainstay of Bangladesh's economy.

## January 2014

The Awami League wins the general election, which was boycotted by the main opposition party and its allies. Hasina wins a second straight term as prime minister.

## January 2015

Political unrest and violence erupt stemming from the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party's (BNP) unmet demands after the 2014 elections.

## December 2018

The Awami League wins the general election amid vote-rigging allegations. Hasina secures a third consecutive term after winning 96% of the votes.

## Timeline of Key Political Events continued...

**March 2020**

Bangladesh's economy suffers due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

**December 2021**

US imposes human rights-related sanctions on Bangladesh's elite paramilitary force, the Rapid Action Battalion, and seven of its current and former officials. Accusations include hundreds of disappearances and extrajudicial killings since 2009.

**2022**

Bangladesh reports GDP growth of 7.2%, making it one of the fastest growing economies in the world. Garment exports and remittances drive the expansion. Wealth disparities increase; wealthiest 10% of the population controls 41% of total income.

**January 2024**

Hasina wins a fourth straight term in elections boycotted by the opposition.

**July 2024**

Students launch protests against government job quotas, which reserve 1/3 of civil service posts for descendants of those who fought in the 1971 war for independence. Protests turn violent after a government crackdown and attacks by groups linked to the ruling party.

**July 2024**

Protests resume during the month and calls grow for Hasina's resignation.

**August 2024**

Nearly 100 protestors are killed by police and security forces, taking the total number of dead to almost 300.

**August 2024**

Hasina resigns and flees the country. Protesters storm the prime minister's residence.



3



# 2013 Shahbagh Massacre – A Precursor to Repression



## 3

# 2013 Shahbagh Massacre – A Precursor to Repression

After the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT), a domestic court set up to prosecute those responsible for atrocities committed during the country's 1971 war of independence, delivered its verdicts, mass protests broke out – both in favour and against the ICT's rulings.<sup>5</sup>

Hasina's government determined life sentences inadequate and called for capital punishment for convicted members of the Jamaat-e-Islam party – a call it claimed reflected the will of the people.

Meanwhile, Hefazat-e-Islam party members demonstrated simultaneously, both against the death penalties handed down to Jamaat-e-Islam party members and concerned by the rise of extreme secularisation within the country through atheist bloggers and open blasphemy of the Quran and Prophet, as well as the increase in mockery of religious symbols and rites, including Hajj.

The governing Awami League party, in pursuit of secularism, positioned narrative surrounding the protests as being 'Islamists' seeking to spread religious fanaticism – a framing international media quickly adopted. A CNN report from 2013, entitled 'Seeking war crimes justice, Bangladesh protestors fight anti-Islam label' reads: "...in the fourth most populous Muslim country in the world, the peaceful movement is also trying to achieve something remarkable: a ban on extreme fundamentalist parties".<sup>6</sup>

## Amendment to the law

As protests grew, parliament proposed an amendment to the law empowering the ICT. Under the proposed amendment, the government could appeal any tribunal verdict. The Asia director of Human Rights watch, Brad Adams, criticised the proposal: "A government supposedly guided by the rule of law cannot simply pass retroactive laws to overrule court decisions when it doesn't like them. [The amendments] make a mockery of the trial process".<sup>7</sup>

## Eruption of violence and state-sanctioned police brutality

As demonstrations continued, May 5 2013 saw an unprecedented scale of violence enacted by the police and security forces. A Human Rights Watch (HRW) report notes that while both the government and opposition parties provide widely-differing accounts,<sup>8</sup> eye-witness testimonies and video recordings confirm a bloody and brutal operation launched by security forces against unarmed protestors.

According to the opposition and Hefazat-e-Islam leaders, the police and security services killed hundreds of protestors during the sweeps, before secretly dumping the corpses, accusing government workers of later picking up the bodies in garbage trucks and dumping them

## 2013 Shahbagh Massacre – A Precursor to Repression continued...

outside the city in mass graves.<sup>9</sup> Party leaders told HRW they had been trying to compile a list of the missing but found it difficult to do so because of harassment by the security agencies. According to the group's leaders, 2,000-3,500 people were killed by the security forces – including scholars and students.<sup>10</sup>

The HRW report notes: "there is strong evidence to dispute the government assertion of a disciplined operation. Journalists and protestors who witnessed the event told Human Rights Watch that on several occasions the security forces opened fire at close range even after unarmed protestors had surrendered".<sup>11</sup>

