

Govt’s reform agenda is promising

Its proper implementation requires national unity

We are pleased with the outline presented by Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus during his address to the nation on September 11. Emphasising the need for a systemic reform, he announced that the interim government had decided to establish six commissions. These commissions will be primarily tasked with reforming the judiciary, electoral system, administration, police, Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), and the constitution, with the goal of creating a state system based on public ownership, accountability and welfare. It is also commendable that a three-month deadline, starting from October 1, has been set for these commissions to complete their tasks.

According to the chief adviser, these reforms have become essential to prevent the re-emergence of fascism or authoritarian rule in Bangladesh, and we agree. However, in implementing them, we hope the interim government remains true to its promise of inclusivity and ensures that its actions are transparent to the public. Given what transpired during the last three elections under the authoritarian Awami League government, reforming the four institutions related to the electoral process—the police, public administration, judiciary, and ACC—is crucial to ensure that future governments remain accountable to the public and can be peacefully removed from power. As the chief adviser stated, the nation does not want to witness another bloody uprising like the one made necessary by the oppressive Hasina-led government, which clung to power through brutal suppression.

The chief adviser raised a couple of key concerns, including the weak state of the economy and the factors further worsening it. The crony capitalist actions of the previous government and its cohorts have left our economy in an extremely vulnerable state. The ongoing worker protests and factory closures are adding to this pressure. While we understand that workers have many legitimate demands that have gone unmet over the years—which we have written about in this column—we urge them to support the continued operation of factories during this difficult time. At the same time, we call on factory owners to engage in meaningful dialogue with workers to find a solution that benefits both parties. In this regard, we also urge the interim government to play a constructive role in facilitating and mediating these discussions.

The key message to take away from Prof Yunus’s speech is the need for national unity, inclusivity, and active participation from all stakeholders to reform and rebuild the nation. In this regard, we hope that businesses, NGOs and other organisations, and ordinary citizens will step up to create a new Bangladesh in which they themselves would want to live.

Ensure women’s safety in public spaces

Gang rape of 70-year-old woman extremely disturbing

We are deeply disturbed by the news of the gang-rape of a 70-year-old woman at Chhobir Haat in the capital’s Suhrawardy Udyan on the night of September 7. The severely injured woman is still undergoing treatment at a hospital, and as of the time of writing this editorial, no arrests have been made.

The incident highlights once again our failure to ensure the safety of women in our streets, parks, and other public spaces. The recent rape on a public bus in Chattogram underscores this issue. Although the alleged perpetrators were arrested in that case, the lack of security of females of all ages remains a concern. The extent of women’s vulnerability becomes worrying when one considers the place where the September 7 rape incident took place. Chhobir Haat, adjacent to the Shahbag police station and situated within the perimeter of Dhaka University (DU), should have been an inherently secured place since a large number of female students frequent the area every day. Besides, the recent events of July and August, that took place in DU, should have guaranteed heightened security.

Unfortunately, the innate patriarchy of our society, its perception of females as second-class citizens, lackadaisical investigation, long-winding legal process, and low conviction rate in rape cases all culminate in the lack of security for women in our country. This year alone, between January and June, at least 250 rape incidents occurred according to data collected by the human rights organisation Ain O Salish Kendra.

A UN study has shown how Bangladeshi men perceive their privileged position in society as a justification for rape. These harmful perceptions must be fought through proper educational reforms and actively countering ideologies that justify violence against women and treat them as second-class citizens. We also urge the interim government to prioritise the security and protection of women, not just by formulating laws and policies but also by ensuring their proper enforcement. In the case of the recent gang-rape case, we call on the police to expedite their investigation and bring the perpetrators to book as swiftly as possible.

TALK CHECK

“We seek reforms. Our sincere request is that you not retreat to the spectators’ gallery after entrusting us with the heavy responsibility of reforms. Stay with us. We will bring reform together. It is everyone’s responsibility. Bring reform to your own field.

Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus, on September 11, 2024 in an address to the nation discussing the creation of six commissions and a path to reform

Business community’s voice needed in interim government

It is necessary for growth and attracting foreign investment



THE THIRD VIEW
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MAHFUZ ANAM

On September 9, in *The Daily Star’s* roundtable discussion with business leaders, including those from the manufacturing, banking and fast job-producing IT sectors, urgent appeals were made to the interim government for help. First and foremost was the need for security. The disappearance of police from the scene and the overall lack of security in the industrial zones led to desperate appeals for army presence to ensure law and order. They specified five industrial belts: Ashulia, Narayanganj, Narsingdi, Chattogram, and Cumilla. These five zones constitute our crucial industrial base that must be protected with the highest priority. Normally, they wouldn’t ask for the army’s help, but they feel it to be an urgent necessity because of the power vacuum that has been caused by the sudden political change that we recently experienced.

