

JULY 36

A win for the youth

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On a Wednesday that history will not soon forget, the High Court rendered its verdict: the October 4, 2018, notification, which had hastily terminated the Freedom Fighter quota in first and second-class government employment, was declared illegal. It was June 5, a day that will be remembered throughout history—the kind of occasion that future generations will point to as the spark that set off the events that occurred just two months later. A day that will leave an indelible impression on us, compelling us to read the pages of history books to comprehend the chain reaction of events that it triggered.

When I joined the protest on July 7, a familiar surge of purpose welled up within me. It was a flashback to 2018 when I stood shoulder to shoulder with thousands, demanding safer roads, a movement that felt like a moral imperative. This time, the stakes were different, but no less important. We were battling for fair representation, insisting on a redistribution of power that did not leave the majority in the dark. What we wanted was reformation, a restructure that would finally allow our voices to be heard in the halls of power rather than drowned out by the noise of the status quo.

After the verdict was handed down on June 5, the students began their protests the following day, though it

our collective memory as a day of profound horror. On that day, the goons of the Bangladesh Chhatra League descended upon the protesting students with a fury that was as brutal as it was unprovoked. I was at the Dhaka University campus that day, and the scenes I witnessed are not ones that will fade from my mind anytime soon. This wasn't just the reality for the students of Dhaka University; it was the reality for students across the nation. The tragic death of Abu Sayed marked one of the first martyrdoms of the protest, and from July 16 onwards, the bloodshed spread throughout Bangladesh. The very soil of the nation was painted red.

By July 19, we were entirely cut off from the outside world, as the government imposed a curfew and shut down internet services. Life carried on in an eerie semblance of normalcy, even as the media spun a narrative that now seems almost laughable in hindsight. For the first time in recent years, I found myself grateful for my newspaper subscription, as it offered a sliver of the truth amidst the boom of state propaganda. On July 21, the Supreme Court dramatically reduced the number of government positions reserved for war veterans and their descendants, and the authorities, in their arrogance, believed that the students' demands had been met. They expected the protesters to go home without ever acknowledging the lives

of people poured out to celebrate a hard-fought victory, marking the end of an era that had come at an unspeakable cost.

From the battle for quota reforms to the toppling of a government, July was a month marked by both triumph and tragedy. Unsurprisingly, August 5 is called July 36. Never before has an uprising in Bangladesh witnessed such a staggering loss of life in such a short span of time—a fact that renders this victory all the more torturous and historic.

It was the demise of a regime that failed to heed the voices of its youth, a regime brought to its knees by a

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PHOTO: SHEIKH MEHEDI MORSHED

wasn't until July 1 that they truly took to the streets. The movement gained momentum as other universities joined the cause on July 3. When their demands continued to fall on deaf ears, the students called for the 'Bangla Blockade,' a move that effectively brought the country to a standstill. Yet even this drastic measure failed to compel the authorities to take them seriously. July 14 marked the beginning of the end when former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, in a press conference, ignited a firestorm with her words: "If the grandchildren of the freedom fighters don't get quota benefits, should the grandchildren of Razakars get the benefit?" This incendiary remark set the nation ablaze, and the students, wounded and indignant, began to cry out, "Chaito gelam odhikar, hoye gelam razakar"—we demanded our rights, and now we're branded traitors.

July 15 will forever be etched in

lost in their quest to be heard.

When the internet finally flickered back to life on July 23, I was confronted with the full scale of the atrocities that had been unfolding while I had been fed the state's narrative. The true horrors—deaths, injuries, police brutality, block raids, mass arrests, and the so-called 'protection' offered to coordinators by the police—became impossible to ignore. What had started as a protest had evolved into a full-blown uprising.

The success of the 'Drahajatra' on August 2 united the masses with the students, and suddenly, the entire nation had coalesced around a single demand: the resignation of the Prime Minister. August 4 saw the deaths of another 114 people, yet even this arbitrary use of force could not quell the spirit of the people. On August 5, the day we had reserved for the 'Long March,' Sheikh Hasina finally stepped down, bringing an end to her over 15-year reign. The streets erupted as waves

movement that began with students but swiftly evolved into a nationwide outcry. The popular outrage was fuelled by a litany of grievances: rampant corruption, grotesque economic disparity, soaring commodity prices, mass disenfranchisement, and the erosion of democratic institutions. Yet, despite the overwhelming force wielded against them, the students' resolve remained unbroken. Their spirit, undeterred by brutality, formed into a vow to combat injustice and ignorance, igniting a movement that would alter the course of the nation's history.

