



A New Era in Bangladesh? The First Hundred Days of Reform

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	i
I. Introduction	1
II. The Road to Regime Change	3
A. Toward a One-Party State.....	3
B. From Job Quota Reform to Mass Movement.....	5
C. The Aftermath.....	6
III. An Ambitious Reform Agenda	9
A. Overhauling Governance and Institutions	9
1. Judiciary	10
2. Administration	10
3. Security sector	11
B. Constitutional Change	12
C. Economic Policy.....	13
D. Justice and Accountability.....	15
E. Credible Elections	17
IV. Implications and Recommendations	18
A. Building Political Consensus	18
B. Maintaining Momentum	21
C. Pursuing Justice.....	23
D. Mobilising International Support.....	23
V. Conclusion	26
APPENDICES	
A. About the International Crisis Group	27
B. Crisis Group Reports and Briefings on Asia since 2021	28
C. Crisis Group Board of Trustees	30

Principal Findings

What's new? Three months after an uprising toppled former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, the reform agenda of Bangladesh's interim government is becoming clearer – along with the pitfalls that lie in its path. Led by Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus, the administration is expected to remain in office for another year and maybe longer.

Why does it matter? After fifteen years of Hasina's rule, Bangladesh has a once-in-a-generation opportunity to improve governance and put checks in place that would stop another autocratic regime from emerging. If the interim government falters, however, the country could revert to the status quo ante or even enter a period of military rule.

What should be done? The interim government should aim to produce quick results to maintain public support for more ambitious reforms. It should avoid staying in power too long and build consensus on new measures among political parties. External actors should offer aid; India should work to repair its image with the Bangladeshi people.

Executive Summary

The interim government in Bangladesh has a monumental task before it. Taking the reins on 8 August, three days after a mass uprising ousted the increasingly authoritarian Sheikh Hasina, the administration led by Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus has moved quickly to delineate a bold agenda of political, governance and economic reforms. Many Bangladeshis describe Hasina's downfall as a "second liberation" (a reference to the 1971 independence war), bespeaking the public's appetite for major change. For now, Yunus and his colleagues have widespread support, but popular expectations are double-edged. If the interim administration falters in making reforms, the outcome is likely to be an early election with little progress; in the worst-case scenario, the military could assume power. The interim government should look to score a few quick wins to keep its social support base strong as it builds consensus around key reforms and prepares the country for credible elections. International actors should back Yunus's administration and bolster the Bangladeshi economy to help inaugurate a new era in national politics.

After fifteen years in office, Sheikh Hasina's administration had grown deeply unpopular. To hold on to power, her government systematically undermined the independence of Bangladesh's institutions, particularly the police, judiciary and bureaucracy. Widespread human rights violations and regular crackdowns on her opponents, coupled with economic mismanagement, stark social inequality and worsening corruption, had weakened support for her party, the Awami League (AL), particularly in the past five years. The party claimed a massive win in the January election, but it owed victory to an opposition boycott and low turnout. In June, a Supreme Court decision reinstating controversial quotas for government jobs provided the spark for student-led protests that ignited the following month. Hasina's brutal response – including a nationwide internet shutdown and a deadly crackdown – saw the student movement transform into a popular revolt that forced her to flee the country hastily.

The euphoria that accompanied Hasina's departure lingers, but the harsh reality of the road ahead is becoming increasingly clear. Already in bad shape, Bangladesh's economy is limping along, having taken a further hit from more than a month of protests and the uncertainty of the transition. Yunus's team has struggled to restore law and order, dependent largely on a police force that was heavily implicated in the anti-protest repression. Maintaining popular support will be crucial, particularly given the interim government's improvised legal foundations.

Rebuilding the country's institutions will also be no mean feat, and while the interim administration is the most inclusive Bangladesh has ever seen, many of its members have little experience in government or management. Maintaining the backing of key political players is already proving challenging: some stand to benefit from an early election, and even Yunus's allies have divergent views about issues such as constitutional reform and accountability for atrocities committed under Hasina's rule. While Hasina's party is now in disarray, Yunus may also face obstruction from pro-AL factions and individuals.

Managing, let alone meeting, sky-high public expectations will be extremely challenging. Experience suggests that the longer the interim government is in power, the louder calls for early elections will get and the larger doubts about its legitimacy will grow. Yunus will also be forced to take unpopular decisions, including on economic reforms that may hurt vulnerable sections of society and on the extent of accountability for human rights violations committed during Hasina's time in power. Many Bangladeshis want revenge for the AL's abuses, an impulse that Yunus is – rightly – not keen to indulge.

While challenges abound, the situation presents Bangladesh with an unprecedented opportunity. Since 1990, two parties – Hasina's AL and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) of her fierce rival, Khaleda Zia – have dominated politics, taking turns in government. Both have manipulated state organs, twisted election rules, mobilised party thugs and built patronage networks to cling to power. But Hasina took these tactics to extremes and pushed the Bangladeshi people too far. As a result, she has handed the interim government a once-in-a-generation opening to put in place stronger checks and balances on future governments. The overarching goal of forthcoming reforms is to make sure the authoritarianism and cronyism of the past fifteen years cannot come back.

Even if it is unclear how successful the Yunus team can be in reaching this goal, the alternatives look unappealing. An early election would likely bring the BNP to office with few restraints on its power; given its record, many suspect it would prove little better than the AL. If political and economic conditions were to deteriorate significantly, the army might intervene, beginning a period of military rule.

The best insurance for Yunus's administration against those seeking to undermine it will be to deliver a steady stream of results, enabling it to maintain public support as it embarks on deeper reforms. Quick wins could include steps to address petty corruption in public services, improve electricity supply and reduce high prices. Strong public support for the interim government could put pressure on other political forces, particularly the BNP, to fall into line around its agenda. In any case, the interim government should be unstinting in seeking consensus among political parties and other key groups, such as the army and students who led the protests that overthrew Hasina. It should balance demands for justice with the need for reconciliation, staying within the bounds of the constitution to mitigate the danger of its decisions being invalidated later. It should also seek to hold fresh elections under a reformed polling system within a realistic timeframe, which should not extend beyond eighteen months.

Foreign governments and multilateral institutions should provide the interim government with technical and financial assistance, including on security, judicial, electoral and economic reform. Foreign governments should also help recover the proceeds of corruption and state-sanctioned theft that are sitting in banks and property markets outside Bangladesh. India, which staunchly supported Hasina throughout her rule, should take steps to repair the resulting damage to its image. Support at home and abroad will be crucial to ensure that Bangladesh does not lose this chance at the political and economic change that many of its people long for.

Dhaka/Brussels, 14 November 2024

A New Era in Bangladesh? The First Hundred Days of Reform

I. Introduction

Bangladesh has seen a tumultuous 2024. Months after prevailing in a stage-managed general election, the unpopular premier, Sheikh Hasina, was forced to give up power by student demonstrations that turned into a mass uprising. Her government's attempts to quell the student protests with deadly force backfired, as the bloodshed brought Bangladeshis from all walks of life into the streets to call for her ouster. On 5 August, she fled for India as thousands of protesters closed in on her Dhaka residence.

In the wake of Hasina's departure, army chief Waker-Uz-Zaman and President Mohammed Shahabuddin opened talks with student leaders and opposition parties. Waker, a distant relative of Hasina's who had been in his job for barely a month, had little desire to assume power himself. He quickly acceded to students' demands for an interim government led by Muhammad Yunus, the famous pioneer of microcredit dubbed "banker to the poor", who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006.¹ On 8 August, Yunus was sworn in and named a sixteen-member cabinet. He appointed the most diverse government Bangladesh has ever seen, comprising former generals, bureaucrats, academics, prominent civil society figures and student leaders. The cabinet includes four women and two members of minority communities.²

There is little doubt that the interim government has a strong mandate for reform, given widespread unhappiness with the country's perceived democratic backsliding and economic decline under Sheikh Hasina. In the wake of her departure, few are demanding a return to the status quo ante. Instead, many are clamouring for what Yunus has termed a "new Bangladesh": a system that works for all citizens, is accountable to them and respects their individual rights.³ Yunus has echoed the students who ousted Hasina in speaking of a "second liberation", a chance for the country to start afresh. The constitution says the interim government must hold fresh elections within three months, but Yunus and his allies appear likely to be in power for at least another year, due more to public and military support (and backing from political parties) than to any legal basis.

This timeframe is short, given the scale of the political, governance and economic reforms they want to undertake. The country's past suggests that the government will be able to maintain public support and political consensus only for a limited period.

¹ In 2007, during a period of military-backed emergency rule, Yunus briefly flirted with starting a political party. After Hasina came to power, he faced numerous legal battles and many of his businesses were seized. See "In Dhaka, a prime minister's 'vendetta' is shaping politics", *Financial Times*, 13 January 2023.

² "Yunus-led interim Bangladesh govt sworn in; diverse members include 2 student leaders", Radio Free Asia, 8 August 2024.

³ "Yunus sworn in as Bangladeshi prime minister, citing country's 'second independence'", *Le Monde*, 8 August 2024.

The powerful head of the military has already indicated that he believes elections should be held within eighteen months.

This report looks at what the interim government has done in its first 100 days with an eye toward drawing lessons it can apply in the time it has left. The report also makes suggestions to outside powers interested in helping the interim government succeed. It is based on more than 40 interviews conducted both remotely and in Bangladesh with interim government officials, politicians, student leaders, civil society activists, analysts and others involved in the fast-moving events of the past year. About two thirds of the interviewees were men, reflecting their dominant role in the country's politics and government. The report also draws upon Crisis Group's previous work on Bangladesh.⁴

⁴ See Crisis Group Asia Report N°336, *Beyond the Election: Overcoming Bangladesh's Political Deadlock*, 4 January 2024; Pierre Prakash, "Bangladesh on Edge after Crushing Student Protests", Crisis Group Commentary, 25 July 2024; and Crisis Group Statement, "Bangladesh: The Long Road Ahead", 7 August 2024.

