

# Hasina regime was uglier than fascism

S. R. OSMANI  
is professor of economics at Ulster University in the UK.

S. R. OSMANI

The reference to "fascist" appears prominently in the Preamble proposed by the Constitution Reform Commission. I shall argue that there are good reasons for avoiding that reference.

The very first paragraph of the proposed Preamble asserts that "(we have) forged united resistance against autocratic and fascist rule in order to establish democracy." The second paragraph goes on to proclaim "the ideals of democracy and anti-discrimination that united (us) against fascist rule in 2024." It is obvious that, without naming names, the Preamble is referring to the "July uprising" against Sheikh Hasina's autocratic regime. The student leaders who valiantly led that mass uprising made frequent use of the words "fascism" and "fascist" while describing the regime they were fighting against, and not surprisingly these words soon came to permeate the entire popular discourse on the uprising. Evidently, in trying to reflect the spirit of "July uprising," the proposed Preamble also captured the most ubiquitous vocabulary that came into currency along with that spirit.

It is nonetheless a mistake for the Preamble to use that vocabulary. Two kinds of error are involved here—one conceptual and the other political. The conceptual error is that, strictly speaking, the term fascism

to argue, it amounts to watering down the ugliness and barbarity of the Hasina regime.

But let me begin with the conceptual error, from which the political error follows as a logical corollary. The root of the problem lies in an inadequate appreciation of what the idea of "fascism" actually stands for.

leading to disastrous military conflicts in Europe in the 20th century. Second, since individual persons are supposed to exist only to serve the interest of the collective called state, fascist rulers have found it fit to ruthlessly suppress all kinds of individual freedoms such as freedom of speech,

Secondly, the economic system was far from being state-controlled and inimical to private entrepreneurship. On the contrary, it was an utterly rotten case of crony capitalism in which Hasina's cronies were given a free hand to loot public resources for private gain. Apparently, then, the only

