

FALL OF AN AUTOCRAT

A timeline

A protest that started with students demanding reform to the quota system in public jobs toppled a regime that lasted more than 15 years defying opposition and international pressure. Despite the High Court reinstating the quota system on June 5, protests began on July 1 and culminated in the Awami League-led government’s fall on August 5.

JULY 1
Protest begins: Students announce protests calling for reforms to quota system

JULY 4
SC delays hearing: More protests after Supreme Court delays hearing on government appeal to challenge the HC verdict.

JULY 14
The ‘Razakar’ issue: Dhaka University students take to streets after Sheikh Hasina labels students grandsons of “Razakar,” a force which fought against Bangladesh’s independence in 1971.



JULY 15
BCL attacks protesters: Students stage protests at universities across the country Hasina’s remark. BCL activists attack students at Dhaka University injuring over 300 people, mostly students.

JULY 16
First deaths: At least six killed in fierce clashes between protesting students and law enforcers joined in by ruling party activists in Dhaka, Chattogram and Rangpur. All universities, colleges and secondary schools are shut down for indefinite period. Students take control of



most of DU and RU halls and vandalise BCL leaders’ rooms.



JULY 17
Hasina urges patience: Police attack students at DU, JU and RU during “absentee funeral” for student martyrs. Students announce a nationwide “complete shutdown” for the next day. Hasina addresses the nation and announces a judicial probe into previous day’s killings.

JULY 18
Internet blackout: Police and BCL men attack students at Brac University and other educational institutions. At least 29 die in daylong mayhem as clashes break out in 19 districts. Agitators vandalise, torch BTV Bhaban, Setu Bhaban and other government establishments. Internet services blocked across the country.



JULY 19
Curfew imposed, army deployed: Effective from midnight, government announces nationwide curfew and deploys army after daylong violence kills at least 66 people. More government establishments, including Narsingdi jail, metro rail stations, BRTA offices, vandalised, torched.

JULY 20
Key quota leaders picked up: At least 21 killed on the first day of curfew amid army deployment. Curfew extended until further notice and a two-day general public holiday announced. Key organiser of quota reform demo ‘picked up’ and several BNP leaders detained.

JULY 21
SC cuts quota: Supreme Court curtails quotas to 7pc as at least seven killed amid curfew. Chiefs of three forces meet Hasina, as UN, EU, UK voice concern over violence.

JULY 23
Govt olive branch rejected: Govt issues circular reforming quota system, but protest organisers reject it. Arrests and raids targeting opposition leaders and demonstrators continue amid curfew. Broadband internet is back in selected areas.

JULY 25
International condemnation grows: UN, Amnesty International, US, Canada call for end to crackdown. Hasina makes first public appearance since army deployment and visits damaged metro rail station. Her comments fuel further anger among protesters.

JULY 26
BNP call for national unity: Detective Branch of police picks up three key protest organisers. BNP calls for national unity and the ouster of government.

JULY 27
Block raids: Block raids targeting protesters, mostly students, continue as DB picks up two more quota protest organisers. Fourteen foreign missions urge govt to hold law enforcers accountable for wrongdoings.

JULY 28
The involuntary statement: Nationwide crackdown goes on, with over 2.13 lakh people made accused in over 200 cases in Dhaka city alone. Mobile internet

is back, but social media remains shut. Six organisers read out a written statement at DB’s office lifting the movement. They later said they were forced to make the statement. Government announces death toll for first time, setting it at 147.

JULY 29
Jamaat-Shibir ban announced: Protesters take to streets again in some districts, face police obstructions, dozens detained. Government announces plan to ban Jamaat-Shibir.



JULY 30
Teachers join students: Teachers of several universities hold rallies condemning the killing of students. Eminent citizens blame government for loss of lives. Protesters reject Hasina’s call for an impartial, international-standard probe.

JULY 31
EU delays talks: Protesters reject government-called nationwide mourning, stage demos in capital, elsewhere. EU delays partnership talks with Dhaka. Hundreds of HSC students announce boycott of exams if fellow examinees not released from police custody/jail.

AUGUST 1
Govt bans Jamaat-Shibir: Government issues gazette banning Jamaat-Shibir under anti-terrorism act. UN offers sending fact-finding team, PM says “UN free to probe violence”. Six organisers freed from DB custody. Protesters hold mass processions and prayers for those killed. Teachers, students of five public universities stage demos.

