

## Talks with parties necessary before placing reports

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He urged the reform commissions to ensure public engagement in the process.

“Reform commissions will hold discussions with the government, which will take time. In our view, the more the time passes, the bigger the problems grow,” he said.

“Who will implement these proposals?” Fakhrul asked, alleging that the administration and government machinery are still not free from fascism.

“If the foundation isn’t strong, imposing changes from the top won’t lead to quick progress. We need to fix the system and strengthen institutions. Only by building institutions that support democracy can we make it successful,” he said.

Fakhrul clarified it is a misconception that his party is solely focused on elections and not on reforms.

“We have been sincere about reforms from the very beginning. Unfortunately, we’re now hearing statements that the BNP does not want reforms, but only elections. This is not correct.”

Fakhrul said the BNP is committed to participating in elections only after necessary reforms to ensure a free, fair and credible voting process.

“We keep talking about elections because it’s the main gateway to democracy and the democratic process,” he said.

Fakhrul also said people must keep in mind the ongoing struggle for democracy since the Liberation War. “We must not forget 1971,” he remarked.

Fakhrul said BNP leaders and activists endured a lot of oppression in their fight against fascism and continued their movement, trying to remain vocal for a long time.

“At that time, we didn’t see many people by our side. Now, we see many, and it feels very good. We are becoming even more inspired,” he added.

Economist Debapriya Bhattacharya, a distinguished fellow at the Centre for Policy Dialogue, said reforms are a “grand dream, but unity is essential”.

“We must move towards elections. But before that, people need relief. Don’t mislead people favouring reforms. Attention must be given to these issues. Don’t just focus on superficial discussions while neglecting people’s livelihoods and security,” he urged.

He also said that the extent of looting during the Awami League regime was unimaginable for the public until research revealed an inherited dire economic situation which needs to be fixed.

Stressing the importance of universal human rights, Debapriya said, “We must ensure the rights of those who are marginalised, affected by river erosion, indigenous communities, Dalits, and those facing discrimination based on gender, religion, or sexual identity.”

“Their rights to live, speak, assemble, and earn a livelihood

first is the dire economic situation and illegal land grabbing. The second is whether we can change the prevailing political culture. The third is the capability of the interim government to tackle the existing challenges”.

To address these issues, he suggested three measures: the effective functioning of the government, meaningful reforms, and a political transformation.

Badiul Alam Majumdar, head of the Electoral Reform Commission, said, “We are the beneficiaries of the mass uprising. We owe a debt to the

holding elections.

“For reforms to be effective, they must focus on improving the living standards of ordinary people,” he added.

He also urged political parties to disclose their funding and its sources and establish internal democracy within their organisations.

Environment Adviser Syeda Rizwana Hasan said forging unity is challenging, but stressed that it must be achieved through incorporating everyone’s opinions. She also emphasised the need for a national consensus on reforms.

reform proposals from the political parties and other stakeholders. This could pave the way for national consensus.”

He said that minimum reforms required for a fair general election must be implemented. “Jamaat-e-Islami is ready to support the interim government for as long as necessary to achieve this.”

Nasiruddin Patwari, convenor of Jatiya Nagorik Committee, said they want a Bangladesh where political parties would be held accountable to the people rather than to any individual or family.

Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal, pointed out that people had two key expectations – control over the prices of essentials and security – and these expectations should be met.

Nurul Haque Nur, president of a faction of Gono Odhikar Parishad, called upon political parties to address election-related issues through mutual discussions rather than creating controversies.

Dhaka University Pro-Vice Chancellor Mamun Ahmed said the reform process lacked focus on education, a key sector.

He stressed the need for a reform



Speakers at a national dialogue on “Unity, Reform, and Elections”. Forum for Bangladesh Studies organised the event at the Krishibid Institution Bangladesh yesterday.

PHOTO: STAR

must be guaranteed. We need to build a united Bangladesh where this is assured. We must come to a consensus on a minimum common ground.”

He added, “... If there’s a robbery at 11:00pm in the most affluent neighbourhoods, if we don’t have security, how long should we wait for reforms? If this is the state of law and order inside the Secretariat, what will happen to general citizens? Whom should we turn to?”

Hossain Zillur Rahman, former adviser to a caretaker government, said aspirations for justice and dignity came to the forefront after the July uprising.

He pointed out three uncertainties regarding Bangladesh’s future. “The

martyrs and the injured who brought us to this point. To repay this debt, we need to carry out reforms and hold fair elections.”

He said that people urged him to reform the electoral system to prevent corrupt individuals from becoming lawmakers.

Highlighting the use of money as a primary cause of electoral irregularities, he called on young people and politicians to take action and put an end to this practice.

Writer and professor Salimullah Khan remarked, “There should be a consensus on minimum reforms for our future. However, we must ensure these reforms do not take too long.”

