



Jhilpar Park: a small respite in Dhaka

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The cramped city of Dhaka comes with a default setting of stress and traffic. But there are a few places where people still sit down, sip a cup of tea and share their woes. Jhilpar Park on South Badda road is one such place.

The elephant in the room

In this case, the elephant is on the road. Jhilpar Park stands right beside the “Elephant sculpture”, which is also marked on google maps as “Hatichottor”. The four elephants that consist this sculpture face the Hatirheel link road, forever staring into the infinite traffic. This sculpture can be your landmark when you are trying to get to the park.

A breath of fresh air

The park stands right on the bank of Gulshan lake. Which means that there is a consistent gentle breeze that can fill your lungs with fresh air and rejuvenate your soul. Standing here in the evening, under one of the trees and taking in the cool air is nothing short of therapeutic. The trees, combined with green lights here and there, creates a verdant cocoon on this small roadside-island surrounded by roads all around, but still, you feel like you can just sit here and relax for a while.



PHOTO: STAR

There's a view of the lake, just on the other side of the road, which might as well be an extension of the park. There are benches facing the lake where one can stare into the lake. The swelling waves on the water body as boats pass by, the cool air creating tingles on the skin, and the scenic view of a busy city in the distant is a picture-worthy moment.

Fancy a snack?

The appeal of street food in Dhaka is strong, and Jhilpar Park will not disappoint.

Have patience for election

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everyone's consensus,” he said.

The question of when the next election will take place is on everyone's mind. “It is on our minds too.”

The government is taking the steps necessary to arrange the election. The new Election Commission will be formed in a few days, he said.

The EC will start updating the voter's list. For the first time, the government is working to find a way for expatriate citizens to vote through postal ballots, Prof Yunus said.

But forming an EC does not end the government's responsibility. “Reforming the state system is a key commitment of this government. You have given us this mandate.”

One of the six reform commissions is the Electoral Reform Commission. The recommendations of the Constitutional Reform Commission are essential for political parties and people so that they can reach a consensus on election-related matters.

“Based on the consensus... electoral laws will need to be amended.

“I am not sure how much opportunity we will have to implement the proposed reforms. However, I assure you, if you allow us, we will make some necessary reforms and hold the election you desire. Until then, I request you all to be patient.

“We want to create an election system that will be in place for generations. This will protect our country from political crises. For this, I am requesting the necessary time from you. Once decisions on electoral reforms are made, you will get the election roadmap fast.”

The interim government should not deprive the nation of the fulfilment of its aspiration of a new political environment.

“The train to the election has started rolling. It will not stop. But as we move forward, we need to do a lot of work. The train will reach its final station depending on how quickly we can lay down the tracks, and this will happen through consensus among the political parties.”

Additional time may be needed to reach a consensus on other important reforms. “We will continue to ask the public and political parties what reforms they want ahead of the election. Some reforms may occur during the election process.

“The election may be delayed by a few months to implement the reforms.”

The most important task is to organise a free and fair election and let the winner take over.

The government maintains regular communication with political parties. “We take their opinions on various issues. These opinions are largely reflected in our decisions. Their opinions are considered in the reform process.”

At the beginning of the 34-minute speech Prof Yunus remembered the martyrs of the Liberation War and the martyrs of the July uprising.

The interim government took office when the country was in utter chaos, he said.

Around 1,500 students and others were killed and 19,931 were injured during the uprising. Their rehabilitation and treatment will be ensured.

“We will surely bring justice for each killing. The efforts for justice regarding the July-August killings are progressing. We will demand the repatriation of the fallen dictator, Sheikh Hasina, from India,” he said.

The government will ensure justice for all the misdeeds committed in the last 15 years. “Innumerable people have been victims of enforced disappearance or killed during this period.”

The commission for enforced disappearances has information on 1,600 instances of enforced disappearances. The commission believes this number will exceed 3,500, he said.

Many are still scared to report enforced disappearances. “Please report to the commission with full confidence. No one has the power to harm you again.”

The testimonies the commission received from the victims are heart-wrenching.

Those involved in these crimes will face justice. No matter how powerful the accused are, or which force they belong to, there will be no mercy, he said.

