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Can the new cabinet part with old ways?

May AL's fifth term in power usher in a more egalitarian future

It is with renewed optimism that we look to Sheikh Hasina—who took oath as the prime minister for the fourth consecutive term—and her newly formed cabinet to address the pressing concerns of the people and take the country towards a secure, sustainable and egalitarian future. We congratulate them on their appointments, and wholeheartedly hope that the new government, which inherits many old problems of its own making, can take decisive actions to bring about much-needed changes to stabilise the economy, contain the cost-of-living crisis, and ease public suffering.

The process and decision of portfolio distribution has been fraught with debates in the past; and while we cannot say the newly formed cabinet is above question, we are at least glad to see some notable changes in key ministries that have suffered repeated setbacks in the past term. Ministries have traditionally been allotted based on political considerations, but now, more than ever, we need leaders who have professional expertise and knowledge in their respective fields to make informed decisions on behalf of the nation. Given the lacklustre and, in some cases, alarming performances of some of the ministries in the past, we are in dire need of better leadership in energy, economy, planning, health, and education, among others.

There can be no denying that the most challenging task ahead of the new cabinet is bringing the economy, which is hemorrhaging on multiple fronts, back on its feet. Despite the urgency with which the economic crises needed to be handled, particularly over the past two years, we saw the near total absence of the concerned ministries in doling out and implementing essential reforms. Additionally, lack of accountability of various key institutions and consolidation of power and wealth among influential quarters have heavily corroded their independence and weakened their foundations. Vested quarters have been given leeway to do as they please, over and over again, at tremendous cost to the people of this country. If we are to move forward in any kind of meaningful way, the new cabinet must pledge to check institutional and structural corruption that are holding the nation and the economy hostage.

Be it the debilitating dengue situation, syndicate-driven domestic market, or widespread corruption in government services, we have repeatedly seen our policymakers deny the glaring issues affecting people. The rule of the new cabinet must begin with acknowledging where it went wrong in the first place and learning from those mistakes, if it really wants the fifth term of the Awami League government to usher in a future that reflects the ideals and aspirations of the Liberation War. The policymakers, who have remained disconnected from the people for too long, must find a way to translate their despair into tangible actions for their betterment.

Another way we are failing our youth

Teenage gang culture exposes deep-rooted societal failures

In the last one year, the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) claimed to have arrested 349 teenage gang members. This alarming rise in teen gangs shows the deterioration of our societal structure and how violence and lawlessness are increasingly consuming the lives of our young people. In Dhaka alone, around 50 teen gangs are said to be active, with members typically aged between 14 and 19 years. According to media reports, these gangs are often backed by a section of ruling party leaders, who act as influential "elder brothers."

Most of these young gang members are selling and abusing drugs, making the prospect of them having a peaceful, prosperous and fulfilling adult life extremely bleak. It is difficult to imagine how these young individuals, once they become so involved in violent and criminal behaviour, can be turned away from such anti-social activities as adults. This means we are creating more (possibly hardened) criminals, whose lives are being tragically destroyed—and who are being used to destroy the lives of others—even before they truly begin.

Experts noted that poverty, lack of education, unemployment, family dysfunction and exposure to violence have contributed to this subculture among the youth. These circumstances are driving some teenagers to seek a sense of identity, belonging and power with the structure of gangs. The fact that we are failing, as a nation, to provide our young people a better alternative points to a massive societal failure. And that young people are being frequently exposed to violence—and that it has become normalised—should concern us even more.

Research suggests that teen gang culture has significant social, economic, and psychological impacts on society. The presence of such gangs creates an atmosphere of fear and insecurity, obstructing the development and well-being of affected communities. In Bangladesh, the proliferation of these gangs has led to increased crime rates, particularly in urban areas.

Under the circumstances, we, as a nation, must become much more conscientious about what we are exposing our youth to on a daily basis. The political violence that has become part and parcel of our society and politics must be questioned and changed. The political patronage being provided to these gangs has to be addressed from the very top. And our young people must be provided with better prospects and the promise of fulfilling lives.

