

Why 2025 is a crucial year for Bangladesh



NO STRINGS ATTACHED

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This New Year is dramatically different from any other New Year we have celebrated. Our nation has gone through a profound transition, one that has brought with it unimaginable possibilities and extraordinary opportunities. The most remarkable part is that one of the least empowered and apparently most politically apathetic sections of the population—the youth—has become a serious political force.

What began as a student-led uprising—sparked by the injustices of an entrenched and repressive government—became the rallying cry for freedom. These young people, some of whom paid the ultimate price for their convictions, have done what seemed impossible: they have united the people, toppled a government that turned into a grotesque parody of power, and forged a path towards a new political order. Standing in the face of live ammunition, willing to sacrifice their lives, they showed a courage that will resonate in the nation's memory for generations. We cannot—and must not—forget the lives lost in this struggle, or the thousands whose bodies bear the permanent scars of their fight for justice.

Against the backdrop of such intense events that include the people's uprising led by students in July-August, and the four months that followed with the interim government taking the helm, let us recap some of the most critical lessons of 2024 as we look forward to 2025.

We are not powerless

The events of last summer were a stark reminder: we are not a powerless people. The uprising demonstrated, in the most instinctive way, that when a critical mass of people are determined, when they come together in unity, anything is possible. Change does not happen by accident, nor does it come through patience in the face of injustice. When pushed to the brink, people will rise. Former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's downfall

came not just because of her own moral bankruptcy or the unbridled corruption of her government and her cronies, but because she underestimated the anger of her own people. Her late—disgraced, detested, and discarded—was sealed by her indifference to the people's suffering.

Time for political parties to evolve

As we move forward, our political parties must face a stark truth: their old ways will no longer suffice. The political culture of the past—built on patronage, fear, and opportunism—must be dismantled if democracy is to flourish in Bangladesh. The BNP, though temporarily revived after years of repression, is no exception. While figures like the Acting Chairperson Tarique Rahman or Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir have displayed a considerable maturity and political restraint, their party, and others, must look inward. They must rid themselves of the old guard's habits, including the pernicious tendency to “take power” rather than earn it. The public has no appetite for the politics of territorial control—whether it is about controlling the markets, transport unions or courtrooms. As history has shown, no regime that rules through fear and lies will ever hold true power. Once the people's fear is broken—once they recognise their own strength—no amount of repression can stop them. The last 15 and a half years of the Awami League regime bleeding the economy dry with financial corruption have made people intolerant of corruption.

Political parties must accept, moreover, the central role that students have played in this struggle. Without their courage and commitment, there would be no opportunity for political activity at all. Which is why political parties must be connected to the spirit and aspirations of these young people.

The vital role of women

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the recent uprising was the role of women. It was the young female

students at Dhaka University who first became the catalysts of the movement. Later, hundreds more female students from other universities played the same role. Yet, as the movement progressed, their voices began to fade into the background. After August 5, the bold, fearless women who had led the protests found themselves sidelined,

Investigations into violence must be fair, transparent, and decisive, and the individuals responsible must be held accountable. These groups deserve equal representation, not just in the media but in our political institutions as well. No democracy can claim to be just while its most vulnerable citizens live in insecurity.

The interim government's reform commissions will be handing in their reports soon, and we look forward to their recommendations, which are to be implemented through dialogue with political parties and other stakeholders. The reforms in the Election Commission, police force, judiciary, and Anti-Corruption Commission will be of

have disastrous consequences.

A grip on the economy, law and order

The economy and law and order will largely influence which way the political breeze will blow. No political transformation can survive without economic stability. As we move into the new year, the interim government must focus on ensuring that businesses, both large and small, can function without fear of disruption or uncertainty. The financial sector must be stabilised—dollar prices should be kept in check, trade must be able to flow. For the poorest among us, food inflation must be mitigated with subsidies so they don't bear the brunt of an economy in crisis. Migrant workers, who contribute to the economy with the vital remittances, must be protected from exploitation, both by unscrupulous agents and employers. The government's diplomatic missions abroad must be responsive, offering real help to those in distress.

