Looking at the July uprising through Actor-Network Theory

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"Action is not done under the full control of consciousness; action should rather be felt as a node, a knot, and a conglomerate of many surprising sets of agencies that have to be slowly disentangled."

— *Bruno Latour (2005)*

When protests swept across Bangladesh in July-August 2024, culminating in the collapse of the Sheikh Hasina regime, the dominant narratives pointed to rising food prices, suppression of electoral rights, and widespread public dissatisfaction. But to understand the complexity and temporality of the July uprising, we need a conceptual apparatus that doesn't reduce cause and effect to binaries of state vs people or elite vs masses. The Actor-Network Theory (ANT), developed by thinkers like Bruno Latour, Michel Callon, and John Law, offers just such a lens.

ANT shifts the analytical gaze away from centralised actors and towards heterogeneous assemblages of human and non-human agents, each contributing agency through a web of interactions. It is not people alone who make revolutions; rather, power is distributed, negotiated, and performed through constellations of bodies, technologies, infrastructures, discourses, and materialities. By tracing how these actors align, disalign, and realign over time, ANT allows us to reassemble the political landscape not as a stable structure, but as a networked effect, always at risk of coming undone.

A revolution of actants

What emerged in July-August 2024 was a perfect storm—not in the metaphorical sense of a rare confluence of disasters but, in ANT's terms, a dense network of actors aligning across domains of affect, infrastructure, economy, and narrative.

Latour's insistence that action should be felt not as a conscious decision but as a "node, a knot, and a conglomerate of many surprising sets of agencies" is particularly useful here. The July uprising was not just the sum of autonomous decisions; it was the effect of entangled agencies acting in concert and contradiction. Streets became stages where crowds moved with semi-intentional choreography, guided by calls from loudspeakers, updates from X feeds, or the sudden dispersal caused by a water cannon. The logic of revolt emerged not from centralised strategy but from the recursive entanglement of all these actors, human and non-human.

Seen through ANT, the July uprising was a networked event, a convergence of actors both familiar and unexpected. University students were joined by school-goers, informal sector labourers, disenfranchised voters, and retired bureaucrats, among many others. But no less significant were skyrocketing rice prices, delayed electricity bills, tear gas canisters, Facebook livestreams, and leaked videos of police brutality. These were not mere backdrops to human agency but active participants in shaping public perception, coordination, and rage. ANT's refusal to grant ontological privilege to humans alone foregrounds how non-humans like hashtags (#DownWithHasina), barricades, and even monsoon downpours shaped the rhythms of revolt. A protester's banner reading "Give me rice or give me justice" was not only a slogan but a node in a wider network of affective mobilisation.

Even the topography of the protests took on meaning through ANT's framework. The occupation of intersections and symbolic siege of ministry buildings all functioned as non-verbal scripts performed by crowds and urban architecture alike. Roads became political actors—so did curfews and roadblocks. These spatial and material conditions produced feedback loops in which visibility, vulnerability, and solidarity were reconfigured in real time.

Translating discontent

Central to ANT is the notion of "translation"—how actors enrol others into a network, often redefining roles in the process. The uprising did not spring from ideological coherence but from the strategic translation of disparate grievances. Some political parties, left-leaning student alliances, religious groups, and civil society organisations constructed temporary alignments around slogans that floated free of fixed referents.

"Down with Hasina" became a capacious signifier, suturing together demands for electoral reform, food security, dignity in labour, and democratic governance. The interim government that emerged post-uprising was itself not a fixed solution, but a provisional actor within this new network, one that could stabilise or unravel depending on how actants continued to assemble.

The translation was not without friction. Competing visions of post-uprising Bangladesh jostled for primacy. Some sought immediate elections; others wanted a truth and reconciliation commission. Still others demanded reparative justice for the dead and disappeared. ANT reminds us that these differences do not weaken the network but demonstrate its dynamism and ongoing negotiation.

Fragility, mediation, and reversibility

ANT emphasises that networks are never permanent. Their stability relies on continuous performance and negotiation. For long, the Hasina regime relied on a network of security forces, foreign investment, bureaucratic compliance, and digital surveillance. But when segments of that network began to disaggregate—as seen in police defections, muted international responses, and media platforms turning critical—the regime's performative power faltered.

Meanwhile, protest networks expanded transnationally. Diaspora activism, international human rights statements, IMF warnings, and viral TikToks all introduced new nodes that exerted pressure on local dynamics. Each new actant either reinforced or challenged the existing topology of power.

