

Breaking down the new populist playbook in Bangladesh



Asif Bin Ali
is a doctoral fellow at Georgia State University, USA. He
can be reached at abinali2@gsu.edu.

ASIF BIN ALI

The way people speak in Bangladesh's politics has changed a lot. Political messaging today mostly entails Facebook Live, YouTube speeches, *waaz* gatherings, viral videos, memes, slogans, filthy language and abuse, and tearful, dramatic livestreams. All of this has coalesced to provide the scaffolding for a populist political communication that is as much a reflection of the chaotic time we are living in as continuation of political trends from recent years. Others can dress it up in theory, but in simple language, those who keep saying, "I speak for the people; everyone else is bad," are basically doing this kind of politics.

In my view, this political messaging has three main layers. First, it builds a pure character called "the people." Here, "the people" are always honest, oppressed, religious, patriotic, and heirs of the martyrs. Second, against this concept of a pure people it builds a group of tainted elites or "traitors." They are invariably labelled as foreign agents, looters, Mir Jafars, enemies of religion, or enemies of the nation. You can add any other label if you like. Third, the story incorporates examples of "enemy" figures, which can vary based on the context. Sometimes the enemy is a particular political party. Sometimes it is the women's rights movement. Sometimes minorities, or "Western culture," or "Indian influence." The more this three-layered story is repeated in songs, in *waaz*, in Facebook posts and addictive videos, the deeper it settles in people's minds.

In today's Bangladesh, there are two

the beginning, this sounds like a demand for justice, and many accept it that way, because the memories of abduction, murder, and repression under the authoritarian Awami League regime are still raw. But slowly, when this language moves out of legal space and enters the realm of purification and "finishing off the party," it is no longer just a language of protest. It becomes a language of right-wing populism.

with the enemies. The language, dress, and stage of these two strands are different, but they converge at one point both speak "in the name of the people." Both declare one or more parties "illegitimate" rather than treating them as political rivals. Both want to mould the state and constitution into their own shape. Both are convinced that they are so morally superior that no one else has the right to

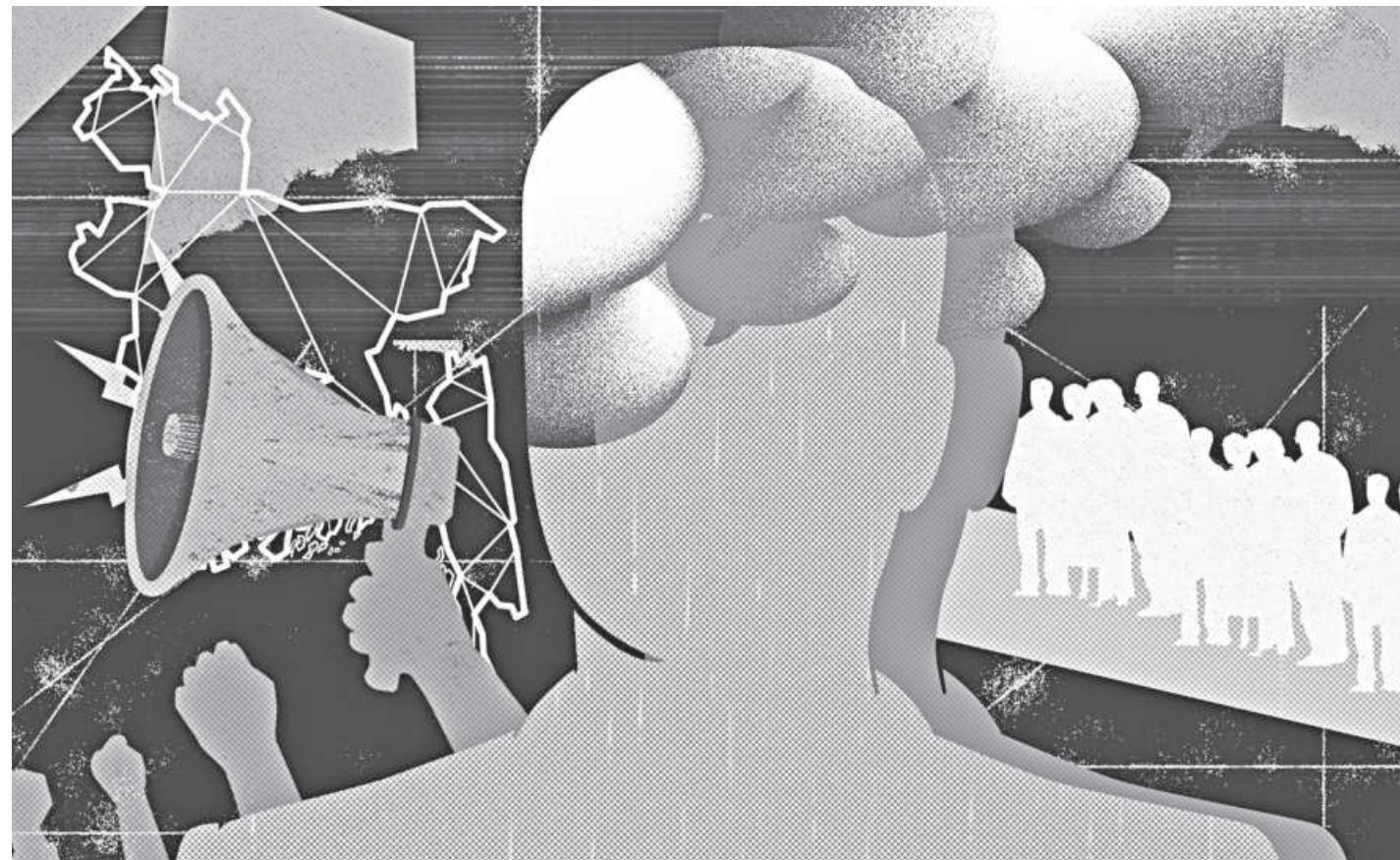
this creates for our democracy. For me, the first big risk is that the ground for multi-party politics becomes narrower. When we keep hearing "ban this party" or "throw that party out of the country," we start to normalise a sort of informal civil-war language without even noticing. Today you may hate one party and try to have it banned. Tomorrow someone else may try to ban your party. Ironically enough, before Awami League saw its activities banned, it cultivated this culture of exclusion by enabling repeated calls for banning BNP and Jamaat, with the latter actually seeing it happen towards the end of Awami League's tenure. The lesson from this is that once the politics of bans and "finishing off" are accepted, no one controls where they stop.

