

# Awami League's downfall and the politics of cognitive dissonance



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History has a way of repeating itself, often with different actors but the same tragic plotlines. The fall of Sheikh Hasina's Awami League government has left behind a political landscape harshly familiar to students of history and political psychology. The party's steadfast refusal to acknowledge its mistakes, its insistence on conspiracy theories, and its remorseless demeanour all indicate a textbook case of cognitive dissonance. As the pioneering social psychologist Leon Festinger argued, when confronted with overwhelming evidence contradicting deeply held beliefs, people do not necessarily change their views; instead, they double down.

Festinger's seminal work on cognitive dissonance explains the mental discomfort experienced when reality clashes with pre-existing beliefs. In the 1950s, he infiltrated a doomsday cult whose members were convinced the world would end on a specific

reality, is now on full display in the Awami League.

For more than 15 years, Sheikh Hasina and her party built a political fortress based on dominance, authoritarian tendencies, and the erosion of democratic institutions. Opposition parties were crushed, the media muzzled, and electoral mechanisms hijacked to perpetuate her rule. When the walls of this fortress crumbled under the weight of mass protests, Hasina and her followers did not introspect. Instead, they sought solace in an alternative narrative: their downfall was not due to popular outrage but rather an international conspiracy.

The Greek concept of hubris—the excessive pride that leads to downfall—perfectly encapsulates the Awami League's attitude. Political scientist Graham Allison's theory of organisational failure suggests that when institutions become too entrenched in their

a grand design. Despite evidence that her government's mishandling of the student-led movement resulted in mass casualties, Hasina and her exiled ministers refuse to acknowledge any wrongdoing. This is not merely political stubbornness but a deeper psychological need to avoid self-recrimination.

Philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre argued that people avoid self-reflection because it forces them to confront their own responsibility. If

provides a coping mechanism for its leaders and supporters, many of whom have invested their careers and reputations in the party's narrative. Admitting failure would be personally and professionally devastating. Secondly, by externalising blame, the party keeps alive the possibility of a political resurgence. If the narrative remains that the Awami League was unjustly removed rather than rightfully ousted, its leaders can

violent suppression of protests, but because they feel abandoned. These were the foot soldiers who once championed the party's cause, only to find themselves leaderless in its darkest hour.

Political theorist Antonio Gramsci wrote extensively about how political movements sustain themselves through "organic intellectuals" at the grassroots level. These are the local leaders, student activists, and community organisers who serve as the bridge between ideology and the masses. However, when a party's leadership becomes too insular and removed from ground realities, this bridge collapses.

The Awami League's grassroots members now face an internal dilemma: do they continue to defend a leadership that refuses to acknowledge them, or do they begin seeking alternative political affiliations? This is where cognitive dissonance becomes an individual as well as a collective phenomenon. For years, these activists believed they were part of a righteous cause. The reality that their leaders abandoned them in exile creates a painful internal contradiction, one that can only be resolved in two ways: either by continuing to believe in the party despite its failures, or by breaking away and facing an uncertain political future.

Acknowledging mistakes is not a sign of weakness; it is a prerequisite for political rehabilitation. Countries with strong democratic traditions have seen fallen parties regain public trust by embracing self-reform. Germany's Social Democratic Party, after years of political decline, rebounded by admitting past mistakes and adjusting its policies. Even in Bangladesh's own history, parties that have embraced change have managed to return to relevance.

Charles Darwin famously stated, "It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change." If the Awami League wishes to remain politically relevant, it must recognise this fundamental truth. Denial, conspiracy theories, and deflecting responsibility may serve as temporary shields against the pain of political loss, but they do not constitute a long-term strategy for survival.



VISUAL: ALIZA RAHMAN

Hasina were to admit that her government collapsed due to internal corruption, misgovernance, and public outrage, she would have to struggle with a lifetime of political miscalculations. The easier option, as cognitive dissonance theory suggests, is to alter the narrative.

