

Our expectations of this government should match its competence



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ZIA HAIDER RAHMAN

However lacklustre the interim government might seem today, it is still the best government one could have hoped for in August. Amid the chaos, an administration was cobbled together and appointments made with only such care and political acumen as an academic and his confidantes could muster under pressure.

Prof Muhammad Yunus was, of course, the right person at the right moment. He brought huge symbolic power, and, more importantly for a mandate, he enjoyed the respect of the student movement that had led the revolution, suffered for it, and had thereby come to define the nation's moral compass. But, even as we fully supported Yunus's leadership, older observers no doubt recalled the professor's abortive attempt 17 years ago to start a party. The hope this time around was that an older and wiser Yunus would enlist enough talent to make up for any shortfall in capability and vision.

The availability and conscription of talent has been an issue. In the first few months, a number of senior appointments were made only for the appointee to withdraw their name within days. And there has been a failure to recruit people with requisite skills into poorly paid government and agency roles relating to finance and economics, such as at the Bangladesh Securities and Exchange Commission.

Moreover, if diaspora associations of Bangladeshis are to be believed, the interim government has failed to avail itself of the country's brain drain of talented Bangladeshis who left for American universities and then went on to develop skills in demanding professional roles abroad, but who, apparently, stood ready to return and provide their services *pro bono publico*. But quality was never the priority in exigent circumstances. This was and remains an emergency government.

If we grasp that our expectations were unrealistic, a decline in our expectations of the interim government need not entail a sense of disappointment. In a recent interview with the editor of this daily, the chief adviser issued a corrective, again, when he said, "We are not rulers but facilitators." This is hardly the revolutionary rhetoric of radical reform; our expectations should correspond accordingly.

What expectations, then, should we have? Told repeatedly to vest hope in various commissions, we might have looked to their terms of reference. But, despite promises, terms were never published, and it now appears none of the commissions received any.

Mercifully, if promises are kept, we are only two or so weeks from recommendations from key commissions. But, again, we

should temper expectations: in the same aforementioned interview, the chief adviser emphasised that recommendations would be acted on if and only so far as consensus among political parties allowed. In recent comments, he added that another commission would be formed, this time to build such consensus. And, in a dramatic turn, he indicated that elections might come as early as the end of 2025, which immediately had many wondering whether anything more than anaemic reforms could achieve sufficient political consensus to be pushed through in under a year.



Nobel Laureate Prof Muhammad Yunus is sworn in as the chief adviser of the interim government by President Mohammed Shahabuddin in Dhaka on August 8, 2024.

FILE PHOTO: PID

No sooner had the chief adviser mentioned the prospect of a short timetable than leaders of the Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal, the Anti-Discrimination Students' Movement, and the Bangladesh Students' Union all demanded that key reforms be completed before holding elections.

It is increasingly apparent that the student movement could emerge next year as the interim government's greatest critics. Driven by a sense of justice, not least to honour the sacrifices of their peers, will students abide anything less than radical reforms? Adviser Nahid Islam, for instance, has scarcely been shy with talk of banning political parties and punishing journalists deemed to have aided the former regime. His public remarks have often been hastily followed by other advisers' efforts to roll back what he said.

The dynamic between the interim government and the student movement may yet decide the former's fate. To some, a full-

manage our expectations of the interim government. If Bangladesh aspires to have liberal democracy—meaning, broadly speaking, democratic pluralism with the rule of law and protections for the rights of minorities—it will be swimming against the global current. These days, the US, France, Germany, and a host of other countries (such as South Korea) are hardly resounding advertisements for liberal democracy. Liberal democracy is losing or loosening its moorings, in countries where one might once have naively thought a version of liberal democracy had achieved permanence, marking an end to a history of grand, ideological struggles.

The theme throughout is the failure of a global economic order to deliver to most citizens; the majority in the US, the UK, France and elsewhere have seen no real growth in household incomes in decades—in the case of the US, for well over three decades. In a climate of economic insecurity and disappointment, right-wing

demagogues have marched in with little more to offer than a pretence of upsetting the applecart.

I mention all this because speaking to the business community has concentrated my attention on economic missteps, as has recognising that it's rare—some would say unheard of—for a country to secure liberal democracy without first finding a firm economic foundation. I can't think of any.

