Wednesday, Aug. 14, 2024 / So you toppled an autocrat

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): Maybe you heard about the tumult in Bangladesh?

<SCORING IN> Tabla menace

*<CLIP> THE TELEGRAPH: Bangladeshi protesters chanting*

SEAN: You had a once beloved, increasingly autocratic and corrupt leader in power since 2009. Sheikh Hasina. A nepo baby. But her family was killed in a coup so a nepo baby with lots of baggage. I digress. The people, especially the young people wanted her out this summer. But she wanted to stay.

*<CLIP> AP NEWS: KRUTIKA PATHI, SOUTH ASIA REPORTER: Hasina cracked down hard, deploying security forces, shutting off the internet, and enforcing a nationwide curfew with a shoot on sight order. More than 300 people have been killed in clashes since mid-July, when the protests turned deadly.*

SEAN: The people ultimately prevailed, as they often do.

*<CLIP> THE TELEGRAPH: Sheikh Hasina’s helicopter flying away*

*<CLIP> AL JAZEERA: CHARLES STRATFORD, CORRESPONDENT: In an address to the nation, the army chief confirmed Hasina had resigned and fled the country.*

SEAN: And now, of all people, there’s an internationally renowned Nobel laureate in charge. And we’re gonna ask how he can salvage the situation there on *Today, Explained*.

SCORING OUT

[THEME]

SEAN: Age has been a major theme of our election here in the United States this year. But we’re far from the only country with old options. Bangladesh just replaced an almost 77-year-old leader with a guy who just turned 84. One of the many differences, though, between our country and theirs, is that young people in Bangladesh are excited about the 84-year-old. We asked freelance journalist Redwan Ahmed, who’s based in Dhaka, Bangladesh, to tell us about his new prime minister, the Nobel Peace Prize-winning godfather of microfinance, Mohamed Yunus.

REDWAN: So Muhammad Yunus is a very well-known figure across the world, and is very well loved in Bangladesh as well.

*<CLIP> BARACK OBAMA: 35 years ago, a young economics professor at a university in Bangladesh was struck by the disconnect between the theories he was teaching in class and the reality of the famine outside. So determined to help, Muhammad Yunus left the classroom for a village…*

REDWAN: He is seen as kind of like a bridge person in this difficult time, like Joe Biden, if I may say, like how he was seen during the 2020 elections. So the student leaders who led the protest, they were very adamant on bringing in Muhammad Yunus as an interim government leader. He's hugely popular, especially because he's the only Bangladeshi to win the Nobel Peace Prize. And, you know, his proximity to the global figures like Secretary Clinton and, you know, the proximity to the Obama administration made him very cherished and talked about. And so people seemed very happy. People seemed very jubilant on the streets. And they said, like, okay, we're so happy that finally we have an educated leader because so far we have had these like cronies, the political party leaders who just thought about the party line, the partisan politics and corruption. So they think this is a great change, this is a great possibility for the country to have him as a leader.

*<CLIP> NBC NEWS: BANGLADESHI PROTESTER: Everyone is happy, everyone is cheerful, everyone is celebrating.*

<SCORING IN> Neutral Irene

SEAN: Tell us what he won the Nobel Prize for.

REDWAN: So he initiated this Grameen Bank in 1983 to provide, like small loans to entrepreneurs in the in the countryside of the people, especially the women entrepreneurs who would normally not qualify to get loans from the banks. He was a professor at Chittagong University, one of Bangladesh's leading university in Chittagong. He found a small village and the name of the village was Jobra. So he picked a few women farmers and, you know, he had this small amount of loan that he gave them as, as a pilot project.

*<CLIP> MUHAMMAD YUNUS: It started with a little amount of money. So little that you can laugh at it, looking back. It is a total loan of $27 to 42 people.*

REDWAN: So that's how he basically started this practice of micro-lending, which eventually…like there are critics of that system. But, you know, in largely what we have seen in Bangladesh a lot of people have benefited from this particular program because the banking sector, they have huge regulations and huge difficulties giving out loan to the small entrepreneurs.

*<CLIP> MUHAMMAD YUNUS: Today, Grameen Bank gives loans to nearly 7 million poor people. 97% of them are women. In 73,000 villages of Bangladesh.*

REDWAN: It's also largely believed that it helped a lot of people, especially in the rural side, to have a better condition for themselves.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: What did the critics have to say about these microfinance ideas?

REDWAN: So one of the biggest critics so far, especially in Bangladesh, is, like, the huge interest rate that often push people towards a debt trap. They keep taking loans after loans to repay the previous loans.

