

Can we bridge the generational gap and reform our democracy?



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Are we witnessing a clash between the worldview and values of Gen-Z and the pre-millennial generations in our journey towards democracy? If so, what are the implications as the interim government completes six months of its tenure and begins consultations on the various reform commissions’ recommendations? How will the aim of building a broad consensus on reforms and charting the roadmap for the next phase of the journey work out?

Political parties of different stripes, in slightly varying tones, have been impatiently clamouring for a parliamentary election as early as possible after “essential reforms” so that the winners can take control of the government. The mention of “essential reforms” appears to be a nod to public demand for reform in public institutions and services. Noticeably, the political class is not asking for nationwide local government elections that could restore many essential local government services

the unprecedented brutality of the regime in repressing the protesters. Success has many claimants to paternity, while failure is an orphan. The political parties claim that they had prepared the ground over the years and that the student movement was merely the spark that ignited the fire. There is truth in this narrative, but the fact remains that the students were the vanguard at the critical stage. The political parties are reluctant to admit that their earlier efforts did not bring success. For that matter, they have not shown any contrition for their collective responsibility, beyond that of the Awami League, for the faltering democratic journey of the country since liberation.

Now, the youngsters have embarked on a campaign to reach out to the people in preparation for forming a new political party. They aim to change the political culture of intolerance, division, polarisation, and the absence of accountability that has dominated the political scene since the birth of Bangladesh. This

in the government, a new party of young people would be a “king’s party” that would compromise the interim government’s neutrality vis-à-vis the national election.

The generational divide is evident in the public dialogue on political transition, the performance of the interim government, and what should happen next. The known faces in the

of political and institutional reforms and forging a broadly unified vision for the journey towards democracy. The other side, with minor variations, argues that the reform agenda can and should be handled by a “political” government (meaning themselves). They also assert that the interim government has been inept in addressing immediate day-

Prof Muhammad Yunus has always upheld the role of young people in his vision for development and his expectations for the future of Bangladesh. He described the students as his “employer” because they invited and persuaded him to take on the task of heading the interim government. Introducing Mahfuj Alam, one of the three youth

for being partial to the presumptive new party and questioned the interim government’s ability to run a national election impartially. They ignore the work underway to empower the election commission to conduct elections independently, without government interference.

All stakeholders—Gen-Z and the rest—talk about the need for unity to move forward in our democratic journey. All seem to agree that a unified vision of basic goals and the steps to be taken is necessary. But with the divergent views of the young and the old regarding priorities and processes, how can these differences be reconciled? A realistic aim may be to forge a common understanding of the rules of the game regarding dialogue and, as much as possible, to reconcile the diverging visions by agreeing on a minimum common agenda of reforms that the interim government could initiate and that a future elected government could continue.

As discussions on the various reform commissions begin, the focus may be on the rules of engagement for all stakeholders—political parties, civil society, Gen-Z, and anti-discrimination activists—and the minimum common agenda for reforms. A part of this process would be the preparation of the July proclamation. The interim government seems eager to be involved, presumably to help minimise the generational divide, in formulating the July proclamation as a testament to the July-August uprising.



VISUAL: MAHIYA TABASSUM

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and let citizens engage in a political process. Nor do they ask for the election of a constituent assembly to settle constitutional and governance structure issues.

What appears to have exasperated the old-line political class is that young students succeeded where they had failed. The student-led uprising toppled the authoritarian regime, which had appeared to be invincible and set to continue indefinitely. The political parties’ 15-year struggle to unseat it had not brought the masses behind them as the students’ movement did—no doubt helped by

initiative has provoked ambivalent, if not outright negative reactions from some political parties.

Political old-timers say they have no objection to a new party of the young, but many betray their nervousness by denigrating this effort, sometimes offering contradictory reasoning. Three lines of argument are deployed by them: students must remain students, they are too inexperienced to handle politics, and a king’s party is not acceptable. How can immature youngsters make policies and run the country? Since three of the “student coordinators” of the movement are

talk-show circuit in electronic media and columnists and commentators in print media—mostly pre-millennials and millennials—betray their generational bias.

