

Consensus key to achieving reforms

The reform vs election debate is unfortunate

The enormous sacrifices made during the July-August uprising have created a historic opportunity for Bangladesh to reshape its political landscape, strengthen institutions, and ensure accountable governance. However, as the months pass and the interim government faces various challenges, a critical question has emerged recently: should the desired reforms precede elections, or should an elected government take the reins of reform implementation? Recent statements by government officials and political leaders show a divide that must be bridged for the sake of the nation.

At a two-day event in Dhaka recently, several government advisers weighed in on the issue, emphasising the need for reforms as well as consensus. In his address, Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus affirmed that preparations for reforms and elections would proceed simultaneously, warning that reforms without consensus and elections without reforms would be counterproductive. Currently, 15 reform commissions are working on proposals expected to be ready by January. In his address, Adviser Mahfuz Alam stated that consultation with all stakeholders, including political parties, would determine the nature and extent of reforms. "We need agreement on how much reform is possible and whether a legal framework can ensure that future governments continue these initiatives," he said.

Meanwhile, BNP has insisted that elections and reforms should progress in tandem. Senior leaders, including Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alangir and Ruhul Kabir Rizvi, have expressed concerns that prioritising reforms over elections could stall the democratic process. Rizvi was particularly critical, claiming that proponents of a reform-first approach harbour "evil intentions" by suggesting that political parties' push for a democratic transition equates to opposing reforms. He underscored the urgency of restoring power to elected representatives who could then implement reforms with a popular mandate.

We must say both sides have valid points. The government's emphasis on implementing some reforms before elections reflects the understanding that a broken system cannot deliver on people's aspirations. Without addressing systemic flaws—such as the politicisation of state institutions, the erosion of rule of law, economic disparities, etc.—elections, no matter how well-conducted, risk perpetuating entrenched power structures. On the other hand, delaying elections excessively risks creating a perception of authoritarian drift as well as alienating those eager to exercise their voting rights.

So, how can we bridge this gap? Through dialogue and compromise, of course. Both camps must find common ground in their positions, tempering their adversarial tones to prevent the reform drive from being questioned or derailed. That said, the sacrifices of July-August demand more than short-term fixes or partisan posturing. Reforms are crucial not just for safeguarding the democratic gains of the uprising but also for ensuring that future governments operate within the desired framework of accountability.

We urge political parties to engage in the reform process in good faith, ensuring that their push for elections aligns with the broader goal of strengthening democracy. At the same time, the interim government must address any scepticism about its reform agenda, demonstrating its commitment to meaningful and inclusive change. Only through a collaborative approach can the reform vs election debate be resolved.

Risks of automation should be addressed

News of RMG workers being laid off is concerning

A recent study has revealed that automation in the apparel sector has reduced the demand for human labour in the production process by nearly 31 percent. Specifically, automation in the cutting process resulted in a 48 percent reduction in workforce needs, while sewing saw a decrease of 26.57 percent. Sweater factories saw the sharpest decline at 37 percent, followed by woven factories at 27 percent per production line. This presents a new reality for RMG workers, many of whom find their skills increasingly irrelevant. The situation is particularly alarming given the already high unemployment rate among our youth.

There is no denying the importance of automation for modernisation and improved efficiency in factories. However, it also comes with the challenge of ensuring job security for the workforce. It is thus crucial to find ways to help our workers adapt to this technological transition rather than leaving them behind.

The RMG sector has long been a cornerstone of our economy, creating jobs and advancing female labour participation, but the advent of semi- and fully-automated machinery is now causing disturbances. While skilled workers are being reassigned to new roles, those with limited skills, primarily helpers, face the greatest risk of unemployment. Small factories, unlike their larger counterparts, often lack the resources to train or reassign workers, further exacerbating the issue. Women, older workers, and those with low literacy levels are particularly vulnerable in this transition.

The problem is compounded by the broader economic challenges facing the RMG sector at present. Many factories have already laid off workers due to financial constraints and political disturbances in recent months. For instance, the Beximco Group recently let go of nearly 40,000 workers across its 15 apparel units, citing a lack of export orders. This points to an urgent need for stability in the sector.

We need proper research and planning to address these emerging challenges. To address the risks of automation, upskilling and reskilling initiatives must be prioritised. Additionally, the government and industry stakeholders should work together to diversify the economy by establishing new industries and work fronts that can absorb displaced workers. Most importantly, the industry must focus on leveraging the potential of our existing workforce rather than presuming they cannot adapt to new technologies. Navigating this transition while safeguarding livelihoods and ensuring sustainable growth is possible.

