

# Issue Brief

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**Bangladesh:  
A Festering  
Wound**

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## Bangladesh: A Festering Wound

### Abstract

*Bangladesh, born in 1971 as a secular and democratic state, through India's military intervention, has undergone a gradual yet profound transformation marked by political instability, military dominance, and increasing religious radicalisation. This paper traces Bangladesh's post-independence trajectory—from the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to the consolidation of Islamist forces through military regimes, dynastic politics, and foreign interferences—particularly from Pakistan and, indirectly, the United States. The regime change of 2024 is examined as a culmination of long-standing political repression, economic distress, and externally supported destabilisation, resulting in heightened anti-India sentiment and persecution of religious minorities, especially Hindus. The study argues that post-2024 Bangladesh poses serious security, economic, and geopolitical challenges for India, including renewed proxy war, refugee influx, insurgency risks, and great-power competition in India's eastern neighbourhood.*

*“The larger project of avenging the defeat of 1971 will be resumed at the first sign of BNP govt faltering and it will be replenished with visceral anti-India activity” (Dasgupta, S. 2026).*

‘We will take it to Kolkata’ - Pak Defence minister warning India of strikes in future conflict (TOI, 2026).

**Keywords:** Secularism to Islamisation, Regime change, Political repression, Religious persecution (Hindus), Proxy warfare

### Introduction

Bangladesh, erstwhile East Pakistan, was created by direct military intervention by the Indian Armed forces in 1971 with great deal of economic and human cost. As per World Bank assessment, the war had cost India approx. \$5.5b at the current value including cost of supporting nearly 10 million refugees. This war contributed to rising inflation, steep fall in agriculture and stagnant industrial growth in the following years—thus retarding economic progress of India for decades to come by.

The swift 13 days victory in 1971, only of its kind in military history post WWII, cemented India's status as the undisputed major power in South Asia. The intervention though forced by the

massive refugee influx and threat to our national security, broke the hostile Pakistan—making it permanently incapable of launching direct military adventure against us. Since then, Pakistan has resorted to policy of inflicting “Thousand cuts” upon India through proxy war using state sponsored terrorism. However, recent events in Bangladesh appears to be an extension of this policy.

Five decades hence, the Regime change in 2024 has brought instability in Bangladesh and posing security challenges for India as the region has once again become a buffer zone for players that are inimical to the economic rise of India.

Though BNP has formed government, the rise of Jamaat by securing 31% of votes of radicalised population cannot be ignored while chalking out internal security policy. Intelligence reports have revealed that, extremist groups are again establishing Training camps in Chittagong hill tracts and. Rohingya refugee camps have become recruitment ground for extremists.

Bangladesh has history of vertical communal divide even before this subcontinent was divided based on Two- Nation Theory.

### **Fateful Decade**

Upon his release, in January 1972, Sheikh Mujibur Rehman took office as the head of Bangladesh. The Mukti Bahini and other militia formed new Bangladesh Army to which Indian Army transferred control on 17 March 1972. Due to internal strife, Mujib declared state of emergency in January 1975 and amended the Constitution barring all opposition parties — a pattern that continues till date.

He assumed himself as President with extraordinary powers. Mujib also got unpopular among veterans of 1971 war and military as they saw it a betrayal due to sidelining of the regular Army in favour of a new politically motivated para military force viz. Jatiye Rakhi Bachini. Mismanagement of economy also played its role.

On 15 August 1975, a group of junior Army Officers invaded the presidential residence with tanks and killed Mujib and his family. Sheikh Hassina and Rehana— daughters of Mujib, were present in Germany. There was speculation in media that foreign power was involved in the coup and assassination.

The coup leaders were overthrown and the nation saw series of coups and counter coups and the country was paralyzed. The Coup of 1977 gave control to Army Chief Zia-ur-Rehman who formed Bangladesh National Party (BNP). The other Party being Awami League (AL).

