



VISUAL: BIPOB CHAKROBORTY

Canards of a prejudiced neighbour



ON THE SHORES OF
(IN) JUSTICE

Dr CR Abrar
is an academic with an interest in
human rights issues.

C R ABRAR

The July massacre and the consequent second liberation of Bangladeshis have taken the world by surprise. At a time when millions in Bangladesh are celebrating the overthrow of Hasina's brutal dictatorship, when several hundred families including those of Abu Sayed, Mugdho, and Faiyaz, are beginning to sense that the wheels of justice have begun to roll, when various countries, international development and rights bodies, civil society organisations and the global media are beginning to absorb and appreciate the courage, tenacity, and commitment of the young heroes, various actors in Bangladesh's next door neighbour (political leadership and the mainstream media, in particular) are busy crafting a narrative denying and undermining the magnificent achievements of the new generation of "freedom fighters."

In the final days of Hasina's regime, the decision to unleash armed Awami goons on the defenceless protesters and the subsequent mobilisation of the security forces with the order to "shoot on sight" (duly executed on a number of occasions, killing scores of people), and the indiscriminate use of tear gas, sound grenade, armoured personnel carriers and helicopters to disperse and terrorise the protesters made it amply clear to the people of Bangladesh and discerning international observers that the Awami regime has reached its nadir. The state's myopic policy of resorting to intimidation and brute force only contributed to further hardening the resolve of the protestors. By August 3, their nine-point demand coalesced into one-point, the unconditional resignation of the government.

On the fateful day of August 5, the students' Dhaka siege programme in realisation of the one-point demand was countered by the state by imposing a stringent curfew backed by the threat of using lethal force. When the former prime minister ordered the siege be quashed "by any means," the armed forces' decision not to open fire on the unarmed protestors sealed the fate of the regime, leading Hasina to flee the country. While her departure triggered joyous celebrations all over the land, the news of killing of more than 100 people on the final two days let loose frenzied outrage, resulting in ransacking of the prime ministerial office and residence in Dhaka, and attacking and, in some instances, torching of the offices of the Awami League and homes and facilities of its leaders.

The violence that ensued was the result of a combination of outrage at the indiscriminate killing of fellow protestors and the venting of a long drawn pent up frustration of a repressed, disenfranchised populace, who were left out of the "economic miracle" conjured by the regime and subjected to denial of fundamental rights including those of assembly, expression and dissent and also ill treatment, seizure of properties, denial of justice and humiliation by the ruling elite in cahoots with the state agencies.

The glorious struggle of the youth of Bangladesh that culminated in the overthrow of a despot through sacrificing several hundred lives received widespread felicitations from all over the world. Unity, resilience,

and creativity demonstrated by the student leadership in steering through the movement against all odds became the topic for discussion in every quarter that value justice, freedom, and liberty, both at home and abroad. In contrast to such a dispensation of triumph and positive image of Bangladesh's new found freedom, the dominant and influential sections of Indian commentators (diplomats, strategic experts, and "Bangladesh observers") and that of the media conjured up a conspiracy theory claiming that the students' movement was being "manipulated," if not "steered" by opposition political parties, such as the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) and Jamaat-e-Islami. Nothing can be further from the truth.

The quota reform movement was an autonomous, organic movement of the students. Though it was initiated by the students of public universities, the atrocities committed against them by the ruling party thugs, blatantly aided by the members of law enforcement agencies, galvanised the students of schools, madrasas, colleges and private universities to join the ranks. As the casualties mounted as a result of trigger-happy response of the state, siblings, parents, guardians and mass people from all walks of life joined the students, swelling the ranks of the protesters. By then they had overcome the fear to face live ammunition. All along there was conscious effort by the student "coordinators" (leaders) not to provide the government any pretext to brand the movement as proxy of the opposition parties. During this entire episode, being mindful of likely public backlash for usurping the movement, political parties such as the BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami had little option but to maintain a low profile, let alone had any opportunity to direct or manipulate it, as claimed by Delhi and Kolkata based pundits.

Some Indian observers also beat the drum that the Pakistani spy agency, ISI, had a hand in orchestrating the protests to dislodge the Hasina government. Others have pointed fingers at China. If indeed such collusion existed, is it not incumbent on those observers to furnish credible evidence to establish the veracity of such claims?

