

Bangladesh in ferment— a fact sheet



[A write-up by Comrades Dr. Joydeep Bhattacharya and Rashed Shahriar, members of the Central Executive Forum of the Socialist Party of Bangladesh (Marxist) is published to acquaint our readers with the actual happenings in Bangladesh.]

By the time thousands of people entered *Ganabhawan* at noon on 5 August last, Sheikh Hasina had resigned. She fled the country. Facebook has become flooded with the word 'freedom'.

'Freedom' is the most cherished word of any person. Nothing can be greater than this in the life of a subjugated people or nation. We became independent in 1971. It was a fight to end the tyranny, injustice, and discrimination of the rulers of West Pakistan. But it was seen that after independence, we got a country; though we did not become independent in the truest sense of the term. 'To save a flower', 'for a smiling face'—the people of our country took part in the liberation war. The country became independent and we got a territory named Bangladesh. But in independent Bangladesh, hundreds of blooming flowers fell to the ground, so many smiling faces were lost. A new struggle had begun. A struggle against the tyrannical government. General Ershad was removed from power. But real freedom remained elusive. In place of one party making false promises to the people, another party of the same genre came to power. The common people were repeatedly cheated and deceived as they, in absence of correct political consciousness, failed to understand the real character of the ruling parties.

We did not have any freedom even during alternate rule of the two parties. But the autocratic rule of the the Awami League's for the last 16 years, had dwarfed all the preceding oppressive regimes. Repeatedly the Awami League rule has reminded us of the black days of Pakistani regime. In 1971, there used to be knocks at the door of the opposition leaders and activists late at night. They were then taken into custody and forced to be in the prison vans. Similar had been the situation during Hasina's government. The families of those so picked up approached the police the next day. But it was of no avail. No arrest was shown by the police. The family members had no clue as to where were they. Some of them could later be traced, while some were found lying on the street half-dead. Such incidents were frequent. Several of the missing persons had been rescued from a secret hideout known as the 'mirror house'. There was no light there; the rooms were dark. The prisoners were brutally tortured with no relent and the food they were served was uneatable even by animals. Some were imprisoned for eight years, some for 10 years.

One didn't have to be a big leader to be black-listed. A teenager was arrested for drawing a cartoon against the government. Mushtaq, who was arrested for posting anti-government material on Facebook, died in jail. These examples are not exceptions. Anti-government cartoons, writings, and criticisms were almost banned in the country. The country was akin to a death-valley. This paramount wrath turned into a

historic mass uprising of the students. And that is why after the fall of Awami League, everyone is saying 'We are independent'.

From anti-quota movement to mass uprising

It started with the protest against reinstatement of the 30% reservation in government jobs for the descendants of the freedom fighters. The freedom fighters do hold a place of respect in the hearts of the people of the country because of their immense sacrifice and laying down lives. But the question that has been raised is why, even after so many years of independence, there should be privilege of quota not only for their children but also for their grandchildren of the freedom fighters? What is the cogent reason for this? Including 30 percent freedom fighter quota, 56 percent of the appointments were hitherto made on the basis of reservation. There is an acute unemployment problem in the country. About 3 crore people are jobless. According to government estimates, there are 8 lakh unemployed youths in the country but according to the experts, the number is much higher. As per a study by BIDS, 48% students who have completed their graduation or post-graduation from national universities, are unemployed. Every year a large number of students enter the labour market after completing their studies. But the job market is limited. Filling up vacancies in government jobs has been stalled. No new jobs are being created. Many university students have been committing suicide every year being unable to bear with the frustration due to being unemployed. Huge amount of hard-earned money of the parents is spent. Dependence on meagre earning from tuition is prolonged. Nights are somehow spent in the balcony of a hall or on the stairs of a mosque. Examinations are passed. Yet jobs are unavailable and the spectre of uncertainty continues to haunt the young brigade. Bribery, corruption, nepotism, and leakage of question-papers further worsen the situation. So, this prolonged oppression, along with undue discrimination and mounting unemployment, has inevitably made the students burst in protest.

