

# Bangladesh's right-wing interim government moves to consolidate its power, end popular ferment

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**22 August 2024**

Two-and-a-half weeks after a popular uprising forced the flight of long time Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Bangladesh's military-installed interim government continues to consolidate its authority and press for the resumption of "normal life" in a country marked by grinding poverty, savage worker exploitation, and gaping social inequality.

It is doing so with the support of the Students Against Discrimination (SAD), the student movement whose agitation triggered the mass protests that led to the fall of Hasina's 16-year-old Awami League regime. The ostensible left parties, many of which are grouped together in the Left Democratic Alliance, and the trade unions are also backing and pledging to work with the interim government, as are the principal opposition party, the right-wing Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), and big business.

The interim government includes two SAD leaders among its 21 "special advisors" or ministers, and has otherwise tried to give itself "progressive" airs.

However, it is manifestly a right-wing capitalist government. It is back-stopped by the military, which oversaw its formation and remains very much the power behind the throne.

The government's first orders of business are ensuring that capitalist "law and order" is re-established, Bangladesh's garment industry resumes pumping out profits for global investors, and the IMF austerity measures Hasina agreed to in Jan. 2023 in exchange for a \$4.7 billion emergency loan are implemented.

The government's right-wing, anti-working-class character is personified by the "chief special advisor," Muhammad Yunus. The 84-year-old Yunus is a former banker and an internationally-celebrated advocate of micro-finance and petty-bourgeois entrepreneurship as the path to capitalist development. He has close connections to Washington, international capital, and various European imperialist powers.

In addition to taking the role of de facto prime minister, Yunus has given himself direct charge over numerous important ministries, including defence, energy, textiles and jute, education, and information and broadcasting.

With the support of the SAD, the BNP, and last but not least the military, Yunus is replacing various Awami League loyalists and appointees at the top of key state institutions. Their replacements are almost invariably persons associated with the BNP or technocrats with ties to domestic big business and/or international

organizations like the IMF and World Bank.

In a move which is no doubt gaining it some popular support, the interim government has also taken action against certain crony capitalists who profited enormously from their corrupt ties with the previous government. The S. Alim Group, which is accused of siphoning off billions from the country's largest private bank to support its global operations, has been stripped of its control over the Islami Bank.

Earlier this week, Yunus met with the newly-appointed head of Bangladesh's central bank and former leading IMF official Ahsan H. Mansur. They agreed that the bank should move to curb rising inflation by adopting a "restrictive" monetary policy. That is, that it should tighten the money supply and raise interest rates, thereby reducing access to credit, slowing economic activity and driving up unemployment. Under capitalism the brunt of such a "war on inflation" inevitably falls on the working class and rural toilers.

The Yunus-led interim government has been warmly welcomed by the western powers, especially Washington. The latter clearly hopes that it can leverage its close ties with Yunus to prevail on Bangladesh to put greater distance between itself and Beijing.

While Hasina enjoyed very close ties to India—America's principal South Asian/Indian Ocean region ally—Washington deemed her too ready to pursue a policy of "strategic non-alignment," using the US-China rivalry to play one off against the other so as to extract maximum favours from both.

For this reason, Washington became increasingly critical of Hasina and vocal in its criticisms of her government's use of state violence and politically-manipulated court cases to suppress its political opponents, including the BNP and its Islamist ally, the Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami.

At an August 20 press briefing, Pentagon Press Secretary Major-General Pat Ryder lauded the US-Bangladesh "defence relationship." He went on to say that Washington looks "forward to working" with the Bangladesh military and interim government "to support our shared values and interests, such as a free and open Indo-Pacific"—code-words for upholding US dominance of the world's most populous and rapidly growing economic region.

According to numerous reports, the Biden administration pressed the previous Hasina-led government to allow it to build a military base on Saint Martin Island, a coral reef situated close to shipping lanes in the Bay of Bengal.

To pave the way for the interim government's formation, the military had the president, a largely ceremonial figure, dissolve the parliament the day after it hustled Hasina out of the country, having concluded her attempt to cling to power through mass violence had dangerously destabilized bourgeois rule.

Legally the interim government's *raison d'être* is to organize fresh elections to replace the previous Awami League-dominated parliament, which was chosen in a vote last January that most of the opposition boycotted on the grounds it was rigged.

