

## Trump fires top-ranked US military officer

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump fired top US military officer General Charles “CQ” Brown on Friday, part of a major shake-up of the armed forces’ leadership.

Trump offered no explanation for Brown’s dismissal less than two years into his four-year term as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, which followed sweeping layoffs of federal workers and moves to dismantle government institutions just a month into the president’s second term.

Brown had been nominated to the top military role by Democratic president Joe Biden and became only the second Black person to hold the position.

Following Trump’s announcement on Brown, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said he was seeking a replacement for Admiral Lisa Franchetti, the first woman to serve as the top US Navy officer.

Trump thanked Brown for “his over 40 years of service to our country” in a post on his Truth Social platform, describing him as “a fine gentleman and an outstanding leader.”



This handout image released by the Hamas Media Office yesterday, shows newly-released Israeli hostage Omer Shem Tov kissing the head of a Hamas fighter shortly after being set free in Nuseirat in the central Gaza Strip.

PHOTO: AFP

## Pakistan NGO chief critical of election has home sealed

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan authorities have sealed the home of an NGO chief who authored a report alleging widespread rigging in national elections last year, he told AFP on Saturday.

Polls in February 2024 took place with the nation’s most popular politician Imran Khan jailed and barred from running, and a coalition of parties considered pliable to the powerful military took power.

This month, NGO Pattan published a report on the elections and described them in a statement as “unprecedentedly rigged” with “vote-rigging, fraud and manipulation”.

Pattan chief Sarwar Bari – currently in London – said his home in the capital Islamabad was sealed off on Friday night. “This is obviously in response to the report,” he told AFP.

His wife Aliya Bano said the property was closed off by a team of around two dozen including police officers, magistrates and Islamabad administration officials.

A judge’s order to seal the residence, seen by AFP, said Pattan’s registration as an NGO had been cancelled in 2019 and it was operating illegally.

Bari said he often used his residence for Pattan meetings and postal correspondence but was adamant it was primarily his home.

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan said in a statement on social media platform X that it was “alarmed” by reports his home had been sealed.

## Silence of the shrines

“Shrines, and Baul and Qawwali musical programmes are being attacked in some places. These aren’t happening everywhere, but everyone must keep in mind that we won’t tolerate even a single such attack.”

MOSTOFA SARWAR FAROOKI, cultural affairs adviser

FROM PAGE 1

Scores of ancient shrines, Sufi Darbar Sharifs and Baul Fakir akhras were attacked in different parts of the country, mostly on the first few days of the power vacuum, but also throughout September amid lax law and order.

Although no attacks were reported in October and December, several shrines were targeted in November 2024 as well as January and February 2025.

In October-November 2024 and January 2025, this reporter visited at least 25 spots and spoke to devotees, khadems, and pirs. Many of them said they have not been going to the shrines out of fear of attacks.

The latest attacks took place on February 20 and 21 during Urs at two shrines in Noakhali and Manikganj.

Earlier on January 8, a 200-year-old shrine was attacked in Mymensingh, also during its Urs and Qawwali musical festival.

Three days later, Cultural Affairs Adviser Mostofa Sarwar Farooki told media, “Shrines, and Baul and Qawwali musical programmes are being attacked in some places. These aren’t happening everywhere, but everyone must keep in mind that we won’t tolerate even a single such attack.”

Based on police findings, the chief adviser’s press wing on January 18 confirmed attacks on at least 40 shrines since August 4.

Meanwhile, police have so far arrested 23 suspects in 15 cases. Separately, investigations into 29 general diaries with different police stations are underway, it added.

The Global Sufi Organisation at a press conference at the Jatiya Press Club on January 23 claimed that at least 80 shrines had been attacked since August.

According to The Daily Star’s own findings, along with counts made in media reports, over 70 shrines and akhras across the country were attacked, vandalised, set ablaze or looted in last year’s August and September alone.

In some instances, devotees were publicly humiliated by having their hair and beards forcibly shaved off.

The highest number of attacks – 14 – on a single day took place on the afternoon of August 5, 2024, our findings show.

The Ashrafnagar Darbar Sharif, founded by Syed Ashraf Ali Chandpuri, in Cumilla’s Laksam was one of those attacked that day.

After workers, devotees and spiritual leaders were beaten and thrown out, the attackers vandalised and looted the shrine before finally setting it on fire, Darbar Sharif sources said.

“A Darbar Sharif is a public place. Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Christians – all are welcome here. People come here out of love. No one is brought here by force and if someone wants to come, they are not stopped by force,” Pir Syed Md Majedul Haque Chandpuri of the Darbar Sharif told The Daily Star on the site in November last year.

