

A new dawn for Syria

The country’s future must be determined by Syrians

With the end of former Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's brutal 24-year reign on December 8, the Syrian people finally have an opportunity to now rebuild their nation. Islamist-led rebel groups swept into Damascus, forcing Assad to flee to Russia, marking a spectacular end of five decades of Ba'ath Party rule in the country. After more than 13 years of civil war, during which Assad's forces ruthlessly suppressed protesters, his government collapsed in the face of a surprising 11-day offensive launched by rebel groups. Only weeks ago, few could have anticipated this dramatic turn in Syria's fate, which now stands at a crossroads as the Middle East grapples with widespread chaos and instability.

Following Assad's ouster, huge crowds were seen cheering in the streets of Damascus. Prisoners held in notorious black sites were reportedly freed by the rebels. Notably, Assad's reign ended after Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)—listed as a terrorist organisation by Western governments and others, including Russia—captured the strategic city of Homs. However, HTS and other rebel groups themselves have dubious human rights records. Given this reality, the UN war crimes investigators have urged those now taking charge in Syria to ensure that the atrocities committed under Assad's rule are not repeated.

Since the start of the most recent rebel offensive, it is estimated that at least 910 people have been killed, including 138 civilians. The war in Syria has already claimed a conservative estimate of 500,000 lives and displaced nearly half of the country's population. It is, therefore, imperative that, with the fall of the previous regime, the country moves forward and begins to heal. The first step towards stability is ending the violence, with all parties in Syria engaging in dialogue to reach a solution that reflects people's will. Moreover, it is crucial that the transition of power proceeds peacefully and that all ethnic, religious and social groups in the country are protected from persecution.

Despite Assad's ruthless actions against his own people, internal factors were not the sole drivers of his regime's collapse. Syria became a battleground for geopolitical rivalries, as external powers exploited the crisis to further their own agendas. Already after the regime change, Israel has seized territory in Syria-controlled areas of the Golan Heights, with its prime minister ordering forces to establish a buffer zone in the region. Reports also indicate that Israel has resumed bombing campaigns in Syria, violating international law and further exacerbating uncertainty both within the country and across the region.

Given the years of suffering endured by the Syrian people—caused by both internal and external factors—it is imperative that foreign interference in the country comes to an end. While the international community should step forward to provide aid and funding for Syria's reconstruction, foreign powers must cease using the country as a pawn in their geopolitical chessboards. The future of Syria must be determined by its own people. Only then can the nation truly reap the benefits of ousting a brutal dictator.

Extortion using dubious cases must stop

Authorities must end the legal harassment of innocent people

It is a matter of deep concern that a section of complainants who filed questionable cases after the August 5 political changeover in the country are now extorting money from the accused. According to the DMP commissioner, some of these complainants are now calling the accused and demanding money, promising to remove their names from the cases or withdraw the cases, for which they do not have the authority. Consequently, even though we appreciate the DMP commissioner's honest admission that some police personnel are also involved in this unlawful practice, the practice itself is worrying. The police chief's assurance that action will be taken against those involved in such extortion is appreciable. And we hope to see concrete action taken to address this problem.

After the fall of the Awami League regime, many cases were reportedly filed by family members, neighbours, and activists of different political parties, accusing several thousand people of the killings during the July-August uprising. This daily, on September 22, reported at least six cases where the killings took place in the capital, but most of the accused in the cases were found to be residents of the complainants' home districts and upazilas. For instance, a man named Labhlu Mia was shot dead during protests in Uttara on August 5. A month later, his cousin Dukhu Mia filed a murder case against 221 individuals—mostly local Awami League leaders—who were residents of their hometown, Rangpur. The other cases are also quite similar.

Clearly, these cases were filed for reasons other than seeking justice which, as legal experts have opined, will only weaken the credibility of the charges. Many of the accused have alleged that they were framed with the sole intent of harassing them—and it seems that filing complaints for the purpose of extorting people is also one of the motives in some cases. The question, however, remains: shouldn't the police have been more careful in registering such cases?

We urge the DMP commissioner to take concrete action on this issue. Experts have previously recommended compiling a list of dubious cases and submitting it to the Supreme Court authorities so they can issue the necessary directives in this regard. This should be done without delay. We also expect the home ministry to look into the matter and ensure that innocent people do not suffer from being falsely implicated in cases or subjected to extortion.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Niazi’s escape plan busted

On this day in 1971, fearing defeat, Lt Gen Amir Abdullah Khan Niazi tried to plot an escape but BBC leaked his plan. To conceal his weakness, he went to Hotel Intercontinental and said proudly, “Where are the international journalists? I want them to know that I will never leave my army behind.”

