

India is failing to understand Bangladesh's new reality



Shafiqat Munir
is senior research fellow at Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS).
He can be reached at shafiqat@bipss.org.bd.

SHAFIQAT MUNIR

The statement by Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh calling upon the Indian military leadership to analyse the conflicts in Ukraine, Gaza and Bangladesh has caused confusion and concern in Dhaka. It is crucial for India to clarify the meaning behind this statement, given its official status. The comparison with Ukraine—which is facing invasion and war with Russia—and Gaza—which has been destroyed by Israel's brutal military campaign that has killed over 40,000 people since October 7,

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2023—are quite intriguing, extreme, and certainly not appropriate.

For the past month, there has been a pressing need for India to recognise that a people's revolution, now being referred to as the "Monsoon Revolution," has taken place in Bangladesh. And the two countries now need to recalibrate their relationship, rebuilding it based on mutual respect, which has not yet been achieved—nor has there been any clear indication that it will be.

As Bangladesh works to rebuild after the Monsoon Revolution, we need our neighbours and friends to stand with us. Statements like that of the Indian defence minister will vitiate the tense atmosphere and are not conducive to fostering a constructive relationship between Bangladesh and India. The Bangladesh foreign ministry should seek an urgent clarification as to what this statement means.

It is equally important for

Bangladesh and send a special envoy to send a clear and unequivocal signal that it is ready to work with our new interim government, especially after the defence minister's statement, which risks fuelling tensions between these two South Asian nations. India also needs to work with all the stakeholders in Bangladesh and build a relationship between the two

India can't take Bangladesh for granted anymore



Dr Imtiaz Ahmed
is former professor of international relations at the University of Dhaka.

IMTIAZ AHMED

the US was behind the uprising in Bangladesh, the defence minister also wanted to alert China at the same time. He tried to tell them that although changes have occurred in Bangladesh, India is prepared if anything happens. It has particularly alerted the US because India is involved with that country in many areas, including on the Indo-Pacific issue. But at the same time, India has increasingly shown that its foreign policy has to be The India Way (as per the title of the book of S Jaishankar). There's a bit of consensus on that in India. While it has maintained a relationship with Russia despite the sanctions, it also has a relationship with China, particularly when it comes to BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and Myanmar. I think that was addressed in some way through this particular statement by the Indian defence minister.

The third factor is not to take Bangladesh for granted, as was done during the Awami League rule. So, I think that message has been put forward to the Indian hierarchies and the stakeholders. It is pretty straightforward because our chief adviser has pointed out a couple of things regarding Teesta water-sharing, border killing, reviving SAARC, and several other issues. Earlier, he also made a particular statement about the northeast. So, I think what the Indian defence minister wanted to say is that it is not going to be what it used to be in the last decade or so, when the Awami League was not a headache for them. Also, it wants to deal with



VISUAL: FATIMA JAHAN ENA

India's relationship was not with the people of Bangladesh; it was with a particular political party or group. And that has failed. I am sure they have now understood that it is far better to have a relationship with the people than with a particular group of people or political party.

New Delhi to understand that a people's revolution has occurred in Bangladesh—people have toppled an autocratic and despotic order. And that this revolution represents the aspirations of all Bangladeshis (from all religions and walks of life) for a just and equitable society.

New Delhi also needs to accept and address the perception that its relationship with Bangladesh was previously centred on a single individual and political party, rather than being a broad-based relationship. In light of this, we also need to take into account the recent killing of Swarna Das by India's Border Security Force (BSF). Incidents like this are unacceptable, but they continue to remain unaddressed. So, there is an urgent need to recast this relationship, making it broad-based, constructive, and grounded in mutual respect.

I have said this before and will say it again: New Delhi needs to recognise the new order which has emerged in

republics, rather than with just one political party or leader.

Moreover, New Delhi needs to understand that this revolution was driven by the Bangladeshi youth—the Gen Z. And so, understanding the perspectives, dreams, and aspirations of the next generation of Bangladeshis is critical for fostering sustainable, long term relations. Their views about the Bangladesh-India relationship are very different from those of the previous generations, and Indian policymakers should also take this into account.

From Bangladesh's side, there is an urgent need to revamp its diplomatic presence in New Delhi. I believe the true message of the post-Monsoon Revolution order in Bangladesh is not being appropriately communicated. We need to think outside the box, as traditional approaches won't cut it anymore. Moving forward, we need to build a future-oriented, forward-thinking agenda.

I think three critical factors probably contributed to what Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh said. First, he wanted to address the domestic constituency and assure the Indian people. It was pretty clear from what he mentioned in his speech, "We have to deal with the unexpected." From the word "unexpected," it became clear that he mainly meant the changes in Bangladesh, which have been seen as major setbacks for India by its media and as some Indian policymakers have indicated after August 5. I think India needed to assure the domestic constituency, "Look, it was unexpected, but we are looking into it." "We are monitoring the situation, we know what is happening," etc. I am sure much of India must have been thoroughly shocked, given that for the last decade or so, it had been saying that it had the best relationship with Bangladesh. Now, there is a missing point: India's relationship was not

with the people of Bangladesh; it was with a particular political party or group. And that has failed. I am sure they have now understood that it is far better to have a relationship with the people than with a particular group of people or political party.

The second point is that we are now in a multipolar world where India wants to acquire its position as one of the major powers. Its economy has already surpassed the UK and France in terms of volume. So, from that point of view, India also wanted to alert the US. Because the general narrative in India has been that

Bangladesh's new regime.

