

THE UNFINISHED PROMISE of July in the Chittagong Hill Tracts



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Following the August 2024 uprising, every peace-loving citizen of the country hoped for radical change at all levels of state governance. There was an expectation that corruption, nepotism, partisan bias, and red tape within the administration would be reduced; that party-backed musclemen would be stopped from capturing large domestic and foreign project contracts; and that national development sectors would see fair and balanced distribution. Law and order were expected to improve, with extortion, snatching, robbery, and the menace of local thugs curtailed.

Yet, even after the political change in August, over the past year we have observed quite the opposite: corruption, snatching, extortion, muscle power, mob violence, and fundamentalism have surged alarmingly. Incidents of rape, abuse, harassment, and attacks on women are occurring regularly. Anyone expressing a dissenting opinion is indiscriminately branded a 'collaborator of fascism' and attacked—sometimes even through the creation of violent mobs leading to killings. Attacks on marginalised communities and religious minorities continue in the same fascistic manner as before.

At a time when the world is emphasising environmental protection to combat climate change, we are witnessing politically connected local strongmen, operating right under the nose of the administration, indiscriminately extracting stones at night from natural sites such as Bholaganj in Sylhet, leaving rivers stripped bare of stones. This is happening despite the fact that the



During the July movement, Adivasi students had stood shoulder to shoulder with their peers against the oppression of the then-authoritarian government.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

dreams, hopes, and aspirations slipping away. We did not want a society ruled by mob terror in exchange for so much blood and so many lives.

The very purpose of the July 2024 uprising was to free the country and its people from the grip of authoritarianism. It was a movement to restore democracy; to reclaim press freedom and the people's right to free speech and expression; to regain the right to hold peaceful assemblies to realise legitimate demands; to ensure that no one would be forced to show identity papers arbitrarily or face harassment while moving freely. It envisioned equitable distribution of opportunities and resources based on equality rather than discrimination, and the building of an inclusive state where all communities—regardless of ethnicity, religion, or race—would be partners in national development.

Regrettably, as days pass, the discrimination-free spirit of July is being steadily undermined. The first major blow to this drifting spirit came with the consecutive communal attacks in Khagrachhari and Rangamati in September 2024. These incidents left five people dead and caused extensive damage to homes, shops, business establishments, and the offices of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Regional Council through arson and attacks. Exactly one year later, in September 2025, violence erupted again in Guimara, Khagrachhari, where three Indigenous people were killed. This violence occurred during a road blockade protesting the gang rape of an Indigenous schoolgirl.

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Adviser to the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change in the current interim government, Syeda Rizwana Hasan, is internationally recognised for her long-standing environmental activism. Even while holding one of the highest responsible

positions in government, she has been unable to take exemplary action against these forest-destroying, stone-extracting criminals. This inevitably raises the question: is this the return for which so much blood was shed and so many lives were sacrificed during the

2024 uprising? Has the spirit of 2024 faded so quickly, within a year? Those of us who carried the ideals of the 2024 movement—who took to the streets to free the country from a decaying system of governance, or who supported the movement morally—now see our

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