

Regime change in Bangladesh: The fallout for India



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Vladimir Lenin, after all, was right. Sometimes, there are decades where nothing happens; and there are weeks where decades happen. Glory to the martyrs and vanguards of Bangladesh who made it to a possible democracy once more!

In Bangladesh, August is apparently a month when decades happen. Karl Marx famously said, "History repeats itself, first as tragedy, second as farce." If the fall of the BAKSAL (Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League) regime in August 1975 was a tragedy, the boisterous exit of the regime this August is a repetition, this time as a farce. The free fall of the regime is a relief for many; however, there are also darker clouds around in the horizon.

The odds are no less apparent. One of these concerns India, the nation state's largest neighbour. The facts around the number one superpower, the US, are another concern. But I can't deal with the second topic in this space. Let me rather stay with only India today.

To some, the events of July-August, for all their valour and glory may tell the same old story. But it is not exactly a void in which they disgorge.

The coup d'état of 1975 was organised clandestinely. It was a civilian military combined effort. There is good evidence that it was sustained by a Western power. The current conjuncture seems to involve a broad coalition of radical forces led by university students, sustained by the support of a cross-section of civil society, political parties and the so-called international community. The fallout now is more uncertain than ever, at least compared to what it was a half century earlier.

The Awami League regime in 1975 under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had gone berserk with its one nation one leader "mantra". In 2024, the daughter's regime only went wilder with its sheer ruthlessness. History repeated itself.

It is perhaps too early to say what awaits us



Did Bangladesh's inevitable neighbour follow even a rule of its own best interest in underscoring the dynastic autocracy in Bangladesh?

PHOTO: PTD

even in the not-too-distant future. A doubt pops up, nevertheless. What is the nature of the August 5 revolution? Is it a popular revolution like the French Revolution flying

One does not choose from an empty set. Not a neighbour, at any rate. Nations act, as everyone knows, not as philanthropists or cynics but in their own best interest. Did

regime that clearly violated all rules of liberal democracy proves highly short-sighted, more now than ever.

What alternatives did India have to choose

from is not apparent, or not well-known in any case. But it may even be non-transparent. In 1975, India blatantly ignored its lower riparian neighbour in claiming the Ganga-Padma as a virtually all-India domestic watercourse. That it is an international river, it apparently forgot then. India's stance on other watercourses changed little since then. The waters of the Teesta and many other common international rivers don't flow quietly anymore.

Border killings on a rhythmic scale are not simply a mystic symbol of India's political muscle but of its myopic nature. It is a bizarre thing: "India's Bangladesh Problem," as one pundit called it. Termites, they call their unhandsome neighbours.

India's China obsession, at least ever since her war with China in 1962, could have misled it to its Bangladesh policy. But a people who didn't put up with Pakistan's proto-colonial repressive regime of two and a half decades can hardly be expected (let alone taken for granted) to welcome such a proverbial "subsidiary alliance" as India desires to perpetrate on Bangladesh.

The latest regime change in the wake of a popular mass uprising should provide an occasion to rethink future relations between the two sovereign neighbours in South Asia, adorned by the common historical legacy of many centuries.

The immiseration of one neighbour for the benefit of the other can only be sustained by such regimes as the just fallen one in Bangladesh. India is a habitat, nay a breeding ground, of proverbial wise men. I am sure they will not be deluded by dreams of "Akhand Hindustan". That simply will not work.

The regime change of August 2024 may also provide an occasion to reflect on the question of national identity, a question the think tanks of national security (or regional imperialism if you like) can only ignore at their own peril.

Let history not repeat a second tragedy. The regime change in Dhaka, apparently, will enjoy the blessings of the "international community." But it is unlikely to work well if India does not consider the forces of the current circumstances today. Tomorrow the same forces will force India to think.

India's best interest may perhaps lie in strengthening a new democracy in Bangladesh. At any rate, not obstructing democratic aspirations of a new generation in its eastward neighbourhood is the key point.

