

# A generation's fight in the shadows of quota



**BLOWIN' IN THE WIND**

Dr Shamsad Mortuza  
is professor of English at Dhaka University.

**SHAMSAD MORTUZA**

Once the curfew lifted, driving on the familiar roads seemed unfamiliar. The oleanders and allamandas on the airport road were in perfect bloom. During the imposed hiatus, the rain and shine had done them good. Maybe the lack of air pollution had given them some extra lustre. I drove through the link road to attend a meeting near a spot that had witnessed one of the bloodiest pitched battles between protesters, police, and their auxiliary forces. As I took the U-loop to get to Hatirjheel Drive, the charred walls of the national television centre came into sight. On that day, I encountered additional signs of destruction: the eerie toll booth at the entrance of the elevated expressway, the towering BRTA and Bridge Authority buildings adorned with burnt feet, the metallic apparitions of numerous ashen vehicles, and the vandalised metro rail stations—all emblematic of the development discourse. However, the streets hold no remembrance of the fallen and injured. To do so, you'll probably have to visit hospitals, graveyards, grieving families or turn to social media. While the broken infrastructure can be fixed, the lives lost can never be regained.

During the state-sponsored lull, the internet shutdown revived an almost forgotten device: the unsmart TV that only speaks. Unlike your mobile phone, it does not listen. The TV channels used sanitised rhetoric to cite official numbers and figures. Life without the internet, the long lines for prepaid utility services, and the spiked prices of daily essentials became unbearable as we craved for normalcy. Memories of anomalous deaths were pushed aside.

The army was brought in to restore peace. Meanwhile, we heard the movement was no longer about quotas; it was about justice. Students fighting for an end to positive discrimination have won their initial battle. The government claims it agreed with the demand from the start. The government was the one who appealed against the court ruling that resurrected the dead quota system. It also patiently allowed the peaceful Bangla Blockade to continue, allowing the



FILE PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

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legal system to run its full course.

On July 14, a taunt from above was audible. The insinuation that the protesters were the descendants of the 1971 collaborators sparked a spontaneous reaction. "We demanded our rights and got branded as collaborators," the students chanted. Their ironic slogan, "Who am I? Who are you? Razakar, Razakar!" was lost in translation. The movement that maintained a career agenda for all potential job-seekers suddenly became ideological. Skirmishes turned ugly. Violence erupted on

the Dhaka University campus. The general secretary of Awami League boasted that his party's student wing was enough to quash the storm. Images of attacks started pouring in. Students turned against each other. Helmet-clad gangs did not even spare female students, causing the movement to spread to other regions. The next day, while we were watching TV, in Rangpur, they shot Abu Sayed, a student of English literature. In a

grieving hearts. At least six people died that day.

The University Grants Commission (UGC) intervened, closing all public and private universities indefinitely. The fulcrum shifted. The students discovered unexpected allies in the "general mob," who started fighting by their side. Their agenda was many and unclear. The police used extreme measures, inciting further violence. By that time, the death toll

had escalated, while thousands sustained injuries, and thousands found themselves in custody. The government summoned the army to restore calm. It expedited the judicial process, and on July 21, the Appellate Division heard the opinions of the amicus curiae, who reminded the court that the decision was an executive one. Everyone across the aisles seemed to be in agreement. What took the parties so long to come to a consensus on the disproportionate quota system, which was a no-brainer from the start? Who will own up

to the madness and carnage? The healing process can only begin with a thorough survey of these questions. The verdict, however, is already out. We hear that dark forces have taken control of the movement and turned it into arson. It appears that the ship for dialogue has sailed. When the students went to the president, he could have just given them his sympathetic ears. When the government decided to scrap the quota, they could have communicated in a non-sarcastic manner. A healing strategy was necessary when students suffered physical and emotional harm. Sending stick-wielding students to beat up the injured inside the hospital was never a solution. The internet abruptly shut down whenever the need to establish a communication channel arose, blaming the fire on the data centre and the fibre cables.