Collective leadership with designated coordinators in major educational institutions and districts was a distinguishing feature of the movement. As and when top leaders got arrested, detained, or were forced to hide, the next tier of coordinators assumed the role and steered the struggle, often by declaring programmes that ensured the continued engagement of the masses. The unflinching commitment to unity and resilience frustrated all efforts (detention, abduction, and torture) of the state agencies to bring about a fissure in the leadership. After the state violence reached its zenith, the one-point demand for the resignation of the government was taken by the students and the students alone. Therefore, to ascribe the success of the protest movement to opposition political parties or external elements not only reflects the stark failure to recognise the depth of the students' agency and ingenuity, it also manifests the wretched level of

understanding of the "Bangladesh observers" of India as to the ground realities of Bangladesh politics.

The claims of widespread violence targeting the Hindu minority were another issue of concern of the prejudiced Indian media and the intellectual elite. The matter also featured in the Indian prime minister's message to the newly installed chief adviser of Bangladesh. It is true, that public backlash against the Awami League leaders and activists engaged in excesses during the party's 15-year rule did impact on some members of the Hindu community. On August 9, Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Oikya Parishad reported that 205 cases of persecution, which includes the burning of temples, sexual assault, and even murders, on minority communities took place in 52 districts since the former prime minister's resignation occurred four days prior.

However, there is also burgeoning evidence that the issue was blown out of proportion by the vested quarters. Images of a prominent Hindu cricketer's home being torched, of Hindu women being gang raped and killed; of Hindu community members trying to cross the border en masse to escape engulfing violence that was rife in the social media were subsequently proven to be fake.

Fact checkers have found that many of the fake posts on social media about "widespread persecution" of Hindus in Bangladesh were posted from various Indian accounts. They noted, "While some attacks on Hindus did occur, houses were also vandalised and burned in Muslim communities." Instead of viewing them as incidents of "communal violence" the attacks were targeted at Awami League leaders and supporters rather than at individuals based on their religious identity. For political expediency "these events were given a communal colour rather than being portrayed as politically motivated." After reaching out to sources in some of the affected districts, Al Jazeera "discovered that the attacks on Hindu households were not driven by religious identity but by political affiliations." The BBC's fact-checking unit, BBC Verify, also arrived at a similar conclusion.

The prejudiced Indian intellectual elite and the media outlets' hypocrisy is palpable by their collective silence about the atrocities committed by the Awami League goons and members of the law enforcement agencies. From their interventions in the TV talks shows, opinion pieces and statements, it is obvious that the killing of hundreds of unarmed youths by illegal use of firearms by Hasina government and injury of several thousand have hardly been reported and thus far failed to stir the conscience of these champions of liberalism who interestingly have passionately condemned the mob vandalism of private and state property, including statues of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

Such insensitive and undesirable reaction by the mainstream Indian intellectual elite and its cohort media to the July massacre should not come as a surprise to ordinary Bangladeshis. They are well aware that it was the Indian government that continued to provide critical support to a regime that usurped power by conducting three sham exercises (falsely dubbed as general elections) in 2014, 2019, and 2024. Time has come for the Indian political establishment to discard its myopic policy of trying to shore up the fallen regime that was overthrown by a popular revolution of freedom loving Bangladeshis, particularly the young people, who aspire to be treated with dignity and respect by its neighbour.

The tasks ahead for Bangladesh



Selim Jahan
is the former director of UNDP's Human
Development Report Office at UNDP in New York.

SELIM JAHAN

As Bangladesh is settling after the unprecedented events over the past weeks—the mass movement, hundreds of lives lost, the overthrow of Awami League government—one of the critical questions before us is what next. What needs to be done in today's Bangladesh, as the country is trying to move forward? The actions needed has an immediate perspective, a short-run one, as well as a medium-term and a long-term context.

Immediately, the broken structure of the law and order-enforcing police administration must be restored. No doubt increasing politicisation of the police force over time, and the recent police actions led to much anger and hostility of the common mass against the police. As a result, the police force is in a state of fear.

Second, social resistance to all kinds of violence must be ensured and legal actions taken. One aspect of this violence is the destruction of public property and buildings, which is not desirable because they belong to people. Measures must be taken to avoid all kinds of revengeful acts and looting. The other kind of violence manifests in the attacks on the lives and properties of minorities, especially religious minorities, and their places of worship. It is gratifying to observe that the collective and concerted efforts of student-public alliances are ensuring the safety of minorities and the protection of their properties and places of worship. Such efforts

as should the future parliament of Bangladesh have two houses; should there be proportional representation in it; should there be term limits on government, etc. There can be public debates in the context of constitutional reforms as well—issues of reverting to the 1972 Constitution of Bangladesh or formulating a new constitution, reflective of the hopes and aspirations of the new generation. The latter issue, however, would require a constituent assembly.

Economic issues may constitute the second aspect of the public debate. The LDC graduation of Bangladesh would possibly be finalised during the tenure of the interim government, and as a result, some of its determinants would be relevant for them. Therefore, the interim government has to confront, in the scenario of changed realities, the issue of Bangladesh's readiness for the graduation, the negotiations with our trading partners, and formulation of a blueprint for protecting the interests of the country.