HUMAN RIGHTS DAY

‘We must challenge not just regimes, but also oppressive legal machinery’

Taqbir Huda, a human rights lawyer who is currently pursuing graduate legal studies at Harvard University and has previously served as the South Asia regional researcher at Amnesty International, talks about the current state of human rights in Bangladesh and the potential way forward, in an exclusive interview with Noshin Nawal of The Daily Star.

What were the most rampant human rights violations that characterised the Awami League rule?

Extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances were undoubtedly the most egregious and systematic violations that were instrumentalised as tools of repression, with at least 708 people forcibly disappeared during the Awami League's 15-plus years of rule, according to conservative estimates by Odhikar. Human Rights Watch dubbed this period as a “decade of disappearance.”

At the same time, thousands were killed extrajudicially, usually under the guise of anti-drug or counterterrorism campaigns. All this happened against the wider backdrop of suppressing dissent, with freedom of expression being systematically dismantled through draconian laws like the Digital Security Act. These laws allowed the regime to criminalise dissent under the guise of legality, creating an atmosphere of fear and silencing opposition voices.

How was dissent silenced during the Awami League rule, and what were the implications for freedom of speech?

The Awami League was alarmingly effective in eradicating dissent, particularly in the online sphere. I can refer to two cases I directly investigated and campaigned for while serving at Amnesty. Take the case of Khadija, a university student who hosted a webinar when she was 17 where a retired army officer criticised the Awami League. Since they couldn't target him—as he was abroad—they went after her. Khadija endured nearly 15 months of pre-trial detention before being released under immense national and international pressure.

During her imprisonment, Khadija was subjected to inhuman treatment. She was forced to do manual labour, placed in solitary confinement, and denied basic medical treatment for kidney-related illnesses. This highlights how authoritarianism had trickled down to the lowest levels.

Another striking example is the case of Anisha Siddika, a victim of arbitrary detention whose case I investigated while working at Amnesty. She was a 58-year-old woman who was arrested at the dead of night in August 2023, after her son made a Facebook post critical of the Awami League and procedural irregularities of the international crimes tribunal. Her son was residing in the US at the time. The state sent a chilling message: no matter where you are, if you criticise the Awami League, they will retaliate by targeting your loved ones who remain in Bangladesh.

They arrested his mother under trumped-up terrorism charges using the draconian Special Powers Act, accusing her of conspiring to commit sabotage against the government. Although Anisha observed the full-face veil as a matter of religious practice, the police forcibly unveiled her face, photographed her, and uploaded her image to their Facebook page. Such a blatant violation of her dignity should have sparked public outrage. Yet, there was a conspicuous silence from the usual circles of civil society and human rights defenders. I would like us to reflect on why we failed to stand in solidarity with Anisha Siddika, despite the very public manner in which the state violated her human rights.

Have you personally been affected by this clampdown on dissent?

Between August 2022 and August 2024, I was working as the Bangladesh researcher at Amnesty International, investigating and reporting on human rights violations perpetrated by the state under the former ruling party. For my own safety and that of my family, I was forced to keep my affiliation with Amnesty a well-guarded secret from the outset. The last thing I wanted was to have a criminal case filed against me for “spreading propaganda” or “tarnishing the image of the state”—which had become the former government's default response to even the slightest bit of critique. Awami League had essentially blacklisted Amnesty, and high-ranking party officials would frequently accuse it of conspiring against Bangladesh



Taqbir Huda

PHOTO: COURTESY

whenever its human rights violations were exposed. To avoid risk of persecution, I had to use a pseudonym and burner phones for external communications, request my non-Bangladeshi colleagues to front our outputs on Bangladesh, and avoid any public facing engagements which would risk putting me on the state's ever broadening radar of surveillance. There were even moments when I added and then removed my Amnesty affiliation from my LinkedIn profile. That's how successful the state was in catalysing a culture of fear.

All this changed on July 16, 2024, a day after the crackdown on the student protesters started, when I decided to accept the first media interview (as a spokesperson for Amnesty) to highlight how the state had used Chhatra League and police to brutalise students, including the killing of Abu Sayeed, on DW News—the first international media outlet to cover the July uprising in any detail. At a moment when the state began killing children while simultaneously imposing a total internet shutdown to block international monitoring, seizing any available opportunity to expose the truth seemed like a moral obligation. So I began seizing every such opportunity that followed, despite the inherent risks which I had assiduously sought to avoid so far.

Human rights defenders should not have to navigate their work under the constant shadow of state retaliation. We must create a culture where questioning authority is seen as a vital part of our national integrity, not a threat to it. In our quest for accountability, we would do well to remember that any attempts to ensure justice must be fair, transparent, and in compliance with international human rights standards. Anything less would dishonour the legacy of those who shed blood for our collective freedom.

What systemic factors allowed such widespread human rights violations to persist for so long?