II. The Road to Regime Change

Sheikh Hasina's sudden downfall resulted from a combination of longstanding grievances and her reaction to the student-led quota reform movement. The protests emerged at a time of burgeoning discontent with her rule, stemming from both a struggling economy wracked by cronyism and a series of government steps that many citizens felt undermined Bangladeshi democracy. The government's unpopularity had only grown since it secured another five-year term in January's deeply flawed election.⁵ The resentment ran so deep that when Hasina responded to the protests with extreme violence, the demonstrations quickly morphed into a mass movement aimed at removing her from power.

A. Toward a One-Party State

Since military rule ended in 1990, two parties have dominated Bangladesh politics: Sheikh Hasina's Awami League (AL) and Khaleda Zia's Bangladesh National Party (BNP).⁶ Each represents a dynasty: Hasina is the daughter of independence leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, while Zia is the wife of military ruler Ziaur Rahman, who became president two years after Sheikh Mujib's assassination in August 1975. For almost two decades, the two parties alternated in government. A constitutional clause mandating that a neutral caretaker government oversee elections helped ensure regular transfers of power.

This pattern of anti-incumbency came to an end, however, following the December 2008 election. After winning a landslide victory with a reform agenda, Sheikh Hasina amended the constitution to scrap the caretaker government provision and consolidate control of key institutions, including the election commission, bureaucracy and police.⁷ Her party secured large majorities in the 2014, 2018 and 2024 elections through a combination of opposition boycotts and vote rigging.⁸ The result, though, was a government that lacked legitimacy, particularly in recent years. Curbs on basic rights, including freedom of speech and association, helped keep Hasina in power, but eroded her popular support.

These developments dovetailed with growing economic challenges. Bangladesh's high growth rates over the last fifteen years masked major structural problems, in part because Hasina was effective at selling the idea of an "economic miracle".⁹ While tens of millions of Bangladeshis rose out of poverty after democracy returned in the early

⁵ "Declining Optimism in Bangladesh: Insights from the 2024 Citizens' Perception Survey", The Asia Foundation, 18 June 2024.

⁶ For background, see Crisis Group Asia Reports N°121, *Bangladesh Today*, 23 October 2006; 151, *Restoring Democracy in Bangladesh*, 28 April 2008; 182, *Bangladesh: Getting Police Reform on Track*, 11 December 2009; 226, *Bangladesh: Back to the Future*, 13 June 2012; 264, *Mapping Bangladesh's Political Crisis*, 9 February 2015; 277, *Political Conflict, Extremism and Criminal Justice in Bangladesh*, 11 April 2016; 295, *Countering Jihadist Militancy in Bangladesh*, 28 February 2018; and *Beyond the Election: Overcoming Bangladesh's Political Deadlock*, op. cit.; and Crisis Group Asia Briefing N°84, *Bangladesh: Elections and Beyond*, 11 December 2008.

⁷ Crisis Group Report, *Beyond the Election: Overcoming Bangladesh's Political Deadlock*, op. cit.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ See, for example, "Bangladesh's economic miracle is in jeopardy", *The Economist*, 1 March 2023.

1990s, inequality also worsened significantly, with wages for low-income workers remaining paltry and the wealthy mostly avoiding tax.¹⁰ Many remained just above the poverty line and were thus highly vulnerable to economic shocks. The COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine were two such jolts, with the ensuing spike in commodity prices hitting the urban poor hard. The government mismanaged its response, in part to protect regime cronies, causing inflation to remain stubbornly high.¹¹

The government's unpopularity was evident well before the January 2024 election, but Hasina was able to hold on. Led by the BNP, opposition parties held large rallies demanding that a caretaker government oversee the polls, but they failed to generate the mass movement needed to force the government to accede to their demands – in part because Hasina had engendered fear among the public with repeated crackdowns on her political opponents.¹² Strong support from New Delhi was also crucial in limiting international condemnation of her measures in late October 2023, when police broke up a BNP rally and jailed the party's leadership. The repression prompted the BNP to boycott the vote, allowing the AL and its allies – including AL members running as dummy “independents” – to claim nearly every seat.¹³ Washington had been threatening consequences if Dhaka did not ensure a credible election, but it backed off to preserve its relationship with New Delhi.¹⁴

Aware of the AL's declining popularity, party insiders and businesspeople had hoped that the post-election period would be an opportunity for renewal, particularly on economic governance.¹⁵ But there were few new faces in Hasina's cabinet, and her nominees to head the planning and finance ministries were both men in their early eighties with little economic experience. Her government struggled to recover public support, instead getting bogged down in a succession of corruption scandals, involving the former army chief, former police chief and a high-ranking tax official.¹⁶ Politically, Hasina also had little new to offer; she continued to dedicate significant portions of her speeches to reminding voters of her father's role in securing independence in 1971, the threats to her life she had faced while carrying out her political “duty”, and the

¹⁰ In 2022, Bangladesh had a Gini co-efficient of 0.50, up from 0.39 in 1991-1992; over the same period, the richest 10 per cent's share of national income rose from 29.2 per cent to 40.9 per cent. (The Gini co-efficient is an index of inequality, with 0 representing absolutely equal distribution of wealth in a given society and 1 representing a situation where one person holds all the wealth.) This score is unlikely to capture the full extent of inequality, as it does not capture the many billions of dollars that wealthy individuals have moved offshore illegally. See “Reducing income inequality: An agenda in search of actions”, *The Daily Star*, 23 March 2024; and “Trade-related Illicit Financial Flows in 134 Developing Countries”, *Global Financial Integrity*, 16 December 2021.

¹¹ Crisis Group Report, *Beyond the Election: Overcoming Bangladesh's Political Deadlock*, op. cit.

¹² Crisis Group interviews, politicians and political analysts, October 2023.

¹³ “Bangladesh's flawed election increases polarization, risk of violence”, *The Diplomat*, 10 January 2024.

¹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, January, June and September 2024. See also “India pressed US to go easy on Hasina before her ouster, officials say”, *Washington Post*, 15 August 2024.

¹⁵ Crisis Group Report, *Beyond the Election: Overcoming Bangladesh's Political Deadlock*, op. cit.

¹⁶ See, for example, “Benazir-Aziz: Govt in discomfort all of a sudden”, *Prothom Alo*, 8 June 2024; “Benazir's corruption and the crisis of accountability”, *The Daily Star*, 16 June 2024; and “Matiur thrived on insider trading”, *The Daily Star*, 7 July 2024.

alleged dangers of the BNP and its one-time ally, Jamaat-e-Islami, returning to power.¹⁷ These lines largely failed to resonate with younger Bangladeshis, many of whom could barely remember a government run by anyone other than the AL.

B. From Job Quota Reform to Mass Movement

The trigger for Hasina's ouster came unexpectedly. On 1 July 2024, students in Dhaka began agitating for reform of controversial quotas under which almost one third of government jobs were reserved for the descendants of veterans of Bangladesh's 1971 liberation war.¹⁸ The government had faced a similar movement in 2018 but, eager to prevent it from escalating ahead of elections that year, had managed to derail it by ordering some of the quotas abolished. The new protest movement was triggered by a June 2024 Supreme Court ruling reinstating these quotas, based on an appeal by descendants of freedom fighters.¹⁹

Led by a group called Students Against Discrimination that included elements of the 2018 movement, the protests slowly gathered momentum on state university campuses through the first half of July, but they seemed unlikely to pose a serious threat to the government. That changed on 14 July, when Hasina appeared to suggest that the student protesters were akin to *razakars* – Bangladeshis who collaborated with the Pakistani military during the 1971 independence war and were implicated in massive human rights abuses against civilians. At a press conference, she asked: "Are the children and grandchildren of freedom fighters not talented? Are only the children and grandchildren of the *razakars* talented?"²⁰ This insinuation incensed the students, who declared that Hasina was an "autocrat", shifting their anger away from job quotas and toward the government's repressive behaviour. As a prominent civil society leader noted:

There's a generation gap. Hasina wasn't able to understand the mood of the country. It's not that she was misinformed – nothing happened without her giving the green light. But she thought she could handle it. In reality, she had lost touch.²¹

At this point, the government might still have defused the protests by opening a dialogue with student leaders, but instead it responded with deadly violence. On 16 July, police killed six protesters, including a young man in Rangpur who stood alone and unarmed in front of officers with his arms outstretched, in what would become an iconic moment.²²

¹⁷ Jamaat-e-Islami is Bangladesh's largest Islamist party. It was banned after Bangladesh gained independence from Pakistan in 1971 due to its collaboration with Islamabad in the preceding war, when its paramilitary forces had committed atrocities. It was later allowed back onto the political scene. Since then, the BNP and Jamaat have often been in alliance, though Jamaat has also collaborated with the AL. See also "Full text of the election manifesto of Bangladesh Awami League", *Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha*, 27 December 2023.

¹⁸ Prakash, "Bangladesh on Edge after Crushing Student Protests", op. cit.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid. See also "Who said what?", *The Daily Star*, 16 July 2024.

²¹ Crisis Group interview, prominent civil society leader, September 2024.

²² "How Abu Sayeed was shot and killed in Rangpur during clash between police and protesters", *The Business Standard*, 17 July 2024.

