

When the state falters, the streets make the rules



Bobby Hajjaj
is chairman of the Nationalist Democratic Movement (NDM) and a faculty member at North South University. He can be reached at bobby.hajjaj@northsouth.edu.

BOBBY HAJJAJ

Every morning now begins with a negotiation. Will the university gates open for classes or chaos? Will Shahbagh hold under the slogans and horns, or collapse into confusion? Will the thin line between rally and riot stay thin, or snap? Bangladesh is living through what I call daily un-governmentality—an everyday sense that order is temporary, bargained over by megaphones and hashtags.

Recently at Chittagong University, clashes between students and locals left hundreds injured; classes were closed, and Section 144 imposed, before the campus choked on tear gas and rumour. Around the same time, engineering students—Buet and their peers nationwide—moved from exam halls to city arteries, shutting down traffic and facing batons with the demand for recognition and a fair path from study to work. These are not stray sparks. This is the new weather.

When authority falters, everyone learns the choreography of defiance. Last year's uprising—born in a dispute over quotas, baptised in blood—retrained a generation. A UN fact-finding report estimated that up to 1,400 people were killed in a matter of weeks. The lesson young people drew is brutally simple: institutions don't listen until the road is blocked. Add to that the maths: nearly 40 percent of 15-24-year-olds are NEET (not in education, employment or training), and 60 million active social media users able to turn a grievance into a citywide shutdown. And you get a polity where governance is performed after disruption, not before it.

We've seen this before, just elsewhere, in other costumes. Consider Thermidorian France (1794-95). The Terror ends, Robespierre falls, but peace does not follow. Instead comes a carnival of revenge. The White Terror sweeps the streets; the muscadins—gilded youth in scented cravats—beat Jacobins with canes while the state looks away. When the Directory finally asserts itself, it does



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

so with grapeshot—Napoleon clearing Parisian boulevards with artillery to restore "order." The lesson is clear: when the state's monopoly of force is absent or uncertain, rival young men improvise one of their own. We remember the cannonade, but forget the drift that invited it.

Or consider Russia after February 1917. The tsar falls and "dual power" enters. The Provisional Government holds the parchment; the Soviets hold the streets. Order No. 1 tells soldiers to obey officers only if the Petrograd Soviet agrees. Factories elect committees. The command chain dissolves

into parallel signatures. Authority multiplies; compliance fractures. No one knows whose "law" will govern any given day. In that unstable chemistry, the most disciplined minority wins.

Fast-forward to Cairo, post-Arab Spring. The square sings, the president falls, and the system re-learns its oldest trick: ban the street, prize the file. Law 107 effectively criminalises

appears, because the road, lately, works.

Political science has language for this. Samuel Huntington warned that when mobilisation outruns institutionalisation, politics decays into a contest of disruptions—a race between new social energies and the state's capacity to absorb them into rules. That is where we stand now: a society that mobilises in hours, and institutions that

warns that dual power ends with the best-organised faction, not the most popular. Egypt shows that criminalising dissent buys silence, not consent. The wiser path is duller, harder.

It starts with clarity: one policing code for all gatherings, published, body-cam-verified, and audited by a civilian inspectorate. No partisan "youth wings," no freelance enforcers. It requires credible short-term gains: paid apprenticeships, transparent recruitment with merit-plus-equity scoring, and timelines that can be checked. (A youth cohort with a 40 percent NEET rate won't stop protesting because you lecture it; it will stop when you hire it.) It demands dignity on campus: ombuds panels that resolve cases in weeks, not semesters, with results posted, not whispered. These aren't romantic solutions; they are practical. They turn politics back into administration before administration is forced back into politics.

But rules and jobs are not enough. Movements are also stories. July minted a myth of salvage—students as the nation's emergency service, called when the state goes missing. Unless we replace that myth with a continuous civic narrative, we will replay it endlessly. That narrative must say: the "win" was not a coronation but a contract. A contract with milestones—policing code by this date, quota-merit reform by that date, apprenticeships by year's end—and co-signers beyond government: universities, bar councils, business chambers, unions. Publish the dashboard, debate it in public, and meet the dates. When the calendar becomes the arena, the street can rest.

