

Spouting democratic phrases, Bangladesh's new "interim" government moves to impose capitalist order

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Bangladesh's new government—formed under the direction and guidance of the military after mass protests caused the country's long-time prime minister, Sheikh Hasina, to flee the country August 5—is moving to restore capitalist order.

Behind saccharine phrases about establishing "true democracy" and realizing the "dreams" of "social justice" that animated the student-led protest movement, the head of the interim government, Muhammad Yunus, is putting together a right-wing capitalist regime.

Key economic responsibilities are being given to people with longstanding ties to the IMF and international capital. The transnational garment manufacturers are being wooed with assurances that the new government will provide them "stability." The Bangladesh Police Force (BPF) is being revamped, with exemplary changes in top personnel and the issuing of new uniforms, and rapidly redeployed.

As Hasina's Awami League-led government collapsed, the BPF's personnel fled, for fear they would be subject to popular retribution for the police's role in the failed attempt to bloodily suppress the protest movement. More than 400 people, most of them students and other protesters, are said to have died in government initiated political violence between mid-July and last week.

The 84-year-old Yunus is a thoroughly right-wing figure, with close ties to Washington and other western imperialist powers. But he has long been falsely promoted as a "friend of the poor," because of his advocacy of "micro-finance" and small-scale "entrepreneurship" as a means of combating crushing poverty and blazing the trail for "inclusive" capitalist development.

With the aim of giving the interim government some popular legitimacy and convincing a population seething with anger over mass joblessness, spiralling prices, and state repression to return to their daily routines, the military and Yunus have been careful to give themselves democratic airs, including in the selection of the interim government's personnel.

Two leaders of the student organization that initiated and led the anti-government protests, Students Against Discrimination (SAD), have been included in the 17-member "cabinet."

Nahid Islam, a 26-year-old who is pursuing a master's in sociology at Dhaka University and SAD's principal spokesman, was named adviser for Posts, Telecommunications and Technology, when the interim government was sworn in on August 8. Another SAD leader, 25-year-old graduate student in linguistics Asif Mahmud, was appointed adviser to the Sports Ministry.

Several other members of the interim government have reputations as advocates for, or are academic specialists in, human rights.

However, the key portfolios are all in the hands of trusted members of the Bangladeshi capitalist elite.

With the military's blessing, Yunus has allotted himself many of the

most important ministries. In addition to being the "chief advisor" or de facto prime minister, he is responsible, among other ministries, for defence, energy, land, textiles and jute, education, and information and broadcasting.

The Home Minister, who oversees the police and law and order, has been assigned to a former army brigadier general, Sakhawat Hossain.

Saleh Uddin Ahmed, who headed Bangladesh's central bank for four years under the last government led by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), is the adviser to the Finance Ministry. As one of his first actions, Ahmed has proposed Ahsan H. Mansur, who worked for many years for the IMF, to head Bangladesh's central bank. As an IMF official, Mansur helped oversee a brutal capitalist restructuring program in Pakistan between 1998 and 2001. He also was the chief financial adviser to the Bangladesh government in 1989-91, as it imposed a regressive Value Added (sales) Tax.

Bangladesh is itself currently in the midst of implementing an IMF-dictated program of austerity measures—a condition for an emergency \$4.7 billion loan program the IMF approved in January 2023.

The right-wing character of the interim government is also underscored by its adviser for Religious Affairs. This post has been given to AFM Khalid Hossain, one of the principal leaders of the Hefazat-e-Islam Bangladesh, an Islamic fundamentalist group, which has agitated for the imposition of reactionary blasphemy laws and strict gender segregation.

The military—which has a long record of coups and dictatorial rule—has foresworn any formal role in the interim government.

But it is manifestly the power behind the throne. It was the army chief, Waker-uz-Zaman, who announced to the country Hasina's resignation, adding that the military was now responsible for the government of Bangladesh, which with a population of 175 million is the world's eighth largest country.

While the military demonstratively bowed to the students' demand for a civilian government, army chief Waker-uz-Zaman, and the heads of the navy and air force, have been intimately involved in the government's formation and its first steps. Meanwhile, Bangladesh's president, Mohammed Shahabuddin—nominally the person Yunus and the other 16 members of the interim government are supposed to be advising—has been shunted to the sidelines.

On Monday, the military chiefs had a private cabal with Yunus to discuss the security situation.

The military has promised to pull its personnel from the streets once order is restored. But on Tuesday it vowed it would be out in force on Thursday, August 15, the anniversary of the 1975 military coup in which Hasina's father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the principal political leader of Bangladesh's liberation struggle, was assassinated.

Neither the military nor Yunus has indicated when elections will be

held. They have indicated, however, that it will not be within the three-month period provided for in the constitution for a caretaker government to organize parliamentary elections. To pave the way for the Yunus-led interim government following Hasina's resignation, President Shahabuddin, acting on the military's instructions, dissolved the Awami League-dominated parliament. It had been elected in an election last January that most of the opposition, including the BNP, boycotted on the grounds they were effectively rigged.

