

## Bangladesh's Fragile Interlude: Revenge Justice, Mob Violence, and the Illusion of Reform

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### Abstract

The ousting of autocrat Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in August 2024, following a student-initiated mass uprising, marked a turning point in Bangladesh's political trajectory and raised hopes for a national unity. The appointment of Nobel laureate Dr. Muhammad Yunus as Chief Advisor of the Interim Government was termed as 'new beginning' for a country plagued by authoritarian rule, political persecution, and systemic corruption. Yunu's team elaborated their 'new beginning' – as one free from political persecution, discrimination, systematic corruption, and institutional decay. The Interim Government promised to initiate long-overdue legal reforms, political inclusivity, and bring an end to decades of authoritarian abuses. However, the promised transformation has largely failed to materialize. One year on, Bangladesh remains mired in cycles of revenge justice, mob violence, religious extremism, and fragile institutional governance. This article examines the limits of transitional reform process, arguing that the structural legacies of repression remain deeply embedded. Drawing on empirical development since the regime change, the article demonstrates how superficial political shifts have not addressed the entrenched practices of control and impunity. The article contributes to broader debates on transitional justice and democratization in South Asia by critically examining the illusion of meaningful reform in post-authoritarian Bangladesh.

**Keywords:** authoritarian legacy, Bangladesh, institutional reform, mob violence, revenge justice

### Introduction

On July 1, 2024, a small but determined group of students gathered at Dhaka University's Teacher-Student Centre (TSC). This event sparked one of the most significant political uprisings in modern Bangladeshi history. Few anticipated it would lead to a massive movement to overthrow an autocratic regime that had ruled for over 15 years, suppressing political opposition, civil society, and dissenting voices, including intellectuals.

The students initially came together to protest the High Court's June 5 ruling (*Ohidul Islam and others v. The Government of Bangladesh and others*, 2021), which reinstated a controversial job quota system. This system, along with others included a 30 percent quota for children and grandchildren of freedom fighters in recruitment for first and second-class government jobs. As the demonstration progressed, it transformed into a larger movement that condemned systematic discrimination and authoritarian repression. Now

called “Students Against Discrimination,” the protest moved beyond its original goal, igniting nationwide resistance against a regime known for over fifteen years of autocratic rule marked by mass arbitrary arrests, torture, enforced disappearances, and extrajudicial killings.

In the following 36 days, the country faced unprecedented state violence in its recent history. According to a fact-finding report by the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), around 1,400 people may have been killed, with thousands more suffering serious injuries from the use of military-grade weapons (2025). Despite attempts to suppress the uprising, growing dissent within state security forces—especially the military—ultimately weakened the regime. On August 5, 2024, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina fled to India, marking a sudden end to a long period of authoritarian rule and opening the door for a possible democratic transition.

Dr. Muhammad Yunus’s appointment as Chief Advisor created widespread hope. He promised a “new Bangladesh” free from impunity and exclusion. The Interim Government pledged significant legal and institutional changes. However, one year later, these hopes had not materialized. Repression and structural exclusion continued, revealing persistent issues beneath the political facade.

Literature on transitional justice and democratization stresses that structural reform, inclusive governance, and accountability are essential for genuine political transitions (Teitel, 2000; Skaar, 2012). The political landscape in South Asia faces unique challenges, including entrenched patronage, ethnic and religious division, and weak institutions (Harriss, 2015; Jalal, 1995). In Bangladesh, recurring authoritarian tendencies and the politicization of legal institutions have been noted for a long time (Ahmed, 2020; Riaz, 2013). Repression during Sheikh Hasina’s time in office raised ongoing international concern, particularly regarding human rights abuses and the decline of judicial independence (Human Rights Watch, 2024; OHCHR, 2024). Recent studies of Bangladesh’s 2024 political turmoil suggest a complex mix

of hope and disappointment stemming from the regime change (Khan, 2025; Mostofa, 2025).

Building on these analyses, this article examines the failure of the transition to bring about structural change. It engages with discussions on transitional governance, fragile states, and post-conflict institutional reform to explain why mere symbolic reform is inadequate for dismantling authoritarian legacies. The article argues that the August 2024 transition represents a fragile period rather than a true democratic breakthrough. Using interviews, human rights documentation, and media reports, it places Bangladesh’s experience within broader discussions on democratization in South Asia. By exploring the gap between expectations and reality, it underscores the illusion of reform and the ongoing challenges facing democratic reconstruction.

