



IPCS

INSTITUTE OF PEACE AND CONFLICT STUDIES

Special Report **#198** | August 2018



## **Politicised Humanity?**

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Tracing Discursive Shifts in Bangladesh  
Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's Stance on  
the Rohingya Before and  
After August 2017

**Albert van Wijngaarden**

*Visiting lecturer in History, Novosibirsk State University, Russia;  
and former Research Intern, IPCS*

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## Executive Summary

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The Rohingya refugee crisis is far from over, and a significant part of any future resolution will depend on the involvement of Myanmar's government. This paper focuses much-needed attention on the other key state actor, Bangladesh, and examines its underlying motivation to help the refugees. Without aiming to discredit Bangladesh's praiseworthy support, this IPCS Special Report questions the sincerity with which this aid is provided by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's government. It does so by revealing the distinct change in Hasina's language after the August 2017 escalation of violence in northern Rakhine. By adjusting her framing of the Rohingya from the 'other' (which sought to absolve Bangladesh of humanitarian obligations) to then presenting them as 'human beings' (and therefore entitled to aid), Hasina salvaged her country's international reputation at a time when the international community started demanding action, and simultaneously appeased internal forces who had equally been advocating a more active Bangladeshi response to the crisis, and to Myanmar. Through unpacking the politics of language in this case, it is possible to more critically assess the newly proposed repatriation and resettlement plans for the Rohingya and potential future political manoeuvring intended to affect their situation.

In the late summer of 2017, the world was shocked by heartbreaking images of Rohingya refugees desperately trying to escape persecution in Myanmar. It is estimated that Bangladesh, where almost all of the Rohingya fled to, now shelters around one million refugees in severely overpopulated camps close to the border. Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, presenting herself as a defender of these refugees, pleaded to the international community to provide aid for the displaced and to pressure Myanmar into taking the Rohingya back. For this, she has received widespread international praise, and in her own country is sometimes fondly referred to as the 'mother of humanity.'

Without taking away from the credit due to Bangladesh for aiding the vast number of refugees in their already severely overpopulated country, this paper calls this image into question by recalling how, until August 2017, Hasina's stance towards the longstanding Rohingya crisis had not been a shining example of humanitarianism. This paper will instead reveal a 'politicisation' of the refugee crisis by showing how Hasina's language in speeches and statements changed after the 25 August 2017 escalation of violence in northern Rakhine, when attacks from Rohingya separatists were followed by an intense military crackdown; occasioning large-scale displacement of the Rohingya, and bringing the Rohingya crisis to the attention of international media and world leaders. Even though looking at language does not provide a complete picture of Hasina's - or her country's - stance on the issue, as the speeches and statements analysed in this paper were primarily made on an international - or at least public - stage, they do reveal how Hasina wanted the world to perceive

Bangladesh's role in the matter.

The earliest sources that will be used to trace Hasina's pre-escalation stances date from early 2012. Although this was certainly not the first time Hasina publicly referred to the Rohingya, this year is significant because it was when a previous mass movement of refugees to Bangladesh occurred in the wake of a large-scale military response to the so-called 'Rakhine state riot'.

The paper uses English media reportage - both national and international - in the corresponding period to extract Hasina's discursive stance on the Rohingya issue. The conclusions are supplemented by findings made during the author's field trip to Bangladesh, particularly Cox's Bazaar, where the refugees are based, and through interactions with various stakeholders of the crisis.

Briefly put, this paper argues that Hasina, for a long time, considered the Rohingya to be Myanmar's problem, not Bangladesh's. She showed herself largely unwilling to take in refugees, proclaiming that Bangladesh was, a) incapable of supporting them and had its own problems to deal with, and b) not responsible for the situation. The understanding of Bangladesh providing shelter to refugees in the spirit of a *'willkommenskultur'* is thereby replaced by an image of a pragmatic government seeking to appease key internal political actors and members of the international community. The hinge on which this shift turns is a discursive re-casting of Rohingya refugees as no longer clear 'others' (whose identity absolved Bangladesh of humanitarian obligations) but rather as part of 'humanity' (and therefore deserving of Bangladesh's help).

