

# Decoding Sheikh Hasina's Autocratic Playbook



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Sheikh Hasina's autocratic rule came to an end in the wake of the mass uprising of July–August 2024, which also led to her to flee the country. Her nearly sixteen-year-long rule had essentially sustained itself through repression, enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, and fabricated legal cases. Various political parties attempted to build resistance against this rule at different times, but such efforts only intensified harsher repression against pro-democracy parties, institutions, and individuals. However, defying all obstacles, the united movement of students and citizens in July–August 2024 transformed into a full-scale mass upsurge. The manner in which state forces and armed party activists were deployed to suppress this uprising was labelled by a United Nations report as “crimes against humanity” (The Daily Star Bangla, 12 February 2025), and these crimes were carried out under the direct supervision of Sheikh Hasina. According to a UN spokesperson, the responsibility for these orders – known as command responsibility – lies squarely with Sheikh Hasina (The Daily Star, 14 February 2025).

Although Bangladesh has experienced authoritarian regimes multiple times in its history, the nature and brutality of Sheikh Hasina's rule were unprecedented. The most extreme manifestation of this cruelty was on display during the July–August 2024 uprising, when in less than three weeks, at least 1,400 people were killed – 13 per cent of them children – and over 14,000 were injured. This brutality was not limited to 2024 alone. Between 2009 and 2023, at least 2,699 people were victims of extrajudicial killings, 677 were forcibly disappeared, and 1,048 died while in the custody of security forces (Bonik Barta, 13 August 2024).

Due to the horrifying nature of

this regime, there has emerged a broad consensus following the fall of the Hasina regime: institutional mechanisms must be established to ensure that authoritarianism cannot rise again. As a first step towards this goal, it is essential to fully understand the nature of Sheikh Hasina's rule.

**Three Forms of Authoritarianism**

Authoritarian rule is not a new phenomenon in any country. The

characteristics of a personalist regime.

**Features of Sheikh Hasina's Personalist Autocracy**

The traits of personalistic autocratic rule began to surface in Sheikh Hasina's statements and actions as early as 2011. By around 2014, Hasina made it evident to the citizens of Bangladesh that she was the sole centre of power and that her authority

Sheikh Hasina's personalist mindset is her repeated use of “I” in public speeches. She often spoke in a way that suggested the government and the state are personally embodied in her – that what citizens receive from the state is something she is individually bestowing. The rights or entitlements of citizens do not seem to factor into her considerations.

A key early instance of her bypassing institutions and establishing her

gradually became evident to the general public. As a result, ordinary citizens also stopped placing trust in formal institutions and instead began directly appealing to Sheikh Hasina for the resolution of any problem. The extent of this is reflected in several news reports from 2020. In January, when the stock market experienced instability, Kazi Firoyz Rashid, a Member of Parliament from the ruling party's ally, the Jatiya Party, publicly appealed for Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's direct intervention. In a parliamentary discussion, he stated that if the Prime Minister intervened, the stock market would recover (The Asian Age, 16 January 2020).

Another hallmark of personalistic rules is dynastic politics. While dynastic rule is not uncommon in South Asia, under Sheikh Hasina's tenure it has manifested in two specific ways in Bangladesh. First, through the accumulation of state resources and privileges by herself and her family; and second, through an implicit claim to power succession – linking the foundation of the state and notions of patriotism so intimately with her family that any opposition to the dynastic arrangement is framed as an act of treason.

Although Sheikh Hasina claimed in 2019, “By family, I mean myself, my younger sister Rehana, and our five children. Beyond that, we have no family” (Sara Bangla, 13 September 2019), the prominence of her family under her rule – and the fact that many beneficiaries of her regime are indeed family members – is evident in the fact that from 2009 to 2024, 15 members of the Hasina family have served as Members of Parliament, with at least eight holding positions as ministers or state ministers (Ittefaq, 12 October 2024).

A crucial element of personalistic autocracy is deification of leaders. The treatment of Hasina herself and her father Sheikh Mujib exemplifies this. While Sheikh Mujib undeniably played a central role in the Bengali nationalist movement of the 1960s in then-Pakistan, the movement was not the achievement of a single individual. Yet, state apparatuses and media created a narrative that provided the idea that Mujib was the only leader at that time. The narrative was institutionalised through the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution wherein Sheikh Mujib

was designated as the “Father of the Nation,” and a provision was added making it mandatory to display his portrait in all government and non-government offices (Article 4A of the Constitution). This means that the absence of such a portrait would legally constitute a violation of the Constitution.

Worse yet, one could not question this provision. Because Article 7A of the Constitution states that any act or attempt to undermine the confidence, belief, or conviction in any provision of the Constitution will be considered a punishable offence and an act of “sedition,” with the penalty extending up to capital punishment. The Digital Security Act enacted in 2018 also included a clause stipulating punishment for “insulting the Father of the Nation” (Article 21).

