

Otondro Prohori

Guarding Who? Against What?

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Of all the things written about the regime, put-downs were always in Bengali. English was for seminar talk.

A former writer, exiled in London, wrote in *Samakal*: “Alright then, let us accept the fiction of the Caretaker. So we have been gifted an army-civilian hybrid, calling itself a ‘Caretaker Government’. But we always know a caretaker to be a *darwan*. But here you come back after an evening dinner to your own house, and your *darwan* won’t let you in”.

Later, after the military had left, really left, and not willingly, I looked back on those two years, 2006-07. It was easy to map so many of us, silenced so quickly. With a minimum of action, only a hint of menace.

At the beginning, it was probably quite confusing, right? For you? For me too. The army was feared, but the democracy that came before was chaos, battles, musical chairs. Maybe there was a secret sigh of relief at the disruption of politics.

Later, after the bloom wore off, by month three (it happened quickly), little fragments of dissent started trickling out. Essays, letters, rumours, *chika* slogans, whispers, rumbblings.

In the Middle of Nowhere, Rumi Ahmed’s blog, published “The Darkness”. A squadron of police marching up the steps of the Public Library to enforce the new law requiring all lights to be out by 8 p.m. To save electricity. The Metallica song on my infernal soundtrack.

Proxy battles were staged, not against khaki but against perceived allies. Our laureate came to speak on campus and was met by groups of students blocking his entrance. How dare he throw his name into the election ring during an army-backed government? *Dalal*. Stooge. The noble Nobelist was in for a surprise. In Europe, he was on a panel with Bob Geldof, Angela Merkel, and here people were calling him *jolpai dalal*. *Jolpai*, the color of the uniform, swiped over him, his frame.

Dissent grew in gradual layers over the months and always with counter-reactions. Physics. A brutal grinding of links. The death of Choles Ritchil. The torture of journalist Akash.

The midnight arrest of CNN stringer Tasneem Khalil.

Zafar Sobhan came over to my house to talk face-to-face, to tell me Tasneem's body was black and blue. *He lifted his shirt to show me. You see why I'm not using the phone any more?*

Thanks a lot, Zafar, you also called me the night of his arrest. Woke my father up in the middle of the night. Hope they're not tapping your phone.

I had also 'seen' Tasneem, the morning after his arrest. Blogs were reposting urgent appeals, petitions were gearing up, Embassy Row was calling intelligence contacts. But wait, there was tasneem.k on my gchat window.

<Idle>, flashed his status. <Idle>.

Hey, are you out... where are you..., I typed.

A rather long silence. And then the chat window logged out.

Oh dear, who have I just written to?

Of course he had given up his password. You would do the same. Stupid to be brave.

Something about that arrest shook our micro circles. A chill of silence. Less and less texting, fewer phone calls, everything migrated to email. A professor called and asked me over one evening. Technical advice *lagbe re*. We discussed security measures. Making backups and deleting files. Renaming folders. Her partner had bought a fingerprint-activated pen drive. That was a bit much, I couldn't figure out how to make it work.

Tasneem's computer and laptop had been the torturer's honey pot, we all learnt a lesson.

The Caretaker Government took over Bangladesh from the politicians on January 11, 2007.

1/11. A nice, pithy, numerical tag for regime change.

Until August of that year, the silencing worked smoothly. Then, one afternoon, a fight broke out on the university campus. The army had requisitioned the university gym since January. One of the key flashpoints. Now three jawans were watching a football match. Someone's umbrella was blocking their view. A soldier shouted, *oi shora!* The umbrella would not move. Maybe it was his lover he was shielding from the sun.

The soldiers moved closer. Suddenly students also started paying attention. One or two of them stood up. Looking over, curious. Idle hands loosely out of pockets. *Thonga* of nuts dropped to the ground. Sandals back on feet. A push, a shove. *Tora janish amra ke*, do you know who we are? I heard the line repeated later. But who said it? Soldier or student?

The soldiers went back to find their comrades in the gym. The students went back as well. Between temporary barrack and dormitory, the numbers were suddenly against the army. By night, burning barrels littered the campus. Riot police spraying the air with gas and bullets. The soldiers barricaded inside the gym. At midnight, a senior officer went on television and said it was an "unfortunate incident".