As a result of the quota reform movement in 2018, the Awami League government issued a directive to abolish it. But that directive was negated by the High Court on 5 June last. On the same day, students of many universities including Dhaka University and Jahangirnagar University lodged protest. Protests have been going on the demand of revocation of the order. The protesting students called for accepting their demands by June. However, no action had been taken by the government. So protests resumed on 1 July as soon as the universities opened after the Eid holidays. Students from almost all the top universities of the country began to gather on the streets. Virtually, the entire student community joined the protest in no time. When the Appellate Division heard the petition on 4 July, it did not stay the High Court verdict. The aggrieved students blocked the Shahbagh Road in Dhaka. Similar programmes were held across the country. Roads were blocked in several parts of the country. On 5 July the day students gave a call for strike. Observance of 'Bangla Blockade' programme commenced from 6 July.

On 10 July, the Appellate Division placed a four-week stay on the direct recruitment (9th to 13th) quota in government jobs and fixed 7 August as the date for the next hearing. But, the students demanded quota reform in all grades of government jobs, saying that the decision in this regard should be taken by the executive department of the government, not the court. They said the agitation would continue till quota system was revoked altogether.

The government had remained silent on the issue. They pressured the students to stop the movement without taking the initiative to negotiate with them. Ruling party General Secretary Obaidul Quader said the quota agitators are demonstrating their strength against the Supreme Court. Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan said the students were "crossing the limit."

Ignoring the threats of the ruling party leaders and ministers, the students took a firm stand in favour of their demands and continued to block the highway and railway tracks. On 14 July, a memorandum was submitted to the President highlighting the same demands. On 14 July, they submitted a memorandum on these demands to the President. On the very same day, in a press conference at Ganabhawan, Sheikh Hasina said, *"I can't do anything about the quota issue.... The executive body has no say over the verdict of the court. The matter has to be settled in the court itself."* At one point of the press conference, she further commented, *"If not the grandchildren of the Muktiyoddhas (freedom fighters), then do we expect the grandchildren of the razakars to get jobs?"* Through such a comment, she actually demeaned the protesting students.

The present generation who carries the true spirit of the Liberation War in their hearts, didn't take it easy when they were compared with the 'razakars', much hated treacherous forces with their hands stained in the blood of millions of people and hence utterly hated. It was a question of self-respect for the protesting students.

To give a befitting reply to such an insulting ridicule, that night, the students of Dhaka University took to the streets of the capital city with slogans of "Ami ke tumi ke, razakar, razaka / ke bolechhe ke bolechhe, shoirachar, shoirachar" (Who are you, who am I, razakar, razakar/ Who are saying so, the autocrats, the autocrats) and "cheyechhila odhikar, hoye gelam razakar" (Wanted my rights, but painted a traitor). These slogans rent the midnight sky. Girls, too, broke the gates of halls and hit the streets.

The movement that started to give a fitting reply to the prime minister's taunt was no longer restricted to the demands of quota reform. It was now an outburst of long brewing anger against the despotic rule of Hasina. On the very same night, the fire of the movement also spread to other universities. In many places, the Chhatra League, the student wing of Awami League, attacked the protesters. Next day, in the afternoon, Obaidul Quader, the General Secretary of Awami League, said, "Chhatra League is ready to give a fitting reply to this." A few hours after this comment, it was seen that Chhatra League brought in hired goons to unleash barbaric attacks on the protest demonstration of the students in Dhaka University. Even the female students were not spared. More than 300 students were injured that day. When the wounded were taken to Dhaka Medical College for treatment, they were attacked there also. The fanatics of Chhatra League set a rare example of monstrosity by attacking under-treatment injured students inside hospitals.

On 15 July, during demonstration in Rangpur, Abu Sayeed, a student of Rokeya University, fell to the bullets of the police there. On the very same day, six more people were killed in different places. Following that, the entire country exploded in protest. People from all strata of the society flooded the streets. After the call of "Complete Blockade", the call of "Complete Shutdown" brought the entire country to a standstill.