Brahmanbaria’s Samsu Paglar Mazar was attacked twice in two days – August 6 and 7.

Khadem Alauddin, also a union parishad member, told The Daily Star on October 8 at the mazar compound that the attackers hit him on the head. When he regained consciousness two hours later, he found himself in a hospital with multiple stitches to his head.

In Narsingdi, even the homes of khadems and devotees were attacked and looted, said Khadem Sajal Fakir of Kappa Paglar Mazar.

There were multiple attacks also on Shah Poran’s Urs in Sylhet throughout August, but by the second week of September, it turned into a clash, leaving at least 50 people injured, according to media reports.

Clashes also took place at Dewanbagh Darbar Sharif in Narayanganj’s Bandar and Trishal

Kauliarchar incident.

**DESTROYING HERITAGE?**

Many of the shrines that were attacked were ancient and have historical, archeological and religious significance.

Some were built centuries back when Islam started to gain ground in this part of the world, and the traditions of mazar and Sufism played significant roles, according to Islamic scholars.

Critics of the present-day shrine culture, however, say some activities such as singing, men and women praying side by side, and smoking are not allowed in Islam, and hence, they must stop.

Of the shrines attacked on August 5, four are traditional ancient shrines – Bairam Shah’s shrine in Dhaka, Garib Shah’s shrine in Jessore, Dewan Sharif Khan’s shrine in Narsingdi and Syed Reza Chishti’s shrine known as Shah Bhala in Chuadanga.

The Garib Shah, Dewan Sharif Khan and Shah Bhala shrines are all large and are visited daily by devotees, Pagals, Fakirs and Bauls.

However, Bairam Shah’s shrine has only one room. Hakim Habibur Rahman’s book “Asudegane Dhaka” mentions that the shrine dates back

“If the government had taken effective measures from the outset and taken action against the culprits, then perhaps the attacks on shrines wouldn’t have continued until this February.”

SHAKIR DEWAN, a devotee of a Keraniganj Mazar

kitchen, caretakers’ quarters, and the shelter for the devotees. They then vandalised everything. Finally, they set fire to the mausoleum and various structures.”

The over 300-year-old mausoleum of Charu Miji Shah in Noakhali’s Lakshmi Narayanpur area was vandalised on September 13.

**CULTURE OF SHRINES**

The tradition of shrines centres around mysticism and it goes back to the early days of Islam.

These traditions of mysticism are known as Tariqa or Silsila. Within each Tariqa, practitioners are characterised by distinct qualities such as Pirs, Fakirs, and mystic devotees (Pagla). The Qalandariya and Madari Tariqa are primarily the paths followed by the spiritually-driven mystics.

In both Semitic and Indian traditions, the path of “divine madness” has been a continuous stream among devotees since ancient times, according to Islamic scholars.

Dr Mohammad Ahsanul Hadi, a Sufi researcher, said there are several opinions regarding the origin of the word “Sufi”. One view suggests that the word originated from “Suffa”, a place in Makkah where a group of young, unmarried emigrants from Madinah lived in poverty. They were called “Ashab al-Suffa”, “Ahlus Suffa” or “Ahle Suffa”.

According to him, the Ahle Suffa would remain eager for the Prophet’s companionship. They would also strive to gain expertise in various branches of knowledge including religion, agriculture, crafts and the sciences.

“The Ahle Suffa often struggled to secure regular meals, some even wore tattered clothes. Some people would mock the Ahle Suffa, calling them mad,” said Dr Hadi, also an associate professor at the Department of Persian Language and Literature at Dhaka University.

The Dargah Sharif, which serves as the centre for Sufi prayers and activities, is typically a complex establishment. Each complex houses a mosque, madrasa, Quran memorisation centre, library, orphanage, community kitchen, hospital, office, guest accommodation and storerooms. Some Dargah Sharifs maintain multiple branches.

Just as the Sufi tradition has the Darbar Sharif, the Baul-Fakirs maintain the custom of establishing akhras and ashrams, which are generally smaller compared to darbars. In many cases, a room in the corner of a residential property is converted into an akhra or ashram.

Our analysis shows that among the four types of institutions in the Islamic mystical tradition, the shrines of the Pagal-Fakirs have been the

most affected. These are places where people of all faiths, races and genders have unrestricted access, and regular musical practices are conducted as part of worship. Annual Urs festivals and fairs are also organised there.

