



Can the youth revive democracy in Bangladesh?

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importance, as true democratic inclusivity cannot be achieved without it. This is where we can pose the question if reality is on its way to reflecting this ideal.

There are four female advisers in the interim government led by Dr Yunus. Rizwana Hasan is the adviser for the Ministry of Environment, Forest, and Climate Change as well as the Ministry of Water Resources. Nurjahan Begum is the adviser for the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. Farida Akhter is the adviser for the Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock, and Sharmin Murshid is the adviser for the Ministry of Social Welfare. All other members of the 21 member government are male, with no representation of anyone from the third gender or any gender minorities.

Anusha Ahmed*, a student of Dhaka University, voices her opinion on the representation of gender minorities in achieving inclusivity. "When the interim government was announced, people were selected from specific fields and were assigned their respective ministries. However, just as I'd really like to see female personnel advocating for equal rights from here on out, there needs to be someone representing the transgender community to improve the grievances they face."

However, she also mentions that rather than representation, taking action is more important in achieving the goal of inclusivity. "I find it more troubling that incidents of gender violence get shoved under the rug. While it may be argued that the country is fragile right now and gender equality doesn't necessarily come first in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, at the very least it should be attended to. Because when we talk about reform and inclusivity, the entire system needs to undergo it."

Maria Gomes, a graduate of Computer Science from BRAC University, believes that for gender minorities, acknowledgement is the first step in the realisation of true democracy. "Gender minority groups contribute just as much to society and you can't realise true democracy without acknowledging that. Inclusion of these groups will provide perspectives that cisgendered people and men will tend to overlook. Thus, effective awareness campaigns must be launched in order to shed light on the struggles and success stories of members belonging to gender minorities, and not just in urban bubbles where it's easy to gain acceptance. Once awareness is reached, only then can the stage be set for discussions and ways to implement inclusive action."

THE DEBATE OVER ETHNIC MINORITY REPRESENTATION

Bangladesh's pursuit of democracy hinges not just on elections and governance but on embracing inclusivity for all communities. In regions like the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), long standing conflicts highlight the need for deeper acknowledgment of indigenous rights, culture, and identity. Without addressing the grievances of marginalised groups, democracy remains incomplete, limited to majoritarian representation rather than fostering harmony and equity.

Despite the appointment of Supradip Chakma as the sole representative of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, in the interim government, concerns persist that his presence may be more symbolic than substantive. "While he served as Chittagong Hill Tracts Development Board chairman, the indigenous people saw little to no development under his watch. Despite his background in diplomacy, he has never raised his voice against the oppression, murder, and rape occurring in the CHT. After taking his oath in the interim government, he expressed his intent to boost CHT tourism. However, this raises concerns, as previous tourist developments like Sajek and Nilachol led to the displacement of indigenous communities without adequate compensation. Supradip Chakma has remained silent on these matters. His focus on tourism, while ignoring basic necessities like access to water and healthcare in remote areas, indicates that he does not accurately represent the needs and concerns of the indigenous community," said a young person from the Marma community, who wished to remain anonymous.

"Just because there is representation in the interim government, doesn't mean our voice is being heard. Our voice isn't being listened to until the government fulfills the demands that the Indigenous



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ORCHID CHANGMA

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people of CHT have been demanding for a long time," said Bijoyan Tanchangya, a student at the University of Dhaka.

Aricia Chakma, a student at North South University, fully agreed. "True support for the indigenous people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts goes beyond token appointments. It involves real action, such as allowing the people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts to be governed by representatives within their community and fully implementing the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord.

Protttoy Chakma*, a young student at the University of Chittagong, says it is important to include Indigenous communities of the Chittagong Hill Tracts into decision making processes. "We, the indigenous communities of the CHT, have long been marginalised and our voices often go unheard in national decision-making processes. The government must take meaningful steps to implement the 1997 Peace Accord fully, ensuring that our land rights are protected, and our autonomy is respected. The government must also address the long-standing issues of discrimination, lack of representation, and inadequate access to essential services such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure. Development projects should be carried out in consultation with indigenous communities, ensuring that they do not lead to displacement or environmental degradation. Our culture, traditions, and way of life must be preserved and promoted, not eroded in the name of progress."

Indigenous people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts expect the same things they have always asked every government that has come to power. Full implementation of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord and 1900 Regulation, solving regional political instability, equitable adjudication of land disputes, along with legal acknowledgment of indigenous identities, providing access to quality education and healthcare tailored to their specific contexts, and ensure their representation in decision-making processes at all levels of government. Moreover, it's also essential to address the socio-economic disparities that Indigenous communities face, promoting inclusive development that respects their traditions and way of life. They seek justice, equality, and the opportunity to contribute fully to the nation's growth while maintaining their cultural heritage.

