Two years after July, who do we trust?



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Two years have passed since those transformative days of the July Uprising. But even now, public debates continue to revolve around constitutional reform, transitional justice, institutional restructuring, and other reform issues. These questions, though important for the country's democratic future, reveal a common assumption: that the significance of July can be understood primarily through changes in authority, in terms of who governs, who exercises power, and which institutions should be reformed. This assumption is understandable but incomplete, as it treats the July uprising primarily as a political event reshaping or redistributing power while overlooking its equally significant role in redistributing public credibility.

This becomes clear when we reflect on the nature of our disagreements over the past two years. People do not just disagree about reforms, elections, or the conduct of political parties. They increasingly disagree about whose account of events deserves to be believed. Student leaders, political parties, journalists, civil society organisations, victims' families, and government officials often offer competing interpretations of what the movement demanded, where the country stands today, and where it should be heading. The disagreement, therefore, is no longer confined to political choices or policy preferences. It increasingly concerns whose interpretation deserves credibility.

Unless we understand how July transformed the relationship between political authority and public credibility—and how that transformation continues to shape Bangladesh's democratic life—we are likely to misunderstand both the achievement of the uprising and the challenges that have followed.

During the 2024 uprising itself, official narratives competed with smartphone footage, eyewitness testimony, independent reporting, and information circulating through countless informal networks. Rather than depending exclusively on institutional explanations, citizens increasingly relied on what they themselves witnessed and on evidence documented by thousands of ordinary people. Official statements often contradicted almost immediately by visual evidence, while many claims gained public acceptance not because they came from recognised authorities but because they could be independently examined and verified.

This experience helped change, perhaps permanently, how public credibility is earned, shifting it from an outcome of an institutional environment dominated by governments, newspapers, universities, courts, and other established institutions to one in which perceived credibility could also emerge from outside those traditional structures. This transformation exposed an important distinction between political authority and public credibility. Political authority concerns the legal power to govern, whereas public credibility concerns whether citizens regard a person or institution as worthy of their trust.



'Over the past two years, debates over constitutional reform, transitional justice, commissions of inquiry, the timing of elections, and even the "ownership" of July have increasingly become disputes over credibility.'
FILE PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

Perhaps one of July's most enduring legacies is that Bangladeshis are now less willing to accept claims simply because they originate from positions of authority.

Democracies become stronger when governments recognise that official authority alone cannot secure public trust. The ability of ordinary citizens to document abuses, question official narratives, and demand justification from those exercising power represents an important expansion of democratic accountability.

However, this achievement has also created a new challenge. The decline of unquestioned authority does not automatically produce trustworthy public institutions. Instead, it creates a more demanding public sphere in which people's credibility itself becomes the object of political contestation.

Over the past two years, debates over constitutional reform, transitional justice, commissions of inquiry, the timing of elections, and even the "ownership" of July have increasingly become disputes over credibility. Social media usage has broadened democratic participation, but it is also used to accelerate the circulation of rumours, selective evidence, and politically convenient narratives. The challenge is no longer simply to distribute political power more fairly, but to cultivate institutions capable of earning public trust in this new democratic environment.

A certain temptation naturally follows this transformation. Once citizens lose confidence in inherited authority, they begin to suspect that every institution is simply another political actor in disguise: the government may be assumed to manipulate information, political parties to exploit July for political advantage, journalists to be partisan, universities to be ideologically compromised, and courts to deliver judgment according to political loyalties rather than legal principle. Such scepticism is understandable in a society emerging from authoritarian rule, and some of it is undoubtedly healthy. Democracies require citizens who question authority rather than submit to it uncritically. But scepticism and cynicism are not the same thing. A democracy cannot function if citizens conclude that no institution is capable of earning their credibility under any circumstances.

This is why the unfinished work of July 2024 extends beyond constitutional reform or institutional changes. Bangladesh also faces the more difficult task of restoring confidence in the judiciary, universities, the media, and public commissions, all of whose authority must rest not on inherited status or political loyalty, but on demonstrable integrity. Their credibility cannot be demanded and must instead be earned through institutional independence, professional competence, transparency, and a visible commitment to truth rather than political allegiance.

The responsibility to achieve this, however, does not belong to the institutions alone. It also belongs to citizens.

If we scrutinise only the claims of our political opponents while accepting those of our preferred leaders (without comparable examination), we have not strengthened democratic citizenship but merely redirected our political loyalties. The spirit of July is preserved by commemorating and also by sustaining the habits of public reasoning that gave the uprising much of its moral force.

Before asking who has inherited July politically, we should ask a more fundamental question: who is building the conditions under which July's democratic aspirations can endure? The enduring significance of July lies not only in changing who governs Bangladesh, but also in transforming the standards by which authority is evaluated. Whether that transformation ultimately strengthens democracy in Bangladesh will be contingent on whether we succeed in building a public culture in which credibility is earned through evidence, integrity, and accountability rather than assumed through office, ideology, or "historical entitlement."

How do we prevent the next wave of research retractions?



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Early in my research career, in a laboratory in Japan, I gave my supervisor a set of results I was proud of. He asked me to run the whole experiment again. This wasn't because he doubted my honesty, but because, as he said, "A result you cannot reproduce is not yet a result." I was annoyed. But it turned out I had been wrong about one of my measurements. That experience of being asked to be careful is not an insult but a way of learning to respect the work—and it has stayed with me for 25 years now.

