



FILE PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

What started as a procession quickly grew into a massive protest in Shahbagh, Dhaka in 2013.

10 YEARS OF SHAHBAGH MOVEMENT

Revisiting
Shahbagh’s spirit



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For a second, cast your mind back to the moment when a convicted war criminal showed the “V” sign in a country that was born from the sacrifices of three million lives – sacrifices that were orchestrated in large part by war criminals like him. He showed that sign because he had escaped, temporarily, the highest punishment for the atrocities he had committed during the Liberation War in 1971. Would it be right to stay indifferent then? What could the youth of Bangladesh have done, on February 5 a decade ago, if not gather at Shahbagh, if not chant slogans against war criminals, if not exhibit outrage?

My mind was flooded with words and memories as I sat down to write about the Shahbagh Movement after such a long time. But along with my thoughts, I think some retrospection may also be useful for today’s discussion.

Did anyone anticipate the overwhelming upsurge following

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the events of February 5, 2013? At least I did not. But I feel blessed that I, along with my comrades, was able to communicate with that massive crowd through slogans. Before Shahbagh, I had never found slogans to be such a powerful medium of communication. There was an exuberance of innovation in producing slogans. Could the crowd cry with utmost outrage had “Ka te Quader Molla, Tui Rajakar, Tui Rajakar” not been rhymed at Shahbagh on the very first evening of the protests? It could hardly be delivered without the historical momentum the crowd brought about at Shahbagh Square.

Hasan Tarek, Hossain Ahmed Tafsir (who passed away just a couple of weeks ago), Tanvir Rusmat, Bappadiya Basu, and Samsul Islam Sumon led a small procession on the DU campus as an immediate response to the verdict of war crimes trial on February 5, 2013. These student leaders belonged to several left-leaning organisations, including the ones affiliated with

the parties allied with the Awami League. In the afternoon, there was a protest at Shahbagh Square by the Blogger and Online Activist Network (BOAN), an organisation by a group of bloggers. But I wonder what would have been the course of the movement if the torch procession had not halted at Shahbagh. It had been en route to Paltan starting from Raju Memorial (TSC, Dhaka University), via Nilkhet, then Hotel Sheraton roundabout, and finally the Shahbagh intersection where people were occupying the street by then. This procession had been initiated by Bangladesh Chhatra Union, but was joined by hundreds of people from all walks of life. Anticipating a spectrum of participation, the Chhatra Union leaders opted not to put the organisation’s name on the procession banner.

People were ready to walk shoulder to shoulder with fellow protesters from different political ideologies to fight the one ideology that had denied our liberation. Shahbagh was able to host a colourful attendance. It rejuvenated several symbolic slogans from the time of our liberation struggle. But the ones like “*Tumi ke, ami ke, Bangalee, Bangalee*” (Your identity, my identity, Bangalee, Bangalee) was changed to “*Tumi ke, ami ke, Adivasi-Bangalee*” (Your identity, my identity, Indigenous and Bangalee) for inclusiveness, which was Shahbagh’s core value. The presence of children and teens was unprecedented. Women came in huge numbers. And it was women activists who took the most slots in leading the slogans. Jahanara Imam, commonly addressed as *Amma* (mother) by the Shahbagh activists, was the only name Shahbagh adopted as its lighthouse.

The escape of convicted war criminal Abul Kalam Azad, also known as Bachchu Rajakar, triggered a deep suspicion among the masses, and with Quader Molla’s “V” sign, that suspicion turned into an outrage, calling into question the government’s commitment to the trial. What could make a war criminal feel victorious even after being sentenced to life imprisonment? Wasn’t it the relief of escaping capital punishment that he was supposed to get? There has been a widespread discussion in the intellectual sphere since then: was the Shahbagh Movement in favour of capital punishment? As far as I know, capital punishment has never been protested by any political party in Bangladesh. The Shahbagh movement demanded this punishment for Quader Molla because the highest punishment in Bangladesh is death penalty. Did Quader Molla, as a convicted war criminal, not deserve the highest

degree of punishment inscribed in our constitution for his proven crimes in 1971?