A prelude to tomorrow



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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SHAMSAD MORTUZA

Late, late yestreen, I saw the new Moon,
With the old Moon in her arms;
And I fear, I fear, my Master dear!
We shall have a deadly storm.
—Ballad of Sir Patrick Spence

The new year is always full of new promises, like the new moon. But as this old ballad suggests, the new cannot ignore the shadow of the old. The juxtaposition of the two, especially when some old issues remain unresolved and are kept in the fold, can result in a storm. The singer, who is an avid reader of nature, reads the signs of nature to warn his master. Poets, writers and artists use their insights to delve into facts that are often in common sight but willingly or unwillingly overlooked. They make connections between dots.

Our new year started with news of some pre-election violence. At a time when hartals and blockades, the main political weapons of the opposition parties, were becoming comedic and farcical, we had the return of arson. Buses, cars, and trains were set on fire to remind us of the tragedies of 2015. There was a large-scale fear of the return of violence as we headed towards the election and the exercise of power. Awami League, in its manifesto, stated a clear message of boosting employment against the backdrop of its visible development. The cabinet with a new look has just been sworn in to deliver a smart Bangladesh. I think the smart thing to do is to create a system in which we do not have to rely on everyday items and basic facilities from others. We do not need a system that allows the price of onions or rice to soar the moment the supply chain is disturbed. We do not want a system that allows billions of hard-earned currencies to be stolen or sent abroad. We do not want to see a system that forces people to go to neighbouring countries for quality education or health services. With so much international focus on our governance, it is important that we create a smart country that puts our citizens first. We listen to them and remain champions of their desires and voices. We remain sympathetic to their worries and woes.

Yesterday morning, I woke up to the news of a female banker who died of a concrete block that fell on her in the Siddheswari area in the city. Was it a



At least four people died in the Benapole Express fire on January 5, 2024.

FILE PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

divine punishment for a mother walking home to her child who was waiting for her? The accident could happen because some powerful contractors decided to continue with their development projects without any safety measures in place. I am still trying to process the news of the death of a five-year-old boy following a circumcision procedure that was conducted under general anaesthesia. The hospital kept the boy in the ICU for days and had the audacity to hand the grieving parents a hefty bill of Tk 6.6 lakh. Instead of being apologetic or explaining the accident, the hospital could show such inhumane attitudes because they are either connected to or have the resources to be plugged into the source of power. These incidents are symptomatic of a system where power corrodes. Unless we address the old shadow of the moon, there are bound to be storms.

The image of a burning train with a man stuck in the window refuses to go away, irrespective of the flurry of

The victim, we learnt from witnesses, was travelling with his wife and little daughter. Once he realised that his family members were already dead from the quick spread of flames, he refused to be saved. At least four people died in that incident, for no reason of their own. I hope those who set fire to the train could sleep well at night. They don't need to if they are already damned in hell and hellbent on turning the lives of others into hell. Who brought fire to him is anybody's guess! Arson and sabotage are shrewd rhetoric lost in the maze of semantics.

There are signs all around us. And we see what we want to see. We hear what we want to hear. The family man who died on that train is not the last of humanity to burn alive. There are thousands of others routinely being killed in Gaza, Ukraine, Myanmar, Syria, and others. I look at the photo of the burning father and quote Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* unconsciously, murmuring,

hell by comparing it to our everyday existence.

Doctor Faustus's initial motivations were noble, driven by a desire not only to expand his knowledge but also to uplift the condition of his impoverished country. He cut his arm to use blood ink to sign the document, as instructed. But the blood congealed, and a divine sign got scripted. It read, "*Homo fuge!*"—literally meaning, "Fly, man, fly!" But there was no flight for Faustus, as he was drawn to the fire like a moth. He took the idea of flight as his means to fly away from the stale scholarship of Wittenberg to become a Renaissance man who would bring progress and development to his country. By the time he realised it, it was a bit too late. And the soul collector came to snatch his claim.

Sometimes, our lust for power brings hell to earth. We let the fire burn and kill humanity. From the ashes of memory, new stories emerge. After all, to live is to be human.

