

After popular uprising

Muhammad Yunus, promoter of “entrepreneurial development,” to head Bangladesh’s emergency interim government

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Muhammad Yunus, an economist and “development banker” with close ties to the United States and other imperialist powers, is to be sworn in as head of Bangladesh’s emergency interim government at a ceremony Thursday.

On Monday, longtime prime minister Sheikh Hasina fled the South Asian country, which is home to 170 million people, amid a swelling popular upsurge against her Awami League government.

Students launched protests against a regressive, discriminatory government-job allocation regime at the beginning of July. In response to brutal state repression, including the deployment of the anti-terrorism Rapid Action Battalion, the movement broadened, with significant sections of working people joining the protests.

On Sunday, after the bloodiest day of violence to date, students called for a mass march on the prime minister’s residence for the next day to press their demand that Hasina go.

Her resignation was announced to the nation by Chief of Army Staff General Waker-Uz-Zaman.

According to press reports, the military gave Hasina just 45 minutes Monday to resign, vacate the prime minister’s residence and accept the military’s offer of safe passage out of the country. It moved against Hasina, who had led the country for the previous 15 years, because it concluded that her attempt to suppress mass popular opposition had backfired and was destabilizing and potentially imperiling capitalist rule.

Since then, General Waker-Uz-Zaman and the heads of the navy and air force have been holding a non-stop series of meetings with the president—a largely ceremonial figure under the country’s constitution—opposition politicians, representatives from the Students Against Discrimination, business and so-called civil society groups.

The leaders of the Students Against Discrimination (SAD), the recently-created organisation that led the student protests, have pressed for Yunus, an 84-year-old Nobel laureate who has been living in the West for over a decade, to head the interim government. “In Dr Yunus we trust,” proclaimed a Facebook posting Tuesday from Asif Mahmud, one of the top SAD leaders.

The SAD leaders have also publicly declared that they will not accept an interim government formed by the military top brass,

which has a long, bloody record of coups and dictatorial rule. But otherwise they have cooperated closely with the military, which is leading the process of government formation.

On Tuesday, SAD activists took over directing traffic in Dhaka, the national capital. Following Hasina’s ouster, the police, who had played the principal frontline role in the attempt to drown the protest movement in blood, fled their posts as protesters surged through the streets and looted the prime minister’s residence, other official buildings, and homes and businesses of some prominent Awami League supporters. Nationwide, dozens or more police stations were torched. The police association said its members would be on “strike” until their security could be guaranteed.

At least 300 people, the vast majority of them students and other protesters, are said to have died as a result of the Hasina government’s campaign of state violence, which included thug attacks organized by Awami League cadre.

When Hasina’s government collapsed, Yunus was in Paris acting as an adviser to the ongoing Olympic Games. In an interview with France 24 Wednesday, shortly before beginning his return journey to Bangladesh, Yunus paid tribute to the student protesters and declared the toppling of Hasina’s government a “Second Liberation Day.” This was a reference to December 16, 1971, when Pakistan, in the face of a Bangladeshi insurgency led by the Mukti Bahini and an Indian military invasion, gave up its scorched-earth attempt to thwart Bangladesh’s secession. Hasina’s father was the principal political leader of Bangladesh’s independence struggle and subsequently led its government until his assassination in a 1975 military coup.

In a televised address Wednesday, Army Chief General Waker-Uz-Zaman spun flowery democratic phrases. “I am certain that he (Yunus) will be able to take us through a beautiful democratic process and that we will benefit from this,” declared the commander-in-chief of the state institution that is the bulwark of capitalist rule.

Among the SAD leaders and the university students that defied the Hasina government’s repression, there is widespread belief that with her government’s overthrow the Bangladeshi state and its institutions can be fundamentally reformed, through “free

elections” and, if need be, further protests. An interim government headed by Yunus is seen as a critical first step in this direction.

“We won’t betray the blood shed by the martyrs for our cause,” declared SAD’s coordinator, the 26-year-old Nahid Islam, who sprang to national prominence after he was brutally tortured by police last month. “We will create a new democratic Bangladesh through our promise of security of life, social justice and a new political landscape.”