Video footage shows security forces repeatedly and brutally beating severely injured protestors and shooting at others at close range. The HRW report notes: "one journalist remembers shaking 25-30 bodies and checking their pulses and is convinced some were dead. Another reporter saw RAB soldiers dragging four bodies near the offices of Biman Bangladesh airlines and loading them onto a truck. When he went to inquire about them, a soldier hit him with a stick on the side his head. The same journalist later checked the pulse of a boy who was lying on the steps of the Sonali Bank and was told by a police officer that the boy was dead. He remembers seeing a lot of bruising around his neck and chest".<sup>12</sup>

### Arrests and intimidation of protestors and media

Many Bangladeshis HRW interviewed stated

authorities used spurious criminal charges to intimidate eyewitnesses and family members of protestors killed by security forces. After members of the public has lodged 'First Information Reports' (FIRs), police would then enter the communities where protestors came from, using the FIRs as justification for otherwise arbitrary arrests of scores of individuals, particularly of men thought to be Jamaat supporters.<sup>13</sup>

The sweeps left men in these communities fearful and drove many into hiding. A researcher from the Bangladeshi NGO Odhikar told HRW that after the protests he visited three surrounding villages in Chittagong, and all were devoid of men.<sup>14</sup>

Simultaneously, several opposition newspapers and television channels were closed by government order during or after the protests.<sup>15</sup>

