

appointed. We are looking forward to someone who can lead the organisation with maturity.

We're witnessing a wave of 'wholesale' charges being brought against artistes, including serious accusations like murder. As someone regarded as a guardian of the cultural community, can you guarantee professional safety for artistes who hold differing political views or beliefs?

I absolutely do not support the practice of filing wholesale or blanket charges. It's deeply troubling.

If there are legitimate, specific allegations against someone or a group, then legal action can and should be taken against the individuals directly involved.

But accusing someone of a crime they had no proven connection to—say, linking them to an unrelated murder—is unacceptable. Allegations must be specific and grounded in evidence. No one, be it the president, prime minister, minister or an artiste, is above the law. If someone commits a crime, they must face legal consequences. But using the law to intimidate or suppress dissent is equally wrong.

Concerts were being postponed, theatre performances cancelled, and actresses harassed at opening events—often attributed to the actions of so-called "special groups". Why hasn't there been a strong and decisive response to stop these incidents?

After the mass uprising and initially after the interim took charge, the police and administration were effectively non-functional. In that vacuum, some incidents happened as we all know.

What really matters is how the state responds to those incidents. For example, every Baul concert that had been shut down subsequently took place.

We must avoid making sweeping generalisations. This year, despite everything, the cultural celebrations during Chaitra Shongkranti and Pahela Baishakh were held on an unprecedented scale. People across the country have said they've never seen such mass participation before.

What does that tell us? Bangladesh is a multicultural, multi-religious melting pot. It has always been this way, and it will remain so.

Three journalists were reportedly sacked for asking you questions. Do you have anything to say about this?

First of all, I personally am fully respectful of the personal freedom of expression. Our government is clear about its stance on journalistic freedom.

I humbly submit that no one lost their jobs for questioning me. For instance, there was a very controversial question about my wife, Nusrat Imrose Tisha, and her role in the *Mujib* biopic. Did the journalist who asked that question face any consequences? Absolutely not.

As for the three journalists now being talked about—they asked me their questions, and I responded directly at the time. For me, that issue ended right there. What happened afterwards—the online backlash and public reaction—was driven by those who participated in the uprising and by the families of the victims of July. As far as I remember, the participants of the movements and the families of the *shaheeds* were shocked because the question of whether Hasina was a proven killer was raised. July is still fresh in people's memories. It hurt them deeply.

However, we don't know why the three media outlets removed them. Neither I nor the government supports such sackings—it's uncomfortable and regrettable. I have called upon newspapers immediately after to investigate if there was any influence, direct or indirect, from the government.

On a lighter note, do you miss direction?

I miss it tremendously. I always knew that taking on this responsibility would put my filmmaking career at serious risk. Many would turn against me—but I have always followed my conscience, doing only what I believed was right. The biggest sacrifice since

filmmaking is inherently political—at least the kind of films I make. So, everything I say or do often sparks controversy. Being outspoken on social media made me a frequent target, and that has likely impacted the mindset of my audience as well. Some people may decide not to watch my film just because I didn't subscribe to their ideology, or to be precise, I stood against them.

Sometimes I wonder—would it have been better if I'd stayed silent on social media and just kept making films quietly? However the next moment, I ask myself, "Is it right for any artiste to keep quiet in the face of a mass killing just because it might cost them some loyal audiences?"

Many are also asking — now that there are no obstacles and you're in power, why aren't you releasing 'Saturday Afternoon'?

The film is already available in an international OTT platform. The people who would watch the film have seen it in their own way. There's no freshness left in it anymore, so why would someone feel there is a potential market in theatres now? It already had theatrical releases in America and Canada.

One of the longstanding issues we've faced is the false binary between religion and culture—especially the tendency to treat Islamic culture as something separate from mainstream cultural identity. This division, we believe, has contributed to a deep political crisis. That's why, from the outset, we've been focusing on two foundational ideas—'cultural inclusion' and 'cultural healing'. This process is already underway, and we're already witnessing its impact gradually.

stepping into this role has been my last directorial project, *840*, aka *Democracy PVT LTD*.

I truly consider it one of my strongest political satires. Then again, when it was released, it didn't find its audience. Right away, there was a right-wing campaign accusing me of sympathising with fascists. Simultaneously, the Awami League launched their own campaign against me.

Caught in this political storm, the film suffered greatly—it became a target of attacks and was largely neglected. But I expected this from the start. Still, I have no regrets because I'm confident *840* will be recognised for its value, even if it takes five years.

I especially miss directing—being on set. For me,

Do you intend to run in the upcoming election?

Absolutely not — I'm a filmmaker. After the uprising, when the country called, I responded. However, I'll return to filmmaking and continue making films. However, if the next government feels the need for advice on the blueprint we leave behind, I'll certainly offer my support. After all, I'm a stakeholder in this country. If I'm called upon, of course I'll share my views. To sum it up — I'm not someone looking to enter politics.

Interviewed by Sharmin Joya

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