The second big risk is the safety of minorities and people with different views. When everyday language teaches that the will of the majority is the only law, that one group's personal reading of religion is the "constitution," and that anyone who disagrees is a traitor, then minorities, women, converts, atheists, and people with different politics are pushed into a life of fear. Many go silent. Some try to leave the country. Some quietly nurse a desire for revenge. Slowly, society starts to crack from within.

The third risk is the weakening of institutions. Populist language almost always says that courts, election commissions, universities, and the media are never neutral and that they are all agents of the "enemy." Often there is some truth in some of the accusations. But when entire institutions are written off in one sweep, law is replaced by the word of populist leaders and influences as the final authority.

Another frightening side is the romanticising of violence. When slogans like "we want the rope," "ban them," or "wipe them out" become normal in marches, when many clap under videos of death on social media, when the state or political parties continue to tolerate or tacitly support this trend, people slowly start to believe that political problems can only be solved by erasing the other side. One day we will see that even in small disagreements people do not look for compromise; they look for ways to finish their opponent.

Many people think that the old authoritarian chapter is over and a new era has begun. But if the language of politics remains as vitriolic as before, changing faces will not change the character of power. Those who dismiss political or ideological rivals out of hand "in the name of the people" today can easily capture all institutions tomorrow, using that same pretext. Democracy is not just about ticking a box on a ballot paper. It demands a basic foundation of inclusion and compromise where you treat your opponent as a human being, acknowledge their right to exist politically, and accept their safety as non-negotiable. Populist political communication is slowly eroding that foundation. If we completely lose that, then even if democracy or election exists on paper, it will be little more than a hollow ritual.



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VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

different strands of right-wing populism walking side by side and, in many places, shaking hands. One strand uses a revolutionary nationalist tone built around the July 2024 uprising and the memory of martyrs; the other works through religious platforms, madrasa networks, and the language of *waaz*. From the outside, they may look like opposites. But if you look closely at the structure of their communication, you see that they are playing the same game in different jerseys.

After the July uprising, some platforms started presenting themselves as "the voice of the martyrs" and "the true representatives of the people." In their language, "people" mainly means students, protesters, grieving families, and ordinary citizens. As the enemy, they single out Awami League. The entire party is framed as "terrorist," "killer," and "enemy of the nation." Along with that come demands to cancel its registration, put it on trial, ban it, and so on. In practice, it is an attempt to erase the party from politics altogether. At

On the other side, we have religious right-wing populism, where "the people" really means the Muslim majority. Here we hear that "we" are the true owners of this country and that the state, the law, and the constitution must all follow "our" beliefs. Anyone who challenges that framing is branded an enemy of Islam, a Western agent, an atheist, a source of *fitna*, etc. This strand communicates through *waaz* gatherings, Friday sermons, processions, religious slogans, YouTube lectures, and viral Facebook clips.

Equal rights for women, reform of inheritance law, recognition of third-gender people, talk of pluralism in the constitution—all this is branded as a "Western agenda." We are told that these are "attacks on the faith of the people" and "plots to destroy the country." As a result, women, minorities, human rights workers, and dissenters all come under pressure at the same time. In this strand, "the people" are defined in one narrow way. Anyone who does not share that exact belief is pushed out of the people's camp and placed

question them.

