

# Bauls, ballots, and the price of weak institutions



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The surest sign of a liberal democracy is not a flag, nor a constitution framed behind glass. It is the quiet competence of institutions—and the political culture that keeps them honest. One shapes the other the way a river shapes its banks, and the banks, in turn, discipline the river.

That is why the institutionalists keep returning to the same blunt lesson: prosperity and stability do not emerge from slogans, but from rules that bind the powerful and protect the ordinary. The modern canon has made this point in different registers—economists Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson's popular formulation of "inclusive" institutions, for instance. Besides, many other scholars have helped renew attention to the study of institutions within top-tier economic and policymaking research. Harvard Business School Professor Tarun Khanna and colleagues, writing from the trenches of emerging markets, named what citizens live with daily: "institutional voids"—the missing intermediaries, enforcement mechanisms, and credible regulators that make markets and democracies functional rather than theatrical.

Liberal democracy is a system of habits: impartial policing, predictable courts, professional bureaucracy, disciplined parties, a press that can wound vanity without being silenced, and a citizenry that does not confuse allegiance with worship. When these habits rot, ballots become costumes in a performance.

In a country like ours, religion supplies a large share of the moral vocabulary that becomes political culture. It is sociology. But it becomes combustible when a single, increasingly literalist and punitive style of religiosity pushes itself into every public space—especially in a society where state institutions are weak enough to be bullied by the loudest. Bangladesh's recent history has seen surges of conservative identification; in the streets, this often takes the form of "guardianship" over women's bodies, music, folk spirituality—over anything joyful that cannot be easily policed.

Political scientist Samuel Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" thesis was never merely descriptive; in practice, it became a script that actors on all sides could perform. When global politics is reduced to civilisational camps—



VISUAL: ALIZA RAHMAN

"the West" and "Islam," each imagined as a single block—religion is pushed into the role of political identity, not only private faith.

Under Sheikh Hasina's long authoritarian arc, a particular narrative was sold abroad: the state as the last rampart against Islamist extremism. And authoritarian states love a single monstrous enemy; it lets them call every democratic demand "instability." After the 2024 uprising, Bangladesh entered a new period. What came with the regime's fall was not only relief; it was revelation—the true depth of institutional depravity, now visible because fear no longer covers it.

We are now scheduled to hold national elections on February 12, 2026. Yet, the air is still thick with the sense that rules do not rule; forces do. There is rising dissatisfaction with the interim administration amid delays on promised reforms, with renewed protests

to mobilise publicly after Friday prayers.

Then came the policing of women's public presence—not through law, but through vandalism and menace. In late January 2025, women's football events in Joypurhat and Dinajpur were cancelled after violence and pressure from groups identified as "Towhidi Janata," with injuries reported; even when authorities later ordered rescheduling, the message had already been delivered: women may play only by permission.

Around the same period, multiple prominent actresses did not attend planned public programmes, with reports of security concerns and local opposition surrounding such events.

And when the interim government's own Women's Affairs Reform Commission produced a report with hundreds of recommendations, backlash turned

grotesque. Viral images of men beating a sari-clad effigy of a woman with shoes on the Dhaka University campus and reports documenting derogatory public rhetoric against the commission and demands to abolish it became common.

This is the context in which the latest target has appeared: the bauls—Bengal's wandering metaphysicians, singing devotion without bureaucracy. Unesco describes baul songs

the other increasingly framed by some as a narrower religious identity suspicious of folk traditions. In that zero-sum contest, bauls are condemned not for violence, but for ambiguity—for refusing to fit cleanly into the boxes.

There is an irony worth underlining for the pious and the political alike. Conservative gatekeepers sometimes cite Imam al-Ghazali as a warrant for crushing "deviant" spirituality. Yet, al-Ghazali's own legacy is more complex: he famously attacked certain metaphysical claims of the philosophers in *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, while his broader work helped make Sufism an acceptable part of orthodox Islam. And in Bengal, encyclopedic scholarship notes that Sufi saints and syncretistic practice were central to Islam's spread and its accommodation with local culture.