AUGUST 2
March for justice: Demonstrators continue protest against killings, thousands join a march for justice. Protesters attacked by AL activists and police in capital, elsewhere, leaving two more dead. Protesters announce countrywide demo for next day. Facebook blocked again for seven hours.

AUGUST 3
One-point demand: At a major rally in Dhaka, student organisers narrow their demand to one-point – resignation of Sheikh Hasina and formation of a “national government” headed by a person who is “acceptable to all.” students reject Hasina’s talks offer.

AUGUST 4
90 killed in mayhem: Widespread clashes break out in Dhaka and in at least 21 districts of the country killing at least 90 people, including policemen. The government reimposes an indefinite curfew across the country. Students announce road march to Dhaka from all parts of the country to force the government to resign.



AUGUST 5
Hasina quits, flees: Tens of thousands of people from different parts of Dhaka and the surrounding areas defy the curfew to converge on the capital’s centre. The army initially tries to stop the flow but then allows people to enter. Crowds storm Hasina’s official residence. By the afternoon, Hasina resigns and flees to India, along with her sister Sheikh Rehana. Army chief General Waker-uz-Zaman invites several political parties for talks. Mob attacks several offices of the outgoing ruling party, police stations across the country.

The first night of curfew and a surprise abduction

FROM PAGE S2

There were three likely spots where the CCTV footage should have picked up the vehicles—a motorbike workshop, an electronic sales and repair shop and a pharmacy.

First, I approached an employee of the workshop saying that last night my brother’s motorbike had been snatched from this area and wanted to see the footage. He could not be less bothered by my plight. “Come back after lunch and speak to the owner.”

I went to the electronics shop and got the same response. The owner and attendant looked at each other. One said they can’t operate the monitor and the footage is not clear at all.

It is difficult to say how, but I had a feeling that people would cooperate if I told them the truth that I wanted to find out who abducted the student leader from their area. It’s an instinctive feeling that grew from the pit of my stomach. So, I blurted out, “I want to find out who has abducted Nahid, a key organiser of the protests.”

I could tell from their eyes that my hunch was right. The attendant came forward and explained – in an almost conspiratorial undertone – how to operate the CCTV monitor. I spent more than two hours trying to identify the cars. They were right. The footage was too blurry to make anything out for certain. The duo suggested I go to the pharmacy, which might have better quality footage. It had remained shuttered for the whole time that I was there. But they told me

where to find the owner.

A bit of cloak and dagger

I found the owner of the pharmacy at an under-construction building. At first, the pharmacy owner refused. But it did not take too much effort to convince him either. He said, “Come back tomorrow.”

And so, I went back the next day. It was July 22. I called the pharmacy owner and he told me to meet a boy across the street who would help with my quest. The young man asked me for a pen drive. When I requested the boy to show me the footage, I found out it would take more than that. The boy mentioned that the CCTV setup was at a widow’s house and that strangers were not welcome there. It all felt like a little cloak and dagger.

I gave him the pen drive and waited for an hour before the young man came back. He said there had been a power outage when Nahid was being detained. “There may be nothing of use at all.” I came back with a broken heart. It had been really close.

Back at the office, my computer couldn’t read the format of the file that I brought with me after so much trouble. So, I sought help from the in-house experts. The first file was literally blank. It had a full hour’s

worth of black screen. But I struck gold with the second one.

You could clearly see a car with Rab-3 written on its side. I was not able to see the number plate at first. But then a law enforcer opened the boot of the car and the number became visible.

I had got what I needed. But, as a newsman, I knew it was not that easy to produce a story. The process of collecting supporting information and comments from law enforcers was painstakingly slow.

Who abducted Nahid first?

The story was finally published on July 30. “Who picked up Nahid for the first time?” read the title.

It was printed during a time when Nahid had been detained for a second time – this time by the detective police and was being paraded in front of TV along with five other coordinators in a bid to break the morale of the protesters. Of course that never really worked out.

A couple of months later, I got a phone call from Rab 3. It was after the interim government had taken over and Nahid had become one of the more visible advisers. The caller wanted to have the footage. Now, they wanted to identify the culprits behind abducting the “honourable adviser”.



