

Opinion – Sovereignty First: US Support on Bangladesh's Terms

Written by Kazi A S M Nurul Huda

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KAZI A S M NURUL HUDA, NOV 2 2024

The 2024 student-led uprising in Bangladesh was not merely a demand for democratic reform; it was a powerful assertion of the people's will to shape their own future. It rejected both authoritarianism and foreign interference. The movement's demands reflect a broader struggle: How can Bangladesh shape its own democratic path without falling under the sway of global powers, especially the United States? As the U.S. positions itself as a potential ally in Bangladesh's democratic journey, its role must be carefully calibrated. While American aid may seem beneficial, it should not infringe on Bangladesh's hard-won sovereignty. The U.S. often champions itself as a defender of global democracy, but in this case, involvement must be approached with caution. The recent movement in Bangladesh shows that its people are more than capable of steering their own democratic transformation. The U.S. role, therefore, should be supportive but not intrusive, with aid offered without imposing an external blueprint.

The 2024 uprising was not just a protest against domestic repression; it was also a firm stand against foreign manipulation. For decades, Bangladesh has grappled with balancing external influences, from regional actors like India and China to international powers such as the U.S. However, this recent movement marked a turning point, driven largely by young Bangladeshis who demanded political change from within, on their own terms. Unlike previous movements, this uprising was not co-opted by foreign interests. Students, ordinary citizens, opposition party members, and civil society pushed back against authoritarianism while simultaneously asserting their independence from foreign powers. The message was unmistakable: Bangladesh's future must be determined by its people, not by outside forces.

While the U.S. has supported democratic movements worldwide, Bangladesh's experience warns of the risks that come with such assistance. The establishment of an interim government, led by Nobel laureate and microcredit pioneer Dr. Muhammad Yunus, has already raised concerns about Bangladesh being used as a pawn in larger geopolitical struggles. Although Yunus's leadership may attract Western attention, it also risks compromising the independence of the democratic movement that Bangladeshis fought for. This presents a dilemma: How can Bangladesh retain its autonomy while accepting help from global powers?

The U.S. must recognize that Bangladesh's future cannot—and should not—be shaped solely by external forces. American involvement should be framed not as a guiding hand but as a supportive partner, one that aids in the creation of institutions necessary for true democracy. To this end, the U.S. must take several proactive steps to engage meaningfully with Bangladesh, while respecting its sovereignty.

One of the most constructive roles the U.S. can play is to facilitate dialogue between the interim government, political parties, and civil society. The uprising revealed that democracy cannot flourish in isolation; it requires the active engagement of diverse actors, especially youth and marginalized communities. U.S. diplomacy can help create platforms for these discussions, provided it avoids dictating the terms. For Bangladesh's democratic transformation to succeed, it must be rooted in local realities.

Supporting Bangladesh's civil society is another area where the U.S. can contribute meaningfully. Organizations working to strengthen democratic norms from the ground up need financial support and technical expertise to

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advance their causes. However, this aid should come without strings attached to prevent these groups from becoming overly reliant on foreign agendas. Independent media, human rights organizations, and grassroots movements play a crucial role in holding their government accountable. The U.S. can assist these entities, but without overshadowing their autonomy or reducing their credibility by associating them too closely with foreign actors.

Moreover, economic progress must go hand-in-hand with political reform. The U.S. has an opportunity to invest in sectors that matter to Bangladesh's youth, such as education, technology, and sustainable development. These investments should align with the aspirations of those who led the 2024 protests. However, any economic engagement must be transparent and free from conditions that could compromise the democratic principles that Bangladeshis fought for.

A fundamental aspect of democratic systems is the integrity of their elections. Bangladesh has long struggled with electoral transparency, and the U.S. can offer crucial assistance here. However, this must be done in a manner that respects Bangladesh's sovereignty. By providing technical expertise and encouraging fair practices, the U.S. can help restore public trust in the electoral process. But it is vital that this support is seen as a partnership, not an imposition, so that Bangladesh retains full control over its democratic mechanisms.

The challenge for Bangladesh lies in maintaining its autonomy while inviting support for much-needed reforms. Recent history has shown that the country's path is fraught with tensions between domestic control and foreign influence. The 2024 uprising opened the door to democratic change but also issued a warning: excessive reliance on outside forces, even well-intentioned ones, can dilute the very ideals that the movement stood for.

While Bangladesh's strategic importance in South Asia is undeniable, particularly in terms of security and regional stability, the U.S. must resist viewing the country solely through a geopolitical lens. Rather than focusing on the strategic benefits of engagement, U.S. policy should center on empowering Bangladesh to make its own choices. For Bangladesh, the lesson of the 2024 movement is clear: democracy cannot be imported. It must grow organically, rooted in the nation's unique cultural and political context.

To genuinely assist Bangladesh's democratic journey, the U.S. must strike a balance between offering help and respecting the country's independence. This means contributing to political and economic reforms without pushing a foreign agenda. By promoting inclusive dialogue, empowering local movements, and ensuring electoral integrity, the U.S. can foster a democracy that is sustainable and grounded in the aspirations of the Bangladeshi people. However, this engagement must be undertaken with a clear understanding that Bangladesh is not a geopolitical pawn. Its sovereignty must not be compromised for foreign assistance. The 2024 uprising showed that Bangladeshis are more than capable of leading their own democratic transformation. What they seek from the U.S. is not control but solidarity, a partnership based on mutual respect, shared values, and a commitment to genuine democracy.

The future of Bangladesh is in its own hands. While the U.S. can offer critical support as a global advocate for democracy, it must do so in a way that does not jeopardize the sovereignty that Bangladesh has fought so hard to protect. The 2024 uprising was a demand for both democracy and independence, and any foreign involvement must honor that. By embracing a strategy that respects Bangladesh's autonomy while supporting its democratic ambitions, the U.S. can play a constructive role in shaping a future where sovereignty and democracy coexist, strengthening the partnership between these two nations without compromising the core values of the Bangladeshi people.

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