Since August, there have been too many economic errors and missed opportunities. One of the world's leading venture capital operations visited Bangladesh to discuss investment in the country. They were not taken seriously, I'm informed, by that tired old Dhaka elite we're all familiar with, an elite that stands to lose some privileges when or if Bangladesh enters the next phase of economic development, a phase in which, among other things, investment capital must be better able to reach the best and the brightest, and, incidentally, stem the drain of talent.

I reflect more and more on what brought us here in the first place. Against a backdrop of massive and rising youth unemployment and an economy stalling for two years after a long period of growth, students took to the streets protesting a quota system that blocked one of the few routes to a measure of personal economic security. Change will take time and will require competences yet to come. We can look forward to the imminent recommendations of commissions, we can even hope for great things in the years ahead, but we should temper our expectations of the administration before us now. Unless we shift our horizons and look to the longer term for transformation, the risk of disappointment will loom large. Such disappointment is the breeding ground for the authoritarianism that has swept over so much of the world. Bangladeshis already know what authoritarianism looks like. No one keen to see the nation flourish would want its return.

REMEMBERING SIR FAZLE HASAN ABED

A life fulfilled



Prof Rehman Sobhan, one of Bangladesh's most distinguished economists and a celebrated public intellectual, is founder and chairman of the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD).

REHMAN SOBHAN

I first met Fazle Hasan Abed at Oxford, though our paths had briefly crossed before. At the time, he was an executive at Shell in Chattogram, a position that placed him within a distinct social circle. However, Abed had already begun to transcend those boundaries. Mutual friends, Viqar and his wife, had spoken to me about his involvement in relief efforts following the devastating cyclone of 1970. He had mobilised a group of like-minded individuals to address the crisis, which deeply impressed me. Here was a corporate executive stepping beyond his domain to directly engage with a national tragedy.

Unbeknownst to me, Abed's commitment was only deepening. When the Liberation War erupted, he made the remarkable decision to resign from Shell, relocate to London, and immerse himself in the cause. London was a hub of activity for the liberation movement, with numerous groups working under the leadership of Justice Abu Sayeed Chowdhury. The environment was fragmented, with each faction pursuing its agenda, often casting aspersions on others' motives. It was in this complex setting that I reconnected with Abed.

Abed sought me out at Oxford, accompanied by his close associate Marietta. They were actively channelling resources to those affected by the genocide in Bangladesh. His approach was twofold: immediate relief and long-term planning. Even amid the uncertainty of July-August 1971, Abed was optimistic about liberation and was already contemplating the kind of society we would want to build in a free Bangladesh.

Our discussions were speculative as the future of Bangladesh remained unclear. The economy was in disarray, and the social fabric had been torn apart by war. Yet, what stood out to me was Abed's determination to become a catalyst for change. He belonged to a new generation that sought not merely to envision

aimed to empower the landless by enabling them to sell water to landowners, faltered due to the entrenched power hierarchies in rural Bangladesh. Still, Abed's willingness to take risks, adapt, and learn remained unshakable.

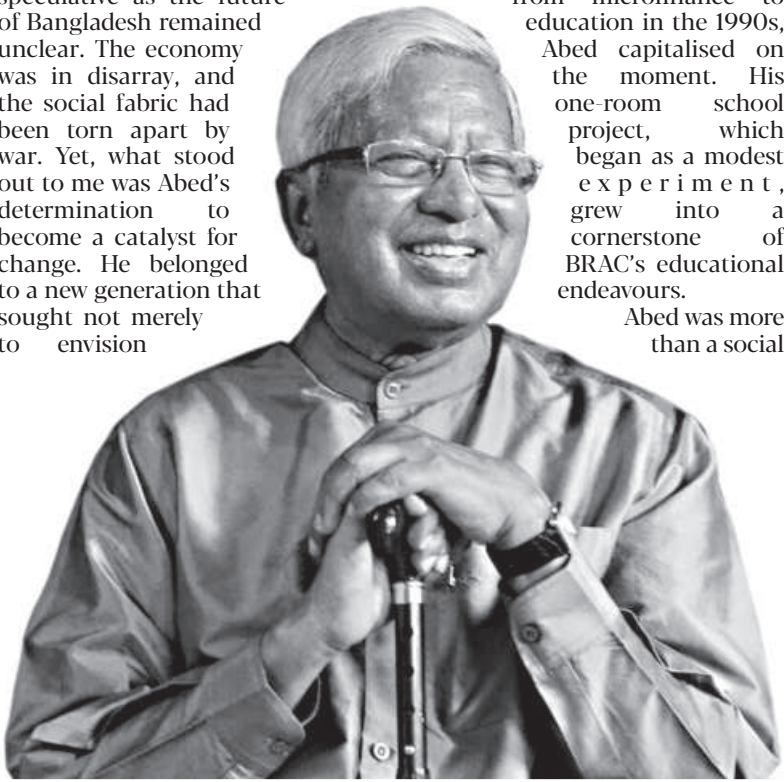
I vividly recall his support when I sought to establish the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD). The idea was modest: to create a platform for public discourse and policy innovation. Abed was among the first to back the initiative, contributing generously and without hesitation. His commitment to fostering dialogue and intellectual growth was emblematic of his broader vision: encouraging systemic change through collective effort and shared knowledge.

