

Greater Washington Awami League

Biography of Sheikh Hasina

Sheikh Hasina was born on 28th September 1947 in Tungipara, a remote village unde Gopalganj district, which is also the birthplace of the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. She is the eldest daughter of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Her mother Begum Fazilatunnesa was widely respected as a tender-hearted lady and for her love for the poor and needy people.

In 1968, Sheikh Hasina married an eminent scientist of Bangladesh, Dr. M.A. Wazed Miah. They are now the parents of a son and a daughter. After her marriage, Sheikh Hasina continued her studies and graduated from the University of Dhaka in 1973. Scion of a political family, she was actively involved in students politics in her college and university life. She gathered political experience in her role as the go-between in maintaining contact between her father and the political and student leaders during Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's repeated imprisonment by the Pakistani rulers in the 1960s. Always



popular among students, Sheikh Hasina, as president of Govt. Intermediate Girls College unit of the Chhatra League, i.e., the students wing of the Awami League, was also elected Chief of the Student Union in 1966. She was an active member of the Students League of Dhaka University and Secretary of the Student League unit of Rokeya Hall. She actively participated in the mass movement of 1969, and at the time of the War of Liberation in 1971, she was imprisoned by the Pakistan occupation army along with other members of her family.

On the fateful night of August 15, 1975 some power hungry and bloodthirsty army officers assassinated the Father of the Nation who was also the elected Head of State, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, his wife, three sons and all the residents of his house. Sheikh Hasina and her only sister Sheikh Rehana survived the carnage as they were then visiting West Germany.

Sheikh Hasina was forced to live in exile because of the restrictions put on her by General Ziaur Rahman, the President of Bangladesh at the time. However, in 1981, she was elected President of the largest political party of Bangladesh, and no force could prevent her return to Bangladesh on 17 May 1981. On her return, she was heartily welcomed by millions of people who were eagerly waiting for the return of the daughter of democracy, Sheikh Hasina.

Sheikh Hasina is the first Prime Minister of Bangladesh to have succeeded in leading the ordinary masses to the threshold of political power. Governments have come and gone since the cowardly

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assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975, but the toiling masses who form the bulk of the population of Bangladesh were always kept at bay in exercise of the power of the state. They were used as vassals by successive military dictators, but were never taken into confidence. They were used as showpieces to the donors in the dictators' bid to get foreign aid and assistance. When aid came, the dictators and their hand-picked few plundered most of it. Poverty continued in its endemic form.

Even the elected government of the BNP led by the then Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia followed the same legacy of defiance and stubbornness that her husband General Ziaur Rahman and his most trusted Second-in-Command General Ershad had left in the body politic of Bangladesh. They exercised power first, to perpetuate their lust for authority and personal gains, and secondly, to keep the people of the country as far away as possible from the citadel of power.

The Elections on June 12, 1996 were an outcome of the vigorous and uncompromising political movement of the people led by Sheikh Hasina and her party which gave the people the chance to choose from among those who represent the power of the people, and not those who epitomise the military oligarchy.

On June 13, 1996 the Awami League won the elections. Sheikh Hasina was sworn in as the Prime Minister of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, the nation her father Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had founded 25 years ago.

Time and again Sheikh Hasina has spoken candidly about her foremost political objective. She said, "We shall continue our struggle and our movement until such time as the economic emancipation of the poor is attained. The exploitation of the poor, who are in a vast majority in our society, by the rich, who are in a minority, must come to an end."

After securing for the people their right to vote freely and fairly through the establishment of a non-party caretaker government, Sheikh Hasina has committed herself to secure their right to food and freedom from hunger and is on record to have done so.

After assuming the responsibilities of the office of the Prime Minister on 23 June 1996, Sheikh Hasina has taken revolutionary steps and initiated widespread programmes in the economic, social and political fields of the country for ensuring total and unhindered development of Bangladesh. She has in the last five years changed the lot of the poor living in the rural areas to a very large extent by undertaking programmes for alleviation of poverty, enhancement of per capita income, creation of job opportunities and increase in food production. She has introduced stipend for the old and for the widows. As Prime Minister, she personally ran a housing and income generation programme for the poorest of the poor in the rural areas called 'Asrayan'. She undertook other housing, programmes as well and programmes like 'A Home A Farm' to encourage household forming and 'Returning Home' to reverse the trend of migration from the rural to the urban areas.

Sheikh Hasina has dedicated her life for the welfare of the people and the nation. She has personally nothing to gain or lose from political activities. Her politics is for the people. Sheikh Hasina had to cover a long way in her struggle to establish democracy in Bangladesh with the sole objective of giving rise to a free and just society. In this arduous journey, the people were the source of her strength. Today, Sheikh Hasina's leadership is a main fountainhead for uniting the people and nation.

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Sheikh Hasina says, 'If, like my father, I have to sacrifice myself, I am ready for that.' She is an undaunted soldier of democracy. Sheikh Hasina has further upheld and taken forward the light her father had lit. At the same time, she continues to discharge the heavy responsibilities that she has been entrusted with.

Sheikh Hasina earned the admiration of the entire nation when she converted her only home "Bangabandhu Bhaban" into "Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Memorial Museum". This house is a silent witness to many historical events, including the nation's War of Liberation and the assassination of its founding father. Sheikh Hasina put it in the charge of a Board of Trustees with herself as its Chairperson. Sheikh Hasina has consistently lent financial assistance to the families of the martyrs of the liberation war as well as poor and needy students.

