

REBUILDING BANGLADESH

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POST-HASINA BANGLADESH

The month that was

TANIM AHMED

The uncertainty that gripped the nation immediately after Bangladesh's former prime minister, Sheikh Hasina, fled the country in a military helicopter to India, eased to some extent when the army chief announced that Dr Muhammad Yunus would be heading an interim government. It was August 5.

What began as a fledgling students' campaign to reform quotas in government jobs under the banner of anti-discrimination student's movement had transformed into an anti-government protest. It culminated in a people's uprising toppling an iron-fisted autocratic regime of 15 years.

As is wont to happen, Sheikh Hasina left a substantial vacuum in the wake of her hasty departure. In her bid to hold on to power, Hasina and her cohorts had politicised and, thereby, destroyed crucial institutions of the state. The police fled their posts, government offices ceased to function, those deemed to be enablers of the Awami League went into hiding. Unfortunate though it was, some elements exploited that opportunity and attacked the minorities. But then the communities and students responded with commendable resilience.

The citizens came together to protect their neighbourhoods and communities.

The role of the entire justice system, both police and judiciary, in the dying days of the Awami League regime left little doubt that would only do the biddings of the powers that be. As a result, both are still scrambling to recover their credibility and image of authority. The Appellate Division, which is the top court of Bangladesh, has been completely reconstituted. The police are going through a cleansing too, with wholesale transfers and new appointments besides relieving a few of the notorious officers. Some have already been accused in criminal cases, including murder, for their role during the July-August protests.

The entire month of August has seen a series of protests and demands almost as part of a ritualistic detoxification after 15 years.

An initial spree of resignations was followed by what could be easily mistaken as a purge. Supposed beneficiaries of the previous regime were at times politely requested to step down and at times dismissed summarily. Some

have been in hiding since the fall of the government. Beginning with the central bank, almost every government agency has seen change at the top. There have also been numerous demonstrations demanding that the government address long held grievances. Almost a month after the fall of Hasina, angry factory workers are still reported to be demonstrating in industrial districts on the outskirts of Dhaka blocking a major highway which is like a national artery.

There has been a slew of criminal cases against top ministers and officials of the Awami League regime.

merely symptoms stemming from an inner core that itself is still rather fluid. The interim government has yet to define its own agenda or its tenure. When Yunus addressed the nation 20 days after taking over the helm of Bangladesh, he laid out an elaborate vision of Bangladesh. He proposed reforms, all of them necessary and crucial, which will take years if not more. While his primary stakeholders—the political parties—are in agreement that reforms are imperative before elections, they are unlikely to give him a blank cheque. On that score, the incumbents will have to soon decide on their agenda, which would then

millions within Bangladesh and beyond, that alone would not have sufficed for the interim government's political and social acceptance. The students continue to be a visible force on the ground and lend substantial political legitimacy to Yunus' government. Thus far, the students have clearly hinted that the reform agenda is rather trivial compared to what they want this government to do. They appear to be inclined to overhaul the system in such a manner that will preclude the need for the reforms that are being discussed.

There appears to be a comfortable obliviousness that although the advisers were sworn in with an oath to uphold the constitution, the latter does not recognise the existence of their government. There are whisperings of farsighted grand political alliances on the right, indignant mutterings from the centre and an eerie silence on the left. The country seems to be locked in a state of constitutional vacuum and political flux at the same time. We may have barely averted a catastrophe and come back from the brink of disaster a month ago, which might suggest smoother sailing. But actually, the course remains almost as uncertain as it was a month ago.

