

Parties must exercise democracy first

Lack of internal democracy casts doubt on the future of reforms

As it is becoming increasingly clear, it is not enough to just plan state reforms and get some of them executed before the next election. To ensure the momentum is not lost post-election, political parties that will eventually take the reins of reform implementation must, too, credibly demonstrate that they can deliver the reforms as promised. As things stand, there remains a huge trust deficit in this regard, considering our experience with the reform drive under the last caretaker government that fizzled out after the 2008 election. One way to prevent that dreadful prospect is to ensure internal reforms within our political parties.

The argument is simple: if they cannot exercise democracy within their internal activities and decisions, how can they uphold democracy at the national level? A party that is run on the principles of accountability and transparency and in line with its own constitution is more likely to stick with the state reform agenda. Otherwise, political parties, once elected to power, risk falling back into the same patterns of patronage, corruption, and authoritarian tendencies that have plagued Bangladesh for so long. Sadly, as a report by this daily again reminds us, most parties still function as highly centralised entities, with little regard for internal accountability or democratic practices.

Our analysis of 25 parties reveals that party constitutions promising regular leadership elections and grassroots-driven MP nomination processes are routinely set aside. Party leaders also hold on to power for years, even decades, only to relinquish control in the event of ill health, legal troubles, or death. For example, Awami League's Sheikh Hasina has been unopposed as party president for 43 years, while BNP's Khaleda Zia has held her position for 40 years. Although almost all party constitutions stipulate a council, every three or four years, to elect their office bearers, in reality, councils are rarely held and have rather morphed into mere formalities, rubber-stamping decisions made by party heads. Also, despite some parties introducing term limits or other reforms, such provisions are seldom enforced. The reliance on dynastic politics further entrenches these issues.

Such practices have hollowed out the democratic essence of our political parties. Accountability for crimes or any breach of code of conduct by party members is another casualty under such circumstances. Since the political changeover on August 5, we have seen many instances where unruly members of some parties simply replaced their Awami League counterparts in various sectors, thus continuing corrupt and repressive practices of the past. It is precisely because of this trend that many have doubts about the continuity of the reform drive under a political government, which is unfortunate considering the huge sacrifices that went into bringing us this historic opportunity for change.

We urge political parties to critically review their internal practices so that citizens can be confident of their ability and sincerity to sustain the reform drive post-election. They must honour their own constitutions and regularly hold and enable their councils to become genuine platforms for electing leaders and shaping policies. They must lead the change that they want to see in the state.

When will our roads be safe?

Govt must take holistic measures to reduce fatalities

The figure 8,543 is not just a statistic representing the fatalities from road crashes in 2024. It symbolises the lives we, as a nation, have failed to protect from our unsafe roads. In fact, according to a report by Bangladesh Jatri Kalyan Samity, our roads were less safe last year compared to 2023—crashes increased by 1.56 percent, fatalities by 8.11 percent, and injuries by 21.56 percent—indicating a deteriorating trend.

The Jatri Kalyan Samity attributed the rise in crashes and deaths to the increasing number of motorcycles and battery-run auto-rickshaws, as well as the illegal operation of both high-speed and slow-moving vehicles on highways. In 2024, motorcycle-related crashes accounted for 36.62 percent of all incidents and 30.08 percent of all fatalities. The inherent instability of these vehicles makes them particularly prone to accidents. Yet, the previous government's policies encouraged their proliferation. Similarly, it failed to curb the rampant use of motorised three-wheelers, vehicles with almost no safety features, which have become a significant contributor to highway crashes of late.

We have discussed the factors behind road crashes—such as unfit vehicles, reckless driving, unskilled drivers, and the unholy nexus between transport leaders, politicians, and law enforcers—ad nauseam, while numerous experts offered recommendations. But little has changed. The authorities attempted a number of road safety initiatives but succumbed to pressure from transport owners and associations.

Although many of the leaders and politicians linked to the previous regime—key players in perpetuating irregularities in the transport sector—are now on the run, the systemic problems in the sector persist. A recent example was the violent crash at the Dhaka-Mawa-Bhanga Expressway toll plaza, which claimed at least six lives. The bus that rammed into three parked vehicles there had no legal documents, the driver lacked a valid license, and the owner allegedly bribed a close associate of a former lawmaker to operate it on that route.

We urge the government to take decisive steps to stop such corrupt practices and make our roads safe, keeping in mind how previous ad hoc and unplanned efforts have repeatedly failed. Establishing a dedicated commission to reform the sector and fully implementing the Road Transport Act, 2018, could be crucial first steps. It is high time for change—too many lives have already been lost.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Trump supporters storm the Capitol

On this day in 2021, supporters of then President Donald Trump stormed the US Capitol, where Congress was meeting to certify Joe Biden's win in the 2020 presidential election. Trump and his backers alleged widespread voter fraud, though there was no evidence for the claims.