Sheikh Hasina is an avid reader of books and journals on international politics, literature and social welfare. She is the author of several books e.g., 'The Plight of The Street Children', 'The Origin of Autocracy', the 'Elimination of Poverty', 'Some Thoughts', 'People and democracy' and 'Development for the Masses'. She has also written numerous articles on different social, economic and political issues of the country. She is a prominent member of the cultural organization called Culture and Literature Sangha and a founder member of a leading sports club of the country, the Abahani Krira Chakra. Sheikh Hasina is a pious lady and has performed Hajj several times.

Endless patience, perseverance and tenacity combined with good judgement and regard for humanity have converged into the personality of Sheikh Hasina which have given her the courage to face and the ability to lead. The daughter of democracy represents the future of Bangladesh.

Political Profile

"We want to form the government after the elections on the basis of national consensus. We want to build a society free from terrorism, corruption and poverty. We want to fully equip the nation with the ability to enter the 21st century along with other developed countries of the world", Sheikh Hasina announced in her election manifesto on 10 May 1996. Then came the June 12 parliamentary elections. The Bangladesh Awami League, under the dynamic leadership of Sheikh Hasina, won a majority of seats in Parliament and formed the government on June 23.

June 23, 1996 is not merely the day on which Sheikh Hasina, daughter of the founding father of Bangladesh, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, was sworn in as the 10th Prime Minister of the People's Republic of Bangladesh. On this day, the people of Bangladesh once again perceived the outcome of their right to freely elect their representatives. After 21 years of ruthless oppression, free-wheeling corruption and overt and covert martial law, democracy has finally been restored.

On the day of the cruel assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on August 15, 1975, along with members of his family, Sheikh Hasina and her sister Sheikh Rehana escaped the gruesome act as they were away from the country. After the tragedy Sheikh Hasina was forced to remain outside the country. but she continued to work for unifying the Bangalees at home and abroad for launching an all-pervasive democratic movement. On May 17, 1981 after nearly six

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years in exile, Sheikh Hasina returned to Bangladesh as the President of Bangladesh Awami League. She was then only 33 years old. Ever since that day, she has constantly been fighting to establish the rights of the people of Bangladesh. She had to struggle for 15 long years to prepare and lead the Awami League for the task of carrying out a ceaseless political movement for the restoration of democracy in the country. Throughout this difficult struggle, the poor masses of Bangladesh stood firmly beside her.

The dream that had once seemed impossible became a reality on March 30. A popular upsurge forced the autocratic regime to surrender to the people's demand for holding national elections under a neutral caretaker government. The pioneer of the movement was Sheikh Hasina, a relentless fighter, carrying forward the legacy of her illustrious father Bangabandhu Sheikh Muiibur Rahman. Sheikh Hasina dedicated 15 years of her life fighting for restoration of the democratic rights of the people of Bangladesh. Her indomitable spirit, political farsightedness and complete devotion to the cause of the people finally helped efface the legacy of military coups, political murder and oppressive regimes.

Throughout her college and university years Sheikh Hasina actively participated in political movements. The death of her father on August 15, 1975 was the turning point in her career. The brutal assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and many of his family members placed the hope for the country's future in his two exiled daughters— Sheikh Hasina and Sheikh Rehana.

The impact of the coup on Bangladesh was quick and powerful. It placed the country completely at the mercy of some ambitious and greedy generals and changed the course of the history of Bangladesh. What happened was not just a change of government. The coup leaders attempted to transform a democratic nation into a military oligarchy. The pro-Pakistan forces, which had suffered an ignominious defeat in the War of Liberation in 1971, regained control of the government and introduced policies to undermine the democratic and secular ideals and values which the Bangalees had firmly cherished and upheld, and which had inspired the creation of Bangladesh. The first move was the imposition of Martial Law to deprive the people of their democratic rights. This was followed by concerted efforts at breaking the spirit of the to struggle. Murders, unlawful imprisonment and tortures sponsored by the then government followed.

Bangabandhu's entire life was dedicated to the emancipation of the people of Bangladesh. All the dreams he had cherished throughout the turmoil of his life blossomed around the somnolent. The volcanic potential of the life of the people of this land manifested in his struggle. He could not have enough time to take care of his family. Bangabandhu's wife Sheikh Fazilatunnesa took care of their children and family, and at times even of party matters in his absence. Her father's ideals, family traditions and a strong personality, coupled with her mother's guidance, helped Sheikh Hasina get transformed into the great leader that she is today.

She had been keen in politics since the beginning of her life. In her own words, "I have been associated with the political ups and downs of the country and with the Awami League since my childhood. I witnessed the unbearable oppression suffered by my father and his colleagues during the democratic movements. My father spent most of his life in prison. Whenever he was free, he used to remain busy with political activities and in organizing the party. I have seen my mother guide the party along with other leaders in the absence of my father, and carry out his plans while he was in prison. My first lesson in politics came out of my family atmosphere. The first time I

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directly got involved in politics was when the country was in political turmoil demanding autonomy and democracy. Later, I fully participated in the students' movement in 1962. Political unrest was widespread among students in 1962. Students, workers, farmers and ordinary people came out on the streets with their political and economic demands. I attended meetings and took part in processions against the undemocratic and anti-people Pakistani rulers. No conscious Bangalee could remain aloof from the political mainstream during those tumultuous days in the sixties. I too could not keep myself away from the path of revolution and resistance".