EDITORIAL

Can we save our republic?



STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

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We can pat ourselves on the back for having been selected the "Country of the Year" by the *Economist* for overthrowing an autocrat. But for the role of the students and the youth, we might well not have been able to assert ourselves. Thus, the acknowledgement of the *Economist* is actually an acknowledgement of the power of the young generation, or Gen Z, to provide leadership in reverting the regression of the country, reclaiming its sovereignty and bringing it back to the path of prosperity.

However, the magazine ends on a cautionary note mentioning the bumpy road ahead, economically, politically, and indeed diplomatically. The British weekly commented that in 2025, "Bangladesh would need to repair ties with India and decide when to hold elections—first ensuring that the courts are neutral and the opposition has time to organise." A tall order indeed.

Not unsurprisingly, our achievement has been taken with derision from certain quarters across the border, in the land of our big neighbour, where the media have gone on overdrive in manufacturing, distorting and concocting news. They manufacture chaos, concoct stories of minority repression, and exaggerate stray incidents to inflate the matter. Admittedly, there have been incidents, albeit isolated, of harassment of minorities in Bangladesh. The difference between what happens in Bangladesh and the persecution of minorities in India is that while in Bangladesh it is done by individuals, the persecution of Indian Muslims is state-sponsored.

We have said many times that while it is one thing to see through a successful revolution, it is another thing to see that the ultimate goal, for which thousands were killed, maimed and disappeared, is achieved. And very few would disagree that the ultimate aim is to achieve an egalitarian society where everyone would be free to follow his or her own goals in a free atmosphere, and would be governed by the rule of law and not by that of men—where s/he can pursue the calling of their own choice and the people's representatives serve the people and not command them. We want a country with a true republican character, in short.

However, regaining our republic



VISUAL: REHNUMA PROSHOON

will not be an easy task. The path forward appears to be extremely fraught as one would have noticed from the seminal stages of the post-revolution period. We are still in the throes of the initial stage, trying to find our feet. It is the muck that we are struggling to remove, the muck that has accrued over the last 15 years in every sector. Reportedly, the economic highway that was flaunted by the Hasina regime was really a dirt road. The story of economic miracle was a myth. Data was manufactured by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics to present a rosy economic picture. These are not my words but the words of the economic task force appearing in their *White Paper on Bangladesh* economy.

But there are inimical forces both within and outside the country who are hard at work to reinstate the fallen tyrant by indulging in choreographed movements in some sectors. Various cadres of the civil service are agitating for their own "cause." It seems that suddenly August 5 has generated the rise of a plethora of demands from various sectors, which had not been seen in the last 15 years.

It also seems that there still are a significant number of sympathisers within the administration who are lying in wait for the opportune

moment to create chaos and numb the administration. One suspects that the deep state is at work, backseat driving the government. Otherwise, how does one explain such a large number of Awami Leaguers finding their way out of the country? And we saw another physical manifestation of this in the fire incident at the Secretariat. Everything points to a well-planned

And human rights are violated in more ways than one. Can those who have siphoned off billions of dollars of the country's wealth be allowed to go free? And those people include Hasina, her family members, and her cronies in the business world. Who will answer for the extrajudicial killings and the killing of the students in the recent uprising?

sabotage work. And this is not the last of such acts of sabotage. The warnings are clear that hostile forces are at work.

The question is, how do we safeguard our revolution, the first being frittered away by a despot who had no love lost for the people of Bangladesh and felt little obligation for the country?

The only way to preserve our newly acquired freedom is to put power where it belongs—to the people. And that brings us to the crux of the issue, that of reforms and election. So far, our base has been weakened. The civil administration and the judiciary, not to speak of the security sector, have been affected by the blatant regime of politicisation by Hasina. Can we proceed with business as usual with a rickety base to build on? The character of the state institutions would have to be restored before the next move in this respect. And that can be possible if we have people with impeccable antecedents and strong moral fibre to run these institutions. But by the same token, laws must be enacted to ensure that state institutions cannot be influenced by the government of the day.

Can we also proceed without holding to account people responsible for gross violations of human rights?

Can those who destroyed democracy, deprived the people of their right to choose their representatives, and made a mockery of parliament and the system be allowed to participate in future democratic exercises without paying for their misdeeds?

