

The Impact of Weaponizing Women's Political Rights on Democratic Backsliding: A Case Study of Sheikhha Hasina (PM of Bangladesh)

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Abstract : This paper examines how authoritarian leaders can strategically weaponise women's political rights to keep power and conceal democratic backsliding, using Prime Minister Sheikhha Hasina's administration in Bangladesh as an example. Using the historical institutionalism framework, the paper investigates how Hasina's government fostered gender-based legislation and representation while eroding democratic institutions. Through a qualitative analysis of legislation amendments, political discourse, and institutional changes from 2019 to 2024, the study demonstrates how symbolic empowerment of women was used to legitimise a more autocratic state. The findings show that perceived gender progress was frequently utilised to cover up both internal and foreign criticism, implying that gender reforms under hybrid regimes can disguise rather than reflect actual democratic development.

Keywords: Democratic Backsliding, Weaponization of Women's Rights, autocratic genderwashing, regime transition.

INTRODUCTION

Current global phenomena of democratic backsliding

Democratic backsliding is a pervasive feature of current global politics. However, despite the widespread attention paid to the phenomenon, there is little agreement on what drives it. The objectives and techniques of leader-driven, antidemocratic agendas differ greatly. Three distinct patterns emerge of backsliding: In certain nations, democracy is undermined by grievance-fueled illiberal leaders who rally around a widely felt citizen grievance and insist that democratic institutions and norms be violated and abolished in order to adequately address it. In other cases, opportunistic authoritarians, who were elected on traditional political platforms, turn against democracy due to the need for political survival and protection. are the agents of democracy's decline. In other countries, powerful actors who were pushed to the political margins during a democratic transition, typically military officers, strike against democracy when they believe it threatens some of their core prerogatives or when they become convinced that they can rule the country better than struggling civilian actors.¹ Even democratically elected leaders may seek to consolidate their power through manipulation of electoral processes, such as

¹ Thomas Carothers and Benjamin Press, "Understanding and Responding to Global Democratic Backsliding - Carnegie Endowment for International Peace," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 20, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/10/20/understanding-and-responding-to-global-democratic-backsliding-pub-88173>.

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gerrymandering, voter suppression, or manipulation of election results. Since, “Backsliding makes elections less competitive without undermining the entire electoral machinery”.

A political system's "turn away" from democracy is usually a process, not a clean, revolutionary break with the past. **Democratic backsliding** refers to the gradual erosion of democratic norms, institutions, and principles within a democratic system. This situation is often characterized by the weakening of checks and balances, the erosion of civil liberties, the manipulation of electoral processes, and the concentration of power in the hands of a few people. Democratic backsliding also involves either suspending some or all of those fundamental constitutional rights that correspond to the categories of fundamental rights or impeding the exercise of those rights without suspending them.²

The relationship between gender rights and political regime

The study on regime type and gender has focused on two key questions: whether and how the political system contributes to gender equality, especially women's rights. Htun and Weldon's study examines the impact of regime type on worldwide gender equality initiatives. Research indicates that advocates and opponents of women's rights have varying priorities, techniques, and efficacy based on state capability, policy legacies, international vulnerabilities, and level of democracy. The study indicated that regime type does not consistently predict support for or resistance to specific reforms, as policies vary significantly. Variation was determined by whether the policies were "status policies" that attacked practices that maintained women in a subordinate position, such as family policy, violence against women, and reproductive freedoms. Gender quotas, class-based policies targeting women's sexual division of labor (maternity or paternal leave and child care), and measures challenging religious, traditional, or customary institutions.

Research on attitudes has attempted to explain why regime type is important. Inglehart and Norris discovered that opinions towards women's leadership are more equal in democracies. Inglehart, Norris, and Welzel found that democracies lead to more supportive citizens of gender equality, based on a study of 70 nations representing 80% of the global population. However, the relationship is influenced by mediate variables such as, culture and shifts in beliefs during democratization. Comparing regime types reveals significant differences in gender equality. Democratic regimes have been more successful in achieving gender equality than authoritarian and hybrid regimes due to factors such as higher economic growth, stronger equal attitudes, more political space, and the expansion of women's movements for change.³ While gender rights in hybrid regimes can be variable and heavily influenced by the specific balance of democratic and authoritarian characteristics and Authoritarian regimes have a poor track record on gender rights. But its controversial because many of them seek to promote rights nominally or weaponize them to legitimize their power as it will be discussed throughout the paper.

The rationale behind selecting the chosen case study

Since the time frame of the study is located at the third wave of autocratization and our main focus is on instrumentalizing of women during democratic backsliding. I found that Shikha Hasina actually meets these criteria as she promoted and empowered women since day one and continued increasing this even during the highest witnessed backsliding during her tenure, ignoring all the criticism that they are

² Larry M Bartels et al., “The Forum: Global Challenges to Democracy? Perspectives on Democratic Backsliding,” *International Studies Review* 25, no. 2 (April 3, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viad019>.