Soon after the assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and other members of his family, Sheikh Hasina began to communicate with party workers while living outside Bangladesh. Despite being forced to remain in exile, on August 15, 1980 she attended a huge political rally in London, on the occasion of the observance of the fifth anniversary of the death of the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

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Sheikh Hasina's first speech in York Hall established her as a political leader. Then in 1981, still in exile, Sheikh Hasina was made the president, in absentia, of the largest political party of Bangladesh, the Bangladesh Awami League. Within a very short period of time she proved to be as charismatic a leader as her father had been. Keeping in mind her father's hopes and dreams for the country, she began to speak out against the oppressive military rulers in an attempt to establish the democratic rights of the people.

It was Sheikh Hasina's unbounded courage and inner strength of personality that sustained her during the traumatic period that followed her return to Bangladesh in 1981. It was not an easy task for a young woman who had been stranded for years with her husband and small children in a foreign country. A hostile government persecuted all those who were loyal to her father and the Awami League. Nevertheless, Sheikh Hasina's courage did not fail her, nor did she lose faith in the future of Bangladesh. Her profound commitment to Bangalee nationalism, secular values and democratic ideals fortified her morale, during those lonely years of her life. In the manner of her illustrious father Sheikh Hasina's deep love for the people of Bangladesh was combined with the conviction that the voice of the people would ultimately be heard. After the initial period of shock and mourning, she began to mobilise and organise Bangalees at home and abroad, especially inspiring those who had lost all hope in the future of Bangladesh. The people responded and welcomed the daughter of democracy with open arms and renewed hope.

In 1981, the Bangladesh Awami League, reeling under the assault of the military regime of General Ziaur Rahman, invited Sheikh Hasina to assume the leadership of the party that had led the country through its war of independence in 1971. She accepted the challenge and returned to a hearty welcome by millions of followers of Bangabandhu. Since that memorable day, as the President of the Awami League, she led the party through a period of reorganisation and rehabilitation. Sheikh Hasina suffered imprisonment several times, fought two national elections and led a massive popular movement through which she ousted an autocratic military dictator from power.

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Under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina, the Awami League spearheaded a struggle against the despotic rulers. She initiated and led an uncompromising movement against the military dictators in an attempt to bring democracy back to Bangladesh.

In 1982, she was the first to raise the voice of protest against assumption of state power through military coups d'etat. Taking great risk, she put tremendous pressure on Ershad's regime to end martial law and hold free and fair elections. Though political activities were banned at that time the Awami League was the only political party that had the courage to demand democratic rights for the people of Bangladesh. In 1983, Sheikh Hasina formed a 15 party alliance from which grew a powerful student movement protesting against the military government. On February 14, 1983 the army entered the Dhaka University campus and fired bullets and used batons to quell the agitating students. On February 15, as she protested the inhuman act through organising a peaceful rally at the Shahid Minar (the memorial for the martyrs of the Language Movement of 1952), Sheikh Hasina was arrested and taken blindfolded to Dhaka cantonment along with her associates. She was kept incommunicado for 15 days. In October 1983, Sheikh Hasina said, "The tactics previously applied to usurp the office of the President since the murder of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman have been adopted once again by General Ershad. The process is, first, staging a coup d'etat, then consolidating power and finally declaring the usurper as President. If the usurper goes to the electorate after he captures power, the result of the election is determined beforehand in his favour. As a result, political instability persists. That is why we demand that state power be handed over to the elected representatives of the people".

Thereafter, she had to suffer confinement time and again. In 1984 she was put under house arrest in February and then again in November. In March 1985, she was put under house arrest for three months at a stretch. On March 26, 1986 in a statement issued in Dhaka on the occasion of the 15th anniversary of the independence of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina said that her party would participate in the general elections as part of its movement to put an end to the politics of "coups, killings, conspiracies and martial law". She also said, "We want to have elections not only to form the next government but also to establish a system that represents the people as well".

Sheikh Hasina became Leader of the Opposition in Parliament commanding the support of 104 elected MPs belonging to her party and alliance. As the youngest Leader of the Opposition she demonstrated her political acumen and sagacity in and outside Parliament. She forced the treasury bench to withdraw a number of bills which went against the fundamental rights of the people. Sheikh Hasina remained Leader of the Opposition until the dissolution of Parliament by General Ershad in December 1987.

In October 1986, Sheikh Hasina, in defiance of martial law, addressed a huge rally in Bogra. On her way from Bogra to Rajshahi, she was detained and forcibly sent back to Dhaka. On November 11, 1987 she was again put under house arrest for a month, despite her being the leader of the opposition in Parliament at the time. During a demonstration in front of the government secretariat on November 10, 1987 the police opened fire on Sheikh Hasina and tried to lift her car with a crane while she was leaving the National Press Club. In the face of strong resistance from the people, the police failed to arrest her and she was able to slip out of the car. On January 24, 1988, while addressing a public meeting in Chittagong, police fired on the crowd, killing nearly 80 people and narrowly missing Sheikh Hasina and her aides. Undeterred by these threats on her life, she went on touring the country from one end to the other to inspire and motivate the people to defend their democratic rights.

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Sheikh Hasina took a resolute stand against military rule from the day she returned to Bangladesh. Since then, she never compromised on her commitment to the people. Her 15 year long struggle against military rule was crowned with success when the last military dictator had to surrender power in ignominy.