As there are now plans to move up to 100,000 refugees to the isolated island, Bhasan Char, off Bangladesh's southern coast, and others fear haphazard, forced repatriations to Myanmar, it is key to bear in mind this politicisation of the crisis in order to better understand and improve the situation of the Rohingya moving forward.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>"Bangladesh: Rohingya Endure Floods, Landslides." *Human Rights Watch*. 5 August 2018. [www.hrw.org/news/2018/08/05/bangladesh-rohingya-endure-floods-landslides](http://www.hrw.org/news/2018/08/05/bangladesh-rohingya-endure-floods-landslides). Accessed on 10 August 2018.

## Framing the Rohingya before August 2017

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Up until 2012, the Rohingya were not on the radar of the international community. However, as horrifying reports appeared in the summer of 2012 following the Rakhine riots, several international media outlets reported on what was happening.

Amongst them was *Al Jazeera*, which secured an interview with Sheikh Hasina on 27 July, giving her a platform to explain the situation herself.<sup>2</sup> The three-minute-long dialogue that ensued is the one source that illustrates Hasina's pre-2017 stance towards Rohingya refugees most candidly. Throughout the interview, Hasina was forced to take a defensive stance against critical questions from the interviewer. Her main aim appeared to be keeping the spotlight on Myanmar as the culprit, and away from any kind of responsibility her own country might have in the matter. She repeatedly stated that it was "up to their [Myanmar's] government" to solve the problem, and definitely "not the responsibility of Bangladesh." Therefore, Hasina suggested, the interviewer "should talk to the Myanmar government, not to Bangladesh." When the interviewer responded by saying that Bangladesh surely had basic moral responsibilities towards the Rohingya, Hasina replied, "Bangladesh is already an overpopulated country, we cannot bear this burden;" quickly adding, "but now things are okay, no more refugees are coming." When subsequently questioned about footage showing the alleged maltreatment of refugees by Bangladeshi border guards, she outrightly dismissed the allegations and assured the interviewer that the guards were acting humanely and were "at most persuading" people to go home. On the question of how the Rohingya could return home to a country where they were persecuted, Hasina replied that this [the Rohingya's possibility to return to Myanmar] was Myanmar's responsibility. Again, attempting to turn the spotlight away from her country she asked rhetorically, "Why should we allow them to enter our country?" and went on to affirm that she has confronted the Myanmar government, but, since the Rohingya are Myanmar's citizens, she believed she had "no right to bop [her] nose into the internal affairs of any country."

That this rather crude language was not incidental is evident, for example, in an interview with the *Sunday Express* on 29 July 2012. Therein she proclaimed, "As for refugees, we have a large number trying to get into our country, which is already overpopulated. How many can we take in?...We don't want any refugees coming to Bangladesh...The international community should try and find out why these refugees want to come."<sup>3</sup> In addition to earlier explanations for not taking in refugees (that Bangladesh was not responsible and unable to help) she added that her motivation for turning away

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<sup>2</sup> "Bangladesh PM speaks out on Rohingya issue." *Al Jazeera*. 5 August 2012. <https://www.aljazeera.com/video/asia/2012/08/201285113421146649.html>. Accessed on 4 April 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Jeory, Ted. 2012. "Bangladesh fear of refugees." *Sunday Express*. 29 July. <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/335909/Bangladesh-fear-of-refugees>. Accessed on 12 March 2018.

refugees was due to the possible danger of Islamist extremists, and that she had intelligence reports on this.

This perceived threat of Islamist extremism and terrorism crucially determined (and/or justified) Hasina's stance towards the Rohingya, as it touched on the essence of Bangladeshi domestic politics: the competition between the secular Awami League and the more Islamist-oriented Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) that has defined politics in the country since the creation of the Bangladeshi state in 1971. Since the Hasina-led Awami League feared the Rohingya could bring extremist views with them, the secularist camp generally took a more anti-refugee stance. In this, they were strengthened by the support of Bangladesh's most important neighbour, India, which has remained anxious about the possibility of Islamists gaining influence in the region.<sup>4</sup>