### **Period Post Mujibur Rehman**

Post Mujib era saw strong emphasis on Islamic identity rather than Bengali. Nation shifted from socialists to market oriented policies and came under political instability, frequent coup, counter coups and Islamisation. During this period, the military took a central role and a period of military backed governance followed. After series of protests, the nation reverted back to parliamentary system dominated by BNP and Awami league in 1990s.

The Parliamentary system, under these two parties, thrived on intense rivalry, frequent protests, strikes and violence. Both parties heavily relied on dynastic politics. The BNP aligned with Jamaat- e- Islami, a communal outfit, influencing the secular landscape adversely. A party in power as a culture, got involved in damaging the political prospects and interests of the opposition resulting by and large single party rule.

### **Islam a Potent Force In Bengal Politics and Polity**

In undivided India, both Punjab and Bengal were highly communalised provinces with intense polarisation. Both Muslim League and Hindu Mahasabha were actively engaged in mobilising their respective religious communities. Introduction of separate electorates for provincial elections in 1937 further exacerbated the divisive environment. Pre- independence saw Bengal going through worst kind of communal riots, major one being:

- 1905 partition of Bengal creating Muslim dominated province in East Bengal which was ultimately reversed in 1911.
- Direct Action Day in August 1946 resulted killing in Calcutta between 5 to 10 thousand and wounding 15000 in a matter of 4 days (Sengupta, A. 2024).
- Noakhali, in November 1946 wherein, organized attacks on Hindus occurred involving forced conversion, rape and mass looting.
- The 1947 partition riots causing massive displacement and death as millions crossed over.

Mr Shaheed Suhrawardi, the then Prime Minister of Bengal, was severely criticised for his inaction and for allegedly interfering with police operations and their response to control the riots. Mr. Mujibur Rehman was his protégé and allegedly was active participant in Muslim league's campaign for Pakistan. Critics and some accounts allege that he was the instigator of violence on Direct Action Day. Later in his career, he positioned himself as a secular leader intending to have religion neutral Bangladesh.

Despite division of Bengal on religious lines, the erstwhile East Pakistan maintained its linguistic, literary and cultural heritage. It maintained deep roots in Bengal Folk music, poetry and literature of Rabinder Nath Tagore. The author witnessed this while in BD during the war.

The political trajectory from 1947-1971 showed a shift away from "Two Nation Theory" towards secular, linguistically driven Bengali Nationalism. When Pakistan tried to impose Urdu in 1952, it was protested and many students sacrificed their life (Abhijit, S. 2026).

### **Radicalisation of Bangla Desh and Role of Pakistan**

Transition of Bangladesh from a secular state to a radicalised Islamic state was a gradual process driven by military regimes from 1975 (after the assassination of Mujibur Rehman) to 1990. Gen Zia ur Rehman (Father of current PM Tariq Rehman) and Gen Ershad sought to solidify their legitimacy against the secular Awami League by aligning with radicalized forces.

In 1977, Zia removed the word 'secularism' from the Constitution.

### **Jamaat-e-Islami (JI): A Communal Oufit**

The JI was founded in 1941 in British India in Lahore. After partition, it split into separate operating branches in Pakistan, India and, post the 1971 war, got separate identity in Bangladesh. Its core mission is to establish Hukumat-e-llahia (Divine Governance), promoting a strict interpretation of Islam in every sphere of life, opposing secularism, western influence and socialism. It operates through its student wings as Jamiat -e-Talaba in Pakistan and Islami Chhatro Shibir in Bangladesh. The latter spearheaded the movement of recent regime change in Bangladesh.

Ban on this party, enforced due to its collaboration with Pakistan in 1971 was lifted in 1979. It had opposed independence struggle and had actively participated in genocide unleashed

by Pakistan Army which led to war crimes trial of its top leaders post-independence. Since formation of BNP by Zia ur Rehman, this party has been aligning with it to oppose Awami league as recent as 2022. Since late 2025 and early 2026 they have become competitive political rivals as Awami League is no more in the political race. Due to this alignment, the country made radicalization obvious, due to following signs:

Number of Madrassas increased from 1838 in 1976 to nearly 9384 by 2011 (Sugie, A. 2019). Awami league, though reinstated secularism in 2011, but retained Islam as state religion. To counter opposition, Awami league also followed the policy of appeasement towards Jamaat- e-Islami and gave concessions to the radical elements like recognising Madrassa degree and reforming text books to be more conservative. Besides this organization, there are many home grown Islamist militant groups aiming to establish sharia law with ties to Al-Qaeda and ISIS.