Systemic failures, rising inequality, and the path to recovery



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Until the fall of Sheikh Hasina's government in 2024, Bangladesh's economy was heavily shaped by rampant corruption, plundering, and illicit asset transfers orchestrated by a select few powerful groups. These practices caused long-term harm to the nation, putting immense pressure on foreign currency reserves, which continued to decline steadily. The economy was further strained by extravagant, debt-financed projects that burdened the nation with high repayment obligations. Inflation reached unprecedented levels, affecting daily life. Despite reports of steady GDP growth, employment challenges remained unresolved, exacerbating social unrest. The rising prices of essential commodities, including gas and electricity, compounded the economic strain on ordinary citizens, intensifying inequality and centralising wealth among a privileged few.

The centralisation of wealth and deepening of social inequality created a precarious economic situation. Without a change in governance, these crises would have worsened. After the Sheikh Hasina administration fell, corruption and asset misappropriation linked to specific banks and development projects came to a halt. A sprawling network of extortion that had permeated various sectors was also dismantled. This shift provided an opportunity for much-needed reforms. The interim government has begun addressing these challenges by forming commissions to investigate systemic failures and propose solutions. It has pledged to base its reforms on findings from these commissions. A white paper committee has already submitted a detailed report highlighting the mismanagement, corruption, and plundering that characterised the previous tenure.

During the previous administration, institutions were rendered ineffective, functioning as tools to implement directives from the top. Institutional processes were sidelined, creating inefficiencies and widespread public mistrust. Restoring these institutions to serve public interests and realigning them with their intended roles has become one of the most critical responsibilities of the current administration. For example, the Bangladesh Bank's integrity and functionality were undermined during the last regime as its policies were

tailored to serve the interests of select groups. Financial irregularities, such as the plundering of funds under the guise of loans, reached an alarming scale. Groups like Beximco, S Alam, Bashundhara, Summit, Orion, and a few more received disproportionate financial benefits, creating instability across the entire financial sector.

Immediate actions such as restructuring politically manipulated banks, shutting down institutions established for vested interests, and implementing measures to curb inflation must take precedence. Addressing irregularities within the



VISUAL: ANWER SOHEL

financial sector is critical to reducing economic haemorrhage and restoring public confidence. Stabilising the financial system and normalising the dollar exchange rate would create a healthier economic environment. Reports such as those by Farashuddin on the Bangladesh Bank and Ibrahim Khalid on the share market provided actionable recommendations, yet no significant progress has been made to act on these insights. This government must prioritise these reforms, ideally by early 2025, to demonstrate its commitment to addressing the financial sector's deep-rooted problems.

In the power and energy sectors, the government has suspended the indemnity law that protected harmful projects from scrutiny. However, it has also announced that many controversial projects and agreements initiated under this law will remain. This decision is deeply concerning, as

several of these projects are detrimental to national interests. The Rampal coal-fired power plant, which threatens the ecological balance of the Sundarbans, and the Rooppur nuclear power plant by Russia, managed by Indian entities, require immediate reassessment. Both projects have been criticised for their financial inefficiencies and environmental risks, raising questions about their long-term viability. Ample research, documentation, and evidence regarding the irregularities and harmful impacts of these projects already exist. There is no need to delay action further. While cancelling projects like Rampal and Rooppur might result in some financial losses, the cost of continuing them would be significantly higher, both economically and environmentally. Lives, livelihoods, and critical natural resources, such as the Sundarbans, are at stake. The government must prioritise the well-being of its people and take decisive steps to mitigate these risks by terminating or renegotiating such harmful projects.



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During the last administration, aside from oligarchs, significant benefits were granted to civil-military bureaucrats and the police to maintain political control. Meanwhile, crucial public sectors like education and healthcare were neglected. This neglect led to systemic inefficiencies, chaotic management, and severe resource shortages. Students and labourers, two of the most vulnerable groups in society, faced acute financial deprivation, limiting their opportunities and quality of life. To address this, the government must allocate more resources to education and healthcare and align funding levels with the UN-recommended proportion of GDP. The interim government could begin that by increasing budget allocations and ensuring their effective utilisation.

It is important to announce a national minimum wage policy by early 2025. Such a policy should ensure that no worker's income falls below the

poverty line. Instead, the minimum wage should be adjusted to reflect a liveable income, allowing workers to meet their basic needs and contribute meaningfully to the economy.

While extortion networks have been curbed in most sectors, there are signs of their resurgence. The supply chain for essential goods remains dominated by an oligopoly or a handful of influential corporate groups. Their influence distorts market dynamics and restricts fair access to goods for citizens. The previous government not only failed to dismantle this oligopoly but actively supported it. The current administration must address this issue by breaking the control of these groups and ensuring competitive practices in the marketplace. Introducing a universal rationing system could be a vital step towards achieving this goal.

Rationing systems, currently limited to select groups such as the military and police, could be expanded to include all citizens. By ensuring equitable access to essential goods, such a system would reduce the influence of monopoly groups and stabilise market prices. Many countries have successfully implemented similar systems. The government can draw from these examples and reorganise the public goods distribution framework to create a fairer and more inclusive system.

