

Should we consider moving to a presidential system?

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In science, insanity is often defined as repeating the same experiment over and over again, but expecting different results every time. The political system of Bangladesh fits this definition: fixated on an ineffective and ancient parliamentary structure, trying different variations without addressing its fundamental flaws. After decades of dysfunction, it is clear that the problem lies not just with the politicians, but with the system itself. A move towards a modern presidential system could offer the country the leadership and governance it urgently needs to ensure sustainable development, and break the political death spiral it has been enduring since independence.

Bangladesh's political landscape has long been dominated by two dynastic factions—the Awami League and the BNP—who remain focused on preserving their legacies rather than addressing the needs of the people. Politics has become the medium to enshrine founders as near-demigods, sidelining new leaders with fresh ideas. As if the country is being driven while looking at the rearview mirrors of an automobile. The current parliamentary system locks out new talent as any new challenger must field 300 parliamentary candidates and win a majority to gain power. This structural barrier ensures the perpetuation of the status quo. There is nothing wrong with a leader who has a political legacy, but they must not be afraid to be directly chosen by the majority of the citizens in a country.

Furthermore, in the parliamentary system, parliamentarians assume ministerial roles, creating a conflict of interest where those who write the laws also enforce them. This system fosters corruption and political patronage,

weakening public trust.

Colonial-era assumptions once held that local citizens lacked the education and capacity to collectively choose a national leader, justifying indirect governance structures. Today, those assumptions are no longer valid. Bangladesh's literacy rate stands at over 76 percent for both men and women, and access to internet-enabled devices has democratised knowledge. Citizens now have access to information better than ever before, and are capable of evaluating leaders based on policies and performance. A presidential system, where people directly elect the executive, would align with this reality—empowering voters to select leaders based on competence and accountability.

A presidential system would allow any individual, irrespective of party affiliation, to run directly for the highest office, breaking the monopoly of legacy politics and creating space for new leadership and innovation. It would introduce competition for the nation's top job. It would also separate more effectively the legislative and executive branches, ensuring that parliament focuses on lawmaking and oversight, while the president

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FILE PHOTO: STAR

governs utilising specialised technocrats. This structure would promote meritocracy, accountability and transparency, strengthening governance and fostering real development.

Bangladesh has experimented with both parliamentary and presidential systems in search of a workable governance model. In 1972, following independence, the country adopted a parliamentary system modelled on the British framework. However, the coalition politics it encouraged soon led to instability. In 1975, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman transitioned the nation to a presidential system in an effort to consolidate executive power and stabilise governance. However, opposition to this shift—especially because it was based on a one-party system—led to dissatisfaction. And in 1991, after

years of military rule, Bangladesh returned to parliamentary democracy through a referendum. While this was a step towards democracy, it failed to eliminate political infighting and the dominance of dynastic factions.

Even today, the same challenges persist, making it clear that the parliamentary system has reached its limits. A return to a presidential model offers a path towards stability, accountability and progress.

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checks and balances.

The interim government has a rare opportunity to reshape the governance model either through judicial intervention or a national referendum. However, a referendum would give the citizens ownership of the new system and provide legitimacy to the transition.

To safeguard democracy, any future amendments to election laws or the constitution should also require public approval through referendums. This would prevent politically motivated changes and ensure that constitutional reforms remain accountable to the people. Additionally, it should be made into law that no elected position of political significance can be held for more than two consecutive terms to limit concentration of power.

The recent student-led movement has revealed that beyond the traditional political sphere dominated by the Awami League and BNP, a new force is emerging—one that can reshape the direction of politics in the country. This movement demonstrated that politics in Bangladesh is no longer exclusively controlled by established parties. An informal alliance formed between students and the country's migrant workers during the uprising has become a powerful force, capable of challenging the status quo and shaping the future of the country.

With the momentum generated by the students and migrant workers, the time for a sea change in Bangladesh is now. The country is being led by Dr Muhammad Yunus, a visionary economist who has empowered millions of women entrepreneurs through microfinance. Yunus's leadership reflects a profound shift towards meritocracy, transparency, and inclusive growth—values that align perfectly with the goals of the recent uprising. More importantly, Yunus has global reach and support to carry out real political and economic reforms needed for Bangladesh to thrive as an economic superpower.

Battery-powered rickshaw is the way forward

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Since the British era, pedal rickshaws have been at the forefront of urban and rural transportation for the entire population of Bangladesh. Be it taking children to school, going to bazaar for groceries, or enjoying an afternoon ride, generations of families have enjoyed door-to-door services of rickshaws in their daily lives. Pedal rickshaws are embedded in our culture, much like Bangkok's iconic "Tuktuks," the Filipino "Habab Habab" or Kolkata's hand-pulled rickshaws. Rickshaws were originally introduced in the subcontinent by the colonialists to exercise their power and portray class differences to the colonised.

