

Will Bangladesh Be Another Egypt?



08-24-2024 ~ The day after former Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina left Dhaka, I was on the phone with a friend who had spent some time on the streets that day. He told me about the atmosphere in Dhaka, how people with little previous political experience had joined in the large protests alongside the students—who seemed to be leading the agitation. I asked him about the political infrastructure of the students and about their political orientation. He said that the protests seemed well-organized and that the students had escalated their demands from an end to certain

quotas for government jobs to an end to the government of Sheikh Hasina. Even hours before she left the country, it did not seem that this would be the outcome. Everyone, he told me, had anticipated more violence from the government.

These protests in Bangladesh this year are not unique. They are part of a cycle of protests that started at least a decade ago, with the issues (an end to the quotas, better treatment of students, less government repression) being similar. These are not simple protests around simple demands that can be easily addressed. The demands—such as quotas—return Bangladesh to what the elite has tried desperately to repress: the ugly history of the country’s origins. The quotas are for freedom fighters who risked life and limb to battle the Pakistani military in 1971 and who won independence for Bangladesh. While it is true that such quotas should not be sustained over generations, it is also true that the issue of the quota is caught up partly with the problems of employment for educated, young people, and partly with the reassertion of the Islamist forces in Bangladesh who had been compromised by their association with the Pakistani violence. After the 2018 anti-quota movement, Sheikh Hasina’s government [decided](#) to cancel the system. The decision went to the courts. The High Court argued that the quotas had to be reinstated, but the Supreme Court—in June 2024—decided that the quotas would not be fully reinstated, but only partly (7 percent for freedom fighters’ children,

and not 30 percent). This was the spur for a renewed protest movement. It targeted Sheikh Hasina's government rather than the courts.

Shahbag Square

A decade ago, a massive protest took place in Dhaka at Shahbag Square. People gathered there to protest a decision by the courts to give a life sentence to Abdul Quader Mollah, who had been personally found guilty of killing 344 people during the 1971 genocide in East Pakistan. Quader Mollah was a leader of the fundamentalist party Jamaat-e-Islami, which had collaborated with the Pakistani military even in the worst days of the violence in this part of what was then Pakistan. Despite this verdict, Quader Mollah was given life in prison and as he left the court, he flashed a victory sign to the Jamaatis, the members of the Jamaat-e-Islami. Millions of people were angered by Quader Mollah's arrogance. For a protest that was formed around a gruesome demand (the death penalty), the people there seemed optimistic about their country. The enthusiasm was infectious. "Let's destroy all evil powers. Let's continue the momentum of the movement of Shahbag. Let's play our roles. Let's build the nation. We know how to defeat our enemies," [said](#) Shohag Mostafij, a development professional in Dhaka.

At Shahbag, I asked people if they had been motivated by the Arab Spring that had taken place two years previously. Aziza Ahmed, one of the young people who helped build the Shahbag protests, [said](#) that it was not "an impulse to follow on the footsteps of Arab Spring or Occupy Wall Street." However, these events provided inspiration, even though the protests started due to blog posts against the verdict (many of these bloggers faced the wrath of the Islamist wing two years later when some of them were murdered). The young bloggers and people like Aziza Ahmed allowed the protests to be interpreted as a youth movement (indeed, Shahbag was often called "generation square" or "Projonmo Chottor" in Bangla in reference to the youth). But, in fact, Shahbag carried within it a deep well of hatred against the Jamaat-e-Islami all the way from 1971. There was [harsh language](#) used in the Square against the Jamaatis who had collaborated with the Pakistani army, including calls for their deaths.

Neither the 2013 Shahbag protests nor the [2018 protests for road safety](#) came to any resolution. Anger simmered under the surface, only to reassert itself in 2024 with the new Supreme Court verdict. Large protests took to the streets against the quotas, bringing in social forces such as the students who faced

unemployment and those who had no ancestral connection to freedom fighters (including the Jamaatis). Protests of this kind are predictable, even though their consequence is unpredictable. Until the afternoon of Sheikh Hasina's departure, it was not clear that she would leave. The mood replicated the situation in Cairo in 2011 when President Hosni Mubarak first said he would not seek re-election (February 10) and then when it was announced that he had already resigned and would be leaving the country for Saudi Arabia (February 11).

From Cairo to Dhaka.

After Mubarak left Cairo, the military took charge of Egypt. The people at Tahrir Square, the main protest site, sought protection behind a figure known to the world, Mohamed ElBaradei, the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency. The military, however, was forced to convene a constitutional assembly and then hold elections in 2012. This election brought to power the Muslim Brotherhood, which had been the most organized force in Egyptian politics. In 2013, the military overthrew the Brotherhood government, and put in place what appeared to be a civilian leadership. At this time, they brought ElBaradei in as vice president, but he only lasted from July to August 2013. The military suspended the 2012 constitution and put one of its own into the presidency, first in his uniform and then in a suit. This man—General, now President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi—has been in power for a decade. Many of the leaders of Tahrir languish in prison, their generation demoralized.

The ElBaradei of the Bangladeshi situation is Muhammad Yunus, a Nobel Prize winner and founder of the Grameen Bank (a scheme of micro-credit for poor women using ideas of [shame](#) as collateral, which has made [considerable](#) money for the largely male bankers). Yunus assembled a cabinet made up of neoliberal officials from the Bangladeshi bureaucracy, academia, and the non-governmental organization sector. The finance ministry, for instance, is in the capable hands of Salehuddin Ahmed, former Governor of the Bangladesh Bank, who will reliably [enforce](#) neoliberal economic policy. He will be perfectly comfortable in a conversation with Egypt's newly appointed finance minister, Ahmed Kouchouk, who used to be a senior economist at the World Bank. No progressive agenda can come from these sorts of finance ministries, let alone an agenda to establish the integrity of the national economy.

As of now, the Bangladeshi military remains in the barracks. But the attitude of repression has not subsided, only the address for the arrests has changed.

Yunus's government has pursued members of Sheikh Hasina's government with arrests on charges that include murder. Every day the newspapers in Bangladesh announce new arrests, all on a variety of charges. Sheikh Hasina's Awami League is being gutted, and she herself has [lost](#) the right to travel on a diplomatic passport. Rashed Khan Menon, leader of the Workers Party of Bangladesh, was [arrested](#) on a murder charge; Shakib Al Hasan, who is currently in Pakistan playing cricket for Bangladesh and is an Awami League member, [faces](#) a murder charge regarding the death of a protester on August 5.

Whether there is any merit to these cases is to be seen, but the avalanche of arrests of members of Sheikh Hasina's Awami League and of associated parties appears like a tide of retribution. Meanwhile, the Jamaat sees a resurrection as one of its wings—the Amar Bangladesh Party—was [registered](#) as a political party and several of its members are likely to be given [responsibility](#) for running several universities. For all the talk of a new Bangladesh, Yunus's government shut down two television channels, Somoy TV and Green TV (which had been previously [boycotted](#) by the Bangladesh National Party, the main opposition front) and its authorities arrested Hashem Reza, the editor of Amar Sangbad, as well as senior employees of Ekattor TV, Shakil Ahmed and Farzana Rupa. The liberal sections of Bangladesh's elite are not discomfited by this wave of repression, which suggests that their liberalism is more political than principled.

The Bangladesh Spring seems to be rapidly escalating toward its Winter.

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