In addition, across the country, numerous sculptures, portraits, and murals of Sheikh Mujib began to be erected. According to a 2021 report from the police department, there were 1,022 sculptures and murals of Sheikh Mujib installed throughout the country (The Daily Star Bangla, 12 January 2021). In 2020, the observance of Mujib's birth centenary turned him into an omnipresent figure across the nation. Through this process, Hasina elevated her father into a form of personality cult. One researcher described the national environment in the following way: “His picture is in every school and government office, on currency notes, and on every road. Bridges, hospitals, government programmes, and sports events are named after him” (Arild Engelsen Rudd, ‘Bangabandhu as the eternal sovereign: on the construction of a civil religion’, Religion, 52(4): 532–549, 2022).

In a personalised regime, the person in power often places themselves at the centre of a cult of personality. But in Hasina's case, while she had built her own uncontested political dominance, she simultaneously legitimises her authority through the glorification and deification of Sheikh Mujib.

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history of the modern phase of state formation shows that the development and expansion of democracy as an ideal and as a system of governance have not progressed in a linear fashion; rather, they have advanced in waves. As a result, at certain points in time, the number of democratic countries has increased, while at other times, the number of countries under undemocratic or authoritarian rule has grown.

In the 20th century, two forms of authoritarian rule became prominent – one being military rule, and the other being one-party systems, most of which were rooted in socialist ideologies. However, by the end of the 20th century, a new type of authoritarianism emerged: personalistic autocracy. Sheikh Hasina's 16-year rule, particularly from 2011 onward, took on the

was beyond question.

Once Sheikh Hasina had succeeded in dismantling institutions – including civil society organisations – and believed that she had established a kind of ideological dominance over society and politics, she institutionalised this system under the conviction of her own invincibility. This is reflected in a 2018 statement by Mohammad Hanif, Joint General Secretary of the Awami League: “As long as Sheikh Hasina lives, the Awami League will remain in power” (Bangla Tribune, 25 April 2018). Hanif's remark sparked controversy, but it had no impact on Hasina or her party leaders. In 2022, then Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal said, “We must try to keep Sheikh Hasina in power for life” (Dhaka Times, 21 May 2022).

One of the clearest examples of

decisions as final occurred in 2011, when she unilaterally overturned the recommendations made after 26 parliamentary committee meetings and decided to abolish the caretaker government system. Another example of her unilateral decision-making, at the cost of national interest, was her role in signing the contract with Indian power company Adani.

Furthermore, in 2023, when nominating Md. Shahabuddin as the President, Sheikh Hasina did not consult any party committee. Even top leaders of her own party were left in the dark about the nomination. After speaking with 15 senior leaders of the party, one reporter noted: “Some leaders described the selection of Md. Shahabuddin as a ‘family decision’” (Prothom Alo, 14 February 2023).

This trend of de-institutionalisation

## Uprising and Nation-Building



FIROZ AHMED

Uprisings, revolutions, or independence movements occur when the collective will of the people manifests as an unimaginable, united force. However, each uprising carries its own character, and each revolution leads to a different outcome. This mass awakening can elevate a nation to greatness but, at the same time, if state leaders fail or act selfishly, it can just as easily plunge a country into long-lasting chaos.

In War and Peace, Tolstoy repeatedly refers to the spirit of strength radiating from the French Revolution. A nation like France, humiliated for centuries, became so empowered by the revolution that its soldiers not only transformed their homeland but, like lava erupting from a volcano, spread across all of Europe – conquering battlefields in Italy, Spain, Austria – until the revolutionary heat finally cooled in the vast frozen plains of Russia. One of Tolstoy's central motivations for writing this great novel was to understand what spark causes such an eruption of energy within a society.

1

Time and again, people of this region, too, have experienced the potential unleashed when the elixir of freedom touches them. In his *Unfinished Memoirs*, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman recalls the surge of enthusiasm among the volunteers of the Pakistan Movement after independence from the British in 1947, and how the Muslim League attempted to suppress it:

“People and government employees worked tirelessly, day and night. In many places, I saw a single officer managing an entire office. A peon and

a constable maintained law and order in a whole police station with the help of League volunteers. People boarded trains depositing money, since there were no tickets. Corruption vanished as if by magic. Gradually, everything began to decline, solely because of government policies. They didn't know how to engage an awakened nation in nation-building.”

The reason was simple – most of the leaders wanted Pakistan for themselves. If the volunteers did all the work, what role would be left for them? So, the following happened:

“Khawaja Nazimuddin ordered the dissolution of the Muslim League National Guard. Zahiduddin, Mirza Ghulam Hafiz, and several others protested. After all, this organisation had actively contributed to the creation of Pakistan. ... Instead of utilising them for development, the national government dismantled the organisation, igniting a sentiment of animosity among them. Leaders of the National Guard, however, decided to continue the organisation, designating Jahiruddin as Salaare-Suba (military chief of the province). He was arrested a few days after coming to Dhaka. By not engaging such a well-established institution for the country's development efforts, the government ultimately harmed the country. ... Some asked us, ‘Where will we get the money to make them work?’ But these people didn't ask for money. They could've worked for years with only minimal expenses... They weren't even paid salaries. The passion National Guard and Muslim League workers had for creating Pakistan – the government failed to harness it.”