We would like to end with a brief comment on the said report of the *Economist*. Bangladesh would need to repair ties with India, it says. Let me stress that it is not for Bangladesh to repair ties with India; rather the opposite is true. Bangladesh has done nothing to impair the bilateral relationship. India has, on the other hand, not only given shelter to a person who stands accused of gross violation of human rights, corruption and other misdeeds in the country's court of law; she is using the soil of India to conspire against Bangladesh.

Since the fall and fleeing away of the autocrat, Indian political leaders have made threatening comments about Bangladesh. Our folly has been that we did not register our protests except for one instance. It is a pity that India has failed to see the reality and to honour the wish of the people of Bangladesh.

The most important thing that is the call of the hour is national unity—this is the first safeguard for our Second Victory.

Air pollution menace needs effective dust and waste management



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Air pollution in Dhaka has been a growing concern for both residents and authorities, with the city consistently ranking among the most polluted in the world. One of the leading contributors to air pollution is the massive amount of dust and waste generated by roadworks, construction projects, and uncoordinated urban development. Experts stress that coordinating government bodies, private stakeholders, and using better technology can reduce dust pollution and improve air quality.

A major source of dust pollution in Dhaka is the frequent road digging for utility work. These frequent disruptions contribute to dust pollution and cause significant traffic jams, leading to further emission of harmful gases from vehicles. According to a report from the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (2023), these ongoing disruptions contribute significantly to the declining air quality in the city.

Many roadworks use low-quality materials, improper waste disposal, and unregulated practices, worsening the problem. The lack of permanent utility infrastructure leads to repeated work, increasing dust and debris. A 2022 study by Chowdhury and Khan found that substandard construction

practices in Dhaka contribute significantly to air pollution due to poor site waste management.

Experts argue that the solution to this issue lies in the coordination between local and national government bodies, private construction companies, and utility providers. The lack of coordination among involved parties causes inefficiency, with multiple agencies digging up the same roads. The government should enforce a collaborative planning system for coordinated utility work. The World Bank (2020) highlights that coordinated urban planning reduces disruptions, improving resource management and urban environments. Besides the private sector should also be encouraged to adopt best practices, including using modern equipment to minimise dust and waste. For instance, using advanced vacuum trucks to remove debris and dust from construction sites can be a game changer. The World Bank (2020) suggests that such innovations could reduce the burden of air pollution in cities like Dhaka, offering a sustainable way to handle urban infrastructure.

A permanent solution to reducing dust and waste from roadworks is

implementing a comprehensive underground utility system. By installing a unified network for water, gas, and electricity, the city can reduce frequent excavations and minimise dust. The World Bank (2020) notes that cities with integrated underground utilities experience fewer disruptions and lower air pollution from roadworks.

A permanent solution to reducing dust and waste from roadworks is implementing a comprehensive underground utility system. By installing a unified network for water, gas, and electricity, the city can reduce frequent excavations and minimise dust. The World Bank (2020) notes that cities with integrated underground utilities experience fewer disruptions and lower air pollution from roadworks.

Besides, dust control measures, like water spraying systems, can reduce airborne particles during roadworks. Digital mapping tools can track utility installations, minimising future digging and ensuring timely roadworks. This is supported by the 2022 Chowdhury and Khan research.

Another crucial factor in managing dust and waste is ensuring

high-quality construction. Low-quality work often leads to cracks and rework, which not only wastes time and resources but also contributes to the continuous disruption of urban areas. The government should impose strict quality standards for all construction and roadworks to prevent the need for repeated repairs. The World Bank (2020) suggests that investment in high-quality infrastructure reduces long-term maintenance costs and improves the city's sustainability.

Private companies should be incentivised to invest in durable, sustainable materials that require fewer interventions. "Green" construction practices, focusing on sustainable materials and waste reduction, should be prioritised in both public and private projects. Research by Chowdhury and Khan (2022) shows that cities with high construction standards experience fewer disruptions and less environmental degradation.

The role of local communities and citizens in reducing dust pollution should not be overlooked. Authorities should engage with residents through awareness programmes on the importance of waste management and reducing unnecessary burning of waste.

Dhaka's air pollution requires a coordinated approach from all stakeholders. By using advanced technology and investing in underground utilities, the city can reduce dust, waste, and create a more sustainable environment. The future of Dhaka lies in long-term planning, collaboration, and the adoption of innovative technologies.