

The police must get back to work

An atmosphere of mutual trust must be created

We are deeply concerned that, so far, only 361 out of 639 police stations have partially resumed operations since Friday, with the assistance of the armed forces and Border Guard Bangladesh. At the time when there is a severe lapse in security across all districts, with many incidents of violence, arson attacks, and even robberies being reported, law enforcement cannot be absent from the scene.

While it is understandable that many police personnel are feeling insecure after the destruction of many police stations in the country and attacks on police personnel, they must remember their primary duty, which is to protect the public. The unprecedented number of civilians—many of them students and even children—who were shot and killed by law enforcers during the quota movement, triggered attacks on police and police stations. But now is the time for all official forces to work together to bring security to the nation. Official forces must collaborate to ensure safety, especially in minority communities that have faced violence and vandalism from different coteries trying to take advantage of the power vacuum created by the former government's departure. The same applies to other groups as well, including members of the former administration, Awami League members, and individuals seen as loyal to the former regime.

Without police presence on the streets, miscreants have seized the opportunity to commit crimes with total impunity. In the absence of police, communities are having to mobilise their members to stay on watch all night, with the student volunteers helping. While this is very admirable, it is hardly a sustainable solution. Only a strong law enforcement presence will deter these criminals.

It is worrisome to know that the chain of command within the police force has broken down after the attacks on police personnel. Police from lower ranks have staged demonstrations and made their 11-point demand. The police force, which has long played a partisan role and embittered the public with its actions, must do everything in its power to regain public trust. The interim government must prioritise security and take necessary steps to restore police presence at the stations. Senior officers, particularly the new IGP, must address this crisis through dialogue with their frustrated juniors and find immediate solutions.

This will also require quick logistical support to repair the destroyed stations and get them operational again, as well as address the legitimate grievances of lower-tier police officers. The process of reform within the police force must begin as soon as possible to depoliticise the force, eradicate corruption, and make it a protector of the public rather than a feared or hated entity.

Global response to Bangladesh's transition

We need the support of our friends, now more than ever

We are heartened by the international community's expressed readiness to work with the interim government of Bangladesh, led by its chief, Professor Muhammad Yunus. Following the fall of the Awami League government, due to the popular demand of student protesters and the masses, Bangladesh faces a long journey to chart a democratic future for its people—a challenge recognised by the international community as well. As Bangladesh embarks on this uncertain yet hopeful path, the role of the interim government in steering the nation toward a democratic future cannot be understated.

Bangladesh endured three days without a government, during which law and order deteriorated amid widespread uncertainty. Now that the interim government has been formed, we are confident that stability will return and law and order will improve. As several representatives of our international partners have correctly emphasised, this must be the new government's first priority, along with ensuring accountability for all recent deaths. To achieve this, the interim government may request international assistance, which we hope our partners will be ready to provide upon request.

At this critical stage, with the economy having suffered significantly over the past month—and given the economic challenges that have plagued the country over the last couple of years—Bangladesh will require substantial support from its foreign friends. According to a recent report, the Bangladeshi economy experienced a sharp contraction in July. To get the economy back on track, Bangladesh could benefit from all the help it can get from other countries. To that end, we hope that friendly nations from all regions will step forward.

Given the disruption to business across all sectors in Bangladesh, we urge our international partners to remain patient and work with our industries to ensure that our commercial partnerships can continue to recover and flourish. The European Union, which imports goods worth \$24 billion annually from Bangladesh, has expressed its eagerness to engage with the new administration, recognising this moment as crucial for fulfilling the aspirations of the Bangladeshi people, particularly its youth. We believe our other foreign friends share similar views and will engage with the government to achieve positive outcomes for all concerned.

The international response to this transition has been overwhelmingly positive, with key global players pledging their support for Bangladesh's journey toward democracy. The international community's support provides a strong foundation for Bangladesh to rebuild and move forward. However, the ultimate responsibility lies with the Bangladeshi people and their leaders to ensure that this transition marks the beginning of a new, more democratic era in the country's history.

A pathway to transformative governance



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The interim government comes with a mandate to ensure a peaceful transition to democracy, but its full scope is undefined, and a timetable is yet to be determined. Expectations are running high, and so are fears. As the Arab Spring has shown, failure could set back the struggle for democracy for decades to come.

I see a window of opportunity to craft a platform for transformative governance, grounded in democratic values and human rights principles. But that window will not last long. Among the many issues that demand the urgent attention of the interim government, it must select and prioritise a few critical reforms that are truly vital for sustaining democracy in the long run, that can be achieved in a short time and can be embedded in such a way that they will outlive this government.

The selection, prioritisation and delivery of those reforms will determine whether this moment in our country's history is a new dawn or a false one.

I believe early action in six key areas is essential.

First is the early restoration of law and order. There continues to be reports of violence, arson and looting, targeting supporters of the previous regime and members of the Hindu community. The political nature of these attacks is evident. The interim government must make it clear that not only does it have zero tolerance for political vendettas or scapegoating of minorities, but that all political parties must proactively reign in their goons or face political and legal consequences.