### **The Political Transition and Disputed Reform Narrative**

After Sheikh Hasina’s fifteen-year regime ended on August 5, 2024, the Parliament was dissolved on August 6. An Interim Government led by Nobel laureate Dr. Muhammad Yunus assumed power on August 8, 2024. The new Advisory Council included the Chief Advisor, 22 Advisors, and three additional members with equal rank. This Council was tasked with guiding the country through a transition. However, unclear process for appointing the advisors raised early worries about legitimacy and representation. Unverified lists circulated in the social media, allegedly proposed by students, political parties, and military factions, but no official criteria or mechanisms were shared. In an interview with *Prothom Alo* on October 7, 2024, Yunus acknowledged that he began his leadership with ‘unknown associates’ after accepting the students’ request to lead the government.

There were significant debates and controversies surrounding the advisor selections. Critics questioned whether some appointees—especially the one from the indigenous community—was genuine representative or just beneficiaries of the previous regime’s support. Including three student leaders in the advisory

body sparked even more debate. This occurred in a context where other student activists from the same movement had formed a new political party, raising concerns about political co-optation. The exclusion of people with leftist political views and the appointment of a leader from Hefazat-i-Islam, a hardline religious group, increased scrutiny regarding the ideological balance and inclusivity of the advisory structure (WION, 2025; International Centre for Peace Studies [ICPS], 2025).

The Interim Government inspired high hopes of creating a ‘New Bangladesh’—a nation built on equality, inclusiveness, and democratic accountability. This vision initially generated widespread optimism. Key to these hopes was a commitment to restoring the rule of law, unifying a divided society, and dismantling the legacy of authoritarianism. Yet, within months, the administration’s actions revealed disturbing continuities. Instead of reducing unrest, the Interim Government leaned on mob violence, capitulating to the demands of extremist right-wing groups and failing to maintain law and order. Reports indicated they allowed revenge justice, which deepened societal divisions. Additionally, the new government was reluctant to confront dissent and seemed willing to replicate the previous regime’s oppressive tactics, including limiting freedom of expression, making arbitrary arrests, using restrictive laws, and experiencing recurring custodial deaths (DW, 2024). This indicated a troubling continuity rather than a transformative break from the past.

The Interim Government’s reform narrative has suffered due to its political convenience and structural limitations. Despite some symbolic gestures of change, the administration has repeated many of the coercive practices it promised to eliminate. The result is a fragile interregnum, where the talk of transformation hides the ongoing presence of authoritarianism.

### **Mob Violence and the Rise of Vigilantism**

In the aftermath, a troubling increase in mob vigilantism has emerged as one of the most visible signs of weak institutions. Between August 2024 and June 2025, mob violence intensified in both

scale and audacity, often occurring in plain sight of law enforcement. According to Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), at least 179 people were killed in mob attacks during this time; that averages nearly 18 deaths per month and marks the highest annual toll in a decade (Ask, 2025; The Daily Star, 2024). These incidents commonly targeted individuals accused of theft, blasphemy, or even dissent. In many cases, police either did not intervene or arrived only after public outrage surged on social media. One especially shocking case involved Abdullah Al Masud, a former student leader with a prosthetic leg, who was beaten to death by a mob in Rajshahi while trying to buy medicine for his newborn child. Despite his pleas and visible injuries, police reportedly did nothing as the attack took place (Prothom Alo, 2024; The Daily Star, 2024). This wave of vigilante violence shows a deeper issue—a weakened social contract and a culture of impunity so widespread that citizens no longer trust the formal justice system. When the state itself violates human rights norms, it indirectly legitimizes unlawful actions, encouraging citizens to take the law into their own hands.

Beyond individual acts of violence, mobs have attacked homes, media offices, heritage sites, shrines, and even disrupted cultural events and women’s football matches (Asian News Networks, 2025; The Daily Star, 2025). These actions are not just spontaneous outbursts of public anger; they seem to be organized by powerful groups, including ultranationalists, religious extremists, and online influencers who want to shape post-uprising narratives and control public morality and dissent (Mostofa, 2025).

