



ANATOMY OF CABRERA ERA

Long reign, limited return

ANISUR RAHMAN

As the clock ticks down on Javier Cabrera's contract, set to expire on April 30, the Spaniard leaves behind a legacy of historic longevity but conflicting results. Appointed in January 2022, he became Bangladesh's longest-serving foreign coach, yet his tenure remains deeply debated.

In an era when Bangladesh coaches rarely lasted months, Cabrera oversaw 39 international matches across four years. The numbers, however, reflect stagnation: just 10 wins, most against minnows such as Bhutan (3), Cambodia (2), Seychelles (1) and Maldives (3), alongside a rare 1-0 victory over India that ended a 22-year wait.

If results raised concerns, expectations only grew with the influx of high-profile players. Backed by Leicester City midfielder Hamza Choudhury, Canada-based Shomit Shome, Italy-based Fahamedul Islam and USA-based Zayan Ahmed, Cabrera had one of the strongest pools in recent years. Yet Bangladesh still failed to reach the AFC Asian Cup finals for the first time since 1980, finishing third in a four-team group with five points from six matches.

Despite improved personnel, a clear identity never emerged. Midfield quality through Hamza and Shomit, combined

with the pace of wingers Rakib Hossain, Fahamedul and Faisal Ahmed Fahim, did not translate into a cohesive attacking unit. Cabrera's approach drew regular scrutiny, with delayed and reactive in-game changes raising eyebrows.

Continuity remained elusive. Even after testing more than 30 players following his predecessor Jamie Day's departure in late 2021, Cabrera failed to build a settled side. Experienced names like Topu Barman, Saad Uddin, Bishwanath Ghosh, Sohel Rana, Rahmat Mia, Rakib, Mohammad Ridoy and Mohammad Ibrahim remained central, while a handful of younger players — Sheikh Morsalin, Mehedi Hasan Srabon, Mitul Marma, Shahrear Emon and Shakil Ahad Topu — established themselves alongside overseas-based additions.

Defensive instability was a constant. The 41-year-old struggled to establish a reliable backline, particularly amid injuries, often deploying players out of position. This lack of stability proved costly, with Bangladesh committing late errors and dropping points in tightly contested matches.

Up front, the issues persisted. A rotating cast of strikers — Aminur Rahman Sajib, Sazzad Hossain, Suman Reza, Arman Akash Faisal, Al Amin, Pias Ahmed Nova and Mirajul Islam

— failed to solve the goal drought, with inconsistent selection undermining any cutting edge.

Cabrera's tactical shift further highlighted the uncertainty. From high-intensity pressing in the 2022 Asian Cup Qualifiers, he moved towards build-up play and controlled possession. The approach peaked at the 2023 SAFF Championship in India, where Bangladesh reached the semifinals after 14 years — a rare high in an uneven tenure.

Ultimately, Cabrera's Bangladesh leaned too heavily on individual moments rather than a defined structure. This raised doubts over whether his system suited the squad's physicality and experience. His failure to convert promise into sustained success — particularly qualification for the 2027 Asian Cup, widely seen as attainable — leaves his tenure less fulfilling than desired.

When he took over, Bangladesh were ranked 186. Over time, the ranking dipped to 192 before rising to 180, and currently stands at 181.

What Cabrera did establish was that Bangladesh could compete at the Asian level. What he could not prove, however, was whether they could win when it mattered most.

Italy football chief resigns after World Cup disaster

AFP, Milan

The head of Italy's football federation (FIGC), Gabriele Gravina, resigned on Thursday, falling on his sword after the men's national team failed to qualify for a third consecutive World Cup.

Gravina revealed he would step down following a meeting held at the FIGC's headquarters in Rome.

Italy fell at the playoffs again on Tuesday, this time after a penalty shootout against Bosnia and Herzegovina and will miss this summer's finals in the United States, Canada and Mexico.

The shock waves of the latest humiliation for one of the world's most important football nations forced Gravina, 72, to go back on his initial plans to wait until a FIGC board meeting next week to announce a decision on his future.

The FIGC said in a statement a vote for a new president will be held on June 22 with Giovanni Malago, the former long-time head of the Italian Olympic Committee who was president of the Milan Cortina Winter Olympics organisation committee, among the names in the hat.

Gravina's resignation also means Italy coach Gennaro Gattuso could resign, as it was Gravina who asked the 2006 World Cup winner to stay on beyond the end of his current contract, which expires in the summer.

