

From Reform to Revolt: The Complex Path Leading to Sheikh Hasina's Political Fall

Maksudul Shadat Akash^{1,2,*} and Md. Toufiqul Sharif¹


ABSTRACT

This paper examines the dramatic fall of Sheikh Hasina, world's longest-serving female prime minister, amid widespread protests and political turmoil. It explores the factors contributing to her resignation after a 15-year continuous rule, including economic mismanagement, allegations of corruption, and brutal suppression of dissent. The study analyzes the socio-political context leading to the anti-quota protests and the subsequent mass uprisings that forced Hasina to flee the country. By evaluating the impact of military intervention and public discontent, the paper provides insights into the broader implications for Bangladeshi democracy and governance. The findings highlight the interplay between authoritarian governance, economic inequality, and the role of civil unrest in shaping political change.

Keywords: Authoritarianism, Awami League, Bangladesh Politics, Student Protest.

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¹Department of Public Health & Informatics, Bangladesh University of Professionals, Bangladesh.

²Program and Research Department, VAALO Avant-Garde Limited, Bangladesh.

*Corresponding Author:
e-mail: shadatmaksudul@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

Sheikh Hasina, the longest-serving female head of government globally, has significantly shaped the political landscape of Bangladesh. Her leadership, marked by a combination of economic development and controversial governance practices, culminated in her recent resignation after a tumultuous period of unrest. The dynamics leading to her downfall are rooted in both her administration's policies and the broader socio-political environment of Bangladesh.

Hasina's first tenure as Prime Minister of Bangladesh began in 1996 and lasted until 2001. Her leadership saw notable economic growth, with Bangladesh experiencing an average annual GDP increase of 6% from 2009 to 2023 during her subsequent terms. Under her rule, from 2009 to 2023, significant improvements were made in infrastructure and social indicators, including enhanced electricity access and poverty reduction (McVeigh, 2024). Despite these successes, Hasina's administration faced increasing criticism for its authoritarian practices, including suppression of political opposition, accusations of corruption, and human rights abuses (Dawn, 2024; McVeigh, 2024).

The initial spark for the recent unrest was a student-led protest against a job quota system that reserved a significant portion of government jobs for descendants of freedom fighters from the 1971 liberation war. This policy, which was reinstated by the High Court in June 2024, had been previously scrapped in 2018 but continued to be a source of significant discontent among the youth, exacerbated by high unemployment rates (The Economic Times, 2024).

Protests escalated in July 2024, with demonstrators accusing Hasina's government of failing to address economic grievances and perpetuating a system of nepotism and corruption (Dawn, 2024; The Economic Times, 2024). The situation deteriorated rapidly, with violent clashes between protesters and security forces leading to over 300 deaths (Ethirajan, 2024). The government's heavy-handed response, including the use of excessive force and derogatory comments from Hasina, further inflamed the situation (Dawn, 2024; McVeigh, 2024).

As Hasina faced mounting pressure and a deteriorating political environment, the military intervened, leading to her resignation and subsequent flight from Bangladesh (Ethirajan, 2024). The transition to an interim government, while initially perceived as a resolution, raises questions about the future of Bangladesh's democracy and stability (Dawn, 2024). This paper explores the multifaceted



factors contributing to Sheikh Hasina's downfall, including political repression, economic mismanagement, and the role of military intervention.

2. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the political downfall of Sheikh Hasina, focusing on the key factors that contributed to her resignation as the Prime Minister of Bangladesh. The research aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the events and dynamics leading to her political demise.

Data were collected through an extensive review of multiple sources. The sources used to gather information encompassed detailed news coverage of the protests, public reactions, and political developments related to Sheikh Hasina's tenure and subsequent resignation.

