

# Oxford Reference



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## Bangladesh

One of the world's poorest nations, Bangladesh is also one of the most populous and most densely populated. The 2011 United Nations *Human Development Report* placed the country's human development index at 146 of 187 nations ranked, while its 150 million people occupied an area roughly equal to that of the American state of Iowa (which has only 3 million inhabitants). And although rapidly urbanizing, the country remains over 70 percent rural. With its monsoon climate, this low-lying country has a larger proportion of its people at risk of flood and famine than virtually any other.

Ethnically, Bangladesh is remarkably homogeneous, with more than 97 percent Bengalis (defined as those who speak the Bengali language) and a scattering of tribal groups, mostly in the mountainous southeast. The country is also principally of one religion, being about 90 percent Muslim, with Hindus making up most of the remainder.

Bangladesh has, in a sense, achieved independence twice, first in 1947 when it emerged from British rule as the "eastern wing" of Pakistan, separated from its western counterpart by 900 miles (1,450 km) of India, and then again in 1971 when, with Indian help, it broke away from Pakistan to become a separate country in its own right after a brief but bloody civil war. Over the ensuing four decades, Bangladesh has been governed almost continuously by members of three families.

The country's politics were primarily authoritarian during its first two decades, with regime changes coming through assassination and military coup. Major leaders during this period include Bangladesh's founding father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, usually referred to as "Mujib" (1972–1975); Ziaur Rahman or "Zia" (1975–1981); and Hussein Muhammad Ershad (1982–1990). Each of the three founded a political party. First came Sheikh Mujib's Awami League (later led by his daughter Sheikh Hasina Wajed), then Zia's Bangladesh National Party or BNP (later led by his widow, Begum Khaleda Zia), and finally Ershad's Jatiya Party.

All three groupings survived to become the principal parties of the 1990s and 2000s. The parties display some increasingly modest ideological differences, with the Awami League professing a moderately left, secular, pro-India stance and the BNP being somewhat more capitalist, less secular, and mildly anti-India. As the newest of the three, the Jatiya Party sought to establish its identity through a mildly pro-Islamic posture. Many smaller parties exist, but only one, the fundamentalist Jama'at-i-Islami, has had much following, and it has trailed far behind the other three.

Through most of the Ershad period in the 1980s, opposition parties engaged in a pattern of mobilization–demonstration–agitation–strike, to which the regime responded alternately with guile and harsh intimidation. In 1990 yet another cycle began, but to the surprise of most observers, this time the political dynamic emulated the overthrow



of Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines in 1986 rather than the customary course of military repression. Called upon to impose martial law, the army instead instructed President Ershad to resign immediately, which he did. Critical to the military's thinking, apparently, was the cumulative movement of civil society elements into the opposition camp. University campuses, professional groups, trade unions, government servants, and even the major foreign-funded development nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) all deserted the regime, a pattern which surely proved instrumental in providing for a peaceful change from the Ershad dictatorship but which also provided an unhappy precedent for the future.

After Ershad's resignation, elections, widely regarded as honest, were held in February 1991, bringing the BNP to power. The new parliament quickly scrapped the presidential system for a Westminster-style model, and Prime Minister Khaleda Zia embarked on an unsteady path that soon descended into political confusion and disruption, continuing the pattern of the Ershad period and setting the tone for the next two decades, during which the abiding problem of Bangladeshi politics has been the inability of the principal parties to agree on a set of working rules of the political game that provide for behavioral civility.

Viewing the agitational approach as the only way to oppose the regime in power, the Awami League spent most of its efforts after the 1991 election in mobilizing drives against the BNP government, with successive confrontations, parliamentary boycotts, and *hartals* (general shutdowns of all activity). Undeterred, the ruling BNP went ahead with an evidently fraudulent election in 1996; but after a huge outcry, including the donor community, it submitted to a second election under a caretaker setup that returned the Awami League to power. Roles now reversed, the BNP mounted a confrontational opposition, employing all the troublemaking tactics that the Awami League had earlier used against it. The 2001 election brought yet another reversal as the BNP resumed power and the Awami League again took up a disruptive opposition.

In the run-up to the next election, slated for January 2007, the ruling BNP was widely thought to be manipulating the system in its favor by fixing the caretaker regime. Playing its final oppositional card, the Awami League declared an electoral boycott. Amid what many thought would be a breakdown of the polity, the military backed what could be called a silent coup, and a new caretaker government took power. It embarked on a "two-begum solution" to permanently exile both the BNP and Awami League leaders, but a combination of domestic resistance and its own ineptitude induced the regime to back down. In December 2008, a new election was held, receiving international approbation as free and fair and giving the Awami League more than three-quarters of the seats, while reducing the BNP to less than 10 percent. Following the election, an initially chastened BNP soon attempted to resuscitate the old agitational politics of the street. A bit more than a year later, the old game of disruptive oppositional politics has essentially resumed. The military-backed hiatus, it appeared, had solved very little.

The political economy at all levels has centered around a patron-client structure in which the beneficiaries of government spending provide the regime with their support. In the urban areas finished garments have joined construction, contracting, and trading as the major sources of income for the regime's supporters, while in the countryside development project monies form the basis of linkage. The patron-client process and institutionalized corruption in general have been fueled to a significant extent by ample foreign aid revenues, averaging between \$1 and \$2 billion yearly for several decades, though, as the domestic economy has improved, the steady level of aid has given the donors successively less weight in influencing public policy. Moreover, the dysfunctional political system has not inhibited an impressive economic growth rate, averaging over 5 percent per capita during 2005–2010.

Bangladesh has over the years been remarkably receptive to experiments in rural development, and several NGOs have gained world-class reputations for their innovative strategies. In particular, the Grameen Bank has pioneered very small loans to landless people without collateral—mostly women—expanding to more than 8 million borrowers with almost no defaulters by 2010. Another notable NGO is the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee, which has evolved a "conscientization" approach to rural development in which village-level groups are encouraged to construct



their own strategies for promoting increased income and control over their own lives.

Foreign relations for Bangladesh have focused primarily in three directions. India, with roughly eight times the population of Bangladesh and more than twelve times its gross domestic product, is inevitably the major concern. Disputes over sharing water from the Ganges River have persistently been the main conflict here, followed by long-festering insurrectionary movements among tribal groups on both sides of Bangladesh's southeastern border with India. Both these problems have abated recently, a process helped by the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, formed in 1983. A second major concern has been dealing with international aid donors, led by the World Bank and the United States, which have pressed for policy reforms such as privatization, reducing subsidies, and encouraging export industries. The third major focus in foreign policy has been the Middle Eastern countries, chiefly Saudi Arabia, which has given significant aid while also encouraging Islamic fundamentalism in Bangladesh.

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