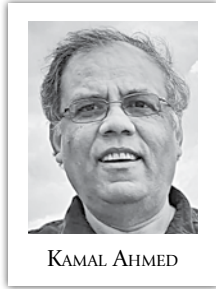


# Embracing new forms of protest in Asia



**T**HE anti-government protests currently sweeping through South and Southeast Asia appear to have gained extraordinary strength and resilience. Among the three ongoing mass protests in this region, the largest and most powerful is the farmers' agitation in India, which has already passed ten weeks. These farmers are demanding the repeal of the government's new farm laws which aim to promote free market policies. In Thailand, anti-government protests that began a year ago resumed after a long pause due to the global pandemic. And the latest protest to attract global attention is in Myanmar where its powerful military, which seized power on February 1, faces a huge popular resistance, the kind of which has not been seen in many decades.

These protests have some distinctive elements. While netizens are using hashtags and memes on the cyberspace, on the street we have witnessed Tractor March, three-finger salute, banging of pots and pans and usage of symbolic colours, etc.

In India, a harsh winter and the government's strong-arm tactics, including snapping of essential supplies of water and electricity, have failed to weaken the farmers' resolve. The protest marks the biggest political challenge faced by India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi. It follows another huge sit-in in Delhi about a year ago against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) allegedly targeting minority Muslims. The Shaheen Bagh sit-in, part of a wider movement against the law, continued for 101 days, perhaps the longest period in modern India. It ended only after the enforcement of a nationwide lockdown to tackle the spread of Covid-19 pandemic in India. The ongoing farmers' protest shares a lot of similarities with that protest. The agitating farmers fear that the new agricultural laws will threaten decades-old concessions—such as assured prices—and weaken their bargaining power, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation by private

companies. Both these protests sprang up within a short time after Prime Minister Modi got a second term in office. The BJP's massive electoral success in the 2019 general election surprised many analysts due to the prospect of the rise of majoritarianism in the world's largest democracy. Both the protests have seen the emergence of new non-political activism. Though most of the opposition parties remained silent about the Shaheen Bagh demonstration, they have now weighed in with vocal support for the farmers. Even some of the coalition partners of BJP in various states have sided with the farmers.

The agitating farmers have also drawn support from political leaders, academics and celebrities from across the world. In fact, those interventions have attracted strong reactions from India's Ministry of External Affairs. Both material and moral support has been pouring in for the farmers despite all attempts to cut off their supplies and isolate them. The government's promise for an 18-month pause in implementing the laws and the Supreme Court's intervention by forming a committee for mediation have



People show the three-finger salute as they rally in a protest against the military coup and to demand the release of elected leader Aung San Suu Kyi, in Yangon, Myanmar.

PHOTO: REUTERS

so far failed to persuade the farmers to stand down.

How this stand-off will end remains an open question. But the protest has already set some interesting precedents for activists all over the world. For one, it remains largely peaceful, except for a brief slip-up on the Republic Day Tractor March at the heart of Delhi, following which the protest organisers swiftly dissociated themselves from the troublemakers and condemned the violence. Patience against all kinds of incitement, including online and offline abuses, and successful resistance to attempted infiltrations by potential troublemakers and politicisation of their cause have already given them a moral victory. Attempts to brand them communists or Khalistan separatists have also failed.

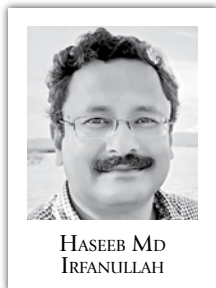
In neighbouring Myanmar, the pro-democracy movement has a broader appeal and participation. The spontaneity in defying the imposition of martial law was something new in Myanmar, coming against the backdrop of the historical dominance of the military in state affairs. People have used numerous tactics to express their disapproval of military rule.

Residents hung red shirts on their balconies and windows, banging pots and pans has become an evening ritual, and demonstrations on the streets have taken a wide range of formations. Even a couple in their wedding dresses took to the street holding placards declaring a rejection of dictatorial rule. Young girls in colourful dresses marched on like a catwalk exhibition. Younger protesters were seen holding posters saying, "You f\*cked with the wrong generation".

These are still early days following the annulment of the general election and imposition of a martial law. But it seems the pro-democracy movement is shaping up to be a wider civil disobedience campaign. Another significant development in the ongoing protest is the support it has drawn from various ethnic and religious minority groups including the victims of genocide, Rohingyas. Rohingya youths living in Bangladeshi camps and elsewhere in the world have taken to social media to express solidarity with the movement. Regrets over ethnic discrimination and repression against ethnic Rohingyas were also heard from a few sane voices. Pro-

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## Is floating agriculture a nature-based solution?



**F**ARMERS of the south-central districts of Bangladesh, namely Barishal, Gopalganj, Madaripur, and Pirojpur, have been practicing floating agriculture for decades, if not centuries. But over the last two decades,

this indigenous, wetland-based agrosystem has turned into something of a "climate celebrity".

