TRANSITIONING FROM AUTOCRACY TO DEMOCRACY

The four challenges for Bangladesh

BLACK, WHITE AND GREY

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Bangladesh is in a transition phase—from autocracy to democracy. After almost 16 years of a personalistic autocracy, a popular uprising succeeded in deposing the regime in August 2024. The popular hope, in brief, is to establish a democratic accountable system of governance and prevent the recurrence of the rise of autocracy in the future. The answer to the question whether the country would succeed has implications for the future trajectory of the country as well as the body of knowledge on democratisation.

TWO CONTENDING ASPECTS OF THE JULY UPRISING
The July uprising came after at least a decade of efforts by various political parties to mount a democratic movement. While these efforts paved the way, it was a spontaneous movement of students which galvanised the people.

The uprising took place contrary to the global trend. Since 2006, the world has been witnessing serious democratic backsliding. In recent years, democratic backsliding has taken a new dimension—autocratisation has intensified. According to the Sweden-based research organisation Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute, we are amid the third wave of autocratisation: that is, not only that democratic countries are regressing, but autocratic countries are also becoming more autocratic. In 2024, as many as 45 countries were autocratising. The people of Bangladesh have been able to swim against the tide and unseat a deeply entrenched autocratic regime, facing unprecedented levels of atrocities.

On the other hand, Bangladesh's experience of overthrowing an autocratic regime through a popular uprising was not an exception. Since the early 2000s, we witnessed authoritarian regimes being toppled by popular uprisings in various countries around the globe. In the early 2000s, a series of uprisings took place in the post-Soviet states: Georgia in 2003, Ukraine in 2004, and Kyrgyzstan in 2005, for instance. We can add the 2006 Belarus protest to the list, although it didn't succeed in deposing the regime. In South Asia, Nepal's second popular uprising took place in 2006.

But the most significant movements took place in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region beginning 2010. These movements are described as the Arab Spring. Tunisia was where it all began, followed by Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Syria, among many other countries. Beyond the region, there were other instances of large-scale popular protest: for example, Thailand in 2010, Turkey in 2013, and Sri Lanka in

2022. The year 2019 was dubbed as "the year of protest."

THE LONGER VIEW
While I am referring to the uprisings in the past 25 years, popular uprisings have taken place around the globe since 1945 and, in many instances, succeeded in deposing autocratic rulers. Bangladesh is not unfamiliar to such an uprising; the 1990 uprising is a case in point. In the Philippines, the Marcos regime was toppled in 1986; in Indonesia, the Suharto regime fell in 1998; and the Velvet Revolution brought changes in Czechoslovakia in 1989. Nepal saw its first popular uprising in 1990, resulting in a seismic shift in the political landscape.

All these movements aspired not only to change the regime but also to establish a sustainable democratic system. Besides, two characteristics of these uprisings are

noteworthy: spontaneity and issue-based. In a large number of these movements, people's participation was not organised by existing political parties; instead, often in the early stage, these parties remained sceptical about the trajectory. Broad participation of diverse demographics has been a defining characteristic of these nonviolent movements. Secondly, these movements often started as single issue-based mobilisations that metamorphosed into pro-democracy movements. There are instances when a movement protesting a price hike of essentials transformed into a movement to depose the government.

THE BILLION-DOLLAR QUESTIONS
How many of these have succeeded in transitioning into democracy? It is a question which has both normative and political significance. In a study published in 2014, Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright, and Erica Frantz showed that only 41 percent of mass uprisings that ousted dictatorships after World War II were followed by democratisation. If we extrapolate the time frame to 2024, the percentage of successful uprisings is likely to be less than 40 percent. The number is unsatisfying. But it provides us with a composite picture and triggers an important question: why are not all popular uprisings succeeding in transitioning to democracy?

Transition from authoritarianism does not have a linear path. Jean Lachapelle, Sebastian Hellmeier, and Anna Lührmann wrote in 2021, "Mass movements that are able to overthrow a dictator do not always lead to democracy. Transition periods present narrow windows of opportunity in which activists face difficult decisions to build democracy and prevent authoritarian relapse." The pathway to democracy is filled with hurdles and the democrats face numerous challenges. Five of these challenges are significant: i) maintaining stability; ii) establishing/building strong institutions; iii) addressing historical grievances; iv) ensuring inclusive participation; and v) autocratic nostalgia.

Maintaining stability: The most immediate challenge to democratic transition is to maintain stability in the post-autocratic period. The upheaval disrupts the status quo and unleashes many contending forces while the government tends to be weak. The challenge of maintaining stability has several aspects, ranging from maintaining law and order to ensuring the legitimacy of the new government, especially the one that is established for the transition phase with a limited time frame. If the new government faces strong opposition from former authoritarian factions, maintaining stability becomes a challenge and often offsets its endeavours.

