

Bangladesh: Challenging The Discourse Of Hasina's 'Losing Ground' – OpEd

eurasiareview.com/25072022-bangladesh-challenging-the-discourse-of-hasinas-losing-ground-oped

July 25, 2022



There is a tendency among scholars to understand third-world countries by assessing the policies of their leaders. No doubt, 'personality politics' plays an important role there. But amid heightened authoritarianism and global democratic backsliding, this tendency often single-outs leadership separating from the people and state. Such analysis is everyone's cup of tea as it seems to serve the tasty critiques opposing authoritarianism. But in the post-positivist era, where we are now challenging the popular discourses, it seems such analysis often has an orientalist nature and creates a greater divide between states and citizens. Most of these analyses are also 'alarmist' in nature. For instance, let's take a deeper look into [the latest article by the Hindustan times](#) on Sheikh Hasina, the current prime minister of Bangladesh. The article warned that Hasina is losing ground considering the great power politics and social and economic distress looming over Bangladesh. This narrative may attract many, especially dissidents. But what does 'Hasina's losing ground' mean for Bangladesh and its people? And how is the article separating the fate of Hasina from the Fate of Bangladesh and its people? This article aims to challenge this discourse and focus on orientalism in our narrative.

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'Cracking down on Islamists' is a common narrative about Sheikh Hasina. But what is 'Islamists' for western scholars are 'extremists' for the people of Bangladesh. Bangladesh has a history of militancy and extremism. It was once also on the 'terrorist-risk' list of the USA in the early 2000s. So, this 'Islamist' discourse is an imposed identity subject to change across space and culture.

The article also mentions the ‘shrewd management’ of great powers to mark Hasina’s rule. But considering Bangladesh’s three-way balancing between the USA, India, and China, it seems the management is not ‘shrewd’ but rather brilliant. Over the last few years, Bangladesh is successfully managing three great powers. Even though the RAB sanction is dictating the narrative of Bangladesh-US relations, its impacts are also exaggerated. It is only a tiny part of 50 years of history; overall, relations are still warm. It is also worth mentioning that the balancing strategy is not exclusive to Hasina only. Traditionally, Bangladesh has followed a foreign policy of balancing between great powers since its birth. The job became more rigid after the renewed US stake in South Asian politics to contain China.

While understanding Bangladesh’s economic situation, there are often exaggerations. Bangladesh’s current external debt to GDP is 21.8%. Even though many take this ratio as alarming, the standard opposes it. According to International Standard, a country is safe until its external debt to GDP ratio reaches 60%. Hence, Bangladesh even has scope to go for further external debt without creating distress.

Moreover, Bangladesh’s debt repayment record is clean as it hardly missed appointments. Indeed, the new repayment will start by 2024, which is worrisome considering the current economic context. But the analysts forget that this argument about debt repayment takes other contributing factors (remittance, export, capital account, etc.) constant. In the next two years, Bangladesh’s earnings will also increase. So the economy will not collapse, unlike many debt-ridden countries such as Sri Lanka.

Bangladesh’s main economic problems are skyrocketing imports and deteriorating foreign exchange reserves. But, these are also not exclusively ‘Hasina’s problem.’ The issues are directly linked with the ongoing commodity shock and worldwide crises. Most countries are currently suffering from this very same problem also. And the ultimate result will be devastating for ordinary people. Hence, there is no scope to portray the problem as exclusive to Hasina. Growing consumerism also plays a vital role in this crisis as it is also one of the factors behind skyrocketing imports.

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However, while ‘alarmist’ discourses negatively portray Hasina’s (Bangladesh’s) economic performance, many objective and comparative analyses beg to differ. Nikkei Asia’s overview of South Asian economies in the context of Sri Lanka’s debt crisis can be an example. According to Nikkei Asia, *“An exception is Bangladesh. Inflation hit 6.29% in April, but the country has so far kept forex reserves and external debt at more sustainable levels, thanks to some tough decisions. Dhaka did not opt for aggressive COVID-19 lockdowns, helping to maintain tax revenue. It has also refrained from intervening extensively in the open market to prop up its currency, saving funds for a rainy day, while carefully managing its fiscal deficit and current account balance.”* The article also predicted high chances that Bangladesh will be able to maintain stability but GDP growth may be compromised.

However, the question of succession is the main problem of Sheikh Hasina and her party, the Awami League. But it's a challenge and inevitable for all parties. Other political parties of Bangladesh also faced the same somewhere in their history. When the time comes, the successors emerge spontaneously. Throughout the Subcontinent's history, many respectable political parties faced the same issue but eventually overcame. The Gandhi Family and congress, and The Zardari-Bhutto families faced this issue previously. The question and debate over capability will always be there. This is the beauty of practicing sound politics and democracy.

But, even though the discourse suggests that Hasina has a dilemma regarding the next election, a free and fair election brings the risk of ousting and manipulating may bring a risk of internal and external pressure. It is also 'predictive' in nature. In reality, the external moralities are not as high as this discourse takes. The discourse also takes many factors constant. The election is still more than a year away. This is still too early to predict what is going to happen next. The participation of all parties is also an issue related to it. There are efforts but as political wind changes direction very often, time for prediction has not come yet. No doubt, the next election in Bangladesh will be crucial.

The discourse tends to portray Bangladesh's problem as Hasina's problem. The discourse also overlooks that if Sheikh Hasina's feet lose ground through an all-out crisis, it will be a nightmare for the people. The discourse also has an orientalist point of view that is common today among Western and western-influenced scholars. Separating leaders from state and people is only a 'third world thing' for such scholars. I wonder if they would do the same to understand any first-world leaders! Indeed, the democratic practices in the third world are not so good, but the standard should not be the western model only. It again brings us to the old Saidian argument that the orient should be understood from the orient's point of view.

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Moroccan authorities are using indirect and underhanded tactics to silence critical activists and journalists, Human Rights Watch said in a report. The