

# Bangladesh's grand politics: Who's really directing the show?



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Ah, Bangladesh! My beloved nation—perpetually at a “critical crossroads,” much like a master’s student who’s read too much Gramsci to remain confused. “The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born; now is the time of monsters,” wrote Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci. Clearly, the man had a front-row ticket to Dhaka’s political circus.

If ever there were a residency programme for Gramsci’s monsters, it’s here—as Bangladesh stumbles from kleptocracy towards something vaguely resembling democracy. The real challenge isn’t spotting the monsters; it’s finding anyone with enough brain cells to slay them.

The country’s interim government shoulders a responsibility so heavy it’s practically collapsing under it. To its absolute credit, it prevented an economic meltdown, allowed the financial sector to thrive, and kept social chaos from boiling over. But its weaknesses are dazzling. Governance gaps, unmet reform promises, and a noticeable disconnect from public sentiment have produced a splendid cocktail of confusion.

The erosion of secular political plurality, the gradual rise of far-right populism among our power falcons, and that sporadic mosaic of violence continue to blur the line between who wags whom—the dog or the tail. The interim’s definition of “public” feels alarmingly familiar: much like the Awami League’s version, where “public” meant “our voters,” and the rest were decorative extras.

Yet, after the signing of the July National Charter, Bangladesh has apparently once again become a “new Bangladesh”—a convenient avowal that has become a cliché!



FILE VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

Meanwhile, the Election Commission’s roadmap remains elusive. Even Jamaat-e-Islami has expressed exasperation and humming about proportional representation, while the BNP—ever evolving—now talks of restoring the credibility of the electoral process. All parties agree on one point: reform within the interim cabinet, reflecting a growing lack of confidence in some advisers! Irony!

At the same time, social media gladiators, armed with echo chambers and homophily, are busy dismantling institutions in real time.

It’s democracy by dopamine.

As if that weren’t enough, our interim administration has developed an odd affection for “outsider advisers”—plucked from cozy networks rather than shared national purpose. Nepotism thrives, “foreign credentialed saviours” swoop in, and some even question the qualifications of several imported experts. It leaves one wondering how they would ensure they pick the right public officials, beyond

Civil society, meanwhile, has outdone itself in disappointment. Its moral authority now hovers somewhere between a late-night talk show and frustration vented through conferences and meetings.

Unsurprisingly, this blend of chaos and confusion is brewing instability. Anxiety, fear of extremism, and the social post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) of July’s mass murders still haunt the streets. Add to that the coercive

interim seems unable to fill.

Yet, the government’s greatest peril lies elsewhere: the disturbing discourse on the politicisation of the International Crimes Tribunal. Seasoned observers like David Bergman have warned that weaponising war crimes justice for political leverage would destroy the very legitimacy it seeks to preserve.

Bangladesh cannot afford another chapter of selective justice masquerading as national healing. If the tribunal becomes a political instrument rather than a moral reckoning, the “time of monsters” will stretch indefinitely. Time will tell.

Which brings us, inevitably, to the question everyone’s talking about: elections. Delays wrapped in reform rhetoric, “inclusive-exclusive” gymnastics, or constitutional hairsplitting are nothing but transparent excuses. Good thing that a large section of the public is punching these narratives out. The nation awaits a credible election by February 2026.

And if this interim experiment is to drift—plagued by obscurity, elitism, or disconnect—what would be the solution then? BNP recently has asked the interim to play a neutral role like that of a caretaker government at a recent meeting, according to one of the advisers. It is worth noting that narratives of corruption allegations have already returned to the blackboards—this time, the writing is not just about the political parties!

Joseph de Maistre reminded us that every nation gets the government it deserves. Ours might still deserve a fighting chance, unless this current situation continues and the interim, its beloved so-called civil society, and the parties all fail to complete the task at hand.

We can only hope that their collective restraint and sense of national duty may yet determine whether Bangladesh steps towards stability—or sinks into another act of tragic farce. And if they fail, dear reader, the monsters won’t just linger—they’ll throw a costume party. And the shimmering promise of a democratic Bangladesh, envisioned by the fallen souls of July 2024, will remain just that: a dream deferred.

