

Tarique Rahman’s return, and the Kundera-esque weight of expectations



A CLOSER LOOK

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Tarique Rahman’s return to Bangladesh after 17 years in exile has been greeted with a scale of emotion that is understandable. There were crowds, chants, tears, symbolism layered upon symbolism. In a country starved of political closure, it felt, to many, like a long-awaited homecoming. But in 2025, we are not a nation that can afford to confuse emotion with resolution. The country is in a stage where it can completely fall apart as well as heal, depending on the political trajectory. And this condition demands discipline—from leaders, such as Tarique Rahman, as much as from those who follow them.

When talking about Tarique Rahman’s “homecoming,” it becomes essential to clarify one point: he did not return to Bangladesh politically unformed or disconnected. From London, especially in recent years, he remained a persistent presence in the country’s political conversation through statements, video addresses, party directives and policy documents. In a way, he shaped the BNP’s oppositional posture and kept himself visible as its central figure. His critiques of democratic erosion, calls for accountability, and insistence on electoral legitimacy were not occasional, random interventions; they were part of a sustained narrative. His exile, therefore, was physical rather than political. What has changed now is not his relevance to the nation’s politics, but his proximity to consequences.

That distinction matters.

From a distance, political language has a certain freedom. It can be sharp, even uncompromising. It can draw clear moral lines and name injustice without having to manage the fallout. On the ground, words can have different consequences. They address volatile public sentiments, weakened institutions, and a political culture where public trust has been worn thin over time. In Bangladesh today, very little is neutral. Silence is often interpreted. And rhetoric,

even when well-intended, can move crowds in directions no one can quite control.

This is why Tarique Rahman’s return should be assessed with a cautious optimism at best, not over-glorification. There is an understandable urge to see this as a historic turning point. But our recent history suggests that such moments, when overburdened with expectations, can just as easily unravel. When leaders are pushed into the spotlight as saviours rather than participants in a fragile political system, politics begins to resemble theatre. Brittle societies like ours can hardly endure that for very long.

Tarique Rahman’s speech on the day of his return offered important clues as to how he understands the weight of this moment. His tone was reasonably mature and restrained. There was an emphasis on peace and unity—elements the country is in dire need of right now. Violence was condemned. Elections were framed as the legitimate route to change. There were gestures towards inclusivity and a visible effort to lower the national temperature rather than raise it. In a country where political language has often normalised excess, this restraint was not insignificant and has not gone unnoticed.

The speech was also revealing in where it fell short of the expectations. It did not offer specificity. It did not articulate priorities; it did not chart out a roadmap. It invoked vision more than pathway. Unsurprisingly, it is a familiar feature of political homecomings everywhere, where leaders talk about vision rather than specifics. But in Bangladesh’s present condition—where trust in politics and politicians is thin and patience thinner, thanks to its bitter political legacy—the absence of detail matters. People are no longer just listening for reassurance. They are listening for structure, for understanding of how the future will be shaped.

Which again brings us to the question of expectations, the central tension of this



FILE PHOTO: BNP MEDIA CELL
Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) acting chairman Tarique Rahman waves from a vehicle after his arrival from London in Dhaka on December 25, 2025.

the relationship between the state and the citizen. It signals an awareness that Bangladesh’s crisis is perhaps not merely electoral, but constitutional.

Alongside this is the 19-point programme—the foundational vision articulated by Ziaur Rahman decades ago, and repeatedly invoked by his son. It is broader, more philosophical, concerned with sovereignty, self-reliance, social justice and national cohesion. Its strength lies in moral clarity rather than operational detail. It reminds supporters that BNP’s claim to legitimacy has always rested on nation-building, not simply regime change.

Together, these frameworks suggest that Tarique Rahman is not returning empty-handed. There is ideological intent. There is an attempt—at least on paper—to move beyond grievance, rhetorical politics.

But we must understand that intent is not

implementation.

Neither the 31 points nor the 19 points function as roadmaps. They tell us what should change, but not how that change will be shaped, financed, legislated, or politically negotiated where required, and who will be its owner and ultimately see it through. They talk about commissions, reforms, and principles, but stop short of outlining timelines or accountability mechanisms.

This does not make them meaningless. It does, however, place a responsibility on their author and the BNP’s leader—now returned to the country—to translate these well-articulated outlines into processes.