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

Myanmar's military junta is losing power



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THITINAN PONGSUDHIRAK

As autocratic leaders gain influence—if not power—in more countries than proponents of democracy care to count, Myanmar is a remarkable exception: its military junta appears untenable. In fact, Myanmar's people are putting their lives on the line to break the generals' grip on power and reclaim their future.

After nearly half a century of military dictatorship, starting in 1962, a decade of political liberalisation, economic reform, and development progress followed, lasting from 2011 until 2021. But Senior General Min Aung Hlaing seized power from Myanmar's re-elected civilian government on February 1, 2021, triggering a civil war in which young people, ethnic-minority armies, civilian leaders, and a defiant population have been fighting the regime. More recently, resistance forces—waging what they now call a "revolution"—have scored a series of battlefield victories, turning the tide of the conflict.

But it is one thing to defeat Myanmar's military; it is quite another to reconstitute a viable pluralistic state with popular legitimacy in an ethnically fractious country. Moreover, Myanmar's deadly internal conflict could drag on for months as the

military makes its last stand around major cities and towns, including the capital of Naypyidaw, relying on air power, armour, and artillery to survive.

The junta appears more vulnerable than ever. The formerly 500,000-strong military currently stands at around 150,000 troops or fewer and is severely overstretched. Widely known as one of the world's most battle-hardened armed forces, having fought for decades against militias raised by autonomy-seeking ethnic minorities, the military picked the wrong target this time. To subdue national protests in the weeks following the coup, government soldiers turned their guns on their own people, indiscriminately killing hundreds of ordinary Myanmar citizens. Popular anger swelled.

The resistance has been largely led by young people of Myanmar who came of age during a period of openness, improved living standards, and rising expectations. Organised into People's Defence Force (PDF) units nationwide, they initially took up homemade arms and other rudimentary weapons, but later aligned with and received arms and training from ethnic militias, formally known as the Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs). Operating in

coordination with the civilian-led National Unity Government (NUG), the EAOs and PDF squads have used guerrilla tactics as well as conventional warfare to attack regime forces. Just a year after the coup, the war reached a stalemate.

But the determined resistance has increasingly gained the upper hand, as military brutality and outright barbarism provoked a nationwide revolt against the junta, with a vast majority of Myanmar's diverse population taking part. After being attacked on all fronts, the army has been running out of recruits, reinforcements, and supplies, and faces plummeting morale.

The point of no return was reached just over two months ago, when the Brotherhood Alliance, comprising the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, the Ta'ang National Liberation Army, and the Arakan Army, conducted Operation 1027. Their coordinated offensive in the northern state of Shan, which borders China, seized two dozen towns and hundreds of military outposts. Assisted by other EAOs and resistance columns from the states of Kayah, Chin, Rakhine, and Kachin, and from the Magway and Sagaing regions, this battlefield breakthrough underscored the military's weakness and boosted the confidence of resistance forces. It now seems like only a matter of time before the junta is toppled.

But while the revolution against Myanmar's military dictatorship will likely succeed, the resistance is far from unified. The EAOs are a motley collection of traditional adversaries united mainly by their opposition to the central authority, while the

young people fighting in the PDF units lack experience in government and coalition-building. For its part, the NUG is inchoate and has yet to produce a convincing leadership.

Kicking out Min Aung Hlaing and his military cronies is only half the battle. The other—and more important—half is moving from a successful rebellion to a workable power-sharing system requiring significant compromises by all sides. It will not be easy to recapture the spirit of Myanmar's decade-long experiment with democracy led by the reform-minded General Thein Sein and Nobel peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, now a tarnished icon.

But it would be a shame if, after winning the civil war, the opposition squandered the peace. Not only would this lead to dashed expectations, but it might also trigger renewed ethnic conflict and a potential breakup of Myanmar into autonomous statelets that could become hotbeds of drug trafficking and criminal activity—a problem for the local population as well as the wider region. Unfortunately, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean), divided over how to respond, has been ineffectual.

Asean now has a second chance to get back on track by engaging the NUG, the EAOs, and even military elements beyond Min Aung Hlaing and his supporters. The ultimate defeat of Myanmar's junta shows that autocracies can be brittle and that the path towards democracy can be regained with blood and sacrifice. But completing this transition will require meaningful support from regional powers and the broader international community.