

The Daily Star recently organised a roundtable titled ‘Vision of the Youth.’ Students from various universities across the country, who led the quota reform movement, participated in the event to share their vision for a new Bangladesh. Below, we present a summary of the discussion.

What do the youth really want?



Mahfuz Anam
Editor and publisher, The Daily Star
Today, we want to hear your visions. You have achieved what once seemed impossible. When we had almost lost hope of freeing ourselves from an undemocratic government, you have taught us to dream again.

Throughout my long career in journalism, I have witnessed the erosion of democracy, the suppression of free expression, and countless human rights abuses. Acknowledging the efforts of my colleagues, we have strived to practise free journalism even in the most challenging times. Yet, much has remained unsaid, or we have self-censored due to concerns for the safety of our reporters or junior colleagues. With many considerations in mind, we chose to refrain from writing about certain issues. But you have dismantled that oppressive environment, and we in the media are particularly grateful to you all.

The government has changed, opening up new opportunities. However, the path forward is far more complex than simply replacing those in power.

After your revolution, we are beginning to see signs of deviation and a tendency to enforce certain decisions, such as entering the Secretariat or cancelling exams. While these actions might seem justified to you, it is crucial to reflect on these matters when guiding a state and fulfilling its associated dreams. We live within a societal structure that requires certain disciplines.

In reality, I must say that the political parties that suffered under the Awami League (AL) have now merely replaced the previous ruling party. The faces are new, but the actions are the same—abusing power in the name of your revolution. You must consider how to safeguard your achievements because this is a slippery slope. You are standing on a mountain peak, surrounded by dangers.

It is incredibly difficult to maintain an environment where true freedom of expression prevails. Freedom of expression means that criticism may be directed at anyone. We have laws to address whether such criticism is based on facts or not. Attacking journalists or vandalising newspaper or TV channel offices does not represent freedom of expression.

Your voices have given me hope, making me believe in the possibility of change.

Through our movement, we have managed to remove the Awami League regime, but our aim is not to simply replace it with any other political party. This point must be stressed.



of a Bangladesh we have aspired to since its birth. To achieve this vision, you must foster a culture of tolerance. You have set many examples already, and I am confident you can set examples in this regard as well.

Shuchismita Tithi
Sub editor, The Daily Star, and Moderator of the Session
The movement started as a student-led demand for quota reform but quickly expanded into a wider protest against the government's suppression and oppression. Initially, students called for the Prime Minister to retract her speech. In response, the student wing of the Awami League, the Chhatra League, launched an attack on the University of Dhaka, prompting students to protest against the Chhatra League itself. Gradually, the movement evolved to demand the Prime Minister's resignation.

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WHAT KINDS OF REFORMS SHOULD TAKE PLACE WITHIN POLITICAL PARTIES?
Masud Rana
Organiser, Rajshahi University
The greatest strength of any political party is its opposition. The mistake the Awami League (AL) made was trying to consolidate its own power while simultaneously attempting to suppress other political ideologies. For example, why did the opposition members of parliament leave after the government fell? This suggests they either considered themselves part of the AL or were conditioned to behave as such. However, the AL could have been stronger if it had allowed opposition parties to retain some power.

Political parties must be democratic internally. Without an internal system of checks and balances, the entire structure will

WHAT KIND OF CONSTITUTIONAL REFORMS DO WE NEED?
Arif Sohel
Organiser, Jahangirnagar University
Over the past 15 years, a fascist regime has rendered the constitution increasingly irrelevant in ensuring the proper functioning of the state, as evidenced by the removal of the caretaker government provision from the constitution.

In this context, it is notable that the regime frequently makes rhetorical references to the 1972 constitution. However, the drafting process of the 1972 Constitution was itself undemocratic; it was crafted by a small group of lawyers without sufficient consultation with the diverse groups involved in the Liberation War—people from various walks of life.

Now, it is high time for us, the

August mass uprising, it is both timely and essential to demand a new constitution or substantial reforms to the current one. Without this, any future democratically elected government could once again devolve into a fascist regime; therefore, serious reforms to the present constitution are imperative.

Prapti Taposhi
Organiser, Jahangirnagar University
Contemporary political parties in Bangladesh, or those trying to remain politically active, are fundamentally undemocratic and authoritarian at their core. They are quick to dismiss anyone who does not conform to their views and, in fact, are the original proponents of cancel culture, which is fundamentally at odds with true democratic political culture. Whichever party comes to power routinely uses repressive legal

juridical power to remove a prime minister from office.

Another significant issue is the process of appointing justices, which is fraught with problems. It is said that a justice's performance is observed for two years before a decision is made on whether they will be granted a permanent position. This process often leads to justices feeling compelled to cater to the ruling regime's whims and sectarian demands.

