

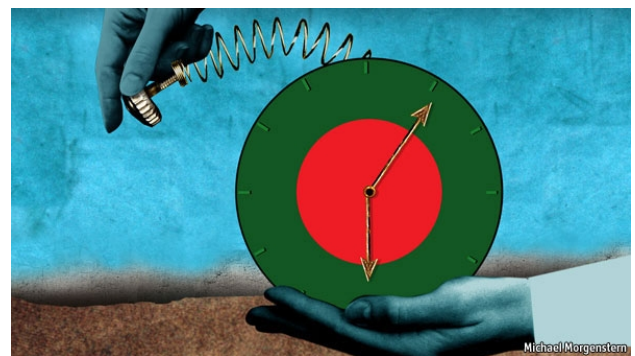
## Banyan

# In the name of the father

**An obsession with Bangladesh's past may explain its prime minister's growing intolerance**

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ASK well-connected Bangladeshis which country they dream of emulating and they usually name one of two big Asian democracies: populous and largely Muslim Indonesia, for its moderation, growing wealth and stability; or India, for its job-creating, increasingly urban economy. Wretched Pakistan is dismissed with the scorn of a divorcee rejecting her abusive ex.



Compared with Pakistan, from which Bangladesh split bloodily 40 years ago this December, life does indeed look better. The country is stable: few of Bangladesh's 160m-odd citizens are Muslim fundamentalists. The economy, with annual output of around \$100 billion, grows by nearly 7% a year and is fuelled by the world's third-largest clothes-export industry. Aid money gushes in, and good things are done against poverty. And, since two years of army-backed rule ended in 2008, the generals have been tucked up securely in barracks.

All this should leave the prime minister, Sheikh Hasina—whom civil servants are said to address as “sir”—feeling confident. Her Awami League romped to an electoral win in December 2008. Her popularity has since dipped, but not disastrously. Nearly half the respondents to an AC-Nielsen survey in January, the most recent one, thought her government did a good job. Few backed the main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), which spurns parliament, calls public strikes and is remembered for the brutality and corruption of its rule in 2001-06.

Facing a general election in a couple of years, Sheikh Hasina might hope to embed democracy and persuade voters to re-elect her—a first for the country. Sadly, judging by her recent behaviour, she seems to seek instead to crush the opposition and provoke an election boycott, silencing pesky critics as she goes.

The mutual animosity between the prime minister and the opposition leader is legendary. Legal attacks on Khaleda Zia, admittedly an unsympathetic figure, are in full flow: an anti-corruption body charged her on August 8th; the same day a court issued a warrant for her exiled elder son over bribe-taking; in June a younger son was sentenced, in absentia, to six years in another graft case; in November she was evicted from her home. Each of these steps may be legitimate; together they look like vengeance.

More surprising was Sheikh Hasina's attack on Muhammad Yunus, thrown out of the Grameen Bank he founded. His most obvious mistake came in 2007, during the two-year interregnum, when he flirted for a while with launching a political party—a “third force” to break the old duopoly. Rumours swirl in Dhaka, however, that Mr Yunus's other sins included his accepting a Nobel peace prize that Sheikh Hasina felt should have been hers, failing to commiserate after an assassination attempt on her in 2004, and being ungrateful for the help she gave Grameen.

In brief Mr Yunus was resented for his high international profile, which threatened to eclipse the sacred memory of Sheikh Hasina's father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who led Bangladesh to independence. Sheikh Hasina wants her father to be revered. A new constitutional requirement declares him father of the nation and orders all offices in the country to display his portrait.

One consequence of the cult surrounding their dynasty is that few institutions are trusted as independent. The courts, for example, have seen corruption cases against Awami League figures quashed. Those against BNP types proceed apace. Opposition leaders report violent ill-treatment. Mahmudur Rahman, a newspaper editor who served in the BNP government, describes being “tortured, handcuffed, blindfolded, stripped naked, starved”.

Harping on such matters is seen by Sheikh Hasina's defenders as a “smear campaign”. Human-rights groups who point to dreadful practices, such as routine killings of criminals by police, are told how much worse things were before. Outspoken critics, such as Odhikar, a human-rights and election-monitoring group, say new government controls on the way they spend money may be a step towards being “strangled”. Trade unions fret that their leaders are threatened and harassed. The government pooh-poohs them all.

The kindest view of the government is that it is clumsy to the point of self-harm. Even sympathetic outsiders say it has bungled forthcoming war-crimes trials of seven men over their alleged roles in the war and massacres of 1971. The goal of holding wrongdoers accountable now risks being subsumed by a partisan witch-hunt. Some of the accused have been held for months without relevant charges. Only opposition figures will be tried.

## **The Sheikh of things to come**

Most troubling is the hasty rewriting of the constitution on June 30th, especially the scrapping of a provision for caretaker administrations to run elections. The Supreme Court suggested keeping the set-up for two more elections, to avoid provoking social strife. Sheikh Hasina herself had insisted on the arrangement when in opposition. In office she heedlessly went ahead and junked it. That bodes ill for fair and peaceful polls in 2013.

Nor do Orwellian touches inspire confidence. The constitution, or at least most of it, shall not be amended in future. Anyone who dares criticise it may be prosecuted for sedition. Mrs Zia has already been warned for having complained about it. Merely to back such a complaint is now illegal. Thought-crime may be next.

All this suggests Sheikh Hasina's dream for Bangladesh differs profoundly from that cherished by her countrymen. She hopes to emulate not Indonesia or India today, but the country imagined by her father before his murder in 1975. Though it fails to fulfil a promise to restore his founding constitution's commitment to "secularism", the new version is mostly loyal to his vision, complete with dated pledges to socialism. By attacking opponents, his daughter settles scores with those who opposed Sheikh Mujib. And, as Orwell knew: who controls the present controls the past. And who controls the past controls the future.

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