

Devils, heroes, or something in between?



OF MAGIC AND MADNESS

Badiuzzaman Bay
is assistant editor at The Daily Star.

BADIUZZAMAN BAY

What's in a name? Quite a lot, actually. Names define identities. Names shape perceptions. They also help set narratives, assign blame, and even influence outcomes. It, therefore, makes sense that the simple act of naming a "mob" has suddenly become contentious because of all the baggage it brings with it in present-day Bangladesh. This debate—triggered by the launch of the Operation Devil Hunt following renewed anti-fascist campaigns and Adviser Mahfuz Alam's characterisation of mobs as "devils" in a stern warning to *Touhid Janata*—was perhaps inevitable in a country reborn through a violent uprising by individuals who would have been branded terrorists or anarchist mobs, and severely punished, had they failed. In a remarkable turnaround, they are now national heroes, and rightly so.

The question is, who qualifies as a mob then? Can such a generic term even capture the diversity and nuances of different groups? While Mahfuz was more specific in his portrayal, the home ministry was less so as it alluded to "saboteurs who attacked students," individuals with warrants against them, "troublemakers", and even the eponymous "devils" as targets of the joint forces operation. This could encompass, among

shared aggression, whether a group is labelled as protesters, agitators, or simply a mob can lead to vastly different public perceptions and politico-legal consequences.

So before diving into these complexities, let's establish the basics. A mob, by definition, is a large, disorderly crowd intent on causing disturbance or violence. If you search online, you will come across context-specific variations such as "woke mobs," "vigilante mobs," "nationalist mobs," "religious mobs," "troll mobs," etc. I remember writing about "lynch mobs" in 2019 when mass hysteria over a bizarre rumour—that human heads were being collected for Padma Bridge construction—led to seven people being killed. As I argued back then, mob violence "is not justice—it's what justice looks like when it is privatised and leased out to the most dominant groups in society." And whatever form it takes, and however justified the motive seems to be, it remains unacceptable in a democratic system where due process and rule of law are considered sacrosanct.

Since the fall of the Awami League government, there has been a wave of mob-related incidents leaving debilitating effects across various sectors, including education. On Monday, a group of individuals besieged

that fostered deep-seated anger and distrust among people. While such behaviour cannot be condoned, things get trickier when the target of this anger is Awami League itself, or what remains of it.

The argument of those opposing the labelling of such acts as mob violence is, if I understand correctly, that any actions targeting the symbols of the ousted regime are necessary to prevent its resurgence.

self-evident.

But what if there are provocations? True, the Dhanmondi 32 demolition was largely a reaction to Sheikh Hasina's virtual speech from India—an act that, given the trauma of her reign of terror, was bound to provoke outrage. Had she not shown the audacity to attempt a political comeback while evading justice for her many crimes, the destruction could perhaps have been avoided. But this reasoning



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FILE PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

Theoretically, you cannot deny the logic—the gross human rights violations the party committed during July-August alone, as highlighted again by the just-released fact-finding report of the UN human rights office, make this non-negotiable. The question, however, is not about the goal but the methods being used to achieve it. After the uprising, there was broad consensus that what happened during this period, including the destruction of public property and infrastructure, served a greater cause, and as such, participants faced no legal repercussions. But should such concessions still be granted six months later, when the nation is trying to claw its way back to some much-needed stability? The answer is

tells only half the story, for expecting a former dictator to behave responsibly is a naivety we cannot afford at this stage.

What about our own responsibility to pre-empt her move, and more importantly, protect the greater interests of the nation? The anti-fascist camp's headlong dive into a trap ostensibly designed to raise questions about the direction of "new Bangladesh" exposes the fallacy of their campaign. Understanding the difference between fighting actual fascism and scoring symbolic victories in an already triumphant landscape is crucial. Moreover, a mob is a deeply unstable force that may take on a will of its own once activated. It is no surprise

that the call to disrupt Hasina's speech set off a domino effect of attacks, vandalism, and arson targeting Awami League-linked houses and establishments in as many as 35 districts. Will anti-fascist mobilisers take responsibility for these attacks, or the reputational damage thus caused to Bangladesh? The UN has already warned about meeting international standards in trials for the perpetrators of July-August massacre. We cannot expect fair justice and global support in our bid while condoning extrajudicial actions against the remnants of Awami League.

