

A New Era of Bangladesh? The First 100 Days Report of Dr Muhammad Yunus's Interim Government

January 2025

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Executive Summary



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Bangladesh's political landscape changed dramatically on 5 August 2024, when nationwide protests against a discriminatory job quota (reservation) system led to the resignation of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

After nearly two decades in power, Hasina's administration, often criticised for its authoritarian tendencies, faced mass opposition, especially from the country's students and youth, calling for equitable governance. Now, an interim government led by Nobel laureate Professor Muhammad Yunus is navigating high expectations to bring stability, economic recovery, and democratic reform to Bangladesh.¹

The crisis was rooted in a quota system that reserved 30 percent of government jobs for descendants of the 1971 independence war veterans, perceived as benefiting Hasina's loyalists.² In a country where youth unemployment is high, this policy stoked frustration and led to protests that quickly escalated nationwide.³

The government's violent crackdown on protesters, killing over 1,000 in only three weeks, further fuelled public anger⁴. Hasina's labelling of protesters as "Razakars" (a term associated with traitors) intensified calls for her resignation⁵.

The national movement culminated with Hasina's resignation and departure, and the formation of a 17-member interim government led by Prof. Muhammad Yunus, who serves as the chief adviser⁶. This cabinet features a diverse array of members, including notable civil society figures, prominent human rights activists, former bureaucrats, and key leaders from the student movement who played a pivotal role in the ousting of Hasina⁷. The inclusion of student representatives, such as Nahid Islam and Asif Mahmud, underscores the government's commitment to democratic reforms and engagement with the youth, reflecting a collective hope among Bangladeshis⁸.

“The Yunus administration’s formation was driven by calls for anti-corruption, improved public services, and equitable governance.¹²”

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Navigating the Political Minefield



Navigating the Political Minefield

Having come to power after the ousting of Sheikh Hasina and the historic student protests, the Yunus-led interim government has faced mixed reviews.⁹ While it has stabilised the unrest that preceded Hasina's fall, its inability to fully meet public expectations has led to mounting criticism.¹⁰ Economic challenges, particularly inflation and youth unemployment, remain pervasive, and fears of growing Islamic influence add to the complexity of governance.¹¹

The Yunus administration's formation was driven by calls for anti-corruption, improved public services, and equitable governance.¹² Yet, public order remains precarious, and critics argue that progress on electoral reforms and institutional changes has been slow.¹³

The Communist Party of Bangladesh's General Secretary Ruhin Hossain Prince described the government's efforts as falling short on law and order and economic stability, with rising commodity prices and stagnating wages continuing to plague citizens.¹⁴

Yunus and some of his advisers, primarily civil society moderates, are running the government with a mandate from the coalition of the student movement.¹⁵ However, the student groups themselves are ideologically divided, with one faction aligned with Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) and another with left-wing Islamic ideologies.¹⁶

JI provides significant ideological direction to the administration, while the BNP, although marginalised, retains influence due to its widespread support base.¹⁷ Tensions persist: JI and student leaders oppose Hasina's Awami League participating in future elections, while moderates and some BNP factions support a reformed AL's involvement.¹⁸

Adding complexity, the army remains a formidable force. Officially under President Shahabuddin, it plays a significant security role but raises questions about its broader influence.¹⁹ Maintaining balance between diverse interests will be critical to defining Bangladesh's path forward.²⁰

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Reforming Governance and Restoring Trust



Reforming Governance and Restoring Trust

Bangladesh's political landscape is deeply divided, and reconciling Hasina's legacy has been contentious.²¹ While some advocate banning the Awami League, Dr Yunus has taken a cautious stance, suggesting that such decisions should emerge from broad consensus.²² Meanwhile, Islamist parties and movements are seizing opportunities to expand their influence, particularly in rural areas.²³

For the first time, Islamic parties are engaging in coalition-building, traditionally avoided due to theological differences.²⁴ These dynamics complicate the interim government's ability to focus on stabilisation and reform.²⁵

The judiciary has been a critical focus of Yunus's reforms.²⁶ The appointment of Syed Refaat Ahmed as Chief Justice marked a departure from past practices, with reforms including the transfer of over 300 judges and efforts to remove executive control over judicial appointments.²⁷ While promising, these are early steps in addressing a deeply entrenched lack of public trust.²⁸

Similarly, the civil service has undergone significant changes.²⁹ Hundreds of bureaucrats tied to the previous regime have been replaced, while civil servants forced into retirement were reinstated.³⁰ Over 850 elected local government leaders were dismissed and replaced by administrators.³¹ Though necessary to depoliticise governance, these moves have encountered resistance and highlighted entrenched patronage networks.³²

The security sector remains fraught with challenges.³³ The police, effectively paralysed during the August upheaval, continues to struggle with authority and public trust.³⁴ Mob violence and inter-ethnic killings remain critical concerns.³⁵ The military's temporary provision of security underscores the limitations of civilian control, raising concerns about its extended involvement.³⁶

Economic instability demands urgent intervention.³⁷ Inflation reached a 13-year high of 11.66 percent in July 2024, with food inflation at 14.1 percent.³⁸ Youth unemployment remains critical, with 41 percent of young people neither in employment nor education.³⁹ Job creation, skill development, and expanding high-potential industries beyond traditional sectors are essential to alleviate economic frustration.⁴⁰