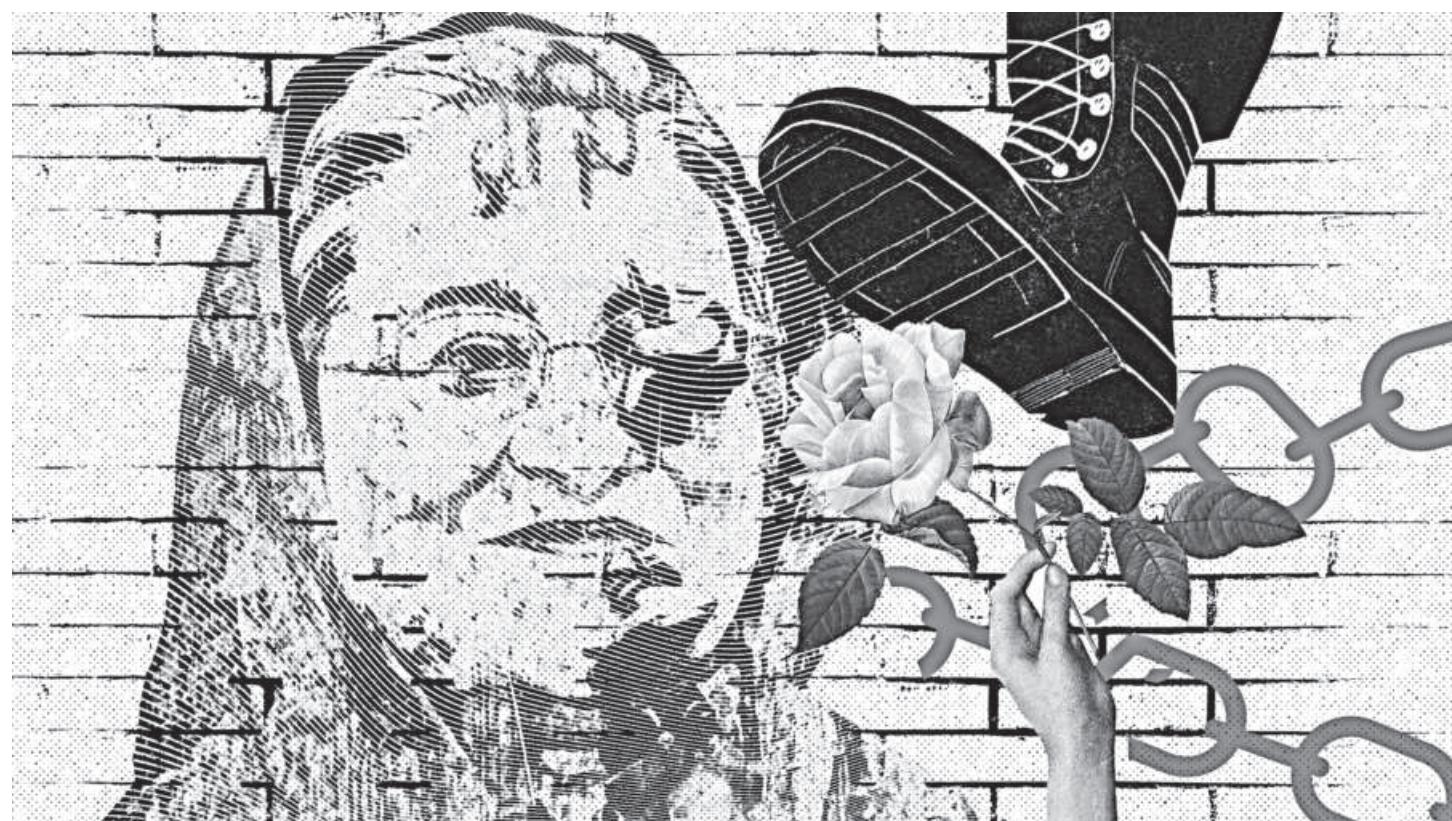
to ask: does this semantic issue really matter for practical purposes? What's the problem if we continue to use the word "fascism" in its popular meaning of "brutal authoritarianism" so long as everyone understands that this is what it means? This is where the matter of political error comes in.

Recall that fascist authoritarianism stems not from personal greed for power (although in some cases such greed may accentuate the brutality of fascist rule), but from an ideological reverence of the collective over the individual. There is thus an element of "selflessness" associated with the ideology of fascism—and this element can by default impart a degree of respectability to any regime described as fascist. True, it would only be a limited respectability since fascism has itself fallen into disrepute because of its association with militarism and suppression of individual freedoms. Nonetheless, its association with "selflessness" does leave room for a modicum of respectability, which a non-fascist authoritarian regime, based on selfish greed, cannot claim. So, if we describe Hasina's regime as fascist, then whether we intend it or not, we are implicitly giving the regime a veneer of respectability by suggesting that she was driven by a selfless political ideology rather than by purely selfish greed for power.

That's the political error. The student leaders might have thought that by describing Hasina's regime as fascist they were condemning it more strongly than they could by describing it simply as authoritarian or autocratic or tyrannical, but they failed to realise that they were actually doing the opposite.

I suspect the dynamics of language is such that brandishing of the terms fascism and fascist will continue to pervade the popular political discourse in Bangladesh, no matter who says what. Perhaps, one can live with that. The layperson may be excused for not appreciating the fact that not all authoritarian regimes are fascist. The students should have known better, but perhaps they may be excused too.

But the same cannot be said for the members of the Constitutional Reform Commission. The constitution of a nation is a sacred document—one that will be preserved for posterity. We must not allow its pages to be desecrated by the misuse of language that involves conceptual and political errors of grievous nature. We should, therefore, delete all references to fascism in this document and describe Sheikh Hasina's fallen regime for what it was—a brutally tyrannical autocratic regime built upon megalomania, selfishness, and unbridled greed for power.