The reason we focus more on the Dhanmondi incident and its aftermath is because of the insistence by some anti-fascist voices on challenging the labelling of their supporters, as if they represent an organised force governed by strict discipline. The truth is, under the broad anti-fascist umbrella, numerous political and religious banners exist—just as there are many types of mobs emerging across the country. A mob, however you characterise it, cannot be expected to see reason or exercise restraint. It cannot distinguish between political and criminal actions, between "reactions" and "revenge," or between legitimate targets and collateral damage.

Another danger of encouraging mobism is how easily it can morph into expressions of ideological fanaticism. For instance, the same mobs that destroyed Mujib's murals and statues over the past months could feel emboldened to attack any structure, symbol or event that they perceive to be anti-religious. In fact, some already are. A recent video shows a man standing before the Raju Memorial Sculpture at Dhaka University, calling it an "idol" and urging its destruction. Monday's book fair assault, the disruptions of women's football matches in Joypurhat and Dinajpur, or the spate of attacks on shrines in recent months—all point to the effects of organised chaos and aggression.

As part of the Operation Devil Hunt, the authorities have so far detained nearly 3,000 individuals, many likely linked to mob-related incidents. But security crackdowns alone cannot prevent this trend. It demands deeper reflection. Should we continue to condone unregulated public outbursts? Should we so easily fall for "provocations"? Or can we channel our grievances into more structured responses that can solidify our transition to democracy, prevent the resurgence of any form of fascism, and restore Bangladesh's global standing? Whatever we do, the idea of a mob must be left in the past.

The honeymoon period of the interim government is over



THE STREET VIEW

Mohammad Al-Masum Molla
is a journalist at The Daily Star. He can be reached at masumjrn@gmail.com.

MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

Six months into the tenure of Bangladesh's interim government, led by Nobel laureate Dr Muhammad Yunus, the country finds itself at a crossroads. What started as a moment of hope—a chance to break free from the chains of authoritarian rule—has increasingly turned into a struggle for meaningful reform. While the government has made strides in establishing reform commissions and investigating past human rights abuses, the promises of democracy, stability, and prosperity remain unfulfilled. In this critical moment, it is time to ask: can the interim government truly deliver, or will it fall victim to the same pitfalls that have plagued Bangladesh's political system for decades?

The government came to power with lofty promises of change, yet six months later, much of that optimism has begun to fade. While some proposed reforms including limits on the prime minister's tenure and a bicameral parliament could pave the way for stronger democratic institutions, these reforms are yet to materialise. Besides, the public is growing frustrated because of the lack of a clear roadmap for the future.

The greatest test for the interim government remains the economy. With inflation continuing to rise and essential goods becoming increasingly unaffordable, many Bangladeshis are questioning whether the government truly has a handle on the economic crisis. Despite some signs of stabilisation in certain sectors, the majority of the population still feels the weight of economic hardship. The absence of real relief for the people, coupled with continued market manipulation by syndicates, has only deepened the distrust in the government's ability to address the crisis. Moreover, imposing VAT on some goods and services added salt

to the wounds, further burdening ordinary citizens who are already struggling to make ends meet.

Political instability remains another pressing issue. The question of when the next general election will take place has become a political flashpoint. Dr Yunus's suggestion of holding elections by late 2025 and early 2026 may seem reasonable from a reform standpoint, but the opposition—led by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party—demands a vote by

economy, curb inflation, and rein in market manipulation. These are not easy tasks, but they are necessary for the long-term health of the country.

Equally pressing is the issue of law and order. The reluctance of the police force to take action, fuelled by fear of retaliation for their role in suppressing the July-August protests, has left a dangerous security vacuum. Crime and mob violence are on the rise, and the public is losing confidence in the ability of law enforcement to protect them. The government must take immediate steps to restore law and order, ensuring that the police are held accountable while also protecting the rights of the people.

