

Opinion – The Future of the Bangladesh Awami League

Written by Kazi A S M Nurul Huda

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KAZI A S M NURUL HUDA, SEP 19 2024

The 2024 student-public uprising in Bangladesh stands as a watershed moment in the nation's political history, with the ousting of Sheikh Hasina's government marking the culmination of years of growing discontent. This movement, however, has raised a profound question: can Hasina's party, Bangladesh Awami League, with its philosophies of Bengali nationalism and secularism, find a path to redemption and reconciliation in the new political landscape? The answer to this question hinges on whether the uprising is understood as an expression of a collective language grounded in ideals like democracy and pluralism, or as a movement driven by a singular, pragmatic goal—the removal of an authoritarian regime.

If we argue that the uprising was underpinned by a collective language of democracy and pluralism, then reconciling with the Awami League becomes an exceedingly difficult task. Bengali nationalism and secularism, the two pillars upon which the Awami League has long stood, are inherently exclusionary in the way they have been politically mobilized. The party has used these philosophies to create stark binaries in the political landscape, dividing the populace into 'pro-Liberation' and 'anti-Liberation' camps, a tactic that marginalized dissenting voices under the guise of protecting national unity and secular values. The collective language of the uprising, if indeed democratic and pluralistic, directly challenges this binary by offering an alternative vision of inclusivity and shared political engagement. In this light, reconciliation between the uprising's participants and the Awami League seems untenable without a fundamental shift in the latter's political identity.

One of the central arguments for the difficulty of reconciliation lies in the stark ideological contrast between the Awami League's historically exclusionary politics and the pluralistic tendencies that would define the uprising if we accept the premise of a collective language. The Awami League has long positioned itself as the sole guardian of Bangladesh's national identity, using secularism as a tool to suppress dissent from Islamist or otherwise oppositional political forces. But a collective language based on pluralism would reject this monopolization of national identity, embracing a more open and fluid conception of political and cultural belonging. The pluralism inherent in the uprising would thus signify a rejection of the very narratives that have sustained the Awami League's political dominance for decades. For the Awami League to be redeemed in such a scenario would require the party to abandon the exclusivist underpinnings of its own identity—an immensely difficult task for a political force so deeply rooted in the historical and ideological soil of post-liberation Bangladesh.

Moreover, the perceived secularism of the Awami League has been deeply contested in recent years, as the party has increasingly relied on authoritarian tactics and pragmatic alliances with Islamist forces to maintain its grip on power. The uprising's purported collective language of democracy and pluralism would expose this hypocrisy, further alienating the party from any attempt at reconciliation. The movement's call for democratic reforms and the restoration of civil liberties would stand in stark opposition to the Awami League's recent record of repression and co-optation, making it difficult for the party to regain the trust of a populace that now sees pluralism as an essential component of the nation's future.

However, if we reject the notion of a collective language and instead argue that the 2024 uprising was driven by a singular, collective goal—the removal of the Sheikh Hasina-led government—then the prospects for the Awami League's redemption and reconciliation improve. In this interpretation, the movement is not seen as an ideological revolt against the very foundations of the Awami League's identity but as a pragmatic response to an authoritarian

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regime that had overstayed its welcome. The focus here is on regime change, not on the repudiation of the ideals of Bengali nationalism or secularism. By framing the uprising in terms of a collective goal, the Awami League can position itself as a victim of circumstance rather than a target of ideological overthrow.

The key distinction between these two interpretations lies in the depth of the movement's critique. A movement rooted in collective language would be existentially opposed to the Awami League's core philosophies, rendering reconciliation impossible without the party undergoing a profound ideological transformation. In contrast, a movement with a singular collective goal of ousting the government allows the Awami League to retain its ideological coherence, even as it accepts responsibility for the political failings that led to its downfall. Redemption, in this case, becomes a matter of political strategy and leadership change, rather than a wholesale rejection of the party's historical role in shaping Bangladesh's identity.

In the aftermath of the uprising, the task for the Awami League, if it is to remain relevant in Bangladesh's political future, is to reconcile with a populace that has grown disillusioned with its recent governance. This reconciliation will be far easier if we argue that the uprising was driven by a collective goal rather than a collective language. The focus on regime change allows the Awami League to reclaim its ideological mantle, positioning itself as a party capable of reform and renewal in the face of political adversity. This path would require the party to engage in a process of introspection, acknowledging the authoritarian excesses of the past decade while reaffirming its commitment to the ideals of Bengali nationalism and secularism in a more inclusive, less exclusionary manner.

Thus, the possibility of reconciling the Awami League's future with the Bangladesh envisioned by the 2024 uprising hinges on the narrative we choose to tell. If the uprising is remembered as an expression of collective language, then the philosophical gap between the Awami League and the movement will remain too wide to bridge. Redemption will only be possible if the party radically redefines its identity. However, if the uprising is understood as a pragmatic collective goal, then the Awami League can find a path to redemption through reform and adaptation, without having to abandon the philosophical foundations upon which it has built its legacy. The question of whether Bangladesh's political future will be shaped by language or by goals will define the path to reconciliation in the years to come.

About the author:

Kazi A S M Nurul Huda is an associate professor of philosophy at the University of Dhaka. He holds a PhD in philosophy from the University of Oklahoma, USA. His main philosophical interests lie in epistemology, political philosophy, ethics, and their interconnections. He is also interested in applied philosophical and ethical areas, such as environmental philosophy, development ethics, business ethics, bioethics, and the philosophy of education. His work has been published in journals such as *Developing World Bioethics*, *Business Ethics*, *the Environment*, and *Responsibility*, *Cultural Dynamics*, *International Journal of Applied Philosophy*, and *Symposion*.