

Police head towards a crowd of quota reform demonstrators in Dhaka on July 18, 2024.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

New student politics demands respect, dignity, and trust



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It is astounding how little a regime, one that has been in power for 15 consecutive years, understands the new form of student politics. Economic performance legitimacy may have satiated the post-liberation first generation who had lived through the depravities and atrocities of the Liberation War. However, the new generation aspires to more than just economic improvements, and rightfully so. Respect, dignity, and trust are the institutional cultures that speak more to the new student politics than metro rails, flyovers, or graduation to a middle-income country. And in each of these, the regime (and regimes past) repeatedly fails to deliver.

When students embarked on peaceful protests in July demanding quota reformation, it was the perceived disrespect felt after the prime minister's speech on July 14 ("If the grandchildren of the freedom fighters don't get quotas, then should the grandchildren of Razakars get quotas?") that gave the protest momentum. This show of disrespect

started with tear gas and rubber bullets transformed into a bloody campaign using automatics and blind shooting from helicopters. When the curfew was imposed, the crackdowns followed.

But it was not just the physical violence and tragic losses that we find hard to process; it was also the stripping away of the dignity of the protesters, their right to protest, their right to dissent. It was a lack of morality, an attitude of authoritarian invincibility, poor politics, and impoverished accountability. Had the regime treated the students as people worthy of dignity, perhaps it would have given them their right to protest peacefully, to vent their grievances that the regime has itself created. It is the culture of viewing people with dignity that the regime needs to adopt in its politics.

I am unsure what exactly the regime was strategising during the days of total internet shutdown and curfew, but its propaganda campaign, led by some top functionaries, backfired gravely. Loss of public trust is possibly the strongest indicator of the decline of any regime.

From the prime minister not initially acknowledging the gravity of the human tragedy as she should have, the information minister claiming that the internet was not intentionally shut down but was disrupted due to the burning of data centres and hundreds of kilometres of cables (when previously acknowledging that the regime was forced to shut down the internet), the home minister stressing that police "remained patient



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is a tenet that seems to be repeating itself in the regime's politics. During the 2018 quota reform movement, a similar remark by the then minister of agriculture on April 9 (where she called the protesters "children of Razakars") fuelled students' anger.

Being blind to the anguish of systemic failure and corruption that led to the formation of these movements, while disrespectfully accusing the student protesters, is the first visible failure of the regime in understanding the new student politics. Perhaps this speaks more to the political culture that the people of party politics have cultivated in their ability to handle dissent. But it is this aggressive politics that instils a culture of disrespect and repeatedly rejects possibilities of peaceful, constructive negotiations. This institutional culture of indecency and disrespect is the least of the institutional failures the regime must acknowledge.

When I speak of new student politics, I am, of course, referring to the non-partisan student body—who have repeatedly taken to the streets in the past decade for their rights—not the militarised youth wings of the political bodies, whom the students associate with campus violence, rent-seeking, and corruption. It was the youth wing of the present regime, Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), that incited the next step of the quota protests, fuelled again by a remark, this time by the AL general secretary (insinuating that the BCL would give these protesters a "fitting reply").

Clashes between the quota protesters and the BCL ensued the very next day; BCL wearing clads of sanctioned impunity from the regime against "unsanctioned protesters." But when the students were able to drive the BCL back, by their sheer numbers, the regime called on its trusted law enforcement agencies—the police, the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab), and the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB)—to quell the students. No conversation, only dominance.

On July 16, six students were killed, including Abu Sayed, and hundreds more since then. What

and only fired when they were forced to" (when there are videos of police openly firing at unarmed individual protesters), to the Detective Branch chief claiming that student protest organisers were "detained for their own safety" (when credible sources attest that they were forcibly picked up, one even from a hospital mid-recovery)—the list goes on.

In the age of social media, repeating a lie does not make it the truth. Even the repeated narrative about BNP-Jamaat-led violence to justify law enforcement killings loses its weight (although, sadly, perhaps not for the staunchest of regime supporters) when so many killings of students and other civilians were caught on camera. Repeatedly, the regime keeps undermining the importance of trust-building with the new student politics. An institutional culture of "trust" is what is demanded by the new student politics.

Respect, dignity, and trust. Perhaps the regime does understand the new student politics. However, unless it can reform itself to provide these basic tenets to its citizenry—to the new student politics—the regime will be unable to cater to people's needs for rights and freedom, and remain on shaky grounds. As my colleagues have mentioned in another opinion piece, "Those who claim to govern must realise that their power is on lease." The regime must acknowledge that this lease cannot be extended through economic performance legitimacy alone. But foremost, what the regime needs to do is have the courage to publicly acknowledge, apologise, and ensure justice for the martyrs of the quota movement for the nation to move forward.

The collective memory of the draconian acts suffered in the pursuit of the right to protest, without proper justice and political reformation, may lead to repeated cycles of horrors. The people of Bangladesh also need to acknowledge that the burden of transforming society cannot be shouldered by students alone. It can only be carried through by the students, alongside the peasants, the workers, and the oppressed. Let injustice never prevail.

When rule of (no) law reigns supreme



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As the world catches a glimpse, but certainly not the full picture, of the horrors that have transpired in Bangladesh, a lack of transparency and a deliberate, disingenuous, and frankly dangerous effort by the authorities to conceal the truth has emerged. Should one be surprised? Probably not, given how this government has responded to any and all forms of civic dissent over the past decade, from any and all sources, political or not. Even for a political party that has established a track record of misusing its political activists in cahoots with law enforcement agencies to repress rather than protect citizens, this latest crackdown marks an alarming low.

