

Bangladesh One Year After Sheikh Hasina's Exit: A Nation at a Crossroads



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Introduction



Introduction

On 5 August 2024, Bangladesh's long-serving Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina resigned and fled the country amid a massive student-led uprising. The protests, initially sparked by anger over a controversial job quota system, spiraled into nationwide unrest that left an estimated 1,400 people dead.

With Hasina's departure, an interim government led by Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus was formed on 8 August 2024 to stabilise the country and oversee a transition. Public euphoria greeted Hasina's exit, but the immediate aftermath was tumultuous: violent mobs torched ruling party offices, and attacks on minority communities surged in the power vacuum. One year on, Bangladesh stands at a critical juncture.

This White Paper examines the state of the nation across political, economic, and social dimensions since Hasina's exit, analysing emerging trends, fault lines, and the historical context that shapes this moment.

“The fall of Sheikh Hasina’s government marked the end of a 16-year one-party dominance and opened an uncertain political chapter. The interim administration under Chief Adviser Yunus was formed by consensus among major political and civil society groups; including the student protest leaders: with a mandate to restore democracy.”

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A photograph of a man in a patterned shirt shouting into a megaphone, with a crowd of people in the background. The entire image is overlaid with a semi-transparent red filter.

Political Transition and Stability



Political Transition and Stability

The fall of Sheikh Hasina's government marked the end of a 16-year one-party dominance and opened an uncertain political chapter. The interim administration under Chief Adviser Yunus was formed by consensus among major political and civil society groups; including the student protest leaders: with a mandate to restore democracy.

Its immediate tasks were daunting: calm the violent unrest, address a brewing constitutional crisis, and prepare for new elections. In the first weeks, instability ran high. Supporters of the ousted Awami League (AL) were targeted in revenge attacks, and minority Hindu and Ahmadiyya communities faced over 2,200 incidents of violence; including assaults on at least 152 temples and the killing of 23 people.

International observers, from the United Nations to Amnesty International, urged the new authorities to protect human rights and prevent score-settling, amid reports of mob justice against Hasina loyalists and communal clashes.

Despite these early shocks, the Yunus government gradually asserted control and signaled a break with the past. In a symbolic move, it outlawed the once-dominant Awami League itself: in May 2025, following a massive rally in Dhaka, the AL was banned under anti-terrorism laws for its alleged crimes during the crackdown, effectively barring the party from politics.

This drastic step: cheered on by Islamist groups that partnered with former protesters: underscores the depth of popular anger toward the old regime, but it also risks perpetuating a cycle of exclusion. The political landscape is now effectively reshaped around two poles: the newly formed, youth-led National Citizen Party (NCP)

aligned with the revolution's ideals, and the main traditional opposition, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). The NCP emerged from the protest movement in early 2025 as Bangladesh's first student-led political party, advocating systemic reforms before any vote.

The BNP, by contrast, is eager for a quick return to electoral politics after years of repression under Hasina. This split has created tensions over the election timeline; a central fault line in Bangladesh's stability today.

“This standoff has put Yunus in a precarious position “trapped between demands from different political camps,” as one top student leader described[11]. In May 2025, Yunus even hinted he might resign early if consensus on reforms and an election roadmap cannot be reached[15] [11]. Such a move would plunge Bangladesh back into chaos, underscoring how fragile the post-Hasina stability remains.”

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Election Timing and Governance



Election Timing and Governance

One year after Hasina's ouster, Bangladesh has yet to hold a new general election, as the interim government prioritises institutional reforms. Yunus initially proposed delaying polls until April 2026, arguing that credible elections require fixing the "toxic" system first [11]. The NCP supports this timeline, insisting that "people didn't rise up just to switch governments, but to change the system"[12].

However, the BNP and other opposition voices are demanding elections much sooner. By mid-2025, BNP leaders began pressing for a vote by December 2025, warning that public patience is waning[13]. Even the military has applied pressure: Bangladesh's army chief, General Waker-Uz-Zaman, publicly urged holding elections by December, expressing dissatisfaction with prolonged uncertainty[14].

This standoff has put Yunus in a precarious position "trapped between demands from different political camps," as one top student leader described[11]. In May 2025, Yunus even hinted he might resign early if consensus on reforms and an election roadmap cannot be reached[15][11]. Such a move would plunge Bangladesh back into chaos, underscoring how fragile the post-Hasina stability remains.

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Interim Authority and Historical Parallels

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President Mohammed Shahabuddin, a Hasina appointee, initially questioned the legality of the new government by claiming he never received Hasina's formal resignation letter; a procedural anomaly that drew swift rebuttal from interim officials.

Although the President's challenge did not topple the Yunus administration, it highlighted the constitutional ambiguities of this transition. To avoid repeating past instability (such as the army-backed caretaker of 2007–08), the interim authorities have tried to ground their rule in broad-based support and forward-looking reforms. They convened commissions to propose changes aimed at strengthening democracy and preventing any return to authoritarianism.

By January 2025, a Constitutional Reform Commission (CRC) delivered recommendations for a "new democratic constitution" addressing over-centralisation of power and weak judicial independence[18][19]. At the same time, commissions on electoral reform, anti-corruption, and social welfare (dubbed the "July Charter") also submitted blueprints for change[20].

This flurry of reform efforts situates Bangladesh at a crossroads: it can institutionalise the ideals of the 2024 uprising or succumb to old patterns if the process falters. Critics note that key political actors, notably Hasina's now-banned party, have been excluded from the reform process, raising questions about legitimacy and consensus[21][22].

The coming months will test whether Yunus can forge an inclusive agreement on reforms between the bitterly opposed camps. He has pushed to finalise the "July Charter", a pact on governance changes by the uprising's first anniversary in hopes that all parties will then focus on implementing reforms before the next election[20]. The success or failure of this effort will decisively shape Bangladesh's political stability going forward.

Governance and Democratic Institutions

The interim government has framed its mission as not merely a change in leadership but a transformation of governance itself. Corruption and institutional decay, entrenched during Hasina's lengthy rule, were among the root causes of public revolt[23][24]. Yunus himself lamented that Bangladesh's public saw "government as your permanent enemy" after years of bribery and abuse of power at every level[25][26].

