

WHEN ART BECOMES THE VOICE OF CRITIQUE

## Cartoonists share hopes, grievances

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RAKSHANDA RAHMAN MISHA

During the July Uprising, Bangladeshi cartoonists played a vital role in dismantling the facade of authoritarianism. Under an oppressive regime, many artists faced the constant threat of imprisonment under the controversial Digital Security Act. Yet, they continued to speak out, using their pens to expose the corruption, absurdity, and injustice of the system. Their caricatures became a powerful tool of resistance, cutting through layers of fear and censorship to reveal truths that words alone often could not capture.

However, in the wake of the movement, a paradoxical silence has emerged. Despite the shift in the political landscape, political cartooning remains surprisingly limited, particularly regarding election-related issues. Some observers note that current cartoons often appear more as tools for party self-promotion



VISUAL: ANIKA TAH SIN HAFSA

creative expression and personal safety.

### The dilemma of labeling

For Morshed Mishu, Cartoonist and Assistant Editor at UNMAD, the challenge is as much creative as it is physical. He describes a sense of “creative exhaustion” shaped by the reality of the political theatre itself. Mishu observes that the actions and statements of politicians have become so inherently absurd that they function as their own caricatures.

“Everything is already so literal,” he explains, noting that the traditional “multiple layers” of satire are difficult to apply when reality is already a farce. Beyond this, he faces the suffocating culture of political labeling. If he critiques the interim government, he is branded a fascist; if he pokes at the BNP, he is called pro-Jamaat; and if he critiques Jamaat, he is labeled anti-Islamic. This constant pigeonholing makes it difficult to maintain the objective, multi-angled perspective that defines a **political cartoonist**.

### Structural hurdles

The psychological toll is equally heavy for Natasha Jahan of *The Business Standard*. She speaks of a profound emotional fatigue and a loss of hope in the post-uprising atmosphere. “I thought cartoons would grow, but that is no longer the case,” she says. The disappointment stems from seeing individuals she once respected change their stances as power dynamics shifted. This sense of being “let down” by the very people the movement sought to empower has created a stifling environment for artists who thrive on hope

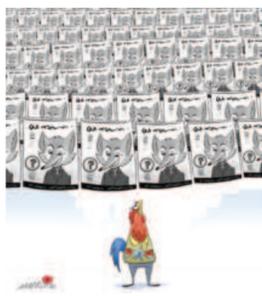
and accountability.

Zahidul Haque Apu, a freelance cartoonist and Senior Manager at Hoichoi Bangladesh, highlights a more structural issue: the lack of recognition. He suggests that many talented artists have stepped back because their contributions go unacknowledged. Unlike musicians or writers, cartoonists often lack a professional support system, leading to a drop in motivation. Furthermore, the pressure is often indirect. Apu recalls receiving “polite calls” questioning his work, such as his tribute to the late Abu Sayed. These “hints of threat” from anonymous sources create a pervasive culture of self-censorship.

### The enduring power of the pen

Despite these constraints, the artists still find moments where their work captures the national mood. Mehedi Haque recalls his 2014 cartoon of the Chief Election Commissioner emerging from a ballot box like a genie from Aladdin’s lamp. Jahan points to her recent work involving a heroic tiger and the Jamaat Ameer, reflecting the complex shifts in political alliances.

Ultimately, the state of political cartooning in Bangladesh today reveals a sobering truth. While the formal barriers of the previous regime may have shifted, the psychological and social risks remain. We see more **self-censorship** than actual state-sanctioned threats, suggesting that the real battle for free expression is now being fought in the minds of the artists themselves. The question remains: can the craft survive in a climate where safety is never guaranteed?



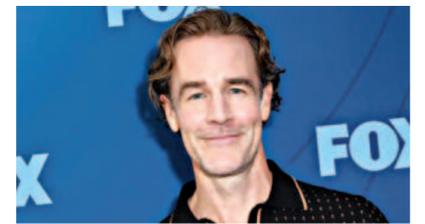
Artworks by Mehedi Haque

rather than critical examinations of the system. As we cross a historic election, we talk to some artists who convey their experiences.

### The risk of the “most profitable game”

Mehedi Haque, Senior Cartoonist at *The Daily New Age* and Executive Editor of UNMAD, provides a candid look at the current dangers. Having drawn political cartoons for over 25 years, he describes this as the most challenging period he has ever faced. The risk, he explains, comes from the desperation of political players.

“Some parties that never imagined coming this close to power are desperate to win this most profitable game,” Haque notes. He points out that many current leaders lack “cultural literacy” and have little understanding of satire, leading to reactions that are often vulgar rather than legal. Working almost alone for long periods has heightened this sense of vulnerability. While his newspaper remains resilient against legal notices and threatening phone calls, the environment demands a constant, exhausting negotiation between



## ‘Dawson’s Creek’ star James Van Der Beek no more

James Van Der Beek, best known for his role as Dawson Leery in the 1990s teen drama *Dawson’s Creek*, has died at the age of 48 after battling cancer. His wife, Kimberly, announced on social media that he passed away peacefully, describing his final days as marked by “courage, faith, and grace”.

In 2024, the actor revealed he had been diagnosed with colorectal cancer following a routine colonoscopy. He continued to share updates about his treatment and health journey online.

A native of Connecticut, Van Der Beek rose to fame alongside Michelle Williams, Joshua Jackson and Katie Holmes. Beyond *Dawson’s Creek*, he appeared in over 60 film and television projects, including *Varsity Blues* and *The Rules of Attraction*. He is survived by his wife and six children.



## Actor Tinu Karim passes away

Television actor Tinu Karim passed away on Thursday, February 12, at around 12:00pm in Barishal after suffering a heart attack, shortly after returning home from casting his vote in the national parliamentary election. His wife, Humayra Nowshin, confirmed.

According to colleagues, the actor had gone to a polling centre earlier in the day. After voting and returning home, he began to feel unwell and was rushed to hospital, where doctors declared him dead.

Earlier this year, Karim had returned home after a 40-day hospital stay that included ICU care and life support. Though he had recovered and been discharged in early January, he suddenly fell ill again at his village home.

Active in the industry for over two decades, Karim debuted on television in 2001 with *Shakkhor* and entered films with *Opekkha* in 2010. He also appeared in *Raat Jaga Phool* and *AltaBamu*.

He is survived by his wife and 11-year-old daughter.



Bubly elegantly poses after casting her vote



Three iconic sisters -- Shuchanda, Champa and Babita voted together



Outspoken Rukaiya Jahan Chamak after casting her vote



Apurba proudly flaunting his thumb



Imtiaz Barshon after voting

## CELEBRITIES JOIN THE FESTIVITIES

‘Vote for Bangladesh’, said Ashfaque Nipun, an instrumental figure in speaking against the past authoritarian regime. It rang true, celebrities joined in droves, hoping to elect the candidates who they deem fit to run their constituency. It was smiles, elation and a quiet promise to do more for the country.



‘July-warrior’ Badhan after casting her vote



Ashfaque Nipun urged everyone to vote for Bangladesh



‘Joyoddhoni’ famed Zohad brandishing a victory sign



Shajal reporting from the voting center