

Opinion – Injustice Paves the Way for Revolution: Lessons from Bangladesh

Written by Shafi Md Mostofa

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SHAFI MD MOSTOFA, SEP 17 2024

On August 5, 2024, a historic moment unfolded in Bangladesh when Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina resigned and left the country after 16 years of rule. Her departure was not the result of a regular election or peaceful transition of power but the culmination of a student-led mass uprising. This revolution, which ultimately ousted the world's longest-serving female prime minister, marked a significant turning point in the country's political landscape. The rise of Dr. Muhammad Yunus, a Nobel laureate, to leadership symbolizes a fresh chapter for Bangladesh. Yet, the roots of this uprising are deeply embedded in the persistent injustices that plagued the country during Hasina's tenure.

Throughout her reign, Bangladesh experienced widespread extrajudicial killings, judicial harassment, enforced disappearances, rampant corruption, and the marginalization of political dissidents. These issues, combined with the sharp division of the nation based on political ideologies, created an atmosphere of frustration and disillusionment. The uprising that forced Hasina's resignation is a stark reminder of the broader historical lesson: injustices, when left unchecked, inevitably lead to revolution.

To understand this, one must look back at the history of Bengal, which sheds light on the enduring relationship between injustice and societal change. Bengal, unlike many parts of the Indian subcontinent, was not traditionally a Muslim-majority region. In fact, the 1872 census revealed that nearly 50 percent of Bengal's population was Muslim, while in Delhi, the center of Muslim rule, Muslims constituted only 11 percent. This demographic transformation raises the question: what led to the large-scale conversion of Hindus to Islam in Bengal?

Theorists suggest that the appeal of Islam in Bengal lay in its promise of equality through the concept of Muslim brotherhood. In a region marked by the rigid hierarchies of the Hindu caste system, where lower-caste individuals were systematically oppressed, Islam offered a more inclusive social order. Those who felt marginalized and dehumanized by the caste system found refuge in the egalitarian values of Islam. The feeling of injustice—rooted in the rigid Hindu caste hierarchy—thus played a critical role in the conversion of many Bengalis to Islam, highlighting how injustice can drive significant social transformation.

This theme of injustice as a catalyst for change is also evident in the partition of British India in 1947. Muslims in British India felt disadvantaged and marginalized under colonial rule, and this sense of injustice fueled the demand for a separate Muslim state, leading to the creation of Pakistan. The feeling of being treated unfairly and the fear of continued subjugation under a Hindu-majority India prompted the Muslim population to seek their own nation.

Bangladesh's own creation in 1971 was similarly driven by a sense of injustice. East Pakistan, which is now Bangladesh, suffered from financial exploitation, political marginalization, and the denial of democratic rights by the ruling authorities in West Pakistan. When power was not transferred to the elected party of East Pakistan, the sense of betrayal and injustice sparked a liberation movement that ultimately led to the creation of an independent Bangladesh. The pattern is clear: every major turning point in the region's history was triggered by injustices that the ruling powers either ignored or perpetuated.

Fast forward to 2024, and the ousting of Sheikh Hasina's government followed a similar trajectory. Under the Awami

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League's regime, injustices were rampant. Citizens were subjected to systemic abuse, corruption ran unchecked, and political dissent was harshly suppressed. The ruling party's failure to address these grievances and its attempts to consolidate power by marginalizing opposition voices pushed the people to the brink. When dialogue and peaceful protest failed, revolution became inevitable.

The key lesson from Bangladesh's history—and indeed, from other revolutionary moments in world history—is that sustained injustice paves the way for upheaval. Governments that allow corruption, repression, and inequality to fester create the conditions for their own downfall. For any democratic government, or indeed any regime, it is essential to address injustices head-on, ensuring that all citizens feel included and valued in the nation's social and political fabric.

Building an inclusive society is the only way to avoid the cycle of injustice and revolution. This requires creating mechanisms for dialogue, compromise, and reform, and using education to foster a culture of empathy, understanding, and mutual respect. If citizens feel they have a stake in the nation and that their voices are heard, the likelihood of a revolutionary movement is diminished.

Moreover, the success of any revolution depends on the cultural preparedness of the people. Revolutions may be sparked by injustice, but their outcomes are shaped by the collective consciousness and readiness of the populace to embrace change. In Bangladesh's case, the cultural strength of the student-led movement, and the symbolic leadership of a figure like Dr. Muhammad Yunus, were key factors in ensuring that the revolution succeeded in bringing about meaningful change. But, the legacy of long term misrule is hard to overcome.

That said, Bangladesh's recent revolution is a powerful reminder that injustices, when left unchecked, inevitably sow the seeds of resistance and rebellion. From the conversion of Hindus to Islam in Bengal centuries ago to the ousting of Sheikh Hasina in 2024, history shows that those who feel marginalized and oppressed will eventually rise against their oppressors. Governments that wish to avoid such uprisings must commit themselves to justice, inclusion, and dialogue—because when injustice becomes the norm, revolution is never far behind.

About the author:

Shafi Md Mostofa (PhD) is a theologian and security studies scholar with broad interests in political Islam, authoritarianism, modern South Asian history and politics, and international relations and the clash of civilizations. He is an Associate Professor of World Religions and Culture at Dhaka University's Faculty of Arts and an Adjunct Lecturer at the University of New England, Australia. He has published with Routledge, Springer, Cambridge University Press, Oxford University Press, SAGE, Brill, Wiley and Blackwell; and in *Politics and Religion*, *Politics and Policy*, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, *Diaspora Studies*, and *Asian and African Studies*. He is the author of "Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh: A Pyramid Root Cause Model" (Cham, Springer) and "Dynamics of Violent Extremism in South Asia: Nexus between State Fragility and Extremism" (Singapore, Palgrave Macmillan). He is also a guest editor of the *Journal of World Affairs*, SAGE.