

# Hasan Mahmud’s comical U-turn



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Once a fierce critic of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), former Foreign Minister Dr Hasan Mahmud now finds himself in an unexpected role. The Awami League (AL) politician, who is currently in London, recently sang praises for the BNP—or, as some may put it, he tried “wooing” his once-despised rival. After 15-plus years of relentless criticism and jabs aimed at the BNP, Hasan’s sudden pivot, following the ouster of his government through the July uprising, has left political analysts and laypeople scratching their heads. A tale as twisted as a Dickensian plot, his evolution from BNP’s heckler to a begrudging admirer is nothing short of literary satire.

Let’s rewind to a simpler time: the era of Mahmud’s full-throated attacks on the BNP, almost as consistent as the sunrise, and twice as intense. He labelled BNP as a “party of parasites” and often credited them with conjuring chaos as easily as Shakespeare’s Iago wove schemes in *Othello*. BNP leaders, according to him, were architects of anarchy, always “misleading the masses” and “haunted by the ‘Tarique-ghost,’” referring to the

party’s acting chairman, Tarique Rahman. His words were chosen with such precision and relish, it was as if he had plucked them from Dante’s *Inferno*, casting BNP leaders into circles of political damnation.

One could almost hear his booming voice, drenched in theatrical scorn, recounting BNP’s supposed failure to win the people’s favour as he proudly paraded AL’s achievements with an air of unearned grandeur. “The BNP presented a fake adviser to Joe Biden,” he would proclaim with mock indignation, using his platform like a mediaeval troubadour, weaving tales of his rivals’ bumbling with all the flair of a Marlowe villain.

With the authoritarian AL regime suddenly overthrown, Mahmud went from denouncing BNP’s every move to extolling the virtues of “restoring democracy,” a concept he had once wielded as a cudgel to suppress dissent. His rhetoric, once thick with sarcasm and scorn, now drips with the honeyed appeal of a suitor attempting to rekindle an old flame—except, of course, that the “old flame” is the very party he tried to extinguish.

Now, as if reliving *Romeo and*

*Juliet*, he calls for “working together” with the BNP for the “greater good” of Bangladesh. In an ironic twist, Mahmud has become something of a Capulet seeking Montague’s embrace, promising a collaborative future he once vehemently rejected. Some critics have taken to calling this performance “The Tragedy of Dr Hasan,” a farce in which a once-proud antagonist now plays the role of political supplicant.

It was not long ago that Mahmud championed AL’s “unassailable” record of peace and prosperity. He proclaimed with the conviction of an orator from ancient Greece that his party had brought unprecedented development to the country. He scoffed at BNP’s concerns for democratic reforms, dismissing them as desperate ploys of a “party that cannot survive without scandal.” He scoffed at BNP’s advocacy for free and fair elections, dismissing it as an “elaborate hypocrisy.” And yet, here he stands now, as humbled as King Lear on the stormy heath, calling for the very reforms he once deemed folly.

At a recent event—his first appearance after weeks of silence post-uprising—Mahmud appeared almost repentant, though it was clear that old habits die hard. Attempting a dignified pivot, he assured his audience that he was “always an advocate for democratic values.” The line was delivered with the sincerity of a character in a Restoration comedy, and the audience responded with what could only be described as a collective gasp of incredulity.

A keen observer might draw comparisons to Chaucer’s Pardoner, a man who sells indulgences with a face so earnest that one could almost forget his dubious dealings. Much like the Pardoner, his newfound alignment with BNP’s calls for transparency and electoral fairness reeks of opportunism dressed as redemption. “I agree with the BNP on

oblivious to his own years-long campaign against him and the BNP. In a feat of cognitive dissonance that would make Orwell proud, Mahmud now promotes Tarique’s vision for governance reform, a cause he had once called “antithetical to Bangladesh’s stability.”

One might wonder, is this newfound admiration genuine,

This metamorphosis, this shedding of old skin for a new one, is almost too convenient to believe. Just as Shakespeare’s Polonius is quick to switch allegiances to remain in favour with the court, Mahmud’s chameleon-like shift seems less an act of principle and more a strategy of survival. The difference, however, is that Polonius’s fickleness ultimately led to his downfall—a cautionary tale that Mahmud might do well to heed.

In his newfound role as BNP’s begrudging ally, Mahmud’s journey resembles that of a character from Molière—perhaps Tartuffe, the unctuous hypocrite who feigns virtue to gain favour. If history is any guide, his overtures will likely be met with the same distrust and ridicule as Tartuffe’s grand gestures. After all, in the court of public opinion, where actions speak louder than words, Mahmud’s record as AL’s attack dog cannot be erased with a few conciliatory statements.

As we watch this spectacle unfold, one cannot help but see the humour in Mahmud’s plight. Here is a man who spent over a decade railing against BNP’s every move, only to find himself on the other side of the table, professing solidarity with those he once derided. It is a tale worthy of satire, a drama of contradictions played out on the national stage. Perhaps the moral of Mahmud’s story is one he himself might struggle to accept: that in politics, as in literature, irony has a way of catching up with those who least expect it.