³ Aili Mari Tripp, “Political Systems and Gender,” *The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Politics*, August 1, 2013, 514–35, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199751457.013.0020>.

still unrepresented although all of these initiatives and policies for women, which appears symbolic or as a shield against the loss of regime legitimacy.

The main research question:

- How do leaders weaponize women's rights to legitimize their power analyzing the case of Sheikh Hasina?

The main concepts of the study

Democratic backsliding: It is the process of regime change towards autocracy in which the public exercise of political power becomes increasingly arbitrary and authoritarian. This strategy often limits the opportunity for public debate and political participation in the process of government choosing and limits citizens' ability to use democratic institutions to hold rulers responsible.

Weaponization of women: refers to the strategic exploitation of their bodies, rights, and roles in social disputes and political agendas, typically to further specific power dynamics or ideological goals, thereby instrumentalizing gender issues for broader ends.

Regime transition: The process of switching from one form of political regime to another, such as from authoritarianism to democracy or vice versa (Democratization), which frequently involves changes in governance structures, institutions, and political norms.

Autocratic genderwashing: It is a method employed by authoritarian governments in which superficial gender equality measures are presented to conceal ongoing political repression and legitimize the regime abroad without implementing meaningful societal improvements.

Feminist institutionalism: An instrumentalist approach investigates how gendered power relations influence and form political and social institutions. It emphasizes the role of both official norms and informal practices in maintaining gender inequality.

The time frame for the study

This study is located on the post-third wave of democratization (from the 1990s – present), specifically focusing on the fourth term of Sheikh Hasina (2019-2024), which witnessed the peak of democratic backsliding through her five terms as a prime minister, marking the world's longest-serving female head of state.

Literature review

Gender rights and democratic regimes

Political gender equality is a crucial component of democracy since all individuals, regardless of gender, should have an equal voice in political representation and decision-making. In practice, democracies outperform non-democratic regimes in terms of gender equality. According to the International IDEA's Global State of Democracy Indices, 41% of democracies have high gender equality.⁴

According to Wang et al, gender equality is essential for democracy to thrive. There is substantial evidence that the growth of democratic institutions correlates with the rise of women in public life.

⁴ Annika Silva Leander, "Gender Equality and the Summit for Democracy," International IDEA, 2022, <https://www.idea.int/news/gender-equality-and-summit-democracy>.

Recent research shows that gender equality is more prevalent in democratic countries. Minimally democratic countries exhibit 33% lower levels of egalitarian gender attitudes than fully democratic countries. In comparison, hybrid and authoritarian governments have significantly lower levels (over 60%). Democracies promote gender equality through institutional functions that "autogenerate" equality before the law.⁵

Women's electoral representation advances gender equality. A study by Wahman, Frantzeskakis, and Yildirim found that having a female president enhances the frequency of female parliamentary speeches, promoting women's political empowerment. The benefits of female leadership are numerous, According to Alexander and Jalalzai, having female heads of state not only improves people's perceptions of women in politics, but also boosts political engagement.⁶ **Electoral institutions have gender impacts.** Literature indicates that proportional representation systems create less barriers for women's representation. Gender quotas also play an important role. Research indicates that nations with gender quotas increase awareness of female underrepresentation and support for female engagement. Electoral gender quotas have a long-term impact on political parties, compelling them to modify their candidate pool and increase legislative diversity. Increased vertical responsibility, such as through elections, leads to improved gender equality in other areas of society. Free and fair elections have been connected to improved women's life expectancy, gender equality in education, and increased engagement in society and the labour force.⁷

Despite the fact that more than half of the world's countries are democracies in some form, political gender equality has lagged behind democratic progress. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, women would make up only 26% of global lawmakers in 2022. The fraction of female heads of state is significantly lower. Only 19 countries will have women in the highest executive offices by 2022. Furthermore, growing authoritarianism and democratic backsliding pose a threat to global democratic growth.⁸

Gender rights and authoritarian regimes

Promoting democracy often prioritizes advancing women's rights and representation. However, autocracies need caution from democratization. Research findings show according to Donno and Kreft, autocracies may promote gender equality as a means of legitimizing the government or advancing other goals. Gender quotas have become more common in electoral autocracies, although they do not necessarily lead to enhanced democracy. According to Bjarnegård and Zetterberg, increasing women's parliamentary representation taking the example of Rwanda has led to compromises on electoral integrity and human rights. Gender quotas are typically ineffective due to poor implementation and enforcement measures, resulting in unequal candidate representation. According to Donno and Kreft, party-based autocracies, such as Rwanda and later on Bangladesh as will be proved on the analysis, prioritize women's rights and use them to gain support, but military autocracies do not.⁹ Increasing

⁵ Suen Wang, "Gender Equality without Democracy? Higher Education Expansion and Authoritarian Values," *Governance* 35, no. 1 (February 15, 2021): 259–79, <https://doi.org/10.1111/gove.12580>.

⁶ Amy C. Alexander and Farida Jalalzai, "Symbolic Empowerment and Female Heads of States and Government: A Global, Multilevel Analysis," *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 8, no. 1 (February 25, 2018): 24–43, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2018.1441034>.

