

Justice, equal rights vital for minorities

Take stern action so that none can exploit their vulnerability

That there have been a number of attacks, including looting and arson, targeting the homes, businesses, and places of worship of minority communities after the fall of the Awami League government cannot be denied, nor should questions like who orchestrated the attacks or what political motives might be behind them be allowed to overshadow the importance of security, justice, and equal rights for these vulnerable groups. According to the chief of army staff, there were around 30 crimes against minority communities in 20 districts. The number provided by the Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council (BHBCUC) is much higher. Only a thorough and impartial investigation can clear up the confusion, and lead to justice, which is vitally needed.

In Bangladesh, minorities—religious or ethnic—are often among the first to suffer during political upheavals. Even during normal times, we have seen how dodgy political elements exploited their vulnerability. Many persecuted minority families also had to flee their homes and even leave the country. However, this time, their response has been markedly different. Members of minority communities chose to stand their ground and protest against the violence. The BHBCUC also presented an eight-point demand, vowing to continue their protests until the attacks ceased. Although the protests were later suspended following assurances from Chief Adviser Dr Muhammad Yunus, tensions still remain.

True, the sensitivities of the issue under the present circumstance made it something of a political minefield requiring caution, but we should be able to unequivocally denounce any attack on minorities and demand their protection from further assaults. We were heartened by the message given by Dr Yunus—that all people in Bangladesh are members of one family—and the solidarity of student protesters and ordinary citizens who guarded the homes and places of worship of minorities. This show of positivity and solidarity must continue. And the interim government must honour its commitment to provide security to all members of minority communities.

But since the minority question keeps surfacing under new realities, we should also critically think about what we are doing wrong, and what we should do to address it. In the new Bangladesh that we hope to build, minorities must enjoy the same rights and protection as everyone else. Some of the demands forwarded by BHBCUC—including the introduction of a law to protect minority communities, full implementation of the CHT Peace Accord, and greater participation and representation of religious and ethnic minorities in government—deserve immediate consideration. Through these and other sociopolitical reforms, we must eradicate their vulnerability so that no vested groups can ever exploit them.

State bodies must perform better

Govt should take steps to depoliticise them, ensure accountability

Continued poor governance in various sectors has long been a thorn in the side of Bangladesh, and this is where critical focus must be given as we begin a new journey after the recent mass uprising. Experts and business community leaders have also called on the interim government to take comprehensive measures to address the underlying issues in these sectors.

Top among them is the banking sector which has long been plagued by various regulatory and policy failures. Nepotism and political interests weakened the central bank to such an extent that it failed to perform its monitoring role and take actions against the banks ignoring rules and norms to cater to the needs of a select few, often politically connected influentials. Bangladesh Bank also sometimes resorted to whitewashing malpractices by adopting incorrect accounting practices. We witnessed similar shenanigans in the capital market, and hardly anyone was held accountable for committing financial crimes. While default loans and money laundering kept on rising, revenue collection by the National Board of Revenue (NBR) came nowhere near expected levels. Rather, NBR repeatedly came to the limelight for the corruption of its officials.

Apart from the financial sector, there have been damning reports of corruption in various other state institutions including Petrobangla and Bangladesh Telecommunications Company Limited. The power and energy sector is another industry bedevilled by corruption, irregularities, and mismanagement. While many state-owned power plants lay idle or inoperative, consumers kept paying exorbitantly for power from private rental units. Another sector straining our wallets and pushing many below the poverty line is healthcare. A total disregard for policy and accountability has turned basic healthcare into a luxury for many citizens. Unfortunately, while all this was happening, the oversight bodies responsible for checking corruption and irregularities did little to prevent them. Even institutions in charge of investigation, such as the Anti-Corruption Commission, were themselves bogged down by irregularities.

Under these circumstances, we urge the interim government to take immediate steps to investigate and publish white papers on the actual conditions of all key sectors. The government, with the help of experts, should also try to revive the ailing sectors, particularly banking, ensure transparency and accountability in NBR, build a more business-friendly environment, create a commission to look into the issues of the health sector, and empower oversight bodies so that they can enforce rules and regulations strictly. The government should also take measures to prevent any politicisation of law enforcement agencies and all other public institutions.

Taste of freedom regained

A magnificent opportunity with potential pitfalls



THE THIRD VIEW
Mahfuz Anam
is the editor and publisher of The Daily Star.