Issues of social harmony, human rights, social inequities, social violence and terrorism may be at the core of the third aspect of public debates. Dialogues on poverty, deprivation and issues of marginalisation may represent the major part of the social inequities. There should be an open and honest discussion on communal harmony, issues of minority insecurities, and

would need multidimensional reforms. It is well known that the political and economic institutions of the country have been increasingly suffering from fundamental institutional weaknesses due to years of neglect and politicisation of the system, making these institutions less and less effective. An important mandate of the post-election representative government will be institutional reforms in the country.

The scope of the reforms will have to be widespread. On one hand, such reforms would encompass the independence of the judiciary, the rule of law, and various aspects of public administration, e.g. law and order enforcing institutions, the Public Service Commission, the Anti-Corruption Commission. On the other hand, they would also be in different economic and social areas. The economic sector would include the banking system, monetary and fiscal policies, the tax structure etc. Reforms are also necessary in economic institutions such as the Bangladesh Bank and the Planning Commission. Ensuring a structure and a culture of transparency and accountability should be at the core of the reform so the evils of nepotism and corruption can be combated. In the social sector, reforms have to happen in the education and health sectors.

One critical aspect of the mass movement is the focus on a disparity-free Bangladesh. In our society, disparities have many faces and exist not only in outcomes among various socioeconomic groups and regions but are present in opportunities, in education, health and in employment. In fact, disparities in employment were one of the major complaints of young people. In the medium-term, different reformatory measures are essential to reduce the multidimensional disparities in Bangladesh.



One of the critical questions before us is what next.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

need to be consolidated.

Third, the destruction of historic national symbols, such as pictures and photos, paintings, sculptures, and museums, can never be beneficial. They are part of national heritage and identity. To understand where we want to go as a nation it is essential to know where we have come from. Setting fire to the Bangabandhu Memorial Museum on Dhanmondi Road Number 32, the desecration of sculptures of the Father of the Nation, and other notable figures represent the destruction of our historical journey as a nation. These are unpardonable crime, which deserves due punishment.

One immediate task of the interim government would be to undertake an objective inquiry into the killings over the past weeks, to bring them to justice and punish them. Similarly, actions should be taken against those who are responsible for the destruction of public properties, symbols of national history and national heritage.

After the immediate actions, the first task to be undertaken in the short-term involves the creation of a democratic, transparent and participatory platform for citizens' dialogue. In such dialogues, there has to be an effective representation of all groups in the society—women, young people, indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities, people of third gender, etc.

Those dialogues may have three aspects: one, a political dialogue which should raise questions such

the responsibilities of the majority.

While short-term reforms are required in various areas, they must align with the future medium-term reforms. One critical reform in the short-term should be in police administration so that even in the short-term, an apolitical, people-friendly, public service-oriented police force can be constituted. The other necessary short-term institutional reform is required in such entities as the election commission. The independence and neutrality of the commission must be enhanced to the highest level so that it can duly perform the mandates bestowed on it. Three, in the financial sector, short-term reformatory measures may be undertaken to combat money laundering and wealth exodus, which would increase the country's resource base.

Because of the changed realities, there may be a need for reconstructing the collaborative and trusting relationship with various countries and international organisations. The interim government will have to perform these tasks in the short-term.

The most important task in the short-term will be to organise, on the basis of public debates and dialogues mentioned earlier, a free, fair, neutral and participatory election. In fact, this would be the prime responsibility of the interim government, which should delegate the reformed election commission this responsibility and oversee the election process.

In the medium-term, Bangladesh

One of the most important tasks in the medium-term would be formulating a long-term vision for Bangladesh, which would identify the path for tomorrow's Bangladesh. Today's youth would be the main architect of that vision, which would motivate and guide the future of Bangladesh. Today's young people would no longer remain the "future of the country," rather they would be the "present of the country."

Let us conclude with three observations. First, an interim government cannot be an alternative to an elected government. In that context, the tenure, mandate and scope of the work of an interim government must be limited and must be duly defined. A large part of the citizens of Bangladesh feel that the tenure of an effective interim government should not be more than two years.

Two, whether election first and reform second or whether it should be the other way round is an unproductive question. Since the fundamental reforms are to be undertaken by the elected representatives of the people, election should precede fundamental reforms. This is because, without the approval of an elected government, fundamental reforms would not receive the required political legitimacy.

Finally, there are some interim proposals for reforms and actions as Bangladesh moves forward. There should be more dialogues, debates and discussions on such proposals. The intention of this article is to initiate that process.