The interim government has taken steps to hold the trial of enforced disappearances and July-August mass murders to the International Criminal Court.

The government is trying to boost the morale of the police. There has been visible progress in this regard, he said.

When the government took charge, there were attempts to spread fear among religious minorities.

“In some cases, they became victims of violence. But the propaganda surrounding this was exaggerated. The little violence that occurred had political connections.”

Six floods had damaged crops and disrupted supply chains, pushing up the prices of vegetables and other essentials.

“We are doing our best to keep the prices of essentials reasonable.”

To keep the supply and price stable in Ramadan, government authorities are meeting traders. Policies are being adopted to curb inflation; fuel prices have fallen a bit, and steps have been taken to increase the gas supply to industries to ensure uninterrupted production.

Efforts are being made to stop extortion in the transport sector, bring hydropower from Nepal

To help free the judiciary of bribery, the Supreme Judicial Council has been reinstated. The government is committed to protect all sectors from corruption.

Restructuring of the Anti Corruption Commission is almost in its final stages; a list of 150 influential individuals accused of corruption and money laundering has been prepared, and investigations have begun against 79.

At least 19,084 government officers and employees have been promoted, 13,429 transferred, and 12,636 punished. The readymade garment sector became unstable, but the government managed to resolve discontent without major violence.

When the interim government took office, foreign exchange reserves were at “rock bottom”. But the economy is now stronger, he said.

Reserves are improving. Without drawing from the reserves, the government managed to pay off nearly \$ 2 billion in foreign debt.

“Ambassadors from different countries who visited me reiterated their governments’ pledges of support. They have already started working on a new framework for assistance.”

Twenty ambassadors from 20 European Union countries whose stations are in Delhi and seven ambassadors of seven EU countries will meet him, he said.

The World Bank, IMF, and other donor agencies and friendly nations have already pledged nearly 8 billion dollars in loans and grants, he said.

Once the aid starts flowing in, the country's economy will become strong, encouraging foreign investors to come here.

The fallen government and its accomplices have syphoned off \$ 12-15 billion from the country every year. The interim government is trying to bring back the money.

“If we succeed, it will give a significant boost to our economy.”

He urged expatriate citizens to invest in the private sector of Bangladesh.

Referring to the Awami League, he said, “They are trying to present themselves in various forms as your favourites. Stay away from the conspiracies of the defeated forces, and keep the country free. Be firm.”

There is a “massive plan” at home and abroad to destabilise and break the morale of the interim government. “A major effort is being made to divide us. The leaders of the fallen government... are trying to come back to the country using ill-gotten wealth.

“Do not let them succeed. Their success would mean the nation's demise, the end of our identity as a nation. Remain vigilant.”

The interim government will leave power in a short period of time.

“But the historic opportunity created for the nation must not be lost, and I strongly call on everyone... to stay firm in ensuring that this opportunity is not lost.”

The wrongs of past 15yrs must be righted

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There is also another expectation -- to right all the wrongs done during this long bout of misrule.

TDS: How would you define a reasonable timeframe?

Fakhrul: There are a few minimum requirements. For instance, the electoral system needs to be reformed to enable free and fair elections. The heavily politicised bureaucracy must be overhauled to make it neutral and capable of facilitating a credible election. Similarly, the judiciary, which has been politicised, needs to be reformed to the extent possible. Complete reform might not be achievable immediately, especially at the grassroots level, but these steps are critical.

TDS: Your acting chairperson, Tarique Rahman, has also spoken about this logical timeframe, making it clear that there's no rush. However, some of your party leaders have mentioned that elections should be held by March or April, leading to some confusion. What is BNP's official position on this?

Fakhrul: We don't want to specify exact dates or deadlines because, as a party, we're being pragmatic. There may be some flexibility with the timeline, but elections must be held as quickly as possible for the good of the country and its people.

Having been in government ourselves, we understand that reforms require some time. However, we insist on timely elections because only an elected government can ensure legitimacy. The mandate of an elected government is entirely different from that of an interim administration. When we interact with foreign stakeholders, investors, and industrialists, they often express concerns about investing during the tenure of a temporary government. Timely elections will resolve many of these issues.