Businessmen showed concern over losing buyers as e-commerce collapsed. Fixing the economy became the priority. The black banners by the elevated expressway serve as a reminder of the time it will take to transform the once hard-earned road into a functional one. The prime minister wept at the vandalism that brought the coveted life in the metro rail to a halt. The home minister has visited the injured policemen. However, no one is present to support the injured and deceased students or ordinary citizens. The tears of grieving parents and kin are spinning in cyber reels.

Meanwhile, the protest has moved to a different level. And our political leaders, blinded by their egos, have failed to see that these young people fighting for their rights don't want to be trapped in any identity binary. They are citizens of the world. They sang "Bella Ciao," hacked into government websites, and mobilised international support. Their idealism has the freshness that defies the stink of old politics. Even the government isolated the arrest of the "BNP-Jamaat" axis from the activities of the students. The sooner the government understands that a student faction or increased military presence cannot destroy the student movement in five minutes, the better for the country. Giving the movement a political colour can create a long-term rift that the country cannot afford. We need to bring the killers and arsonists to justice, but we also need empathy and open-minded leadership.

As a teacher, I want to go back to my class and embrace all my students as one. We will begin the healing process by creating space for one another to share and grow in the true spirit of the Liberation War.

## Can we expect some accountability from the government?

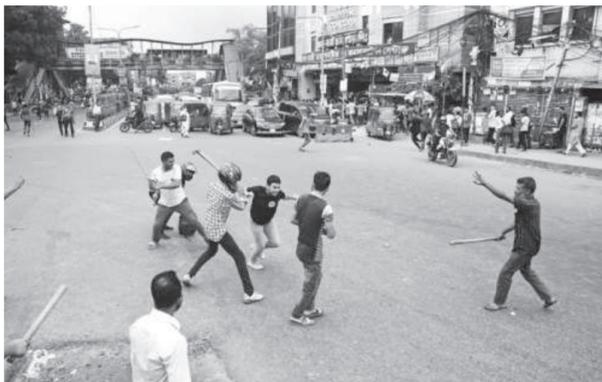


Dr Rainer Ebert  
holds a PhD in philosophy from Rice University in Texas and is a research fellow in the Department of Philosophy, Practical and Systematic Theology at the University of South Africa. He can be reached at [rainer@ebert.com](mailto:rainer@ebert.com), and his X handle is @rainer\_ebert.

**RAINER EBERT**

Last week's political violence in Bangladesh was by far the worst I have seen since I first visited and fell in love with this country 15 years ago. Some media outlets report that around 150 lives have been lost, others say 170. Among those who lost their lives are young adults, uninvolved bystanders, and law enforcement personnel. Once the dust settles and a careful tabulation is done, the actual number of deaths could be far higher than the numbers circulating at the moment. In addition, thousands were injured, many of whom have a long road to recovery ahead, and some of whom may never fully recover.

What we saw was nothing short of disturbing and, tragically, seems it could have been largely avoidable. The protesters' initial demand for a reform of the quota system in



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PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

**What was the process and legal basis for the government's decision to shut off mobile data as well as broadband internet on July 18? Was civil society given the opportunity to request a judicial review of that decision? Considering the devastating impact of the decision to impose a curfew and shut off the internet for millions of people in terms of education, commerce, healthcare, and personal relationships, was that decision proportionate to the purpose it was meant to achieve?**

government job recruitment, whether you agree with it or not, was surely not unreasonable, and should have been addressed through political dialogue. Instead, armed Chhatra League members entered the University of Dhaka campus on July 15, and attempted to quell the protests by assaulting protesters. The situation only escalated from there.

Now, as Bangladesh slowly edges towards a semblance of normalcy, all eyes must be on the government: will it choose accountability, or more of the cronyism and selective application of the law that got the nation into this trouble in the first place? As I write this column, I am looking at a bunch of national dailies and I see reports of more than three thousand arrests and many more cases filed in connection with the recent violence. BNP and Jamaat are mentioned over and over again, and the prime minister herself said that this time she "will not spare them." Insofar those arrested have in fact been engaged in violence and the destruction of public infrastructure

and private property, and it is expected that they will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law.