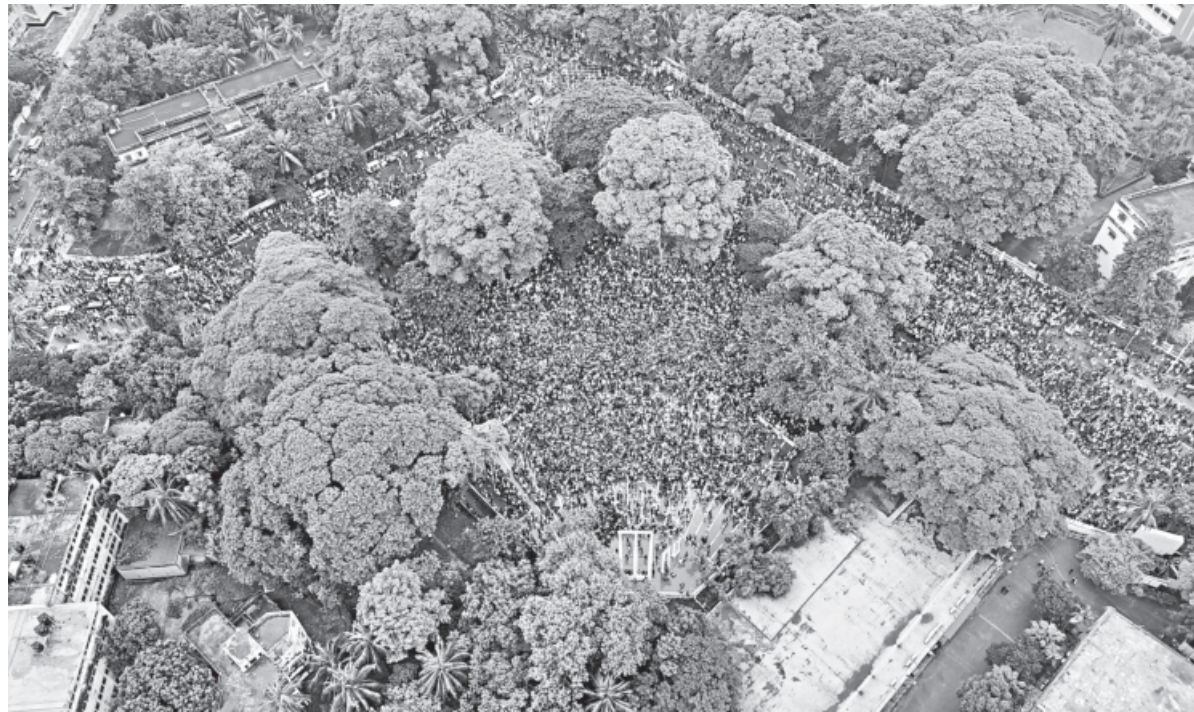
The police force, too, must undergo a serious reform. No longer can they serve as instruments of political repression. They must be transformed into protectors of the people and guardians of public safety, not agents of a ruling party. Only through such reform will we restore faith in our justice system.

A free press is non-negotiable

A democracy cannot function without a free and independent media. In the years ahead, we must ensure that the press is not choked by political pressure or fear. It is only through a robust, fearless media that the people can remain informed and engaged. Only a free press can ensure that a government is accountable to the people.

A call for unity

In the end, survival as a nation will depend not just on political or economic reforms, but on a return to basic human decency: empathy, compassion, altruism, and honesty. We must embrace inclusivity—the strength of our nation lies in our diversity, not in our uniformity. The events of August 5 were a powerful testament to what we can achieve when we stand together, united despite our differences. As we enter 2025, let us carry that unity forward. Because, as history has shown, when we are divided, we fall. But when we are united, we are unstoppable.



FILE PHOTO: NAIMUR RAHMAN

In 2024, we once again showed what we can achieve when we stand together, united despite our differences.

their leadership diluted. Women must reclaim their leadership roles—not just in student movements but across all political and social spheres. In a democracy, their full participation is not an option—it is essential for its survival. This must be acknowledged by all stakeholders, the interim government and political parties including those started by student leaders as well as politically influential Islamist groups.

The vulnerability of marginalised groups is real

We must acknowledge that marginalised groups and minority communities are still vulnerable. These groups face both direct and indirect violence, which erodes their sense of belonging and safety. The interim government, and society at large, must take swift action to protect these citizens, ensuring that they are seen and heard.

Embrace inclusivity and religious harmony

Islamist parties in the country have to accept that ours is a pluralistic society and democracy is the only way forward. They must choose inclusivity over exclusivity, dialogue over division. The language of hate—whether aimed at religious, political or ideological opponents—has no place in a democracy. The hatemongers, the “influencers” who stir unrest and target journalists, government officials or ordinary citizens, must be held accountable. To allow them to propagate violence and division is to undermine the spirit of the 2024 uprising.

Reforms: The essence of real change

Elections alone will not bring about the change we so desperately dream of. The reforms we need are systemic, rooted in institutions.

special interest as these institutions must be restructured to operate independently, free from political influence. Until this happens, we cannot expect truly free and fair elections. Without reforms, democracy would be an empty shell.

Youth's power must be wielded with caution

The youth, who has so forcefully reshaped our political landscape, must now approach their newfound power with humility. They must never be susceptible to hubris. Their strength lies not in domination but in serving the people who have entrusted them with the power to bring about change. Their political actions, their strategies, and their ideologies must always reflect the collective will, and never the ego of a single generation. Youthful idealism must be tempered with wisdom, for power without responsibility can

Dhaka's footpaths are a battleground



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The footpaths of Dhaka are always busy with commercial activity. Street vendors line the walkways, selling everything from fruits and clothes to mobile accessories and snacks. For many, these vendors are a lifeline, offering affordable goods and services, conveniently. Yet, this same vibrant economy is a source of frustration for pedestrians, who find their paths obstructed and their safety compromised. According to a study by the Dhaka Transport Coordination Authority (DTCA), 60 percent of the footpaths of Dhaka are illegally occupied. But this occupation of footpaths by vendors is simply not an issue of right and wrong—it is a deeply human story, one that reflects the complexities of urban poverty, survival, and the need for inclusive solutions.

