

## Will the interim government be truly anti-discriminatory?



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The state reform that is being undertaken now needs to ensure recognition of Indigenous populations. The Indigenous populations have been involved in liberation struggles from long before, whether it was the Liberation War of 1971 or the fight against the British or even before the British empire came into existence. They were also a part of the movement against authoritarianism. For ages, Indigenous populations and their contributions have been invisibilised. We do not want to go through such invisibilisation again. We want to be recognised by our identity and for our achievements.

At this critical juncture of this country, we need to ask if the 2024 protests are truly respectful of differences and anti-discriminatory, or if this is turning into a majoritarian movement. In 2018, we saw that with the abolishment of the quota system, the quota for Indigenous populations was wholly cancelled as well by the former prime minister. Then, in 2024, we saw that the 5 percent quota reserved for ethnic minorities was reduced to 1 percent by the court.

In addition, another matter worrying the Indigenous people is the upsurge of violence directed towards minorities since the resignation of the former prime minister. We urge the student movement to be cognisant of the insecurity facing minorities in the country and provide support.

One of the convenors, Asif Mahmud, used the words *'khubro*

*nigoshi'* when describing Indigenous communities. We expect our convenors to understand the politics behind words such as *prantik jonogoshi*, *upojati*, tribal, and other such terms to describe ethnic minorities, and we expect them to realise that the use of such terms is not belittling of any group that claims to be anti-discriminatory.

Another grievance among ethnic minorities has been the fragmentation in our regional parties since August 5. As many may know, in Chittagong's JSS (Jana Samhati Samiti) backed Hill Women's Federation, two women have been kidnapped allegedly in the presence of the army. We can thus see that at each point, the repercussions of student politics deserves our attention. We need to ensure that this does not devolve into a majoritarian movement that is not inclusive in reality. Student politics is clearly showing us the direction of state reform, and when discussing state reform, we need to ensure that all groups are represented regardless of their positionalities. Under no circumstances can this be a state for one ethnicity, one language, and one religion.

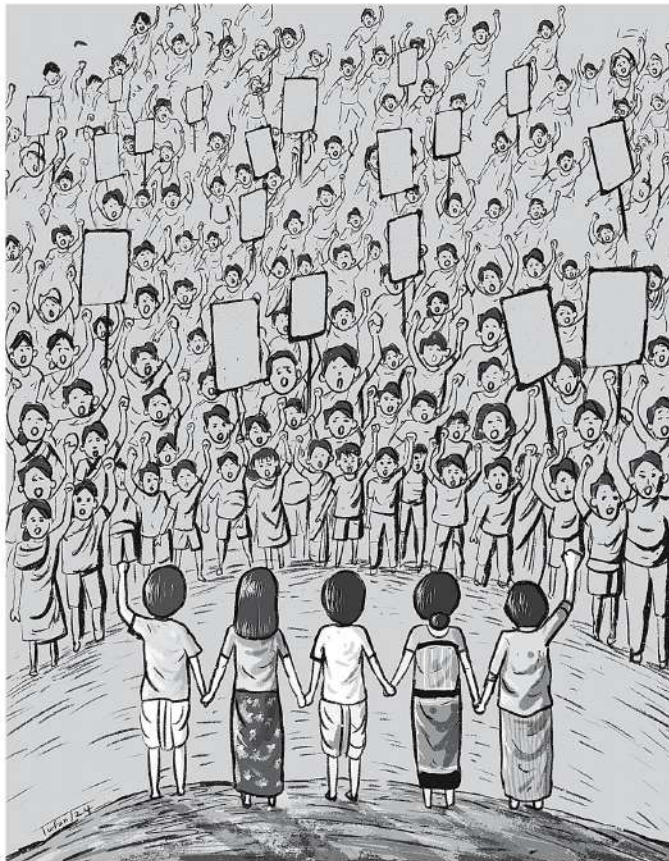
We expect that those who form the interim government will respect difference be it of gender, religion, ethnicity, or language. I also hope that instead of being swayed by popularity, the interim government acknowledges and appoints the people who have actually worked for

different communities and brings their concerns forward. There are many different lists currently making rounds on social media. Some of those people have played a significant role in militarisation of hill districts. Moreover, there are also people in those lists who have attempted to enforce Bengalisation. We do not want such people. In my view, people who cannot value differences should not be in the interim government.

Another matter that I believe requires emphasis is freedom of speech. In the myriad mediums for expressing our thoughts, whether on social media, a conference, or any form of gatherings, we would often engage in self-censorship. I expect the interim government to give us the space to speak, show our stories and share about our lives, livelihoods, and experiences, even if we are in disagreement.

We saw a massive corrosion of freedom of speech under the past regime. Under no circumstances do we want this from the interim government. At the very least, give us the platform to speak. It is not necessary for us to always be in agreement, nor do we accept the interim government or any government to always accept our demands. We do not want any erosion in the opportunities for speaking. We have seen that it was not only the government restricting freedom of speech, but also workplaces that required employees to not post on social media regarding certain matters. We do not want such monitoring and surveillance, and we wish for the interim government to take steps to ensure this.

Lastly, I want the interim government to be inclusive, so that each group has representation, whether it is women or the students, the disabled community, or the Indigenous populations.



The importance of giving Indigenous people a platform cannot be understated.

ILLUSTRATION: TUFAN CHAKMA