Along with the physical protection of the above areas, what has been emphasised is the restoration of law and order in general. The truth is that, because of their role during the past regime, police now suffer from a severe backlash for which they hesitate to go to public places and take firm action when needed. This obviously sends out wrong signals to the criminal elements who are creating havoc in our factories.

With the sudden fall of a regime who appeared to have had endless unaccounted for power, there now exists a crisis of governance of sorts. The hatred towards police due to their partisan use has been multiplied a thousand times by their trigger-happy colleagues who killed more than a thousand students and citizens, and injured thousands more, as initial official estimates show. Our border guards—BGB—who have no training in crowd control or how to deal with mass protests, were used, which added to the death toll on the streets of Dhaka and the rest of the country. This has resulted in a tremendous anger and desire for revenge against the previous regimes and their henchmen: the politicians. Included in this is a section of the business community who did nothing but exploit their political connections to loot the country. This is exemplified by the so-called private sector adviser of the former regime, who could have been better termed “personal sector representative,” as he never worked for the overall benefit of the private sector and used his privileged position to advance his own

interest and those of his cronies.

This, however, led to an overall impression of the private sector as a product of undue privilege. This narrative is influencing both a section of our society, especially the young people, and some within the government, giving the impression that the interim government is not fully cognisant of the private sector’s role in advancing, modernising and driving the economy as a whole. The fact that there is no representative from the business community in the interim government is considered by many to be indicative of the above mindset. For the sake of our immediate and long-



PHOTO: COLLECTED

The warehouse of a factory in Gazipur was set on fire on September 11, 2024, highlighting the need for increased security in industrial areas.

term growth, this has to change—and immediately so. We urge the interim government to appoint an adviser from the private sector.

An important fact that has to be remembered is that not the entire private sector was the recipient of the former regime’s largesse. Only a section of them influenced policies that favoured only them. There is a large number of businessmen who suffered because they refused to toe the line. They did not default on loans. They paid their due taxes and yet got constantly harassed. The distinction between the genuine private sector and the crony entrepreneurs must be urgently and seriously made.

Regardless of the background of their owners, factories are national

assets. How they built them must be a big factor in dealing with them, but what they built with personal assets or bank loans cannot be viewed as anything other than the collective wealth of Bangladesh. That particular viewpoint appears to have been put in the background. This is evidenced by reactions to factories owned by individuals close to the former ruling party or whose wealth has been a direct result of cronyism, undue favours, dubious tax breaks, and illegal practices that should have nothing to do with doing proper business.

Yes, none of them would probably have been anywhere near the wealth they accumulated without their political connection, yet their production facilities cannot be treated as “enemy properties” and burnt down, as has been the case for several industries. The direct impact of such action is the threat to the jobs of workers. The vandalism and looting of stocks and raw materials, and in many cases of the machinery and its spare parts, clearly indicate the involvement

amendments to the old one has been going on, a similar discussion for changes in the economy has not been that forthcoming.

We need fundamental reforms in the way we do business. To attract FDI and increase local investment, we need urgent reforms in the banking laws and regulations. To start with, we must make the professional management of banks mandatory and introduce international practices in regulating the role of bank directors who think of themselves as “owners” of the banks and not small shareholders, with the depositors being the main owners. The practice of protecting the depositors’ rights must immediately be introduced. It’s the directors that can be held as mostly responsible for destroying the banking system.

We must investigate why we have not been able to attract FDI over the past decades in spite of our economy’s growth. Mega-corruption was of course a big factor. Too many laws are in operation that inhibits entrepreneurship. Bureaucratic hassle, land registration issues, and the overall delay in getting things done all contribute to the lack of efficiency in our system, which must be changed if we are to realise our potential.