Today, Sheikh Hasina stands transformed from the political fugitive as she was in 1975, to be in the center of the political life of the nation, pioneering the struggle to re-establish the ideals for which millions of Bangalees fought and died. Sheikh Hasina steered the historic mass movement which toppled the autocratic regime of General Ershad and forced him to transfer power through constitutional means. At a huge public meeting in Dhaka on November 6, 1990 Sheikh Hasina announced the constitutional formula for the peaceful transfer of power in accordance with Articles 51 and 56 of the Constitution. This was eventually accepted by the entire nation. On November 27, 1990 Sheikh Hasina was again confined in Bangabandhu Bhaban following the proclamation of a state of emergency. But the government was forced to release her the same day, in the face of a mass protest against her arrest. On December 4, 1990 General Ershad was compelled to step down and accept the demand of the people following a 24 hour ultimatum Issued by Sheikh Hasina.

It was a matter of great disappointment, however, that her party did not get an absolute majority in Parliament in the 1991 national elections. the Awami League received 38% of the popular vote and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party received 31%.

Sheikh Hasina's accomplishments as Leader of the Opposition in Parliament drew the admiration of the entire nation. As in the past, she stood firmly on the side of the people on every issue in which the interests of the people were involved. She observed how the Presidential System had been abused by previous leaders. Sheikh Hasina steered all the political parties towards a parliamentary system which eventually had to be accepted by the BNP government. Indeed, it was due to her initiative and leadership that today the nation has been able to attain its goal of establishing a parliamentary form of government.

Sheikh Hasina has always stood by the poor masses of Bangladesh. In 1992, she launched a nationwide campaign to help the farmers and workers who had been suffering from negligence and indifference under the BNP government. In 1995, peasants raised their protest against an artificial fertilizer crisis created by the BNP leaders and their henchmen, which resulted in the death of 18 peasants in police firing. Sheikh Hasina reacted sharply in support of the poor peasants and mobilised a strong peasant movement across the country to protect their interest. Soon after, the BNP government killed 17 workers who had been agitating against the closure of several hundred mills and factories. Sheikh Hasina rushed to the aid of the workers to share their concerns and helped them to unite in the defense of their rights.

In August 1995, a teen-aged girl Yasmin was raped and brutally killed by a gang of policemen in Dinajpur. Seeing no justice being done a group of people surrounded the police station and demanded justice. The police opened fire and killed seven of the protesters. Sheikh Hasina strongly protested against this cruelty and, using the example of the Dinajpur incident aroused public awareness about similar crimes committed by the BNP government. This led to an enormous public reaction against the BNP all over Bangladesh.

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As Leader of the Opposition in Parliament, Sheikh Hasina always upheld the interest of the people and the cause of democracy. Witnessing what happened during the previous by-elections Sheikh Hasina began to demand the creation of a permanent system which would ensure free and fair elections in the country. She demanded the resignation of the BNP government and proposed the establishment of a non-party, neutral, caretaker government to conduct national election.

In 1994, Sheikh Hasina succeeded in organising a campaign that brought together other major opposition parties closer to hers in the movement for democracy. When all negotiations with the government failed, the opposition members in Parliament resigned on December 28, 1994. Sheikh Hasina launched a renewed movement demanding that general elections be held under a neutral caretaker government. The movement gained momentum when the BNP held polls on February 15, 1996 which was boycotted by all political parties. The boycott was universally supported and the turnout of voters was as low as 5%. On March 9, 1996 Sheikh Hasina declared a non-cooperation movement against the BNP government. People from all strata of society along with government officials and employees fully cooperated with the movement. As the non-cooperation movement approached a climax, at the directive of Sheikh Hasina, the 'Janatar Mancha' i.e. people's platform, was organised in Dhaka. Thousands of people from all walks of life expressed their solidarity with the movement. This turned out to be the final blow to the BNP government, and on March 30, 1996 the then Prime Minister Khaleda Zia was forced to resign and a non-party caretaker government was formed. Even the most virulent of her critics were compelled to congratulate Sheikh Hasina on her political sagacity in the creation of a neutral caretaker government and her successful exercise of leadership in mobilising popular support. The idea of a neutral caretaker government is seen by political observers as a significant contribution of Sheikh Hasina to the cause of democracy. Political thinkers feel that this system may be applied to other Third World countries in future.

Sheikh Hasina has made it clear at various points of time that she would continue her struggle for the economic emancipation of the poor masses. This has always been her fundamental political objective. She has often said, "The rich minority of the people must stop exploiting the poor majority". Sheikh Hasina has vowed to eliminate corruption. According to her, "Corruption at the top levels of government is the root of many evils in society". She believes that corruption can be checked at all levels only if corrupt government leaders are dealt with an iron hand.

Sheikh Hasina's courage and charisma have often invited attempts on her life. Unidentified gunmen opened fire on her residence several times. On September 11, 1991 during the parliamentary by-elections, a group of armed BNP hooligans shot at her. The bullet narrowly missed her. During her Train March in 1994, gunmen opened fire on her compartment at Ishurdi railway station. In the last anti-government movement, Sheikh Hasina's rallies were attacked by BNP activists, who opened fire and hurled bombs to disrupt those meetings. However, defying such attacks, she boldly addressed the rallies and declared that if the Awami League could form the government, it would eliminate terrorism from society. No threat could deter her from the struggle to achieve the right to vote and bring about economic emancipation of the people.

Despite the heavy responsibilities of being the leader of the largest political party in the country, Sheikh Hasina has also been working tirelessly to promote international peace, disarmament, racial harmony, goodwill and fraternity among nations. In 1984, she attended the Sixth Congress of the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organisation (AAPSO) in Algiers as a special guest. At the invitation of PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat, Sheikh Hasina visited the PLO headquarters in

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Tunisia in 1985 and exchanged views with PLO leaders on international affairs and matters of mutual interest.