### **Role of Pakistan in Radicalising**

Following the assassination of Mujib, Pakistan who had not reconciled with the loss of this province, kept on influencing the political landscape of Bangladesh contributing to a shift away from secularism towards a more Islamic -oriented, aligning more with oil rich middle Eastern nations. Reports indicate Pakistan's covert support to the coup plotters within the Bangladesh Army as, it rapidly recognized the new post-coup government, offering economic aid in the form of rice and cloth. It also influenced shift in the foreign policy of Bangladesh more towards USA from Soviet Union and India.

The 1977 takeover of Pakistan by Gen Zia ul Haq, the pace of radicalisation got further impetus. It revived the spirit of "Two Nation Theory" in Bangladesh which it had discarded in 1971. His regime saw massive flow of funds from Middle East, aimed at promoting Wahhabi/Salafist ideologies. He partially shifted these funds to Bangladesh which promoted drastic shift from secular India till it was corrected partially by Awami League coming to power in 2009.

### **Events Leading to the Fall of Sheikh Hassina**

As stated earlier about deep political mistrust and differences among the main political parties (BNP and AL), the patience dried up by the opposition due to 15 yrs long continuous rule

of Sheikh Hasina. The events took downward spiral when students in July 2024 protested against Quota system reserving 30% of government jobs for 1971 freedom fighters' descendants.

Intense anti-incumbency sentiments grew after 15 yrs of one party rule marked by repression of opposition, shrinking civil liberties, rising wealth disparity, high unemployment and inflation causing frustration among the youth. It was also alleged that 2014, 2018 and 2024, elections were rigged. Though Quotas was struck down by the supreme court, agitation was continued, intensified by BNP, Jamaat-e- Islami and other radicalised civil society organisations and student unions.

### **Mohammad Yunus and Interim Government**

Due to these factors, Sheikh Hasina had to flee the country on 05 August and took asylum in India. The interim government was formed by Mohammad Yunus who was in USA for considerable period of his life. His relations with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina had been deeply antagonistic for two decades. The relations became further strained when he was removed as a Managing Director of Grameen Bank by her.

Tension intensified when the Hasina government accused Yunus of corruption and influencing the World Bank to withdraw loan for the Padma Bridge Project in 2012 by using his connections in USA (The Economist, 2012).

Under Hasina's regime he faced over 10 lawsuits. He has a long history with the US establishment with whom he had close "partnership" and "warm" relations. He was a popular choice with many western governments. Over the years, he had cultivated friendship with European Royals and the Clintons who helped him to expand microcredit initiatives in the USA.

After the exit of Sheikh Hasina, he was appointed head of the caretaker government, on the popular demand of Student Union **of Bangladesh**. During his tenure, he had consistently promoted anti-India feelings among the population for giving shelter to Sheikh Hasina and many a times had formally asked for her deportation back to BD.

He released hundreds of individuals including convicted extremists and terrorists who were jailed by the previous AL govt. He also lifted ban on JJ. During his tenure, anti- terrorism apparatus was also diluted and it remains so even during the current government.

His tenure as head of interim government saw break down of law and order and increased incidents of communal violence, which some allege that he used it to postpone elections and allowed radical elements to gain influence.

### **Role of Foreign Powers in Regime Change**

The events in Bangladesh in July-August 2024 were not spontaneous but the result of planned regime change operations targeting ouster of Sheikh Hassina and simultaneously bringing to power the Islamists headed by Jamaat -e -Islami party.

#### **USA**

Interests of both USA and Jamaat- e- Islami were converging in 1971 as both did not want bifurcation of Pakistan. USA perceived defeat of Pakistan— a severe setback to her authority in West Asia and South Asia which she was exerting through Pakistan who was member of CENTO. Beside this, Hassina always suspected role of USA in assassination of her father Mujib.

