

# The Bangladesh we want

*Lessons learnt as we rise from the ashes of our past*



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Every Bangladeshi has a clear understanding of what went wrong in the past 15 years: blatant disregard for basic democratic values and principles, complete dissolution of systemic checks and balances through the decline of democratic institutions, unprecedented levels of kleptocracy leading to economic destabilisation, law enforcement agencies co-opted as ruling party apparatus, violation of human rights and, of course, unparalleled brutality.

Prior to 2009, though not perfect, Bangladeshis had been living with their own brand of democracy. Both major political parties and their coalitions had experienced being voted in and out, with the usual barrage of corruption, cronyism etc. in play during their times. In any case, pre-2009, our expectations from democracy were relatively low to begin with. So how did things get to these unprecedented depths?

The idea here is not so much to rehash the very obvious democratic and institutional failings as stated earlier, which certainly crafted a path for its demise, but to examine from an anthropological perspective, if one may, the deeper contributing factors to see what lessons we can draw from it. As we delve into some of these underlying factors that in effect, served as catalysts for a second independence movement, it appears as though Sheikh Hasina failed to understand the basic socioeconomic DNA of her own people.

The first factor taps into perhaps one of the most defining features of us Bangladeshis as a people—and that is the deep-rooted need for us to be able to express ourselves, our thoughts and our opinions. Freedom of expression is a right close to our hearts, deeply intertwined with the very essence of our identity. History also stands witness to the fact that the 1952 Language Movement led by students, the vehicle for our expression, was the first step towards the formation of Bangladeshi nationalism.

Over the past 15 years, through the enactment of repressive and draconian laws, the use of politicised state institutions and the violent ruling party student wing, extraordinary levels of brutal suppression were perpetrated by the government to curb any form of expression that was not single-minded praise of the prime minister and her regime. People have been indefinitely detained, tortured in custody, falsely accused of crimes just for sharing or liking a social media post. Had Sheikh Hasina been able to learn from history or comprehend the essence of her people (in modern terms we call this emotional intelligence), she may have been able to predict that this would only serve to fuel anger and nationalism in peoples' hearts until the moment it erupts, taking down everything in its path.

The second factor is the PM not really

internalising the significance of the national youth demographics vis-a-vis creating a culture and personality cult around her father Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Bangladesh has a youth bulge of over 28 percent which translates to almost 46 million people between the ages of 15 and 29. This under-30 population has never seen Mujib

what exactly this "muktijuddher chetona" had devolved into over the past decade—an unspoken password to signal Awami League party allegiance. Anyone not subscribing to muktijuddher chetona was then a razzakar or a potential anti-state element needing to be dealt with.

This segues to the third factor, which is Hasina effectively creating a party state. This is largely an aging political strategy whereby the only way to have access to better opportunities is if one is part of the ruling party. The ruling party, also known as the "winner," owns and is entitled to all social and economic perks and the only "easy" way to live a potentially better life is to join the party ranks. Once in, real perks only start to come in when you rise through the ranks; and to do so, the only currency that works in

between the haves and the have nots.

Another major factor towards growing frustration and anger amongst people has been Awami League's blatant and continued reuse of political tactics that usually have an expiry date—for obvious reasons—after being deployed a few times. The most notable of these has been the party machinery perpetuating some form of horrific violence themselves and then blaming the opposition or some other targeted rival groups for it. The AL has been known to use this repeatedly and for multiple purposes, such as to divert attention from itself on some issue or other, to evade accountability or most commonly to try and generate an excuse to persecute the opposition. Volumes can be written on it. The loss of lives, waste of national resources and the ensuing violence notwithstanding, the

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Protesters shout slogans as they vandalise a mural of Sheikh Hasina with paint and mud, demanding her resignation at Teacher Student Center area of University of Dhaka in Dhaka, Bangladesh, August 3, 2024.

PHOTO: REUTERS

or been a part of the 1971 independence movement and, as such, does not share the same emotional connection the way the older generation does. Therefore, the "muktijuddher chetona," a concept leveraged by Hasina et al. to evoke and exploit emotions attached to the hard struggle that brought freedom, did not lend itself to the same extent of emotional manipulation of the younger generation. In fact, Bangladeshi youth saw more clearly than its elders did

this system is loyalty and the demonstration thereof. Depending on the level, loyalty is demonstrated by carrying out, orchestrating or supervising all manners of nefarious activities that violate human rights, undermine democracy, further kleptocracy etc. Thus continues the vicious cycle: the more you demonstrate loyalty, the higher you rise, and the higher you rise, the more engaged you become in corruption. This eventually results in a society that is split

hubris and the condescension demonstrated in assuming that a whole nation of people are completely devoid of being able to read such obvious ploy is inexcusable.

Lastly and possibly the single most deciding factor leading to this mass uprising has been the continued use by the AL leadership of its student wing—the Chhatra and Jubo leagues—as ruthless tools for oppression and suppression. Given immeasurable powers and zero accountability, the student wing

was instructed to keep the general grassroots society "in line." The merciless brutality that these groups have perpetuated on the people of Bangladesh over the past decade and a half will not be forgotten from our collective minds anytime soon. Murder, torture, extortion, scams, kidnapping, communal violence—Chhatra and Jubo leagues have openly done it all and never been called to order by its parent party. Given such actions, it was really fate accompli that the people would eventually push back once the proverbial last straw broke the camel's back.

