

## An unexpected move by the government

### Cancellation of national days has raised concern

We are surprised by the decision of the interim government to cancel eight national days—including the one commemorating the historic March 7 speech of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman—which comes off as an ill-timed revisionist attempt that it could have done without now. As it happens, the country is going through a very turbulent phase, with sky-high food prices and persistent security concerns tightening the thumbscrews on the government. The slow progress on the state reform drive is also testing citizens, as is the divisions that surfaced after the uprising. This is not the time to risk further turmoil through such a contentious move, that too without a consensus-building process preceding it.

We are not saying the decision is totally devoid of reason. In fact, the monopolisation of the Liberation War narrative during the 15-year rule of Awami League, and the sense of alienation and outrage that it caused among many, creates the ground for some realignment, if not revision, of historical matters. A concerted pushback against the ousted regime's political legitimacy is more or less expected. Defending the government decision, the information adviser has said that the very designation of these days was a "fascist behaviour." Of the eight, five were related to the birth and death anniversaries of Sheikh Hasina's family members alone.

But any lumping together of Hasina-specific days and nationally significant ones is misleading at best and dangerous at worst. In writing off the first set of days, the government also targeted occasions like the historic March 7 and the November 4 National Constitution Day which has upset many, and justifiably so. Can we just dismiss events that are an inseparable part of our existence? The March 7 speech, in particular, does not belong to Awami League nor even Sheikh Mujib. It is a treasure that belongs to the whole nation. The adviser's suggestion that it is "important but not worthy of being designated a national day" points to a poor understanding of how it galvanised the nation in 1971, encapsulating the spirit of the Liberation War. His comment on Bangabandhu also suggests an inability to separate the man Awami League so unashamedly used from the man who, for all his flaws, played a leading role in our independence struggle.

A re-reading of Bangabandhu and our Liberation War is certainly necessary in the new age, but it is best left to scholars, historians and the wider society—not to government functionaries. The government has waded into a territory that doesn't concern it, and the manner in which it has done it raised more questions than it resolved. The cancellation of the two above national days is particularly problematic because of its disruptive potential at this crucial time when unity is more urgent than ever. We urge the government to review the decision.

## A misguided approach to justice

### Concerns about judges must follow due process

The decision by some student leaders to protest on the High Court premises on October 16, demanding the resignation of "pro-Awami League fascist judges," was disappointing and unnecessary. In a country where the rule of law is upheld, Supreme Court premises should be regarded with sanctity. Pressuring the judicial system and the chief justice to remove questionable judges through protests on court grounds is not the right approach, as it fails to show proper respect for the judiciary.

For the sake of argument, let's assume these judges should be removed because of their controversial appointments. However, there is a proper and legal way to accomplish that. If there is any place where the rule of law must take precedence, it is on court premises—especially when it concerns the court and its officers. Under the previous autocratic Awami League regime, we witnessed how all systems of governance, including the legal system, were completely undermined. In the new Bangladesh we aspire to create, we must ensure that no one similarly bypasses the system to achieve their goals, as this would set a dangerous precedent that could cause further harm in the future.

The students could have met with the chief justice to express their concerns about judges whose appointments were considered questionable. It is true that, during its 15 years in power, the AL faced numerous allegations of filling the High Court with loyalist judges. However, the chief justice could have addressed these concerns through proper legal procedures, as even those judges have a constitutional right to defend themselves. In light of this, at least the chief justice did not violate proper procedure to remove them. Instead, he decided that 12 judges will not be assigned to benches for now, meaning they will not be participating in judicial activities for the time being.

To follow proper procedure, the attorney general would simply need to withdraw a review application challenging a previous Supreme Court decision that struck down a constitutional amendment aimed at transferring the power to remove judges from the Supreme Judicial Council to parliament. Afterward, allegations against the judges could be presented to the Supreme Judicial Council, which would determine whether there is sufficient cause for their removal.

For the sake of judicial reform, independence, and the proper dispensation of justice, there is no alternative but to establish due process and the rule of law. To achieve this, legal procedures must be followed, even to correct any wrongs that have been done. Therefore, our message to students is that, while we respect your views, we urge you to respect the process.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY



### Puerto Rico becomes US territory

On this day in 1899, Puerto Rico was turned over to the United States following the Spanish-American War.