For this reason, relations between USA and Awami League had remained strained till today (Khasru, B.Z. 2024). During Sheikh Hasina's trip to USA in April 2023, to attend World Bank meeting, no one from the Biden administration came to meet her. During elections held in Bangladesh in 2018, USA raised concerns about its fairness.

Time to time, the Hasina government has been critical of USA for its support to BNP. On the other hand, Sheikh Hasina's tilt towards China had become significant concern for the USA. She, in fact, was balancing relations of Bangladesh between India and China.

Sheikh Hasina has alleged that the USA wanted St Martin Island to exert influence in the Bay of Bengal, and her refusal had led to current state of events. She also alleged that USA wanted to carve out a Christian State like East Timor to include parts of Bangladesh and Myanmar (Dincel, S. 2024). She had also refused to join QUAD. However, such reports were subsequently denied by her son on X attributed to her mother.

USA is also concerned with China developing deep sea Port Kyaukpyu in Myanmar. It will allow China to bypass the narrow Strait of Malacca for oil and gas imports as it also includes an oil and gas pipelines running from the port to her Yunnan province. See map below.



USA was also concerned with the growing friendship between Bangladesh and India under the rule of AL. USA was also disturbed by Modi government's decision to proceed with deep sea drilling in the Bay of Bengal to extract hydrocarbon reserves as it would give economic boost to India. India is also developing deep sea port at Sittwe in Rakhine province of Myanmar which would give access to India's northeast states through Sea cum Road connectivity easing dependence on land route passing through the Siliguri corridor. See map below.



USA is also not very happy with India's independent foreign policy. All the aspirations of USA would be well served if there is a favourable and pliable regime in Bangladesh. It will give launch pad to unleash forces to destabilise India and curtail its economic progress. It suits China too (Naduvath, J. 2025).

USA continues to harbour pro Khalistani elements in her country, reasons are obvious. In March 2026, American national Mathew VanDyke and six Ukrainian nationals were arrested as

they had gone to restricted area in Mizoram illegally, crossed over to Myanmar and trained the armed groups banned in India in Drone operations to be used as means of delivery of explosives for terrorist strikes.

### ***China***

China has been a significant economic and strategic partner of Sheikh Hasina government. It had invested \$14b worth of investment in Bangladesh enjoying good relations with the government. Will China dislodge anti- America government in Bangladesh just to put any kind of pressure on India? Answer is obviously “NO”.

Even though there is no definitive evidence available for China’s involvement in the regime change, few think tanks in India are leading the narrative that China is the major player in the game of this change.

### ***Pakistan***

The regime change operations was supported by Pakistan using her influence on local elements like Jamaat- e- Islami. Post regime change, both the countries have strengthened their defence ties to an extent that Bangladesh is interested in purchasing Pakistan military equipment.

Allegations suggest that a prominent student leader— Nahid Islam, was recruited by ISI in 2022. Pakistan has offered to train the army of Bangladesh. Pakistan Foreign Minister, Ishaq Dhar, visited Dhaka. Pakistan has drastically eased travel restrictions for Bangladesh citizens and vice versa.

It is believed that Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and other Pakistan based militant groups claimed to have active role in the movement, raising concerns that Bangladesh could become a renewed breeding ground for extremist activities supported by Pakistan against India (Nanjappa, V.).

Tarique Rahman allegedly travelled to middle East country for meeting the ISI officials where the plot was hatched for launching the campaign and creating conditions in Bangladesh for ousting Hasina. He became active on social media platform X, encouraging the movement through street power.

## **Economic, Political and Security situation in BD Post Regime Change**

Post regime change, anti-India became a sort of Bangladesh nationalism. The country faced severe economic strain, fragmented politics and social unrest. GDP growth came down to 3.3% against 9% under previous regime. An estimated 2.1 million jobs were lost between July-August 2024.