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Tanim Ahmed

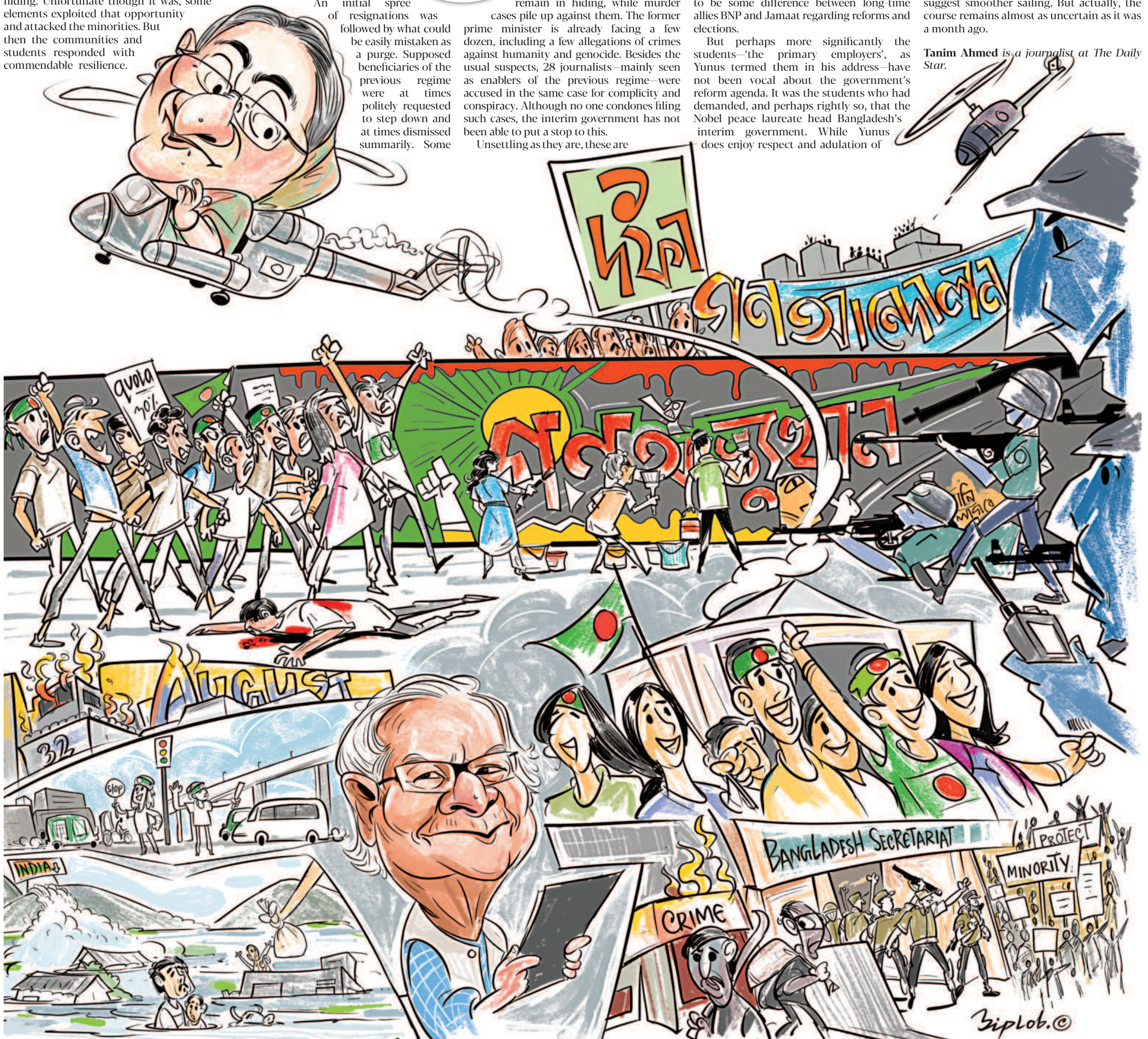
Former ministers and MPs remain in hiding, while murder cases pile up against them. The former prime minister is already facing a few dozen, including a few allegations of crimes against humanity and genocide. Besides the usual suspects, 28 journalists—mainly seen as enablers of the previous regime—were accused in the same case for complicity and conspiracy. Although no one condones filing such cases, the interim government has not been able to put a stop to this.

Unsettling as they are, these are

dictate their tenure. Already there appears to be some difference between long time allies BNP and Jamaat regarding reforms and elections.

But perhaps more significantly the students—the primary employers', as Yunus termed them in his address—have not been vocal about the government's reform agenda. It was the students who had demanded, and perhaps rightly so, that the Nobel peace laureate head Bangladesh's interim government. While Yunus does enjoy respect and adulation of

Tanim Ahmed is a journalist at The Daily Star.



The Daily Star recently organised a roundtable titled 'Vision of the Youth.' Students from various universities across the country, who led the quota reform movement, participated in the event to share their vision for a new Bangladesh. Below, we present a summary of the discussion.

What do the youth really want?



Mahfuz Anam, Shuchismita Tithi, Masud Rana, Nazifa Jannat, Arif Sohel, Meghmallar Basu, Umama Fatema, Sabah Anjim Farabi, Mustafiz Rahman, Mozammel Haque, Prapti Taposhi

Mahfuz Anam
Editor and publisher, The Daily Star
 Today, we want to hear your visions. You have achieved what once seemed impossible. When we had almost lost hope of freeing ourselves from an undemocratic government, you have taught us to dream again.