I then searched for any reports of legal proceedings of any kind against the Chhatra League and law enforcers, but it was in vain. True accountability requires the equitable prosecution of everyone who broke the law, regardless of political or

rods, sticks, stones, other weapons, and helmets. Yet, in many places, including in front of Dhaka College, there were clashes despite police presence. What was the rationale for letting violence unfold unopposed by law enforcement?

A day later, videos of a member of police shooting unarmed protester Abu Sayed point blank were widely shared on social media. He later died in a hospital. Has a formal investigation been launched, and has the officer involved in the shooting been suspended pending its outcome?

Are those responsible for the deaths of Dhaka Residential Model College student Farhan Faiyaz and countless other protesters across Bangladesh being held accountable? Has an independent commission to investigate these deaths been formed? Who authorised the use of lethal force against protesters? What structural steps are the security forces taking to prevent the use of excessive force in the future?

What was the process and legal basis for the government's decision to shut off mobile data as well as broadband internet on July 18? Was civil society given the opportunity to request a judicial review of that decision? Considering the devastating impact of the decision to impose a curfew and shut off the internet for millions of people in terms of education, commerce, healthcare, and personal relationships, was that decision proportionate to the purpose it was meant to achieve? Were there no less disruptive means available to the government to achieve the same purpose?

With no opposition worth the name in parliament, who will do the necessary political work of reviewing the manner in which the total internet blackout unfolded and was justified by the government? Who will ask the government the questions that need to be answered to determine if it has overstepped its authority? The people of Bangladesh deserve timely answers to these and many other questions they are certain to have, and the government will be measured by the quality of the answers it provides. It has an opportunity to stake out a positive path forward. If that opportunity is missed, then who knows what awaits the country in the future.

## CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

**ACROSS**

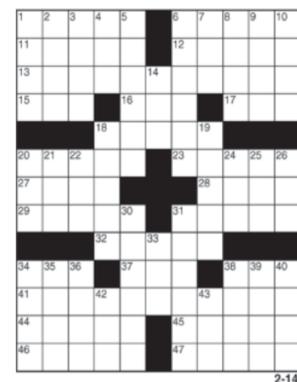
- 1 Like some notebook paper
- 6 Taking to court
- 11 Dote on
- 12 Passion
- 13 Barbra Streisand hit
- 15 Compass dir.
- 16 Pen fill
- 17 Fall behind
- 18 Jeans material
- 20 Valentine's Day gift
- 23 Frisco player
- 27 Opera piece
- 28 Cairo's river
- 29 Polite chaps
- 31 Amorous archer
- 32 Corridors
- 34 Cash dispenser

**DOWN**

- 37 Golf peg
- 38 Desire
- 41 Beyoncé hit
- 44 Microwave feature
- 45 Gives over
- 46 Stretches over
- 47 Valentine symbol
- 1 Statutes
- 2 Wedding vows
- 3 Alaskan city
- 4 Memorable time
- 5 Disavows
- 6 Registered
- 7 Online address
- 8 Revered one
- 9 Flaring star
- 10 Golfer Norman
- 14 Tourist stop

**18 Ominous tarot card**

- 19 Less
- 20 Cloth scrap
- 21 Metal source
- 22 Lust, e.g.
- 24 Tiny taste
- 25 Yale rooster
- 26 Valentine color
- 30 Nymph chasers
- 31 Hold tightly
- 33 Floral garland
- 34 Play parts
- 35 Journey
- 36 Baby's call
- 38 Luke's teacher
- 39 At any time
- 40 Egg setting
- 42 Buddhism branch
- 43 Spike of film



**JULY 15 ANSWERS**



WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO [dsopinion@gmail.com](mailto:dsopinion@gmail.com).

**CORRIGENDUM**

In our July 16, 2024 issue, the set of clues for the crossword puzzle that was published was wrong. We sincerely apologise to our readers for this unintentional error. We are publishing the same puzzle today with the right set of clues.