**[No joy in Dhaka](https://www.dawn.com/news/1847667/no-joy-in-dhaka)**

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THERE is a sense of irony in watching tanks and armoured personnel carriers on the streets of Dhaka, defending a government that traces its lineage to the forces that resisted the Pakistani army’s ultimately futile effort to abort the birth of Bangladesh in 1971.

This month’s unrest in the nation once known as East Pakistan was spurred by the re-imposition of laws that reserved around 30 per cent of government jobs for the descendants of those who fought in the Bangladesh war of liberation. The quota was uncontroversial when it was introduced by the present prime minister’s father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, in 1972. Hardly anyone could have objected to special consideration for the stalwarts of the resistance to Islamabad’s hegemony, or their families.

Half a century later, such a law is harder to defend — particularly when unemployment among graduates is substantially higher than the national average. The quota was effectively rescinded in 2018, until revived by a high court last month. After dozens of deaths and hundreds of arrests, it is likely to take much more than a supreme court decision sharply reducing the quota to diminish the rage that led to the unrest, which has lately been subdued following curfew and shoot-on-sight orders.

Unfortunately, Sheikh Hasina Wajed’s reign across four consecutive prime ministerships since 2009 — plus a previous stint as Bangladesh’s second woman prime minister after Khaleda Zia — has been accompanied by an apparent determination to turn Bangladesh into a one-party state. That’s precisely what her father had disastrously plumped for in the months before he and most of his family were murdered by Bangladeshi army officers in 1975.

Bangladesh’s crisis has only partially been resolved.

Bangladesh had a Gen Zia in charge two years before Pakistan did, but he was killed by the military in 1981, paving the way for a fellow general more in line with the Pakistani Zia’s religious predilections. A joint effort by Hasina and Khaleda Zia managed to topple Ershad, and Zia became prime minister for a second term. It appeared a better outcome than achieved by the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy in Pakistan, but yet another military intervention led to the imprisonment of both the ‘begums’. However, by 2009 Hasina was back at the helm.

She has been there ever since, come hell or high water, based substantially on condemning the opposition to prison, or worse. There have been deaths in jail and disappearances under her watch, and her aim is seen as a one-party state of the kind her father sought to institute months before he was assassinated. Despite all his missteps, nothing of that sort was on the agenda of Mujib’s Pakistani equivalent, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto.

Courtesy of Dr Kamal Hossain, Bangladesh managed to establish a constitution in 1972, before Pakistan managed to do so almost a year later. Unlike Pakistan’s, it was indubitably secular and potentially socialist. Hossain, who served as first law minister and then foreign minister under Mujib, was caught unawares when the leader alongside whom he had been imprisoned in Haripur in 1971 proclaimed a one-party state in February 1975. He was murdered alongside family members in August that year, and the military coup spawned the equally short-lived Zia rule, followed by the Ershad interregnum that in many ways imitated the fundamentalist trajectory of Pakistan’s Zia.

The return of democracy has not been smooth, with subsequent military interventions vying for attention with political squabbling that always seemed to have more to do with egos than ideology.

Bangladesh’s economic growth rate since 2009 has been im-pressive, based to a large extent on garment exports — which have relied primarily on sweat-shops with occasio-nally deadly locati-ons. It’s an industry that mostly em-ploys vulnerable women, and in which demands for safer working conditions and higher wages have been crushed by the state.

The achievements of Sheikh Hasina’s government stretch from relatively impressive economic figures to state capture stretching from the military to the judiciary. No civilian government in Pakistan can claim to have been equally successful, notwithstanding the obvious parallels related to punishing political opponents.

The question for Hasina’s government now is whether backtracking on quotas that are assumed to have benefited the ruling par-ty will suffice to calm popular anger that ext­e­nds beyond that particular plaint to uneq-ual growth, and suspected corruption where the current culprits can more readily be pinpointed under effective one-party rule.

Notwithstanding Bangladesh’s successes, its failures cannot be ignored. Far less repression and a lot more democracy could set it on a more productive path – and the same essentially goes for Pakistan. But embarking on it with Hasina’s Awami League still at helm could be seen as an impossible dream.

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