Police and members of the AL's student wing killed dozens more people on 18 July, as protests spread to private university campuses.²³

Having already shut down universities, the government switched off the internet and ordered the military to enforce a shoot-on-sight curfew, infuriating many Bangladeshis and prompting non-students to join the protests in large numbers.²⁴ In contrast to traditional political activities, which are heavily male-dominated, women also played a prominent role in the protest movement, both during the earlier, peaceful phase and after the government resorted to violence.

In a bid to quell the unrest once and for all, the security forces shot hundreds dead between 19 and 21 July and arrested thousands more, including student leaders, who were forced to record video statements calling off the movement. The virulence of the crackdown seemed to take the wind out of the protests at first. But when the government restored internet access on 28 July, after a ten-day blackout – and simultaneously failed to release the detained student leaders – the protests quickly resumed. On 3 August, student movement coordinators demanded Sheikh Hasina's resignation and announced a campaign of "comprehensive non-cooperation", for instance refusing to pay taxes, attend school, go to work or send remittances through formal channels.²⁵ On 4 August, almost 100 people – mostly protesters, but also fourteen police – were killed in fresh violence. The government ordered another curfew, but on the morning of 5 August hundreds of thousands of people heeded a call from student leaders to march on Dhaka despite the risks.

After the army refused to intervene, Hasina was left with little choice but to flee. As protesters neared her official residence, she hurriedly took a helicopter to a nearby airbase, where she boarded an air force plane for India.²⁶ Some have claimed that what unfolded that morning was a "soft coup" conducted by the armed forces, but in reality Waker, the army chief, let the marchers proceed only reluctantly and under pressure from within military ranks.²⁷ A crackdown would have meant not only international opprobrium for the army – in the form of sanctions and the loss of prestigious UN peacekeeping roles for Bangladeshi forces – but also internal ructions that could have turned violent. "The army was compelled to do it – it wasn't voluntary. They were at risk themselves if they stood by Hasina", a senior BNP official observed.²⁸

C. *The Aftermath*

After Hasina left, President Shahabuddin – whose role would typically be ceremonial – found himself legally holding the reins of power. In reality, though, army chief Waker was the key player. Shortly after Hasina fled on 5 August, he met with major political party leaders and announced to the country that an interim government would be formed. The president dissolved parliament the following day. Later, on 6 August, student representatives held marathon talks with the president, Waker

²³ Prakash, "Bangladesh on Edge after Crushing Student Protests", op. cit.

²⁴ Crisis Group Statement, "Bangladesh: The Long Road Ahead", op. cit.

²⁵ "Non-cooperation movement: Protesters announce 15 points", *The Daily Star*, 3 August 2024.

²⁶ Crisis Group Statement, "Bangladesh: The Long Road Ahead", op. cit.

²⁷ Crisis Group interviews, sources close to the military; analysts, September 2024.

²⁸ Crisis Group interview, senior BNP official, September 2024.

and other senior military officers, who eventually agreed to appoint Yunus as head of the interim administration.

The constitution makes no mention of an interim government, specifying only procedures for an “emergency government”, and in 2011, the AL had scrapped the provision for caretaker governments to hold power ahead of elections. While an emergency government would have been more in keeping with the constitution, it would have required the approval of the prime minister (who had fled the country), would have been limited to 120 days and would have suspended a number of fundamental rights. Furthermore, past emergency governments have typically been led by the military, whereas the students in this case demanded a civilian government, threatening to return to the streets if the army assumed power, whether in full or in part. In any case, the military had little desire to rule directly, and wanted to see order restored, so it agreed to let Yunus take the helm.

Uncertain as to the legal basis for these interim arrangements, however, President Shahabuddin sought the Supreme Court’s opinion. The Court moved quickly. On 8 August, its Appellate Division ruled that in the circumstances an interim government comprising a chief adviser and advisers could be formed, paving the way for Yunus and his cabinet to be sworn in.²⁹ Even so, this opinion may not be definitive. A prominent legal expert told Crisis Group that he believed the interim government was “clearly unconstitutional”, because the president did not have the prime minister’s approval to dissolve parliament. He said any decision it takes may later be declared invalid.³⁰ These concerns are heightened following a comment by Shahabuddin to a journalist in October, in which he raised doubt as to whether Hasina had formally resigned. His remarks prompted students to join protests demanding Shahabuddin’s removal, but the government has resisted these calls, likely because of the risk of triggering a constitutional crisis.³¹

The interim government stretches the constitution’s bounds in other ways. The charter specifies that elections be held within 90 days of parliament’s dissolution, seemingly setting a deadline of 4 November. Meanwhile, there is also the issue of whether the interim government has the authority to enact, amend or repeal laws. Section 93 empowers the president to enact ordinances that are equivalent to laws of parliament in certain circumstances, with the measures later put to parliament for approval. This method has its legal critics as well, but the government is banking on a combination of a pliant Supreme Court, political consensus, military backing and popular legitimacy to see it through. This position reflects Bangladesh’s political history, in which military governments have twice got parliament to later validate extra-constitutional actions through constitutional amendments.³²

²⁹ In its opinion, the court said: “To fill the constitutional vacuum, the president may, in case of emergency, appoint a chief adviser and other advisers to carry out the executive functions of the state as an interim measure. The president may administer oaths to the appointed chief adviser and other advisers”. See “Advisory council approves Interim Government Ordinance, 2024 draft”, United News of Bangladesh, 20 September 2024.

³⁰ Crisis Group interview, constitutional expert, September 2024.

³¹ “Tensions grip Bangladesh as student protesters demand president’s resignation”, Associated Press, 23 October 2024.

³² The fifth amendment validated all laws made under military rule after the August 1975 coup, while the seventh amendment legitimised the actions of Hussain Mohammad Ershad’s regime between

Its potentially contentious legal status notwithstanding, the interim government's most pressing challenge when it took office on 8 August was to restore law and order. In the wake of Hasina's departure, many police had abandoned their posts, in part due to fear of reprisal from protesters (see Section III.A). Around 250 people are thought to have been killed between 5-11 August, mainly in attacks on people linked to Hasina's regime, especially AL members. Members of religious minorities, particularly Hindus, have also been targets, but primarily because of their AL affiliation rather than religion.³³ Police began returning to work on 12 August and political violence has since subsided, though not entirely. Mob violence, including lynchings, continues to break out, while arsonists have attacked the country's industrial zones. Interim government officials have appealed to citizens not to take the law into their own hands.

The post-Hasina retribution, however, was more restrained than many observers had anticipated. After fifteen years of extreme repression in which the regime had persecuted many of its opponents, analysts told Crisis Group that they had feared that thousands, possibly even tens of thousands, might be killed in reprisal.³⁴ In the event, BNP leaders did what they could to control rank-and-file members to prevent mass bloodshed. Many families also have members on both sides of the political divide, which also helped minimise violence. "I have to give credit to Bangladeshi society", said an interim government official. "Somehow this revenge killing was avoided. ... We haven't seen the worst-case scenario".³⁵

One explanation for the relative lack of violence is that AL officials did not put up much resistance. At the grassroots level, BNP operatives quickly took control of lucrative rackets that had previously been under AL control, such as extorting roadside shops, collecting illegal tolls, and demanding protection fees from illegal businesses, such as brick kilns and quarries.³⁶

1982 and 1986. Both amendments were later declared unconstitutional, however. "Bangladesh's post-revolution government is sailing through uncharted legal waters", *The Business Standard*, 23 August 2024.

³³ One organisation reported 205 incidents targeting religious minorities in the days after Hasina's ouster, including attacks on Hindu temples. Some of the group's allegations have been disputed, however, with an investigation seeming to debunk its claims that nine Hindus had been killed in sectarian violence. Regardless, Yunus very quickly condemned the attacks as "heinous", and few have been reported since police began returning to their posts. Indian politicians and media have vastly exaggerated the level of violence, peddling claims that Hindus were "slaughtered" and the victims of "genocide". See "205 incidents of persecution of minorities since Aug 5: Oilka Parishad", *The Daily Star*, 10 August 2024; "The far-right videos distorting the truth of Bangladesh minority attacks", BBC, 18 August 2024; "Islamophobic, alarmist': How some India outlets covered Bangladesh crisis", Al Jazeera, 8 August 2024; and "Claims of sectarian motives in nine Hindu deaths falter under scrutiny", Netra News, 30 October 2024.

³⁴ Crisis Group interviews, analysts, September 2024.

³⁵ Crisis Group interview, interim government official, September 2024.

³⁶ Crisis Group interviews, sources with knowledge of the matter, September 2024.

III. An Ambitious Reform Agenda

A key challenge for the interim government will be to manage sky-high public expectations. Given the constraints on Yunus and his allies – including their lack of governing experience, the pent-up grievances in Bangladeshi society and the country’s fractious politics – it will most likely be impossible for them to deliver entirely on their ambitious agenda.

Nevertheless, the country has a rare opportunity for political, economic and social renewal. The atrocities of July and August have created a “never again” moment: a desire to put in place guardrails sturdy enough to prevent another autocrat from emerging. To achieve this goal, the government will need to amend laws and the constitution; reform the election commission and electoral system; and make changes within the police and bureaucracy, given the centrality of these institutions to holding free and fair elections. As an interim government figure put it, “If we don’t repair our institutions, there won’t be free and fair elections or a smooth transition, so what will be the point of all this?”³⁷

On 11 September, Yunus formed six commissions to spearhead these reforms. Headed by respected civil society leaders and former bureaucrats, each of these bodies will handle a key area: the judiciary, the electoral system, state administration, the police, corruption and the constitution.³⁸ The commissions began work on 1 October and will report back by the end of the year; the interim government will then hold talks with political parties and undertake public consultations to complete plans for reforms in these six areas.³⁹ It has since announced four additional reform commissions, focused on health, media, labour rights and women’s affairs. The commissions have nonetheless been criticised for their lack of inclusivity, particularly with regard to women and minorities.⁴⁰

A. Overhauling Governance and Institutions

Perhaps the most difficult of all reforms will be to overhaul Bangladesh’s institutions. During her fifteen years in power, Sheikh Hasina worked assiduously to undermine their independence so that they would do her bidding.⁴¹ She typically did so by stacking them with supporters, showering them with largesse or cowing their senior officials. Already, the interim government has replaced several senior and mid-level members of key institutions, particularly in the judiciary, bureaucracy and police. Many officials close to the AL remain in place, however. A full clean-out is impractical, and the government wants to give all those who remain a chance to get behind the reform agenda.