The roots of this issue lie in the colonial-era criminal laws that the postcolonial state inherited and expanded upon. These laws grant sweeping powers to the police, such as arresting and searching

individuals without warrants, seizing their devices, and denying them bail, leading to lengthy arbitrary detention awaiting a trial.

At least 708 people forcibly disappeared during the Awami League’s 15-plus years of rule, according to conservative estimates by Odhikar. Human Rights Watch dubbed this period as a ‘decade of disappearance.’ At the same time, thousands were killed extrajudicially, usually under the guise of anti-drug or counterterrorism campaigns. All this happened against the wider backdrop of suppressing dissent, with freedom of expression being systematically dismantled through draconian laws like the Digital Security Act.

Alarmingly, the latest available statistics show that almost 80 percent of Bangladesh's prison population consists of pre-trial detainees—individuals who haven't even been convicted of any crime. This is a direct result of an authoritarian penal system where human rights of the accused are violated by the state with full legal sanction. Additionally, we lack an independent prosecutorial system; prosecutors are often ad-hoc political appointees, while the police and judiciary have been compromised through partisan recruitment.

If the police, prosecution and judiciary are effectively under partisan control, how can the criminal justice system be anything other than an instrument of oppression at the beck and call of whichever party is in power? The Awami League used the same colonial policing model that the British Raj introduced to quash native rebellion, against protesters during the July uprising and beyond.

We would be remiss if we did not acknowledge that the mass arrests, mob assaults, prolonged remand and detention of former Awami League ministers and high-ranking officials on legally dubious charges are also a cause for concern. The right to a fair trial is not conditional; it is absolute, no matter how egregious the alleged crime may be or how detestable the person accused may be. We owe it to all the victims of Bloody July to ensure that justice for their killings is obtained through a fair and transparent process, rather than one that reproduces injustices. We cannot allow their deaths to be exploited for the settling of political vendettas. We cannot allow the legal system to be misused in the same way that the Awami League had misused it.

Authoritarians come and go, but authoritarian institutions and laws remain intact. True emancipation requires dismantling these systems. We must challenge not just regimes but also the oppressive legal machinery that sustains and justifies the state's sweeping punitive powers.

How do you evaluate the role of the National Human Rights Commission?

The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) has been largely irrelevant in the course of my human rights work in Bangladesh. We were aware of its existence but, as Dr Shahdeen Malik once aptly described it, the NHRC had become “a

retirement home for top bureaucrats.”

Given that the NHRC does not possess formal executive powers or direct investigative powers over law enforcement agencies (who are accused of committing the bulk of human rights violations), the only possible role it could meaningfully serve is that of a watchdog. Unfortunately, we currently lack robust human rights statistics, relying instead on data published by certain NGOs. Even those are often methodologically dubious because they are primarily based on newspaper-reported incidents, which are not the most reliable sources. If the NHRC were to adopt a methodology for documenting and enumerating human rights violations, it could provide a vital resource (and perhaps even serve as a contact point) for international human rights organisations working on Bangladesh (which typically lack a field presence and are reliant on ground sources), such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Civicus, etc.

which have worked persistently to push for accountability for human rights violations in Bangladesh at the international level.

Equally important is shifting our understanding of justice. Victims of human rights violations often require reparations—compensation, rehabilitation, and restitution—but these mechanisms are almost non-existent in our legal framework. For example, the Crime Victims Compensation Act, proposed in 2007, remains a draft even after 17 years. The NHRC could consider taking the lead in ensuring reparative justice for victims of human rights violations.

Have human rights defenders been reduced to mere political pawns?

Not pawns, but human rights defenders were systematically restricted and silenced. The government allowed activism on certain “apolitical” issues—those involving non-state actors—but cracked down on work that exposed state complicity. NGOs working on sensitive issues like extrajudicial killings or enforced disappearances faced defunding, deregistration, intimidation, and freezing of assets.

One does not have to look further than the retaliation faced by Odhikar. Its leaders were targeted, jailed and its operations crippled, sending a chilling message to others. Human rights organisations had to choose between reporting on the most pressing human rights violations or avoiding state crackdown. Most opted for the latter, perhaps as a matter of survival.

What is your vision for the future regarding freedom of dissent and human rights in Bangladesh?

I dream of a Bangladesh where dissent is no longer criminalised but celebrated, and where human rights work is allowed to thrive instead of being self-incriminating. Human rights defenders should not have to navigate their work under the constant shadow of state retaliation. We must create a culture where questioning authority is seen as a vital part of our national integrity, not a threat to it. In our quest for accountability, we would do well to remember that any attempts to ensure justice must be fair, transparent, and in compliance with international human rights standards. Anything less would dishonour the legacy of those who shed blood for our collective freedom.

Read the full version of this interview on our website.