

A welcome admission

Reforms must accompany Rab's apology

The Rapid Action Battalion (Rab), a specialised unit of Bangladesh Police, has finally admitted that much of the allegations against it—of enforced disappearances and murders in the guise of crossfires—are true. Historically, the force has constantly denied that it is involved in such activities. We welcome this rather surprising announcement, but acknowledgement is only the first step towards justice.

At a views exchange meeting on Thursday, the Rab director-general apologised to families who lost their loved ones to enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings, acknowledging the existence of secret prisons. This comes 20 years after the formation of Rab, which was aimed at curbing organised crime and terrorism, but turned into a "government death squad," as per statements of many activists and critics. Over the period, the unit garnered a reputation associated with extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, and torture of opposition political figures and critics of the government. As per data compiled by Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK), at least 1,200 people were killed in the so-called crossfires involving Rab from the force's inception in April 2004 till June this year.

But now, the opportunity for redress has arisen. The inquiry commission on enforced disappearances, formed on August 27 this year, is investigating around 1,600 complaints, 172 linked to Rab, and the International Crimes Tribunal has initiated relevant proceedings. The US sanction of Rab drastically brought down extrajudicial killings. Therefore, what transformed the force into a weapon of suppression, as the data implies, is the complete lack of accountability. Fortunately, Rab itself is aware of this fact, and is accordingly drafting a new law to regulate its operations, while mulling to introduce a new name, logo and uniform. We hope such actions will bear fruit and not just be for optics.

The apology should be followed by genuine attempts at reform, and the DG's pledge to never partake in such crimes is hopeful. But much remains to be done. As Mayer Daak, a platform of the families of enforced disappearance victims, has made it clear, every person forcibly disappeared must be returned to their loved ones, and families have to be informed about incidents of disappearances and deaths. While many are advocating for the disbandment of this force, if it does remain, we demand a proper legal framework for Rab to operate, one that would take the rights of citizens, including freedom of expression, into consideration. Additionally, there has to be consequences for the unit's past crimes, for which an independent body to investigate the cases is paramount. And based on the findings of the investigations, those who have been involved in these crimes must be brought to justice. If genuine changes are achieved, we are optimistic that Rab will emerge as a pro-people force.

Prioritise women's online safety

A nation which can't do so will always get left behind

The findings of a recent study showing that 78 percent of women in Bangladesh face tech-based violence is very concerning. Such violence has the potential to drive women out of the digital space, hindering both their own and the nation's economic, technological and social progress.

The study, conducted by NETZ Bangladesh between July and November 2023 with 300 respondents from eight districts, also found that 50 percent of women avoid online activity or hide their identities on social media due to safety concerns. Incidents of violence have primarily occurred on Facebook, the social media platform used by many young women entrepreneurs in Bangladesh. Multiple fake accounts and/or AI-generated deepfake videos and doctored photos have been used to financially and emotionally exploit or blackmail women. Thirty-five percent of the respondents reported suffering mental health issues due to online harassment.

However, there is little redress for the female victims of cybercrimes. According to an op-ed published in this daily, 26,592 complaints were registered by women with the Police Cyber Support for Women between November 2020 and April 2023, making up 77 percent of the total number of complaints. Yet, 33 percent of complainants refused to pursue legal action. This reluctance stems from the lack of victim-centric support, which creates more hassle for women than restitution. The lack of gender sensitisation among law enforcement members, lengthy legal process, and low conviction rate discourage women from seeking legal recourse. According to a report published in this daily, of the 2,141 cases filed with the cyber tribunal of Dhaka between 2014 and 2022, verdicts were delivered in only 213 cases, and the accused were acquitted in more than 50 percent of the cases.

Under such circumstances, law enforcement officials, lawyers and judges must be sensitised and educated on the nuances of cybercrimes. We hope that the Cyber Security Ordinance, currently with the cabinet, will properly address issues of cyberbullying and, unlike the Cyber Security Act and Digital Security Act, will not merely become a tool of oppression. The new law must provide a clear definition of cyberviolence against women and, if necessary, a specific law must be enacted to tackle this issue. At the same time, law enforcement members need access to advanced technology and training in digital forensics to investigate these crimes. Above all, social media literacy is crucial, which calls for the inclusion of online safety in the education curriculum and social campaigns against cybercrimes.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY



Sandy Hook shooting

On this day in 2012, a mass shooting at Newtown in Connecticut, US left 28 people dead, including 20 children from Sandy Hook Elementary School and the 20-year-old shooter Adam Lanza.

Bangladesh-India relations must be based on justice and equal dignity



Dr Selim Raihan is professor in the Department of Economics at the University of Dhaka and executive director of South Asian Network on Economic Modeling (SANEM). He can be reached at selim.raihan@econdu.ac.bd.