However, perhaps the most daunting challenge the interim government faces lies within its own bureaucracy. Bangladesh's bureaucratic system is notorious for inefficiency, corruption, and an ingrained culture of

figures over their duty to the people, and many bureaucrats seem more focused on maintaining the status quo than implementing much-needed reforms. The situation has become so dire that even simple requests for services often result in frustration, delays, and, at times, exploitation.

The reform of this bureaucratic system is crucial if Bangladesh is to break free from its cycle of inefficiency and corruption. However, the government has been slow to tackle these deep-rooted problems. The failure to reform the civil service is not just an administrative issue—it's a political one. Without addressing these systemic issues, the government will continue to be undermined by the very institutions it seeks to change. Reforming the bureaucracy is not a matter of tinkering with policies; it requires a fundamental shift in the culture and operations of the civil service.

Finally, the government must confront the spectre of past crimes and human rights abuses. The previous regime, led by the Awami League, is guilty of numerous atrocities, and many of its members have yet to be held accountable. The investigation process has been slow, and many ask whether those responsible will ever face justice. The interim government must ensure the judicial process remains independent and transparent, allowing for true accountability without political interference.

The time for empty promises and political gamesmanship is over. If the interim government is to succeed, it must act swiftly and decisively. The people of Bangladesh deserve a government that will put their needs first, not one that is bogged down by bureaucracy, political favouritism, and economic mismanagement. True reform will require more than just words—it will require action, accountability, and a clear vision for the future.

In the coming months, the government will face a crucial test: can it overcome the challenges that have plagued Bangladesh's political system for so long, or will it become just another failed experiment in transitional rule? The answer will determine not only the future of this government but the future of Bangladesh itself.



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

mid-2025. With no clear consensus on the election timeline, political uncertainty continues to fester. Moreover, allegations of government favouritism towards certain political groups have only deepened divisions, raising concerns about the neutrality of the administration.

If the interim government is to survive, it must address these challenges head-on. The lack of a concrete election roadmap is a major source of instability, and it must be resolved as quickly as possible. Similarly, the government must take decisive action to stabilise the

authoritarianism. These issues are not easily addressed, and the government's struggle to reform the civil service is becoming increasingly apparent. The red tape and lack of accountability in public sector have often hindered progress on numerous fronts.

Despite the government's call for reform, many citizens still find themselves entangled in a web of bureaucracy that stifles action and delays change. Long-standing issues such as corruption, inefficiency, and the disregard for citizens' rights persist within the civil service. Public servants often prioritise loyalty to political

CROSSWORD

BY THOMAS JOSEPH

CROSS

- 1 Golf goals
- 5 Yellowstone animal
- 9 Steer clear of
- 11 Doctor's reading
- 12 Island off Naples
- 13 Happened
- 14 Even score
- 15 Sent
- 17 Lost one's footing
- 19 Scrollwork shape
- 20 Condescending look
- 21 TV spots
- 22 Shiny finish
- 24 Sit-up targets
- 26 Bridge utterance
- 29 In the style of
- 30 Cut off
- 32 Passed over
- 34 "The Last Jedi" role
- 35 Shire of "Rocky"
- 36 Steer clear of
- 38 Vote in
- 39 Indy entrant
- 40 Frees (of)

41 Garden sections

- DOWN
- 1 Accords
- 2 Uses
- 3 Entice
- 4 Knight's title
- 5 Post-dinner sound
- 6 Wed in secret
- 7 Evaluate
- 8 Marsh plants
- 10 Put to rest
- 11 Bill stamp
- 16 Jane Eyre, for one
- 18 Cribbage markers
- 21 Memo letters
- 23 Web spinner
- 24 Acid's opposite
- 25 Dealt with a leak, maybe
- 27 Evergreen tree
- 28 Like ranked players
- 29 Fall flower
- 30 Petty fight
- 31 Textile workers
- 33 Photos
- 37 Chemist's place

SATURDAY'S ANSWERS



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