³⁷ Crisis Group interview, interim government source, September 2024.

³⁸ “Yunus charts a path to reforms”, *The Daily Star*, 12 September 2024.

³⁹ “Timeline unveiled for reforms preceding polls”, *Financial Express*, 20 September 2024.

⁴⁰ “Reform commissions: Less women, no members of the religious minority”, *Prothom Alo*, 24 October 2024.

⁴¹ Crisis Group Report, *Beyond the Election: Overcoming Bangladesh’s Political Deadlock*, op. cit.

1. Judiciary

Bangladesh's judicial system has never been entirely safe from political interference, but under Hasina the meddling assumed alarming proportions as her administration used the courts to cudgel her political opponents. In 2017, the chief justice himself was pressured to resign after the Supreme Court he headed ruled that parliament could not sack judges; facing serious threats to his safety, he later fled the country and was convicted in absentia of seemingly bogus corruption charges.⁴² By going after the country's top judge, Hasina sent a clear signal that any member of the judiciary who defied her would face dire consequences.⁴³ Over her last decade in power, the legal system got clogged with hundreds of thousands – by some estimates, millions – of cases filed against regime opponents, including Yunus himself. The charges were often based on flimsy or even non-existent evidence, but judges were loath to dismiss cases for fear of retribution.⁴⁴

The interim government has already taken several steps to restore the judiciary's independence. Under pressure from student demonstrators, the former chief justice resigned shortly after Hasina fled, with a respected jurist, Syed Refaat Ahmed, taking the job. Unjust cases filed against protest leaders in July and August are being dropped; earlier charges against opposition figures are also expected to be withdrawn gradually. On 21 September, the new chief justice outlined judicial reforms aimed at addressing the "crisis of public trust". His main plan is to abolish the executive's control of promotion and transfer of judges, creating instead a separate secretariat under the Supreme Court to select the most capable jurists.⁴⁵ In the meantime, the interim government has transferred and promoted more than 300 lower court judges.⁴⁶ A senior judge told Crisis Group that his colleagues already feel a new freedom. "The biggest change is the level of politicisation and pressure that we faced before – nothing like that is happening now", he said.⁴⁷

2. Administration

The interim government faces a similar challenge – and has adopted a similar approach – in restoring an efficient, impartial bureaucracy. The task is immense, given the size of the civil service. The interim government has already appointed dozens of new high-level officials, while terminating those deemed close to the AL and reinstating several civil servants who had been forced into retirement.⁴⁸ It announced 400 promotions in three batches in August, and it has replaced almost all the 64 deputy commissioners, a powerful position in the civil service. In mid-August, the government also

⁴² "Bangladesh: Ex-chief justice alleges he was 'forced' to resign", Al Jazeera, 28 September 2018; and "Bangladesh sentences former chief justice to 11 years in jail", Al Jazeera, 10 November 2021.

⁴³ In another egregious example, the Anti-Corruption Commission filed charges against a judge who had acquitted BNP acting chair Tarique Rahman of corruption charges. "ACC sues former judge who acquitted Tarique Rahman", *Dhaka Tribune*, 12 June 2022.

⁴⁴ Crisis Group Report, *Beyond the Election: Overcoming Bangladesh's Political Deadlock*, op. cit.

⁴⁵ "Dual administration system in judiciary to be abolished: Chief justice", *The Business Standard*, 21 September 2024.

⁴⁶ "Another major reshuffle in judiciary", *The Daily Star*, 8 September 2024.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interview, senior judge, September 2024.

⁴⁸ "Chief Advisor Yunus meets with secretaries", *bdnews24.com*, 4 September 2024.

dismissed more than 850 elected leaders of local governance bodies – many of whom had fled after Hasina’s fall – and appointed administrators in their place.⁴⁹ The process has hardly been seamless, with some of those overlooked for promotion protesting the appointments.⁵⁰

The bureaucracy is not just politicised, though; it is also highly inefficient. The quota system has deprived it of many good recruits, while both large-scale and petty corruption, already commonplace, got worse under Hasina. “One of the main challenges for the interim government is to use the existing bureaucracy, which is very inefficient, to get some results, to push through vital reforms”, acknowledged an interim government official.⁵¹

3. Security sector

Perhaps the biggest challenge when it comes to reforming institutions will be dealing with the security agencies, particularly the police force. Crisis Group flagged police reform as an important task when Hasina came to power in 2009; even then, the police were “a tool of political control and a source of patronage”.⁵² Her subsequent reign made matters worse: in the words of an interim government official, she turned the force into her “attack dogs”.⁵³ Over the years, the force was stacked with AL supporters, particularly members of the party’s thuggish student wing, the Chhatra League. Hasina’s reliance on the police to keep her in power was evident during the July-August protests, when they unleashed deadly violence to break up demonstrations that started out being largely peaceful.

As noted above, the government’s first priority has been to restore law and order. As many police officers deserted their posts for fear of retribution, the interim government on 17 September granted the army magistracy powers for two months. During this period, army officers have the authority to do things like issue arrest orders, execute search warrants and disperse unlawful assemblies.⁵⁴ The decision has roused controversy, but the interim government has defended it as necessary to counter “subversive acts”.⁵⁵ The interim administration knows that, if the public thinks it cannot ensure a basic level of stability, it will lose support, affording its opponents an opportunity to push for an early election. There is also widespread concern that AL cadres are fomenting violence as part of an attempt to bring the interim government down. Such an effort would be unlikely to succeed, but it would nonetheless risk

⁴⁹ “Govt removes 876 elected reps in local admin”, *The Daily Star*, 19 August 2024.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interview, mid-level administrator, September 2024. See also “Public admin busy with promotions, postings; order yet to be restored”, *Prothom Alo*, 12 September 2024. The government has formed a committee to assess complaints from civil servants who say they were overlooked for promotion for political reasons. “Five-member committee formed to look into appeals of deprived govt officials”, *Prothom Alo*, 16 September 2024.

⁵¹ Crisis Group interview, interim government source, September 2024.

⁵² Crisis Group Report, *Bangladesh: Getting Police Reform on Track*, op. cit.

⁵³ Crisis Group interview, interim government source, September 2024.

⁵⁴ “Bangladesh grants army ‘magisterial powers’ to restore law, order”, *The Express Tribune*, 18 September 2024.

⁵⁵ Ibid. See also “Grant army magistracy power only where necessary: Fakhrul”, *The Business Standard*, 19 September 2024.

weakening the interim government. “It’s a sideshow, but the intent is there”, commented a student leader.⁵⁶

Police have gradually returned to duty, and the government has replaced senior officers implicated in abuses under Hasina’s regime.⁵⁷ These measures alone are unlikely to be sufficient, however. Trust in the police remains low and morale is poor, with officers worried about being attacked or charged for their role in the crackdown on protesters under Hasina’s regime.⁵⁸ A mid-level officer said little had changed inside the force, adding that personnel are upset that the government has taken no action against those responsible for killing police officers in the aftermath of Hasina’s flight. “Protesters hanged our officers in the streets”, he said. “Who asked for justice for the police who were murdered? No one”.⁵⁹ The officer said the ways government leaders have traditionally treated the police would need to change, too. “Governments need to realise that we are not political party cadres. ... Their habit of using us for their interest damaged our professionalism”. Deeper reforms will likely have to wait until the newly formed police commission reports back toward the end of 2024.

Reform of other security agencies is likely to prove even more challenging, in part because they are under military command or include army officers. With the interim government dependent on the army for support, Yunus can ill afford to upset its members.⁶⁰ The Rapid Action Battalion, an elite crimefighting force whose widespread human rights violations led the U.S. to sanction several of its senior officers, comprises representatives of the military’s three branches, as well as the police and two paramilitary forces, Border Guard Bangladesh and Ansar. The Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI), the military intelligence service, has also been implicated in a range of alleged abuses, from enforced disappearances to bank take-overs.⁶¹ While the army chief has replaced the heads of these agencies and forced several former officials into retirement – some have even been arrested – there has been little public discussion so far about how to prevent further abuses.⁶²

B. Constitutional Change

There is a consensus among political forces backing the interim government that constitutional safeguards are necessary to enshrine democracy and prevent another autocrat from hijacking the state apparatus.⁶³ Reforms are likely to focus on strengthening checks and balances on the executive, in part by building up the prerogatives of other institutions, particularly the judiciary and parliament.⁶⁴ The combination of

⁵⁶ Crisis Group interview, student leader, September 2024.

⁵⁷ A further reshuffle was announced in late August to “revamp” the force and put “capable” and “professional” officers in key posts. “Major reshuffle in police force”, *The Daily Star*, 28 August 2024.

⁵⁸ “The morale issues of Bangladesh police”, *The Daily Star*, 19 September 2024.

⁵⁹ Crisis Group interview, mid-level police officer, September 2024.