We must remember when people or companies invest either in one’s own or in a foreign country, it’s their own wealth—or borrowed from banks—that they are investing. We should allow them to make legitimate profits and prevent them from profiteering. The precondition for this to work is an intangible element called confidence, which comes from a whole set of factors, such as the legal framework, business practices, political interference, corruption, and bringing those who break the law to justice. Many foreign investors came to Bangladesh, and after waiting several years, they left because they felt we are not dependable in terms of business stability. This is not to say that foreign investors have no flaws—sometimes they push investment in areas that are not our priority or in terms that do not suit us—but the overriding need for them cannot be ignored. If state-controlled countries like China and Vietnam can attract huge FDI, why can’t we who practise market economy? The reason is that they are able to generate that intangible factor that we referred to earlier: confidence.

It is our hope that the new Bangladesh, headed by a man of vision and integrity and with unrivalled global respect, and driven by the energy and honesty of the young people with the wholehearted support and confidence of the public, will be able to create that vital trust and necessary confidence both within the nation and among the international community, and we will be able to build a democratic, equitable and rights-based future.

The case of disgruntled DC aspirants



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In a stunning departure from the disciplined nature of public service, chaos erupted at the heart of Bangladesh’s Ministry of Public Administration on September 10. Mid-level civil servants, frustrated with the recent appointment of 59 deputy commissioners (DCs), openly protested at the secretariat, shouting slogans and shoving senior officials—a scene unimaginable in the typically hierarchical and rule-bound structure of bureaucracy. The discontent stems from allegations of favouritism and unfairness in the selection process, as many aspiring DCs found themselves bypassed in favour of others.

At a time when Bangladesh is undergoing a crucial transformation under a newly installed interim government, such a breakdown of discipline in the very agency tasked with maintaining order is deeply troubling. Following the July uprising, the government’s foremost task has been restoring law and order—a task that hinges on the effectiveness of field administration where the DCs play

a crucial role as the highest-ranking officials at the district level.

It’s not difficult to see why mid-level officers are frustrated. For years, the civil service has been seen as a tool for political gain, rather than an institution governed by merit and professionalism.

Bureaucracy, as envisioned by Max Weber, is built on the foundations of hierarchy, discipline, and adherence to written rules. The very essence of public service is its commitment to professionalism and order, even in the face of frustration. When those who are meant to uphold the system become its disrupters, it sends a dangerous message.

Under the long tenure of Sheikh Hasina, appointments were frequently influenced by political connections rather than competence. As a result, the civil service is now deeply polarised, with many officers feeling sidelined and discriminated against due to their perceived affiliations.

While the interim government has

of elements for whom national interest is of least concern.

With all the nepotism, corruption, looting of the national exchequer, and power abuse, Bangladesh’s economy has grown. However flawed it is, with all its inner weaknesses, we increased exports—some would question the undeserved subsidies and tax facilities that were given—and captured new markets, and brought in technologies to make new products, thus expanding our export markets. Take the latest statistics (some of which needs to be more thoroughly verified), there is strong and undeniable evidence of our advancing economy.

The country is now poised for some fundamental changes. While the talk about a new constitution or serious

made significant strides in addressing some of these issues, the damage inflicted by years of politicisation is not easily undone. The latest round of DC appointments, which should have been an opportunity to restore confidence, has instead exacerbated the sense of injustice within the ranks.

However justified their grievances may be, the actions of the junior officers cannot be condoned. Bureaucracy, as envisioned by Max Weber, is built on the foundations of hierarchy, discipline, and adherence to written rules. The very essence of public service is its commitment to professionalism and order, even in the face of frustration. When those who are meant to uphold the system

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At this critical juncture, the civil service must rise above personal grievances. The country is recovering from a period of immense political and social upheaval, and the citizens deserve a functioning, competent and impartial administration. It is the duty of every civil servant, especially

those in leadership positions like DCs, to ensure the smooth functioning of government institutions and the delivery of essential services.

The interim government, for its part, must take swift and decisive action. The politicisation of civil service must be addressed through transparent processes, ensuring that future appointments are based on merit and not political loyalty. More importantly, the grievances of civil servants must be heard through formal channels, rather than allowing discontent to spill into the public arena.

During his address to the nation on September 11, Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus announced the formation of six reform commissions, which includes the Public Administration Reform Commission, to be led by Abdul Mueed Chowdhury, the newly appointed chairman of Biman Bangladesh Airlines. The commission can identify necessary reform measures for a professional, accountable and pro-people civil service in Bangladesh.

Additionally, this incident serves as a stark reminder that the civil service itself must be part of the solution. Public servants are not merely employees of the state, they are the backbone of governance. At a time when the country is grappling with challenges on multiple fronts, from economic instability to social unrest, the civil service must act as a stabilising force, not a source of discord.