

## A troubling trend in relations emerging

India's latest trade restriction shows the need for dialogue

It is difficult to imagine how the strained India-Bangladesh relations can improve with India continuing to hint at its desire to do otherwise. India's recent decision to ban the import of certain jute products and woven fabrics from Bangladesh via land ports follows a series of measures that appear to be further distancing the two countries in terms of trade engagement—developments that will undoubtedly affect overall bilateral relations.

According to a new notification from the Indian Directorate General of Foreign Trade, several Bangladeshi products will now be subject to new port restrictions. These include jute products, flax tow and waste, jute and other bast fibres, single flax yarn, single yarn of jute, multiple folded, woven fabrics or flex, and unbleached woven fabrics of jute. The import of these items from Bangladesh will no longer be permitted through any land port along the India-Bangladesh border; instead, they will only be allowed entry via the Nhava Sheva seaport. These port restrictions, however, will not apply to Bangladeshi exports to Nepal and Bhutan transiting through India.

In May, India had already imposed restrictions on the import of garments, agro-processed foods, furniture, and other goods from Bangladesh through land ports. The export of garments—the single largest category of Bangladeshi exports to India—was limited to entry through two seaports: Kolkata and Nhava Sheva. Reportedly, this change was introduced without any formal prior communication from Delhi. It followed India's earlier decision in April—again, without advance notice—to suspend transhipment facilities for Bangladeshi cargo bound for third countries via Indian land borders, raising concerns about a tightening trade regime.

Bangladesh, for its part, blocked Indian yarn imports on April 13 through the Benapole, Bhomra, Bangabandha, Burimari, and Sonamajid land ports. The justification provided was the need to protect the domestic textile and spinning industries from Indian raw material imports.

For decisions that impact millions of dollars in trade and the livelihoods of exporters and importers on both sides, such a lack of engagement and transparency is unbefitting of neighbours with closely interlinked economies. Even if such restrictions are genuinely necessary, they should be introduced through proper dialogue, with clear intent and phased implementation, to minimise harm to either—or both—parties.

The absence of communication, and the pattern that is emerging, suggest that these decisions are being driven more by political messaging than by economic rationale. This, inevitably, will affect bilateral relations. With the global economic order undergoing significant disruption, both countries must ask themselves whether damaging trade and mutual relations is truly in their best interest—or whether, in doing so, they are simply shooting themselves in the foot.

## Ensure justice for the disappeared

Hold those responsible for enforced disappearances to account

The United Nations Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances has expressed deep concerns over the widespread impunity surrounding enforced disappearances in the country and has called on Bangladesh to ensure genuine accountability from its security, law enforcement, and intelligence agencies. Following a four-day visit to the country, it published a report highlighting these concerns. We echo the UN's concerns, as we still await a full account of the state-sponsored human rights violations that occurred during the 15-year rule of the Awami League. After the July uprising that led to the fall of the AL government, the public expected that those responsible for such grave human rights abuses would be held accountable. Unfortunately, we have yet to see significant progress in the investigation of these enforced disappearance cases.

Soon after taking office, the interim government established a commission to investigate all cases of enforced disappearances. It also ratified the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, making Bangladesh accountable to international human rights bodies. The commission has verified 1,350 cases of disappearance and identified 16 secret detention centres, known as Aynaghar, which were used for torture. Evidence suggests that these were not isolated incidents, but part of a coordinated system operated under centralised authority. Investigations revealed that state security forces, including the RAB, DGFI, and the Detective Branch, were directly involved in these grave human rights violations. As highlighted in a fact-finding report by the United Nations Human Rights Office (OHCHR), the AL government systematically abused the justice system and security apparatus to suppress civil society, targeting journalists, activists, and dissenting voices through intimidation and enforced disappearances. Such practices must stop once and for all. The next elected government must make a firm commitment that such grave human rights violations will never be repeated in future.

To deliver justice in these cases and to prevent future human rights violations, the state must ensure full accountability and uphold fair trial standards in all judicial proceedings, as emphasised by the UN Working Group. Preserving the evidence properly is of utmost importance. Survivors of enforced disappearances have recently called on the government to establish independent oversight mechanisms for all security and intelligence agencies, while also urging the state to formally acknowledge the role of these agencies in past rights violations, which is critical in ensuring justice for the victims. Furthermore, the repressive laws such as the Special Powers Act, 1974, and the Anti-Terrorism (Amendment) Act, 2013, which have reportedly been used to justify extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, and enforced disappearances—and are also incompatible with international human rights standards—must be repealed. Last but not least, the security institutions must regain public trust and legitimacy "through genuine accountability processes within these institutions," as the UN Working Group has suggested.

