

Will our roads remain death traps?

Mawa expressway crash exposes state failure to ensure road safety

We are horrified by the tragedy that occurred at the toll plaza of the Dhaka-Mawa Expressway on December 27, where a speeding bus rammed into three vehicles—a private car, a motorcycle, and a microbus—killing six people from two families. The CCTV footage of the incident shows a bus speeding towards the toll plaza and colliding with the vehicles waiting in queue there. Reportedly, the bus from Bepari Paribahan was operating without a fitness clearance for over a year, and the 26-year-old driver had no valid driving licence.

The transport sector in Bangladesh has been mired in chaos and a lack of discipline for decades, fuelled by a corrupt network of transport leaders, police, and politicians. This network has allowed unlicensed and unskilled drivers to operate vehicles, ultimately leading to an increase in road crashes and fatalities. According to the Road Safety Foundation, at least 37,000 lives have been lost in road crashes in the country over the last five years. While several measures, such as establishing lifespans for commercial vehicles, drafting regulations for illegal three-wheelers and enforcing speed limits, were taken by past authorities to enhance road safety, these decisions could not be implemented due to pressure from transport owners and associations.

The bus involved in the Mawa expressway crash reportedly had brake problems, and the driver had asked the owner to fix it. But the owner, instead of doing that, told the driver to “drive slowly.” The bus also lacked a valid route permit and updated tax documents. And to operate it, the bus owner bribed a close associate of the imprisoned Shajahan Khan, a top transport leader and former Awami League lawmaker. This is a prime example of the lawlessness that pervades the transport sector.

This unholy nexus of transport leaders, police, and politicians must be broken up. The government must make this a priority. While it should take steps to immediately implement the Road Transport Act, 2018, it should also take decisive actions to completely overhaul the sector. The adviser to the road transport and bridges ministry recently mentioned that they would take a “whole new approach” to reduce road crashes and deaths. We would like to see some concrete action from the ministry now. They can start by establishing a road safety commission to bring about the much-needed reform to the sector. As for the toll plaza crash, we hope the government will do everything in its capacity to ensure justice to the victims. No more lives should be lost on our roads and no more families should suffer lifelong devastation due to crashes caused by unfit vehicles and unskilled drivers.

Address corruption in labour migration

Govt must diversify markets and upskill our workers

We are concerned about the decline in the number of our migrant workers going abroad this year, given the fact that remittance remains one of the major sources of foreign currency earnings for Bangladesh. According to a recent report by the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU), labour exports from Bangladesh have dropped by 30.8 percent—from 1,305,453 in last year to 906,355 this year. What’s worse is that the number of female migrant workers going abroad has gone down by 22 percent this year compared to last year.

According to the RMMRU report, persistent corruption, irregularities, and fraud have led to a contraction of foreign labour markets for Bangladesh. Italy and Serbia, for example, suspended labour recruitment from Bangladesh because some workers were found to have used fake documents. In Malaysia, a syndicate together with its Bangladeshi cohorts has embezzled \$2 billion from Bangladeshi migrant workers by overcharging them, taking syndicate fees, and carrying out a “visa trade” since 2021. As a result, many workers could not find the jobs they were promised in Malaysia and had to return home empty-handed, losing their life savings and being pushed into poverty in the process. Because of this, Malaysia shut down labour imports from Bangladesh in May this year.

The challenges facing labour migration must be faced with timely, effective actions. The government must take strict legal steps against those accused of embezzling migrant workers and conducting labour export through unlawful means. To this end, it must also engage with the authorities in the destination countries. Failure to ensure workers’ safety and rights is another huge factor. The physical, mental and financial abuse that they face in the destination countries, compounded by our society’s failure to reintegrate them, can be demotivating enough. If this issue is not addressed promptly, the number of migrant workers, especially women, is unlikely to rise. Proper diplomatic efforts are needed to ensure that countries recruiting Bangladeshi workers are committed to ensuring their rights and safety.

Finally, since our labour exports are still mostly in the low- and semi-skilled categories, we must invest into upskilling the migrant workers with various training so they can meet the global demands. This will help us expand and diversify the labour export market, as well as ensure steady remittance earnings.

