

# How the interim government can make lasting reforms



Elaine Pearson  
is Asia director at Human Rights Watch (HRW).

ELAINE PEARSON

Visiting Dhaka in January, it felt like the climate of fear that had pervaded the country for many years had finally been lifted.

I met with female university students who had been part of a protest movement that successfully ousted former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her abusive Awami League government. These women, mostly in their 20s, talked about a sense of freedom that they had never experienced before.

Hasina held on to power for more than 15 years after she won office in 2008, with sham elections in 2014, 2018 and 2024 and a campaign of violence and intimidation against the opposition.

Meanwhile, her government clamped down on critics, even jailing people for critical social media posts. Many civil society leaders either fled into exile or went underground, fearing arrest. Hundreds of Bangladeshis became victims of extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances by security forces. Others were arbitrarily arrested and tortured.

Hasina's political opponents faced multiple charges and unending harassment. Among them was Nobel Laureate Prof Muhammad Yunus. One year ago, a Bangladeshi court sentenced him to a six-month jail sentence on politically motivated charges.

Fast forward to today, Yunus is heading the interim government as its chief adviser and has met with Human Rights Watch (HRW) to discuss the findings of our new report, "After the Monsoon Revolution: A Roadmap to Lasting Security Sector reform in Bangladesh."

A newly formed inquiry commission on enforced disappearances has estimated that there were 3,500 disappearances during the Hasina period. It is recommending the dismantling of the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab), which has overseen killings, disappearances, and torture with impunity. It's a far cry from 2021 when we released our report documenting a widespread pattern of disappearances and were met with blanket denials.

Now, the interim government has formed commissions to recommend reforms to key sectors including the electoral system,



Protesters face off against police in Shahbag, Dhaka during the quota reform movement on July 5, 2024.

FILE PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

justice system, public administration, police, anti-corruption office, and the constitution. Politically motivated charges, like the ones against Yunus, have been dropped.

But these gains are fragile. Hard-won progress will be lost without swift and structural reforms that can withstand pressure by forces in and outside the government that wish to derail human rights

reforms. Institutions that were subject to political capture under Hasina, like the police, find it all too easy to repeat mistakes of the past, just changing the political stripes of the targets. Already, over 1,000 cases have been filed against tens of thousands of people, mainly Awami League members, accusing them of murder, corruption or other crimes. While those involved in criminal acts should be

since the Awami League government was ousted. Homes and properties of Awami League leaders have been vandalised.

Just as Hasina would insist that her political opponents were "traitors," now critics of the interim government are deemed to be supporters of her fascist government. The interim government initiated Operation Devil Hunt on February 8, which one police officer says is being "conducted to combat

**Hard-won progress will be lost without swift and structural reforms that can withstand pressure by forces in and outside the government that wish to derail human rights reforms.**

ousted Hasina, finding that over 1,400 people may have been killed. UN Human Rights Chief Volker Türk recommended "a comprehensive process of truth-telling, healing and accountability, and to redress the legacy of serious human rights violations and ensure they can never happen again," and offered assistance "in this vital national accountability and reform process."

To help cement the reforms, the Bangladesh government should bring a resolution at the upcoming UN Human Rights Council session in March under Item 10. The resolution should request technical assistance, further investigations, and monitoring and reporting by UN-backed human rights experts.

A resolution brought by the Bangladesh government would not be punitive, but would be an opportunity to garner international support and buy-in for the human rights reforms they want to pursue.

As the penholder, Bangladesh would have ownership of the text and control over the commitments and outputs. For Bangladeshis, a resolution that requests independent public reporting could also help to counter the growing misinformation and disinformation campaigns that are stoking grievances and seeking to undermine the interim government's reforms. It would make it more difficult for vested interests to undermine human rights progress.

There are precedents for this. Honduras initiated an Item 10 resolution in relation to its penitentiary, security, and justice systems, adopted by the council by consensus in 2023. It requested the UN human rights office to provide technical assistance and capacity building to national civilian authorities in penitentiary, security, and justice matters, in order to improve human rights in Honduras.

As one of the female student leaders told us, "We don't want to go back to how things were before." That means lasting reforms, strong institutions, and empowered people, so that there is never again scope for authoritarianism. No Bangladeshi should have to sacrifice their life again to win democracy.

## Khaleda's call for unity is a step in the right direction



THE STREET VIEW

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

MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

Bangladesh's political landscape has long been defined by division and vengeance. The cycle of retaliation, where one party in power seeks to silence and punish the opposition, has turned politics into a battleground of personal vendettas rather than a platform for national progress. This toxic environment has not only deepened mistrust, but has also hindered the country's democratic development. At a time when political discourse is increasingly being shaped by hostility, BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia's recent speech from London offers a rare and necessary call for unity. Her appeal to move beyond vengeance is not just a political statement—it is a vision for a more stable and democratic Bangladesh.

Khaleda's six-minute virtual speech from London was notable not just for what she said, but for what she did not say. Despite being under medical treatment and having endured 17 years of political persecution—including imprisonment—she did not utter a single word against Sheikh Hasina. She did not even directly mention the Awami League.

The former ruling party and its leaders left no stone unturned in its efforts to weaken her and her party, yet instead of responding with anger or a call for revenge, she appealed to the people with a message of unity. This makes her stand apart from her political adversary, whose rhetoric has often been laced with accusations and hostility towards opponents.