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

Like most other "isms" such as communism, nationalism, liberalism, conservatism, etc., fascism is essentially a political ideology, which has a distinct ideal—a conception about the kind of society worth striving for. The core of this ideal is the conviction that the objective of politics (in the broadest sense) should be to serve the interest of the "collective entity" of the state or the nation, as opposed to the interest of the "individual persons" who constitute the state. In other words, it is the "greatness" of the collectivity called state, rather than the "well-being" and "freedom" of individual persons, that is the supreme goal of all activities of a fascist regime.

This ideology leads inevitably to a number of pernicious consequences that have historically been responsible for giving fascism the bad name it has, rightly, acquired. First, in search of "greatness" of the state, fascist rulers have tended to engage in "militarism" and "expansionism,"

freedom to dissent, etc., so as to prevent anything that could be even remotely deemed to be subversive of the state. The same ideology also paves the way for rule by a "great" dictator, who is supposed to be a human embodiment of the "collective," and who usurps the responsibility of pursuing the greatness of the state, at whatever cost of the well-being and freedoms of individuals. On the economic front, the faith in the supremacy of the collective tends to create a highly regimented and state-controlled economic system, where private initiatives are viewed with deep suspicion. A fascist regime is thus characterised by the following features: inherently militaristic in its outward orientation, unashamedly authoritarian in its political system, and strictly regimented in its economic institutions.

It is now easy to see why the term fascism does not correctly describe Sheikh Hasina's regime. For one thing, her regime was not militaristic in its outward orientation.

similarity with fascism was the authoritarian political system, but there is a fundamental difference here, which is the main focus of my argument.

As noted above, authoritarianism of a fascist regime stems from a political ideology that eulogises the collective over the individual. In contrast, one can argue that Hasina did not have any ideology at all. It was her megalomania and an unquenchable thirst for personal power, rather than the interest of the "collective state," that motivated her brutality.

The gist of the matter is that while all fascist regimes are authoritarian, not all authoritarian regimes are fascist. An authoritarian regime can be called fascist only when it is driven by the political ideology of the supremacy of the collective over the individual. Hasina was not driven by any such ideology; hence, it's a mistake to use the term fascism to describe her regime.

At this point, one might be tempted

not a correct description of the oppression meted out by the last regime. And the political error is that by describing Hasina's regime as fascist, we are unwittingly granting it a somewhat elevated status it does not deserve. The latter error is more important for practical reasons, since, as I am going

## Applause and amnesia: No Other Land's Oscar win



Sumaya Mashrufa  
is manager to executive director's office at Friendship.

SUMAYA MASHRUFA

The Academy awarded its Oscar for Best Documentary Feature to *No Other Land* on March 3. Palestinian activist Basel Adra, 28, shot most of the documentary on his camcorder from 2019 to 2023, showing the Israeli military's destruction of his hometown, Masafer Yatta, a small region in the southern occupied West Bank. Basel made the film with Israeli journalist Yuval Abraham.

First things first, this award didn't validate *No Other Land*—it validated the Oscars. Hollywood, once in a while, needs a moment like this to assure itself that it is inclusive, welcoming, and engaged with the world's pressing realities. From now on, the Academy can point to this moment with fervent glee. After all, I imagine nothing can be worse for the elite liberals than being dubbed complicit.

Meanwhile, the very system that congratulates *No Other Land* refuses to screen it. Even online streaming platforms in the US have not shown interest, despite *No Other Land* being the highest-grossing Oscar-nominated documentary. Streaming giants that host countless war films and violent cinema spanning all genres remain silent. Netflix, which removed 24 Palestinian films from its archive in October 2024, has shown no interest. So, while the Academy basks in its "bravery," the film remains inaccessible to most American audiences.

Yuval told *The New York Times* in an interview published on February 19, "In the US, so many people are writing to us, 'How can we watch it?' So we decided to do the theatrical release independently, and it's now going to show in about 100 theatres in the US."

