

Reform dialogue must deliver consensus

Talks with political parties scheduled in mid-February

It's reassuring to know that the interim government is moving ahead as per the timeline set for the reform drive, with talks with political parties slated to begin in mid February. According to Law Adviser Asif Nazrul, the date of the first meeting will be fixed in consultation with the parties and stakeholders of the July uprising. Six reform commissions have already submitted their reports, while the remaining ones are expected to submit theirs by this month. Dialogue on their recommendations forms the second—and perhaps most crucial—phase of the drive, as it will determine not just the reforms that can eventually be pursued but also the consensus necessary for their continuation post elections.

A timely and proper completion of this process has grown in significance of late. This is partly due to the unfortunate debate that has surfaced around "elections versus reforms"—exposing growing distrust between political parties like the BNP and student movement leaders—and partly due to continued public suffering caused by the suspended stage in which the nation finds itself, pending reforms in key sectors. Expediting consensus building on the reform proposals is, therefore, paramount. However, this will be anything but easy, as evidenced by recent comments and gestures by key stakeholders.

The BNP, for example, has announced a plan to launch "a movement" aimed at "correcting some government mistakes" and "clearing the way" for an elected political government. Earlier, its secretary general suggested that if the interim government loses its neutrality in conducting elections, it should be replaced by a "neutral government"—a comment that drew fierce reactions from student representatives in the government. Such confrontational exchanges weaken the government's position as a mediator in the reform drive. They also raise questions about whether the stakeholders can see eye to eye on the more radical reform proposals surrounding the constitution, electoral structure, judiciary, and public administration.

This is where Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus, also head of the National Consensus Commission, must play a critical role. At the heart of the reform discussions will be the challenge of reconciling differing priorities. He and other commission members must therefore show extreme foresight and patience to navigate the political minefield and convince stakeholders to move beyond entrenched positions. They must also ensure that the process does not lose legitimacy or stall under pressure, which would result in further political instability, setting back both the reform agenda and the prospect of a smooth democratic transition. Given the stakes, the participating parties must also approach the upcoming dialogue with a spirit of compromise.

The fact is, while the next election is crucial in restoring people's right to vote, it is the one after that—or the one next—that will be the true test of the current reform process. After all, so many people did not die in the uprising just for a temporary democratic transition. As well as free elections, it is equally important that all other impending reforms are faithfully implemented in the long run. For that, consensus is vital, so all stakeholders must put their differences aside and engage in the dialogue with sincerity.

Simplify the process of compensation

Why are July victims, martyrs' families being made to suffer?

It is disheartening that many individuals injured in the July uprising—and the families of those martyred—are still waiting for their promised compensation that remains entangled in bureaucratic red tape. With Tk 5 lakh set for martyrs' families and Tk 1 lakh for the wounded, the one-time financial assistance should have been easier to access, yet the process of getting compensation continues to throw up challenges.

It begins with securing a seal from a BCS doctor or hospital director on the application form, which must be accompanied by hospital tickets or discharge certificates bearing an MBBS doctor's seal. Additionally, applicants must provide photographs of their injuries as well as a bKash number linked to their national ID for payment. These documents must then be entered into the Management Information System of a government hospital, upazila health complex, or the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS). Thereafter, the civil surgeon and deputy commissioner's office must verify the patient's permanent address before the documents can be submitted to the July Shaheed Smriti Foundation via post, email, WhatsApp, or in person.

However, inefficiencies in government offices and hospitals—coupled with bureaucratic hurdles—have turned this process into an exhausting ordeal. Reportedly, families are often forced to make multiple trips across cities, spending large sums of money. For those living outside Dhaka, the situation gets even worse, with many reporting that they had to visit the July foundation seven or eight times due to missing documents or the unavailability of officials. Numerous additional complications have also been reported, making the compensation claim process not just difficult but also deeply humiliating.

Officials say that the strict procedures are necessary to prevent fraud and other irregularities. But the inefficiency of the system is undeniable, and they cannot shirk responsibility for it. It is unacceptable that after enduring immense suffering during the uprising, victims and their families must now face further hardship simply to receive the support they deserve.

Under these circumstances, we must reiterate our call for the authorities to simplify and expedite the compensation process. If the current workforce engaged in this process is inadequate, it must be expanded immediately. The authorities must also investigate why deserving recipients are facing such difficulties and take immediate corrective measures.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Accession of Elizabeth II

On this day in 1952, Elizabeth II ascended the throne of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, following the death of her father, King George VI. She became the longest-reigning monarch in British history in 2015.



