



## THE JULY REVOLUTION IN BANGLADESH: A POLITICAL ENQUIRY

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### Abstract:

*Bangladesh nested in South Asian panorama has experienced political convulsion since the time of her birth. She has shifted like a pendulum between the modes of democracy and authoritarianism. Sheikh Hasina, the daughter of the freedom fighter Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had served as Prime Minister of Bangladesh for last fifteen years. However, behind the façade of democracy and liberalism, she was accused of being a Dictator. The July Revolution which happened in July-August, 2024 resulted in a drastic change in Bangladesh. The students' community who spearheaded the movement was joined by people of all layers and sections. After a month-long struggle, the Hasina Government got toppled. This article intends to focus on the background of the July Revolution which is often hailed as the Second Liberation Movement of Bangladesh. It will throw light on the tug of war between the forces of authoritarianism and the defiance thrown by the common people. An anatomy of the Movement would be done by focusing on it's nature and implications. The article will draw to an end by zeroing on the road which lies ahead of this South Asian country.*

**Keywords:** Democracy, Authoritarianism, Revolution, Hasina Government, South Asia

Revolutions have the power to turn the pages of history and bring mammoth transformations as it culminates. Revolutions always demand a price of it's own. Bangladesh, a democratic country nested in the South Asian panorama had experienced a whirlpool in the month of July to August 2024 and this surge had unsettled the country even today. Strategically, Bangladesh is an immediate neighbor of India and it shares a border with Myanmar. It is in close proximity to Nepal, Bhutan and China. Historically, India was the messiah in helping Bangladesh to achieve her independence by intervening militarily in the Bangladesh Liberation War and was the first country to recognize the independent country of



Bangladesh. Hence, it is quite pertinent that from the strategic as well as historic point of view, the political well-being of Bangladesh would be of much relevance to India. Behind this backdrop, this article intends to focus on the background of the July Revolution which is often hailed as the Second Liberation Movement of Bangladesh. The article will throw light on the tug of war between the forces of authoritarianism and the defiance thrown by the common people. An anatomy of the Movement would be done by focusing on its nature and implications. The article will draw to an end by zeroing on the road which lies ahead of this South Asian country. This methodology/ data that has been chosen/ used for this study is gathered from secondary sources. Books, research articles, reports, newspaper clippings, online databases have been consulted for conducting this study.

### **Background of the July Revolution**

It is noteworthy to mention that the history of Bangladeshi politics is characterized by weak governance, factionalism amongst parties and fluidity of political process. However, there is tremendous resilience amongst the people of Bangladesh to confront the crisis as they are the victim of natural and political disasters for ages. Patience and optimism against all odds mark the character of the people. One cannot ignore the nation's repeated efforts to establish an inclusive and democratic system of governance and rejection of authoritarianism of all varieties. (Riaz 298) The July or the Monsoon Revolution as it is called had enough reasons behind it. It is a fact that revolutions or revolt do not start abruptly. It takes time to articulate the demands and grievances of the people. Finally, a spark is needed to ignite the flame. Bangladesh is no exception to this. If we take a deep insight on the background of the July Revolution, we can find a basket of reasons which acted as a catalyst for this uprising.

Firstly, Bangladesh being a democratic country is built on the mandate of the people. However, it is an irony that the roars of authoritarianism had silenced the tune of democracy in Bangladesh. Sheikh Hasina, the daughter of legendary freedom fighter of Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was hailed as a democratic idol of the country. The tragic assassination

of her father and other family members in 1975 became a central element of her political narrative. This personal tragedy was employed to galvanize support and portray herself as the sole guardian of the nation's democratic ideals. (Hassan 175). However, much against the popular expectation the fifteen years of her tenure (2009-2024) of Prime Ministerialship was

the epitome of authoritativeness. Her regime characterized a repressive political environment where monopoly of power pitches high. There is a zero tolerance of the Government towards political opposition. She used the political patronage and the state resources to keep herself in the position of dominance. People's voices are unheard over the years and their aspirations are neglected by the legislature and the government while formulating and executing policies and strategies. (Khan 23)

Severe irregularity and manipulation of the processes of elections held in the year 2014, 2018 and 2024. A vicious nexus of politicians, bureaucrats and business people emerged, who used control over state resources to perpetuate specific regimes in power. (Jahan 60) Hence, it appears that democracy was in peril in Bangladesh.

