

The cadences of a people's victory



NO STRINGS ATTACHED

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The thunderous sounds in the streets were no longer of sound grenades and bullets. They were the reverberating cheers of thousands of people celebrating the culmination of an arduous, painful and, sadly, bloody journey to victory. It is, no doubt, a victory of the students and the people of Bangladesh. And it is the total defeat of a leader and government that has shown their most monstrous side by turning state machinery, along with their party goons, on their own people.

This victory has come at the cost of hundreds of lives of overwhelmingly young people, mostly students. Even small children have not been spared—basically the future of this nation. Was it possible for a government to continue to stay in power after killing the country's future, for murdering ordinary citizens in cold blood? Was it possible for a leader to keep on denying the truth about these murders by her own direction, blaming them on her political opponents when the evidence is out in the open for all to see? Could any leader and cabinet be more detached from the pulse of the people, from the hearts of the youth?

The outcome of the events of the last few weeks were inevitable. Even after killing more than 200 people in less than a week and with no let up from the protesters, Sheikh Hasina's obstinance prevailed. On August 4, the violence escalated to newer levels, leaving at least 93 dead. The former prime minister had become deaf to the cries of the people, blind to the sea of blood she had spilled with the help of the police, BGB, and the unnamed goons who fired guns

right beside these forces. Thus, on August 5, despite an indefinite curfew being called, in spite of the memory of those chilling sounds of impending death, the people could not be held back. In Dhaka, the eerie calmness of the morning changed very quickly with crowds forming practically on every main thoroughfare, with the biggest one in Shahbag, where everyone seemed to congregate. As hard as it is to believe, only a little while ago, protesters had been shot near the Shaheed Minar and other areas.

When the army started to clear the way for the crowd, the mood changed even more dramatically. Even before the news of the unseemly exit of the former prime minister from Gono Bhaban by helicopter started spreading, the sounds of freedom from a repressive regime that had shown just how merciless it could get to retain power, resonated throughout the streets. The incredibly brave young people of this country have steadfastly stood up once again against the full force of an autocratic government—and won!

But volatility is a constant in our reality; all too soon, things did take an ugly turn. The pent-up anger of people was displayed in the most distasteful way with the ransacking of Gono Bhaban, seen as the seat of a hated regime, setting of fire to the Bangabandhu Bhaban at Dhanmondi 32 and to police stations all over the country, and attacks on houses and businesses belonging to the Hindu community and on their temples. The feeling of jubilation was tainted by the violence which went on without any hindrance. After watching

children, students and ordinary citizens being ruthlessly murdered by the orders of the government, the fury of the public is understandable. But violence cannot bring justice for violence.

This is the message that the members of the Bangladesh Student Uprising Central Committee have voiced during their press briefing on Channel 24. They have categorically told their fellow protesters

party or religion. They promised to stand against any kind of communal violence.

The clarity and determination of these young leaders is awe-inspiring. More so because we have not heard our leaders talk like this for decades. Yes, we have claimed to be a democracy for the last 33 years. Yet, when was the last time we heard words like "justice" and "equality" from the mouth of a leader? When was the last time we heard that all cases

movement.

There are, of course, misgivings that the former regime will somehow manipulate the situation, that other players including extremist forces will take over. We don't know what lies ahead for us, and the uncertainty makes us jittery and holds us back from unreservedly celebrating this victory.

But listening to the resolute voices of these young people who have a clear idea of



The sounds of freedom from a repressive regime that had shown just how merciless it could get to retain power, resonated throughout the streets of Dhaka and the rest of the country on August 5, 2024.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

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to be vigilant of those taking advantage of the situation, who have carried out arson attacks and vandalism in order to malign the movement. They asked everyone to be mindful of instigators and refrain from any kind of looting, arson, communal violence and protect all minority communities and public assets. They have insisted that their movement is peaceful and has brought about a national unity that transcends political

of enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings would be tried and those involved would be brought to book?

As of this writing, a group of representatives of the movement were set to visit Bangabhaban to meet up with the president. They have made it very clear that any government that comes without the endorsement of the members of the movement would not be acceptable and would result in the continuation of the

what kind of country they want to build, one that enshrines the true values of democracy, one cannot help but feel hopeful that a real change, one that will truly free us from the suffocating clutch of fear, could actually be possible. When I see young protesters managing traffic and pictures of Muslims guarding Hindu temples on social media, the feeling gets stronger. Abu Sayed and his fellow martyrs would be proud.

This is not the Bangladesh we stood in the line of fire for

Mindless violence, looting, and vandalism cannot be who we are



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At 2pm on Monday, Bangladesh was freed from an autocrat. It baffles me that I can finally use the word "autocrat" on print to describe the fallen Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina because our law made sure we couldn't since 2018.

My brother and I rushed to the streets not being able to hold our excitement. The wind was electric. I had never seen so many people on the streets, with flags in their hands. Families carried their children on their shoulders, chanting slogans of victory. Rickshaw pullers saluted students, giving speeches standing on their rickshaws on how they refuse to live life under any tyrant, goons or *chandabajaaj* (people who use their muscles to extort money).

We could breathe a sigh of relief; as Sheikh Hasina fleeing the country meant the enforced disappearances—of students, journalists and activists, police-run raids in the houses of student protesters under the directive of the former premier and the mindless killing of students at the hands of Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) had come to a stop. Bangladesh is (for now) a country free of censorship of any kind. But the joy soon transitioned to utter horror as we walked from Motijheel to Shahbagh.

At Motijheel, crowds gathered in front of Sonali Bank and ripped off the posters of the autocrat Sheikh Hasina. We cheered till we heard someone discussing how we should tear down everything built under the Awami League regime. We brushed it off at first, thinking that after such a long time, people's sense of freedom has been awakened and there will be some extreme views coming in because of this momentary period of boundless freedom.

