What kind of president do we need?



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Views expressed in this article are the author's own.

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Mohammed Shahabuddin's less-than-ceremonious exit from the presidency allows the ruling BNP to draw a line under months of ambiguity over two issues. First, his resignation, citing health concerns, brings down the curtain on the last remnant of the Awami League regime still occupying a constitutional office and playing a formal role in the affairs of the state. Second, it removes any grounds for criticism of BNP for having retained him without clarifying whether he would serve out the remainder of his five-year term.

History will likely distinguish between Shahabuddin and the office he occupied. The former president, serving at a crucial time in Bangladesh's history, exercised limited influence over the transition that followed the 2024 mass uprising. His principal function was to formalise decisions reached by the student leadership, BNP, Jamaat, and the armed forces. It began with supplying the institutional vehicle through which Sheikh Hasina's ouster was converted into a new governing arrangement. The interim government, as we know, was formed under the authority of the presidency through recourse to Article 106 of the Constitution and the rarely invoked doctrine of necessity. Its ordinances drew their baseline legality from the same source.

After August 5, 2024, the state machinery had been depleted of moral authority and administrative capacity. Bangabhaban became the solitary bridge between the ousted regime, the interim administration led by Dr Muhammad Yunus, and the elected government now led by Tarique Rahman. The mechanism through which power changed hands also helps explain why 2024 is better understood as an uprising than as a revolution.

Recall how the AL government ceased to exist and became, *de facto*, null and void. Parliament was dissolved. The overarching power structure built around Sheikh Hasina collapsed. Yet, the basic architecture of the state remained intact, with the president continuing in office and providing the constitutional mechanism through which the vacuum created by the absence of the executive branch was addressed. In other words, Bangabhaban enabled the transfer of power without dismantling the organs of the republic. A revolution in the fuller sense would have required the replacement of that architecture and the suspension of the Constitution. Neither occurred.