⁷ Juan J. Fernández and Celia Valiente, "Gender Quotas and Public Demand for Increasing Women's Representation in Politics: An Analysis of 28 European Countries," *European Political Science Review* 13, no. 3 (June 1, 2021): 351–70, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1755773921000126>.

⁸ Annika Silva Leander, Op. Cit.

⁹ Daniela Donno and Anne-Kathrin Kreft, "Authoritarian Institutions and Women's Rights," *Comparative Political Studies* 52, no. 5 (September 10, 2018): 720–53, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414018797954>.

nominal representation in political institutions and promoting women's rights in autocracies might mask a lack of genuine democratic development. According to Bjarnegård and Zetterberg, President Paul Biya's dictatorship in Cameroon has used gender equality to garner donor cash while rigging elections and banning opposition groups.

The writings on authoritarian regimes and gender rights mostly address the question of why autocracies implement such policies. The conducted researches to address this question emphasizes that nondemocratic leaders' strategic reasons, rather than pressures from women's movements. According to Aili Mari Tripp's contribution, gender-equality reforms might have different motivations across countries. In some cases, they marginalize political opponents, while in others, they develop clientelist networks.¹⁰

The concept of "**autocratic genderwashing**" is used to explain why authoritarian nations implement gender-equality initiatives. Autocratic genderwashing occurs when autocrats claim credit for progress in gender equality in order to divert attention away from ongoing nondemocratic behaviors, such as abuses of electoral integrity and human rights. They use the frequently simple link between gender equality and democracy to gain legitimacy and maintain regime stability. Gender equality is utilized to develop legitimization methods for various groups. Being aware of this tendency may make researchers and democracy campaigners less likely to embrace inclusion as a substitute for competition in nondemocratic nations.¹¹

The global literature on authoritarianism and gender rights demonstrates authoritarian regimes' paradoxical practices, in which they may explicitly suppress women and neglect their rights while pushing legal or other reforms that appear to support women's rights. It demonstrates how many such regimes use women's rights to advance domestic and international goals, motivated by political, economic, and symbolic rewards. In many places of the world, state feminism has resulted in top-down strategies, sometimes in response to activists and movements for women's rights. However, women and their concerns may be overlooked in the regime's pursuit of legitimacy and the survival of the ruling party.¹²

Gender rights and hybrid regimes

Hybrid regimes refer to a country that holds elections yet has strong autocratic characteristics. also known as "electoral autocracies," which combine democratic and authoritarian features of governance, can have a substantial impact on a country's gender rights and especially, women rights situation. These regimes combine formal democratic institutions and practices with authoritarian features such as limits on political and civil liberties.

Decision-making power is frequently concentrated around a small elite, usually consisting of men. This can increase gender inequality by barring women from positions of leadership and influence in government, resulting in policies that ignore or harm women's rights and interests. Women under hybrid regimes may confront substantial impediments to political involvement. Even if women are legally permitted to vote and run for office, informal impediments such as patriarchal norms, a lack of money,

¹⁰ Sarah Sunn Bush and Pär Zetterberg, "Gender Equality and Authoritarian Regimes: New Directions for Research," *Politics & Gender* 20, no. 1 (March 16, 2023): 212–16, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1743923x22000460>.

¹¹ Elin Bjarnegård and Pär Zetterberg, "How Autocrats Weaponize Women's Rights," *Journal of Democracy* 33, no. 2 (April 2022): 60–75, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2022.0018>.

¹² Tripp, Aili Mari, 'Gender, Women's Rights, and Authoritarian Regimes', in Anne Wolf (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Authoritarian Politics* (online edn, Oxford Academic, 23 Jan.

2024), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198871996.013.20>, accessed 19 May 2024.

and political violence can severely restrict female political participation. Furthermore, under many hybrid regimes, the political system is controlled to keep the ruling elite in power, potentially marginalizing women and other underrepresented groups.¹³

Economic policies in hybrid regimes are frequently both pro- and anti-gender equality. On the one hand, women may get access to education and jobs as part of larger economic development initiatives. Economic inequality and limited access to resources, on the other hand, have the potential to exacerbate gender differences.¹⁴

Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is a clear example on this, who has implemented a hybrid system that restricts political liberties and civil society. While there have been legal changes to improve gender equality, women's rights activists have suffered tremendous repression.¹⁵

Gender rights and democratic transition

Until the early 2000s, as Georgina Waylen pointed out, the literature on democratization was blind to discrimination against women and their role in democratic transitions and consolidations, but feminist interest and work on the gender dimension of these foundational social and political processes has gradually grown. As the third wave of democratization gained momentum, experts assessed its impact on gender equality. The study concluded that democratic revolutions from Latin America to East Europe had poor gender outcomes.