Next day, the army withdrew from campus. The city smelt blood, riots flared on all campuses: Chittagong, Rajshahi and back to Dhaka. Fighting spread to the shops. The students were joined by urchins and flotsam. The invincible object meets the...

As groups gathered, courage was in numbers. Closed-off spaces opened wide. A quiet building to eat *muri chira* now hosted coded gestures. I was happy to plough through any newly open door. *Jodi laiga jai*, the lottery slogan for accidental connections.

A little bit of glasnost, but Allah and Army remain off-limits.

Recently, a newspaper editor told me: I need to put an affiliation in your byline.

– But I have no affiliation.

– I need to put an organisation.

– Why? This is my personal view, not from an organisation.

– Still needs an organisation.

– But then it will seem like an organisation is endorsing this.

– Are they?

– No. So why give it?

– Because, listen, if they call, I need to be able to identify the writer. And you need an affiliation for that.

– You would hand over author information like that?

– Ahha, why are you *gulfaying* things together? No one is handing anything over. They will just want to reach you. To invite you over. For a cup of tea and a chat.



When the Parjatan office was boarded up, I didn't raise an eyebrow. Their slogan for useless decades: Visit Bangladesh before the Tourists Come. No big loss. After the shuttering, tractors moved in.

Then one day, the tarp came down, a new sign went up. Dhaka Cantonment Starts Here. Overnight, the khaki zone had extended from Old Airport all the way to Bijoy Sharani. The Cantonment now envelops and faces off against the prime minister's office. Right next to the baroque sculpture of the three oysters.

In 1975, tanks had to roll from the Cantonment to Dhanmondi. Now it would take minutes to form a pincer.

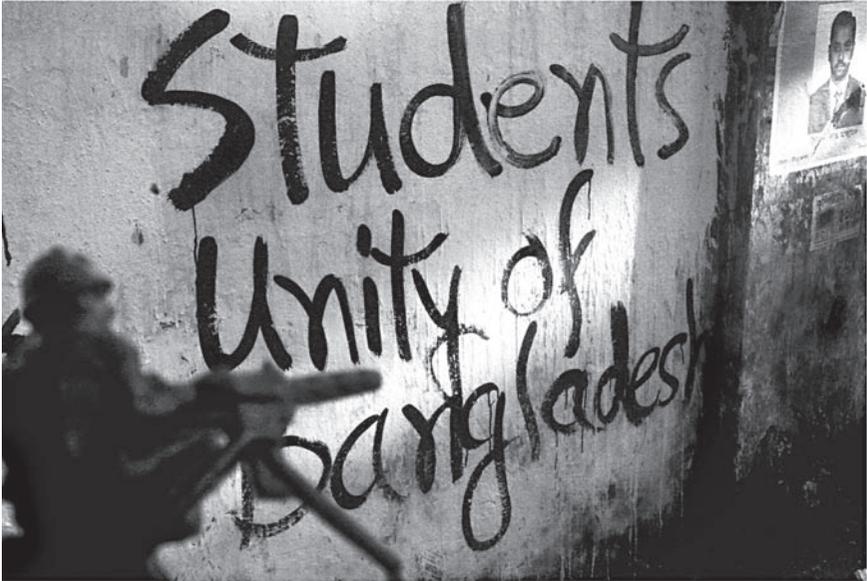
No wonder they were relaxed about giving elections.

The politicians also note the new geography. And 'behave'.

