

Repression, Rebellion, Reflection

Contributed by Abeer Mustafa
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"The government should not think that because the urban "civil society" supported its selective anti-corruption drive and its economic agenda, it has overwhelming support all over the country. Alas, the Dhaka-based high society is insignificant in an electorate of seventy million. The government must treat these millions respectfully, de-politicize and humanize its actions, and consider accelerating elections." (Photos by E-Bangladesh)

What was most surprising about the recent round of violent events in Bangladesh was the rapid pace by which quarrels became processions, protests became revolts, and frustration became rage. From protest to revolt

How can something that began with accidentally blocking someone’s view of a football match escalate so quickly into anti-establishment riots, claiming two lives and hundreds of injuries across the country? What’s going on here?

Rebellion is by nature risky and counter-intuitive. One can easily endanger one’s life. A state of emergency makes it even more risky to speak out. The government’s punishment can be swift and ruthless, as thousands of students, journalists, teachers, hawkers, and politicians have found out over the last months. Even Sheikh Hasina got jailed because she was being vocal.

So it must have taken a good deal of pent-up anger for people to raise their fists in front of black-clad policemen and armored vans, especially at a time when the state has suspended the fundamental right to protest.

Not only did these students riot in different parts of Bangladesh, they came to be supported by locals, hawkers, rice-sellers, small businessmen, bostibashi—basically, the under-classes. Teachers got involved as well. The flames spread to at least a dozen cities, and threatened more.

Their demands also quickly escalated. What began as a cry to withdraw an army camp inside Dhaka University became a clarion call to restore democracy, continuing even after the government sincerely announced that they would remove the camp. In between the unruly mob burnt everything from effigies to trucks. If these events had not moved so fast, the government would not have declared a curfew, closed all universities, and imposed censorship. The driving force

The authorities may treat this as a pre-planned event. But the reality is much simpler. Nearly everything about this, from the blocking of the view in the football stands to the rioting in Rajshahi, was a fit of spontaneous frenzy. Events like these are difficult to be controlled closely by politicians.

What brought people together is also simpler. It was not an "evil force" guiding their behaviour, unless the word "evil" means people’s desire to be able to afford food, not to be evicted on whim and without warning, not to be arrested without showing reason and treated guilty unless proven innocent, not to be labeled readily as corrupt plotters or scheming hoarders or blackmailing bankers or thugs in the guise of students.

What was driving this is clear. Rebels are usually straightforward about what they want, because a rebellion is a way to publicise demands. What got the rebellion to expand was really a longing for democracy. Why desire democracy?

This is something the caretaker government (CTG) will be well-advised to take very seriously. It should ask whether it is wise to wait another 15 months before holding national elections.

Optimism had rightfully greeted the CTG when it was inducted in January. Devious political games and schemes began in Dhaka, but around the country people had a much simpler and more innocent hope: finally, now, free and fair elections would be held. That hope has turned into demand.

CTG is absolutely right about the poison of corruption in our society. But when the generals say that democracy has not worked in Bangladesh, what they show is how removed they are from what the people want. As one street vendor said in a BBC interview: "They are killing us to keep themselves in power. They think the public are idiots. But we are not idiots. They have come to organise elections, so they should just hold elections and leave."

So after such gross misrule during 2001-2006, why would ordinary people still prefer elections and democracy? Again, the reason is simple: Democracy gives them at least some access to decision makers, some security that if a bunch of them got together and demanded something, it might be heard.

Right now they have no access and no security. They are at the receiving end of the government’s sharp stick,

and they're hurting politically and economically. But CTG is responding with even more repression. After imposing a curfew, cutting off cell-phones and international lines (and blaming it on sabotage), cordoning off the campus, beating whomever they could find, and arresting an unknown number of students, it has now filed cases against 42,000 people!

It would be a mistake for the CTG to think that because the sophisticated urban & civil society supported its selective anti-corruption drive and its IMF-kissing economic agenda, it has similar overwhelming support all over the country. Alas, the Dhaka-based high society is nothing but an insignificant drop in an electorate of seventy to eighty million.

The right strategy for the government is to listen to, talk to, and treat these millions respectfully, de-politicize and humanize its actions, and accelerate the schedule for national elections. State power, which according to the Constitution clearly belongs to the people, needs to be returned to its lawful owner at the earliest.

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