

## A new dawn rises on Bangladesh

After Hasina's fall, we must strive to build a pro-people, inclusive society

This is a day that will be remembered for generations to come. A day when a 15-year long authoritarian rule has finally come to an end. A day when people truly rose to power, putting aside their differences and uniting in their desire for freedom and a better tomorrow. It will not be an exaggeration to say that the extraordinary showing of the student-mass movement that has led to the downfall of Sheikh Hasina—who came to power for a fourth consecutive term only this January—will henceforth be the new reference point in our history of mass uprisings.

The anticipation was building up even before the day began, with the planned "March to Dhaka" preponed by a day because of the urgency created by the events of the previous day. In what many called the second wave of violence, about a hundred people perished that day as ruling party activists and police clashed with anti-government protesters. During the first wave on July 18-21, over 200 people had died. So desperate protesters, seeing their demand for justice frequently trivialised, wanted an end to all the farce and violence with a final push. And at 3PM on Monday, with crowds from across the country heading to Dhaka to siege Gono Bhaban, disregarding a curfew, the army chief announced the resignation of Sheikh Hasina. An interim government will likely be formed soon to run the country.

In the coming days, we will know more about the interim government which we hope will swiftly deliver on the promises of justice for each of the killings and a peaceful democratic transition. But right now, let's recognise this moment in our history. Perhaps nothing describes the events of the past few weeks better than what the Russian revolutionary Vladimir Ilyich Lenin once said: that there are decades where nothing happens, and then there are weeks where decades happen. We have seen such eventful weeks in 1952, in 1969, and in 1990. But none of those uprisings claimed so many lives. None of them were against a democratically elected government, however questionable those elections were. This makes it all the more crucial that we remember the background in which this latest uprising was set, and ensure that our future actions align with it, otherwise the huge sacrifices that went into making it successful will have been for nothing.

The first goal of this movement was establishing justice for those who perished during protests marked by brutal crackdowns by security forces, aided by ruling party cadres. But then, because of the constant refusal of the government to recognise the gravity of the tragedy and conduct fair investigations, it transformed into a bigger fight against the very seat of power that favours the interests of a few over that of the vast majority of the people. It is this fight that has galvanised the whole nation, bringing together foes and friends alike. On Monday, people claimed their first victory in this fight. But the destination is far ahead. So, the fight must be on.

The extraordinary scenes that unfolded after the fall of the Awami League government underscored both long-awaited joy and long-suppressed anger. Soon after the announcement, millions of people poured into the streets all over the country. Despite the lingering grief over the loss of over 300 lives during the brutal crackdowns, the atmosphere was electric and filled with hope and possibility. Families with children, elders, students—everyone was out on the streets. It was a kaleidoscope of colours and sounds. Marching down the streets, many were waving flags or chanting slogans, their voices rising in unison, a powerful testament to their shared struggle and newfound liberty.

These upbeat scenes on streets, however, starkly contrasted the scenes of devastation in other places. It was painful to see a repeat of the vandalism that once stained the movement so soon after its victory. Some observers called it a total anarchy, as mobs went about destroying and pillaging houses of ruling party leaders, ruling party offices, public buildings and properties, and key symbols of power including Gono Bhaban, Prime Minister's Office, police stations, etc. Even the parliament and the Bangabandhu Memorial Museum at Dhanmondi 32 came under attack. Equally alarmingly, many houses, businesses and places of worship of minority communities were destroyed. A number of lives were also lost. The breakdown of law in the aftermath of the government's fall is a reminder of how important it is to ensure calm and peace so that we don't end up ruining this special moment in our history.

As we enter a new era, we must do so with optimism but also caution. While it is vital to stay watchful so that no untoward incident like what happened yesterday happens again, we also must start thinking about the kind of future we want. To truly honour the sacrifices of our fallen heroes, we must strive to build a future where democratic and egalitarian values trump narrow political interests. The time to rebuild our nation is now.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY



### Atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima

On this day in 1945, the United States dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan—the blast killed more than 70,000 people and destroyed most of the city—in an effort to hasten the end of World War II.

# The cheapening of life, the cracks in the system, and the fall of Hasina

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We have reached a point of no return. The era of Sheikh Hasina has come to an end, although we do not yet know exactly what comes after. While many are celebrating, now more than ever it is necessary to take stock. How did we get here, and what do we do so that we never get here again? The quota reform movement and its aftermath have served as a prism, casting light on the tremendous inequalities that have been produced in Bangladesh over the past decade. From the beginning, this regime staked its existence on the power of accumulation and patronage—opening Bangladesh up for business to all in exchange for loyalty. In the process, this once proud party became a violent, extractive club that anyone could join by saying the right words. State, government, and party have become one, through a process that Gramsci called "passive revolution": an elite, state-led effort to catalyse economic development while absorbing competition and neutralising enemies (that is why this is different from fascism).