*<CLIP> AL JAZEERA: MEHDI HASAN, ANCHOR: For example, France 24 reported on a former Grameen Bank debt collector a few years ago who said their technique is to scare borrowers and insult them. “We tell them to sell their clothes. I'm not proud of myself. Several times I'd even been obliged to say, ‘Sell your children.’ That, that… we should ignore that kind of stuff?*

*MUHAMMAD YUNUS: Absolutely ignore it. These are cooked up stories. You don't know who said what. You have to go back to the basic principle…*

REDWAN: In some cases, there have been reports of suicides when the borrowers they could not repay the money, and they killed themselves because the banks or the institutions who are providing these small loans, they were pursuing them for repayment. And in some cases, we have also seen that the lenders that took away the cattles that families owned, who could not pay back. That also created a lot of backlash against the system, especially Grameen system.

SEAN: So what's his relationship like with the former prime minister?

REDWAN: So there's this very, like, interesting relationship between these two.

SCORING IN <Scanning the horizon>

REDWAN: Sheikh Hasina did actually help Yunus when he was starting out with this idea of microfinancing. And, you know, she was also a champion of this microfinancing ideas. And things started to change after Yunus won the Nobel Peace Prize, especially during 2007 and eight.

*<CLIP> PBS NEWSHOUR: FRED DE SAM LAZARO, CONTRIBUTOR: She's publicly denounced Yunus as a corrupt opportunist in a spat that experts traced back to 2007 in a time of political upheaval, when Yunus toyed with forming his own party.*

SEAN: She was jealous.

REDWAN: Well, I would not disagree. I think she, she made that clear several times by saying, ‘I'm not jealous.’

SEAN: <laughs>

REDWAN: That came up repeatedly, especially after, you know, she actually helped host these million refugees on the Myanmar border. In Cox's Bazar, there is more than a million Rohingya refugees. So her close circle said she was expecting a Nobel Peace Prize then.   
  
SEAN: Mmmmm.   
  
REDWAN: But when it didn't happen, she was believed to be very pissed at the international community. So she was very adamant that she did not like Yunus especially after 2009.

*<CLIP> MUHAMMAD YUNUS: She calls me as a bloodsucker of the poor people.*

SCORING OUT

SEAN: They're kind of after the same economic legacy. Right? Sheikh Hasina touted improving Bangladesh's economy and, and said she made it one of the fastest growing. Yunus is this economic development hero recognized around the world. Who do you think has been more successful in, in bringing opportunity to Bangladeshis?

REDWAN: I think that's a very tricky question in terms of like, you know, who is more successful because they both had very two different roles. Like, you know, Hasina was in the government. So her focus was mostly in governing and, you know, leading the country. Whereas Yunus was more of a global figure and he was expanding his work across the world. So, Sheikh Hasina did a lot for the country, though a lot of it was just a product of the time.

*<CLIP> SHEIKH HASINA: Which is our priority? Food security, nutrition, healthcare, housing, clothing, everything. So we are going smoothly.*

REDWAN: She did a lot of infrastructure development in Bangladesh. She built a lot of, you know, a lot of bridges, a lot of infrastructure, roads and highways. And, she helped the country transition from the LDC, like least developing country, to the developing country status.

*<CLIP> SHEIKH HASINA:We are developing our economy very fast. You know that. Before Covid-19 pandemic, we achieved our GDP, 8%, 8.1%.*

REDWAN: And on the other hand, Yunus has been very successful in having … he won the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

*<CLIP> BARACK OBAMA: Muhammad Yunus was just trying to help a village, but he somehow managed to change the world.*

REDWAN: His ideas was being touted, you know, globally. There was a very wide acceptance of the things that he was, he was preaching. So I think, I mean, there is no any head to head comparison between these two because, you know, that they were playing in a very different arena.

SEAN: Alright. Well, she’s out. And he’s in. But he didn’t win an election. He’s been tasked with overseeing a caretaker government. What does that entail?

REDWAN: So this caretaker government, their main task was to hold elections. But now this is very tricky because the student protesters who basically led this protest and this uprising which resulted in the ousting of Sheikh Hasina, they are in favor of keeping this government for a longer term …

SEAN: Mmmmmm!

REDWAN: … to, to do what they are demanding as election reform of the nation.   
  
SEAN: Hm.   
  
REDWAN: They say that Awami League in the past 15 years have totally corrupted the government. They have completely destroyed the system, the state mechanisms. So their demand right now is like, for the country to move forward, they have to have a complete reform of the system, and that is not doable in three months, six months, or even a year.

*<CLIP> NBC NEWS: SAIRAJ SALEKIN, STUDENT PROTESTER: This is not just the end of the tyrant, Sheikh Hasina. With this, we put an end to the mafia state that she has created. We don't want a military government. We need a civilian government. And we’re going to ensure it.*

<SCORING IN> The sky darkens

REDWAN: We are hearing a lot about, you know, this government might stay much longer. We never know how it is going to go down with Yunus as its leader. As we also know, he's pretty old as well. It is. He's 84. And we have seen what happens with 84-year-old leaders. <laughs>

SEAN: <laughs> You know, sometimes they're very stubborn and try to stay in office. Has he said what he might do? Has he said, ‘I'm just here for a couple of months. Don't mind me.’ Or has he said, ‘I'm going to figure out how to stay longer.’