Masud Rana
Organiser, Rajshahi University
 The greatest strength of any political party is its opposition. The mistake the Awami League (AL) made was trying to consolidate its own power while simultaneously attempting to suppress other political ideologies. For example, why did the opposition members of parliament flee after the government fell? This suggests they either considered themselves part of the AL or were conditioned to behave as such. However, the AL could have been stronger if it had allowed opposition parties to retain some power.

Arif Sohel
Organiser, Jahangirnagar University
 Over the past 15 years, a fascist regime has rendered the constitution increasingly irrelevant in ensuring the proper functioning of the state, as evidenced by the removal of the caretaker government provision from the constitution. In this context, it is notable that the regime frequently makes rhetorical references to the 1972 constitution. However, the drafting process of the 1972 Constitution was itself undemocratic; it was crafted by a small group of lawyers without sufficient consultation with the diverse groups involved in the Liberation War—people from various walks of life.

Mozammel Haque
Organiser, Dhaka University
 Looking at past elections, especially the most recent one, securing the nomination seemed more important than winning the election itself, as it was often assumed that whoever won the nomination would automatically win the election. Those who had more money, wielded more muscle power, utilised the media for propaganda, and exploited the bureaucracy were more likely to secure a nomination. These corrupt practices must be stopped. It is not uncommon to see individuals involved in corruption and money laundering participating in elections. Such practices must be banned.

Mustafiz Rahman
Organiser, Dhaka University
 The role of the ombudsman, as outlined in Article 77, is another provision worth discussing. The ombudsman is meant to act as a mediator between the bureaucracy and the general public, serving as a check and balance on power. Article 70 is particularly contentious because it was essentially designed to prevent a vote of 'no confidence' against the Prime Minister. A possible modification

Prapti Taposhi
Organiser, Jahangirnagar University
 Contemporary political parties in Bangladesh, or those trying to remain politically active, are fundamentally undemocratic and authoritarian at their core. They are quick to dismiss anyone who does not conform to their views and, in fact, are the original proponents of cancel culture, which is fundamentally at odds with true democratic political culture. Whichever party comes to power routinely uses repressive legal

judicial power to remove a prime minister from office. Another significant issue is the process of appointing justices, which is fraught with problems. It is said that a justice's performance is observed for two years before a decision is made on whether they will be granted a permanent position. This process often leads to justices feeling compelled to cater to the ruling regime's whims and sectarian demands. The role of the ombudsman, as outlined in Article 77, is another provision worth discussing. The ombudsman is meant to act as a mediator between the bureaucracy and the general public, serving as a check and balance on power. Article 70 is particularly contentious because it was essentially designed to prevent a vote of 'no confidence' against the Prime Minister. A possible modification

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Nazifa Jannat
 The latest Election Commission Act was passed in 2022. According to this Act, the Chief Election Commissioner and three other individuals will form the Election Commission, with a six member search committee proposing their names. It is essential for the search committee to publish their meeting minutes and resolutions as public notices. This transparency would ensure public participation by keeping people informed about the EC's activities and fostering a system of checks and balances. The media can also play a crucial role in keeping the public updated and holding the EC accountable.

Mozammel Haque
 In countries without proportional representation, elections often end up doing more harm than good. In such systems, voters are left with no choice but to vote for one major party to remove the other—BNP to oust AL and vice versa. Even when we campaigned for a leftist party or candidate, the most common response was, "Your candidate is good, but if we vote for you, it will be wasted." This sentiment arises because, if a vote does not cross the 50 percent threshold, it doesn't count, which is fundamentally undemocratic. Without proportional representation, the fear of a wasted vote drives people to choose between the two largest political parties, thereby hampering political plurality.

Mustafiz Rahman
 Political parties based on religious ideologies often promote extremism and are prone to rejecting differing viewpoints. This issue is compounded in countries with an official state religion, where those who align with the national religion and engage in its politics can come into conflict with the principles of secularism, which advocates for tolerance and inclusivity. Such a bias towards a particular religion can limit representation for others. While everyone should have the right to participate in politics, it is vital for political parties to embrace inclusivity.