Sheikh Hasina was also a special guest at the First Eleanor Roosevelt International Caucus of Women Political Leaders, organised by the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs in San Francisco in 1987. In 1988, she delivered the keynote speech on Disarmament and Development at the Seventh Congress of Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organisation in New Delhi. In 1988, Sheikh Hasina attended the meeting of the Presidium Committee of the World Peace Council in Prague as a member of the Presidium of the World Peace Council. She was a special guest at an international seminar held in Dhaka by Bangladesh Peace Council in 1992. She also attended the Convention of the Democratic Party in New York in 1992.

Sheikh Hasina has also been very active in the promotion of bilateral relations in the South Asian region. She has visited India on a number of occasions for deliberation with its leaders on bilateral problems. As a special guest, she visited Katmandu in 1992 to attend an International Seminar on Lord Buddha organised by the Nepal-Bangladesh Friendship and Cultural Association. She attended a meeting of the Leaders of the Opposition of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) held in Karachi in 1992. On November 5, 1993 she visited China as Leader of the Opposition where she discussed bilateral and multilateral issues relating to agricultural and industrial development of Bangladesh with Chinese co-operation.

Sheikh Hasina has been an active participant in promoting the cause of Human Rights as well as the rights of women. In June 1993, she addressed the NGO conference held in Vienna prior to the Second World Congress on Human Rights. She visited Washington D.C. on February 2, 1994 in response to an invitation of the Chairman of the Congressional Executive Committee to the National Prayer Breakfast. In March, 1994 while visiting India, she met with the Prime Minister of India and discussed the issue of sharing of the Ganges waters and demanded a reasonable solution. She also demanded that the "Tin Bigha Corridor" should remain open for the citizens of Bangladesh round the clock. In May 1994, she attended the Socialist International Seminar in Tokyo, Japan. In 1994, she was elected Vice President of the Eastern Vision Forum at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Sheikh Hasina has dedicated her life to the difficult and often dangerous task of crusading for democracy in her country, rather than opting for a safe and comfortable life abroad. In February 1996, an English news commentary broadcast on the BBC World Service programme described Sheikh Hasina as an 'Iron Lady' for her uncompromising stand on the issue of the democratic rights of the people.

In the midst of her pre-occupation with the day-to-day responsibilities as president of the Awami League and Leader of the Opposition, she never lost sight of her goals, nor did she falter in her firm commitment to the cause of freedom and human rights.

Now, at the apex of her political life, Sheikh Hasina is an outstanding Third World leader who has made great contributions in enlarging the scope of freedom for the people and enriching the human spirit. Today, Sheikh Hasina ranks first and foremost among the political leaders in Bangladesh. It is because of her leadership that she has successfully been able to lead her party through a relentless mass movement in ousting a military autocratic regime. Hers is the voice of

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the people, of reason and pragmatism. She is always graceful even after hectic organisational activities. She is a person with vision and balanced approach to life. An ardent protagonist of the parliamentary form of government, Sheikh Hasina believes in a mixed economy and healthy competition between the public and the private sectors. She is in full agreement with the essence of the foreign policy expounded by her father— "Friendship to all, malice to none".

"I have taken a vow to transform this country into a politically stable one. Deep in my heart, I believe that economic development that changes people's fate can come only through political stability." Sheikh Hasina has said, adding, "My political aim is to ensure the people's right to ballot and bread. I want to start from the grassroots, where the majority of the poorest of the poor live in inhuman conditions".

Sheikh Hasina's life has been dedicated to the people of Bangladesh. Her political ambitions begin and end with the welfare of the people of Bangladesh. Her goal is to fulfill her father's dream of building a golden Bangladesh, "Sonar Bangla". Her political aim is the establishment of a free, just and caring society. Sheikh Hasina has often said, "If I have to lay down my life like my father, I am ready for it".

It was Sheikh Hasina's unswerving commitment to democratic ideals and secular values which made her a symbol of the aspirations of the people. She launched her crusade for the restoration of democracy in the country right from the time she touched the soil of Bangladesh in 1981. Defying the then President General Ziaur Rahman's autocratic rule, she declared, "I have nothing to lose. I pledge to fight for the restoration of democracy in the country and the fundamental rights of my people". She has adhered to her promise.

Two decades of military and quasi-military rule destroyed the existing democratic institutions of the country. They also created a lumpen class at the helm of affairs of the state, who plundered the economy, destroyed values, crippled the education system and corrupted the society. Hardly any civil institution was left unscathed by all pervasive greed and hatred perpetuated by the Generals and their civil-military cronies.

Sheikh Hasina knew well that it would be a daunting task on her part to revive the shattered democratic institutions, if her party was voted to power in the June 12, 1996 national elections. Keeping this in mind, she made it categorically clear in her election manifesto that if the Awami League won the elections she would form a government of national consensus with a view to clearing the refuse and waste that had piled up in society during two decades of misrule.

After assuming power as Prime Minister on June 23, 1996 she re-assured the nation of her election commitments by inducting ministers from the Jatiya Party (JP) and the Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD) in her newly formed cabinet. Later, she inducted two ministers from the BNP in her cabinet. Regarding the economic policy of her government, she reiterated the prime need for alleviation of poverty through creation of maximum employment opportunity, both in rural and urban areas, especially in the predominantly agricultural sector.

