



Bangladesh

Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan) is a Muslim-majority South Asian nation bordering India and Burma (Myanmar) on the Bay of Bengal. The world's eighth most populous country, with approximately 167 million people, it has a land area about the size of Iowa. Its democratic system has faced many serious challenges, including political violence, weak governance, corruption, poverty, demographic and environmental strains, and Islamist militancy. The United States and Bangladesh have partnered on various issues and worked together to promote shared interests in South Asia and the Indo-Pacific region.

Bangladesh is a parliamentary democracy that conducts regular elections, though there are increasing concerns that it is backsliding toward a one-party, hybrid regime that includes elements of authoritarianism and democracy. The ruling Awami League (AL), the party of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, increasingly dominates national politics. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) has been the main opposition party. In opposition, both parties have at times used demonstrations, labor strikes, and transport blockades, as well as the ballot box, to regain government control. Prime Minister Hasina, in office since 2009, won her third consecutive term in December 2018. During that election, observers reported vote rigging, voter intimidation, and mass arrests of opposition activists. The next parliamentary elections are scheduled for January 7, 2024.

The World Bank projects Bangladesh's economic growth rate fell from an estimated 7.1% in 2022 to 6% in 2023. Readymade garments accounted for 85% of Bangladesh's exports in 2022. The Economist Intelligence Unit expects Bangladesh's export growth to decelerate due to slowing consumer spending in Europe and the United States. Agriculture, previously the largest employment sector, accounted for 37% of total employment in 2021, second to the service sector's 41%. The World Bank reported remittances to Bangladesh of \$21.5 billion in 2022.

Relations with the United States

The United States has long-standing relations with Bangladesh, and is among its largest export markets and sources of foreign investment. The Obama, Trump, and Biden Administrations, and many Members of Congress, have focused on issues relating to Rohingya refugees from Burma, democracy, good governance, economic development, humanitarian concerns, labor rights, human rights, and counterterrorism. Some Members contend that supporting democracy, rule of law, and human rights, including in Bangladesh, is critical to advancing U.S. interests. The State Department announced in May 2023 that it will restrict visa issuance for any Bangladeshis it finds to be undermining Bangladesh's democratic election process ahead of scheduled 2024 voting.

The United States and Bangladesh hold annual bilateral Partnership Dialogues and Security Dialogues, and have developed a cooperative security relationship to meet shared concerns, including violent extremism and regional security. As part of these dialogues, the two governments have agreed to work closely together for a shared vision of a free, open, inclusive, and peaceful Indo-Pacific.

Figure 1. Bangladesh in Brief

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| Land area: Slightly smaller than Iowa and mostly low lying delta | |
| Resources: Natural gas, arable land, timber, coal | |
| Natural hazards: Droughts, cyclones, extensive flooding | |
| Ethnicity: 98% Bengali (2019 est.) | |
| Religion: 91% Sunni Muslim, 10% Hindu, 1% other (includes Buddhists and Christians) (2022 est.) | |
| Population: 167.2 million (2022 est.) | |
| Life expectancy: 72 years (2021 est.) | |
| GDP: per capita \$6,494 ppp with 10.1% growth (2021 est.) | |
| Origin of GDP: Agriculture 3.3%, Industry 10.3%, services 5.8% (2021 est.) | |
| Exports: <u>Products</u> - garments, knitwear, agricultural products, frozen food, jute, leather. <u>Partners</u> - U.S. 15.1%, Germany 11.1%, U.K. 7.9%, Spain 5.7%. (2021 est.) | |

Sources: Economist Intelligence Unit, World Bank, Asian Development Bank, State Department, Census Bureau, World Atlas.

Rohingya

The predominantly Muslim Rohingya have faced persecution in Buddhist-majority Burma for years. The Burmese government has denied them citizenship and treated them as illegal immigrants. In FY2022, the United States provided \$265 million in humanitarian assistance for Rohingya refugees from Burma, including in host communities in Bangladesh. The State Department announced an additional \$26 million in assistance in March 2023. Total U.S. assistance for the Rohingya since August 2017 is now almost \$2.1 billion. Approximately one million Rohingya currently reside in Bangladesh, testing the government's ability to provide adequate security, food, and sanitation. Bangladesh officials have criticized Burma for its failure to take steps to repatriate the Rohingya. Bangladesh began relocating Rohingya from existing camps in Bangladesh to Bhashan Char, a remote island in the Bay of Bengal, in December 2020, despite warnings that the island is vulnerable to sea level rise and storm surges. Press reports estimate that roughly 30,000 Rohingya refugees had been relocated to the island as of January 2023.