The talking heads on television are often the protagonists of one or another existing political party, along with some familiar faces from the media and civil society. Largely outnumbered by their older counterparts, the young representatives of the July-August movement, when invited to participate, are usually articulate in their arguments and clear in expressing their goals and plans. Often, the effort in the shows to offer diversity of views ends up being an argument between the young and the rest.

The young speakers generally take the position that the sacrifice of July-August was not just to have an election and hand over the government to the winning political party/parties without at least beginning a process

to-day problems, such as improving law and order and controlling prices. They claim that the people want an early parliamentary election (but presumably not a local government election). They insist that political parties are in touch with the people and speak for them. It is evident that they are not in touch with the Gen-Z population, which makes up at least a third of the country’s voters.

The anchors of talk shows are reluctant to challenge the often vacuous and self-serving assertions of political parties and older-generation pundits. The anchors themselves often appear sympathetic to the positions taken by the elders. Columnists, editorial writers in print media, and op-ed article writers, beyond rhetorical words about harnessing the energy and idealism of youth in nation-building, are at best ambivalent about the position presented by the young and the role they may play in shaping the country’s future.

representatives in the advisory council, to former US President Bill Clinton at an event in New York, Yunus described Mahfuj as the “mastermind” of the movement. I doubt that anyone in the audience took it literally to mean that Mahfuj singlehandedly orchestrated the fall of the Hasina regime. Yunus, in his usual effusive and generous way, had used a rhetorical expression. Talk shows and social media in Bangladesh were abuzz with discussions about Yunus being too deferential and submissive to students.

In an interview with *The Financial Times* at the World Economic Forum in Davos, speaking about events in Bangladesh, Yunus spoke of young participants in the anti-discrimination movement reaching out to the masses, preparing to form a political party of their own. He thought this might help bring about a much-needed change in the political culture of Bangladesh. Old-school politicians pounced on Yunus

Nationwide local government elections at the union and upazila levels would allow citizens to engage in the political process and improve local services, which have become nonfunctional since the disbanding of local councils.

An agreement to hold an election for a constituent assembly within three months would start the process of settling constitutional and state structure questions with citizen participation. The adoption of a constitution would then pave the way for parliamentary elections, with its structure and character (bicameral, proportional representation, women’s representation, etc) determined as prescribed in the newly adopted constitution. This step-by-step process would allow the necessary time and deliberation for the far-reaching reforms envisioned, helping to bridge the generational divide.

National unity alone can ensure stability and desired reforms



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In August 2024, the chief adviser of the interim government said in his speech, “We are one family. We have one goal. We are committed to fulfilling the aspirations of our youth, and we are ready to take on this challenge.” This statement reflected his concern that if national unity collapsed, the achievements of the mass uprising could be lost. That very concern is now becoming evident.

Since taking over the country’s governance, the interim government has faced disruptions to public life from more than 170 movements driven by diverse vested interests. This wave of demonstrations arises from the perceived weakness of the interim administration, marked by fractured state institutions and the absence of a political party’s organisational strength. Protesters have exploited this vulnerability to push their demands—some legitimate, others serving personal agendas—at a time when maintaining national unity is more critical than ever. Since independence, political parties have weaponised divisive ideologies such as the “spirit of independence,” “Bengali vs Bangladeshi,” and “Pro-India vs Pro-Pakistan.” Although these differences are minimal in reality, they have been exaggerated to serve political agendas.

This deliberate polarisation has kept Bangladesh trapped in a cycle of disunity and stagnation. Oxford development economist Paul Collier refers to such situations as a “Conflict Trap,” where persistent division severely restricts a society’s potential for progress. To break free from this cycle, the country’s politics must prioritise public welfare over divisive narratives.

The previous government left the country’s economy and governance system in a fragile state. Due to the inefficiency of state institutions and the perceived weakness of the government, the law-and-order situation has deteriorated, commodity prices have soared, and extortion has become rampant. Continuous street protests threaten to paralyse public order, further worsening an already fragile situation.

When the interim government was formed, many hoped it would steer the country towards stability. However, six months down the line, that optimism has faded. Even the chief adviser recently acknowledged growing concerns over the government’s ability to manage the crisis.

