

# Political Risk Update: March 3, 2021

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## Bangladesh: Protests over writer's death could intensify

### Event

On March 1, riot police stopped student protesters reaching the Home Ministry in Dhaka, a day after police used tear gas and rubber bullets against opposition activists who had gathered near Dhaka's National Press Club.

### Outlook

The rallies were sparked by the February 25 death in police custody of the writer Mushtaq Ahmed, who had been detained since May 2020 under the 2018 Digital Security Act (DSA). Protests over Ahmed's death and the DSA will likely continue in the coming days. They could lead to further violent confrontations between demonstrators and police.

### Analysis

Similar protests, mainly involving students, had taken place at Dhaka University and other parts of the capital over the preceding two days. Several protesters were injured in clashes with security personnel on February 26. The cause of Ahmed's death remains unclear, but 13 ambassadors to Bangladesh swiftly released a joint statement expressing concern about it and the DSA's compatibility with international human rights laws. The government has been accused of using the DSA to target its critics, and Ahmed was arrested after making comments on social media regarding the government's response to the COVID-19 crisis. Bangladesh will come under growing pressure from governments administrations and human rights organisations to reconsider the contentious legislation.

## Jordan: Government quietly repositions on accountability in response to Washington

### Event

On February 28, Prime Minister Bisher al-Khasawneh dismissed the interior and justice ministers for breaking COVID-19 rules by dining in a group of nine people at a restaurant, rather than the permitted maximum of six.

## Outlook

The swift dismissals were intended to forestall domestic anger at elite rule-breaking, but they are also part of a push to demonstrate to Washington that the government respects accountability and democratic legitimacy. Like other Arab monarchs, Jordan is looking to reposition itself for an administration in Washington that has a renewed focus on these issues. Further public moves are likely to follow, ahead of an upcoming Washington trip for King Abdullah.

## Analysis

The ministers were removed after the government on February 25 reimposed Friday lockdowns and increased curfew hours because of a new rise in COVID-19 cases. Fines for violations have also been increased. King Abdullah appointed Khasawneh as prime minister in October 2020 as a fresh face to address mounting discontent over the state of the economy and the pressure on the country's health resources. There had also been criticism of a heavy-handed security crackdown on teacher protests in July and August that had been widely popular. Separately, King Abdullah on February 17 wrote to the head of the powerful General Intelligence Directorate obliquely suggesting that its role should become more externally focused, according to its core mandate, rather than concentrating on domestic issues.

## Pakistan: Government optimistic that Financial Action Task Force will de-list it soon

### Event

At the conclusion of its plenary meeting on February 25, the intergovernmental Financial Action Task Force (FATF) said Pakistan would remain on its 'grey list' of jurisdictions that only have weak measures against terrorist financing.

## Outlook

Continued presence on the grey list has an economic cost by making it harder for the country to attract foreign investment, but the government is confident that securing Pakistan's removal from the list is only a matter of time. It no longer fears demotion to the more serious FATF 'blacklist'.

## Analysis

Islamabad was grey-listed in June 2018. Since then, it has made incremental progress in completing an agreed action plan designed to strengthen its counterterrorism safeguards. At an October 2019 plenary, the FATF said Pakistan was largely in compliance with just five out of 27 items on the plan. The number of items satisfactorily addressed was up to 14 by February 2020 and 21 by October last year. It now stands at 24. The FATF "strongly urges" Pakistan to complete its plan by June. The organisation's latest write-up on the country, like the one produced last October, contains no suggestion of a possible relegation to its 'blacklist', which would put Islamabad at risk of sanctions.

## Ethiopia: Abiy faces deepening Tigray dilemmas

### Event

Speaking on February 27, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken expressed deep concern over the humanitarian and human rights situation in Tigray, and called for the immediate withdrawal of Eritrean and Amhara troops from the region.

### Outlook

Amid signs that the Tigray conflict is still far from under control, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's government remains heavily dependent on Amhara and Eritrean forces for security there. However, this dependence will leave it increasingly exposed to criticism over human rights and humanitarian issues. Staying the course risks alienating vital international partners, but shifting strategy risks a rupture with key allies Eritrea and Amhara.

### Analysis

Blinken's statement follows a damning Amnesty International report alleging the massacre of hundreds of civilians by Eritrean troops in the tourist town of Axum in Tigray; the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission has said the findings should be taken "very seriously" and align with preliminary findings from its own investigations. Ethiopia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has questioned the veracity and methodology of Amnesty's findings and criticised Blinken for meddling in sovereign affairs, while insisting it is working to expand humanitarian access and facilitate human rights investigations. However, a new UN report on the humanitarian situation published on February 28 notes continued impediments to access amid reports of intensifying violence and ongoing serious human rights violations.

## Kenya: Upcoming referendum will further divide the political landscape

### Event

On February 23, 26 county assemblies endorsed the Building Bridges Initiative (BBI) reform report, reaching the number required to trigger a popular referendum on the constitutional changes set out in the BBI.

### Outlook

The outcome was a major victory for President Uhuru Kenyatta and opposition leader Raila Odinga, now a close Kenyatta ally, who have together generated much political support for the BBI. At the same time, it represents a major blow for Deputy President William Ruto, whose failure to translate his criticisms of the BBI into wider political opposition will be a serious setback to his 2022 presidential hopes.

### Analysis

The BBI was launched by Kenyatta and Odinga following their 2017 election dispute as a vehicle to end Kenya's perennial electoral crises. The resulting reform initiative produced a 200-page report in October 2020 containing multiple reform proposals, including major changes to

the structure of government at all levels. Kenya is now poised to organise a costly and complex referendum on implementation of the BBI that may well exacerbate these political tensions and will undoubtedly distract from other political priorities.

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