

# Hopes and anxieties of the Bangladeshi diaspora



**AN OPEN DIALOGUE**  
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**ABDULLAH SHIBLI**

A number of recent op-eds and news items on the Bangladeshi diaspora in the US and the Middle East caught my attention. I have also read several knowledgeable articles and op-eds on the contribution and concerns of the diaspora published in these columns since the July uprising. There is indirect evidence that the interim government is very much aware of the roles played by the diaspora, particularly those who live in North America and the UK.

A media report, "Forex market on the mend as remittances rebound," provided some encouraging news for the new administration. It not only signals that our foreign exchange coffers will be bolstered in the coming months but also indicates a positive trend. The hard-working Bangladeshis are sending money home once again, and they foresee that things are heading the right way after the July-August uprising.

I was also glad to note that the editor of this newspaper was visiting the US a few weeks ago, and left with a very positive impression about the role of the diaspora after attending the St Gregory's High School alumni reunion held in New Jersey. He noted that he met several cricketers and other well-known Gregorians who were able to charm him with their feelings of nostalgia and patriotism for their old country. Also, worth noting, as he pointed out in his op-ed, that "there were professionals from

academia, business, engineering, IT, medicine, pharmacy, and even cybersecurity."

I am curious to know if the editor of *The Daily Star* also met with the average diaspora in the New York tri-state area. Most of the Bangladeshi diaspora, ie, those I come across on an everyday basis in the US, have a slightly different perspective on the comings and goings in their birthplace. A majority of the Bangladeshis living in this region are hard-working men and women, many of whom are from lower middle-income groups, according to data from the Pew Research Center. I mention this group because most of those living in the tri-state area, which includes parts of New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut, are small-scale entrepreneurs or hold blue-collar jobs. I meet them occasionally and hear from them regularly, and I will present some of their concerns and aspirations from a random sample.

They are concerned about many issues, some recent and some from the immediate past. It was reassuring to learn that the Bangladesh Army Chief General Waker-uz-Zaman has vowed to back the country's interim government led by Professor Muhammad Yunus "come what may" to help the government complete key reforms so that elections could be held within the next 18 months. I will provide a short list of issues, the

diaspora is concerned about, in the following paragraphs. The diaspora always pays special attention to the law and order situation in the country, particularly in the hill tracts, and the safety and security of the minority community. Rallies, human chains, protests, and demonstrations have been held in all major cities. A protest rally was

ethnic and religious minorities in Dighinala, Khagrachari, and Rangamati. People from Bangladeshi Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim communities, including Indigenous families, and several Indian and American citizens participated in the protest.

The cost of living, particularly for those who live on fixed incomes and

savings and have seen their lifestyles disrupted. With the inflation rate in the double digits, they have been experiencing the "shrinking taka." Any money sent to them buys less and less every day. My frozen personal bank account with one of the affected financial institutions has made it impossible for me to send any financial support to my

gone into hiding, and are nervous about resuming their regular activities. The flip-flop on the Constitutional Reform Commission, mass allegations against political activists and civilians alike, and blanket accusations for the misrule of the former government also surface occasionally. The current administration needs no reminder that with an estimated 13 million Bangladeshis residing abroad in 162 countries, the diaspora stands as the sixth-largest migrant group globally. Their views and actions have some influence, echoing across Bangladesh's financial and social spheres. Bangladeshi people living abroad (diaspora) often experience significant emotional and social impacts due to the hardships faced by their families still living in Bangladesh, as they maintain strong emotional connections to their homeland despite being physically distant.

Our interim leader Prof Yunus, a champion for poverty eradication, was recently in New York City to attend the United Nations General Assembly session. He was expected to meet with Max Roser, a kindred spirit. Roser is a professor at the University of Oxford's Blavatnik School of Government, where he researches global issues such as poverty, hunger, and war. In the September 24 issue of *The New York Times*, Roser wrote, "Poverty is not history. People around the world are still struggling to afford housing, heating, transport and healthy food for themselves and their families." The diaspora is aware that the time the interim government has is short and the tasks ahead for Prof Yunus are lengthy, but we have confidence that Prof Yunus is the right person to take the helm at the right time to make a dent in the issues we face.



The Bangladeshi diaspora, particularly those in North America and the UK, played a significant role in the recent mass uprising.

PHOTO: REUTERS

## BENEATH THE HEADLINES

# Readings from a citizens' perceptions survey



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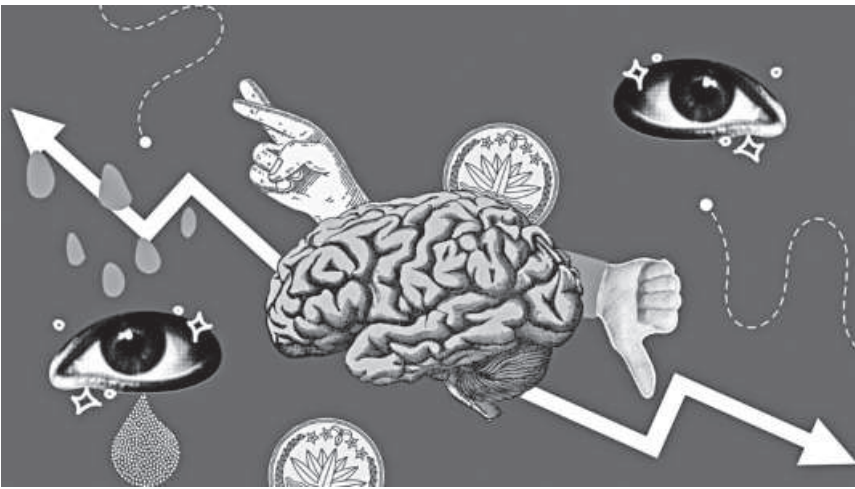
**IMRAN MATIN**

Recently, BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) presented the findings from a nationally representative Rapid Research Response 2024 survey to get a national picture of citizens' perceptions, experiences, and expectations in the first 40 days since the fall of the former autocratic government on August 5. This survey is part of a longitudinal survey that BIGD has been conducting since 2019. The current round was a phone survey that collected responses from 2,363 adult men and women from all districts. District and rural-urban population weight was used to calculate national-level estimates.

The findings attracted widespread attention on traditional and social media. In this write-up, I want to go beneath the headline, offer a snapshot of the average mood of the nation, and examine trends and variations which can hold important insights for political and policy strategy.

The general findings on the national mood were, to an extent, as expected—people feel very optimistic, both in terms of the political and economic directions of the country. There was a dramatic improvement from similar surveys we conducted before, the most recent one being in January this year. The mood upswing from the 2022 survey to the latest RRR 2024 survey is from 39 percent to 71 percent for political direction and from 25 percent to 60 percent during the same period for economic direction. The optimism is driven by a sense of freedom and relief, which creates aspirations about a better future. It is also a reflection of the urgency with which people want to see tangible positive outcomes and progress.

Looking at the trend data across 2022, January 2024, and the RRR 2024 survey, we notice that the optimism in the political direction (39 percent, 41 percent, and 71 percent for each of the three surveys) is consistently higher than the corresponding economic direction



VISUAL: ALIZA RAHMAN

(25 percent, 32 percent, and 60 percent) of the country. In short, economic optimism remains markedly lower than political optimism, remaining behind by about 10 points in each of the surveys. Furthermore, in the RRR 2024 survey, we find that the economy has also been clearly prioritised as a focal area of reform. Indeed, there is a real urgency to get the economy to work for the majority in terms of creating jobs, improving real wages, and managing inflation to reduce the sufferings of people in the context of the ongoing polycrisis since the pandemic.

Digging deeper into these numbers, we find three interesting differences in trends occurring across lines of gender, income, and rural-urban areas. Women have consistently been less optimistic than men across economic and political directions, and the gender gap seems to have grown further in the RRR 2024 survey. In the economic direction, the gap was five percentage points in the 2022 survey, and grew to eight percentage points in the RRR 2024 survey. Similarly, in the political direction, the gap widened in the same timeframe from three percent to nine percent. Despite the strong presence of women in the

revolution in July, their representation in post-August 5 decision making spaces has been less visible. There have also been growing incidents where the future of women's rights seems uncertain and under assault. These developments and experiences may have played a role in shaping women's perceptions and expectations.

