

ABUL MANSUR AHMAD'S 46TH DEATH ANNIVERSARY

# His lament was the unfulfilled promise of democracy



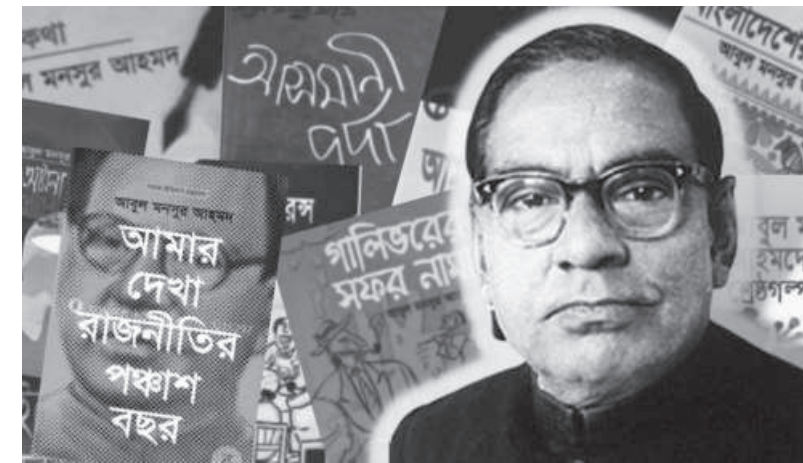
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Following the July uprising that led to the fall of autocracy, discussions on three key issues—the constitution, elections, and democracy—have gained new momentum. This is because the existing constitution has been abused at will by autocratic rulers to legitimise their authority. Amid these debates, the demand for constitutional reform, driven by aspirations for democracy, has emerged as the most prominent topic.

In this context, the thoughts of renowned writer and political thinker Abul Mansur Ahmad have resurfaced. He is one of the primary Bangalee Muslim middle-class intellectuals who documented history through the lens of politics. His widely read book, *Amar Dekha Rajnitir Ponchash Bochor* (Fifty Years of Politics as I Saw It), offers insights into many issues concerning the constitution, elections, and democracy in Bangladesh. These issues remain unresolved even after 54 years and keep resurfacing in the political discourse. Meanwhile, ordinary people continue to shed blood in pursuit of an egalitarian society.

After the 1972 constitution was drafted, Abul Mansur Ahmad raised a profound argument regarding “legislative error in the Constitution.” He wrote: “Democracy, socialism, nationalism, and secularism have been established as the fundamental principles of our state. I strongly support all four. However, in my opinion, none of them, except for democracy, should have been mentioned in the constitution as fundamental principles. Except for democracy, the rest are government policies, not state policies. If democracy is properly established, all other noble objectives will naturally be achieved. Nationalism, socialism,



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and secularism all serve the people; therefore, they benefit a democratic state. But absolute democracy is the only true guarantee of well-being. If democracy is not secured, none of the other principles will be either.”

This has indeed been the reality. The lack of democratic practice has forced us to face multifaceted crises—including authoritarian rule within political parties, one-party governance, periods of military dictatorship, and the concentration of power in the hands of a single political force. The constitution has been amended to serve vested interests. Elections became questionable, and the integrity of the constitution has been repeatedly compromised, leaving the nation's democratic aspirations frustrated year after year. And yet, no one seems to care!

Political leaders have misled the people with empty promises since independence. Abul Mansur Ahmad captured this harsh truth in his writings. He observed that although the Awami League secured an

overwhelming majority in the 1973 general elections, polls in several constituencies faced allegations of irregularities. He noted:

“Even if there were around twenty-five opposition members in a 315 member parliament, it would not have harmed the ruling party in any way. On the contrary, having parliamentarians in the opposition

This was the beginning of our downfall. Instead of cultivating good governance, leaders have continuously engaged in the politics of crisis. Yet, whenever necessary, Abul Mansur Ahmad fearlessly spoke the truth—be it in Pakistan or independent Bangladesh. This reminds me of columnist Syed Abul Maksud, who wrote nearly 15 years ago: “The unfortunate people of this country have been learning lessons on democracy from various so-called masters and gurus for nearly three-quarters of a century. They continue to study but never pass. Like Adu bhai, they remain stuck in the same class. However, the key difference between students in a traditional school or madrasa and Bangladesh's students of democracy is that it is the students who fail or pass in conventional education, but in the case of democracy, it is the teachers who are failing more than the students.”—*Prothom Alo*, September 2, 2010

In the writings of Abul Mansur Ahmad, we see examples of Sheikh Mujib's shortcomings. His writings present many such historical accounts. This book can be considered an extraordinary document covering the period from the 1920s to the 1970s.

Like many of his contemporaries, Abul Mansur Ahmad began his political journey by participating in the Krishak-Praja conference. Later, he and many others became involved in Muslim League politics. However, the Pakistan they had envisioned never materialised. It did not take long for the Bangalee middle class to become disillusioned. Once again, the cycle of struggle and resistance, and a political narrative of gains and losses began. But Abul Mansur Ahmad did not remain silent. He spoke out, wrote extensively, and took action whenever possible—sometimes as a lawyer, sometimes as a writer or journalist, and at times, as a politician.