I have personally sat through a Friday sermon where a khatib described bauls as people who eat human excrement—malice dressed up as piety. Even if one believes baul metaphors cross theological lines, the cruelty of the propaganda is not proportionate to any alleged deviation. It is not *da'wah*; it is dehumanisation. And dehumanisation is how mobs prepare themselves.

So, the question institutionalism forces upon us is not only who is right, but who benefits when the state looks weak. When extremist street-power rises visibly in the absence of an autocrat, it can retroactively validate the autocrat's propaganda: "Only I can control the monsters."

In such conditions, any manufactured chaos becomes a bargaining chip—domestically and internationally.

To preserve democracy, we must reject extremist intimidation on principle. But we must also reject it tactically in the short term, because chaos is a currency spent by those who want to discredit electoral politics and re-legitimise authoritarian "order."

What should be done is, in fact, unromantic: enforce existing law consistently; prosecute violence regardless of banner; protect women's sports and cultural gatherings as ordinary public order duties, not "special permissions"; and defend freedom of expression without waiting for international embarrassment. Above all, rebuild institutional reflexes—police that respond to crimes rather than crowds, administrators who do not surrender the state's authority to whoever shouts loudest, and political parties that stop outsourcing public morality to mobs.

A democracy does not die only when a dictator returns. It also dies when citizens learn to whisper. And nothing teaches us to whisper faster than the sight of a state that will not stand between the vulnerable and the violent.

## Is selective amnesia the price of a new Bangladesh?



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When a government prints too much money, the currency gradually loses its value. When a political party overuses history, that history too loses its value. This is exactly what happened to our Liberation War history. For over 15 years, the Awami League regime exhausted the moral capital of the Liberation War to justify everything from corruption to authoritarian control, commodifying the sacred until reverence became fatigue. The consequence has been corrosive. Today, many view symbols of the struggle not as national heritage, but as regime tools. Cynicism has taken the place of memory.

However, cynicism is no substitute for history. Discarding the gold because the miner was corrupt is a grave mistake, one that is turning into a dangerous national amnesia. That danger is visible on our streets, on our campuses, and in official conduct. Stand at any busy intersection in Dhaka today and shout "Joy Bangla," the slogan synonymous with the Liberation War, and you will feel it.

Sixteen months after what was hailed as a "second independence," uttering the slogan feels less patriotic and more like a personal risk. Words that once united a fractured nation against genocide now invite abuse, threats, assault, or branding as a traitor. This fear is the clearest measure of where we stand. I write this as a citizen who welcomed the end of the Awami League's authoritarian rule. Like millions of others, I suffocated under the grip of the last decade. I felt stifled by a one-party arrogance that commodified

1971 for political legitimacy. So, I wanted reform.

But in the bargain for a new future, I did not consent to the erasure of the history that made this republic possible. Citizens participated in an uprising to end a regime, not to lobotomise the nation's memory. The crisis we face is not merely about slogans. It is a moral inversion that was laid bare on Martyred Intellectuals Day, when Jamaat-e-Islami Secretary General Mia Golam Parwar claimed that "Indian agents" murdered our intellectuals, while a pro-vice chancellor of Chittagong University dismissed the Pakistani army's culpability as "absurd".

History is not a blank slate. Contemporary records, including Jamaat's own mouthpiece Dainik Sangram (1971), document the role of Al-Badr killing squads drawn from Islami Chhatra Sangha. The International Crimes Tribunal later judicially established Jamaat's culpable role in the systematic liquidation of intellectuals. Blaming "Indian agents" today is not revision; it is denial.

Shout "Joy Bangla" in the wrong crowd, and you risk being branded. For instance, in Muktagacha, Mymensingh, a Victory Day programme organised to honour freedom fighters was suspended after disorder broke out when veteran freedom fighter Bashir Uddin concluded his speech with the slogans "Joy Bangla, Joy Bangabandhu". A group of youths protested with counter-slogans, climbed onto the stage, and forced the upazila administration to halt the event.

