

## Change in Bangladesh, the challenges for India

**W**ith events in Bangladesh unfolding at a rapid pace, this writer recalls the events of February 2009 when (now former) Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina faced a major crisis within two months of her taking over. The mutiny of the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR), a paramilitary force, where the rebels took over the BDR's headquarters in Dhaka, left 74 dead, out of whom 57 were army officers.

The unrest spread to 12 other towns and cities and posed a direct threat to the fledgling democratically elected government of Sheikh Hasina.

Indian Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon was called back from Colombo by the then External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee, where this writer was also present, being the Head of Division for Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and the Maldives. We took the only available flight, late at night, to Mumbai and to Delhi to reach early the next morning. Within two hours, the Foreign Secretary began meeting Ambassadors of important countries to convey India's concern about the unfolding crisis and seeking their understanding in case the situation got worse.

The mutiny failed. It was bound to fail since Ms. Hasina had just come to power riding on "clean" elections with huge backing from women and youth, and without the army's interference. But in the 15 years of her tenure, all this seems to have been squandered.

### A growing disconnect

The recent elections in 2024 were least inclusive with the Opposition's boycott, dwindling democratic space, an erosion of human rights, a severe economic downturn and, even more significantly, high levels of unemployment among the youth – a segment of support which had earlier benefited from the sustained economic growth under Ms. Hasina. And when the students' protests broke out, led by the Anti-Discrimination Student Movement, the fact that it was handled in a ham-handed manner – almost as if they were the enemies of the state,



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New Delhi can capitalise on its strong development partnership with Dhaka and work closely with the interim government, the army, and the people

and which saw the use of violence – sealed Ms. Hasina's fate.

### Factoring in public opinion, challenges

However, Bangladesh Army chief, General Waker-uz-Zaman, has stepped into a situation that is quite different from what existed when Gen. Moeen U. Ahmed took over in 2007 in a coup. In 2007, one needed the army to bring the anarchy and the violence that was unleashed by both the major political parties under control, restore governance and facilitate elections. The situation demanded a strong man at the top. In 2024, the army is seen more as facilitating the will of the people by driving out a beleaguered Prime Minister and restoring the democratic process. This has also made the army more vulnerable and, therefore, more responsive to public opinion.

A sign of this vulnerability is the acceptance of the students' choice of Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus as the head of the interim government. Normally, coup leaders nominate lacklustre technocrats to run the country under their tight supervision, and not accept a popular leader who commands widespread respect, internally and externally. But then, the army's vulnerability may well be the silver lining which Bangladesh is looking for. Mr. Yunus is seen as a passionate supporter of democratic values and the rule of law. He is a known Hasina-baiter, on account of how she treated him. While he did nurse political ambitions and wanted to start his own political party, he is not seen to be close to the two main parties, the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party. Could this be the springboard he needs to launch a third force in Bangladesh?

However, selecting the interim government is not the only task right now. There is an equally serious issue – of the students' agitation being hijacked by those suppressed under the earlier regime or who had boycotted the elections or supported from outside the country. They include not only the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and the opposition but also the banned

Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami which had unleashed Islamic jihadist violence in 2006-07. Violence against Awami League sympathisers and their properties continue, symbols of Bangladesh liberation including the statues of Sheikh Mujibur Rehman are being demolished, and the Hindu minority community is under attack. Accommodating such polarised forces in the interim government will weaken both Mr. Yunus and the army and, inevitably, give a fillip to anti-India forces. Will a weak army leadership be able to control these forces?

While India was the first country to flag "contemporary forms of religio-phobia against non-Abrahamic religions" in the United Nations Security Council in 2021 and in the UN General Assembly in 2022, it has demurred, raising this more forcefully with its neighbours and the West, apart from the usual expression of concern. Recent events in Bangladesh have shown, yet again, that if India does not, nobody will.

### Mirroring Myanmar and the Maldives

The situation in Bangladesh is akin to events unfolding in Myanmar rather than Sri Lanka. After three consecutive elections in Myanmar, the coup leaders are finding it difficult to retain control over the people and ethnic groups and may well collapse sooner rather than later. After four consecutive elections in Bangladesh, where peoples' democratic aspirations have been raised, the military will find its role considerably circumscribed.

For India, the situation seems similar to what happened in the Maldives where it, *inter alia*, propped up President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih without building bridges to the other side and facing a backlash when the opposition came to power.

