

The duty to rebuild



Bobby Hajjai
MP, is the state minister for primary and mass education. He writes in his personal capacity and can be reached at bobby.hajjai@gmail.com.

BOBBY HAJJAI

There are moments in a nation's life when victory does not feel like triumph at all. It feels like an inventory. One counts the broken things. The bent institutions. The exhausted treasury. The roads that still exist but no longer promise movement. The schoolrooms in which children are present but learning is absent. The offices where authority survived but purpose did not. The new government of Bangladesh came to power not into comfort, but into consequence.

For those of us who spent more than a decade in agitation, argument, assembly, resistance, and the often-lonely labour of democratic politics, government is not a coronation. It is an audition before history. One has marched for the vote; now one must justify it. One has denounced arbitrariness; now one must build order without becoming arbitrary oneself. One has spoken for the people in the long season of opposition; now one must answer to them in the morning glare of office.

That is why the election manifesto placed before the nation by BNP Chairman Tarique Rahman on February 6 mattered profoundly. It was not simply a shopping list of promises, nor the usual carnival literature of South Asian politics. At its core was a pledge to restore the dignity of the vote, rebuild accountable government, undertake constitutional and electoral reform, and pursue a Bangladesh that is both economically stronger and politically more answerable. It set down 51 priority points, grouped around nine major commitments, and spoke openly of a state that would be "directly answerable to the people." It also tied this democratic language to an ambitious agenda: the aspiration of a trillion-dollar economy by 2034. In a country long blighted by the inflation of slogans and the shrinkage of institutions, the interesting thing was not the scale of the promise, but

the attempt to bind prosperity to legitimacy.

Yet manifestos do not govern in the abstract. They govern in the debris of what they inherit. And what this government inherited was no small matter. The World Bank estimates Bangladesh's real GDP growth fell to four percent in FY2025, down from 4.2 percent in FY2024, marking a third consecutive annual slowdown. Development expenditure contracted by 25.5 percent in FY2025. Gas shortages were undermining power generation, industry, and wider economic activity. The IMF, meanwhile, identified the banking sector as the country's most pressing vulnerability. Reporting on that assessment noted tax revenue at only 6.9 percent of GDP in FY2025 and system-wide non-performing loans surging to 34 percent by June 2025. These numbers are symptoms of a republic that has been living off of institutional depletion.

This is the economic prose of our inheritance: slower growth, weaker investment, constrained energy supply, a fiscally frail state, and a banking system that too often served influence before prudence. To this, one must add the visible wear of public life itself: overburdened cities, distorted incentives, degraded service delivery, and a generation of young people whose ambition exceeded the opportunities arranged for them. One may speak grandly of national destiny. But destiny, in a developing country, often comes down to whether the lights stay on, whether credit is honestly priced, whether the school teaches, whether the road connects, whether the permit is given by rule rather than favour.

And now history, in its malicious humour, has added a further burden. The new government must govern not only amid inherited fragility, but amid a turbulent world. The war in the Middle East has already begun

to trouble Bangladesh's energy arithmetic. With shipping through the Strait of Hormuz disrupted and fuel supply threatened, what was once a distant war is impacting our fuel and fertiliser chains, and our calculations of price and supply. Fertiliser production has already been curtailed and every delay at sea threatens to reappear on land as costlier energy, tighter transport, industrial disruption, and fresh inflationary unease.

Against that vulgar pageantry, he has tried to project something else: restraint, sobriety, a notion of office as trusteeship rather than spectacle. In a poor country, personal frugality in leadership is pedagogic. It tells the political class that the age of indulgent government must end.

As for the cabinet, one should resist both cynicism and flattery. It is neither a gathering of miracle workers nor a council

struggle, I feel most sharply the moral urgency of education. If politics is to mean anything beyond the capture of office, it must alter the life chances of children. In primary and mass education, we are working under the prime minister's instructions to remake the primary school into something more than a holding pen of attendance and certificates. It must become a vault of learning: the place where language is formed, numeracy secured, curiosity dignified, discipline humanised, and the future made less accidental.

This is especially urgent because our present literacy claims, though often repeated with bureaucratic satisfaction, still conceal a harsher truth. Bangladesh's literacy rate for those aged seven and above was reported at 74 percent in 2022, and functional literacy at 77.9 percent in 2023. But literacy that means little more than name-writing, form-filling, or ritual survival in the paper economy is not enough. A nation cannot modernise on signature-literacy alone. It requires reading with comprehension, writing with clarity, and reasoning with confidence. The target must be nothing less than genuine literacy for all, because only from that foundation can secondary schooling succeed, technical education deepen, and higher education cease to be a bottleneck of disappointment.

