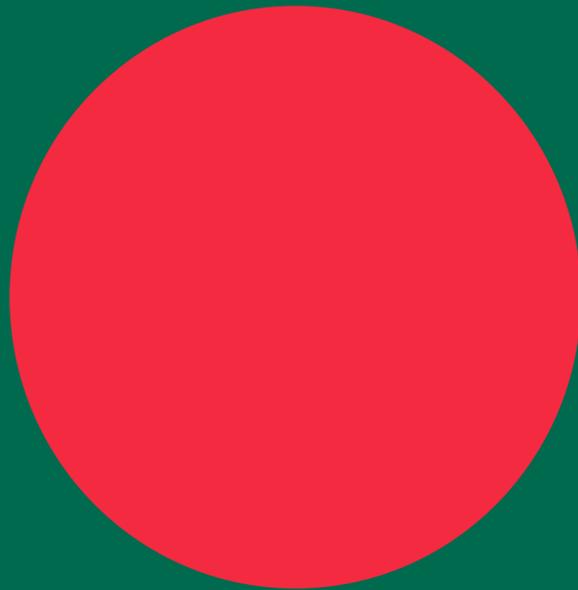


November
2018

Bangladesh Report



Susan Guarda
South Asia Democratic Forum
2018-11-30



South Asia Democratic Forum

This document was produced by the South Asia Democratic Forum (SADF) after its mission to Dhaka, Bangladesh, from 23 to 27 November 2018. The objective of this report is to provide findings of the mission regarding the achievements of the country under the government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|----|
| 1. SADF DELEGATION AND OBJECTIVE OF MISSION..... | 3 |
| 2. BACKGROUND: SNAPSHOT OF BANGLADESH AS A MODERN STATE..... | 3 |
| 3. FINDINGS ON SECULARISM..... | 4 |
| 4. FINDINGS ON QUALITY EDUCATION..... | 5 |
| 5. FINDINGS ON ECONOMIC GROWTH..... | 5 |
| 6. FINDINGS ON WOMEN EMPOWERMENT..... | 7 |
| 7. FINDINGS ON THE COUNTRY’S ACHIEVEMENTS AND CURRENT SITUATION.... | 8 |
| 8. FINDINGS ON THE RULE OF LAW AND THE ICT..... | 9 |
| 9. CONCLUSION..... | 10 |

1. SADF delegation and objective of mission

On 23-27 November, the South Asia Democratic Forum (SADF) conducted a mission to Dhaka, Bangladesh. The purpose of the mission was to visit a wide range of sectors and get an overall view of Bangladesh's progress.

The delegation included Members of the European Parliament, Rupert Oliver Matthews from the European Conservatives and Reformists Group (head of the delegation), Fulvio Martusciello and Alberto Cirio from the Group of the European People's Party. Members of the Portuguese Parliament also formed part of the group, including Joao Pereira from the Popular Party; Sandra Pereira from the Social Democratic Party; and Joana de Lima from the Socialist Party. The head of delegation was accompanied by his assistant, Marc-André Desmarais. The SADF delegation was supported by Madi Sharma, member of the European Economic and Social Committee. Susan Guarda and Laura Silva from SADF oversaw the delegation.

2. Background: Snapshot of Bangladesh as a modern state

In 1971, Bangladesh, formerly East Pakistan, became an independent and sovereign nation after a nine-month bloody war with Pakistan. The government of Pakistan and their collaborators murdered 3 million Bangladeshis and raped 200,000 to 400,000 women in the quest to curb the movement for self-determination. In an effort to learn about the history of Bangladesh, the delegation took a guided tour through the museum of Bangabandhu. This was the home of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the father of the nation and father of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. During the tour, the delegation learned about the life of the father of the nation; how he lived and where he held important meetings. Through each room of the house, the delegation revisited the memory of the genocide, which is believed to be one of the worst acts of genocide in the world. Each bullet on the wall told a story. Each bloodstain revealed a piece of their painful past. The delegation realised that the memory of the 1971 genocide is still present in the lives of Bangladeshis.