Can Bangladesh break India final jinx?

Bangladesh will take on India in the final of the 2026 SAFF U-20 Championship at the National Football Stadium in Male today, hoping to secure a maiden win over their neighbours in the final of the tournament at any level. The match will kick off at 9:00 pm.

Like their senior team, Bangladesh's age-level sides have never beaten India in a SAFF Championship final. The national team lost both their finals against India — in 1999 and 2005 — while the age-level teams suffered defeats in 2019 (U-18), 2022 (U-20), and 2025 (U-19).

However, Bangladesh held India to a 1-1 draw earlier in the group stage of this edition.

Both teams began their campaigns with wins over Pakistan — Bangladesh winning 2-0 and India registering a 3-0 victory.

Bangladesh edged past Nepal 1-0 in the semifinal, while India thrashed Bhutan 5-0 to storm into the final.

Defending champions India have won the tournament a record four times.

Bangladesh's only title came in 2024.

We always like to play against India and want to bring the trophy home by beating them. So, that historic moment is upon us, with the final taking place tomorrow [today].

Bangladesh U-20 captain Mithu Chowdhury



PHOTO: SAFF

69 DAYS TO GO



THE FASTEST BRACE EVER

In the semifinal of the 2014 edition, Toni Kroos struck twice within just 69 seconds against hosts Brazil — the fastest brace ever scored by a player in World Cup history. On that unforgettable night in Belo Horizonte, Germany delivered a stunning performance, demolishing Brazil 7-1.

**** Visit The Daily Star's website to also read: 'Four stars: Italy's World Cup glory story'.**

JOY IN BANGKOK



Bangladesh players celebrate in jubilant fashion following one of their four successful penalty corners during a thrilling 4-3 victory over Chinese Taipei during their opening Pool B fixture of the Asian Games Qualifiers in Thailand yesterday. After falling behind to an early strike, the men in red and green showcased clinical set-piece execution to turn the game around. A brace from Ashraful Islam, alongside strikes from [R] Amirul Islam — adjudged player of the match — and Deen Mohammad Emon, proved enough to withstand a late surge from their opponents and secure a vital three points ahead of their remaining group matches: against Sri Lanka today and Uzbekistan on April 6. The top six teams from this event will qualify for September-October's Asian Games in Japan.

PHOTO: AHF

Another director quits as BCB set for meeting on Saturday

SPORTS REPORTER

The Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) is set for a board meeting on Saturday on the backdrop of another director stepping down on Thursday — the third such resignation in less than six months of the current board.

Yasir Mohammad Foyzal Ashiq, who came into the board from the National Sports Council (NSC) quota, tendered his resignation.

"I have resigned due to personal reasons. I have submitted it to the BCB's central office. There was no issue of interference in my decision," Yasir told The Daily Star.

BCB CEO Nizamuddin Chowdhury could not be reached for a comment.

Yasir was one of the two NSC-nominated directors in the current board. Initially, Isfak Hasan had been nominated alongside him but after his links with the deposed Awami League government surfaced — he had sought nomination from Awami League for the national election in 2024 — he was replaced by Rubaba Dowla.

Ministry of Youth and Sports secretary Mahbub-ul-Alam told The Daily Star that the NSC has not yet discussed a replacement.

"We are aware of the resignation but it has happened just today [Thursday]. We have a sports council to decide on these issues. The honourable

State Minister for Youth and Sports Aminul Haque is the chairman of the council. A decision will be made after discussions with him," he informed.

Before Yasir, director Ishtiaque Sadeque had resigned in January citing personal reasons while last month, Amjad Hossain also stepped down as a director.

However, BCB president Aminul Islam Bulbul had told The Daily Star during a recent interview that their resignations have not been accepted yet.

Ahead of the meeting, there is tangible anxiety in the air in BCB as an independent inquiry committee, formed by the NSC, is currently investigating alleged irregularities in last year's BCB election.

Ahead of the polls on October 6, Bulbul had sent a letter to the Ministry of Youth and Sports on September 18, asking district and divisional sports associations to send councillors' names only from the ad-hoc committees.

This letter remains at the heart of the controversy surrounding that election, which a BCB director highlighted as a "mistake" to The Daily Star.

The inquiry committee began its work on March 24 and is expected to submit its report by the second week of April, which will shed light on the fate of the current board.