The analysis of these sources followed a thematic approach, identifying key themes based on recurring topics and issues. These themes were organized into categories reflecting the major factors leading to Hasina's political downfall. The goal of the analysis was to synthesize the information and construct a coherent narrative of the events.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Background and Rise to Power

Sheikh Hasina, born on September 28, 1947, is the daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founder of Bangladesh (McVeigh, 2024). After surviving the brutal assassination of her family members in 1975, Hasina lived in exile in India until her return to Bangladesh in 1981. She quickly became a prominent political figure, leading her father's Awami League party to a significant victory in the 1996 elections (McVeigh, 2024). Despite a turbulent political career, including periods of imprisonment and opposition from rival Khaleda Zia, Hasina's leadership secured her continued dominance in Bangladeshi politics (AFP, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c).

3.2. Economic Achievements and Challenges

Under Hasina's leadership, Bangladesh experienced considerable economic growth. The nation saw consistent GDP growth and significant improvements in infrastructure, including widespread electricity access and reductions in poverty rates (McVeigh, 2024). However, these achievements were marred by increasing economic disparities and corruption. Critics argue that while the economic benefits were substantial, they disproportionately favored the wealthy elite, exacerbating income inequality and public dissatisfaction (Dawn, 2024; McVeigh, 2024).

3.3. Political Repression and Human Rights Abuses

Hasina's administration faced significant criticism for its authoritarian practices. Allegations of political repression, including the suppression of opposition parties and the use of extrajudicial killings, became increasingly prevalent. Reports emerged of enforced disappearances and the imprisonment of dissenting voices, contributing to a growing climate of fear and discontent (Dawn, 2024). The crackdown on student protests in July 2024, which resulted in numerous deaths, highlighted the administration's repressive tactics and further fueled public outrage (Ethirajan, 2024).

3.4. The Role of the Job Quota System

The job quota system, which initially aimed to reserve positions for descendants of freedom fighters, became a focal point of discontent. In June 2024, the High Court reinstated the quotas, sparking widespread protests among students and young people frustrated by high unemployment and perceived injustice (The Economic Times, 2024). Despite the system being scrapped previously, the reinstatement was seen as a symbol of the administration's disregard for public grievances. The student-led protests, which quickly gained momentum, transformed into a broader anti-government movement demanding Hasina's resignation (Dawn, 2024; The Economic Times, 2024).

3.5. The Role of the Military and the Interim Government

As the protests intensified, the military's role became increasingly significant. The army, traditionally respected in Bangladesh, was seen as a neutral entity but eventually intervened to restore order. General Waker-uz-Zaman announced the formation of an interim government and urged citizens to avoid violence (Al Jazeera, 2024; Ethirajan, 2024). This move was perceived as a direct response to the escalating violence and the pressure on the government to address the crisis.

3.6. Sheikh Hasina's Resignation and Aftermath

On the day of her resignation, Sheikh Hasina fled the country, reportedly seeking refuge in India. Her departure was met with widespread celebration among protesters who had long criticized her leadership as dictatorial and corrupt (Al Jazeera, 2024; Ethirajan, 2024). Hasina's resignation marked the end of one of South Asia's most enduring political dynasties and raised questions about the future stability of Bangladesh (McVeigh, 2024).

The transition to an interim government led by the military has been controversial. Critics argue that such interventions undermine the democratic process and could lead to prolonged instability. The immediate priority for the interim administration is to stabilize the country and pave the way for a return to civilian rule through credible elections (Dawn, 2024; Ethirajan, 2024).

4. CONCLUSION

Sheikh Hasina's resignation signifies the conclusion of a pivotal era in Bangladeshi politics. Her tenure was characterized by notable achievements, including substantial economic growth and infrastructure development. However, these accomplishments were overshadowed by widely acknowledged concerns regarding authoritarianism, corruption, and human rights abuses. The recent unrest initiated by discontent with the job quota system and intensified by the administration's repressive measures, underscores the intricate interplay of political, economic, and social factors contributing to her downfall. The shift to an interim government presents crucial questions regarding the future trajectory of democracy and stability in Bangladesh.

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ETHICAL CLEARANCE

Ethical clearance was not required for this study, as it relied solely on publicly available sources. However, the study adhered to rigorous ethical standards by ensuring that the representation of events and individuals was both accurate and respectful. Efforts were made to avoid bias and misinterpretation in presenting the data, maintaining the integrity and credibility of the findings.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this research.

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