Political history is rife with examples of leaders who refused to accept responsibility for their downfall. US President Richard Nixon, after Watergate, remained convinced that he was the victim of a media-driven witch hunt. In more recent history, Donald Trump's continued insistence that the 2020 US presidential election was stolen shows a similar psychological mechanism at play.

The Awami League's strategy of non-apology serves a dual purpose. Firstly, it

mobilise support on the promise of a return to power.

However, this strategy carries long-term risks. Philosopher Hannah Arendt, in her analysis of totalitarian regimes, observed that when political parties rely on manufactured narratives to sustain their existence, they become increasingly disconnected from reality. The more the Awami League insists that it was the victim of a grand conspiracy, the less likely it is to engage in the necessary reforms to regain public trust. In a democracy, no party can survive indefinitely without a genuine social contract with its citizens.

One of the most revealing aspects of the Awami League's downfall is the reaction of its grassroots activists. Many have gone into hiding, not because they were part of the

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date. When the prophecy failed, rather than admitting their mistake, the cultists rationalised their beliefs by claiming their faith had saved the world. This pattern, where individuals or groups faced with disconfirming evidence refuse to accept

ways, they resist necessary adaptation even in the face of imminent collapse.

This is evident in Hasina's unchanging rhetoric, even after her government was ousted. Leaked phone conversations reveal her solid belief that she was the victim of

## The future of international crimes prosecution in Bangladesh



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The International Crimes Tribunal, Bangladesh (ICT-BD) has been widely perceived as the ultimate forum for prosecuting crimes committed during the July uprising. The high expectations placed on the ICT-BD often lead to the filing of cases that may not fall within its jurisdiction. This tendency may result in prolonged proceedings or improper use of tribunal resources.

The prosecution of international crimes, whether at the international or domestic level, is a serious matter. The gravity of these crimes, their contextual elements, and the ranks of the offenders distinguish them from other domestic offences. For instance, murder is criminalised under all penal legislation worldwide. However, murder may be classified as genocide, a crime against humanity, or a war crime depending on the presence of specific contextual elements. It may often appear that certain complaints—such as those related to single incidents or incidents falling below a particular threshold—don't fall within the jurisdictional framework of the ICT-BD.

The trial of international crimes has always been considered an exception to a country's general criminal justice system. This implies that an alleged crime should first be prosecuted through the general criminal justice system before being referred to a specialised tribunal dealing with international crimes, rather than being directly referred to a specialised tribunal.

Recognising the importance of this issue, the interim government incorporated Section 11A, paragraphs 3 and 4, into the International Crimes (Tribunals) Act, 1973 through the International Crimes (Tribunals) (Amendment) Ordinance, 2024. Section 11A(3) states that if an accused is charged under the 1973 act but the subsequent evidence suggests the commission of a different offence punishable under the Penal Code, 1860, or any other applicable law, the case may be transferred to a competent court for appropriate adjudication. Section 11A(4) outlines procedural matters related to such transfers.

It is worth noting that the application of Section 11A(3) of the 1973 act applies only after charges have been framed. However, it would be more effective if this process could be initiated at the time of charge framing. In order to maximise the benefits of Section

11A(3), the ICT-BD should adopt prosecutorial guidelines to filter out cases that fall outside its jurisdictional framework. This approach can be referred to as "domestic complementarity."

In the context of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), the ICC can only investigate and prosecute individuals accused of international crimes if the forum state is unwilling, unable or inactive in addressing the situation. Here, the ICC and domestic criminal justice systems function in a complementary manner. One of the key objectives of the principle of complementarity in the Rome Statute is to reduce the ICC's workload and give precedence to domestic justice mechanisms. Similar justifications can be applied to the ICT-BD.

This policy is to mitigate the risk of political backlash. Though it is entirely legal to prosecute an individual for a general crime after determining that the allegations of international crimes against them are not substantiated, the political ramifications of such prosecutions could be significant. Such a prosecution may be perceived as an abuse of process or an act of political vengeance by the supporters of the accused, even if fair trial standards are thoroughly upheld. A well-implemented domestic complementarity policy would help the ICT-BD avoid such controversies. From the accused's perspective, such a policy would also simplify legal proceedings, reduce procedural complexities, and help the accused avoid harassment.