When it comes to the income

between rural and urban areas—people in rural areas were more optimistic than the urban population in the previous survey rounds; this reversed in the recent RRR 2024 survey. In the 2022 survey, people in the rural area were four percentage points more optimistic in both political and economic directions of the country compared to the urban sample. Comparatively, in the RRR 2024 survey it was the opposite, with the urban population now five percentage points more optimistic than the rural population in terms of political direction and eight percentage points more optimistic in terms of economic direction. This change of trend in optimism and aspirations in the urban population, in the context of urban poverty and employment reality, may increase different types of claims given that urban labour is relatively more organised. The reversal against rural areas also needs political and policy attention. In addition, political and policy attention is needed for the comparatively lower optimism seen in the rural areas.

It may be challenging for opinion surveys such as this one to reflect true public opinion, especially on topics about which people may be afraid or embarrassed to express their views or preferences publicly. In this RRR 2024 survey, we used an experimental method called a randomised list experiment to identify biased responses to questions where we thought such bias was likely. One such question was if the respondent supported the one-point demand of the uprising calling for the resignation of Sheikh Hasina on what was being called July 34. We find that an overwhelming 83 percent of the respondents said yes to the question. The randomised list experiment suggests that the true, unbiased yes was 60 percent, suggesting that 23 percent of those who said yes did not give an unbiased response.

This type of self-censorship raises an important challenge for the democratic Bangladesh we all want to craft where everyone can express their views without fear. The July uprising has opened up this freedom in ways that were unimaginable over the last 15 years. Still, the divisive wounds will need to be healed through restorative justice so that we can become more united and inclusive in our diversities, paving the way towards people's deliberative democracy.

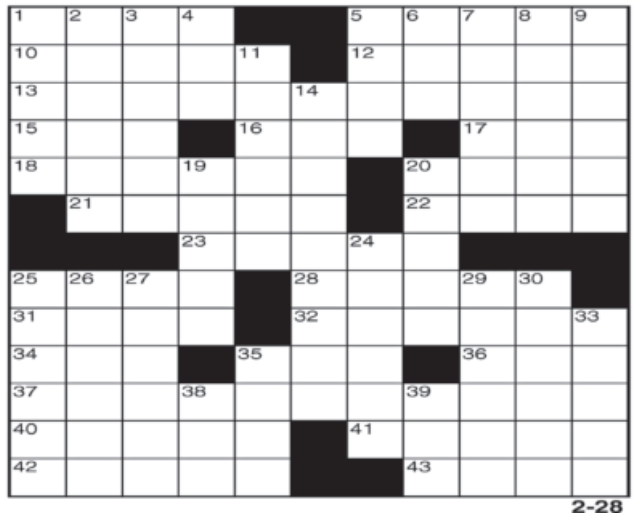
## CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

### ACROSS

- 1 Sibillant summons
- 5 Eiffel Tower setting
- 10 Match in value
- 12 Singer Cara
- 13 Grammatical category
- 15 "My country--of thee"
- 16 Attempt
- 17 Beavers' creation
- 18 Black Sea port
- 20 Old letter
- 21 Laundry problem
- 22 Commentary piece
- 23 Signed
- 25 Automaker Benz
- 28 Make wavy
- 31 Singer Burl
- 32 Yearly
- 34 Catch some z's
- 35 Employ
- 36 Uno plus due
- 37 Spot for spectacles
- 40 Exodus figure
- 41 Lesson leader
- 42 Stage direction
- 43 Disavow

### DOWN

- 1 Basil-based sauce
- 2 Ten-armed swimmers
- 3 Circle-in-a-circle, in Venn diagrams
- 4 N Mahal
- 5 Feel sorry for
- 6 Rainbow shape
- 7 Study
- 8 Preposterous
- 9 Appeared
- 11 Admits
- 14 Site for a car's oil
- 19 Goes yachting
- 20 "The Kiss" creator
- 24 Writer Hemingway
- 25 Checkers demand
- 26 Arthurian island
- 27 Meal
- 29 Change genetically
- 30 Church leader
- 33 Distrustful
- 35 Cold War side
- 38 Glimpse
- 39 Bossy's chew



## YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS



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