This supplement highlights the key details of the reform proposals and the rationale behind them, aiming to raise public awareness, spark discussions, and encourage robust participation.

ILLUSTRATION: **SOJIB ROY**

# EDITOR'S NOTE

Dear Readers,
We are proud to present the final instalment of our five-part special supplement series, marking The Daily Star's 34th anniversary. This concluding edition explores the reform proposals introduced by various commissions under the interim government, aiming to rebuild Bangladesh in the spirit of the July 36 mass uprising.

The Proclamation of Independence of Bangladesh pledged to uphold equality, human dignity, and social justice. However, successive governments since independence have failed to fulfil this vision, culminating in over 15 years of autocratic rule marked by lawlessness, corruption, and the disempowerment of the people. The July 36 uprising has given us a historic opportunity to correct these failures and chart a new path forward. In this context, the reform proposals serve as a blueprint for change. With most proposals already submitted, the crucial phase of implementation has begun. The success of this stage depends on how well these proposals reflect the people's aspirations and whether political parties can set aside differences to work towards a shared national goal. Achieving a broad consensus on the reform agenda is essential for ensuring its success and long-term sustainability.

This supplement highlights the key details of the reform proposals and the rationale behind them, aiming to raise public awareness, spark discussions, and encourage robust participation. Members of various commissions, alongside experts from relevant fields, provide their insights into these proposed reforms. We hope our readers will deeply engage with this rare opportunity to reshape Bangladesh's future.

Finally, we extend our heartfelt gratitude to the contributors of this special issue for their invaluable insights. We also sincerely thank our readers and patrons, whose unwavering support over the past 34 years has continually inspired us to uphold our motto: Your Right to Know.

**Mahfuz Anam**
*Editor & Publisher*

# Our primary objective is to institutionalise balance and strengthen our institutions

***Dr Ali Riaz, head of the Constitution Reform Commission and professor at Illinois State University, shares insights on the constitutional reform proposal in this exclusive interview with The Daily Star.***

**Ali Riaz**

**The Daily Star (TDS):** How do you evaluate your commission's work—was it more of a complete rewriting or a revision of the Constitution of Bangladesh?

**Ali Riaz (AR):** The Constitution Reform Commission has been entrusted with two key responsibilities. The first is to review the current Constitution, which, as observed by the public and civil society, contains numerous flaws. The most significant shortcoming is the failure to realise democratic aspirations. Instead, autocratic tendencies have repeatedly surfaced, becoming particularly dominant over the past 16 years.

The second responsibility is to propose necessary reforms to democratise the Constitution. Accordingly, we have put forward recommendations focusing on the executive branch, the legislature, and fundamental human rights. Now, it is the responsibility of political parties to implement these suggestions, while our commission's role is to rewrite, revise, and amend the Constitution.

During the press briefing on November 3, we explicitly stated that our work involves revision, removal, and addition. However, the extent to which these recommendations will be executed ultimately depends on the political parties.

**TDS:** You introduced new principles in response to recent uprisings, marking a departure from the 1972 Constitution. What necessitated these amendments to its original principles?

**AR:** The promises of the Liberation War of 1971—equality, dignity, and social justice—were reflected in the Proclamation of Independence. These ideals should have been enshrined in the Constitution of 1972, though they were not fully incorporated at the time. Importantly, these promises form the foundation of the state, and we believe it is essential to return to them, as 1971 remains the source of our collective identity and aspirations. These three principles are not only the bedrock of the state but also a concrete expression of the people's aspirations, born out of a long history of struggle. We firmly believe these ideals should form the foundation of the Bangladeshi state. The aspiration for democracy, embedded in the Constitution of 1972, remains unquestionable. Over the last 16 years, particularly during the movements of July and August, the masses have resisted overwhelming oppression in their fight for democracy. This enduring spirit of struggle has been incorporated into our proposal. In addition, we have emphasised the importance of pluralism. To create an inclusive society and state, we must first embrace diversity, allowing for multiple voices and paths. For instance, we must include marginalised groups such as Dalits and the third gender. Similarly, within religions, there are various sects that must also be acknowledged. Bringing together these diverse groups under one unified state is essential. Our vision for pluralism seeks to broaden connections and foster inclusivity, ensuring that a majority of people feel represented. The ongoing discussions about the principles of the state are highly positive, as they aspire to return to the spirit of 1971 while upholding democracy. Such discussions are crucial, especially given the lack of meaningful dialogue over the past 53 years. What we have proposed are merely suggestions—the rest will depend on the decisions of political parties and members of civil society.

**TDS:** Your proposal has faced criticism regarding the exclusion of secularism—how do you ensure pluralism without it?

**AR:** If you examine secularism academically, you will find that its ideas and forms have evolved significantly, accompanied by discussions on its limitations. Another crucial factor is the political reality. Over the past 53 years, secularism has, at times, led to confusion and been used as a tool for repression, raising the question of how best to navigate these complexities.

In response, we have integrated academic critiques with the aspirations of the people gathered through discussions. We believe it is essential to broaden participation in these conversations, moving beyond the traditional focus on the relationship between the state and religion or between religion and society. Instead, we advocate for expanding these discussions to embrace greater inclusivity, recognising that pluralism and secularism are not entirely separate. Rather than treating secularism as a problem, we should explore ways to strengthen and foster inclusiveness within these critical debates.

**TDS:** How did your commission navigate reform decisions—such as adopting a proportional election system—when even key political parties struggled to reach a consensus?

**AR:** We did not engage in direct discussions with political parties but consulted civil society members, various socio-cultural and professional organisations, as well as legal and constitutional experts. Political parties shared their views in written form, along with inputs from many others, all of which we carefully considered. Our work aimed to democratise the process and reduce the centralisation of power in a single individual—principles rooted in the ideals of the 1971 War of Liberation—to uphold citizens' rights. We gathered perspectives from relevant groups and incorporated our own insights, as the nine commission members have extensive experience working on constitutional matters. With these collective inputs, we sought to reach this point.

**TDS:** One of the key focuses of your recommendations is to curb the Prime Minister's overwhelming power. How do your proposed provisions address this issue?

**AR:** Our suggestion is that in a Westminster-style parliamentary system, the Prime Minister will inevitably hold some powers, as the PM is selected by the ruling party based on the confidence of the majority members in parliament. However, there must be a mechanism to check and limit the Prime Minister's authority. The challenge, which has been debated for the past decade, is how to establish this balance effectively.

A common perception is that transferring some of the Prime Minister's powers to the President could create equilibrium. However, this approach presents two key issues. While such a shift may appear to establish balance, there is no guarantee of its effectiveness, as the Prime Minister and the President are not merely individuals but institutions. Democracy functions through institutions, not individuals, which is why our focus is on institutional reform.

To achieve this, we have proposed a balanced framework, most notably through the establishment of the National Constitutional Council (NCC). This council aims to bring together the three organs of the state under a unified structure, ensuring a more robust system of checks and balances. In our experience, the relationship between the ruling party and the opposition has always been overwhelmingly bitter. However, a democracy cannot function effectively under such circumstances. Looking ahead, we expect a more cooperative and balanced political environment. With this in mind, we have considered the three organs of the state, ensuring that they operate with greater coordination and discussion.

Additionally, we propose granting some authority to the President. At present, the President cannot act without the Prime Minister's recommendations, but our proposal allows the President to exercise certain powers independently. Moreover, our focus extends beyond the executive branch—we have also outlined measures for the legislature. Specifically, we propose that all standing committee chairs be selected from the opposition party and that the deputy speaker also be appointed from the opposition. This would help establish a robust system of checks and balances.

For instance, in matters of declaring a state of emergency, the current system places this decision solely in the hands of the Prime Minister. We recommend that such a decision be made by the National Coordination Committee (NCC) instead, ensuring broader consultation and consensus. While emergencies may arise in certain situations, their declaration should be a matter of collective discussion. Our primary objective is to institutionalise balance and strengthen our institutions.

**TDS:** How would your proposed bicameral parliament enhance legislative accountability?

**AR:** The concept of a bicameral system emerged from two key considerations. First, in our current parliamentary process, even in the most credible previous election, parties came to power with only 40-41% of the total vote. This means a significant portion of the electorate—those who did not vote for the ruling party—remains unrepresented. These individuals are citizens and voters who supported other parties that failed to secure victory. The question, then, is how to ensure their voices are heard. Our goal was to address this issue and provide a mechanism for their representation.

Second, a brute majority or a two-thirds majority in parliament allows for the passage of any legislation without sufficient checks. This creates the risk of laws being enacted that could undermine fundamental rights. To prevent such occurrences, we proposed that certain critical laws—especially those affecting human rights—should require approval from an upper house. However, budgetary matters should remain under the jurisdiction of the lower house.

In essence, we believe this system would create a necessary balance. Given our current political reality, we must find a solution that ensures fair representation and safeguards against unchecked legislative power.

**TDS:** How would your proposed guidelines strengthen human rights protection?

**AR:** Now, rights are divided into two forms: basic rights and citizens' social and economic rights. What we consider is that these rights must be ensured. Economic rights cannot be ensured overnight—for instance, the right to food for all. Therefore, we have stated that these rights should be progressively ensured based on the state's capacity.

In the Constituent Assembly debates of 1972, it was discussed that economic rights should have been ensured. However, the country lacked the capacity at the time, as it was devastated by war and everything was just beginning. But now, we are not in the same position. Although we still cannot do everything, we can meet the demands of some of these rights.

Some rights, however, are basic and must not be denied. No one should be left without protection, and fundamental rights, such as the right to vote, must not be taken away for disappearance. We have also emphasised the importance of ensuring the rights of future citizens. Now, we exist in this universe as custodians of future generations. While we use nature, it must be protected.

**TDS:** What would be the role of National Constitutional Council (NCC)?

**AR:** We intended to structure it so that the three organs of the state could sit together to discuss any matter. However, now discussions can only take place in parliament, and our experience has not been satisfactory. There should be a dedicated platform to deliberate on laws, the future, and various state affairs.

We proposed that appointments to constitutional bodies should be made by the NCC. We observed that when such decisions depend on individuals, personal preferences take precedence. Instead, we want these appointments to be made institutionally.

The NCC consists of the president, prime minister, leader of the opposition, chief justice, and speaker. Within this framework, they can discuss and resolve matters in a way that benefits citizens and the nation as a whole. If we establish institutions that function independently of individuals and ensure their continuity, institutionalism will naturally take root.

**TDS:** Your proposal requires a two-thirds parliamentary majority and a referendum for constitutional amendments, making changes more challenging for political parties. What is the rationale behind this?

**AR:** The fundamental principle is that citizens must have a say in any constitutional amendments. The constitution exists for the people and serves as their protector. Without incorporating their views, amending the constitution is unacceptable.

We have witnessed how the 15th Amendment significantly curtailed the people's power to vote. A core democratic principle is that governance must be based on the people's consent. Elections serve this purpose—political parties reach out to citizens, gather their views, and, through the voting process, secure their mandate to govern.

We have also proposed a four-year parliamentary tenure. The idea originated from recommendations by various political parties and civil society members. History shows that prolonged power often leads to abuse. Therefore, we advocated not only for a four-year term for Parliament but also for all constitutional commissions to prevent potential overreach and ensure accountability.

**TDS:** How optimistic are you about a change in political culture?

**AR:** Our past may be bleak, but that does not mean our future is destined for frustration. I believe political parties and political culture will continue to develop from this point forward.

My optimism stems from witnessing this recent uprising. Will we not learn from this event? Of course, we will. However, I am also realistic—I do not expect political parties to change overnight, as that would be utopian. A written constitution can establish institutions and provide guidance, but it alone is not enough—it must also cultivate an environment where a healthy political culture can thrive.

None of us are perfect, but we can now express our aspirations. Naturally, not everyone's desires will align—some will share common ground, while others will differ. Yet, it is crucial to voice our thoughts, as such space for expression was previously nonexistent.

Politicians are part of our society; they remain connected to the people and understand their thoughts and expectations. Ultimately, the success of our initiatives will hinge on public consensus. I remain hopeful—when discussing politics, we find many shared perspectives. If we can foster a space where politicians align with public sentiment and receive broad support, meaningful change can be achieved.

*The interview was taken by* **Priyam Paul**.

**A glimpse into the July Uprising 2024.**

PHOTO: NAIMUR RAHMAN

- Our vision for pluralism seeks to broaden connections and foster inclusivity, ensuring that a majority of people feel represented.
- The National Constitutional Council (NCC) aims to bring together the three organs of the state within a unified structure, ensuring a more robust system of checks and balances.
- We propose that all standing committee chairs be selected from the opposition party and that the deputy speaker also be appointed from the opposition. This would help establish a robust system of checks and balances.
- We propose that certain critical laws—especially those affecting human rights—should require approval from an upper house.
- If we establish institutions that function independently of individuals and ensure their continuity, institutionalism will naturally take root.

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# ELECTION COMMISSION'S POWER over executive bodies key to election integrity

***In conversations with Dr Badiul Alam Majumdar, head of the Electoral System Reform Commission. He is also the secretary of SHUJAN: Citizens for Good Governance.***

**Badiul Alam Majumdar**

**The Daily Star (TDS):** Could you please share how your commission functioned and what outcomes it achieved?

**Badiul Alam Majumdar (BAM):** First and foremost, we have thoroughly reviewed all relevant laws, rules, and regulations. At the same time, we have sought opinions from political parties by collecting their written proposals. Additionally, we have gathered feedback from various stakeholders through websites, emails, and Facebook, as well as through direct discussions.

Based on this, we have made approximately 150 recommendations, some of which focus on ensuring credible elections. Our electoral space has become criminalised, polluted, and frequented by undesirable individuals. In many cases, criminals are now being elected. During discussions with us, many have expressed concerns that such individuals should not be allowed to enter the esteemed institution of the Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban. To address this, the electoral process must be cleaned up.

To this end, we have put forward several clear recommendations. For instance, we propose enacting laws to disqualify individuals involved in serious crimes against humanity or severe corruption from contesting elections.

We have recommended a provision ensuring that fugitive accused individuals cannot participate in elections. Those convicted by judicial or international courts should be deemed ineligible from the date of their conviction.

For those imprisoned within the country, they may submit their nomination papers through the prison authorities, subject to permission. However, all others must submit their nomination papers in person. This measure is intended to prevent criminals, fascists, and individuals involved in serious crimes—such as crimes against humanity, severe human rights violations, enforced disappearances, murders, extrajudicial killings, repression, and torture—from contesting elections. Given the deep wounds inflicted on our country, it is essential to keep such individuals away from the electoral process and the political sphere.

We have also proposed introducing a "No Vote" option. The affidavit format has been revised to allow for verification, ensuring that any assets held abroad by candidates are disclosed. Additionally, after the election, the Election Commission must certify that the election was conducted fairly and acceptably.

An election is not just about one or two constituencies; it is a comprehensive process. If anyone is aggrieved, we have provided a mechanism for them to seek legal recourse and obtain swift remedies through the courts.

**TDS:** Given the past three major fraudulent elections, what measures would you suggest to prevent future electoral malpractice?

**BAM:** In the 2018 and 2024 elections, the Election Commission simply announced the results as received from the returning officers. Now, we have assigned them a specific responsibility to certify whether the entire election was conducted properly before making any official announcement. If anyone disagrees with their decision, they have the right to appeal to the higher court, which must resolve the matter within seven days.

We have proposed a provision for re-elections in constituencies where voter turnout falls below 40%. Additionally, to hold accountable those who turned the 2018 and 2024 elections into a mockery, we have suggested forming a special commission. This commission will also investigate judicial authorities who played a role in legitimising these controversial elections.

If wrongdoing goes unpunished, it only encourages further misconduct. Domestic and international observers play a crucial role in ensuring fair elections, so we have recommended changes to relevant policies. Furthermore, we have emphasised the need for a media policy to support transparency in the electoral process.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

- We propose enacting laws to disqualify individuals involved in serious crimes against humanity or severe corruption from contesting elections.
- An election is not just about one or two constituencies; it is a comprehensive process. If anyone is aggrieved, we have provided a mechanism for them to seek legal recourse and obtain swift remedies through the courts.
- If there is a possibility of a controversial election, as seen in 2014, 2018, or 2024, the Election Commission should have the power to send a reference to the Supreme Court through the President, seeking a directive to postpone the election for up to 90 days if necessary.
- All political parties should ensure that their internal committees are formed through democratic elections. An updated and publicly accessible membership list should be maintained and published annually on their websites.
- Student, teacher, and labour organisations affiliated with political parties should be abolished, and foreign branches of political parties should be dissolved.

**TDS:** What key reforms do you propose to strengthen the Election Commission's independence, accountability, and effectiveness?

**BAM:** Our primary recommendation regarding the formation of the Election Commission is to clearly define its structure, responsibilities, powers, and accountability. We propose that the appointment of Election Commission members be based on a consensus among political parties. Additionally, the commission should remain accountable to a special parliamentary committee both during its tenure and after retirement, as no such accountability mechanism currently exists.

If negligence in duty leads to electoral misconduct, the Election Commission should be held accountable under Sections 76 to 89 of the RPO. Any wrongdoing by commission members must have consequences.

We also advocate granting the commission absolute authority in finalising election candidates. Ensuring its financial independence and giving it the power to appoint its own secretary are crucial steps.

Furthermore, we recommend repealing the law that transferred the national ID system to the Ministry of Home Affairs and reinstating it under the Election Commission, a measure that has already been implemented.

Additionally, if allegations of electoral fraud arise in any constituency, the Election Commission should have the authority to investigate and, if necessary, annul the election and order a re-election.

**We have also proposed introducing a "No Vote" option. The affidavit format has been revised to allow for verification, ensuring that any assets held abroad by candidates are disclosed. Additionally, after the election, the Election Commission must certify that the election was conducted fairly and acceptably.**

The Election Commission should be entrusted with ensuring the security of candidates and their agents. Moreover, any actions by the executive branch that could influence the election process must require prior approval from the Election Commission. In other words, the commission's authority over other executive bodies is crucial for maintaining election integrity.

If there is a possibility of a controversial election, as seen in 2014, 2018, or 2024, the Election Commission should have the power to send a reference to the Supreme Court through the President, seeking a directive to postpone the election for up to 90 days if necessary.

**TDS:** What key reforms would you suggest for political parties?

**BAM:** To cleanse political parties of criminal influence, we propose that individuals convicted of serious crimes, crimes against humanity, human rights violations, or fugitives should not be allowed to become party members. Anyone found guilty by judicial courts or international criminal courts should be disqualified from both elections and party membership.

All political parties should ensure that their internal committees are formed through democratic elections. An updated and publicly accessible membership list should be maintained and published annually on their websites. Only registered members should be allowed to participate in electing party committees.

Additionally, student, teacher, and labour organisations affiliated with political parties should be abolished, and foreign branches of political parties should be dissolved.

To ensure financial transparency, political parties must manage their funds and donations through the banking system, with all transactions being audited. The Election Commission should publish these audit reports for public scrutiny.

Election expenses fall into two categories: visible and invisible. Visible expenses can be regulated, and political parties may be compelled to comply to some extent. However, vote-buying remains hidden, and nomination trading also occurs entirely behind the scenes in various forms. There is no concrete evidence of these practices, and without verifiable information, corrective action cannot be taken. Addressing these issues largely depends on the sincerity of political parties and the vigilance of citizens.

For women's empowerment, we propose a rotational system, increasing the number of reserved seats for women to 100. The total number of parliamentary constituencies should be expanded to 400, with 100 seats reserved exclusively for women. These seats should be contested only by qualified female candidates, ensuring direct elections rather than nominations. This will provide women with equal responsibilities, rights, and opportunities as men. Over time, as gender parity in politics improves, such reservations may no longer be necessary. A similar model has been successfully implemented in India's panchayat elections and has proven highly effective.

There is currently a gender gap in voter registration, with the number of female voters declining despite women constituting a slightly larger percentage of the population than men. This discrepancy must be addressed to ensure fair representation.

Ensuring voting rights for expatriates is crucial, as they constitute approximately 15 to 20 million of our population. If they are deprived of their voting rights, the legitimacy of our elections may be questioned. Therefore, they should be included in the voter list and allowed to participate in elections either through postal ballots or an e-voting system.

**TDS:** What key reforms do you propose for strengthening the local government system and ensuring fair governance?

**BAM:** We have proposed reforms in the local government system. Currently, there are nine general seats and three reserved seats for women, totalling 12 members in local government bodies. We recommend increasing the number of general seats from nine to 12 and reserving four seats for women instead of three.

Additionally, we propose making local government elections non-partisan and holding them before national elections in a rotational manner. To ensure fair governance, we suggest forming a permanent Local Government Commission, which will oversee the election process, prevent undue dismissals of elected representatives by bureaucrats, and establish a financial decentralisation framework.

**TDS:** What reforms do you propose for the presidential election?

**BAM:** Regarding the presidential election, we propose expanding the electoral college to include not only Members of Parliament but also all elected local government representatives. This would create a much larger electoral body of approximately 65,000 to 70,000 members, ensuring that only qualified individuals are chosen as President.

**TDS:** How has the debate over the Proportional Representation (PR) system evolved in your political context, and what are the prevailing opinions on its implementation?

**BAM:** Many who initially supported the Proportional Representation (PR) system are now opposed to it because, in our political context, they do not want representatives of fascist regimes to return to power. Most people do not want the Lower House to be part of the PR system. However, there is widespread support for implementing the PR system for the Upper House. In our country, the stance of political parties often shifts depending on whether they are in opposition or in government.

**TDS:** How confident are you in achieving free and fair elections in the future?

**BAM:** It is evident that holding a fair election does not solely depend on the Election Commission; it is ultimately a political decision. If our politicians decide that they do not want a fair election, even the strongest Election Commission would find it nearly impossible to ensure one. However, the Election Commission can prevent unfair, controversial, or fraudulent elections, and we have included provisions for that. Ultimately, the willingness of political parties to conduct fair elections is crucial.

If a fair electoral process is not established, it will render all efforts futile, and that would be unacceptable. It would also be a betrayal of those who sacrificed their lives in the 2024 uprising. Therefore, it is essential for our citizens to remain vocal and active in safeguarding democracy.

*The interview was taken by* **Priyam Paul**.

**People occupied the Parliament Bhaban on August 5, 2024.**

PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

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# Democratic reforms must begin with political parties

***The Daily Star speaks with Professor Rounaq Jahan, an eminent political scientist, author, and distinguished fellow at CPD, on the challenges and future of political reforms in Bangladesh.***

**Rounaq Jahan**

**The Daily Star (TDS):** What are the critical areas where reforms should begin in Bangladesh's political sphere to promote democracy?

**Rounaq Jahan (RJ):** To promote democracy, we must first democratise our political parties. Parties play a central role in the proper functioning of representative democracy. They recruit and socialise people in political activities. They select and train people for elected positions and offices. They generate political values through propagation of their ideologies. They mobilise voters, structure voting choices, and run election campaigns. We cannot institutionalise democracy unless we have political parties who are truly committed to practising democracy.

Our political parties have played contradictory roles in promoting democracy. Their glorious role in our nationalist struggle in the 1950s and 1960s and in all our pro-democracy movements from the 1950s till the present is undeniable. In contrast, when our political parties were elected to govern the country, they failed to behave in a democratic manner. They have suppressed political opposition, limited citizens' rights, abused state power to perpetuate their own regimes, and eroded the independence of all state and non-state institutions.

But we have to remember that no matter how critical we are of them, we need political parties. They are the essential actors who mediate and aggregate the diverse political interests in the country. They are close to the people on the ground. They lead protests, manage election campaigns, and are the driving force behind elected governments. We cannot move forward in our democratic journey unless it is led by political leaders and parties who are skilled and farsighted enough to navigate the perilous transition process that lies ahead.

At present, our political leaders and parties face the challenge of regaining people's trust in their democratic credentials. They need to demonstrate that they can initiate meaningful reforms to democratise their own organisations. We all recognise that external prescriptions of reforms, unless owned by the parties themselves, will have limited impact. Governments and civil society organisations can exert pressure from outside, but meaningful reforms will take place only when parties prioritise these reforms.

I hope after the July 2024 student-led mass uprising, our political leaders have woken up to new ground realities that the people are no longer willing to accept the autocratic and oppressive behaviour of the parties. They need to show now that they follow universally accepted democratic norms within their organisations as well as when they relate to other parties and citizens.

**TDS:** How can internal democracy within political parties be improved, and what role does it play in the broader democratic system?

**RJ:** Internal democracy within political parties is key to democracy promotion and consolidation. The arguments are relatively straightforward: that parties must practise what they preach; that if a party is run in an autocratic manner and it is not inclusive, it can hardly be expected to nurture democratic values outside.

Almost ten years ago, I published a book, *Political Parties in Bangladesh: Challenges of Democratisation* (Prothoma, 2015), where I elaborated on some of the undemocratic practices of our political parties. By using several indicators which have been used in other global studies, such as the processes of leadership selection, candidate nomination, policy-setting, representation of social diversity, party funding, and conflict resolution, my study showed that none of our political parties practise democracy within their own organisations.

Improving internal democracy will not be an easy task. Undemocratic practices have now become almost normal. But parties can begin this process by first following their own organisational rules. For example, rules of most parties state that there should be regular council meetings and elections for various party positions from grassroots and up; but none of these rules are followed by our political parties. For over forty years, our two major electoral parties have been led by dynastic leaders who have been repeatedly "elected" uncontested. The office bearers of various committees and candidates for elected offices have also been selected by top party leadership. There is little policy deliberation and debate within party forums. Party workers are used to mobilise votes, celebrate commemorative days, and establish authority in different areas by show of physical force. Key party decisions have been taken by top party leaders, sometimes against the advice of other party leaders.

These undemocratic practices now need to change. The party leaders should begin implementing their own organisational rules. They can start the process by electing leaders of all committees at all strata through regular secret ballot, nominating party candidates for elective office from panels selected by grassroots committees, and involving party workers in policy discussion and debates. These actions are relatively straightforward, simple, and would be a step forward.

However, we do have some deeply entrenched undemocratic practices that would be more difficult to dismantle. For example, our major parties have been built through abuse of state resources. When in power, political parties have used state agencies and state resources to reward their supporters and punish their opponents. The mission of capturing and retaining state power at all costs has become an obsession with the major electoral parties for their own survival.

The competition for grabbing public resources has led to corruption and criminalisation of party politics. Business people and maastans have emerged as dominant players. Factions within parties have multiplied due to increasing contestation for a share of the spoils. The factional feuds have led to increasing political violence between and within parties. Interestingly, more people are getting killed due to intra-party violence. For example, according to Ain-O-Salish Kendra, between 2002 to 2023, intra-party violence has led to 447 deaths as opposed to 266 deaths due to violence between parties. It is also worth noting that the incidence of intra-party violence is higher within ruling parties, which implies that they have more patronage resources to distribute.

Factional feuds have also strengthened the position of dynastic leaders, who have become indispensable for holding together the various feuding groups and factions within the parties.

Factionalism within parties is common worldwide, but in most cases, conflicts are resolved through democratic processes, such as secret balloting, to select leaders without external interference. Unfortunately, in our political system, decisions are often dictated by supreme dynastic leaders. Without their involvement, no one listens to one another, perpetuating an autocratic political culture that obstructs progress towards intra-party democracy.

**TDS:** What kind of political culture is necessary to sustain a truly democratic environment in Bangladesh?

**RJ:** The cornerstone of political culture in a democracy is tolerance towards dissenting voices. In a democracy, there will be discussion and debates, competition for power, winners and losers, but all of these contestations must be peaceful and follow democratic rules of the game. A winner in a democratic election cannot behave in the style of "winner takes it all". She/he cannot abuse power to eliminate the loser. Electoral democracy means peaceful transfer of power, rotation of power, and the rule of the majority with the consent of the minority.

In a democratic environment, people should be free to express their opinion without feeling threatened that they will be punished by either the state or non-state actors. Hate-mongering, 'othering', branding, tagging, misinformation and disinformation campaigns, and mob violence are all detrimental to sustaining a democratic space in any country.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

**TDS:** How can institutional support, beyond political parties, contribute to a stable and effective democratic political system?

