

What now after mass VC resignations?

Reforming the public university system is a must

Since the fall of the Awami League government in a mass uprising led by students, an unusually high number of vice-chancellors of public universities—at least 13 so far—have stepped down in the face of pressure from students and fellow teachers. Along with the VCs, many top officials including provosts and members of proctorial bodies have also resigned. For instance, all the members of the proctorial bodies of Dhaka University (DU), Shahjalal University of Science and Technology (SUST) and Jagannath University (JnU)—as well as several other key position holders in these universities—have submitted their resignation letters.

Understandably, the list will become longer in the coming days. In hindsight, the mass resignations were bound to happen since most top officials in public universities were appointed on political considerations by the previous government. There is now hope that these vacancies, including the all-too-important VC positions, will be filled by capable and honest individuals following due procedure. However, this cannot happen in a vacuum; it is vital that new appointments are made as part of a wider reform agenda that will ensure improved academic activities, academic freedom, and students' safety in the universities, and establish a culture where teachers and students are not bogged down by the bad influences of politics.

Over the past decades, we have seen how the student wings of major political parties, most notably Chhatra League, created an atmosphere of fear on our campuses. From taking control of the residential halls—thus effectively making the posts of provosts redundant by allotting the seats themselves—to engaging in seat trades, from forcing students to take part in political rallies to torturing them for not abiding by their diktats, the BCL's terrorising tactics have totally ruined the academic environment of universities. And despite frequent criticism of the obnoxious “Gono room” culture, university authorities did not take any action to stop it.

So, establishing a violence-free environment by ensuring the safety of students in residential halls and campuses should be a top priority for the incoming administrations. Students have also demanded a ban on partisan student politics; some public universities and medical colleges have already imposed such a ban. We expect a prudent decision on this as well as on teachers' politics from the authorities. We would also like to see a transparent teachers' recruitment process, freed of any political influence, so that only the competent and dedicated are hired to build our future leaders.

Modernising the curriculum and academic activities should also be a priority going forward. While creating new knowledge should be the aim of our universities, few put enough emphasis on this presently. This needs to change. The authorities need to increase the budgetary allocation for research activities in universities. Moreover, the need for academic freedom of both teachers and students cannot be overstated. These are but a few of the reforms we expect from the authorities in the future. Our students deserve nothing less.

Israel gets away with another war crime

How much longer will the international community stand for this?

We condemn Israel's horrific bombardment of the Al-Tabeen religious school and mosque in Gaza, which killed at least 93 people including 11 children. The death toll is one of the largest from a single strike during the 10 months of aggressive military campaign by Israel in Gaza. According to civil defence rescuers, three Israeli missiles hit the complex—used as a shelter for internally displaced people—while the latter were performing their dawn prayers or sleeping. As such, it clearly amounts to another war crime committed by Israel.

The Israeli military has confirmed that it used “three precise munitions” for the attack. Such meticulous arrangement for the purpose of killing innocent civilians once again shows what the Israeli campaign in Gaza is truly about. However, as always, Israel has claimed—without any evidence—that it had received intelligence suggesting at least 19 Hamas and Islamic Jihad terrorists were eliminated in the attack. According to international law, even if some of the individuals who took shelter at the school were militants, Israel cannot wipe out so many civilians in the process of attacking them. But as we have seen repeatedly, this rogue nation has absolutely no respect for international law.

Since October 7, Israel's military campaign has killed at least 39,790 people in Gaza. With nearly all of the Gaza Strip's 2.4 million people displaced at least once during this time, many have sought refuge in school buildings, having nowhere else to go. Since July 6, however, Israel has hit school buildings at least 14 times, leaving the inhabitants of Gaza with literally nowhere left to go. This nonstop killing and traumatising of an entire people must be brought to an end immediately.

For months, we have been hearing about a potential ceasefire. However, time and again, Israel has either refused to show any sincerity in negotiations or launched one horrific attack after another that have sabotaged the entire process. The latest strike also comes at a crucial time which indicates that Israel is trying to obstruct another mediation effort—which Qatar, one of the mediators, has openly said. As some Israeli analysts have also pointed out, Netanyahu is trying to prolong the fighting for political gains. As such, it is time for the international community, particularly the western countries backing Israel, to force it back to the negotiation table, and stop it from launching any further attacks on defenceless Palestinians.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY



Fidel Castro was born

On this day in 1926, Cuban political leader Fidel Castro, who transformed his country into the first communist state in the Western Hemisphere, was born.