Secondly, the overdominance of the state has limited the space for the civil society. Bangladesh's once unstable electoral authoritarian regime, frequently teetering between military rule and parliamentary democracy has turned into a resilient one-party system (Qayum 144). The civilians felt suffocated because of the regression of the state. The Government took measures to restrict the freedom of speech and fragment all alliances which had critical voices against the former. The ruling elites pay lip-service to the Awami League Supremo and they target associations which runs antithetical to the dictum of the State. The intellectuals had much to say about the daunting political climate, economic inequality, alarming corruption and fragmented social fabric which were however not accommodated by the Hasina Government.

Thirdly, gross Human Rights violations had been witnessed during the regime of Sheikh Hasina. Cases of abduction, detention, enforced disappearances, extra judicial killing were of regular occurrences. All these activities stem from the psychological fear of resistance of the State as they are accused of doing torture, persecution, denying bail, using unnecessary force against the targeted individuals and groups. Shades were provided to the criminals who were used for coercing and intimidating others. The poor situation of human rights in Bangladesh had invited the criticism of the Human Rights Organizations. It is noteworthy to mention here that the Judiciary also had a compromised existence in Bangladesh. From endorsing the abrogation of the caretaker government to approving laws like the Digital Security Act, or turning a blind eye to financial crimes, the judiciary has often deferred to the executive rather than acting as an independent arbiter of justice. (The Daily Star, June 2025)



Fourthly, the media which is considered to be the fourth pillar of democracy had come under intrusive surveillance during the Hasina regime. There had been strict censorship of press which includes both electronic and social media. The journalists had often been penalized for airing their unbiased opinion and had fallen prey to a threat culture. The Daily Star and Prothom Alo are known to be the only independent newspapers in Bangladesh. They were declared an “enemy” of democracy and the Bangladeshi people by Hasina. Reporters from these newspapers were barred from her office and public events. Hasina’s press conferences were infamous for being choreographed events that allowed her to bask in tributes lavished upon her by attending journalists, who were cherry-picked by her supporters in mainstream media. Any questions Hasina received were usually framed in a way that gave her an opportunity to criticise those in opposition. (www.thenewsminute.com, September 2024). Coupled with that the Government often twist the arms by instructing the Business Houses to not provide any advertisements to those Media Houses which are critical of the acts of the Government. However Bangladesh has ranked 165th among 180 countries in the 2024 report (Reporters without Borders) – placing at the bottom among the South Asian nations after Afghanistan. (The Business Standard, May 2024)

Fifthly, the immediate cause for the start of the July Revolution was the controversial Quota system. The Quotas or reservations were there in the Government posts for the descendants of those who were freedom fighters of Bangladesh. This quota system which were previously abolished was reinstated in June, 2024 by the High Court. (Human Rights Research Centre, 2025) This had created a great resentment among the masses as this would slash down the opportunity of the common rank and file in getting Government jobs. The University students started protests against this encroachment of the merit based employment by the quota system which was essentially discriminatory in nature. As Bangladesh’s population has grown and educational standards have improved, more qualified candidates have emerged, leading to increased competition for employment in the public sector. There are about 46 million people in the 15-29 age group, and most of them are unemployed. The fixed quota percentages have failed to adapt to the changing demographics and economic conditions, leading to widespread frustration. (Rahaman, 2024). Moreover, those who were opposing the job quotas were referred to as children of ‘Razakars’ by the Supremo indicating that the predecessors of the former collaborated with the Pakistani army in the Bangladesh Liberation



Movement held in 1971. This created a hatred in the mind of the people as they were equated with that of an enemy of their own motherland. Such reckless behavior of the Government had crossed all limit of patience of the public. It is indeed true that love comes without punctuations. so does hate. the flip of a coin and the story can change. (Halder 2024)