So the burden before this government is immense. It must repair the economy without cruelty, reform the state without chaos, govern firmly without forgetting why democracy was demanded in the first place. It must keep faith with the manifesto without becoming enslaved to rhetoric. It must confront a broken inheritance and a hostile world at the same time.

But there is also, beneath the burden, an austere kind of hope. Not the sentimental hope of campaign music and flags. Not the hallucination that one election redeems a nation. Rather, the sterner hope that comes when public office is inhabited by people who know what it took to get there, and therefore know what it would mean to fail. A government born after democratic struggle carries a special obligation: to prove that sacrifice was not merely dramatic, but useful.

That is the work now. Less trumpeting, more toil. Less pageantry, more repair. The republic, after all its bruising, asks not for ecstasy, but for seriousness.



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FILE PHOTO: STAR

Our region, too, is not a meadow of stability. South Asia remains prey to strategic suspicion, unsettled borders, uneven growth, migration pressures, and the permanent temptation of political simplification. In such a neighbourhood, a government cannot afford either romanticism or vanity. It must be serious and must be plain in its priorities. It must understand that sovereignty in our age is not about chest-thumping rhetoric but about competence to ensure food, energy, education, order, and credibility.

In this setting, the prime minister's preferred idiom of leadership matters. Much of public life today involves theatre: sirens, entourage, waste, and upholstered ego.

of mediocrities. It appears, factually, to be a mixed formation: senior political veterans, recognised party figures, some technocratic appointments, and a few first-time parliamentarians shaped by the upheavals of recent years. Outside observers have already noted both the weight of the old guard and the inclusion, at junior levels, of newer protest-era voices. That seems a fair description. A cabinet in a recovering democracy need not be glamorous; it must be competent, cohesive, and capable of learning in public. On that count, cautious optimism is a legitimate stance.

For my own part, serving now in government after years in democratic

Nepal election: A lesson in honouring a people's uprising



Aishwarya Sanjukta Roy Proma
is lecturer in the Department of International Relations at the University of Rajasthan.

AISHWARYA SANJUKTA ROY PROMA

On a Tuesday morning in September 2025, a 19-year-old student named Suman Thapa tried to log into TikTok and saw that it was blocked. By Friday, he was in the streets with thousands of others. By the following week, he was dodging live firing. Nepal's government had made the oldest mistake in the authoritarian playbook when it tried to silence people who had nothing left to lose.

Something unusual happened in Kathmandu in September last year. It did not begin with a manifesto or in a party headquarters, or through a general strike. It began with a social media ban. The government of former Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli, already under the weight of contradictions, moved to restrict access to online platforms that young Nepalis treat as public space. That decision lit a fire that the administration either did not see or chose to ignore.

Within days, the protests had outgrown their original grievance. Tens of thousands of young people poured into the streets of Kathmandu, Pokhara, and Biratnagar. The movement had no single command structure. It was organised largely on Discord

servers and TikTok channels, coordinated by grassroots citizens. Parliament was stormed. Government buildings were set alight. When police opened fire, at least 77 people were killed. By mid-September, Oli resigned and Nepal's president called on elections. The country's first woman to lead a government, former Chief Justice Sushila Karki, was appointed as the interim prime minister. She was tasked with holding the election within six months.

The election was held on March 5 this year. The results point to a landslide for rapper Balendra Shah, which few in Nepal's political establishment anticipated, even after the uprising.

Revolutions rarely announce themselves. Nepal's did not, either. There was no vanguard party, no clear state transformation, no counter-institution waiting to take power. It signalled a moment of free-falling legitimacy for a political class that recycled itself through coalitions and backroom arrangements for three decades. This is what philosopher Antonio Gramsci called an "organic crisis." It is a rupture in which the dominant class loses its capacity to lead, not merely to govern by

force. The Nepali state's coercive response, including firing at protesters, only confirmed what the streets were already saying. Authority had become a destructive power for a generation that grew up after Nepal's civil war and the 2015 earthquake.

Nepal's political configuration had long been a cartelised party system involving the Nepali Congress, the Communist Party of Nepal (UML), and the Maoists. They compete by rotating through power-sharing arrangements that shield them from meaningful accountability. Oli himself had served four times. The country's economic record remained dismal. GDP per capita stagnated. Youth unemployment was high enough that emigration, particularly to the Gulf states and Malaysia, had become a default life plan for much of the population under 30.