Hence, we urge the authorities to prioritise resolving these issues and bring order in labour export, so that our migrant workers can go abroad without much worry, and continue to contribute to the economy.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

USSR established

On this day in 1922, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), more commonly known as the Soviet Union, was formed with its capital in Moscow, eventually incorporating 15 republics and constituting (in area) the largest country in the world until its dissolution in 1991.



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

UPRISING, UNITY, AND UNCERTAINTY

Power, protest, and politics in 2024



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The year 2024 has emerged as the most significant conjuncture in the political history of Bangladesh since its independence in 1971. To state the obvious: on August 5 this year, we witnessed the fall of the longest-serving fascist ruler in the country’s history, brought down by the largest mass uprising in the history of Bangladesh. Also known as the July uprising, it was led by none other than students themselves. Indeed, the uprising was an epic of resistance—what some have even metaphorised as a “political earthquake”—that morphed the mundane prose of daily life into the vibrant poetry of broad-based unity, particularly in July and August.

This epic was written with the blood, sweat, and tears of the people themselves as they came together across classes, genders, professions, occupations, political parties, organisations, groups, even generations. For instance, even children—cradled in their mothers’ arms or perched on their fathers’ shoulders—were visibly present on the streets, embodying the collective spirit of our resistance. And, of course, the costs of this uprising were staggering. At least 1,500 people were brutally killed, with nearly 20,000 wounded, many suffering devastating injuries such as the loss of eyes, arms, legs or other limbs. Those who were murdered came from all walks of life—children, youth, the middle aged, the elderly, women, workers, and more—each a poignant reminder of the immense sacrifices made in the pursuit of freedom and justice.

But to grasp the significance of the year 2024 in political terms, I believe, requires accounting for its radiant singularity as well as understanding its determinate web of connections—direct or indirect—to preceding years. In other words, it is essential to envision a dialectic of continuity and discontinuity that encompasses a broad temporal horizon—a framework that underscores the imperative to historicise. Rabindranath Tagore, although on a different register, tells us in a poem, “O time past, you wander from world to world, continuing to work in silence” (translation mine). I particularly align with my favourite Black writer James Baldwin, one who instructively asserts that “history is literally present in all that we do.” To speak of politics in 2024, then, is also to recall the entire history of political culture that has unfolded since 1972, and—dialectically—with the history of people’s resistances to that very culture. So, what does politics look like in 2024? And what is politics, after all?

Politics is often understood as the art and science of governance, involving the administration of government, public policymaking, and control within a formalised state apparatus. This includes the actions of political parties, elected officials, bureaucracies, and legislatures, as well as formal mechanisms like laws, elections, and diplomacy. However, politics ranges beyond the zodiac of formal institutions to encompass all

spaces where power relations, power struggles, and decision-making processes and practices obtain and operate—from families and communities to workplaces and even global interactions. It also embraces informal practices, resistance movements, and cultural norms (as the Italian Marxist revolutionary Antonio Gramsci rightly contends, culture is political). In this piece, I address politics in both its formal and broader senses while exploring political culture.

Of course, understanding politics and even *Realpolitik* requires grasping the underlying political culture. And the mainstream ruling-class political culture that has evolved from 1972 to 2024 can be characterised by *at least* five broad and distinct yet interconnected trends: 1) the commodification and commercialisation of politics and politicisation of plundering business elites, driven by the logic of capital; 2) the bureaucratisation of politics and the politicisation of bureaucracy; 3) the militarisation of politics and the politicisation of the military; 4) the class driven politicisation of religion, often divorced from religious principles; and 5) the criminalisation of politics and the politicisation of criminals, as Badruddin Umar aptly described. Together, these trends characterise at least part of what I term the “fascisation of politics,” exemplified in practices like extreme nationalism, authoritarianism, corporatism, media monopolisation, cult fetishism, masculinist idolisation or even deification of a singular leader, and repression through organised state violence and surveillance—all continuing to remain decisive hallmarks of Sheikh Hasina’s regime in 2024 (more on Hasina’s brand of fascism later). Clearly, the trends I have categorically described here egregiously ran counter to the core principles of our Liberation War of 1971—*equality, human dignity, and justice*—principles that the July uprising sought to reclaim repeatedly with exemplary fervour and brio. Within this framework, then, Hasina’s 2024 election (January 7), the year’s first major political event, must be understood.