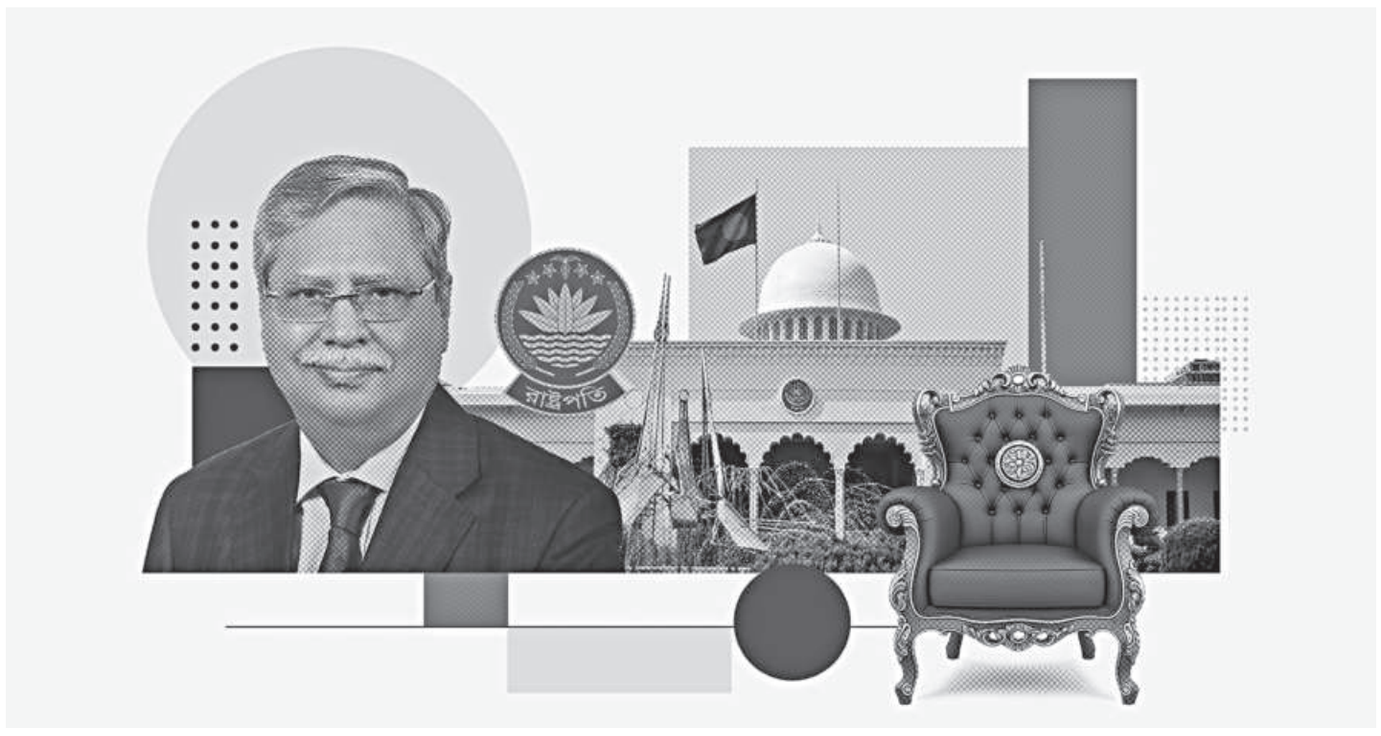


ILLUSTRATION: **ANWAR SOHEL**

The resulting settlement was neither ideal nor expressly contemplated by the Constitution. The events from August 5 to August 8, 2024 may continue to face political and judicial scrutiny in the years to come. But it should be acknowledged that leveraging Bangabhaban provided the closest available approximation to a by-the-book transfer of executive power to Dr Yunus. As in the past, the presidency served as the last resort when the constitutional text provided no direct answer. By giving formal expression to the outcome of the uprising, the office also conferred a measure of legitimacy on the interim government.

In a Westminster-derived system, a ceremonial head of state ordinarily acts on the advice of the elected executive, led by the prime minister as head of government. The president embodies the state and serves as a nexus among the three branches of government: the executive, the legislature, and the judiciary. When the executive branch ceases to function, the residual powers of the head of state provide the conventional basis for constituting a new administration. This role resembles the reserve powers of the British monarch. Normally dormant, these powers acquire importance when the chain of executive advice breaks down and the continuity of government comes into question.

Bangabhaban performed that function in August 2024.

The debate now turns to the profile that BNP may seek in its presidential nominee. Its thumping majority in parliament guarantees that its candidate will enter Bangabhaban, so the decision rests with the prime minister and the BNP Standing Committee now. The July charter has clearly raised the stakes. Depending on how fully its proposals are enacted, the reforms will expand the president's role in appointments to key state bodies and place Bangabhaban at the centre of the process of forming the caretaker government ahead of the next election.

So, what kind of president should BNP seek? Broadly speaking, it has three options for the presidency.

The first is a seasoned BNP leader who commands respect beyond the party. The advantage here would be experience. A veteran politician would understand how crises develop, how parties behave under pressure, and how disputes among competing centres of power escalate. Years in national politics would also ensure cross-party relationships that can be helpful. A potential drawback in this scenario would be public perception of the nominee's association with BNP. Resignation from any party position before assuming the presidency is a given, but opponents and segments of the public may still view that person through the partisan identity that carried them to Bangabhaban.

Bangladesh's experience in this case offers mixed lessons. Abdur Rahman Biswas acted firmly to avert a military coup in 1996. By contrast, A.Q.M. Badruddoza Chowdhury resigned in 2002 after losing the confidence of BNP parliamentarians. Both were BNP stalwarts, though their tenures in Bangabhaban unfolded very differently.

The second option for the presidency would be a civil society leader without formal BNP affiliation. The principal advantage would be distance from party politics. Such a nomination would present the presidency as a non-partisan institution rather than a seat reserved for rewarding party loyalty. A candidate from outside mainstream politics could enter Bangabhaban with greater credibility across party lines. The disadvantage, however, would be limited experience in handling crises. Academic distinction, professional achievement, and personal integrity offer only partial preparation for the complexities of dealing with rival parties, senior bureaucrats, security actors, and so on.

Iajuddin Ahmed remains an unfortunate example in this case. A respected academic, he assumed the additional role of chief adviser in 2006 amid criticism from across the political spectrum. He failed to command confidence, and his decisions contributed to the breakdown that culminated in the military-backed takeover of January 2007. His tenure exposed, among other things, the shortcomings of a civil society background unaccompanied by the political acuity required of a president.

The third option would be a senior civil servant, such as a retired secretary to the government, or a former judge. The advantage here would be an inner knowledge of the state machinery. Such a person would understand how political direction translates into bureaucratic implementation and how legal mandates become public policy. The disadvantage would be the outlook formed by a long career inside the bureaucracy. Bangladesh's civil service is rightly criticised as bloated, insular, and resistant to reform. A former bureaucrat may bring command of procedure while remaining attached to the caution, hierarchy, and inertia that have slowed efforts to modernise public administration.

Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed represents the best case for this profile. He guided Bangladesh from military rule to parliamentary democracy in the early 1990s. When he was elected president in 1996 after being nominated by the AL government, he brought a reputation for neutrality unmatched by his successors.

