

Bangladesh and the July 24 revolution

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The Bangladeshi students have played a significant role in the country's independence and development as a nation-state. It would be inaccurate to assume that this was the first time independent Bangladeshi students created a political, social, and economic turning point. In the 1990s, the anti-Ershad all-party student coalition successfully overthrew the dictator Ershad. This movement represented the people's desire for a modern, functioning democratic system that was free from interference, including the protection of freedom of speech and the establishment of an independent judiciary. However, most student organisations were affiliated with the major political parties and played an integral role in their parent party's election activities. This resulted in a regime change rather than a true revolution or political transformation.

Following the election, Bangladesh experienced a significant ideological divide and a deepening sense of polarisation among its populace. Political leaders, in their quest to rally support, resorted to increasingly divisive rhetoric that not only alienated segments of the population but also stifled constructive discourse. This trend undermined the potential for effective governance and obstructed the country's path toward democratic prosperity. The opportunity to foster a robust culture of democratic values and norms was squandered, leading to widespread disillusionment among citizens. This shift was evident in subsequent elections, which reflected deepening polarisation and heightened animosity between factions. The gradual erosion of democratic norms and civic engagement, as promised, paved the way for authoritarian tendencies to take root, ultimately steering the political system toward

dictatorial rule, where dissent was stifled, and the voices of opposition were suppressed, and it almost became a one-party system.

However, the emergence of a dynamic, student-led revolution marked a pivotal shift, creating a renewed window of opportunity for meaningful political change. This movement, fuelled by young people's aspirations, has the potential to reinvigorate democratic engagement and restore hope for a more unified and progressive future for Bangladesh.

Historians have debated the definition and explanation of the word 'revolution' from various perspectives and in different ages. However, the overarching conclusion is that 'it is a forceful or peaceful change that constitutes a futuristic and rational political and social shift, aiming for human emancipation, enlightenment, and improved governing systems that enhance and guarantee individual freedom and liberty'. So, this revolution would be scrutinised in future as a success or failure based on the above observation.

Recently, we have witnessed a similar revolution in Sudan, where the demands of the people, particularly students, led to the overthrow of dictator Bashir. However, the interim government struggled to operate effectively and was weakened by external influences. Consequently, the military attempted to seize control, resulting in a civil war between rival army factions, characterised by ideological divisions and foreign interference. Although I do not anticipate any similar events occurring in Bangladesh, which has strong civic institutions, foreign interference cannot be ruled out.

After fifty years of Bangladesh's independence, it is worth noting that politicians are still dividing people into two categories: freedom

fighters and collaborators of the Pakistani army. This division is a barrier to unifying the people, even though the majority of the population directly or indirectly participated in the independence war. Only a small minority of Bangladeshis worked with the Pakistani army to oppose Bangladeshi independence.

The subsequent rulers of Bangladesh, including the Awami League and the BNP, did not resolve the issue of traitors after gaining independence. Instead, they have used political rhetoric to divide people on this issue. The quota system for freedom fighters should have ended after one generation following independence to promote greater national unity. However, political parties could have used this popular policy change to their own benefit, but they failed to anticipate it or achieve it due to the dictatorship in place. Every child born in a country should have equal opportunities, and political leadership should ensure that these ethical and universal values are upheld. No individual can claim sole credit for Bangladesh's independence; it was a united struggle by the Bengali people against oppressors. Initially, the people of East Pakistan voted for a single party in the election, and when their choice was denied based on their identity, they fought for their rights. It has been a long time since we became an independent country, yet those issues still divide us.

Moreover, political assassinations and frequent martial law have created even more distrust and weakened democratic systems. In every change, winning activists used their mob to lynch and harass the opposition members and their associates, and it became culturally intertwined, including ideologically driven professionals- teachers, professors and civil servants.

As is apparent recently, revolutionaries are questioning the foundation of Bangladesh and using their mobs to lynch secular and opposition political activists. Questioning the independence of Bangladesh and demeaning freedom fighters have pushed revolutionaries onto a similar path to that of independence deniers. Consequently, the masses who participated in the October 24 revolution are losing faith in the revolutionaries, as indicated by some polls.

As a student of 'Revolution in History', it seems to me that revolutionaries will ultimately fail to achieve their objectives and to help form a new regime that deposes the old. I repeat the quote from the leading scholar of the revolution, Hobsbawm- "They are a series of events, generally associated with 'revolt' and capable of transferring power from an 'old regime' to a 'new regime' though not all revolutions achieve such a transfer."ⁱ For a movement to be deemed a true revolution, it must embody a progressive spirit, looking towards the future while advocating broad-based popular participation. This entails fostering an inclusive environment where diverse voices can contribute to decision-making processes. Furthermore, a genuine revolution should seek to enact profound social, cultural, and economic transformations that address systemic inequalities and empower marginalised communities. By intertwining innovation with active civic engagement, such a movement can lay the groundwork for sustainable change that resonates across generations. Moreover, despite the student leader's heroic efforts, their influence in the political transformation seems to be fading, and they are becoming irrelevant.

I previously urged the caretaker government to establish a truth commission, similar to the one implemented in South Africa after the end of apartheid. This step is essential to resolving deeply divisive issues

and addressing entrenched sentiments between different groups. Currently, it seems that we are treating members of opposing parties as criminals. While it is true that some deposed party members may have engaged in corruption and criminal activities, as have politicians and activists from past governments, not all members of a party are guilty of wrongdoing.

In this context, a truth commission can assist authorities in reintegrating those individuals into society. In severe cases, it can recommend appropriate punishment for the most severe offenders. This approach has the potential to revitalise a revolution, foster a positive vision for Bangladesh, and ultimately create a cohesive, altruistic future with a functional democratic system.

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ⁱ Hobsbawn, E., J, 'Revolution', In *Revolution in History*, eds. by Roy Porter and Mikulas Teich (Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 9