The result was the return of bureaucratic rule across Pakistan, bringing with it corruption, hoarding, food shortages, unemployment, and smuggling. The *Unfinished Memoirs* recounts this too, as a boatman in Gopalganj tells Sheikh Mujib:

“Bhai jaan, you've come only now, I'm doomed. There are five of us, and we've been ordered to pay five taka. Some days I earn two taka, some days even less – how can I pay five taka? Yesterday, the chowkidar confiscated a



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED/THE DAILY STAR

brass lota from my father's time because I couldn't pay.” He broke into tears saying this. ... Then he said, “It was from you, I heard of Pakistan, and this is the Pakistan you brought us?”

2

How much did Bangladesh learn from this lesson in the *Unfinished Memoirs* after gaining its own independence? Let me share, from memory, an anecdote of Colonel Kazi Nuruzzaman. Around 16 December, his sector's freedom fighters told him, “We thought the war might last ten years like in Vietnam. But the country was liberated in just nine months! We don't want to return home yet. We want to eliminate illiteracy, repair roads, assist with agriculture, restore local administration. We don't want any salary, just food, clothing, and shelter will do.”

A thrilled Nuruzzaman saw in them the spirit of Vietnam, China, or Soviet Russia – warriors who had kept schools running during wartime, helped farmers and workers, and engaged in national reconstruction. He eagerly joined them. But within a few days, the camp was dismantled, and the fighters were each handed 50 rupees and sent home.

Thus, the post-Liberation enthusiasm faded quickly – just as it had after 1947. But this time, the disillusionment was even more bitter, because the hope and promises of 1971 were even stronger. So, too, was the sense of betrayal.

Consider writer and politician Shamsuddin Abu Zafar, a personal friend of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. After the tragic assassination of 15 August, he was so distraught that he even contemplated leaving the country. In his diary, expressing his disappointment three and a half years after independence, he wrote:

“[16 April 1975] Today was the Ghorashal fair. I stayed home. In childhood, I used to see so much excitement about fairs among villagers. Today, barely a fraction of that remained. People are too busy harvesting boro rice. They are troubled by hunger. No one even remembers the fair. The poor farm labourers told me they are surviving day after day by boiling flour in hot water and eating it like barley...”

And a few days later he wrote:

“[11 August 1975] ... The Mujibs ride in a Mercedes while that boy sleeps in a manhole. This is Bangladesh in 1975. A

country whose 74% of budget depends on foreign aid – its President imported not one but two Mercedes cars. Each costs £30,000. At government rates, that's 900,000 taka in London. With taxes, the cost will be 2.7 million taka here. Meanwhile, salaries aren't paid yet. The telephone lines are still dead.”

Even after such bloodshed, true liberation remained elusive, tied closely to the personal and class character of those who assumed power, and significantly, to a lack of any visionary ambition conducive to nation-building. There was no grand vision of what the state should be – only a desire to plunder, to enrich kin and allies. In Ahmed Sofa's words, quoting Professor Razzak:

“History gave Sheikh Mujib a chance to become a statesman. He failed to seize it.”

3

This is also a fact: that every transition from one era to another leaves indelible marks on history. The Pakistan Movement freed Muslim peasants from zamindari rule. The Liberation War freed Bengalis from the grip of the Pakistani state, controlled by the military and civilian bureaucrats. But at every historical juncture, this land

has failed to realise its full potential, never achieving that positive post-revolutionary transformation that reconstitutes a nation and elevates it to a new level of civilisation.

Take the story of Vietnam from Kazi Nuruzzaman's narrative again. More bombs were dropped on Vietnam than on all of Europe during World War II. They gained independence after us. Yet today, Bangladesh cannot compare to Vietnam – once reduced to ashes by napalm bombs – on any global benchmarks. Even non-revolutionary countries like Singapore, South Korea, and Malaysia – each had leaders who envisioned and pursued a nation-building dream. That's where we fell behind, every single time.

Surely, the 2024 mass uprising, too, will leave a deep imprint on Bangladesh's history. Regardless of what happens next, any future attempt to impose terror by any group in educational institutions will face fierce resistance. The courage and experience of fightback these young people have acquired has influenced the people of this country, once again after many years, to pursue new political dreams, new ideologies, and new visions of society.

We know despair has engulfed many over the past year. The question of whether Bangladesh will move forward or descend into anarchy has emerged for valid reasons. The only source of hope is this awakened generation of youth. In ancient mythology, the churning of the ocean first brought forth poison. Shiva held it in his throat. Only then came the nectar.

We are now living through the phase of spewing poison of the 2024 uprising. What we now need is the emergence of leadership with a bold reimagination for politics, a constitution, and an economic roadmap – leadership that is capable of bringing nectar to this nation as well.

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