

BNP's pledge for reforms sounds good

We would like to see the party match its words with actions

BNP's acting chairperson Tarique Rahman made a number of promises on Thursday, which we hope the party sincerely intends to fulfil. Such promises, however, are nothing new. We have heard similar promises when a party was not in power only to see them being forgotten after coming to power. Nevertheless, the promises made by BNP in its reform agenda sounds promising on paper.

Tarique emphasised building a Bangladesh where not even the prime minister could abuse power, highlighting principles such as the rule of law, human rights, freedom of speech, transparency, and accountability. Drawing from BNP's "31-point Outline for Structural Reforms," he reiterated some objectives that are both novel and ambitious. For instance, no party has previously placed much emphasis on ensuring a free press. But Tarique declared his resolve to enable the media to "speak truth to power" and openly criticise the government. If implemented, this would mark a significant departure from the Awami League's harsh persecution of dissidents and journalists. Furthermore, the proposed reforms to curtail the government's excessive power—including the introduction of a bicameral parliamentary system and limiting the prime minister's tenure to two consecutive terms—suggest that the party might be embracing more mature political practices.

Unfortunately, if we observe the party's actions, we can deduce that it is already faltering in realising some promises, mainly that of curbing corruption. For example, there have been multiple reports of "BNP-linked" groups extorting citizens, with its party members or activists allegedly filling the void of AL-established syndicates—as well as regular infighting within the party. While BNP leadership has issued warnings against such behaviour, more decisive actions are necessary. Otherwise, such incidents will continue to cast doubt on assurances from BNP's leadership and make it harder for citizens to place their trust in the party.

BNP's pledge to build an inclusive, liberal, and democratic Bangladesh—by balancing power among the legislative, judicial, and executive branches and dismantling the tools of oppression used by past governments—is commendable. However, sincerity is the key to achieving such a transformation. Much of the scepticism surrounding BNP—as well as other political parties—could be addressed if the party itself practiced democratic principles, such as decentralising its decision-making process. Additionally, it could move away from the failed dynastic politics of our region, which has acted as an obstacle to the democratisation process.

The July uprising demonstrated that people are fed up with dynastic politics driven by violence, oppression, and corruption. Many have sacrificed their lives to break free from this system and secure the rights of all citizens. All political parties, including BNP, must honour these sacrifices and ensure they are not in vain.

Simplify the birth registration process

Alleviate the sufferings of parents seeking the service

We are concerned about the cumbersome process of birth registration in the country, which has been causing immense suffering to the parents who want to enrol their children in school next year. Reportedly, many parents in Dhaka are facing delays of several months to complete their children's birth registration. This is primarily due to a government rule that requires individuals born after 2001 to provide both their parents' birth registration certificates and National Identification (NID) numbers in order to register their birth. Since a large number of the parents do not have their own birth registration certificates, they are now having to first apply for their own before applying for their children's, which is taking up a significant amount of time. In many cases, there are discrepancies between the information on their birth certificates and NID cards. Correcting these inconsistencies also takes considerable time. As a result, many parents are running out of time to enrol their children in their preferred educational institutions.

Clearly, this problem would not have arisen if birth registration had been completed immediately after birth, at the hospital. According to Article 7 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, birth registration must be done immediately after a child's birth. Additionally, a directive from the Registrar General's office recommends that birth registration be completed within 45 days of a child's birth. However, this rule remains largely unimplemented in the country. Many parents, therefore, only seek to register their children's births when preparing to admit them to school.

Every year, in the first eight months, the city corporations receive only a handful of birth registration applications. However, from September onwards, the number of applications increases, putting considerable pressure on the city corporation offices. This year, the situation has worsened, especially due to the vacuum created in the city corporations after the fall of the Awami League regime. While birth registration work resumed by the end of September, the process remains as inefficient as before.

We, therefore, urge the authorities to make the birth registration process simpler and more citizen-friendly. It makes little sense for parents to be required to produce their own birth certificates to register their children's births. They should be able to do so using only their NID cards. Furthermore, since we already have a digital system for birth and death registration, the government should promote its use among service seekers. In the long term, the government should consider appointing a registrar at every hospital across the country so that the registration process can be completed at the hospital.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Bhutto becomes Pakistan's Prime Minister

On this day in 1988, Benazir Bhutto was elected as prime minister and became the first woman in modern history to lead a Muslim country, serving as prime minister from 1988 to 1990 and again from 1993 to 1996.