Waylen's comparative study is backed by existing literature on transitions in Latin America and Eastern Europe. The research on transitions in Latin America finds that democratic consolidation weakened women's movements and autonomy by institutionalizing political processes and coopting women's organizations by political parties.¹⁶

Case study researches reveals that women's civil freedoms were critical in enabling women to organize, which sparked protests and led to change in a number of countries. Quantitative studies conducted over the last 25 years have also found that more equal distribution of education between men and women, female labor force involvement, and the understanding of gender equality as part of broader cultural changes all contribute to democratization. Expanding women's rights may play a unique role in democratization. Inequalities in civil liberties and rights between men and women, such as their freedom to move, discuss politics, and hold material and immaterial assets, can impact the establishment of electoral democracy. Improvements in women's civil liberties are projected to significantly enhance the pressure and calls for political change that authoritarian governments face. Relaxing these limits creates the conditions for growing push for additional democratic reforms.¹⁷

¹³ Wilde, et al. *Civil Society and Gender Relations in Authoritarian and Hybrid Regimes: New Theoretical Approaches and Empirical Case Studies*. 1st ed. Verlag Barbara Budrich, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvdf01h0>.

¹⁴ Sharon R. Wesoky, et al., *Civil Society and Gender Relations in Authoritarian and Hybrid Regimes: New Theoretical Approaches and Empirical Case Studies*. Opladen, Germany: Barbara Budrich Publishers, 2018, (ISBN: 978-3-8474-0729-4), "Hypatia Reviews Online 2019 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1017/s2753906700002898>.

¹⁵ Nikolaos Stelgias, *Turkey's Hybrid Competitive Authoritarian Regime; A Genuine Product of Anatolia's Middle Class* 4, no. 2 (2015), <https://ejournals.bc.edu/index.php/levantine/article/download/9161/8248/15656>.

¹⁶ Aili Mari Tripp, Op. Cit.

¹⁷ YI-TING WANG et al., "Women's Rights in Democratic Transitions: A Global Sequence Analysis, 1900–2012," *European Journal of Political Research* 56, no. 4 (March 17, 2017): 735–56, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12201>.

Research gap: Autocratic transition

After reviewing the literature, I found that promotion of gender rights isn't exclusive to democratic regime, but there is an intersection of gender rights and all political regimes types with autocratic transition and deepening authoritarian which appears controversial and raises a why and how questions. There were attempts and contributions to answer these questions, which can be summarized as follows: First, autocratic regimes perceive gender equality policies as a means of keeping power over the political opposition. Second, regimes use such reforms to achieve international prestige which is beneficial when rulers want to avoid outside calls for democratization. Finally, autocrats seek performance-based legitimacy from women citizens or women's organizations in order to pacify the general public. When these legitimation methods are utilized to protect regime stability and prevent democratization.¹⁸ This paper is going to address this research gap by applying in the analysis part on the case study of Bangladesh democratic backsliding during Sheikh Hasina's regime.

Theoretical approach

Adopting historical institutionalism from the approaches within feminist institutionalism. In an effort to provide an explanation for gendered institutional outcomes in various settings, further emphasizes the significance of being aware of "temporal and spatial specificities." All institutions are gendered, yet over time, gender relations vary within and among specific organizations or the investigation of political institutions¹⁹. While institutions have distinctly gendered cultures and are involved in processes of producing and reproducing gender. Historical institutionalists did not argue that institutions were the only variables that mattered, nor did they deny that dramatic shocks to the system could induce change. Analyze the historical evolution of gender norms, roles, and institutions within each period

In the complicated realm of gender rights and autocratic transitions, a historical approach is useful because it can offer context, spot trends, reveal power dynamics, evaluate long-term legacies, guide policy, and encourage intersectional analysis—all of which are critical for knowledge advancement and social change.²⁰

Through the historical context, it will be useful to know the current context by knowing all the previous periods of the current authority.

Historical institutionalists are generally concerned in the meso-level, with their research focusing on major 'real world' political and historical issues. Historical institutionalist (HI) scholars take history seriously when attempting to explain variations in significant or unexpected patterns of events, employing problem-driven, contextual, and chronologically sensitive research methodologies. HI scholars reject RCI's overly functionalist view of institutions, viewing them as enduring legacies of largely contingent events and political struggles, using a definition of institutions that includes the formal and informal rules, norms, and practices embedded in the organization of politics, society, and the economy. In this approach, both timing and sequencing are considered as critical, because once institutions are built, they tend to 'path dependence', restricting what can be achieved and when it can be accomplished. While HI is frequently criticized for emphasizing structure and continuity, HI academics highlight how institutions serve as both restraints and strategic resources for players. Individuals, according to this viewpoint, are both rule-followers and strategic self-interested actors. While

¹⁸ Elin Bjarnegård and Pär Zetterberg, Op. Cit.

¹⁹ Meryl Kenny, *Gender and Political Recruitment: Theorizing Institutional Change* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

²⁰ Jennifer Curtin, "Feminist Innovations and New Institutionalism," essay, in *Gender Innovation in Political Science New Norms, New Knowledge* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019).

institutions restrain actors, they are themselves the consequence of 'deliberate political strategies, of political strife, and of choice'.²¹

This will be utilized in our case through inherited institutions from Hasina's father and the establishment of gendered institutions through 20 years on all her regimes.