Since Hasina's government took office in 2009, Khaleda's political life has been marked by a series of humiliations and hardships. She was forcibly evicted from her longtime residence in Dhaka cantonment, an episode that saw her break down in tears at a press conference, only to have her emotional plea dismissed by the Awami League leaders as insincere. The hostility intensified further in 2013, when Khaleda was

physically blocked from participating in the BNP's "March for Democracy" protest. In an infamous display of political suppression, the government positioned sand-laden trucks outside her residence, ensuring that she would not be able to leave. It was a moment that came to symbolise the state of the country's democracy, one where dissent was not just discouraged, but actively silenced.

Khaleda's ordeal did not stop at political obstruction. She was later imprisoned on corruption charges under circumstances that many believe were politically motivated, while

**Unity does not mean forgetting past injustices or allowing wrongdoing to go unpunished. A nation cannot build its future solely by seeking revenge for its past. Accountability must be pursued, but it should not be weaponised for political gain.**

Hasina, despite facing similar allegations, had all cases against her dismissed upon assuming power. Even from behind bars, Khaleda became a target of ridicule, with Hasina mockingly referring to her as a "thief" and repeatedly belittling her political movement. At one point, Hasina even suggested that Khaleda should be "thrown off" the newly constructed Padma Bridge, an astonishing remark for a sitting prime minister to make.

Yet, despite all of this, Khaleda Zia chose not to focus on past grievances. She warned

held to account, mass complaints without adequate evidence only undermine justice.

Meanwhile, members of security forces, worried that they might now face prosecution, are threatening families to keep them from giving evidence to the inquiry commission on enforced disappearances.

Religious and ethnic minority communities have also faced reprisal attacks

Awami fascism." As many as 12,500 people have been arrested in three weeks, but the authorities need to be careful because describing citizens as "devils" can lead to human rights violations by law enforcement or vigilantes.

Earlier this month, the UN human rights office released its report on security force violence during the protests that

that fascist forces and enemies of the country are working to undermine the mass uprising and called upon the BNP activists to unite and reorganise with greater determination. Her message was clear: politics should be done for progress, not retribution.

In Bangladesh, power and politics have frequently been used to punish political rivals, who have been treated as enemies rather than opponents. This has resulted in a deeply polarised society where policy debates are sidelined in favour of personal attacks. Khaleda Zia's refusal to engage in this cycle of hostility sets a different precedent—one that prioritises reconciliation over retaliation.

History offers valuable lessons on the importance of unity over vendetta. Nations that have broken free from cycles of political revenge have been able to move forward and rebuild. South Africa's transition from apartheid, Chile's return to democracy after dictatorship, and Germany's post-war reconciliation all demonstrate that progress is possible when leaders choose dialogue over division. Bangladesh, with its own history of resilience, has the same opportunity: to reject the politics of punishment and embrace a future built on democratic principles.

However, unity does not mean forgetting past injustices or allowing wrongdoing to go unpunished. A nation cannot build its future solely by seeking revenge for its past. Accountability must be pursued, but it should not be weaponised for political gain. True democracy thrives when differences are debated, not suppressed, and when justice is served in a manner that strengthens, rather than divides, the nation.

For too long, Bangladeshi politics has been defined by who holds power rather than how that power is used to serve the people. Khaleda Zia's call to go beyond vengeance presents an opportunity to reset this dynamic. The real question is whether the country's political leadership—on all sides—is willing to rise to the occasion. This call for unity should not be dismissed as mere rhetoric. It is an essential step towards restoring democracy, fostering stability, and ensuring that governance serves the people. If Bangladesh is to move forward, unity must not just be an idea—it must be a practice.

## CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**  
1 Freeway exit  
5 May honoree  
9 Love affair  
11 Wed in haste  
13 Plateau's kin  
14 Meyers and Rogen  
15 Fire proof  
16 Walkers' straps  
18 Vacillates  
20 Geologic period  
21 Unmanned flier  
22 Deuce topper  
23 Unconscious  
24 Egg - yung  
25 Grass clump  
27 Gang territories  
29 Band blaster
- 30 Dickens boy  
32 Grabbed with a toothpick  
34 Med. coverage group  
35 Sparkly crown  
36 Libya neighbor  
38 Blundered  
39 Lover of drama  
40 Other  
41 Okla., once
- DOWN**  
1 Moroccan city  
2 Ticked  
3 Button material  
4 Deposit  
5 Plateau's kin  
6 Bullfight cries  
7 Herb with an oregano-like scent  
8 Bubble shape  
10 Show mercy  
12 School paper  
17 Before, in poems  
19 Promote  
22 Thatcher, for one  
24 Supplier of money  
25 Critical asset  
26 Strike caller  
27 Bind  
28 Smile coyly  
30 Market action  
31 Truck part  
33 Son of Hera  
37 Procured



## YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

C	R	I	B	T	I	M	E	S
H	O	N	E	D	A	G	E	N
A	D	L	E	R	C	O	T	T
S	E	E	S	M	O	T	H	E
M	O	T	H	E	R	A	R	E
	O	U	S	T	N	E	D	
N	A	P	S	U	S	E	D	
T	O	M	S	A	T	E		
A	T	M		P	O	T	H	E
B	R	O	T	H	E	R	O	R
L	A	N	A	I	E	D	W	I
E	D	I	C	T	D	A	T	E
S	E	A	T	S		M	O	S

WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO [dsopinion@gmail.com](mailto:dsopinion@gmail.com).