

# Leaders, beware of 'Yes Men'



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Political power allocates economic resources and opportunities, and, as such, it attracts all types of people with a wide range of motivations. When a leader rises to the top, especially through a sweeping electoral mandate, the attraction becomes even stronger. People want to be close to authority, to be seen as insiders, and to share its glow. Some come with competence and conviction; others bring experience and moral courage. Many, however, arrive with a far simpler calculation: proximity to power brings personal gain. Among them, the most dangerous companions of power are those who never disagree, never question, and never challenge decisions, and who tell leaders only what they want to hear. These are often called "Yes Men."

The landslide victory of the BNP in the recently held general election, under the leadership of Tarique Rahman, has reshaped Bangladesh's political landscape. For many citizens, it marks a transition and a chance to strengthen democratic institutions. However, history shows that overwhelming mandates can carry risks. Landslide victories often tempt leaders to believe that their authority is beyond challenge. In such situations, honest feedback can slowly give way to flattery, and loyalty may come to mean unquestioning

obedience. While praise may be reassuring, constructive, thoughtful, evidence-based and respectful dissent is far more valuable as it protects leaders from costly mistakes. Understandably, no one likes to hear "I told you so" or be told directly that they are wrong. Yet, giving and receiving advice, feedback and even criticism are essential to effective leadership and sound decision-making. Pointing out policy weaknesses or raising uncomfortable truths about governance is part of responsible citizenship. Sadly, such discourse is often viewed as disloyal or unpatriotic by many leaders.

In many societies, including Bangladesh, criticism is often misunderstood. Constructive criticism helps us recognise our mistakes and improve, yet we frequently fail to accept it with grace. We assume that any criticism, whether about a cricketer's batting technique, a friend's personal choice, or someone's manners, must carry an ulterior motive. Similarly, when citizens disagree with government decisions, criticise leaders or write unflattering opinion pieces, they are quickly labelled "unpatriotic," "conspirators" or "anti-state." Such reactions discourage open discussion and create fear and silence. Silence is dangerous for any government.

The truth is that leaders who

surround themselves with people brave enough to say "this may be wrong" are far better equipped to govern than those shielded by constant applause. Yet, human ego, especially when reinforced by power, resists discomfort, preferring harmony over honesty. As Yes Men tighten their grip around a leader, they begin to control access

and authority becomes entitlement. Leaders begin to believe they cannot be wrong.

Bangladesh has already seen where this path leads. The 15 and a-half year rule of Sheikh Hasina presents a glaring example of how prolonged power, combined with sycophancy, weakens judgement. Over time, her leadership became isolated within

collapse came, it appeared sudden only to those who had stopped listening. For ordinary citizens, the warning signs had been visible for years.

Ironically, overwhelming electoral mandates often speed up this decline. Landslide victories can convince leaders that they alone represent the will of the people, turning elections

secure. Each time, that belief was proven false.

The BNP's current mandate offers both opportunity and responsibility. A strong mandate provides a chance to rebuild institutions, restore trust, and reset political culture. It is also a test of restraint. The real challenge is not defeating opponents at the ballot box, but governing in a way that prevents the return of authoritarian habits. This requires leaders who welcome disagreement, encourage debate, and protect independent thinking. It calls for advisers valued for their competence and integrity, not just loyalty. Above all, it demands humility and an understanding that electoral success does not mean people voted for the political leaders because they are morally perfect.

Therefore, leaders should avoid Yes Men not only for their own sake, but to ensure that institutions remain healthy. Political parties must allow internal discussion. Institutions must function without fear. The media and civil society should be able to raise concerns openly. These mechanisms strengthen governance rather than weaken it. The lesson is simple: leaders do not fall when criticism is loud, but rather when there is only silence.

As Bangladesh enters a new political chapter, the true test of leadership will lie in how carefully leaders listen to those who disagree. History shows that nations suffer most when leaders choose comfort over truth. If Bangladesh is to avoid repeating its political cycles, those in power must resist the comfort of constant applause. The real strength of leadership lies in the courage to hear the truth. Therefore, leaders should beware of Yes Men. They are often the first sign of decline.



