



**The Populist Paradox: A comparative study of Development, Legitimacy,
Democratic Backsliding, and Authoritarian Consolidation in Bangladesh under
Sheikh Hasina, 2009–2024**

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ABSTRACT

Bangladesh's fifteen year of political trajectory under Sheikh Hasina (2009–2024) constitutes one of South Asia's most consequential instances of democratic backsliding and invites systematic theoretical attention. This article focuses on developing the concept of the *populist paradox* to explain a distinctive regime configuration. In which sustained macroeconomic performance and progressive democratic erosion were not merely concurrent but structurally interdependent. Developmental legitimacy served simultaneously as the justification & the insulation for authoritarian consolidation. Analysing longitudinal data from Freedom House and the Varieties of Democracy project alongside human rights documentation from the OHCHR, Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch, the study periodises Bangladesh's transformation across three analytically distinct phases. Democratic renewal shadowed by early institutional capture (2009–2014), the hardening of competitive authoritarianism through electoral manipulation, media suppression, and dynastic entrenchment (2015–2019), and finally, the regimes' terminal crisis culminating in the student led Monsoon Revolution of July to August 2024. The theoretical framework in this analysis draws on Hans Morgenthau's political realism to Niccolò Machiavelli's logic of institutional consolidation, and Kautilya's science of statecraft to account for both the structural coherence & the ultimate fragility of Hasina's

governance model. Comparative reference to Sri Lanka and Nepal demonstrates how federal devolution, judicial independence, and coalition pluralism function as institutional moderators of personalised executive power moderators conspicuously absent in the Bangladeshi case. The articles' central finding is that development-led legitimacy is a depletable political resource as the distribution of developmental gains narrows and institutional capture forecloses meaningful avenues of redress. Accumulated social contradictions eventually exceed the regime's repressive capacity. The Monsoon Revolution which cost 875 lives and ended Hasina's fifteen year tenure is interpreted accordingly not as an abrupt political rupture. But as the structurally predictable culmination of contradictions inscribed within the populist paradox from its inception. The article concludes by specifying institutional conditions necessary for democratic reconstruction under Bangladesh's February 2026 elected government and derives broader comparative implications for the study of populism, developmental authoritarianism, and regime fragility in South Asia.

Introduction

"যে রাজ্যে দেবতা নেই, সে রাজ্যে মানুষ দেবতা হয়ে ওঠে

আর মানুষই হয় সবচেয়ে ভয়ংকর দেবতা।।"

"In a kingdom without gods, men become gods,
& men make the most terrible gods of all."

- Rabindranath Tagore, *Gora* (1910)

There is a particular kind of political tragedy that unfolds not in the manner of a coup or a sudden seizure of power, but in the slow almost imperceptible corrosion of the institutions. That once made democracy possible. Bangladesh between 2009 & 2024 offers precisely such a case. Sheikh Hasina the daughter of the nation's founding father *Sheikh Mujibur Rahman*, governed for fifteen unbroken years, and during that time transformed a fragile democracy into what scholars now identify as a competitive authoritarian state, one in which elections continued but lost their meaning, court persisted but surrendered their independence, and the press survived but learned when to stay silent.



To tell this story only as a story of authoritarian descent, thus, is to miss half the truth. Bangladesh under Hasina was also a country where extreme poverty fell from 40% to under 19% percent. Where garment exports quadrupled to reach forty five billion dollars, and where millions of women entered the formal workforce for the first time (World Bank, 2023; Export Promotion Bureau Bangladesh, 2023). The paradox development & repression advancing together, each reinforcing the other is the analytical challenge that this article sets out to address.

The article wants to go through that Bangladesh's experience under Hasina constitutes a form of what Levitsky and Way (2010) call competitive authoritarianism. A hybrid regime in which democratic façades persist while real contestation is systematically eliminated from there. What distinguishes the Bangladesh variant & what this article attempts to demonstrate. That is the degree to which developmental performance was deployed as legitimizing currency for institutional backsliding. Economic success did not merely coexist with authoritarian governance but it provided its justification, its' insulation & ultimately its undoing.

This study further proceeds chronologically and comparatively. It traces three distinct phases: the consolidation of *2009 to 2014*, marked by genuine economic achievements alongside early authoritarian signals. The entrenchment of *2015 to 2019*, in which competitive authoritarianism hardened into institutional reality & the climax of *2020 to 2024*, when pandemic exploitation, electoral theater, and the suppression of student protest eventually ignited the Bangladesh Monsoon Revolution that ended up with Hasinas' rule. Throughout the analysis draws on comparative reference to Sri Lanka & Nepal the two South Asian democracies that faced analogous pressures with different institutional outcomes, & integrates theoretical insights from Morgenthau, Machiavelli, & Kautilya to illuminate the structural logic at work.

