



BANGLADESH NEEDS AN INTELLIGENCE REFORM AFTER PEOPLE'S REVOLUTION

by

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Sheikh Hasina's demise in power after [15 years of ruling](#) Bangladesh with an iron fist has raised several speculations on the country's future reformation plans in various sectors. The aftermath of the student movement, which later turned into a popular uprising known widely amongst Bangladeshi youths as the [July Revolution](#), has now concentrated on efforts to bring peace and stability to the country after months of turmoil, bloodshed, and anarchy. The [new interim government](#) led by Nobel Laureate Dr. Muhammad Yunus and his advisors is [expected](#) to restore internal stability and deal with external challenges. The security apparatus, including law enforcement, paramilitaries, and intelligence agencies, is vital to achieving such objectives. The [terrible atrocities](#) committed under Hasina's guidance against ordinary people, especially during the July Revolution by the [security apparatus](#), have created a robust popular sentiment to reform Bangladesh's security apparatus.

The Intelligence Community (IC), which is the collection of all the intelligence agencies of a country, is collectively one of the crucial arms of the security apparatus. Their secret works are linked with a country's domestic and foreign national interests. For this reason, intelligence is dubbed as the missing dimension of political science and international relations. Therefore, one of the key priorities of the new government must be to reform Bangladesh's primary intelligence agencies. The reform must be undertaken in light of the [policy](#) failures of the previous regime, internal security threats, and the new geopolitical realities of Dhaka.

Key Intelligence Agencies of Bangladesh

There are at least a [dozen intelligence](#) agencies in Bangladesh. Amongst these arguably, four agencies are notable: Special Branch (SB), National

Security Intelligence (NSI), Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI), and National Telecommunications and Monitoring Centre (NTMC). The SB is the primary agency that collects domestic intelligence, whereas its counterpart NSI is tasked with collecting [foreign and external](#) intelligence. DGFI is tasked to acquire defense intelligence, both internal and external. These three agencies [primarily rely on Human Intelligence](#) (HUMINT) to gather information. NTMC is the [primary](#) and arguably the [only agency](#) specializing in collecting [Signals Intelligence](#) (SIGINT). NTMC also [coordinates](#) with other agencies if they require any assistance related to SIGINT. Interestingly, these agencies also have broad responsibilities like counterterrorism, counterintelligence, and counterespionage.

To oversee the Bangladeshi IC, including these four significant agencies, there is a [National Committee for Intelligence Coordination](#) (NCIC) headed by the Prime Minister and coordinated by the National Security Advisor. In reality, coordination between these agencies remains very limited, and a wall of separation exists between them. Thus, a sense of rivalry prevails between these agencies, which can result in an intelligence failure due to a lack of coordination.

Intelligence in the Hasina Era

After coming to power, Hasina single-handedly put her loyalists in significant positions in these agencies. As relations with India [warmed](#) during her rule, robust intelligence gatherings against New Delhi slowed down. Even in Myanmar's case, the Hasina regime showed less interest in conducting robust surveillance because Dhaka felt that Naypyidaw was too occupied in [internal strife](#) and posed no significant threat. This was a misjudgment and proved to be fatally wrong when a massive [Rohingya incursion](#) took place in 2017, to Dhaka's surprise. The emergence of the [Kuki Chin National Front](#) (KNF) was also a failure of the IC despite the group doing shady activities for a long time before directly [challenging](#) the government.



To simplify, in the Hasina era, the intelligence agencies were of the view that, apart from terrorism, there were no significant threats to national security. Hasina also utilized this absence of threat to use these agencies to further her political interests. She initiated a campaign of political surveillance and intimidation of dissidents. Agencies like DGFI imprisoned political dissidents without warrants and established prisons infamously known as ‘[Aynaghor](#)’ (House of Mirror). Even NTMC, which is an intelligence agency, [ensured](#) nationwide internet blackouts for [11 days](#) while people were protesting against [Sheikh Hasina’s demise](#). These are clear indications that Hasina had diverted the allotted mandates of these agencies and used them for her regime’s survival.