VISUAL: STAR

many issues,” he declared in a voice as smooth as an actor’s monologue, his words carefully rehearsed for maximum effect.

Mahmud has gone beyond mere agreement; he now echoes BNP’s proposals as if they were his own, including the idea of a bicameral parliament. With a straight face, he praised BNP’s acting chairman for “championing the cause of intellectual inclusion,” seemingly

or merely a last-ditch attempt to salvage his relevance in the present scenario? Perhaps he sees himself as a transformed man, like Scrooge on Christmas morning, proclaiming his repentance to an unsuspecting world. Yet, unlike Scrooge, Mahmud lacks the charm of a man humbled by self-awareness; instead, he projects the aura of a politician whose convictions change as easily as the tides.

## Of frequent demands and conspiracies



BLOWIN’ IN THE WIND

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SHAMSAD MORTUZA

Aspectre is haunting Bangladesh. Any group staging protests to press home their demands is quickly labelled as “ghosts” of the previous regime. Demands are seen as conspiracies to unsettle the government, and exorcising the spirit has become a priority for those running the show.

This is a narrative that we have seen promoted by successive regimes. Old habits die hard. The apparitions of political sectarianism are reappearing. The pedal rickshaw pullers, the students demanding universities, the injured July protesters seeking government attention—anyone with demands is being othered, and often dehumanised. Viewing the opponents as morally repugnant is part of a culture of political divisiveness that creates a feedback loop of hatred.

Perhaps 100-plus days since the regime change are not enough to talk about truth and reconciliation. But without a space for the “other” to come clean—be it legal or social—it will be difficult to establish political and economic stability. Our overseas partners need assurances that their investments are secure. Our entrepreneurs need the guarantee to run their businesses without hindrances. It can only happen when all citizens begin to feel safe and included.

The vandalism of “enemy” property or the exodus of businessmen close to the previous regime has added to our economic woes. The unemployment rate has shot up, and the lines before the subsidised food trucks are getting



Students of Government Titumir College take to the streets in Mohakhali, Dhaka on November 18, 2024 demanding for an upgrade to university status. Their demonstration caused traffic gridlock across the capital and disrupted rail communication with the rest of the country.

FILE PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

longer by the day. Depending simply on overseas bailouts and remittances will not mend the wounds inflicted by the stealing of money or a broken financial body. The chief adviser’s declaration to include members of the former party only after due process of trials is a welcome move. It at least gives many the hope of seeing the emergence of a democratic

system.

Democracy requires participation from all stakeholders. By privileging one body or opinion and silencing the rest can never be healthy for democracy. We have already seen how one clandestine group used the former government as a Trojan horse to foray into their realm. The detrimental process requires reform.

Then again, it should be allowed only after following due diligence. Conversely, democracy is not synonymous with mobocracy where anything goes, and petty interests prevail over greater ones.

The perception of Awami League’s return in different guises is something that is held by many. There may be some truth in the idea

that groups of rickshaw pullers, garment workers, students, and other disgruntled people are being manipulated, though only those with institutional intelligence have insights into such matters. Common sense, however, dictates that the root cause of dissatisfaction needs to be extracted so that the bad tooth does not pain the entire body.

Dehumanising the “other” simply gives the government an excuse to ignore the core problems. The injured students who waylaid the health adviser, for instance, were quickly identified as students of Chhatra League who have taken advantage of the government’s policies to rehabilitate July victims. Why there isn’t a proper list of the injured is a

question that we can ask. During the July uprising, we received regular updates of names and numbers. So what’s stopping the authorities from preparing such lists now?

Similarly, the battery-run rickshaw drivers were called associates of various ward commissioners of the past regime. It is surprising that a government comprising many NGO leaders is announcing policies without thinking of the rehabilitation of those affected by said policies. There is a huge battery industry to aid the 40 lakh illegal battery-run rickshaws that are plying the streets around the country. Where will these people go? What will they do? Will they be pushed into crime?

If your livelihood is stripped away, do you really need to be a member of conspirators to take to the streets? What alternative routes or earning options are we proposing for them? The same goes for the idea of banning polythene. Without creating alternative carry-on bags, the decision ended up becoming a gimmick with the shelf life of a newspaper.

The demand for upscaling certain government colleges into public universities is another case of opportunism that should not be tolerated. The government has sought time to review the merit of the proposal, while the suspicion about the anarchy let loose by the students of said colleges is rife among the netizens.

This is solidified by the fact that one of the seven colleges affiliated with Dhaka University has broken ranks with its peers. The students of Government Titumir College believe that they have the necessary infrastructure to have their own university. Maybe they see many private universities in the city operating under the roofs of multi-storey buildings. Perhaps they are under the impression that they are adequately equipped to have a

university of their own.