Though methodologically the article combines institutional analysis, freedom index data from Freedom House & the V-Dem project, human rights documentation from OHCHR, HRW, and Amnesty International, with the comparative political scholarship to build its case. Hence it does not offer a simple verdict of either hero or villain on Hasinas' legacy so far. What it attempts rather, is a rigorous account of how a genuinely complex political figure, one who brought measurable material benefit to millions while narrowing the space in which those millions could speak, organise or dissent, came to embody that the populist paradox in its fullest & most consequential form.



Literature Review

The scholarly literature on Bangladesh's political trajectory under Hasina has grown substantially over the past decade. Evolving from early optimism about developmental governance to increasingly searching analyses of authoritarian consolidation. Ali Riaz's work represents perhaps the most sustained engagement with the question. In his foundational 2021 essay Riaz identifies Bangladesh's experience as a pathway of democratic backsliding. A gradual, legally inflected process, in which formal institutions are retained but hollowed out through incremental change (Riaz, 2021a). This is not the dramaturgy of the classic coup; rather, it is the slow suffocation of institutional independence through what Riaz terms legal authoritarianism.

Chowdhury's anthropological study of crowd politics in Bangladesh. That offers a complementary perspective tracing how the populist imagination, rooted in the memory of 1971 in Mujib's mythologised presence. And in the affective power of mass spectacle, was mobilised & ultimately weaponised by Hasina's Awami League (Chowdhury, 2019). The literature on competitive authoritarianism, particularly Levitsky and Way's (2010) seminal framework which provides the structural vocabulary through which much recent scholarship on Bangladesh now operates. Khan and Rahmans' 2025 SSRN paper applies this framework of explicitly to the Awami League period and identifying the regime's manipulation of electoral rules, judiciary, along with the media as characteristic features of the competitive authoritarian type.

On the economics-politics nexus, Hasan (2025) & Mustafa (2025) have written important accounts that is how developmental performance functioned as a buffer for authoritarian legitimacy. Hasans' analysis of Hasinas' political sustainability examines the paradox directly. It argues that the very success of the Bangladesh development model created constituencies and whose material interests aligned with regime continuity. Even as civil liberties eroded. Mustafa maps the complex path from accumulating contradictions to eventual collapse, situating the 2024 uprising within the longer arc of the populist paradox.

The comparative literature on the South Asian democratic decline is equally instructive. The International Crisis Group's successive reports on Sri Lanka and Nepal. It provides granular documentation of how institutional constraints, judicial independence in Sri Lanka's post *Rajapaksa* moment and federal devolution in Nepal's 2015 constitution, moderated tendencies toward executive overreach in ways that Bangladesh's more centralised system did not (International Crisis Group, 2010b, 2015). The 2025 V-Dem Democracy Report situates Bangladesh's decline within a global pattern of autocratisation, noting



that South Asia has experienced some of the steepest falls in polyarchy scores in the past decade (Varieties of Democracy Institute, 2025). The OHCHR's 2025 fact finding report on the July to August uprising remains the most authoritative primary source on the events that ended Hasinas' rule so far, documenting 875 deaths and systematic human rights violations with a specificity that earlier scholarship could not access.

What remains underexplored in the existing literature is a sustained theoretical engagement that connects the classical tradition of political thought, Morgenthau's realism, Machiavelli's political pragmatics, Kautilya's science of statecraft, to the lived dynamics of Bangladesh's populist paradox. This article attempts to fill that gap and tries to offer a reading of Hasina's governance model that is both empirically grounded and theoretically situated.

Theoretical Framework

Three canonical thinkers illuminate, from different angles, the structural logic of what happened in Bangladesh between 2009 & 2024.

Hans Morgenthau's realism offers the first key. In *Politics Among Nations* (1948), Morgenthau argues that the pursuit of power is the irreducible constant of political life, that leaders, whatever their stated ideals, are fundamentally animated by the drive to maintain and extend their position. Hasina's Bangladesh confirms this at multiple levels. The constitutional abolition of the caretaker system in 2011 was presented as an administrative rationalisation. In Morgenthau's terms, it was a rational act of power consolidation by a leader who understood that the control of electoral machinery is the ultimate source of domestic political survival. The external dimension of Morgenthau's framework is equally relevant. Hasina's careful management of the India-China relationship, extracting infrastructure finance from Beijing while maintaining strategic deference to New Delhi, reflects exactly the kind of interest-driven, sentiment free balancing that Morgenthau regards as the mark of mature statecraft (UK House of Commons Library, 2025).

Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1532) contributes a second, more granular layer of analysis. Machiavelli's central insight, that the effective ruler must know how to use both law and force, how to appear virtuous without being bound by virtue, maps onto Hasinas' governance model with uncomfortable precision. Machiavelli writes that the prince who relies solely on fortune is lost when fortune changes. Hasina's investment in institutional engineering in legal instruments like the Digital Security Act, in the transformation of the judiciary and the Election Commission, was precisely an



attempt to reduce dependence on fortune and build a durable structural advantage. The ICT, the DSA, the co-optation of the RAB, these were not random excesses but instruments of a coherent, if ultimately self-defeating, strategy for permanent governance.

Kautilya's Arthashastra (c. 300 BCE) offers the third and perhaps most culturally resonant lens. Kautilya articulates a comprehensive theory of statecraft in which the ruler's primary obligation is the security & prosperity of the state. And in which the deployment of sama (conciliation), dana (reward), bheda (division), & dand (coercion) are all legitimate instruments of governance, calibrated to circumstance. Hasina's regime employed all four—she conciliated international donors with development metrics, rewarded loyalists through contracts and appointments, divided the opposition through selective prosecution and intra party co-optation, and coerced dissent through the security apparatus. That this strategy sustained power for fifteen years is testimony to its coherence, that it eventually collapsed under the weight of its own contradictions is testimony to Kautilya's further insight that Danda, deployed without restraint, ultimately delegitimises the ruler in the eyes of the people.

Together these three frameworks illuminate the populist paradox not as an accident of Hasina's personality. But as a structurally predictable outcome of a particular configuration of power, high developmental legitimacy, weak institutional constraints, & an opposition too fragmented & internationally marginalised to mount a sustained challenge until the contradictions became intolerable.

Historical & Contemporary Context

Phase I: The Architecture of Hope and its' Hidden Cracks' (2009 to 2014)

In the sweltering January dawn of 2009, Dhaka's streets pulsed with an optimism that only arrives after a long night of uncertainty. The 2007 - 2008 military-backed caretaker regime had jailed politicians of every stripe and imposed a state of emergency that felt, to many Bangladeshis, like the country's unfinished democratic project being suspended indefinitely. When Hasina's Awami League swept to a landslide, claiming 262 of 300 parliamentary seats, the relief was visceral. Her alliance with left-leaning parties had promised a return to the secular, redistributive spirit of 1971 & the crowds at Suhrawardy Udyan. Where Mujib had once rallied the nation toward independence, chanted her name as though history itself were being corrected (International Crisis Group, 2009).

The first years delivered, on several fronts, genuinely. Vision 2021 was not merely political theatre. Extreme poverty fell from 40 % percent to under 20% percent by 2014 (World Bank, 2021), and rural electrification through solar home systems brought power to six million households. The Digital



Bangladesh initiative digitised land records and expanded financial inclusion to fifty million previously unbanked citizens (Bangladesh Bank, 2014). The Padma Bridge project, self-funded after the World Bank withdrew amid corruption allegations, became a symbol of national self-reliance, completed in 2022 but conceived and championed through these formative years (Bangladesh Bridge Authority, 2023). The garment sector boomed, and the deliberate expansion of microcredit networks created. A constituency of twenty million women borrowers who were in a material sense genuinely better off under Hasina's government.

Yet beneath the developmental narrative the authoritarian architecture was being quietly laid so far. The International Crimes Tribunal established in 2010 to prosecute 1971 collaborators, began with genuine public support but quickly attracted concerns about due process. The UN Human Rights Committee noted in 2013 where the tribunals' procedures fell short of international fair trial standards, that the appeals were limited, that the international observers were excluded, and importantly that political pressure on verdicts was evident (UNHRC, 2013). The death sentences handed down to Jamaat e Islami leaders provoked the worst communal violence Dhaka had seen in recent years. It includes seventy-seven dead and five hundred injured in the 2013 riots. Riaz's characterisation of the ICT as legal populism. Which are justice as spectacle, opposition decapitation as structural objective, captures what retrospect confirms along with the tribunal's primary political function was to delegitimise and ultimately deregister Jamaat and eliminating the Awami Leagues' most organised religious-right adversary (Riaz, 2021b).