BANGLADESH INTERIM GOVERNMENT'S 100-DAY JOURNEY

Bridging immediate needs with long-term vision



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In its first 100 days, Bangladesh's interim government (IG) has taken critical steps towards stabilising the country and signalling a new direction. The IG's commitment to transparency and accountability stands out, with robust criticism now emerging freely in news outlets and on social media—a promising sign of democratic practices returning to public discourse. With substantial national and international support, the IG has initiated several changes, including public briefings and a clear anti-corruption stance, which are refreshing shifts from the secrecy of past regimes. Notable achievements include stabilising central bank reserves, appointing reform commissions, empowering the army to help restore law and order, supporting a peaceful celebration of the largest Hindu festival, and reopening of university campuses.

In a recent show of responsiveness, the IG addressed the protests by injured individuals from the mass uprising. When demonstrators demanded better treatment and financial support, four advisers intervened very late at night, assuring swift action and pledging funds for their medical needs and rehabilitation. This engagement exemplifies the IG's commitment to addressing urgent public grievances directly and transparently—a positive step towards rebuilding trust and showing accountability.

As I wrote in an earlier piece, there is a deep divide between the elite and the working people—a disconnect that's not just economic or cultural, but deeply moral. Integrity has too often taken a backseat to personal gain, fracturing the country's social and moral fabric. For decades, millions of Bangladeshis have felt that leaders of every stripe put self-interest above public good, leaving working people behind.

In addressing this disconnect, the IG faces deep-seated challenges on multiple fronts—from economic pressures to political factionalism—that demand a careful balance between "immediate actions" and a resilient "long-term vision."

The government faces an uphill economic battle. High inflation, unemployment, and rising living costs weigh heavily on working people, while local corruption, soaring prices of food and fuel, and powerful syndicates controlling key sectors expose the

deep-rooted challenges of dismantling entrenched power structures. The IG's appeals to working people must be authentic and rooted in real change—not just high-minded reform ideas or blaming the past 15 years of institutional breakdown.

Political observers note a lack of political savvy within the IG, and its struggle to strike a balance between competing demands from various

needs, the IG must also build a resilient governance model that can withstand political shifts and uphold democratic principles. Avoiding past mistakes, such as the abrupt abolition of the caretaker government in 2011, will be key to restoring public trust. Strengthening institutions, establishing accountability pathways, and fostering diplomatic stability are essential for Bangladesh's long-term growth.

People aren't looking for quick fixes. They want a principled, realistic approach that respects the complexity of the task at hand. Building Bangladesh from Tetulia to Teknaf isn't about instant solutions but about setting a foundation rooted in solid principles and pragmatic action.

After years of hollow promises, regime changes, and fragile constitutional amendments, many

Jonogon committed to justice and opportunities for all.

The IG's immediate priorities should include: i) bringing high-profile detainees to justice through a transparent judicial process; ii) reducing the influence of syndicates in essential sectors like food and housing; iii) increasing representation from a diverse set of stakeholders in the decision-making process; and iv) establishing a systematic, regular reporting process by the IG on progress and challenges to build public trust and transparency. Rather than waiting for another crisis to unfold, the IG should leverage its intelligence units to gather insights and proactively address growing discontent, some of which may be fuelled by competing factions.

Alongside these short-term actions, the IG must work on building a resilient governance model. A "Bangladesh 2.0" model should balance pragmatic action with justice and inclusivity, creating institutions that uphold democratic values and avoid past mistakes. Long-term goals should focus on strengthening institutions, establishing clear accountability pathways, and securing diplomatic stability to foster sustainable growth.

In international diplomacy, the IG faces the challenge of balancing ties with key allies while asserting Bangladesh's sovereignty. With Trump's re-election and close ties to Indian Prime Minister Modi, Bangladesh must navigate this complex landscape by emphasising its commitment to democratic values, stability, and regional cooperation. Strengthening partnerships with the US on counterterrorism and climate issues, while fostering respectful cooperation with India on economic and security concerns, will allow the IG to secure Bangladesh's interests amid shifting alliances.

Moreover, the IG can leverage the unique asset of Professor Yunus and his extensive international network to reinforce Bangladesh's diplomatic credibility. Balancing these international relationships with domestic priorities will require both skilful negotiation and a clear commitment to the interests of working people.

Bangladesh has defied odds before, but today's greatest challenge is to bridge the widening divide between the elites and the working people. The IG must embrace principled pragmatism—a balance of foundational values and adaptable, practical approaches—to withstand political change and foster resilience. By addressing immediate needs and laying the groundwork for sustainable institutions, the IG can forge a future that honours its people and stands strong in the face of future challenges.



Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus walks off stage after taking oath at the Bangabhaban as the head of the interim government, in Dhaka, Bangladesh, August 8, 2024.

PHOTO: REUTERS

groups within and outside the government seems to be limiting its ability to deliver effective, actionable outcomes.