Seen through ANT, the July uprising was a networked event, a convergence of actors both familiar and unexpected. The photo was taken at Central Shaheed Minar in Dhaka on August 2, 2024. FILE PHOTO: **PALASH KHAN**

Crucially, ANT helps us see that power is not possessed but enacted through these fluctuating relations.

Equally important is ANT's insight that the collapse of a regime is not the end of a network but a transformation. The Hasina regime's fall did not erase its network; it reconfigured it. Some institutions adapted; others resisted. The military's neutrality, for instance, became a pivotal actant.

Technopolitics and infrastructural breakdown

Technology played a vital role as a mediating actor. Smartphones, VPNs, mobile banking apps, and content moderation algorithms shaped how information flowed and resistance formed. The failure of certain infrastructural systems—supply chains, energy grids, and digital transactions—also acted as silent insurrections against the state's claim to order and efficiency.

ANT understands these not as background conditions but as relational disruptions that recalibrate agency. A power outage in Chattogram was as much a political actor in the uprising as a protest march in Dhaka. In this sense, the uprising was as infrastructural as it was ideological.

Moreover, the sheer visibility of infrastructural breakdown became a form of counter-legitimacy. When people waited in line for hours for cooking oil or faced sudden disruptions in mobile banking, these daily inconveniences became discursive weapons, channelled into rants on social media, street slogans, and graffiti. ANT allows us to see how this cascade of micro-failures activated macro-political consequences.

Reassembling networks in motion

What emerges from this ANT-inflected reading is not a catalogue of causes but a dynamic cartography of entanglements. Rather than asking why the revolt happened or who made it happen, we begin to see how agency was dispersed, re-routed, and recursively enacted through volatile connections. ANT enables us to perceive these shifting assemblages as the very medium of political possibility. The uprising thus resists closure—not because it was unfinished in terms of outcomes, but because its very structure was one of continuous rearticulation. Before we speak of conclusions, we must acknowledge this provisionality.

ANT does not offer moral judgement or teleology. It offers a method for tracing how associations form, dissolve, and recombine. The July uprising in Bangladesh was not the result of a single cause or charismatic leadership. It was a dense choreography of actors assembling into momentary consensus, driven as much by affect and infrastructure as by slogans or manifestos.

In retrospect, to ask who led the uprising is the wrong question. The better question, from ANT's perspective, is: what network of humans and non-humans made the uprising visible, thinkable, and actionable? The answer lies not in the linear history of regime change but in the topology of connection—a cartography of revolt that remains provisional, reversible, and still unfolding.

ANT invites us to remain attentive to the unfinished nature of political transformation. The networks that brought down the Hasina regime are not inherently emancipatory; they are heterogeneous, unstable, and constantly in flux. What they do offer, however, is a method for tracking the emergence of new possibilities and the contestations that accompany them.

The energy politics in recent wars

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The world today is observing the aftermath of the Israel-Iran conflict, while the war in Gaza rages on. While numerous columns have delved into both these conflicts, the intricate association between energy politics and these conflicts has received little attention. The powerful impact that fossil fuel energy sources have had on international geopolitics, particularly in the Middle East, since the 20th century is not only undeniable, but entrenched within the domestic and international political economy.

Fossil fuels, particularly oil and gas, lie at the heart of the contemporary global economic system. Thus, it is hardly surprising that control over oil resources not only became critical for national economies, but also deeply intertwined with geopolitics. This has the potential to incite violent competition among multiple entities, including governments and oil corporations, as a result of which armed conflicts become almost inevitable. A vast majority of all oil-rich regions and their neighbouring countries which have oil or gas pipelines passing through them have been centres of long-drawn out bloody conflicts. Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Ukraine are prime examples, and of course, Iran and Palestine.

Ever since oil was first extracted there in the early 20th century, Iran's history throughout the world wars and the ensuing eras has revealed the consequences of aggressive political behaviour by foreign powers with regard to petroleum resources. Today, Iran holds about 24 percent of the Middle East's and 12 percent of global oil reserves, producing about 3.3 million barrels of crude oil per day. Its proven natural gas reserves are second in the world, estimated at 1,200 trillion cubic feet (34 trillion cubic metres), accounting for 16 percent of global reserves. These vast reserves of oil and natural gas have enticed governments and oil corporations who are desperate for cheap, valuable fuels for their industries.

The beginning of the foreign exploitation of Iran's oil can be traced back to the start of World War I. Decades later, following the end of World War II, the conflict between the Soviet Union and the West for Iran's petroleum was a big part of the Cold War. A few years later, in 1953, the democratically elected Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh was overthrown by the combined efforts of the Western coalition after he demanded a larger share of the oil profits for the Iranians. The Western powers then provided full ruling authority to Shah Reza Pahlavi who was far more accommodating of the West's oil demands.

