

Time to set aside partisan interests

Building consensus on key reform proposals is the main challenge

We welcome the initiation of the official process to build consensus on the proposals submitted by six key reform commissions, with Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus calling it the start of the “second phase” of the interim government. Earlier, when four of the six commission reports were submitted, Prof Yunus took a similarly upbeat view of it alluding to a “new chapter” for the nation. Indeed, the first meeting of the National Consensus Commission, attended by some 100 representatives from 26 political parties and alliances, was all about reaffirming the commitment to state reform in line with the spirit of the July uprising, as well as determining the process of consensus building. At the end of this process, there will be a charter based on discussions with political parties and civil society, which will serve as a roadmap for executing the reforms.

The significance of undertaking this process properly cannot be overstated. Prof Ali Riaz, co-chair of the seven-member consensus commission, has stated that dialogues will be held with all political parties individually and in groups, including “unofficial discussions.” He also signalled that even though the commission has been given six months, their goal is to reach consensus as soon as possible. Summaries of the six reports have already been shared with political parties for review and feedback. Reportedly, there will be a methodical approach to collecting feedback. One participant at Saturday’s meeting told *Prothom Alo* that mention was made of a website where the reform proposals would be published and political parties can mark “yes” or “no” on each, ensuring transparency and accountability in the process.

That said, we think it is important that the reform proposals are categorised based on feasibility and urgency. For example, certain proposals—such as improving electoral integrity, ensuring transparent governance, or curtailing the prime minister’s powers—already enjoy broad consensus. Others—such as constitutional amendments or restructuring key institutions—may require prolonged deliberation and public endorsement. It is also essential to separate short-term, easily implementable reforms from those requiring long-term structural changes. However, the greatest challenge will be in reaching consensus on the most critical reforms. This is where political parties must demonstrate their commitment by prioritising national interests over partisan agenda.

Unfortunately, consensus-building has historically been fraught and elusive in Bangladesh’s politics. When the BNP secretary general refers to a “minimum consensus” as a baseline for wrapping up this process, leading to the next elections, it further raises questions about its success. We, therefore, urge political parties to engage in the reform dialogue with the sincerity and compromise it demands, because without political buy-in and constructive engagement, even the most well-intentioned reform initiatives may falter. They must rise above their differences, partisanship, and adversarial postures for the sake of a “new Bangladesh” that truly reflects the aspirations of those who fought and sacrificed during the July uprising. The ball is in their court now.

Replace broken medical equipment

Poor services at Barishal hospital must be addressed

The sorry state of the Sher-e Bangla Medical College Hospital (SBMCH) in Barishal, where a number of diagnostic machines have remained out of order for more than half a decade, is deeply concerning. SBMCH is the only fully-fledged hospital not just for the people of the six districts of Barishal division but also for patients from other southern districts such as Sandwip, Hatiya, and Gopalganj. However, instead of receiving subsidised diagnostic and medical services at this public facility, they are forced to pay for medical tests and treatment at nearby private clinics and diagnostic centres.

According to a report by *Banik Barta*, the only MRI machine at the hospital has been out of service for eight years. As a result, patients needing MRI scans are forced to go to private clinics where the cost ranges from Tk 5,000 to Tk 25,000—which is often beyond the means of poor patients. Other essential medical equipment, including three ultrasonogram machines and eight X-ray machines, have also been non-functional for several years. Even common eye surgeries cannot be performed because the hospital’s LASIK laser machine has been out of service for seven years, while the phaco machine for cataract surgery is also currently broken. It is beyond comprehension why the hospital authorities have not replaced or repaired these machines despite their prolonged dysfunction. There are allegations that a syndicate of hospital staff and doctors benefits from this situation, referring patients to private facilities in exchange for commissions.