It is also worth looking at how this populist communication works in practice. The first thing is language. There is no detailed policy discussion, no balanced reasoning. There are short, aggressive lines, insults, mockery, religious quotes, and words of war. People are pulled into emotion very quickly and have no time for close analysis. The second thing is platforms. Through Facebook Live, YouTube, TikTok, shorts and reels, political leaders or influencers walk straight into people's homes. There is no presenter, reporter, or editor in the middle, so what they say gets absorbed as a kind of raw truth. The third thing is the religious stage. When *waaz* speakers frame the state, women, the law, and the constitution, for example, in the language of "halal vs haram" and "faith vs disbelief," then a different opinion is no longer just an opinion. It becomes hostility to religion. Such rhetoric creates fear, and people hesitate to ask questions.

The real question is what kind of risk all

Uncertain politics, unsettling economy



AN OPEN
DIALOGUE

Dr Abdullah Shibli
is an economist working at a non-profit fiscal
intermediary. He previously worked for the
World Bank and Harvard University.

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

Bangladesh's much-anticipated parliamentary elections are scheduled for next February. And they could not have come at a more fraught time for the country. More than 16 months have passed since the interim administration took office, and unofficial estimates indicate a downward trend in the government's approval ratings. Compounding the situation and muddying public sentiment are the uncertain outcomes of the betting games played out on social media.

One does not need to be a born pessimist to urge the interim administration to scale back its promises and carefully manage the electorate's expectations.

Several "what if" scenarios could influence the missing pieces in the country's political jigsaw puzzle. The first is the timeline for the return of BNP's acting chief from exile in London. The second is the feasibility of the referendum or "gono vote" proposed by the chief advisor. The third concerns the possibility of an alliance between BNP and the other two parties, Jamaat and NCP. Finally, the ebb and flow of violence and tension—partly linked to the ICT judgment against the former prime minister, who fled to India on August 5 last year—adds to the uncertainty. Political parties have voiced their positions on these issues, leaving voters puzzled, with some appearing indifferent to the outcomes.

Alongside the political maelstrom, economic uncertainties have compounded the existential crisis for ordinary citizens. Recent inflationary projections have raised

rate volatility, and de-escalation of hatred and the blame game.

The road to a post-election "magic land" still has rough patches ahead. Medium and small-business owners face continuous unrest on the streets, which has instilled fear and uncertainty. Investors are wary of entering an ecosystem that has endured repeated shocks, while job creation remains virtually at a standstill.

vegetables, eggs, onions, and meat—remain beyond the reach of the average consumer.

On the positive side, the country's foreign exchange reserves are rising—a notable achievement of the current government. Critics, however, argue that this is partly due to a lower import bill, resulting from reduced demand, consumption, and affordability. Direct foreign investment has dwindled to a trickle, and the International Monetary Fund



FILE VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

concerns about resolving bread-and-butter issues. There is hope that, in the coming weeks, as the cool winds settle in, some progress will emerge towards stability, with less chaos and mob rule, moderation in price and exchange

For fixed income and low-to-middle-income earners, the price of essentials has not fallen despite positive inflation numbers. A survey of retirees last week revealed that, except for potatoes, most items—including

(IMF) awaits engagement with the elected government. Unemployment stood at 2.73 million in the October-December period of fiscal year 2024-2025, while prices have surged due to informal levies. Meanwhile,

hundreds of factories remain closed, partly due to politically displaced owners going AWOL and shortages of gas and electricity.

There are, however, some silver linings. The garment industry is likely to continue, even with a 20 percent tariff on exports to the US, benefiting from higher tariffs on India and China. The country signed a 30-year lease on Laldia Container Terminal in Chattogram, representing an investment exceeding \$550 million—one of the largest Public-Private Partnership (PPP) investments in the nation's history. In April 2025, Bangladesh received around \$650 million from the World Bank to develop the Bay Terminal Marine Infrastructure Project in Chattogram. Both initiatives are expected to create significant employment.

In sum, if political instability continues, it will negatively impact the economy, discourage investment, and make life more difficult for the common citizen. Political uncertainty, lack of government policy, corruption, and banking sector stress remain key factors weakening the economy. While economic recovery is possible, political stability and effective policy implementation are essential.

Bangladesh is passing through a crucial juncture, with international lobbies increasingly active. Fortunately, Hasina is no longer central to national politics, although sympathy and support for Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the Awami League persist among a small segment of the population. Much will depend on the next election. Once a political government is formed, there may be accommodation for grassroots leaders and members of the Awami League.

What the country urgently needs is sanity. It must address critical national issues such as law and order, political stability, restoring confidence in the business sector (both local and foreign), and reviving the languishing education sector and youth development programmes to create employment opportunities.