In reality, the interim government will be a right-wing capitalist regime, beholden to the transnational garment industry giants, other foreign investors and the Bangladeshi bourgeoisie. Its first task will be to restore order and continue the implementation of the austerity measures demanded by the IMF in exchange for the \$4.7 billion bailout it provided the Hasina government last year.

It, and whatever government succeeds it, elected or otherwise, will uphold the staggering social inequality that characterises contemporary Bangladesh, with the military remaining the power behind the throne.

Hasina was widely praised by the World Bank and leading business publications for presiding over rapid economic growth. The benefits of this growth flowed, however, almost entirely into the pockets of investors and the Bangladeshi ruling elite, especially a layer of pro-Awami League crony capitalists. A Wealth-X study found that, between 2010 and 2019, Bangladesh saw the number of individuals with a net worth of \$5 million grow by more than 14 percent per year—the highest growth rate in the world. Meanwhile, Bangladeshi garment workers are among the most savagely exploited anywhere in the world, making little more than \$100 per month.

Yunus is a thoroughly right-wing figure. An economist and founder of the Grameen Bank, he professes concern for the poor, but promotes as the solution to the mass poverty created by imperialist oppression and capitalist exploitation “entrepreneurial development.” That is the promotion of micro-businesses financed by micro-credit. His conceptions have been copied by larger financial institutions, resulting in what critics have called a new form of debt bondage.

Yunus is much celebrated in the West. In addition to winning the Nobel Peace Prize, he was awarded the US Presidential Medal of Freedom by Obama in 2009 and the US Congressional Gold Medal in 2010.

US officials have been quick to praise the military’s role in the current crisis and to announce their readiness to work with the Yunus-led interim government. No doubt Washington hopes it will be able to leverage its longstanding connections to Yunus to press for Bangladesh to distance itself from China, as part of its all-sided military-strategic offensive against Beijing

That illusions in Yunus, the military and the reactionary Bangladeshi state so dominate among the students is bound up with the pernicious political role of Stalinism. For decades, the various Stalinist parties have revolved around the Awami League and its arch-rival the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). While waving red flags, they are bitterly hostile to the mobilisation of the working class as an independent political force, fighting to rally the rural toilers against capitalism and in the fight for worker’ power and socialism.

There is mass anger in the working class over sweatshop wages, mass joblessness and political repression. But the unions, whether Stalinist-led or not, strove to prevent the working class from intervening in the mass anti-government movement, using strikes and other class-struggle methods, to assert its own interests and initiate a challenge to Bangladeshi capitalism, through the building of committees of action.

The BNP, meanwhile, is trying to exploit the discrediting of the Awami League to position itself and its allies, most significantly Jamaat-e-Islami, an Islamist communalist party, to win power in the promised elections.

On Wednesday, the BNP held a mass rally attended by tens of thousands outside its Dhaka headquarters. The rally was addressed by the former BNP prime minister, Khaleda Zia, and her son, the party’s acting chairman, Tarique Rahman.

Till Monday, the ailing 78-year-old Zia had been under house arrest following a 2018 conviction on corruption charges. Rahman spoke from London, where he had fled soon after the Awami League came to power. In his speech Rahman demanded elections within three months and claimed the BNP would deliver real democracy. However, in almost the next breath, he said a BNP-led government would establish an Upper House of the Legislature comprised of experts “not involved in politics.” While he gave no details, clearly this proposal is aimed at insulating parliament and the government from the will of the people and providing the ruling class with an alternate mechanism for imposing its agenda.

Recent days have seen violent attacks on members of Bangladesh’s Hindu minority. In response, the SAD has organised student volunteers to defend Hindu temples. The BNP and all the other parties, including the Jamaat-e-Islami, have gone on record as condemning these attacks.

No faith should be given to these pronouncements. As in India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, communal attacks in Bangladesh have long been used by the ruling class as a means of diverting social anger along the most reactionary lines.

The critical issue facing workers and youth in Bangladesh outraged by state repression, grinding poverty and mass unemployment is to recognise that their democratic and social strivings will only be realised through the fight for social equality. A frontal assault on the wealth and privilege of the capitalist ruling class must be mounted and socio-economic life reorganised, so that social need, not private profit, is the animating principle. To prosecute this struggle requires the building of a mass revolutionary party of the working class based on the Trotskyist strategy of permanent revolution.



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