The interim government should think outside the box when it comes to policing. The discredited and demoralised police have walked out. Within hours of the police going on "strike", well-organised groups of students and volunteers took to guarding neighbourhoods and managing the city traffic in Dhaka with remarkable skill, politeness and diligence. This could well be the beginning of a new community-based policing system that this country badly needs.

Second is accountability for human rights violations—not to be done forty years down the road but here and now. The interim government should initiate a credible and transparent accountability process, in line with internationally recognised standards and with international assistance, into

the massive human rights violations in recent weeks and past years. The government should take up the offer of assistance from the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and ask for an international commission of inquiry.

The international nature of the inquiry will be vital for the credibility of the process at home and abroad. By taking the bold step of inviting an investigation, supported by the United Nations, into Bangladesh's



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human rights obligations which are underpinned by international treaties, this interim government will set an important precedent on accountability and respect for the rule of law which future governments cannot ignore easily.

Third is to strengthen the right to freedom of expression and the role of independent news media. The government should immediately repeal the Cyber Security Act, the law on criminal libel and the Information and Communication Technology Act, which were used by the previous government to gag the media, prosecute and punish journalists and human rights defenders, and disrupt the internet.

The previous government

judiciary and commitment from its highest echelons to its rank and file to upholding fairness, human rights, and the rule of law.

At a minimum, the interim government must develop an effective judicial mechanism to resolve electoral disputes. As Director-General of the International Development Law Organization, I played a part in the reform of Kenya's Supreme Court, following the adoption of a new constitution in 2010 after the bloodiest post-electoral violence in the history of that country. The reform of the supreme court and the exemplary leadership of successive chief justices have created such public trust that there has been no large-scale political violence in Kenya since then.

a profound change in the political culture. The people of this country, especially the youth, are fed up with self-serving, corrupt and violent politics and politicians. They want a new type of politics that cares about ordinary people, that values equality, opportunity and justice.

The interim government, the student-led movement and all who support it must work to create a broad-based national movement with new ideas, leaders and innovative political structures that are representative of the gender, age, ethnic, religious and socio-economic diversity of our country and committed to create a rights-respecting, just and democratic society. We must have a truly alternative choice at the next elections.

Let people, not political parties decide interim govt's role



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Bangladesh witnessed an unprecedented people's revolution led by students which culminated in the fall of the Awami League government and the formation of an interim government. An important outcome of the July movement points to the abject failure of the political parties in the last 15 years to instigate a people-led upsurge to topple the Awami League government as citizens were disgruntled with the political parties and overall political system. On the other hand, an important social issue raised by students gained the resounding support of citizens to depose the mighty Awami League government within a month. There is a powerful sense of freedom in Bangladesh now.

Before the formation of the interim government, some decisions and demands of the major political parties caught my attention. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party's (BNP) decision

to hold an assembly on August 7, was very immature. They should have waited till the formation of the interim government and restoration of law and order. We also saw a large rally by Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami which could have been avoided. Meanwhile, we noticed demands for early elections, and enquiry about the interim government's timeframe, legality, and agenda. I was not surprised by these decisions and demands of our major political parties since their ultimate motive is to be in power and unfortunately not to realise the real aspirations of the crores of Bangladeshi. However, some political individuals are in favour of giving the interim government a certain time to carry out fundamental reforms, the absence of which made the country dysfunctional.

There is a fundamental difference between a "caretaker" government and

an "interim government." I believe we have a definition of the "caretaker" government but not an "interim" government. The 13th amendment to the Constitution of Bangladesh, which included provisions for a caretaker government to conduct general elections and transfer power impartially, was passed in 1996. This amendment added a new chapter, Chapter IIA: Non-Party Caretaker Government, in part IV of the constitution. Three elections were held under the caretaker system which was abolished by a constitutional amendment on June 30, 2011.

The question is: who will delineate the definition of the "interim" government? The answer is simple—the people of Bangladesh. The next question is how can this be done? The answer also lies with the people of Bangladesh.

The interim government should call for a plebiscite within the next three months along with a clearly thought-out reform agenda and estimated timeframe to achieve them. According to Britannica, a plebiscite is a "vote by the people of an entire country or district to decide on some issue, such as choice of a ruler or government, option for independence or annexation by another power, or a question of national policy." Generally

in a plebiscite, voters are asked not to choose between alternate regimes or proposals but to confirm or reject the legitimacy of a certain form of government or course of action. More importantly, through plebiscites a government can reach people directly, bypassing intermediaries such as political parties for people's mandate on important issues such as the legitimacy of a government.

The list of the reforms should be quite large ranging from constitutional reforms to institution building. Some of the top agendas should include reviewing and rewriting the constitution to align with citizens' welfare and protection; revamping the electoral system to curb the influence of families to instil democracy within the parties' selection of nominees and leaders and pave the way for dedicated politicians; restoration of a transparent administration which is accountable to citizens; establishment of an efficient, inclusive and just judiciary system; and setup of a modern economic system focusing on efficiency and equity.

If I understand the mood of the citizens of our country correctly, people are ready to give adequate time to the current interim government as they regard it as their saviour, liberator, and the only institution that would fulfil their dreams.