Moving forward, as we grab with relief a chance to rebuild our nation, we must learn from this and take corrective actions to ensure we never ever find ourselves, as a nation, in a remotely similar place again. Starting with the reversal of the draconian laws, we will need to ringfence our freedom of expression and other basic rights in such a way that it cannot be dismantled so easily by any ruling regime.

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Also moving forward, we can't have any more party states. Guardrails within institutional processes will need to be put in place such that every appointment in the civil service and other state services must be merit-based with rigorous due process followed. All appointed government officials will need to declare (similar to declaration of assets) if they or their immediate relation is a registered member of any political party.

And finally, political party reforms will need to be proposed to abolish the political party affiliated student wings. Our apolitical student movement has shown us that we do not need political student wings to bring about political change. Over the years, political party student wings have only served to politicise education institutions and be instrumentalised by parent parties as necessary.

Like a phoenix, as we rise from the ashes of our past selves, it is important that we take some time for collective introspection to chart a strategic way forward.

## When will we democratise the political parties of Bangladesh?



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Revolutions spark dramatic changes, but the real test lies in the reform strategies that can steer a country toward justice. With numerous pressing issues, prioritising the right reforms is crucial. Recent upheavals, such as the Arab Spring, illustrate how popular movements can falter and revert to oppressive practices under new regimes. This makes future protests even more challenging, particularly in poorer nations with less experienced protesters.

Revolutions are rare, and missing the opportunity can mean losing it forever. While a revolution can ignite immense hope, without proper reforms, it risks descending into chaos rather than improving people's lives. Marginalised groups, including workers, farmers, and minorities, have historically been promised the benefits of democracy but have rarely seen these promises fulfilled. Time and again, they have been betrayed by politicians who prioritise self-interest, profiteering, and looting of the state. This has often created distrust and anxiety among the general populace, who lack the means to voice their concerns through legitimate institutional mechanisms.

In Bangladesh, the structure of political parties, characterised by a lack of internal democracy, raises doubts about the long-term success of student-led revolutions. While the student movement has achieved a significant victory, true success remains elusive. Discussing reforms in public institutions like the justice system, law enforcement, and the election commission is insufficient. For lasting justice, peace, and socio-economic well-being, we must prioritise internal democracy within political parties. Internal democracy is a fundamental cornerstone of any democracy, yet Bangladeshi political parties have consistently evaded it, bringing us back to square one repeatedly. For instance, from the fall of the former President Hussain Muhammad Ershad to the fall of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, including the end of the last BNP government, people have been disappointed by autocratic attitudes, governance, and rampant corruption. These parties have often suppressed dissent and alternative voices through intimidation, abductions, and extrajudicial killings, perpetuating a cycle of abuse.

Focusing solely on public institutions

while ignoring political party reform risks repeating past mistakes. Without addressing internal party dynamics, the same autocratic and oligarchic behaviours are likely to resurface. Therefore, any reforms initiated by the interim government must prioritise the internal revolutionisation of political parties.

The biggest hurdle is the undue influence that a few families exert over their political parties. They hold undemocratic power and

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monopolise their parties. Sheikh Hasina had total control of her party, with family members and close associates installed in key positions, thereby protecting her dominance, and avoiding criticism. The lack of internal democracy and dialogue has further silenced dissent through state machinery.

To break free, political parties must democratise. They need to be free from dominant family politics, which often function like mafia operations. Leaders should be elected, not selected, and internal election processes must be genuine and observed by an independent body to prevent them from becoming mere box-ticking exercises. An

independent body, through constitutional changes, can rigorously scrutinise whether these parties uphold and practice democratic values, providing all members a fair chance to run for leadership at all levels.

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such limits, the old guards will find excuses to stifle new leaders and maintain their grip on power. The current political vacuum clearly shows that parties have hardly allowed any members to consider running for leadership, let alone pursue the democratisation of their parties.

Furthermore, separating student politics from party politics is essential for genuine reform. Students should have the freedom to engage politically through student union elections, but this involvement should not be swayed by the direct influence of political parties. So far, students have been used by all political parties to pursue their political

agendas, rather than being provided with free and fair spaces for dialogue and education.

Decentralising the abuse of power at the local party level is also crucial. Committees in villages and towns, as well as in major cities, should be elected by grassroots members and local public, rather than being handpicked by central leaders who are often disconnected from local issues. This may help reduce the bribery and nepotism rampant within parties and obstruct internal democratisation. Marginalising alternative voices within the parties prevents those who could contribute to greater democratic rights and values from being heard, both within the party and among the public.

All this may sound radical to the existing parties, especially when they are in a hurry for an election, but they must be honest with themselves before convincing the public that the old ways are acceptable. The old politics of violence and revenge are no longer acceptable. Current acts of vandalism against public and private properties, along with communal violence, all indicate why reform is urgently needed as the transition of power to a democratic party hopefully occurs in due course.

Though the interim government and the spirit of the movement face a tough task, they must ensure political parties undergo necessary radical democratic reforms, just like public institutions. Otherwise, history will repeat itself, and the real freedom and well-being of the people will suffer.

At this critical moment, the revolution must serve every citizen, not just a few politicians or oligarchs who seek to govern without accountability or transparency.