The Shahbagh Movement can hardly be attributed to a protest that began in just 2013. Gonojagoron Moncho was not merely all about an online call. It bears the legacy of Ekattorer Ghatak Dalal Nirmul Committee’s movement in 1992, led by Jahanara Imam. But if we talk about the youth upsurge of 2013, we should acknowledge the role of blog sphere activism against war criminals, which had been on the rise for a couple of years before Shahbagh. There were instances of bloggers organising events and running offline campaigns to amass support in favour of the war crimes trial. These initiatives paved, at least to some extent, the way for the readiness of urban youth for a movement like Shahbagh.

However, if anybody tried to label this movement as an apolitical one, that would not be appropriate at all. A deep-rooted political culture of protest pushed the people to a spontaneous protest throughout the country, and the Bangalee diaspora replicated that too. I think 2013 was a transitional point that forced our youth to give a serious thought to politics again.

The Shahbagh Movement, which took place in the last year of a parliamentary tenure, created a range of new equations and dynamics in Bangladesh’s politics. What else has influenced the BNP to visibly distance itself from Jamaat-e-Islami in recent years? What would have been the scenario if BNP, the leading opposition party at that time, had opted to stand for the pro-liberation sentiment of a huge segment of their supporters over electoral mathematics associated with Jamaat? How beneficial was it for the opposition party to label Shahbagh as *Nastik Chhatar* (Atheist Square)? Did it not leave the leading opposition party’s activists with no option but to normalise machetes on people for mere opinions? Did the government officials’ statements that were made in response to the machete killings not leave the next victims vulnerable to be killed likewise? Did the government not take the chance to employ rigorous acts like the Digital Security Act to suppress any dissenting voice against the power in return for crucifying the so-called “blasphemous” bloggers and writers?

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How many Shahbaghs, whether they praise or scold, do different camps talk about? For haters, only one Shahbagh is good. But I can acknowledge and identify multiple waves there. And the spectrum of “Shahbaghis” (Shahbagh activists) would admit that “all the Shahbaghs” belong to one entity: the matriarchy of Jahanara Imam. Do they still envy her?

Why are we so opposed
to seeing Hero Alom
in politics?



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MOSTAFA SHABUJ

Among the six parliamentary constituencies where by-elections were held on February 1, two drew particular attention: Bogura-4 (sadar upazila) and Bogura-6 (Nandigram and Kahalu upazilas). The reason? Ashraful Hossain Alom, better known as Hero Alom, the internet celebrity with a massive fan following, contested the by-polls from these two seats as an independent candidate.

Journalists in Bogura received numerous calls from all over the country, even from journalists who work for international media outlets and agencies since the morning of election day. The only question they asked was: is Hero Alom becoming a member of parliament? The results, when announced, revealed that the polls had ended with a low turnout, and Hero Alom was defeated in both seats.

In Bogura-4, he lost by 834 votes to the candidate from Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD), an ally of the ruling Awami League. (Awami League supported the JSD candidate and did not nominate their candidate in Bogura-4).

On the election night, Hero Alom held a press conference where he rejected the election results and alleged result manipulation. “Educated people would be forced to call illiterates like me ‘Sir.’ That’s why they don’t want to accept me. They could not accept my victory... That is why the election officials changed the results,” he claimed.

This entire saga raised many questions: why are people so interested in Hero Alom? Why did they vote for him? It is evident that people wanted to see him in

Why did less than 24 percent of voters cast their votes in the Bogura-4 and Bogura-6 by-polls? Why are major political parties going bankrupt? Why do ordinary people not want to participate in political activities nowadays? Before trolling Hero Alom for trying to become an MP, these questions need to be answered.

parliament. Is he eligible enough to represent people in parliament?