The IG must prioritise people's most pressing needs, fears, and aspirations. For a rickshaw puller or garment worker, the focus isn't on central bank reserves or constitutional reforms—they need assurance that they can afford food, protect their homes from syndicate control, and secure educational opportunities for their children's future. The Open Market Sales programmes, offering essential food items at subsidised prices to low income families, is a proactive step towards maintaining affordability amid rising food inflation. However, such programmes need to expand to reach the millions still struggling.

While addressing these immediate

are questioning whether traditional governance models—democracy, socialism, or communism—still serve today's needs. These frameworks were created for past eras marked by monarchies, colonialism, and industrial revolutions. Bangladesh in 2024 faces a new set of material and moral realities that demand a governance model built not only for the present but resilient enough to stand the test of time and political vagaries.

Bangladesh needs a new governance model rooted in both ideal justice (*nyaya*) and practical justice (*niti*). It must balance autonomy, inclusivity, and accountability, yet honour the country's unique blend of culture, religion, and identity. Such a model is essential to unite people not as Bangalees or Bangladeshis but as a community of *Boishamma Birodhee*

The barriers to unionisation in the garment industry



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According to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) Bangladesh boasts the title of being the second largest global RMG exporter. The garments sector has contributed to transforming the local economy to lower-middle income from one that was worryingly below the poverty line. Although worth a staggering amount of \$55 billion a year, the industry's infrastructure is far from perfect. Be it political unrests in the country, sustainability concerns from pressure groups or worker dissatisfaction, it is riddled with issues that need to be urgently addressed. Not to mention that workers are paid less than a living wage, which is not inflation adjusted to the soaring costs.

Bangladesh has a class problem which deters from effective conversations about the many barriers to operational unionisation in the garment industry. Without trade unions, it is difficult to address safety issues and elevate workers to fair wages and improved working conditions. The Labour Act 2006 governs labour relations and workers' rights in myriads of sectors of Bangladesh with an entire

chapter dedicated to trade unions and industrial relations. Following the dreadful Rana Plaza collapse, the legislation had various amendments made to it to ensure workplace safety, maintain health standards and improve workers' rights and representation. Additionally, to ascertain that the formation and registration of trade unions is facilitated, provisions were strengthened.

While this Act explicitly grants permission for trade unions to be formed, a minimum of 10 workers within the same establishment are required to register one. The registration process is dauntingly bureaucratic and involves extensive paperwork. By the virtue of this legislation, the registered trade unions have the right to represent their members and can engage in collective bargaining on behalf of their members and negotiate better wages, working conditions, and other benefits. Employer interference through imposing any contractual obligations on workers to not join any union, dismissal or discrimination of workers who are members of any

union, and refusal of employment on such grounds is deemed unlawful through the Labour Act 2006.

It has been established that on paper there is a comprehensive guide for operation of this in an ideal world, but the reality is far from it. The implementation is dangerously deficient. Lack of awareness of the workers themselves prevent them from recognising the benefits of collective bargaining. It does not help that the legislation is riddled with legal jargons that a lay person cannot comprehend. Workers in the garment sector also fear ramifications from employers as they consider themselves low skilled and highly replaceable. There is sufficient precedence of fear mongering by employers in this regard with reports of intimidation, harassment, and retaliations against union organisers and participating workers alike. Historically, the government has been complicit in the maltreatment of workers as they often prioritise increasing the GDP of the country rather than emphasising better standards of living.

Earlier this year, following massive protests by garment industry workers, the minimum wage was increased from Tk 8,300 to Tk 12,500, whereas workers and trade unions say that Tk 23,500 is the living wage. Even this unsatisfactory increase came at the cost of the lives of four workers, while many others were left injured. Many workers were arrested without any possibility of bail. During this time, letters have been issued by big-brand

buyers such as ASOS, Hugo Boss, and H&M asking for suppliers to conclude negotiations peacefully and offer the workers an adequate living wage. Buyers conveniently neglected to quote the amount asked for by the workers in those letters. So, they are indirectly colluding with the employers in the maltreatment of these workers by not up taking the cost of increasing the minimum wage.

Despite legal frameworks being present, it could prove to be useful to simplify the union registration process. Many NGOs and grassroots organisations are running awareness campaigns to ascertain that workers are aware of their rights to unionise. However, it is pertinent for the government to also be involved in the process and detract from the unfair power dynamics between the workers and employers. Employers should face penalisation for engaging in intimidation or any other unfair practices to prevent workers from forming unions. International pressure by purchasers on employers in the garment industry should be more than just condemnations on paper, it should be more than hollow commitments to support a minimum wage, and they should reaffirm the exact amount demanded by the unions and workers.

The barrier to effective unionisation by workers in Bangladesh remain a critical issue and tackling it is the first step to creating a long overdue fair and equitable working environment for the blue-collar workers on whose backs this country runs.