⁶⁰ Crisis Group interviews, September 2024.

⁶¹ Most notoriously, DGFI ran a secret prison system known as the Aynaghar or “house of mirrors” in which it held enforced disappearance victims in solitary confinement for years. “Inside the Aynaghar”, *The Daily Star*, 21 August 2024.

⁶² “Three former DGs of DGFI sent on forced retirement; ARTDOC GOC Lt Gen Mujibur dismissed”, *The Business Standard*, 12 September 2024.

⁶³ Crisis Group interviews, September 2024.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

Bangladesh's first-past-the-post voting system, a unicameral legislature based on the Westminster system, huge authority vested in the government-appointed chief justice and constitutional restrictions on lawmakers opposing their own party has created an environment in which the prime minister wields nearly all powers. For the sake of fair elections, many also think the country should return to the caretaker government model that served it reasonably well for two decades, before Hasina scrapped the constitutional provision in 2011.⁶⁵

The main point of debate on constitutional reform – and a looming fault line – is whether the charter should be amended or entirely rewritten.⁶⁶ Within the government, and among several influential jurists, the dominant view seems to be that rewriting the constitution would be time-consuming and politically divisive, as it would presumably require a constituent assembly.⁶⁷ But many student leaders favour a new constitution, arguing that the present charter, enacted in 1972 and amended seventeen times, has been used to oppress the people of Bangladesh. “We ... want to radically transform the state mechanism so no party or political ideology can ever become a monster again”, one said. “The interim government needs to heed that desire, because their mandate is from an uprising, not a ballot box”.⁶⁸

Whichever approach is taken, no authority is likely to pursue constitutional reform until after an election, particularly given the doubts about whether the interim government itself is constitutional.

C. *Economic Policy*

Under Hasina, Bangladesh's economy unquestionably grew, but the macro-economic indicators the government published were highly misleading. It was an open secret that Hasina's administration was manipulating key economic data for much of its time in office.⁶⁹ The World Bank has estimated that from 2015 to 2019 about half of Bangladesh's reported gross domestic product growth was “unexplained”, in that it could not be attributed to structural improvements or the effects of earlier reforms.⁷⁰ In other words, the numbers were cooked, though to what extent remains unclear. “It was rubber-and-pencil growth”, an economist observed.⁷¹ Export statistics were also doctored; in early July, Bangladesh Bank said export figures for the previous fiscal year alone had likely been inflated by \$10 billion.⁷²

⁶⁵ The BNP proposed some of these reforms in a 31-point plan it unveiled in 2023. “An Outline of the Structural Reforms for the State”, Bangladesh Nationalist Party, 2023.

⁶⁶ “New constitution or amendments”, *Bangladesh Pratidin*, 10 September 2024.

⁶⁷ Crisis Group interview, source close to interim government, September 2024.

⁶⁸ Crisis Group interview, student leader, September 2024.

⁶⁹ Crisis Group interview, Bangladeshi economist, September 2024.

⁷⁰ “Bangladesh – Country Economic Memorandum: Change of Fabric”, World Bank, 22 September 2022.

⁷¹ Crisis Group interview, Bangladeshi economist, September 2024.

⁷² “Bangladeshi mismatch in export data cements doubts on official stats”, *Nikkei Asian Review*, 30 July 2024. Much of the blame for this data manipulation has been pinned on the former planning and finance minister, Mustafa Kamal, who is now the subject of an Anti-Corruption Commission investigation. Kamal is thought to have left the country prior to 5 August and has not commented on the charges in public. Crisis Group interview, Bangladeshi economist, September 2024. See also “Lotus Kamal: The architect behind fabricated statistics”, *Bonik Barta*, 25 August 2024.

Corruption also worsened under Hasina's government, particularly in the banking sector, and became a major source of resentment. More than \$100 billion are thought to have been moved offshore illegally over the past fifteen years.⁷³ Industrial-scale looting by ruling-party acolytes has left some of the country's biggest private banks insolvent, according to regulators, putting depositors' money at risk. "It's a classic case of crony capitalism", a foreign economist said. "The amount of embezzlement that the country has faced, particularly in the financial sector, is extraordinary".⁷⁴

Despite popular grievances over economic hardship, long-term economic reform is a lesser priority for the interim government than political change. Its view is that addressing fundamental economic problems, such as low tax revenues, will take years – far longer than the interim government's likely lifespan – whereas political reforms to improve governance can be taken more swiftly and lead to better economic decision-making. Nevertheless, to get a clearer picture of where the country stands, the interim government has formed a committee to write a white paper on the state of the economy.⁷⁵ The team will also review contracts signed by the previous government, including some large-scale infrastructure projects developed without competitive bidding.⁷⁶

In the meantime, the interim government is focused on short-term macro-economic priorities, such as maintaining stability, building up foreign currency reserves and bringing down inflation. When Yunus came to office, foreign reserves were falling precipitously, and food prices were rising at close to 15 per cent. Power outages were increasing, and the government owed more than \$1 billion to Indian electricity providers.⁷⁷ The protests and political uncertainty had also disrupted the ready-made garment sector, which generates around 85 per cent of the country's export revenues and is a major source of employment for women, in particular.

The early signs suggest that policymakers can avoid a Sri Lanka-style economic crash that brings down the government.⁷⁸ The interim government has secured billions of dollars of additional financial support from multilateral financial institutions, including the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank and Asian Development Bank.⁷⁹ Exchange rate reforms have helped boost foreign reserves.⁸⁰ Inflation,

⁷³ "Bangladesh seeks help from FBI, U.N. agency to recover laundered money", *Nikkei Asia*, 12 September 2024.

⁷⁴ Crisis Group interview, foreign economist, September 2024.

⁷⁵ "White Paper Committee to look into previous calculations of GNI, inflation: Economist Debapriya Bhattacharya", *Bangladesh Pratidin*, 17 September 2024.

⁷⁶ "All deals inked during AL regime will be examined: Debapriya", *Jagonews24.com*, 17 September 2024; and "Most high-cost projects lack competitive bidding", *Bonik Barta*, 19 September 2024.

⁷⁷ "Bangladesh struggling to muster dollars to pay Indian power debts, sources say", *Reuters*, 21 September 2024.

⁷⁸ In April 2022, a long-brewing economic crisis came to a head in Sri Lanka when the government ran out of foreign currency. It defaulted on its debt repayments and was unable to pay for essential imports. The crisis sparked a protest movement that forced the president to resign and flee the country. For background, see Crisis Group Asia Report N°341, *Sri Lanka's Bailout Blues: Elections in the Aftermath of Economic Collapse*, 17 September 2024.

⁷⁹ "Bangladesh seeks \$5 bln in emergency support to boost forex reserves", *Prothom Alo*, 12 September 2024.

while still high, has declined from its July peak, and Dhaka has started to clear its debt in the power sector; it is also seeking to renegotiate terms with some of its external creditors, including Russia and China.⁸¹

To clean up the mess in the banking sector and restore public confidence, the government has appointed a respected former IMF official to head the Bangladesh Bank. The central bank has reconstituted the boards of underperforming banks and increased the level of deposit insurance; deposits have since risen, according to regulators. Authorities have also started trying to recover some of the bank assets that were moved offshore.

Nevertheless, serious economic risks remain, particularly given the state of the financial sector, the impact of unrest on the garment industry – foreign brands have moved many orders to other countries – and persistent high inflation.⁸² The latter is an acute concern given the effect that high prices could have on the interim government's popularity. "The biggest concern beyond the financial sector is high inflation", said an economist. "Everyone here is petrified about this".⁸³

D. Justice and Accountability

The interim government has regularly highlighted the need for accountability for past atrocities, particularly those committed during July-August. In that regard, it is expected to seek Hasina's extradition from India under a treaty with New Delhi; Yunus has stated publicly that Hasina "has to be brought back, or the people of Bangladesh won't be at peace".⁸⁴ Whether India, which staunchly supported the Hasina government until the very end, would accede to such a request remains uncertain. For now, Yunus has sought the UN's help in conducting an independent investigation. After an exploratory visit in late August, the UN Human Rights Office sent an eight-member team to Bangladesh in mid-September to collect evidence of abuses committed between 1 July and 15 August. The investigation has largely been completed and the evidence is now being analysed.⁸⁵

That atrocities were committed is uncontroversial, but once the investigation is complete, the interim government will face difficult decisions about how to proceed. It has several options, starting with the domestic International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) that Hasina established in 2010 to try alleged war criminals.⁸⁶ Another would be a

⁸⁰ At \$2.4 billion, remittance inflows in September were the second highest in more than three years. "Falling hundi demand, dollar rate: Secret behind Aug-Sep remittance boost", *The Business Standard*, 9 October 2024.

⁸¹ "Govt urges China to reduce loan interest, extend repayment period", *The Daily Star*, 13 September 2024.

⁸² "RMGs upbeat, recovering from \$400m loss, \$2b order shift amid unrest", *The Business Standard*, 19 October 2024.

⁸³ Crisis Group interview, foreign economist, September 2024.

⁸⁴ "CA Prof Yunus wants Hasina to return, face trial", *Dhaka Tribune*, 5 September 2024.

⁸⁵ Crisis Group interview, November 2024. See also "UN fact-finding mission to begin work soon: foreign adviser", *United News of Bangladesh*, 17 September 2024.

