

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF DEMOCRACY

Can we hold onto our precious freedom?



NO STRINGS
ATTACHED
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The idea of freedom is central to the concept of democracy. When we talk about fundamental democratic rights, we essentially mean basic freedoms that are guaranteed for every citizen regardless of their race, sex, religion, ethnicity, language, or any other status. A democracy ensures a form of governance that protects the right to life and liberty, freedom of expression, access to education, health, protection of the law and so on. Unfortunately, Bangladesh's history bears witness to how successive so-called democratic governments have abused the term in astounding ways, becoming anything but democratic.

After the stunning fall of an autocratic regime camouflaged in democratic garb—a fall made possible by the sacrifices and courage of our students and the general public—we now have a precious opportunity to reclaim our rights as a people. At the same time, we are trapesing on a delicate tightrope with no safety net if we fall.

We cannot afford to miss this opportunity to realise the unfulfilled dreams of a nation that tasted freedom in 1971 after enduring nine months of bloody warfare and genocide by an occupying force. The aspirations of our freedom fighters, that included the general people, to build a country free from oppression, discrimination and poverty, remain unfulfilled. Fifty-three years later, a new generation is fighting for that freedom.

In 1991, after the fall of the Ershad government through a peoples' uprising led again by students, we thought we were finally on the path to democracy. It seemed everyone was on the same page, including

of corruption, nepotism and violation of constitutional rights.

These attacks on the basic principles of democracy as enshrined in our constitution, were taken to new heights during the 15-year rule of Sheikh Hasina. In fact, neither of the two major parties practiced democratic norms within their ranks—both were dominated by one-person rule and relied on dynastic succession of power.

Hasina's way of consolidating power was to politicise every state institution and machinery to completely obliterate any kind of dissent or anyone she considered an obstacle. She used the police and other security forces, including intelligence agencies, to clamp down on opposition parties, particularly the BNP and Jamaat, through arbitrary arrests and jail sentences. Anyone she or her cronies considered a challenge to her power was harassed or persecuted through draconian laws such as the Digital Security Act (later renamed the Cyber Security Act). This included journalists, civil society members, teachers, students, cartoonists, writers and also members of minority communities.

Accusations of "hurting religious sentiments," "anti-state activities" and being "anti-liberation" were used to crush perceived opponents or for personal revenge. While freedom of speech and the independent media became casualties of Hasina's regime, a culture of obscene sycophancy flourished rendering any divergent opinion to be dangerous and resulting in frightening consequences. The number of enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings

soared, the poor went hungry and the middle class struggled to make ends meet.

The economy buckled under a crippled banking sector, foreign exchange reserves dwindled to precarious levels and power plants awarded to cronies became money pits, failing to meet the demand for electricity. Every sector and institution fell victim to this mafia state, where oligarchs ruled and every single decision came from only the top

students had finally awakened the people, bringing together people from all walks of life and political affiliations to free the country from the clutches of a dictator.

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fair election can take place, there is much to be done to heal, rebuild and restore. Ensuring the security and safety of all citizens and their properties must be the first priority. The hundreds of closed factories must be reopened through sincere dialogue with workers. The new political kids in town must put an end to the old habits of extortion and political supremacy.

One thing is for sure: we cannot go back



People from all walks of life gather at the central Shaheed Minar to press home their one point demand for Sheikh Hasina to resign on August 2, 2024. PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

It would, however, be naive to think that democracy has been freed and restored to its rightful place—to the people of Bangladesh. True, on August 5, the people reclaimed the power that had been robbed from them for decades. But we are now merely at the preparatory stage in the long journey towards a functioning democracy.

the leaders of the two major political parties. The elections were considered to be free and fair, and the rise of independent media gave promising signs of a thriving democracy. But as we know, all too soon democracy started to suffer unforeseen blows. During the BNP's regime, the tentacles of greed and power began to creep in, ushering in a culture

soared during her rule. It was a mafia state, where the "family" included all relatives and friends who had the license to loot banks, siphon money abroad, grab land, and even put people they didn't like in jail, with total impunity. Megaprojects worth thousands of takas in loans were launched as part of the development illusion, while food inflation

boss—the prime minister. Thus, in 15 years of unopposed rule, marked by two farcical elections where the opposition boycotted and ballots were stuffed the night before in one, democracy was completely eradicated and the constitution blatantly violated.

But as history has shown, every tyrant must ultimately bow down to those they have terrorised. The latest onslaught on a democracy already on life support took place between July 15 to August 5, when Hasina made the worst error of judgement by unleashing her goons, the police and other security forces on unarmed students and general people. The bloodshed that ensued—over a thousand lives lost, thousands blinded or maimed for life, a five-day internet blackout and the imposition of a curfew—led to a spontaneous uprising for freedom. The

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The interim government led by a visionary person of integrity, faces a daunting task ahead. The suppressed resentment, fear, anger, grief and deprivation of people whose voices had been silenced for 15 years have been unleashed, some in violent and anarchic forms. Meanwhile, remnants of the fascist regime continue to work their mischief to discredit the interim government and the student activists. Religion is being weaponised to promote ideas that are in direct conflict with democratic ideals. Mob justice continues to create an atmosphere of fear, and the moral police feel empowered enough to openly display their misogyny.