Political parties have mostly failed to condemn these actions and international accountability clearly. While some parties have distanced themselves from mob violence, framing it as public anger after years of oppression, others have justified it as a historical norm or rebranded mobs as “pressure groups” (Views Bangladesh, 2025). This mixed messaging from government advisors has further confused the issue, suggesting tacit acceptance and empowering vigilante actors (The Diplomat, 2025).

Ultimately, the rise of mob violence in post-

authoritarian Bangladesh highlights a worsening governance crisis. When the state itself engages in or tolerates rights violations, it validates unlawful actions. The result is a dangerous shift in how justice is perceived, where citizens—disillusioned with institutional solutions—turn to violence for retribution and control.

### **Religious Extremism and Targeted Attacks**

Between August 2024 and June 2025, Bangladesh witnessed a sharp escalation in religiously motivated violence, disproportionately targeting minority communities and non-conforming Muslim sects. According to the Manobadhikar Sangskriti Foundation (2025), at least 241 violent incidents were documented during this period, including attacks on 20 Hindu temples, the killing of at least seven Hindus, and vandalism of over 100 Sufi and Ahmadiyya shrines. Additionally, 137 homes and businesses belonging to minority groups were ransacked, and 14 set ablaze, underscoring the scale and intensity of the persecution. This highlights the extent and severity of the persecution.

Government and law enforcement responses have been widely criticized for their passivity and inconsistency. Officials frequently described the violence as “spontaneous public anger”, while Chief Advisor Muhammad Yunus publicly framed the incidents as political rather than religious in nature (The S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies [RSIS], 2025; Observer BD, 2025). Despite the severity of the attacks, very few people were arrested, and most were released on bail within days. In contrast, at least 20 Hindus remained incarcerated for allegedly ‘hurting religious sentiment’ (Observer BD, 2025; Connecting Nations, 2025). The lack of accountability and the arrest of victims rather than perpetrators underscores the state’s failure to protect minority rights, contributing to a deteriorating human rights environment (Human Rights Watch, 2025).

Extremist groups such as Hefazat-e-Islam and elements within Jamaat-e-Islami, have remerged in rural areas, exploiting religious sentiments and political instability to expand their influence. Their return has included public rallies

with ISIS-style symbols, calls for Sharia law, and threats against secular and minority communities (Dhaka Tribune, 2025; RSIS, 2025). The interim government’s counterterrorism response has been fragmented and opaque, failing to address the ideological and organizational roots of radicalization.

The growth of religious extremism indicates not just a failure in law enforcement but also a deeper decline in Bangladesh’s secular and diverse foundations. The acceptance of hate speech, selective law enforcement, and political support for hardline groups have created a situation where minority rights are increasingly at risk. Without a strong and inclusive strategy to combat extremism, Bangladesh may face further instability and condemnation from the international community.

### **The Promise — and Failure — of Legal Reform and Institutional Reform**

In the wake of Bangladesh’s political transition, the Interim Government pledged to overhaul legal and institutional reforms aimed at dismantling the authoritarian legacy of the previous regime. In two phases, ten reform commissions were established – public administration, judiciary, electoral system, constitution, police, and anti-corruption commission – in the first phase, followed by four commissions on health, mass media, labor rights, and women’s affairs in the second phase (Observer BD, 2025). Despite the ambitious plans, concerns about exclusion and tokenism emerged quickly. Notably, only the head of the Women’s Affairs Reform Commission was a woman, and there were no representatives from religious or ethnic minority communities on any commission (Prothom Alo, 2025).

On 29 August 2024, the government’s accession to the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (CED) was celebrated as a significant step. However, critics argue that the gesture was largely symbolic, as domestic legislation and enforcement mechanisms remain inadequate. The newly formed commission to investigate past disappearances has yet to deliver substantive outcomes, and victims’ families

continue to face barriers to justice (Amnesty International, 2024).

The legal amendments introduced during the transitional period have faced significant criticism. On 21 May 2025, the government promulgated the *Cyber Security Ordinance, 2025*, repealing the widely condemned *Cyber Security Act, 2023*. While it removed nine contentious provisions, including those criminalizing criticism of national symbols, the new ordinance retained several sweeping clauses that continue to restrict freedom of expression. These include expansive powers for law enforcement to arrest, conduct surveillance, and censor online content with minimal judicial oversight (Prothom Alo, 2025; The Daily Star, 2025). Despite government claims of civil society consultation, the final ordinance has been widely criticized for failing to align with international human rights norms (Lexpllosion, 2025).