Until then, let’s monitor a credible election—perhaps under the watchful eye of the public—and enjoy the show while the popcorn still lasts.

## Why survival in Dhaka feels accidental



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Dhaka has always been a city of contradictions—of ambition and neglect, progress and peril, pride and decay. In recent times, the contradictions have turned fatal. The same projects that symbolise our march towards modernity now routinely remind us how fragile and often expendable human life has become. From the death of Abul Kalam Azad under a falling metro rail component to the fires that devour factories and warehouses, from the plane crash that reduced classrooms to rubble to the toxic air that quietly robs us of years, Dhaka seems determined to prove that survival here is not deliberate but a coincidence.

Abul Kalam Azad, a 35-year-old father of two, was sipping tea at a roadside stall—an ordinary act on an ordinary day—when a bearing pad from the overhead metro rail suddenly hit his head, killing him instantly. The irony could not have been sharper. A project built to elevate the lives of Dhaka’s citizens literally came crashing down upon one. That small, seemingly insignificant part—a bearing pad meant to absorb shock between the pillars and the rail—became a symbol of a much larger shock: how recklessness and negligence have been normalised in this city.

The metro rail, built at a staggering cost of Tk 1,500 crore per kilometre—among the highest in Asia—was meant to be Dhaka’s modern marvel. Instead, it has now become a cautionary tale of misplaced priorities and poor oversight. Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (Buet) engineers had reported substandard bearing pads as early as 2020. A similar incident in 2024 saw a bearing pad fall off another section, after which a committee was formed and recommendations made, which, for whatever reasons, were not enough to prevent the fatal accident.

A compensation of Tk 5 lakh was swiftly announced, as if a human life

could be itemised and closed like a project file. A metro rail that could take more than 50 years to recover its costs could not guarantee safety for one of those who paid for it with their taxes—and now, with his life.

The structural fragility of Dhaka is not without moral frailty. Within a week, two major fires broke out in the city—at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport’s cargo village and Mirpur’s Rupnagar area. Thirty-seven fire units battled the airport blaze as flights were diverted to Chattogram and Kolkata. The Mirpur fire killed at least 17 people in a garment factory after an adjacent illegal chemical warehouse exploded.

We have seen this before, again and again. Fires that start with a spark and end with commissions of inquiry. In 2024 alone, Bangladesh witnessed

million—a concentration deemed “immediately lethal.” Even then, crowds gathered at the site—families searching for missing loved ones, onlookers recording footage, and journalists narrating the spectacle. The scene captured both the human cost of failure and the national habit of treating disasters as daily news rather than turning points.

What makes these fires unforgivable is that they are preventable. Most originate from the same few causes, and most could be stopped with basic enforcement and planning. Yet the city continues to grow upward and outward with reckless speed, as if height itself were proof of progress.

If fire exposed our lack of safety, the plane crash at Milestone School in Uttara laid bare our lack of preparedness. When a military training jet plunged into the school compound, killing and injuring children, the tragedy revealed just how unprepared our emergency response remains. There was a shortage of ambulances at the scene, no field hospital, and coordination was chaotic, as if emergency care were a lottery rather than a right.

Burn victims were rushed through choked streets to the few hospitals

**To live in Dhaka is to practice optimism against evidence. It is to wake each morning under the silent prayer that gravity, gas, and governance will all behave today. But when a city demands miracles to survive its own design, something fundamental has gone wrong. Survival should never depend on luck.**

26,659 fire incidents—an average of 73 fires every day—killing 140 people and injuring more than 340. The Fire Service and Civil Defence recorded property losses of Tk 447 crore, though how one measures the loss of dignity or livelihood remains unclear.

The causes are familiar: illegal chemical storage, faulty wiring, congested roads, locked exits, and weak enforcement. The solutions are also familiar: task forces, mobile courts, and promises of reform. The repetition itself has become a tragedy. When fires occur with such regularity that they no longer shock us, emergency becomes routine.