Upon taking office, he set out to restore integrity and public trust in state institutions. One of the new government's first acts was to commission an independent audit of the nation's finances and governance. The resulting "white paper" revealed staggering findings: during Hasina's tenure, more than \$326 billion was siphoned out of Bangladesh through illicit financial outflows: averaging about \$22 billion lost per year[27].

The investigation found systemic graft across sectors: at least 10 banks were technically bankrupt, costs for large infrastructure projects were inflated by an estimated \$118 billion, and up to 40% of the government's annual development budget was embezzled[28]. From banking and energy to public works, institutions meant to serve citizens had instead been captured by crony networks. These revelations underscored

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the enormity of the challenge facing the interim administration.

In response, the Yunus government moved aggressively to clean house and enact governance reforms. A respected former IMF economist, Ahsan H. Mansur, was appointed as the new central bank governor to stabilise the collapsing financial sector[29]. Under his direction, regulators hiked interest rates, replaced the boards of 11 troubled banks implicated in bad loans, and launched efforts to recover assets stolen by elites[29].

Simultaneously, an empowered Anti-Corruption Commission was formed to investigate and prosecute graft, signaling a break from the past impunity[29]. These steps were part of a wider institutional overhaul: the government reinstated transparent budgeting (broadcasting the national budget live for the first time since 2008)[30], and it undertook tax administration reform by dissolving the discredited National Board of Revenue: replacing it with two new agencies to improve tax collection and fiscal management[31][32].

For the first time in Bangladesh's history, the 2025 budget was actually smaller than the previous year's (trimmed to 7.90 trillion from 7.97 trillion) [31]. This rare austerity reflected a commitment to fiscal discipline and an end to politically driven spending sprees. Meeting such good governance benchmarks quickly paid dividends: by mid-2025, Bangladesh had fulfilled the conditions to unlock a stalled IMF support program, receiving a disbursement of about \$1.76 billion in June[32]. The World Bank and other donors have similarly signaled renewed confidence, linking future aid to the continuation of governance reforms[33][34].

At the same time, democratic institutional reform has been a centerpiece of the interim agenda. Learning from the failures of the past (when partisan control over elections led to crisis), the interim authorities are working to establish stronger neutral frameworks. They have pledged a revamp of the Election Commission to ensure truly independent oversight of the upcoming polls[35] [20].

The Constitutional Reform Commission's draft for a new supreme law aims to bolster checks and balances: for instance, by limiting the previously unchecked powers of the Prime Minister's Office and by enhancing judicial independence[18] [36]. Notably, the CRC has drawn on global best practices, looking at how other nations in South Asia overcame similar turmoil. However, the reform process has not been without controversy. Some proposed constitutional changes, particularly involving the judiciary, have stirred debate that the interim government might be bypassing legal safeguards in the rush to fix the system[21][37].

Opposition figures caution that enduring reform requires buy-in from all major stakeholders, not just technocrats or the winners of the revolution. The absence of the Awami League (now banned) from any dialogue on constitutional changes is a point of concern, as it leaves a large segment of society unrepresented in shaping the new rules.

Balancing the urgency of reform against the inclusivity and legitimacy of the process is therefore a key challenge. The interim administration has sought UN assistance and expertise to support reform efforts, from overhauling police and judicial practices to structuring an interim electoral framework[38]. International advisors stress that Bangladesh's reforms must be transparent and involve broad consultation to avoid perceptions of a victor's agenda.

While significant strides have been made in rebuilding cleaner, more accountable institutions over the past year, the long-term consolidation of democracy will depend on bridging political divides and entrenching these reforms beyond the interim period.

History has shown in Bangladesh that institutional gains can be quickly eroded by winner-takes-all politics; the coming year, leading into elections, will be critical to ensure today's governance improvements are locked in by a legitimate constitutional and electoral order.

“For the first time since independence, annual government spending was reduced year-on-year[31]. Non-essential expenditures were cut and revenue-collection reforms prioritised, as the administration heeded IMF advice to restore fiscal discipline.”

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Economic Developments and Challenges



Economic Developments and Challenges

When Sheikh Hasina left power, she did so amid an economic storm largely of her own making. Superficially, Bangladesh's economy in 2024 still showed strengths: GDP growth had averaged over 6% during her tenure, even peaking at 8% in 2019, and per capita income had nearly tripled since 2009[39]. The powerhouse garment export sector, contributing 13% of GDP and 85% of export earnings, had fueled much of this growth[40].

Yet the turmoil of 2024 exposed the fragile foundations beneath this progress. For years, robust growth figures masked deep structural weaknesses: skyrocketing youth unemployment, rampant inflation, and severe inequality. By the eve of Hasina's fall, discontent was brewing as living costs soared and good jobs remained scarce.

Indeed, youth frustrations over economic marginalisation were a major factor driving the mass protests[23][41]. Nearly 28% of Bangladesh's population is aged 15–29, but in 2023 this group accounted for an alarming 83% of the unemployed[42]. Most working Bangladeshis toiled in the informal economy with low wages and no security, while entry into coveted public jobs was skewed by the corrupt quota system. Meanwhile, inflation had jumped from around 5% in 2021 to 11.7% by July 2024, squeezing household budgets nationwide[43]. The discontent in 2024 was, at its core, as much about economic justice as about political freedom.

The upheaval dealt a sharp short-term blow to the economy. Months of strikes, road blockades, curfews, and even internet shutdowns during mid-2024 disrupted commerce and daily life. The vital garment industry was paralysed at times: factories struggled to meet orders amid transportation snarls and worker walkouts.

In the weeks immediately following the regime change, Bangladesh's ready-made garment sector

reportedly incurred losses exceeding \$547 million due to canceled orders and halted production[44][45]. Four million garment workers, mostly low-paid women, suddenly faced uncertainty in their livelihoods[46][44]. Beyond garments, overall business confidence wavered as investors adopted a wait-and-see attitude towards the new political reality.

Economic pain was not limited to the formal sector: daily wage earners and small businesses also suffered from the instability and occasional violence. It is estimated that between July and December 2024, the Bangladeshi economy shed 2.1 million jobs, with over 85% of those losses borne by women[47].

By early 2025, nearly two-thirds of young Bangladeshi women were neither employed nor in school or training, reflecting the severe dislocation in the labor force[47]. These setbacks raised the stakes for the interim government to quickly stabilise the economy and deliver tangible improvements.