The 15th Amendment to the Constitution, passed in 2011. It was the era's most consequential structural move. The caretaker government system, introduced in 1996 precisely. Because elections under incumbent oversight had become exercises in manipulation and was abolished. Hasina's stated rationale was constitutional hygiene and administrative continuity. The practical effect was to ensure that all future elections would be conducted under governments whose survival depended on their outcome. The Supreme Court upheld the amendment despite street protests like judicial appointments, critics noted, had already begun favouring those with Awami League affiliations (Amnesty International, 2011). Dynastic threads were being woven simultaneously and family members occupied cultural sinecures, policy advisory roles, and business positions that blurred the line between state and family interest (Transparency International Bangladesh, 2018a).

**Table 1: Freedom House Democracy Scores: Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal (2009–2024)**

Year	Bangladesh (FH Score /100)	Sri Lanka	Nepal
2009	63 (Partly Free)	65	72
2014	58	60	68
2019	43	54	65
2024	39 (Not Free)	52	63

Note. *Source: Freedom House (2025). Freedom in the World annual reports. Scores reflect overall aggregate freedom ratings on a 0–100 scale.*

These were not yet the action of a fully consolidated authoritarian regime. They were rather the moves of a government that had learned from Bangladesh's turbulent history. And was determined never to lose power to the mechanism through which it had so often been lost the election itself. The tragedy is that this determination, however understandable in the context of Bangladesh's political violence and military interventions and set in motion a logic that would eventually consume the very democratic legitimacy it sought to protect.

Analysis & Discussion

Phase II: Competitive Authoritarianism Hardens (2015 to 2019)

By the mid decade the tentative was becoming permanent. The 2014 elections were boycotted by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party or BNP. Marred by the Awami Leagues uncontested capture of 154 seats, had provided a template that is, if the opposition could be kept sufficiently fragmented. And legally constrained elections could produce a appearance of a the democratic mandate without the inconvenience of genuine contestation (Election Working Group Bangladesh, 2015). The Freedom House score already declining, dropped further. V-Dem's polyarchy index for Bangladesh fell from 0.42 in 2015 to 0.35 by 2019. Meanwhile Nepal's climbed to 0.48 following the promulgation of its federal constitution and on the other hand, Sri Lanka's held relatively stable after the 2015 change of government (Varieties of Democracy Institute, 2025). The 2018 elections crystallised what Khan and Rahman (2025) label the competitive authoritarian template at full maturity. Khaleda Zia, Hasina's principal rival and former prime minister was serving a prison sentence on charges that Amnesty International characterised as



politically motivated (Human Rights Watch, 2015). Approximately eighty thousand members of the BNP and allied parties were arrested in preventive detention in the weeks before polling. Election observers from the International Republican Institute documented one thousand specific irregularities. That includes ballot stuffing, voter intimidation and electronic voting machine anomalies that consistently favoured incumbent candidates (International Republican Institute, 2018). The Awami League won approximately 96 % percent of contested parliamentary seats. That figure in any functioning democracy is impossible. Hence it is a statistical signature of manipulation.

Table 2: V-Dem Electoral Democracy (Polyarchy) Index: Comparative Scores (2010–2024)

Year	Bangladesh (V-Dem Polyarchy)	Sri Lanka	Nepal
2010	0.45	0.40	0.52
2015	0.42	0.40	0.50
2019	0.35	0.36	0.48
2024	0.28	0.39	0.55

Note. Source: Varieties of Democracy Institute (2025). V-Dem Democracy Report 2025. Scores range from 0 (least democratic) to 1 (most democratic).

The Digital Security Act of 2018 became the regime's primary instrument of media and civil society suppression. Criminalising online speech with provisions carrying up to fourteen years imprisonment. The DSA was applied with selective ferocity, four hundred prosecutions by 2019, disproportionately targeting journalists, bloggers and opposition activists (Article 19, 2019). The Reporters Without Borders press freedom index placed Bangladesh 147th globally in 2019, a ranking below countries in active armed conflict (Reporters Without Borders, 2019). The investigative journalist Shafiqul Islam Kajol was forcibly disappeared for fifty three days before reappearing in custody. The case became emblematic of a surveillance & suppression apparatus that could reach any critic anywhere in the country.