He emphasised the need to define the minimum reforms necessary for

“If we hesitate about reforms this time, there will be no stability in the country again,” she warned.

Industries Adviser Adilur Rahman Khan said fascist collaborators have been given different positions over the last 15 years and they cannot be removed in a day or two, or even in four months.

People should put pressure on the government and support efforts to remove them, he added.

Jamaat-e-Islami Secretary General Mia Golam Parwar said, “I want to send a message to the chief adviser: reform proposals may be submitted by December. Once they are submitted, they should be reviewed, and another public dialogue should be held focusing on the common

“In the future, politics will no long center on any individual or family. In the new political settlement, there will be no room for ‘Mujibism or Hasina’.

Ganosamhati Andolon Chief Coordinator Junaid Saki said a consensus among political parties on key issues like reforms and elections is crucial for a bright future.

“This consensus would help the country move forward,” he added.

Basudeb Dhar, president of Bangladesh Puja Udjapan Parishad, said a conspiracy is afoot to undermine national unity.

“The fire at the Secretariat and the attacks on religious minorities are part of this conspiracy.”

Tania Rab, senior vice president of

commission on education.

Eminent photographer Shahidul Alam said reforms should be inclusive and focused on the ordinary people. Reforms should ensure the betterment of everyone, including workers and day labourers.

Business leader Fazlul Haque expressed concern that the economy had been overlooked in the reform process over the last few months. He called for the unity among the business community, excluding the oligarchs, to ensure economic stability.

Brig Gen (ret'd) Hasan Nasir, a member of the commission on reinvestigation of the 2009 BDR mutiny, and journalist Mushfiq Fazal Ansari also spoke at the event, among others.

## Consensus key to reforms, election

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Because of this unity, Bangladesh can now reach goals that appear to be unattainable. “This is our greatest opportunity. We must build an economy that ensures the equality of wealth and opportunity for all citizens.”

The state will be such that it makes identities such as minority or majority irrelevant. The identity as a citizen of Bangladesh will be enough, Yunus said.

As the video streaming suffered a technical glitch, Chief Adviser’s Press Wing later gave a written script of the address.

According to the script, Yunus said that preparations for reform

and elections will continue simultaneously. Every citizen should participate in the reform while the Election Commission prepares for the election.

The 15 reform commissions will hand their reports to the government in January, he said.

Just because a commission makes a recommendation does not mean people must accept it. This is why a National Consensus Building Commission has been formed, he added.

Stating that the young people become eligible to vote at different ages in different countries, he said 17 was the right age for one to be eligible.

“I am not sure what the election reform commission will propose. If everyone agrees on the proposal and reaches a consensus, we will accept that.”

Addressing the event, Bangla Academy President Prof Abul Quasem Fazlul Huq emphasised that the next elections must be free and fair.

“We should leave past mistakes behind... and ensure judicial independence, establish rule of law, and improve education and health care,” he said.

Prof Mushtaq Husain Khan of the University of London said in the absence of unity on reforms and elections, the future would be bleak.

Mere changes to the laws and regulations are not enough. “Collective efforts are necessary to dismantle the monopolistic power structures. For this, political parties can play a significant role. If political parties fail to dismantle the informal power channels, they will not succeed,” he said.

Ali Riaz, head of the Constitution Reform Commission, said people were united on their demands for accountable governance, elections that reflect the people’s will, and the prevention of autocracy.

Administrative reforms alone are insufficient and a change in the political culture is equally necessary, he said.

While democracy is under threat globally, Bangladesh has upheld democratic principles by defeating a fascist ruler, he said, adding that the next election should be viewed as a tool to safeguard democracy, not a mere means to gain power.

Faruk Wasif, director general of the Press Institute of Bangladesh, moderated the programme.

### FAMILIES OF JULY MARTYRS DEMAND JUSTICE

Those injured during the July uprising and families of those killed jointly inaugurated the event. They demanded the swift trial of those responsible for the casualties and the rehabilitation of the injured.

Abu Bakar Siddik, a Dhaka

Polytechnic Institution student who got shot, accused some political parties of giving shelter to fascists.

Robiul Awal, whose brother Imam Hossain was shot dead at a demonstration, expressed doubts the killers would ever face justice. “Yes, we all want reforms and elections, but please focus on the trials,” he said.

Abul Hossain, whose son Shahriar Hassan got killed, said, “No one made the ultimate sacrifice for an election alone. Reforms should come first, then the election.”

Golam Rahman, also a father who lost his son, said he wondered if former prime minister Sheikh Hasina would face trial.

## 6 killed as bus hits 3 vehicles at toll plaza

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said Abdul Quader Jilani, officer-in-charge of Hasara highway police station.

Five of them died at Mitford Hospital and another at National Institute of Traumatology and Orthopaedic Rehabilitation, popularly known as Pangu Hospital, said police.

The bus was heading to Kuakata.