Prapti Taposhi
 The concept of religion-based politics is often misunderstood. Political parties that are associated with religion-based politics frequently advocate for

theocracy, yet religion encompasses more than just theocratic rule; some might describe their approach as Shariati politics. Additionally, Maulana Bhashani's politics, rooted in Hutukam-e-Rabbani, played a crucial role in Bangladesh's independence. By adopting an inclusive mindset, the state would naturally evolve from the community rather than imposing itself upon individuals. This inclusiveness would be reflected in both rural and urban areas, continuing a tradition of coexistence. Communities can overcome the limitations of theocracies focused on specific rituals or obligations. History demonstrates that genocide has occurred in the name of both religion and secularism, underscoring the need to critically evaluate political systems that lack inclusivity.

Mozammel Haque
 The current state of student politics requires thorough reassessment. The traditional structures and characteristics are no longer effective, as evidenced by the growing disillusionment among both youths and the general public in Bangladesh. We currently lack successful models for student politics that truly address the needs of the people. To rectify this, we must first focus on developing effective policies and mobilising resources to meet political aspirations. Practical experience is crucial and should be given serious consideration. Only through this approach can we build a solid foundation for student politics that is recognised nationally. As emphasised, student politics should primarily serve the interests of young people. Upholding this principle is essential if we are to prepare Bangladesh for modern, internationally recognised political engagement.

Sabah Anjim Farabi
 When discussing religion-based politics, it's crucial to consider the role of religion itself. As a Muslim, I speak from an Islamic perspective which teaches that Islam does not condone interference in the practice of other religions. It is the government's duty to ensure that individuals of all faiths are protected, and if the government fails in this responsibility, it should be held accountable.

Meghmallar Basu
 In theory, religion-based politics could be progressive, as illustrated by the Maulana Bhashani's politics. However, in Bangladesh, parties like Jamaat-e-Islami and Khilafat Majlis, which engage in religion-based politics, often present themselves as protectors. This raises the question of why individuals from other religious communities would seek protection rather than equality.

Mustafiz Rahman
 What we have consistently observed before and during the July massacre is violence against student movements. The student wing of the Awami League, Chhatra League, has been disruptive even during exam periods at our university. This group exerted significant control over students, frequently commanding various aspects of their lives. Many activists would skip lectures to attend political meetings and participate in processions. This dominance has made us increasingly pessimistic about university-level politics in Bangladesh, which is why I support the idea of making student politics illegal.

Meghmallar Basu
 University-level politics in Bangladesh, involving both students and teachers, tends to be highly polarised. I support the recent calls to eradicate corruption from student politics. These demands are part of a broader narrative advocating for a ban on student politics. However, if student politics were to be banned, it would not necessarily end campus polarisation. Instead, new divides could emerge, as groups might feel marginalised.

Mozammel Haque
 The pressing need is for corruption-free youth politics. To achieve this, we must ensure transparent and equitable processes for accommodation facilities and student elections. University administrations need to be both credible and effective.

Umama Fatema
 Before addressing the legality of student politics, we must focus on the condition of student dormitories. Until 1990, some traditions of student politics were upheld despite widespread rigging. The 28-year hiatus of DUCSU suggests a loss of essential ethical standards. Today, it is crucial for students with genuine intentions to step up. Banning student politics would only create unnecessary obstacles.



PHOTO: AHSAN RAHMAN

Can we rebuild the lost trust in LAW ENFORCEMENT?

The euphoria of August 5 was marred by incidents of violence including attacks on minorities and supporters of the former government, rampant looting and burning of houses and establishments associated with the Awami League regime. Mobs attacked police and some perished under their wrath; police stations were burnt to the ground. The result was a general feeling of insecurity as police became reluctant to perform their duties, fearing for their safety. In the wake of all the uncertainty and mutual mistrust, how can we come to a state of peace and normalcy?

JYOTIRMOY BARUA

Advocate, Supreme Court of Bangladesh

After the jubilation following the fall of Sheikh Hasina, we saw the horrors of the nights of August 5—how houses were set on fire, vandalised and looted, and no one was prepared for that. For some unknown reasons, the army disappeared from the streets. Whose decision was that, and why was it done? From different individual sources, we heard that the army did not have enough human resources or they were not prepared for the ensuing chaos, but we have not received an explanation from any official sources yet.

Had there been army vehicles in the streets, or if people knew that army platoons were patrolling the streets, then these incidents could have been avoided. The arson attack at the Bangabandhu Memorial on Road

32, and other state institutions, such as the Shishu Academy, could have been avoided. Also, individual attacks, neighbourhood robberies could have been addressed.

