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Impact on India-Bangladesh Relations Following Changes in Bangladesh's Political Regime

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Abstract:

The relationship between India and Bangladesh has been influenced by historical, political, and economic factors, with significant shifts often tied to changes in Bangladesh's political regime. This study explores how different governments—democratic, military, and caretaker—have affected bilateral ties in areas such as trade, security, water-sharing, and regional geopolitics. The research finds that Awami League-led governments have generally strengthened relations with India, while BNP and military regimes have often led to strained ties due to differing policies. Key areas of engagement, including economic cooperation, border management, and diplomatic negotiations, are analyzed to understand the evolving dynamics of India-Bangladesh relations. Despite challenges like trade imbalances, river water disputes, and geopolitical tensions, diplomatic efforts and mutual interests continue to drive the partnership forward. The paper concludes with policy recommendations for enhancing bilateral cooperation, emphasizing the need for sustained diplomatic engagement, conflict resolution mechanisms, and increased economic collaboration.

Keywords: India-Bangladesh Relations, Political Regime Change, Bilateral Diplomacy, Military Rule in Bangladesh, Security and Border Issues

Introduction:

An Overview:

India and Bangladesh share deep historical, cultural, and economic ties, shaped by their geographical proximity and shared political history. Since Bangladesh's independence in 1971, bilateral relations have fluctuated between cooperation and tension, largely influenced by changes in Bangladesh's political regime. Leadership transitions—from democratic governments to military rule and caretaker administrations—have played a significant role in shaping diplomatic engagement with India.

Research Objectives:

This study aims to analyze the impact of political regime changes in Bangladesh on its

bilateral relations with India. The specific objectives are:

1. To examine the historical evolution of India-Bangladesh relations and how political shifts have influenced diplomatic engagements.
2. To assess the impact of regime changes (democratic, military, and caretaker governments) on key bilateral issues such as trade, security, water-sharing, and regional connectivity.
3. To identify challenges and areas of tension in India-Bangladesh relations, including border disputes, migration, and geopolitical influences.
4. To evaluate economic and strategic cooperation between the two nations under different political administrations in Bangladesh.
5. To propose policy recommendations for strengthening India-Bangladesh relations through diplomatic stability, economic collaboration, and regional security cooperation.

This research seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how regime changes in Bangladesh have shaped its foreign policy toward India and what measures can be taken to ensure sustained cooperation.

Scope and Structure of the Paper:

This paper examines the impact of political regime changes in Bangladesh on its bilateral relations with India. It covers historical developments, diplomatic engagements, economic ties, security cooperation, and unresolved challenges. The study focuses on:

- The historical evolution of India-Bangladesh relations since 1971.
- The influence of different political regimes (Awami League, BNP, military, and caretaker governments) on bilateral ties.
- Key issues such as trade, water-sharing, border security, and regional geopolitics.
- Future prospects and policy recommendations for fostering stronger relations.

The research primarily relies on historical analysis, government reports, scholarly articles, and news sources to provide an objective assessment.

1. Historical Context of India-Bangladesh Relations
2. Sheikh Hasina's Controversial Victory and Political Polarization
3. The Fall of Sheikh Hasina: A Movement Fueled by Student Protests
4. What Were the Bangladeshi Student Protests?
5. India-Bangladesh Relations After the Fall of Sheikh Hasina
6. Conclusion

Historical Context of India-Bangladesh Relations:

India and Bangladesh share long-standing historical, cultural, linguistic, and economic connections. Their relationship has been shaped by colonial history, the partition of India, the Liberation War of 1971, and subsequent diplomatic and commercial interactions.

1. Colonial Era and Partition (Pre-1947):

Before 1947, India and modern-day Bangladesh were part of British India. Bengal was a significant province with a rich cultural and economic heritage. The British-planned partition of Bengal in 1905, which was later reversed in 1911 due to strong opposition, created tensions. However, the final partition in 1947 led to East Bengal becoming East Pakistan, which faced political and economic subjugation under West Pakistan.

2. India's Role in the Liberation War (1971):

By the late 1960s, discontent in East Pakistan grew due to political and economic neglect by West Pakistan. Following the 1970 elections, in which Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's Awami League won a landslide victory but was denied power, the situation worsened. The Pakistani army's violent military operation led millions to flee to India. Under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, India supported Bangladesh's independence by aiding the Mukti Bahini (Bangladeshi independence fighters) militarily, politically, and humanitarily. India formally entered the war on December 3, 1971, leading to Bangladesh's independence on December 16, 1971.

3. Renewed Cooperation (1996-Present):

In recent decades, India and Bangladesh have worked to enhance economic and security collaboration. A landmark agreement in 2015 resolved the long-standing land boundary issue by exchanging enclaves, fostering goodwill. Trade links have grown, with India becoming one of Bangladesh's main trading partners. Strategic cooperation has also improved, particularly in regional connectivity and counterterrorism initiatives. India has invested in Bangladesh's infrastructure, including telecommunications, power, and railroads, contributing to its economic growth.

Sheikh Hasina's Controversial Victory and Political Polarization:

Sheikh Hasina's recent election victory has been surrounded by controversy, leading to increased political polarization in Bangladesh. The Awami League has dominated the political scene for over a decade, but allegations of election manipulation, repression of the opposition, and authoritarian rule have raised concerns about the party's hold on power.