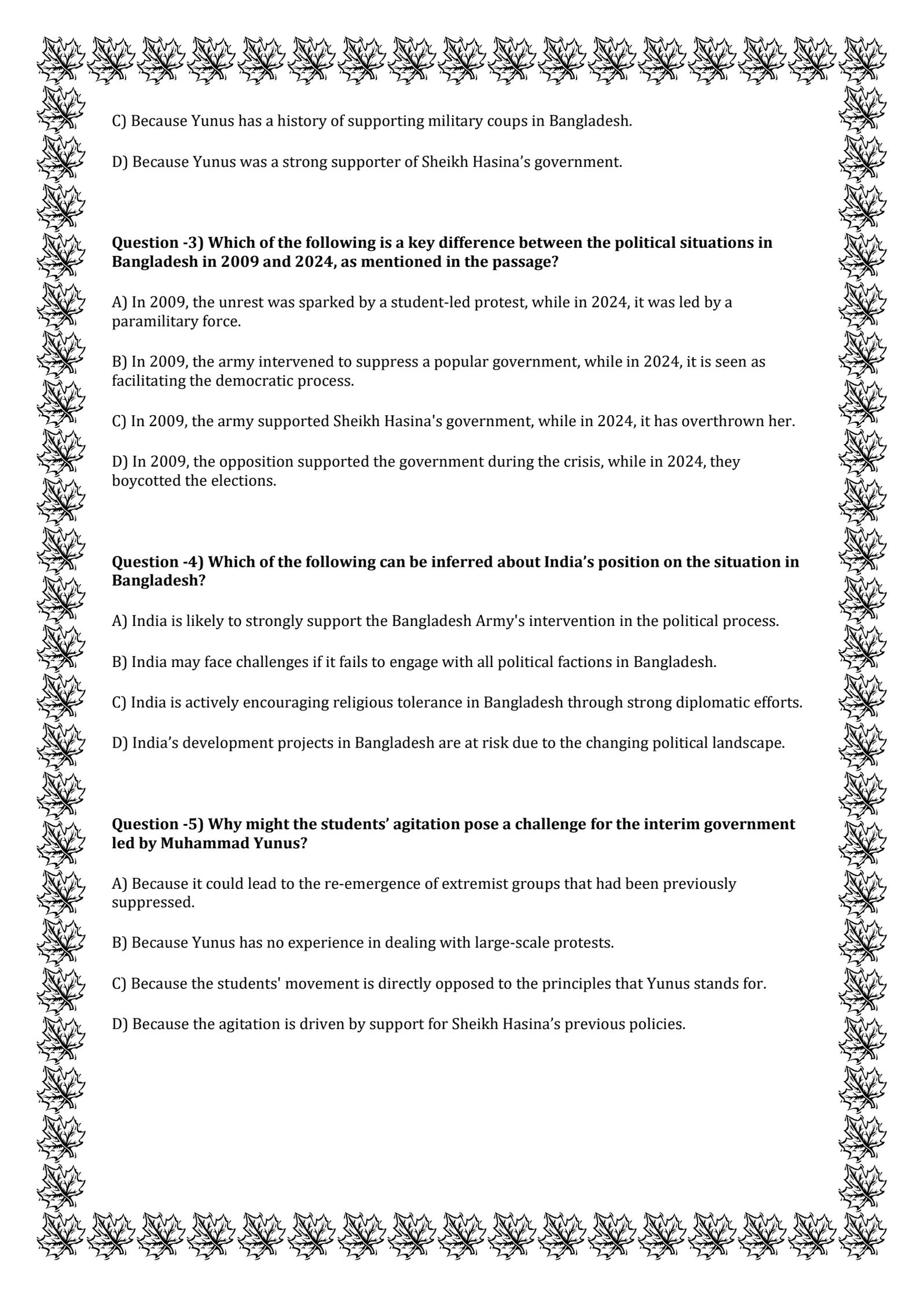
What is in its favour though, whether in the Maldives or Afghanistan or Sri Lanka, or now in Bangladesh, is the strong development partnership and projects it has built for the benefit of their peoples. India's best bet is to work closely with Mr. Yunus and the army, and with the people.

**Question -1) Which of the following most accurately reflects the main purpose of the passage?**

- A) To discuss the historical context and ongoing challenges in Bangladesh under Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's rule.
- B) To analyze India's strategic responses to political crises in neighboring countries.
- C) To compare the political instability in Bangladesh with that of Myanmar and the Maldives.
- D) To highlight the role of the Bangladesh Army in shaping the political future of the country.

**Question -2) Based on the passage, why is the army's acceptance of Muhammad Yunus as the head of the interim government considered unusual?**

- A) Because Yunus is closely aligned with the two major political parties in Bangladesh.
- B) Because the army typically prefers to appoint technocrats without popular support.



C) Because Yunus has a history of supporting military coups in Bangladesh.

D) Because Yunus was a strong supporter of Sheikh Hasina's government.

**Question -3) Which of the following is a key difference between the political situations in Bangladesh in 2009 and 2024, as mentioned in the passage?**

A) In 2009, the unrest was sparked by a student-led protest, while in 2024, it was led by a paramilitary force.

B) In 2009, the army intervened to suppress a popular government, while in 2024, it is seen as facilitating the democratic process.

C) In 2009, the army supported Sheikh Hasina's government, while in 2024, it has overthrown her.

D) In 2009, the opposition supported the government during the crisis, while in 2024, they boycotted the elections.

**Question -4) Which of the following can be inferred about India's position on the situation in Bangladesh?**

A) India is likely to strongly support the Bangladesh Army's intervention in the political process.