As a result, the general public suffered the most and are still suffering. We heard from different Hindu businesses how Jamaat or BNP activists carried out extortion, threatening arson attacks on warehouses with goods worth lakhs of taka. In some places, the business owners tried to manage the situation by giving money to the goons; in other areas, they could not and their houses and businesses were attacked and looted. Well-off Hindu households and even impoverished Hindu families in neighbourhoods were individually targeted only because of their religious identity. In many cases, these families did not even dare to go to the media to report these attacks.

The attacks on some police stations, as well as families of police personnel, have been so severe that many are too afraid to get involved in anything. Because of my personal contact with several police officers, I have tried to find out how they are feeling. A lot of people within the police are traumatised—they need counselling. It is important to find a way to help them get back to work.

But let me be clear: we do not want to see anyone, who has been identified as a perpetrator in the mass killings, involved in any work of the state. It is not enough to merely suspend them for their crimes. It is very

important to set an example by trying them and bringing them to book to create public confidence. The previous regimes always ignored these issues.

Not every action performed in uniform, be it of the police or any other security agency, is legal. I want to reiterate that we need to come out of the culture of taking only administrative actions against someone who commits a crime while wearing a police uniform. We need to try such perpetrators under criminal offences just like a layperson is tried. This has to be brought under the purview of our existing laws. If restrictions exist in the current laws, those have to be removed and new provisions for trying law enforcers must be incorporated.



Jyotirmoy Barua

MAISHA ISLAM MONAMEE

Student of Institute of Business Administration (IBA) at the University of Dhaka

The recent resurfacing of videos and images from the police crackdown during the anti-discrimination student movement has plunged us into a deep reckoning. These records, apparently captured during the internet shutdown, unveil the extent of the brutality unleashed upon innocent protesters—students, civilians, and activists who dared to raise their voices. As we watch the horrific footage of police officers opening fire on unarmed citizens and dumping their dead bodies like sacks, it is impossible to not feel a profound sense of betrayal. The police force, funded by our money, was meant to protect us, not the interests of a ruling party. But in those moments, they became agents of oppression, leaving an entire generation traumatised.

The trauma inflicted by these events runs deep. For many of us, the police are no longer the first responders in times of crisis but are seen as a threat and an instrument of violence that could be turned against us at any moment. This fear is not unfounded—it is born out of real experiences, documented in videos that are now indelibly etched into our collective memory, triggering a visceral response of fear, disgust, and disbelief. The images of bloodied students, the sound of gunfire, and the sight of lifeless bodies have left us questioning whether we can ever trust those who were supposed to protect us.

To understand the depth of this betrayal, we must remember the fundamental role of the police in a democracy. The police are not meant to serve the interests of any political party or government; they are meant to serve the people. Their salaries are paid by taxpayers—by us. It is our money that funds their operations, and it is in our name that they are supposed to act. When the police turn their weapons on the very citizens they are sworn to protect, they are not only betraying their oath but also misusing the resources provided by the people. This breach of trust is egregious because it undermines the very foundation of our society. The rule of law is essential for the functioning of any democracy. When the enforcers of the law become violators of it, the entire system is called into question. How can we, as a society, have faith in the justice system when those responsible for upholding it are seen as perpetrators of violence?

To begin addressing this trauma, there must be a collective acknowledgment of what happened. The interim government must take steps to ensure that the truth is not buried, that the stories of the victims are heard, and that those responsible for the violence are held accountable. This is not just about punishing the perpetrators; it is about sending a message that such actions will not be tolerated, and that the state stands with the people, not against them.

It goes without saying that rebuilding trust in the police force will be a monumental task. The first step must be a complete overhaul of the police force—one that addresses both the structural issues and the culture of impunity that has taken root. This means implementing rigorous accountability measures, ensuring that those who abuse their power are swiftly and publicly punished, and creating mechanisms for independent oversight of police actions. The police must be taught to see themselves not as enforcers of the state's will but as protectors of the people. This shift in mindset is crucial if we are to restore any semblance of trust in the institution.

The trauma, disgust, and fear that we feel today are valid responses to the horrors we have witnessed. But we must channel these emotions into action—into demanding reform, into building a police force that we can trust, and into creating a society where such atrocities can never happen again. It is time to reclaim the police force for the people, to rebuild it into an institution that serves and protects us all.