Mohammed Shahabuddin is the counterexample. His service in the judiciary and the Anti-Corruption Commission gave him the credentials associated with this category. His tenure, however, fell short of the independence associated with Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed and remained clouded by allegations of corruption, abuse of power, and sycophantic subservience to the AL regime.

The fragility of today's political environment favours a seasoned politician. The next president, in my view, will face five tests. First, the successful nominee must restore the dignity associated with Bangabhaban. Second, they must remain above day-to-day politics while staying attuned to the public mood. Third, they must possess the autonomy and competence to advise, caution, and warn the government when its decisions threaten the national interest. Fourth, they must safeguard Bangladesh's effort to rebuild the state machinery and return its principal organs to full working order. Fifth, they must serve as a guardian of the spirit of the Constitution.

Since Mohammed Shahabuddin's resignation, speculation has been rife about who would be his successor. Several names have emerged, but BNP has so far kept any decision closely guarded. One thing is certain, however. Bangladesh is entitled to expect the government to deliver a president with the clean public image that is sacrosanct to the office of head of state.

How Bangladesh can build a more powerful passport



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A passport may seem like a simple travel document, but at a foreign border it also represents the credibility of the state that issued it. Immigration authorities assess not only the individual traveller, but also the reliability of the country's identity records, document security, migration management and willingness to accept responsibility when citizens violate immigration rules.

Bangladesh's weak position in global passport rankings, therefore, deserves attention without national embarrassment or sensational comparison. The Henley Passport Index ranks 199 passports by the number of destinations accessible without a prior visa, using International Air Transport Authority (IATA) data, and according to its latest calculation, Singapore leads the 2026 ranking, while Bangladesh ranks 97th, sharing the position with North Korea. The index does not measure a nation's dignity or cultural worth; it simply indicates how much mobility confidence other governments extend to its passport holders.

Clearly, we need improvement that requires more than asking friendly states for visa-free access. Bangladesh needs a national mobility strategy combining diplomacy, secure identity systems, labour recruitment, border management, aviation, trade and consular responsibility.

First, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs should create a specialised passport and mobility diplomacy unit. It could identify realistic partners, prepare country-specific negotiating dossiers, and coordinate the ministries whose decisions affect international travel. Bangladesh should prioritise countries with growing trade, investment, education, labour, tourism or aviation links, especially where Bangladeshi travellers do not overstay or engage in irregular employment much.

The objective need not always be complete visa exemption. Practical gains may come through electronic visas, visas on arrival, long-term multiple-entry visas for businesspeople and academics, accelerated student processing, simplified transit rules, and trusted-traveller programmes. If evidence of compliance could be generated from such limited access, it could increase confidence in Bangladeshi travellers and thus lead to wider access.

Although Bangladesh's e-passport system is an important achievement, a sophisticated booklet cannot compensate for inconsistent civil records. Passport issuance increasingly relies on NID data for identity verification, but interoperability among the databases maintained by the institutions responsible for birth registration, national identity cards, and passports remains limited. As a result, variations in names, birth dates, parental identities, and transliteration continue to create the potential for suspicion even when they result from administrative error rather than fraud.

The value of an e-passport also depends on whether foreign borders can authenticate its chip. The International Civil Aviation Organization's Public Key Directory enables states to exchange the digital certificates needed to verify electronic travel documents. Bangladesh should ensure prompt reporting of lost, stolen, cancelled, and fraudulently obtained passports while its missions regularly explain the country's verification and anti-fraud procedures to host authorities.

Also, it must be noted that passport strength is affected by travellers' conduct abroad. Visa overstaying, unauthorised employment, fraudulent student admission, document manipulation, and unsubstantiated asylum claims can trigger restrictions against an entire nationality. The actions of a minority then impose higher costs and longer scrutiny on legitimate tourists, students, researchers, businesspeople and family visitors.

Since irregularity often begins before departure through deceptive recruitment, excessive migration costs, unsuitable visas, and unregulated intermediaries, Bangladesh should strengthen recruitment oversight, pre-departure information, and legal assistance abroad. It should also respond quickly when another government seeks to verify the nationality of a person subject to lawful return. A state cannot credibly request easier entry while appearing unwilling to take responsibility for citizens who no longer have a legal right to remain abroad.

Besides, for visa negotiations with priority countries, Bangladesh should use evidence such as data on visitor numbers, timely return, tourism spending, tuition payments, investment, research collaboration, and contributions to bilateral trade. Its bargaining assets include a large consumer market, garments, pharmaceuticals, information technology, aviation demand, a global diaspora, and substantial education and medical travel. Bangladesh is also among the major contributors to UN peacekeeping, an international role that can be integrated into a broader narrative of reliability and cooperation.

