



EU, U.S. Watching Parliamentary Elections in Bangladesh with Concern

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The parliamentary elections in Bangladesh, which will be held on 7 January, probably will be won by the Awami League, which has been in power since 2009 and is led by the current Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. A boycott of the vote by the main opposition party, which accuses the government of creating unequal conditions for electoral competition, as well as strong social polarisation may lead to mass protests, violence, and destabilisation in the country. This in turn may weaken the credibility of Hasina's government and hamper Bangladesh's cooperation with the U.S. and the EU. China and Russia may use this opportunity to increase their influence in South Asia.

Pre-Election Drama. Voters in Bangladesh, which has a population of 165 million, will elect 300 members of the unicameral parliament (Jatiya Sangsad) this month. An additional 50 seats are reserved for women, based on the parties' vote distribution. In total, 2,260 candidates from 29 parties or as independents are running for seats. However, only one party really counts, the centre-left Awami League (People's League, or AL), which has been in power since 2009. It was headed from 1981 by Sheikh Hasina, who is a daughter of the first president of Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and was prime minister from 1996 to 2001. The main opposition force, the conservative-right Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), is boycotting the elections.

The BNP demanded that Hasina resign and that a neutral and temporary (90-day) caretaker government be established for the elections period. This system had existed in Bangladesh since the restoration of democracy in the early 1990s, but was abandoned in 2011 during the AL's first term. According to the BNP, the electoral irregularities of the 2014 and 2018 elections are proof that the next vote held under the AL government will not be equal nor free.

To pressure the government, the BNP organised the largest protest in years on 28 October, but it turned into riots and clashes with the police in which 16 people died, including two police officers, and 5,500 people were injured. The authorities cited these events to take actions against the opposition. By

mid-December, more than 20,000 BNP activists had been arrested, including the Secretary General and most of the rest of the party's leaders. On 12 December, the national Electoral Commission banned all non-election related meetings and rallies until election day. Despite this, the BNP is calling on its activists to strike and protest to maintain pressure on the government, which may be a harbinger of a serious confrontation.

Main Issues. The limiting of civil rights and freedoms is one of the main topics of this year's campaign. In *The Economist's* 2022 Democracy Index, Bangladesh ranked 73rd and was listed among the world's hybrid regimes. For years, human rights organisations have been pointing to the deteriorating state of democracy in Bangladesh, cases of extrajudicial killings, disappearances of activists, and arrests and intimidation of AL's political opponents. A report in November by experts with the UN Human Rights Council pointed at a sharp rise in political violence, use of excessive force by the authorities, internet shutdowns to disrupt protests, the "weaponisation of the judicial system to attack journalists, human rights defenders, and civil society leaders", as well as limiting the space for expression and criticism of the authorities. In the 2023 press freedom ranking prepared by Reporters Without Borders, Bangladesh was 163rd out of 180 countries.

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BNP leaders have been targeted in attacks and through pressure from the authorities for many years. The party's former leader, Khaleda Zia (a two-time prime minister and widow of the sixth president, Ziaur Rahman), was sentenced to 17 years in prison in 2018 on dubious corruption charges. The party is now led by her son, Tarique Rahman, although in exile in London because he faces a number of criminal charges in his homeland. Other critics of the government are also the target of harassment, such as Muhammad Yunus, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006, who was sentenced in January this year to six months in prison for violating labour law.

Another spark for the opposition to Hasina's government is the economic situation. Although Bangladesh remains overall a [positive example of economic development](#), social progress, and recovery from the pandemic (the IMF estimates that GDP growth in 2023 was 6%), but high inflation (in November 2023, it was 9.5%), and job losses have worsened the situation of many in the country. Employees in the clothing sector, one of the key parts of the economy, are increasingly demanding pay rises and improved working conditions, which has led to demonstrations, for example, the two-week long mass protests in Dhaka in November last year.

