

Bangladesh's toxic politics

Hello, Delhi

It is up to India to try to stop Sheikh Hasina ruining Bangladesh

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THE Punch-and-Judy show of Bangladeshi politics, in which the ruling party—run by the daughter of a former president—bashes the opposition—run by the widow of a former president—before swapping places with it, has been running for decades. The outside world rarely pays attention because nothing seems to change.



Recently, though, the squabbling has turned into a crisis (see [article](http://www.economist.com/node/21555938) (<http://www.economist.com/node/21555938>)) which threatens to make life still worse for the 170m poor Muslims who suffer under one of the world's worst governments. Since Bangladesh's political leaders show no interest in their fate, outsiders need to do so.

When Sheikh Hasina, leader of the Awami League and current prime minister, and Khaleda Zia, leader of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), alternated in power in the 1990s, things were pretty bad, but in the past decade they have got worse. The administration Mrs Zia headed from 2001 to 2006 was a brutal kleptocracy. It was followed by army-backed unelected technocrats. Then in 2008 the Awami League swept to power in a landslide victory. The League has 229 of 300 parliamentary seats compared with 31 for Mrs Zia's BNP. Sheikh Hasina has used this mandate to consolidate power and hound her enemies, real and imagined.

There has been a spate of mysterious disappearances. This month 33 senior members of the opposition were arrested on charges of vandalism and arson. A war-crimes tribunal to investigate the atrocities in Bangladesh's war of independence in 1971—some of the bloodiest in modern history—now looks like an attempt to discredit the BNP and its Islamist allies. And the hounding of Mohammad Yunus, a pioneer of microfinance, creator of the Grameen Bank and a Nobel laureate, is seen as payback for his temerity in 2007 in trying to launch a “third force”

in politics. Meanwhile, journalists and activists face intimidation and worse, and the vibrant NGOs that keep the spirit of democracy alive worry that proposed legislation would leave them at the mercy of government whims.

Last year the League did away with the provision that caretaker administrations should oversee elections. The arrangement was not ideal. In January 2007 protests led by the League, convinced that the BNP would rig an election, led to a coup. But without some assurance of fair play the BNP will boycott the next election, due in 2014. So there is the prospect of yet more protests, which in Bangladesh often take the form of crippling strikes. There is also the real prospect of utter political paralysis, risking even worse turmoil on the streets.

The only voice in Dhaka

The outside world is trying to do its bit. The World Bank has scrapped a deal to pay for a big bridge because of its suspicions of corruption. EU ambassadors have denounced the treatment of Mr Yunus and the harassment of activists. Hillary Clinton flew to Dhaka this month to stand by Mr Yunus.

But the government seems unmoved. In a snub to Mrs Clinton, it announced a review into ownership of Grameen, a move to take over (and probably destroy) the bank. The only country to have much influence in Dhaka is India. Until recently the regional superpower tolerated Sheikh Hasina's excesses, in part because Bangladesh has cracked down on Islamists. India now seems to be hedging its bets between the two parties. But if it still wants to have a functioning democracy next door, it needs to speak out far louder in favour of it.

From the print edition: Leaders