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[afgazad@gmail.com](mailto:afgazad@gmail.com)

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[KIT KLARENBERG AND WYATT REED](#)

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## Leaked files expose covert US government plot to 'destabilize Bangladesh's politics'

*Leaked docs reveal that prior to the toppling of Bangladeshi PM Sheikh Hasina, the US govt-funded International Republican Institute trained an army of activists including rappers and "LGBTQI people," even hosting "transgender dance performances," to achieve a national "power shift." Institute staff said the activists "would cooperate with IRI to destabilize Bangladesh's politics."*

On August 5, months of violent street protests finally toppled Bangladesh's elected Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. When the military seized power and announced the imposition of a so-called "[interim administration](#)," video footage showed Hasina fleeing to India aboard a helicopter. As vast swarms of student protesters overran the presidential palace, Western

media outlets and many of their [progressive-leaning consumers](#) cheered the rebellion, framing it as a decisive defeat of fascism and the restoration of democratic rule.

Hasina's replacement, Muhammad Yunus, is a longtime Clinton Global Initiative fellow granted a Nobel Prize for pioneering the dubious practice of micro-lending. While Yunus has hailed the "meticulously-designed" protest movement that thrust him into power, Hasina personally accused Washington of working to remove her from power over her alleged refusal to allow a US military base on Bangladeshi territory. The State Department has dismissed allegations of US meddling as "laughable," with spokesman Vedant Patel [telling reporters](#) that "any implication that the United States was involved in Sheikh Hasina's resignation is absolutely false."

But now, leaked documents reviewed by The Grayzone confirm the State Department was informed of efforts by the International Republican Institute (IRI) to advance an explicitly stated mission to "destabilize Bangladesh's politics." The documents are marked as "confidential and/or privileged."

IRI is a Republican Party-run subsidiary of the [National Endowment for Democracy](#), which has fueled an array of regime change operations across the globe since it was conceived in the office of CIA Director William Casey over forty years ago.

The newly-uncovered files reveal how IRI spent millions in the lead-up to Hasina's overthrow covertly coaching opposition parties and establishing a regime change network concentrated among the country's urban youth. Among the GOP-run Institute's front line foot soldiers were rappers, ethnic minority leaders, LGBT activists hosting "transgender dance performances" in the presence of US embassy officials – all groomed to facilitate what the US intelligence cutout called a "power shift" in Bangladesh.

### **IRI offers Bangladeshi youth "the knowledge and skills to wield online... tools for change"**

The origins of the protests which toppled Hasina can be traced back to 2018. [That summer](#), thousands of young people took the streets of Dhaka to demand safer roads and stricter traffic laws after an unlicensed bus driver killed two high school students. The demonstrations grew despite heavy repression, eventually prompting the Hasina administration to impose more stringent laws on negligent driving.

Since their victory, scores of Bangladeshi students have honed their protest tactics, shutting down transit points in response to what sometimes seemed like trivial abuses. Against a backdrop of intensifying crackdowns, the opposition Bangladeshi Nationalist Party (BNP) held an escalating series of street protests, which often morphed into riots. The simmering

war between student protesters and Hasina’s government reached a boiling point this August 4, when the military stepped in and seized power.

Following the coup, [pundits](#) have pointed to the role of social media in whipping up anti-government sentiment and driving havoc in the streets of Dhaka. Not coincidentally, the recently-leaked IRI files emphasize the importance of online training and message discipline in affecting political change.

### **IRI seeks ‘power shift’ in Bangladesh**

IRI has operated in Dhaka since 2003, ostensibly “to help political parties, government officials, civil society, and marginalized groups in their advocacy for greater rights and representation.”

In reality, as the documents make abundantly clear, IRI has funded and trained a wide-ranging shadow political structure, comprising NGOs, activist groups, politicians, and even musical and visual artists, which can be deployed to stir up unrest if Bangladesh’s government refuses to act as required.

The student protests of 2018, and the overwhelming electoral victory by Hasina’s Awami League in December of that same year, appear to have inspired the IRI’s regime change aspirations. In 2019, the Institute began conducting research to inform its “baseline assessment” of the country, which consisted of “48 group interviews and 13 individual interviews with 304 key informants.” In the end, “IRI staff... identified over 170 democratic activists who would cooperate with IRI to destabilize Bangladesh’s politics,” according to [an IRI report](#) which was submitted to the State Department.