REDWAN: He hasn't said anything about the tenure publicly, which is very frustrating for a lot of political parties, especially on the opposition in the last 15 years, 15 or 17 years. Because they are very hungry for power. They can't wait to see an election taking place. Whereas, you know, the government, the current interim government has not said a word about their term.

SCORING BUMP  
  
SEAN: Redwan Ahmed. Freelancer based in Dhaka. Catch his work in the *Guardian*, *Voice of America*, and right here on *Today, Explained*. When we are back how to take care of a government as a caretaker government.

SCORING OUT

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

DAN SLATER (University of Michigan professor): I'm Dan Slater. I'm a professor of political science at the University of Michigan, and I'm the director of the Center for Emerging Democracies there.

SEAN: You know, Muhammad Yunus is popular, but it takes more than that to transition a country from autocracy to democracy. Tell us a bit about caretaker governments and what it takes to make a successful one.

DAN: Well, usually a successful one won't be in power very long at all.

SEAN: Ha!

DAN: And hopefully it will use its power pretty lightly. And I think the real key is that the caretaker government sees itself as a, sort of, neutral party. Doesn't side real strongly with, you know, either side or with the other, particularly in a highly polarized, contentious, tumultuous context like Bangladesh right now. So it's really not the popularity of Yunus per se that matters. It's really more his ability to to create the perception that he's above the fray and trying to, you know, start Bangladesh on a path of reforms that gets it out of, the kind of downward spiral of autocratic backsliding it's been going through for the past decade or so.

SEAN: But the same student protesters who managed to somehow get rid of Sheikh Hasina seem to want Yunus to stick around for a while. Is that going to be an issue here?

DAN: I'm sure it'll be an issue. You know, the timing is certainly of the essence, but I think the bigger issue is not how long it lasts, but how, again, how neutral they're able to appear. Are they able to put in place, you know, reforms that have some consensus across different elites that won't be seen to be doing the bidding of one group or another? You know, I mean, Bangladesh has a long history of being really polarized between two different political parties. Neither of those, I expect, is going anywhere. So the key here really is to make sure that the Awami League, you know, Sheikh Hasina’s political party, that their members don't feel that they're being targeted, that they're being ousted.

*<CLIP> WION: Despite facing an unceremonious ouster of its prime minister, Sheikh Hasina, followed by targeted violence on its activists and leaders, Bangladesh's Awami league is not prepared to be written off any time just now.*

DAN: The whole reason for these protests was the sense that Awami League, you know, members and followers were getting all the goodies. And so it's going to be very, very challenging to, to move forward in a way that levels the playing field and doesn't, you know, make the, you know, people who were followers of the former government feel like they're major losers here.  
  
SEAN: Bangladesh isn’t the first country to go through this. What can we learn from everyone else who’s been in the same position?

DAN: You know, the cases that probably jump to mind the most for me would be Egypt and Indonesia.

SEAN: Hm!

DAN: Which have a lot of parallels themselves. So, you know, Egypt, I think, is a case where, you know, you can think about 2011, Tahrir Square. And again, you get the excision, the removal of a particular autocrat.

*<CLIP> ABC NEWS, 2011: It's literally just been announced that Hosni Mubarak is to step down and they're streaming into Tahrir Square to celebrate…*

<SCORING IN> A clear vision of the future

DAN: And at least for a time, you know, I think there was a real consensus that, you know, there was a need to move forward and kind of move away from the legacies of the Mubarak regime. But what really happened was it was mostly a, kind of, reassertion of power of the military.

*<CLIP> CBS NEWS: The army had watched passively for 18 days as this revolution gathered force. Now it's in charge.*

DAN: Like Sheikh Hasina, you know, Hosni Mubarak was, you know, someone who really, really plumped up the police as his sort of personal guard, as a weapon against the military. But the Egyptian military's got a lot of pride, they've got a lot of weaponry. They have a lot of money, they have a lot of business interests. And once they saw Mubarak is no longer useful, they could sort of work with the protesters to help get rid of the old guy. But as soon as the Muslim Brotherhood came in and started really changing the nature of the Egyptian state and society in ways that a lot of Egyptians, especially the middle class, were uncomfortable with, the military could basically come back in with full force and actually have a lot of support for doing so.

*<CLIP> AP NEWS: Fireworks and jubilation erupted in Tahrir Square tonight as the military announced it dissolved Egypt's constitution and deposed President Mohammed Morsi after just one year in office.*

DAN: So, so that's certainly a cautionary tale. And I think the lesson there is that, you know, polarization is kind of the thing to look for. And the thing you have to worry about. Polarization pits one half of society against another, that's when the military wins. Because that's when the military can say, you pick side A over B, and Side A is perfectly happy with it because they want to beat side B.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: Mm. And how did it go better in Indonesia?

