

A CALL FOR GRATITUDE

1971 gave Bangladesh body, July 2024 soul



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A SECTION of people in our society seeks to postulate an unfortunate dichotomy between the liberation war of 1971 and the anti-discrimination movement of July 2024 that ended decades-long Awami League misrule in Bangladesh. They seek to create a misleading divide and force us to choose between the two. In this essay, I argue that, instead of adhering to the 'either-or' binary logic, we should follow a 'both-and' approach that justly recognises the sacrifices and achievements of Bangladeshis in both 1971 and July 2024.

Bangladeshis who fought in the liberation war of 1971 did so to establish social justice and human equality and to reject exclusionary practices, resource disparities and foreign domination. The 1971 liberation war was colossal and all-pervasive, continuing for nine months and affecting well-nigh the entire population in every part of the country. Given the magnitude of the war, the death toll was commensurately higher than that of the July revolution.

In 1971 people of Bangladesh had a geographical entity — a land of their own — at the cost of so many lives. However, soon after the cessation of Bangladesh from Pakistan, they were disillusioned. The social justice and human equality that they desired remained a mirage for decades and the foreign domination that they detested simply changed its mask — influences from outside and exploitation by foreign powers never truly stopped in Bangladesh.

The political system that developed soon after the victory in December 1971 made a travesty of democracy in the country. It didn't take long for the entire adminis-



trative system to be corrupt. The country witnessed the evils of political thuggery and violence.

The political and intellectual elite established a system that helped the rich become richer and made the poor poorer. Competence, hard work, diligence, sincerity, honesty, integrity, responsibility, patriotism and similar values and personal characteristics were not acknowledged or rewarded — these positive traits did not usually lead to careers and professional status. On the contrary, bribery or doing the bidding of people in power often paved the way for worldly success and privilege. People of principle and good character who resisted the temptation to give in to corrupt practices remained marginalised in an unfair system.

Thus, the soul of Bangladesh — a country that was created in 1971 — continued to be soiled by corrupt practices. The defilement of the country's soul reached a

sickening height with the massive human rights violations and economic crimes perpetrated by the Sheikh Hasina regime that ruled Bangladesh for the second time from 2009 to 2024. It presided over unprecedented levels of graft, plunder of public funds, bank looting and capital flight. Secret abductions, enforced disappearances and unlawful killings became the defining features of Hasina's rule. Under the Hasina government, the cost of human life became lower than the cost of bullets.

The lingering (mis)rule of Sheikh Hasina systematically destroyed democracy, dismantled democratic norms, eroded the autonomy of state institutions and established a one-party (or person-alistic) authoritarian system. The electoral process lost all meaning and the voting turned into a mockery, as the results were mostly pre-arranged. As Hasina and her ministers were able to retain and

return to power undemocratically, they had no regard for public sentiment or welfare and gained impunity and immunity for their political and economic crimes. As a result, corruption and oppression in Bangladesh continued to be on the rise during the Hasina regime.

To add fuel to the fire, Hasina and her party exploited the spirit of 1971 and committed atrocities and white-collar offences in the name of the war of independence. Thus, the nation that was established in 1971 suffered a total collapse of public trust during the tenure of

Hasina. It completely lost its soul, its moral compass.

The youth of Bangladesh who led the July 2024 revolution grew up under the Hasina government and came of age observing her misrule. They didn't see much hope for their country and were deprived of dreams for a bright future. Finally, they couldn't take it any more and started a movement to cleanse the country of its internal ills and external influences and exploitation. They sought to regain the soul of Bangladesh in its pure form.

The July 2024 youth were fully

aware of the extent of cruelty of the Hasina regime. They knew about its brutal crackdown on dissent and other human rights abuses including enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings by government forces as well as broad daylight murders by Awami League hooligans. The existence of government-run secret detentions (Aynaghar) was common knowledge. Therefore, the July youth knew the risks and the price that they would have to pay for defying the regime.

Despite intimidation and threats of violence and death, they did not hesitate to take to the streets to end the totalitarian regime of Hasina. They saw death around them in the streets of Bangladesh but did not run away. The Hasina government sent out security forces (and Awami League ruffians) armed to the teeth to crack down on protesters, but that didn't deter the youth from proceeding with their demonstrations and demanding an end to autocracy in their country. Therefore, what made the July revolution truly extraordinary and unforgettable is this feat of bravery (in the face of death) that the protesters exhibited in the streets of Bangladesh.

On August 5, 2024 (also known as July 36, 2024), the invincible youth ousted the Hasina government and helped the country regain its soul. They gave the country a new beginning and a clean slate.