While these three factors are important, the ball is now India's court. It's now up to them how they will deal with Bangladesh. But it's too early. In the next three to six months, how India will deal with Bangladesh will become clear. If there is a meeting between the Bangladesh chief adviser and the Indian prime minister at the United Nations in New York, that could give us an indication of what kind of changes will come. But no doubt New Delhi is quite sure that this is a different regime from the Awami League one. So, they will have to deal with it accordingly.

What politics for the new generation should look like



Azmin Azran
is a journalist at The Daily Star.

AZMIN AZRAN

On August 3, when Nahid Islam made his announcement from Central Shaheed Minar regarding the one-point demand for Sheikh Hasina to step down, he also said something important that might've gotten lost in the clamour. Nahid's call to build a new political settlement where no dictatorship can ever take root again is one that will eventually be vital for the future of Bangladesh.

In the aftermath of the Awami League government's ouster, it takes scant reflection to realise that the political settlement that has existed since the revival of democracy in 1991 has categorically failed. The BNP's repeated refusal to hand over power to neutral caretaker governments in 1996 and 2006 followed by the Awami League's death grip on the nation for 15-plus years stand testament to this failure.

The period since 1991 has seen repeated attempts by whoever is in power to silence, imprison, and neutralise whoever is in the opposition. While this lack of trust and goodwill among politicians has weakened the country's democracy, all of this was done with a disdain for public welfare. Governments at certain points did oversee the physical and human development of the country, but whenever it came down to a choice between public safety and the continuation of the incumbent's hold on power, the latter was chosen. From forming

partisan election commissions to conducting sham elections, and then lying to the public through their teeth—this treatment has been the norm for decades now, so much so that a vast part of society started to get used to it.

Unlawful apprehensions by government-backed law enforcers, criminal activities by student and youth wings of the ruling political parties, and corruption in the bureaucracy went unchecked. There has always been an air of inevitability in all of this, that this is how the powerful in Bangladesh are supposed to treat the powerless. Unless one wishes to turn from an innocent bystander to a victim, they had better stay quiet.

All of this points to a prevailing lack of respect for the ordinary people among the ruling class in Bangladesh. Whether or not this disrespect is a result of weak democracy, or if the weak democracy is a result of the disrespect, can be debated like the chicken-and-egg problem. But the differing levels of tolerance for this disrespect is a good place to start if we want to understand why the buck stopped with this new generation, whose legitimate demands—met with disdain and disproportionate force—became a catalyst for a mass uprising, the first of its kind since 1990.

Before delving into the politics

that might be acceptable for the new generation, let us try to understand who they are as people. Popular discourse enjoys exploring the vocabulary of Gen Z and marvelling at their courage and indomitable spirit, but looking at the root of these things may be a more productive venture. Solely focusing on how the Gen Z is

kindle that they were able to uproot the evil spirit of autocracy that had descended upon this country, that many others before them failed to even stand up to?

Having spent a considerable part of my career working at a youth magazine, working with people born right before or after the turn of the millennia, and being born



VISUAL: SHAIKH SULTANA JAHAN BADHON

different from the rest of society—and even exoticising them—is counterproductive in the sense that it creates an artificial barrier for the rest of us to realise and internalise the values that helped them achieve the impossible.

We must not forget that the new generation is only a younger version of us—they are our younger siblings and our children. Yes, their world has been shaped differently by access to the internet from early childhood, but what exactly is the effect the internet has had on them? What part of their humanity did it

in that same period myself, my observation of this generation is that their sense of individuality is strong. The internet allows everyone to be a person defined by their own interests and beliefs, as opposed to a person shaped—or limited—by their surroundings and physical reality. This is, of course, not universal and should only be thought of as a trend in opposing directions for people of different generations. However, this stronger sense of self leads directly to a stronger sense of self-respect, and with young people, that is what makes the buck stop.

of laws and guns, they do not have the appetite to stand and accept that. You push a person with self-respect too far, and they strike back. You push a generation like that too far, and empires fall.

So what does all of this tell us about the politics of tomorrow? Politicians need to stop thinking of those they wish to govern as their servants, and learn to think of them as their employers. Anyone with a job will know that employers require appeasement, and employees need to be wary of the mood of their employers and work to maintain

its balance. Most importantly, the employer's authority demands respect.

Politicians need to start understanding that the loud, unnecessary, intrusive politics that we know today needs to become the politics of the past. Holding up traffic for a party anniversary while regular people suffer is a form of disrespect. Covering every possible surface in public buildings and busy intersections with the unwelcome faces of politicians and the seven generations of underlings they sponsor is a form of disrespect. Going on TV and calling press conferences only to spew laughable lies disrespects the public's intellect. Getting elected through free and fair elections only to turn around and gut democracy so your power goes unchallenged is possibly the worst form of disrespect there is, and the politics for the new generation has no space for it.

What direction our politicians choose to go is up to them, but for the next few decades, whether or not politicians keep their jobs will be determined by the voting public, who will be largely made up of the Gen Z, the Gen Alpha, and those that come after them. It is the responsibility of this interim government, and active politicians, to work towards building a political settlement that espouses an attitude among politicians where they prioritise and respect their constituents. Fair electoral practices and financial accountability and ethical standards for politicians need to be codified with this premise in mind.

We have already seen how the new generation reacts to injustices. If our politicians of the future decide to test these people again, they will do so at their own peril.