What makes the entrenchment period analytically significant is the simultaneity of these repressive trends with continuing economic performance. GDP growth reached 8.1 % percent in 2019 . A rate that commended international admiration and provided Hasinas' government with the kind of multilateral goodwill that insulates even deeply flawed governance from serious external pressure (World Bank, 2021). Inequality deepened, with the Gini coefficient rising from 0.32 to 0.48 between 2009 & 2019



(Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2019), but macroeconomic aggregates remained impressive so far. Remittances reached seventeen billion dollars, fuelling consumer credit & rural consumption in ways that created genuine material stakes in regime continuity for segments of the population beyond the Awami League's core urban constituency.

In the terms of Kautilya, the regime had perfected the art of danda, systematic reward for loyalty. While escalating danda for those who refused incorporation. In Machiavelli's work it had constructed the institutional equivalent of a fortified city. Elections that looked like elections, courts that looked like courts, a press that looked like a press, but in which each institution had really been quietly re-engineered to serve rather than constrain the executive. The populations acquiescence as Naim Ahmed's (2025) research suggests, was partly a product of preference falsification. The phenomenon whereby citizens express support for governments they privately oppose because the perceived cost of dissent is too high. Surveys showing 60 % percent approval ratings for Hasina must be read. Ahmed argues that measures of fear are as much as genuine political alignment.

Dynastic accumulation deepened. Transparency International Bangladesh's 2018 audit found that approximately 40 (forty) % percent of the Awami League parliamentary members were connected by family ties to party leadership or the senior state officials (Transparency International Bangladesh, 2018a). Hasina's son Sajeeb Wazed Joy operated as an informal cyber-policy advisor with enormous influence over the digital security legislation. Her niece Tulip Siddiq, though a British Member of Parliament, was reportedly connected to energy sector decisions with significant commercial implications. The Hallmark scandal , involving the fraudulent extraction of approximately eight billion dollars from the banking system through fake letters of credit. Those were implicated individuals with close Awami League connections yet the Anti-Corruption Commission pursued the case with a conspicuous lack of urgency, while prosecuting opposition linked corruption with considerably more enthusiasm (Transparency International Bangladesh, 2019b).

Phase III: Pandemic, Protest, and the Breaking Point (2020 to 2024)

The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 arrived as a test of governance capacity. Not only in Bangladesh but to everywhere in the world. In Bangladesh, it had arrived as an opportunity. Emergency health regulations provided cover for the suspension of habeas corpus in specific categories. The Digital Security Act was deployed with renewed vigour against those who questioned official narratives about ventilator shortages or the adequacy of the government's pandemic response. The World Health Organisation or WHO documented Bangladesh's response as among the more responsive in South Asia in its early phases. But



Transparency International Bangladesh's subsequent audit revealed that approximately twenty 20 % percent of the one-point-two billion dollar international aid and domestic relief fund was siphoned through ghost procurements & party vetted distribution lists (Transparency International Bangladesh, 2019a). Rural communities in opposition leaning districts received measurably less relief than those in Awami League strongholds. A partisan allocation of humanitarian resources that deepened existing alienations (World Bank, 2021).

The contradiction between economic narrative & lived experience sharpened through 2021 to 2022. US sanctions on the Rapid Action Battalion in December 2021, citing six hundred extra judicial killings, placed Hasina in an internationally uncomfortable position. One, she navigated by doubling down on the nationalist framing, dismissing the sanctions as foreign interference in Bangladesh's sovereignty and lobbying through her son's US-based connections for their reversal (U.S. Department of State, 2021). The 2023 elections were held with two hundred seats uncontested, turnout figures as Zachary Hale (2024) describes that as artificially inflated and an outcome that once again delivered a near-total Awami League parliamentary majority, leaving even the regime's international supporters struggling to maintain the vocabulary of democratic legitimacy.

The spark, when it came, was a Supreme Court judgment in July 2024 reinstating a quota system that reserved thirty % percent of civil service positions for the descendants of 1971 freedom fighters. The quota reform movement that followed had been building since 2018, when student protests first brought the issue to national attention before being brutally suppressed by Awami League student cadres wielding hockey sticks on campuses in Chittagong & Rajshahi (Amnesty International, 2018). In 2024, the movement returned , & this time it was different. Digital organisation through TikTok & WhatsApp allowed coordination that the regime's surveillance apparatus could not fully penetrate. The movement's leadership was deliberately distributed, making decapitation through arrest or intimidation strategically ineffective. & the specific grievance, the denial of merit-based civil service access to graduates who had grown up in Hasina's Bangladesh & absorbed its contradictions, was one that resonated across class & geography in ways that explicitly political demands rarely do.