Economic downturn after an uprising is a likely scenario and has happened in many instances. It is largely because during an autocratic rule, a kleptocratic economic system is institutionalised and capital flights become a common phenomenon. Often, those who are key economic players with control over the market have close affiliation with the fallen regime and have little incentive to cooperate with the transitional government. These cause economic hardships, which is very much likely to fall on the marginalised groups and the middle class. This creates a serious hindrance to immediate governance and long-term transformation. The experiences of the past 25 years show that most of the countries in the MENA region failed to maintain stability, which led to widespread unrest and civil

wars in some instances. Some have managed to maintain it. Sri Lanka is a case in point.

Rebuilding institutions: Robust and independent institutions, such as a fair electoral system, an impartial judiciary and free press, are essential to democracy. However, the new government inherits these institutions which are weak and corrupt. Often, these institutions are hollowed out. The length and nature of authoritarianism determines the contours and power of these institutions; during personalistic autocracy, these institutions become loyal to the autocrat. Deinstitutionalisation is a key feature of personalistic autocracy. Transitioning while maintaining the status quo within these institutions has proven to be difficult.

Experiences of various democratic transitions demonstrate that two institutions emerge as critical elements in the immediate aftermath of the downfall of autocrats: the judiciary and the military/security apparatuses. In Egypt, a tussle between the Morsi government and the judiciary became a key issue after the Muslim Brotherhood was elected in the first election after the fall of Hosni Mubarak's regime in 2011. A military council ruled the country during the interregnum (Feb 2011-June 2012). But under Morsi's tenure, the military declined to be subservient to the civilian authority. As Omar Ashour wrote in 2013, "The ultimate test of any democratisation process is asking whether the elected civilian institutions are in control of the armed institutions or not." In Egypt, it was not, and the 2013 coup brought the military back to power.

In Sudan, the military, although initially appearing neutral and occasionally supportive, played key roles. The collapse of the civilian-military partnership developed after the uprising due to the military's reluctance to cede power, engendering a

authoritarianism, or systematically vitiated the process which contributed to the survival of an autocratic regime. Besides, whether those who remained supportive of the regime but didn't participate in the violence should be given space is a vexing question. This becomes a major issue regarding the authoritarian successor parties. As James Loxton wrote in 2016, "Authoritarian successor parties—or parties that emerge from authoritarian regimes but that operate after a transition to democracy—are one of the most common features of the global democratic landscape." Fortunately, in most cases of transition, autocratic regime parties have seen leadership changes, ideological reframing, and a desire to remain relevant by adjusting their positions.

Resurgence of autocratic nostalgia: The democratisation process, especially after an uprising which has experienced violence or resulted in collapse of state apparatuses, was followed by disorder and instability. There are several reasons for the disorder. One of the principal reasons is the weakening of the law and order agencies. But it is also because of the rise of contending forces to capture the vacuum created by the departure of the previous regime. Under the circumstances, some citizens long for "stability." Nadia Jmal described the phenomenon "as a longing for the authoritarian past. It seems to indicate more than a mere sentimental longing for the 'good old days.'" She further noted, "It also reflects how political, economic, and social dissatisfaction with the present opens the possibility for backsliding under precarious democratic transition." The phenomenon is also called "autocratic nostalgia." In recent years, we have seen this phenomenon in the MENA region. Studies have highlighted this as a roadblock in Tunisia. Often, this is a result of misinformation and disinformation by the supporters of the deposed regime

VISUAL: **SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR**

coup and plunging the country into a civil war among the factions of the military. In Tunisia, the military remained on the sideline except on security issues and protected its corporate interests, which impeded democratic transition but did not derail it altogether. In Sri Lanka, the military remained indifferent to the changes.

No democratic transition is complete without targeting abuse, eradicating torture, and annulling the impunity of security services, with effective and meaningful civilian control of both the armed forces and the security establishment.

Addressing historical grievances: Injustices, such as human rights violations or corruption, abound in an autocratic regime. These create deep divisions and require attention, both in the short and long terms. In many instances, these injustices, especially when these are perpetrated against ethnic or religious groups or regions, create a fault line. No government overseeing the transition or having assumed the role of ruling the country can suspend the question of addressing it for long. But it becomes contentious and sensitive because of the possibility of abuse by dominant groups. In post-conflict societies, truth and reconciliation (T&R) processes have been established, or significant legal reforms have been made to address the issue of historical grievances. While space would not allow going into the details of each effort of T&R, we can best describe the results as "mixed": for example, success in South Africa and not-so-much in El Salvador. However, one lesson has been clear in that the T&R process can neither be an exoneration process nor a tool for vengeance. The process should be crafted in such a manner that distinction between the two is easily discernible. Above all, justice for serious crimes such as crimes against humanity must be ensured.