In light of these considerations, the ICT-BD should formulate a clearly defined policy on domestic complementarity. At minimum, it should include definitions and elements of relevant crimes, the relationship between the ICT-BD and the general criminal justice system, case filing procedures, and other procedural guidelines. A standardised complaint submission form for the ICT-BD could also be introduced.

Simultaneously, the government should

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The foremost reason for adopting a domestic complementarity policy is strategic policymaking. The trial of international crimes is legally complex and politically sensitive, requiring a careful balance between the victims' rights and the accused's fair trial rights while facing multifaceted challenges from both domestic and international quarters. Therefore, the ICT-BD should be selective in selecting cases. This approach is also crucial from the perspective of the judicial economy. In some instances, external political pressures may urge the ICT-BD to take on cases that do not satisfy its jurisdictional requirements under the 1973 law. Outright rejection of such cases could also provoke a public outcry. A clearly defined policy on domestic complementarity would help manage such situations constructively.

Another reason in favour of adopting

reconsider broadening the scope of Section 11A(3) through an amendment to the International Crimes (Tribunals) Act, 1973. As noted earlier, the provision currently applies only after a charge has been framed. Its effectiveness would be significantly enhanced if amended to allow its application from the moment of case initiation. The expansion of the scope of interlocutory appeals under the 1973 act can also help achieve the objectives of Section 11A.

At present, Section 21A of the law limits interlocutory appeals to cases involving contempt of the ICT-BD. By contrast, the Rome Statute and the statutes of UN ad hoc tribunals permit interlocutory appeals on jurisdiction, admissibility, arrest warrants, and framing of charges. Expanding the scope of interlocutory appeals of the ICT-BD through an amendment to the 1973 act would align the tribunal with

international standards.

The recent report on Bangladesh by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has raised concerns about the compliance of the ICT-BD with human rights standards. In response, the government has expressed its intention to the OHCHR to further amend the 1973 act, to address these human rights-related criticisms (2025

OHCHR Bangladesh Report, Para 255). At this juncture, the government should seriously consider amending sections 11A(3) and 21A of the law to enable the ICT-BD to formulate a domestic complementarity policy. Concurrently, the ICT-BD should adopt a policy to manage its workload, reduce external pressures, enhance judicial efficiency, and strengthen its legitimacy and effectiveness.

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### Invitation for e-Tendering

Invitation Reference No.	Memo No: 35.01.8800.471.07.001.25-697	Date: 16/03/2025	
Tender ID & No.	Work description	Publication publication date & time	Opening date & time
1087082, e-GP/68/EE/SDR/2024-2025	Protective works by RCC Palisiding at 5th(p) Km of Kaliakandapara-Kamarkhanda-Ullapara (Bhutgacha) (2-5403) Road under Sirajganj Road Division during the year 2024-2025.	16 Mar -2025 11.00 Hrs	08 April-2025 15:30 Hrs
1087081, e-GP/69/EE/SDR/2024-2025	Repair of Potholes and Seal Coat at Ch: 4+476 (p) to 5+976 (p) Km of Porabari-Kamarkhondo-Nalka (Jamtoli) (2-5406) Road under Road Division Sirajganj during the year 2024-2025.	16 Mar -2025 11.00 Hrs	08 April-2025 15:40 Hrs

This is an online tender where only e-Tenders will be accepted in e-GP Portal and no offline and hard copy will be accepted. To submit e-Tender please register on the National e-GP System Portal (<http://www.eprocure.gov.bd>) is required. The fees for downloading the e-Tender documents from the National e-GP System Portal have to be deposited online through any registered bank's branches for 08.04.2025 up to 13:00 Hrs. Further information and guidelines are available in the National e-GP System Portal and from e-GP help desk ([helpdesk@eprocure.gov.bd](mailto:helpdesk@eprocure.gov.bd) (+880960912233, +880176265528-31).

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