On the other side, the BNP generally viewed Muslim refugees from Myanmar more sympathetically, especially as the situation escalated and the plight of fellow Muslims provided an increasingly powerful argument against the supposed immorality of the Awami League. In 2016, for example, BNP leader Khaleda Zia was quoted as saying, "Many Rohingya refugees have long been staying in our country, which is densely populated and witnessing a shrinking of livable land. We are also facing various social problems for it. Despite that, I call upon the authorities concerned to give the Rohingya refugees shelter as much as possible on humanitarian grounds to save their lives."<sup>5</sup> But, all in all, the BNP remained fairly moderate in their critique of the government. This cannot be said of the radical Islamist forces in the country, most notably Hefazat-e-Islam and Jamaat-e-Islami, who became the most determined defenders of the Rohingya. Jamaat-e-Islami have generally been less radical in their public statements, often sticking to calls to "stop ongoing massacre and genocide,"<sup>6</sup> although they have consistently been linked to radical Rohingya groups. Hefazat-e-Islam has given voice to the most radical on the fringes of the political spectrum by controversially calling for a "jihad against Myanmar."<sup>7</sup> However, before 2017, these pro-Rohingya voices were not yet so influential that Hasina had to change her position, and she could still justify her stance by showing herself to be the protector of secular Bangladesh, as opposed to the BNP and the Islamists.

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<sup>4</sup> "India: Rohingya have 'terror' ties." *Al Jazeera*. 18 September 2017. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/09/india-rohingya-muslims-terror-ties-170918134840406.html>; see also "Bangladesh fears Rohingya violence may help recruit extremists." *The Indian Express*. 9 September 2017. <https://indianexpress.com/article/world/bangladesh-fears-rohingya-violence-may-help-recruit-extremists-4836169/>.

<sup>5</sup> Rahman, Mahfuzur. 2016. "Rohingya Refugees Trapped in Limbo." *Inter Press Service*. 30 November. <https://www.ipsnews.net/2016/11/rohingya-refugees-trapped-in-limbo/>. Accessed on 5 February 2018.

<sup>6</sup> "Ameer-e-Jamaat condemns mass killings against the Rohingya Muslims; urges to offer prayer on Friday." *Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami*. 30 August 2017. <https://jamaat-e-islami.org/en/article-details.php?category=31&article=370>. Accessed on 12 March 2018.

<sup>7</sup> "Hefazat: Jihad against Myanmar if Rohingya killing continues." *The Dhaka Tribune*. 15 September 2017. <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/nation/2017/09/15/hefazat-jihad-myanmar-killing-rohingya/>. Accessed on 3 March 2018.

The low position of the Rohingya refugees on the Bangladeshi government's priority list before 2017 shows not only from explicit objections against them, but also mainly from their absence in political statements, most notably in Hasina's annual speeches at the UN. In her address on 27 September 2012, a mere two months after the Rakhine riots, she failed to mention the Rohingya, only referring to Myanmar in relation to a peaceful settlement of a "41 year old Maritime Boundary dispute."<sup>8</sup> In her subsequent speeches at the UN from 2013 to 2016, Hasina also remained silent about the plight of the Rohingya. This silence is even more questionable in the light of her repeated calls for improvement of international policies concerning migrants.

Her 2016 UN address, especially, should have raised some eyebrows. That year, Bangladesh organised the Global Forum on Migration and Development. Hasina referred to this forum extensively, apparently without feeling the need to speak about her country's internal refugee crisis. Moreover, she dedicated a major part of her speech to the condemnation of other countries' failure to cope with their respective migrant crises, proclaiming that "Violent conflicts continue to rage in several places, with heavy toll of human lives. Those fleeing from conflicts are often denied protection across borders. Dire humanitarian needs are at times ignored or access blocked<sup>9</sup>." Referring to the infamous image of a deceased Syrian boy on a Greek beach, Hasina then asked what crime "the 3-year innocent child of Syria" had committed. She added that she found it "hard to bear all these cruelties as a mother," and asked if these happenings would not "stir the world's conscience?"

These words may seem odd coming from the leader of a country about which the director of Human Rights Watch, on 22 August 2012, said: "The government is trying to make conditions for Rohingya refugees already living in Bangladesh so awful that people fleeing brutal abuses in neighbouring Burma will stay home."<sup>10</sup> And there are plenty of other examples that make Hasina's condemnation of other states at the UN sound rather hypocritical. Take, for instance, Hasina's parliamentary address on 7 December 2016, a few months after her words on the status of refugees at the UN: in language that mirrors the style then in vogue amongst right-wing commentators on the European migrant crisis, she was quoted saying that Bangladesh would not allow "waves" of Myanmar's citizens to sneak into the country. Although she pointed out the necessity of providing "shelter, food and medicine to them [the Rohingya refugees] on humanitarian grounds," she also said that Bangladesh "can't allow waves of them by opening our frontiers as we are an independent and sovereign country." She also referred to the killing of nine Bangladeshi border police personnel that October, proclaiming that "thousands [of refugees] are suffering" because of the acts of ill-willing

