

## A major national crisis averted

Govt must provide more clarity regarding election, reform, and trial

We are relieved that the chief adviser has not followed through on his desire to resign. All major political parties have reaffirmed their support to the chief adviser and expressed that they do not want him to step down. Thankfully, a national crisis has been averted.

At the same time, we are wondering what else, other than the chief adviser's decision to resign being reversed, has been achieved. We are waiting, for instance, to hear the chief adviser and his cabinet's response regarding the issues of contention brought forward by the BNP, Jamaat-e-Islami, and NCP. BNP has said it has placed its demands, and the chief adviser has listened. But the issues have not been resolved. The party reiterated its demand for a general election to be held by December this year and the resignation of two student representatives in the advisory council as well as the CA's national security adviser. Jamaat has demanded a timeline for the election and another for reforms and trials of Awami League leaders for their alleged role in mass killings during the July uprising. Meanwhile, the NCP has demanded reconstitution of the Election Commission, local government polls before the general election, and roadmaps to July killing trials, political reforms, and plans for parliamentary and constituent assembly polls. It also added another demand: that all national and local elections during the Sheikh Hasina regime be declared "invalid."

Thus, we are back to square one, with no visible consensus between the government and the political parties. Meanwhile, protests and lockdowns continue. Yesterday, employees of the Bangladesh Secretariat staged demonstrations inside the office premises protesting the government's initiative to amend the Government Service Act, 2018 by introducing stricter penalties. The Dhaka South Nagar Bhaban has again been padlocked by protesters who demand BNP leader Ishraque Hossain to be sworn in as the mayor following a court verdict. The NBR is in deep crisis with disgruntled employees continuing to protest, demanding the chairman's removal and the repeal of a new ordinance that splits the tax authority. Customs clearance and business operations have been hampered due to the protests. The result has been total chaos and disruption in regular public services and businesses, as well as paralysis of the city.

But, ultimately, the interim government and its chief are responsible for maintaining stability—both within the country and within the government. It must find ways to negotiate with all the political and non-political stakeholders and come to some points of convergence. The government has identified three main priorities: election, reform, and trial (of the accused in the July uprising killings). But in order to allay all uncertainties and curb the barrage of constant protests, the interim government must provide clarity regarding an election roadmap and the reforms it is undertaking.

## Address causes of child sexual abuse

Rape statistics reveal how vulnerable children are, despite legal measures

A recent report in this daily once again highlights how unsafe this country has become for children, particularly girls. Reports of rape cases compiled by Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK) and Bangladesh Mahila Parishad during the first quarter of this year show that the majority of the victims are aged below 18 years. ASK documented 342 reported cases, with 87.56 percent of known-age victims being children. Alarmingly, 40 victims were aged between infancy and six—too young to even grasp the horror inflicted on them. However, that does not appear to discourage the perpetrators, some of whom even carry out this heinous act in gangs. ASK data shows children also made up the majority of gang rape victims. Of the 84 reported gang rapes between January and April, 32 victims' ages were known, and 20 of them were minors. What does it say about our society—that before one protest over child rape ends, another child falls victim?

Last year, an analysis published in this daily based on ASK data revealed that one rape occurred every nine hours in Bangladesh and the majority of victims are girls. For adolescent girls, the situation is even worse. The 2024 Violence Against Women Survey showed that adolescent girls, whether married or not, are the most vulnerable when it comes to both intimate partner violence and non-partner violence. These findings make one thing painfully clear: in Bangladesh, a girl's age, marital status, or social position offers no protection from abuse. In fact, child marriage only reinforces patriarchal—and in some cases, predatory—attitudes towards girls. Despite progress in education and growth in the economy, we have failed to challenge the misogynistic mindset still pervasive among some men among us. Unfortunately, attempts to introduce topics in schools that provide comprehensive mental, physical and reproductive health education along with teaching and encouraging appropriate behaviours to young people have been blocked.