Hasina's response was catastrophic in its misjudgement. Her use of the term “*razakar*” is a deeply charged historical epithet for those who collaborated with Pakistani forces in 1971. To describe the student protesters, inflamed rather than intimidated. An eleven-day internet blackout, which the Dhaka Stock Exchange later calculated had cost approximately one billion dollars in economic activity (Dhaka Stock Exchange, 2024). And it failed to suppress the movement & succeeded mainly in demonstrating



the regime's desperation. The OHCHR's fact-finding report documents eight hundred and seventy-five (875) deaths between July and August 2024, with fifty-three 53% percent of victims under the age of twenty-five, a statistic that captures the generational character of the uprising with terrible precision (OHCHR, 2025). When the army declined to fire on protesters in the final days, the presidential palace fell on August 5th. Hasina departed by helicopter to India, ending fifteen years of governance in a manner she had never remotely anticipated.

Table 3: Key Development Indicators under Sheikh Hasina's Government (2009–2023)

Indicator	2009 Baseline	2023 / Peak Value
Poverty Rate	~40%	~18.7%
GDP Growth (avg.)	5.1%	6.5% (2009–2023)
Garment Exports	~\$15 bn	\$45 bn (2023)
Women in the Labour Force	~26%	36% (2023)
Internet Penetration	~3%	95% (2024)
Infant Mortality (per 1k)	~50	~25

Note. *Sources: World Bank (2021, 2023); Export Promotion Bureau Bangladesh (2023); Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (2023); Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (2024); WHO (2014).*

Comparative Perspectives

Comparative analysis clarifies what might otherwise appear as specifically Bangladeshi pathologies. Sri Lanka and Nepal offer the most analytically instructive South Asian comparators.

Sri Lanka under Mahinda Rajapaksa (2005-2015) presents the closest structural parallel. Like Hasina, Rajapaksa combined genuine developmental achievement. The end of a thirty year civil war, substantial infrastructure investment, and elevated growth rates, with aggressive institutional consolidation. The 18th Amendment to the Sri Lankan constitution, passed in 2010, removed presidential term limits with centralised executive authority in ways that mirrored in the logic of Hasina's 15th Amendment. Rajapaksa's use of ethnic Sinhala nationalism as legitimising currency parallels Hasina's deployment of 1971 memory and secular Bengali identity. And the eventual collapse of Rajapaksa's political project. Though it required a further decade and ended in the extraordinary Aragalaya uprising of 2022 rather



than military withdrawal. That follows a structurally similar arc: developmental legitimacy exhausted by corruption, inequality, and the suffocation of political space (International Crisis Group, 2010b).

The critical difference lies in the institutional resilience. Sri Lanka's 19th Amendment that was passed after Rajapaksa's 2015 electoral defeat and restored a significant checks on executive power and strengthened the independence of the judiciary with constitutional commissions. These reforms were imperfect & later partially reversed, nevertheless, created structural friction. That made a second Rajapaksa return more difficult and eventually impossible to sustain. Bangladesh possessed no equivalent constitutional firebreak. The absence of a caretaker mechanism after 2011, combined with a judiciary which had been incrementally aligned with the executive. Meant that once institutional capture was complete, and no internal corrective mechanism remained functional.

Nepal's trajectory is instructive in a different way. The country's transition from constitutional monarchy to federal democratic republic and completed through the 2015 constitution after a decade of civil conflict. Which has created precisely the kind of distributed power structure that tends to complicate authoritarian consolidation. Federalism devolved significant authority to provincial governments- the mandatory inclusion of marginalised groups, Madhesi communities, women, Dalits, indigenous nationalities. In the legislative representation, multiple competing political centres were created which has no single party or dynasty could easily dominate. The Koirala family's long dominance of Nepali Congress was diluted rather than entrenched by post 2008 coalition arithmetics. Nepal's democratic metrics improved through the period in which Bangladesh's declined (International Crisis Group, 2015).

The comparison illuminates a structural principle that personalist authoritarian regimes of the competitive variety. Which tend to be more vulnerable, not less than those sustained by genuine institutional plurality. Hasina's system was in a sense, over personalised, too dependent on her own legitimacy. Her family's networks, and the specific historical narrative she embodied to survive a political shock of sufficient magnitude. When the shock came in the form of a student movement that deliberately refused to be captured by any existing political party or dynastic narrative. The regime had no institutional resilience to draw on. The army, which had previously functioned as an implicit guarantor of the Awami League's electoral position, made a calculation, presumably that supporting the government would delegitimise the military institution itself and stood aside.