I was reminded of the memory because academia in Bangladesh is suffering a difficult period. Recently, an investigation by *Prothom Alo* revealed that a large number of papers by researchers at our universities have been withdrawn from international journals due to issues such as fabricated data, plagiarism, fake peer review, and even papers brought from commercial "mills." The number of retractions—at least 325, by the Bangla daily's estimate, between 2019 and 2026—is worrying, and the first reaction has been to ask who should be punished. That is a fair question. But as both an active researcher and someone involved in quality assurance at my university, I find it more useful to ask this instead: what will trigger the next wave of retractions, and are we ready to prevent it?

In my perspective, that next wave is already visible: the undisclosed use of artificial intelligence (AI) in research. AI is now part of how research is done, from literature review and data analysis to coding and language editing. When used openly and responsibly, it can be a legitimate and useful tool, and there is no point pretending researchers will stop using it. The danger is not AI itself; it is the undisclosed use of AI tools. Journals around the world have already begun retracting papers for undisclosed AI-generated content, false citations that no real source supports, and for results no human author can actually stand behind. A researcher who lets a model produce text, data, or references and then presents it as entirely their own is committing a new version of an old offence, and more and more are being caught doing it. Within a year or two, this may well be a leading cause of retraction in our field, which we should prepare for.

The university I work at has just adopted a policy on the responsible use of AI. It does not ban AI, which would be both impractical and inconsistent with how research now works. Instead, it requires disclosure: a researcher must state which AI tools were used and for what purpose, personally verify everything the tools produce, and remain fully responsible for the final work. It says plainly that AI cannot be used to generate data or be listed as an author. In effect, it draws a clear line between using a tool and surrendering one's integrity. In effect, it also draws a line before the issue becomes big enough to prompt a retraction notice.

It started when the university brought in a formal plagiarism policy a year ago, enforced through a plagiarism-checking tool. Every research paper, thesis, class assignment, and capstone project is checked for originality, under an institution-wide subscription covering more than 12,000 students and over 500 faculty and staff members. The value of this is more cultural than technical. A student learns in their very first semester that their work will be checked, so that by the time they become a researcher, honesty is not a rule forced from outside but simply the way they have always worked.

Structure matters when institutional money is involved. When I apply for funding to publish a paper or attend a conference, the request does not go straight to a finance desk. It first passes my department's head and dean. It then goes to a school research committee, where internal and external experts look at the research—whether it holds up, not just whether the paperwork is in order. Only after that does it reach the central research office for a final review. Real resources are set aside to support researchers, but not a single taka moves until the work has passed through several independent and expert sets of eyes.

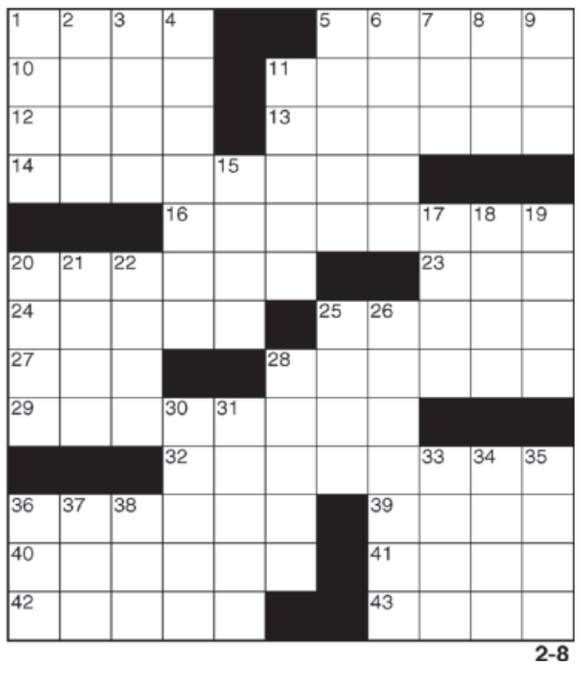
Even after an international journal has said yes, our own reviewers look at the work again. And I have had my own accepted papers sent back to me with tough, uncomfortable, but undeniably useful questions. As an author in a hurry, I have found this friction inconvenient; but I know that it is also essential. It is, I believe, the real reason some institutions come across misconduct so rarely. It is hardly that one university's researchers are more honest than another's. Clean records, in the end, are not due to luck; they are the expected result of structure.

I do not write this from outside the problem. I write as a researcher whose own work is checked, and checked again, by his colleagues and his institution every time he publishes—and who, after 25 years, has learned to be grateful for it. The retractions troubling us today could have been prevented, so can the ones coming tomorrow, but only if we build the safeguards now, while there is still time to get ahead of retractions altogether.

CROSSWORD
BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Full range
5 Tart fruits
10 Except for
11 Riddle question
12 Clumsy ones
13 Link
14 Some evergreens
16 Flippered fish-eaters
20 Read
23 Diamond club
24 Pop stars
25 Port-au-Prince's nation
27 "Knives Out" star de Armas
28 Horse restraint
29 Remote
32 One way to play
36 Spot for an X
39 __ avis
40 Vast expanses
41 Steel ingredient
42 Borscht base
43 Basilica part

DOWN
1 Since
2 Curbside cry
3 Finished
4 Piquant
5 Pumps, e.g.
6 Baggy
7 Sturdy wood
8 Outback bird
9 Tentative taste
11 Question of place
15 Tamblyn of "West Side Story"
17 Somewhat
18 Past due
19 Mix up
20 Singer Edith
21 Writer Ferber
22 Crowd sound
25 Slugger Aaron
26 Mali neighbor
28 Smarts
30 E's musical equivalent
31 Diving birds
33 Tombstone name
34 Debate group
35 Rational
36 Hope of comedy
37 One in the hand
38 Director Ang



2-8

MONDAY'S ANSWERS

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