How to not fall for another dictator

Lessons from the Arab Spring



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The quick-fire collapse of Sheikh Hasina's Awami League regime seemed unbelievable till it happened on August 5, 2024. The historic fall of the longest serving female head of state in the world mirrors the Arab Spring in the Middle East, which began in 2010 when anti-authoritarian uprisings toppled one notorious dictator after another in the region. Before her resignation, Bangladesh's former Prime Minister's response to the student quota reform movement with crushing lethality that killed at least 450 people, had begun resembling the obsessive autocratic tendencies and brutal methods of ousted Arab leaders such as Tunisia's Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, and Libya's Muammar Gaddafi—to name a few.

The "one-point" step down slogan—Ek Dafa, Ek Dabi—reverberating in the nationwide protests on Saturday, August 3, was reminiscent of the slogan of the Arab Spring, "The people want to bring down the regime," as were the images of hope and euphoria of mass gatherings of people from all walks of life striving for democratic change. But beyond the optics, the most significant parallel between Bangladesh's historic movement and the Arab Spring is their driving force: pent-up frustration and socio-economic grievances of the mass people, the youth, the middle and lower class, towards grave inequality and injustice fostered by corrupt, fear-mongering dictatorships.

Though the Arab Spring led to the fall of seemingly invincible leaders, the victory was short-lived in most countries, as the downfall of the reviled regimes instead led to further turmoil. Only Tunisia, came out of the revolution as a success story and began backsliding last year. Libya and Syria collapsed into civil war, and foreign powers' heavy investment in Yemen's democratic transition led the country to a disastrous civil war. Egypt, on the other hand, witnessed a military coup followed by the rise of a leader even worse than the one they got rid of. Understanding the underlying reasons for the failure of the nations' to transition to democratic regimes is crucial as Bangladesh navigates uncharted waters of a seismic

regime change, unlike any before.

In an article published in the Catalyst, writer Anand Gopal attributed the Arab Spring's failure to neoliberal economic policies which were not challenged after the oppressive governments were toppled. "Because the poor and working class didn't have the structural leverage to organise collectively and as a class, they instead conceived of them differently—say, as Muslims against the more elite figures who don't represent Islam. That's where fundamental Islamists came in," writes Gopal. The role of the political economy cannot be understated for a constructive change in the system of governance in Bangladesh.

The disparity between long standing elites in Bangladesh—many of whom silently adhered to Sheikh Hasina's regime for their own gains—and the working class or unemployed—who were denied basic economic and human rights—need to be addressed as we shift towards a system where an all-powerful regime can never rise again. There is anger, there is hate—and that was always going to be the case. The fragmented society has to establish a unified dialogue to solve it. Democracy as an umbrella idea for "free speech" and "free and fair elections," without addressing deeply unequal systems—that triggered Hasina's fall—will lead us down the same path as the Arab nations that went backwards despite a world-changing moment.

Since Sheikh Hasina fled, attacks on Hindu minorities have escalated, and vandalism, looting, burning and violence has engulfed the nation. Bangladesh is predominantly a secular country, and its very strength lies in that fact. The student coordinators have insofar stepped into protecting minorities, and minority places of worship. To retain and expand unity of all communities in Bangladesh, the interim government and the Bangladeshi community as a whole, have to work towards changing the existing social contracts which disproportionately affect marginalised people of all religions. During ruler's uprisings against three-decade ruler Mubarak, minority Orthodox Coptic Christians thought the discrimination would

end after the revolution, but it escalated instead. Five years later, as current President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi took office overthrowing an Islamist regime, the violence and divisions between Muslims and Christians have continued to intensify, along with socioeconomic disparity.

A burst of democratic spirit and national unity, similar to what we witnessed last week, brought down the oppressive regimes

Defence Minister Abdel Fattah-Al Sisi, whose dictatorial regime is more autocratic and harmful to Egypt's middle and lower class, than Mubarak's was. The economic woes which drove people to protest and demand for social justice, dignity and democracy, in the streets of Cairo in 2011, continue to persist today.