I think the University Grants Commission (UGC) should seriously consider merging universities to reverse the process of “quantity over quality” policy followed by the previous government. The populist attempt to have universities everywhere has spread our resources thin. Even in the US, struggling institutions are merged to bring them under consolidated management.

A decision of merger will give the right message to the aspiring colleges that feel that rebranding would add value to their degrees. The reality is, many of these institutions don’t have the teachers with the right pedigree to teach at a tertiary level. They complain about the syllabuses and exam questions that are followed at the major public universities. This I can tell from my own experience of conducting exams at these colleges.

But when these students keep on blocking major streets or vandalising train, their motive becomes clear. They want to hit the iron when it is hot and soft. But it is time for the iron to be solid, without which there will be more copycat agitations. The actions taken by the military in dealing with the students of Dhaka College and City College were necessary. Students seem to be pursuing everything except education, which cannot be the norm. The actions, though regrettable, are the results of leniency shown for too long. The message needs to be loud and clear. Reform needs time. This is not the right time to make illogical demands. Fixing the state, as one popular graffiti tells us, will require further patience and sacrifices.

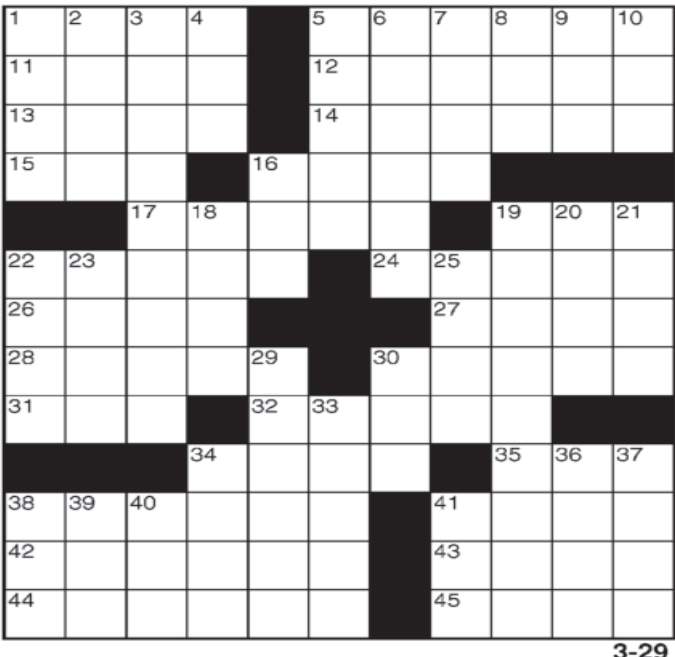
Those who gave their lives or got injured in the July-August uprising sought systemic change. Such change cannot come if everyone thinks in terms of personal agenda or vendetta. The ghost of conspiracy can be exorcised if we process the body through the required rites.

### CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Informal farewell
  - 5 Collect \$200, maybe
  - 11 Final, e.g.
  - 12 Reverberated
  - 13 Marina spot
  - 14 Worn down
  - 15 – Aviv
  - 16 State frankly
  - 17 Diamond corners
  - 19 Newsstand buy, for short
  - 22 Crab’s place
  - 24 Hackneyed
  - 26 St. Louis sight
  - 27 Mob event
  - 28 Gags
  - 30 Stately dance
  - 31 Braying beast
  - 32 Witty remarks

- 34 Crooned
  - 35 Diving bird
  - 38 Speculative question
  - 41 Lot unit
  - 42 Pal of Pooh
  - 43 Onion layer
  - 44 Made tea
  - 45 Sibillant summons
- DOWN**
- 1 Final, e.g.
  - 2 Car bar
  - 3 Members of the offense
  - 4 Band blaster
  - 5 Irritate
  - 6 Clue heading
  - 7 Display
  - 8 Grassy clump
  - 9 “Golly!”
  - 10 Strange

- 16 Cigar bit
- 18 Ibuprofen target
- 19 They hold letters
- 20 Scads
- 21 Stan of jazz
- 22 Mexican peninsula
- 23 Amorous archer
- 25 Snare
- 29 Knight’s attendant
- 30 Costume part
- 33 Hungry, probably
- 34 Put away
- 36 “Exodus” author
- 37 Lane’s co-worker
- 38 Fly catcher
- 39 That woman
- 40 Pro vote
- 41 Pharaoh’s symbol



### TUESDAY’S ANSWERS

D	E	M	O			S	H	O	P	S
E	X	A	M	S		T	A	R	O	T
F	I	R	S	T		F	A	M	I	L
E	L	I		R	I	G		G	A	L
R	E	N	O	I	R		T	I	N	E
	D	E	C	K	S		E	N	D	S
		T	E	T	R	A				
D	U	P	E			H	A	R	S	H
E	M	I	T			A	N	S	W	E
A	P	E		I	N	K		E	R	E
F	I	R	S	T		D	E	G	R	E
E	R	R	O	R			D	A	V	I
N	E	E	D	Y			P	E	N	S