Human Rights and Religious Freedom

Some analysts and policymakers contend that human rights and religious freedom are under threat in Bangladesh. The State Department's *2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Bangladesh* highlights a number of concerns, including "unlawful or arbitrary killings, including extrajudicial killings; forced disappearance[s]; torture or cases of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment by the government." It also noted reports of extrajudicial "crossfire" killings in 2022. Security forces are rarely held accountable for such deaths. The constitution recognizes Islam as the state religion, but also officially upholds secular principles. Despite the government's public espousal of tolerance, religious minorities face discrimination and violence. The State Department notes widespread communal violence against Hindu, Christian, and Buddhist religious minorities in Bangladesh.

Democracy

Observers had long categorized Bangladesh as a democratic nation. However, some analysts now argue that Bangladesh is approaching, or has already become, a one-party state. The 2018 election, in which Sheikh Hasina won her most recent five-year term, was "not considered free and fair by observers," the State Department reports. Freedom House assesses that AL has consolidated political power through harassment of the opposition and its perceived allies, as well as of critical media and civil society voices. According to Human Rights Watch, authorities have jailed opposition members, violated freedom of speech, and suppressed AL critics. Transparency International, which measures levels of national corruption, ranked Bangladesh 147th of 180 countries in 2022; Bangladesh dropped to 163rd of 180 countries in Reporters Without Borders' 2023 *World Press Freedom Index*. Freedom House designates Bangladesh as "partly free." Following the announcement of new U.S. visa restrictions, Dhaka promised the 2024 elections will be free and fair. Some observers remain concerned about democratic backsliding in Bangladesh in light of the ongoing government crackdown on the BNP and other opposition parties, which has sparked large-scale protests. The BNP and 14 other registered parties are boycotting the election; this makes an overwhelming AL victory all but guaranteed. Some analysts question whether the elections can be considered free and fair given these circumstances.

Demographic and Environmental Concerns

Bangladesh is one of the world's most densely populated countries, and some analysts assess that growing demographic pressures and environmental problems may result in millions of displacements. The World Health Organization estimates that climate change may displace as many as one in seven Bangladeshis. World Bank data show that Bangladesh's population growth rate has slowed from an annual rate high of 3% in 1967 to 1.1% in 2021. Some projections indicate the population will peak at 193 million in 2053. If that happens, observers suggest many nationals may migrate to already-overcrowded cities or to neighboring countries, such as India, straining social services and, perhaps, contributing to regional instability.

Islamist Extremism

The U.S. government generally views Bangladesh as a moderate voice in the Islamic world, but the emergence of some Islamist militancy in the country has concerned the governments of both the United States and Bangladesh. Both governments identify a common interest in countering Islamist extremists. Both the Islamic State (IS) and Al Qaeda have been active in Bangladesh. A 2016 terrorist attack by IS-aligned militants killed over 20 people in Dhaka; fatalities included one American, along with several other foreigners. Other militant groups, such as the suspected IS-aligned Neo-Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh, have also been active. Bangladesh authorities have been largely effective in thwarting IS militants since the 2016 attack, the State Department assesses.

External Relations

Positioned at the intersection of India, China, Southeast Asia, and the Bay of Bengal, Bangladesh occupies a geo-strategically important location, and its foreign policy seeks to promote trade, economic development, and diplomatic linkages with a range of countries. In February 2023, Bangladesh abstained from a U.N. General Assembly vote on a resolution reprimanding Russia for invading Ukraine.

The Bay of Bengal region is a focus of China's Belt and Road Initiative, which emphasizes global infrastructure, energy projects, trade, transit, and other linkages. China also has become Bangladesh's primary supplier of military equipment, including two submarines, maritime patrol vessels, tanks, and fighter jets. By one estimate, China supplied approximately 74% of Bangladesh's weapons between 2010 and 2020. Bangladesh-China ties expanded significantly following President Xi Jinping's 2016 visit to Dhaka, where President Xi and Prime Minister Hasina agreed to upgrade the bilateral relationship to a "strategic partnership of cooperation." Prime Minister Hasina traveled to China in 2019 to further strengthen bilateral cooperation.

Some Indian officials express concern that Bangladesh's growing engagement with China could impact the close Bangladesh-India relationship. Some consider China's "encroachment" in India's neighborhood as a challenge to Indian interests. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi described Bangladesh as a significant pillar of India's "Neighborhood First" policy during a 2020 virtual summit with Hasina. In 2020, Bangladesh halted development of what would have been its first deep-sea port at Sonadia after India opposed China's involvement. Bangladesh and India continue to maintain close relations, and Prime Ministers Hasina and Modi signed several Memoranda of Understanding in New Delhi in September 2022.

Bangladesh and Japan also have been developing closer relations, with Japanese financing of infrastructure projects in Bangladesh. In August 2022, the Japan International Cooperation Agency signed an investment agreement with Bangladesh SEZ Ltd. to establish a Special Economic Zone Development Project. Japan is assisting with the construction of a deep-water port at Matabari. Some experts see developing ties with Japan as reflecting Bangladesh's desire to balance its relations with external partners.

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