For all but 12 years since 1971, the political landscape of Bangladesh has always been

demanding bribes in return for procurement decisions and political appointments. The prospect of BNP or other existing parties returning with the same political dynamics will inarguably perpetuate the same cycle of corruption and mass sufferings.

Breaking free of authoritarianism is a long, difficult road. In 15 years, the Awami League has ruled the country with a fortress of fear, normalising inequality of the classes, thuggery of those in power, wealth appropriation by government authorities, corruption within the elites and government officials, cronyism and lawlessness in every corner of the society. While we could not write any of this before, it must be said now that the legal system was also robbed of its independence. The student wing of Awami League, BCL, which has long terrorised the youth and dissenters with brute force, have also been left behind; the brainwashing of violent ideologies too, needs to be addressed constructively.

Tunisia, which was long known to be the only success story coming out of the Arab Spring—holding two democratic free and fair elections in 2014 and 2019—is now facing the exact issues they fought against in 2011. The civil society in Tunisia won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2015, for mediating the National Dialogue in 2013. Yet its drive for consensus to keep both labour and business parties content without concrete steps to address the economic issues since 2011 led to a stagnating economy, affecting the youth, causing widespread disillusionment and polarisation. The current populist President Kais Saied, as such, has been cracking down on dissenters and, according to critics, suppressing challengers ahead of October elections after the Tunisia court jailed potential presidential candidates on August 5. Tunisia's unfortunate relapse only affirms that sustained recovery from autocratic governments requires far more innovation and a renewed effort to connect political citizenship with socioeconomic rights. Change never happens overnight, but positive change warrants learning from other nations, like the Arab states. Despite leading an exhilarating revolution, the citizens continue to live through the same oppression—uprisings continue to rock the region since 2018.

Marwan Muasher, a former Jordanian diplomat who authored The Second Arab Awakening, told the Middle East Eye, "Arab Spring 1.0 could have resulted in social peace if Arab governments understood the need for new social contracts and the need for more open political systems, and the need to fight corruption institutionally."



Students coordinators of the movement have voiced that they want a change in the overall system of Bangladesh, in which fascism or 'any leader like Sheikh Hasina' can never emerge again.

PHOTO: AFP

of the Arab countries a decade ago, but the movements lacked structure or plans for the future. When such a formidable dictatorship falls, there's a blitzkrieg of non-violent actions needed to create a new form of governance from scratch. In that regard, the students' dialogue with the army, and the appointment of Dr Yunus as Chief Advisor, aligned with the students' requests, is a start. But due to the fact that the Awami League regime denied citizens free elections, and a breeding ground for new political parties to emerge, the interim government will have to stay intact for longer than previous ones, in order to start rebuilding the cracked pillars of the country before groups with vested interests take advantage of the political vacuum.

Egypt's swift return to autocracy, after ousting Mubarak, is a cautionary tale for Bangladesh. In 2012, Egypt elected Islamist Mohammed Morsi, with fierce opposition from the protesters who ousted Mubarak—paving the way for a military coup by

caught in a tussle between BNP, the political dynasty of former president Ziaur Rahman, and Awami League, the political dynasty of the Father of the Nation, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Recently, BNP General Secretary Mirza Fakhru Islam has announced that Tarek Rahman, the son of former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia will return to Bangladesh from exile in the United Kingdom. Students coordinators who have led the monumental movement have voiced that they want a change in the overall system of Bangladesh, in which fascism, authoritarianism, or "any leader like Sheikh Hasina" can never emerge again. Tarek Rahman's ascendancy to politics was based on nepotism—which the quota reform movement sought to fight. His political career has long been under a cloud; though he denies certain charges, a leaked US embassy cable from 2008 called him a "notorious and widely feared... symbol of kleptocratic government," who had "flagrantly"