

# One year post-uprising: How do students view Bangladesh today?

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Photo: Orchid Chakma

Last year, *Campus* reached out to students after the July uprising to learn about their expectations for the future of Bangladesh. Many people believed that uprising would usher in a new era of inclusivity, transparency, and substantial reform.

Students who were members of different marginalised communities, ethnicities and beliefs, all demanded an administration that listens, represents, and acts. Now, with a full year behind us, we return to the same voices — and some new ones — to ask: How much of their expectations have been fulfilled?

## Between populism and reform

Afzal Haque\*, a 24-year-old who recently graduated from Dhaka University (DU), lamented that the hopes he had after the uprising remain unfulfilled. He says, "A year ago, we had hoped for a Bangladesh free from fear, class oppression, and systemic discrimination. In place of mature

governance, there has grown a ridiculous culture of mobocracy." Afzal feels that justice is being replaced with indignation, and the eerily similar trend of self-censorship of the past persists.

Afzal notes, "For most of those who had harboured hopes of a new progressive dawn, it now looks little more than a shiny twist."

The rise of populism and the state of law and order add to Afzal's worries. "Law and order hangs on a scale of doubt," he observes, "While policy initiatives in favour of substantial reform are being constantly overruled by those in favour of populist demands."

An indigenous student who resides in Bandarban shares the same sentiment as Afzal. She says, "As a member of an indigenous community, we didn't feel safe during the previous regime, nor do we feel safe now. No one thought about us before the uprising; it feels like no one thinks about us now. There are no changes; I have no expectations," she says with a heavy heart.

"I expected the three branches of government to be strengthened, along with sweeping political reforms," said Tasfia Tarannum Ridita, an undergraduate student at BRAC University. "When constitutional, judicial, and anti-corruption reforms were announced, I was genuinely excited. But it soon felt like the efforts were falling short. The electoral commission made a lot of recommendations regarding the reforms. In fact, I was part of one of the conferences held in the National Parliament. But I, along with most other people, don't think the commission has any real autonomy."

But there are voices of people such as Nabila Rakib, a fourth-year student at the Khulna University of Engineering and Technology (KUET), who see improvements. Nabila notes, "The ongoing political unrest and clashes instigated by various parties are deeply concerning and undermine the democratic process. However, there have been some notable improvements in administrative efficiency and foreign reserve management, offering a glimmer of hope for economic recovery."

Sadiq Mahmood, a recent graduate from the economics department at DU, expands on the economic progress made during the past year. He states, "Amid the economic turmoil, the interim government's continuous efforts balanced the dollar rate, recorded higher remittance, and turned up the debt repayment massively. The mandate for economic stabilisation is on point, but a general lack of transparency in the whole mechanism still persists."

While some of the students spoke of the economic recovery, many of the students we interviewed discussed how the public is frustrated by the democratic institutions' lack of enforcement. Their worries are heightened by the administration's failure to take initiative on reforms.

**Volatile political landscape, side-lined women, and underrepresented minorities**

Growing up, we had reconciled ourselves to the notion that the politics in our country was a lost cause. Between corruption, illegitimate regimes, and an overall lack of agency for the average citizen, it felt as though we had little choice in political matters, hence, it was simply better to not concern ourselves with them. The youth had a profound lack of knowledge on political history and current affairs, which in turn, enabled the political landscape to remain unchallenged by them.

Last July, amidst the uprising, the youth had finally broken the curse, taking the initiative of breaking this vicious cycle through gaining knowledge. Resources on different eras of political histories were being shared, and productive discussions were commonplace. Following the events since August 5th, however, the blazing streak eventually died down.

Anika Hasan\*, a final year student in DU, shares her disappointment regarding the continued lack of political awareness in the youth. "I had expectations regarding people in general as I felt they were becoming more politically aware. People are generally taken advantage of by the ruling regime, and as students were protesting, becoming more aware of our rights— we had broken some stereotypes. Eventually, the new government took over and gave us some hope about a new Bangladesh, but this too turned out to be a dystopian nightmare as minorities and women were politically side lined. Political parties are arguing about elections without any visible signs of reform. Better policies must be adopted to ensure fundamental rights of citizens."