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<sup>8</sup> United Nations. 2012. General Debate of the 67nd Session; <https://gadebate.un.org/en/67/Bangladesh>. Accessed on 10 February 2018

<sup>9</sup> United Nations. 2016. General Debate of the 71nd Session; <https://gadebate.un.org/en/71/bangladesh>; Accessed 10 February 2018.

<sup>10</sup> "Bangladesh: Assist, Protect Rohingya Refugees." Human Rights Watch. 22 August 2012. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2012/08/22/bangladesh-assist-protect-rohingya-refugees>. Accessed on 12 March 2018.

individuals.<sup>11</sup> A hard stance against migrants was thereby justified for security reasons, internally but also externally. In reference to 'terrorists' sought by Myanmar that could be hiding amongst the refugees, she also said, "We will not let anyone use Bangladeshi territory to launch any attacks on a neighbouring country," adding that all Rohingya involved in terrorist activities would be deported to Myanmar.

Amongst many instances, another particularly clear example of Hasina's usage of strong language in relation to Rohingya refugees can be found in 2015, as she commented on Rohingya who were already in Bangladesh but sought to leave the country in search of a better life. Dismissing claims that Rohingya refugees were not given enough opportunities in Bangladeshi refugee camps, Hasina called emigrating refugees "mentally sick" and fortune-seekers, again mirroring right-wing commentators on the European migrant crisis. "Side by side with the middlemen," Hasina stated, "punishment will have to be given to those who are moving from the country in an illegal way. For they are tainting the image of the country in the international arena and putting their life into danger."<sup>12</sup>

Considering all of the above, it is clear that the language used by Hasina in the period before the August 2017 escalation of the Rohingya refugee situation does not comport with her own words before the UN, or with her current language and reputation.

In a summary of her discourse, Hasina presented three main arguments for a hard stance towards Rohingya refugees: (I) there was a possible terrorist threat posed by radical refugees, (II) Bangladesh was already too overpopulated and financially incapable of providing help, (III) the Rohingya were citizens of Myanmar and therefore the responsibility to care for them lay with Myanmar and not with Bangladesh. Another clear trend in Hasina's discourse was that a solution to the crisis should be sought by Myanmar itself, and international organisations should try to put pressure on the country to resolve its issues with the Rohingya and allow the refugees to return to their homes. Lastly, it is also important to take heed of the scant amount of direct references to the Rohingya that Hasina has made over the years, despite the fact that there had been many refugees in Bangladesh for decades. The Rohingya were especially conspicuous by their absence on the international stage offered by the UN, thereby providing a clear indicator of the low priority the issue had for Hasina.

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<sup>11</sup> Alamgir, Mohiuddin. 2016. "Bangladesh can't allow 'waves' of Myanmar citizens: Hasina." *New Age*. 8 December. <https://www.newagebd.net/article/4337/bangladesh-cant-allow-waves-of-myanmar-citizens-hasina>. Accessed on 2 April 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Taylor, Adam. 2015. "Bangladesh prime minister says 'mentally sick' migrants should be punished." *The Washington Post*. 26 May. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/05/26/bangladesh-prime-minister-says-mentally-sick-migrants-should-be-punished/>. Accessed on 10 February 2018.



## The Humanisation of Refugees after August 2017

As more and more refugees crossed the Bangladesh border in August 2017, and international reporters arrived on the scene to capture their suffering, Hasina's language towards the Rohingya changed noticeably. Rather than constantly emphasising the incapability of Bangladesh to accept more refugees, after August 2017, Hasina started referring to the Rohingya in terms of shared human rights. Instead of a refusal to take responsibility, in this new frame, a duty to help other human beings in need was placed upon Bangladesh.