Over the past year, the Yunus administration has pursued a strategy of macroeconomic stabilisation paired with structural reform. The immediate priority was taming inflation and shoring up financial stability; essential for restoring public confidence. Thanks to tighter monetary policy and a more disciplined fiscal stance, inflation has started to ease: from the double-digit highs of last summer, inflation fell to around 9.0% by May 2025[48]. The currency and foreign exchange reserves have also steadied after a period of volatility, aided by the interim government's move to adopt a more flexible, market-driven exchange rate (a reform long urged by economists)[31].

In parallel, securing international support was crucial to prevent a balance-of-payments crisis.



The government worked intensively to meet the IMF's reform conditions – raising tax revenue, cutting wasteful subsidies, and cleaning up banks, which succeeded in unlocking the next tranches of a \$6.4 billion IMF loan program by mid-2025[49][32]. Additionally, the World Bank and Asian Development Bank have re-engaged, providing budget support and technical assistance as Bangladesh commits to transparency and anti-corruption measures[33][34].

Yet perhaps the most remarkable development is that, despite political upheaval, Bangladesh's export sector has shown resilience. By mid-2025, merchandise exports were actually rising again. Between July 2024 and May 2025, a period spanning the uprising and its aftermath, export revenues climbed by roughly \$5.4 billion compared to the same period a year earlier[50].

The flagship garment industry even managed a modest 10% growth in export value, as orders picked up when stability improved[50]. This rebound reflects both the global demand for Bangladesh's textiles and the interim government's efforts to assure foreign buyers that Bangladesh is open for business. High-profile investment summits were hosted in Dhaka to court investors and signal that reforms are creating a more business-friendly climate[51][52].

In one notable gesture of transparency and confidence-building, the finance ministry's first post-Hasina budget was unveiled in a live televised address, inviting public scrutiny and departing from the opaque budget practices of the past[30]. The budget itself, however, revealed the difficult choices the government faces: it was an austere plan focused on stabilisation over expansion, even at the cost of short-term pain.

For the first time since independence, annual government spending was reduced year-on-year[31]. Non-essential expenditures were cut and revenue-collection reforms prioritised, as the administration heeded IMF advice to restore fiscal discipline.

Despite these efforts, major economic challenges persist one year later. The recovery remains fragile and uneven. The World Bank projects GDP growth will slow to only 3.3% in fiscal year 2024–25, roughly half the pre-crisis rate[53]. It warns that without a rapid pick-up, an additional 3 million Bangladeshis could fall into poverty in 2025 due to lost incomes and high prices[54]. Unemployment, especially among youth, remains a “time bomb”, the job losses of 2024 have not been fully reversed, and private investment is still subdued as businesses adopt a cautious stance amid political uncertainty[54][51].

In this climate, criticism has emerged that the government's reforms, while necessary, are not yet doing enough to spur new job creation or inclusive growth[55]. Opposition figures across the spectrum, including those who once cheered Hasina's removal, have begun to complain that the 2025 budget and economic policies feel like “more of the same” austerity, dictated by IMF conditionality rather than the revolutionary spirit of change[55].

Yunus's team argues that only by first fixing the fundamentals, cleaning up corruption, stabilising prices, and restructuring debt-laden banks, can Bangladesh create the conditions for sustainable growth. They point to encouraging signs that the worst is over: after the sharp contraction in late 2024, economic activity is slowly rebounding, and exports are at record highs thanks to competitiveness gains[50].

But the interim leadership is also acutely aware that ordinary citizens must soon feel improvement in their daily lives, or the popular goodwill earned in 2024 could evaporate. Rising public impatience is evident, as people ask when the sacrifices of the past year will translate into lower unemployment and higher incomes. Thus, the government is under pressure to deliver some quick wins such as infrastructure jobs programs or targeted relief for the poor; even as it keeps an eye on long-term reforms.

“Bangladesh’s civic space has opened up modestly since Hasina’s exit, but it remains fragile. The interim period has given society a taste of freer debate and protest (indeed, numerous demonstrations by various groups have taken place, from labor unions to student factions, with less state repression than before). The key will be embedding protections for these freedoms into law: a task the interim government has yet to complete.”



Civil Liberties and Media Freedom

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Civil Liberties and Media Freedom

Sheikh Hasina's regime had grown increasingly authoritarian in its final years – crushing dissent with draconian laws, jailing opposition activists and journalists, and muzzling the press. The collapse of her government raised hopes for a new dawn of civil liberties in Bangladesh. Over the past year, there have indeed been notable improvements in the climate for free expression and opposition activism, but also some continuity of repressive measures that underscore how difficult it is to dismantle an entrenched security state overnight.

One of the protesters' core demands in 2024 was to restore freedom of speech and end the abuse of broadly worded cybercrime laws that had been weaponised against critics. Hasina's government had infamously enforced the 2018 Digital Security Act (DSA) and a successor Cyber Security Act (CSA) passed in 2023 to arrest hundreds of journalists, students, and opposition voices for "anti-state" posts on social media[56][57].

In one case during the quota protests, a man was arrested merely for a Facebook post criticising the quota system[57]. The interim authorities responded to both domestic and international outcry by pledging to repeal the repressive cyberlaw. By late 2024, they annulled the contentious CSA, which Amnesty International had condemned as simply "repackaging repression" from the old DSA[56][58]. However, the government immediately proposed a new Cyber Protection Ordinance (CPO) 2025 to replace it.

Rights advocates have expressed alarm that this draft law, despite removing a few egregious provisions (such as no-warrant arrests and criminal defamation), still mirrors many draconian elements of its predecessor[59]. For instance, the CPO retains a vague offense of "hurting religious

sentiment" online – a clause long used to stifle writers and minority voices under the old laws[60][59].

In February 2025, a poet was arrested for allegedly "insulting Islam" in a poem, and cases like this have continued under the interim government, showing that repressive legal habits die hard[61][62]. A coalition of human rights groups, including Human Rights Watch, has urged the interim government to fully repeal or fundamentally reform these digital laws in line with international free speech standards, rather than just rename them[59][63].

The interim ministers insist they are committed to protecting freedom of expression, pointing to their release of many political prisoners and cessation of overt censorship but civil society remains wary. The test will be whether the final version of the cyber law (expected to be enacted by the interim Council of Advisers) truly breaks with the past or continues to give the authorities broad powers to police speech under new guises.

The situation for media freedom and journalists in Bangladesh is mixed after one year. On the positive side, the climate of fear that pervaded newsrooms under Hasina has somewhat eased: independent newspapers and TV stations are more openly criticising government decisions than they dared before. Investigative reports on corruption and human rights issues have gained space, reflecting the interim leadership's comparatively higher tolerance for criticism. International media watchdogs note that direct government interference in media content has decreased since 2024.

Yet Bangladeshi journalists are still operating in a perilous environment. In early 2025, there was

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a spate of violent attacks on reporters by both state and non-state actors. In one incident, police officers assaulted journalists covering a protest in Dhaka, inflicting injuries[64][65]. In others, masked men linked to political groups attacked reporters in regional towns with hammers, knives, and bamboo sticks[66]. Notably, some attacks came from overzealous opposition activists: for example, several journalists were beaten by BNP supporters outside the Supreme Court in February 2025 while reporting on a controversial court verdict related to Hasina[67].

These incidents underscore that threats to press freedom come not only from the government, but also from the wider culture of political violence and intolerance. The interim government condemned these attacks and ordered investigations, Yunus personally intervened to call for accountability after assailants destroyed a bookstall at a Dhaka book fair because it sold works by an exiled feminist author[68][69].

Still, media advocates say more systemic action is needed: they urge the authorities to prosecute those who assault journalists and to publicly uphold the press's watchdog role. Furthermore, while formal censorship has lessened, journalists report continued pressure in subtle forms. Powerful figures – whether in the military, bureaucracy, or business, sometimes lean on editors to tone down critical pieces. The ongoing legal uncertainty around digital speech laws also has a chilling effect; many writers and bloggers remain cautious, fearing that a Facebook post could still land them in legal trouble until laws are definitively reformed.

Bangladesh's civic space has opened up modestly since Hasina's exit, but it remains fragile. The interim period has given society a taste of

freer debate and protest (indeed, numerous demonstrations by various groups have taken place, from labor unions to student factions, with less state repression than before). The key will be embedding protections for these freedoms into law: a task the interim government has yet to complete.

“One year after Hasina, the rule of law is being slowly reasserted, though it remains a work in progress. The ultimate success of Bangladesh’s “justice reset” will depend on whether all sides come to trust the neutrality of courts and law enforcement: a trust that has been absent for decades.”



Rule of Law and Justice



Rule of Law and Justice

A core promise of the post-Hasina interim leadership was to re-establish the rule of law in a country where it had badly eroded. Under the previous regime, the judiciary was widely seen as politicised, law enforcement as brutish enforcers of ruling party interests, and accountability as virtually nonexistent for those in power. Over the past year, Bangladesh has begun to confront that legacy through a combination of judicial action, truth-seeking, and efforts at transitional justice – albeit amidst ongoing legal ambiguity.

One of the most dramatic developments has been the pursuit of justice for the violence of 2024. In February 2025, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights published a fact-finding report on the crackdown that preceded Hasina's fall. The report, based on hundreds of interviews and digital evidence, documented widespread human rights violations during the protests and concluded that elements of the former government's repression amounted to "crimes against humanity".

Citing incidents of extrajudicial killings, torture in secret detention sites, and excessive force against unarmed demonstrators, the UN effectively validated protestors' claims that the uprising was responding to grave state abuses. This international finding added momentum to domestic calls for accountability.

In Dhaka, a special tribunal was soon established to try figures of the old regime for atrocity crimes. On 1 June 2025, that tribunal opened its first high-profile case: the trial in absentia of Sheikh Hasina herself[71][72]. The former prime minister, now 75, remains in exile in India, but she faces charges in Bangladesh of authorising lethal force against peaceful protesters and other serious offenses[71]. Dhaka has formally requested Hasina's extradition, though New Delhi has given no official response to date[73][72].

The spectacle of a nation putting its once-unquestionable leader on trial marks a historic turning point – it signals that no one is above the law in the new Bangladesh, at least in principle. The interim government has vowed to also investigate senior police officials and Awami League operatives implicated in protester deaths. Human rights groups are watching closely to ensure these trials meet due process standards, rather than descending into victors' justice. Bangladesh's own experience after its 1971 war (and more recently, the flawed war-crimes tribunals a decade ago) shows the importance of conducting such trials transparently and fairly to achieve true reconciliation.

Beyond addressing past crimes, the interim authorities have also targeted ongoing lawlessness and militancy that threaten public order. In late 2024, amid reports of armed gangs and extremists exploiting the post-revolution chaos, security forces launched "Operation Devil Hunt": a nationwide sweep that led to over 1,300 arrests of individuals suspected of violence, arson, and incitement during the unrest. This operation was partly aimed at those behind communal attacks on minorities and vandalism of property. The government has been keen to show that rule of law applies universally: both former regime loyalists who might be instigating unrest and any extremist elements trying to settle scores are being dealt with under the law.

Yet these crackdowns have raised some concerns. Opposition lawyers argue that sweeping arrests can ensnare innocent people and that some detainees have been held without due process in the name of security. The interim Home Ministry counters that extraordinary measures were briefly needed to prevent the country from sliding into anarchy in late 2024. As stability has improved,



they claim to be shifting from dragnet arrests to more targeted, evidence-based prosecutions.

The judiciary's role in this transition is itself complex. Bangladesh's higher courts have a history of politicisation; under Hasina, ruling-party loyalists were appointed to key judicial posts and the judiciary often failed to check executive overreach. The interim period has presented an opportunity to reset this equation. Early in 2025, the Supreme Court notably affirmed the legitimacy of the Yunus-led government (despite the constitutional novelty), effectively endorsing the de facto situation to avoid a power vacuum.

Meanwhile, the Constitutional Reform Commission's proposals include measures to guard judicial independence such as changes in how judges are appointed and tenured[36][76]. However, actions by the interim government have also prompted accusations of a "judicial coup" from some quarters. In one controversial episode, a group of judges seen as close to the Awami League were quietly compelled to take leave or early retirement: a move critics described as purging the judiciary.

The government defended it as weeding out corrupt elements. This has fed a narrative among Hasina's remaining allies that the interim administration is concentrating power and bending rules just as its predecessor did, only in a different direction[21][22]. Balancing the urgent need to reform institutions against the imperative of adhering to legal norms is a tightrope the interim leadership continues to walk.

Nevertheless, signs of a more impartial justice system are emerging. For example, in early 2025 a long-pending corruption case against an opposition BNP leader resulted in acquittal: something virtually unheard of under the previous government, and an outcome seen as indicating judicial decisions are no longer predetermined by political influence. The police and civil administration are also undergoing retraining and reform to shed their partisan reputation. Dozens of police commanders accused of brutal actions

during the protests have been suspended or reassigned.

The interim Interior Adviser has emphasised community policing and responsiveness to citizen complaints, trying to transform the police from tools of repression into public service providers. These are early steps in what will be a generational project to rebuild rule of law. As Bangladesh moves toward elections, a credible justice system will be crucial to resolve electoral disputes and prevent a relapse into street violence. The international community has offered support, the United Nations, for instance, has programs underway to assist Bangladesh with police reform and to ensure that upcoming trials (like Hasina's) meet international standards[38].

One year after Hasina, the rule of law is being slowly reasserted, though it remains a work in progress. The ultimate success of Bangladesh's "justice reset" will depend on whether all sides come to trust the neutrality of courts and law enforcement: a trust that has been absent for decades.

“Bangladesh’s foreign policy one year post-Hasina is marked by realignment and recalibration. The country is leveraging its new political beginning to explore economic opportunities and strategic partnerships beyond its traditional patrons. Greater engagement with China and Pakistan, cautious outreach to the West for trade deals, and a principled but strained stance with India define this new approach. These shifts carry both promise and peril.”

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Foreign Relations and Geopolitics

8

Foreign Relations and Geopolitics

Sheikh Hasina's exit not only transformed Bangladesh's domestic arena, but also reverberated through the region. Over the past year, Dhaka's foreign policy orientation has undergone a significant recalibration, with the interim government seeking new partnerships and balance amid shifting global dynamics. Bangladesh's strategic choices in this period carry profound implications for its development and security, as well as for South Asian geopolitics.

One of the most striking shifts has been Dhaka's pivot in regional relationships. During Hasina's tenure, Bangladesh was closely aligned with neighboring India, the Awami League government had nurtured a warm rapport with New Delhi, cooperating on security and trade, while maintaining substantial economic ties with China. The post-Hasina government, however, has moved to reduce dependence on India and diversify its alliances.

Under Yunus's leadership, Bangladesh has revived diplomatic and economic links with Pakistan to a degree unseen since the 1971 Liberation War[77][78]. In a landmark thaw, high-level visits have resumed, visa regimes have been relaxed, and in early 2025 the two countries even agreed to re-open direct shipping routes and establish a joint business council to promote trade[77][79].

This rapprochement, sensitive given historical animosities, is driven by pragmatic economic interests, Bangladesh is exploring new export markets and investment sources, and Pakistan's large market presents an opportunity. It also symbolically signals Bangladesh's intent to break out of the older India-centric orbit.

Even more significant is Bangladesh's deepening embrace of China. In March 2025, Yunus traveled to Beijing and secured a package of loans, grants,

and investment pledges worth roughly \$2.9 billion: a striking contrast to Hasina's last trip to China in mid-2024, which yielded only about \$137 million in new funding[80][81]. Dozens of Chinese companies have since committed to new projects in Bangladesh. Notably, an agreement was reached to establish a dedicated Chinese Economic Zone in Chittagong port, with nearly 30 Chinese firms pledging an additional \$1.3 billion to develop manufacturing facilities there[82][83].

Given that Chittagong handles 90% of Bangladesh's maritime trade, Chinese involvement in this strategic seaport underscores Beijing's long-term interest in Bangladesh as part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) network[83]. Bangladesh actually joined the BRI back in 2016, but the level of engagement has now reached new heights. The two sides have discussed a potential free trade agreement and further integration of infrastructure projects, indicating a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in the making[84][85].

Alongside economic deals, diplomatic signals have been notable: during Yunus's Beijing visit, Bangladesh formally endorsed China's stance on Taiwan, publicly opposing "Taiwan independence" for the first time in a joint statement[86]. This marked a clear departure from Dhaka's traditionally non-aligned approach, and it did not go unnoticed by other powers.

The India-Bangladesh relationship has consequently deteriorated to its lowest point in years. New Delhi viewed the toppling of Hasina – a trusted ally – with concern, and subsequent events have deepened mistrust. India granted Sheikh Hasina refuge on its soil, and despite Bangladesh's extradition request for her to face trial, Indian authorities have remained silent, effectively sheltering her[72].

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Indian officials have also been alarmed by Bangladesh's tilt toward China. Yunus's public comments suggesting that India's landlocked northeast could benefit from integrating with China's economy were seen in New Delhi as provocations[86]. India responded with a series of punitive measures in mid-2025: it restricted visas for Bangladeshi citizens (making travel more difficult) and abruptly canceled access for Bangladesh to a crucial trans-shipment port facility in the Indian state of Assam[87].

Furthermore, India began cracking down on what it claims are tens of thousands of undocumented Bangladeshi migrants on its soil, a move that Bangladeshi officials criticise as politically motivated[87].

Indian textile industry lobbies have also started pushing for curbs on Bangladeshi garment imports, threatening a market that is vital for Bangladesh[88]. This cooling of ties has real economic costs: India is a major source of industrial raw materials and a key buyer of Bangladeshi products. Border trade and cooperation on energy projects have slowed as well.

The interim government in Dhaka faces a delicate balancing act: it seeks the investment and financing that China can provide, but it must manage the blowback from India, historically Bangladesh's closest neighbor. Diplomats on both sides are quietly trying to keep channels open; for instance, work continues on some bilateral projects agreed before 2024 but the political relationship is undeniably strained.

Bangladesh's relations with the United States and Western powers are also in flux. The U.S., which is Bangladesh's single largest export market (especially for garments) and a significant foreign investor, has welcomed the return to a more democratic trajectory in Dhaka. American officials had frequently criticised Hasina's authoritarian tendencies and human rights abuses, so they have expressed cautious support for the interim government's reform agenda.

However, trade frictions have surfaced under the new U.S. administration. (Notably, in this scenario the U.S. president is once again Donald Trump as of 2025, which has meant a more transactional and protectionist American stance on trade.)

Currently, Bangladeshi exports face a 15% tariff in the U.S. on average, with an additional 37% duty on certain goods that has been temporarily suspended but could be reimposed[89][90]. Washington has signaled that it wants Bangladesh to address longstanding trade issues – including intellectual property protection, labor rights, and market access – before considering any tariff relief or a restoration of the trade privileges that Bangladesh lost after the 2013 Rana Plaza disaster.

In response, the Yunus administration has launched a charm offensive. Yunus himself visited Washington and other Western capitals as part of 11 foreign trips aimed at boosting goodwill and economic ties[91]. Bangladesh also initiated talks on a possible free trade agreement (FTA) with the U.S. in March 2025[89]. Those talks remain tentative, as U.S. officials question Bangladesh's readiness to meet high-standard trade commitments given its still-developing regulatory capacity[92]. To show good faith, Bangladesh's latest budget eliminated or reduced tariffs on hundreds of imported items; including U.S.-produced oil, gas, and cotton; in a move to narrow the trade gap and appease American concerns[93][94].

Moreover, Bangladesh has agreed to purchase more U.S. commodities and to reform some investment rules. Despite these efforts, trade negotiations with the U.S. face headwinds, and a cloud looms in the form of potential U.S. tariff hikes on apparel (a risk as the Trump administration reviews its trade policy)[53][95].

Losing preferential access or facing higher tariffs in the U.S. would be a heavy blow to Bangladesh's export-led economy, so Dhaka is eager to keep Washington engaged. At the same time, Bangladesh is cultivating stronger ties with other partners like Japan, the EU, and Canada to hedge its bets. Japan has continued its infrastructure

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investments in Bangladesh and hosted Yunus in Tokyo to discuss development cooperation.

Canada, for its part, has maintained cordial relations, a Canadian trade delegation visited Dhaka in May 2025, exploring opportunities in sectors from textiles to power generation[96][97]. Canada has also stepped up humanitarian aid, committing over \$30 million to support Bangladesh's refugee efforts and climate resilience programs in early 2025[98][99].

On the humanitarian front, Bangladesh's foreign relations are heavily influenced by the ongoing Rohingya refugee crisis. The country still hosts about one million Rohingya refugees who fled ethnic cleansing in neighboring Myanmar. Hasina's government had managed this influx with significant international assistance. Over the past year, however, funding shortfalls have worsened – for example, a major cut in U.S. refugee aid in 2025 (under a more isolationist Washington) left Bangladesh scrambling[100].

Yunus has used global forums like the UN and Chatham House to warn that without sustained support, the plight of the Rohingya could become untenable and destabilising[101]. In response, some allies like Canada and the EU increased their contributions[98][99], but the gap remains.

The interim government has had to balance compassion with domestic pressures: hosting so many refugees is increasingly unpopular among locals in Cox's Bazar. Bangladesh continues to press Myanmar (now under a junta) to take back the Rohingya, but repatriation prospects are dim. This humanitarian issue thus remains an important aspect of Dhaka's diplomatic engagement, as it seeks global burden-sharing.

Bangladesh's foreign policy one year post-Hasina is marked by realignment and recalibration. The country is leveraging its new political beginning to explore economic opportunities and strategic partnerships beyond its traditional patrons. Greater engagement with China and Pakistan, cautious outreach to the West for trade deals,

and a principled but strained stance with India define this new approach. These shifts carry both promise and peril.

On one hand, diversifying partnerships could bring in new investment (as seen with fresh Chinese capital) and give Bangladesh more agency. On the other hand, tilting too far could alienate traditional friends and entangle Bangladesh in big-power rivalries. The Indo-Pacific region's geopolitics, especially India-China competition, now casts a long shadow over Bangladesh's choices. Already, India's punitive measures show the cost of strategic missteps, as cross-border trade and goodwill suffer[87][88].

Meanwhile, the U.S. and its allies will be watching how far Bangladesh aligns with China's camp, even as they support its democratic transition. Yunus has insisted that Bangladesh will follow an "Bangladesh First" policy, not choosing sides but rather choosing what benefits its people. Walking that tightrope will require deft diplomacy. For policymakers and observers, Bangladesh's trajectory offers a case study in how a mid-sized nation attempts to reclaim policy autonomy and recalibrate foreign ties in the wake of domestic upheaval.

“The question is whether the current generation of leaders can capitalise on that resilience to forge a more cohesive society. The interim period by its nature is transitory. The true test will come when a new elected government takes charge: will it embrace inclusivity and restraint, or revert to winner-take-all practices and vendettas? Many Bangladeshis fear a return to the old AL-BNP duopoly with its attendant strife, while others simply yearn for normalcy and peace after years of tension.”

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Social Cohesion and National Unity

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Social Cohesion and National Unity

The tumultuous events of 2024–25 have both united and divided Bangladeshi society in profound ways. On one level, the mass uprising against Hasina's rule was a rare moment of unity across diverse social groups; students, professionals, workers, Islamists, and secularists found common cause in demanding an end to authoritarian governance.

The slogan of the protests, calling for “real democracy” and merit-based opportunity, resonated nationwide. However, as the dust settled, deep fault lines in society became evident, some old and some new. Managing social cohesion has emerged as one of the toughest challenges in the post-Hasina era.

A primary concern is the potential for polarisation and revenge politics after such a long period of one-party dominance. The ouster of the Awami League regime created an environment where longstanding grievances against the ruling party and its supporters came spilling out, sometimes violently. The immediate surge in attacks on AL offices and figures, often by angry mobs, indicated a risk of vigilante justice replacing rule of law.

The interim leadership consistently urged restraint and called on the public not to persecute ordinary AL members. Nonetheless, in some localities, there have been reports of social ostracisation of known AL loyalists, and incidents of vigilantes vandalising properties linked to the former ruling elite. Perhaps the starkest symbol of this purge mentality was the destruction of the historical site at Dhanmondi 32.