Following the ouster of the Awami League government, many doctors and officials who were affiliated with the party and benefited from the regime’s corrupt practices were removed from public hospitals, including SBMCH. However, corruption is so deeply rooted in our health system that its eradication is yet to be achieved. In SBMCH’s case, we hope the new hospital management will be able to identify and dismantle the syndicate profiting from the “broken-machine business.” They should urgently replace the faulty and broken machines so that patients can receive care at the public hospital at subsidised rates. Finally, we hope the healthcare reform commission will recommend effective measures to ensure greater accountability among doctors and hospital staff and eliminate corruption from the sector.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

China invades Vietnam

On this day in 1979, China invaded Vietnam following a series of anti-Chinese, pro-Soviet manoeuvres taken by Vietnam in its bid to bolster its ties with the Soviet Union, rather than with China.

What the media opinion survey tells us



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The interim government recently conducted a survey across the country to determine how people here feel about the media. The National Media Opinion Survey, a first of its kind in Bangladesh, was conducted during the first week of January by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) at the request of the Media Reform Commission. More than 45,000 families from all 64 districts participated and were asked what they thought about the media. The BBS used a strict sampling method to examine how people reach, interact with, trust, and believe the media is independent.

The survey showed an interesting fact: teachers are trusted sources of information; over 42 percent of the respondents said they were their most trusted sources. Rural teachers enjoy more trust (nearly 45 percent) than their urban counterparts (just over 34 percent). This proves that teachers still hold considerable influence over the general population in Bangladesh. This finding, along with others from the survey, shows that Bangladesh still has trouble making sure that the media is open, honest, and free to access for everyone.

The survey findings indicate a significant shift in media consumption patterns in Bangladesh, with mobile phones emerging as the most widely used platform to access media content. As many as 59.28 percent of the respondents said they accessed media on their mobile phones, with rural usage slightly higher at 61.93 percent compared to 52.85 percent in urban areas. Women appear (66.99 percent) to be relying on mobile phones for media access more than men (54.33 percent).

The survey also sheds light on public trust in social media. Among digital platforms, Facebook is ranked as the most trusted, with 31.36 percent of respondents considering it a reliable source of information, followed by YouTube at 16.5 percent. Other social

media platforms lag significantly in terms of public trust.

The poll shows a worrying trend for newspapers in Bangladesh: less than 27 percent of respondents said they read newspapers, with urban readers (35 percent) relying more on newspapers than their rural counterparts (less than 25 percent). Men (nearly 34 percent) read newspapers more than women (over 20 percent). Most newspaper readers (37.61 percent) still prefer the print version, while only 2.58 percent readers still read the digital version.



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

Almost half of the respondents (46.52 percent) said they don’t read newspapers because they don’t find it necessary, while 15.88 percent said they don’t get the time.

Television remains a key source of information in Bangladesh, especially during the time of a crisis. According to the survey, 35.17 percent respondents find TV as the most reliable source. Overall, 65.42 percent watch TV, with higher viewership in urban areas (74.86 percent) than rural ones (62.68 percent). A gender gap persists, with more men (71.31 percent) watching TV than women (59.85 percent). The primary reason for not watching TV

is a lack of interest (53.58 percent), followed by a lack of time (12.5 percent).

Radio listenership has plummeted to just six percent, with slightly higher rates in urban areas and more male listeners than females. The primary reasons for its lack of popularity are its lack of relevance as well as availability.

The National Media Opinion Survey also reflects a widespread public scepticism regarding media independence. Only 17.29 percent of respondents believe that media has complete freedom, while 24.18 percent feel media has some level of independence. Respondents also cited political interference (79.46 percent), government control (71.5 percent), and intervention by influential people (50.14 percent) as significant obstacles to press freedom. Meanwhile, 47.22 percent of respondents believe journalists cannot report freely.

People want the media to be free and impartial, as the survey has

found. Some 67.67 percent said a fully independent press is necessary, while 59.94 percent wanted impartial/unbiased reporting. Furthermore, 32.68 percent believe the media should be free from government control, and 37.39 percent want it to be free of political influence. However, when it comes to state-controlled media, the public opinion is divided. More than half of the respondents (56.47 percent) believe that Bangladesh Television (BTV) should remain under government control, while 55.35 percent hold the same view regarding Bangladesh Betar, the state-run radio broadcaster.