This discursive shift is very clear upon inspection. For instance, on 12 September 2017 Hasina appeared in a BBC news piece in which she strongly condemned the actions of the Myanmar army, especially the attack on defenseless "common people." Just as she did before August 2017, she emphasised that these refugees are citizens of Myanmar, and that they can only temporarily stay in Bangladesh. She also continued to express her wish for the refugees to be returned to Myanmar as quickly as possible, declaring that the Bangladeshi parliament had agreed on a resolution stating "Myanmar should take back all their citizens." Another continuity can be seen in her insistence to try and persuade the international community to increase pressure on the Myanmar government to come up with a solution.

However, towards the end of the clip, a profound shift is noticeable, as the reporter asked Hasina how long Bangladesh aimed to feed the refugees. Her answer indicates a complete change of strategy. Instead of evasively pointing out that the Rohingya are not Bangladeshi and that the responsibility to take care of them ultimately lies with Myanmar, as she did before, Hasina replied straightforwardly, "For as long as necessary. They are human beings and we cannot push them away."<sup>13</sup>

This conscious shift of language is perhaps most clearly visible in the remarks Hasina made on 18 September 2017 related to her meeting with US President Donald Trump. In stark contrast to the words she used in the 2012 interview with Al Jazeera, when she repudiated the Bangladesh's humanitarian obligations as Myanmar's neighbour, she proclaimed, "We do not expect anything from anybody, they [the Rohingya] are our neighbours. These people came to us, we are trying to help them." Even more surprisingly, she continues by saying that "Bangladesh is not a rich country. We have 160 million inhabitants. But if we can feed 160 million, we can also feed others. We are ready

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<sup>13</sup> "Myanmar crisis: Bangladesh PM in Rohingya plea." *BBC News*. 12 September 2017. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-41238180>. Accessed on 10 February 2018.

to share our food [...] We see people as human beings, so we are assisting them.”<sup>14</sup>

This new ‘humanitarian’ language can be discerned in practically all the subsequent statements made by Hasina, whether in interviews like the one with FRANCE 24, on 15 December 2017, wherein she again professed the necessity to offer help on humanitarian grounds, or in speeches like her 2017 address at the UN, where she stated that the Rohingya were cared for in Bangladesh by Bangladeshis, who, if needed, “will eat a full meal once a day and share the rest with them.”<sup>15</sup>

There are two main reasons for this shift. The first is that Hasina’s old position had become internationally unsustainable in the face of widespread media attention. With increasing reporting on the injustice done to the Rohingya, and the refugees arriving en masse in Bangladesh, promoting a restrictive refugee policy was simply not an option anymore. Moreover, Hasina’s abandonment of her old discourse regarding Rohingya refugees not only allowed her to save face and safeguard her and her country from international criticism, but it also boosted Bangladesh’s international reputation. This allowed Hasina to present her country as having overcome the difficulties of the past, while simultaneously portraying herself on the international stage as Bangladesh’s undisputed leader.

Moreover, after her shift, she consistently started linking her newfound responsibility towards refugees to her own past experiences. Evocations of the history of Bangladesh and her and her father’s role in this were already very much a recurring theme in Hasina’s public statements. The change can, however, be found in the direct link of this history to the Rohingya refugee crisis. This shows most clearly when turning again to Hasina’s yearly speeches at the UN. In each of these she referred to Bangladesh’s troubled history, the suffering of 1971, and the importance of her father – Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, regarded by many as the country’s ‘founding father’ – and his murder. Whereas she had always employed historical narratives rhetorically to impress upon her audience the necessity to create stability, or to illustrate how far the country had come, in her 2017 speech this history was used differently. That year, Hasina linked her personal story of having narrowly escaped death and living abroad in exile to her ability to relate to the suffering of the Rohingya, and therefore her deep and personal sense of responsibility towards the refugees.<sup>16</sup>

That these efforts improved her international reputation shows from the praise she received from world leaders such as Pope Francis and President Trump – the latter writing on Bangladesh’s

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<sup>14</sup> The interview was posted by WION: “Here’s why Sheikh Hasina expects no help from Trump on Rohingya refugees fleeing Myanmar.” WION. 20 September 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mFosUumvOjc>. Accessed on 12 March 2018.

<sup>15</sup> “Bangladeshi PM calls violence in Myanmar ‘unacceptable.’” *France 24*. 15 December 2017. <https://www.france24.com/en/20171215-interview-sheikh-hasina-pm-bangladesh-rohingya-crisis-burma-guarantees-repatriation>. Accessed on 10 February 2018.

