



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.



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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.

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

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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

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

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 the 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.

Tanim Ahmed is a journalist at The Daily Star.