This is where expectations start to become uncomfortable.

And then there is also the expectation of restraint that goes beyond mere rhetorical condemnation of violence. In a political environment where mob violence is seemingly becoming substitute for institutional accountability, leadership requires repeated, unambiguous signalling that disorder is not a legitimate political instrument and will not be accepted as such. This is not about silencing protests; this is about refusing to legitimise disorder. Words must be chosen with an awareness of how quickly they can travel, and how easily they can be twisted to serve the purpose of vested quarters. As

I said before, now Tarique Rahman does not enjoy the leverage of distance, now he has to shoulder the weight of his words in a Milan Kundera-esque style.

In addition, there is the inevitable and more prominent expectation of electoral anchoring from Tarique Rahman. Having long argued that elections are the only legitimate pathway to change, Tarique Rahman is now expected to bind his political project firmly to that process—perilous and imperfect as it may be. This means discouraging disruption, resisting brinkmanship, and committing to outcomes that are not predetermined. In a country scarred by boycotts and flimsy mandates, it is a basic expectation.

However, and most critically, there is an expectation of temperature management. Bangladesh is not only polarised; it is at the boiling point. Years of repression, economic strain, and civic space shrinkage have resulted in a public mood that vacillates mostly between rage and outbursts. Leadership in such a context is not only about discouraging violence, but also creating space: for institutions to regain public trust, for politics to come to a steady pace, for disagreement to exist without becoming violent and for the people to heal.

This will perhaps be Tarique Rahman’s most critical test of political acumen.

Tarique Rahman’s return is therefore not a conclusion, but a test of his political maturity. He arrives with a powerful legacy, a solid, mobilised base to a country watching and hoping for stability, justice and a new era that will decide the nation’s trajectory for the next leap to progress. Having said all these, he also arrives at a moment where miscalculation carries unforeseen risks.

Therefore, assessing Tarique Rahman’s homecoming with cautious optimism is justified.

Bangladesh does not need another myth. It needs politics that can tolerate difference of opinion, navigate ambiguity, create unity and resist the urge to relent to chaos. Whether Tarique Rahman can meet all the expectations should be decided not by the scale of his welcome, but slowly, in how he handles power and formally holds it, when the time comes, regardless of the role he occupies in the next parliament.

The much-awaited return has happened. Expectations now carry weight—and the country will witness how they are borne.

Why we must save institutions that whisper moderation into our society



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Bangladesh has long depended on quiet, steady forces that make good choices feel natural: teachers who turn study into habit, newspapers that promotes tolerance, and cultural bodies that rehearse pluralism in public life. Behavioural economists Richard H Thaler and Cass R Sunstein call these “nudge” forces that shape the choice architecture so people lean towards better options without coercion. Nudge theory accommodates both liberalism and paternalism because liberalism alone cannot create good habits. In a country where formal systems—especially education—are uneven and people are time pressed, nudges are practical nation-building tools that can create an informed and inclusive society.

Everyday decisions are influenced as much by defaults, framing, and social cues as by deliberate reasoning. Our brain operates through two systems: automatic and reflective. Our mother tongue flows from the automatic system, while speaking another

language requires reflective effort. When we act from the reflective system, caution replaces instinct. Thaler and Sunstein’s framework draws on this dual-process psychology: keep good choices in the automatic system while respecting individual freedom.

For decades, mainstream newspapers and secular cultural organisations have played this role and helped shape civic norms in Bangladesh. Publications like *The Daily Star* championed merit and fairness, often through reporting on education and stories that fostered social harmony. Cultural institutions such as Chhayanaaut advanced pluralism through music and performance, reinforcing secular ideals. These efforts formed part of the behavioural architecture of a democratic society.

Individual citizens often lack the capacity to make better choices alone. This is where wealthy countries intervene and surround their citizens with invisible nudges; in poorly educated societies like ours, these

institutions are fewer. Unlike welfare states, our government makes limited attempts to build such architecture. Only a handful of media and cultural organisations shoulder this responsibility.

That architecture is now being dismantled by social media. Engagement-optimised feeds give more weight to outrage and attention-grabbing content over accuracy and balance, systematically amplifying polarising content. Uncritical platforming normalises extreme statements by inflating perceptions of societal support. In Bangladesh, extremist campaigns mobilise online and spill offline into harassment or attacks on media and cultural organisers. Their goal is not only intimidation—it is to delegitimise the institutions that anchor shared norms.

