

# Should Bangladesh opt for a national government?



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Post-revolution scenarios play out in diverse ways. Turmoil and instability follow revolutions, and political systems struggle to come to terms with new realities. Changes in 1947, 1971 and 1990 resulted in tension and turmoil, but a resilient Bangladesh eventually overcame the challenges.

In his poem "The Road Not Taken," Robert Frost highlighted the challenges and consequences of choice. He preferred the road "less travelled by" that made "all the difference." The July uprising in Bangladesh brought the country to a critical juncture of history, and it became the call of the interim government to decide which road to take. Guided by public demands, the student leaders' passion and the advisers' wisdom, holding the general elections and handing over the rein of government to the elected majority political party emerged as the preferred strategy for returning Bangladesh to normalcy.

The dominant pattern of thinking at present is that elections will restore a democratic government and establish an authority that would address the numerous challenges facing the country. After speculations and unclear statements from some advisers and demands from various groups to declare a schedule, the chief adviser informed the nation last month that elections would likely be held in late 2025 or the first half of 2026.

At this moment, society is divided into several ideological, political, social, and

to be done in promoting cohesiveness and harmony within the government machinery. There were reports of insubordination and breach of discipline in the police academy in Sarda, and members of the Ansar battalion put the secretariat under siege to press their demands. With serious dissatisfaction and resentment among key agencies that have a critical role to play, it will be difficult to hold free and fair elections.

societies. Most citizens of Bangladesh are concerned about that. The country lost the services of many personnel in the disciplinary services since the fall of the previous regime. These agencies are essential for assisting with holding elections and must be repopulated with new recruits.

The economy is under pressure as incalculable amounts of bank loans remain outstanding, foreign exchange reserves

the government. Considering the possible drain on financial and human resources, this may not be the ideal time for the country to invest in electoral activities that may not produce sustainable results. Citizens may not be ready to participate in a democratic electoral process at this stage when many national questions remain unresolved.

Under the circumstances, the road not taken could be the option of establishing an inclusive national government that would give priority to stability, social justice, and democratic values. The July uprising forged an unprecedented unity in a divided society. It produced an opportunity to bring back depoliticised, alienated, and apathetic groups into the governing process. Focusing on elections at this time could lead to dividing a population that was unified in demanding termination of an autocratic regime.

Recent showings of hostility towards Bangladesh by certain quarters in India further underlines the importance of national unity. The chief adviser's consultations with political parties to build national unity and respond to the challenges opened an opportunity for all stakeholders to work together. A national government will add to the strength to plan and chart a course for the future political settlement in Bangladesh. It would serve the purpose of deliberating and finding answers to questions that fractured the society. Without a national consensus, a divided nation will continue to return to the same cycle of problems.

The process of healing and reconciliation in society requires regular dialogues and deliberations on important national questions. It requires an inclusive approach to listen to the voices of all stakeholders and build consensus on national issues. The projected time frame of 12-18 months for the election, suggested by the chief adviser, will still require an effective government, particularly for reassuring citizens that electoral arrangements are fair and impartial. At the same time, the interim government needs to gain the confidence of the public in their ability to ensure law and order and control the spiralling inflation. These are two issues with which most citizens are concerned. The March for National Unity on the first day of the new year resonated with chants for reform and justice, and these must be accomplished before the elections.

This task can be performed most effectively by a national government that represents all interests in society. Elections can be held after the national government tackles the critical problems that confront the country and that could make "all the difference" for ensuring a return for post-revolution Bangladesh to a parliamentary democratic republic, the ideal that guided the Liberation War.



The July uprising in Bangladesh brought the country to a critical juncture of history.

FILE PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

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economic groups, and their views and expectations vary from one another. Policies of the past regime contributed to sharp divisions in society. It will take a long time to overcome the bitterness and animosity accumulated over decades and return to normal democratic practices. Elections will not be productive until those goals are achieved.

Degeneration and misuse of state institutions have diminished their capacity to organise and manage the task of holding national elections, not to mention the discharge of their constitutional responsibilities. Recent events of protests by groups aggrieved by the interim government's decisions suggest that there is much work

Public trust and confidence in the electoral system and the role of the Election Commission have declined to dangerously low levels, and it will take time to restore them. The practice of seeking nominations from political parties for appointment in the Election Commission must be replaced with a transparent and inclusive arrangement in which public consultation can be incorporated. Since elections involve competition between candidates and political parties, they bear the risk of creating further divisions in society. This could affect the prospect of forging national unity that is needed for long-term productive results.

Decline in the law and order situation is a widespread problem in post-revolutionary

dwindle, and trade and business suffer. A massive capital flight took place through cronyism and corruption perpetrated over decades. The spiralling inflation has impacted crores of people who find it hard to survive. Steps by the interim government and the Trade Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB) to offer relief through the sale of essential commodities at "fair" prices is barely adequate compared to the citizens' need.

The government's financial strength is limited, and the costs of governance are on the rise. Elections are expensive undertakings and involve deployment of large numbers of government employees. This could divert attention from more urgent tasks confronting

# Can Bangladesh and India transcend South Asia's colonial legacies?



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The relationship between Bangladesh and India has long been a study in asymmetry. For decades, it has resembled a delicate dance where one partner dictates the rhythm while the other struggles to keep pace. But recent developments suggest that this fragile dynamic is beginning to crumble as Bangladesh asserts its sovereignty in ways that challenge India's self-perception as the "big brother" in South Asia. This transformation raises profound questions about the moral responsibilities of regional powers and the meaning of true independence in a postcolonial world.