TDS: Regarding the interim government, particularly the current one -- there is a suggestion that although it lacks electoral legitimacy, it came to power after a mass uprising involving students and the public, with active participation from all political parties, including the BNP. Doesn't that give this government a mandate derived from the uprising?

Fakhrul: The uprising undoubtedly aimed for reforms. But that doesn't mean this government can operate indefinitely, like what we saw during the 1/11 period [indicating the government that took power on January 11, 2007] or similar situations in the past. An unelected government must not exceed its logical timeframe. Prolonged tenure creates various complications, including difficulties in maintaining international relations.

Additionally, anti democratic and fascist forces often take advantage of such transitions. During 1/11, the government's attempts at reforms ultimately failed, forcing them to hold elections and leave.

TDS: As someone who has spent the entire life in politics, would you say that the BNP, as a major political party, practises democracy internally?

Fakhrul: I won't claim we do it perfectly well, but we are practising democracy. Our standing committee sits four times a month. Decisions are made collectively. The current situation has prevented us from holding councils everywhere, but we

“We come here often. It's on my way home from university and we love the street food options here. It's really convenient because without this place, you have to get a rickshaw and go all the way across the lake,” says Shawon Bhuiyan Rahi, a third-year student at Manarat International University. His friend Sifat Ahmed agreed, and one can see why.

There are the usual options, such as halim, fuchka, pani puri, jhalmuri, and boiled eggs, but that's just the beginning. For street food junkies who like to treat their tastebuds, there's kebabs and rolls, soup and noodles, dosa and, hold on to your seat, live pizza!

If you are still looking for more, there are carts that make chittoi pitha on the spot, and if you've ever tasted these delicacies with chilli chutney, your mouth should be watering by now.

If you want to elevate your street food experience and get fancy, there is also a restaurant here that offers Thai, Chinese, and Indian food, along with a juice parlour where you can get a refreshing drink to forget the terrible weather these days.

And finally, to finish things off, there's ice cream, and who can so no to ice-cream really?

So, if you are around Hatirheel this week, why not drop by for a chat?

will address that.

Abolishing the caretaker government system was the greatest mistake. Elections under a caretaker government fostered democratic practices. In contrast, there has been no accountability in the last three elections. A country's democratic culture influences its political parties, and all of us must work together to strengthen it.

TDS: Are you concerned that the current government may delay elections or avoid them altogether?

Fakhrul: At this point, I don't see any indication of that. We've had both formal and informal discussions with the student leaders, and I haven't felt that they intend to delay or avoid elections.

TDS: You are advocating for elections, and the government is too. You're suggesting elections at a reasonable time, while the government wants reforms first. But the government hasn't openly stated any intent to hold on to power indefinitely. Doesn't this align the BNP, the anti discrimination student movement, and the government to some extent?

Fakhrul: There isn't much difference in principle. However, several fundamental issues need clarification. For instance, some are suggesting rewriting the constitution rather than amending it. Even Dr Ali Riaz, who heads the reform committee, has stated that the constitution will be rewritten.

It remains unclear whether the constitution will be rewritten or drafted anew, or simply amended.

TDS: What's your stance on this?

Fakhrul: We've also formed a committee on constitutional reform, which we'll share with the government. We're willing to cooperate in making the necessary amendments to the existing constitution for governance. However, fundamental changes to the constitution should be entrusted to the people. Only their representatives can undertake such tasks.

TDS: But it was the people who carried out the uprising.

Fakhrul: Who exactly are “the people” behind the student-led uprising? Whose voices will you prioritise?

TDS: Those who led it.

Fakhrul: How do you determine that? This issue is being debated from many perspectives.

TDS: You were indirectly aligned with the movement. While you may not have been formally involved, the students led it, and the world witnessed that. Isn't that clear?

Fakhrul: We aren't denying that. We embrace it. We were also part of it. Our point is that any constitutional change requires the people's mandate. This government is not a revolutionary government.

TDS: Do you think they should form a party?

Fakhrul: That's not for me to say.