VISUAL: SHAIKH SULTANA JAHAN BADHON

Alternative voices are filtered out, critics are portrayed as enemies, and inconvenient facts are buried under optimistic stories. Slowly, the leader's world shrinks and becomes isolated. They hear only good news. Data is adjusted to appear positive. Warning signs are ignored. Meetings turn into rituals of agreement. Gradually, confidence turns into arrogance,

a narrow circle of loyalists who equated criticism with disloyalty. Institutions meant to act as checks were weakened or politicised. Public grievances over corruption, economic pressure, electoral credibility, and shrinking civic space were ignored or suppressed. A carefully managed image of stability replaced honest engagement with reality. When the

from a tool of accountability into a source of self-validation. Bangladesh has seen this before. The elections of 1973 and 2001, for example, produced massive victories, and both periods ended badly. Power became concentrated, dissent was sidelined, and corruption grew. Each time, leaders believed they were acting in the nation's best interest and felt

## Restoring trust in judiciary is the new govt's litmus test



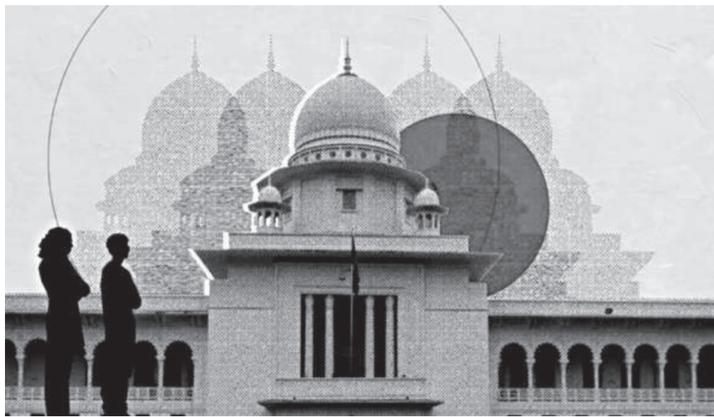
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MD. ARIFUJAMAN

With a resounding two-thirds parliamentary majority, Bangladesh's new government assumes office with formidable expectations. Chief among them is the restoration of public confidence in a justice system that, for many citizens, has come to evoke anxiety rather than assurance.

In the decades following independence, the country's higher judiciary was widely regarded as a constitutional sentinel. Landmark judgments strengthened the separation of powers, defended fundamental rights, and articulated doctrines intended to restrain executive overreach. The Supreme Court in Dhaka came to be viewed as a symbol of republican promise: that power would answer to law, not the other way round. Even amid political upheaval, there were moments when judges asserted autonomy with quiet resolve, reinforcing the belief that the courts could stand apart from partisan contests.

That inheritance has been severely strained under the government of Sheikh Hasina. What began as decisive political consolidation after a landslide victory in 2008 gradually hardened into a centralisation of authority in which legal mechanisms were increasingly perceived as instruments of control. Human rights organisations, opposition leaders and sections of the legal profession have long alleged that criminal law and procedural devices were deployed to



FILE VISUAL: STAR

weaken political rivals. Opposition figures often found themselves facing multiple cases across different districts at once, ensuring a carousel of court appearances, bail hearings, and procedural adjournments. Even in the absence of conviction, the burden of process—financial, reputational, and psychological—proved punitive. In such circumstances, the journey through the system became a

sentence by itself.

The scale of arrests during periods of political tension compounded these concerns. At various junctures, particularly ahead of elections or mass demonstrations, thousands of opposition activists were detained. Charges frequently invoked public order or security provisions framed in broad terms. Families and defence lawyers spoke of "ghost cases" in which unnamed accused persons were subsequently identified as opposition supporters. Bail, critics argued, was inconsistently granted and pre-trial detention sometimes appeared to function as a means of deterrence rather than a strictly necessary safeguard, whereas government officials maintained that firm measures were required to preserve stability in a combustible political environment often marked by street

confrontation. Bangladesh's political culture has rarely been placid. But the cumulative effect of mass arrests, contested prosecutions, and the visible entanglement of political conflict with courtroom proceedings has led to a steady erosion of public trust.