The deceased were car passengers Amena Akter, 45, her daughters Israt Jahan Imi, 26, and Riha Moni, 11, Israt’s two-year-old son Aiyaz Hossain, and motorcycle riders Reshma Aktar, 33, wife of Suman from Maghbazar, and her seven-year-old son Md Abdullah.

The bus staffers managed to flee the scene, OC Jilani said, adding that filing of a case in this connection was underway.

Reshma’s father Malik Fakir told The Daily Star said his daughter, along with her husband and child, on a motorcycle was going to attend her sister’s wedding in Madaripur.

An eyewitness, Sujan, who was in another car on the other line of the toll plaza at that time, said they saw the bus was coming at a high speed and within a moment it crashed onto the car and two other vehicles.

Devan Azad Hossain, Srinagar Fire Service Station officer, said they went to the spot after hearing the news of the accident and sent the injured to hospital.

## Election commissioners breached oath of office

### FROM PAGE 1 PUNISHMENT ‘A MUST’

The last general election in January had been at the centre of controversy as it was not competitive and inclusive due to a boycott by the major opposition parties, including the BNP. The AL had to field dummy independent candidates, many of whom were leaders of the party, to make the polls appear participatory.

The 2018 election became controversial with opposition parties alleging ballot-box stuffing the night before election day. In January 2019, the Jatiya Oikya Front alleged before the EC that between 30 and 60 percent of the votes were cast the night before.

The same month, Transparency International, Bangladesh, in a study found that stamping of ballots took place the night before election day in more than one centre in 33 of the 50 surveyed constituencies.

The 2014 election was one-sided, in which 153 lawmakers out of 300 were elected unopposed as most of the opposition, including the BNP, boycotted the election.

The AL-led alliance won more than two-thirds majority in all three national elections held under the Hasina government.

A section of police officials on Tuesday admitted that they were under pressure from higher authorities while performing duties during the last three national elections.

In a meeting with the reform commission, they also alleged that

there were “financial transactions” during the polls.

The reform commission members believe that the election commissioners, by overseeing the “controversial” elections in 2014, 2018 and 2024, breached their “oath to preserve, protect, and defend the constitution.”

Its chief Badiul said everyone is aware of how those elections were conducted.

“We are considering these issues so that no one can get the scope to evade accountability for their wrongdoing. Those responsible should be brought to justice and punished. These elections need to be investigated. If the question of justice arises, the matter must be investigated first. These are our considerations while preparing the recommendations,” he said.

He emphasised the EC’s role as a constitutional body and said that the election commissioners took an oath to uphold the constitution and ensure the democratic system will be effective through free, fair, and neutral elections.

“By failing to do so [hold fair polls], they have violated the constitution on one hand and breached their oath on the other,” Badiul added.

The reform commission is also thinking about how to hold the election commissioners accountable if they are involved in irregularities.

It is considering proposing legal provisions to take action against the commissioners through investigation in such cases, said a member of the

reform commission, who wished not to be named.

### MEANINGFUL CHANGES

Badiul said that they are considering a recommendation to change the law under which the chief election commissioner and other election commissioners are appointed.

The government can appoint its desired people as CEC and election commissioners under the law, he said. “There are weaknesses in the law.”

To avoid manipulation of the system, the reform commission chief said, representatives from the opposition and the third-largest party in parliament, along with the treasury bench, should be included in the search committee responsible for selecting nominees for the CEC and other election commissioners’ posts.

The commission is likely to recommend restoring the provision of the Representation of the People Order, 1972 (RPO) that empowered the EC to postpone elections at any stage after announcing the schedule.

After an amendment in July 2023, the EC now can postpone elections only on the polling day.

He noted that the RPO includes provisions for taking action against those committing electoral offences, but no significant action was seen in the past.

Asked about his thoughts on empowering the EC, Badiul said, “We will try to increase the powers of the independent Election Commission. It is under our consideration.”

He said, “It is also important to mention that we cannot make any

individual independent. According to the constitution, the Election Commission is already independent. However, we cannot force someone to act independently if they have a subservient attitude.

“That is why we are advocating for a law to ensure the appointment of neutral individuals as the CEC and ECs. If this happens, meaningful changes can take place.”

### PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION

Badiul said the reform commission would keep the issue of introduction of a proportional representation system “under serious consideration”, along with the restoration of a caretaker government to oversee national elections; and limiting the tenures of the prime minister to two terms.

He noted that these issues, as well as the introduction of bicameral legislation, and direct elections to women’s seats, are related to constitutional amendments. The government formed a separate commission for constitutional reforms.

“Members of the two commissions are discussing ways to ensure coordination between their proposals on such matters,” Badiul said.

Proportional representation is an electoral system in which seats in parliament are allocated to political parties based on the proportion of votes they receive in an election.

About the caretaker government system, Badiul said, “Recently, the High Court delivered a verdict