SELIM RAIHAN

The relationship between Bangladesh and India is a matter of profound significance and multifaceted complexity, deeply rooted in the historical, geographical, and cultural connections. Historically, this relationship has traversed numerous ups and downs. While there are many instances of friendship, cooperation and mutual support, incidents of suspicion and distrust have disrupted this bond. Recent political changes in Bangladesh due to a student-led mass uprising and the regional and international reactions associated with them have escalated these feelings of doubt and mistrust. Differing messages and perspectives within the realms of politics, diplomacy and the media are affecting the balance of relations between the two countries. As a result, establishing a sustainable, trust-based relationship based on justice and equality has become a significant challenge.

Addressing these challenges requires careful and proactive engagement from both countries. Resolving issues through cooperation, a visionary policy, sincere efforts, and a balanced perspective are essential.

Bangladesh-India relation is not confined to the political realm; it holds immense significance in economic, social, cultural, and geographical aspects as well. In this context, it is crucial for both the Indian government and its major political parties to assess Bangladesh's current political changes with an impartial and pragmatic perspective, and accept the realities associated with the 2024 July uprising. And their priority should be to cultivate a multidimensional, deep and inclusive relationship with the people of Bangladesh.

Regrettably, recent instances of anti-Bangladesh propaganda in certain Indian media outlets, open support for the ousted government, and dissemination of exaggerated news and misleading information have created barriers to impartial and objective analysis. As a result, the relationship between the two countries has become increasingly strained. The recent attack on the Bangladesh Assistant High Commission in Tripura has further exacerbated this situation. It is a condemnable incident that has damaged the diplomatic ties between the two countries. The Indian government must take swift

and effective measures to prevent such occurrences in the future.

On the other hand, Bangladesh should focus on establishing a relationship with India based on justice and mutual respect. In this regard, it is essential to jointly explore solutions to long-standing unresolved issues, such as equitable sharing of river waters, stopping border



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

killings, facilitating mutual trade and investment, and improving cross-border communication.

It is also vital for the Bangladesh government and political parties to avoid creating a space for anti-India rhetoric in discussions or protests. Adopting a responsible and mature approach in dealings with India is essential for safeguarding Bangladesh's long-term interests. Cheap anti-India sentiment may serve the immediate interests of certain political groups, but it is never conducive to the well-being of the Bangladeshi people.

Concerns about the rights of religious minorities in Bangladesh and India are a tangible and deeply rooted issue, embedded within the social and political structures of both countries. In both nations, minority communities have, at various times, faced discrimination, persecution, and the shrinking of their rights. Addressing such discrimination through state action and well-planned policy formulation is crucial. However, this issue often becomes the focal point of political debates, complicating the path to a genuine solution and preventing

the core of the problem from being addressed.

The primary demand of minority communities in both countries is equal rights, security, and a life of dignity. They do not wish to be used as tools for any political group's interests. Keeping this reality in mind, especially in the context of Bangladesh's recent political changes, ensuring the security of minorities should be a key focus of the interim government.

In this regard, it is essential to remain vigilant both within Bangladesh and beyond, against any group whose activities may disturb communal harmony. Such groups not only jeopardise internal stability but also have a negative impact on international relations. For example, an increase in communal tensions within Bangladesh

for human rights.

Building a multidimensional and balanced relationship between Bangladesh and India based on justice and equal dignity is an imperative of our time. In the context of the deep interconnections of geography, history, culture and economics, making this relationship more sustainable and dynamic will ensure the socioeconomic welfare of the people of both countries. This is not only necessary but also essential for the overall development of both nations and regional stability.

In recent times, especially following the July uprising in Bangladesh, this has posed a significant challenge for the political parties, civil society and media in both countries. It has highlighted the need to reassess outdated strategies, narrow perspectives and one-sided

decision-making processes. At the same time, it has created an opportunity to open the door to a new and positive bilateral relationship. Now is the time to seize this opportunity and take effective action. In bilateral discussions, both parties should jointly seek solutions to unresolved issues based on justice and mutual respect. If this opportunity is not seized in time, narrow-minded communal groups will try to exploit this gap and further complicate the situation.

Therefore, Bangladesh and India should take a collective initiative to begin a new chapter in the bilateral relationship. It is not only the responsibility of political leadership but also of civil society, academics and the media to create a positive environment. This will not only help build trust between the two countries but also set an example of peaceful and cooperative relations for the larger South Asian region. This way, current challenges will be addressed and the way for a brighter future for the people of both countries will also be paved.

Maintaining communal harmony is not solely the government's responsibility. Civil society, the media and religious leaders also play a crucial role in this process. It is necessary to create a humane, tolerant, and dignified environment where everyone can live safely in their own identity. Such a tolerant and inclusive environment is not only vital for minorities but also for the overall social stability and development of both countries. Bangladesh and India have a historic opportunity to set an example through cooperation, contributing to a future built on religious tolerance and respect

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

Rebuilding Syria after Assad

Charles A Kupchan is professor of international affairs at Georgetown University and senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations.