In any democracy, the line between legitimate prosecution and political litigation depends not only on statutory authority but on credibility. When a substantial segment of the electorate believes that legal proceedings are calibrated to sideline opponents, the moral force of verdicts weakens—whatever their technical merit.

Doubts were further amplified by concerns over judicial appointments and administration. Critics argued that postings and promotions within parts of the judiciary reflected partisan proximity rather than professional distinction. Senior members of the bar warned of the chilling effect that executive influence—or even the perception of it—can have on judicial independence. Over time, the distinction between accommodation and autonomy appeared blurred. For ordinary citizens, the implications were not confined to high-profile political trials. Civil disputes languished. Criminal cases drifted through endless adjournments. Backlogs swelled. The impression took hold of a system capable of swift action when political stakes were high, yet paralysed when everyday litigants sought redress.

Courts rely on legitimacy, not coercion, and their authority depends on the belief that decisions are impartial. When that faith falters, compliance weakens and social cohesion suffers.

The newly elected government has inherited not only the institutional issues but also this legacy of scepticism. Restoring trust, therefore, will require confronting the past candidly. Laws that enabled mass arrests and

broad prosecutorial discretion, particularly under the guise of national security or digital regulation, must be carefully reviewed and refined to prevent abuse. Judicial appointments and disciplinary mechanisms need to be insulated from partisan influence. Cases widely perceived as politically motivated may warrant principled review to ensure fairness. Crucially, political leaders must exercise restraint: public commentary on ongoing cases or pressuring of investigators erodes confidence. Institutional culture evolves slowly, but leadership that respects boundaries can accelerate sustainable reform.

Restoring trust will not be accomplished through speeches or legislative arithmetic. It will emerge incrementally, case by case, as citizens observe whether the law is applied consistently regardless of political affiliation. Independence cannot be proclaimed; it must be practised. A two-thirds majority in parliament can make or amend statutes with ease but it cannot compel public belief. That must be earned through visible fairness, procedural rigour, and a demonstrable departure from the patterns that have led many in Bangladesh to question whether justice was blind, or merely blindfolded depending on the circumstance.

If the new government succeeds in disentangling law from partisanship, it will do more than rehabilitate an institution. It will revive the foundational promise of Bangladesh: that power is subordinate to principle, and that courts exist not to shield the powerful but to protect the rights of all. For a country long harbouring democratic aspirations, the next chapter will be written on the steady, unglamorous work of restoring faith in justice. Whether those courtrooms can once again command trust may prove the defining test of Bangladesh's democratic resilience.

CROSSWORD  
BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**  
1 "You there!"  
5 Lipstick slip  
10 Moreno and Hayworth  
12 Bisect  
13 It shows red and blue states  
15 Cobbler's cousin  
16 Band blaster  
17 "Give — rest!"  
18 Be frugal  
20 Waiter's aid  
21 Fall flower  
22 Corn units  
23 Battery end  
25 Set of stores  
28 Stately home  
31 "Rome was not built in —"  
32 Lever, of a sort  
34 Turn bad  
35 Had supper  
36 French friend  
37 It shows an X  
40 Painter Matisse  
41 Black card  
42 Cart pullers

- 43 Strong — ox  
**DOWN**  
1 Gets ready, briefly  
2 Sand substance  
3 Takes the wheel  
4 Tic-toe link  
5 Store  
6 Chess piece  
7 Mark Twain's New York home  
8 Film set on Pandora  
9 Settles a debt  
11 Flower part  
14 Unprepared  
19 Tuscan setting  
20 Quite small  
24 Risk takers  
25 George Washington's wife  
26 Puts on a pedestal  
27 Draws toward midnight  
29 First Family of 2010  
30 Arbor  
33 Turn red, perhaps  
35 Without repairs  
38 "Right you —!"  
39 MPG-rating org.

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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	U	S	E		R	E	N	E
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