Why a political consensus on reforms is necessary



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On August 5, 2024, Sheikh Hasina, who was serving as the prime minister, tendered her resignation and subsequently left the country. What initially appeared to be a relatively modest request for reform in the quota system rapidly evolved into a widespread and intense mass uprising within just a few days. This transformation underscores the deep-seated discontent simmering beneath the surface.

The mass uprising can be attributed to four major factors. First, the demand for reforming the quota system had garnered substantial support from students and the general populace. Second, persistently high inflation, shrinking job and business opportunities, and pervasive corruption created significant public dissatisfaction. Third, the lack of political freedoms, restrictions on freedom of expression, and general political oppression contributed to growing discontent among the populace. Finally, the Awami League's top leaders, in their attempt to suppress the movement, exhibited a severe lack of sensitivity and arrogance. Their use of excessive force to quell the protests resulted in an unprecedented number of fatalities among students and ordinary citizens within just a few days, further fuelling the anger and intensity of the uprising.

On August 8, 2024, the interim government, under the leadership of Dr Muhammad Yunus, a Nobel laureate, came to power. The interim administration is expected to manage the immediate aftermath of the unrest, address the pressing issues that had fuelled the uprising, and lay the groundwork for a stable and orderly transition to a more permanent government.

The political settlement under the Hasina regime

Under Sheikh Hasina's leadership, the political landscape was characterised by a dominant party regime. Although the 2009 election was competitive, subsequent elections in 2014, 2018, and 2024 faced significant criticisms for their serious flaws. Sheikh Hasina's dominant party regime exhibited five key characteristics. First, the regime was marked by a coalition of five primary actors: the ruling political elites, influential economic elites (predominantly cronies), the civil bureaucracy, the military

bureaucracy, and law enforcement agencies, all centred around Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. This coalition worked collaboratively to maintain control and influence across various sectors. Second, this coalition fostered a “stable corruption equilibrium” among corrupt ruling political elites, corrupt civil and military bureaucrats, corrupt law enforcement agencies, and dominant private sector cronies. These actors had a broad consensus on major economic policies and political agendas, particularly in managing and profiting from critical economic



VISUAL: REHNUMA PRASHOON

sectors, including large infrastructure projects. Third, the regime faced a significant legitimacy deficit, largely due to the flawed elections of 2014, 2018, and 2024. This legitimacy gap was further exacerbated by the use of force, political repression, and widespread corruption to retain power. Fourth, by focusing on infrastructure and development, the government aimed to present itself as a promoter of progress and economic growth, thereby compensating for its shortcomings in democratic governance and political legitimacy. Fifth, this regime managed to secure “unconditional” support from key regional players of geopolitics, especially India, China, and Russia, despite the regime suffering from a

critical deficit in political legitimacy.

However, the regime's claim to developmental legitimacy weakened as the economy plunged into crisis from prolonged high inflation and macroeconomic instability. Finally, with the departure of Sheikh Hasina, the old political settlement was broken.

Major challenges of the interim government

The interim government is confronted with several significant challenges. First, the government should address the breakdown in law and order, ensuring security and restoring public trust across the nation. There have been reported cases of attacks on minorities, which need to be prevented. Second, the interim administration must work to restore and optimise supply chains to support businesses, ensure the availability of essential goods, and promote economic recovery. Third, with high inflation eroding purchasing power, the government must implement measures to stabilise

The interim government will not be able to function properly and address challenges if there is a fragile political settlement. The country needs a new political settlement among the key actors, currently critically important in Bangladesh's politics. They are the student movement platform, political parties, the military, the bureaucracy, and the private sector. However, these actors have differing agendas and lack a unified consensus. Also, the regional and global power players may exert their influence on these agendas.