However, following the Shah's ouster in 1979, the subsequent regime took back control of its petroleum and natural gas reserves. This could be pinned down as the main underlying cause of the present conflict between Iran and the West. It is for this reason that the West endorsed and supported Israel's execution of Operation Rising Lion against Iran. While the narrative spread by the Israeli and Western authorities centred on the allegation that Iran was developing nuclear weapons, this was undoubtedly done with the clear objective of weakening the regime, and paving the path for a regime change, just like 1953 and for the same reasons.

While the West's interest in Iran's oil has always been quite straightforward, Israel's energy politics with regard to Iran is deeply connected with its unrelenting military campaign in Gaza. Charlotte Dennett, an investigative journalist covering the Middle East, pointed out in a 2023 column that the campaign was likely influenced by the discovery of oil and natural gas off the coast of Gaza, Israel, and Lebanon in 2000 and 2010, worth nearly $500 billion. Following the talks on drilling in the Gaza marines by the Palestinian authorities and Israel's subsequent intervention, Operation Cast Lead was launched against Gaza at the end of 2008. This marked the beginning of a long series of military onslaughts, finally culminating in the ongoing war that started on October 7, 2023. In this case, the overt narratives centred around the political issues of uprooting Hamas and getting back the hostages they had kidnapped, but the covert objective is presumably linked with, among others, Gaza's location in the Mediterranean coast along the potential militarised energy corridor.

Iran is geo-economically linked to this energy corridor through the trans Israel pipeline that extends from the Eilat port on the Gulf of Aqaba in the Red Sea to Ashkelon on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. This pipeline was originally built to transport crude oil from Iran to Europe, via Israel. Unfortunately for Israel and the West, Iran stopped using the pipeline after severing relations with them in 1979.

Thus, it is natural to contend that a regime change in Iran would result in the reopening of the pipeline. If that were to happen, Israel's position as the main energy corridor in the Middle East would be solidified, bypassing Russia to become the main energy provider to Europe. Additionally, the Ben Gurion Canal Project, which will connect the Saudi Arabian city of Noem to Israel's Haifa, is also underway. Once completed, this would ensure the West's and Israel's complete control over the oil and gas reserves and all the critical pipelines in almost the entire Middle East.

Throughout the decades, the unrelenting demand for cheaper and accessible fossil fuel resources has claimed thousands of innocent lives in this region. Within an economic system that is built on maximising profits by any means possible, with little space for ethics or empathy, this is to be expected. As Dennett contends, the Israel-West coalition is likely taking the "long view," convincing themselves that the world will forget the atrocities in Gaza and Iran once economic development takes off in the Mediterranean coast and Israel emerges as a new powerful, strategic energy hub. But will the world truly forget or forgive the brutal mass killings in exchange for an industrialised zone and luxury resorts? As long as the collective conscience of humans does not disappear, the answer would be no.

Furthermore, it is time for global society, from individual level up to the ruling class, to reflect on the true cost of this global neo-liberal economic system and the pervasive culture of consumption. Especially when this system and model of economic development is driven by limited supply of fossil fuels, the stakes reach much higher than violent, genocidal competition for oil and gas. In addition to human lives, there is a massive environmental cost in the form of global warming and large-scale toxic pollution that results from wars. Energy politics of petroleum is thus not only a grave danger to the conflict-ridden nations but also the planet itself.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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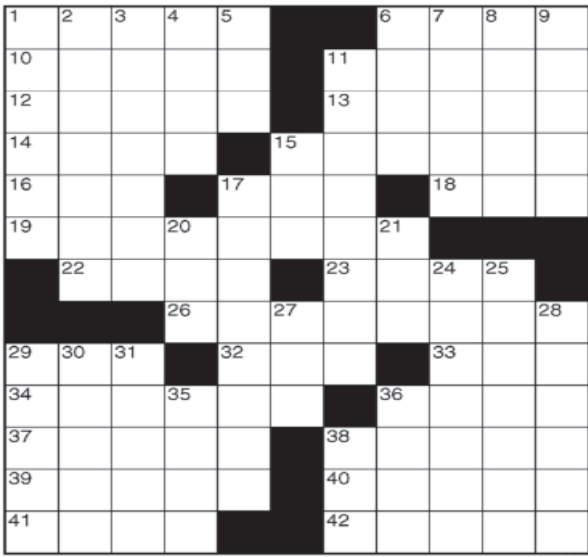34 "Little Women" author
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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS