Post Sheikh Hasina’s exit, can Bangladesh’s democracy be salvaged?

written by Joseph Rozen | 23.09.2024

“The transition ahead presents a historic opportunity to reform and revitalise the country’s institutions, to restore fundamental freedoms and civic space, and to give all in Bangladesh a part in building the future.” – Volker Türk, UN Human Rights Chief

The student-led protests in Bangladesh in July this year violently ended Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s 15-year iron fist rule and paved the way for a dramatic transition of power in an already fragile democracy. Almost two months later, the unfolding events exposed the true nature of the political crisis and evaporated hopes for re-establishing the democratic process in the country under the interim government led by Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus.

First, in his quest to form an interim government that would represent all sections of the political system, Yunus appointed ex-army general Sakhawat Hussain as the home affairs advisor (equivalent to minister in an interim government), but three days later, Hussain was given a different portfolio due to criticism stemming from the protest leaders, including the BNP. They argued that Hussain advised officials of Sheikh Hasina’s Awami League to reorganise with new faces and play a part in Bangladeshi politics.

Although the Awami League’s participation in Bangladeshi politics after Hasina is crucial for an equal representation of all views and communities in the country, it was seen by the protest leaders as a move to rehabilitate and whitewash the “murderers” from the Awami League and immediately threatened to oust anyone who would tread this path.

This might explain why since Yunus took over, he made several decisions in favour of the BNP and its allies. He lifted a ban on Jamaat-e-Islami that had been in place since 2013 due to the party’s charter violating the constitution. Now, the Islamist party can resume its activities and run in future elections. Asif Nazrul who was appointed as the Law advisor in the interim government defended the

decision, saying that the ban on Jamaat was used for political manoeuvring. Nazrul has been a strong defender of the Jamaat since the 2010 war crimes trial began.

Moreover, the Yunus-led interim government appointed Supreme Court lawyer Tajul Islam as the chief prosecutor of the international crimes tribunal (to investigate the crimes committed during the liberation war in 1971 by Pakistan and its local accomplices such as the Jamaat). It is worth pointing out that Tajul Islam was the joint convener of a political branch of Jamaat-e-Islami, the Amar Bangladesh Party, and is known as the top lawyer of the Jamaat. The other prosecutors, appointed by Yunus, also hold a track record of defending Jamaat activists and working on cases against Hasina.

As the Islamists regain their place in Bangladeshi society and politics, fears loom over the safety and freedom of Hindus. Since the protests, the Hindu minority, constituting about 13 million individuals or nearly 7.95 per cent of the total population, has been a target of more than 200 attacks on communal backgrounds.

The government led by Yunus argued that reports on the attacks are exaggerated and a non-issue. He also reiterated that the security and freedom of all communities in Bangladesh is a top priority, and Hindus can feel safe, a message he also conveyed to India's Prime Minister, Narendra Modi. Even if such reports were an exaggeration, the fears among the Hindu minority have solid grounds. In the current political environment, there is no party to represent the interests of the Hindu community, which generally supports the Awami League, and is on a path to becoming alienated from the country's politics.

Moreover, in a recent order by the home affairs advisor, Jahangir Alam Chowdhury, he urged the Hindu community to halt some of the traditional activities practised during Durga Puja (mainly playing music), and not to interfere with the Muslim prayers. Such a step, even if minor, indicates the shrinking space of religious freedom in Bangladesh.

These developments do not hold a positive prospect for Bangladeshi democracy under the interim government, which seems to bend under the pressure of anti-Hasina and Awami League factions, drifting away from achieving the goals of inclusion and unity. Those who led the opposition not long ago, are now using

similar means to suppress their opponents, proving that not much has changed in Bangladesh and unity seems unachievable.

This is a concern, not only internally for the stability of Bangladesh and the future of its people but also in the broader geopolitical rivalry between China and the US with mounting challenges to India. Following the coup, Hasina fled to her close ally India, exposing it to pressure from all directions.

On the one hand, families of the 1,000 protesters killed during the violent protests in July and early August demanded Sheikh Hasina be brought to trial on accusations of crimes against humanity, including in the International Criminal Court, if she seeks asylum. Bangladesh and India signed an extradition treaty in 2013 and as the chief prosecutor, Mohammad Tajul Islam, expressed his plans to request Hasina's extradition.

On the other hand, India is expected to protect the Hindu community in Bangladesh and be more vocal about it in the international community. Yet, India is not seeking to meddle in Bangladesh's internal affairs and maintains a delicate approach as it was considered by BNP and others as the enabler of Hasina's government for many years.

In the meantime, the US sent an official delegation to assess the new situation. Yunus met with the delegation and expressed his desire to "reset, reform, restart" the country. In return, he got a promise from the US for additional aid during the transition. At the same time, the Chinese ambassador in Dhaka met with the leadership of Jamaat-e-Islami, a natural engagement between the two, as China became the main supporter of Pakistan and one of the few countries to interact with the Taliban in Afghanistan. This may be another negative development for Western interests in the Indo-Pacific.

Published in Firstpost, September 22, 2024.