Ensuring inclusive participation: Ensuring inclusivity is a serious challenge for a polity during democratic transition. There is no disagreement about the need for participation of diverse groups and voices. But the thorny question is how to engage those who have been part of the previous regime, especially those who have undermined democracy, perpetrated violence, adopted ideology of

with a deliberate goal to resist democratic reforms and undermine the consolidation of democracy.

These challenges make the transition process fragile; resilient authoritarian structures and practices often act to foil the transition process altogether.

The preceding discussion gives us some general clues drawing on the global experience of recent decades as to what the primary challenges are faced by governments during the transition process. But there are other challenges that are specific to countries undergoing a transition process.

CHALLENGES TO DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION IN BANGLADESH
When we speak of challenges to a country, we usually imply challenges to the government. In a normal time, it is natural that we hold the government responsible and underscore the challenges it faces. These are day-to-day issues of governance. But when a country is undergoing a democratic transition, the challenges to the process should not be viewed as challenges to the government alone.

In 2025, as Bangladesh is amid a transition process, there are four challenges that are not exclusively of the interim government's but of the entire political class—or we can say of all the political forces.

Peaceful transition: Peaceful transition to a democratic system requires a peaceful and orderly election; countries that have succeeded in transitioning to democracy, at varying degrees, have been successful in organising peaceful elections. The experience of transition in Eastern Europe in the 1990s, the Philippines in the 1980s, and in Sri Lanka after 2022, for example, bear this out. On the contrary, in the entire MENA region, except for Tunisia, this is what lacked and pushed these countries to violence in the long run.

While it is the responsibility of the transitional government to organise the election, the stake is far greater for the political parties who would like to see the transition to ensure that an election is not only a matter of who would get to power, but the first step to close the chapter on authoritarian regimes. This requires openness, ability to compromise,

and making concessions as the process is organised and unfolds. Political rivals must work together. The timing of the election is not inconsequential, but two points are important: first, whether it allows it to be orderly and peaceful, and second, whether the political parties can agree to a *modus operandi* that their behaviour won't be an impediment to the process. Otherwise, it would help justify the previous regime's sham elections. The transitional government, in this instance, the interim government, will have to lead the process. But it alone cannot ensure it.

Reforming the rule of the game: Bangladesh's history of governance, not only of the 15 and a half years but also of the past 53 years, has made it evident that return to "business as usual" is not an option for democratisation. If the institutions had worked, structures were supportive of

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democracy, and laws were for the people, the country would not have been here. It is imperative to make structural changes to prevent a recurrence of the past. For example, the constitutional provisions that have enabled the rise of autocracy need to be revised, amended, and rewritten as needed. New institutions need to be built to create accountability mechanisms. Importantly, the inadequacies of the existing constitutional provisions, laws and institutional structures need to be acknowledged.

It is erroneous to think that all reforms are the interim government's responsibility—so is the understanding that as the reform process is a continuous endeavour, we can wait to address it at a later time. In fact, it is the responsibility of the political parties to commit and create a binding agreement with the citizens on fundamental reforms. This is the opportunity to create a new social contract. Compromise is key to this success; in some instances, transcending the party's interests is imperative. But institutional reforms, or lip service to the reforms, will fall flat, even in a short term, unless there is a change in the political culture: how parties select their leaders, how they act within the larger political domain.

Trials of the autocrats: Democratisation, after a violent past, requires addressing the crimes committed under the previous regime. Those who bear the "command responsibility" must be tried, otherwise they will be emboldened. The behaviour of the leaders of the Sheikh Hasina regime after the uprising—especially their lack of remorse, unwillingness to accept the responsibility, and threats of reprisal—are deeply worrying. These behaviours are different from other instances, except in those situations where the country descended into a civil war. As the governance of the previous regime was largely based on force, violations of human rights were rampant, and there have been many instances of crimes against humanity under the Rome Statute, to which Bangladesh is a signatory.

Preparing for the great game: Global geopolitics has been in flux over the past decades; the rise of China and resurgence of Russia combined with the weakening of the US's global role have made the situation volatile. With impulsive characteristics of the Trump administration and policies of protectionism and "go alone" attitude, the world will witness more volatility in the near future. For Bangladesh, the challenge is not only to navigate through the great game that has started in the Asia-Pacific region but also to face a hostile neighbour. India, which extended all-out support to the Hasina regime, shows no interest to recalibrate its policy towards Bangladesh. Harbouring Hasina is one thing; allowing her to engage in instigating violence is a different matter. The interim government is managing daily diplomacy, but it cannot devise a long-term strategy. That is why the political forces, whether vying for power in the future, should delineate their perspectives and strategy where possible.

The July uprising in 2024 created an opportunity of democratic transition, but its success is not guaranteed as the global experience. How the political forces in Bangladesh deal with these challenges will have a determining effect on the transition process and the trajectory of the country.

The opinion expressed in this article is the author's own and does not represent any commission the author is involved with.