However, as we started walking towards Shahbagh, the smiles started to fade from our faces. People were carrying army officials on their shoulders thinking they were the ones who stepped in and brought this freedom. They got on top of their armoured vehicles, raised their flags, danced. I could see some people in the public visibly uncomfortable by the scene, but they too shrugged it off because

hey, we're celebrating!

When we were crossing Suhrawardy Uddyan, we could see a thick cloud of smoke from the outside, so we walked in to see what happened. Vandals had set large stages, which were set up for commemorating mourning day by the Awami League regime, on fire. A statue replicating Bangabandhu's historical March 7 speech was set on fire. We asked people to stop the fires immediately since if it spreads to a few nearby trees, the whole park would be set ablaze. In return, we got looks of disgust from people. A student wearing his ID card ran up to us and said, "We have been trying to stop these people from setting things on fire. Don't waste your breath, apu."

Worried, we started walking past the burning pandals. The smoke was so thick that it became hard to breathe and we walked into a crowd of people beating up a BCL-affiliated student with whatever they could find. Rods, bricks, bamboo, sticks—you name it.

The angry mob said they found him with weapons. There were a few students protecting the person, shouting and requesting that we hand him over to the army and not take the law in our hands. At one point, all of us, who were trying to save this person's life were being called Chhatra League or Razakar, just because we didn't want another life being taken before our eyes. As protesters, all of us who stood in the line of fire had seen enough people, particularly students, being shot, maimed, and killed. It was ironic how we were now taking hits from a mob to save the life of someone we were supposed to hate. At one point, the mob outnumbered us, and the person was beaten to death. We couldn't retrieve his identity or cross check if he was associated with BCL fearing we might get killed.

A few of us had strayed from the mob to ask the army officials at the barrack of the Shahbagh intersection to just show up and clear the people. They said they can't help. From then on, we knew the kind of anarchy we're seeing may be only the beginning. Being on the ground, we hadn't yet heard of the communal violence on Hindu communities,

temples being torched, and the attacks on Awami League affiliated members and their families, alongside policemen and their families.

We walked towards TSC and saw microbuses being set on fire. Vandals were aggressively telling people not to take videos or photographs. Chairs were being stolen from the halls and the people who looted Gono Bhaban, the prime minister's residence,

of Abu Sayeed, Mir Mugdho and Farhan Faiyaz and the 200-plus people's deaths if, during the first hours of independence, this is the picture of freedom we paint throughout the country? Are we really free if we don't take into the consideration the concern of our minority communities? Many had asked the same question after witnessing the mindless vandalism on Monday. We are so vulnerable and afraid now that rational

is that the mob justified their vandalism with the argument that "they did this to us, so we will do the same to them." No. Students did not sacrifice their lives to establish an order of vigilante justice. They did it so that people, no matter from what background, have the right to speak up, claim justice and call out injustice. The movement is called "Anti-discrimination Movement" and in no way can we let that rhetoric be politicized or diluted. Many of you can already notice how BNP has band-wagoned on the student's right to justice as a movement that they had always sided with.

I am proud that the student leaders I have put my faith in have called out this mindless violence and set up watch parties. I am proud that they are constantly distinguishing that these mindless acts of vandalism are not what we side with. I hope they continue to create this stride. Because when I saw vandals parading with their motorbikes at Manik Mia avenue on Monday, it seemed to me that we just replaced Chhatra League with Chhatra Dal, thus opening up an avenue for the historical cycle to repeat.

We are at a monumental time in Bangladesh's history to create change. We have an opportune moment to redefine the Bangladesh we want to see without being deterred by the apathetic thought of: "We will simply never see this in Bangladesh."

The civic society has the biggest role to play now, to draw a line in the sand—and that's the only thing that has been giving me hope. Amidst this mindless vandalism, civic society groups made human chains to stop vandals from destroying police stations, they helped to return stolen items from Gono Bhaban, imams from mosques along with students joined the watch parties outside temples to protect them. This is the Bangladesh I dreamt of, my grandfather dreamt of as a student politician during the Liberation War, and the countless other freedom fighters who took a bullet. This is the time to call out all sorts of injustice that hindered our society under an autocracy for so long—not just politicians, but also businessmen who licked Awami League's feet and who will now show support for our students, acting like they were supporting them all along.

It is time for us to be vigilant on all fronts, it's so much harder to protect freedom than to achieve it. If nothing else, what this protest proved is that students have the power to take down an autocrat that everyone feared, we can again take down any one who stands in the way of building a free Bangladesh for all. Our work has just begun.



The aftermath of the vandalism at Khilgaon Police Station in Dhaka on August 5, 2024.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

were cheered on as they brought in the chairs.

At 5pm, I started from Shahbagh towards The Daily Star building. On the way, multiple men on bikes were honking their horns, catcalling women. Mobs were targeting TV news offices in Karwan Bazar, which did not telecast the student protest coverage, as they feared pressure from the authorities. ATN Bangla's office was completely vandalised till the fifth floor, some people were seen looting the building. The same happened to a few other TV news channel offices. I could see a witch-hunt in place and, fearfully, I kept thinking, "They'll kill me if I speak up now."

I didn't know what to think and I felt numb at the horror I witnessed. What was the point

people have started to believe in the endless disinformation.

If we still find hanging Sheikh Hasina's undergarments on fans and valiantly showing them in front of the media funny, I must say we are paving a dangerous precedence for religious begets and other radical groups to use the same rhetoric and crack down on women empowerment with the logic—if you empower women, you will get a tyrant like Sheikh Hasina. The politics of the AL regime will be used as a line of defence for them to channel their hidden agendas. As a nation, we need to be far more vigilant than we have been in these dark days of no law and order.

The reason why I think I was most horrified