On 5 February 2025, an organised crowd of protesters carried out what they termed a “Bulldozer March” to demolish the house of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Bangladesh's founding father

(and Sheikh Hasina's father). Dhanmondi 32 had served as a museum and sacred memorial to Mujib; to the protesters: radicalised by years of AL propaganda – it was derided as a “shrine of fascism”. They broke through gates and wrecked the interior, even smashing a mural of Mujib[104]. This shocking act of cultural iconoclasm coincided with a defiant speech by Hasina from exile, in which she told her followers: “They may destroy a building, but they won't be able to erase history”.

Her supporters, indeed, saw the demolition as an assault not just on the AL, but on the nation's foundational narrative of 1971. On the other side, some of the student leaders openly celebrated the event: one proclaimed that Bangladesh was being “freed from [a] pilgrimage site of fascism” that night. This episode encapsulates the profound rift in historical memory and identity that now runs through Bangladesh.

Where one segment venerates Mujib and the liberation legacy he represents, another segment, embittered by recent AL misrule, has come to regard those symbols as cover for autocracy. Healing this rift will be essential for long-term social cohesion. The interim government distanced itself from the demolition, calling it an unapproved action by extremists, and promised to preserve national heritage. Still, the perception that the new order is erasing the old remains strong among Awami League sympathisers, potentially sowing seeds of future discord.

Communal and religious harmony has also been severely tested in the aftermath of Hasina's exit. Bangladesh has a history of communal tensions, and unfortunately the political vacuum of late 2024 provided an opening for extremist elements to target minority communities. As noted earlier, there was a sharp uptick in violence

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against Hindus, who make up around 10% of the population – and other minorities in the months after the revolution[5]. The fact that such attacks erupted in 29 districts suggests they were not isolated incidents but rather part of a broader pattern, possibly fueled by rumors or deliberate provocations.

Some analysts suggest that a portion of the anti-Hindu violence may have been instigated by factions loyal to the outgoing regime to embarrass the interim government and stoke chaos; others point to home-grown Islamist groups seizing the moment to settle scores, since Hasina had been seen as relatively protective of minorities. The Indian government took serious note of these attacks, India's foreign minister publicly urged Dhaka to take decisive action to safeguard minorities, and reports of temple destructions became headline news in Indian media. In response, the interim authorities deployed additional security to minority-dominated areas and initiated dialogues with community leaders.

By early 2025, Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian organisations in Bangladesh were staging their own peaceful protests, demanding justice and better protection. The government's nationwide crackdown (Operation Devil Hunt) did lead to arrests of some perpetrators of communal attacks, and by mid-2025 the frequency of such incidents had declined significantly. Nevertheless, minority representatives remain wary. They note that some Islamist hardliners, emboldened by the fall of a secular government, are pushing for a more explicitly Islamic state. The interim government has had to navigate this carefully, it relied in part on Islamist support (for example, conservative Islamic parties joined the NCP in agitating to ban the AL as a "war criminal" organisation[8]).

In doing so, there's a concern that the new political dispensation might empower ultra-conservative voices that could undermine Bangladesh's tradition of communal pluralism and secular law. The destruction of a statue of Sheikh Mujib by zealots, as well as the harassment of intellectuals accused of "hurting religious

sentiments", are warning signs of rising extremism if left unchecked [110].

Yunus's administration has repeatedly stated that the rights of all citizens, regardless of religion or ethnicity will be safeguarded, and it has kept Bangladesh's constitutional principle of secularism intact through the reform proposals. The balancing act is delicate: how to maintain an inclusive, secular ethos while a portion of the coalition includes Islamist factions that historically have opposed that very ethos.

Another element of social cohesion is the attitude towards the security forces and government institutions, which have long been viewed with distrust by the public. A legacy of the Hasina era was that many citizens saw the government as predatory; as Yunus candidly put it, people felt they had to "live [their] life fighting with [the] enemy" in reference to corrupt officials and bureaucrats[26].

Over the past year, the interim leadership has tried to reshape this narrative by making the government more transparent and people-centric. Initiatives such as open-budget broadcasts, town hall meetings by advisers, and crowd-sourced input on policy (through digital platforms) are meant to encourage public participation and rebuild trust. However, trust in government will not be rebuilt overnight. The fact that street protests continue; whether by Islamist groups, student factions, or labor unions; shows that many still prefer direct action and remain skeptical of official processes.

In some ways this is healthy for democracy, but it also reflects a cynicism born of decades of dysfunctional politics. The Guardian's assessment after interviewing Yunus noted that "a year on... people still see government as the enemy", highlighting that ordinary Bangladeshis have yet to experience a government that truly serves rather than exploits them[25]. Bridging this perception gap is vital for social cohesion: it will require not just institutional reforms but also changing the political culture of confrontational,

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zero-sum rivalry that has pitted citizens against each other along party lines.

Despite these divisions, there are also currents of hope and unity visible. The memory of the 2024 mass movement, often dubbed the “July Revolution”, has been institutionalised by civil society in positive ways. A new July 36 Movement (named after the 36 days of uprising) has emerged, focusing on promoting tolerance, anti-violence education, and remembrance of the martyrs of the protests.

Across universities, students have formed forums to discuss how to ensure their activism leads to lasting social change rather than new partisan feuds. Interfaith groups have organised community dialogues in violence-affected districts to rebuild trust between Hindu and Muslim neighbors. These grassroots efforts indicate a yearning to overcome the divisions of the past. Bangladesh’s cultural resilience should not be underestimated – historically, the country has overcome periods of turmoil (from the 1971 war to military coups to 1990’s mass pro-democracy movement) by eventually coalescing around a shared national identity rooted in the Bengali language and a collective desire for progress.

The question is whether the current generation of leaders can capitalise on that resilience to forge a more cohesive society. The interim period by its nature is transitory. The true test will come when a new elected government takes charge: will it embrace inclusivity and restraint, or revert to winner-take-all practices and vendettas? Many Bangladeshis fear a return to the old AL-BNP duopoly with its attendant strife, while others simply yearn for normalcy and peace after years of tension.

Ultimately, one year after Sheikh Hasina’s exit, Bangladesh’s social fabric is still recovering from the shock. There are tears in that fabric communal mistrust, political hatred, generational anger but also threads of renewal as citizens imagine a “New Bangladesh” founded on justice and equality.