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### SIBBIR AHMAD

In Bangladesh, authoritarianism began with a knock on a dorm room door. For over 15 years, in Bangladesh's public universities, thousands of students were summoned late at night—not by professors, but by enforcers of the ruling regime. They were called to "guest rooms" in student dormitories, spaces informally repurposed by the ruling party's student wing, the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), and interrogated.

There, the violence began.

The accused were questioned about their activity, network, and political loyalty. Did they post or like anything critical of the government? Were they connected to any opposition group, or even suspected of sympathising with one? Did they share a video of a speech? Miss a rally? Fail to pay tribute to the prime minister's father?

Once labelled disloyal, they were beaten with cricket stumps and iron rods, burned with cigarettes, slapped, kicked, and in some cases, thrown from balconies. Some were left permanently disabled. Others never came back.

This was not random violence; it was regime policy.

Under Sheikh Hasina's increasingly authoritarian rule, Bangladesh was governed not by popular mandate but through the manufacturing of fear. Elections were rigged. Courts were manipulated. Dissent was criminalised. But the most enduring frontline of repression was found not in the courtroom or the ballot box, but in the dormitory corridors of the nation's public universities.

Why the dorms? Because historically, students have been at the frontline of resistance to authoritarianism in Bangladesh.

From the 1952 language movement to the anti-autocracy uprisings of the 1990s, it has always been students—not generals, not elites—who sparked Bangladesh's most powerful political transformations. The Hasina regime understood this better than anyone. As long as campuses remained free, so did the possibility of resistance. And so, her administration didn't merely surveil universities, it occupied them.

BCL, later banned as a terrorist organisation, acted as a de facto paramilitary force. They controlled room allocations, ran dormitory surveillance, and summoned one

or more students at a time for questioning—interrogations that blurred into beatings. According to a 2024 report by Socchar: Torture Watchdog Bangladesh, 78 percent of the victims were non-political students, targeted for things as trivial as skipping a rally, liking a Facebook post, or wearing a religious cap.

One student was beaten with a hammer and left with shattered bones. Another was thrown from a fourth-storey balcony. A female student was stripped, filmed, and blackmailed. Students were offered urine to drink when they begged for water. Soft drinks were given between beatings to rehydrate them so the torture could continue.

And no one intervened.

Not friends. Not university officials. Not the police. The institutions that should have protected

the streets, they did something far more dangerous: they took back the dormitories.

Roommates heard the screams but dared not intervene. Friends distanced themselves from the victims to avoid becoming targets. Parents checked their phones every night, fearing the worst. An entire generation lived under the doctrine of survival through silence.

Socchar's interviews with victims capture this with chilling clarity. Survivors speak of nightmares, isolation, dropped studies, and years of anxiety. One student, tortured over a decade ago, has still not returned to Dhaka—too afraid to set foot in the capital.

This model of repression reflects what scholars of authoritarian regimes describe as "the politics of

the streets, they did something far more dangerous: they took back the dormitories.

The first act of revolution was the liberation of the halls. Students expelled the BCL from university campuses across the country, reclaiming the very spaces that had long been outposts of terror. The same dorm rooms that once echoed with screams now echoed with resistance.

This seismic shift triggered a chain reaction. When the dormitories fell, so did the fear—and then the regime itself. Sheikh Hasina, who had remained in power through administrative muscle, manipulated courts, elections devoid of legitimacy, and a culture of fear, was forced to flee. Her downfall began not in parliament or on the streets, but in the dorm rooms her regime once used



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

students became their betrayers. Administrators loyal to the regime looked the other way or helped compile target lists. Law enforcers arrested victims under fabricated charges. Perpetrators were rewarded with government jobs, academic posts, and scholarships abroad. In Hasina's Bangladesh, brutality wasn't punished, it was promoted.

Between 2009 and 2024, BCL perpetrated hundreds of violent incidents across university campuses, resulting in thousands of injuries, sexual assaults, and deaths. While survivors may have healed from their physical wounds, the psychological scars—the long-term trauma they

fear." In autocratic systems where elections are manipulated and opposition is silenced, violence serves not just to punish dissent, but to prevent even its imagination. Fear is engineered to fragment solidarity and extinguish embryonic resistance, especially in universities, the historic cradle of social movements.

But authoritarian control is never total.

In July 2024, that fear finally cracked. Students ignited a mass uprising against a rigged job quota system that disproportionately benefited ruling party loyalists. What began as a protest soon became a revolution. But before taking to

to control a nation.

Let that be remembered.

Because the regime that ruled with terror did not fall to international sanctions or elite negotiations. It fell to the courage of students who, after years of silence, finally said: enough.