Political theorists have long argued that while governments enforce laws, citizens must uphold them, and

political parties should act as a bridge between the state and the people. The current crisis has revealed weaknesses in all three areas.

The interim government has taken on the responsibility of managing a weakened state, where law enforcement, the judiciary, and public administration were dismantled by previous rulers. These institutions

police personnel. However, since such an expansion cannot happen overnight, deploying other disciplined forces is necessary to manage the country’s current crisis.

Military forces with expanded authority have been deployed, but their numbers remain limited for policing duties due to their primary defense responsibilities. Paramilitary

Leaders of the anti-discrimination student movement played a crucial role in recent political events and must now set a clear, purposeful direction. Forming a party with government support would merely repeat past mistakes. Instead, they should prioritise a long-term vision focused on addressing the root causes of underdevelopment. The most effective reform lies in fostering a politically aware and engaged citizenry—transforming individuals into active citizens. Although this is a lengthy process, it remains the only sustainable solution.

require extensive reforms, which cannot be achieved in the short term. Given this, the government must engage in open dialogue with political parties, civil society, and key stakeholders to present a clear roadmap for necessary reforms and announce a specific date for national elections. It appears the government is moving in that direction.

The country faces severe law and order challenges due to the lack of an impartial and effective police force. Currently, the police-to-population ratio in Bangladesh is significantly inadequate. To meet effective policing standards, Bangladesh needs to recruit a substantial number of additional

groups such as the Ansars, the Village Defence Party (VDP), and the Bangladesh National Cadet Corps (BNCC), along with retired military and law enforcement personnel, can play a vital role in maintaining public order. The VDP alone consists of thousands of trained individuals with strong grassroots connections, making it particularly well-suited to managing law and order in upazilas and rural areas.

Finally, the performance of the advisers within the interim government must be critically assessed. Formed hastily amid a national crisis, the government, now after six months in power, must

identify and replace underperforming advisers with competent, results-driven individuals.

Political parties must move beyond verbal support and actively assist the government. While insisting on a definitive election date is logical, political parties must play an active role in resolving several critical national issues—improving law and order being one of them.

During Durga Puja, political parties played a commendable role in protecting Hindu temples. A similar model could be adopted to combat extortion, highway robbery, and the activities of teenage gangs through community policing initiatives. This would have the added benefit of increasing public support for the parties, which would help them in the next election.

Recent protests by students, bureaucrats, and labour unions have prioritised narrow interests over national stability, disrupting public life. Political parties, leveraging their networks within these groups, should mediate these grievances through constructive dialogue, ensuring short-term demands do not aggravate the current crisis.

A political party that claims broad public support must demonstrate it by actively engaging with all segments of society to improve current conditions. Failing to do so weakens its credibility and casts doubt on its ability to lead a future government. With public scrutiny at its peak, the party’s actions today will significantly shape voter sentiment in upcoming elections.

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direction. Forming a party with government support would merely repeat past mistakes. Instead, they should prioritise a long-term vision focused on addressing the root causes of underdevelopment. The most effective reform lies in fostering a politically aware and engaged citizenry—transforming individuals into active citizens. Although this is a lengthy process, it remains the only sustainable solution.

Thus, the primary aim of a new political party formed by students should be to spearhead systemic reforms by confronting colonial-era structures that hinder effective governance. Their most significant role would be to educate grassroots communities, fostering socio-political awareness and mobilising citizens to stand against injustice, corruption, and deep-rooted misgovernance. By choosing to remain in opposition rather than pursuing power, they can serve as an effective watchdog—ensuring government accountability without becoming entangled in it. Bangladesh is at a critical juncture. The August 5 movement has highlighted the urgent need for structural reform, but achieving this will require the active participation of all stakeholders. Playing the blame game will not resolve the crisis. The country’s future depends on shared responsibility, strategic reforms, and a commitment to unity. If the interim government fails, it will not be their failure alone—it will be a collective failure of the political class, civil society, and the people. Only a unified, pragmatic approach can enable Bangladesh to break free from the cycle of conflict and division. The time to act is now.