We have tried to address the issue of sexual violence against women with laws, which alone cannot prevent these heinous crimes. It is time the government listened to the rights bodies and took steps to break the silence regarding cases of abuse, introduced school-based safety training, improved mental health and rehabilitation services. It also needs to facilitate community engagement involving parents, teachers, and local leaders, including the religious ones, increase monitoring of cybercrimes, and address the issue of offensive contents on social media. Ultimately, we must root out misogyny from society if we hope to make Bangladesh safe for girls. Until then, our children remain vulnerable.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

### Cyclone Remal makes landfall

On this day in 2024, Cyclone Remal made landfall on the coast of Bangladesh and India's West Bengal, leading to the evacuation of hundreds of thousands of people from low-lying coastal areas. It claimed 18 lives and injured 2,503 people in Bangladesh, and heavily impacted fisheries, roads, and housing.

# EDITORIAL

## How to describe the Awami League accurately?



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In an article titled "How Not to Describe the Awami League" published in this newspaper, British journalist David Bergman rightly underscores the importance of accuracy in labelling a political party—particularly when such labels carry potential legal consequences. Those familiar with Bergman's work over the years know that he has consistently taken on politically sensitive and controversial subjects, often at significant personal and professional costs. His courage and commitment to journalistic integrity deserve recognition.

Bergman is correct in asserting that "while serious criticisms of the Awami League are both valid and necessary, they must be proportionate and grounded in fact." His analysis focuses primarily on the legal validity and appropriateness of labelling the Awami League as "fascist" or "Nazi." He argues that comparing the party to the Nazi regime trivialises the scale of Nazi atrocities and misrepresents the complexities of Bangladeshi politics.

Indeed, any historical comparison between the Nazi Party and the Awami League would be an exaggeration. The scale of violence, genocidal policies, and totalitarianism under the Nazis is unmatched. However, describing the Awami League as a "fascist" party—based on its trajectory and actions within the context of Bangladesh's political history—is not a distortion. On the contrary, it is a term that demands serious consideration.

Let's examine what defines fascism. According to *Merriam-Webster*, fascism is:

"A populist political philosophy, movement, or regime (such as that of the Fascisti) that exalts nation and often race above the individual, that is associated with a centralised autocratic government headed by a dictatorial leader, and that is characterised by severe economic and social regimentation and by forcible suppression of opposition."

The *Cambridge Dictionary* defines it as:

"A political system based on a very powerful leader, state control, and being extremely proud of (the) country and race, and in which political opposition is not allowed."

With the exception of racial supremacy, the Awami League—especially under Sheikh Hasina's

leadership—demonstrates most of these traits. It is important to acknowledge that the Awami League of today is not the same party founded by Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The party that once led the struggle for independence has undergone several transformations—dissolving into BAKSAL in 1975 and re-emerging under

Pakistan. The idolisation of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman—evident in the proliferation of his images, statues, and memorials—has fostered a cult of personality around the Sheikh family. The Awami League's grip on the state apparatus has allowed it to mobilise supporters and suppress opposition with unmatched efficiency.

The CFR also warns that, while classical fascism is historically tied to the interwar period, its characteristics can reappear in modern political contexts. Global democratic backsliding only increases the risk of such authoritarian tendencies resurfacing.

Bergman's cautious assertion that "elements of the Awami League's conduct may well resemble certain authoritarian traits of a fascist party" but that it is "inaccurate to describe it

as long ceased to function. These indicators are: rejecting democratic rules of the game; denying legitimacy to political opponents; encouraging violence; and curtailing civil liberties. All four apply to Bangladesh's current political landscape.

That said, Bergman's concerns about repression, including arbitrary arrests and politically motivated charges, are entirely valid. Justice demands that those responsible for violence—particularly against opposition members and student protesters—be held accountable. However, no one should be persecuted on fabricated or political expedient charges.

Bergman, like several commentators, seems to conflate a ban on the *activities* of the Awami League with a ban on the *party*



Describing the Awami League as a 'fascist' party is not a distortion. This photo was taken in Chattogram on July 31, 2024, at the peak of the mass movement against Sheikh Hasina and her government.

FILE PHOTO: RAJIB RAJAHAN

military rule. Since Sheikh Hasina assumed leadership in 1981, the party has been fundamentally reshaped—ideologically and structurally—into a vehicle for autocratic rule.

Recognising that fascism today is understood more broadly, the US-based think tank Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) identifies extreme nationalism, cult of personality, and mass mobilisation as hallmarks of fascist systems. Has the Awami League not exhibited these traits?

Consider how dissenters have been labelled anti-national, often branded as "Razakars" or agents of

as one" is problematic. This framing can inadvertently downplay the extent of Sheikh Hasina's authoritarian control. Party officials, including the general secretary, frequently have openly acknowledged that final decisions rest solely with the party chief. Even her son, Sajeeb Wazed Joy, once admitted that Sheikh Hasina appreciates being portrayed by Western media as an authoritarian leader.

Using the four key indicators of authoritarian behaviour identified by Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt in *How Democracies Die*, one could argue that democracy in Bangladesh

itself. The official notification only restricts its activities including use of violence, which the interim government considers can influence the judicial process adversely—not the party's existence. It is akin to placing conditions on a defendant during trial to prevent interference. This distinction matters and must be preserved to avoid further confusion.

In sum, describing the Awami League in precise and historically informed terms is essential for ensuring that political discourse in Bangladesh remains honest and grounded in reality.

## The NHRC also requires reform



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Bangladesh is at a pivotal moment in history. After one and a half decades in the tight grip of authoritarian practices, the country has now had more than nine months to begin forging a path towards a new future.

While addressing the multiple areas that are in desperate need of systemic reform, the interim government must not lose sight of the important legal and institutional reforms that can ensure an enduring respect for human rights. One such institution is the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), which could, if reformed, be key to robust oversight, redress, and accountability for human rights violations.

The NHRC has historically had glaring shortcomings in fulfilling its function as an independent mechanism to promote and monitor compliance with international standards on human rights and the rule of law. These failings led the UN accreditation body Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI) to give the NHRC a "B" rating in April 2025, for the third consecutive time since its initial accreditation, meaning that it only partially complies with international standards.

The importance of the NHRC cannot

be emphasised enough. If, during the last decade, it had functioned according to international standards, with the capacity and willingness to hold inquiries with authorities in cases of enforced disappearances and to carry out unannounced visits to detention sites, victims of human rights violations could have had an avenue for redress. Instead, it remained inefficient. Its inability to intervene for the protection of human rights reached abysmal depths during last year's July uprising, when, on July 30, the then chairman of the organisation reacted to the massacre of protesters with a mere statement calling the situation "unfortunate and a violation of human rights."

The NHRC currently stands vacant, following the resignation en masse of its commissioners in November 2024, three months after the interim government came into power. However, simply appointing new commissioners would be insufficient to ensure that the institution functions independently and effectively. Instead, several amendments must be made to its founding legislation, the National Human Rights Commission Act, 2009, to achieve this end.

International standards on human rights institutions, set out in the Paris

Principles, state that such institutions must be impartial and independent. However, the current politicised process of appointing NHRC members runs against these ideals. The process is led by a seven-member selection committee, with a majority of members from the ruling party: the speaker of the house, two ministers, the cabinet secretary, as well as a

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ruling party MP. The selection process must be participatory, inclusive and transparent. For example, a model like Sri Lanka's Constitutional Council, which has representatives from the legislature (both government and opposition) and civil society, would better ensure the respect of such principles.

The Paris Principles also require that national human rights institutions have a broad mandate and adequate powers. Such a scope would enable the NHRC to investigate

any human rights violations, collect evidence, work with civil society and government actors, and make their findings and recommendations public. Critically, the NHRC Act also stipulates that the commission's powers do not extend to matters relating to the conduct of public servants and public sector workers. These exemptions must be removed, and all public authorities, including the military, police, and intelligence agencies, must come within the NHRC's purview.

According to the Paris Principles, human rights institutions must have adequate resources to carry out their functions independently, free from external influence or the fear of financial retribution. The NHRC Act sets out that a human rights commission fund will be constituted to finance the institution. However, the fund can only be serviced by annual grants made by the government or grants made by local authorities. This provision puts the NHRC at the mercy of government funding, which may be revoked at any time. The state must be compelled by law to provide adequate funding to the commission, as part of a national budgetary allocation, to discharge its functions, with a guaranteed minimum sum that the NHRC can access without fear of revocation.

While these amendments are just the beginning in ensuring adequate oversight by the NHRC, they are indeed a matter of urgency if victims of human rights violations and abuses are to have an efficient, effective human rights mechanism to approach for redress in Bangladesh now and in the future.