

The triumphs and challenges of a generation in flux



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

Dr Shamsad Mortuza
is professor of English at Dhaka
University.

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

The timing of the flood couldn't have been worse. The country is yet to recover from the political storm that has created an administrative vacuum both at the centre and in the periphery. The students are once again at the forefront by reaching out to the victims of the flood that has inundated the country's eastern region.

The creativity and passion with which they are collecting funds, identifying essential items, creating support networks, and undertaking rescue missions are remarkable. This is another example of our youth rising to the occasion. Social media displays their activism, allowing us to hear their humanitarian voices and connect with their peers. However, we must avoid any undue and oversimplistic expectation that this generation alone will

of its desired reforms, we need to have a reality check and emphasise intergenerational dynamics.

The young generation's rise to prominence in politics is both phenomenal and accidental. What began as a movement among some public university graduates seeking systemic changes for equal job opportunities transformed into a singular demand: regime change. The tide has turned. The autocratic regime is toppled. A new challenge has now emerged: filling the power vacuum.

We have thrust many of our students into leadership roles. Thankfully, an interim government comprising experienced civil society and public service members assists them in understanding the institutional knowledge and the intricacies of the governance



Members of Students against Discrimination movement collect money and relief items to help flood-affected communities, at Dhaka University on August 23, 2024.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

There is also a risk of elevating the leaders through excessive praise. We should use constructive criticism as a stimulus for meaningful change. The nation does not require further reminders about the negative effects of hero worship and the formation of cults. Generation Z, like any generation, is not a homogenous entity. Many of them are deeply committed to political change, but they vary in their scope and conviction. Leaders of the movement, when elevated to positions of power, may not accurately reflect the diverse views and concerns of all their peers representing different social strata.

change everything overnight. Such expectations will place huge pressure on this generation that is still coming of age. And they may not have yet developed a thorough idea of the complex and intricate nature of the problems that they are dealing with. I believe that in order for us to move forward as a country with all

machinery. But due to the movement's spontaneity and sporadic nature, there is no clearly defined leadership. The coordination team represents the movement, but many volunteers and local enthusiasts are operating in uncharted areas. This inexperience, combined with their youthful

idealism, is likely to cause missteps.

The recent cancellation of HSC exams will be a classic example. A group of students stormed the Secretariat and demanded immediate annulment of the public examination. An adviser attempted to reason with the students, but to no effect. Their threats of violence compelled the government to concede to a proposal to prepare results based on the examinations that they have appeared in so far. With the memory of the quota reform movement still vivid, the government probably did not want to risk exacerbating the situation. The caution is understandable, but it will lead to further complications. Not surprisingly, another group of students have contradicted the demand of their peers, as they feel that the compromised results based on partial exams will jeopardise their future in competitive exams, higher

studies, and selection of majors. Mobocracy drowned out their response.

This incident exemplifies a troubling aspect where group interests precede institutional ones. This is also seen in the series of news reports that state how institutional heads are being asked to resign from their posts. Those who faced the call to step down ostensibly remained silent or ambivalent during the movement. These individuals are found guilty of complicity in the crimes of the previous regime. There could be many invisible local factors or hidden agendas. It is possible that different dormant regimes will return. Indeed, we need a culture of accountability. But we also need to refrain from rash judgements that can destabilise many of our already fragile institutions. At the same time, we need to be careful about less noble intentions that may take

advantage of a power vacuum. As Greta Thunberg, one of the most prominent Gen Z climate activists, has emphasised, real change requires action from those in power, not just from passionate young people.

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their cleaning or street monitoring activities did not get equal media attention. Private university students assert that their sacrifices received insufficient recognition. This disconnect could lead to fractures within the movement as different factions vie for influence and control. The HSC fiasco is a case in point.

The use of technology, particularly social media, plays a crucial role in the rise of Gen Z activism. It allowed activists to connect with one another, share information rapidly, and mobilise support on a global scale. However, the rapid pace of online activism can result in superficial engagement, reducing complex issues to mere hashtags and soundbites. Some groups could intensify their activism to become more radical. For instance, a group of female students went to Shahbag Police Station insisting on forcing an alleged perpetrator of sexual assault into writing a confessional statement, snatching him away from the uniformed forces. Support for a patient army officer and a radical female voice divides the internet.

A prerequisite of nation building is continuity and stability. Gen Z has been the catalyst for change. However, a single generation cannot bring about changes. We must not overlook the contributions and experiences of previous generations. We need intergenerational collaboration, not generational rivalry, to address the multifaceted crises facing us. For instance, as a flood-prone country, we developed a disaster management model. Although we should have immediately deployed professional forces to deal with the flood aftermath, the focus appears to be more on crowdsourcing and their viral visibility.

While we are thankful to Generation Z for the ultimate sacrifice they made to bring down an autocratic regime and force far-reaching reforms, we need to bridge the intergenerational divide. We need a reality check. The future depends on whether we can channel their energy and idealism into sustainable, long-term change, highlighting each generation's role. We need to build a bridge over the troubled waters.

How Awami League soured the youth's perception of Bangabandhu



Azmin Azran
is digital features coordinator at The Daily
Star.

AZMIN AZRAN

August 15 this year was unrecognisable compared to how the day has been observed over the 15 years of Awami League rule. This year, the day came just 10 days after former prime minister Sheikh Hasina, in the face of a student led mass uprising, was forced to resign and flee the country. Her government was subsequently dismantled.