⁸⁶ The ICT was created to try those who allegedly committed war crimes – in many cases Islamists – during the country's bloody independence struggle in 1971. The tribunal was an election promise from Hasina and had strong public support, particularly among young, secular urbanites, who later

hybrid local-international mechanism. Interim government officials say they may also develop a truth and reconciliation process for those accused of lesser crimes.⁸⁷

There is intense debate within the Yunus administration as to the most appropriate venue for seeking justice. One source close to the government said most advisers want a degree of international involvement and recognise that the ICT, in its current form at least, has little legitimacy. “They know this is a kangaroo court. If you use it to target Hasina some people will be happy, but it could damage the country’s international image”, the source said.⁸⁸ Likewise, it may be difficult to avert the perception that prosecution of high-level crimes is free of partisan political influence. This risk appears to have risen following the appointment of prosecutors linked to Jamaat-e-Islami, many of whose former leaders were executed after trials at the ICT.⁸⁹ “It’s really important to make sure people don’t see it as just tit-for-tat”, agreed a legal expert. “Some international involvement could be important, like having a foreign judge”.⁹⁰

In the meantime, a messy legal process is playing out through local police stations and courts. Under Bangladeshi law, police have an obligation to accept criminal complaints from members of the public, and there are few limits on who can be named in these complaints. For serious offences, police can arrest the accused without a warrant – a power that has been widely misused in the past, particularly to target the political opposition. Hundreds of people connected to Hasina’s administration, including ministers and parliamentarians, have already been arrested on alleged links to the July-August violence, despite often not being present when the alleged incidents occurred. Judges hearing the cases have remanded most of them to custody. As of late September, more than 200 cases of murder and attempted murder had been filed against Hasina alone; many senior officials from her administration are facing similar charges.⁹¹

The process is open to abuse, and allegations have surfaced that it is being used to settle political scores well beyond the elite. Some complaints list hundreds of defendants, many of them unidentified. In one case, a lawyer who had criticised the interim government on Facebook was named in a murder complaint filed with police, despite the complainant apparently having no idea who he is; the complaint was reportedly prepared with the help of lawyers from the BNP and Jamaat.⁹² “Lots of people named in these cases have no connection to the incident”, said a legal expert involved in the process. “It’s causing fear and anxiety. ... People think they are going to be arrested any minute”.⁹³ While these cases are widely seen as flawed, the interim

staged rallies calling for tougher penalties for the accused, but experts and rights groups identified serious procedural shortcomings. Nine major figures in Jamaat were indicted along with two BNP officials; most were later executed, including Jamaat’s leader.

⁸⁷ Crisis Group interview, source close to interim government, September 2024.

⁸⁸ Crisis Group interview, interim government source, September 2024.

⁸⁹ The new chief prosecutor, Tajul Islam, was a defence lawyer in the ICT cases against Jamaat-e-Islami leaders, as were two of the four new prosecutors. “Lawyer Tajul Islam made chief prosecutor at ICT”, *Prothom Alo*, 8 September 2024.

⁹⁰ Crisis Group interview, Dhaka-based legal expert, September 2024.

⁹¹ “Cases against Sheikh Hasina surpass 200”, *Prothom Alo*, 25 September 2024.

⁹² “Plaintiff says he does not even know the accused lawyer ZI Khan Panna”, *Prothom Alo*, 21 October 2024.

⁹³ Crisis Group interview, Dhaka-based legal expert, September 2024.

government has no power to block them without first abrogating legal rights and practices that were established during the colonial period and have become ingrained.⁹⁴

E. Credible Elections

Finally, the interim government is focused on establishing a system for holding credible polls after three national elections marred by irregularities. The task is far larger than overhauling the election commission. Yunus himself underlined that the work of five of the six commissions announced on 11 September are “essential for a free and fair election”.⁹⁵ The public administration, police and judiciary all play an important role in organising and managing elections in Bangladesh; the senior bureaucrats known as deputy commissioners, for example, usually act as returning officers who oversee all polling activity in a particular constituency. It was in large part through her control of these institutions, combined with her 2011 abolition of the constitutional clause providing for a caretaker government, that Hasina was able to stage-manage three successive votes. Ensuring credible polls in the future will therefore require the interim government to succeed in pursuing its broader political reform agenda.

That said, a new election commission comprising respected, non-partisan figures will be essential for building confidence in the electoral process. On 5 September, all five commission members resigned, saying they could not meet the constitutional requirement to hold an election within 90 days of parliament being dissolved. The outgoing members proposed several reforms, including proportional representation and the reintroduction of a neutral caretaker government. The interim government is expected to name their replacements in the coming months, while the commission on electoral reform is likely to propose changes to the body’s powers and responsibilities. The interim government has also said it will review the voter list.

A key issue is whether to retain first-past-the-post voting, which critics say has contributed to Bangladesh’s toxic politics by creating what is in effect a two-party system. Shifting to proportional representation, they argue, would create space for more political parties. “We need a system that reflects the will of the people”, said a student leader.⁹⁶ Not surprisingly, with the AL in the doldrums, the country’s other main party, the BNP, is strongly opposed to the idea, as proportional representation could deny it a parliamentary majority.⁹⁷ But analysts said they believed the BNP could be forced to accept the change. “Yes, the BNP will be the big loser, but it would be suicidal for them to go against it”, one said. “It’s a new ballgame and the best thing they can do is reinvent themselves”.⁹⁸ How a proportional representation system could be designed in time for the next election is unclear, however, as it would seemingly require amending the constitution.

⁹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Dhaka-based legal experts, September 2024.

⁹⁵ The exception is the constitution reform commission, as its recommendations will be implemented after the election. “Govt to set up 6 commissions for key sector reforms”, *Dhaka Tribune*, 11 September 2024.

⁹⁶ Crisis Group interview, student leader, September 2024.

⁹⁷ Crisis Group interview, senior BNP official, September 2024.

⁹⁸ Crisis Group interview, political analyst, September 2024.

IV. Implications and Recommendations

A. *Building Political Consensus*

In the wake of Hasina's fall, the interim government has a unique opportunity to pursue political reform. But the pitfalls are many. To have any chance of seeing through its reform agenda, Yunus will need to maintain a degree of political consensus and keep divisions in check. To this end, Yunus has held regular meetings with political parties, both collectively and separately, to seek their input and keep them apprised of his plans. As a government insider noted:

Right now, everything is possible, provided the political forces ... have the patience to wait for that reform process to take place. That is a big, big question, though. I don't trust them to have the appetite for reform.⁹⁹

With the AL largely out of play, the most potent threat is the BNP, because of its formidable grassroots network. The party, which is trying to change public perceptions of it as little better than the AL, has issued strong statements of support for the interim government, saying it is willing to give Yunus and his colleagues time to make reforms. BNP leaders have taken commendable steps to limit retributive violence by the party rank and file and to expel members involved in extortion. The party will also make recommendations to the reform commissions.¹⁰⁰ A senior BNP official told Crisis Group that the party recognised politics in Bangladesh had drastically changed. "There is a trust deficit, and we need to win back [the public's] confidence", he said. "Ultimately, that will be a good thing for the country".¹⁰¹

But precisely how much time the BNP will be willing to give Yunus is unclear, as senior officials have made differing statements.¹⁰² Party leaders also seem to be struggling to control the party's grassroots supporters, many of whom are keen to embark on an election campaign. If the BNP leadership loses patience, the party could agitate for an early poll, which it would likely win. With its large following, it likely has the capacity to make the country ungovernable – a tactic regularly deployed in the past by both the BNP and the AL to force demands on governments. There are already signs the party could ramp up pressure: on 17 September, thousands of BNP supporters gathered in Dhaka to call for an election, and further rallies have taken place.¹⁰³ That said, the risks of such an outcome should not be exaggerated. As the largest opposition party, the BNP is entitled to act as a check on the interim government. Yet it is also in the party's interest to work with Yunus, lest the younger generation of voters already disillusioned with the country's traditional parties come to see it as a spoiler.

Countervailing the BNP are the interim government's two main backers, students and the army. The former emerged from the July-August protests as a potent politi-

⁹⁹ Crisis Group interview, source close to the interim government, September 2024.

¹⁰⁰ "Transforming state: BNP takes action", *Daily Sun*, 21 September 2024.

¹⁰¹ Crisis Group interview, senior BNP official, September 2024.

¹⁰² On 16 September, for example, BNP secretary general Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir said elections should be "held without delay". But on 24 September, senior joint secretary general Ruhul Kabir Rizvi said the twelve- to eighteen-month timeframe proposed by the army chief was "not excessively long".

¹⁰³ "Bangladesh opposition party demands a new election after Hasina's ouster", Associated Press, 18 September 2024.

cal force, even if they have not (yet) coalesced into a political party. Their interests align closely with the interim government's, in that they want it to stay in power for an extended period and carry out deep reforms, but keeping the students on side will not necessarily be easy. Crucial differences of opinion seem to be emerging between student leaders and members of the interim government over issues such as constitutional reform, the AL's future and accountability for atrocities.¹⁰⁴ Some student leaders, for example, have called for a ban on the AL and a complete rewrite of the constitution.