MAHFUZ ANAM

The student-led people's movement toppling an autocratic government reminds me of a song by Sabina Yasmin: "Shob kota janala khule dao na, ami gaibo gaibo bijoyeri gaan" (Open all windows, I want to sing the song of victory). Though it was in praise of our Liberation War, it resonates in my heart today. Suddenly, we are living in a world without barriers of thought. Many of us had forgotten how to speak freely. We would always either switch off or put our mobile phone in the adjoining room, because of the surveillance regime that we lived under. Self-censorship became embedded in our subconscious. A small minority of print media tried to hold power to account while the rest competed with each other to genuflect themselves to power. They opted for "lapdog" journalism rather than being the "watchdog." Fear of saying anything other than the koshered version was so prevalent that frank opinions were only expressed in the most intimate of settings. Anybody speaking to us as journalists would preface their comments by saying "not to be quoted."

For the last 10 years or more, nothing could be said against Sheikh Hasina or any member of her family. Expressions like "powers that be," "highest level of decision-making," etc were used while referring to the former prime minister. A law was enacted, under the guise of showing respect to the father of the nation, that made punishable even the slightest criticism of any member of Sheikh Hasina and her family. Throughout her tenure, the use of cartoons of the former PM, her sister, son, daughter, niece and nephew, or any negative comment about them, however well documented, was not permitted, and harassment including jail term could not be ruled out. Anything but the "family" was the norm in our storytelling.

Rigged elections in 2014, 2018 and 2024, and Sheikh Hasina and the Awami League getting away with it, served to demoralise us the most. In every democracy, however flawed, elections serve to be an occasion for robust expression of the public will. This the people of Bangladesh, save those belonging to the ruling party and its allies, were deprived of. Also, by repeatedly manipulating elections, the Hasina government deprived itself of the vital feedback that free and fair elections usually give, as evidenced by the last election results in India. By manipulating elections, Sheikh Hasina, her government and her party never got the real message and, as such, suddenly found the ground shifted

from under their feet when the student-led movement started.

The question that keeps on churning in my mind is: how did we go there? Why couldn't we prevent this from happening? Did we protest as we saw our freedoms being erased? Here comes the issue of moral bankruptcy of our intellectuals in general. As we

as the most shameful capitulation of the judiciary to the executive in Bangladesh's history. All Appellate Division judges were called by the president, on returning from which the group declared that they would no longer sit in any bench or participate in any deliberations where the chief justice would be present. In effect, all the judges expressed "no confidence" in the chief justice. But on what grounds? No explanation was given.

This one instance in which the mere wish of the prime minister led to the sacking of the highest judge of the highest court, with not even a demur by so many senior judges, sealed, in my view, any chance of independence of the judiciary. But it was brought on by the judges themselves. Couldn't a single

the students crushed the barriers and opened them all. A fresh wind of change is now blowing through Bangladesh. New hope, new expectations and, most importantly, new possibilities are coming before us.

We must remember that just as we are good at fighting for justice, defeating the autocrats, and driving the military back to the barracks, so also we have a sad record of not being able to reach the goals that inspired us to fight the oppressor.

We missed the opportunity to build Sonar Bangla, first due to Bangabandhu's fatal mistake of launching BAKSAL and then because of his brutal murder along with his family and the consequent entry of the military to run the country.



ILLUSTRATION: BIPOB CHAKROBORTY

saw Sheikh Hasina get more and more entrenched in power, we became more and more amenable to compromise.

The Awami League led a group of 14 parties in which some very renowned politicians were involved. These politicians spent their lives in trade union movements, fought for peasants' rights, women's rights, anti-extremism and democracy. But as a part of the then ruling party alliance, they all got sucked into the world of privilege, wealth and power. How could these leaders not see the rot that was setting in?

Over the 15 years of Sheikh Hasina's tenure, we didn't hear of a single resignation from any post within the government or outside. No minister, no MP, no academic, no professor, no vice-chancellor, no judge ever had the moral courage to stand up and say, "Enough. I will not take this anymore and will be guided by my conscience."

The way the highest tier of judges fell in line to oust the then chief justice, Surendra Kumar Sinha, will remain

judge resign to protect the dignity of the judiciary?

When the judiciary succumbed without clamour, all the other institutions and the people within them lost hope. One by one, most institutions collapsed—and often with our own help.