Attacks on religious minorities, especially Hindu drastically rose. As per various news agencies, and MEA of India, till December 2025, 2,900 incidents of violence against minorities most of it on Hindus, like killing, sexual assaults and destruction of places of worship were reported; 152 Hindu temples desecrated (figures given by Minister of State {External Affairs} in the Parliament on 07 February 2025) and more than 100 Hindus were killed. A 23-year-old Hindu youth, Dipu Chander Das, was burnt alive. USA, who claims to be champion of Human Rights Cause, did not make any official attempt to stop this human tragedy.

### **Analyses of Recent Elections in Bangladesh**

General elections, post student led uprising, were held on 12 February 2026. These elections excluded Awami League —the party that ruled over Bangladesh for maximum number of years post its creation. In this election, the BNP and Jamaat- e- Islami, who were allies when Awami League was in power, contested against each other to rule the country. Elections witnessed very low turnout (47.91 %).

Awami League's support base of 30% is broadly intact which can be activated any time by its leaders to destabilise the BNP government. Unless Awami league is permitted to return to politics to share nationalist agenda of BNP, there is every possibility of Jamaat securing an upper hand in the coming days.

Tarique Rehman who has become PM, had fled Bangladesh in 2008 and returned after 17 years of self- imposed exile. (He was sentenced to life imprisonment in 2018 in a grenade attack case in absentia in which Hasina was injured and 24 people were killed. He was acquitted in August 2024 by the High Court after the fall of Hasina's government. In 2016, he was also sentenced in absentia to 7 yrs jail over money laundering.

Though his party won two third of majority (209 seats out of 300 seats with 49.97 % vote share), Jamaat-e-Islami led alliance including NCP formed by the students has emerged as strong opposition with 77 seats with 31.76% vote share. Out of these 77, the party has won 51 seats in districts along the Indian borders.

### **Friction Points Between BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami Post February Elections**

Jamaat-e-Islami expressed serious questions about the integrity and fairness of the election process. Both have entered into a phase of expanding their electoral base at the cost of each other. Run up to the elections saw intense rivalry including violent clashes between the two parties.

There is ideological divergence on governance. While BNP wants to build safe and self-reliant Bangladesh, Jamaat wants more hardline Islami agenda and advocacy for Sharia based laws. Hindus have voted en-block to BNP, likely to become target of radical elements of JI.

BNP will come under tremendous political pressure from JI if it promotes pro Indian stance, which it will have to if it wants economic revival. Confidence of its police has yet not been restored.

### **India will Lose Here**

India enjoyed peaceful relations with Sheikh Hasina government. Many contagious and complex issues were resolved during her tenure. Cross border terrorism /insurgency came to a considerable halt. Our Eastern region commenced having political stability and its economic growth was on the ascendency. There was tranquility on the border. Mutual trust, connectivity and economic growth was experienced by both the countries.

The regime change has once again given rise to mistrust, communal tensions, anti-India stance and the country is once again in the process of what it was when it was part of Pakistan, though the current govt is making efforts for course correction.

India is going to face all or some of the following situations detrimental to its economic, security and geopolitical issues.

## ***Security Challenges***

Increased pressure on BSF with respect to surge in refugee influx due to political volatility within Bangladesh. Possibility of return of anti-India militant groups from Myanmar and using Bangladesh as a launch pad cannot be ruled out

Jamaat winning sizeable percentage of radicalised population, will be a constant threat to the stability of BNP government which may lead to communal tensions targeting Hindus. It will create communal tensions within our country too – putting political, diplomatic and military pressure on the central government to save Hindus.

Recreating insurgency in neighbouring states of West Bengal, Manipur, Assam, Tripura and Meghalaya, will put extra burden on security forces including Army and on finances, thus adversely affecting economic development of the Eastern region.

USA's influence on its internal and external policies to use it as a leverage over India cannot be ruled out.

USA is likely to develop a naval base in Bay of Bengal where China is also developing—bringing rivalry between two super powers closer to our periphery.

Narcotic trade which had shifted from North of Thailand to Bangladesh and Myanmar border, will have a spillover effect to our side of the border and can be a source of law-and-order problem and instability in India's Northeast as currently being witnessed in Manipur.