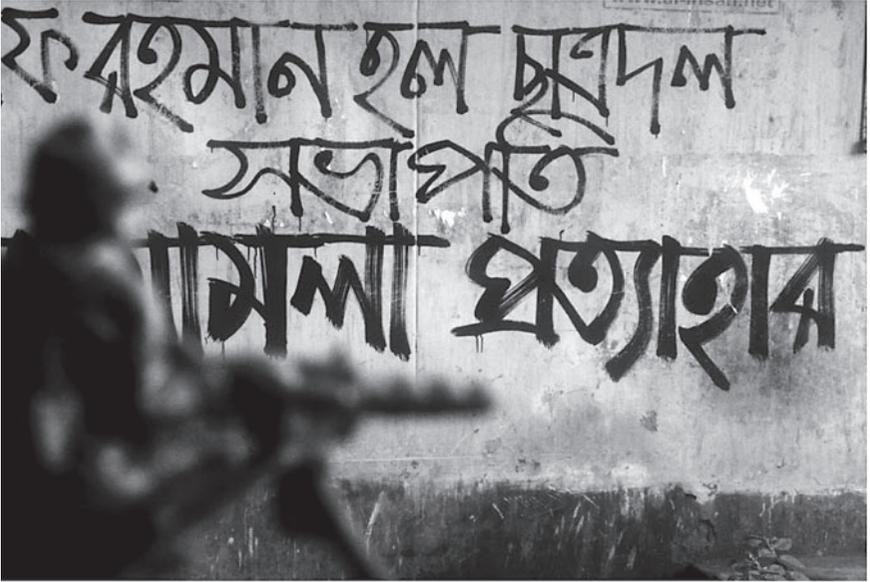


Ferdous was the first to tell me who the new CNG stations were going to. One franchise is with the main network of Army Welfare.

I thought of Kaa's song. *Trust in me, just in me. Shut your eyes and trust in me. You can sleep safe and sound. Knowing I am around. Slip into silent slumber. Sail on a silver mist. Slowly and surely your senses. Will cease to resist.*



Ekota. Unity. Until the Caretaker withdraws. And then it will be back to taking your eyes out at night, after the coloured panel wins against the bleached.



F. Rahman Hall. Student Union Chairman. Withdraw False Case.

A few months later, at dawn, the same hero would be caught in a bank robbery.
The getaway car hadn't been tuned, it stalled a mile away.



When no court stepped in to save the Rangs Building, we understood the army bulldozers were unstoppable. When the building suddenly collapsed, the workers' families started camping outside at the water fountain circle. An old man from the villages who would not be bullied, cowed or threatened. Whose son was melting in the heat, between the girders of floors five and six. He only said, I have come to bury my son. I won't ever leave.



I thought of panning up and taking in the construction sponsor. The Mobile Co. But it seemed pointless to take crowd-pleaser potshots at the expats. When everyone else is getting in line for a share, it's too easy to lob at MNCs.

The digging outside my house, for a mystery cable line and a 'mega' (pronounced 'myaga') hub, is by a new company called Emoh. After I asked for their permission documents, they handed over a folded, photocopied letter from the Dhaka City Corporation. At the top is the operations manager's name, another retired officer. The expats have only quarterly report goals, that's almost easier to size up.

Back to elections. Back to democracy. The new normal. Mission accomplished.

But the residues are still here.

A temporary camp for highway construction.

Phantom investor.

New chairman.

List of approved guests.

Shadow falls. A theorist talks about the architecture of occupation, hollow land. But security presence in Asia is subtle. Suit-tie-coat-*bideshi*-degree. Think tanks, seminars, conferences, talk shows, newspapers. Everyone has an opinion on the century's obsession. War against an invisible enemy.

They tell us, we know all the answers. How to catch them, inside and outside borders. How to keep them out. Facial hair, surname, skin hue, city of birth, passport – the full spectrum domination of motivation recognition. It's not who you are, it's who we say you are.

Dhaka is now inside a security-zone bubble. Will democracy remove the steel wire barricades and midnight checks on Dhanmondi Bridge? On the day after the state of Emergency was lifted, I saw a homeless woman drying her family's clothes on that same wire barricade. A sweet, fleeting moment.

But a few days later, the barricades were back in action. The demand for ID, the sudden stop-and-search, the rummaging inside your camera bag, the interrogation.

Eto raat e beriyechen keno? Janen na din-kal kharap? These bad times keep good people home. Only thugs and drunks out at the witching hour.

I feel a searing nostalgia for open space, a time before these 'temporary' structures. Temporary camps that never leave. It's all to make you safe and secure. Safe from what?

A long pause.

Yourself, your weaker side, your politics, your affiliations, your nightmares, your ideology, your rights, your friends and neighbours.

Your dreams.