

BNP'S FEAR OF DEPOLITICISATION

Legitimate concern or misplaced anxiety?

by Kazi ASM Nurul Huda

AS BANGLADESH'S political landscape undergoes significant transformation, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party faces one of its most critical existential challenges: the fear of depoliticisation. This concern, encapsulated by an adviser's remark — 'Political parties have not been able to reform the state even in 53 years' — echoes sentiments voiced during the era of the 1/11 caretaker government. That period saw political parties sidelined in favour of a technocratic regime that delegitimised their role by framing governance as an apolitical endeavour. Political parties were labelled corrupt and destabilising, eroding public trust and institutional significance. Today, similar dynamics are emerging, with grassroots movements and public discontent challenging the traditional role of parties like the BNP.

At the heart of BNP's anxiety is the rise of a potential rival political force from the 2024 student-public uprising. Spearheaded by young leaders, this movement has captured public imagination by articulating frustrations and presenting itself as a fresh alternative to established parties. While competition is natural in politics, the BNP faces a deeper question: can it remain relevant in a landscape increasingly dominated by non-traditional movements? The emergence of these student leaders as a potential 'king's party' poses two key threats. First, they risk siphoning off BNP's voter base by presenting themselves as more attuned to grassroots concerns. Second, their rise perpetuates the perception that established parties are relics of a dysfunctional political system, further eroding trust in the BNP.

Public perceptions of the student leaders intensify BNP's challenges. Although these leaders — except for

three — hold no formal roles in the interim government, their actions often resemble those of government officials. Public criticisms of the government by these figures are widely interpreted as attempts to assert independence, yet they remain tethered to the 'king's party' label. This ambiguity around their alignment creates a potent challenge for the BNP: facing a competitor that claims to represent grassroots change while benefiting from its proximity to power.

This fear is amplified by the broader context of Bangladesh's political ecosystem, which suffers from a lack of robust democratic practices. If elections are delayed, manipulated, or do not occur, alternative actors like the student leaders could gain significant informal influence and further sideline established parties. For the BNP, this is not a hypothetical concern but a credible threat to its ability to function effectively in a system where power dynamics are increasingly shaped by perception and informal alliances rather than structured processes.

The parallels with the 1/11 government are striking. During that period, technocrats and non-partisan actors sidelined traditional political players under the guise of reform, echoing today's scepticism towards established parties. Even if outright depoliticisation remains unlikely, the erosion of public trust in political institutions mirrors the same dynamics that weakened parties like the BNP in the past.

Philosophically, the BNP's concerns align with longstanding debates about democracy and political participation. John Stuart Mill argued that democracy thrives on informed, structured engagement. When public involvement shifts from organised institutions to fragmented or transient movements, the quality of political debate and decision-making suffers. For the BNP, the rise of movements

like the student uprising represents competition and poses the risk of sidelining established mechanisms of accountability and deliberation, ultimately reducing politics to fleeting emotional appeals.

Similarly, Alexis de Tocqueville emphasised the role of political parties in organising public sentiment and translating individual interests into collective action. Without such structures, he warned, societies risk political fragmentation and incoherent governance. For the BNP, these insights underscore a deeper fear: that alternative political actors, while powerful in mobilising public sentiment, lack the institutional stability needed to ensure sustained and effective governance.

The rivalry between the BNP and the student leaders obscures the interconnected nature of their contributions to the 2024 uprising. While the student leaders see their activism as the defining moment of change, they must recognise that the fall of *Hasinocratic* authoritarianism was not achieved in 3–5 weeks alone. It was the culmination of numerous episodic struggles, with their movement serving as the climactic chapter. Similarly, the BNP must confront its failure to connect meaningfully with the public — a key weakness that contrasts sharply with the student leaders' ability to channel frustrations into a coherent movement.

Despite these challenges, this moment offers the BNP an opportunity for reinvention. The student leaders succeeded by understanding public grievances and framing their movement in ways that resonated with ordinary citizens. The BNP must bridge its leadership gap, engage more directly with the electorate, and address perceptions of inefficiency and disconnection. By doing so, it can position itself as a party capable of representing not just its traditional

base but a broader cross-section of society.

At the same time, the student leaders must realise that movements, no matter how impactful, cannot sustain political transformation without transitioning into institutionalised frameworks. Rejecting traditional institutions outright risks perpetuating instability and undermining their ability to deliver meaningful governance. A stable political structure is essential for translating public energy into effective policy and long-term change.

Ultimately, the path forward lies in constructive competition. The BNP must view the rise of alternative forces not as an existential threat but as part of a vibrant democracy. Coexisting and competing with these movements can strengthen democratic norms and provide voters with diverse and meaningful choices. Similarly, the student leaders must engage with established parties like the BNP to ensure that their movements contribute to a balanced and accountable democratic framework.

This moment of transformation is not without risk, but it is also rich with potential. The collective efforts of both the BNP and the student leaders against authoritarianism show that Bangladesh's political landscape is capable of renewal. The challenge now is to channel this energy into building a political culture that values both tradition and reform — balancing innovation with stability, ensuring inclusivity, and fostering resilience. By addressing their respective shortcomings and embracing opportunities for reinvention, both the BNP and the student leaders can help ensure that fears of depoliticisation give way to a stronger, more dynamic democracy.

Dr Kazi ASM Nurul Huda is an associate professor of philosophy at the University of Dhaka.