Meanwhile, the formation of a robust political opposition—especially a youth-led student party—was one of the central hopes that emerged post-August. However, public trust has eroded over the past year, according to Rezwana Saima, a graduate from DU, "Right after the uprising, the student leaders of the National Citizen Party (NCP) enjoyed overwhelming support from young people. However, there have been allegations of corruption and favouritism against quite a few members of the party. Whether or not these allegations were true, these have managed to hurt their public image, and to some extent the support they had initially gathered."

"Putting the accused Awami League leaders and members on court and bringing them to justice was long overdue and I believe that is something the interim government has shown some progress in," added Saima. "But after years of farcical elections, the promise was to establish a true multi-party democracy, which we are yet to observe."

Maria Gomes, a graduate from BRAC University shares similar frustrations regarding the political landscape. "There has been a rise in anti-women rhetoric and fundamentalist ideologies, and it's partially due to limiting education that may allow people to change their views or have discussions that don't necessarily align with their own ideologies. I am not very optimistic about reviving democracy as the government hasn't done anything to enforce that parties adhere to the standards expected by those who took to the streets to begin with."

Anika and Maria are both of the opinion that marginalised communities had been underrepresented in the current political landscape, and allies of said communities hadn't made many moves to improve their plights. Anika expresses that dealing with issues as they come up and not getting to the root cause of widespread violence in our societies have been a major failing.

When asked how things can start looking up from here on out, Maria says, "The interim government should advocate for free speech and ensure none of the parties engage in hateful, corrupt rhetoric or campaigns and essentially make sure July isn't needed again. We need tangible results, and not hollow promises."

Progress in women and children's affairs has also been underwhelming. While several policy drafts have been introduced—such as mandating that investigations of crimes involving women and/or minor victims be completed within 15 days and trials concluded within 90—many remain just that: drafts.

"They've added new sections on defining rape, addressing sexual intercourse under false promise of marriage, and forming a dedicated tribunal for child rape cases," Ridita noted. "But marital rape remains legally invisible under Section 375. Conviction rates are still abysmally low, and unless a case gets massive media coverage, justice remains elusive. Furthermore, when the Women's Affairs Reform Commission delivered 443-point reform suggesting uniform family law and scrapping male-favouring inheritance laws, it was met with severe backlash and outright stalled."

### **An uncertain future**

For many of our youth who played an active role in the protests, stood front and centre, and bore the brunt of the horrifying attacks laid out against them, the landscape today has little to offer beyond the optics and the big looming question of '*what does the future look like?*' begins to leave a strange taste in the mouth.

Tasneem Zaman Labeeb, a 23-year-old student at the Institute of Business Administration, DU, discusses how his views have shifted in the past year. Spending much of the time during the protests on the streets, Labeeb risked his safety to stand for a cause he wholeheartedly believed in. "I genuinely hoped for a new system," he shares with *Campus*, "Something built from the ground up, for the people. While removing an autocrat from power was an incredible feat, I believe our efforts following the uprising should have focused more on restoring democracy. Some might say we have done that, but to me, the same old tunnel-visioned, partisan politics, mixed with rising fanaticism, is dragging us toward something dangerous."

Aonkita Dey, a 24-year-old studying Economics at BRAC University, who was also majorly involved in spreading awareness and raising their voice during the protests, finds little reason to celebrate. "All around me, people keep talking about equality and justice for all, but at no point has this equality and justice reached women or any of the minority communities across Bangladesh."

Uprooting fascist powers and maintaining democracy is a long-term process. While the situation today leaves a lot of room for improvement, whether or not things actually get better depends more on effective policy drives and ensuring something like the previous regime never occurs again and less on lip-service.

Labeeb ends his statement on a bittersweet but ultimately hopeful note, "It's honestly shameful that we still haven't managed to properly support the families of the July martyrs or those who were severely injured. There's also very little being done to actually pass justice to the Awami League members. But even still, I want to stay hopeful. I hope this country can finally move out of survival mode and start building something better."

*\* Names have been changed upon request for privacy.*