DAN: So in Indonesia there were a lot of parallels. It was a massive student-led uprising in 1998. And it was a, you know, a dictator who'd been in power for over 30 years with a lot of support from the military.

*<CLIP> UK NEWS: <Protesters chanting> On the streets of Jakarta, the fires of protest are burning. This was the reaction today to the killing of unarmed student demonstrators by the security forces of a regime fast losing control here….*

DAN: And, you know, it was another student-led revolution that, that toppled a dictator.

*<CLIP> AP NEWS: After 32 years of power, President Suharto finally resigned in a brief and apologetic statement. <Crowd cheering> Before he'd even finished speaking, jubilation erupted at Parliament, where thousands of students were occupying the complex for the fourth day.*

DAN: The key there, in a lot of ways, was that in Indonesia, the there was, you know, a lot of support not just from society, but also from from elites around Suharto, that they could kind of nudge the old man out of power and keep going in their own right.

<SCORING IN> Neutral Richard

DAN: Indonesia, just by way of background, I mean, it's the, it's the world's fourth largest country. It's the largest, you know, Muslim majority country in the world—it's got the world's largest Muslim population. And it's been a democracy for 25 years. So what they pulled off, in the late 1990s and have sustained, although it's certainly fragile and struggling like democracies pretty much everywhere. They pulled off something pretty remarkable. And a lot of it was because of an ability for consensus, an ability to make sure that nobody was going to lose too much power, lose too much of, of what they gained in the past in the process of transition. And in fact, their one big difference was, you know, unlike a case like Egypt or Bangladesh where there's this, you know, tension and divide between police and military, in Indonesia, the military and the police were actually united. They were unified. And one of the main reforms was dividing them. And the idea there was that the police was going to become actually professional and not just be political and in the hands of the military. So there are always a lot of differences across these cases. But, the core point that getting through these transitions requires managing polarization, avoiding really severe punishment of the whole range of outgoing leaders and their followers and, you know, trying to get on a pretty clear timetable to democratic elections in which a caretaker government knows that it's setting up its own obsolescence. And it's going to have to hand power over to people with a real political base, people who can win elections. And it's about, you know, making that flight path to do so.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: So, you know, I hear it's lonely at the top. If Muhammad Yunus is listening to this conversation right now. What would you say to him to, you know, help him get more towards the, the Indonesian model and farther away from the Egypt one?

DAN: I think the main thing is just that you're not going to do it alone. And, you know, we tend to look at leaders in that kind of light. As if, you know, they're miracle workers or magicians, and it's really going to be about building that support. I think that, probably the most important thing I would say is surgical strike at most in terms of the old regime.   
  
SEAN: Hm.  
  
DAN: You know, you have to be very, very careful about vilifying and victimizing the broad mass of supporters of the outgoing dictator. You know, in democracy you have to deal with, you know, with your, your rivals, your enemies. Hopefully they're their only rivals and not blood enemies.

SEAN: It's funny, you know. I'm sure, to a lot of people listening, like, Bangladesh and Dhaka feel so far away. But for much of this conversation, we've been talking, I've been thinking about the rally that Kamala Harris and Tim Walz had last week, and the amount of times where the crowd started chanting “Lock him up!”

*<CLIP> HARRIS RALLY: [CROWD CHANTS LOCK HIM UP].   
HARRIS: Hold on.*

SEAN And they looked very uncomfortable and they tried to quickly tamp it down.

*<CLIP> HARRIS: Here's the thing.The courts are going to handle that. We're going to beat him in November.*

SEAN: There are parallels even in this country.

DAN: There certainly are, there's no question about it. And I think that that's again, something where you have to, to differentiate. You know, Donald Trump is not the same thing as all his supporters. You know, in some matter of years, maybe next year, maybe in five years, Donald Trump is not going to be, you know, this major political figure. But he's going to still have…the people who are following him are still going to be around.

<SCORING IN> I’m on your roof (strings)

DAN: And so, you know, you've got to figure out, you know, some way of, of sharing a country with people and of, you know, drawing lines on what's, you know, what's acceptable ways of competing and what are not acceptable ways of competing. And, you know, yeah, America has got enormous challenges. This is, there's nothing exotic or, you know, or distant about any of this stuff.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Dan Slater. He’s the second faculty member from the University of Michigan we’ve had on the show this week. Let’s go Blue! Haleema Shah produced with an assist from Miles Bryan. Matthew Collette edited. Laura Bullard double checked the facts. And Rob Byers and Patrick Boyd mixed this episode of Today, Explained.

SCORING OUT

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]