Internal Threats Linked with Geopolitical Realities

There are several critical internal threats linked with the geopolitical challenges ahead of Bangladesh. Dhaka may see a resurgence of faith-based terrorism, which was [relatively low](#) during the rule of the previous regime. Taking advantage of internal chaos, various faith-based terrorism outfits can increase their activities. They can incite [sectarian and religious violence](#) against the minorities like the Ahmadiyyas or the Hindus. Again, there are continuous reports of Rohingyas [illegally exfiltrating](#) from refugee camps and trying to assimilate with local communities. They have even managed fake Bangladeshi national [identity cards and passports](#) with the help of corrupt local authorities. Due to a lack of monitoring, Rohingya camps have also seen the [rise of armed groups](#) that carry out cross-border criminal activities like smuggling, trafficking, and gun violence. In the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), there is also a new insurgency led by KNF, [killing](#) members of the Bangladesh Army and [looting banks](#). All of these are significant security challenges for Dhaka right now.

Again, these issues are not exclusively internal but have foreign dimensions. The [rise](#) of faith-based terrorism will create an adverse relationship with India. Pakistan [may facilitate](#) these groups by funding them in exchange for carrying out terrorist attacks inside India or inciting violence against Bangladeshi Hindus. Rohingya armed groups might be supported

by foreign actors to create chaos in local communities. They can also be used as a tool for sabotage against various infrastructures by foreign actors. The [animosity](#) between the Arakan Army and Rohingyas can also destabilize the Bangladesh-Myanmar border and bring the future of [Rohingya repatriation](#) into question.

Equally, in the CHT [relationship](#) between KNF and Myanmar-based Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) can prove deadly for Dhaka. KNF could even house Kuki-based [insurgents of Manipur](#) in CHT, which will further [complicate](#) Dhaka’s relations with New Delhi if not addressed accurately. China may also play a role in supporting such activities in CHT. Therefore, the rise of terrorism, violence against minorities, Rohingya-based security concerns, and CHT-based insurgency can be utilized by foreign intelligence agencies for their geopolitical interests. This can make Dhaka’s position vulnerable, which must be addressed by reforming and revitalizing the country’s intelligence apparatus to meet its security challenges. Given Dhaka’s [balancing foreign policy goals](#), the Bangladeshi IC must avoid doing anything that impacts bilateral ties with vital partners unless they are forced to do so in response to other external actors trying to plot against Dhaka.

Need for an Intelligence Reform

Dr. Yunus and his cabinet have [proclaimed](#) the necessity of reforming the irregularities conducted during the Hasina administration. Key advisors like Brigadier Sakhawat Hossain have also urged for reform of law enforcement and related agencies. Significant changes have been made in the ranks of agencies like [DGFI](#) and [NSI](#). Hasina-aligned chiefs of SB and NTMC who facilitated state-sponsored terror and unconstitutional use of force have been [dismissed](#) from their jobs or [arrested](#). DGFI had also stated that all [political prisoners had been released](#) after Hasina [fled to India](#). Despite these, the new administration still has lots left to do. All these intelligence agencies should be depoliticized, and focus on national security priorities based on internal threats and geopolitical rivalry. Agencies must work to serve national interests, not party interests. Hasina’s focus



on political intelligence is one of the reasons why [armed groups have emerged](#) in Rohingya camps and the rise of the KNF in the CHT. There were instances where an armed Rohingya group murdered a [DGFI officer](#), and the KNF ambushed the Army, inflicting [severe casualties](#). These intelligence failures must be addressed.

Primary intelligence agencies of Bangladesh must focus on the declining safe havens for faith-based terrorism, ensure ethnic and religious stability, and not turn into an instrument of political repression. These agencies must be made to work on counterinsurgency and [counter-subversion](#) of any foreign actor sincerely. A nonpolitical senior intelligence official should head NCIC, like the [Director of National Intelligence](#) (DNI) in the USA, and checks and balances must be ensured to discard sole control of the Premier over IC. To avoid policy miscalculation, these agencies must provide clear intelligence, active coordination with themselves, and active oversight on domestic and external issues. Moreover, the Bangladeshi IC must be brought back into shape where they must focus on their respective mandates to achieve success and secure success in national security interests. Eventually, intelligence agencies will sometimes be the first wall of defense against any crisis in Dhaka. With all the policy and administrative reforms and changes in Bangladesh, Dr Yunus and his cabinet must carefully look into this vital issue and make the required changes with utmost importance.

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