### **III. PROJECT ACTIVITIES**

Project Objective and IR	Activity	Date(s) and Location(s)	Participants and Purpose
<b>KEY ACTIVITIES</b>			
<b>Cross Cutting</b>	<b>Baseline Assessment</b>	4/20/19 – 5/9/19	As part of its baseline assessment, IRI conducted field visits to 15 upazilas in nine districts in five divisions (Dhaka, Sylhet, Rajshahi, Khulna and Chittagong). IRI staff conducted 48 group interviews and 13 individual interviews with 304 key informants representing both traditional and non-traditional civic actors and <a href="#">identified over 170 democratic activists who would cooperate with IRI to destabilize Bangladesh’s politics.</a>

The report, which documented the IRI’s activities in the country between March 2019 and December 2020, shows the US government’s regime change campaign ramped up

significantly after Hasina’s “lopsided victory.” Her administration, they declared, had become “entrenched,” and their “political position” had “solidified.”

Meanwhile, the IRI concluded that the BNP opposition had “failed to successfully mobilize” its supporters. The party’s attempts to “foment street movements” had floundered, and it remained “marginal,” leaving the Awami League’s “power... undiminished.” Nonetheless, IRI considered BNP to be “still the most possible party to drive a power shift in the future.”

The idea that this political change might be achieved via the ballot box, however, didn’t appear to be up for consideration. With BNP apparently too “violent, insular, rigid, and hierarchical” to win an election, IRI instead proposed a “broad-based social empowerment project that fostered and expanded citizen-centered, local and non-traditional forums for political engagement.” In other words, street mobilizations.

Much of the IRI’s fascination with street protests and online communication is spelled out in a [separate internal report](#) titled, “Social Media, Protest, and Reform in Bangladesh’s Digital Era,” which declared that Bangladeshi students “have again led the country’s most vibrant protest movements, with the help of a tool their predecessors didn’t have: the internet.”

“Moving forward, IRI intends to expand its work with college students across the country,” the report declared.

The document explains that Bangladeshi protesters successfully used social media to promote videos and “short documentaries” of their actions, and compel local and international media to cover the upheaval. For example, Facebook-streamed live videos of police breaking up protests “went viral and helped spread knowledge of the protests across the country.”

One of the most powerful viral moments arrived in the form of a protest anthem by [Kureghor](#), which the IRI called “the biggest internet-based Bangladeshi music band.” IRI staff noted they actively worked “to ensure Bangladesh’s young people have the knowledge and skills to wield online and off-line tools for change,” which helped them “to extract concessions” from elected officials.



*“The objective of IRI’s youth programs is to ensure that Bangladesh’s young people have the knowledge and skills to wield online and off-line tools for change,” reveals an internal IRI document which featured this graphic.*

**“LGBTI people” as US regime change shock troops**

The IRI also supported a variety of “socially conscious artists,” which it called “an underutilized actor” for regime change purposes. “While traditional [civil society organizations] face constant pressure, individual artists and activists are harder to suppress and can often reach a wider audience with their democratic and reformational messages,” the Institute pointed out.

But Washington’s propaganda efforts weren’t just left to individual artists. The IRI also wrote that it had identified three “marginalized communities” to serve as shock troops on wedge issues – “Biharis, plainland ethnic groups and LGBTI people.”

In total, between 2019 and 2020, “IRI issued 11 advocacy grants to artists, musicians, performers or organizations that created 225 art products addressing political and social issues,” which it claimed were “viewed nearly 400,000 times.” Additionally, the Institute bragged that it “supported three civil society organizations (CSOs) from LGBTI, Bihari and ethnic communities to train 77 activists and engage 326 citizens to develop 43 specific policy demands,” which were apparently “proposed before 65 government officials.”

Between October and December of 2020, the IRI hosted three separate “transgender dance performances” across the country. Per the report, “the goal of the performance was to build self-esteem in the transgender community and raise awareness on transgender issues among the local community and government officials.” At the final performance, in Dhaka City, the US Embassy sent its “deputy consul general and deputy director of the Office for Democracy, Rights and Governance” to participate.

