

# The Power of One

Contributed by Abeer Mustafa  
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"What about the quarter of a million people that the caretaker government has arrested? What about the students who were beaten indiscriminately, or the veteran university professors humiliated for supporting democracy, or the laid-off mill workers beaten for seeking food, or the journalists clubbed for doing their jobs? All these issues have disappeared from the political agenda to make space for the singular issue of getting the party chairperson out of prison."

If there had been some doubt before, there should be little remaining now: Awami League and BNP, the two largest parties in Bangladesh, each with millions of followers, are each centered on a single person. Look at their current campaigns. Gone are most other issues, and the main focus of each party is on getting their respective chairpersons, Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina, out of prison. All for one

It is natural that a political party would be dismayed if the party boss is arrested and imprisoned. But what is striking is the sheer singularity of this demand. Everything else has been subordinated to this, as if the party's sole purpose is to revolve around its leader, much like the planets revolve around the Sun.

On this account, AL's zeal has probably surpassed that of BNP's. Two weeks ago, over 100 former MPs signed a petition wanting Ms. Hasina's release before Eid. The party has orchestrated international pressure on this, getting U.S. Congressmen and British MPs to put pressure on the government. Needless to say, the release has not materialized.

Again, all this should be fine. There is no due process of law in Bangladesh now and all fundamental rights are still suspended. No one who is arrested in these conditions can defend herself or himself fairly. In the absence of legal protection, noise made by the political parties and carried by the media is the only avenue left. Some are more equal than others

But as important as she is, Ms. Hasina is only one person among countless others arrested. You hardly hear of the other leaders of the party who were arrested without charges long before Ms. Hasina was. Most of them are in real prisons, unlike the makeshift houses in which the former Prime Ministers are kept detained. AL's "free" leadership, including Ms. Hasina, were at best lukewarm about the arrests of their party colleagues. They had nothing to say about their sham, summary trials, and very little real concern about the absence of due process. Their voices of protest were all but a whisper.

While AL's central command lavished legal and political help for its embattled boss, it refused to commit legal assistance to its other leaders who were arrested earlier. The charges in those cases were no different; they were basically about corruption, extortion or other criminal accusations. But AL at that time even welcomed the arrests, saying that anyone proven to be corrupt would be expelled from the party. And not only that—Ms. Hasina declared, entirely unilaterally, that if elected, she would proceed to legitimize all the actions of Bangladesh's military-led government. Whether corrupt or not, many of the arrested partymen, from student leaders all the way up to Presidium members and the General Secretary, had sacrificed decades of their time and efforts into the party, only to see the rug pulled from under their feet at the convenience of the boss. Damn the disappeared

And what about the quarter of a million people that the caretaker government arrested in a mad frenzy within a few months? One hardly hears strong demands for protecting their rights in the daily speeches and statements coming out of the party's leadership nowadays. Many of them are still detained in horribly overcrowded prisons, still without charges, and many of them have been subject to physical and psychological abuses, according to human rights organizations. Torture centers were set up to summarily punish scores of them, as Human Rights Watch reported. A good number died at the hands of government agents.

And what about the students who were beaten indiscriminately in their hostel rooms for demanding a campus free of the military? Or the veteran university professors who were forced into confessing their "crimes" and signing letters of apologies for supporting pro-democracy movements? Or the laid-off mill workers who were beaten for seeking food and relief in gruel kitchens? Or the journalists who were clubbed and kicked for doing their jobs, and then jailed with the pretext that "it's for their own safety"?

All these people have simply disappeared from the political agenda. The explanation? Well, one was given by Dr. Muhammad Yunus, who declared in a recent interview that all those arrested must be corrupt—and for why would they be arrested otherwise?—and implied that they simply deserved their fate. Such is our fate. We have a Nobel Peace Prize winner unconcerned with wide abuses of human rights. We have leaders of a party that is supposed to have progressive grassroots values showing little genuine affection for the masses in misery. Fair weather friends

So witness the power of one. It is nothing new. It is so authoritative that it decided, one random day back in the early seventies, that the nation should simply forget, by way of a general amnesty, the terrible atrocities of the 1971 war collaborators. It is so overwhelming that it offered, again singlehandedly, wholesale approval of the actions of a military-led government. It is so forceful that it usurps the entire agenda of the only political party that could have provided a principled support for human rights at a time when such support is needed the most.

For many reasons, we want to see democracy restored at the soonest, but we also know that our political parties are horribly centralized organizations, run by sycophancy, not democracy. We have seen that most of the pressure for reform has really been an effort to force out targeted people and install replacements preferred by the government. So the reasons we want to see democracy restored has little to do with the political parties and mostly to do with having basic rights guaranteed by our constitution.

The story recounted here focuses on Awami League. Of course, BNP is no different. But BNP does not represent a progressive agenda in the way that AL claims for itself. Our bigger gripe is with AL simply because we expect more from this party. Certainly, one day, when the tide turns in its favour, AL will once again trumpet its progressive horns and rev up the rhetoric of human rights and democracy. But that would be meaningless. The test of its values is now, and it is failing in that test.

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