B) India may face challenges if it fails to engage with all political factions in Bangladesh.

C) India is actively encouraging religious tolerance in Bangladesh through strong diplomatic efforts.

D) India's development projects in Bangladesh are at risk due to the changing political landscape.

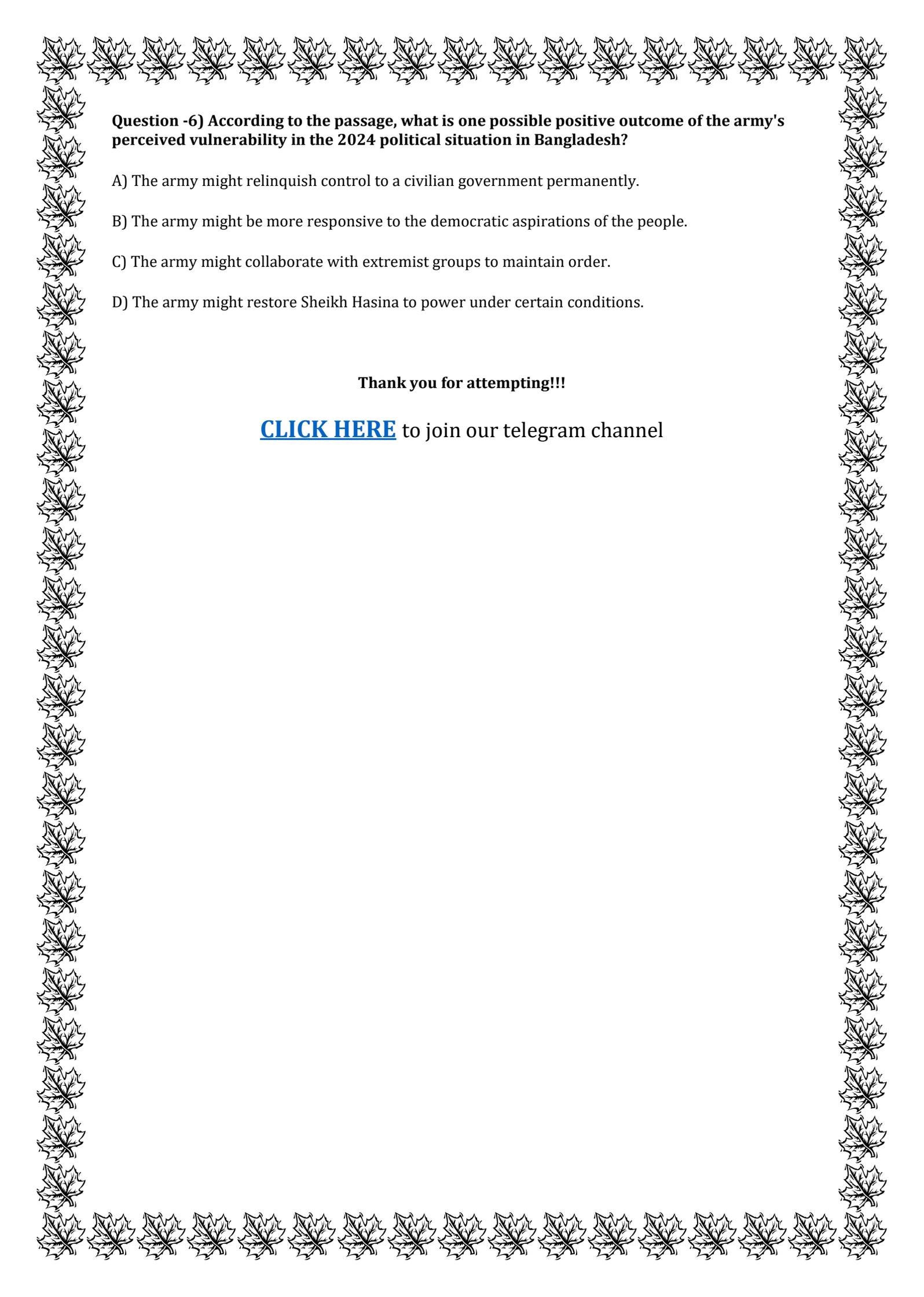
**Question -5) Why might the students' agitation pose a challenge for the interim government led by Muhammad Yunus?**

A) Because it could lead to the re-emergence of extremist groups that had been previously suppressed.

B) Because Yunus has no experience in dealing with large-scale protests.

C) Because the students' movement is directly opposed to the principles that Yunus stands for.

D) Because the agitation is driven by support for Sheikh Hasina's previous policies.



**Question -6) According to the passage, what is one possible positive outcome of the army's perceived vulnerability in the 2024 political situation in Bangladesh?**

- A) The army might relinquish control to a civilian government permanently.
- B) The army might be more responsive to the democratic aspirations of the people.
- C) The army might collaborate with extremist groups to maintain order.
- D) The army might restore Sheikh Hasina to power under certain conditions.

**Thank you for attempting!!!**

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