<b>Bandhu Social Welfare Society</b>			
<b>Objective 1; IR 1.2</b>	<b>Activity 1.2.1: Transgender Dance Performance (Cox’s Bazar)</b>	10/14/20	Bandhu organized the first of three dance performances titled “Rejoicing Life” in Cox’s Bazar. The goal of the performance was to build self-esteem in the transgender community and raise awareness on transgender issues among the local community and government officials.
<b>Objective 1; IR 1.2</b>	<b>Activity 1.2.1: Transgender Dance Performance (Khulna)</b>	10/28/20	Bandhu organized its second dance performance in Khulna City to raise public awareness on transgender issues. Around 100 visitors attended the program, including LGBTI people, NGO leaders, citizens and the Khulna District Administration Commissioner.
<b>Objective 1; IR 1.2</b>	<b>Activity 1.2.1: Transgender Dance</b>	12/09/20	Bandhu organized its final dance performance in Dhaka City, which engaged around 100 visitors. Guests from the Bangladesh government including

Finally, the IRI also carried out “community-specific quantitative and qualitative research,” which included “three focus group reports” and what it called “the largest published survey of LGBTI people in Bangladesh.”

In sum: “IRI’s program raised public awareness on social and political issues in Bangladesh and supported the public to challenge the status quo, which ultimately aims for power shift [sic] inside Bangladesh.”

In the US, Republican Party politicians have traditionally scorned government support for visual artists, transgender dancers, and rappers. But when an opportunity to install a more US-friendly government arose, the GOP’s in-house regime change organ eagerly transformed its domestic cultural enemies into political foot soldiers.

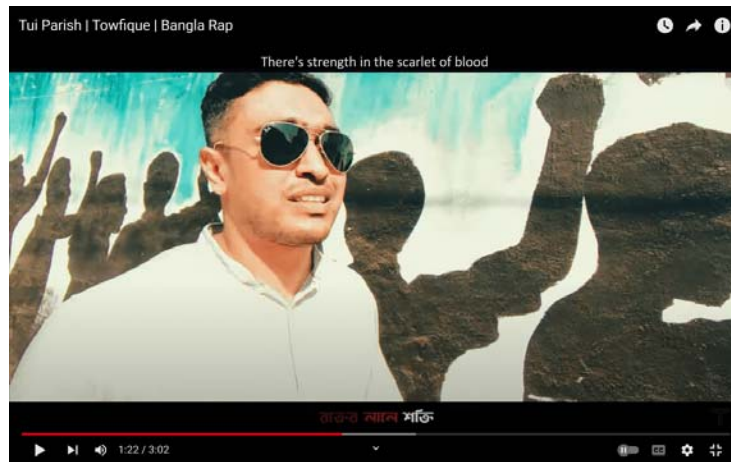
### **Bangladeshi rappers on the US intelligence payroll**

This July, Bangladeshi media celebrated a barrister and Bangla rap artist named Towfique Ahmed as an influential face and voice of the protest movement to topple Hasina, touting his [offer of free legal](#) support to protesters arrested during the demonstrations.

IRI documents reveal that [Ahmed](#)’s music has been directly subsidized by the US government. According to the Institute’s files, Ahmed “released the first of two music videos under IRI’s small grants program, “Tui Parish” (You Can Do It),” in 2020.

ADVOCACY GRANTS			
Towfique Ahmed			
<b>Objective 1; IR 1.2</b>	<b>Activity 1.2.1: Small Grants Program: Towfique Ahmed Video Release</b>	4/14/20	Towfique Ahmed released the first of two music videos under IRI’s small grants program for his song “ <a href="#">Tui Parish</a> ” (You Can Do It), which targets youth with a message of perseverance in difficult times and encourages those who are committed to strengthen democracy in Bangladesh in every possible way including protests and street movements. The video was released on YouTube and Facebook.
<b>Objective 1; IR 1.2</b>	<b>Activity 1.2.1: Towfique Ahmed Music Video Release</b>	12/31/20	Towfique Ahmed released his second music video titled “ <a href="#">E Daay Kaar</a> .” The song’s lyrics address a variety of social issues in Bangladesh including rape, poverty and workers’ rights. The song was designed to reveal social issues in Bangladesh and build up disappointment and even dissent to government so as to call for social and political reforms.