That is what "being like Singapore" really means. This development has been real, despite what many like to claim. Bangladesh has transformed beyond recognition, a transformation concretised in the new national monuments (like the Padma Bridge). Enormous fortunes have been made, making this once "basket case" the home of countless millionaires. Certainly, some of that wealth has "trickled down." But our exports bring in billions because we can squeeze down wages by any means. We have rented out vast swathes of the land as EZs and EPZs, where the "normal" rules don't apply. Scandal after scandal have revealed the fortunes made using connections, or by directly using the state apparatus, funneling their wealth to tax havens, businesses in Dubai, or homes in Canada. We boast of remittance income, while the people who make and send that money—often in terrible conditions—receive nothing but neglect. These are not accidents; accumulation needs disposability. Wealth grows at the cost of someone else's life.

Those who could find patrons, who could "buy in" their fealty, could claim a share of the pie, which is precisely what the 30 percent freedom fighter quota came to represent: a loyalty card. The quota reform movement was reborn when the frustrations of primarily middle-class students—facing jobless growth and a lifetime of precarity—combined with increasing resentment at blatant corruption,



VISUAL: DEBASHISH CHAKRABARTY

state violence, and clear disdain for the public. The official reaction to the carnage on July 19—the obsession with vandalism and indifference to the human cost of repression—only reinforced the sense that this was a government for itself. After that point, nobody was really interested in talk about "third parties," real or otherwise. Why was it that the first to join the students on the streets were those who will neither pay tax nor ride on expressways? Why did Dhaka's rickshaw-pullers bring out solidarity processions? Just as these students recognised their disposability—which is what turned government jobs into lifelines worth fighting for—they found natural allies in those the nation leaves behind, who have no other means of laying claims on the state. As the crackdown unfolded, however, many of us who do pay taxes and ride the metro remembered that we are punished with higher tax rates than money launderers, that our wallets are worth less and less while some build resorts, and that our students, our children, are being

and enroll enough investors into their gamble, they could ignore the land and river-grabbing, the broken roads, the waterlogging, the unemployment, the inflation, the energy crisis, the money-laundering and corruption, and the brewing resentment; the last could be dispelled by the might of the ever-ready foot soldiers and police, seemingly given a limitless "right to violence." Perhaps they truly believed that they had a permanent, historical mandate to rule. But the true fragility of this project has now been laid bare. This movement has many troubling dimensions, and we have written about some of them. But what it has done is provide a conduit, through which students and others have learned to transform their frustrations into structural questions to put to the state, questions that it has failed to answer with a consistency that almost begs belief. The scale of death and destruction—and the license to kill—defies anything that our predecessors faced in the 50s and 60s, or during the anti-Ershad

movement. They have crossed the "red line," making any more talk of negotiations suspect.

There is much to learn from these repeated comparisons to the past. In the 1960s, a group of Bengali economists put forth the famous "two economies" thesis, an articulation of internal colonialism based on extractive development: channeling the resources of the East to furnish the development of the West, leaving some scraps for the "peripheral" elite and keeping the rest in line by force. The struggle for Bangladesh was born when those scraps were no longer enough, when middle-class frustrations aligned with the dispossessed. But what happens when the "two economies" are not separated by geography and language? When we cannot distinguish "the enemy" from ourselves?

We have been trapped in this cycle of "peacetime war" ever since the end of the war itself, toppling regime after regime with little to show for it. Our state has remained a colonial apparatus, designed for extraction and middleman-rule. Since the transition to democracy, each regime has busied itself with enrichment, patronage, and (mutual) annihilation. The institutions we built have either fallen to partisanship or have had to insulate themselves for survival. The absence of any civil society interventions in the quota reform debate while there was still time is no less a failure than the state's. For years, we academics have made no real attempt to address the misalignment between graduation and employment rates. The media's role in engineering the "rajakar" fiasco should not be forgotten either, nor the unwillingness of so many university administrations to protect their students. We all have much to answer for.