Nepal's next leader is a rapper whose verses talk about potholes and bureaucratic rot. That alone tells you something has broken open. Balendra Shah, known publicly as Balen, is 35 years old. He trained as a civil engineer, became one of Nepal's most prominent rappers, and won the Kathmandu mayoral race in 2022 on an anti-establishment platform. His music targeted corruption and inequality and his songs circulated as unofficial anthems during the September protests. He joined the Rastriya Swatantra Party (National Independent Party) in December 2025, and was announced as its prime ministerial candidate shortly after. The Rastriya Swatantra Party itself was founded in 2022. Oli, the veteran communist-turned-nationalist, was beaten in his own constituency, where Shah ran directly

against him. Nepali Congress, the country's oldest democratic party, won a fraction of its expected seats. Gagan Thapa, Congress's newly elected leader and widely regarded as its most credible reformist voice, lost his own race to an RSP candidate.

The RSP ran a disciplined, well-funded campaign, with a social media operation of over 660 people and significant backing from the Nepali diaspora, particularly in the US. Shah's platform focused on health and education for poor Nepalis, anti-corruption reform, and a break from the coalition politics that had made governance in Kathmandu an exercise in managed dysfunction. He offered something that the old parties had failed to: the credible possibility of a different kind of politics.

Bangladesh went through its own version of this uprising in 2024, when student-led protests brought down Sheikh Hasina's government. The two episodes share certain structural features: the youth frustrated by stagnant economies and closed political systems served as catalysts for the fall of the old system. In both cases, social media was used as both an organising tool and a political battleground. Both uprisings show the particular volatility that results when a government responds to civic protest with lethal force.

The danger in any popular uprising is not that it succeeds in removing a government, but the pace of mobilisation. Nepal has managed this transition better than many had predicted. The interim administration deliberately insulated itself from party politics and provided a holding structure that maintained basic state functions while the

election was organised. A voter roll of nearly 19 million was updated, over 800,000 first-time voters were registered, and the election itself was conducted, by all independent observer accounts, freely and fairly.

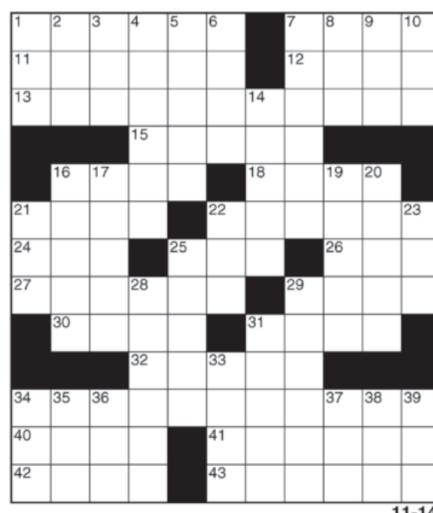
This was rather significant, given that parliament had been dissolved and the country had just come through its most violent political rupture in years. Nepal's constitutional framework, with its imperfections, provided a procedural path through the crisis. Karki followed it. The Election Commission followed it. The results are being respected.

Winning an election, it turns out, is the easy part. Political scientists who study democratic transitions are fairly united on one uncomfortable point: the removal of an authoritarian or dysfunctional incumbent is not a democratic consolidation. It is a window. What passes through that window depends on whether the incoming government can convert popular energy into durable institutional change. Whether the institutional machine of Nepal, resistant to reform for decades, can be made responsive to those demands is a question that will take years to answer.

At a minimum, what Nepal has demonstrated is that democratic elections remain one of the few mechanisms through which a population can peacefully retire a political class that has exhausted its legitimacy. The uprising created the conditions. The election translated them into a mandate. Whether that mandate becomes governance, with all the complexity and compromise that word implies, is the chapter that has yet to be written.

CROSSWORD
BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS
- 1 Tilted type
- 7 Decisive defeat
- 11 Ill will
- 12 Different
- 13 Took the lead
- 15 Dancer Castle
- 16 Rivals
- 18 Poet Ogden
- 21 Atlas pages
- 22 Hunting dog
- 24 Luau music maker
- 25 Films, slangily
- 26 Metal source
- 27 Business news topic
- 29 Stage item
- 30 Challenge
- 31 Club cost
- 32 Be of advantage
- 34 Refused to think about
- 40 On the ocean
- 41 Eventually
- 42 Abound
- 43 Tahini base
- DOWN
- 1 Little devil
- 2 Letter after sigma
- 3 Maximum amount
- 4 Easter flowers
- 5 Bakery workers
- 6 Hand over
- 7 Prepare, as leftovers
- 8 Flamenco cry
- 9 Much of N. Amer.
- 10 Lasso of TV
- 14 Building wing
- 16 Counterfeited
- 17 Verdi creation
- 19 Mall business
- 20 Long lunches
- 21 Silent
- 22 Polite address
- 23 Agent, for short
- 25 Tick off
- 28 Writer Greene
- 29 Throbs
- 31 Keaton of film
- 33 Bustles
- 34 Touch lightly
- 35 Try out
- 36 Take in
- 37 Lupino of film
- 38 Block up
- 39 Iris setting



SATURDAY'S ANSWERS



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