

A BANGLADESH 'ONE-PARTY STATE' AND INDIA'S OPTIONS

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Sheikh Hasina gestures during a meeting with foreign observers and journalists at the Prime Minister's residence in Dhaka on January 8, 2024. | Photo Credit: Reuters

India has been joined by China and Russia in congratulating [Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina](#) on her [return to power](#) in yet another election without the participation of the principal opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party-Jamaat-e-Islami coalition. Unlike China and Russia, India is a functional democracy and will have to live with allegations of United States-type double standards of 'democracy at home and support for autocracies abroad' to suit strategic interests.

With [Ms. Hasina back in power for a record fifth time](#) (fourth in a row), India stands assured of continuity in the excellent bilateral relationship it has with Bangladesh, as Ms. Hasina has certainly addressed India's security and connectivity concerns unlike any other foreign leader. But she cannot turn Bangladesh into a one-party state and count on Indian support as she often tends to.

The world's most populous democracy having to back a friendly government sustained by three highly controversial elections sits uneasy on India's image as a global big player (if not big power). This also explains why anti-Indian sentiments are at an all-time high in Bangladesh — India's support for an increasingly autocratic regime sustained by rigged and non-participatory elections has not gone down well, especially with the youth (60% of the population in Bangladesh is below 25 years) who resent the massive corruption through large-scale bank defaults and extensive money laundering, the mismanagement of economy and the abnormal price rise that tainted the Hasina government in its third term after a decade of substantial economic growth.

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That India's strategic partner, the United States, and its European and Asian allies are intensely critical of the Bangladesh elections makes it doubly difficult for India to defend elections where large-scale false voting under the active watch of the uniformed forces has been reported to boost voter turnout statistics or to ensure the defeat of candidates unacceptable to Ms. Hasina's close circles.

The Bangladesh Parliament now resembles an extended national Council of the ruling Awami

League, with 61 independents from the party (allowed to contest to boost participation) emerging as the main 'Opposition bloc' to the League's 223 elected Member of Parliament in a 300-member House.

Analysts see this election as "a firm step towards a one-party police state". But Ms. Hasina's adviser, Salman F. Rahman, sought to justify the absence of Opposition by referring to the Indian situation. "The Indian parliament does not have an Opposition leader because the Congress failed to get the mandatory ten percent seats needed to get that. Should we call India a one-party state?" Mr. Rahman was quoted as saying.

Mr. Rahman is at the heart of many unseemly controversies faced by the Awami League such as stock market scams, large-scale money laundering and bank defaults, and now electoral frauds such as the use of under-age children caught on camera voting by turn several times over. His Bangladesh Export Import Company Limited (Beximco) conglomerate is synonymous with crony capitalism eating into the vitals of a vibrant economy and his political influence on Ms. Hasina has earned him the adage of being the de facto Prime Minister.

He is also spearheading the Awami League's new Islamist agenda that operates at the political and social levels — electoral understanding with Islamist groups such as the Hefazat-e-Islam and a push for the government's plans to create 560 model mosque cum islamic cultural centres which could supplant the vibrant syncretic and secular Bengali linguistic cultural space that paved the way for Independence and sustained Bangladesh's largely secular identity .

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Immediately after securing her fourth consecutive term in office, Ms. Hasina described India as a "trusted friend" and recalled her seven years of personal uncertainties after the 1975 military coup that left almost her entire family dead. But most pro-Indian elements in the Awami League have been eliminated in three stages — nominations, poll process and then during the formation of the cabinet and parliament committees. So, India's only hope of having some actual influence is to push Ms. Hasina hard to induct some pro-Indian leaders in the cabinet.

India battling with its western allies over Bangladesh will be at considerable diplomatic cost at a time when New Delhi needs them to keep China in check. The loss of influence, both at the decision-making and popular levels, in Bangladesh is unacceptable and a double-whammy, more so because it comes in the wake of India's loss of influence in almost the entire neighbourhood, from Nepal to the Maldives, and calls into question Prime Minister Narendra Modi's much trumpeted "Neighbourhood First" policy.

A very prominent Indian business house and its political patrons may feel happy over the lucrative power purchase agreement signed by the Hasina government, but it is poor compensation for the actual loss of influence.

It is time India stops putting all its eggs in the Awami League basket and takes a close look at genuinely secular platforms in the gender, minority, labour and youth spaces where there could be potential for a party like India's Aam Aadmi Party to emerge. This could also help India avoid a dilemma that it faced in 2001 when the A.B. Vajpayee government tried to establish good relations with the BNP-Jamaat coalition government (Ms. Hasina blamed India's Research and Analysis Wing for her defeat) only to regret the spurt in Islamist radicalism spilling over into Indian territory.

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