Revolutions demonstrates that a shared vision for the future and a collective effort to reshape institutions are far more effective than divisive and violent upheavals. In Bangladesh, cultivating a civic culture that encourages participation, dialogue, and peaceful conflict resolution is a far more reliable path to lasting progress.

As LT Hobhouse notes in his book

For more measured and deliberate changes, Bangladesh might look towards the American and Glorious Revolutions. These revolutions, while not devoid of conflict, were marked by a clearer vision for the post-revolutionary order and a stronger emphasis on establishing lasting institutions rather than merely dismantling the old ones. They focused on legal and constitutional reforms that laid the groundwork for stable governance, rather than precipitating widespread disorder.

Liberalism, great social changes do not arise solely from innovative ideas—they require the activation of collective emotions and passions to break away from entrenched routines and challenge oppressive authorities. Yet passion, if unguided, can easily become chaotic and counterproductive. What Bangladesh needs is not a revolution of streets and chaos but one of minds and policies—a revolution rooted in a shared vision and practical understanding of

While significant, the survey has shortcomings; for example, it excludes platforms like WhatsApp, and has a vague definition of “lack of interest.” Future such surveys should include demographic data and explore the views of key stakeholders like journalists, media outlet owners, and civil and military government officials, whose perspectives on media freedom are crucial, especially given the past challenges in accessing such groups.

Despite its limitations, the survey highlights the need for media policy reforms in Bangladesh. It also underscores how developing media literacy, especially in the rural areas and among women, is necessary. Educational programmes and training can be launched to counter misinformation and promote awareness regarding the media’s role.

Ensuring media independence is another urgent necessity, so is bridging the digital divide. While mobile phone usage is high, computer usage remains low, particularly in rural areas. Expanding access to technology in these areas is crucial to ensure equitable access to digital information. The control of state-owned media also needs reassessment.

The survey conducted by the Media Reform Commission is essential to understand public perception regarding the country’s media industry. Despite its limitations, it presents a valuable opportunity to improve the country’s media system. The next crucial step is to take concrete actions based on these findings. Making the full dataset publicly accessible is also vital, particularly for those conducting media research. Keeping the data locked away under the pretext of preventing commercial misuse would only deepen distrust, contradicting BBS’s transparency policy.

Maintaining neutrality and independence also requires self-regulation within the media itself. Media institutions must engage in introspection and ensure governance within their structures alongside their calls for government accountability. If media organisations themselves obstruct the Media Reform Commission’s recommendations, it will severely impede press freedom and stall Bangladesh’s democratic progress—a pattern that history has repeatedly demonstrated.

how to achieve meaningful change. First, activists and thinkers must demonstrate the feasibility of their aims by grounding their revolutionary ideas in the realm of the possible. They must show how these aims can either harmonise with existing institutions or lead to the creation of new, viable frameworks that better serve the populace. In Bangladesh’s context, where democratic structures exist but remain weak and often falter, the goal should be to improve, rather than reject, the system entirely. The focus should be on building upon what works and rectifying what does not.

Second, a compelling social theory must be developed and clearly communicated in a way that resonates with the real demands and aspirations of people. This theory should offer a clear explanation of how society should function and why. It must provide a constructive blueprint for addressing pressing issues such as governance, corruption, and social inequality, while remaining anchored in the nation’s cultural and historical ethos. Finally, the principles of this social theory must evolve into a comprehensive social philosophy that guides the nation towards a long-term vision of justice, prosperity, and democratic integrity. This philosophy should unify and direct activists, lending coherence and purpose to their efforts, and ultimately become a force in shaping national policies and public opinion.

As Bangladesh looks to the future, it is crucial to pursue well-structured and purposeful change. This approach will direct the passionate energies of the populace towards strategic and constructive goals. Such a path will ensure that the changes we seek are not only profound but also enduring. It will build a stable and prosperous society that reflects the true spirit of our democratic aspirations.