EDITORIAL

Is the pendulum swinging too fast between left, centre and right?



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One of the biggest accomplishments for Bangladesh after the July uprising was the victory of the women's national football team at SAFF Women's Championship. Bangladesh has been the defending champion at the SAFF championship since 2022. Therefore, one can imagine the irony when international news emerged of religious fundamentalists protesting and vandalising venues to cancel women's football matches in the country, deeming them "un Islamic." This kind of cruel juxtaposition serves as a microcosm of the broader culture war in Bangladesh.

Perhaps the biggest mistake one can make when analysing Bangladeshi culture is to assume that it is homogenous across the country. But the fact is it is a diverse nation. From region to region, there is profound variation in language, food, festivities, lifestyle, and values. Even in Dhaka, there is often a world of difference between those who travel by expressways and those who rely on local buses.

Before the fall of the Awami League regime, three cohesive elements in the culture were common among the majority of Bangladesh's disparate groups: the political identity of Bangladeshi nationalism, cultural values of Islam, and a general disdain for the mafia-style fascism that defined Bangladeshi politics—made worse by more than a decade of Awami League's kleptocratic rule. With the fall of a tyrant and the perception that the unifying cause has been accomplished, our differences have once again surfaced, inviting debate and reconciliation—something impossible under autocratic rule.

Only in a democracy can people with diverse value systems band together and find representation for their voices and cultures. However, democracy is not a perfect system, and one of its greatest flaws is what scholars term the "tyranny of the majority."

To rule based on numbers rather than rightness or excellence is the essence of the tyranny of the majority, a concept explored by influential 19th century scholars such as John Stuart Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville. In simpler terms, democracy, if unchecked, can lead to the oppression of minorities by the majority, prioritising sheer numbers over truth, justice or merit. For this reason, in a proper democracy, counter-majoritarian institutions must exist to limit the majority's ability to



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represer minorities and stifle political competition. That is why democratic constitutions include a bill of rights and supermajority clauses, designed to counterbalance the tyranny of the majority. Needless to say, such institutions in Bangladesh are not functioning as intended.

Now, the mass uprising that led to the previous regime's ouster in August has opened the floodgates of a culture war. This is not necessarily a bad thing. All civilisations and societies undergo internal cultural conflicts. In modern terms, ideological groupings within the culture war tend to align along variations of the left-right political spectrum. Political scientists define the left wing as being characterised

the religious right wing has carried a permanent stain. However, this has now shifted as the cultural left carries its own albatross around the neck in the form of the ousted Awami League. Right-wing populists have begun branding the entire left wing as enablers of fascism. Rhetorical attacks on progressive institutions—accusing them of supporting Awami League authoritarianism and being pro India—are now central to the right wing strategy for power.

Furthermore, the right wing has cultivated various institutions with distinct identities over time. Whether through charity foundations or political entities, these organisations represent different facets of the

right wing. Now, they have gained prominence, elevated by their support for the student-led mass uprising and by the severe lack of political representation from the left. There is no inherent issue with a culture war as long as the playing field is level. But is that really the case? The playing field has never been level in Bangladesh. It certainly was not level before, as the right wing was brutally suppressed through state-sponsored violence, extrajudicial killings, and enforced disappearances.

The state is still reeling from the uprising, and the police and civil administration have yet to fully regain control. Various extreme right-wing groups are exploiting the situation to advance their own agendas—whether through religiously motivated attacks on Indigenous communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, the vandalism of *mazars* (shrines), or the recent attack on the venue of a women's football match. It is now evident that within the right wing, there exist violent elements willing to resort to undemocratic means to achieve their goals. The question remains: are the rising stars of Bangladesh's new right wing aware that within their ranks lie elements of misogyny, racism, and bigotry that no text can justify? Will the democrats ever manage to rally and recover to defend their own values?

Going forward, there needs to be a broad understanding among the people of Bangladesh that one's values and beliefs do not necessarily make them bad. There will always be differences of opinion among people, and such differences need to be resolved in a democratic manner under the purview of the law. Neither the left nor the right of the country's political identity spectrum should be considered evil, or as the "enemy of the people"—as some populists are trying to peddle. That is not to say that people cannot make mistakes. Historically, people have made grave mistakes—mistakes that have cost lives and livelihoods. But if we are to accomplish truly inclusive democracy, then we need to own up to our mistakes first. Both the right and left need to surgically cut out the evil parts in themselves before coming to the discussion table. Only then can there be proper debate and reconciliation.