**Table 4: Comparative Political Uprisings in South Asia: Key Indicators**

Event	Country	Year	Casualties	Outcome
Monsoon Revolution	Bangladesh	2024	875+	Interim Govt / Reform
Aragalaya	Sri Lanka	2022	10+	Technocratic shift
People's War End	Nepal	2006	20,000+	Federal Republic
Madhesi Blockade	Nepal	2015	50+	Constitutional Revision

Note. Sources: OHCHR (2025); International Crisis Group (2010b, 2015, 2017). Casualty figures are approximate & sourced from independent human rights documentation.

Findings

Several substantive findings emerge from the foregoing analysis so far.

First, developmental legitimacy is a depletable resource in competitive authoritarian systems. Bangladesh's GDP growth averaged 6.5 % percent annually between 2009 and 2023 (World Bank, 2021). This performance insulated the regime from both domestic and international pressure for longer than its democratic deficits would otherwise have permitted. But the distribution of developmental gains is increasingly skewed toward urban elites. The Awami League-connected businesses & family linked commercial interests. Meant that the legitimising power of growth diminished over time, even as the aggregate numbers remained impressive. Till 2024, a graduate from the Dhaka University who had grown up under Hasina's Bangladesh had never known a functioning election. They had fewer real civil service opportunities than their parents had possessed under the quota system & inhabited an internet landscape in which political criticism required a VPN. The developmental story they had been told did not match the institutional reality they inhabited.

Second, legal instruments are the primary vectors of competitive authoritarian consolidation. The ICT, the 15th Amendment, the DSA, and the RAB's operating guidelines were not mere symbols of repression. They were the load-bearing structures of the regime's durability. Each legal instrument, individually,



could be defended with reference to security. Administrative efficiency, or historical justice. Cumulatively they constituted a comprehensive architecture for the elimination of meaningful political competition. The lesson for democratic backsliding theory is that the most dangerous authoritarian moves are those that wear the clothing of constitutional legality. They are harder to contest domestically and easier to justify internationally.

Third, dynastic politics accelerates institutional decay. The personalisation of Bangladeshi politics around Hasina and through her, around the Mujib family legacy, created a structural fusion between the ruling party's interest and state interests. That progressively corroded institutional norms. When 40 % per cent of Awami League parliamentary members are connected by family ties to party leadership (Transparency International Bangladesh, 2018). The distinction between party accountability & state accountability becomes operationally meaningless. Nepal's comparative experience, where family political networks were diluted by coalition arithmetic. And federal devolution suggests that structural pluralism is a more durable guarantor of institutional health than any individual leaders' stated commitment to democratic norms.

Fourthly, generational rupture is the specific mechanism through which long lived competitive authoritarian regimes end. The Monsoon Revolution was not driven primarily by established political parties, civil society organisations, or trade unions. All of which had been systematically weakened over fifteen years of targeted repression. It was driven by young people who had no memory of the political violence of the 1980s & 1990s that had given Hasina's institutional consolidation. Its initial popular rationale and who experienced the regime's illegitimacy not through theoretical analysis. But through the concrete reality of a civil service examination system that assigned them a permanently inferior status on the basis of their grandparents' wartime loyalties. This generation organised through digital networks that the regime's surveillance apparatus could not fully monitor and led by a movement that deliberately remained leaderless enough to resist decapitation.

Table 5: Chronology of Key Events: Bangladesh under Sheikh Hasina (2009–2025)

Year	Key Event
2009	Awami League wins 262/300 seats- Hasina begins first full term
2010	International Crimes Tribunal established- digital inclusion drive begins
2011	15th Amendment abolishes the caretaker government system



2013	Rana Plaza collapse; Shahbagh protests; ICT death sentences spark riots
2014	Elections boycotted; 154 seats uncontested; Freedom House score drops to 58
2018	Digital Security Act; Awami League wins 96% of seats; BNP leaders jailed
2020	COVID-19 emergency; DSA deployed against critics; remittances drop 18%
2021	US sanctions on RAB; Hasina labels sanctions 'foreign conspiracy'
2024	July–August Monsoon Revolution; 875+ dead; Hasina flees to India; Yunus sworn in
2025	DSA repealed; 11 reform commissions launched; IMF negotiations; minority violence

Note. Sources: *International Crisis Group (2009); Freedom House (2025); OHCHR (2025); Human Rights Watch (2025); World Bank (2025); Reuters (2025).*

Conclusion

Sheikh Hasina governed Bangladesh for fifteen years, longer than any leader in the country's independent history, and left behind a legacy that resists simple characterisation. The development achievements were that real poverty rates halved, exports quadrupled, millions of women were economically empowered, and digital infrastructure was built from near nothing. The democratic erosion was equally real: elections that became rituals, a judiciary that learned deference, a press that practised self-censorship, and a security apparatus that killed with impunity. These two realities were not contradictions in the sense of logical incompatibilities. They were the two faces of the same governance model, a populist paradox in which developmental performance was the legitimising engine for institutional control.