The overall situation of press freedom and freedom of expression has worsened significantly. In the past 11 months, journalists have faced killings, death threats, arbitrary arrests, false charges, prolonged detentions, and other forms of intimidation. Media offices have been raided, accreditations revoked, and travel bans imposed. At least 10 journalists have been killed, 412 have been arrested in politically motivated or baseless cases, and 39 have been formally charged (Reporters Without Borders, 2025). The media now operates in a climate of fear, worsened by ongoing surveillance and harassment of both journalists and human rights defenders.

Meanwhile, the tribunals investigating the July violence still lack fair trial guarantees. The continued use of death penalty and concerns over political bias in evidence admission raise serious due process issues. Moreover, the “July Charter”—a proposed roadmap for political reconciliation and anti-corruption reform—remains stalled, with no substantive progress to date.

Similarly, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) became ineffective after all the commissioners resigned following the regime change. A December 2024 ordinance changed the selection process, allowing appointments without

the Parliament’s Speaker. However, the government missed a chance to improve the Commission’s mandate, as recommended by the UN and civil society advocates (ETV Bharat, 2024; Amnesty International, 2025; Network Bangladesh, 2025). As of mid-2025, no new appointments have been made, leaving the Commission inactive and victims without institutional support. The failure to revitalize the NHRC underscores a broader reluctance to pursue meaningful reform and reinforces the perception that transitional governance in Bangladesh is more symbolic than substantive.

The Interim Government’s legal reform agenda, while presented progressively, has been undermined by exclusionary practices, inadequate stakeholder engagement, and the persistence of repressive legal frameworks. The continued censorship, surveillance, and politically motivated arrests—particularly targeting journalists and activists—suggest that the promise of a “New Bangladesh” remains largely unfulfilled.

### **A Fragile and Dangerous Interregnum**

Bangladesh today stands at a precarious crossroads. The post-2024 transition, once seen as a democratic breakthrough, now reveals a harsh truth. Ousting an autocrat does not dismantle the deep-rooted machinery of repression. It also does not heal the societal divides that have long fuelled intolerance, exclusion, and violence. Over the past year, the fragility of institutions, the persistence of authoritarian practices, and the limits of symbolic reform have become clear (Ahmed, 2024; Khan, 2025).

Minority communities still face threats, including mob violence, religious persecution, and institutional neglect. Political activists remain locked up without trial, and civil liberties—especially freedom of expression and assembly—are regularly restricted (OHCHR, 2025; Human Rights Watch, 2025). For ordinary citizens, the hope of a “New Bangladesh” has turned into disappointment. Economic instability, rising inflation, and a declining rule of law have deepened public frustration, especially among young people and marginalized groups (Raiser,



2025; Vivekananda International Foundation [VIF], 2025).

Religious extremism has surged, emboldened by the political vacuum and the Interim Government's inconsistent response. Hardline groups have reasserted themselves in public life, targeting secular voices, women's rights advocates, and minority communities with impunity (RSIS, 2025; Global Strat View, 2025). The rise of vigilante violence and moral policing shows a broader loss of public trust and a dangerous shift away from formal justice.

To move toward meaningful reform, Bangladesh must start a careful process of rebuilding institutions—one based on transparency, accountability, and citizen involvement. Civil society needs to be empowered to monitor abuses and advocate for inclusive governance. Structural changes should focus on judicial independence, accountability in law enforcement, and protections for minorities. International actors must remain alert and resist the temptation to accept mere words as true progress.

The global community has a critical role to play. Democratic governments and rights organizations must: insist on independent investigations into the July 2024 crackdown and subsequent mob violence; demand the repeal of vague, repressive laws that criminalize dissent and legitimate expression; monitor religious extremism and minority persecution with equal vigilance; condition development aid and security assistance on measurable human rights benchmarks; and support civil society groups who risk their safety to document abuses and advocate for justice.

The stakes are high. Failure to act decisively will not only betray the victims of last year's violence but will encourage both state and non-state actors to intensify their attacks on Bangladesh's fragile democratic aspirations. This interregnum must not become a smokescreen for repression reborn.

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