## **Economic**

- Risks loss of investment to infrastructure projects in Bangladesh funded by India such as rail links, port development and Maitri pipeline, that transports diesel from Assam to Bangladesh.
- Loss of Jobs for both the countries.
- Potential long-term interruption to supply chain for essential and engineering goods for both the countries.
- Increased security expenditure.
- High inflation and economic crisis in Bangladesh will reduce the demand for Indian goods.

## **Geopolitical Challenges**

China is reportedly developing the old World War II era airfield in the Lalmonirhat district located in Northern Bangladesh near the Indian Border. It is considered as a strategic project challenging security concerns of Siliguri corridor. China will hasten up sale of military hardware to Bangladesh Air Force.

Situation facilitates convergence of aims of USA, China and Pakistan to destabilise India so that it is not able to flex its economic muscle to be a regional power. It gets credibility when US Deputy Secretary of States, in March 2026 Raisina Dialogue, said that USA will not allow India to become rival like China or words to that effect.

### **From 2.5 warfront War India now will face 3.5 Front War**

Bangladesh may enter a mutual defense pact with Pakistan coming under her nuclear umbrella and may be ally of Pakistan's proxy war. The situation suits Pakistan the most as it will give her alibi on terrorism and avoid India's warning post Op Sindoor.

Bangladesh may become a colony of Pakistan for goods and services which in turn will give boost to Pakistan's crumbling economy —giving boost to her defence spending and posing better military challenge to India.

### **Worst Case Scenario**

Worst and possible challenge will be the fallout of continued persecution/ genocide of Hindus. Under the previous rule of BNP (2001-2006), the Hindu community in Bangladesh faced severe persecution.

### **The Way Out**

- Utilise economic and connectivity leverage to ensure protection of minorities particularly Hindus.
- Fence the remaining portion of India-Bangladesh border. Increase patrolling of the border and strengthen the local police of all the neighboring states to detect and deport any illegal intruder. Madrassas close to the border should come under surveillance/scrutiny.
- Establish permanent posts of central security forces on likely routes of infiltration of insurgents.

- In case intensity of Proxy war on the behest of Pakistan increases, then India should not hesitate to hit their camps with drones /surgical strike. If Bangladesh goes under anarchy resulting mass exodus of Hindus and other victimized communities, then kinetic action to carve out another country out of Bangladesh should become single most option without any hesitation. For this, our preparations, both military and diplomatic, must go on so that this option is exercised with zero warning and delay.
- USA must be engaged diplomatically to force the government in power to be secular, honoring the stability and security of India.

Ensure that Bangladesh is governed with the rule of law and remain neutral between India and China. At the same time, India must have a diplomatic leverage over USA deterring her involvement in anti-India activities from the soil of BD.

## Conclusion

Bangladesh's post-1971 history demonstrates a steady erosion of secular, democratic foundations on which the nation was created. What began as a linguistically driven liberation movement against religious majoritarianism gradually gave way to militarisation of politics, institutional weakening, and the instrumentalisation of Islam for political legitimacy. External actors—most notably Pakistan, and at times the United States—have repeatedly exploited these internal fault lines to shape outcomes contrary to India's security interests. The regime change of 2024 represents not an isolated political transition but the culmination of decades of instability, radicalisation, and foreign interference.

For India, the consequences are immediate and severe. The resurgence of Islamist forces, deepening Pakistan–Bangladesh military cooperation, persecution of religious minorities, and growing anti-India sentiments together threaten border stability, internal security in the eastern and northeastern states, and long-term regional connectivity goals. Bangladesh risks reverting to a strategic posture reminiscent of its East Pakistan phase.

India must therefore respond with strategic clarity rather than reactive diplomacy. Protecting minorities, preventing cross-border militancy, and preserving regional balance demands a calibrated approach combining diplomatic engagement, economic leverage, intelligence preparedness, and robust border management and threat of kinetic action. Stability in Bangladesh

is no longer a peripheral concern—it is integral to India’s national security and its aspirations to be a leading regional power.

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