Hasina's government declared August 15 the National Mourning Day and a public holiday to solemnly remember the assassination of the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and most of his family members in 1975. Yet, on the day of Hasina's fall, statues of Bangabandhu were torn down in various places, and his residence at Dhanmondi Road 32, which had been turned into a museum, was set on fire.

The interim government subsequently cancelled the public holiday, and many individuals were stopped and harassed at Dhanmondi Road 32 on August 15, apparently for trying to pay respects at the residence of the country's first president.

But what does this mean? Does the new generation really think so little of Bangabandhu? How did it get to this stage?

We spoke to some youngsters and asked them about their perception of who Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was, and how that perception changed over time.

Rubama Amreen, 15, says she can't recall when she first learnt about Bangabandhu, but admits that she has been hearing the name for as long

as she can remember. "It was more like knowledge instilled within us from birth," she said. The one thing that stood out to her when she learnt about the Liberation War in school was the "incessant glorification of Bangabandhu, which was strange, especially compared to how we were taught about other world leaders."

Sakib Rahman (not his real name), 24, points out what was missing in history lessons about Bangabandhu. "In our social science textbook, the history mostly revolved around the Liberation War and a big section about his March 7 speech. Nothing was mentioned about the Awami League rule during 1972-75. Back then, I thought of him as a national hero who was a saint."

However, the post-war period in Bangladesh's history was recent enough that many youngsters had the chance to learn about Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's time in power from family members who saw it firsthand. The advent of the internet, on the other hand, has made it doubly difficult to limit anyone's knowledge of history simply to textbooks or other government-approved media.

Sakib's interest in that period of history was recent. "I got interested in the history of post-war politics during the recent protests. Books like *Bangladesh: A Legacy of Blood*, *Jasod er Uthan Poton*, and *3 Ti Shena Obhuthan o Kichhu Na Bola Kotha*, etc painted the real picture about Sheikh Mujib for me. I knew his rule wasn't that great, but after knowing the details, it completely changed how I viewed him."

Anindya Alam, 24, shared how his perception was shaped by his family's honesty about the history of that period. "My family background is diverse. My father's side has been very pro-Awami League and has political history, while my mother's side, post-liberation, has been very critical of the Awami League. As I grew up and my family began to have more

everyone's throat, to the point of mockery. I think the previous government tainted the image of Bangabandhu themselves, by overdoing it to the point of no return." Anindya Alam added, "Bangabandhu had a fairly positive perception among Bangladeshis and the Hasina regime took advantage of that. The previous government,



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honest conversations about history with me, I had access to two different narratives." For Anindya, while one side reaffirmed the narratives taught by his textbook, the other side told him about the looting, the nepotism, the extrajudicial killings, and the terror perpetrated by the Rakkhi Bahini.

Even if an honest reading of history is not consistent with what the younger generation has been taught, it doesn't explain the disdain with which many in this generation have treated the memory of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, especially since the fall of the Hasina government.

Some think the Awami League is to blame for that. Wasima Aziz, 19, said, "The previous government showed the idea of Bangabandhu being an unquestionable figure down

in Bangabandhu's name, tried to rewrite history. By attributing every little success to him, the previous government tried to justify their authoritarian regime. All good things happened because of Bangabandhu. But people aren't stupid. We recognised our oppression, and we attributed that to Bangabandhu, because all oppression was justified in his name."

Mesbah Kamal, professor of history at Dhaka University, echoed some of these sentiments and pointed out exactly where the Awami League got it wrong.

"History is non-linear in nature; every action has a reaction. The post-1975 attempts to erase Bangabandhu from our history brought about a serious reaction in 2009 when Sheikh Hasina came to power. She tried to establish Bangabandhu as the father

of the nation and the commander-in-chief of the Liberation War. However, in the process of doing this, she often presented her father in a way as if Mujib is their family property and her family has a special authority over the country. No one, especially the young generation, was on board with it."

Pointing out the Awami League's mishandling of Bangabandhu's history, he said, "Another dimension is the overprojection of Bangabandhu—the tendency to force him onto the nation. Bangabandhu should have been portrayed as the champion of nationalist and humanitarian spirit, but that was not done."

So, what comes next? How do the young generation want to approach the figure of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman now, out of the yoke of Awami League?

"Frankly, the history of Bangabandhu should be regarded in the same way as that of any other historical leader. There's no need to glorify him or put his name in the mud. Acknowledging both sides provides a better chance to understand not just the heritage of our country, but also what it means

him as the father of the nation or not should be left to them. The people of this country have never been given a choice. I hope the future is different. I hope the younger generation of Bangladeshi students are encouraged to form their own opinions."

Historian Mesbah Kamal extends hope for the future too. "Bangabandhu was a politician; he may have made mistakes alongside making many correct decisions. The young generation could have been told what the Awami League learnt from his successes and mistakes, and what other parties should learn from that period."

"Bangabandhu's contribution in the period between 1947 and 1970, in 1971, and in rebuilding the war-ravaged country is undeniable. But these histories don't just belong to the Awami League or Bangabandhu. The history that has been told until now has not done justice to people like Sher-e-Bangla AK Fazlul Huq, Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, Comrade Moni Singh, Muzaffar Ahmad, Syed Nazrul Islam, Tajuddin Ahmad, and Col Abu Taher.

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to rise up to a position of that much power and act as a representative of a huge population," said Rubama Amreen.

Anindya Alam suggested, "People must be given an authentic historical account of Bangabandhu and his regime. Whether they decide to view

Students understand this," Kamal said. "I feel that whatever distance may have been created among the youth in understanding Bangabandhu's contribution will change over time in the synthesisation process, and Bangabandhu will eventually be recognised and respected in general."