Method and data

This paper conducts a qualitative analysis to examine the implications of the exploitation of women's political rights on democratic processes. By relying on secondary sources such as analytical studies, academic books and articles, and scientific references to be used in content analysis and discourse analysis of presidential speeches. In addition, reviewing the constitutional provisions, especially the articles and their subsequent amendments, as well as examining the changes that have occurred in the laws, and evaluating women's representation and status within the Bangladesh Parliament, with a special focus on the women's quota system. Therefore, this research can be described as descriptive and analytical research that aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic at hand.

Analysis

When the political regime came to power

Hasina's father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Bangladesh's founding president, was assassinated in 1975 during a military coup, along with several close family members who were seen as Rahman's prospective successors. After violent infighting inside the Awami League's ranks and files, Hasina took over as leader in 1981. Sheikh Hasina came to power in 4 terms, as she was the head of the Awami Party. Before she assumed the presidency, the party was witnessing disintegration and defeats and lacked charismatic leadership. It was witnessing many divisions among its members, and it succeeded in organizing this²². Her father's previous presence as prime minister affected her policies, as she adopted a traditional leadership style, and the party's failure to protect her father from his overthrow and assassination enabled her to impose her control over the party.

First term as Prime Minister (1996 – 2001): Her rise embodies the phenomenon of transmitted charisma that was previously missing in Bangladesh after the assassination of her father, Sheikh Mujib, which continues to influence current politics in Bangladesh. Then she served a period (**from 2009-2014**), In the year before she took office in mid-2008, the country witnessed discontent over the situation and the Asian economic crisis, and the reforms promised by the previous party were not implemented. They realized that it was a wrong decision to overthrow Sheikh Hasina in her first term. Then she took over from (**2014 to 2019**) She took office from 2019 until now.²³ Marking Bangladesh's longest-serving prime minister.

²¹ Fiona Mackay, Meryl Kenny, and Louise Chappell, "New Institutionalism through a Gender Lens: Towards a Feminist Institutionalism?," *International Political Science Review* 31, no. 5 (November 2010): 573–88, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512110388788>.

²² Verónica Montecinos, "Sheikh Hasina of Bangladesh: Politics, Personality and Policies," essay, in *Women Presidents and Prime Ministers in Post-Transition Democracies* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

²³ Ali Riaz and Sohel Rana, "Bangladesh: The Making of an Electoral Autocracy," essay, in *How Autocrats Rise: Sequences of Democratic Backsliding* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024).

When democratic backsliding acts were perceived

Despite the nation's descent into personal despotism under Sheikh Hasina's leadership, there are certain places where I may identify the specific moment of democratic collapse as well as its course and mechanism. When the Awami League won elections in 2009, it had three choices:

First one: take note of the democratic processes' failure in 2006 and learn from them; address the brittleness of democratic institutions; establish accountability mechanisms by fortifying the Anti-Corruption Commission and Election Commission; and place Parliament at the center of democratization and policy-making.

The second alternative: is reverting to the assertive policy approach that prevailed before 2006, along with the persistent fragility of institutions and ambiguity that permits power shifts based on an administrative framework. from the executive branch. In the course of elections;

The third: is to establish personal rule by putting Sheikh Hasina in total control not only of the state but also of the party and all its institutions, including law enforcement and civil administration, and reform the regime to guarantee its authority is unassailable.

However, Sheikh Hasina ultimately opted for the third alternative, which involved establishing a political structure that gave the impression of being democratic but was authoritarian. Political scientists referred to this structure as a "tyrannical regime that was hybrid" and "electoral"²⁴.

When the party congresses were held, the party council formally adopted a proposal giving her the authority to appoint all party members as well as members of the central committee, including the party committee. This practice was made possible by the party constitution, which gave her the authority to exercise additional constitutional and constitutional powers in her capacity. The country started the institutional phase of democratic backsliding along with the establishment of Sheikh Hasina's total authority over the executive and legislative branches of government following the constitutional revision. At this point, autocratic leaders avoid the institutional norm while simultaneously changing the rules of the game by extraconstitutional and constitutional means. As she started to "use economic development to compensate for the deficit in political legitimacy," Hasina followed suit.

The year before the election, in 2013, 329 individuals were murdered without cause. It was clear that, following the 2014 election, democracy was being displaced rather than progressed. After the Jatiya Party was named the "official opposition" and included in the government, the 2014 election resulted in a legislature that was controlled by the ruling party and the executive, **effectively creating a one-party state**. Therefore, the 2018 election, in which opposition parties like the BNP took part, had no bearing. International media reports claim that the election commission, civil administration, and members of the electoral commission coordinated massive rigging and that vote boxes were stuffed the night before.

The government enacted the Digital Security Act 2018, a broadly worded bill with more severe penalties, in October 2018, months before the election. In addition to making many forms of free speech illegal, the Digital Security Act punishes lawful opposition with harsh fines and jail terms²⁵.