### **Nature of the Movement**

The July or the Monsoon Revolution appeared in the horizon of Bangladesh and drenched the country in a severe manner. The movement was hailed as a Gen Z revolution, spurred by young Bangladeshis. (Reuters, August 2024). The Movement got started in July 5 and continued till August 5, 2024. The reinstating of the Quota system had created a deep resentment in the minds of the students of Bangladesh. Students belonging to different universities of Bangladesh namely Dhaka, Rajshahi, Jahangirnagar, Jagannath and Chittagong University staged peaceful protests against the quota system. The students gave an ultimatum to the Government do away with the reinstated quota system by issuing a detailed executive order by July 4, 2024. To put pressure on the Government, the students belonging to Dhaka and Jahangirnagar University brought out processions and blocked Shahbagh. The Sheikh Hasina Government however refused to pay any attention to the student agitation considering it a waste of time. As there was no intension to adhere to the given deadline, the students across different universities started an Anti-discrimination Students movement. The students showed firmness in not compromising their merit and future because of the reservation made by the Quota system. The students were asserting their strength collectively in the form of boycotting classes and examinations, enforcing dharnas, blockades of key locations, organizing road shows, disrupting railways and highways so that this creates a pressure on the working of the Government. In midst of the growing agitation, the Appellate Division of the Judiciary on July 10, 2024 imposed a status quo on quota for four weeks. However, this could not satisfy the masses as they wanted a parliamentary law on the reversal of the quota system with regard to the Government jobs at all levels. At this hour of mounting tension on July 12, direct retaliation came from the side of the Bangladeshi Chhatra League, the students wing of the party Awami League. They attacked the students protesting at the Comilla Victoria College. With the endorsement of Obaidul Quader, the General Secretary of Awami League since 2016 its affiliated students group Bangladesh Chhatra League the Jubo League and Swechasevak wing unleashed a severe crackdown on the protestors. However, as the movement showed vigour to continue,



the Government declared curfew and ordered for shoot at sight if anyone tries to violate the curfew order. It is alleged by the Hasina Government that Chattra Shibir, the student wing of the banned Jamaat-e-Islami, allegedly backed by Pakistan's ISI, is inciting violence and turning student protests into a political movement in Bangladesh. (The Economic Times, August 2024)

To check this all educational institutions were shut down, 4G internet facilities were restricted so that the protestors fail to communicate. An effort was made to muzzle the use of social networking sites like Whats App, Facebook and others so that this kind of movement don't get any support, either moral, financial or institutional from anywhere. However, all this arbitrariness of the State could not unnerve the students who were defying the authority of the State in full force. On July 15, as the injured protestors of University of Dhaka gathered at Dhaka Medical College and Hospital for their treatment, the activists of Bangladesh Chhatra League attacked the wounded protestors. One incident however turned the situation adverse for the Government. Abu Sayeed, one of the protestors and student of Begum Rokeya University got killed by the Bangladeshi Chhatra League. The televised murder of Abu Sayeed, an unarmed student of Begum Rokeya University, is an indictment of a rogue government that has long lost its right to rule. His outstretched arms as he had faced the police will become the Tiananmen Square moment in Bangladesh's history. (The Wire, July 2024)

This infuriated the masses and resulted in vandalism. This cold-bloodedness and indignity brought massive protest in the length and breadth of the country. The students ousted the members of the Bangladeshi Chhatra League from the campus of Dhaka and Rajshahi University. As the flame of revenge got ignited, the revolution followed its own course. The protestors continued their agenda on bringing government to a standstill. The protestors ransacked Bangladesh Television Bhavan, Office of Bangladesh Bridge Authority, Bangladesh Road Transport Authority, Metro Stations, Police Stations amongst many others. Armed assailants set fire to the prison and broke open cell locks, letting 826 prisoners, including nine militants, to escape. The attackers looted weapons, ammunition and food supplies while causing extensive damage to the facility. (Dhaka Tribune, June 2025) Dhaka under Sheikh Hasina witnessed unprecedented violence and thereby some cautious steps were taken. The Supreme Court abolished the reservation of 93 percent job of civil services and opened it for all people based on merit. However, 5 percent of the government jobs were reserved for descendants of Bangladeshi Muktiyoddha, one percent for ethnic minorities and