The July youth had no partisan interest or political ambition. Nor were they trained and geared to run a country. They saw oppression and thought it their moral responsibility to stand up to it. They rose to the occasion and liberated Bangladesh from Hasina's misrule. What the political parties — repressed under the Hasina regime — would do to fix the country was beyond the remit of the July warriors. They and the whole country

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1971 gave Bangladesh body, July

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expected the political parties opposed to Awami League politics to play appropriate roles in realising the aspirations of the people.

Unfortunately, two years on, we are on the brink of the same disillusionment that the post-1971 generation may have experienced in Bangladesh. The pure-hearted July rebels paved the way for political parties that were silenced by Hasina's autocracy — to conduct their political activities in a perfectly open manner. They do not seem to understand or acknowledge the sacrifices of the July youth that breathed in them a new political life.

Soon after the success of the July revolution, political parties and their affiliated student organisations started taking credit and ascribing its spectacular success to themselves. They began stating (boasting) that they were behind the design and planning of the revolution. The disclosure of such questionable information makes the movement look narrow rather than broad. It also shows that these political groups are unable to rise above their parochial interests.

Their exclusionary attitude thwarts the idea that the revolution is for everyone and that everyone should be included. It is important to understand that weakening the inclusive character of the July revolution is not in the interests of those who work for a democratic, united and prosperous Bangladesh. Making an exclusive claim to the success of the revolution only demonstrates the narrow-mindedness of the claimants and creates division among those who uphold the July spirit. Needless to say, such cracks in the rank and file of the veterans of the revolution bring joy to the enemies of Bangladesh.

It is very important to establish the truth that, in July 2024 patriotic Bangladeshis of all walks of life formed a united front and combined their strength to depose an unjust ruler. People with and without political affiliation joined forces to fight the Hasina government. Many untold stories of their sacrifice and heroism will perhaps

never be chronicled in the annals of the revolution.

For example, Saima (not her real name) hails from a district neighbouring Dhaka. She had no prior political experience but actively participated in the revolution. When the brutality of government forces and the huggery of Awami League miscreants hit a peak and she couldn't stay in her university dormitory, she took shelter in a relative's house in Dhaka and couldn't join processions for a few days. Her mother back home was equally devoted to the revolution and came to know that her daughter couldn't take to the streets. For those days when the daughter couldn't go out to participate in demonstrations, the mother took to the streets in her native town to make up for her daughter's absence.

There are thousands of such mothers and daughters whose dedication and sacrifice made the July revolution a success. Any exclusive claim by any political group on the success of the July revolution is an affront to the sacrifices of such mothers and daughters and innumerable other Bangladeshis who were prepared to give everything and ready to lay down their lives, for their country.

The political party that is now in power in Bangladesh stands to benefit the most from the July revolution. Like other Bangladeshis, its people also participated in and made great contributions to the movement. However, after coming to power, it has shown a lukewarm attitude to and a lack of genuine enthusiasm for the revolution. Its apparent hesitancy to implement the July National Charter makes way for its critics to question its stance on the revolution.

Because of Hasina's repressive rule, many BNP leaders couldn't stay in Bangladesh under her rule — those who were in Bangladesh had a dishonourable existence. Only God knows what would have happened to BNP as a party by now if the July revolution hadn't taken place and if Hasina had continued to remain in power for another two years. By embracing the July spirit and

its charter, BNP could come closer to the hearts of the people and become a more popular political party. Unfortunately, to its own peril, the party seems to have chosen a different path and allowed a wedge to be driven between it and the July revolution. In the long run, such a stance will certainly harm BNP the most.

Moreover, certain elements in the party are involved in criminal activities like money extortion and bludgeoning political opponents, which are somewhat reminiscent of the days of the Hasina government. Obviously, those reprobates BNP affiliates fail to understand that with the success of the July revolution, Bangladesh has entered a new phase and people may not tolerate a relapse to the criminal and oppressive practices of the Hasina regime.

Ungratefulness is a pervasive feature in humankind. People often forget the good things done for them, and this happens everywhere. Often the negative trait of ingratitude is more preponderant than the positive trait of gratitude. Given this universal phenomenon, I worry a lot about the legacy of the July 2024 revolution. How will its heroes and heroines be remembered and recognised? More importantly, how will the July veterans be treated, especially by politicians of both ruling and opposition parties who are at the receiving end of the largesse of the revolution?

Bangladesh's current ruling and opposition parties may choose to show short-sightedness and be ungrateful to the July revolutionaries. Such ungratefulness may discourage the noble-minded, patriotic youth from sacrificing their lives for their country in the future. Or, it may lead to another revolution to purge the country of corrupt political practices. Unfortunately, none of these two possibilities augurs well for the country and its people.

How many revolutions can Bangladesh afford? ♦

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