**RJ:** Political parties are undoubtedly key political institutions, but several other critical institutions also play a pivotal role. For example, we need strong and independent state institutions to work as effective check and balance mechanisms. These include Parliament, the judiciary, the Election Commission, the Anti-Corruption Commission, the Human Rights Commission, and other constitutional commissions.

One of the persistent challenges we have faced in the past is that whenever a party came to power, it has attempted to politicise and control all state institutions. This led to the ascendance of an all-powerful and unaccountable head of government. We can establish the rule of law only when all state institutions can function independently, following their own rules.

It is a matter of concern that even in our neighbouring countries such as India, Sri Lanka and Nepal, people have trust in the integrity of the electoral process and the Election Commission. In these countries, the higher judiciary has sometimes given judgements against the actions of the regime in power. Sadly, in Bangladesh, citizens have lost trust in the integrity of these state institutions.

To build a democratic system, side by side with state institutions, we also need strong and independent non-state institutions such as trade unions, peasant organisations, student organisations, professional organisations, and civil society organisations. These organisations will generate their own group demands. Political parties can then mediate these collective demands and formulate their own policies and programmes.

Independent media is another critical actor that can hold both state and non-state actors accountable. However, at present, our immediate priority is restoring the integrity of elections and trust in the independence of the judiciary. We cannot expect to have a peaceful democratic transition unless we can restore people's trust in these two institutions.

To truly foster democracy, we must restore trust in elections, guarantee judicial independence, and ensure freedom of expression. If we achieve these fundamental goals, we will go a long way in realising *rastra-sanskar*, which is currently being debated.

**TDS:** How can a national consensus be built to encourage political parties to adhere to democratic values and practices?

**RJ:** National consensus cannot be built overnight. It will take time, commitment, and hard work on the part of all stakeholders. Unfortunately, in the last fifty-four years, we have seen repeated breakdowns of our democratic order. We have taken a few steps forward and then many steps backwards. Moving forward, we need to be more vigilant against taking any backward step. As soon as we identify any violation of democratic norms and rules, we need to protest and take corrective action to get back on the democratic path.

A major stumbling block in our path towards achieving national consensus is the prioritisation of debates about identity, history, and culture by political parties. If parties prioritise discussions on economic and social development policies, it will be easier to reach consensus on important issues facing the nation. Culture wars will only intensify divisions, as we are now witnessing in the USA.

**TDS:** What measures can be taken to safeguard against a return to autocracy?

**RJ:** I am reminded of Lord Acton's famous quote: "eternal vigilance is the price of liberty". Vigilant citizens who are committed to maintaining a democratic system are the best safeguards against a return to autocracy. Of course, citizens need to be empowered through the protection of their fundamental freedoms, such as freedom of expression. They need to be guaranteed their minimal democratic rights, such as regular free and fair elections to elect parties/people in and out of power and get fair justice from an independent judicial system.

As I noted earlier, we need to build democratic state and non-state institutions to safeguard individual freedoms and protect against a return to autocracy. But institution-building needs time, and practices are more important than formal laws and rules. By simply amending or rewriting a constitution or proclaiming a law or ordinance, we will not be able to safeguard against a return to autocracy. Our values, norms, and above all, our practices need to be more democratic. This will take time; we need to be patient and stay on the democratic course. We need to engage in civil dialogues with people who hold opposing views and not resort to threats or actual violence to eliminate them.

We will make mistakes, but we can take corrective measures only when we keep an open mind and are willing to listen to criticisms. Those of us who are concerned about democracy have a responsibility to act whenever processes seem to be heading in the wrong direction. This requires criticism grounded in freedom of expression and ensuring accountability through strong institutions.

*This interview was taken by* **Priyam Paul**.

- We cannot move forward in our democratic journey unless it is led by political leaders and parties who are skilled and farsighted enough to navigate the perilous transition process that lies ahead.
- According to Ain-O-Salish Kendra, between 2002 to 2023, intra-party violence has led to 447 deaths as opposed to 266 deaths due to violence between parties.
- Hate-mongering, 'othering', branding, tagging, misinformation and disinformation campaigns, and mob violence are all detrimental to sustaining a democratic space in any country.
- To build a democratic system, side by side with state institutions, we also need strong and independent non-state institutions such as trade unions, peasant organisations, student organisations, professional organisations, and civil society organisations.
- To truly foster democracy, we must restore trust in elections, guarantee judicial independence, and ensure freedom of expression. If we achieve these fundamental goals, we will go a long way in realising rastra-sanskar, which is currently being debated.

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# Without judicial supremacy, all institutions will collapse

***The Daily Star sits down with Barrister Jyotirmoy Barua, Supreme Court Advocate, to discuss the pressing issues within Bangladesh's judicial system that call for reform.***

**Jyotirmoy Barua**

**The Daily Star (TDS):** What are the key reforms required for the judiciary in Bangladesh?

**Jyotirmoy Barua (JB):** Judicial reform revolves around judicial supremacy, with a key focus on entry-level appointments. The judiciary consists of lower and higher courts, yet the Constitutional Reform Commission (CRC) proposed abolishing subordinate courts without addressing necessary structural reforms. For example, Article 111 mandates Supreme Court rulings as binding on lower courts, but the CRC did not recommend amending this, creating contradictions.

Currently, subordinate court judges are recruited through a commission, often appointed after passing an exam with minimal training. This system allows individuals with limited practical experience to adjudicate complex legal matters. In the past, judicial appointments required maturity and experience, but today, candidates can memorise textbooks, pass exams, and become judges with little real-world exposure. A minimum of five years of legal practice before judicial appointment would ensure practical knowledge.

The appointment of Supreme Court judges in Bangladesh is governed by Articles 95 and 98 of the Constitution. Article 95 outlines judge appointments, while Article 98 addresses temporary appointments. The Supreme Court Judges Appointment Ordinance 2025 introduced changes, some necessary but others problematic. Despite stakeholder consultations, key concerns were overlooked.

Previously, the Chief Justice (CJ) appointed judges in consultation with the President, though political interference was common. The new ordinance shifts this authority to a Supreme Judicial Appointment Council, contradicting Article 95, which mandates that only the CJ nominates judges. Again, the CJ is designated as a council member, despite the council's stated purpose of advising him. If such a council were necessary, it should have been structured to allow the CJ to form it at his discretion.

VISUAL: SHAIKH SULTANA JAHAN BADHON

Other members include senior judges from the Appellate and High Court Divisions, but the inclusion of a district judge is problematic. Article 152(1) defines an administrative unit as comprising judges below the district judge rank. Allowing subordinate judges to influence Supreme Court appointments disrupts judicial hierarchy and raises concerns about conflicts of interest.

Another issue is the Attorney General's participation in the council. As a political appointee, the Attorney General is susceptible to government influence, which could compromise judicial impartiality. Additionally, the ordinance allows the CJ to appoint a law professor or legal expert as a council member. However, professors lacking direct legal practice experience may not be suited to assess judicial candidates.

The ordinance's provisions appear to promote inclusivity by allowing lower judiciary members and external stakeholders a role in judicial appointments. However, this structure is unsuitable for the judiciary, where hierarchy is crucial.

Historically, around 70% of Supreme Court judges have been appointed from practising lawyers, while 30% have come from the judiciary. This balance recognises the distinct skill sets required in higher courts. Lower court judges primarily follow strict legal procedures, whereas Supreme Court judges must exercise judicial discretion. Judges accustomed to rigid procedural rulings may struggle with the broader interpretative role required in the Supreme Court.

Article 6 of the ordinance outlines the council's authority to nominate candidates and introduce additional eligibility criteria beyond those in Articles 95 and 98 of the Constitution. One such criterion is a minimum age of 45 years for appointment. Lowering this to 40 years would be more reasonable, as lawyers gain substantial expertise within ten years of practice. Talented legal professionals may be dissuaded from joining the judiciary if they must wait until 45, especially given the financial and professional constraints of judicial roles.

The ordinance also introduces qualifications related to candidates' education, professional experience, and publications. While these may appear beneficial, they introduce loopholes that disadvantage practising lawyers. Lawyers can begin practising with an undergraduate degree, whereas lower court judges often pursue postgraduate degrees at government expense. This discrepancy gives judicial officers an advantage in Supreme Court appointments, effectively reducing the number of lawyer appointees.

Judicial appointments should not be based on retrospective scrutiny of qualifications but rather on professional competence. Eligibility criteria should be established by the Constitution or Parliament, not left to an appointment council's discretion.

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- A minimum of five years of legal practice before judicial appointment would ensure aspiring judges gain practical knowledge before assuming responsibilities.
- The interim government should prioritise establishing an independent, transparent judicial appointment process to ensure competence, diversity, and public confidence.
- Decentralisation, like India's model, could ease burdens for litigants by establishing High Courts and circuit benches, improving judicial accessibility in Bangladesh.
- Decentralisation improves accessibility, but its success depends on structured implementation ensuring judicial consistency; otherwise, its effectiveness remains uncertain.
- Judicial reforms must ensure CJ's accountability while preserving the position's dignity.

# Without judicial supremacy, all institutions will collapse

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By undermining merit-based selection, the ordinance fails in its stated objective of enhancing transparency and competence in judicial appointments. Instead, it exacerbates existing challenges, creating barriers to the inclusion of qualified legal professionals. To uphold fairness, merit, and judicial independence, these structural flaws must be addressed and rectified.

