

Bangladesh: ‘Development over democracy’: Why Bangladesh’s foreign affairs advisor has such a difficult job

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Gowher Rizvi has to defend the indefensible.

In Bangladesh, ask a ruling Awami League politician what words should follow “development” and the response will be “over democracy”. Riding on two successive controversial elections, Awami League politicians are given to reminding Bangladeshis that they have alternative but to keep backing the ruling party if they want to steer the country into a faster lane of development.

At some of the public gatherings, after listing examples of development that has taken place under three consecutive Awami League tenures spanning over a decade, some politicians cite Mahathir Mohammad of Malaysia or Li Kuan Yu of Singapore to emphasise that Bangladesh’s best option is to continue with the government run by their party rather than voting another one into power.

There is nothing wrong with that. It is in a democratic right for a political party to inform the people about their successes and to seek votes to keep it into the power. But the problem is that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s government, facilitated by a largely unquestioning media, has become a master at selling its achievements and botching it up when uncomfortable questions crop up.

A [Deutsche Welle interview](#) on February 10 with Gowher Rizvi, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s foreign affairs advisor, is a classic example of this. Rizvi was interviewed by the uncompromising veteran journalist Tim Sebastian who has attained a global fame for asking questions that are anything but anodyne.

Sebastian asked Rizvi about arbitrary detention, torture, enforced disappearances and extra-judicial executions – all of which the Bangladesh government is accused of by the United Nation and groups such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and Committee Against Torture. Against those questions, the otherwise-suave Rizvi faltered and reluctantly admitted that his government is indeed culpable of “some the mentioned crimes”.

On more than one occasion, Rizvi tried to steer the conversation towards his strong suit – the development taking place in Bangladesh. But Sebastian thwarted him.

“You are very good at promoting the economic successes of Bangladesh,” the journalist said. “But that’s not what I am asking about. I am asking you about the things that have gone wrong in your country.”

About two years ago, an eerily similar thing had happened when Rizvi was interviewed by *Al Jazeera*’s Mehdi Hasan in a programme titled “[Is Bangladesh a one-party state?](#)”

Hasan asked Rizvi about the human rights abuses like extra-judicial killing and enforced

disappearances in Bangladesh. He also asked about the [2018 national election](#), which had been clouded by pre-election violence and allegations of a crackdown on the opposition, as well as widespread reports of vote-rigging and intimidation on election day.

Ignoring the documented references of enforced disappearances that Hasan pointed out, Rizvi said that the “government does not need to disappear people” as it has the “authority to arrest people”. He added that the government “will investigate” such incidents had occurred. He also made such counterintuitive statements as Bangladesh “is not a one-party state” and that it held “free and fair elections”.

Tough task

Bangladeshi-American geo-political analyst Shafquat Rabbee said that Rizvi is one of the rare internationally reputed individuals who has been at the service of the current Bangladesh government.

“As a former faculty of Harvard’s Kennedy School of Governance, he should know what good governance means,” Rabbee said. “The fact that he struggles so much in front of foreign journalists is because he has to deprogram his lifelong training and lectures on democratic governance while defending his current employer which has made Bangladesh a one-party state of a peculiar variety.”

The reason Rizvi has tough time defending the current Bangladesh regime in front of unbending foreign media, Rabbee said, is that it has an abysmal records of human rights violations.

From January 1, 2009, to July 31, 2020, at least 572 people have been reported to have been forcibly disappeared by security forces and law enforcement agencies in Bangladesh, according to [a Human Rights Watch report](#). While some were eventually released, shown arrested or discovered killed by security forces and law enforcement agencies in so-called crossfire encounters, the whereabouts of many of them is still unknown.

[Amnesty International said](#) that reports of extrajudicial executions in Bangladesh spiked sharply following Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s directive to launch an anti-narcotic drive in May 2018 and her defiant stance that “no [drug] godfather will be spared”. Human rights organisations documented 466 such deaths in 2018 alone, more than three times as many as recorded in 2017. A Human Rights Watch report also asserted that there were more than 300 “crossfire” killings in 2019 and not one member of the security forces was held accountable.

Widespread torture alleged

[The Committee Against Torture in its report](#) expressed concern at consistent reports alleging widespread and routine torture and ill-treatment by law enforcement officials for the purpose of obtaining confessions or to solicit bribes, the lack of publicly available information about these cases, and the failure to ensure accountability for law enforcement agencies, particularly the Rapid Action Battalion.

“Often the representative of the Bangladesh government fails to respond the questions because they try to avoid the inconvenient truths,” said Dr Ali Riaz, distinguished professor of Politics and Government department of Illinois State University in the US.

“They attempt to deflect rather than confront the questions with answers, as the ground reality is strikingly different from their narrative,” Riaz said. Rizvi was no exception, he said.

“Besides, many of them have little influence on policy making,” Riaz said. “Therefore, they can

hardly speak of anything beyond the official statements.”

Australia-based Bangladeshi writer Faham Abdus Salam didn't mince his words while talking about Rizvi's "performances" when faced with tough questions from international media outlets.

“It happens so that as a political party, Awami League has only one Gowher Rizvi at its disposal, who is at least ‘presentable’ to the international media,” Salam said. “Evidently, he is clueless; but he is willing to lend his Harvard/Oxford credentials to defend the regime. Between the choice of an obscure but honorable Harvard academic position and becoming an Awami loyalist – he chose the latter.”

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