Sinan Ülgen, a former Turkish diplomat, is director of EDAM, an Istanbul-based think tank, and a senior policy fellow at Carnegie Europe.

CHARLES A KUPCHAN and SINAN ÜLGEN

The rapid fall of former Syrian President Bashar al-Assad reflects the dramatic changes that have swept the strategic landscape of the Middle East in the past year. After civil war erupted in Syria in 2011, Assad clung to power for over a decade, despite facing a coalition of forces backed by the United States and Türkiye. But only 11 days after the rebel group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) launched its offensive, Assad fled to Russia, ending his family's 50-year rule.

That outcome was the result of years of ineffective rule and economic and social hardship, with even the Alawi community that was Assad's base of support defecting without a fight. The end came when his main external backers, Russia and Iran, also abandoned him, reflecting both countries' profound weakening. Russia's war against Ukraine continues to drain its resources and preoccupy the Kremlin, while Israel's post-October 7 campaign against Hamas, Hezbollah (which provided significant support to the Assad regime) and Iran itself has crippled the Iran-led "axis of resistance."

Syrians will not miss Assad, a brutal ruler who failed his people. Many are celebrating in the streets, and refugees who have been sheltering abroad or in opposition-held pockets of Syria are

starting to return to their homes.

But hope must be tempered by caution. Across the Middle East, the removal of strongmen has generally produced violent chaos, not stable and inclusive governance. During the Assad era, the Alawi minority ruled over a Sunni majority; revenge could be in the offing. More generally, Syria's diverse population could easily fall prey to the politics of ethnic and sectarian division.

In fact, since well before Assad's flight, Syria has been a state in name only. Its civil war divided the country into numerous fiefdoms that have been under the effective control of often hostile rival groups. One of those groups—Syria's Kurds—is aligned with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), prompting Türkiye to take control of a broad swath of Syria's north.

Amid these existing fractures, extremist groups could capitalise on Assad's fall and the resulting turbulence to strengthen their territorial footprint and power. That is what happened in 2014, when the Islamic State was able to seize control of a significant piece of Iraq and Syria as a result of the political mayhem in both countries. Extremist groups could now run the same play, which is why Israel has spent the last few days building a "security zone" beyond

its border with Syria and destroying weapons stocks in the country.

A case in point is HTS itself, which began life as an affiliate of al-Qaeda, and is still designated by the US and other countries as a terrorist group. While HTS's leaders have pledged moderation and inclusiveness as they seek to fashion a national government, the group has a track record of repression. More broadly, Syria's contending factions might seek to settle scores, not work together. Iran's influence in Syria has plunged, but the Islamic republic will try to retain its leverage as its former proxies—particularly the disenfranchised Alawis, a Shia sect—jockey with rivals for position.

In short, there is a great deal that could go wrong.

Looking ahead, Syria's trajectory will depend first and foremost on its myriad players' ability to achieve an inclusive political transition. Rebuilding a functioning state will require the restoration of Syria's territorial integrity, which in turn will depend on the willingness of multiple territorial stakeholders to share power and sacrifice their autonomy in the interest of national unity. The other key challenge will be forging a new social contract that provides Syrians adequate levels of security and economic opportunity.

Syrians themselves must do most of the hard work, but the international community has an important role to play. For starters, drawing on the harsh lessons learnt in Iraq, where the wholesale dismantling of the Ba'ath regime produced violent chaos, outside powers should press the newly empowered opposition groups to

refrain from forcibly sidelining the Alawis, who formed the backbone of the Assad regime. Türkiye and the US should press their Syrian proxies, the Syrian National Army and the Syrian Democratic Forces, respectively, to be constructive players and work with, not against, the transitional government.

Outside powers can also help prevent the further collapse of the Syrian state and its economy. Achieving a post-conflict settlement will become all the more difficult if the quality of life continues to deteriorate, and basic services like healthcare and education are unavailable. It was under precisely such conditions that regime change in Iraq produced radicalisation and state failure.

The international community should therefore launch a multilateral aid programme that combines humanitarian and financial assistance with capacity-building measures. As hosts to a large number of Syrian refugees, Türkiye and the European Union have a keen interest in the early implementation of a multilateral strategy to foster the right social and economic conditions for the safe, voluntary return of the displaced population.

Assad's fall has created an opportunity for the political and economic reconstruction of a key Arab state and the reshaping of its regional role. But the next few months are critical. The record of efforts to stabilise post-conflict societies in the region is littered with failure. Syria for the past 13 years is a case in point, as are Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya. It's time to get one right.