Institutional decay was a hallmark of the Hasina administration, affecting sectors from education and healthcare to banking, infrastructure and even the judiciary. Restoring institutional integrity requires urgent attention. However, the resurgence of coercive practices within institutions, mob violence, power grabs, and forced resignations threatens a fair working environment. These practices must be stopped to rebuild trust and allow competent individuals to perform their roles effectively. Without functional institutions, efforts to restore economic and social stability will remain futile.

Bangladesh's economic policies have long been shaped by institutions like the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), and Asian Development Bank (ADB). The World Bank and ADB, with their various projects in sectors such as water, energy, railways, education, healthcare, jute, forestry, and infrastructure, and the IMF with its loan flow, actually determine policy frameworks to support global, regional, and local big businesses at the cost of public interest and the environment. Detailed investigations into projects and programmes supported by these institutions are essential to determine the scale of public suffering, deprivation, and national loss, including the environmental disasters caused by them. Mechanisms must be introduced to hold these institutions accountable. Without addressing this systemic issue, meaningful economic change will remain elusive.

A call for moral tourism in CHT

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While Bangladeshis frequently express solidarity with oppressed communities around the world, the Indigenous communities of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) at times remain overlooked in their ongoing struggle for recognition and rights.

While places like Cox's Bazar and Sylhet are the most visited places among tourist attractions, the CHT region has seen many tourists over the last decade. The sprawling hills and the different rivers that wind through the valleys offer views that mesmerise the eyes. Thus, it is not unfair to assume that tourist groups nowadays are considering exploring locations within the CHT for their next adventure. However, these exquisite tourist locations, such as Sajek Valley, Kaptai Lake, and Bandarban, carry the dark past of the Indigenous communities; behind all the beauty of the region, the pain of their suffering quietly lingers.

The Indigenous communities have experienced oppression in different forms, including arson attacks and forced evictions. For instance, on the night of February 19, 2010, arson attacks targeted 200 *Pahari* households in the Baghaihat area of Sajek union in Rangamati. Furthermore, in Bandarban's Nilgiri, many Mro and Marma families from

six villages were evicted to make way for resort developments. There have been countless instances of such "land-grabbing" cases.

While these spots are spellbinding and major contributors to the tourism sector, they certainly raise questions about our morals when we visit these places; thereby, indirectly supporting this expulsion. Does exploring these places bring out the "righteousness" we readily claim to uphold as per our captions on social media awareness posts? Aren't we tacitly approving of these

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evictions? Our double standard is glaringly evident in this case. We lay significant emphasis on equality and equity, yet we almost invariably turn a blind eye to the persecution that has been going on for decades in these regions. This ignorance reflects a massive gap in awareness about these matters. Nevertheless, among young tourists—a major portion of visitors to these regions—there appears to be a fair level of cognisance. Despite this, the pursuit of adventures almost always supersedes moral considerations.

If we want to be "morally correct," our actions should align with what

we stand for. Thus, we should carefully weigh our decision before booking a ticket to one of these places. Well, these might prompt knee-jerk remarks like "these spots are remarkably contributing to the tourism sector," which is absolutely true. Nonetheless, that is not an apt response, given the fact that we are dealing with moral principles. Morality addresses right and wrong based on ethical principles, irrespective of economic gains. The question I am asking is: whether or not these so-called "trivial" moral

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aspects should be considered. If we can stop consuming Coca-Cola for its endorsement of Israeli aggression in Palestine, the continuation of travelling to these spots solely for pleasure is, by no means, morally justifiable. Well, it's true that the situation might not change much if we stop going to these places, and no one might not effectively benefit from that. However, there are various ways through which we, as individuals, can contribute to making things better for the Indigenous communities, thereby not only staying true to our morals but also focusing on the greater

good of the society.

To begin with, one of the easiest ways to ensure a morally responsible trip is to stay at a hotel or resort that was built on undisputed land, ensuring no displacement of the local population. Besides, we can follow the path often adopted by some adventure lovers, such as staying with the Indigenous communities in their traditional *machang* homes. These homes, built on elevated platforms, offer the best experience, providing picturesque views and a serene environment. This also gives travellers an opportunity to understand the sufferings of the Indigenous communities, fostering empathy. However, many travellers may feel unsafe, or find such arrangements inaccessible, rendering this impactful for many. Alternatively, we can integrate them into the workforce of this growing tourism sector to ensure peaceful and sustainable livelihoods for them.

If achieving such option is not viable, we can contribute to community-led initiatives aimed at improving the livelihoods of the Indigenous communities. While it is very easy to list all the measures that can be adopted, the ground reality is very different, and execution often poses challenges. If all else fails, and if we get the chance during our trip, we can still leave a mark by sitting with them, sharing stories, learning from their resilience, and recognising the humanity that binds us all beneath the surface.