While political parties are pressing for elections to be held as soon as possible, the student movement advocates for comprehensive reforms across political, administrative, constitutional, economic, and institutional domains to ensure a meaningful democratic transition. There is strong support for these reforms from civil society. The roles and positions of the military, bureaucracy, and private sector in this

prices. Fourth, the government needs to tackle severe macroeconomic issues, including falling foreign reserves, and sluggish growth in exports and remittances. Fifth, to ensure a smooth and credible democratic transition, reforms that uphold democratic principles and restore public confidence in governance should be instituted by fostering political dialogues and setting up transparent electoral processes. No doubt, all these challenges may intensify in the context of the changed and uncertain dynamics of the interim government's relationship with regional and global power players.

Why is a new political settlement necessary?

context remain ambiguous.

Without a clear consensus on the necessity of these reforms, and with the possibility of elections being held prematurely, there is a substantial risk of reverting to entrenched, undemocratic practices. The outcome of the new political settlement will largely depend on the relative strength and bargaining power of these actors. Civil society organisations have a crucial role to play in facilitating dialogue to forge a political consensus on the reform agenda, thereby contributing to a more stable and democratic political settlement. If that doesn't happen, the country could face extended periods of political instability.

We must strengthen our institutions to preserve democracy

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The views expressed in this article are his own.

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Bangladesh has made history by overthrowing Sheikh Hasina's regime, which was marked by incredible brutality towards its own people for the last 15 long years. Many Bangladeshi Americans could not have imagined this saga would be written in such a breathtakingly ruthless fashion, resulting from four weeks of popular uprising. The power of the people that toppled her rule was beyond our wildest imaginations.

We, Bangladeshi Americans, spent sleepless nights over the past few weeks, getting updates from friends and families, and monitoring the situation through online news. The news of the notoriously defiant former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina resigning and fleeing the country felt almost surreal. However, we eventually came to terms with the new reality and the relief that the mass uprising had finally succeeded, and the carnage stopped.

The situation remains extremely fluid. Many Bangladeshi Americans have voiced concerns about whether the revolution will be preserved by a new generation of leadership that will serve as accountable leaders to the constitution and their voters, or whether we will revert to the old patterns of repression, vengeance, and totalitarianism.

To preserve democracy, we must strengthen our governmental bodies—the executive, the legislative, and the judicial branches. In a true democracy, these establishments develop resilience against attacks from political parties. The endurance of these institutions in American politics remains the vital lifeline for continued freedom in the country. Even in the US, these governing bodies do come under relentless attacks by political forces. Yet, they are robust enough to withstand such assaults and remain fundamental to democracy. Politics

can be corrupt, unhinged, selfish, and immoral, but democratic institutions refuse to bow to political pressures. Despite relentless attacks on these entities, they strive to play by the rule.

Public offices must have public trust, and to do so our institutions should be built bottom up so that every citizen is treated fairly and enjoys a fair share of rights and responsibilities. Bangladesh must undergo massive political and constitutional reforms. We must embrace electoral reforms and create and enhance independent bodies to investigate government conduct. We should promote civic engagement and education to strengthen anti-corruption measures, reform political parties, and improve human rights protections. We must not politicise our sacred institutions ever again.

In rebuilding the nation, we must preserve and respect the wishes of the young generation who made the ultimate sacrifices to achieve this “victory.” Our policymaking must reflect their opinion, giving them the forefront in building the new generation of public servants.

We must also foster tolerance of diverse opinions, which is the lifeline of a vibrant democracy. However, it is disheartening to see people burned alive and businesses destroyed across the country post-revolution. We must not treat people critical of our policies as enemies and seek retribution

for political disagreement. It is our obligation to safeguard the lives and liberties of those who support the fallen regime. Nearly 50 years into independence, we must not divide the country into pro-liberation and anti-liberation groups, because our freedom fighters did not sacrifice their lives for mean-spirited politics and material gains.

The time has come to rebuild the country on tolerance and democratic principles. The time has come to let people form their government through their voices and votes. Their right to freedom of expression must be protected at any cost. We must not use state apparatuses to deal with people's discontent.

The end of Sheikh Hasina's regime is an example of the cruel destiny of a repressive government. People have spoken, and the leadership must listen if we do not want history to repeat itself. All public officials, whether appointed or elected, must be held accountable when they violate their oaths.

To conclude, let us allow the rekindled spirit of the Liberation War to build a new Bangladesh by forming robust public institutions. We salute our heroes who made the ultimate sacrifices with their lives and faced imprisonment and forced disappearances to write this glorious new chapter.