The suppression of freedom of speech and expression, disregard for constitutionally protected fundamental rights, sidelining ideas from civil society on governance reform, rejection of fostering political competition between the opposition and the ruling party, and the rampant politicisation of theoretically impartial institutions of the state stand in direct contrast to the ruling party's own belief that it is the principal architect and only feasible guarantor of the country's economic stability. The economic stability storyline is progressively being rejected by a growing proportion of Bangladeshis, who are disgruntled because the developmental upshots on paper—flaunted through eye-catching infrastructural projects, rather than an innate focus on improving the average person's quality of life—are not benefiting them on a day-to-day basis.

The sheer level of wilful ignorance or, more dangerously, a defensive political posture that compels public sector stakeholders, such as law enforcement personnel, to present an embarrassingly partial or, worse, blatantly incorrect version of events can be described as authoritarian at best and as reckless at the least. This version of events places the majority of the blame on political opponents of the ruling party before any proper independent investigation and without reflecting on the government's own errors. Giving a misleading account of the chain of events that led to significant death and destruction to provide media cover for a political party that is in a crisis of its own making seems to characterise both the authorities' political and public policy reactions in the days following the deployment of the armed forces.

A narrative from both the government and some mass media outlets promotes a version of events that is far detached from the reality experienced by foreign observers, international media outlets, and, most importantly, the country's own citizens. This narrative pits the protection of the state, including vandalised

public assets, against the security of the individual, contravening the very principle of the rule of law that should guide the actions or inactions of any government with an ounce of consideration for the overarching health of its relationship with its electorate. Sadly, that relationship was neither respected nor maintained when aggression, rather than reconciliation, was leveraged to tackle innocent protesters and their genuine grievances about a policy matter.

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hope regarding their individual futures and acute concerns for their own safety and that of their peers. Both the velocity and traumatic scenes of the unrest have left the country reeling, making it more dejected than it has been in a very long time. Since 2014, the Awami League has governed Bangladesh without a proper electoral mandate—anyone who argues otherwise is living in a fool's paradise—and its loss of connection with the pulse of the average voter has highlighted just how out of touch it is with the political sentiments and policy needs of Bangladeshis.

Young people—mostly university students and their growing cohort of allies—caught in the crossfire of politically incited violence by ruling party decision-makers, combined with suppression, have borne the brunt of the turmoil. Eyewitness accounts and international media point to one underlying cause: the authorities' heavy-handed response, characterised by indiscriminate attacks on unarmed civilians and blatant violations of basic human rights under the guise of protecting national security. No amount of political cover or attempts to bury the truth through social media control and censorship will succeed.

Beyond the immediate deaths and arrests, consider the long-term psychological impact on young people. They cannot trust their government or

seek accountability from the authorities. Forms of civic rebellion and an outpouring of anger, both violent and non-violent, will inevitably appear, as the authorities have turned the people they should serve into their very adversaries.

The government has only one way to improve the situation: it should exhibit humility and an apologetic tone and admit how dreadfully it mishandled a crisis that could have been resolved through reconciliatory efforts with the student protesters. Instead, the government has aggravated the dissatisfaction of a population already burdened by pent-up frustration stemming from the ongoing cost-of-living crisis, high levels of inflation, endemic public sector corruption, outward money laundering by the elites, growing youth unemployment, and the partisan monopolisation of public institutions that benefit only a few.

The experiences of those who have lived through the chaos speak volumes. Testimonials from citizens who are living through these dark days and nights challenge the sanitised versions of events presently being portrayed in the country by the authorities. The government's

narrative focuses on the destruction of public assets, including a metro rail station and several government buildings—actions that are absolutely condemnable, but secondary to the suffering inflicted on Bangladeshis by those oath-bound to protect them. The value of human life has been cast aside. The desire to display unopposed and unfettered strength has overshadowed any devotion to the rule of law and the policy stances that should naturally arise from respecting it.

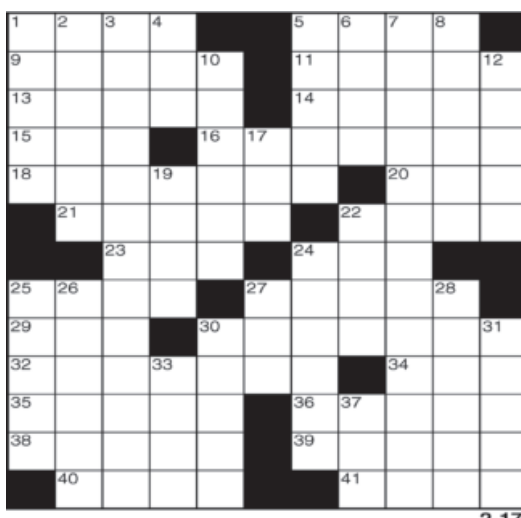
I want to end on a personal note. My words would be stronger and my arguments more forceful in condemning the ruling party for their actions if I were writing for an outlet operating in a functioning democracy. Bangladesh is not such a place. This newspaper, like others in the country, must exercise caution due to operational risks from tools like the Cyber Security Act and an environment where any statement perceived as a threat to the authorities can lead to legal repercussions for both the newspaper and the writer. Thus, while my analysis represents a toned-down version of my true thoughts, there is one central message that we all have: the opposite of the rule of law has prevailed in Bangladesh over the past few weeks. This is not the end, but a troubling indication of what lies ahead.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Cuts off
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 - 13 Make amends
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 - 16 Extreme
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 - 20 Wallet bill
 - 21 Extreme pain
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 - 25 Thin board
 - 27 Luminous glows
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- DOWN**
- 1 Minimum amount
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 - 3 Shot takers
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 - 32 Takes a breath
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- 25 Armada makeup
- 26 Roster
- 27 Orangutan, e.g.
- 28 Drunks
- 30 Not drowsy
- 31 Boat back
- 33 Birds, to biologists
- 37 Sheep call



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