The song explicitly targeted “youth with a message of perseverance in difficult times,” while encouraging “those who are committed to strengthen democracy in Bangladesh in every possible way, including protests and street movements.” The lyrics of [his second](#) IRI-funded music video addressed “a variety of social issues in Bangladesh including rape, poverty and workers’ rights.” It was explicitly “designed to reveal social issues in Bangladesh and build up disappointment and even dissent to [the] government so as to call for social and political reforms.”



*“There’s strength in the scarlet of blood,” Bangladeshi rappers declare in a US government-sponsored hip-hop track.*

IRI was particularly proud of the fact that its Bangladesh “art program... contributed to American cultural diplomacy in Bangladesh.” By funding local hip-hop artists, “IRI promoted a uniquely American art form,” the group noted. The US has a long history of weaponizing music for soft power purposes, stretching from the CIA’s co-optation of jazz in the 1950s to USAID’s deployment of anti-communist rappers as agents against Cuba’s present-day government.

During one of the IRI’s televised cultural programs, the host “introduced rapper Towfique Ahmed’s music video with a description of rap’s origin in the US.” The Institute boasted that “this message reached over 79,000 households” across the country.

Elsewhere, IRI noted approvingly that in interviews with Bangladeshis “who attended public exhibits or watched IRI’s programs on television,” it was clear that “public consumers of the media products understood the messages of the art.” These responses were said to demonstrate that IRI had moved close to its goal “to drive [a] power shift in Bangladesh through social and political reforms” that year. Effusive praise was heaped on the “non-traditional civic actors” it had trained in the country:

“They are neither solely an artist nor solely an activist; instead, they are functioning as a *hybrid agent of change* [emphasis added]. While cultural activism in Bangladesh may not directly influence policy change and improve institutional behavior alone, it can certainly shape the political debate, advance social dialogue and raise more public awareness on key issues.”

### **IRI documents expose the BNP as unpopular, directionless**

IRI's internal documents make clear that the opposition BNP's lack of popularity necessitated the US government's infiltration of Bangladesh's civil society. One IRI report suggested that without a multi-million dollar cash injection from the US regime change apparatus, the BNP would remain trapped in a cycle of "vacillation between violence, boycott and participation," and near-total rejection by voters.

The IRI's 2020 final report is even more explicit, noting the BNP "has also failed to successfully mobilize opposition. Since the 2018 election, the BNP political strategy has shifted between boycotting and joining elections while trying to foment street movements against the government. None of these tactics have worked. The BNP remains marginal, and the AL's power is undiminished. However, the BNP is still the most possible party to drive [a] power shift in the future."

The Institute wasn't the only DC-based player involved in efforts to oust the Awami League. An [IRI writeup](#) of a September 2019 meeting with BNP leadership notes the participation of a Senior Director for Blue Star Strategies, the controversial lobbying outfit which Hunter Biden helped convince to work on behalf of now-dissolved Ukrainian energy conglomerate Burisma. "The BNP has contracted with Blue Star Strategies," the report notes, "to manage their communications and advocacy work with US-based policymakers and other key stakeholders."

US officials have [charged](#) that Hasina's Awami League relied on autocratic methods like vote rigging to compensate for its lack of public support. However, one leaked file related to a secret meeting between IRI and the BNP noted that the opposition party is "a persistent critic of IRI's public opinion research," as the figures "consistently" show "high approval ratings for the Awami League and negative ratings for the BNP."

Elsewhere, a [document](#) outlining IRI's "Bangladesh Strategy 2021-22" acknowledges the BNP "faces external pressure, internal disarray, and declining popularity." A party activist was quoted as saying BNP members and supporters were "in confusion about who is leading the party," as it was "missing leadership."

IRI went on to lament that the BNP "appears to be losing popularity" within an already dwindling base, and that even before COVID-19, its public rallies "were sparsely attended." Perhaps this is why "political party strengthening" was listed first under a section of an IRI document entitled, "Priority Areas of Work for IRI."



IRI's Bangladesh wing would "emphasize the need for support in advance of the next general elections," while "[steering] away from traditional pre-election activities." More music videos and art gallery shows were on the way, apparently.

Without any sense of irony, the IRI report concluded by warning of foreign interference in Bangladesh's internal politics: "predictably, the [Awami League] and Sheikh Hasina would seek re-election by all means under the support of India." As if to justify its own meddling in Bangladesh, the IRI insisted it was "necessary to counterbalance interference from regional powers" in the vote, which went ahead in January 2024.