Also, through BIMSTEC, BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal), and bilateral arrangements, Bangladesh can pursue easier travel for businesspeople, students, researchers, patients, cultural professionals, and organised tour groups. Harmonised online applications, reduced fees, business-travel cards, and simpler land-border permits may not immediately change a global ranking, but they would increase the passport's practical value.

Notably, mobility privileges are also reversible. In March 2026, the European Commission suspended visa-free travel for holders of Georgian diplomatic, service, and official passports, citing failures to uphold commitments linked to the visa-free regime. The wider lesson is that passport power depends on continuing confidence in state institutions, documentation, migration governance, and adherence to international obligations.

Bangladesh, therefore, should adopt a five- or 10-year mobility strategy with measurable targets: new e-visa, visa-on-arrival and visa-waiver arrangements; lower visa-refusal and overstay rates; faster identity verification; fewer fraudulent documents; and quicker consular and readmission decisions. An annual mobility report should publish progress and assess the performance of diplomatic missions.

The power of a passport comes from confidence that the document is genuine, its holder is identifiable, immigration conditions will be respected, and the issuing state will act responsibly when problems arise. A stronger Bangladeshi passport must therefore be built not only at the foreign ministry, but also in birth-registration offices, passport departments, recruiting agencies, embassies, border databases, and courts. It is ultimately a project of national credibility, connectivity and negotiating capacity.

Corrigendum

In the crossword published on Page 9 of *The Daily Star* on August 1, 2026, incorrect clues were published inadvertently. The correct crossword has been published today. We regret the error.

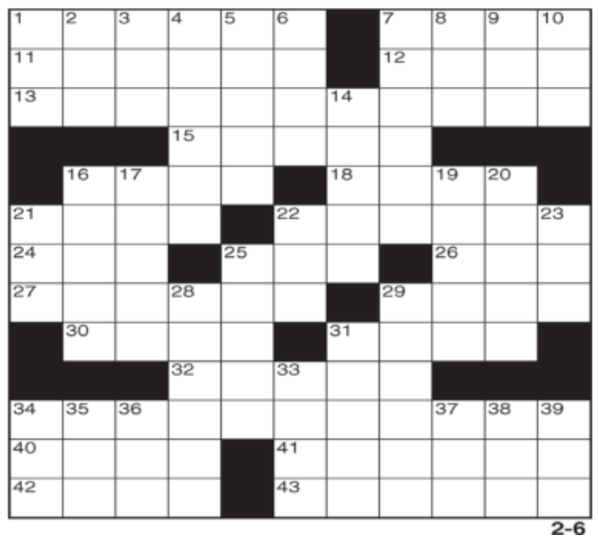
CROSSWORD
BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Human ancestor
7 Latte topper
11 Gomez of "Only Murders in the Building"
12 Bumpkin
13 Workplace motto
15 Inventor Nikola
16 Olympus leader
18 Vaccine type
21 Easy win
22 Got a C, say
24 Company abbr.
25 Yoga need
26 Sedan or SUV
27 Cheated at hide-and-seek
29 Office leader
30 Glade grazer
31 Smoker's discard
32 Cap feature
34 Sturdily made
40 Cuzco native
41 Flowering shrub
42 South African farmer
43 Do over

DOWN

1 Donkey
2 Stew sphere
3 North Pole worker
4 Get together
5 Pays to play
6 Opposing votes
7 Some brothers
8 Owned by us
9 Crunch targets
10 Ran into
14 Parade sight
16 Like urban areas
17 Game show host
19 Fancy neckwear
20 Minimum amount
21 Tear
22 Knee protector
23 Hosp. workers
25 Deserve
28 Vest material
29 Coarse fabric
31 Hooch
33 Sirius or Polaris
34 Shirt protector
35 First número
36 Cubes in a glass
37 Pub stuff
38 Neptune's domain
39 Skin art, for short



2-6

FRIDAY'S ANSWERS

S	O	F	A	S	■	G	A	S	P	S
A	L	I	E	N	■	E	X	P	E	L
T	E	R	R	A	■	N	E	A	T	O
■	■	■	O	G	R	E	■	N	E	W
C	L	A	S	S	I	S	M	■	■	■
H	A	R	M	■	D	I	E	S	E	L
A	T	E	I	T	■	S	T	O	V	E
D	E	A	T	H	S	■	A	M	E	N
■	■	■	H	E	E	D	L	E	S	S
S	A	P	■	C	A	R	L	■	■	■
P	L	A	Z	A	■	A	I	S	L	E
U	T	T	E	R	■	I	C	I	E	R
D	O	S	E	S	■	N	A	D	E	R

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