As a guardian of political thought, he warned against the misuse of religion in politics. Yet, even today, religion continues to be exploited recklessly.

In a chapter titled “*Dhormo Shashito Rashtro, Na Rashtro Shashito Dhormo*” (Religion-

Governed State or State-Governed Religion) from his book *Beshi Dame Kena, Kom Dame Becha Amader Swadhinota*, he expressed a harsh but undeniable truth: “Those who have sought to govern the state through religion, in the end, subjected religion to the control of the state. A religion-governed state would have been ideal if it were possible. But history teaches us that it is not. Those who ignore this lesson and attempt to mix religion with politics, end up harming both. And the damage to religion is far worse for people than the damage to the state. Yet, they remain unaware of the harm they are inflicting on religion.”

Abul Mansur Ahmad fearlessly articulated many such harsh truths in various contexts. There is no inherent contradiction between the 1972 constitution and the ideals of the Liberation War in addressing social inequalities. However, their implementation has been inadequate, leading to widespread deprivation. The constitution promised equality before the law, but that promise has remained unfulfilled.

And because that promise was not fulfilled, Bangladesh's youth led an unprecedented mass uprising on July 36. Such a wave of resistance had never been seen before in the monsoon. It was reminiscent of Kazi Nazrul Islam's poetic vision of rebellion. Such revolutions are never foretold. Political science classrooms do not teach about the art of such uprisings. However, when history's lessons are ignored, people stumble at every step. Politics influences the society. Whether an individual engages in politics or not, politics never leaves them alone.

After the partition of India, it took nine years for Pakistan to formulate its first constitution. However, it remained in effect for only two years. In contrast, Bangladesh adopted its constitution in a remarkably short time after independence. The constitution came into effect on December 16, 1972. That constitution has been amended 17 times over the past 52 years—not out of care, but out of political self-interest.

Once again, calls for constitutional reform and amendments have emerged regarding this. Ironically,

those who were meant to govern have instead found themselves governed by the flaws within it. The reason for this is the ambiguities and contradictions embedded within the provisions and sub-clauses.

In this context, Akbar Ali Khan once quoted Abul Mansur Ahmad's ultimate solution for Bangladesh's constitution—that it must be truly democratic. Abul Mansur Ahmad wrote: “During the drafting of Pakistan's constitutional framework, I argued that instead of ensuring the protection of Islam, efforts should be made to safeguard democracy. For it is democracy that guarantees the protection of religion. Similarly, during the drafting of Bangladesh's constitution, I stated that socialism in Bangladesh is not at risk—democracy is. Cure democracy of its ailments, and socialism will inevitably thrive.”

Agreeing with the views expressed in *Amar Dekha Rajnitir Ponchash Bochor*, Akbar Ali Khan said, “I was somewhat surprised. For quite some time, I had been saying these things, believing them to be my observations. But then I realised—I was merely reiterating what Abul Mansur Ahmad had said long ago. Our constitution is built on four pillars—democracy, socialism, nationalism, and secularism. My argument is that in a country where democracy does not exist, secularism can never be sustained in a meaningful way.”

In this way, many of our most critical political thoughts have remained buried in obscurity. We seem to be trapped in an endless cycle, revolving around the same issues decade after decade, unable to find a way out—oscillating between political extremes under the guise of balance.

From the era of East Bengal to the early years of independent Bangladesh, Abul Mansur Ahmad raised sharp and intellectual questions about the constitution—most of which remain unresolved to this day.

We can still draw upon his ideas to navigate our crises. Thus, we may be able to restructure our society—one that we acquired at a great price. Otherwise, in the absence of democracy, we may be forced to shed blood once again!

## Are we looking at a second republic or a fourth?



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The Jatiya Nagorik Party (National Citizen Party, NCP), driven by the momentum of the anti-discrimination student movement and the Jatiya Nagorik Committee, recently proposed the establishment of what they call a “second republic” in Bangladesh. This bold declaration has reignited debate over the country's constitutional trajectory and evolving governance. At its core, the proposal seeks to redefine the state structure by reconstructing the constitution, ostensibly to prevent future authoritarian rule. But framing this moment as the “birth” of a second republic overlooks the deeper and more complex reality of the country's political evolution. Bangladesh is not on the verge of a second republic—it is transitioning into its fourth. Recognising this distinction is not just a matter of historical accuracy but is essential for understanding the true nature of the transformation underway.

In a discussion published by *Prothom Alo* English on March 1, 2025, Ariful Islam Adib, senior joint convener of NCP, elaborated on what the party envisions by a second republic. He said their vision seeks to unify the people's historical struggles into a single political moment, one that demands an entirely new constitutional order. “The first republic,” he asserts, “was the independence we gained through our great Liberation War. The constitution formulated after the War had some structural flaws, which made the government and prime ministers authoritarian and fascist.” By calling for a “second republic,” Adib and his party advocate for breaking away from

this flawed system to prevent the monopolisation of power and ensure lasting democratic stability.

