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"Democracy Means Tolerance. We Don't Have That"

By ALEX PERRY

Opposition leader and former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed was abroad during a 1975 coup that killed her father, independence leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and wiped out most of her immediate family. Since then, she has survived several assassination attempts of her own, the latest in August 2004 when a bomb at a political rally she attended killed 21 and left her partially deaf. TIME's Alex Perry spoke to Hasina at her Dhaka home the night before she flew to the U.S. to seek treatment for her hearing. You've been demanding that the government deal with Bangladesh's Islamist militants. How do you feel now that most of the top leaders have been arrested? Hasina: These terror groups are protected by the government. This is their baby. Maybe because of pressure—domestic and international—they had to take some action. But they want to blame the opposition—us, the Awami League. I believe the government uses these terror groups. All the bomb blasts that have taken place in this country have targeted us, minority groups and the secular, democratic, progressive civil society. [The terrorists] target us, then [the government] blames us. Now the Prime Minister has arrested them. And the J.M.B. [terror group Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh] have admitted their responsibility. [But] it's all just a drama. How much of this conflict stems from unhealed wounds dating back to Bangladesh's war of independence, when the country was split between nationalists and pro-Pakistan Muslims? Hasina: It goes back to 1971, or even 1947 [when the territory now known as Bangladesh became East Pakistan during India's bloody Partition]. It's an ideological split. We believe in secular politics. We're very liberal. We struggle for the common people. Their only aim is to make money, remain in power and exploit people, that's all. They never think about people. The question is: should this country be ruled by a military dictatorship, or by them, or by the people? Why is Bangladeshi politics so intense? It seems that parties are either in power or trying to overthrow the government. Hasina: People compare us to other democracies. But [in America], when the Republicans are in power, how many Democrats are killed and tortured, how many women raped? Even a 6-year-old girl was raped because her parents worked for my party. Almost all my family members were assassinated. And who was behind that? These killers have not been brought to justice even after 30 years. Every day [killers] target our people. I can show you pictures—I don't know how long you could bear to look at them. And I have to look after the people affected, their families. You can't imagine what we're going through. These killings were discussed in [Britain's] House of Commons [and] House of Lords, in the European Parliament. But we're not even allowed to discuss them in our parliament. The democracy you established in your countries, we never established in our countries. Democracy means tolerance. It means being able to go freely to any part of the country. We don't have that. When both parties expend all their energy fighting the other, there's a danger that governance can take second place. Is that what is happening in Bangladesh? Hasina: That's not true. During my time in power, we established good governance. We

raised GDP growth from 4% to 6.6%, we cut inflation from 6.4% to less than 2%, we erased the food deficit♦nobody starved in my time♦and literacy and life span went up from 46% to 67% and 58 to 64. American investments rose from \$25 million to \$1 billion. We had three floods and there were predictions that 20 million people would die, but we distributed free food to 4.5 million people and not even 1,000 people died. I signed the Chittagong Hill Tracts peace accord. I brought 64,000 refugees back from India to our country. I solved the problem of sharing the water of the Ganges with India by bilateral discussion. You can't compare this corrupt government with my government. I didn't do politics to benefit myself. [The government] is destroying all the institutions in this country: parliament, the executive, the judiciary. They don't even let me speak in parliament♦my microphone should be on automatic, so I can speak whenever I want, but it's not. How important is the coming general election? Hasina: Most people are against terrorism. If they get a free and fair election, they will give their reply. But how will we have a free and fair election when the government has politicized all the electoral institutions? I believe people want a change. Our people are wonderful and tolerant. And if they are pushed to the wall, they won't accept it. Imagine a situation in which you lost. Hasina: Eventually, [junior governing party] Jamaat-i-Islami will be in power. They will marginalize the B.N.P. [Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's ruling Bangladeshi National Party]. And it will be a totally Taliban state. Their slogan is: We will be the Taliban and Bangladesh will be Afghanistan. They will eliminate all of us. The personal cost of politics in Bangladesh is enormous. Hasina: I was born and brought up in a political family. From my childhood, my father gave his life for the country and for the people. Our people are poor and my father tried to help them and get them independence. He wanted to develop the country, the nation, the people. Whatever I learned, I learned from my father. Love the people, love the country. I lost my nearest and dearest, everyone, it's true. But I took it as a challenge to fulfill their dream. This is my commitment to the people. After all, many of them also lost their dear ones. I don't want to be someone, I want to do something. I have to do something. Does this make the fight with the Prime Minister too personal? Hasina: People only say that because we are two women. This is a very male-dominated society. That's why this question comes up. When my father was leader, I saw her very often. They used to come to my house. My father made her husband a major general. There is nothing personal in it. It's ideological.

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