TDS: If they form a political party, shouldn't they leave the government?

Fakhrul: They absolutely should. Otherwise, the government becomes biased. You claim the government will remain neutral, establish a neutral Election Commission, and conduct impartial elections. But if you simultaneously run a political party and hold government power, doesn't that create a direct conflict of interest? If you want to discuss revolutionary change, then form a revolutionary government and run

Man beaten to death in Kishoreganj

A CORRESPONDENT, Kishoreganj

A Hindu man was beaten to death over his alleged relationship with a Muslim girl in Nowabad Bhuiyan Bazar of Kishoreganj's Karimganj upazila early Saturday.

Ridoy Rabi Das, 21, worked at a hair salon in Nowabad Bhuiyan Bazar.

Locals said he had a relationship with a 16-year-old girl.

Lt Col Riazul Karim of Karimganj army camp said locals brought him there after he was beaten up. “He fell ill during interrogation. We hospitalised him.”

The cause of his death could be known after autopsy and viscera reports, the army officer said.

Dr Kamrul Islam of President Abdul Hamid Medical College Hospital said army personnel brought Ridoy to the hospital around 2:15am on Saturday and he died an hour later. He had injury marks on different parts of his body, he said.

Locals said Ridoy and his cousin Shakil Rabi Das were brought to a club by the girl's relatives on Friday.

Local UP Chairman Mostafa Kamal, member Jahangir Miah, and Nowabad Bhuiyan Bazar committee President Manzil Miah were present at the club, said Shakil.

Shakil alleged that their phones were taken away and they were beaten up.

“After an hour, we were taken to a nearby army camp in an auto-rickshaw. At the camp, we were interrogated separately. I don't know what happened to Ridoy,” he said.

Chairman Mostafa denied the allegation of beating up Ridoy. He said they just checked Ridoy's phone and sent him to the army camp.

students, its ban has been justified. Yet, the BNP seems to believe that the decision was not right. Why is that?

Fakhrul: No one from our party has said that banning Chhatra League was unjustified. What we've said is that the decision to ban any organisation should be made by parliament.

TDS: Allegations have surfaced that BNP leaders are now engaging in the same extortion and land-grabbing that AL leaders were accused of. What's your take on this?

Fakhrul: You can't generalise such claims. Yes, there have been isolated incidents, and we've acted decisively. Over 700 members have been expelled for misconduct. We're well aware of the issue and remain vigilant.

TDS: Final question. There seems to be a growing narrative against certain media outlets in Bangladesh, particularly The Daily Star and the Prothom Alo, labelling them as accomplices of fascism, with even calls from some quarters to shut them down. Though this sentiment may not be widespread, it does exist. As the secretary general of a major political party, what is your stance on this, and what do you think should be done in this regard?

Fakhrul: Our position is very clear: we strongly believe in the complete freedom of the press. It was Ziaur Rahman who first brought this principle forward.

That being said, media freedom must be exercised with responsibility. For example, some time ago, a newspaper published a report claiming that all arrangements had been made for Begum Khaleda Zia to leave the country, but she refused to go. This was utterly baseless and a completely false report. The media must refrain from publishing such unfounded news, especially when it concerns national leaders. There must be a solid basis for such claims. Baseless reporting should not happen.

Right now, the media's most significant responsibility is to contribute towards ensuring that this government quickly holds fair elections. Another crucial role for the media is to avoid maligning the parties that are genuinely involved in the movement for democracy. These are our expectations. There may be differences of opinion, and that's fine, but deliberate misrepresentation is unacceptable.

We're vocal about press freedom. For instance, we welcome the decision to repeal the Digital Security Act and Cyber Security Act. This is a very positive step, and it is what we've been advocating for. However, we also want everything to be done with a sense of responsibility. In a democracy, rights are essential, but so is accountability. Everyone must act responsibly.

As for the calls to shut down media outlets or burn them down, we're entirely against such actions. Some isolated incidents may have occurred, but we've protested against them to the best of our ability.

TDS: Thank you very much for your time.

Fakhrul: Thank you as well. We're always in support of ensuring that you can continue to speak the truth freely.

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