remaining one percent for physically challenged and third gender. However, such reforms were initiated too late to pacify the masses. As the movement has gathered momentum against all forms of authoritativeness and exploitation pursued by Sheikh Hasina, the common rank and file were in no mood to compromise. They continued with their agenda even when Sheikh Hasina approved gazetted notification with regard to the verdict given by the Supreme Court. Ms Hasina has blamed political foes for violence. (BBC News, July 2024). Another strategy that the Hasina Government adopted was the picking up of the leaders of the Movement by the armed forces so that the movement loses its strength and direction. But Sheikh Hasina being a seasoned politician could feel the pulse of the International community and Diplomatic Missions. She could sense a pressure for easing out the contemporary mayhem. The Internet facility got restored and an effort was made to bring life to normalcy. The students however continued with their demonstrations with a one-point programme i.e. the resignation of Sheikh Hasina from power. A March for Justice was organized to shame the murder, killing, torture, disappearances and mass arrest pursued by the Government. However against this burning situation, the Bangladesh Prime Minister announced July 30 as the Day of National Mourning for commemorating the lives lost in the movement. While Awami League leaders posted black profile pictures on Facebook, many users in Bangladesh chose red, rejecting the official mourning as a farce and declaring they will mourn only when justice is served for the dead students. (The Telegraph, August 2024) Hence the slogans of the protesters kept ringing in the air and perhaps Sheikh Hasina could now read the writings on the wall. However, the finale came on August 5, 2024 when common people through out the length and breadth of the country marched to Dhaka claiming the resignation of Sheikh Hasina. They defied all resistance offered by Awami League and vandalized the official residence of the Prime Minister. A message was made clear that the protesters were in favour of establishing real democracy in Bangladesh and that would come at the cost of resignation of Sheikh Hasina. Sheikh Hasina ultimately submitted her resignation letter to President Mohammed Shahabuddin and hastily fled to India by an army helicopter seeking political asylum. Later, his residence and several statues of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman were vandalised. Images of dozens of youths viciously tearing down or destroying statues, murals and other representations went viral on social media, especially in the capital, Dhaka, where the famous Raju Memorial, an iconic sculpture that stands on the site where Mujibur delivered a historic speech appealing for Bangladesh's freedom on 7 March 1971, was attacked (Aparicio 4)).The resignation of the authoritarian Prime Minister

rejoiced the masses and celebrations were observed by the protesters marking their victory. The Army Chief General Waqar-uz- Zaman declared at 4 pm on the same day that an interim government would be constituted. On August 8, 2025 Muhammad Yunus, the Noble Peace Laureate and an Economist took the charge of the interim government. With an interim government in charge until the next elections, the nation feverishly awaits a raft of reforms that will finally usher in the much-vaunted Bangladesh 2.0. (The Daily Star, June 2025).

After making an anatomy of the nature of the movement, it is important to take a look on the number of casualties of the July Massacre. According to government records, the number of people injured in the movement so far stands at 18,247. Among the eight divisions, naturally there has been the highest number of casualties and injuries in Dhaka. As many as 11,073 people have been injured in Dhaka division. MIS (Management Information System) has found information of 622 people being killed during the movement across the country. Analysis of the incidents of deaths showed that 443 people were brought dead to hospitals after the violent incidents. Meanwhile, the remaining 179 people died while undergoing treatment in hospitals. The highest number of casualties has been recorded in Dhaka division. As many as 477 people have died in this division. (en.prothomalo.com/ September 2024)

### **Implications of the Movement**

The July Revolution has played a significant role in initiating dramatic changes in the political fabric of the country. The fleeing away of Sheikh Hasina gave a clear signal that the roars of authoritarianism is bound to get silenced when the winds of democracy flows. People demanded for a New Bangladesh with sweeping reforms and good governance. However, in Bangladesh democracy has had a chequered and uninterrupted career. As for ‘Golden Bengal’, it is now seen more as the symbol of a visionary past than as a blueprint for the future. (Schendel 312)

Secondly, Authoritarianism has a pattern of its own. It has a regional significance to the countries like Nepal and Srilanka who are also witnessing instability and the surge of democratic forces.

It highlights the necessity for South Asian countries to maintain democratic standards, promote inclusive governance, address socio-economic inequalities, and uphold non-interference in internal matters by external forces. (Thapa 1) Bangladesh has been an illustrious template for these South Asian countries to learn and rectify if they are pushing



the problems of the common people below the red carpet.