# Hasina's misrule should not affect our judgement of Bangabandhu

## The history of Liberation War must be honoured



THE THIRD VIEW  
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Two recent announcements have taken us by surprise: first, the reconfiguration of national days, and second, the statement by Information Adviser Nahid Islam that the interim government does not consider Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as the Father of the Nation.

Regarding the national days, we are on the same page as the government on most of them except three: March 7 (the day of Bangabandhu's historic speech), August 15 (the day of his assassination along with most of his family), and November 4 (the day our constitution was promulgated). History was made on these days, and their significance should not at all be eroded.

Bangabandhu is a giant of history and the supreme leader of our independence movement. There were many others, such as Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, Sher-e-Bangla AK Fazlul Huq, Tajuddin Ahmad, Syed Nazrul Islam, and Gen MAG Osmani. History will judge them all and give them their due place.

In our view, Bangabandhu must be judged in two separate segments: the first is up to our independence, and the second is after his return to Bangladesh on January 10, 1972. In the first phase, his role is central and decisive. He united the Bangalee nation to demand its economic, cultural and political rights. He generated in us the self-confidence to demand, assert and fight for our rights. During the 13 years (in total) that he was in jail, he never compromised. His sweeping victory in the 1970 general election made him

uniting the people of East Pakistan, gradually building the anti-Ayub Khan movement, electrifying us with the Six-Point Programme, a stunning victory in the 1970 election, his March 7 speech, and the non-cooperation movement in March 1971 through



Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's historic speech on March 7, 1971 is an integral part of the independence movement of Bangladesh.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

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the spokesperson of the people of East Pakistan, a responsibility that he carried with tremendous courage and honesty till we became independent. His lifelong struggle to free us from the clutches of Pakistani rule is indisputable. He is the leader who inspired us to take up arms against the brutal and inhuman Pakistan Army. He was the leader of our Liberation War.

But he faltered severely in running the country, especially in building a democratic polity. There is a lot of controversy about Bangabandhu's role after our liberation. Setting up Rakkhi Bahini and using it for political ends have always been a subject of criticism. But the action that really damaged his stature and respect was the introduction of one-party rule in January-February 1975. It was the beginning of autocratic rule in independent Bangladesh.

Many leaders, while succeeding in revolution, falter in nation-building. They make mistakes, some of which cost their people tremendous pain, sufferings, and even lives. The great Chinese leader Mao Zedong comes to mind. His life was full of struggle, sacrifice and love for his people, but there were also the "Great Leap Forward" and "Cultural Revolution" that led to incalculable tragedies and intellectual stifling. There are numerous other examples. Bangabandhu had his share of failings. Like others in history, he must be judged in totality.

The best thing to do is to let qualified historians—not the politicised ones—do the job.

What we cannot and must not do is judge Bangabandhu in light of Sheikh Hasina's fundamentally flawed, undemocratic, anti-people, corrupt, power-hungry, intolerant and fascist rule. We cannot malign Bangabandhu's historic and indisputable role with what Sheikh Hasina did in the 15-plus years she was in power. His role in

which people totally paralysed the then Pakistani government, stand out among the proudest moments in our history. In all this, the general people and university students, especially those from Dhaka University (much like today), played a pivotal role.

Many of the leaders and followers of the anti-discrimination movement of today will have different viewpoints and their own interpretations of history. As long as they are fact-based, we must respect them. However, some may not be fully aware of the historic

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The younger generation of today, aged 20-25 years, may form their impression of Bangabandhu only through the prism of Sheikh Hasina's misrule, corruption and abuse of power, the last few weeks of which, especially from July 15 to August 5, 2024, was a witness to a massacre of general public, pedestrians, street hawkers, bystanders and demonstrating students. Whatever little goodwill and credibility she and her party still enjoyed evaporated and was replaced by hatred in those weeks, the results of which we are all seeing now.

The past decade and a half, especially after the abolition of the caretaker system, followed by the manipulated elections in 2014, 2018 and 2024, turned the Awami League into a fascist party. It became deeply corrupt and considered itself above all laws. Sheikh Hasina turned supremely arrogant, and became obsessed with power, intolerant of the slightest criticism, contemptuous of independent media, and disdainful of the constitution. She became immersed in self-glory of "Nobody loves the country as much as I do" or "I can do no wrong because I am Bangabandhu's daughter." In the process, the Awami League turned into a party of exploiters, sycophants and self-servers who looted the country

Bangabandhu through the misrule of Sheikh Hasina. She did, in our view, the greatest damage to her father's legacy by creating a personality cult that disgusted all and made us forget his extraordinary courage, political acumen, historic insights, and organising ability. She tried to depict him as a person with no flaws, which made the younger generation deny giving him the due credit and honour. Her actions reminded us of that great song of Tagore: "Nijere korite gourob dan, nijere keboli kori opoman."