<sup>16</sup> United Nations. 2017. General Debate of the 72nd Session. <https://gadebate.un.org/en/72/bangladesh>. Accessed on 10 February 2018.

Independence Day in 2018: "Your personal leadership has been critical to addressing the plight of the Rohingya who fled to safety in your country. I thank you for all you have done to assist these men, women and children in need."<sup>17</sup>

The discursive reorientation by Hasina thereby contributed to the potential increase of pressure from the so-called international community on Myanmar in light of a lack of proposed solutions from Myanmar to address the Rohingya crisis. This last point comes out very clearly in Hasina's remarks on her meeting with Trump on 18 September 2017. She is quoted saying that Bangladesh "as a next-door neighbour already offered them [the Government of Myanmar] [help], if you need any help definitely we will do that [sic]. But they should take back the Rohingya because Myanmar is their country<sup>18</sup>." In an almost binary process, all the favourable press received by Bangladesh contributes to influencing the image of Myanmar negatively.

The second explanation for Hasina's changed stance is a shift in Bangladesh's internal public opinion. Unsurprisingly, the images of refugees suffering also reached the Bangladeshi public itself, causing increased support for Islamist parties who were claiming to be in favour of defending the Rohingya. By moving away from her traditional secular position and more in the direction of Islamist parties, Hasina sought to appropriate powerful arguments from her opponents. In 2016, for example, *The Independent*, a Bangladeshi newspaper, reported that new tensions had led the BNP to urge Hasina to open the borders to refugees and had made the government "uncomfortable."<sup>19</sup> On 15 November 2017, an article in the Bangladeshi newspaper *The Daily Star* shows that Hasina's shift in language provided her with new rhetorical ammunition. The article reports that Hasina countered BNP criticism about her supposed unwillingness to deal with the Rohingya crisis by saying that her government was caring for the refugees, and that it was Khaleda Zia, her political adversary, who had gone to the refugee camps, dressed opulently, and with a "huge motorcade," not with the aim of helping out, but only to portray the government in a negative light.<sup>20</sup>

That this strategy proved to be successful on the national stage is also evident from remarks made by prominent Awami League leaders. According to the party's president, Pijush Bhattacharya, "Sheikh Hasina's stance on the Rohingya crisis has improved Bangladesh's image around the world,"

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<sup>17</sup> "Trump lauds Hasina's 'personal leadership' in addressing Rohingya plight." *bdnews24.com*. 25 March 2018. <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2018/03/25/trump-lauds-hasinas-personal-leadership-in-addressing-rohingya-plight>. Accessed on 24 April 2018.

<sup>18</sup> The interview was posted by WION: "Here's why Sheikh Hasina expects no help from Trump on Rohingya refugees fleeing Myanmar." WION. 20 September 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mFosUumvOjc>. Accessed on 12 March 2018.

<sup>19</sup> Jakir, Abu. 2016. "Govt uncomfortable over Rohingya refugee crisis." *The Independent*. 29 November. <https://www.theindependentbd.com/printversion/details/70290>. Accessed on 14 April 2018.

<sup>20</sup> "Bangladesh facing unprecedented crisis over Rohingya issue: PM." *The Daily Star*. 15 November 2017. <https://www.thedailystar.net/rohingya-crisis/bangladesh-verge-unprecedented-crisis-over-rohingya-issue-pm-prime-minister-sheikh-hasina-1491607>. Accessed on 14 April 2018.

while another senior party member declared, "It has boosted up Awami League's popularity. People will keep it in mind while casting votes in the next election."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Fazlur, Raju. 2017. "Awami League's stance on Rohingya, a boon ahead of elections." *The Dhaka Tribune*. 30 October. <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/politics/2017/10/30/awami-leagues-stance-rohingya-elections/>. Accessed on 14 April 2018.