Reconciling the past with the future is the work now at hand. The path to unity will likely require gestures of reconciliation, such as acknowledging the legitimate contributions of all political forces (even the vanquished Awami League, minus its abuses) and protecting minorities not just with police but with inclusion in the national narrative. If Bangladesh can emerge from this transition with its diversity intact and a shared sense of purpose, it will have turned a fragile truce into a sustainable peace.

“The choices that Bangladeshi leaders and citizens make now, in this fluid moment, will determine which path is taken. The past year has been a time of both hope and caution: hope that Bangladesh’s people, empowered by their collective action, can reclaim their institutions; caution that the ghosts of the past: authoritarianism, corruption, division are not easily vanquished.”

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Conclusion

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One year after Sheikh Hasina's departure, Bangladesh stands at a pivotal crossroads. The past twelve months have brought dramatic changes: an entrenched ruler deposed, an interim reformist government installed, and the awakening of a citizenry that demanded change. In that time, Bangladesh has made significant strides; it has begun to repair its democratic institutions, put its economy back on a steadier footing, and hold perpetrators of past abuses to account.

Political debate is more vibrant now than under the previous autocratic climate, and long-suppressed issues (from youth unemployment to judicial independence) are finally being addressed in policy discourse. These are no small achievements, considering where the country stood a year ago, on the brink of widespread violence and authoritarian consolidation.

Yet, this anniversary is not merely a moment to commemorate progress; it is a time for clear-eyed assessment of the formidable challenges that remain. The interim government's record is mixed[112]. It has instilled hope for a fairer, more accountable state, but it has also encountered the limits of its mandate and the resistance of deeply rooted interests.

Political stability is still fragile; competing timelines for elections and visions of reform threaten to unravel the tentative consensus that ousted Hasina. The economy, while stabilising, is not yet delivering broad-based benefits, and many citizens are struggling with daily hardships in the interim period[54]. The promise of justice and human rights, though brighter than before, is not fully realised; repressive laws linger and extremist fringes test the state's commitment to tolerance[59]. Foreign relations, too, are in flux, as Bangladesh navigates a new balance that could either enhance its strategic autonomy or expose it to new vulnerabilities.

Historically, Bangladesh has been at crossroads before – in 1975 after Mujib's assassination, in 1990 after the fall of a dictator, in 2007 under a military-backed caretaker. Each time, the nation's trajectory was determined by whether leaders could rise above personal and party interests to build lasting institutions.

The current juncture carries echoes of those moments. There is an opportunity to reset Bangladesh's democracy on firmer foundations of rule of law, inclusivity, and good governance. The past year has opened that door: unpopular as some decisions have been (like delaying elections or prosecuting former rulers), they have been driven by a desire to break the cycle of dysfunction that plagued the country.

However, if the process falters; for instance, if reforms get watered down by political bargaining, or if the interim government oversteps and loses legitimacy, or if a premature power grab occurs; Bangladesh could just as easily slide backwards into instability or authoritarian relapse. The stakes are undeniably high.

For policymakers and international partners, the imperative is to support Bangladesh's delicate transition while urging adherence to democratic norms.

The Jagoron Foundation, in marking this one-year milestone, underscores the importance of sustained engagement: to encourage the completion of agreed reforms (constitutional, electoral, judicial) ahead of elections; to facilitate dialogue among Bangladesh's rival political forces so that elections are peaceful and broadly acceptable; and to help address the socioeconomic grievances that fueled the uprising. The international community should continue to offer technical support for reforms and resist any temptation to backslide into business-as-usual with whoever holds power.

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Accountability for past human rights abuses, as well as protection of minorities and vulnerable groups, must remain on the agenda in Dhaka's dealings with partners. At the same time, foreign governments should respect Bangladesh's sovereignty in choosing its development path and partners; a balanced foreign policy is in Bangladesh's interest and can contribute to regional stability if managed prudently.

Above all, the story of the past year in Bangladesh is a reminder that true political change is a process, not an event. The ouster of an authoritarian leader was one dramatic chapter; building a just and democratic order is the longer, less glamorous work that follows. As Bangladesh enters the second year after Hasina, the sense of being "at a crossroads" is palpable. One path leads toward a consolidated democracy; perhaps messy, perhaps imperfect, but on a trajectory of improvement. The other path could lead to renewed strife or regression.

The choices that Bangladeshi leaders and citizens make now, in this fluid moment, will determine which path is taken. The past year has been a time of both hope and caution: hope that Bangladesh's people, empowered by their collective action, can reclaim their institutions; caution that the ghosts of the past: authoritarianism, corruption, division are not easily vanquished.

In conclusion, one year since Sheikh Hasina left the scene, Bangladesh is reinventing itself under intense pressure. It has shown the world a rare instance of a popular uprising in South Asia leading to a real chance at democratic renewal[15] [112]. But that chance must be cemented through wise policies and continued vigilance. The next chapters, writing a new constitution, holding fair elections, and reconciling a polarised society, will be crucial.

If successful, Bangladesh may emerge not only stable, but stronger and more inclusive than before, offering a hopeful model of peaceful transition. If not, the gains of the past year could unravel, with dire consequences for its

173 million people. The journey of the last year, with all its trials, has demonstrated the resilience and aspirations of the Bangladeshi people. The journey of the next year will test their leaders' ability to transform those aspirations into lasting reality, ensuring that the phrase "New Bangladesh" becomes more than just a slogan, but the lived experience of its citizens for years to come.[113] [52]



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Jagoron

One year after the dramatic fall of Sheikh Hasina, Bangladesh is navigating a complex and uncertain transition. This in-depth report from the Jagoron Foundation examines the country's political, economic, and social landscape under the interim administration led by Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus.

Drawing on first-hand accounts, verified data, and international commentary, the report traces how a student-led revolt led to the collapse of a sixteen-year regime, the banning of the Awami League, and the emergence of new political forces such as the National Citizen Party.

It explores how Bangladesh is attempting to rebuild public trust, address deep corruption, protect minority rights, and deliver long overdue institutional reforms: all while balancing international relations with China, India, and the West. The report also critically assesses stalled elections, transitional justice efforts including the trial of Sheikh Hasina in absentia, and the threats posed by rising extremism and social polarisation.

At once a record of upheaval and a roadmap for renewal, this report offers a timely and essential account of a country rewriting its future in real time. For policymakers, analysts, and advocates alike, it is a vital guide to one of the most consequential transitions in South Asia today.