However, as yet the interim government has said nothing about when new elections will be held; only that it will not be within the three-month period given for a "caretaker" government to do so in a constitutional clause that Hasina abrogated. Nor has Yunus announced when the interim government will outline its timetable for new elections.

He and other government representatives, along with much of the capitalist media, are claiming that key state institutions were so corrupted under Hasina's "fascist rule" that time must be given to fundamentally reform them.

Everything suggests that Yunus and the military intend to use a prolonged period of rule by the unelected interim government to implement IMF-dictated austerity, privatization, and other "structural reforms" demanded by domestic and global capital.

In a dangerous development, 19 public post-secondary institutions, including 11 universities and six medical colleges, have imposed a blanket ban on student politics. Thirteen of these have also prohibited teachers and staff from engaging in political activity. SAD and many of the student groups affiliated with it are wrongheadedly supporting these bans on the grounds that the student wings of the traditional political parties have long bullied students and wielded inordinate control over campus life.

Last week, the UN said that, based on reports from the media and protesters, it concluded some 650 people were killed between July 16, when Hasina ordered police and Awami League thugs to initiate a campaign of mass violence against students protesting against a regressive, discriminatory government-job allocation system, and August 6.

On Tuesday, the non-governmental Human Rights Support Society (HRSS) released a report that said at least 819 people had been killed in political violence between July 16 and August 18, and a further 25,000 had been injured, mostly by police bullets, rubber bullets, tear gas and pellets.

According to the HRSS, the majority of the deaths came in the final days of the Hasina regime and the immediate aftermath of its fall, when dozens of police stations were attacked, and reactionary elements took advantage of the breakdown in authority to mount communal attacks on temples, homes and businesses of Bangladesh's Hindu minority. As across South Asia, the Bangladeshi ruling class has a long and vile record of using communalism and communal violence to divert social anger along reactionary lines.

The HRSS said that of the 293 dead whose professional identity it could establish, 144 were students, 57 labourers, 5 journalists, 35 of other professions, and 51 were police or other security personnel.

The Hasina regime, long lauded on the financial pages of the

western media for supposedly presiding over rapid capitalist growth, fell victim to mass popular anger over joblessness, poverty, state repression and an ever-widening chasm between a small layer of Bangladeshi capitalists and their managerial enforcers and other hangers-on, and the vast majority of the population, comprised of workers and rural toilers.

What began as a student protest over the limited issue of government job quotas exploded into a popular uprising in response to the Awami League government's brutal repression of the students.

However, the working class—and this remains the great danger—was effectively reduced to the role of a spectator and then part of the supporting cast in these events. Workers and their families joined in the mass protests. But the working class did not intervene as an independent force, under its own class banner, advancing its own democratic and social demands, and using the methods of class struggle, strikes, factory occupations and general strikes. For this, the various Stalinist and other left parties and the trade unions are responsible.

For decades, that have orbited around the two main capitalist parties, the Awami League and the BNP, arguing that workers can advance their interests by pressuring and even openly aligning in electoral blocs with these right-wing capitalist and pro-imperialist parties.

Today, under conditions of social upheaval and ferment in the streets, these organizations are redoubling their efforts to subordinate the working class to the bourgeoisie by boosting the legitimacy of the right-wing capitalist government hastily improvised by the military. The Stalinist parties and union leaders are also joining Yunus and the military in unduly flattering the student protesters.

That the students showed great courage is indisputable. Nor is their sincerity in question. But if the ruling class is today hailing them as "martyrs" and "heroes" and leaders of a "revolution," it is with the aim of exploiting their petty-bourgeois naiveté, delusions and aspirations.

The entire history of South Asia over the past century demonstrates that in the imperialist epoch, genuine democracy cannot be established under the rule of the bourgeoisie. The struggle for democracy is inseparable from the struggle against imperialism and for social equality—that is, socialism—and must be based upon the working class.

The most class conscious Bangladeshi workers, students and professionals must begin the struggle to build a revolutionary workers party, based on Trotskyism, the Marxism-Leninism of the 21st Century, to fight for the independent political mobilization of the working class, rallying the rural toilers behind it, in the fight for a workers and peasants government and international socialism.



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