In recent years, there has been a debate about the suitability of pedal versus battery-powered rickshaws in today's Bangladesh. We also witnessed demonstrations by both groups of rickshaw drivers in recent months. Both types of rickshaws have benefits and drawbacks, so there needs to be a thorough analysis at the national level to determine the future of millions of rickshaw pullers and drivers. This article will try to dig into the arguments raised by different groups from a socio-economic perspective.

One of the major challenges in incorporating battery-powered rickshaws into our cities is the cost of batteries and their installation. For rickshaw pullers, most of whom are financially vulnerable, transitioning to battery-powered rickshaws can be a costly undertaking with many, particularly in Dhaka, not owning their rickshaws. Instead, they rent them from contractors or businessmen who typically have fleets of 10 to 20 rickshaws, charging a fixed daily fee. As battery-powered rickshaws gain popularity, more owners are likely to replace traditional pedal rickshaws with battery-operated ones. However, the high cost of batteries may force them to reduce the size of their fleets, which could lead to significant unemployment in the rickshaw industry.

Another issue is that 90 percent of the nation's rickshaw-charging garages rely on illegal or bypassed electricity connections. As a result, rickshaw pullers do not pay for electricity, causing losses for the Dhaka Power Distribution Company, Dhaka Electric Supply Company, and Bangladesh Rural Electrification Board.

However, battery-powered rickshaws offer greater mobility compared to pedal rickshaws due to their consistent speed and longer range. According to a research paper titled "Impact of Pedal Powered Vehicles on Average Traffic Speed in Dhaka City," roads without rickshaws have an average speed of

about 20 kilometres per hour, whereas roads with rickshaws average only 11 kilometres per hour. This shows that pedal rickshaws slow down traffic, creating obstacles for cars, motorcycles, and buses.

Currently, almost the entire rickshaw industry operates within the grey economy, meaning it is neither taxed nor regulated by the government. This lack of oversight leads to frequent unlawful activities, including traffic violations, bribery, corruption, and syndicate involvement. A major concern with battery-powered rickshaws is the risk of serious injuries to both pedestrians and passengers in

lanes, this is a crucial step toward ensuring safety and smoother traffic flow.

Moreover, battery-powered rickshaws should be regulated to generate revenue from charging. Similar to gas stations, rickshaw charging stations can be established in various areas. These stations could also incorporate solar systems to alleviate some pressure on the electricity grid. Additionally, separate metres and electricity pricing—aligning with rickshaw fares and the average income of rickshaw pullers—should also be implemented. Plans also must consider fare limits for rickshaws to ensure economic

in their respective localities. The national framework must include separate lanes for rickshaws in three-lane or wider roads, mandatory speed limits that may vary according to area, and limits on the number of rickshaws allowed to ply in a particular area to control congestion. Strict implementation of these rules at the national and local levels will ensure improvements in traffic congestion and road safety.

It is a complex task to legalise and implement regulations for battery-powered

rickshaws, and the issue is exacerbated by the electric power consumption concerns and economic consequences on pedal rickshaw pullers. However, in the long run, battery-powered rickshaws have to be incorporated in our society because of the benefits they offer—higher speed and accessibility. Steps can be taken to improve the structural integrity of battery-powered rickshaws to address safety concerns. The government must ensure a smooth transition to battery power-rickshaws so that all parties can benefit from it.



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FILE PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

the event of an accident. The fragile structure of these vehicles, combined with their relatively high speeds, does not offer enough safety for the users and passengers.

Rickshaw lanes are not a groundbreaking idea or revolutionary policy in Bangladesh. They have been often advocated as a solution and successfully implemented in some areas, including the Bashundhara residential area, which shows how traffic could improve if rickshaw lanes were introduced throughout Dhaka and other cities. Adding dedicated rickshaw lanes would enhance mobility and safety by separating rickshaws from motor vehicles. Establishing these lanes on the far left side of roads would not only address the speed mismatch between rickshaws and motor vehicles but also help reduce illegal parking issues. According to a study by Bari and Eroymsan (2006), parked cars are the "least efficient users of spaces," so creating rickshaw lanes would yield greater benefits. Although some argue that developing nations face a "shortage of road space" for separate

accessibility for people from all income backgrounds.

The rickshaw industry requires digitalisation similar to most other industries in Bangladesh. A complete switch to battery-powered rickshaws would be a key step forward. These rickshaws ease the physical strain on drivers and create an income option for the elderly and disabled. In some areas, rickshaw pullers require a licence to operate. Ensuring that they carry their licence will ensure they are held accountable for traffic violations.

In fact, it is essential to bring the entire industry under government administration and include services such as registration of rickshaws, appropriate training to ensure compliance with traffic rules, etc. Currently, there is no national law governing rickshaws. They are controlled by individual municipalities and city corporations. So it is important to introduce a national-level legal framework based on which local governments can add their own regulations

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SATURDAY'S ANSWERS