So, democratic backsliding has been perceived during her different terms in various ways and continued in increase until it reached its peak on her fourth term through protests, rebellions, killing, elections manipulation, Human Rights Watch and other rights organizations had accused the government repression of opposition and strictions on public opinions. As will be discussed and clarified blew.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid



Sheikh Hasina's attempts before the end of the first for re-election

Sheikh Hasina has taken various initiatives to boost her re-election chances as her first term ends, such as trying to achieve economic development and implementing initiatives such as the Grameen Bank to reduce poverty. Prioritizing education, leading to improved literacy rates. Promoting women's political participation and representation, such as allocating seats for women in Parliament or encouraging women to run for office, was part of its efforts to empower women politically²⁶, but despite this, there was repression of the opposition, especially the opposition party (Bangladesh National Party) whose president was Khaleda Zia, which shows that his policy towards women was official and his actual policy was to manipulate women, but she did not succeed in getting her party re-elected after their term ended.

But the most prominent signal was in its attempts before the end of the second term, and the suppression of freedoms became clearer. In addition to changing the constitution, the government also changed laws related to freedom of expression, which are mainly aimed at silencing critics: the law in question is the Information and Communications Law²⁷.

A woman is Bangladesh's Prime Minister, yet very few Bangladeshi women are politicians

Although Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her Awami League party were expected to win a fourth consecutive term in next month's general election, a staggeringly small number of contenders - 5% of 1,895 people vying for 300 parliamentary seats - are women, according to data from the Election Commission.

"This figure is simply not acceptable to us – especially after 52 years of independence," Khushi Kabir, a prominent feminist, said in an interview. "This just goes to show that the patriarchal mentality still lingers in the minds of many in key positions."

Only 20 of the 263 candidates nominated by the ruling party are women, according to the data. The Jatiya Party, the only other notable participant in the race (the main opposition party is boycotting the vote), has fewer than 4% female candidates on its slate.

This significant gender disparity in politics, **however**, contrasts sharply with Bangladeshi women's success in education and other socioeconomic metrics in the country. Girls have a greater school enrollment rate and frequently outperform guys on exams. According to a Mastercard poll, around one-third of all entrepreneurs in the country are women. Bangladesh's economic backbone, the ready-made garment sector, employs over 2 million individuals, more than 90% of whom are women. According to World Bank data, Bangladesh has a higher share of women in the labor force than other South Asian countries. But, despite these advances, women are still significantly underrepresented in government and political leadership roles.

Hasina acquired her political roles from slain male family members. However, despite their prominence in Bangladesh's brutal and contentious politics, few girls have followed in their footsteps and ran for

²⁶ Mohammad Eisa Ruhullah and Zuly Qodir, "Analytical Study of Politics in Bangladesh : Ages of Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia's Dictates," *International Journal of Islamic Khazanah* 11, no. 1 (January 31, 2021): 1–11, <https://doi.org/10.15575/ijik.v11i1.10409>.

²⁷ The Making of an Electoral Autocracy ,p 67-69.

public office.²⁸ But, Hasina took this step and this was reflected on her policy especially, that embedded on institutions that continued her heir from her father and even Khaleda Zia.

The low rate of participation of Bangla women in politics is obvious when looking at the number of female candidates contesting the next 12th general election. Sharifa Quader, the Jatiya Party's Dhaka-18 candidate, earned a reserved seat for women in the previous election and is married to Jatiya Party head G.M. Quader:

"Gender-based discrimination still exists in our society," Quader told VOA. "Male leaders oppose female leadership because they believe women are incompetent. They believe that only men are entitled to leadership. Again, women are responsible for managing the family. Furthermore, society seeks to keep women from advancing."

"Our prime minister is a glaring example that the women can march forward in the realm of politics if they are given opportunity," Quader stated. "Previously, another woman served as Prime Minister. However, our society and political parties do not prioritize women."

The Bangladesh Election Commission has urged political parties to guarantee that a third of their leadership positions are held by women. Even significant political parties like the Awami League, Bangladesh Nationalist Party, and Jatiya Party did not meet the quota. "It means that the parties do not have a women-friendly environment and they don't want women in politics," Alam stated.²⁹

Crises affected regime's legitimacy

Mohammad Sajal Hussain's father died in captivity under strange circumstances, and he did not inform anyone. "My father struggled to breathe. He was admitted to the ICU but was resting on the floor. "He was handcuffed, and his legs were tied," Mr Hussain explained. They suspect he was beaten in prison and not provided adequate food or shelter from the elements.

For over three decades, Mr Rahman was an active organiser of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). The BNP is the primary opposition to Ms Hasina's Awami League Party, which won another five years in power in this weekend's contentious election. His son feels that this was the sole reason he was jailed, and he blames the prime minister for his death. "Hasina is killing people, and she is once again in power. This is a dictatorship. "I did not vote," he explained. "My father was killed; how could I vote? "It violates our human rights."

From Rebel to Ruler

Hasina's admirers present her as a pro-democracy hero who rose from the daughter of a rebel leader to the highest office in the country. She became a strong advocate for democracy, denouncing military dictatorship and advocating for Bangladeshis' basic human rights. She was initially elected Prime Minister in 1996. Since then, the country's politics have been dominated by two opposing dynasties: one led by Ms Hasina and the other by Khaleda Zia, the BNP leader.