During monsoon months, floating beds are traditionally made with compactly intertwined water hyacinths and other plant materials. Once the bed surface gets rotten, farmers plant different crop seedlings and grow vegetables on these buoyant platforms.

Since the turn of this century, first NGOs and then different agencies of the government have been extensively promoting floating agriculture as a livelihood option for poor farmers, a means to achieve nutrition security, a measure to reduce flood risks and, of course, as a climate-smart agricultural practice.

In 2014, leading global bodies, namely the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), recognised Bangladesh's floating farming as an adaptation option in their publications. The following year, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) declared this practice as one of the Globally Important Heritage Agricultural Systems—the only one from Bangladesh.

The reason for this tremendous interest in floating agriculture is simple. Since we have been experiencing prolonged floods and waterlogging because of changing climate, growing crops on floating beds can help us cope with this adverse situation and ensure our food security. By raising winter crop seedlings on floating beds, farmers can

transfer the seedlings to the soil as soon as flood water recedes, thus avoiding potential crop damage from cold weather. The simplicity of this organic way of agriculture is also an attraction.

Since Bangladesh's floating agriculture depends on nature—wetlands, flood waters, aquatic plants—can it be called a nature-based solution (Nbs)?

In the last couple of years, there has been a lot of discussion about Nbs as a

worth of damage every year. These also trap carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, thus helping to keep the earth cooler.

All our biodiversity conservation related work to save our plants and wildlife may seem to fall in the category of Nbs. Similarly, when we manage the fisheries of a wetland to reduce poverty in the surrounding villages, it may also seem to be an Nbs. But these examples are not of Nbs.

To be an Nbs, an ecosystem-based



Floating beds in Banaripara, Barishal, Bangladesh.

PHOTO: HASEEB MD. IRFANULLAH

means to fight climate change. Nbs involves actions we take to protect, restore, create, and sustainably manage our ecosystems to tackle different challenges facing our society such as climate change, food insecurity, and biodiversity loss. Protecting the 5000-year-old Sundarbans, creating green belts of trees along Bangladesh's coast over the last 55 years, or restoring mangroves of Nuniarchhara (near Cox's Bazar town) are examples of Nbs initiatives. Such forests around the world offer protection against coastal flooding—a 20-km mangrove stretch could protect us from up to USD 250 million

action should provide both human wellbeing and biodiversity benefits. The two aforementioned examples either give biodiversity benefits through conservation or community development benefits through poverty alleviation, but not both. The restored mangrove forest in Nuniarchhara, on the other hand, not only stands as a natural wall against storm surges and captures carbon dioxide, but also significantly increased bird and fish diversity in the area and improved livelihoods of the villagers with the rise in nature-based tourism.

Now, let us compare the characteristic features of floating agriculture with those of Nbs. First, the main purpose of floating agriculture is not managing, protecting or restoring any wetland ecosystem where it is practiced. It, however, does support human wellbeing by providing income and nutrition from crops grown on the floating beds made up of natural resources, like water hyacinth and other aquatic plants.

Second, floating agriculture does not give any obvious biodiversity benefits, like a protected forest or river would do. If farmers grow indigenous crop varieties on floating beds, it can indeed contribute to maintaining the agro-biodiversity of a region. But if we dig into this farming system—from making floating beds to cultivating on them to disposing of them later—we will see its environmental benefits.

Since water hyacinth is a notorious alien invasive species, using it to make floating platforms supports its control, thus allowing other aquatic species to survive and flourish in wetlands. Floating agriculture does not require a lot of pesticides and fertilisers to grow crops, and hence does not cause huge water pollution as the conventional land-based agricultural system does. Moreover, when water recedes after the monsoon, the rotten floating beds are dismantled and mixed with soil as organic fertiliser to grow winter crops. In this way, it reduces chemical fertiliser use and improves soil health.

Third, an Nbs should address one or more societal challenges, and floating agriculture addresses at least three: by ensuring food security, contributing to social and economic development through creating livelihood opportunities, and adapting to climate change.

So, based on its contributions to nature, biodiversity, and human society by tackling societal challenges, floating agriculture is indeed an Nbs.

There is a different form of floating farming called aquaponics. Here, a raft is made with bamboo or iron frame which

democracy activists abroad have already made appeals to the international community that restoration of NLD into power should include a firm commitment and plan for recognition of Rohingyas' citizenship and repatriation.

The military government's intimidating tactics—including nightly raids to nab activists, periodic suspension of internet, banning social media platforms and deployment of armoured cars and tanks—seem to have failed to dissuade protesters from continuing their agitation. Stories coming out from various parts of the country show protesters remain steadfast in their resolve. Intense international pressure on the military ruler may have provided them some encouragement. But memories of the brutal crackdowns of 1988 and 2007 make observers nervous. Protesters are using the three-finger salute that originated in Thailand and it has become a symbol of resistance and solidarity for the ongoing democracy movement. The gesture first surfaced in Thailand just days after a military coup in May 2014.