One defining aspect of Abed's leadership was his adaptability. He understood that sustainable development required innovative, self-sustaining models rather than perpetual reliance on donor funding. He was acutely aware of shifting donor priorities and adept at aligning BRAC's initiatives with emerging trends.

An illustrative example was the one-room schoolhouse initiative. My cousin, Kaniz Fatema, was involved in this project, which drew inspiration from successful models in Pune, India. Abed strategically delayed scaling up the programme until education became a priority for the donor community. When the time was right, he secured significant investments, transforming it into a cornerstone of BRAC's work.

Abed's entrepreneurial spirit extended beyond BRAC. He understood the importance of aligning his initiatives with global trends and donor interests. When the world's focus shifted from microfinance to education in the 1990s, Abed capitalised on the moment. His one-room school project, which began as a modest experiment, grew into a cornerstone of BRAC's educational endeavours.

Abed was more than a social



Sir Fazle Hasan Abed (April 27, 1936 - December 20, 2019) SOURCE: BRAC

transformation but to actively participate in it.

After liberation, Abed returned to Sylhet. There, he embarked on what can only be described as a revolutionary journey, immersing himself in rural Bangladesh—a stark contrast to his previous corporate life. The challenges were immense: a shattered economy, devastated communities, and a nascent government struggling to take shape. Yet, through trial and error, Abed persevered. Whether experimenting with microfinance, initiating one-room schools or rebuilding livelihoods, he was guided by a singular principle: bringing about incremental, sustainable change. His work in Sylhet laid the foundation for BRAC, which would go on to become the world's largest NGO.

Each step Abed took was original and daring. He did not merely adopt tried-and-tested methods; he invented new pathways. His approach to microfinance, for example, emerged as a pioneering model that would eventually uplift millions. Yet, not all his experiments succeeded. The deep tube-well programme, which

entrepreneur; he was a visionary leader who could have excelled in any corporate boardroom. His business acumen, coupled with an unwavering commitment to social justice, made him a transformative figure. He was a pioneer of social entrepreneurship, demonstrating that impactful change could be achieved through innovative, sustainable practices. His initiatives improved the lives of millions, not only in Bangladesh but globally.

What distinguished Abed was his relentless pursuit of fulfilment. He derived satisfaction not from wealth or accolades, but from the tangible impact of his work. By the time of his passing, Abed had touched countless lives, leaving behind a legacy of hope and progress.

In reflecting on his life, I am struck by the profound sense of accomplishment he must have felt. Fazle Hasan Abed departed this world as a fulfilled human being—a rare and extraordinary achievement. His life serves as an enduring inspiration, reminding us of the power of vision, resilience, and unwavering commitment to the greater good.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
1 Somewhat
5 Cockpit guesses
9 Madrid museum
10 Arrival of a sort
12 Copter part
13 Baseball's Yogi
14 Factory store
16 Lifeboat need
17 Takes advantage of
18 Get the better of
21 Bear's lair
22 Writer Hemingway
23 Eat away
24 Gaming spot
26 Crater part
29 Beginning

- 30 Blood fluids
31 Western Indian
32 Equip
34 Laundry problem
37 Scoundrel
38 Physicist Nikola
39 Lecturer's aid
40 Depend
41 Pub pints
DOWN
1 Wake up
2 Fasten, as the hatches
3 Pop stars
4 Ripped
5 Flow out
6 Make a bow in
7 Quiver contents

- 8 Narrow passage
9 Strutting
11 Hind,s counterpart
15 Ontario city
19 Take apart
20 Casual shirt
22 Lake near Buffalo
23 Snaky shape
24 Patrol boat
25 Relaxed
26 Prove false
27 Van Gogh painting
28 Partners
29 Eject
30 Bar seat
33 Arm bone
35 Sick
36 Dissenting vote



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