Since Hasina's flight, the students have continued to mount protests to press for the purge of leading state institutions of Awami League loyalists implicated in the violent repression of their agitation and/or the pervasive corruption of her regime. Last Saturday, the head of the Supreme Court and five other Supreme Court justices resigned.

However, those filling the places of the defrocked Hasina supporters are almost invariably right-wing figures, many of them with ties to the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, which is no less beholden to international capital, corrupt and anti-democratic than the Awami League.

Over the past week, several universities—with the support of the student groups affiliated with Students Against Discrimination—have moved to ban campus political groups and “politics” (i.e., political discussion) among students and faculty. While these bans are being justified as a means of deterring political intimidation and violence on the part of the youth organizations of the Awami League, BNP and the BNP's Islamist ally, the Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh, this is a very dangerous development that threatens students' basic democratic rights, and by implication, those of the working class.

The harsh reality of Bangladesh's “economic miracle”

The sudden collapse of Hasina's 16-year-old Awami League regime is the product of the massive crisis roiling Bangladeshi and world capitalism. For much of the last decade, Bangladesh was celebrated as a capitalist growth story, with annual economic growth, spurred by the expansion of the garment sector and infrastructure investment, regularly exceeding 7 percent, and per capita GDP surpassing India's.

But all this was based on savage exploitation of the 4 million garment industry workers and the toiling masses as a whole. Social inequality soared.

The country was further economically and socially destabilized by the COVID-19 pandemic and then by the food price rises that resulted from the NATO-instigated war with Russia. Hasina responded with increased repression, particularly to any strike movement or unrest among the garment industry workers.

It was within this context that the student protest movement suddenly became the catalyst for an outburst of mass popular anger against the Awami League government.

At its outset, the SAD agitation targeted a regressive discriminatory job quota system that limited university graduates' access to government jobs. The students advanced no broader demands addressing the problems facing the working class or rural toilers. What transformed their protest into a nationwide popular uprising was mass anger over the repression meted out by the police and Awami Party thugs.

Workers and their families joined the student-initiated protests. However, they did so as individuals, not as a class, using strikes and other weapons of class struggle and advancing their own demands.

For this, the various Stalinist parties and the trade unions, whether affiliated to them or independent, are politically responsible. For years, they have orbited around, and in many cases formally allied with, either the Awami League or its arch-rival, the BNP. Thus, in recent weeks the

Workers Party of Bangladesh has scrambled to put some distance between itself and the hated Hasina-led, now ex-government.

With the working class politically suppressed, the field has been left open for the ruling class and its military guardians to exploit the naiveté, democratic illusions, and, petty-bourgeois prejudices and aspirations of the SAD leaders.

On Monday, Yunus met with the leaders of the BNP and a half-dozen other opposition parties. At the conclusion of the meeting, the BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir said they had agreed that the interim government needs time to prepare elections. He also angrily denounced the reports of communal attacks on Bangladesh's Hindu minority since Hasina's resignation, terming them an Awami League slur on the people, although several such attacks have been well-documented. Moreover, the Bangladeshi ruling class, like its counterparts in India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, has a long, foul record of using communal violence against religious and ethnic minorities as a means to split the toiling masses and promote reaction.

For the moment, the principal concern of the BNP appears to be to remove its Awami League ruling-class competitor from a future election. It has called for sit-ins Wednesday and Thursday in front of its party offices across the country to demand that Hasina be charged with genocide and other Awami League leaders prosecuted.

This week, the New Delhi-based *Economic Times of India* carried a report that claimed Hasina had issued a message in which she blamed the US for her government's fall. Washington, she was reported as saying, was intent on punishing her for her refusal to allow the US to convert Saint Martin Island, a coral reef situated close to shipping lanes in the Bay of Bengal, into an anti-China military base.

Hasina's son and close confidant, Sajeeb Wazed, has denounced the report as false. He is also claiming that his mother never resigned and will return to the country when fresh elections are called.

In India, which has been rattled by the loss of the government that it considered its closest ally in South Asia, there have also been numerous suggestions, including from leading opposition politicians, that a “foreign hand”—be it the US, China or Pakistan—played a determining role in last week's events in Bangladesh.

That US imperialism will seek to leverage its ties to Yunus to advance its interests is indisputable. It is also clear that the military shoved Hasina out the door, whether she formally resigned or not, because it had concluded that her effort to cling to power through massive state violence had backfired, and was dangerously destabilizing Bangladeshi capitalism.

However, the root cause of the sudden collapse of her government was the eruption of mass anger onto the streets of Dhaka, Chittagong and across the country.

If the struggle for democracy is not to be aborted by the venal Bangladeshi bourgeoisie, it must be tied to the fight for social equality and based on the working class. Workers and socialist-minded youth must base their struggle on the Trotskyist program of permanent revolution, which politically animated the 1917 Russian Revolution and explains that in the epoch of imperialism, the democratic rights of the masses can only be won and secured through the fight for workers power and international socialism.



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