**TDS:** Given the limited time of the interim government, what specific measures can be taken to ensure long-term sustainability in addressing systemic issues within the judiciary?

**Until proven in court, the accused is presumed innocent, which is not just a rhetoric, rather a fundamental principle of natural justice.**

FILE VISUAL: **STAR**

**JB:** Not all systemic issues within the judiciary fall under the remit of the interim government; rather, internal management-related matters must be addressed by the judiciary itself. As the CJ holds the jurisdiction to oversee these matters, it is within his authority to determine the appropriate measures for resolving various challenges related to case management. This includes decisions on forming special benches to expedite the disposal of cases.

Within the Supreme Court, a separate General Administration (GA) Committee operates under the CJ. In line with long-standing tradition, the CJ consults with the GA Committee and senior judges when making decisions regarding judicial directives, case management procedures, and necessary reforms. These considerations extend to streamlining judicial processes and enhancing digitalisation—in some instances, full digitalisation is being explored—which are commendable initiatives. In my view, rather than burdening the interim government with these matters, the judiciary itself must be held accountable and pressured to address such issues independently.

Given the short timeframe of the interim government, its focus should be on laying the groundwork for an independent and transparent judicial appointment process—one that ensures judicial competence, maintains professional diversity, and upholds public confidence in the judiciary. If these foundational principles are not safeguarded, any short-term adjustments will fail to deliver sustainable improvements, ultimately shifting the burden of inefficiencies onto the general public.

**TDS:** How should judicial accountability, particularly in matters of disciplinary actions and the removal of judges, be addressed?

**JB:** The proposed reforms concerning disciplinary actions and the removal of judges initially included the establishment of an independent judicial commission for appointing Supreme Court judges. However, the recently enacted ordinance introduced a council instead. Notably, this ordinance was passed before the Constitutional Reform Commission (CRC) submitted its report and recommendations, thereby lacking a substantive basis. The CRC had recommended the formation of an independent Judicial Appointments Commission (JAC), composed of the Chief Justice as Chair, the next two most senior judges of the Appellate Division, the two most senior judges from the High Court, the Attorney General, and a citizen nominated by the upper house of the Constitution.

A new provision has also been introduced concerning investigations, granting the National Constitution Council (NCC), alongside the President, the authority to refer complaints to the Supreme Judicial Council. This adjustment significantly diminishes the President's exclusive authority, granting similar powers to the council.

Regarding accountability, in many countries, the Constitution is entrusted with ensuring judicial accountability. However, in countries like ours, where democracy remains fragile, relying solely on constitutional mechanisms poses significant challenges. Even before the 16th Amendment, when the Supreme Judicial Council was in operation, there was little evidence of judges being successfully scrutinised or removed. In many cases, they were forced into retirement rather than held accountable.

**To effectively reduce case backlogs, whether in civil or criminal matters, significant reforms in case management are required.**

PHOTO: **PRABIR DAS**

If a judge has a serious case of financial corruption against him, allowing them to leave in the name of protecting the judiciary's honour and dignity is not only detrimental but also undermines the very principles of justice. Thus, while the Supreme Judicial Council exists, its mere presence does not guarantee judicial accountability unless these systemic issues are addressed.

**TDS:** Can you elaborate on the proposed decentralisation of the High Court and its impact on the overall judicial process?

**JB:** During the Ershad administration, an initiative aimed to establish High Court benches in Chattogram and other locations to improve access to justice. While some litigants voluntarily approach the High Court, others are legally bound to do so when lower courts fail to provide adequate remedies. Decentralisation could reduce financial and logistical burdens for litigants outside Dhaka, similar to India's model, which has multiple High Courts across states and circuit benches in remote locations. Implementing a comparable system in Bangladesh could enhance judicial accessibility.

However, decentralisation presents challenges. Identical cases filed in different regions could lead to conflicting decisions, undermining judicial uniformity and increasing the burden on the High Court. The absence of a centralised case management system could further complicate legal proceedings. Given that writ petitions alone exceed 20,000 annually, decentralised benches would need to handle all case types, which could risk inefficiencies.

Practical experience suggests that decentralisation offers limited benefits. Resistance also exists among Dhaka-based judges and senior lawyers, who fear that decentralisation will disrupt established practice structures and diminish their authority. Decentralisation would redistribute cases, potentially making it difficult for experienced lawyers to maintain influence.

While decentralisation offers advantages in accessibility, its feasibility depends on structured implementation to ensure judicial consistency. Without addressing these concerns, the initiative remains uncertain in its effectiveness.

**TDS:** What measures should be taken to reduce the backlog of cases, and how should the root causes of delays in the judicial system be addressed?

**JB:** The judiciary's backlog exists at both lower and higher courts, but the High Court faces a particularly severe and growing crisis. This surge in cases does not indicate increased legal awareness or trust in the system but rather reflects rising social injustice. Litigation has increased due to systemic injustices and administrative failures. With the state itself involved in criminal activities for over 15 years, it is inevitable that the judiciary will experience an influx of cases.

Judicial inefficiencies and case backlogs stem from structural flaws, further complicated by political appointments. Many judicial recruits, appointed through political affiliations, prioritise monetary incentives over legal integrity. Due to inadequate remuneration, they often lack the motivation to prepare for trials. Ensuring adequate compensation and establishing independent oversight could help ensure accountability.

Expanding access to legal aid could also help, but awareness and accessibility remain challenging. Major reforms are required in case management. Dr Yunus once compared the system to a "cage" where accused individuals face dehumanising treatment before trial. Justice demands that all be presumed innocent until proven guilty. Thus, reform is essential, particularly in judicial management, legal education, and recruitment, to address systemic failures and reduce case backlogs effectively.

*The interview was taken by* **Miftahul Jannat.**

# A FAIR AND TRANSPARENT TRIAL is necessary to ensure accountability

***In conversation with Noor Khan Liton, a human rights activist and a member of the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances***

Noor Khan Liton

**The Daily Star (TDS):** What is the current status of human rights in the country, and what urgent issues need to be addressed?

**Noor Khan Liton (NKL):** Over the last 15–16 years, the country has experienced a period marked by authoritarian rule. In an effort to maintain their grip on power, the ruling regime resorted to various oppressive measures, including enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, persecution, systemic corruption, and the silencing of dissenting voices. Thousands of baseless cases were filed against individuals, some even posthumously, exposing the extent of human rights violations during this time. For instance, there were incidents where cases were lodged against individuals who had been deceased for two or three years, falsely implicating them in recent events. This period overwhelmingly disregarded human rights, with grave implications for justice and accountability.

When political parties attempted to organise and criticise the regime, individuals were targeted, often under the guise of maintaining law and order. Many people were killed in so-called "crossfires," abducted, or disappeared. Families of abducted individuals were frequently threatened into silence. Some abductees were found dead, while those who returned alive often refrained from speaking about their experiences, likely due to fear or coercion. Many remain missing to this day.

- It is critical to prioritise uncovering the fate of those who have disappeared, as claimed by their families and eyewitnesses.
- Empowering the police to act independently and responsibly, while maintaining strict discipline, is vital to ensuring stability and public trust.
- Separating the roles of the army and police from civilian affairs would better serve the public interest.
- A dedicated and autonomous body is required to oversee law enforcement agencies, identify misconduct, and recommend measures to ensure those responsible face justice.
- We must establish an independent Human Rights Commission that genuinely reflects the will of the people.

PHOTO: **PRABIR DAS**

Now, it is critical to prioritise uncovering the fate of those who have disappeared, as claimed by their families and eyewitnesses. The fundamental question remains: Are they still alive? Answering this is a crucial human rights task. Additionally, allegations of extrajudicial killings and the experiences of those who returned alive after being disappeared must be thoroughly investigated. Those responsible—whether the prime minister, president, chiefs of law enforcement agencies, or other officials—must be identified and brought to justice. A fair and transparent trial is necessary to ensure accountability and send a strong message to society, state leaders, and law enforcement agencies that no one is above the law. This would deter future violations and establish a precedent for justice.

Another pressing issue is restoring discipline within the police force, which, over the past 15 years, was frequently used as a tool of oppression against the people. The police force is still reeling from the setbacks caused by this misuse of power. To improve law and order and serve the public effectively, reforms are essential. Empowering the police to act independently and responsibly, while maintaining strict discipline, is vital to ensuring stability and public trust.

The prevailing sense of uncertainty among the populace also demands urgent attention. People are unsure about the future, and it is imperative to provide them with hope and a clear roadmap.

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# A fair and transparent trial is necessary to ensure accountability

**Those responsible—whether the prime minister, president, chiefs of law enforcement agencies, or other officials—must be identified and brought to justice. A fair and transparent trial is necessary to ensure accountability and send a strong message to society, state leaders, and law enforcement agencies that no one is above the law.**

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Recent statements from certain individuals have only added to this uncertainty, creating confusion instead of reassurance. It must be emphasised that the current government is temporary and that a durable solution lies in forming a government through free and fair national elections. This process should be expedited to restore stability and confidence among the people.

At the same time, ongoing reforms must continue, and political parties must commit to consensus-building and establishing a shared vision for progress. One critical area of reform is the balance of power between the president and the prime minister. Without this balance, there is always a risk of reverting to authoritarianism. Achieving this equilibrium will be essential to fostering democracy and preventing the re-emergence of fascism.

**TDS:** How can we prevent human rights violations carried out under the pretext of national security concerns, such as combatting drugs and militancy? What is view on abolishing the RAB?