To move forward, Bangladesh must institutionalise justice. Independent commissions must investigate campus torture. Perpetrators must be prosecuted. Student politics should be banned from dormitories. Universities must offer trauma support for survivors. Most importantly, the country must declare, clearly and permanently, that no student shall ever again be tortured for an opinion.

## How to quiet Dhaka's horn habit



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### MD KARIMUL ISLAM

If you are a pedestrian or a regular commuter in a city like Dhaka, the constant blare of vehicle horns is an unavoidable part of your everyday life.

A few months ago, I visited an ENT specialist for a temporary ear issue. I shared my concerns about the relentless noise pollution on the roads, especially from motorbikes, buses, and private cars. To my surprise, the doctor revealed that he, like many others, had replaced his car horn because the original one made too low a sound to reach commuters' ears. What does this signify? Are we unknowingly adapting to an increasingly aggressive acoustic environment, risking our mental well-being and gradually damaging our natural hearing?

In Dhaka, traffic noise far exceeds tolerable levels. According to the UNEP Frontiers 2022 report, the city's traffic generates up to 119 decibels (dB)—the highest among the reported countries. The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends that long-term exposure to noise from road traffic should not exceed 53 dB during the day-evening-night period and 45 dB during the night to avoid adverse consequences on health. UNEP data shows that a motorbike

horn alone typically produces around 90 dB, often louder in congested Bangladeshi streets. I consider this a form of torture for every commuter—though less so for those in air-conditioned vehicles.

WHO warns that regular exposure to such noise can rupture the ear's tympanic membrane and cause sleep disruption, cardiovascular disease, cognitive impairment, and hearing loss. The UNEP report states that in Europe, long-term exposure to environmental noise contributes to 48,000 new cases of ischaemic heart disease and 12,000 premature deaths annually. Can we imagine the numbers for Bangladesh? Sadly, we lack the data.

Bangladesh has laws for controlling noise pollution, but enforcement remains feeble. The Noise Pollution (Control) Rules 2006 prohibit sound levels above 50 dB in silent areas, 55 dB in residential zones, and 70 dB in commercial zones during the day. Violators may face jail, fines, or both. However, penalties are rare.

One reason for this weak enforcement is the lax approach to holding violators accountable. The 2006 rules set a maximum noise limit of 85 dB for motor vehicles,

measured 7.5 metres from the silencer pipe. But continuous monitoring and enforcement are difficult. If someone lodges a complaint verbally or in writing, the authorities may act after an investigation. A lack of manpower further hampers intervention. Though the rules offer comprehensive sound management guidelines, a dedicated policy for road traffic noise, with ongoing monitoring and accountability mechanisms, could be more effective.

The Ministry of Environment, Forest, and Climate Change announced stricter measures against unregulated horns in November last year. This is a bold step, but doubts remain. For any new policy to succeed, it must address the limitations of past efforts, especially how violators will be held accountable. Without meaningful reform, the status quo will continue.

The ministry also launched a nationwide awareness campaign to discourage noise pollution. While potentially impactful, I observed some early pilots in Dhaka and found vehicles honking even louder in front of campaigners. Honking is deeply ingrained among drivers; awareness alone will not change that. Campaigns must be paired with effective penalties.

But enforcement raises practical questions: How do we track if a vehicle exceeds horn limits at every junction or road? Will the government install decibel meters everywhere? Can noise be traced to individual vehicles? And who will enforce these rules—the traffic police or a new unit?

Declaring certain areas as silent

zones seems a simpler option. Yet this too fails without proper enforcement. A report by *The Business Standard* found that sound pollution rose by nearly 1 percent in a designated silent zone near Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport in October 2024.

So, what can the authorities consider? First, clear communication. Residential, commercial, industrial, or mixed-use areas should be properly demarcated, and sound limits communicated. Public awareness of health risks should extend beyond symbolic demonstrations and be amplified through media and street campaigns.

Second, target the problem at the source. Vehicle fitness tests should prioritise horn type and volume. High-decibel horns, including hydraulic types, must be banned. Imported vehicles should retain their original, environmentally friendly horn systems, with no post-import modifications allowed. Incentives for quieter horns and classification of alterations as offences under updated rules could help ensure compliance.

Another innovative solution is a mobile app that allows citizens to measure and report vehicle noise levels instantly. Real-time data would empower authorities to monitor and fine offenders more effectively.

Sound pollution is a complex, long-term challenge. Yet cultural change—supported by improved road infrastructure, noise barriers, clear regulations, health education, and research-based soundscape planning—can lead to meaningful noise reduction over time.