Syed Tarik, a poet and practitioner of the Sureshwari tradition of Fakiri, said shrines have their own unique culture, inviting people, including women, from all religions and castes. People pray as they wish, in their own way. There is no religious rigidity in shrines; they are “spiritual free zones”, he said.

“However, the demolition of shrines is halting worship through music, while also restricting women’s entry and expressions of devotion. By forcefully imposing the Sharia system, there is an attempt to destroy the shrine’s unique culture. Imposing one’s own opinions on others is undemocratic.”

**LIVING IN FEAR**

Khadems and devotees across the country have been in a state of insecurity even months after the first wave of attacks.

On the other hand, Bauls, who traditionally perform at mazars both for a living and for spiritual delight, cannot fathom how fellow citizens would attack them.

Some estimates suggest, there are about 400,000 professional Baul singers in the country.

“We’ve been living in fear. The attackers continue to threaten us. They’ve even threatened to burn our homes down,” said Sheikh Sadi, a devotee of Malek Darbesh Majar in Cumilla’s Laksam, which came under attack in August.

This mazar’s Urs festival, which usually takes place on September 8, did not take place this year.

Meanwhile, there are also examples of other mazar programmes being forcibly shut down.

In Narsingdi’s Palash upazila, the Urs festival at Yusuf Ali Fakir’s shrine is traditionally held on November 7 every year. This year, a group of people along with police forced the organisers to stop the programme the previous evening, said the shrine’s Khadem Sajal Fakir.

In one of the country’s principal shrines, Shah Paran’s shrine in Sylhet, the yearly Urs did take place this year, but with no musical performance.

Musical performances as part of worship have been suspended at the surrounding shrines as well.

Aleya Begum, a renowned Baul artiste known as Baul Mata, said, “Typically, Bauls remain busy from the month of Kartik until just before the monsoon. However, this year they’re sitting idle. This is because their performances are primarily centred around shrine-based Urs festivals, which are being obstructed in various parts of the country.”

She said she too was scheduled to perform at an Urs in Bandarkhola of Madaripur’s Shibchar upazila on October 8 – but it was obstructed. The organisers then took permission from the district administration to hold it on October 23, but it was stopped yet again.

“We can’t engage in confrontation even when we face such resistance. Fighting is not the way of life for Bauls and Fakirs. While we’ve lost our incomes, what is sadder is that we’ve also lost our inner peace because we can’t sing,” she told The Daily Star.

The writer is a freelance journalist and researcher.

## Bangladesh firm with 2 people got \$29m from US

FROM PAGE 1

magazine pretty soon, for being great scammers.”

Before getting to Bangladesh, Trump had also mentioned a USAID project in India. He said, “\$21 million [was] going to my friend, Prime Minister Modi, in India for voter turnout. We’re giving 21 million for voter turnout in India. What about us? I want voter turnout too.”

Both projects were among 17 international aid programs in countries including Bangladesh, Nepal, and India that were cut based on DOGE’s recommendations.

## Activists consider more top posts to minimise discord

FROM PAGE 1

However, there were differences of opinion primarily over who would assume the role of member secretary.

The Jatiya Nagorik Committee, the citizens’ platform launched after the uprising, split into three groups over the top posts of the new political party’s convening committee, said insiders.

One consists of leaders of Students Against Discrimination who had been previously involved in Ganatantrik Chhatra Shakti and Chhatra Odhikar Parishad.

Those previously affiliated with leftist politics form the second faction and the third comprises former members of Islami Chhatra Shibir, at least three leaders of the civic platform had previously told this newspaper, requesting to be anonymous.

Although the discord among the groups of student leaders over the new party’s member secretary post has waned, it is yet to be completely resolved.

Ali Ahsan Zonaed, former president of Shibir’s Dhaka University unit and a member of Nagorik Committee’s executive council,

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denied a report by a Bangla daily that he had some understanding with former Shibir leaders over the top positions of the new party. “It is not true,” he wrote on Facebook.

He, however, criticised the way the leadership of the new party is being formed as “neither democratic nor inclusive”.

“In this context, discussions about who holds which position are irrelevant. So, we have been emphasising that any qualified person should be able to take up their desired position. We are discussing the criteria for determining this qualification. Resolving this issue is now our primary and main objective,” wrote Zonaed.

Requesting to be unnamed, two leaders of the Nagorik Committee told this newspaper that there are some “differences of opinion” regarding the top leadership.

“There may be some issues, but it is a healthy competition, not a split. We are hopeful about resolving the issues before the announcement of the party and making the announcement on time,” a leader of the Nagorik Committee told The Daily Star.