Arundhati Roy once wrote of "the exquisite, excruciating ache of possibility." That ache hangs over Bangladesh now. We can normalise the daily haggle—today's detour, tomorrow's curfew—or we can tame contention, folding it into institutions that respond faster than a viral call-to-action. Thermidor's dandies, Russia's committees, Egypt's bans—take your cautionary pick. Or choose the slower revolution: a state whose first reflex is to answer, not to wait; a politics that tells young people the road is not their only megaphone; and a narrative that binds victory to the humbler heroism of keeping one's word, on time.

Inflation and inequality fuelling a geography of despair



Mahjabin Rashid Lamisha
is senior research assistant at Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC).

MAHJABIN RASHID LAMISHA

There is a tinge of pessimism that seems to run through all of us, a quiet sense of doubt about whether things in the country are truly improving. Financial strain and food inflation have long been familiar concerns, but in recent years, anxiety around social security and political stability have joined them, making daily life feel more uncertain. This sentiment, so often heard about in daily exchanges, is not merely anecdotal. It is reflected in data. The national survey on the State of the Real Economy, conducted by PPRC, shows that pessimism is emerging as a defining feature of households in Bangladesh, weighing heavily on the poor.

Data says that the mood of the economy isn't very optimistic. One in three households (33 percent) in the lowest income decile state that they are pessimistic about their future. When the scope is widened to include the bottom two deciles, nearly a quarter (24 percent) still carry the same bleak outlook. By contrast, data show that 62 percent of the top two deciles express optimism, buffered by resources and networks cushioning them against volatility. This stark divide is not just about material inequality; it also reflects an emotional level. A geography of hope and despair is mapped neatly onto income levels.

What explains such divergence? For poorer families, pessimism is grounded in lived realities. Over a quarter of the bottom decile report being "always in shortage," and nearly four in ten "occasionally in shortage" to describe their current household condition. These are not abstract measures. They mean skipping meals, borrowing to buy necessities, or having a heavy debt burden. By contrast, the top two deciles live in a different reality: nearly half of them report they are "doing well," with another 11 percent describing themselves as "very well off." For this income class, shortage is not a daily condition that affects their day-to-day life.

While the survey explored concerns in many domains, inflation overshadowed them all.

Households across all groups named price hike as their biggest economic concern. But the poor experience it with particular cruelty. Nearly two-thirds of the bottom decile name price hikes as their number one worry. It is the price of onions, of rice, of cooking oil—each hike felt in smaller portions, diluted curries, and unpaid debts at the local grocer. For the poor, it is about whether tomorrow's meal can be secured. While for

The national mood can best be described as fragile resilience. Hope is still alive, but it is uneven. The danger is that pessimism will harden into disillusionment—not only with the economy but with the very idea of upward mobility. The data, thus, is not just a story of despair. It is also a call to action. Policymakers must take seriously the emotional pulse of the economy.

the wealthier, the concern shifts towards loan repayments or capital shortages. The worries do not end there. Income drops (50.3 percent) and food insecurity (37.7 percent) weigh heavily, creating a cycle of reduced earnings and rising costs. Health adds another layer. Among the poorest households, more than half cite costs of treatment and medicine as major concerns. For many, illness is not only a health shock but a financial catastrophe. An illness or accident can mean selling livestock, pulling children from school, or falling deeper into debt.

Even social anxieties take on sharper edges in poverty. Drug abuse and juvenile crime are prominent among the poor. Together, these experiences feed an everyday pessimism that is heavier than any macroeconomic index can capture. And yet, the survey also uncovers a