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and laundered money abroad.

I think the greatest damage to Bangabandhu was done in the way his birth centenary was celebrated and the unlimited taxpayers' money that was spent for it. It turned him into a demi-god, building a personality cult that no democratic polity can tolerate and which the Bangalee psyche detests instinctively. Thousands of books and hundreds of statues were commissioned and paid for by the state, which sometimes turned out to be exorbitant amounts.

All important government offices, banks, hotels, airports, etc had to set up a "Mujib Corner." The vulgar culture of every minister, MP, mid- to high-level government official and others having to start their speech with five to seven minutes of eulogy to Bangabandhu, followed by one to Sheikh Hasina, became mandatory. Fear operated among the government servants that if by chance their eulogies fell short of the norm, their jobs might be in jeopardy. The story goes on.

The following year was the golden jubilee celebration of our liberation. The story followed the same pattern: nobody but Hasina's father played any part in our freedom struggle. The most disgusting aspect of it was the literal elimination of the role of Mukti Joddhas in all of the official narratives but for some passing references. The birth centenary that was in 2020 continued for a year with the ultimate fascist act of trying to propagate "Mujib's Bangladesh" instead of "People's Bangladesh."

The hatred generated by all these excesses committed by the Hasina regime are now converging to malign Bangabandhu's image. The present generation of student protesters—those belonging to the group of 15-30 years—have literally seen only one government: that of Sheikh Hasina over the last 15 and a half years. Their world view and political consciousness were shaped by her government's oppressive behaviour that only generated resentment and hatred. The "development" narrative got lost in the wake of extrajudicial killings, human rights violations, and unbridled corruption.

If, during the last one and a half decade, academic freedom was permitted and Bangabandhu's role was objectively evaluated along with his mistakes, his true contribution would have never been questioned. Sheikh Hasina never understood that truth lasts forever and propaganda only as long as the regime's tenure.

We urge the students not to look at

who held power because they wanted their own versions to be considered the only truth.

In the beginning, it was only the Awami League—no other party, group or even ordinary people apparently played any part in our independence struggle. Most of the Mukti Bahini members were children of poor farmers. No credit was given to them; they were all Awami Leaguers. During the time of Khondaker Mostaq Ahmad, Gen Ziaur Rahman, and Gen Ershad, Sheikh Mujib disappeared and was replaced by the power holders of the time. When Khaleda Zia took over after the fall of autocracy in 1990, the narrative was that our Liberation War began only after Ziaur Rahman declared independence. Nothing happened before as that would bring Sheikh Mujib to the scene. Throughout this whole period, perpetrators of the genocide during the war was called "Hanadar Bahini." The naming of the Pakistan Army became a taboo.

With Hasina coming to power, the narrative changed and suddenly Ziaur Rahman disappeared from the scene, and his role in declaring independence and the significance of his crucial actions at the beginning was replaced by false and condemnable terms such as "ISI agent," "Pakistani spy," etc.

With the usurpation of history and politicisation of facts—of which Hasina is not the only one guilty—was a nation and our children as future citizens have suffered terribly. Politically convenient history-telling destroyed respect for history, especially among the younger generation. Our school textbooks are the most sorry examples of what we have done with our past. It must stop. Now is the moment when we have people in power who are outside the bi-polarity of our politics. We must move away from the confines of the two-party narrative—shifting from one biased narrative to another—that has kept us prisoners of bias and ignorance and avoid the trap. Students are bringing in a refreshing wind of change in our thinking process, but they must be alert against falling into this old trap.

We got a sovereign land in 1971, but we failed to build a nation. Instead of harmony, we created division. Instead of reaching out to others, we shunned them as enemies. Instead of understanding each other, we politicised history to deepen the schism. It is now time to unite the nation with a true depiction of our legacy and come out of the deeply damaging culture of destructive politics that dissipated our vital energy away from nation building.