

Cricket, Politics and a Diplomatic Rift: Bangladesh's T20 World Cup Withdrawal

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Summary

After Bangladesh refused to play its matches in India in the upcoming Twenty20 World Cup, co-hosted by India and Sri Lanka, the International Cricket Council replaced Bangladesh with Scotland. It is a reminder that cricket cannot be divorced from politics, especially in South Asia. It is also a stark indication of the depths to which relations between India and Bangladesh have plunged.

Cricket has often played a role in bringing nations in South Asia together or at least signalling a thaw in relations, especially between India and Pakistan. This has led to the coinage of the term 'cricket diplomacy'. However, the refusal of the captain of the Indian cricket team to shake hands with his Pakistani counterpart in all three matches of the 2025 Asia Cup, including the final in which the two countries played against each other, signalled a low in [cricket diplomacy](#). Subsequently, after India won the final, the Indian team refused to collect the trophy since it was being awarded by Mohsin Naqvi, the Asian Cricket Council Chairman and Pakistan's Interior Minister.

More recently, cricketing ties have frayed between India and Bangladesh, taking the worsening relationship between the two countries to a new low. Bangladesh, with one of the largest cricket fan bases in the world, will not be part of the upcoming Twenty20 (T20) World Cup beginning on 7 February 2026 and being jointly hosted by India and Sri Lanka. Bangladesh was meant to play all its group stage matches in India but the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB), backed by the country's government, refused to play in India, citing security concerns. It had requested that its matches be held in Sri Lanka. The International Cricket Council (ICC) not only rejected Bangladesh's request but also [replaced it with Scotland](#) on 24 January 2026.

Bangladesh's refusal to play in India was a reaction to the Board for Cricket Control in India's (BCCI) instruction to the Kolkata franchise of the Indian Premier League – the richest T20 league in the world – to release the [Bangladeshi player, Mustafizur Rahman](#). While no reason was given for the BCCI's directive, it is believed that the BCCI had given in to public backlash over a Bangladeshi playing in the Indian Premier League (IPL) despite reports of Hindus being victimised in Bangladesh. One of the ugly aspects of the backlash in India was the aspersions cast on Bollywood icon, Shahrukh Khan, who is a co-owner of the Kolkata cricket franchise. It is also likely that the BCCI, nominally an independent body, was asked by the Indian government to act against the Bangladeshi player.

Given the BCCI's position, the BCB argued that it was not safe for its players to play in India. It stated [in a statement](#), "Following a thorough assessment of the prevailing situation and the growing concerns regarding the safety and security of the Bangladesh contingent in

India and considering the advice from the Bangladesh government, the Board of Directors resolved that the Bangladesh National Team will not travel to India for the tournament under the current conditions.”

Following Bangladesh’s stand, there were multiple rounds of discussions between the BCB and the ICC, which were unsuccessful in resolving the impasse. Eventually, the ICC’s board members met on 24 January 2026 and [conveyed to Bangladesh](#) that “there was no credible or verifiable security threat to the Bangladesh national team, officials or supporters in India.” Hence, the ICC decided not only to deny Bangladesh’s request to play in Sri Lanka instead of India, but also subsequently replaced it with Scotland.

The outcome was not surprising given India’s enormous influence in the ICC and that the international cricket body is headed by Jay Shah, a former BCCI secretary. Bangladesh has accepted the ICC’s decision but also accused it of double standards in reference to the governing body’s accommodation of India’s request to play their 2025 Champions Trophy matches in the United Arab Emirates instead of Pakistan, which was the host country. While this allegation has merit, it is also true that India’s position in world cricket is such that it can dictate to the ICC in a manner that no other member nation can.

The BCB had reason to be aggrieved about the exclusion, with no reason given, of a Bangladeshi player from the IPL. However, its refusal to play the T20 World Cup in India was never likely to gain approval, given Bangladesh’s weak bargaining power and India’s dominance within the ICC.

The incident once again showed that cricket, and sport in general, cannot be divorced from politics. It was also a stark indication of the depths to which relations between India and Bangladesh have plunged. Once India’s most friendly neighbour, during former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s tenure, ties between the two countries have rapidly deteriorated since Hasina’s ouster in August 2024. The ripples of the incident have been felt beyond India and Bangladesh, with Pakistan backing Bangladesh and threatening to withdraw from the T20 World Cup.

While [Pakistan is unlikely to pull out](#), given the financial and other losses a country faces when it withdraws from the World Cup, India’s neighbourhood is clearly looking far more hostile than it was a year ago.

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