International context. That Bangladesh hold fair elections is important for the EU, the country's largest trading partner (19.5% of total trade in 2022), the recipient of almost half of its exports (45.7%), and an important source of development aid and investment. In 2022, the two sides initiated a Political Dialogue and negotiations of a new Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (CPA), and in October 2023, Hasina was a special guest at the EU Global Gateway Forum in Brussels. However, in September last year the EU decided not to send its Election Observation Mission to the upcoming elections, claiming it would not "serve for its purpose this time". The European Parliament, in its resolution of 14 September, also expressed serious concern about the deteriorating human rights situation in Bangladesh, warning that it may negatively impact the decision to extend the country's participation in the Everything But Arms (EBA) trade preferences system.

The U.S. is even more decisive than the EU when it comes to maintaining democratic standards. In 2021, the Department of Justice imposed sanctions on members of the government paramilitary Rapid Action Battalion for grave human rights violations, and Bangladesh was not invited to the first [Summit for Democracy](#) in December. U.S. representatives called for free and fair elections in 2023 and announced visa restrictions for people who "undermine the democratic electoral process". The American pressure is met with an assertive response from the Bangladeshi authorities and leads to tensions, in times when the U.S. shows growing interest in Bangladesh due to its role in the Indo-Pacific.

China officially considers the elections an internal matter of Bangladesh. In recent years, China has become its second trading partner (15.9% share in 2022), the largest source of imports of goods (24.5%), and the main supplier of arms (75%). Since Bangladesh's involvement in the Belt and Road

Initiative in 2016, [China has provided it with loans](#) for a number of strategic investments, such as the \$3.6 billion Padma Bridge that was completed in 2022. They hope that they will continue good cooperation with Hasina's government also in the area of security.

Russia, which announced a [pivot towards Eurasia](#) after its aggression against Ukraine, is also intensifying its cooperation with Bangladesh. Sergei Lavrov was the first Russian foreign minister since Bangladesh's independence in 1971 to visit Dhaka, which took place in September 2023. In October, Russia delivered nuclear fuel to the country's first nuclear power plant in Rooppur, which is being built by Rosatom (\$12.65 billion, of which \$11.35 billion is to be covered by a Russian loan). Last November, for the first time in history, Russian ships arrived in the Bangladeshi port of Chittagong after exercises with the navies of Myanmar and then India in the Bay of Bengal. In November, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova condemned the U.S. criticism of Bangladesh, describing it as "shameless interference" in the country's internal affairs.

Conclusions. The boycott of the elections by the main opposition party and the mass arrests of its members mean that the Awami League will most likely win the elections decisively, and Hasina will return as prime minister of Bangladesh for the fourth time in a row. However, strong internal polarisation and existential importance of this election to BNP pose a serious risk of mass protests and clashes during the elections and in the following days. However, it seems that the AL, which has secured the loyalty of the army and the justice system, will be able to bring the situation under control. However, elections held in such conditions will be another sign of the deteriorating state of democracy and the rule of law in Bangladesh.

Hasina's new government will continue its non-aligned foreign policy based on balancing between the major powers. However, the way the elections are organised may lead to a serious crisis in relations with the West. If the protests are violently suppressed, the U.S. and the EU may be under pressure to introduce restrictive measures against the AL government. Biden's administration may, for example, expand the list of officials banned from entering the U.S. In the case of the EU, it will be more difficult for it to extend trade preferences under the EBA and continue negotiations on the new CPA, which would harm Bangladesh's economic interests.

Tensions in relations with the West would be an opportunity for China and Russia to further increase their influence in South Asia and the Indo-Pacific region more broadly, including in the security sphere. Bangladesh will likely be invited to join BRICS+ during this year's Russian presidency in this format. Hasina remaining in power will also be beneficial for India, which has strengthened cooperation with Bangladesh in many areas in recent years. Closer relations with China, Russia, and India will reduce the effectiveness of Western criticism of Bangladesh for human rights violations and make international pressure on the country to improve democratic standards more difficult.