

The Daily Star

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Injustice must not beget injustice

Attacks on minorities and lootings must stop

As we venture into a brave new world, we are alarmed to see celebrations of the fall of Sheikh Hasina spiral into vengeful violence and attacks on minority communities. At least 142 people were killed in attacks and clashes around the country, with thousands injured, and Hindu houses and businesses were looted and torched in at least 27 districts, on the day the students' movement declared "independence" from the Awami League's authoritarian regime, dampening the mood of celebration for many. We also saw major public establishments, including those of great historical importance, being desecrated or set on fire, without any consideration that these do not belong to the Awami League but to the country and its people. In short, it was anarchy in many places around the capital and all over the country, with mobs taking out their pent-up anger on those associated with the Awami League and members of law enforcement, going so far as to burn some of them alive. The latter, in many places, opened fire on the agitating mob, leading to more deaths. The army, who stated they were taking control of the country after Hasina's resignation, were conspicuously missing from the scene, even as people were killed and their houses burnt to ashes.

Such looting and vandalism are perhaps expected following the fall of any regime, yet we cannot but be disheartened that a movement that was built on the premise of anti-discrimination should descend into such ruthless intolerance. A movement which was against mindless killings cannot be allowed to conduct brutal killings of its own, no matter how grievous the accusations against the persons on whom the violence is conducted; otherwise, we become the very monsters we sought to overturn. The rule of law and justice must prevail, not revenge; and law enforcers and members of Awami League who were involved in killing, corruption and all forms of injustice must be tried under the law. In this regard, the students' movement has already condemned the attacks and called upon all to refrain from lynching, looting and attacks on minorities and to stop any such violence from taking place in their communities. In many places, it has been heartening to see students and civilians, including madrasa students, setting up committees to protect temples, churches or houses of minorities. This is the Bangladesh we want to (re)build, one where we come together to protect those vulnerable, ensure the rights guaranteed by our constitution and uphold the values of the Liberation War.

While the mob descended into madness, we were flabbergasted to see the inaction of the army in ensuring peace and people's security, and protecting key historical sites of the nation. We need not remind them that the responsibility of the deaths and destruction lies with those running the country. We urge them to restore the rule of law, identify the perpetrators of arson, vandalism and killings, and take urgent steps to ensure security of the minorities. We cannot let the sacrifices of our students go in vain—we must uphold their vision of free, just and democratic society for all.

Stabilising economy is a top priority

There are many hurdles to overcome in the coming days

It goes without saying that Bangladesh's economy stands at a critical juncture. It has been suffering immensely amidst all the political unrest of late and the prolonged crisis that preceded it. Following Sheikh Hasina's resignation as prime minister, we're now in the process of having an interim government. It is, therefore, crucial to take advantage of the normalisation of the situation to kick-start economic activities with full vigour, and bring the country on a path of recovery.

Among the main challenges we are facing are high inflation, falling foreign exchange reserves, high burden of default loans, poor governance in banking sector (and in general), and corruption. On top of that, the recent spate of violence leading to the massive destruction of public and private properties will have terrible impacts on the economy. Hence, it is urgent for order to be restored and for any further act of vandalism to stop. The air of uncertainty regarding the type of government that will be formed next needs to be addressed. It must be remembered that the system of governance has become so corrupt that people's democratic and economic aspirations cannot be met without significant structural changes.

Parallel to bringing back normalcy in the country and ensuring justice, all forms of disruption to internet connection and other communications have to be prevented. Moreover, regular educational and business activities need to be resumed with full vigour to restore confidence among people. Transportation and logistical operations received significant hits during recent weeks. These must also be resumed with utmost urgency. And the supply chain disruptions that are leading to rising inflation must be fixed.

There are a number of systemic issues that have been plaguing the banking sector, all regulatory bodies, stock market, bond market, the insurance industry, and the tax administration. So, separate committees need to be set up to identify and address the problems plaguing these sectors. While these steps are taken, it must be recognised that lower-income groups are already enduring severe financial hardship. They cannot wait for committees to be set up and for things to stabilise. Many need urgent help, for which we request the relevant departments to take special initiatives including social safety measures.

Ultimately, the political and economic quagmire that the country currently finds itself in has been the result of years of undemocratic practices. So while we focus on fixing the damage that has been done in recent weeks and over the years, we must strive to transition to a more democratic system so that rent-seeking, inequality and all other economic ills can be overcome in the long run.

AWAMI LEAGUE'S CRUSHING FALL

Does it augur true victory of the people?



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IFTEKHARUZZAMAN

The humiliating fall of Sheikh Hasina and her party the Awami League represents a powerful reaffirmation of the invincibility of people's power, particularly youth power. It has opened the gateway to an extraordinary political transformation catalysed by a completely non-political and peaceful quota reform protests that grew into the anti-discrimination movement. The youth and civic uprising has shattered the foundations and structures of a political regime that not only failed to learn the important lessons of youth power in our history—of which the party itself was the main beneficiary on several occasions—but also failed to realise that they were incessantly inviting disastrous consequences for themselves.

The unaccountable abuse of power and unbridled corruption with impunity in a monopolised politico-governance space, dependent on politicised and professionally bankrupt state institutions, blinded them to the extent that they developed a culture of ridiculing the writing on the wall and paid the inevitable price.