Student leaders are also thought to harbour ambitions to set up their own political party, though that will likely take time. One said the political culture is so "polluted" that if the students got into the game now, "we'll be exactly like the other parties", implying that reforms must be undertaken first. "You cannot play cricket on a football field. You have to change the field first – after that we might play", he explained, hinting that they may form a party, but only after reform comes to fruition – perhaps following the next election.¹⁰⁵ In the meantime, students have formed a National Citizens Committee, a platform that seeks to lobby for reforms, for which they hope to build grassroots support.¹⁰⁶ Without the formal structures of a party, though, the student movement could fracture, with some elements breaking with the interim government. As a Bangladeshi analyst noted, "The students are not organised under any ideology except that they want reform. I find it hard to see how they'll remain a cohesive group".¹⁰⁷

The Bangladeshi army – one of the few institutions Hasina was unable to completely control – is another major player. Its decision not to enforce Hasina's 4 August curfew order is what sealed her fate, and army chief Waker played an important role in coordinating discussions about forming the interim government. Neither Waker nor the army as an institution seems to have political ambitions, making them unlikely to undermine the interim government. "Both the elite and the low-level [military personnel] are all behind the military chief as long as the military is not going to lead", said a military insider.¹⁰⁸ In a rare interview, Waker said he is firmly behind Yunus, adding that he expects elections in twelve to eighteen months. "I will stand beside him. Come what may. So that he can accomplish his mission", he promised.¹⁰⁹

That said, keeping the army's support could limit the interim government's ability or willingness to tackle past human rights violations or corruption by the military or senior security officials, as public opinion demands. Waker also appears to have his own ideas about political reforms that affect the military, suggesting that the president control the armed forces rather than the prime minister.¹¹⁰ His views will need to be taken into account. "The army chief is hugely powerful", confided a government

¹⁰⁴ Crisis Group interviews, September 2024.

¹⁰⁵ Crisis Group interview, student leader, September 2024.

¹⁰⁶ "Students unveil National Citizens Committee", *New Age*, 8 September 2024.

¹⁰⁷ Crisis Group interview, political analyst, September 2024.

¹⁰⁸ Crisis Group interview, source close to the military, September 2024.

¹⁰⁹ "Bangladesh army chief pledges support for Yunus' interim government 'come what may'", Reuters, 24 September 2024.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

source. “He doesn’t show his power, but he’s the one propping up this government in some respects”.¹¹¹

Sheikh Hasina’s toppling has also increased the influence of Islamists, particularly Jamaat-e-Islami and the hardline pressure group Hefazat-e-Islam.¹¹² Hasina, who presented herself as a secular leader, tried to shunt Jamaat aside by deregistering the party, persecuting its members and executing several of its leaders through a flawed war crimes tribunal. Her stance against Jamaat and more radical Islamic forces, including violent extremists, was an important reason why many secular Bangladeshis supported the AL. Ironically, though, her crackdown seems to have strengthened Islamist forces, which now find themselves well placed to help fill the political vacuum left by her abrupt departure.¹¹³ Once despised by many Bangladeshis due to its support for Pakistan in the liberation war, Jamaat now elicits sympathy as one of the Hasina administration’s many victims. In recent years, the party has also focused on providing essential services, such as health and education, in places the state neglected, allowing it to garner grassroots support.¹¹⁴

Islamist forces played a prominent role in the anti-Hasina movement. When the demonstrations escalated in late July, Jamaat members – together with Hefazat-e-Islam and other Islamist activists – joined the student protests. This alignment has somewhat rehabilitated Jamaat’s image. The party has appealed to the Supreme Court to regain its registration, and it will clearly be a force for Yunus to reckon with. He has already had to make compromises to accommodate Islamists, including appointing Jamaat-linked lawyers to the ICT and dissolving a committee tasked with reviewing school textbooks.¹¹⁵ The Islamists’ growing influence makes many secular-minded Bangladeshis nervous. “What will happen to me – a woman who doesn’t wear niqab, who works at night?”, asked a woman politician. “Honestly, they make me a bit scared for the future”.¹¹⁶

One lesson of the Hasina years is that trying to cut Islamist groups out of the country’s political fabric is likely to be counterproductive. “Bangladesh is never going to be a secular society”, an observer noted. “It’s important to engage Islamic forces rather than push them toward the fringe and make the fringe stronger”.¹¹⁷ An interim government member agreed: “We have to create a system in which everyone can express their opinion and hold protests legally, peacefully – provided they accept a democratic Bangladesh”.¹¹⁸ Their highly motivated supporters are a powerful force on the streets, but Jamaat and other Islamist parties – who are in talks about an alliance – pose a limited electoral threat, having never won more than 10 per cent of the ballot. They could, however, prove an essential prop to larger parties when it comes to mustering a majority in parliament.

¹¹¹ Crisis Group interview, interim government source, September 2024.

¹¹² “Understanding Bangladesh’s most potent religious opposition”, Lowy Interpreter (blog), 31 March 2021.

¹¹³ “Islamist parties gaining ground in Bangladesh amid post-Hasina political vacuum”, *The Diplomat*, 16 September 2024.

¹¹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, senior Jamaat-e-Islami official and political analyst, September 2024.

¹¹⁵ “Textbook review body cancelled amid criticism from Islamists”, *New Age*, 28 September 2024.

¹¹⁶ Crisis Group interview, woman politician, September 2024.

¹¹⁷ Crisis Group interview, political analyst, September 2024.

¹¹⁸ Crisis Group interview, interim government source, September 2024.

More concerning is the risk of violent extremism, which should be distinguished from the Islamist political movement. Bangladesh has not suffered a major jihadist attack since militants killed dozens at an upscale bakery in Dhaka in 2016, but the weakness of the security apparatus in the aftermath of Hasina's departure has likely increased the threat. Some banned groups are already taking advantage of the more open political environment to mobilise.¹¹⁹ On 26 August, Mufti Jashimuddin Rahmani, the leader of a prominent extremist group, Ansar al Islam, was released from prison after being granted bail on terrorism charges; he had already served a five-year sentence for involvement in the murder of a blogger.

B. *Maintaining Momentum*

The interim government derives its mandate from a mass uprising. If it is unable to maintain popular support, it will likely have to call an early election that would almost certainly bring the BNP to office with few restraints on its power. In that case, Bangladesh might slip back into the politics of patronage, muscle and coercive use of state institutions, endangering the country's future stability and squandering a rare chance at transformation. But an even worse scenario is possible. If disorder reaches crisis point, the army could step in, albeit reluctantly, likely heralding a prolonged period of military rule. All actors, domestic and international, should take steps to avoid these outcomes.

To sustain public support for its long-term reform plans, the interim government will need to deliver a steady stream of results. It has already managed to chalk up successes in terms of ensuring accountability and securing financial aid. It has also announced Bangladesh's accession to the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance and created a five-member national commission of inquiry to determine the whereabouts of individuals forcibly disappeared. In the international arena, the September meeting between Yunus and Joe Biden on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York, in which the U.S. president pledged "continued support" for the interim government's "reform agenda", has provided an important political boost.¹²⁰ Dhaka has also taken a more assertive position toward India, including submitting formal complaints to New Delhi over the killing of Bangladeshis by Indian forces along the border, which public opinion welcomes.¹²¹

Yet even with new revelations of the Hasina administration's corruption and mismanagement, which are emerging daily, the current enthusiasm will only sustain the government so far. The Yunus administration should identify more ways to keep up momentum over the coming year, while deeper reform plans take shape and the path to new elections is laid out.

¹¹⁹ Five days after Hasina fled, a group called Hizb ut Tahrir, which was outlawed in 2009, staged a march in Dhaka. It has since called for the ban on its activities to be lifted, claiming it has no links to violence, but the interim government has ruled out this step. "Hizb ut Tahrir Bangladesh wants withdrawal of its ban", *New Age*, 9 September 2024.

¹²⁰ "Readout of President Joe Biden's Meeting with Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus of Bangladesh", White House, 24 September 2024.

¹²¹ "After a teenage girl is killed on the Bangladesh-India border, a war of narratives emerges", *The Diplomat*, 7 September 2024.

There are many steps the government could take to generate tangible improvements in people's lives. Tackling petty corruption in delivery of public services – a common complaint in Bangladesh – would be one of them: given the scale of the challenge, targeting a particular aspect of corruption, such as fees for workers heading overseas, would make progress more feasible. Containing high prices would bolster household budgets; lifting wages in the garment sector, even a little, would benefit millions. Getting police back on the streets would help alleviate Dhaka's notorious traffic jams, which have worsened in the officers' absence. Restoring a steady electricity supply to homes and businesses would be a boon to the economy and Bangladeshis' quality of life.¹²² Clearing the backlog of court cases by dropping the countless politically motivated charges filed under Hasina would not just be hugely popular, but more importantly would free up judges to focus on the real work of dispensing justice.

To improve day-to-day governance, meanwhile, the interim government should expand its cabinet. At present, some advisers are working on several portfolios and appear to be overstretched. In other cases, cabinet members who lack administrative experience would benefit from additional help, in the form of experienced aides and support staff. The interim government should also review the membership of the reform commissions and consider further appointments to make them more representative.

Maintaining public support will help keep would-be spoilers in check. If the interim government's agenda has strong backing, the political cost of attempting to undermine it will be high, providing good insurance against agitation for an early election. The interim government and the reform commissions it has established should also engage in genuine dialogue with key political players – not just allies such as the students and the army, but also the BNP and Islamist parties, particularly Jamaat given its political weight. Reaching consensus on key questions such as constitutional reform or the voting system will be difficult, and all sides will need to make compromises.

At the same time, the interim government should quickly announce a clear schedule for the election. While many are calling for it to remain in office for a minimum of two or three years, eighteen months is a more realistic timeframe given the political pressures it faces. It should also seek to remain within the spirit of the constitution, to the extent possible, to minimise the risk that its actions are later deemed unconstitutional by the courts.

¹²² Power outages are largely due to financial constraints and mismanagement, rather than lack of infrastructure. Bangladesh has mothballed around half of its installed generation capacity of 27,800 megawatts, primarily because it has cut back on fuel imports to save foreign exchange. The shortfall means that grid operators must cut power to certain areas, with smaller towns and rural areas the most affected, suffering nine to twelve hours of outages a day. See "Load shedding worsens, exceeding 1700MW shortfall", *The Business Standard*, 11 September 2024.