However, months of violence had preceded the election, with at least 18 arson attacks just days before the vote. A train fire last Friday heightened tensions in the capital Dhaka. Authorities accused the BNP of trying to frighten voters. However, the opposition denied any involvement in the affair. According, to

²⁸ Oyon Aman, "A Woman Is Bangladesh's PM, but Starkly Few Bangladeshi Women Are Politicians," Benar News, December 22, 2023, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/bengali/bangladesh-women-politics-12222023160709.html>.

²⁹ Aditto Rimon, "Women Still Underrepresented in Bangladesh Politics," Voice of America, January 5, 2024, <https://www.voanews.com/a/women-still-underrepresented-in-bangladesh-politics/7428384.html>.

human rights groups, about 10,000 opposition activists and party leaders have been imprisoned since late October. At least sixteen persons were killed.

Human Rights Watch also discovered evidence that security personnel used disproportionate force, mass arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, torture, and extrajudicial killings during a recent wave of election-related violence.

Abdul Moyeen Khan, a member of the BNP's standing committee, claimed that the government has hijacked the country's institutions and that the vote is rigged.

"What would happen if our party participated in this election? We would have been legitimizing an extremely unfair election, which would have been immoral," he stated. The mood was shared throughout Dhaka, as hundreds marched against the administration.

"This is a one-sided election, you can't clap with one hand," one man told the ABC.

"I am not BNP, I am not Awami League, I just want my right to vote back," he stated.

Critics believe these episodes follow a similar pattern, as the previous two elections under Hasina were marked by violence and suspicions of vote manipulation.

Has Hasina strengthened her hold on power?

Protesters urged Hasina to resign. Instead, she has secured another five years in power. Critics such as Mr Khan believe the country is headed for one-party control: "Totalitarian governments are unacceptable in today's world. "People do not accept authoritarian regimes, which is exactly what this government is," he stated.

On the other hand, The government has defended the election's integrity, noting that 27 opposition parties are still contesting. "There's no need to boycott or withdraw from elections. "There are no restrictions from the government or the ruling party," said Bahauddin Nasim, the Awami League's joint secretary general. Ms Hasina still has supporters. "She works hard, and she has dreams for the country," Sabina Akhter Tuhin, a former Awami League MP and independent candidate, said. **The emotion was shared throughout the city.**

"Our Prime Minister will be re-elected." "Even a storm can't stop her," another voter added. The Bangladeshi Electoral Commission's initial estimate put voter turnout at 40%, which may be the clearest indicator of how many people decided to participate in what's been labelled a pre-determined poll.³⁰

Supporting women's rights

During all of these incidents Sheikh Hasina continued empowering women ignoring criticism for their ineffectiveness.

Sheikh Hasina's government has implemented a number of constitutional and legislative modifications, as well as measures, that appear to benefit women's rights. Here are some noteworthy examples:

Constitutional and Legislative Amendments

³⁰ Meghna Bali and Som Patidar, "‘You Can’t Clap with One Hand’: Why Bangladesh Is Divided over Its Iron Lady PM," ABC News, January 8, 2024, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-01-09/sheikh-hasina-wins-fifth-term-as-bangladesh-pm/103293042>.

The Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution (2011)

Article 28 (2): The Fifteenth Amendment reaffirmed that the state shall not discriminate against any citizen on the basis of religion, race, caste, gender, or place of birth, thus reaffirming the ideal of gender equality.

Article 28 (4): This amendment permits the state to make particular arrangements for women and children. This provision specifically allows for positive discrimination to ensure women's growth and empowerment.

Legislative initiatives supporting women's rights include the Domestic Violence Prevention and Protection Act (2010). This law was enacted to protect women and children from domestic violence while also ensuring justice for victims. It contains provisions for restraining orders, safe shelters, and legal aid.

National Women's Development Policy (2011): Although not a constitutional amendment, this measure was a substantial legislative step towards gender equality. It sought to provide women's equal rights in all aspects of life, including property ownership, education, work, and political engagement.

Child Marriage Restraint Act of 2017: This act seeks to discourage child marriages, which disproportionately affect girls, by raising the legal marriage age to 18 for women and 21 for men. Despite opposition to a clause permitting exceptions with parental and judicial agreement, the measure is a step towards preserving girls' rights.

Labour Law Amendments (2013): The Labour Act was amended to improve women's working circumstances, including maternity leave benefits and workplace harassment protections.

Implementing and Modifying Gender Quotas for Women in Parliament:

Tenth Amendment (1990): Initially, Bangladesh's Constitution provided for reserved seats for women in Parliament. This provision was introduced by the Tenth Amendment, which designated 30 seats for women to be elected by directly elected members of parliament.

The fourteenth amendment (2004), passed by a previous government, raised the number of reserved seats for women from 30 to 45.