In her first address to the nation after becoming Prime Minister, she said that peasants, who are the mainstay of the economy, would be rendered all possible support in the form of supply of agro-inputs, fertilizer, seeds, pesticides and irrigation equipment at low price, if need be, through price subsidy. She also reconfirmed that her government of national consensus would stick to its

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announced policy of pursuing a free-market economy by allowing the forces of demand and supply to determine the economic equilibrium. She also made emphatic mention of her government's policy of carrying out necessary structural reforms in the economy to put it at par with the global economic system.

Face that reflects Bangladesh

Sheikh Hasina, the eldest daughter of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the father of the nation, ended her term of office of Prime Minister on July 15, 2001, after successfully completing her mandate. This was the first time in the history of Bangladesh (born in 1971) that a constitutional government, duly elected under free and fair elections, conducted by a neutral caretaker government, peacefully transferred power to a successor caretaker government, a rare feat indeed in any third world country. Between 1996 and July 2001, Sheikh Hasina led Bangladesh from the front, with a hands-on style of dynamic governance. She restored political, economic and social stability; institutionalized the forces of democracy, peace and freedom and through prudent macroeconomic and sectoral policies, initiated sustained economic growth with equity and social justice. Bangladesh posted an average of 5.5 per cent GDP growth per annum for the entire duration of her term of office, with low inflation, averaging 1.5 per cent per annum. This was perhaps the most remarkable achievement of her government in the economic sector. Sheikh Hasina introduced the financial sector reforms, set up the parliamentarians training institute, the law reforms commission. She created a massive social security net for the poor and vulnerable segment of the population with targeted poverty alleviation programmes/projects covering health, housing, food, welfare and security of the poor citizens in general, and women and children in particular. The shelter and livelihood project called Asrayan provide shelter, credit, training and education to more than 33,000 extremely poor families of the country, spread all over Bangladesh. Micro credit and training programmes under the aegis of 14 different agencies and ministries of the government helped directly in alleviating poverty. She introduced many direct programmes for the upliftment of women and children and supervised them directly. Bangladesh set a rare example of astute and near perfect disaster management in 1998 when the country was devastated by the worst floods of the century which engulfed more than two thirds of the country for a period lasting three months. Many pundits and media had predicted that at least 20 million people would die in these floods. But, through Sheikh Hasina's exceptional and extraordinary handling, not a single person perished and Bangladesh survived this unprecedented natural disaster. More than 4 million families were given food stamps (under the vulnerable group feeding programme) for nine months to help them cope with the losses sustained due to the floods. Adequate management of post flood problems resulted in bumper winter crops.

When she became prime minister in June 1996, Bangladesh was a food deficit country. The average cereal deficit was of the order of 4 million tons per annum. When she left office, Bangladesh had a surplus of 2.5 million tons of food grains, for the first time in its history. Appropriate policies, programmes and inputs for the food and agriculture sector and their timely implementation had enabled this, i.e., the transformation of the country from a food deficit to a food surplus one. In recognition of her success in the food, nutrition and agriculture sector, the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) awarded her the prestigious Ceres Award (1999).

Two other crowning achievements of Sheikh Hasina are the Ganges Water Sharing Treaty with India and the Peace Accord with the tribal dissidents of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. These were

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outstanding sores of decades and had bled Bangladesh politically, socially and economically. Through her bold, imaginative and innovative leadership she solved them within the first two years of her tenure, without help and/or mediation from any third party. This was another unique feature of her achievements. For more than two decades the areas comprising the Chittagong Hill Tracts were disturbed with low level insurgency. The state spent millions in keeping a semblance of order in the area. There were deaths and diseases affecting the people and the security forces. The Peace Accord of 1997 ended that all and the area is now fully integrated into the mainstream of life in Bangladesh. Massive development efforts have been undertaken for its economic development.

The Ganges Water Sharing treaty has helped the south western districts of Bangladesh in having adequate water during the lean season of April/May and brought about significant improvements in Bangladesh's bilateral relations with India with which it shares a border of more than 4,000 miles. In recognition of her initiatives in bringing peace in the Chittagong Hills and signing of the water treaty Sheikh Hasina was awarded the UNESCO peace prize (Felix Houphouet-Boigny prize) in 1998. For her leading role in promoting peace at home and abroad she was the only head of government to be invited to address the Hague Appeal for Peace Conference. When both India and Pakistan detonated nuclear devices and became nuclear powers, Sheikh Hasina took a major initiative in defusing tension in the region by visiting both the countries and counseling to lence and restraint to their leader Sheikh Hasina had won the elections in 1996 on the basis of her manifesto in which she had promised to return people's right to vote and food. One recalls with horror and dismay the voterless elections of February 15, 1996, in which the people of Bangladesh were effectively disenfranchised. Sheikh Hasina's movement for the restoration of people's right to vote got its flywheel from this sham of an election conducted by the discredited BNP government.

After winning elections in 1996, Sheikh Hasina initiated all the necessary moves to consolidate democracy and give it a firm root. She made parliament the focal point of all discussions on major policies, introduced and enacted scores of bills for reforms and made all actions of her government accountable and transparent. She introduced the Prime Minister's question time for the first time and took questions every Tuesday whenever the parliament was in session. She reformed the parliamentary committee system by making MPs rather than ministers, their chairpersons. The system worked with remarkable success and for the first time in the history of Bangladesh, the committees became effective and lively forum of debates and recommendations on major national and international issues. Through this process, she returned the government to the people of Bangladesh.