3. Findings on secularism



In 1972, Bangladesh adopted a secular Constitution. Driving down the streets of Dhaka, religious tolerance was visible and normalised. On the first day of the mission, the delegation went to visit different houses of prayer, including the Dhakeswari National Hindu temple, the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Dhaka, the Army Central Masjid Mosque, and the Dharmarajika Buddhist Monastery Complex. The country's most practiced religion is Sunni Islam, making up more than 85% of the population, while Hindus constitute the second largest religious group with approximately 10% of the population.



4. Findings on quality education

The current administration has made great efforts in preventing political violence. This was done by implementing faith-based awareness programmes. Unlike the government of Pakistan, who fosters hatred between religions through its national education curricula, Bangladesh introduced anti-fanatic chapters in academic textbooks. The Ministry of Education has strived to ensure that Bangladesh remains a secular state. The ministry has been organising awareness programmes against terrorism in different schools and colleges. Additionally, the government is developing a standard national curriculum that includes minimum standards of secular subjects to be taught in all primary schools, up to grade eight. The ministry has also been working with Imams and delivering anti-terrorism sermons in mosques since 2016.

In the last decade, Bangladesh has taken great strides in the education sector. In addition to fulfilling global targets, the country has attained universal access to primary education and high levels of education completion. The focus has now been placed on quality education by updating school curricula and training teachers.

The delegation visited several classrooms and was happy to see the students learning a variety of subjects, including languages, mathematics, and science. The delegation spoke with the students and asked questions about their studies and current projects they are working on.



5. Findings on economic growth

Not only has Bangladesh thrived in the education sector, but it has also significantly progressed economically. Throughout the city, there were construction projects and works, giving the delegation a positive view of the country's development. One of the most eye-opening trips was to a garment factory outside of Dhaka belonging to *Nassa Group*. *Nassa Group of Industries* is one of Bangladesh's largest industrial conglomerates and one of the most significant investors in the country's economy.



The Group makes clothes for many well-known shops, including *Zara*, *Walmart*, *Mango*, *Bershka*, and many more. The delegation concluded that the safety and health of the workers was being prioritised. The Director of *Nassa Group*, Gazi Mohammad Zaber stated, 'we are not the same country as the times of the Rana Plaza. We are better now'. He emphasised that it is important for our delegation to pass the message along that Bangladesh is a new country in terms of workers' rights and working conditions. The

delegation learned about the process of making clothes, from the beginning to the final phases. It visited workers on different floors and observed their working conditions. Overall, the delegation was greatly impressed with the progress.



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s administration selected a host of mega infrastructural projects to transform the future of the country. They include the Padma Multipurpose Bridge, the country’s first nuclear power plant, and a new deep-sea port. Per capita power generation has increased along with national and regional connectivity and Bangladesh has entered into a number of international agreements to construct new roads and highways.



The SADF delegation was thankful for the very kind welcome and hospitality that it received from the *Nassa Group*.

6. Findings on women empowerment

Uplifting women's status is something that has always been valued in the family of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. Her father started the process of empowering women by making it a constitutional obligation under Article 28 for women and men to have equal rights. The SADF delegation was honoured to meet with the Prime Minister at Gonobhavan and to have the opportunity to ask her questions about Bangladesh's development, especially on women's rights. The head of the delegation commenced the meeting by introducing everyone and asking the Prime Minister about the development of the country. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina initially said: 'After my father died, I took it as my responsibility to step up and help my country. I thought, if my father and family sacrificed themselves for this country, then I can too. The next generation deserves a better life and it is my responsibility to make it happen. That is why developing Bangladesh is a priority for me.'

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina highlighted that now women are better educated, safer, and more prosperous than their previous generations. The Prime Minister stated 'there was a time when women had no job opportunities or opportunities in general. There were no women in high ranks'. She also emphasised that women's economic participation is for her fundamental to strengthening their rights and enabling them to have control over their lives.