“To its credit, the Yunus administration has reduced mob violence and stabilised the economy, but the slow pace of reform has drawn criticism.⁴⁹”

Priorities for Reform



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Priorities for Reform

Political reforms remain a cornerstone of Yunus's agenda.⁴¹ These include ensuring electoral integrity, judicial independence, media freedom, and institutional accountability.⁴² Widespread demands for electoral reform include revising the "Chief Election Commissioner and Other Election Commissioners Appointment Act 2022" to ensure impartial appointments.⁴³

Yunus insists on substantial reforms before elections, likely delaying polls until 2026.⁴⁴ Judicial reform efforts, including the Supreme Court's suspension of 12 high-ranking judges perceived as pro-Awami League, signal commitment to independence and fairness.⁴⁵

Freedom of the press has become another critical issue.⁴⁶ Since Hasina's ouster, over 150 journalists have faced charges, often severe and politically motivated.⁴⁷ The interim government must create a safe environment for media and end unjust prosecutions to promote transparency and accountability.⁴⁸

To its credit, the Yunus administration has reduced mob violence and stabilised the economy, but the slow pace of reform has drawn criticism.⁴⁹ Recent appointments to the Advisory Council, such as Mostofa Sarwar Farooki and Sheikh Bashir Uddin, have sparked outrage, with allegations of conflicts of interest and favouritism undermining public trust.⁵⁰ Protests erupted on university campuses, where student leaders accused the administration of promoting autocratic allies rather than merit-based appointments.⁵¹

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5



International Crisis Group Report



International Crisis Group Report

According to the International Crisis Group's Asia Report N°344⁵², the Yunus administration has charted an ambitious reform agenda, focusing on political, governance, and economic reforms.

Key challenges include managing public expectations, maintaining political consensus, and addressing entrenched systemic issues. The report underscores the monumental task before Yunus: restoring law and order, rebuilding institutions, and ensuring justice for past atrocities.

While public support remains strong, the risk of faltering reforms could lead to an early election or military intervention. The report highlights the need for quick wins, such as tackling petty corruption, improving electricity supply, and addressing inflation. International support, particularly financial aid and technical assistance, is deemed critical for sustaining reforms and stabilising the economy.

The Yunus administration's legal framework is also under scrutiny. The formation of the interim government stretched constitutional bounds, relying on Supreme Court endorsement to navigate a legal grey area. Critics warn that this uncertainty could undermine future reforms if deemed unconstitutional.

The report further elaborates on the economic challenges inherited from Hasina's regime, including manipulated economic data, rampant corruption in the banking sector, and inflated export statistics. Despite these issues, early signs indicate the government is stabilising the economy through international aid and exchange rate reforms.

“Yunus marked his 100 days in office by urging patience from the nation as his administration tackles the “extremely tough” challenge of restoring democratic institutions.⁵⁶”

6



Addressing Broader Challenges

6

Addressing Broader Challenges

Bangladesh's food market is plagued by monopolistic behaviour, with a handful of businesspeople controlling essential commodity imports.⁵³ Rising commodity prices and stagnating wages exacerbate financial hardship for the poor, while low foreign direct investment continues to stifle economic growth.⁵⁴ Observers note that Yunus must address these systemic issues to prevent growing dissatisfaction from derailing the reform agenda.⁵⁵

Yunus marked his 100 days in office by urging patience from the nation as his administration tackles the "extremely tough" challenge of restoring democratic institutions.⁵⁶ In a televised speech, Yunus emphasised that the formation of an election commission was imminent, though he declined to provide a specific timeframe for elections, stating these would occur only after completing critical reforms.⁵⁷ "We aim to build an electoral system that will endure for decades," he said, stressing the importance of stability and justice.⁵⁸

Yunus highlighted the grave human rights abuses under Hasina's regime, reporting that nearly 1,500 protesters were killed during the demonstrations, with as many as 3,500 forcibly disappeared over her 15-year rule.⁵⁹

He reaffirmed his government's commitment to prosecuting those responsible, noting ongoing efforts with the International Criminal Court and a commission investigating forced disappearances, which has already identified over 1,600 cases.⁶⁰

The government has issued an arrest warrant for Hasina, who remains in exile in India, and summoned her to appear in court to face charges of crimes against humanity.⁶¹ Several of her former ministers are also expected to face similar charges.⁶² However, Yunus acknowledged the monumental challenge of navigating the fragile alliance that brought him to power and meeting the nation's high expectations without faltering.⁶³

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Conclusion



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Bangladesh's political transition represents both challenges and opportunities. Yunus's interim government holds a unique mandate to reshape the nation's future by addressing systemic inequities, encouraging democratic reforms, and promoting inclusive governance.

However, the administration's failure to adequately address rising unemployment, spiraling inflation, and allegations of nepotism threatens its credibility.

Dr Yunus must urgently deliver on the promises of reform to restore public confidence and maintain stability.

The next phase will determine whether Bangladesh can overcome its turbulent past and emerge as a resilient democracy with equitable growth.



FOOTNOTES

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