There is no legal bar for him to contest any election in Bangladesh. According to Article 66 of the constitution, a Bangladesh citizen who is at least 25 years old can be a member of the parliament. The Election Commission accepted Hero Alom’s candidature following the laws of the land.

After the election results were announced, many said Hero Alom may have lost the polls, but he won

against elitism.

Hero Alom does not speak proper Bangla. He does not have formal education. He makes low-quality music videos and sings Rabindra Sangeet in a “distorted” way. These are the reasons that make him the subject of criticism and trolling on

social media every day. But does he have any allegations of corruption, loan default, money laundering, illegal land grabbing, stealing relief items from the poor and needy against him?

Alom himself said people from the elite, upper classes could not tolerate that someone like him was rising up from the working class, that is why they opposed him so much.

A former police chief, during a talk show, did not want to speak about Alom after the election results were announced on February 1. When the moderator asked him repeatedly, he said he did not consider Alom a political figure. To him, Hero Alom was just a Facebook celebrity.

This brings me back to the question of Hero Alom’s popularity. I asked voters in Bogura why people voted for Hero Alom. In response, many said they voted for him because of emotional reasons, while some others voted for him out of frustration with the main political parties.

They said the MPs who had been elected from the mainstream parties

before did not prioritise the people’s interests or work for their well-being. They promise big things before the elections, but forget to deliver once they win. One cannot approach an MP easily with any problem. In contrast, Hero Alom is simple, honest and approachable, and a better option than others, according to many young voters.

During his campaign for the by-polls, Hero Alom admitted that if he won, he would only get seven to eight months’ time in parliament, and so he would not be able to do much for the people. But he would make sure to do what most urgently needed for the people in the time he would get. Voters liked this simple confession. They can relate to him, seeing him

as one of their own.

If democracy means the rule of people, for the people and by the people, and if the people want to see Hero Alom in parliament, representing their interests, why are we, the educated class, so opposed to the idea?

Come to think of it, why are good people moving away from politics? Why are people turning away from big political parties? Why did less than 24 percent of voters cast their votes in the Bogura-4 and Bogura-6 by-polls? Why are major political parties going bankrupt? Why do ordinary people not want to participate in political activities nowadays? Before trolling Hero Alom for trying to become an MP, these questions need to be answered.

In Bangladesh, after the 90s, democracy has been under constant stress, with questionable elections and rampant irregularities committed by elected public representatives. In this situation, if people want to rely on candidates like Hero Alom to uphold their interests, where is the problem?



Hero Alom

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

1 Talk incessantly about

7 Depend

11 Singer Grande

12 Lake near Buffalo

13 Place for ballpark figures

15 Survives

16 Chilled

18 First-rate

21 Rain heavily

22 Grand Canal setting

24 Tire track

25 Disfigure

26 Stew sphere

27 Decree

29 Penny

30 Nursery group

31 Saucy

32 Will names

34 They may be

squeaky

40 Wander

41 Jordan neighbor

42 Fairy tale monster

43 Fitting

DOWN

1 Holds

2 Curved path

3 Carnival city

4 Sitting room

5 Basket-ball's Shaquille

6 Arrests

7 Intellect

8 Screw up

9 Pot part

10 "You bet!"

14 Mink's cousin

16 tennis setting

17 Beat

19 Pan, for one

20 Blood-hound's clue

21 Debate side

22 Moving truck

23 Chow down

25 Stingy one

28 Not out

29 One of the Borgias

31 Most writing

33 Sacred bird of Egypt

34 To's counter-part

35 Piece of lumber

36 Crew tool

37 Zodiac animal

38 Singer Shannon

39 Willy

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11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42

5-3

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

H A R S H

A C U T E

T E T R A

U R S A

S H U T T E R S

P I N T

A N D E S

S T O R E D

F I R

A R O M A

T O P I C

S N E A K

A P A R T

R O M E O

E L M E R

S O L E

P U P P E T

G L O V E

U S E S

S T U T T E R S

B O O T

S E D A N

C R A T E

A S Y E T