This page was exported from - Shelburne Free Press
Export date: Sat Oct 31 18:49:03 2026 / +0000 GMT

Bangladesh, Venezuela and Democracy

by GWYNNE DYER

If all that mattered is economic growth, then Shaikh Hasina would still be in power. She has ruled Bangladesh for 15 continuous years during which the country's per capita income more than tripled. Yet she has been overthrown by the very same students who stood to benefit most from her remarkable economic achievements.

They were the ones who didn't have jobs yet, of course. Millions did get jobs, but there are far more educated young people in this generation than in the last and there were not enough to go round.

Sheikh Hasina fed their anger by reserving a large proportion of the government jobs (30%) for young people from families whose older members had fought in the Independence War (from Pakistan) of 50 years ago.

She was just trying to strengthen her position by rewarding her own supporters in the Awami League, but that kicked off the protests that have now forced her to flee to India. The protests were not initially about idealistic notions of democracy or some other abstraction; they were about jobs.

Yet four hundred people, almost all of them students, laid down their lives in the protests against her increasingly arbitrary rule, and it's not really worth dying for a slightly better chance at a cushy but not very well-paying job. They also talked about democracy, by which they really meant equality, or at least equality of opportunity.

That's also what motivated more than two-thirds of the Venezuelans who remain in the country to cast their votes against tyranny last week even though they knew the election would be rigged. They may yet succeed in forcing the ruler, Nicolás Maduro, to give up and go into exile too, because fairness is a basic human value.

Around a third of the world's people live in countries that can be called democratic, although all of them are flawed in one way or another. What is striking is that practically every autocratic regime in the world also claims to be democratic. In principle (although not yet in practice) it is the default human political system.

We are talking about the nature of ?human nature' here, and the key point is that it has a history. It changes over time in response to changing circumstances, but there is a detectable theme running through it for at least many tens of thousands of years.

Human beings belong to the primate family, most of whose members live in smallish groups (rarely more than a hundred). They have strongly graded hierarchies like those in our nearest relatives, the chimpanzees. There is a boss who rules by force and by fear but also by making alliances, and there is constant turmoil as other would-be bosses rise and fall.

Any diligent reader can find exceptions to all the above statements, but by and large that is the primate condition. It was presumably once the human condition too ? but all the ancestral human groups we know about lived in absolute equality.

We know this because the last genuine hunter-gatherer bands survived long enough to be studied by the first anthropologists. They were all dedicated to equality, even to the extent that they automatically banded together to bring down any individual who tried to set himself above the others. How did that come to pass?

Early human beings were still living in quite small groups, but they were already intelligent enough to realize that the monkey-king model served nobody's interests except the king's. They also had language, so they could conspire together.

The revolution may have happened once and spread, or it may have happened a thousand times in different bands, but the human default mode became egalitarian. It must have remained that way for at least thousands of generations, because equality and fairness

have become universal human aspirations.

Unfortunately, when we went into the first mass societies five thousand years ago, we had to revert for a long time to our other, older heritage of brutal hierarchy. Early mass societies could not be egalitarian: there was no way for large numbers of people to meet and talk and decide together. If you wanted civilization, it had to be a tyranny.

That situation prevailed until we developed mass communications a few centuries ago. That technology made it possible for us to decide things together again as equals, and as soon as we got it (just printing, at first), our long submerged but never forgotten ?democratic' values re-emerged as well.

That's what the American and French revolutions were about. That's what the Bangladeshi and hopefully the Venezuelan revolutions are about now. These are not random events. They are part of a long but promising process of reclaiming our real values.