The Awami League wound up winning the election in a landslide, while the BNP [boycotted](#) the vote, despite overt State Department [attempts to compel](#) their participation.

The IRI has not responded to a request from The Grayzone for comment about its activities in Bangladesh.

### **Pro-US micro-loan maven, Clinton acolyte takes charge in Dhaka**

Before the August 2024 coup, Hasina had complained for years about [US demands](#) to construct military facilities in the country as part of Washington's broader [Indo-Pacific Strategy](#) of "containing" China.

Refusing to acquiesce to Washington's pressure, Hasina remained close with India. In May 2024, just days after meeting with Donald Liu, the Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia and Central Asia, Hasina warned that a "country of white-skinned people" had demanded she allow the installation of a military base in the Bay of Bengal. She apparently declined, telling legislators: "I do not want to come to power by leasing out parts of the country or handing it over to someone else."

[Similar obstinance](#) led to the undoing of Imran Khan, the former Prime Minister of neighboring Pakistan, who was removed from power in an April 2022 military coup backed by the US. As economist Jeffrey Sachs [noted](#), "the very strong evidence of the US role in toppling the government of Imran Khan raises the likelihood that something similar may have occurred in Bangladesh."

With the pesky Hasina government and her Awami League now out of the picture, Washington's preferred political leaders have taken on the task of dividing up the country and punishing dissidents – like the 150 journalists who've been charged since August 4. As Dhaka descends into chaos, with roving BNP gangs engaging in [street battles](#) for control of territory, a so-called "interim government" has emerged. It has already granted sweeping police powers to the military, and while it initially claimed to seek power for just a handful of

months, one [report](#) in The Guardian estimates the unelected new regime could maintain control of the country for “up to five or six years.”

Leading the new government is Muhammad Yunus. A close associate of Bill and Hillary Clinton, Yunus [received](#) a Nobel Prize [in 2006](#) for pioneering the concept of “microlending,” a piratical form of [legalized loansharking](#) that has impoverished and immiserated swaths of the Indian subcontinent ever since.

During Hillary Clinton’s tenure as Secretary of State under Obama, Yunus [was shielded](#) from prosecution in Bangladesh for corrupt business dealings, and simultaneously showered with millions in US government contracts. Clinton also [threatened](#) Hasina’s son with an IRS audit unless the Bangladeshi leader dropped an official probe into Grameen Bank, a microlender Yunus founded. US diplomatic cables released by WikiLeaks [confirm](#) multiple covert contacts between Yunus and US officials over the years, and reveal a favorable view of the predatory lender prevailed in American halls of power.

Standing alongside Clinton at the Clinton Global Initiative this September, Yunus [boasted](#) that the seemingly spontaneous “revolution” that toppled Hasina had actually been “meticulously-designed.”

“It’s not just [that it] suddenly came, it’s not like that.” Instead, it was “very well designed, even the leadership – people don’t know who the leaders are, so you can’t catch one and say, ‘it’s over.’ It’s not over.”

Yunus is not the only new Bangladeshi leader with clear ties to Washington. In 2021, his new foreign minister, Touhid Hossain, served as a “featured guest presenter” at a [USAID workshop](#) which trained Bangladeshi reporters on “countering misinformation.”

Within hours of Hasina’s flight from the country, Bangladesh’s new leaders ordered the release of BNP leader Khaleda Zia, who was serving a 17-year prison sentence for corruption. If Yunus ultimately does decide to cede power, the BNP now appears poised to inherit leadership. That’s because, with the Awami League practically banished from Bangladeshi politics, the once-flailing BNP has become the only possible alternative.

Even establishment analysts have begun to acknowledge that the return of the BNP now appears all but inevitable. As the Crisis Group [stated](#) days after Hasina’s ouster, “If an election were to occur tomorrow, the BNP... would probably emerge victorious.”

Now, the stage is set for Dhaka’s return to the US orbit. At a September 26 business luncheon in an upscale New York hotel, Yunus [signaled](#) that the country is once again open for business, assuring the assembled foreign investors: “As the US looks for its supply-chain

diversification under its Indo-China Policy, Bangladesh is strategically positioned to become a significant partner in fulfilling that goal.”

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