Indeed, from 2008 to 2024, Bangladesh’s elections under Sheikh Hasina’s leadership were marked by the abolition of the caretaker government system and the establishment of an electoral process that lacked genuine competition. Opposition parties faced repression, electoral fraud, and exclusion, with the ruling Awami League securing unopposed or manipulated victories. Formal elections every five years turned out to be merely symbolic, bereft of public participation. This monopolistic governance led to severe declines in human rights, the rule of law, and economic stability, leaving the people in crisis, its so-called economic growth notwithstanding (more on economic growth later). Kallol Mustafa’s 2024 book titled *Sheikh Hasina Sarkar: Durnitee o Nipironer Khotian* (*Sheikh Hasina’s Government: A Chronicle of*

Corruption and Oppression) usefully anatomises and analyses Hasina’s electoral authoritarianism. Drawing on his rigorously researched work, I have identified 18 key areas of the fascist Hasina regime’s actions, most, if not all, of which continued through 2024: 1) deprivation of voting rights; 2) dismantling democratic norms; 3) suppression of dissent; 4) enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings; 5) judicial impunity; 6) politicisation of state institutions; 7) corruption and money laundering; 8) bank looting and scandals; 9) stock market manipulation; 10) reliance on foreign loans for costly projects; 11) rising inequality; 12) jobless growth and unemployment; 13) severe labour exploitation; 14) business cartels and rising commodity prices; 15) fabricated statistics; 16) plundering in the energy sector; 17) environmental destruction; and 18) a submissive foreign policy with India, compromising sovereignty. And, undeniably, 2024 emerges as the bloodiest year in our history since 1971—a year soaked in violence and despair. Pablo Neruda’s haunting lines resonate powerfully, “Come and see the blood in the streets/ Come and see/ Blood in the streets.” At least 1,500 lives were mercilessly taken, and countless others left maimed and shattered, as already noted. This is a year that surely calls for reckoning, not mere remembrance.

Owing to space constraints, I will briefly focus on inequality and the marginalised populations who have

As others and I have written elsewhere, ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities—particularly Indigenous communities, Bangalee Hindus, Ahmadis and Shias, Urdu speakers—have faced multifaceted marginalisation since 1975, when Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’s one-party authoritarian rule sowed the seeds of fascism. For these groups, land rights have always been a critical issue, compounded by unjust, discriminatory laws—an issue that remains insufficiently addressed to this day.

The July uprising and the subsequent formation of the interim government on August 8, 2024 must be viewed in this broader context. While I can’t recount the full narrative of the uprising here, its significance deserves brief but categorical reflection. First, the movement inaugurated a collective political subjectivity and new historical agency, made possible by the creative, non-hierarchical, non-partisan leadership of young students and the oppressive history of fascism and failed resistances. Second, it heightened political consciousness among the people like never before. Third, it immediately secured certain freedom of speech. Most importantly, through the students’ *anti-discrimination* platform, the movement repeatedly reclaimed the three core principles of our Liberation War: *equality, human dignity, and justice*. Finally, it led to the formation of the interim government, a necessary but increasingly fragile outcome.

The interim government, led by Prof Muhammad Yunus, identifies as reformist, establishing commissions to propose democratic restructuring of state institutions. Student leaders from the uprising, alongside the military and political parties, helped negotiate its composition. However, most of its members, lacking political expertise and experiences (in the hardest sense) and even ties to mass uprisings, do not position the government as “revolutionary.” It is unrealistic to expect it to extend beyond limited democratic reforms within the existing undemocratic systems.

To be effective, the Yunus government must reprioritise instead of restlessly moving in numerous directions. First, it must compile a full list of those killed and injured during the uprising and provide financial support to their families. Second, accountability demands that those responsible for the mass killings—especially Sheikh Hasina and her cabinet—be brought to justice. Third, the police and bureaucratic system must be restructured and made efficient. Fourth, the government must address soaring prices of essential goods. Lastly, of course, it must ensure conditions for free and fair elections.

There are immense challenges ahead, both for the government and for us—the people. Let 2024 not drag on but give way to a truly new year of meaningful action and intervention. A new Bangladesh cannot emerge from old ideas and from old, unreformed political parties. Democracy and the country’s future decisively rest on *centring*—not tokenising—the agendas and aspirations of the most exploited and marginalised: poor peasants, workers, women, ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities, who together constitute the majority. Our real struggle begins now—after the uprising—as we confront the question of how to use our newfound freedom.