The Fifteenth Amendment (2011), passed under Sheikh Hasina's leadership, raised the number of reserved seats for women in Parliament from 45 to 50. This amendment also prolonged the reserved seat period for another ten years, ensuring that female representation remains consistent.

Local Government Act (2009): The Hasina government also prioritized local government institutions, establishing quotas for women in local councils. The Local Government (Union Parishad) Act requires that one-third of the seats in Union Parishads be reserved for women, who would be elected directly by the people.³¹

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Quotes

“Women empowerment is a must for successful achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as women are the most important drivers of transformation,” – while addressing a Roundtable of UN Secretary General’s High-Level Panel (HLP) on Women’s Economic Empowerment: “Let us,

³¹ Bangladesh-the role model in women’s empowerment, accessed May 21, 2024, <https://cri.org.bd/publication/2019/April/Women-Empowerment/Bangladesh-The-Role-Model-in-Women’s-Empowerment.pdf>.

once again, take a vow to achieve gender parity in all aspects and make the world a better place for our women and girls.” – during a meeting on ‘Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment: A Commitment to Action’.³²

By discourse analysis, According to Sheikh Hasina empowering women is more than just a policy. It lies at the heart of her political thought. It is part of her overall political vision for Bangladesh and beyond. This is exemplified by her statement at the Commonwealth Women's Forum in London in April 2018, when she stated: "We want to build a future where world peace and women's empowerment remain the cornerstones to create a society free of poverty, discrimination, and conflict."³³

The data reveals that Sheikh Hasina's government has used women's political rights to consolidate power and deflect criticism, particularly during moments of democratic backsliding. By supporting women's empowerment, the administration projects a progressive image that serves to mitigate accusations of authoritarianism and electoral malfeasance. This deliberate exploitation of women's rights demonstrates the complicated interplay between genuine initiatives towards gender equality and their instrumentalization for political benefit.

We may see patterns that Sheikh Hasina's previous periods created, such the concentration of power in the executive branch and the silencing of opposition voices, continuing in her fourth term. The governance dynamics in her fourth term may be influenced by the institutional legacies of her previous terms, which include modifications to the constitution and legislative frameworks.

Decisions made during Sheikh Hasina's first four terms, such quelling criticism and consolidating power can still be influencing political conduct and policy results during her fourth term. Due to path-dependent dynamics, the track of authoritarian consolidation and democratic deterioration set in previous periods may continue in her fourth term.

Conclusion

Based on the historical institutionalism framework and examining the loss of democracy over several eras, the research article sought to investigate the effects of abusing women's political rights on the decline of democracy in the case of Bangladesh during the Sheikh Hasina era. A number of issues about the weaponization of women's rights were examined during her rule. Bangladesh's democratic ideals were undermined and power was concentrated within the governing elite throughout Hasina's reign, which began with promises of democracy and prosperity but ultimately saw a descent towards authoritarianism. Bangladesh under Sheikh Hasina's leadership is a lesson in the vulnerability of democratic institutions to unbridled executive authority and the value of defending democratic values and liberties.

This study investigates hybrid systems in Bangladesh and offers multiple contributions. This study gave insight into the mechanisms through which authoritarianism takes hold in ostensibly democratic contexts and highlights the nuances of hybridity in governance structures by analyzing the evolution of Bangladesh's political system from democratic aspirations to authoritarian tendencies. To defend democratic institutions, plans must take these important problems into consideration. Additionally, it offered a thorough and comprehensive explanation of the strategies used by authoritarian regimes to hold onto power, such as stifling criticism, rigging elections, and passing harsh legislation.

³² “Sheikh Hasina Standing up for the Women of Bangladesh,” Centre for Research and Information, October 9, 2020, <https://cri.org.bd/2018/04/27/sheikh-hasina-standing-up-for-the-women-of-bangladesh/>.

³³ “Women’s Empowerment and Sheikh Hasina,” Bangladesh Awami League, accessed May 16, 2024, <https://albd.org/articles/news/32243/Women%E2%80%99s-empowerment-and-Sheikh-Hasina>.

So, democratic backsliding may happen gradually and continue in raising till it reaches a point to be perceived for anyone. Even if there was historically established democratic institutions. As it was reflected in our case through instrumentalization of women's rights from the day one appears as a hero and defender and supporter for women until it became clear that it didn't change the situation, just was a shield to cover the autocratic transition and regime losing legitimacy. This case could be provided in the literature on how weaponization happens during transition (one-party rule) and as an example for gender rights and non-democratic political systems.

Recommendations

Comparative analyses of hybrid systems in other contexts can be added to find similar trends and diverging paths via our lens and future outlook on the development of this topic, as well as the support and advice this paper gives for research endeavors. Analyzing Bangladesh's experience in relation to other nations dealing with comparable issues can provide important new perspectives on the processes involved in the consolidation of despotism and the decline of democracy. An important area for further research is how external actors, including foreign governments, international organizations, and regional dynamics, affect the development of hybrid regimes. Additionally, how external factors influence domestic politics and democratic transition processes can inform international intervention strategies and support the advancement of democracy.

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