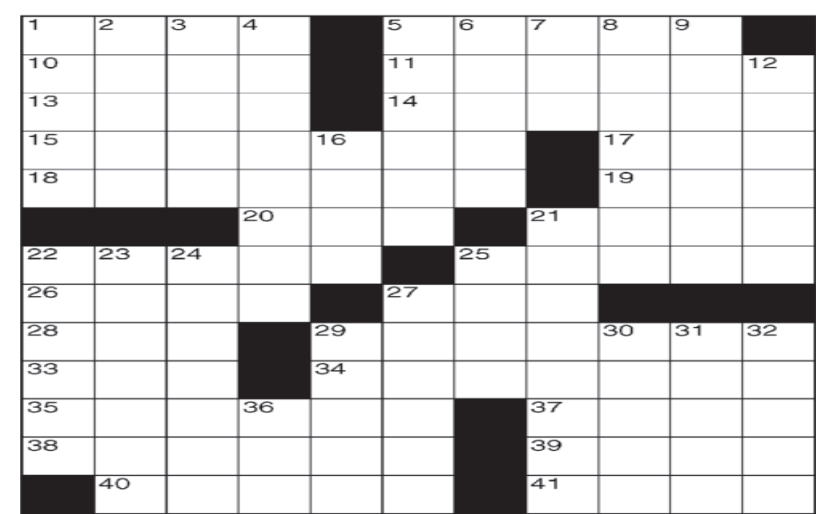
paradox. Even amid such hardship, 54 percent of households say they refuse to give up. This resilience and learned toughness run deep in Bangladeshi society. Among the poorest, 27.6 percent still describe their situation as "manageable," despite daily struggles. This is not naive optimism; it is the determination to endure even when the odds are stacked against them. However, resilience, though admirable, is not enough on its own. Without real support, it risks turning into quiet endurance, a silent acceptance that nothing will ever change. The mood captured in the data is thus both a warning and an opportunity. It warns that pessimism is becoming entrenched among the poor, threatening not only their well-being but the social fabric at large. Yet the same data indicates an opportunity—the resilience that people still hold can be turned into genuine confidence, but only if policies step up to meet their needs.

The message from the numbers is hard to miss. An economy cannot thrive on the optimism of a few while the majority remain weighed down by despair. The survey shows a clear divide: pessimism concentrated at the bottom, optimism clustered at the top, and a middle that is caught between cautious hope and lingering fear. If this gap is left unattended, it risks deepening inequality, turning poverty into not just a shortage of income but a shortage of hope. Households spelt out their needs—they want prices kept under control, stronger social safety nets, better education and health, and jobs for young people. These demands come from families watching inflation eat into their meals, medical costs drain their savings, and their children's futures hang in uncertainty.

The national mood can best be described as fragile resilience. Hope is still alive, but it is uneven. The danger is that pessimism will harden into disillusionment—not only with the economy but with the very idea of upward mobility. The data, thus, is not just a story of despair. It is also a call to action. Policymakers must take seriously the emotional pulse of the economy. Growth rates and fiscal charts cannot hide the lived pessimism of those struggling in shortage. To restore balance, policy must go beyond applauding resilience and create conditions where resilience is no longer the only way to survive. In the end, the real test of an economy is not in its averages, but in whether its poorest citizens can still look forward to tomorrow with hope. Right now, too many cannot, and that is a crisis graver than any fiscal deficit.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
1 Like skyscrapers
5 Very serious
10 "Garfield" dog
11 Left over
13 Flaring star
14 Irritate
15 Caribbean country
17 Motor need
18 African country
19 D.C. baseballer, for short
20 Ruby of films
21 Gershon of "Bound"
22 Company symbols
25 Fleet makeup
26 Kitchen appliance
- DOWN**
27 Wallop
28 Earth: Prefix
29 African country
33 Hockey's Bobby
34 European country
35 1998 Winter Olympics site
37 Enemies
38 Mini burger
39 Opposed
40 Endures
41 Roger of "Cheers"
- DOWN**
1 Salad servers
2 Love to pieces
3 Pep up
4 Used for support
5 Ice cream treat
6 Shaq of the NBA
7 Except
8 European country
9 Dependent
12 River areas
16 Gets older
21 Overdo it
22 Secure site starts
23 Comprehensive
24 Eurasian country
25 Rail or quail
27 Pays tribute to
29 Painter Edouard
30 Witch
31 Minotaur's home
32 Desert spot
36 TV spots



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

M	A	R	C	E	L	S	I	F	T
A	S	I	A	G	O	I	D	L	E
T	I	P	T	O	P	L	E	O	N
E	D	I	T	S	S	T	A	R	S
S	E	T	A	S	T	Y	M	I	E
S	A	L	T	N	P	E	P	A	
A	W	L	R	O	S	S			
T	A	M	P	E	R	C	A	S	T
R	E	S	O	W	R	A	T	T	Y
E	L	M	S		H	I	P	H	O
S	E	A	T		A	G	E	O	N
T	E	N	S		M	A	S	S	E

WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO dsopinion@gmail.com.