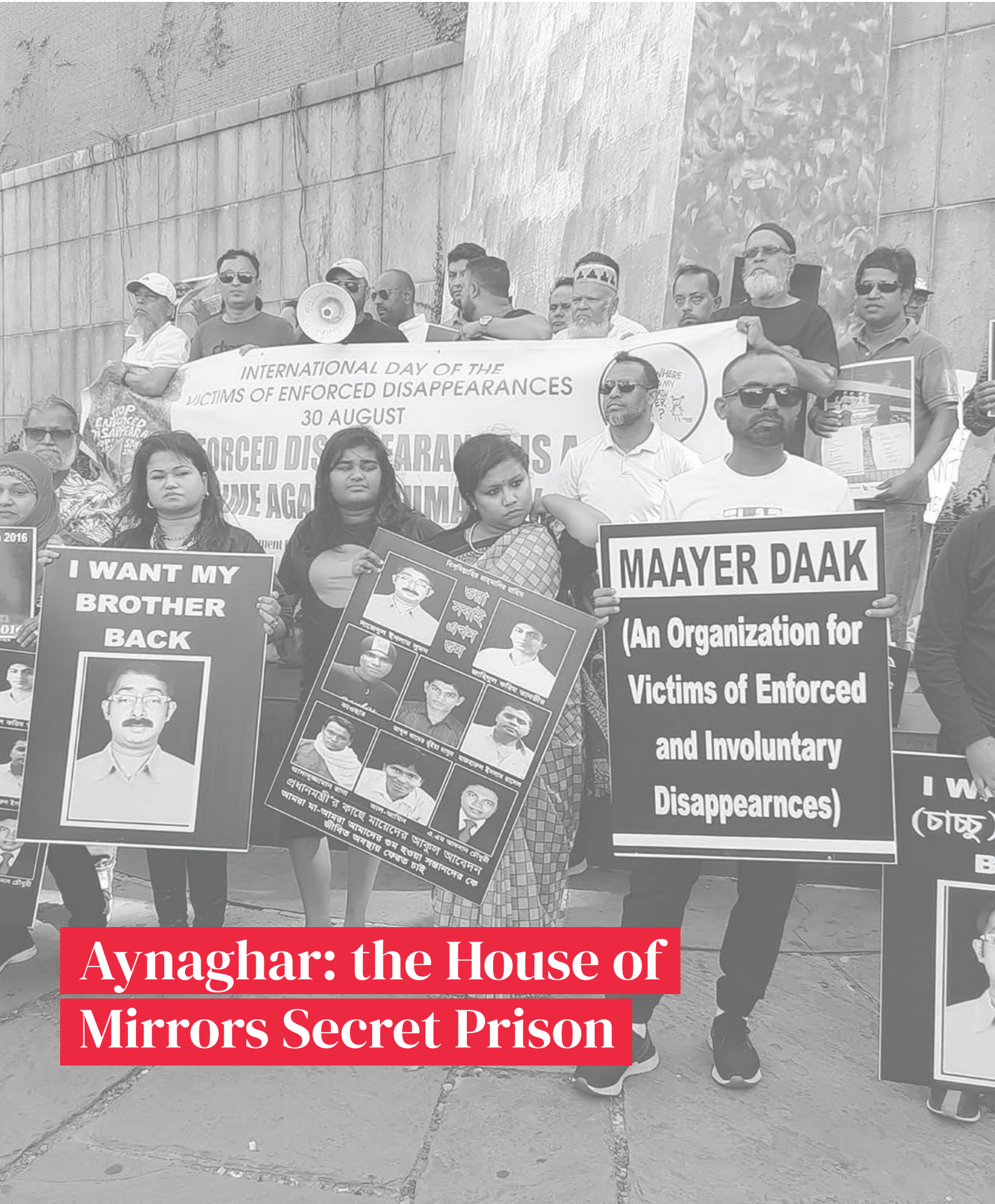
### Retreat of protestors

The Shahbagh massacre prompted the Hefazat-e-Islam movement to retreat and make an unofficial deal with Hasina, which included the government accrediting their Darul Ulum certificates. In global media, reports of the massacre remained confined to the presentation of the threat of Islamists in Bangladesh.

The unofficial deal was positioned by international media as Hasina's government treating Hefazat-e-Islam "softly" and "preferring to engage in negotiation" on account of the party's "less militant" approach in comparison to Jamaat-e-Islam.<sup>16</sup>







# Aynagar: the House of Mirrors Secret Prison



## 4

# Aynagar: the House of Mirrors Secret Prison

Aynagar, or the House of Mirrors, was a secret prison in Bangladesh where political dissidents were imprisoned for years without trial, tortured, and even executed.<sup>17</sup>

The prison was given the name Aynagar because prisoners were only able to see themselves; kept in solitary confinement throughout their detention, and they could only hear the screams of other prisoners being tortured.<sup>18</sup>

Aynagar was run by army intelligence officers from the Counter-Terrorism Intelligence Bureau of the Director General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI), who did not relay any news to prisoners from the outside world and played music constantly throughout the day to prevent prisoners from knowing how much time had passed based on the sound of the Adhan from local mosques.<sup>19</sup>

The prison's existence first became public in 2022, following a report by a whistleblower. There are reportedly 30 cells inside Aynagar, with soundproof investigation cells where prisoners are tortured.<sup>20</sup>

However, only since the Bangladesh Students Against Discrimination Movement, which overthrew Hasina's regime on 5 August 2024, has the secret prison and the torture which took place there become public knowledge.<sup>21</sup>

Several prisoners have been released since Hasina was overthrown, and as of 7 August 2024, the Bangladesh Armed Forces have stated that there are no detainees remaining in Aynagar.<sup>22</sup>

Families of the disappeared reject the DGFI's statement and have been protesting outside its headquarters, demanding to inspect Aynagar and 23 other detention centres across Bangladesh where the disappeared are believed to be imprisoned.<sup>23</sup>

## Case Study: Sheikh Mohammad Salim

Sheikh Mohammad Salim was abducted by a group of men at an auto repair shop and was severely tortured and beaten whilst in prison.<sup>24</sup>

Salim reported that his cells in Aynagar had no windows, a high ceiling with just one light, loud and huge exhaust fans, the sounds of which drowned out every other sound in the room.<sup>25</sup>

He recorded that the walls of his cell had been carved with the writings of many prisoners before him, many of whom wrote about their abduction by the DGFI.<sup>26</sup>

Salim was not the security services intended target, and as a victim of mistaken identity, he was soon released, after which he fled to Malaysia.<sup>27</sup>

5



**Profile:**  
**Sheikh Hasina**



# Profile: Sheikh Hasina

Sheikh Hasina became Bangladesh's prime minister for the first time after her Awami League party won the 1996 elections. Her second stint in power, which began in 2009, was marked by impressive economic growth: averaging an annual GDP of 7%<sup>28</sup> making the country one of the fastest growing economies in the world.<sup>29</sup>

Dubbed "Asia's iron lady"<sup>30</sup>, Hasina's political career has not been without continued controversy and is described as being stained with a "ruthless use of power"<sup>31</sup>, with allegations including but not limited to:

- Abductions and kidnapping of political opponents<sup>32</sup>
- Capital punishment - sentencing 20+ opposition leaders to the death penalty<sup>33</sup>
- Electoral malpractice<sup>34</sup>

- Extrajudicial killings<sup>35</sup>
- Introduction of a 'Digital Security Act', which the UN has said "imposes harsh punishments for a wide range of acts that are not clearly defined"<sup>36</sup>
- Facilitating the rise of political extremism
- Eroding civil liberties
- Widespread corruption<sup>37</sup>
- Human rights violations<sup>38</sup>
- Media censorship<sup>39</sup>
- Arbitrary detention and torture, including the notorious 'Aynaghar' – or 'House of Mirrors' – a secret prison where political dissidents were imprisoned for years without trial, tortured, and even executed<sup>40</sup>

Protesters in the country's capital, Dhaka, refer to an "autocratic and repressive regime"<sup>41</sup>, and accuse Hasina's government of being in power "without the people's mandate"<sup>42</sup>.



6



**Current  
Context**

## 6

# Current Context

In early July 2024, thousands of Bangladeshi students blocked major intersections and the police precinct in Shahbagh, a popular square in the country's capital city Dhaka. The protesting students, referred to as the 'Students against Discrimination Movement', took to the streets to protest the government's employment quota system - a method that categorises and limits government jobs based on certain criteria.

## What is a quota system?

An employment quota legislation requires private and/or public sector employers, who employ a certain minimum number of workers, to ensure that a given proportion of employees consists of designated persons from society, including those who are from economically marginalised communities.

## The quota system in Bangladesh

After Bangladesh's independence in 1971, Mujibur Rahman, founder of Bangladesh and the father of Sheikh Hasina, established a quota system in 1972, reserving:

30% of jobs for freedom fighters and their families  
10% for women affected by the war  
40% for poor districts, and  
20% based on merit.<sup>43</sup>

This system faced protests in 1973 and was modified in 1976, reducing the quota for poorer districts to 20%.<sup>44</sup>

In 2018, anti-quota movements emerged after the Bangladesh High Court rejected a petition challenging the legality of the quota

system. Protestors demanded a reduction in the percentage of government jobs reserved for families of freedom fighters from 30% to 10%.

Sheikh Hasina initially declared she would not end the quotas due to their significance in her father's legacy and post-independence period. However, she later banned all quotas, including those for indigenous people.<sup>45</sup>

With increasing high unemployment in recent years – particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic - Bangladeshi university students took to the streets to protest.

## Sheikh Hasina's response to protests

Anti-protest rhetoric swiftly became a mechanism to clamp down on protestors, with Sheikh Hasina branding demonstrators "terrorists" and threatening to "suppress them with a firm hand".<sup>46</sup> Hasina referred to the protestors as "razakars", meaning 'traitors' – a term used for those who supported the Pakistani military during the liberation war. Given Hasina had called for capital punishment for the "razakars" following the International Crimes Tribunal in 2013, which resulted in the Shahbagh massacre mentioned earlier, this deliberate attribution to student protestors set the precedence for what would unfold in the coming days.

Nationwide curfews were imposed and internet connection was repeatedly cut across the country to stop protestors organising.<sup>47</sup>

In Dhaka, the country's capital city, there were reports of night-long police raids, resulting in more than 11,000 arrests.<sup>48</sup>

## Current Context continued...

### Police brutality

Across the capital, student protesters were attacked by police and security personnel. At Dhaka Medical College, police opened fire on protesters.<sup>49</sup>

Students and protesters at Dhaka University Campus and the Shaheed Minar, a national monument in the capital, were beaten by police as they assembled.

Raiyan Aftab, 23, a student at BRAC University, witnessed police shooting at protesters outside the campus: "They shot everybody. There is blood in front of my university right now. There's like 30 bodies... I couldn't sleep all night"<sup>50</sup>.

Although media reports vary regarding the exact number of student protesters killed (estimates range from 150-1200), police brutality and the use of disproportionate force is clear given the murder of 25-year-old student Abu Sayeed in broad daylight, captured on numerous mobile devices.<sup>51</sup>

On 16 July 2024, 25-year-old English student, Abu Sayeed, was protesting outside Rangpur's Begum Rokeya University, where he was studying English. In clips shared widely on social media, an unarmed Abu Sayeed stands across from police – his arms outstretched in protest. Police fired multiple rubber bullets or shotgun pellets at Abu Sayeed, who was pronounced dead on arrival at the Rangpur Medical College Hospital<sup>52</sup>. While an autopsy has been carried out, the results of this were not made public.<sup>53</sup>

Some students described being blindfolded and tortured by police<sup>54</sup>. Emergency department doctors said they had been overwhelmed as dozens of young people with gunshot wounds had been brought in.<sup>55</sup>





# Latest Developments



# Latest Developments

After mounting pressure, Sheikh Hasina resigned 5 August 2024 and fled the country to neighbouring India.<sup>56</sup>

A day later, President Mohammed Shahabuddin dissolved parliament to make way for new elections.<sup>57</sup> The release of opposition leader, Khaleda Zia, from house arrest was also ordered. Zia was a long-time rival of Hasina and was convicted of corruption charges by her government in 2018.<sup>58</sup>

## Murder case against Hasina and her administration

A court in Bangladesh opened a murder investigation into Hasina and six top figures in her administration over the police killing of a man during protests.<sup>59</sup> Filed by private citizen Amir Hamza, the legal suit is over the killing of grocer Abu Saeed, whose family did not have the finances to file the case. The court also named former Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan and Obaidul Quader, the general secretary of Hasina's Awami League party, as well as four top police officers appointed by the government who have since vacated their posts.<sup>60</sup>

## Resignations and arrests

Students demanded the resignation of the country's Chief Justice, Obaidul Hassan, who agreed to vacate his post "in principle".<sup>61</sup> Justice Hassan earlier oversaw the much-criticised war crimes tribunal, which ordered the execution of Hasina's opponents. His brother was also Hasina's longtime secretary.<sup>62</sup>

While attempting to flee, Hasina's former adviser Salman F Rahman and former law

minister Anisul Huq were arrested by police.<sup>63</sup> The former had been dressed in disguise and had shaved his notable white beard to avoid detection.

## Muhammad Yunus as interim head of government

Student leaders then called for Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Muhammad Yunus, to head an interim government.<sup>64</sup> The economist accepted the call and was sworn in as chief adviser of the interim government on Friday 9 August 2024.<sup>65</sup>

Yunus, one of Hasina's staunchest critics, was charged with more than 200 cases during her time in office. Charges included forgery, money laundering and embezzlement.<sup>66</sup> In January 2024, a labour court sentenced the Nobel Peace Prize winner to six months in jail for violating the country's labour laws.<sup>67</sup>

Hasina's administration had begun a series of investigations of Yunus after coming to power in 2008. She became enraged when Yunus announced he would form a political party in 2007 when a military-backed government ran the country and she was in prison, although he did not follow through on the plan.<sup>68</sup> More than 170 global leaders and Nobel laureates in an open letter urged Hasina to suspend all legal proceedings against Yunus.<sup>69</sup>

After assuming office, Yunus hired a lawyer to work on the release of 57 Bangladeshis imprisoned in the UAE for demonstrating in support of the student protests in Bangladesh.<sup>70</sup> Emirati news agency, WAM, said the demonstrators had been charged with deliberately disrupting transportation, inciting protests, rioting, causing damage to property and sharing content about the demonstrations online.<sup>71</sup>



## Latest Developments continued...

### Targeting of minorities

Reports have emerged of attacks against minorities – namely Hindu households, temples and businesses – since Hasina’s resignation.<sup>72</sup> The new interim government stated: “The attacks on religious minorities in some places have been noted with grave concern,” and that it would “immediately sit with the representative bodies and other concerned groups to find ways to resolve such heinous attacks.”<sup>73</sup>

Critics state the burning of religious places of worship have been orchestrated by the ruling party to create fear and chaos and turn the international media attention to the supposed risk facing religious minorities from so-called ‘Islamists’.

The student movement mobilised to have its supporters guard Hindu temples and churches.<sup>74</sup> Not long after, students were seen guarding Hindu temples and other places of worship in social media footage and images verified by Al Jazeera’s fact-checking agency Sanad.<sup>75</sup>

Muslim religious leaders in the country also called for protection of religious minorities. Scholar Dr. Mizanur Rahman Azhari, whose large social media presence keeps him engaged with the country’s youth, wrote on X: “I call upon all Bangladeshis to ensure the safety and security of all religious and ethnic minorities. I also urge Bangladeshi students and youth to help safeguard and protect all places of worship belonging to religious minorities.”<sup>76</sup>







# FOOTNOTES

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**76** Dr. Mizanur Rahman Azhari, shared via X <https://x.com/AzhariTweets/status/1822181370065506550>