

Are we trying to get ‘everything, everywhere, all at once’?



NO STRINGS
ATTACHED

Aasha Mehreen Amin
is joint editor at The Daily Star.

AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

The euphoria of August 5, and the momentous days leading up to it, especially since July 15, are now being overshadowed by a cloud of uncertainty. Most of us feel like we have no idea what the future holds, which direction this country is going in, or what it will mean for us individually.

Some of my friends are genuinely worried whether we are regressing towards an era of more restrictions on women—what they should wear, which spaces they are allowed to occupy, what kind of work they may be permitted to do. Truth be told, I too am concerned and dismayed. Instead of looking forward to a nation where everyone's freedom is guaranteed—regardless of religion, gender, race, ethnicity, ideology, or political affiliation—I find myself worrying whether I'll be able to express my thoughts freely without being labelled as “anti-this” or “pro that,” much like under the previous regime. I am not sure whether I can tell my daughter that the new Bangladesh, free of fear and injustice, she has been so excited about, is really on its way.

So, what is the source of this unease? Where do we begin? Is it the wave of dubious murder charges against anyone associated with the former regime, no matter how tenuous the connection, or those who have criticised the current interim government, even targeting an advocate who consistently supported the student protests? Is it because of reports of women being beaten up in public for the clothes they wear, for being unaccompanied at night? Is it because groups of students claiming to be part of the anti-discrimination student movement are going to schools, universities and government offices, forcing resignations of VCs, teachers, principals, and officers, or resorting to vandalism to demand rechecking of HSC results and to get an “auto pass”? Is it because of the overnight “takeover” of markets, bus stands, and bazaars by the new political kids in town? Is it because “fear” continues to be the weapon to bully and terrorise and force whatever outcome is desired by particular groups?

We seem to be suffering from wanting “everything, everywhere, all at once,” the title of an extraordinarily long film that won many



Protesters clashed with police while demonstrating in front of the Bangabhaban in Dhaka on October 22, 2024.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Academy Awards, where one loses track of the overload of bizarre things happening in different dimensions.

Unfortunately, current events make it difficult not to be sucked into the vortex of gloom and doom. The ridiculous pace at which things are happening, moreover, makes it impossible to write anything that is not dated. In the last 24 hours of writing this piece, a volley of disturbing events has taken place with the surety that more will follow.

It started with the president's comment that he had not actually seen the former prime minister's resignation letter in a conversation with Manab Zamin's editor which came out in the paper's weekly publication. This provoked all kinds of debate regarding whether indeed Sheikh Hasina had resigned and if not, what did it all mean. More immediately, it called

activists congregating near the Shaheed Minar and Raju Bhashkorjo, with the anti-discrimination student movement issuing an ultimatum to the government to meet their five-point demands. They included—the removal of the president, abolishing the 1972 constitution replaced by a new one that reflected the spirit of the uprising, and “proclamation of the republic” to rebuild a post-2024 Bangladesh in consultation with democratic and functioning political parties. All this in one week or else they “will return to the streets with full force.”

Meanwhile, crowds gathered near Bangabhaban, getting increasingly belligerent as police tried to prevent them from breaking through the security barriers. Despite detonating stun grenades, using tear gas, and batons, the police could not control

are still in a flux, a turbulence that should have been anticipated and mitigated. It is understandable that the president's latest comments and all the speculations it has given birth to would make the student protesters nervous and suspicious. But the law adviser's statements regarding the president, later endorsed by the chief adviser's office, should have been enough for them to wait for the government's decision. It was, after all, the students who invited Professor Yunus to lead the interim government and guide us towards a democratic process. Is it reasonable to expect such fundamental changes, as outlined in the five demands, to happen in just one week? The government has to be given the time and space to carry out the reforms required to ensure the basic prerequisites for the democratic process, which have been

completely destroyed by the previous regime. This is why they have 10 reform commissions headed by respected citizens.

At the same time, we must all acknowledge the reality of instigators from various quarters, whether from the previous regime or other political players, to make the interim government look ineffectual so that some agenda can be served.

This makes it all the more crucial for the interim government, despite its overwhelming tasks to repair and heal a country financially crippled and institutionally made sick by a morally corrupt regime, to always be in close contact with the students and the public. Student leaders should take advantage of the access they have to a government formed on the basis of their movement and discuss their demands. At the same time, while the interim government's mandate is to fulfil the aspirations of the July-August uprising, it must also exercise its authority to prevent excesses that are reminiscent of the regime that has been ousted.

August 5 happened through a violent, abnormal sequence of events during which the government turned on its own people and used the police to brutally suppress them. The overwhelming majority of protesters were students and the general public, all coming together because of a common cause—to free themselves from 15 years of repression. But while all these people were united over their frustration and anger against a dictator and her cronies, once the common enemy was ousted, the very same comrades have become divided. Political rivalries, personal vendetta, and a sense of entitlement among various groups, started to surface, while remnants of the old regime are working to take advantage of this divisiveness.

While we may be critical of the interim government's delayed response to a series of troubling incidents, we should not be too quick to dismiss them. We must appreciate the enormity of their responsibilities. More importantly, we must not forget what happened only about three and a half months ago. Are we already forgetting the faces of those young men and women, being brutally beaten, then cold-bloodedly shot at the behest of a heartless dictator? Let us share the sorrow of the families who lost their loved ones for a movement that promised to bring freedom and justice to us. There are still thousands of people, many in the prime of youth, who are alive but have lost a limb—a leg, an arm, the ability to see again during the movement. Such tremendous sacrifice obligates all of us to be more restrained, forgiving, and patient. We have to realise the futility and dangers of wanting everything, everywhere, all at once.

A TRIBUTE TO KOMOL SIDDIQI

Rest in peace, warrior, your battle won



Niaz Zaman
is a retired academic, writer and translator.