**NKL:** For a long time, people have been harassed and persecuted under the guise of "national security," while members of law enforcement agencies operate without accountability. This must change. We need a clear and precise definition of national security—what constitutes a breach and what does not. Furthermore, the military should focus solely on its designated areas of responsibility, while the civil administration must function independently in its own domain. Separating the roles of the army and police from civilian affairs would better serve the public interest.

PHOTO: STAR

Those who established the RAB and allowed it to operate unchecked, using it for killings and abductions, must be brought to justice. Justifying such actions by citing "necessity" does not excuse the killing of citizens by an agency that blended military and police functions. The respective governments must take responsibility for the actions of these agencies and ensure accountability.

Certain tasks must be addressed permanently. For example, there is an urgent need for an independent body to monitor police activities. This cannot be adequately handled by the Human Rights Commission alone, especially as such bodies are often not empowered to operate independently. A dedicated and autonomous body is required to oversee law enforcement agencies, identify misconduct, and recommend measures to ensure those responsible face justice.

**TDS:** Could the Digital Security Act remain a tool for repression despite reforms?

**On the International Day of Victims of Enforced Disappearances, 30 August 2021, at the National Press Club, a discussion was organized by the 'Mayer Daak' organization, featuring a child named Saba. Saba's father, Mahfujur Rahman Sohel, had been forcibly disappeared. Saba waits for her father, looking down the road.**

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

**NKL:** The potential for oppression under the Digital Security Act still exists, and a thorough review is needed to ensure that no law undermines people's rights or facilitates persecution. Such laws must be identified and repealed.

**TDS:** How do you evaluate the current situation, especially police case handling and the rise of mob justice?

**NKL:** Unfortunately, even today, after arrests are made, reports of harassment and deaths in police custody continue to surface. In Bogura, the deaths of four political activists have raised serious concerns. We still hear about the persecution of minorities, though its extent may vary, and many such incidents are politically motivated. However, no such violation should occur. Human rights should have been fully protected since the 5th of August, yet people are still being killed or harassed under the guise of mob justice.

Another concerning trend is the exploitation of student deaths in recent uprisings, with individuals falsely implicated in killings for personal or political gain—an open secret. These actions neither reflect a democratic state nor a commitment to human rights. When a person is brought before the court, the state must ensure their protection, rather than subjecting them to kicks, torture, egg-throwing in court, or attacks while seeking medical treatment in hospital. Such actions are intolerable and must be prosecuted. Those responsible must face trial.

**TDS:** The plan to establish a UN Human Rights Office in Dhaka was abandoned. How do you evaluate this decision?

**NKL:** I hope the government reconsiders establishing a UN Human Rights Office in Bangladesh. We must reflect on the incidents that have taken place here, as their repercussions will be long-lasting. Investigations and trials will require substantial time and effort. There is an urgent need for formal assistance from international bodies, particularly in light of the killings, abductions, and persecutions over the last 16 years, including those that occurred during the recent 36-day period. We need forensic evidence, expert involvement, and expanded collaboration. Given our limited resources, seeking international support—especially through the UN—would be the most effective course of action.

**TDS:** Why was the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) ineffective during widespread human rights violations, and how can it become a true watchdog?

**NKL:** The human rights commission has never been allowed to function independently. Successive governments have consistently interfered by appointing individuals who blindly supported their agendas. The commission has lacked both the environment and the resources necessary for effective operation. We must establish an independent Human Rights Commission that genuinely reflects the will of the people. This is a critical issue, but it can only be achieved if there is no government interference in its work.

*This interview was taken by* **Priyam Paul.**

# Aligning employer concerns with worker protections is key

***An insightful discussion with Syed Sultan Uddin Ahmed, head of the Labour Reform Commission and executive director of BILS, on the future of labour rights and reforms in Bangladesh.***

**Syed Sultan Uddin Ahmed**

**The Daily Star (TDS):** Why is labour sector reform the most urgent priority?

**Syed Sultan Uddin Ahmed (SSUA):** Bangladesh has undergone a major political transformation, driven by students, workers, and the public, all united in the pursuit of a non-discriminatory and equitable society. These issues did not emerge overnight. Bangladesh's history is deeply tied to workers' struggles, evident in the Liberation War, the 1954 elections, and the 21-point charter—all centered on equality and ending discrimination. Tea garden workers, sanitation workers, agricultural and industrial labourers have long faced exploitation and harsh conditions.

Workers have repeatedly fought against injustice, but systemic discrimination remains unresolved. Fragmented struggles—farmers' movements, workers' protests, and the fight for independence—have shaped our long-standing pursuit of equity. The events of 2024 result from continuous struggles and sacrifices. To realise our aspirations, we must address their root causes. Inequality is deeply entrenched, requiring not just reform but a transformation of the world of work. Time is slipping away—without action, we risk falling further behind.

**TDS:** Which areas has the commission identified for reform in both the formal and informal sectors?

**SSUA:** Exploitation of workers, systemic discrimination, lack of protection, and deprivation of basic rights remain critical issues. While modern industries have created jobs, they have also deepened inequalities—not just between employers and workers but within the workforce itself.

Take maternity leave, for example. Government employees receive six months of leave, private-sector workers are entitled to four months (often not granted), and informal-sector workers—who make up 85% of the workforce—get none. This disparity highlights how even fundamental rights are unequally distributed. Motherhood is a societal responsibility, because the child is part of the society. However, our system has created disparities even in such fundamental areas through law.

Inequality extends to employment structures as well. Permanent and outsourced workers often work side by side in government offices, yet the latter receive no job security, bonuses, or maternity benefits. Even the Prime Minister's Office employs outsourced workers under these conditions. Additionally, a recent government directive banning direct recruitment for fourth-grade positions blocks low-income families from securing government jobs.

Informal workers face even greater challenges. If a rickshaw puller can no longer work due to age or health, there is no pension or safety net.

Meanwhile, the formal sector is not as structured as it seems. Only 15% of workers are covered by labour laws, and even among them, disparities exist. A major portion of the formal sector is not even included under labour laws, such as journalists, junior officers in banks, factory supervisors, and mid-level managers. In the formal sector, a joining letter should be given, and a certificate should be provided stating the worker's employment history. Termination must follow a proper process. At the manufacturing level, there is no mechanism for grievance redressal.

Exploitation takes many forms, but fragmented grievances prevent a unified movement for change. If combined, the scale of injustice would be overwhelming. For example, four re-rolling mill workers died this year, and factory accidents continue unchecked. Minimum wages exist across 47 sectors, but disparities persist, revealing the formal sector's hidden informality.

Creating a non-discriminatory Bangladesh begins at home. When children witness the humiliation of domestic workers, they internalise and normalise exploitation. These ingrained biases later extend to the workplace, perpetuating systemic discrimination.

Our commission has been tasked with creating recommendations, but the problem is far deeper than anticipated.

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Labourers are waiting along a road in Mirpur, expecting to be chosen by employers.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

- Government employees receive six months of leave, private-sector workers are entitled to four months (often not granted), and informal-sector workers—who make up 85% of the workforce—get none. This disparity highlights how even fundamental rights are unequally distributed.
- A dedicated wing within district-level labour offices could be created to handle complaints from informal sector workers, such as domestic workers and street vendors, with a specific day each week set aside to resolve their cases.
- Addressing systemic inequality requires a comprehensive solution. The most urgent priority is to ensure a dignified, non-discriminatory, and ethical society for every worker.
- We aim to shift to universal labour protection, ensuring all workers—formal and informal—have access to social security, fair wages, recognition, representation, safe conditions, and protection from exploitation.
- The formal sector is not as structured as it seems. Only 15% of workers are covered by labour laws, and even among them, disparities exist. A major portion of the formal sector is not even included under labour laws.

# Aligning employer concerns with worker protections is key

**Workers must have the right to organise. If we set a rule that a union can only be formed if 10% of an institution's workforce supports it—this may be suitable for a manufacturing unit, but not for occupation-based workers such as domestic workers, rickshaw pullers, or day labourers, so we advocate for a flexible system.**

FROM PAGE 12

Addressing systemic inequality requires a comprehensive solution. The most urgent priority is to ensure a dignified, non-discriminatory, and ethical society for every worker. To achieve this, eight crore working people must be freed from these injustices.

**TDS:** What are the core recommendations the commission has received from the stakeholders?
**SSUA:** Workers face numerous challenges, and we have received fundamental and logical recommendations through consultations with marginalised communities—tea garden workers, shipbreakers, garment and domestic workers, fishermen, health workers, and others. One major finding from our divisional meetings is that job security remains the core demand. Many workers face termination without rightful dues, and factory closures and government circulars, such as the retirement age of 60 for cleaning workers, have led to job losses without social security or pensions.

Stakeholders emphasised two key points: recognition for every worker and access to fundamental rights necessary for a decent livelihood. In addition to legal amendments, proper enforcement mechanisms should be in place.

Moreover, outsourced workers face corruption and bribery in recruitment as agencies alter hiring methods under various pretexts. Healthcare remains neglected, with a strong demand for specialised hospitals in industrial zones. Other urgent demands include ration cards based on occupation, due payments, emergency funds, simplified trade union processes, and legal reforms.

We also consulted employers, who raised concerns about bureaucratic hurdles, competition with large corporations, and business closures. They seek structured dispute resolution instead of abrupt shutdowns. Additionally, they highlighted the need for better worker mobility, particularly in sectors like hospitality and furniture-making. Addressing these issues requires urgent policy action.

