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Bangladeshi Prime Minister flees to India amid mass uprising

Bangladesh's longtime prime minister, Sheikh Hasina, fled the country Monday amid a mass popular uprising against her increasingly brutal authoritarian rule.



Protesters shout slogans as they celebrate Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's resignation, in Dhaka, Bangladesh, Monday, Aug. 5, 2024. [AP Photo/Rajib Dahr]

Army chief General Waker-uz-Zaman announced Hasina had resigned in a televised statement to the nation, hours after she and her sister had been spotted with army escorts at Dhaka international airport. It was subsequently learned that Hasina, who headed Bangladesh's government for the past 15 years, had flown to India, which has enjoyed close ties to her regime.

Declaring the country of 170 million people was "going through a revolutionary period," General Waker-uz-Zaman said that the military would oversee a peaceful transition to a new

government and the restoration of order. He claimed to have already consulted with opposition leaders and “civil society” groups.

The general appealed to the population to leave the streets and ordered that schools, colleges, factories, and offices reopen Tuesday morning upon the lifting of a curfew. Trying to defuse the mass anger, Waker-Uz-Zaman postured as a friend of the people. “I promise you all,” he avowed, “we will bring justice to all the murders... Have faith in the army of the country. Please don't go back to the path of violence and please return to non-violent and peaceful ways.”

As the general was speaking, jubilant crowds were surging through the streets of the national capital, Dhaka. The prime minister's residence and several government buildings were stormed and sacked. The *New York Times* cited a garment worker Monsur Ali, who said he was among the thousands of people who entered Hasina's residence. “We went there out of anger. Nothing is left there.”

Everything suggests that the army top brass forced Hasina from power, after concluding that her attempt to cling to office through bloody repression was dangerously destabilizing Bangladeshi capitalism.

The working class has yet to intervene in the crisis as an independent political force. But in ever greater numbers working people have joined the protest movement that university students initiated at the beginning of last month over a regressive government job allocation system. They have done so to oppose the state violence and to voice their anger at mass unemployment, grinding poverty and ever-deepening social inequality.

The military and the ruling class clearly fear the continued disruption of the country's massive garment industry will reduce profits, exacerbate the country's economic crisis and fuel worker unrest.

On Sunday, almost one hundred people, including 13 police officers, were killed in clashes between anti-government protesters and security forces across the country. This brought the death toll since the protest movement began to over 300.

Despite the repression and a blanket government curfew, the Students Against Discrimination called for a mass march Monday on the prime minister's official residence in, Dhaka, to demand Hasina's resignation.

Up until Monday, Hasina had pursued a hardline, unleashing the police, including the notorious anti-terrorism Rapid Action Battalion and thugs organized by the Awami League, her political party, against peaceful protesters. She denounced the students as “terrorists,” gave “shoot-to-kill” orders for those defying a government curfew, and falsely claimed the

movement had been orchestrated by the main opposition parties the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the Jamaat-e-Islami, an Islamist communalist party.

While the army was deployed against the protests, the police played the principal role in the attempt to violently suppress them. This included arresting thousands. According to press reports, at a meeting last Friday junior officers expressed concern to their superiors about having to shoot unarmed protesters.

Several hours after the Chief of Army staff announced Hasina's resignation, Bangladesh President Mohammed Shahabuddin said that he had presided over a meeting with General Waker-uz-Zaman, the heads of the navy and air force, and leaders of the opposition.

The president said that the meeting had decided parliament should be dissolved to allow for the establishment of an "interim government," and that the army would "take measures to normalize the prevailing anarchic situation."

The current parliament, which is dominated by Hasina's Awami League, was elected last January in a vote that the BNP and its allies, most importantly the Jamaat-e-Islami, boycotted. They cited the government's record of repression of its political opponents and refusal to allow for a caretaker government to be appointed to oversee the election.

President Shahabuddin also announced that the meeting agreed the BNP's longtime leader Khaleda Zia, who was jailed in 2018 in a corruption case, should be immediately freed.

The leaders of the Students Against Discrimination have welcomed the intervention of the Bangladesh army, which is the bulwark of capitalist rule and has a notorious record of repression and dictatorship. From all reports, the student body is actively participating in the formation of the promised interim government.

Such a government will be a right-wing capitalist regime tasked with restoring order and continuing to implement the austerity and privatization measures that the Hasina-led Awami League government agreed to in 2023 in exchange for a \$4.7 billion IMF bailout loan.

In all likelihood the BNP and its allies will have a prominent place in the interim government. But the military will remain the power behind the throne.

For decades official politics in Bangladesh have revolved around the bitter rivalry between Hasina and her Awami League and Zia and her BNP. Hasina emerged as leader of the Awami League following the 1975 assassination of her father Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the most prominent political leader in the Bangladesh independence struggle and the country's then president, as part of a successful military coup.

Zia became the de facto leader of the BNP in 1983, two years after her husband, Ziaur Rahman the party's founder and Bangladesh's fifth president, was assassinated by a group of army officers.

Both parties are beholden to international capital, have extensive crony capitalist and corrupt patronage networks, have used repression and anti-democratic skullduggery against their political rivals, and met any serious opposition movement within the working class with an iron fist.

The BNP, it need be noted, only declared its "support" for the the student movement in mid-July, after masses of people had taken to the streets in outrage at the government repression. There are many parallels between the crisis now unfolding in Bangladesh, the world's eighth most populous country, and that which roiled Sri Lanka two years ago. In July 2022, mass protests and strikes chased President Gotabaya Rajapaksa from power. But with the assistance of the trade unions and the opposition parties a new government was soon installed under the avowedly pro-big business and pro-Washington Ranil Wickremesinghe. It has pushed through savage IMF austerity measures while building up the repressive forces of the state in preparation for a violent showdown with the working class.

To prevent a similar outcome, Bangladeshi workers and students must chart a new course based on Leon Trotsky's program of permanent revolution—the program that animated the October 1917 Russian Revolution and the subsequent struggle against its Stalinist degeneration. The working class in Bangladesh must constitute itself as an independent political force, in opposition to the entire political establishment and all sections of the ruling class and its state apparatus. It must strive to rally the rural toilers behind it in the struggle for a workers and peasants' government, committed to the socialist reorganization of economic life and the mobilization of the international working class against imperialism and global capital.