Before the interim government can create an environment in which a credible, free and

to the old style of governance, one that had no accountability, no representation of people's aspirations and did not ensure the rights of all, especially women and minority communities.

The chief adviser's speech on September 11 indicates that the process of reform is underway. Special commissions are being formed to carry out the much-needed reforms to institutions, especially the electoral process, the Election Commission, police, judiciary and the legal system. Good governance is being introduced to the broken financial sector. But the repair process requires patience, humility and unity from all. It is the only way we can hold onto our precious freedom and not let it slip through our fingers again.

The need for transparency in political financing



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As more details emerge about the misdeeds of business groups like S Alam following the fall of the Awami League government, we are left to ponder just how deeply intertwined the fortunes of these business tycoons were with the political party at the centre of Bangladesh's authoritarian turn. While the correlation has long been clear, the causality will, hopefully, be established further as more investigations take place. But if we can only uncover the specifics of the financial relationships between industrial groups and political parties after dramatic resignations of prime ministers following mass uprisings, this does not bode well for the state of accountability in the country. Yet, these relationships have long shaped the fate of our country, enabling political parties to hide behind money to undermine democracy— disenfranchising of millions of poor and powerless.

Money is pivotal in politics, but if we want to prevent it from becoming poison as it has in the past, the democracy-oriented reform agenda of the interim government has to include robust mechanisms to ensure financial transparency in Bangladeshi politics.

Currently, political financing—or more specifically, campaign financing—in Bangladesh is governed through the Representation of the People's Order (RPO), 1972. It provides guidelines for candidates on how to maintain and report their finances, and restricts both candidates and parties to specific spending caps for election campaigns. After the latest regulations update, candidates cannot spend more than Tk 25 lakh on elections, while political parties are limited to Tk 4.5 crore if they field over



Every penny raised and spent by political parties or campaigns must be publicly available so that voters can make informed decisions. FILE PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

200 candidates (less if they field less).

Anyone familiar with the previous "elections" held between 2014 and 2024 will know that it is virtually impossible these spending caps were adhered to, despite parties' claims of compliance on paper. In 2018, for example, Awami League claimed to have spent Tk 1.05 crore on the election, BNP said it spent Tk 1.11 crore, and Jatiya Party got it done for just Tk 4.52 lakh. The reason they have been able to get away with these unabashed falsifications, as reported by

which encompasses the entire vertical of the political process. Going forward, the EC needs access to forensic accountants and the power to summon financial records from political donors. Every step needs to be taken to make these records as accessible as possible to voters, with the media taking a proactive role in highlighting discrepancies and suspicious connections found within these records.

This is not to suggest that business organisations or wealthy individuals should be prohibited from donating to political

parties. They have the right to participate in politics, and providing funds can be their way of staying engaged. However, voters should have information on who is financially backing a candidate.

As reliance on small financial contributions by supporters and political party members and voluntary participation in political work has dwindled, it has become a global trend for political parties to turn to large businesses for funding. The larger the business, the larger their financial contribution, which often leads

While campaign financing is a core component of political financing, there is much more to it. Political parties in Bangladesh and globally for that matter must remain relevant through media and social media outside of election cycles, which also costs money. Regulating political financing should not hinder the survival of political parties. Legal, transparent, and democratically engaging fundraising methods need to be left open for them.

back to the sort of politics that connects them to people and relies on supporters and members to finance their basic functions. The alarming trend of the majority of parliament members being businesspeople highlights the unhealthy intertwining of business and politics—a trend that has to be reversed.

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In Germany, elected officials are asked to pay a portion of their salaries to the party which nominated them, a process which has both benefits and pitfalls. In many countries, including the UK, Sweden, Spain, Canada, and Australia, the state provides direct funds to political parties once they qualify for it through electoral means. Some nations indirectly support political parties by allowing them to use state resources such as the state media. Foreign aid for political parties can be a contentious matter, but considering the vast Bangladeshi diaspora, a mechanism could be created for their contributions to support democracy without inviting foreign influence.

Ultimately, those who fund politics will always have influence on political parties, and should a candidate get elected, this influence will then seep into the government. Whether or not it's a huge conglomerate or regular people contributing to the coffers of parties, they will always expect their money to carry weight, which is why transparency is paramount to this process. Every penny raised and spent by political parties or campaigns must be publicly available so that voters can make informed decisions.

The UN's focus on Artificial Intelligence for this year's International Day of Democracy is relevant for Bangladesh, where technology could help make democratic processes more transparent and efficient. However, the foundation for such progress lies in a resource that has somehow become increasingly scarce: common sense.