Renewed US-China trade war is about tech supremacy too



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The year was 1993. Chinese cargo ship Yinhe, sailing across the Indian Ocean, found its GPS equipment jammed, which depended on the US global satellite navigation system. Soon enough, US Navy ships appeared and wanted to search the vessel. Why? Because Washington suspected it was carrying chemical weapon materials for Iran. After a humiliating three-week standoff with food and water running out, the ship was searched, but no such cargo was found. Deeply humiliated, Beijing resolved that it must have its homegrown technology so such an incident would never be repeated. The outcome is BeiDou—better, bigger, and more advanced than any other satellite navigation system available today.

A similar spirit drives China's ambitions in the satellite broadband race, as ventures like Qianfan (also known as Thousand Sails or G60 Starlink), Guowang, and Geespace (developed by the automotive giant Geely) challenge the dominance of SpaceX's Starlink.

Launched in 2019, Starlink began with the ambitious goal of providing high-speed, low-latency internet coverage to even the most remote corners of the globe. It has steadily grown into a formidable network, with nearly 7,000 satellites already in orbit, and plans to deploy thousands more. It has proven to be of strategic value by providing crucial internet services in the Ukraine war. When terrestrial internet infrastructure was disrupted, Starlink terminals enabled Ukrainian

forces to maintain communication, coordinate operations, and gather intelligence. This has highlighted the potential of satellite broadband networks to provide resilient communication channels in conflict zones, a capability that China undoubtedly recognises and seeks to achieve.

China's determination to become a major player in this field is evident. Qianfan, for instance, aims to create a constellation of 13,000 satellites, while Guowang has similar aspirations with its "national-level satellite internet constellation" plan. Geespace focuses on providing services to both the Chinese domestic market and international clients, with a constellation designed to support autonomous driving and other data-intensive applications. These ventures could provide high-speed internet access to underserved and remote areas of China and the world, bridging the digital divide and fostering economic growth. They could also be crucial to China's military and strategic ambitions, providing secure and reliable communications for its armed forces and intelligence agencies.

This competition also encompasses the development of satellite jamming technology. Both players are investing in capabilities to disrupt each other's satellite networks while protecting their own. Despite their ambitions and resources, Chinese ventures face significant technological hurdles. Developing and deploying a

massive satellite constellation requires advanced technology in areas like satellite manufacturing, launch capabilities, and network management. The United States Space Command (USSC) reported that Qianfan scattered hundreds of space debris while launching 18 satellites in August last year. The escalating trade war between

The US's restriction on tech exports to China, specifically designed to hinder the latter's progress in the space race, has continued since Trump's first presidency, followed by Biden's and then Trump's. The crucial role of artificial intelligence adds another layer of complexity to this race, and companies like DeepSeek, at the forefront of AI innovation in China, are poised to become key players.

Washington and Beijing have made this technological competition more complex. The US's restriction on tech exports to China, specifically designed to hinder the latter's progress in the space race, has continued since Trump's first presidency, followed by Biden's and then Trump's. The crucial role of artificial intelligence adds another layer of complexity to this race, and companies like DeepSeek, at the forefront of AI innovation in China, are poised to become key players. It also raises questions about the effectiveness of US's tech sanctions

on China: are they spurring China's innovations? Their sophisticated AI algorithms can analyse vast amounts of satellite imagery, enabling enhanced navigation, environmental monitoring, and even national security applications.

Innovative Chinese researchers and companies possess several advantages in the satellite broadband race, including robust government support and substantial financial and policy backing for their ventures. Additionally, China benefits from lower labour and manufacturing costs than the US, providing a significant economic edge. The country also boasts the world's largest internet market, offering a vast potential customer base. Furthermore, China's satellite broadband ambitions align with its military and strategic goals, enabling secure communication for its armed forces and intelligence agencies.

However, China must also overcome several crucial technological barriers, such as designing and manufacturing fast and efficient two-nanometre semiconductors, which Taiwan's TSMC already produces with Washington's active support (in comparison, China's SMIC is making five-nanometre chips for Huawei.) Washington's export controls on sensitive technology could hinder Beijing's progress. Still, such situations often stimulate innovations, as the development of DeepSeek without NVIDIA's most advanced chips has shown (it has recently been questioned, though.)

The implications of this competition are far-reaching. It's not just a commercial contest between companies; it's a strategic rivalry between two superpowers vying for technological supremacy. The outcome will shape the future of communication, global commerce and access to information, and redefine the balance of power in the 21st century.