

# Why a benevolent dictatorship will not succeed in Bangladesh



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The fact that former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's backers, before her eventual ouster in August 2024, would position her as the only person capable of serving as an effective head of government carried with it an implied argument: that the Awami League supremo should be permitted to govern sans a sound electoral mandate because she was perceived to be uniquely possessing the competencies, strength, and brand recognition deemed indispensable to the republic.

Two arguments tended to be invoked, albeit tacitly. First, economic development was assumed to require the unspoken postponement, dilution, or subordination of democratic competition. Second, political stability was portrayed as a precondition for securing that development. Authoritarian practices were, thus, treated as a necessary evil in the name of preserving stability. These arguments served to justify both the institutionalisation and social normalisation of authoritarianism. Unfortunately, that impulse has not yet disappeared.

The tendency to argue that Bangladesh needs an authoritarian leader—provided that leader is benevolent—remains a middle ground to which many retreat, especially when they believe voters lack sufficient literacy to make informed choices and when they identify additional limitations in Westminster-style liberal democracy: a multi-party parliamentary order in which one side may hold ideological leanings that the other regards as intolerable, but which nevertheless remains a system in which competing visions of society can coexist through norms of mutual restraint.

The possibility that an Islamist government could eventually come to power in Bangladesh, not necessarily by brute force but by leveraging the democratic system to first win office and then use that mandate to refashion the government into a form of theocratic state apparatus, may cause some concerns among secularists and liberals. Urban elites and progressives, in particular, may therefore be tempted to conclude that the ruling party should be allowed to govern for as long as necessary to keep theocrats out of power, even if that means treating the ballot box in local and national elections—and, more broadly, the mechanisms that enable representative government to function—as secondary. That



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

line of thinking would place the country on a slippery slope.

A benevolent dictatorship is a system in which one ruler retains all political and policymaking power, but is portrayed as using that power in pursuit of the common good rather than for personal gains. Embedded in that definition is the assumption that such a ruler would act as a strongman while still keeping the country's overarching needs and interests in view.

Allegedly, some BNP activists have already begun indulging in the kind of rhetoric that once helped place Hasina above the democratic system, suggesting that Tarique Rahman should govern for life or remain in office for three or four terms. This kind of talk should be shut down now, especially by a prime minister who, to his credit, has so far largely avoided presenting himself in those terms. But Bangladesh is all too familiar with this pattern of sycophancy. Similar chatter began in the early years of Hasina's post-2009 rule, and the country should not go down that road again.

For a benevolent dictatorship to work, two prerequisites would have to be met. First, the ruler would have to be exceptionally selfless

and able to withstand the corrupting effects of power. Second, they have to use coercion cautiously, only after careful judgement, and only when force is truly justified. No society can safely assume that either condition will hold.

There are four reasons why a benevolent dictatorship would not work in Bangladesh.

First, the country's political history is rooted in a long record of resistance to all forms of authoritarianism. During the partition of the

right-wing, or centrist in character, would move it in precisely the opposite direction from the one envisioned at its founding.

Second, Bangladeshi culture does not readily lend itself to one-party rule. It is an intensely opinionated society, and those opinions must be allowed to be voiced without fear of persecution under an authoritarian regime. From dinner-table conversations to streetside exchanges, people hold strong and

culture is not suited to a Chinese-style authoritarian system or to other communist or military dictatorships of the late 20th century.

Third, there is little evidence that benevolent dictatorship is a model that can be replicated. Singapore under Lee Kuan Yew is often invoked, but it is a city-state of roughly 60 lakh people, whereas Bangladesh is about 30 times more populous. Bangladesh, a post-colonial society that has repeatedly had to shed blood to rekindle the flames of democracy, exists on an entirely different demographic and political scale, making any like-for-like comparison untenable. That something may have appeared to work politically in Singapore does not mean it could work in Bangladesh.

The very few cases cited as successful examples of benevolent dictatorships are outliers; they do not amount to a persuasive body of evidence on which a country can build its future.