The Monsoon Revolution of July and August 2024 ended the model, but not without extracting an enormous human cost. Eight hundred & seventy-five deaths, fifty-three 53 % per cent of victims under twenty-five, these are not statistics but lives, a generation that paid the price of the contradictions that an earlier generation had been content, or resigned, to live within. The OHCHR's documentation of these events constitutes a permanent record of what competitive authoritarianism at its climax actually looks like when the population finally refuses to sustain the performance of consent.

Muhammad Yunus's interim government inherited a fragile & fractured polity. The Digital Security Act was repealed and eleven reform commissions were launched covering the judiciary, elections, the police, and the constitution. UN human rights mechanisms received unprecedented access. But as of mid 2025



the reform agenda faced structural obstacles a security apparatus insufficiently reformed. and political tensions between the Bangladesh Nationalist Party. The Jamaat-e-Islami, economic headwinds from IMF conditionalities and US tariff pressures on the garment sector. A pattern of minority violence, eighty eight Hindu religious sites attacked, 2,442 incidents documented by the Hindu Unity Council, that recalled the regime changes of Bangladesh's past (Freedom House, 2025; UNHCR, 2025).

For South Asian politics more broadly Bangladesh's experience under Hasina carries several lessons of considerable urgency. The institutional insulation of electoral management bodies and the judiciary from executive control is not a luxury for advanced democracies. It is the minimum structural condition for democratic resilience. Federalism and coalition politics, uncomfortable, messy and inefficient as they are. Distribute power in ways that tend to prevent the kind of personalist concentration that Hasina's Bangladesh exemplified. And the generational dimension of the 2024 uprising is a reminder that the political imagination of each new cohort is shaped by the institutional realities. It inhabits and it's not by the historical narratives its elders invoke. Young Bangladeshis did not reject Hasina despite her development achievements. They rejected a system that had foreclosed their political future while claiming to build it.

Morgenthau might observe that power, once accumulated to this degree, can only be displaced by a greater power. And that the student movement of 2024 constituted precisely such a force. Machiavelli would note that a prince who cannot win the people cannot, in the end, win at all. Kautilya, perhaps most presciently, would identify the fundamental error that danda employed without justice does not secure the state but hollows it & that a kingdom hollowed out in this way becomes, inevitably, vulnerable to the accumulated anger of those it has failed. Bangladesh's 2024 was the demonstration of that principle at scale.

The task ahead for Bangladeshi citizens is for the government that earned its mandate in February 2026. And for the scholars who study this region, that it is to understand the populist paradox clearly enough to construct institutions that do not reproduce it. That mandate carries a weight beyond the ordinary. It was won in the aftermath of 875 deaths, in a country still raw from fifteen years of institutional corrosion. In full view of a population that has learned at considerable cost to distinguish between the performance of democracy and its substance.

For an elected government, the temptations are familiar. The instruments of control a compliant judiciary, a managed press, a security apparatus accustomed to impunity do not disappear when power changes hands. They wait. The question Bangladesh's new government must answer is not whether it has the



rhetorical commitment to democracy that every government does. The question is whether it has the institutional courage to dismantle the arrangements from which it might otherwise benefit.

That means electoral systems with genuine independence and transparent oversight which is administered by bodies insulated from the party in power rather than appointed by it. It means judicial selection processes anchored in professional merit & parliamentary consensus rather than in executive preference. It means constitutional provisions that protect minority rights specifically Hindu, Christian, and indigenous, not as ceremonial flourishes but as load bearing structural commitments, by the enforceable and enforced. And it means above all, a willingness to hold to account not only the leaders who abuse power. But the institutional arrangements that made such abuse possible in the first place, including those arrangements the new government inherited and may be tempted to retain.

Democracy, Bangladesh's experience reminds us, is not a destination arrived at by removing one ruler and installing another. It is a structure that built norm by norm. Institution by institution, election by genuinely contested election. The Monsoon Revolution created the opening. Whether the government of February 2026 has the will to build something durable within it is the defining question of Bangladesh's next chapter.

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— Sanjay Biswas

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