The fascist Awami League government is on the path of suppressing the people's movement with brutal attacks. The government had let loose the entire coercive state machinery and its party forces on the students and the people. Police-RAB-BGB and the terror army of Chhatra League-Yuva League-Awami League have already murdered more than 200 students and people till then. According to the reports in newspapers, this figure was more than 500, however, actual facts were yet to be known. More than 50 people had lost their vision due to bullet injury. More than 6,000 were injured. More than 11,000 protesters had been arrested. The Awami League regime had launched arrest drives through block raids in the areas of Dhaka and the outer districts. When the government failed to contain the movement with Police-RAB-BGB and the terror brigade of the party, it imposed curfew and stationed the military on the streets. Internet was blocked and mobile service was made dysfunctional. Shutting down the social media platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook, the government started telecasting one-sided government narratives on the television. But some news about the objective situation could not be prevented from reaching out to people who were shocked and dumbstruck after seeing the circulated videos which showed how the police surpassed all limits in killing people with indiscriminate shooting. Bullets struck many victims at the chest, and many others in the head. The innocent children, on the balcony and on the rooftops, were also not spared from being shot at. Till date, as per the news received, 32 children had been victims to this killing spree. Since the liberation war, this was the first time that the country is witnessed a bloodbath of this nature. Both during the liberation from Pakistani rule or in post-independence Bangladesh—people have been amidst intense movements and struggle. The language movement, the mass uprisings of 1969 and 1990 and many such other movements had stirred this land. Torture and exploitation were no less even back then. However, the people didn't witness streets flooded by streams of blood, they did not have to cross heaps of dead bodies piled together. In that aspect, the fascist Awami League government had also crossed all records of brutality of all the dictators of the past. However, nothing could thwart the dauntless waves of the brave hearts—the indomitable spirit of the students and the people. The flame of rage was radiantly aglow.

The fire spread everywhere

This flame, that had been initially a spark centred on the demand of quota reform, had been transformed into a wildfire and spread everywhere. At this juncture, the movement was no longer a movement of the students only and the demands were not restricted to that of quota annulment. The entire nation was dumbfounded and horrified by the indiscriminate firing and murder that was resorted to for containing the movement.

Getting over the first lash of overwhelming shock, bewilderment and grief, a spontaneous mass uprising began over the demand for justice against the mass—murderers. With every day, the movement grew in strength. On the other hand, under pressure of movement, the government was compelled to call

an urgent court session to release a notification reforming the quota system. At the same time, the government went on continuing with their evil trickery they took the tactics of misguiding the people by secretly murdering many, detaining the movement coordinators, arresting them from the hospital and taking them to the DB office, tortured them and forced them to give false statements to confuse people.

It is true that people from all walks of life took to the streets in solidarity with the students' demands. However, the accumulated rage and frustration amongst people over the years also played a crucial role in involving them in the movement. The torture, victimization, kidnappings and arrests in the 15 year long fascist rule of the Awami League had blocked all the means of voicing protest. In the last three national elections of 2014, 2018 and 2024, people were not able to cast their votes. The entire election process was stage-managed and the Awami League had retained power through rigging. Thus Awami League had concentrated all powers by wielding money, muscle and administrative powers. As a result of being in the government for a very long period, they were using the coercive machinery in whatever way they chose to. And they were backed by the big businessmen-capitalists of the country. They have looted thousands of crores of rupees in various development projects. Using their influence, they had in a planned way taken away millions and millions of taka from the banks, and smuggled them out of the country. People were grovelling under the burden of skyrocketing inflation of necessary commodities due to syndicate rule, plunder and extortion. And a tiny group went on becoming richer and richer. Therefore, the anger that had accrued for days after days exploded like volcano after the massacre. This was not the first time that the students came out on the streets. In 2021, they had organized large scale protests when two of their friends were run over by a bus. They demanded due road safety. That movement marked the augury of awakening the sleeping conscience of the masses.