Which brings us to the fourth reason: Bangladesh has spent much of its history placing excessive faith in individual leaders and, in turn, has failed to allow public institutions to develop and mature in ways that would enable them to outlast any one head of government. Consider the leaders of post-independence Bangladesh. Each came from varying ideological traditions and contexts. But politics has repeatedly been bookended by figures around whom entire systems are made to revolve. The state has a long track record of bending around the individual rather than requiring the individual to work within a well-oiled system.

Nation-building should not take place on the assumption that one leader will remain virtuous. Bangladesh today cannot afford to bank on one leader to solve all of its problems through force of personality, discipline, and work ethic alone. The country needs a capable team around the leader, an opposition able to function as a government in waiting, and a civil service that works in a non-partisan manner.

The period from 1991 to 2006, for all its flaws, at least preserved a competitive parliamentary landscape with two major parties and other smaller but electorally significant parties. That period does point in the direction the country needs to move as a basic first step. The most transformational political contribution the prime minister can now make is to ensure that his administration upholds the basics of good governance and parliamentarism so that, when the time comes for him to step aside, the system does not collapse with his departure.

This would require ensuring that, much like his mother, Khaleda Zia, the prime minister presents himself not as indispensable to the republic but as a statesman who governs through consensus-building, subject-matter expertise, negotiation, and good faith. That, in itself, would stand as a consequential achievement following the 2024 mass uprising.

often divergent views on political issues. One reason why so many Bangladeshis have taken to the streets at various times since independence—including during the 1990 and 2024 mass uprisings—once the status quo became unmistakably authoritarian is the country's outspoken and dissenting civic culture. That kind of society cannot be constrained by a benevolent dictatorship. The more one tries to control Bangladeshis, the angrier and more unpredictable the nation is likely to become.

From 1947 to 1971, the politics of erstwhile East Pakistan remained intertwined with repeated struggles in pursuit of democratic aspirations. The 1952 Language Movement, the mass mobilisations against Gen Ayub Khan, the Six-Point Movement, the 1969 uprising, the 1970 general election, and the 1971 Liberation War cumulatively reflected a single continuum in the quest to establish democracy: a struggle that remains unfinished even today.

A commitment to preaching and practising democracy was embedded in the Proclamation of Independence and it later became one of the four core state principles associated with the post-independence constitutional vision. The birth of Bangladesh is inseparable from democracy and from the search for a liberal, pluralistic, and secular state architecture. To place the country's fate in the hands of a so-called benevolent dictator, whether secular,

# From censorship to chaos, we must steer clear of the extremes of social media



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Bangladesh's online space today reflects a shift that was perhaps inevitable, but also difficult to manage. It is not simply a story of increasing freedom. It is a reaction shaped by years of suppression, followed by a hard reset without a corresponding structure to guide the future.

Bangladesh today is dealing with the legacy of overbroad regulation and the rise of unregulated online hostility. Addressing only one will not restore balance. The space in between, where disagreement can exist without fear from either the state or the crowd, is currently unprotected. And this is where policy must shift.

For much of the past decade, laws like the Digital Security Act, 2018, were repeatedly misused. There were numerous instances where social media posts led to arrests, prolonged detention, or criminal proceedings,

including against journalists, students and the general public. Even when the law was reworked into the Cyber Security Act, 2023, the stated objective was to reduce misuse by softening penalties and altering certain provisions. Yet concerns persisted that the core structure remained largely unchanged, continuing in widespread suppression of dissent.

However, that phase did not end without consequences. When control over expression is prolonged and then suddenly shattered, people do not simply return to neutral behaviour. They push outwards. Comparative studies on societies emerging from overly restrictive environments show that expression often becomes more forceful and less restrained, as individuals assert what was denied previously. Bangladesh is now experiencing a version of that shift. Online disagreement increasingly

turns into coordinated backlash. Often, individuals who take moderate positions or who do not align clearly with dominant narratives are subjected to collective targeting or pile-ons that discourage participation. It is a pattern of behaviour that makes civil dialogue difficult.