It also has to be pointed out that the documentary doesn't centre on a land where the impact of Israeli aggression is beyond measure. It breaks my heart to write this,

Nassar, said in a press conference on February 10.

In Basel's camera, the documentary shows the Israeli military coming to the village with demolition orders at regular intervals. They don't demolish the whole village in one go. They go one home at a time. This has been one of the settlers' strategies since the beginning. The purpose is to break the spirits and dignity of the people and make this

question, "Don't you have anywhere else to go?" a mother says, "I have no other land. It's our land." She is Basel's mother. When the Israeli military arrives in the middle of the night to arrest Basel, she says, "Go wear a warmer coat. It's cold"—like mothers do, you know? I know that mother; perhaps you do too. The mother, knowing that construction was forbidden and a school couldn't be built, came up with a brilliant idea. Women and

The trauma and pain of Masafer Yatta weren't enough to stop the destruction—but a seven-minute walk by Tony Blair was. Of course, once the aura of a British prime minister's walk wore off, the demolitions resumed.

This is not a film about history—this is happening right now. When *No Other Land* won the Berlinale, Berlin Mayor Kai Wegner said, "Anti-Semitism has no place in Berlin, and that also applies to the art scene," adding, "Berlin is firmly on Israel's side." I can no longer be astonished by the West—I cannot ask questions like, "How can anyone become anti-Semitic by just showing what's been happening?" I understand and have been educated: in Berlinale or the Oscars, the sense of morality is spectacle deep.

The Oscars have a long history of rewarding politically charged films while perfectly maintaining the status quo that these films often critique as the antagonist. When Marlon Brando won Best Actor in 1973, he chose Native American activist Sacheen Littlefeather to receive the award in his place. She was booted on stage while speaking against Hollywood's treatment of Indigenous peoples. Fifty years later, *No Other Land* is honoured. Ironically, nothing about "No Other Land" changed because of the documentary's Oscar win. The land in question remains contested, bulldozers remain on standby, and the world remains comfortable with a neatly packaged tragedy. The Academy, of course, will move on. It has done its job. It has awarded. It has absolved itself.

Just one last thing—the film was released months after the deadly Hamas-led attacks in southern Israel on October 7, 2023, which triggered Israel's renewed destruction of Gaza. At least 1,100 people were killed in the attacks in Israel, and about 240 people were taken captive. By the time a ceasefire took effect in Gaza on January 19, 2025, more than 48,000 Palestinians had been killed in the war. An estimated 13,000 additional people are buried under the rubble and presumed dead, according to Al Jazeera. Basel always sleeps with his shoes on—the army can come and drag anyone out of their home at any time. I am adamant and hold my feet to the ground. I have divorced my hope from reason, and what I dream is this—Basel sleeping without his shoes on.



A Palestinian family living in a cave after their house in Masafer Yatta was demolished by Israeli forces in 2022.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

but no matter how painful the situation of Masafer Yatta is, considering the rest of Palestine, it is one of the less impacted places by the Israeli occupation. The documentary is not about Khan Yunis, Rafah, or Al-Shifa Hospital in Gaza City. It's not about Al-Mawasi, nor about Al-Zahraa, Al-Mughraqa, and Wadi Gaza—three towns now declared uninhabitable, as Al-Zahraa's mayor, Nidal

process "invisible" to the world. I guess Israeli authorities gradually learned how little the world chooses to see anyway.

They say these demolition orders are to make way for tank training and army barracks—where they will train more soldiers, who will then march into more homes with more demolition orders.

At one point in the documentary, to the

children, who are less likely to get arrested, would build during the day, while men would work only at night. That's how the school, Basel went to, was built.

I have to mention Tony Blair's seven-minute stroll here. When Blair visited Masafer Yatta, Israel later cancelled the demolition of schools and homes along the streets he walked. "This is a story of power," Basel says.