The role of the ombudsman, as outlined in Article 77, is another provision worth discussing. The ombudsman is meant to act as a mediator between the bureaucracy and the general public, serving as a check and balance on power.

Article 70 is particularly contentious because it was essentially designed to prevent a vote of 'no confidence' against the Prime Minister. A possible modification

Mozammel Haque
Organiser, Dhaka University
Looking at past elections, especially the most recent one, securing the nomination seemed more important than winning the election itself, as it was often assumed that whoever won the nomination would automatically win the election.

Those who had more money, wielded more muscle power, utilised the media for propaganda, and exploited the bureaucracy were more likely to secure a nomination. These corrupt practices must be stopped. It is not uncommon to see individuals involved in corruption and money laundering participating in elections. Such practices must be banned.

Meghmallar Basu
In countries without proportional representation, elections often end up doing more harm than good. In such systems, voters are left with no choice but to vote for one major party to remove the other—BNP to oust AL and vice versa. Even when we campaigned for a leftist party or candidate, the most common response was, "Your candidate is good, but if we vote for you, it will be wasted." This sentiment arises because, if a vote does not cross the 50 percent threshold, it doesn't count, which is fundamentally undemocratic. Without proportional representation, the fear of a wasted vote drives people to choose between the two largest political parties, thereby hampering political plurality.

Another important issue is that, according to media reports, 90 percent of former parliament members were millionaires. We want representation from different groups, such as religious minorities and women. How can a person earning millions represent someone whose fundamental class interests are different from theirs?

In my opinion, the two most critical factors are implementing proportional representation and strictly regulating the amount of money spent in elections and the sources of that money.

Prapti Taposhi
We must not overlook the fact that political influence is not the only factor corrupting the Election Commission; powerful businessmen and industrialists also play a significant role in this.

Moreover, the 13th Amendment stipulated that there should be five members in the Election Commission, including a woman, to create an inclusive body. However, this is not reflected in our current EC. The women in the EC often lack agency and rarely have any real scope to voice their opinions. They tend to serve as mere puppets or showpieces, which raises the question: How logical is it to keep women members in the EC under such circumstances? This is something we must critically examine.

Arif Sohel
The concept of religion-based politics is often misunderstood. Political parties that are associated with religion-based politics frequently advocate for



Nazifa Jannat
The latest Election Commission Act was passed in 2022. According to this Act, the Chief Election Commissioner and three other individuals will form the Election Commission, with a six-member search committee proposing their names. It is essential for the search committee to publish their meeting minutes and resolutions as public notices. This transparency would ensure public participation by keeping people informed about the EC's activities and fostering a system of checks and balances. The media can also play a crucial role in keeping the public updated and holding the EC accountable.

HOW DO YOU VIEW THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN POLITICS?
Sabah Anjim Farabi
When discussing religion-based politics, it's crucial to consider the role of religion itself. As a Muslim, I speak from an Islamic perspective, which teaches that Islam does not condone interference in the practice of other religions. It is the government's duty to ensure that individuals of all faiths are protected, and if the government fails in this responsibility, it should be held accountable.

Prapti Taposhi
Political parties based on religious ideologies often promote extremism and are prone to rejecting differing viewpoints. This issue is compounded in countries with an official state religion, where those who align with the national religion and engage in its politics can come into conflict with the principles of secularism, which advocates for tolerance and inclusivity. Such a bias towards a particular religion can limit representation for others. While everyone should have the right to participate in politics, it is vital for political parties to embrace inclusivity.

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Meghmallar Basu
In theory, religion-based politics could be progressive, as illustrated by the Maulana Bhashani's politics. However, in Bangladesh, parties like Jamaat-e-Islami and Khilafat Majlis, which engage in religion-based politics, often present themselves as protectors. This raises the question of why individuals from other religious communities would seek protection rather than equality.

It is crucial to recognise that the longstanding policy of banning these parties has been ineffective. Despite 15 years of repression, Jamaat-e-Islami has not disappeared; rather, such repression often enhances the party's image as a symbol of resistance. In the 1980s, Shibir was not banned outright but was challenged through a collective agreement among active student parties, despite their differing views. They reached a consensus to exclude such politics from campus, and any attempts by Shibir to enter were collectively thwarted. It represented both a social and political struggle.

Umama Fatema
When we scrutinise the religious parties in Bangladesh, we find that they are not fundamentally different from the AL or BNP, aside

from some linguistic differences. Since most people are religiously inclined, these parties exploit religious rhetoric to build their voter base. This religion-based politics is not grounded in genuine religious philosophy; instead, it functions merely as a tool for securing votes. Moreover, it seems that religion is being weaponised by political parties to suppress others through its rules and rituals.