Maisha Islam Monamee

RASHED NIZAM

Crime reporter, Jamuna Television

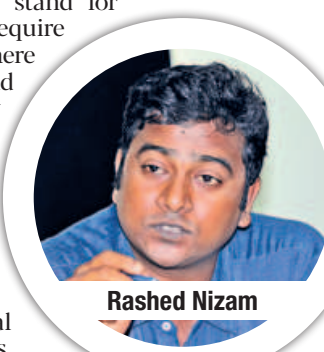
Our past experiences of covering a conflict or clash did not work this time during the uprising because we did not know where we could stand for safety. Reporting rules require journalists to stay somewhere above the ground or behind the most powerful party in a conflict zone to avoid attacks. This time, we had a totally new experience and had to stay in the middle. Consequently, five journalists were killed during the unrest and we still do not have data on the total number of injured journalists.

After the events (in July and early August), it was the police who were attacked the most. We could not go to Jatrabari, Mohammadpur and Uttara police stations in relation to the incidents that took place on August 5 and after. Nobody knows yet the total number of police fatalities. From August 5 onwards, I received phone calls from many people, especially journalists or friends from minority communities, who asked for confirmation of certain attacks. As a crime reporter, my primary source of confirmation is the police whenever there is a murder or other criminal incident. With no police in sight anywhere for the first few days, who could we call for confirmation?

We could not go to the spot and collect the news ourselves because of fear of attacks. Media outlets, including The Daily Star, quoting two organisations, reported that 205 incidents of communal violence took place in 52 districts, but why could they not follow up on their own? The change in journalism that we had expected in the new country where we would have freedom of expression—I have not seen it yet. For how long will we operate out of fear?

Moving forward, another serious concern is politicisation of the police. There are two organisations for the police: Bangladesh Police Association, which includes personnel from inspectors to all the lower ranks; and Bangladesh Police Service Association which is for BCS cadre police. Suddenly, the latter announced that they were creating a new committee as they could not find members of the previous committee. The person who was named as the main adviser of the committee had been an active official during BNP regime. This is indicative of the same politicisation in police that we have been talking about. What kind of change is really taking place, then?

The police reform programme has not been implemented in Bangladesh for many years, though a lot of money has been spent on it. There was a critical point there about making the police independent. The interim government should start the reform process because a political government will never carry it out.



Rashed Nizam

MOHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

Former Inspector General of Police

Let's first ask: why does the police behave the way it does? Does it operate on its own? No, it does not; it is directed, as it is part of the executive. The question, then, is: can legal action be taken against members of the force who are directed by the executive?

There are some legal protections afforded to law enforcement, which were made during the colonial era. For instance, Section 76 of the Penal Code states: "Nothing is an offence which is done by a person who is, or who by reason of a mistake of fact and not by reason of a mistake of law in good faith believes himself to be, bound by law to do it." Whether to keep this provision is a big question. After the birth of Bangladesh in 1971, a constitution for the People's Republic was formed. But the politicians at the time did not change colonial rules and regulations because



Mohammad Nurul Huda

they wanted to exercise such power.

The relationship between the police and the public is that of chase and counter-chase. Why is the relationship like this? It all comes down to the mindset of the police who wants to ascend to power any cost—and it's not just one person, it's everyone.

Our constitution is republican but our rules are feudalistic. It is very difficult to defeudalise and decolonise yourself. Heavy words are easy to say but implementation on the ground is very difficult. Public servants must consider themselves as appointed servants of the republic. They need to understand the difference between serving a party and serving the people.

ASHFAQUE NIPUN

Filmmaker

If we are to focus on the events of August 5, one must ask about the role of the army. On one hand, they withdrew the curfew, but then they disappeared from view. Was it really that they did not have enough manpower?

We know the characteristics of the Bangladeshi people; they become rule followers as soon as they step into the cantonment. And there was a soft corner amongst the masses regarding the army during the uprising, so it is confusing why they simply allowed such vandalism and violence to take place.

Meanwhile, the distrust that has been created between the people and law enforcement agencies—the police, in particular—needs to be addressed urgently. Never before have we heard of such

widespread attacks on police stations. Many stations in Dhaka were set on fire and police personnel were hanged. Violence begets violence. No matter how much we despise the police, we need them at the end of the day



and we need to be afraid of them. The fact that a police station was set on fire means that now the fear is gone. If another incident untoward happens after a year, it means a group of 10 people can go and attack a police station



Ashfaque Nipun

because that tendency has been created among us. We need to come out of this. We are all looking for immediate solutions. But the truth is that real reforms will take a long time. It might not be done even in five years, given the extent of corruption and injustice that

was perpetuated over the past 15 years. A huge gap has been created between us and the police, the judges and every single segment of the administration. We do not believe in any investigation. We do not trust any judgements. We believe that all these are hollow words, that nothing will materialise at the end of the day. This trust has to be rebuilt.