It really did not have to come to this. Elite club politics, the counsel of sycophants, and the passion for vengeance have squandered all of the potential the last 15 years had held. The 2008 elections had carried many hopes: a thriving economy and a mature political system amongst them. If only we had learned to respect human life and make the state-civil society-people triad function. Instead of fulfilling her father's dreams, Sheikh Hasina has repeated his mistakes, and has walked straight into the same trap. And while this is a new horizon in many ways (especially for this generation), we have also been here too many times before. No hero, technocrat, or general will deliver us, nor will the death of party politics. Either we finally build a people's republic—which requires a lot more than elections—or we condemn ourselves to repeat this "legacy of blood" until there is nothing left to fight over.

## A walk through free (?) Dhaka

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People in Bangladesh went to sleep on Sunday night, August 4, shaken by the horror of the death of around 100 people throughout the day. The days leading up to it were no less horrific. What started as an anti-discrimination movement became a nine-point movement for government accountability and eventually morphed into a one-point demand for the government's resignation. The death of hundreds in the span of just under three weeks over these reasonable demands had kept the nation suspended in dread.

The morning of August 5 was no different. The Anti-Discrimination Student Movement had called for a "Long March to Dhaka" the day before. As people were expected to pour into Dhaka from across the country, first the prospect, and then the news of more needless deaths consolidated the dread we had carried over from the month of July into August.

But then the tide turned. The first sign of the shifting winds came with the Chief of Army Staff's announcement to make a rare address to the nation at 2:00pm. In different parts of Dhaka, news of clashes between protesters and law

enforcement turned into news of law enforcement standing aside as people flooded the streets.

We dared to join the tide as well. From inside Bashundhara R/A, where people famously keep to themselves, processions of 20, 40, or even more came out of each block. The chants of *Palaise re palaise, Hasina palaise* (Fled, fled! Hasina has fled!) rang out through the usually quiet streets, all the way to the raucous intersection in front of Jamuna Future Park at Nadda. Groups gathered in circles, dancing, clapping, and chanting. Their faces betrayed unbound happiness, relief, and the outpouring of anger and dissent that had been repressed for years. To us, it seemed that many were at a loss as to what they wanted to say. Most of them could only muster one immensely strong word: "Bhua."

The expressions of happiness, although simple, felt raw. People randomly handed out food and water for free, to our surprise—surprise because we don't remember in our collective memory what these little acts of kindness and camaraderie in this country looked like. Rickshaw-pullers and CNG auto-rickshaw drivers joined in the celebrations. The first

rickshaw-puller we asked to take us towards Dhaka South apologetically refused, saying he wanted to go the opposite direction and celebrate with the crowd, understandably so. The rest of the way, no rickshaw-puller or CNG auto-rickshaw driver refused to go the mile towards any direction, nor did they try to negotiate the fare. One of them said, "*Joto khushi den bhara*" (Pay however much you want to).

In Gulshan, we saw people chant slogans from inside their Land Rovers. On foot, people were louder. On the streets, there were children dressed in red in the arms of their parents, there were elderly citizens with energy beyond their years, and there were groups of young people whose beaming faces reflected their sense of achievement. We could see it on their faces—the unfettered show of joy and the proud show of freedom in their gait. The collective sigh in the air was almost audible.

It was not all rosy. As expected, a deluge of people angry at law enforcement after weeks of face offs, when left to their devices on the streets, lashed out at any symbol of perceived government power. Police boxes, political offices of the Awami League, and a number of unidentifiable streetside structures were set on fire in Tejgaon Industrial Area. Smoke hung thick in the air and it was hard to breathe, and while people everywhere were armed with sticks and pieces of wood, in some areas, the weapons were of a more sinister nature. In Karwan Bazar,

buses in front of government offices lay burnt and broken. On Kazi Nazrul Islam Avenue, which served as the main artery for people moving from Shahbagh towards Ganabhaban, the crowd hurled brickbats towards the building that houses the office of ATN News, disregarding the safety of parts of the same crowd who were walking on the road right under it.

By 4:30pm, some were using the same road to return after having played their part in the breach of the Ganabhaban and the Prime Minister's Office in Bijoy Sarani. People displayed their loot, which included everything from expensive looking china to useless looking sofa cushions. The expressions on their faces, that would have otherwise looked brave, seemed unnerving. In the same procession where a police car was being flattened by a score of angry citizens, a hundred yards behind, a boy plucked a yellow flower from a roadside garden inside a building for the girl who was with him, making vivid the fact that it is a day for the chaotic expression of emotions—both good and bad.

Bangladesh has gone through a day of historical proportions, and the people on the streets seem to know this. While the struggles, sacrifices, and sentiments that led to this moment make us hopeful that history will look favourably upon August 5, 2024, the people of Bangladesh need to learn how to pull together and build the country back up for that to happen.