The national conversation, however, remains incomplete. It continues to focus on censorship versus freedom, as if one must be reduced for the other to survive, which oversimplifies the problem. The Cyber Security Ordinance, 2025, later ratified as Cyber Security Act, 2026, recognises internet access as a civic right, which indeed is a commendable addition. However, we are still far from home. Vaguely termed provisions and a limited mandate for threat intelligence sharing are still present, leaving space for broad interpretations and little to no space for incorporating platform obligations through public-private collaboration. To overcome these hurdles, we must not aim for control in a broad sense, but for structured protection of the space for participation itself. This requires a more deliberate set of measures.

First, legal provisions must be narrow and conduct-based. Direct threats, incitement to violence, and sustained targeted harassment should be clearly defined and actionable. This allows the law to address real harm

without opening the door to interpretation that can be used against dissent. Second, and equally important, the law must recognise coordinated harassment as a distinct harm. Current frameworks tend to focus on individual posts, but much of the pressure online comes from collective targeting. Addition of an intelligence-sharing protocol can open the door to a workable system allowing patterns of behaviour, repeated targeting by multiple accounts, organised pile-ons to be identified and addressed through platform obligations and legal recognition.

Third, protections for users must be built in. The Cyber Security Act has very lenient provisions regarding the time allowed for finishing investigation and lacks a fast-track complaint mechanism for victims of coordinated abuse, which requires platforms to respond within defined timeframes and ensure transparency in how complaints are handled. Without this, victims will continue to withdraw from participation. Fourth, safeguards against misuse must be structural, not optional. Independent oversight, judicial authorisation for serious action, and public reporting on enforcement are essential. These are not additions; they are what make regulation credible in a post-abusive environment.

Finally, there must be an explicit recognition

that protecting civil discourse is a policy goal. This means acknowledging that online space is not only about individual rights, but about maintaining conditions where disagreement can occur without intimidation. Without that, freedom of expression exists formally, but not meaningfully.

Global approaches offer direction here. Countries are increasingly holding platforms accountable for systemic risks, including organised harassment, rather than treating online harms as isolated incidents. Under the EU's Digital Services Act, major tech companies must proactively identify and reduce online harms or face massive penalties totalling 6% of their worldwide earnings. In the UK, the Online Safety Act 2023 imposes a duty of care on platforms to protect users from abuse and harassment, with statutory enforcement powers. Additionally, Australia's Online Safety Act 2021 empowers the eSafety Commissioner to ensure platforms address cyber-bullying and other online abuse, introducing mandatory compliance measures.

The relevance is not in copying these models directly, but in recognising the shift towards addressing behaviour at scale. Bangladesh's challenge is to adapt that understanding to its own context. The next phase of policy must actively protect our digital space, especially for those who are neither loud nor aligned.

ACROSS

- 1 Final
- 5 Snowy bird
- 10 Pinnacle
- 11 Vineyard harvest
- 13 Subsequently
- 14 Alludes to
- 15 Brewski
- 17 Lyricist Gershwin
- 18 Skilled showoff
- 19 Illuminated
- 20 Massive
- 21 Finished
- 22 Confectioner's harvest
- 25 Hair over the forehead
- 26 Poet Khayyam
- 27 Cellist's need
- 28 Work wk. start
- 29 US/USSR tension
- 33 Ran into
- 34 Emergency phone
- 35 Tolerates
- 37 Notion
- 38 Most rational
- 39 Bookish sort

DOWN

- 1 Gate part
- 2 Sneeze sound
- 3 Do refinery work
- 4 Serves drinks
- 5 Winter drink
- 6 Say "hi" to
- 7 Squealer
- 8 Letter after delta
- 9 Ripping
- 12 Declares
- 16 Toledo setting
- 21 Wasting time
- 22 List separators
- 23 One-celled creatures
- 24 Saloon of the Southwest
- 25 Shackle part
- 27 Increases
- 29 Heart's place
- 30 More broad
- 31 "... the end of -"
- 32 Prepared
- 36 Singer Shannon



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS



CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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