In the Mirpur blaze, hydrogen sulphide gas reached 149 parts per

with any capacity, while infection risks soared in overcrowded wards. In the absence of institutional response, citizens improvised. Volunteers carried stretchers; doctors extended shifts. Yet good intentions cannot substitute for good governance.

Disasters in Bangladesh expose not just the fragility of systems but the hierarchy of concern. Each new tragedy triggers outrage, condolences, and pledges of reform. But once the headlines fade, the next tragedy quietly queues for its turn. We have learned to live with institutional dysfunction as though it were a natural phenomenon—like rain or traffic.

And then the omnipresent air itself becomes the enemy. According

to the Air Quality Life Index (AQI), Bangladeshis are losing 5.5 years of life expectancy due to air pollution. Dhaka residents could live seven years longer if particulate matter levels were reduced to World Health Organization (WHO) standards.

In 2021, over 19,000 Bangladeshi children under five died from pollution-related illnesses, according to UNICEF. The sources are well known: brick kilns, old diesel vehicles, unregulated construction, and industrial waste. Brick kilns alone contribute nearly 60 percent of Dhaka’s air pollution.

The government has declared certain zones “degraded airsheds” and promised cleaner fuels, but policy without enforcement remains wishful thinking. Laws are drafted, agencies formed, and circulars issued—but the air does not obey paperwork. It obeys emissions.

The common thread across these crises—whether a falling bearing pad, a burning warehouse, a crashing jet, or a choking sky—is the same: the absence of accountability. Dhaka’s tragedies are not isolated events; they are the natural consequences of a system that prefers announcements over action, show over vigilance. Our resilience has become a polite word for endurance. We survive not because our systems work, but because individuals—drivers, doctors, firefighters, neighbours—do what institutions fail to do.

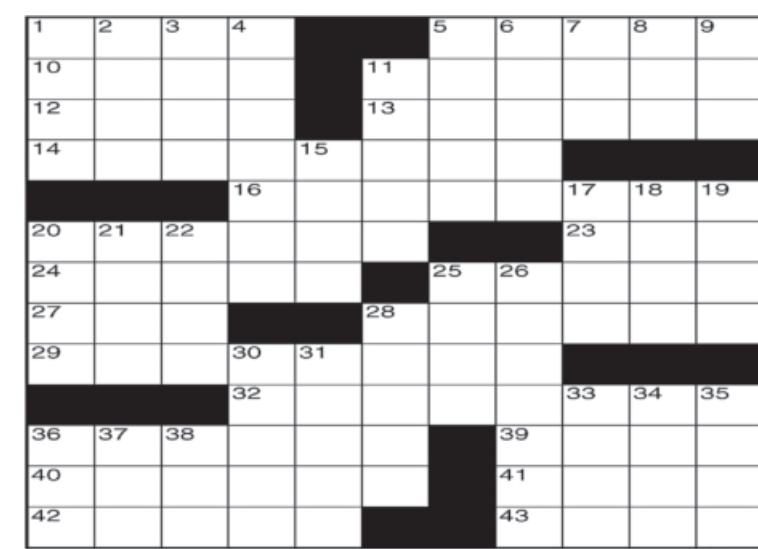
And so, every day in Dhaka becomes an act of collective improvisation. We cross roads that might collapse, inhale air that might kill, enter buildings that might burn, and stand under infrastructure that might fall. Yet we call it “development.”

To live in Dhaka is to practice optimism against evidence. It is to wake each morning under the silent prayer that gravity, gas, and governance will all behave today. But when a city demands miracles to survive its own design, something fundamental has gone wrong. Survival should never depend on luck.

Dhaka dwellers deserve better—not as a privilege, but as a basic right. Development must mean more than construction; it must mean safety, foresight, and accountability. Until then, every death like Abul Kalam’s, every fire, every crash, and every breath of toxic air will remind us that in this city, survival itself has become the most uncertain achievement.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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