## Implications for Future Efforts to Address the Rohingya Crisis

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Finally, there is the question of what the future implications of this discursive shift may be. Although it must be recognised that any durable solution to the Rohingya crisis will depend overwhelmingly on the Myanmar government, one must be realistic regarding the possibility of Myanmar's willingness to mitigate the crisis at this stage since the Myanmar government, army, and government-affiliated groups were the ones behind the crisis in the first place. As Hasina noted in front of an international audience at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) in April 2018, "We started discussions and they [the Myanmar government] are ready to take them [the refugees] back, but unfortunately they are not taking the initiative."<sup>22</sup> Indeed, recent attempts at repatriating Rohingya do not spark much hope regarding the possibility of a swift return of refugees. In April 2018, for example, a report about the first Rohingya family to return to Myanmar was widely regarded as a publicity stunt from the Myanmar government.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, many reports show large-scale devastation of villages, leaving Rohingya returnees no home to return to. And even if the Rohingya were provided with new housing, they would still be living alongside those who drove them out. It is not realistic to assume that the perpetrators of ethnic cleansing have suddenly become more tolerant towards the Rohingya. It is therefore very probable that the Rohingya will have to remain in Bangladesh for a longer period.

In that case, observers and analysts must take heed of the Bangladeshi government's intentions and recognise that Hasina's shift in language calls into question her primary reasons to help the Rohingya refugees. Even though Hasina now emphasises the recognition of Rohingya refugees as human beings, she still describes them explicitly as foreigners that need to return as quickly as possible. A future change of stance towards the Rohingya refugees is for example not unthinkable when she was recently quoted saying, "We have given them shelter on humanitarian grounds [...] now we want them to go back."<sup>24</sup> Because of this, measures to prevent the Rohingya from integrating into Bangladeshi society can still be justified. Given the function of language and the polarisation of the refugee crisis, one is forced to reinterpret policies such as the marriage ban

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<sup>22</sup> Sheikh, Hasina. 2018. "Bangladesh's development story: policy, progress and prospects." Key-note speech delivered at Overseas Development Institute, London. 17 April 2018. <https://www.odi.org/events/4550-bangladesh-s-development-story-policy-progress-and-prospects>.

<sup>23</sup> Safi, Michael. 2018. "First Rohingya refugees repatriated to Myanmar despite UN safety fears." *The Guardian*. 15 April. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/15/first-rohingya-refugees-repatriated-to-myanmar-despite-un-safety-fears>. Accessed on 15 August 2018.

<sup>24</sup> "Bangladesh wants Rohingyas to go back: PM." *The Daily Star*. 26 July 2018. <https://www.thedailystar.net/rohingya-crisis/prime-minister-sheikh-hasina-says-bangladesh-wants-rohingya-refugee-go-back-myanmar-1611418>. Accessed on 13 August 2018.

between Rohingya and Bangladeshis, and the active attempts by the authorities to prevent refugees from working, or even leaving their camps.<sup>25</sup>

The proposed plan to relocate migrants to an island off the southern coast particularly begs to be questioned. Both prominent international organisations and the Rohingya refugees themselves have already spoken out against the plan;<sup>26</sup> however, if one of the motivations for the move is not to help refugees in need but to keep them from integrating, the international community should be very critical of the endeavour. Moreover, in this regard it does not help to hear Hasina dismissing a question posed after her talk at the ODI concerning the danger of flooding on the proposed island by replying that all of Bangladesh is prone to flooding. Similarly, critical reflection is warranted towards her remark at the same talk that Bangladesh was “developing a better place for the refugees” with real houses, and that she would allow the Rohingya to “do some livelihood works,” and thereby let them “make some money.”

Ultimately, in searching for a sustainable solution to the Rohingya refugee crisis, which in the foreseeable future will involve Bangladesh, it is necessary to assess the meaning(s) of political language used by powerful actors and determine what purposes and whose interests such discourse serves. Even though the people of Bangladesh certainly deserve praise for making efforts to alleviate the suffering of Rohingya refugees, it is also clear that the Bangladeshi government's help is not a radiating example of humanitarian altruism, but rather a superficial, pragmatic response, skillfully used to further particular political goals.

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<sup>25</sup> "Bangladesh restricts movement of Rohingya refugees." *Al Jazeera*. 17 September 2017. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/09/bangladesh-restricts-movement-rohingya-refugees-170917004640300.html>. Accessed on 12 August 2018.

<sup>26</sup> Hussain, Maaz. 2018. "Rohingya Refugees Reject Bangladesh Plan to Move to Remote Island." *Voice of America*. 27 July. <https://www.voanews.com/a/rohingya-refugees-reject-bangladesh-plan-relocation-remote-island/4502586.html>. Accessed on 12 August 2018.



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