While some city-based study groups discuss concepts like *Pranid* or Stewardship, these ideas have minimal presence in rural areas. Given the state's repressive nature, a shift in governance could create a genuine space for discussions on religion-based politics, fostering more meaningful engagement. People

The current state of student politics requires thorough reassessment. The traditional structures and characteristics are no longer effective, as evidenced by the growing disillusionment among both youths and the general public in Bangladesh.

should have the freedom to choose which ideas they accept.

Sabah Anjim Farabi
It's crucial to recognise that no politics is entirely free from religious influence. The Awami League centres its politics around Mujib-dharma, the BNP around Zia-dharma, and Jamaat-e-Islami on Islam-based principles. Every political party, in some way, adheres to its own 'dharma' globally. Even those who are anti-religion in their politics can inadvertently create a new form of ideological influence.

Nazifa Jannat
Labelling groups as majorities or minorities fosters a sense of otherness, impacting indigenous people, dalits, transgender individuals, and others. Our

objective should be to unite as Bangladeshis citizens, ensuring equal rights for everyone without categorisation. We all belong to this country equally, with equal rights and opportunities.

In 2024, mass murders occurred, where students, youths, and the elderly people were killed by state apparatus under the Awami League government. However, we must not forget the events of 1971 or alter the established historical narrative. While condemning the 2024 genocide, it's also important not to forget Jamaat-e-Islami's role as war criminals in 1971.

HOW DO YOU VIEW STUDENT POLITICS IN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS?
Mustafiz Rahman
What we have consistently observed before and during the July massacre is violence against student movements. The student wing of the Awami League, Chhatra League, has been disruptive even during exam periods at our university. This group exerted significant control over students, frequently commanding various aspects of their lives. Many activists would skip lectures to attend political meetings and participate in processions. This dominance has made us increasingly pessimistic about university-level politics in Bangladesh, which is why I support the idea of making student politics illegal.

When student politics leads to practices such as extortion and terrorism, it becomes a serious concern. At Jagannath University, such activities have been prevalent, setting a poor example for academic institutions. Student politics must be banned as it has already been corrupted and is at risk of further being influenced by propaganda, leaving behind the ideals of law-abiding politics.

Masud Rana
Student politics in Bangladesh has always been relevant. A recurring issue with youth-based political groups is that final approvals are typically granted by higher authorities. I am uncertain about how decisive or effective individual student leaders from the AL and BNP have been. This has weakened the foundation of student politics

and hindered the development of student leaders. Student politics should be for students and should not be exploited by major parties like the AL and BNP to extend their influence.

Arif Sohel
The current state of student politics requires thorough reassessment. The traditional structures and characteristics are no longer effective, as evidenced by the growing disillusionment among both youths and the general public in Bangladesh.

We currently lack successful models for student politics that truly address the needs of the people. To rectify this, we must first focus on developing effective policies and mobilising resources to meet political aspirations. Practical experience is crucial and should be given serious consideration. Only through this approach can we build a solid foundation for student politics that is recognised nationally. As emphasised, student politics should primarily serve the interests of young people. Upholding this principle is essential if we are to prepare Bangladesh for modern, internationally recognised political engagement.

Meghmallar Basu
University-level politics in Bangladesh, involving both students and teachers, tends to be highly polarised. I support the recent calls to eradicate corruption from student politics. These demands are part of a broader narrative advocating for a ban on student politics. However, if student politics were to be banned, it would not necessarily end campus polarisation. Instead, new divides could emerge, as groups might feel marginalised.

Student politics is influenced by societal dynamics. Divisions and discrimination within society inevitably impact student politics. Political actors in Bangladesh must confront this issue and strive to build more equitable communities.

It is widely believed that student politics was more sophisticated during the 1970s and

1980s. DUCSU elections were more regular at that time, and student leaders had to demonstrate their effectiveness. In recent decades, however, political figures have increasingly neglected the need to gain approval from the masses.

Certain regulations from the 1990s require revision. On-campus accommodation should not be allocated based on political affiliation. Such practices disadvantage ordinary students by prioritising those with specific ideological or organisational ties. Ensuring fair access to accommodation would support the development of progressive student politics.

Prapti Taposhi
A university should be a haven for free thought. I envision Bangladeshhi educational institutions where students are granted the liberty to express themselves openly. Issues such as U.S. imperialism, Indian aggression, and both local and international politics are crucial subjects that students need to debate and understand.

Mozammel Haque
The pressing need is for corruption-free youth politics. To achieve this, we must ensure transparent and equitable processes for accommodation facilities and student elections. University administrations need to be both credible and effective.

Umama Fatema
Before addressing the legality of student politics, we must focus on the condition of student dormitories.

Until 1990, some traditions of student politics were upheld despite widespread rigging. The 28-year hiatus of DUCSU suggests a loss of essential ethical standards. Today, it is crucial for students with genuine intentions to step up. Banning student politics would only create unnecessary obstacles.