Former US President Bill Clinton visited Bangladesh in March 2000—the first official visit by a US president to our country. The impressive record of Bangladesh in poverty alleviation, stable macroeconomic growth, infrastructure development, gender equity and overall socio-economic advancement were the main reasons for enthusing a US president to visit Bangladesh. He was much impressed by what he saw during his brief stay—the poverty alleviation efforts in particular. He met with the beneficiaries of the special shelter and livelihood project called the Asryan, Sheikh Hasina's brainchild, and was moved to tears by his interaction with the beneficiaries. He mentioned in no uncertain terms that Bangladesh is a country with immense potentialities and the most wonderful human resources. Sheikh Hasina's government has done very well in harnessing these resources. He had pledged all support for the economic development of Bangladesh during his bilateral discussions with prime minister Sheikh Hasina.

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In recognising her pioneering role in poverty alleviation in particular the G-8 summit organisers invited her to attend the last summit in Italy. This was a unique event in as much as no other Asian leader had ever been invited to any G-8 outreach event before. The exclusivity of this rich men's club is well known. But that notwithstanding, Sheikh Hasina was singled out for an exceptional honour. When the Italian prime minister, the chair of the summit, was told by our foreign office that Sheikh Hasina's term of office would end before the summit, he (the Italian prime minister) changed the invitation to a personal one to enable Sheikh Hasina to participate and make her own contributions in this major event. Sheikh Hasina's persuasive intervention made poverty alleviation a major agenda item of the summits to be held in future. G-8 is the grouping of the richest nations of the world and they control more than two thirds of global industrial output. Their concern is with growth and stability. Poverty is something quite alien to their line of thinking, and yet they realised the importance of this overarching theme in a total global perspective—thanks to Sheikh Hasina's exceptional articulation of the main issues in her address to the outreach event on poverty alleviation.

The commitment of Sheikh Hasina to democracy, pluralism, freedom, peace, liberty, tolerance and universalism are now well known and as a result she has emerged as an outstanding global personality. She has improved the image and standing of Bangladesh in the comity of nations, like no one could ever imagine. From the so called international basket case a la Henry Kissinger, Bangladesh under her bold, charismatic and dynamic leadership has emerged as a nation with pride and high prospects few were willing to attribute to her before 23 June, 1996. This is her most outstanding accomplishment in a short period of five years. It has taken similarly situated nations 20/30 years to come anywhere near such a feat.

Daughter of Democracy

Mankind has entered a new millennium. New hopes and aspirations, new dreams and new ideas are sweeping the intellectual realms of the developed as well as the developing world. New ideas and dreams are blooming everywhere around us.

Democracy is said to have been spreading its roots all over the globe. Liberalisation of global economic regimes are opening up a tremendous potential for development that was inconceivable in the past. The information superhighway, computer technology revolution, rapid developments in harnessing reusable and pollution-free sources of energy, maddening progress in gene technology, advancements in medical science and other branches of science assure us that mankind has scaled an enviable height of. But what did all these mean to Bangladesh at the advent of the new millennium?

They symbolise the following:

- A popular democratic government has been established.
- The economy is being streamlined and a high growth prospects were in view.
- Public sector reforms were generating positive results and a stable economic regime is expected to be in place.
- The Financial sector is being regularised and major reforms are under way.
- Education system is being geared up to meet the needs of the nation and the government worked on a new education policy, which would incorporate all the necessary elements of an appropriate system.

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- The civil society movement gained in strength so much so that the NGOs and other social development organizations are playing increasingly important roles in certain fields of social and human development in the country.
- Long standing problems with neighbours have either been solved or at least mitigated, and an aura of good neighbourliness has been created in the eastern flank of the South Asian subcontinent.
- Religious fundamentalism and cultural intolerance against other people's religious practices have been completely eliminated from the soil of Bangladesh. Bangladesh is now an ideal place of religious harmony and ethnic and cultural tolerance.

Taken all these together, Bangladesh can boast as a country that nurtures democracy and respects human rights. Given stable political environment, the country may become an example of democracy and development for others in the first quarter of the 21st century.

Bangladesh has been a quagmire of democracy for more than two decades. The promises that had been there upfront as the nation emerged independent from a sea of blood on December 16, 1971 were blighted with the gruesome murder of the Father of the Nation and the President of the country Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on August 15, 1975. He was murdered by a disgruntled faction of the armed forces who were instigated and financed and later provided with legal cover by the forces that had opposed the independence of Bangladesh. These forces could not accept their humiliating defeat in 1971 in the hands of Bengali freedom fighters, and were waiting in ambush for a moment to hit back. As they could not do away with the historical and political reality of Bangladesh as a free and sovereign country they engaged themselves in a conspiracy to eliminate the forces that had provided leadership to the independence movement. They first targeted Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and members of his family including his wife, three sons, two daughters-in-law, his brother, and his close relatives like Sheikh Fazlul Haq Moni, President of the youth front of the Awami League, and Abdur Rab Serniabat, his brother-in-law and a cabinet minister. After killing them in the early hours of August 15, 1975 the gang of a few Majors killed Syed Nazrul Islam, Tajuddin Ahmed, Capt. Mansur Ali and AHM Quamaruzzaman who formed the top leadership of the Awami League. The first two were Acting President and Prime Minister of the provisional government of Bangladesh at Mujibnagar that led the War of Independence. The killers had put them into jail after killing the Father of the Nation. But apprehending that the people could burst into mass-upsurge and storm the jail to set their leaders free, the murderer Majors killed the four national leaders inside the maximum security cells of Dhaka Central Jail at dead of night on November 3, 1975.