Government's ploy to detract students' movement using 'politics of tagging'

During their 15 year long rule, whenever Awami League had faced a crisis, it had tagged the protesters as Jammatis and terrorists. Thus they endeavoured to overcome the crises by playing on communal-fundamentalist card. They had wanted to sustain its rule by instilling fear in the minds of the humane, liberal, democratic-minded people of the country.

In order to break the current movement as well, the government had resorted to a two-fold attack. On one side, it had pressed on the various state forces and the party's terror brigade while on the other hand, they had tried to tag the protesters as anti-independence negative force. The government also propagated that the movement was no longer in the hands of the students and that the BNP-Jammat had infiltrated into the movement. The government tried its best to isolate the democratic-minded people from this movement. By citing the instances of attacking, vandalizing and setting on fire some government buildings, the ruling quarters wanted to curry sympathy of the people by painting these acts as works of sabotage by the Jammat-BNP combine and thereby soliciting public support in favour of its rule of suppression and oppression. But according to media report, the bus owners set fire to the metro rail, a Shramik League (affiliated to Awami League) leader in Chittagong hired hoodlums to burn the BRTC bus. He was later identified and arrested also.

Students, both Hindus and Muslims, took part in the protest. They fought unitedly and died together. As Sheikh Hasina was forced to flee, the people of the ousted Awami League and vested interests cunningly attacked some religious places of the minorities to malign the movement. However, the students immediately foiled the heinous conspiracy. All the misdeeds of the government had been exposed to the people and the country. So, the movement could not be deviated from the goal. The support and participation of the people was increasing day by day. Eminent writers, poets, actors, singers, musicians and litterateurs had also lent their support to the movement. Their participation with creative initiatives in their respective fields of work, had provided momentum to the movement.

One-point demand— killer Hasina must resign

Six protesters, including Abu Sayeed, were martyred on 15 July. On 16 July, the Left Democratic Alliance, the Anti-Fascist Left Front and Bangladesh JASAD, in a joint statement, demanded resignation of Sheikh Hasina and not just an apology. As already said, a brutal attack on the people of the country was brought down by shutting down the internet from 17 July and declaring a curfew from 19 July. The police began to arrest anyone they wanted from the residential areas through 'block raids'. On 26 July, at 11am, cultural activists organized a rally of music or "gaaner michhil" by defying the imposed ban. In the evening, Left Democratic Alliance, Anti-fascist Left Forum and Bangladesh JASAD collectively organised a condolence meeting in memory of the martyrs of the movement.

On the morning of 27 July, a protest rally was held at the initiative of women. The *Anti-Discrimination Student Movement* held a nationwide protest rally on 29 July. They gave a call of wearing red cloths around their faces and eyes on 30 July as a mark of protest and appealed to colour their respective social media profiles in red. A large number of people from all over the country, including well-known celebrities joined the programme. The 'March for Justice' was organized by the *Anti-Discrimination Student Movement* on 31 July. On that day, the lawyers of the High Court prevented the police from arresting the protesters in the High Court premises. Martyrs across the country were remembered on 1 August through a programme titled 'Remembering the Heroes'. A call was given for nationwide protest demonstration on 2 August.

Professor Anu Muhammad raised a clear demand for the resignation of Sheikh Hasina at the National Press Club on 2 August before the huge rally of students and common people had commenced journey. More than ten thousand people were present on the occasion. Through this, the desire for freedom from the fascist rule of Sheikh Hasina, which was tormenting in the hearts of the people, was voiced loudly. The next day, the *Anti-Discrimination Student Movement* demanded Sheikh Hasina's resignation from the gathering of millions of people at the Shaheed Minar. People across the country had been demanding this.