DU, ‘laasher michhil’, and an uprising

FROM PAGE S2

Some of the fallen were nameless street children, without families, their names unlikely to appear on martyrs’ lists.

Fast forward to August 4, the day before Hasina’s fall, I reached Shahbagh after being stopped twice by the police. There, I found a sea of people – from 4-year-old Anas on his father’s shoulder with a placard that read, “Shoot me if you can,” to rickshaw pullers like Yusuf.

By afternoon, as security forces and ruling party men opened fire indiscriminately, bullet-hit bodies poured in in the DMCH – some dead, some alive.

At one point, as the hospital could not accommodate anymore, protesters carried their fallen comrades out of the hospital and piled them at the Shaheed Minar, chanting, “There’s no space left for my martyr brothers.”

And then, out of sheer exhaustion and exasperation, I witnessed a desperate, defiant act.

Some of the protesters began a solemn procession, carrying four bodies on their shoulders. It felt like the climax of everything – the suffocating weight of 15 years under authoritarian rule and the brutal atrocities inflicted on dissenters – all converging into a single, haunting image: a literal laasher michhil, a procession of the dead, on the streets of DU.

The procession was attacked by police when it reached Shahbagh. Amid gunfire, protesters were forced to retreat, leaving the bodies behind. The police then seized and carried the bodies away.

Back at the Shaheed Minar, the night brought another haunting sight.

A child’s body lay wrapped in a blood-soaked national flag at the base of the monument. We tried to find his identity searching his school bag and pockets for any identification, without success.

Another body lay beside him, also unnamed, unknown.

Then, a man claiming to be the child’s father arrived. He left in a hurry as he couldn’t provide any proof supporting his claim.

We decided to take the bodies to DMCH. As we boarded the bodies on rickshaw vans, the police arrived and opened fire on us, even as we raised our press vests to show we were journalists.

The bodies were snatched away – a routine task of police in the culture of impunity.

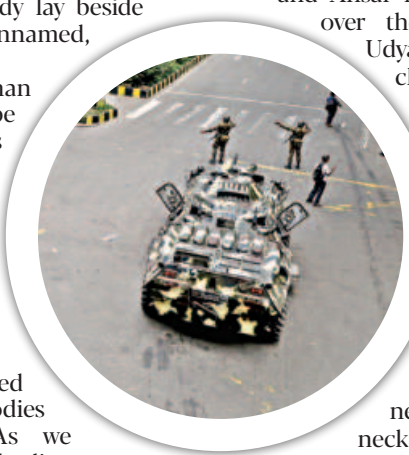
I felt exhausted, devastated, and defeated, wondering if his parents would ever know what happened to their child.

Panic swept over me as the image of four-year-old Anas flashed in my mind: “Did they shoot him too?”

By midnight, the student leaders announced that the long march to Dhaka, originally planned for August 6, would now be held on August 5. Its aim was clear: to topple the autocratic regime.

The horrors of the day and the uncertainty of what lay ahead kept me awake through the night.

It was already August 5



FROM PAGE S2

Some students tried to defuse the situation, but things quickly escalated.

Desperate to escape, the police and Ansar members tried climbing over the wall of Suhrawardy Udyan, with the main gate closed. As they struggled to climb, protesters hurled sticks and bricks at them, some officers falling and injuring themselves in the attempt.

The police retaliated with gunfire. I scrambled for cover as the shots rang out. A young man nearby was hit in the neck. In shock, I shouted at another man close by to keep his head down. The firing continued for a harrowing 30 to 35 seconds before the police finally withdrew.

By the time I returned to Shahbagh, the crowd had swelled. People poured in from all directions. By 2:50 pm, the mood began to shift – relief replaced fear. People hugged army personnel, took photos with them, and offered flowers.

At 3:11pm, back at the Raju Sculpture, a spirit of resilience and hope filled the air. The crowd waved the national flag, chanting, “We are free.”

That night, as I lay in bed, the day replayed vividly in my mind – the gunfire, stun grenades, and chants of defiance. For days, the memories lingered, refusing to fade. Even with my eyes closed, the sounds of that chaotic, historic day echoed as if it were still unfolding.