PROMISES AND PROTECTION: A CRITICAL MOMENT FOR RELIGIOUS MINORITY RIGHTS

Dr Muhammad Yunus has repeatedly reassured that the interim government prioritises protecting religious minority rights. Yet religious minorities are still faced with concerns about whether their voices are truly being heard. The wave of violence against minority homes and places of worship, in the past few months and the subsequent attempt at politicising and benefitting from these acts of violence by various factions of national and international societies has left deep scars, and promises alone seem insufficient to quell their fears.

Priti Saha*, a young Hindu student, believes that more can be done to ensure the safety and freedom of the Hindu community. "Are there adequate reparations and compensations being made, and have those who have orchestrated attacks on Hindu temples, residences, and families brought to justice?"

She also emphasised that rural Hindus have always been especially vulnerable and that whoever holds power is expected to ensure their safety and improve their lives, providing equal access to opportunities. "The interim government was established to address the country's current challenges before an election. A key priority should be uplifting rural Hindu communities by ensuring their safety, access to education, and protection from discrimination. This would be a significant step toward fostering communal harmony in Bangladeshi society."

Arko Bhowmick*, another young Hindu person, aspires to live in a Bangladesh where the preparations for Durga Puja wouldn't be marred by the news of Durga idols and temples being vandalised. "This has happened every year, and it is as if everyone has become desensitised to it. There is a pressing need to ensure that we can celebrate all our religious ceremonies, festivities, and rituals freely and fearlessly."

Simon Srijon, a young Christian individual, said that he and other people from the Christian community are optimistic about the interim government, but are uncertain about the future. "While I feel that our voices are being heard, and the interim government led by Dr Muhammad Yunus will do its best to preserve and protect the interests of Christian and other minority communities, we are concerned whether this will continue when an elected government is in place."

"As Bangladeshi citizens, we all have the right to practice our religion freely and without fear. We're still not

there yet, and it will take a conscious effort from all parties involved, especially the government. It has to ensure that no particular religion can establish ascendancy over others," said Joy Gomes*, another young Christian student who studies at a reputed public university in Bangladesh.

TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY: A TEST FOR THE INTERIM GOVERNMENT

"When two elephants fight, it is the grass that gets trampled. For over two decades, our political landscape has been the battleground for two powerful political dynasties. Both of these parties, in their respective terms, have backslid democracy through rampant corruption. They have exploited the system by fostering a gross culture of nepotism. So, it is certainly refreshing for the general public to see new, able, and educated people taking the helm," says Kabid Shiam, a student at the Department of Media, Communications, and Journalism at North South University.

Transparency and accountability have two key purposes. For starters, it makes the government more accessible to the people it serves. A transparent government enables citizens to engage in the democratic process and stay informed about government budgets, spending, and projects. Second, transparency is an effective tool against corruption. "I hope this interim government can hold transparency and accountability establishing a true democracy, as the last two administrations had real problems in doing so. Trust is essential in building a prosperous nation," says Kabid.

When government processes are transparent, corruption is less likely to grow, and when a government is accountable, it listens to its citizens and uses their comments to create and enhance its policies and services. Bangladesh has a 24 out of 100 rating on Transparency International's 2023 Corruption Perceptions Index, placing it 149th out of 180 countries. This reflects a high amount of perceived corruption. With this interim government in place, the students have high expectations for the corruption rate to fall and democracy to rise.

Zayan Zaman, majoring in computer science and engineering at the Independent University Bangladesh, expresses, "For the first time in a long time, if not ever, we have a set of leaders who are committed to putting the nation before politics, reform before personal gain, and the welfare of the people above all else. This government bears the immense responsibility of not only rebuilding the nation but also restoring the people's faith in the system. This can only be achieved if the government is fully transparent about its decisions and arrangements; otherwise, questions and doubts about its competency are likely to arise."

Critiques have already started coming in, beginning with the appointment of student coordinators as advisors. This sparked debate when, a day after the oath ceremony, people discovered their educational backgrounds to be insufficient and unrelated to their assigned positions—just one of many issues that are talked about. Such concerns reflect a greater need for transparency and meritocracy in governance, which are essential components of any democratic country.

However, the pace of their work has not kept up with the citizens' enthusiasm. While it is too soon to judge the workings of this interim government, given the line-up of advisors, every neutral citizen ultimately hopes for its success. Zayan further states, "Achieving such a feat requires building trust through actions, checks and balances, and a steadfast commitment to prioritising the needs of the citizens over corruption and personal interests."

**Some names have been changed at the request of the interviewees.*

Azra Humayra is a student of Mass Communication and Journalism at the University of Dhaka.

Zabin Tazrin Nashita is an engineering student at the Islamic University of Technology.

Sumaiya Rashid is a student at the University of North Texas.

Bipra Prasun Das is a student at North South University.



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