The student movement soon transformed into a people's movement, thanks to the spontaneous participation of common people protesting not only the use of force by law enforcement agencies, but also the misrule symbolised by abysmal governance failures. It represented a powerful outburst of public sentiment against the use of political, public or governmental positions as licences for corruption and self-enrichment at the expense of the vast majority of people thrust into a day-to-day survival crisis due to the failure to manage the economic situation. By then, all indicators were clear about the inevitable outcome.

The price paid in terms of hundreds of deaths and multi-dimensional violations of the fundamental rights of students, children, adolescents, and common people is enormous and must be accounted for. These tragedies and losses could have been avoided if not for the regime's intransigent ostrich syndrome and the state institutions, whose only capital was blatant lies, which distanced them further from the people. The anti-discrimination movement led by the students will forever remain a lesson for the political leaders of Bangladesh that, when politicians turn into authoritarians, they only defeat themselves, and that youth-led people's power cannot be suppressed by any form or level of force.

Sheikh Hasina's exit marks the fall of an authoritarian regime, but whether it will eventually lead to a sufficiently robust democratic transition, consistent with the true spirit and aspirations of the youth movement and the people at large, remains to be seen. This will depend on whether the transition government and its successor can deliver a genuine overhaul of the state structure, particularly the key state institutions



The state of politicisation, dysfunctionality and professional bankruptcy in which our institutions are today is the creation of decades of deliberately sustained governance deficits.

PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

mandated to ensure genuine public participation and representation in governance, rule of law, justice, transparency, accountability, and fundamental freedoms. Failure to ensure these may not only take us back to business as usual, but also push us from the frying pan into the fire.

On top of the challenges ahead for true victory is the issue of accountability for everyone involved, without fear or favour, who was responsible for various injustices and violations during the movement—a promise made by the new authority. Will this accountability be based on a nationally and internationally acceptable investigation conducted by a fully independent commission, possibly at the initiative of the United Nations? How robust will the scope of accountability be? Will it address

government officials, including police officers, who have been subjected to revenge. The students have demanded accountability and justice through due process, not revenge and mob justice. Targeted attacks on minorities or others based on any marker of identity are completely contradictory to the core agenda and spirit of the anti-discrimination movement. Why, then, can these not be immediately stopped and those responsible brought to justice?

The list of aspirations of the student movement is both pertinent and challenging. Will the interim government undertake the task of creating a framework and process for overhauling the state structure, including the key institutions involved in establishing the rule of law, which the government will

the unlimited hunger for power and the zero-sum game of politics driven by a desire for permanent control, be handled? The cost of reconciling with the possibility of losing power is synonymous with losing the licence to abuse power and accumulate illicit income and wealth, both at home and abroad, through corruption, loan defaults, swindling, and money laundering. No one should be under any illusion that these "virtues" are the monopoly of the Awami League alone, especially given the track record of potential political beneficiaries of the forthcoming transition.

The vision, aspirations, and takeaways of the student movement are crystal clear to the people of the country. Whether this will be the case for the incoming power holders or not remains to be seen.

We must never let such an environment of fear reign again



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SHAHRIAR SHAAMS

The moment the news got out that Sheikh Hasina had fled Bangladesh, the mood of the entire nation changed. The feeling of invigoration was tantamount. People felt as if they had finally been able to escape the haze of oppression that clung to the back of their necks and overseen all their hesitations to speak out. It won't be an exaggeration to say that much of the celebration that we witnessed on August 5, 2024 was due to this. The final nail in the coffin of this environment of coercion had been hammered up.

Every Macbeth has their Macduff, for whom Birnam Wood arrives sooner or later. But by the time it does, the needless loss of lives, the killings, the forced disappearances and the despotic rule of might cannot merely be mopped up as casualties under the

rug. For so long, an iron hand ruled and it emanated an environment of fear. The general public, overwhelmed by this fear, had to undergo a play of amnesia just to go through their day-to-day lives.

Fear cannot ever lead to forgetting. It is an untreated wound in the nation's body, and it festers around, growing worse and worse until drastic action is needed. The escalated end of Awami League's 15-year-old regime is proof of that. What we must ensure now is that it is never repeated. Increasingly, over the past decade, we have seen how slowly and efficiently the freedom to state one's views has been destroyed. Whether it be a Facebook post or an editorial in a national newspaper, self-censorship led the way for peculiar dancing around with words on paper. We barely ever said anything against

the powers that be, and when we did, we had to couch our words with such fluff that we might as well have said nothing.

Journalists must understand that this is a historic event, that they must seize the moment and bring back the voice they lost over the past several years. They must take hold of their teeth and not let go. The power of

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words can never be underestimated. The power of unarmed youth who weathered blackouts and butchering deserve a record of their struggle. There

must be a record, too, of all the grit that went around among intellectuals during this time. The reason this environment of fear was successful was in good part because of the collusion of a section of the intelligentsia, who had long traded in their morals for pitiful brushes with power. We must ensure that no tolerance is given to these grifters who moulded words over TV screens and op-ed pages to support regimes and their atrocities. We must strengthen our institutions so that journalists cannot be picked up due to captions that may go against the state narrative, or be forced to tangle with legal harassment over words of obvious satire.

Consistently providing a platform to such grifters have weakened our idea of journalistic courage, resulting in a new generation having to read between the lines by nature. Sheikh Hasina's resignation does not automatically liberate our tongue, for it will take time to settle into the new order of things. The following days will also show us how congenial the new order would be. The movement will truly end when the people are able to live under a clear sky, free of an encroaching greyness of coercion and arm-twisting. That work begins now.