The 2018 and subsequent elections were marred by claims of irregularities, with the opposition, particularly the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), accusing the ruling party of voter suppression and intimidation. The decline of democratic institutions under Hasina's leadership has been a significant concern, with law enforcement, the judiciary, and the Election Commission often accused of favoring the ruling party. Political tensions have escalated, with street protests, strikes, and violent clashes becoming common, especially during election periods.

The Fall of Sheikh Hasina: A Movement Fueled by Student Protests:

Sheikh Hasina's long reign in Bangladesh has been marked by strong diplomatic ties, infrastructure development, and economic growth. However, growing frustration, particularly among

the youth, has posed a significant challenge to her administration. Student protests, historically influential in shaping Bangladesh's political landscape, have played a crucial role in her potential downfall.

The 2024 elections, widely seen as a sham due to the absence of opposition parties, sparked widespread protests. The youth, disillusioned by years of repression, viewed the elections as another manipulation of democracy. Protests erupted across universities and streets, with the government responding with mass arrests, internet shutdowns, and violent crackdowns. Unlike previous uprisings, these protests gained momentum, drawing in broader sections of society, including civil society and professionals.

The international community, which had largely tolerated Hasina's authoritarian tendencies due to Bangladesh's strategic importance and economic progress, began to express concerns. Sanctions from the United States and European countries further isolated the government. Even India, one of Hasina's closest allies, signaled a shift in its stance, unwilling to be seen as supporting a regime losing public support.

Within the Awami League, internal rifts emerged as younger members distanced themselves from Hasina's conservative policies. Security forces, aligned with the government, hesitated to use excessive force against protesters, fearing a loss of legitimacy. Under mounting domestic and international pressure, Hasina's power gradually eroded, leading to her eventual resignation.

What Were the Bangladeshi Student Protests?

Student protests in Bangladesh have historically played a significant role in shaping the country's political and social landscape. Over the years, students have organized protests against quota reforms in government jobs, government repression, road safety, electoral fraud, and corruption. These protests have often been met with violence, police crackdowns, and internet shutdowns.

A major student movement focused on quota reform in government jobs, which reserved a significant portion of public sector positions for specific groups, such as descendants of liberation fighters. Students argued that the system was unfair and denied equal opportunities to most eligible candidates. Protests in 2018 forced the government to announce reforms, but the movement faced arrests, crackdowns, and accusations of political repression.

Students have also been at the forefront of protests against authoritarianism and electoral fraud, particularly during Sheikh Hasina's controversial election victories. Many young people are disillusioned with the political system, blaming the government for stifling dissent and undermining democracy. During the 2024 elections, students joined protests against the suppression of opposition voices, further fueling discontent.

India-Bangladesh Relations After the Fall of Sheikh Hasina:

Political developments in Dhaka have historically influenced India's relationship with Bangladesh, and Sheikh Hasina's downfall marks a significant shift. Hasina, one of New Delhi's closest allies, ensured strong diplomatic, economic, and security collaboration. The future of India-Bangladesh relations will depend on who succeeds her and how the new leadership perceives India's influence.

If the opposition, particularly the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) or an alliance of anti-Hasina forces, comes to power, relations could become more complex. Historically, the BNP has taken a more conservative and nationalist stance toward India, often accusing Hasina of prioritizing Indian interests over Bangladesh's sovereignty. A new government may renegotiate key aspects of India-Bangladesh relations, including trade agreements, water-sharing accords, and transit rights. Long-standing issues like the Teesta River water dispute could resurface as major points of contention.

Security cooperation will also be crucial. Under Hasina, Bangladesh's crackdown on insurgent groups operating in India's northeastern states was highly valued by New Delhi. A change in leadership could lead to a reevaluation of this approach, especially if BNP-affiliated groups distance themselves from India's security concerns. Additionally, China's growing influence in Bangladesh could complicate matters for India. A new government might deepen military and economic ties with Beijing, shifting the regional balance of power and forcing India to work harder to maintain its influence.

Conclusion:

The relationship between India and Bangladesh has been significantly influenced by changes in Bangladesh's political regime. While Awami League-led governments have generally fostered closer ties, BNP and military regimes have often led to strained relations due to policy divergences. Despite challenges such as trade imbalances, border disputes, and water-sharing issues, both countries have maintained a strategic partnership based on mutual interests in regional stability, security cooperation, and economic collaboration.

To sustain this positive trajectory, both nations must prioritize diplomatic engagement, economic collaboration, and conflict resolution mechanisms. By addressing unresolved issues like border management and water-sharing, and maintaining a nonpartisan approach to foreign policy, India and Bangladesh can continue to build a strong and lasting relationship for regional peace and prosperity.

Changes in Bangladesh's political regime have played a crucial role in shaping India-Bangladesh relations. While periods of political stability and cooperation have enhanced trade, security cooperation, and regional connectivity, transitions to regimes with different foreign policy

orientations have periodically caused tensions. Despite these fluctuations, the deep historical, cultural, and economic ties between the two nations have ensured the durability of their bilateral relationship.

Moving forward, both countries must prioritize diplomatic communication, economic partnerships, and conflict resolution mechanisms to maintain a mutually beneficial relationship. By fostering trust, addressing unresolved issues like border management and water-sharing, and adopting a nonpartisan approach to foreign policy, India and Bangladesh can continue to build a strong and enduring partnership for regional peace and prosperity.

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