NIAZ ZAMAN

It rained the day they laid the warrior to rest. The gathering at the graveyard was small, but he had fought in the Liberation War, he had lost his right eye in that war, and he was laid to rest with full military honours. The last post was played before they laid him down in the arms of Chaity, his baby daughter who had passed away at the age of nine months in 1986, and whose loss Komol perhaps felt more poignantly than the loss of his eye.

Masroor ul Haq Siddiqi Bir Uttam, better known to family and friends as Komol Siddiqi, passed away in the early hours of October 7. I had last met him a little over a year ago, on September 15. A portion of his living room could be called “a Liberation War corner.” Apart from a poster of our war martyrs, there was a poster of the sector commanders, and photos of him receiving awards from two different prime ministers of two different parties. There was also a group photo of victorious freedom fighters, one of whom included a bearded Komol. I had not seen the photo before. Komol told me that a few years ago someone had given him the photo taken after the group had liberated Narail.

Age had caught up with Komol as it has caught up with me, but the spirit which had led him to join the war in 1971 was still there. We talked for two hours about the past, about the war, about what it had meant to us. Little did I realise that he would soon suffer a bout of illness that would confine him to a wheelchair and in the end lead to his passing. He was fortunate to be able to attend the marriage of his younger daughter in late August.

The youngest of five brothers, Komol Siddiqi was born on September 18, 1941, to Wajeda Ahmed in New Delhi, where his father, Z. Ahmed, was working. It was one of the rare times that the family were together. Komol's mother usually remained with the family in Magura while his father was stationed in New Delhi, moving when the government offices did to Shimla. Mr Ahmed passed away while

Komol was still very young.

It was the determination of Komol's mother and later the support of his eldest brother—who gave up his dreams and joined the army—that enabled Komol and his brothers to go to school and college. Komol got admission to Ahsanullah Engineering College, which in 1962 was upgraded to East Pakistan University of Engineering and Technology, the present Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET). Graduating in 1963, he immediately got a job in the Water and Power Development Authority.

Komol was a carefree young man, fond like the rest of his family of music. He was one of the early students of Chhayanat, learning to play the *tabla*. He was also imbued with the spirit of Bengali nationalism that had gone into the creation of Chhayanat.

In 1971, after the war broke out, he and a brother crossed over to India to join the fighting. For three months, Komol worked with the government-in-exile. Then, while his brother—known as Baby Siddiqi—remained in Kolkata, Komol left to take up arms. He fought in Jessore, Narail, and Faridpur.

On December 7, he and his troops liberated Narail. Nine days later, on December 16, General Niazi signed the instrument of surrender. The war was over. Bangladesh was free.

However, on December 15, the war was not yet over. Bhatiapara, then in Faridpur district, was still under the control of Pakistani troops. Bhatiapara was strategically very important for the Pakistan Army, as it was through the wireless station located there that communication was maintained with the rest of the country. Under the orders of his sector commander, Major Abul Manzoor, Captain Siddiqi, as he was called, proceeded to the area with his troops. During the battle Komol was shot in the right eye.

Komol should have died that day, but, thanks to his fellow soldiers, he was moved immediately to a hospital in Alipur. He was so

badly injured that the doctors there believed that he could not survive. The news of his injury reached his friends in Kolkata, among them Aly Zaker. The friends rushed to the hospital. They asked about wounded freedom fighters and were shown a heap of dead bodies. Terrified that one of the bodies would be that of their friend, they searched through the corpses. Komol was not there.

Fortunately, Komol had been moved

that had been done.

The poet Abu Zafar Obaidullah wrote a memorable poem in honour of Komol, called “Komoler Chokh.”

*Komolke chhino tumi,
Shundor sutham deho,
Prodipto chokh,
Dupur roder moto,
Tibra prokhor.
(Do you know Komol,*



Komol Siddiqi standing on the far right with fellow freedom fighters and villagers after liberating Narail.

PHOTO: COURTESY



Masroor ul Haq Siddiqi Bir Uttam

to the army hospital. Dr Madan, an army doctor there, had also treated Major Khaled Mosharraf. Thanks to Dr Madan, Komol's life was saved, but his eye could not be saved and the right side of his face was terribly disfigured. Komol returned to Dhaka where Ejazul Haq, known to his friends as Emran, took him to see the president, Justice Abu Sayeed Choudhury. Emran had learned that a group of badly injured freedom fighters were being sent for medical treatment to Germany. He hoped that Komol could be included in that group.

Komol was in Germany for nine months undergoing surgery and facial reconstruction. The doctors there did the best they could and asked him to return for plastic surgery. He didn't. He was content with the reconstruction

The handsome, sturdy young man, With radiant eyes, Resplendent as the afternoon sun, Keen and sharp.) Just one bullet, the poet says, tore away that young man's right eye. An elegy for Komol's eye, the poem is also a tribute to all those who like Komol fought in the war. Some lost their limbs, some lost their lives, Komol lost his eye. Komol, as he often said himself, was only one of the soldiers in a people's war.

Komol was honoured for his bravery in the war and awarded the Bir Uttam. Sadeque Hossain Khoka, then mayor of Dhaka, honoured several freedom fighters by naming roads after them. One of these roads was named after Komol.

she accept a gift from those who had robbed her father of his eye, taken countless lives, dishonoured countless women?

Though Komol accepted state invitations and did speak on occasions, he did not like to take credit for his role in the war. It was a people's war, he often said. He did not support the special quota for children and grandchildren of freedom fighters. We did not fight to get benefits and special concessions, he would say. Had he been well in July and August, perhaps he would have stood beside the youth and supported the anti quota movement.

Rest in peace, warrior. You won the battle. It is for the new generation to preserve the victory.