A non-cooperation movement was announced from 4 August with a solitary demand—Hasina Government must resign. The 'Long March to Dhaka' programme from 6 August was announced. The 'March' date was preponed by a day i.e. from 5 August in the wake of the brutal killings by the police and Awami League criminals across the country on the first day of the non-cooperation movement on 4 August.

On Monday, 5 August 2024, as the day progressed, hundreds of thousands of people started marching towards the Shaheed Minar and Ganabawan from different points of Dhaka. There was no way the government could have prevented it. The state machinery was helpless and had no means to stop this tide. In the afternoon, Sheikh Hasina was forced to resign and secretly fled the country from Ganabawan.

Commendable role of common people

People coming from diverse sections and professional backgrounds had joined the movement- some openly, some indirectly. The university teachers had played a pivotal role. "University Teachers' Network", a university teachers' organization had been engaged in a continuous struggle against the fascist regime since long. They played a dauntless role in this movement. On 17 July, they managed to free two protesters from Shahbagh Prison. Similar incidents also happened in Jahangirnagar University, Rajshahi University and Islami University. In different universities, teachers joined the students in the rallies. This was indeed unprecedented.

On 29 July, six coordinators of the *Anti-Discrimination Student Movement* were detained at the DB office. They were not allowed to speak. They were forced to give statements as drafted by the authorities. The university teachers were not allowed to meet them. High Court lawyers Ainunnahar Lipi and Manzoor Al Matin filed a writ petition "challenging the legality of the detention of the six coordinators and ordering them not to shoot at the movement." The police was forced to release the six coordinators; though the writ "asking for orders not to shoot" was dismissed. However, the issue had sparked massive outrage across the country. In the 'March for Justice' programme, numerous lawyers from all over the country stood up for the agitating students. A public inquiry committee has been formed to investigate the mass-murders. As mentioned, actors, directors and artistes working in different mediums actively participated in the movement. They are still active on this platform under the name of 'Visual Media Artistes'. The rickshaw pullers of Dhaka city played an almost organized role in this movement. They not only organized rickshaw rallies, but also managed to reach the destination of the protesters by avoiding the eyes of the police during the curfew and other times. Each of them communicated through gestures and understood whether there was any danger ahead. When this movement was uplifted from a students movement to a mass uprising, many people from the shop workers, small businessmen to the lower middle class and the peasants were involved in this movement, took bullets to their chests and embraced martyrdom.

Post-upsurge period: 'There will be political talks'

A particular wall writing might have captured the attention of many on Facebook. In it, the statement "Here political discussion is prohibited" is changed by replacing the phrase "is prohibited" by "will go

on". Before the uprising, it was common to find display of the message "political speech is forbidden" in almost all tea shops or various institutions. No one was allowed to discuss politics. Because there was a big risk in expressing any dissent. But the mass uprising has brought a new dawn in Bangladesh. Today, everyone is looking for a way out and want that the freedom of expression is not forbidden again, that the autocratic rule is not brought back. Everyone wants to get a direction in this respect. It has been further observed that the public's choice was not tilted towards any established political force in the opposition. The forces that have ruled over the people at different points of time, no longer hold a place of trust in the hearts of the people. This is a very important point. The public has rejected the so called big parties and their politics. As a result, now discussions about what can be done to reform the various structures of the state at this time are becoming prominent.

Fall of fascist regime of Awami League, Step up fight to overthrow fascist state

With the resignation of Sheikh Hasina, the fascist government of Awami League has just collapsed. This is undoubtedly the first victory of the revolution. But we should not forget, in the past too, there have been big movements in this country, there have been mass uprisings, we have liberated the country by waging a war of liberation, people have sacrificed their lives. But the dream of establishing a democratic state has not been fulfilled. We have to remember that the socio-economic system from which all kinds of discrimination and unemployment are born, did not end with the mass uprising of the students, did not collapse the fascist state structure. The capitalist economic system gives birth to the fascist regime. The strength of the people's movement led by the left democratic forces has to be increased. A politically conscious, organized and morally strong people's movement is the only guarantee for the earning and protection of democratic rights.