Reading articles, I have seen authors compare the uprising with the 1968 protest that erupted from the Sorbonne in France. Television shows sometimes have gone so far as to label demonstrators as 'French' in their spirit of resistance. But to compare the struggle of Bangladesh's youth to a mere echo of past movements is to overlook the extraordinary passion with which they fought—a passion unparalleled by any previous uprising. One French slogan, *Sois Jeune et Tais Toi*—"Be Young and Shut Up"—became a rallying cry for a generation demanding the right to be heard.

Bangladeshi students had similar objectives; they wanted to live in a country where they could use their rights without fear of retribution. Historians will write about the new Bangladesh, but it is critical to remember that it originated from the dreams and hopes of a generation that refused to be silent.

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PHOTOS: STAR

The streets will remember

Following August 5, as no traffic policemen were found on duty on the roads, students took charge of traffic management in different parts of the capital, as well as various other parts of the country, as volunteers. The country will forever be indebted to its student populace for the role it has played during these trying times.



OPINION

Chaos, uncertainty, and our newfound social awareness



ILLUSTRATION: ABIR HOSSAIN

ZABIN TAZRIN NASHITA

The Anti-Discrimination Student Movement has been a resounding success, as evident by the resignation of the Sheikh Hasina-led government. The interim government has been sworn in, and hopes of reformation are running rife throughout the whole country. Of course, the anticipated moment of truth came at a great price with rampant vandalism and looting following suit, and the most shameful of all, attacks on minorities and their properties.

As the lives and properties of religious minorities, especially the Hindu community of Bangladesh, were under threat, the general population wasted no time in coming forward to offer their protection and aid. With the police being on strike, students of Bangladesh took to regulating traffic. Initiatives were also taken and executed for cleaning up different areas, including the parliament building. Last but not the least, this movement has inspired an unprecedented level of social consciousness and made way for open conversations surrounding various pressing matters.

The movement has attempted, from time to time, to make room for the voices of minorities and their sufferings. While activists have been vocal in calling for the demilitarisation of Chittagong Hill Tracts for some time, the issue is finally gaining much needed traction among the youth. The notion "none of us are free until all of us are free" is circulating all over social media, expressing solidarity with the indigenous people of Bangladesh whose rights have been violated for decades now.

The abduction of human rights activist Kalpana Chakma in 1996 was spoken of with reverence, and as a symbol of struggle and resistance. The youth has rightfully adopted the belief that the total reform of Bangladesh we all seek cannot be achieved without protecting the lives and lands of indigenous communities.

The Anti-Discrimination Student Movement has exposed many underlying issues in the system. The murder of Sagar-Runi; seventeen-year-old Tanvir Mohammad Toki; Avijit Roy, activist and founder of the internet blogging community *Mukto-Mona*; Sohagi Jahan Tonu,

a student who was raped and murdered within the Cumilla Cantonment area—have resurfaced holding the regime accountable for its lack of transparency.

The Anti-Discrimination Student Movement has also made space for conversations surrounding class consciousness. Class consciousness refers to the subjective awareness of a social class, typically the working class, of their shared interests, and the need for collective action to achieve change. It helps us understand how to fight back against exploitation and put aside differences to protect our rights.

This movement has shown us a picture of unity within the social classes that we've only read about in the history of the Liberation War. People from the working class, such as rickshaw pullers,

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shopkeepers, electricians and construction workers came forward in helping the protesters. In turn, donation links and crowdfunding were arranged for martyred or injured members of the working class. Not to mention, people engaged in constructive conversations about the unjust treatment suffered by the working class and the need for their voices to have a platform.

This movement has not only caused us, the youth of Bangladesh, to be more socially and politically aware, it has also helped us understand how important it is for representatives of all communities to have a voice. Amidst the chaos and uncertainty that seems to have taken over the country, our newfound social awareness remains a sliver of hope for a better future.



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