

The Monsoon Revolution

How Generation Z overthrew an autocratic regime in Bangladesh. And what it means for Germany. By Shafqat Munir

Over 36 days in July, Bangladesh underwent a revolution. What started as a movement for quotas in government jobs turned into a demand for the ruler's removal. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina had just won disputed elections in January, while opposition parties and civil society were silenced. It was hard then to imagine that she would soon have to flee the country. Yet, for many in Bangladesh it was not that surprising, given that such a large population had been suppressed for so long.

Sheikh Hasina is now in India, facing an uncertain future. Her voluntary return to Bangladesh is close to impossible, given an arrest warrant and a large number of murder charges against her. Hasina's government's lack of will is evident, as over 1,500 people were killed and more than 20,000 injured during the 36-day revolution. There is a strong possibility that the authorities will file an extradition request so she can face trial. Her loyalists have either fled the country or are being arrested.

Multiple drivers led to our Monsoon Revolution but three stand out: corruption, suppression of freedom of speech, and the brutality of the regime. Tensions had simmered due to a slowing economy, rising unemployment and higher prices. As the middle class suffered, people used social media to highlight wealth displays, misuse of government funds and corruption. Demands grew for the end to the reservation of a large number of government jobs for the descendants of veterans of the 1971 liberation war.

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Despite the government's assurances and declarations, nothing concrete had been done to tackle corruption and abuses of power. People were also disillusioned and angry at growing autocracy,

including the use of secret prisons like the Aynaghar (House of mirrors, editor's note) internment centre where detainees were kept in dire conditions. Civil society, once the pillar of Bangladesh's democratic emergence, had been coerced, humiliated and in some cases tortured into silence.

Perhaps I would have never written such an essay under that government as I would be deeply fearful of the consequences. Still, the dam broke and people from all walks of life came out to demand her resignation and a return to democracy. Bangladesh's Monsoon Revolution was the first successful Gen Z revolution. It was led by students who refused to cower down in the face of violence. It was these young people's spirit of sacrifice that ultimately brought everyone, including the elderly, out onto the streets.

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Bangladesh's Gen Z showed how technology can be the ultimate force multiplier in a revolution. When the regime shut down the internet for a week, protesters used innovative methods like Bluetooth apps to communicate. Tens of thousands were mobilized through social media, with smartphones becoming powerful tools of dissent opposed to the government's firearms. But the protests were not just about fighting against the use of brutal force. The capital, Dhaka, also saw protest through art, graffiti and music. The sight of tens of thousands of young people singing a patriotic Bangla song is still etched in everyone's memory.

The revolution showed that, no matter how much force a government uses, people that rise *en masse* can never be defeated. Ultimately, all autocrats must bow down to the will of the people, no matter how powerful they are and no matter how brutal they are willing to be.

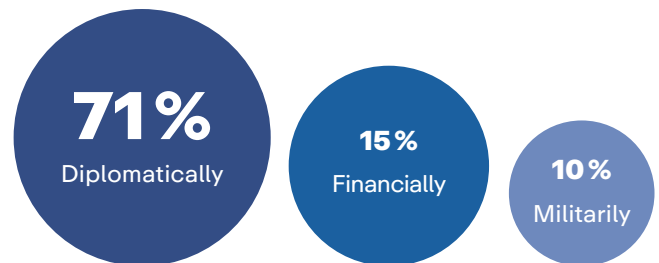
‘The government always told us that less democracy meant more development.’

In this context, Germany is a vital partner for Bangladesh, not only for our economy as one of our largest trading partners in Europe but also in our democratic journey. German support for our democratic reforms will be crucial. Germany promotes values such as human rights and the rule of law, which are very important for Bangladesh. This dual role is particularly relevant because, to justify its authoritarianism, the previous government always told us that less democracy

Pivot to diplomacy

Of those who favour more engagement on international crises:

Should Germany become more strongly engaged militarily, diplomatically or financially?



2024: don't know 3%, no answer 1%

meant more development. The revolution reaffirmed that the argument of development as a substitute for democracy is a major fallacy.

The task ahead for Bangladesh is onerous. The interim government needs to focus on three priorities: reforming the electoral system, ending endemic corruption, and beginning the process of security-sector reform, which must include restoring the public's trust in the police and security services. After 16 years of systemic repression, the Bangladeshi people are finally speaking out, but while protecting our right to do so, we also need to ensure freedom, dignity and empathy for all. Many recent revolutions have been false dawns; let the Monsoon Revolution mark a true change. ↗



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