

## Opinion Bangladesh was ready to explode. I was there with the students.

What comes next will determine whether my country can find lasting change.

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We had violated curfew to join the protest at Shahbag, the Bangladeshi equivalent of Tahrir Square. Injured friends we left behind bade tearful goodbyes, not knowing whether it would be the last time we'd meet. Police opened fire on our group of 20-some students, teachers and journalists. Three were hit, and as they were taken to the hospital, my partner and I happened upon a brave rickshaw driver who agreed to take us on to Shahbag. As we wound our way through the narrow back streets of Dhaka, news of Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's resignation reached the square. Soldiers stowed their guns and jubilant youth clambered aboard their armored vehicles, leading the crowds in triumphant cheers. It was Aug. 5. Just days before, these very soldiers had been firing at us.

For a long time there have been two Bangladeshes. The first offered an improbable rags-to-riches tale of a country marked by one of the fastest rates of gross domestic product growth in the world. That Bangladesh was led by Hasina, the world's longest-serving female head of government. The other comprised a long-suffering populace, squirming under the yoke of that ostensibly visionary leader, who was also a ruthless autocrat who jailed, disappeared and killed anyone who stood in her way. Under her rule, Bangladesh had become a land of dangerous binaries. You were either with her ruling Awami League, or you were declared a razakar, a collaborator, and therefore an enemy of the state.

Bangladesh the development miracle was a creation of the ruling party elite and the business community that it served. A coterie of intellectuals, cultural players and other white-collar professionals orbited around it, offering their stamp of approval in exchange for perks. Narendra Modi's India was its chief patron and corruption was the norm. From 2010 to 2019, Bangladesh led the world in wealth growth among the ultrarich. Our country, the world's second-largest exporter of clothing, had become a land of high rises and shiny shopping centers.

The other Bangladesh was made up of the unlucky working classes — the garment workers, migrant laborers and millions of others who toil in low-paid jobs, often under subhuman conditions, lining the pockets of the wealthy. Many live in slums with poor sanitation. Most take home a monthly salary roughly equivalent to about \$113. This is hardly enough to feed a family. It is no wonder that in markets that serve garment workers, 10-15 families regularly pool together to buy rotten vegetables in bulk.

The gap between these two Bangladeshes was tearing the nation apart.

A controversy over a quota system for government jobs supplied the spark for student protests that rocked the country in July. The system, originally intended as a gesture to liberation warfighters at the time of Bangladesh's founding, 50 years later had morphed into a discriminatory policy favoring government loyalists, denying much sought-after jobs to legitimate applicants. Students had protested the quota system in 2018, and having failed to quell the protests with violence, Hasina had scrapped it altogether. A court decision on June 5 to reinstate the system enraged students. They peacefully took to the streets. The government responded violently, this time with guns. Security forces killed six students in the days that followed.

Before long, demand for fair government job opportunities transformed into a broad movement for dignity and basic rights. Fear and repression might have worked for Hasina for the past 15 years, but when people are prepared to brave bullets in the streets, you know there's no going back. The students' foremost demand was that Hasina apologize. That simple act might have saved her. Her hubris, it turns out, would spell her doom.

But it was the public that paid the steepest price. Internet and mobile networks were cut and hundreds died in the violent repression that ensued. Many thousands were injured. The image of 25-year-old Abu Sayed, a student of English literature, arms outstretched, seconds before he crumpled under a barrage of bullets, has been etched into Bangladesh's collective memory. The video of his death on July 16 went viral. Students began calling for Hasina's ouster.

Sayed was the son of working-class parents. A gifted student, he was attending one of the country's public universities while working as a tutor to support his family. People like Sayed, for whom civil service jobs are one of the few routes available to move up the social ladder, were on the front lines of the protests. More well-to-do students went to private universities and had other options: going abroad, working plush corporate jobs, joining family businesses or even becoming entrepreneurs. And yet many of these more privileged students also joined the protests. Bangladeshis had had enough.

Having spent time in the streets throughout my career as a journalist, and having reported on the student movements since 2018, I had some street cred. I had met some of the students when I was jailed in 2018 for the crime of "instigating the ongoing movement." I had sheltered some of them this summer during the most intense violence and visited others, many of whom had been tortured by security forces, in the hospital, I had become a mentor of sorts.

Yes, I was expecting the government to fall, but I never thought it would happen this quickly. In the vacuum left after the prime minister's departure, the students who had earlier been persecuted by the police took to policing the streets themselves. They steered the formation of the interim government, inviting Muhammad Yunus, Bangladesh's celebrated Nobel Peace Prize laureate, to lead. Yunus accepted, and following some backdoor negotiations with the military, two students joined the interim government. If there was any worry that their newfound power might go to their heads, the students themselves formed a watchdog body to oversee the new government.

Less than a month old, Bangladesh's new cabinet is made up of respected citizens with zero preparation. They are sailing in uncharted waters. Few have either the political or administrative experience needed to steer us. The problems ahead are enormous. Even a more experienced cabinet would have had problems meeting Bangladeshis' extremely high expectations. Welcome to the youthquake known as the Monsoon Revolution.

We are living day-to-day. As we rejoice at the arrest of each fleeing general or minister, we agonize over the possibility that they will be denied basic due process — that we will recreate the crimes of the former regime. We must shed this leftover culture quickly.

We watch. We wait. There are hopeful signs. The country was hit by devastating floods last month, and the extraordinary outpouring of support for student-organized relief campaigns is encouraging. The interim government has also taken steps to bring an end to the culture of enforced disappearances — primarily against governmental critics — that characterized Hasina's rule.

Only time will determine whether the blood spilled on Bangladeshi streets this summer will result in lasting change or whether it will simply be a seasonal shift, a monsoon that disappears with the movement of the sun.