This frustration with past governance failures is valid. Over the years, various groups in Bangladesh, including civil society organisations, opposition parties and, notably, student-led movements have consistently advocated for structural reforms to prevent the return of authoritarian rule. The idea of a second republic reflects a broader aspiration for a decisive break from systemic failures, rather than a series of incremental reforms. However, this framing overlooks the fact that Bangladesh has already undergone multiple political and constitutional transformations, each representing a distinct “republican” phase by promoting the sovereignty of the people in deciding their body of representatives. Consequently, defining a republic as anything beyond substantial constitutional reforms aimed at securing popular sovereignty and addressing systemic failures could risk plunging the country into a reign of terror, potentially unmanageable in our current context.

The concept of a second republic draws inspiration from countries that have undergone fundamental constitutional overhauls, most notably France and Spain. France, for instance, established its first republic in 1792 following the fall of the monarchy, only for it to collapse in 1804. The second republic (1848-1852) emerged after another revolution but was short-lived, giving way to further republics over time. Each transition marked a radical restructuring of governance,

legally and institutionally. Applying this framework to Bangladesh shows that the country already transitioned through three distinct republics before the mass uprising in July-August 2024, each marked by significant shifts in governance, national identity, and political structure, pointing towards popular sovereignty, which is a mark of the

growing authoritarian control. The assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on August 15, 1975, marked the violent end of this phase.

The second republic emerged following the military coup of November 7, 1975, bringing military-backed rule under Ziaur Rahman and later HM Ershad. This period saw an ideological shift as Zia moved

governance remained under the military's influence. It was not until 1990, when mass protests forced Ershad to resign, that Bangladesh transitioned back to civilian rule.

The third republic began with the fall of Ershad on December 6, 1990, marking the return to civilian governance under alternating leadership of the Awami League



The success of the student-led mass uprising in July-August 2024 marks a decisive break from the trajectory of ‘Hasinocratic’ authoritarianism.

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“republican” phase.

Bangladesh's first republic began with its independence in 1971 and the adoption of the 1972 constitution, which sought to establish a democratic, secular, socialist and nationalist state. This represented a significant effort to redefine the state structure in alignment with the ideals of popular sovereignty post-independence. It was an era of idealism as the new nation aimed to rebuild from the destruction of war. However, governance quickly became centralised. Political instability, economic struggles, and the shift to a one-party system under BAKSAL in 1975 led to

away from Bangalee nationalism and introduced “Bangladeshi nationalism.” In 1977, Zia removed secularism from the constitution, rehabilitated Islamic political groups, and promoted privatisation over state-controlled socialism. Although marked by military dominance, the reinstatement of a multi-party system in 1979 can be seen as an attempt to reintroduce some degree of popular participation in governance. Zia's assassination in 1981 triggered further instability, culminating in Ershad's authoritarian rule, which cemented military dominance in politics. Despite holding elections,

and BNP. At the outset of this phase, the enactment of a caretaker government system to oversee free and fair elections was seen as an attempt to ensure popular sovereignty. However, both the major parties later amended the constitution to consolidate power rather than strengthen democracy. By the time of the 2014, 2018, and 2024 elections, each widely criticised for irregularities, Bangladesh drifted further into authoritarianism, characterised by the centralisation of power, suppression of opposition, and erosion of democratic institutions under Sheikh Hasina's prolonged rule.

The success of the student-led mass uprising in July-August 2024, which led to the ouster of Sheikh Hasina on August 5, marks a decisive break from the trajectory of “Hasinocratic” authoritarianism. Bangladesh is now entering its fourth republic, not as a mere extension of the past but as a structural overhaul of the state and its constitution to prevent authoritarianism from resurfacing. This moment is critical as the country seeks to dismantle the entrenched centralisation of power that defined the Hasina era. The goal is to establish governance that is more transparent, accountable, and resistant to single-party domination, thereby moving closer to the republican ideals of popular sovereignty and systemic reform.

However, this transition must be approached without distorting history, as previous regimes have done to justify their rule. The NCP must uphold historical accuracy in its framing of the republics. The Awami League was heavily criticised for manipulating history to serve its political agenda, and any new political force must avoid the same appropriation of history. Whether one advocates for a second republic or a fourth, the fundamental goal must be to preserve historical integrity rather than rewrite history for political convenience. Understanding Bangladesh's evolution as a progression through distinct republics is crucial to ensuring that the lessons of the past inform the future.

The road ahead remains uncertain, but one fact is clear. Historical truth must not be sacrificed in the pursuit of political change. Bangladesh is entering its fourth republic, and recognising this reality is the first step towards fostering a genuinely democratic future. A steadfast commitment to truth and transparency will be essential in shaping a republic that not only learns from past mistakes but also lays the foundation for a truly democratic and accountable state.