Dhaka, a city of over 20 million people, already struggles with a lack of adequate infrastructure for pedestrians. Footpaths are meant for safe walking but pedestrians are forced onto the congested roads as vendors have taken over Dhaka's footpaths. This results in a chaotic mix of people and vehicles, increasing the risk of road crashes. It also creates difficulties for vulnerable groups such as the elderly, persons with disabilities, and children since navigating these cluttered spaces is not only inconvenient but can be life-threatening for them too. Moreover, the unregulated nature of these street markets leads to sanitation issues, traffic congestion, and loss of aesthetic appeal in many neighbourhoods.

But beneath this apparent disorder lies an uncomfortable truth: the vendors are not villains. They are individuals trying to survive in a city where formal employment

opportunities are limited. Street vendors play a vital role in Dhaka's urban ecosystem. Selling goods on the street is a primary source of income for thousands of families in the city. Many street vendors are rural migrants or individuals displaced by poverty, who have turned to street vending as a means of survival. Vendors provide affordable goods and services to millions of



FILE PHOTO: STAR

Dhaka's footpaths are battlegrounds between livelihoods and mobility.

Dhaka's residents. These small businesses sell inexpensive meals for workers and budget clothing for students, serving those who can't shop at malls or supermarkets. Vendors bring goods directly to people's doorsteps, saving time and transportation costs for those who rely on them. For many in Dhaka, they are an essential part of daily life. The street markets of Dhaka reflect the city's entrepreneurial spirit and cultural diversity. They are part of

what makes Dhaka, Dhaka.

It is essential to find a balance between the needs of pedestrians and the livelihoods of vendors and the task is not easy. Evicting vendors outright would ignore the socio-economic realities they face, but leaving the current situation unchecked would exacerbate the problems of urban chaos and safety. Providing solutions requires a combined approach of actions such as: i) designing designated vending zones; ii) creating time-based access; iii) licensing and regulation; iv) creating pedestrian-centric design; v) support vendors; and vi) engaging community.

Dhaka can allocate specific areas as vending zones, especially near busy markets, bus stops, and residential neighbourhoods.

compliance with sanitation and safety standards. This could include rules on how much space each vendor can occupy. To create pedestrian-centric design, footpaths should be widened, where possible, and new infrastructure projects should incorporate vending-friendly designs. For example, shaded areas or small kiosks integrated into sidewalks could accommodate vendors without obstructing pedestrian flow. Furthermore, vendors should be given access to microfinance, training, and alternative employment opportunities to reduce their dependency on informal street vending. Programmes to integrate them into formal markets or co-ops could uplift their economic prospects. Finally, solutions must involve dialogue between pedestrians, vendors, local communities, authorities, implementation agencies, and technical personnel. This guarantees that policies are effective, fair, and comprehensive. It's not that no initiative ever took place to regulate these vendor activities and provide pedestrian facilities, but continuous monitoring and a permanent policy are needed for effective results in the long run.

The story of Dhaka's footpaths is not only about conflict; it is also about survival, resilience, and the urgent need for compassion. It is about acknowledging the humanity of both pedestrians and vendors and designing solutions that allow both to thrive. These walkways, now battlegrounds between livelihoods and mobility, hold the dreams of vendors striving to make ends meet and the frustration of pedestrians seeking safety and dignity. Imagine a Dhaka where footpaths breathe with life and purpose—wide, clean, and welcoming, where vendors thrive in organised, vibrant spaces, and pedestrians move freely and safely. This is not just a vision; it is a call to action that requires strong political will. To reclaim our walkways is to reclaim our humanity, creating a city that honours both its people's struggles and their right to a better future.

Introducing a licensing system for street vendors would help regulate their numbers and ensure

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Forgoes food
- 6 Christmas song
- 11 Improvised
- 12 Supreme Court justice Kagan
- 13 National park in California
- 15 Shade tree
- 16 “My country — of thee”
- 17 Pub pint
- 18 Decree beforehand
- 20 Road sealer
- 21 Blackjack card
- 22 Painter Magritte
- 23 Edge
- 26 Pondered
- 27 Eye part
- 28 Mass of gum
- 29 Frequently, in poems
- 30 Response delay
- 34 “My word!”
- 35 Belief, in brief
- 36 Smelter supply
- 37 National park in Arizona
- 40 Spine-tingling
- 41 Rental contract
- 42 Takes it easy

43 Foot parts

DOWN

- 1 Like old photos
- 2 “Hello” singer
- 3 Pillow covers
- 4 Youngster
- 5 Show biz routine
- 6 Halt
- 7 The whole shebang
- 8 Feels empathy
- 9 Like some rural bridges
- 10 Like skiers' clothing
- 14 Arbor climber
- 19 Earth tones
- 22 Ill-mannered
- 23 Online journal writer
- 24 Game official
- 25 Distraught
- 26 Playtypi and pandas
- 28 Minn. neighbor
- 30 Sea motions
- 31 Faithful
- 32 Stool
- 33 Trait carriers
- 38 Tiny complaint
- 39 “The Matrix” hero



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS



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