

Bangladesh: The Freedoms of 2024

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*The dramatic overthrow and ouster of the Awami League government led by Sheikh Hasina in Bangladesh in August 2024 has opened up unknown vistas for the country. In this post, **Kazi A. S. M. Nurul Huda** looks at the freedoms gained, and what one can learn and discern from it all.*

The student–public uprising in Bangladesh in July-August 2024 has invited a wave of intellectual and political discussions but its philosophical undercurrents have yet to be fully explored. One particularly insightful way to understand the events is through the lens of Isaiah Berlin’s distinction between negative and positive freedom. This dual conception of freedom allows us to grapple with the internal dynamics of the movement and the broader political implications for Bangladesh’s future. The uprising illustrates how the tension between the desire for protection from state overreach and the demand for self-determination shaped the collective consciousness of the protesters, revealing the underlying complexity of freedom in a political movement.

At the heart of this uprising was a rejection of the authoritarian governance of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina who had, through increasingly oppressive measures, narrowed the scope of political participation and personal autonomy. The desire for negative freedom — freedom from coercion — became a driving force for the movement. Students, ordinary citizens and members of Opposition parties came together in the streets to oppose the suffocating control of the state. Widespread government surveillance, extrajudicial killings, disappearances, and suppression of political dissent cultivated a climate of fear that eroded basic civil liberties of the population. The movement’s momentum was fuelled by this collective yearning for relief from authoritarian rule, reflecting a quintessential demand for negative freedom.

Yet, to understand the depth of this uprising, one must also consider the role of positive freedom, which Berlin defines as the capacity for individuals or groups to realise their potential and take control of their own lives. For many protesters, especially the younger generation, the movement was not simply about dismantling an oppressive system; it was as much about the creation of a new political and social order in which they could assert their agency. Positive freedom, in this sense, goes beyond the immediate demand for the

removal of state interference. It is the call for a more active and participatory form of citizenship where individuals feel empowered to shape their own destinies and the future of their nation.

In the case of Bangladesh's student–public uprising, these two conceptions of freedom were in constant tension. On the one hand, the movement aimed for liberation from the oppressive forces of the state and focused on the dismantling of the government's authoritarian apparatus. On the other hand, there was a more constructive vision, one that envisioned a future where the people of Bangladesh could exercise their collective agency and build a pluralistic and democratic society. This tension, however, was not easily resolved, and it became clear that the movement's leaders and participants were not all aligned in their vision of what freedom should entail.

A key moment in the uprising occurred when protesters began calling for the resignation of Sheikh Hasina, a demand that encapsulated the drive for negative freedom. It was a reaction against the Prime Minister's refusal to recognise the legitimacy of the protests and her continued use of state violence to suppress dissent. By framing the movement as a struggle against tyranny, the participants unified under the banner of a common enemy. Yet, as the movement progressed, the question of what would replace the current regime became more pressing. What kind of political and social structures would best serve the people? Would the fall of Sheikh Hasina truly lead to the establishment of a freer society or would it simply open the door to new forms of domination?

Here, the philosophical tension between negative and positive freedom becomes critical. While the removal of an authoritarian ruler might achieve a form of negative freedom by eliminating the immediate source of oppression, it does not guarantee the emergence of positive freedom. A society free from tyranny is not necessarily one where individuals or groups can fully realise their potential. Indeed, the history of political revolutions is replete with examples where the overthrow of a dictator led to new forms of political repression or the consolidation of power by other elites. The French Revolution, for example, initially sought freedom from the monarchy but struggled to reconcile the various visions of freedom that emerged in its aftermath. In this context, the student–public uprising in Bangladesh must be seen not just as a movement against something but as one that struggled to define what it was for.

Moreover, the uprising's failure to articulate a cohesive vision for positive freedom was complicated by the diverse range of participants involved. The inclusion of political parties like the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami, who had long opposed Sheikh Hasina's government, added a layer of complexity to the movement's aims. These political parties, while covertly united with the students in opposing the regime, had their own political agendas that did not necessarily align with the broader aspirations of the protesters. This fragmentation within the movement made it difficult to construct a unified vision of positive freedom that could serve as the foundation for a new political order.

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Philosophically, this raises important questions about the nature of collective action and the possibility of achieving a truly pluralistic society. Can a diverse coalition of political actors, with differing conceptions of freedom and justice, coalesce into a movement that fosters positive freedom for all its members? Or will the inevitable conflicts of interest within such a coalition prevent the realisation of a more participatory and inclusive form of governance? The Bangladesh uprising, in its failure to sustain unity after the remarkable fall of Sheikh Hasina, suggests that these tensions are difficult to resolve.

Yet, the uprising's legacy should not be dismissed as merely a failed attempt to achieve freedom. On the contrary, the movement's success in toppling an authoritarian government represents a significant step toward the realisation of negative freedom in Bangladesh. The fact that such a diverse coalition was able to unite, even temporarily, against a common foe demonstrates the potential for collective action in the face of oppression. But the next challenge for Bangladesh will be to harness this collective energy in the pursuit of positive freedom — to build a political system that empowers individuals and communities to shape their own futures.

In a nutshell, the student–public uprising of July–August 2024 in Bangladesh provides a compelling case study in the dynamics of negative and positive freedom. While the movement succeeded in dismantling the oppressive apparatus of Sheikh Hasina's regime, it also revealed the difficulty of transforming a struggle for liberation into a constructive vision for the future. The philosophical challenge now is to learn from these tensions to create a political framework that allows for the flourishing of both negative and positive freedom. Only by addressing both aspects of freedom can Bangladesh hope to achieve a truly democratic and pluralistic society, where individuals are not only free from coercion but also empowered to take control of their own lives and destinies.

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