The World Economic Forum recently ranked Bangladesh first in gender equality among South Asian nations for the second consecutive year. Bangladesh has progressed in four key areas: education, economic participation, health, and political empowerment. Portuguese Member of Parliament Sandra Pereira concentrated on gender equality questions and sexual reproduction issues in Bangladesh. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is well known for her championing of women's rights and equality and thus had a strong agenda in that area. Although Bangladesh is a somewhat conservative country — when compared to Europe — she aims at promoting higher education and job opportunities for women around the country. Bangladesh has substantially

achieved the MDGs with regard to gender parity, which will help in implementing SDG-5 Gender Equality before 2030.

Portuguese Member of Parliament Joana de Lima was last to speak and praised the tremendous achievements of Bangladesh.

7. Findings on the country's achievements and current situation

In addition to women empowerment, the Prime Minister also informed the delegation about the achievements of Bangladesh in other sectors.

The Prime Minister explained 'before becoming Prime Minister, I would think about the country's poor people. Once I took office, under my administration, we started working from the grassroots level; I wanted to make this country poverty-free. I then targeted my aim. My priorities became providing food to the population, as people were starving. I also had community clinics built all around the country'. Bangladesh is the eighth most populous country in the world with about 160 million people and has recently been applauded as an exceptional health performer. This is a consequence, among other factors, of sensitive and highly focused health programmes with widely deployed community health workers reaching all households.

Regarding education, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said: 'I also surveyed the country to see where schools were missing. We made education free until 12 years of age. 24 million children are currently receiving a stipend to study'.

The SADF delegation also met with the Awami League (AL) delegation at the State Guest House. During lunch, both delegations had a very interactive discussion about the country's current political situation. The AL delegation stated that 'we cannot think of having a Prime Minister who does not support the Liberation War memory'. They highlighted that the AL believes Bangladesh



needs to continue to be a secular country. When discussing about the opposition party, the AL delegation highlighted their differences and emphasised that the BNP uses religion to promote themselves. Bangladeshi people are very religious, but they do not use religion for their benefit. According to the AL delegation, 95% of religious minorities vote for AL because of the party's policies. As the opposition party aligns with the Jamaat-e-Islami, if they come into power,

Bangladesh will be a dangerous place and it will threaten the democratic progress that the country has undergone.

The SADF delegation had a press conference attended, among others, by the *Daily Sun*, *Channel 24*, and the *Daily Samakal*. The head of delegation told the press that the SADF delegation and the European Parliament believe that Bangladesh is capable of holding their own free and fair elections, which is why they will not be sending an official observer mission.



8. *Findings on the rule of law and the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT)*

The SADF delegation had the honour of meeting with advocates of Bangladesh's Supreme Court, as well as barristers-at-law, including Dr Salim Mahmud from Bangladesh's Energy Regulatory Commission Tribunal and Imranul Kabir Barrister-at-law at Lincoln's Inn among others. During the meeting, the barristers spoke to the delegation about the history of the ICT and its functioning. Susan Guarda took the floor to introduce her co-authored working paper with Paulo Casaca on war crimes. From her research, Ms Guarda found that, by far, the ICT was more transparent and fairer compared to the tribunals in Cambodia and Iraq.

In explaining the rule of law in Bangladesh, the barristers stated that Article 27 of the Constitution guarantees that all citizens are equal before law and are entitled to equal protection by the law. Article 31 guarantees the enjoyment of the protection by the law, and being treated in accordance with the law as inalienable rights of every citizen. The discussion gave the delegation a clear picture about how Bangladesh's judiciary system works.

9. Conclusion

The high-level delegation was impressed with the achievements of the country under the present government led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. The delegation agreed that Bangladesh has undergone an impressive transformation. It was received in the country in the best way possible, which made the team feel at home. The delegation is very thankful for the kind hospitality received from their hosts.