Recent mob attacks on *The Daily Star*, *Prothom Alo*, and cultural centres including Chhayanaaut mark a dangerous escalation. Arson and vandalism against these spaces are not just violence against property—they are assaults on Bangladesh’s traditional “nudge” institutions. These organisations have long shaped social, cultural, and educational norms, making moderation and pluralism the default experience of civic life. In an age dominated by misinformation and outrage-driven algorithms, their role is more critical than ever. Protecting these institutions is not optional; it is a prerequisite for safeguarding the behavioural architecture of a democratic society.

Secular content creators have tried

to counter hate with facts on Facebook, YouTube, and short-video platforms. But the playing field is tilted: algorithms reward heat, not light. “Civility” nudges on platforms struggle to reduce engagement with harmful posts, even if they boost attention to harmless content. That is worthwhile, but it rarely beats virality engineered for rage. Secular content creators have not shown success in cooling down the mob created by extremist content creators.

Should secular voices abandon social media, then? Not entirely—but they must stop treating it as the main battlefield. Secular actors who anchor their strategy on platforms built for engagement are effectively playing away, under hostile referees. Moreover, outperforming social media influencers in traditional media is easier for secular and informed voices. No powerful influencer has succeeded in traditional media with a few exceptions. In most cases, they fail to create knowledge and turn to social media that rewards shallow provocation.

Our Bangalee culture has long been upheld by cultural activities, but their scope has shrunk in the age of social media. Extremists exploit this vacuum to spread hate speech online. Secular activists cannot match this reach through cultural events alone. The good news: institutions like *The Daily Star*, *Prothom Alo*, and Chhayanaaut remain relatively credible and capable of reaching the masses. They uphold our cultural identity and sense of independence. We must save them.

In Bangladesh, we have fought hard for the political aspect of democracy, but rarely for its cultural dimension. Democracy cannot be smooth or sustainable unless political democracy aligns with its prerequisite cultural democracy. Bangladesh’s independence movement in 1971 was a long journey towards that alignment—but we have struggled to hold it. Today, Bangladesh faces a severe deficit of cultural democracy and is mired in an environment of cultural authoritarianism. At times, we defeated cultural authoritarianism while tolerating political authoritarianism; at other times, we fought political undemocratic forces by enforcing cultural intolerance. This cycle must end. We need to defeat both simultaneously. That is why traditional “nudge” institutions are essential—not only to sustain democracy but to deepen it.

The smarter move? Stop treating social media as the main stage. Use it tactically, not existentially. Reinvest in the quiet infrastructure—mainstream media and cultural forums—that once made decency the default. These spaces still command trust, reach, and depth. They can inoculate society against the rage economy.

If we want pluralism to remain Bangladesh’s everyday common sense, the answer is not to shout louder on an outrage machine. It is to protect and strengthen the institutions that whisper moderation into our civic life. Because when the quiet guardians fall, the noise will rule.

CROSSWORD
BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Fiddler’s need
6 Overturn
10 Cider fruit
11 Shrek’s love
12 Rock formed from clay
13 Bring on
14 Stock holders
15 Make happy
16 Yale rooter
17 Director Burton
18 Was a pioneer
19 SOS indication
22 Sailor’s call
23 The Emerald Isle
26 Young lady
29 June honoree
32 Greek consonants

33 Serving feat
34 Grove fruit
36 Scheme
37 Lover of drama
38 Greek consonant
39 Clarifying words
40 Snowy wader
41 Play group
42 Gander’s mate

DOWN

1 Sounded hoarse
2 She loved Hamlet
3 La Paz language
4 Miseries
5 Once known as
6 Excellent
7 From the area
8 Not available

9 Did kitchen work
11 Scenes of a lot of shooting
15 Cobbler’s cousin
17 Checking for fit
20 Male cat
21 Polite address
24 No slacker
25 Houdini feats
27 Take to court
28 Capitol group
29 Column type
30 Fragrance
31 Titled women
35 Dapper
36 When repeated, a Samoan city
38 Beer container

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FRIDAY’S ANSWERS

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