A reign of terror set in under the brutal military authority of General Ziaur Rahman. As the Martial law supremo Ziaur Rahman used all his training and motivation that he had received in the Pakistan army to suppress the democratic aspirations of the people of Bangladesh. Through military decrees he indemnified the killings of August 15 and November 3 and rewarded the killers with diplomatic assignments and big business deals. He rallied the anti-liberation forces around him and proudly announced that he would make politics difficult for the civilians. He was honest to his utterances. The following years saw the emergence of barrack-backed politics and controlled political activities that saw the patronisation of election rigging, massive vote fraud, buying of political favour and rampant embezzlement of aid funds by the allies of self-proclaimed rulers [Army Generals and civil bureaucrats]. The anti-Bangladesh political forces acted as their henchmen. Politics had been militarised in its lengths and breadths.

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But there had always been light at the end of the tunnel, and the dark and ominous clouds were not without silver linings. The Awami League was a huge political party with supporters in every household in Bangladesh and its supporters, sympathisers and workers had not accepted the rule of the Generals as a political system. They waged a relentless struggle against military rule in whatever form they could. Those were the most testing years for Bangladesh. The democracy that we now enjoy has been largely the contribution of the followers of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who refused to wilt under pressure and temptation and stood like a rock against the long military oligarchic rule of General Zia (1975-81) and General Ershad (1982-1990). The silver lining was that Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib's daughter Sheikh Hasina was alive and the nation pinned its hopes on her. They saw the image of the daughter of democracy in her. The nation began to call her by that name.

In an interview with 'Newsweek' on May 11, 1981 following her election as the President of the Awami League Sheikh Hasina said she was neither afraid of being killed nor deterred by the strength of the government she would face. "in one's life," she said, "risks must be taken. If a person is afraid of death, life has no dignity." "One of my priorities will be to restore the full democratic rights of all the people of the nation," Sheikh Hasina added. And she told the people that she was convinced that her father's legacy would strengthen their cause. "The people of Bangladesh had a lot of love and affection for him", she said. "I will be able to complete his work."

Sentinel of Peace, Saviour of People

Sheikh Hasina was conferred Doctoral degree of Law by the Boston University, USA on 6 February 1997, Honorary Doctor of Law by the Waseda University of Japan on 4 July 1997, an Honorary Doctorate of Philosophy in Liberal Arts by University of Abertay Dundee of the United Kingdom on 25 October 1997 and Desikottama (Honorary) degree of Doctor of Literature by Visva-Bharati of India on 28 January 1999.

She was also conferred the degree of Doctor of Laws, Honoris Causa, for her distinguished creative contributions in the service of society by the Australian National University on 20 October 1999. Dhaka University conferred Honorary 'Doctor of Laws' degree to Sheikh Hasina on 18 December, 1999 for her outstanding contribution towards peace and democracy.

The world famous Catholic University of Brussels, Belgium conferred Honorary Doctorate degree (Doctor Honoris Causa) on Sheikh Hasina on 4 February, 2000 for her decisive role in establishing democracy, protecting human rights and peace. Sheikh Hasina has been conferred Honorary Doctor of Humane Letters by the Bridgeport University, USA on 5 September, 2000. Sheikh Hasina has been awarded UNESCO's Houphouet-Boigny Peace Prize for 1998 for her outstanding contribution in Bringing peace through ending the 25 years of conflict in Chittagong Hill Tracts with political courage and statesmanship.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina received prestigious Pearl S. Buck award '99 on 9 April 2000 in recognition of her vision, courage, achievements in political economic and humanitarian fields by Randolph Macon Women's College of USA. The UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO)

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has been awarded the prestigious 'CERES' medal to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in recognition to her fight against hunger on 02 August, 1999.

Sheikh Hasina was named Paul Harris Fellow by the Rotary Foundation of Rotary International. She was also given Medal of Distinction in 1996-97 and 1998-99 and Head of State Medal in 1996-97 by the International Association of Lions Clubs.

The All India Peace Council announced on 12 April 1998 that Sheikh Hasina has been given 'Mother Teresa Award'.

She was awarded Personality of Asia 2000 by the Afro-Asian Lawyers Federation for Human Rights along with the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, who was awarded the same for Africa.

Sheikh Hasina has been awarded M K Gandhi Award for 1998 for her contribution towards promotion of communal understanding, non-violent religious harmony and growth of grass-roots democracy in Bangladesh. The Mahatma M K Gandhi Foundation of Oslo, Norway gives the award. The Foundation is named after Mahatma Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, the great Indian leader, statesman and philosopher, known the world over for promotion of human right and non-violence. Previous winners of the Award include President Jimmy Carter of the United States; President Mikhail Gorbachev of the former Soviet Union; President Nelson Mandela of South Africa (Nobel laureate for peace) and Professor John Galtung of Norway, known for his work for peace science.

Very few politicians in Bangladesh now can match the inherent talent and wide vision the former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has. One can conclude that these virtues have made her the most beloved and most honoured leader. She is certainly a soldier who has long waged a war against autocracy, poverty, terrorism and corruption. She is again a politician who envisioned a land of affluence so every citizen gets his/her fair share of the wealth of his/her nation. She always reiterates that state power to her is only a means to serve the people and not to subjugate them. That is the principal reason why she is closer to the people than any other politician of her time irrespective of the fact that she is in or out of power. That does not really matter much.

After years of struggle that pitted her against the military dictators and autocrats and disguised fundamentalists she proved her credentials to the people and her country more than anything else. Let every human society know that Bangladesh under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina will pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, and oppose any foe to assure the survival and the ultimate success of liberty.