**TDS:** What challenges has the commission faced so far?
**SSUA:** One of the biggest challenges is managing expectations. Many workers and stakeholders expect the commission to directly address their demands. However, our role is to create recommendations, not implement policies.

Another major challenge is the vast number of stakeholders, each with unique struggles—from garment and health workers to shipbreaking labourers, sales representatives, and long-neglected Union Parishad Chowkidars and Gram Police. Many come from remote areas, seeking recognition. Despite time constraints, we have engaged extensively to ensure their voices are heard and included in our work.

There is very little data or research on many of these groups, making it difficult to develop precise recommendations. The available research is often too generic or secondary. Even the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) survey lacks sector-wise diversification, making it difficult to create targeted recommendations. For example, while the fisheries sector is documented, there is no specific data on subgroups such as dried fish sellers.

**TDS:** Could you explain how the commission plans to bring about structural reforms in the labour system?
**SSUA:** We aim to shift from employer-based labour protection to universal protection, ensuring all workers—formal and informal—have access to social security, fair wages, recognition, representation, safe work conditions, and protection from exploitation. A national minimum wage should serve as a baseline, with sector-specific structures built upon it.

Workers must have the right to organise. If we set a rule that a union can only be formed if 10% of an institution's workforce supports it—this may be suitable for a manufacturing unit, but not for occupation-based workers such as domestic workers, rickshaw pullers, or day labourers, so we advocate for a flexible system. A universal provident fund can ensure financial security for mobile workers.

We propose a permanent labour commission, overseen by a tripartite monitoring body, and a central labour database for transparency in welfare benefits. Aligning employer concerns with worker protections is key. Our goal is an inclusive, universally applicable labour law, ensuring all workers receive basic legal protections, regardless of their employment type.

**We are recommending a three-way collaboration between academic institutions, industries, and skill development authorities. Industries should identify their workforce needs. Employers must forecast future skill requirements and communicate these needs to skill development authorities.**

Additionally, workers should have access to mechanisms for resolving grievances and securing settlements. Besides the court system, a dedicated wing within labour offices at the district level could be established to take complaints from informal sector workers, such as domestic workers and street vendors. A specific day each week could be set aside to resolve cases involving informal workers. This is not asking for much—it is a basic system to ensure that everyone has access to justice.

**TDS:** Regarding legal reforms, which areas is the commission focusing on the most?
**SSUA:** We aim to expand labour law coverage to include all workers, not just those in formal institutions. Key focus areas include occupational safety, health, workplace accidents, and compensation for all sectors. Strengthening the labour department will enable workers to file complaints, access social security, and engage in welfare funds. We propose a three-tier system for resolving disputes, ensuring that only critical cases reach higher courts. This would reduce the burden on labour courts and make the process more efficient.

For the informal sector, a dispute redressal system should be tailored to workers outside formal employment. For the formal sector, an Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) mechanism should be established. Serious disputes should be handled by labour courts as a last resort, reserved for cases involving criminal violations or major breaches of labour laws.

**TDS:** What recommendations has the commission made for women workers and child labourers?
**SSUD:** We aspire to create a child labour-free country but recognise gaps in community, union, and trade union involvement. Efforts have primarily depended on NGOs and government projects, often without sufficient accountability. The commission is assessing these shortcomings to tackle corruption and inefficiencies.

For child workers, employment must not hinder education. We propose linking employers with skill development programmes to ensure a "learning by doing" model.

Women workers need skill development to adapt to technological shifts and access alternative employment if needed. A major challenge is the lack of civic amenities in industrial zones. Many women leave their children in villages due to inadequate childcare facilities. Industrial zones must include schools, daycare centers, and hospitals. Women workers face systemic neglect, requiring a sector-wise approach to ensure their protection and well-being.

**TDS:** How is the commission working to improve skill development?
**SSUA:** Those who are ready are seizing skill development opportunities, while those who are not are being left behind. For example, if a factory introduces a new machine that replaces 10 workers, there should be a plan to train them to operate the technology rather than leaving them unemployed.

We are recommending a three-way collaboration between academic institutions, industries, and skill development authorities. Industries should identify their workforce needs. Employers must forecast future skill requirements and communicate these needs to skill development authorities. Skill development authorities should design relevant training programmes to equip workers with industry-specific skills.

Academic institutions should coordinate with skill development organisations to ensure graduates receive proper training before entering the job market. The goal is to ensure that students graduate with the necessary skills to enter the workforce immediately, without requiring additional training.

We aim to move beyond the mindset that any work is better than no work. Every citizen has the right to decent, meaningful employment, and it is crucial to ensure that no one is forced into indecent jobs or lives in uncertainty.

*The interview was taken by* **Saudia Afrin**.

# We must curb the rise of unscrupulous media

***The Daily Star engages with Kamal Ahmed, journalist and head of the Media Reform Commission, for an in-depth discussion on media reform and press freedom in Bangladesh.***

**Kamal Ahmed**

**TDS:** How would you evaluate the current media scenario in Bangladesh?

**Kamal Ahmed (KA):** Two crucial factors for press freedom are journalists' economic independence and a sustainable industry business model. When employers do not pay journalists, there is a significant risk of compromising their principles and ethical codes, which is already a widespread issue. Outside Dhaka, many journalists work for media houses without salaries or employment guarantees. This financial insecurity drives them toward economic compromises that lead to corruption and deviate from the fundamental mission of truth-telling.

Similarly, media houses without sustainable business models often rely on big businesses and the government for advertisements and financial support. This dependency creates undue influence, shielding businesses and funnelling external funds to sustain media outlets. It creates a vicious cycle that undermines press freedom. This is a key reason for the media's failure to carry out responsible and objective journalism.

**TDS:** What key reform recommendations has the commission received from stakeholders?

**KA:** Stakeholders overwhelmingly emphasised the need for economic freedom and job security for journalists to ensure honest, independent journalism. Fair compensation from employers is crucial to reduce corruption and lobbying. Secondly, people have expressed concerns about the proliferation of unscrupulous media. A myriad of portals is popping up daily—sometimes by the hour—that have no public interest. Their main objective is to gain advantages for businesses and political power, often for political favours. This is causing serious harm to journalism. This influx of media outlets is not serving the public interest. Stakeholders stress the need to curb the unchecked rise of unscrupulous media.

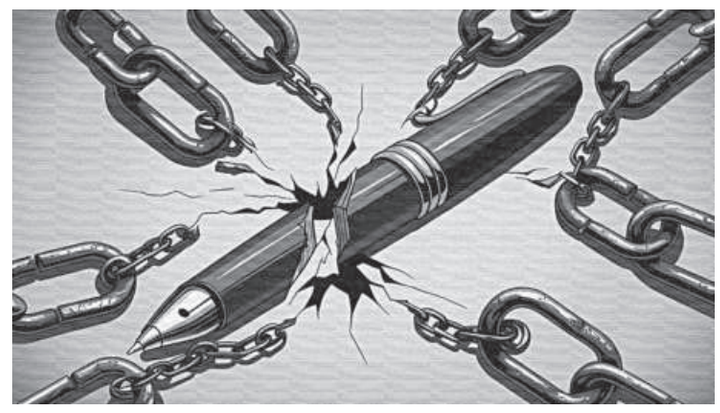

ILLUSTRATION: **ANWAR SOHEL**

ILLUSTRATION: **NOOR US SAFA ANIK**

PHOTO: **STAR**

There are also questions about whether the market has the appetite for this vast number of media outlets—46 TV channels, 22 radio stations, hundreds of newspapers, and thousands of online platforms. Reforms may be necessary to remove unethical players from the industry. To inform these recommendations, we visited seven divisional headquarters, held meetings with district representatives, and engaged with hundreds of practitioners, publishers, editors, and journalists across various media sectors. These insights shaped our proposed reforms.

**TDS:** How is the commission tackling key issues of journalists' rights, including wage board implementation, timely salaries, and risk allowances?

**KA:** The wage board is not within the remit of this commission, so we will not discuss it. However, we found a dominant view among working journalists outside Dhaka that they are not benefiting from the wage board. In fact, some ownersfalsify records to claim they are implementing the wage board, even though they are not. These owners also manipulate circulation figures to receive higher advertising rates. As a result, owners benefit, while only a few journalists see any advantage from the wage board.

Additionally, the wage board is limited to the newspaper industry and does not cover electronic media, including television channels, radio, and online outlets. There is a strong demand for a nationally accepted salary floor for the entire media industry, regardless of the type of media they work in.

**TDS:** The politicisation of journalists' unions often undermines their ability to negotiate effectively with media owners. What are the commission's recommendations to tackle this issue and

CONTINUED ON PAGE 15

- Ensure journalists' economic freedom and job security to uphold honest, independent journalism. Policies should be implemented to guarantee fair wages, timely payments, and protections against financial vulnerability.
- There is a strong call for a nationally standardised minimum wage across all media sectors.
- Stakeholders have suggested forming a permanent media commission to assume the responsibilities of the current Press Council, with a broader focus on press freedom.
- Questions remain about whether the market can sustain the sheer number of media outlets—46 TV channels, 22 radio stations, hundreds of newspapers, and thousands of online platforms.
- A unified regulatory body must be established to oversee all journalists across print, television, radio, and online media. This body must be independent of government control and funding to ensure true media accountability and freedom.

# We must curb the rise of unscrupulous media

**Media reform depends on investors, many of whom resist compliance with regulations and disregard employment laws, making them likely opponents of enforcing journalists' rights.**

FROM PAGE 14

strengthen the unions' capacity to represent journalists' interests?