In Thailand too, the pro-democracy activists have not lost the steam of the protest. On February 13, protesters briefly clashed with police after draping Bangkok's Democracy Monument in red cloth symbolising the blood shed for the cause of democracy. They were demanding changes in law that prevents criticism of the monarch. Protests began in early 2020 following the dissolution of the Future Forward Party by former military ruler and prime minister Prayut Chan-o-cha. Their other demands include a democratic new constitution and dissolution of parliament which is dominated by pro-military politicians. Though the Covid-19 pandemic caused some temporary disruption in their movement, the activists are now back to the street.

Popular protests, whether for democracy or special interests of a larger section of the population, always stir political debates which sometimes do not remain confined within a single territory. Therefore, these protests need closer attention. There's a lot to learn from these, especially the creative ways of communication and tactics of sustaining the steam for a prolonged struggle.

Kamal Ahmed is an independent journalist based in London.

is kept suspended above the water by plastic containers as floats. Earthen or plastic pots with soil placed on the frame are used to grow vegetables. Beneath the floating structure, a net cage is installed to culture fish. This innovative and integrated system was first tried by WorldFish and its partners in Barishal in 2013. Since then, it has been piloted in other parts of coastal Bangladesh. It is a useful adaptive option in low-saline areas as it uses a small amount of non-saline soil to grow vegetables and culture salt-tolerant fish, like tilapia, both providing economic and nutritional security to rural households. But this artificial production system is not an Nbs, as it does not offer any biodiversity benefits.

What an Nbs is and is not may seem like an academic debate. But it is not. The rapidly increasing global interest in Nbs is expected to increase flow of funds to implement Nbs worldwide, including in Bangladesh. A relatively new concept like Nbs is at the risk of being miscommunicated, misinterpreted and misused, if the policymakers, funders supporting Nbs programmes, and development practitioners implementing Nbs initiatives are not well-informed about the essential features, standards and boundaries of Nbs.

Since all Nbs efforts depend on ecosystems and natural processes, their effectiveness very much relies upon climatic and environmental factors. Changing social and economic conditions also influence the impacts of an Nbs. Bangladesh's water-hyacinth-based floating farming is no different. While we are proud of our traditional floating agriculture and have been investing in its expansion as an adaptation option to climate change, it is crucial that we continuously measure its effectiveness under the changing climate and different social contexts. Otherwise, instead of being a solution, an Nbs could become a burden.

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### QUOTABLE Quote



IAN FLEMING

(May 28, 1908-August 12, 1964)  
British writer

*You only live twice. Once when you are born and once when you look death in the face.*

### CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

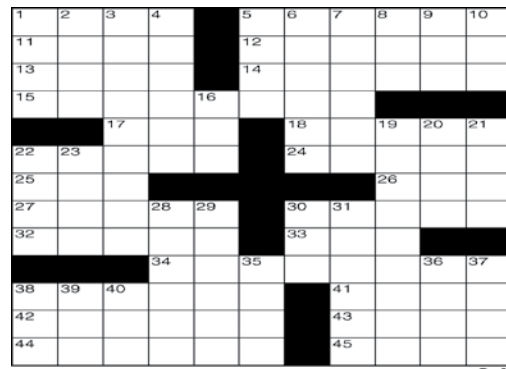
- 1 Card collection
- 5 Like a sloop
- 11 Wheel bar
- 12 State without proof
- 13 Safari sight
- 14 Oozy sediment
- 15 Series-ending abbr.
- 16 Sharpen
- 17 Kevin of "The Big Chill"
- 19 Inlet
- 22 Derby prize
- 24 2008 Pixar movie
- 26 Wildly eager
- 27 Sign up
- 28 Have faith in
- 30 Almanac contents

DOWN

- 1 Secluded valley
- 2 Way to go
- 3 Leaves work, perhaps
- 4 Boxer Norton
- 5 Wall worker
- 6 Never before seen
- 7 Rotate
- 8 Slugger Williams

ACROSS

- 9 Easter find
- 16 That guy's
- 18 Tripod trio
- 19 Plans stage movements
- 20 Stepped down
- 21 Urges
- 22 "Doggone!"
- 23 Fairy tale monster
- 25 Not quite closed
- 33 Full of flavor
- 34 Birds, to biologists
- 36 Tot's scrape
- 37 Al who created Abner
- 38 Okra holder
- 39 Screw up
- 40 Tell tales
- 41 Mensa



### TUESDAY'S ANSWERS

DECK MASTED  
AXLE ALLEGE  
LION SLUDGE  
ETC HONE  
ROSES WALLE  
AGOG JOIN  
TRUST FACTS  
SET OZARK  
PELVIS IOWA  
ORIENT QUIP  
DRESSY STEP

### BETLE BAILEY



### BY MORT WALKER



### BABY BLUES



### BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT



WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO dsopinion@gmail.com.