Judged against the background of total institutional collapse, the crucial significance of the student-led uprising cannot be overestimated. The chief of the interim government Prof Muhammad Yunus most appropriately termed the uprising our second "liberation." It is truly so. We now have a genuine chance of undertaking fundamental reforms that we so desperately need.

The student-mass uprising has broken down all structures of oppression. It has opened the door for all of us to dream again. Freedom is in the air and our right to free speech seems to have been regained. What the students have taught us is to never lose hope. When all doors were shut,

The second opportunity was missed with the fall of General Ershad and the restoration of an elected and representative government. There was a well-thought out plan by all the political parties that came together to topple Ershad's autocratic government. But when BNP came to power in 1991, that plan was ignored. When the Awami League came to power in 1996, it did the same. Thus, instead of the politics of unity, development and peace, we entered a phase that *The Economist* termed "the battle of the Begums."

Now we have a third opportunity. Usually, nations are not so lucky. How we make the best use of this occasion will be our biggest challenge. The most urgent task is to unify the nation. We must not lapse into the same destructive culture of relegating the interest of the country behind that of the party and putting the interest of the party behind that of the leader. We have suffered enormously because of it, and it is true for us all.

Proposition for a national youth parliament



Nishat Farzana
recently worked on youth political participation issues in the Asia Pacific as a UN volunteer specialist with UNDP.

NISHAT FARZANA

In July and August, Bangladesh witnessed an incredible demonstration of grit and determination from its youth. Historically, the youth have always been at the forefront of major movements in Bangladesh, such as the Language Movement of 1952. Earlier this month, the youth of this fairly young nation once again changed its course by leading a massive movement against the discrimination in government jobs, which ultimately resulted in the resignation of the former prime minister.

It is now crucial to incorporate the voices of the youth in the country's decision-making processes. Bangladesh can achieve this by establishing its own youth parliament, which would serve as a meaningful policy-making platform solely led by the youth, for the youth.

Bangladesh is experiencing a rise in its youth population. As of 2023, youths account for 28 percent of the

country's population. These young people face numerous challenges, including unemployment, poverty, administrative and regulatory barriers to accessing financial services, and difficulties in obtaining quality education. Young people in the underdeveloped and climate-vulnerable regions are the worst victims of the prevailing socio-economic and environmental problems.

To capitalise on the demographic dividend, it is essential to address the problems faced by young people; otherwise, these issues will become problems for the entire country. Policymakers must actively engage with the youth, listen to their concerns sincerely, and establishing a youth parliament is the most systematic way to do so.

On a global scale, data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union shows that half the world's population is under 30, yet only 1.74 percent of MPs in South Asia

represent this age group. The former National Parliament of Bangladesh did not have any MPs under the age of 30. So, who could have represented the concerns of the youth in the nation's most important legislative body?

In the Asia-Pacific region, many countries have established government-facilitated institutions to enable youth civic engagement in political and decision-making processes. Sri Lanka, Malaysia, and Nepal have strong national youth councils. Vietnam and the Philippines have youth councils that also serve as policy-making bodies to the government. Bhutan's National Youth Assembly includes Women, Children, and Youth Standing Committees, while India and Pakistan have temporary National Youth Parliament schemes that provide short-term platforms for debate on timely issues.

These youth structures typically engage in activities such as dialogues, debates, and training on topics like entrepreneurship, innovation, and skill development.

Bangladesh has a Standing Committee in Parliament on the Ministry of Youth and Sports, but the actual presence of youth in this committee has been lacking. We also have a National Youth Council. However, this government-affiliated council has been perceived as inactive and largely absent on youth issues.

Additionally, there are a few mock Youth Parliaments organised by social development agencies to enable short-term discussions. However, the policy recommendations from these forums rarely reach decision-makers. The political system needs to be revisited and restructured to accommodate a youth parliament that can serve as a policy-making body on major issues.

Establishing a youth parliament in Bangladesh has always been complex and fraught with technicalities. The current situation presents an opportune moment to establish a national youth parliament as a testament to the power of Bangladeshi youth. A well-structured youth parliament can transform the mindset of the country's young people by equipping them with the knowledge and experience of parliamentary processes. Such a parliament can bridge generations by encouraging veteran leaders to collaborate with the new generation, ensuring that leadership wisdom is passed on.

If a youth parliament is successfully established, it must ensure diversity and inclusivity in participation, sustainability and transparency in the engagement process, and authenticity in its operations. If the country's politicians are unwilling to pass the baton to new faces, the nation will face periodic setbacks in its development journey.