Historically, Bangladesh's ties with India have been marked by a complex interplay of dependency and domination. From the 1971 Liberation War to the treaties and memoranda of understanding signed over the decades, the balance of power has overwhelmingly tilted towards New Delhi. The persistent border killings, trade disparities, and political interference have only deepened the perception that Bangladesh exists as a subordinate rather than an equal. This dynamic reached its zenith during Sheikh Hasina's tenure, a period characterised by India's outsized influence on Dhaka's policies.

This era can be described as one of "soft colonialism," where Bangladesh's sovereignty was compromised in exchange for political stability. Treaties disproportionately favouring India became the norm, and protests against these arrangements were met with repression. The fear of speaking out against Indian interests grew so pervasive that it symbolised the erosion of Bangladesh's democratic fabric.

This behaviour speaks to a broader psychological and geopolitical dilemma.

The recent ousting of Sheikh Hasina represents more than just a political shift. It signifies a collective yearning for dignity and self-determination, a reclamation of what Sir Isaiah Berlin would describe as both negative and positive freedom. Negative freedom, or the absence of external constraints, reflects Bangladesh's desire to shed India's overbearing influence. Positive freedom, the ability to act autonomously and shape its destiny, embodies the nation's quest for equitable partnerships based on mutual respect.

Certain quarters in India, however, still appear ill-prepared for this change. Their reactions—ranging from inflammatory rhetoric in political circles to disinformation campaigns in some sections of the media—betray a deep unease. The arrest of former ISKCON leader Chinmoy Krishna Das Brahmacari and the killing of a Muslim lawyer in Chattogram have been weaponised to stoke communal tensions and paint Bangladesh as unstable. These narratives, far from fostering regional harmony, reveal India's discomfort with losing its grip on a neighbour it once controlled with ease.

This behaviour speaks to a broader psychological and geopolitical dilemma. Big powers often struggle to transition from dominance to partnership. For India, the loss of a pliant ally like Sheikh Hasina represents not just a strategic setback, but also a symbolic blow to its self-image as the regional leader. The shift in Bangladesh's stance challenges India to rethink its approach to leadership.

Sir Berlin's framework helps illuminate why this transition is so

fraught. Negative freedom without positive freedom risks perpetuating cycles of dependency; positive freedom without mutual respect risks devolving into isolationism. True freedom, both for individuals and states, lies in the interplay of the two. For Bangladesh, this means asserting its sovereignty while cultivating relationships grounded in dignity. For

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India, it means relinquishing the allure of hegemony in favour of ethical leadership.

This moment also demands introspection from India's political establishment. The rise of Hindu nationalism and populist rhetoric has created a domestic environment where dominance over smaller neighbours is seen as a measure of strength. The BJP-led government, elected three consecutive times, has often conflated regional leadership with coercion.

Allowing Sheikh Hasina safe haven while undermining the recent student-led mass uprising in Bangladesh and the country's new government is symptomatic of this mindset. Yet, such

tactics are counterproductive, eroding trust and destabilising a region already fraught with tensions.

Bangladesh, too, faces critical challenges. As it seeks to redefine its relationship with India, it must address the internal vulnerabilities that have historically made it susceptible to external manipulation. Strengthening democratic institutions, promoting national unity, and ensuring justice for all citizens—regardless of religion or ethnicity—are essential steps. Sovereignty without internal cohesion is fragile; autonomy without accountability is hollow.

The broader question is whether South Asia can transcend the legacies of colonialism and embrace a model of cooperation that prioritises collective well-being over individual dominance. India, as the region's largest and most influential nation, bears a unique responsibility in shaping this future. By embracing humility and reciprocity, it can transform its role from a "big brother" to a genuine partner. For Bangladesh, this moment represents an opportunity to lead by example, demonstrating that sovereignty and solidarity are not mutually exclusive.

The moral vision required to achieve this transformation is not merely a matter of policy but of principle. It demands a recognition that true leadership lies in empowering others, not in subjugating them. For India, this means treating its neighbours not as instruments of its ambitions but as collaborators in a shared journey. For Bangladesh, it means carefully balancing independence and interdependence with courage and wisdom.

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**CROSSWORD**  
BY THOMAS JOSEPH

| ACROSS                      | DOWN                       |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1 Move borders, perhaps     | 1 Bitterly cold            |
| 6                           | 2 Pitching stat            |
| 11 Fragrance                | 3 Made way, in a way       |
| 12 Banish                   | 4 Choir word               |
| 13 Show uncertainty         | 5 Fort feature             |
| 14 Bona fide                | 6 Daughter of Leda         |
| 15 Tooth layer              | 7 Skating jump             |
| 17 Outdated                 | 8 Make a sharp turn        |
| 19 Brooch                   | 9 Yale rooter              |
| 20 Get-up-and-go            | 10 Rent out                |
| 23 Untie, perhaps           | 16 Geologist's concern     |
| 25 Titled woman             | 17 Martini garnish         |
| 26 Asked to one's home      | 18 Solitary sort           |
| 28 Julia Louis-Dreyfus show | 20 Made a lot              |
| 29 Astaire's partner        | 21 Abrasive powder         |
| 30 Mess up                  | 22 In itself               |
| 31 Traffic snarl            | 24 Cautious taste          |
| 32 Do fabric work           | 25 Pound choice            |
| 33 Quilt cloth              | 27 Spotted game pieces     |
| 35 Fable fellow             | 31 Kyoto setting           |
| 38 Fit for the fleet        | 33 Heart                   |
| 41 George W.'s wife         | 34 Lt.'s superior          |
| 42 Musical drama            | 35 The Matterhorn, for one |
| 43 Hog the mirror           | 36 Lobe spot               |
| 44 Scatter                  | 37 Take to court           |
|                             | 39 "You — Here"            |
|                             | 40 Statute                 |

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

|        |       |     |      |
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| SCOUR  | RUNON |     |      |
| CURRY  | ARISE |     |      |
| HENS   | GLASS |     |      |

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