By contrast, announce from a public stage that Pakistan did not kill Bangladesh's intellectuals, and you are shielded by the freedom of expression. We are fast building a country where it is physically dangerous to affirm the Liberation War, but increasingly safe to apologise for those who opposed our birth.

This corrosion has seeped into the imagination of the young. A Dhaka University student contesting in the Ducusu polls had shared a post in August in favour of pilot Rashid Minhas, who died stopping Bir Sreshtho Matiur Rahman from defecting. The post sparked a mixed reaction at the time. To celebrate the man who tried to strangle the birth of his own nation is a moral collapse.

This empathy for the oppressor is now being institutionalised. At DU, authorities were seen scrubbing away street portraits of Razakars. A similar sanitisation occurred at Chittagong University, where effigies painted on the floor were repainted. We have reached a point where the symbols of war criminals are protected from "disrespect," while the heroes of 1971 can be slandered.

That rupture is being reinforced through a campaign of renaming. Dismantling personality cults is defensible; erasing key actors of the Liberation War is not. At Rajshahi University, the Shaheed Tajuddin Ahmad Senate Building has been reduced to a generic "Senate Building." To erase the name of the wartime prime minister, who led the government while Bangabandhu was imprisoned, is to strike at the administrative core of the great 1971.

The ideological damage is mirrored by physical ruin. The Museum of Independence at Suhrawardy Udyana remains vandalised and shuttered. In Meherpur, hundreds of sculptures at the Mujibnagar Memorial Complex, where the provisional government took its oath, were destroyed. More than a year later, there is still no clear plan to restore these sites. Tenders

are missing, budgets opaque, and the message unmistakable: history can wait.

The same disdain shadows our cultural symbols. Demands to replace "Amar Shonar Bangla"—branded as an Indian imposition—are surfacing with disturbing frequency. Alongside this, a more poisonous ideology is growing. Popular religious speakers now tell packed gatherings that 1971 was a betrayal and that 1947 was the "real" independence.

To argue that Bangladesh's birth was a mistake is to revive the two-nation theory in new clothes. When such claims go unchallenged, they move from opinion to open contempt for the graves of those who died resisting that idea. Alongside this, in the aftermath of the July uprising, we are seeing a familiar attempt to audit the genocide itself. Was it really thirty lakh? Were the rape accounts exaggerated? This is how denial begins: by reducing mass murder and

sexual violence to a numbers game.

Even state rituals are shrinking. For the second consecutive year after the uprising, the Victory Day parade was cancelled despite no concrete security threat. When a government pleads poverty only to scale back Victory Day—while spending freely elsewhere—it signals not austerity but fatigue with the event that justified its existence. The tragedy of this moment lies in a false binary: that to be anti-fascist, you may have to be anti-1971. "Joy Bangla," we are told, belongs to a party, not to the people. But governments change; the war that created the republic does not. Because history is not a policy circular than an interim authority can repeal.

I want reform, as much as anyone. I want an independent judiciary, a professional civil service, and a press that does not live in fear. What I refuse to accept is that the ticket to this new Bangladesh is forced amnesia about the old one. The country that emerged

in 1971 is not a disposable draft. It was forged through Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's vision; steered by Syed Nazrul Islam, Tajuddin Ahmad, M Mansur Ali and A H M Kamaruzzaman; fought for under General M A G Osmani's command; voiced by Ziaur Rahman on Bangabandhu's behalf; and sustained by unnamed students, farmers turned fighters and mothers who sent their children to war.

Walking through a capital stripped of its victory parade, I made my own observance. Regimes may try to hijack history, but victory never belongs to any party or government. It belongs to the people. Our responsibility now is twofold. We must reclaim 1971 from those who commodified it for power, and we must defend it from those who seek to distort it through denial, dilution, or manufactured narratives. In building a new Bangladesh, we cannot afford to insult the war that made the republic possible.

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