C. Pursuing Justice

The interim government should carefully consider how it goes about prosecuting those responsible for human rights violations – both recent cases related to the protest movement and older cases on Hasina’s watch. It should find a way to balance demands for speedy justice with the need to ensure fair trials and avoid claims of politicisation. A national mechanism with international involvement is likely best for that purpose. Given its chequered history, if the International Crimes Tribunal is to hear cases, the 1973 law underpinning it should be overhauled to ensure it meets international standards. It should also have at least one international judge. A parallel truth and reconciliation process, possibly with international support, could help avoid clogging the courts with less serious cases while giving the country a chance to move forward. In the meantime, the interim government should direct the police not to arrest those named in public complaints without sufficient evidence. The UN, meanwhile, should keep assisting investigations of human rights violations and help strengthen human rights protections.

More broadly, the government should try to restrain the purges that are occurring in all Bangladesh’s institutions, where anyone perceived as having links to the former government is being targeted for removal. While the impulse for revenge may be understandable, it is causing major upheaval within institutions and undermining the interim government’s day-to-day operations, in many cases without justification. The appointment of replacements has also been haphazard in some cases, causing resentment within institutions.

Similarly, the government should resist public pressure to ban the AL. While its leaders and senior officials are clearly implicated in heinous crimes, the party has been central to Bangladeshi politics for more than five decades and should have the opportunity to rebuild itself under new leadership. Not only is outlawing political parties contrary to the spirit of the movement that overthrew Hasina, but it also carries political risks. The AL has a hard core of supporters who might be pushed underground if the party were proscribed. “About 20 per cent of Bangladeshis, even if they witnessed genocide with their own eyes, would still support Sheikh Hasina”, observed a source close to the interim government.¹²³ Keeping the door open to the AL would also empower those within its ranks who want to move on from the Hasina family, while weakening those who hope to destabilise the interim government to bring Hasina or a close associate back to office.

D. Mobilising International Support

Outside powers have an important role to play in assisting the interim government’s reform efforts. The rhetorical backing proffered so far is promising, as are the billions of dollars of new loans, which should be expanded.¹²⁴ As seen during his September visit to New York, Yunus’s international standing is one of the interim government’s key assets. He should use his profile to rally additional support for the administration

¹²³ Crisis Group interview, source close to interim government, September 2024.

¹²⁴ For more, see “Budget support from WB, IMF, ADB: Bangladesh may get \$5.65b by this fiscal year”, *The Daily Star*, 19 October 2024.

and its reform plans. The interim government will also need to take care in managing relations with the incoming U.S. administration, given President-elect Donald Trump's close ties to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and stated disapproval of "chaos" in Bangladesh.¹²⁵

International financial institutions, in particular, should materially aid the Yunus administration, to which economic instability is a major threat. These institutions can provide the technical and financial support the interim government needs to clean up the mess left by Hasina and her cronies, particularly in the banking sector. They should come through with the billions of dollars of additional support they have promised, which will be important for shoring up foreign reserves.

Western countries' standing in Bangladesh has been badly harmed by their long-standing support for Hasina and the widespread perception that, during her reign, they put their own interests above those of the Bangladeshi people. The European Union in particular and some of its member states are perceived as overly focused on doing business.¹²⁶ They now have the opportunity to start repairing the damage. One area in which their technical support might be welcomed is security and judicial reform. Another important contribution would be helping strengthen the election commission and the electoral environment. They should also consider aid to ensure that national accountability mechanisms meet international standards. Safeguarding tariff-free access to European markets for Bangladeshi garment exports will help maintain economic stability.

Both the interim government and its external partners should be careful, however, not to waste their energies on certain sorts of technical assistance. Already, a scramble for influence is taking place among embassies in Dhaka, many of which are offering to provide advisers to the cabinet and bureaucracy.¹²⁷ The interim government needs to assess these offers carefully to ensure they serve Bangladesh's interests, rather than those of the donors. The UN, embassies and financial institutions should coordinate to avoid overlap and ensure that support is coming from those best placed to give it.

The UN should also work with the interim government and international donors to overhaul the Rohingya refugee response.¹²⁸ Dhaka should lift restrictions on humanitarian agencies so they can make the response more sustainable, which in turn should help attract more donor support at a time when funding is dwindling. Interim authorities should also address insecurity in the refugee camps.

Economic justice is also crucial. Over the past fifteen years, hundreds of billions of dollars have likely been funnelled illegally out of Bangladesh. Much of the lucre

¹²⁵ Less than a week before the U.S. election, Trump tweeted about "barbaric violence against Hindus, Christians and other minorities" in Bangladesh, which he said "remains in a total state of chaos". Trump also promised to "strengthen our great partnership with India and my good friend, Prime Minister Modi". Tweet by Donald J. Trump, @realDonaldTrump, 4:03am, 1 November 2024.

¹²⁶ French President Emmanuel Macron's visit to Bangladesh in September 2023, during which he clinched a deal to sell Airbus planes to the national carrier and made almost no mention of democracy or human rights, is often cited as exemplifying this approach. "Hasina, Macron seal deal on aircraft that Bangladesh doesn't need, cannot afford", *The Diplomat*, 1 October 2023.

¹²⁷ Crisis Group interview, diplomat, September 2024.

¹²⁸ Bangladesh is hosting close to one million Rohingya refugees, most of whom fled Myanmar in 2017. See Crisis Group Asia Report N°335, *Crisis Mounts for Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh*, 6 December 2023.

appears to have ended up in the United Kingdom, the U.S., the EU, Singapore and the Middle East.¹²⁹ It is unclear if financial authorities and service providers – banks, lawyers, real estate agents and so on – in these countries conducted proper due diligence on the source of these funds. Such due diligence would have been particularly important, given that the clients were often politically exposed individuals and that, on paper, Bangladesh has strict rules about moving money out of the country.

Since 2016, for example, Hasina's land minister, Saifuzzaman Chowdhury, has allegedly built up a \$500 million global real estate empire, including 360 properties in the UK alone.¹³⁰ While he did not list them on his asset declaration when running for re-election in January, Chowdhury insists that he bought the properties with income from legitimate businesses outside Bangladesh that he has owned for years.¹³¹ The head of the country's largest private bank, who is accused of having "siphoned off" more than \$10 billion to companies he was affiliated with (as well as associates), reportedly has a \$570 million property portfolio in Singapore.¹³² Through a U.S. law firm, the businessperson, Mohammed Saiful Alam, has insisted there is "no truth" to the allegations, decrying a "coordinated campaign" against him and "other leading businesses".¹³³

Authorities in these countries now have a responsibility to work with the relevant Bangladeshi agencies to freeze the proceeds of corruption and other criminal activity on the part of Hasina and her cronies. They should then help recover the money so it can be returned to the rightful owners in Bangladesh, whether that is the government or the private sector. This step would also contribute to stabilising the financial sector by building up banks' asset base.

As Bangladesh's largest neighbour and the regional heavyweight, and in light of its history in supporting the war of independence, India holds a unique position among the country's foreign partners. But New Delhi, which has historically backed the AL, needs to accept the new Bangladeshi reality. Its unwavering support for an unpopular autocrat over the last fifteen years has done immense damage to its reputation among Bangladeshis. It now needs to tread carefully to avoid actions that suggest it could be undermining the interim government. Additionally, it should take the initiative to help Bangladesh prosper, such as by proposing new talks on water sharing deals, improved border management and a review of bilateral economic agreements. It should also reach out to opposition forces, including the BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami, with which it has hardly any relations.

¹²⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Dhaka-based economists, businesspeople and analysts, September 2024.

¹³⁰ "How a Bangladesh minister spent more than \$500m on luxury property", *Al Jazeera*, 20 September 2024.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² "Bangladesh central banker accuses tycoons of 'robbing banks' of \$17bn with spy agency help", *Financial Times*, 28 October 2024; and "A close look at S Alam's Singapore empire", *The Business Standard*, 10 September 2024.

¹³³ "Bangladesh central banker accuses tycoons of 'robbing banks' of \$17bn with spy agency help", *op. cit.*

V. Conclusion

Sheikh Hasina's flight from Bangladesh on 5 August has created a once-in-a-generation opportunity for political renewal that can move the country beyond the bitter divisions and violence that has characterised much of the past five decades. The interim government has a strong public backing for reform and the support of key players, including student leaders and the army. Major parties have also said they are willing to delay elections in favour of reforms. The interim government has identified its priorities, outlined a process and laid out an initial timeline.

The risks that this reform process unravels are formidable, however. The interim government will need to build political consensus while maintaining economic stability and delivering steady results to ensure that the Bangladeshi public remains firmly behind it. The alternatives would be unappealing for both Bangladesh and its partners. Holding elections without reforms to put checks and balances on a future government could let another autocratic regime emerge, while a military takeover would be an even bigger setback. International actors should work with the interim government to support its ambitious goals and help move Bangladeshi politics into a new era.

Dhaka/Brussels, 14 November 2024

Appendix A: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former Foreign Minister of Argentina and Chef de Cabinet to the United Nations Secretary-General, Susana Malcorra.

Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. She first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director in 2011 and then Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Liberia.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kyiv, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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Shearman & Sterling LLP

White & Case LLP

Global Partners

(2) Anonymous

APCO Worldwide Inc.

BP

Chevron

Eni

Equinor

GardaWorld

Sempra Energy

TotalEnergies

CRISIS GROUP EMERITII

Mort Abramowitz – Founder and Trustee Emeritus

George Mitchell – Chairman Emeritus

Gareth Evans – President Emeritus

Lord (Mark) Malloch-Brown – Founder and Chairman Emeritus

Thomas R. Pickering – Chairman Emeritus