Thirdly, as an immediate neighbor and long-term ally India had a good relation with Bangladesh under Sheikh Hasina. Different agreements were signed between the two countries on trade, transit, transshipment and water sharing. However, Sheikh Hasina had been reduced from the image of an icon to that of a traitor. She had been guilty of pursuing electoral manipulation, corruption, nepotism and gross human right violations. India knowing everything has given refuge to her, it is quite likely that there can be a rise of anti-Indian sentiment amongst the people of Bangladesh. Moreover, as the Government is running under an interim Government under Dr. Mohammad Yunus, the display of hatred towards India has become more blatant along with the growing proximity to countries like China and Pakistan. This has created some kind of uneasiness for India as she has to count the new geo-political realities and maintain her stand accordingly.

Fourthly, Bangladesh has scored well in different indicators under Sheikh Hasina as the country's GDP has gone high in 2023. The improved educational, health, standard of living, reduced infant mortality, infrastructural growth, rate of poverty alleviation speaks in her favour. Despite criticism of her years in power, Hasina was credited with turning around the economy and the massive garments industry, while winning international praise for sheltering Rohingya Muslims fleeing persecution in neighbouring Myanmar. (Reuters, August 2024) But in terms of domestic political indicators, she has failed miserably. However, Politics can have a spillover effect on other functional areas like economy which is perhaps a thrust area of any Government. Supply chain disruptions have reduced the availability of goods, leading to price hikes and increased inflationary pressures. The readymade garment sector, which accounts for more than 80 per cent of Bangladesh's US\$50 billion in export earnings, has been hit hard, and factories have remained closed since July 20, resulting in daily losses of nearly US\$150 million. The internet blackout also severely impacted e-commerce and Facebook-based businesses, with daily revenue losses estimated at US\$5 million. (www.asiapacific.ca/publication, July 2024) This political anarchy and the new interim arrangement might demotivate the foreign investors to continue their investment in Bangladesh. This might break the supply chain which are crucial for promoting economic development of the country.



Fifthly, the political upheaval in the country can be harvested as a golden opportunity by the terrorist and religious extremist groups. They can attempt an assault and strike their own country. They can strategically use the political vacuum and further their own interest. The resurgence of terrorism can be a cause of concern for Bangladesh as well as India being its immediate neighbour.

### **Road Ahead**

Bangladesh has experienced coups, upheavals, turmoil and siege as a scar on her body. The recent student protests, which many in Bangladesh have christened as the Bangla Spring taking a cue from the Arab Spring or the Monsoon Revolution, as a watershed moment in Bangladesh's political landscape, driven by the same spirit of activism that has characterised student movements in the country for over 70 years, even before its independence in 1971, when it was known as East Pakistan. (The Business Standard, June 2025) The July Revolution has made a reality check of the country. It was originally a students' movement, however with the passage of time it acquired the complexion of a peoples' movement. The fall of curtain over the regime of Sheikh Hasina has opened up a Pandora's box. It reminded us of the party led by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the Awami League, won a massive victory in the 1970 elections but could form a government in 1972 only after Bangladesh became an independent state after a war of liberation with Pakistan. Following the elections of 1973 which renewed his mandate, the government of Bangabandhu became increasingly autocratic. In June 1975, the Constitution was amended and the existing parliamentary form of government was replaced by a presidential form dominated by one party. (Murshid 195) The Pandora's box also manifested different realities which were trampled by the septuagenarian for a decade and a half. The crisis has been an eye-opener that in the name of pride and glory of the past, one can not compromise the need of the present. They have to be treated with dignity and given their due. Sheikh Hasina failed to read the writings of the wall. She tried to negotiate untimely and this cost the position of the longest serving female Prime Minister of the world. As truth can not be hidden for long, the power of democracy can not be sidelined forever. It has the strength to reclaim its position. Although a temporary transfer of power has taken place to an Interim Government, it is yet to be seen how well it functions. It is a high time to conduct a proper democratic election in Bangladesh so that a party comes to power holding the people's mandate. The world is eagerly waiting to witness how Bangladesh navigates and tide over this crisis for good.

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