**KA:** Union activities, including whether there should be a single union or multiple unions, are not within the remit of this commission, and we cannot offer an opinion on that. However, based on the feedback we received from the field, we do feel that in the absence of a strong union, journalists' rights are being compromised, ignored, and undervalued.

There is a sentiment that there should be a strong union, but whether and how a stronger union can emerge depends on the journalists themselves.

Conversely, journalists across the country are deeply divided. In some upazilas, there are as many as four press clubs. In certain cases, internal conflicts among rival journalist groups have forced the administration to intervene—appointing administrators for press clubs or even having deputy commissioners take over as district press club presidents, as seen in Mymensingh, Rangpur, and Chattogram.

Such disunity is deeply disheartening. The root cause of this division seems to stem from petty interests, such as owning a building for the press club, collecting monthly rents, or pursuing other financial gains. These financial motives fuel rivalries, leading to disunity and the formation of parallel organisations.

VISUAL: **ANWAR SOHEL**

**TDS:** What recommendations are being considered to ensure sustainable media ownership, especially for smaller, independent outlets?

**KA:** A key issue is assessing whether a media house serves the public interest. A clear test should determine if it prioritises group or party interests—such outlets should not receive public funds, state sponsorship, government ads, or tax benefits. Support for newsprint, broadcasting equipment, and electronics must be transparent, corruption-free, and accountable to curb industry malpractices.

Fraudulent certifications and inflated circulation numbers distort competition and fuel corruption. Advertisement rates should be based on accurate circulation figures. Two methods currently exist. One involves inspection by government officials and teams assisted by representatives from the industry, including journalists, union members, owners, and other employees. Another approach is to link circulation figures to annual tax returns. A newspaper having 100,000 copies in circulation would not report 150,000 for tax purposes. While this policy already exists, it remains unenforced. Proper implementation would curb fraud and push dishonest players out of the industry.

Additionally, many media owners violate employment laws by denying job security, failing to issue appointment letters, and terminating employees unlawfully. Media houses not complying with these laws should be penalised. Practical steps include enforcing labour laws and eliminating corrupt practices for a fair and accountable media environment.

**TDS:** How can the Press Council be strengthened to effectively regulate media accountability and uphold press freedom?

**KA:** Established in 1974, the current Press Council has failed to uphold press freedom, as seen in its approval of Dainik Dinkal's closure. Having lost its purpose, its very existence is now in question. There is a pressing need for reform and the creation of a unified regulatory body covering all journalists across print, television, radio, and online media. This body must remain independent of government control and funding. A possible model could be drawn from the Press Council of India, which sustains itself through a one-percent levy on newspapers.

A self-regulatory body should function as both a grievance mechanism and a mediator while protecting journalistic rights. Stakeholders have suggested forming a permanent media commission to assume the responsibilities of the current Press Council, with a broader focus on press freedom. Additionally, there is a strong call for a national journalism standard—a universally accepted code of ethics. This permanent commission would ensure industry adherence to these standards, fostering effective media regulation and ensuring journalists comply with ethical guidelines.

**Attack on journos during July Uprising.**

PHOTO: **PRABIR DAS**

**TDS:** What legal reforms is the commission considering to safeguard media freedom?

**KA:** We are seriously considering this. Several countries have already enacted laws to protect media freedom. In the European Union, there is a region-wide law that safeguards media freedom, prohibiting the invasion of reporters' privacy and protecting them from state or agency surveillance.

Pakistan has also proposed a press freedom protection law, which is in its final stages of approval. This law would make the government bound to ensure the protection of journalists while they work. Under this law, professional journalists cannot be intimidated, harassed, threatened, or legally sued for carrying out their professional duties. The responsibility for enforcing these protections would lie with the government. We need to propose and consider implementing a similar law to safeguard press freedom and protect journalists in their work

**TDS:** What are the challenges in implementing reform recommendations, and what steps are needed to address them?

**KA:** Media reform depends on investors, many of whom resist compliance with regulations and disregard employment laws, making them likely opponents of enforcing journalists' rights. Additionally, media ownership is often concentrated, limiting fair competition. Investors with political ties may resist reforms, creating challenges for any government. However, the interim government has the authority to enforce existing laws, which, if implemented properly, could bring significant change to the media landscape.

*The interview was taken by* **Saudia Afrin.**

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# Human welfare must be at the centre of development thinking

***Dr KAS Murshid, former Director General of BIDS and head of the Task Force on Economic Strategy Redesign, discusses pivotal reforms to reshape Bangladesh's economy.***

**KAS Murshid**

**The Daily Star (TDS):** What is the scope of responsibilities defined for the Task Force on Redesigning Economic Strategy?

**KAS Murshid (KASM):** Our task force was mandated with the responsibility of rethinking economic strategy and recommending policies and interventions in the short and medium term. Our intention was to propose pragmatic, actionable interventions with a strong public interest component.

There are numerous initiatives that cannot be completed in the short term. We felt that we should identify measures that could be acted upon almost immediately—the "low-hanging fruits"—in addition to policies that are urgent but need to be anchored within a longer timeframe.

Our report consists of two parts: Part I examines sectoral issues, while Part II focuses on cross-cutting issues. The sectoral discussions include macroeconomics, trade, agriculture, industry, education, and health, while the cross-cutting issues address critical concerns such as food and energy security, leveraging digital and AI technology, reducing the digital divide, reforming the planning process, combating everyday extortion, and improving government efficiency.

One of the main challenges we identified is diversification. We aimed to address diversification in agriculture, industry, and manufacturing, as well as in exports. These areas are vital, and our work involves identifying where policy adjustments can support and encourage diversification. While some issues can be addressed through policy changes, others require additional support, such as improvements in infrastructure or energy.

**Although export growth, foreign reserves, technology and services are essential, these must be seen as tools to facilitate human development.**

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

We have proposed recommendations to reduce income and wealth inequality, including a progressive tax system, improved education and skills development, expanded financial inclusion, stronger social safety net programmes, labour market reforms, regional development, good governance, gender equality, innovation, and increased public awareness.

Moving forward, I believe human welfare must be at the centre of all development thinking. Although export growth, foreign reserves, technology, and services are essential, they must be seen as tools to facilitate human development. To expand and nurture this, we need to invest in skills, capacity, the physical and social environment, and a well-functioning, competitive market backed by an efficient governance regime. For a resource-poor country like ours, our most significant asset is human capital. Therefore, our best strategy is to focus on building human skills and capacities. This is the perspective the task force has adopted.

**TDS:** Could you provide an overview of the key initiatives you intend to implement, including those aligned with the economic white paper, as well as a detailed plan and timeline?

**KASM:** The issues outlined in the white paper have resonated with us. The white paper highlights several critical concerns: poor governance, high levels of corruption, mismanagement, significant money laundering, inflation, high unemployment, and a particularly alarming rate of graduate unemployment. It also points to a lack of skills, a shortage of dollars, depleted reserves, and insufficient gas supplies. These are the pressing challenges we currently face.

The white paper primarily evaluated the actions of the previous government. The task force, on the other hand, has drawn up a list of policy interventions in critical areas of the economy that could be implemented relatively quickly. There is no contradiction between the two reports.

We have recommended launching pilot projects to develop scalable governance models for future reforms, such as selecting a public hospital, a community clinic, the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA), and even an entire ministry for comprehensive reforms. Reviving the Buriganga River has been identified as a high-priority project to prevent its extinction.

Additionally, we have proposed establishing several new institutions, such as a Centre of Global Excellence in STEM, Engineering, ICT, and AI, and a Centre for Social and Behavioural Change Communication and Research. The former will help position Bangladesh as a regional hub for advanced research and studies in STEM, while the latter will assess behavioural patterns and dynamics that promote or constrain socio-economic development.

Given Bangladesh Biman's failure to meet modern aviation standards, the task force suggests establishing a new airline, tentatively named Bangladesh Airways. This new airline would utilise half of Biman's existing assets but would be managed by an independent, world-class management company.

To address the urgent need for tax and customs reforms, we call for the National Board of Revenue (NBR) to expedite its automation process. We also recommend the establishment of an independent, high-powered oversight body to drive these changes. A Regulatory Reform Commission (RRC) is also proposed to tackle over-regulation and bureaucratic inefficiencies that hinder business growth and foreign investment. The commission would monitor, evaluate, and streamline regulations across various sectors, improving the ease of doing business in Bangladesh and attracting both domestic and foreign investment.

For urban transportation, the task force recommends implementing automatic traffic signalling and transitioning to a single-operator bus franchise system. The report also suggests opening up the health sector to foreign investment, waiving cash-out fees for remittance earners, recognising the internet as a "social good," and immediately withdrawing the 20% supplementary tax and 2% surcharge on internet services.

The closure of the Indian medical market has highlighted the need for high-quality healthcare within Bangladesh. To meet this demand, liberalising foreign direct investment (FDI) in the health sector is essential. This move would reduce the need for expensive medical tourism abroad, foster competition, and improve healthcare services in the country.

Selected polytechnics could be upgraded to technical colleges, offering a two-year BA (Tech) degree to equip students with the necessary competencies and help eliminate the perception of an "inferior" academic degree associated with polytechnic certificates. In other words, technical education requires gentrification.

In line with efforts to diversify exports, the task force proposes "cherry-picking" high-potential firms for policy, financial, and technical support. This approach targets selected non-RMG (ready-made garment) export performers from approximately 1,500 entities currently exporting a minimum of $1 million annually.

Further recommendations include enhancing the one-stop service system, revitalising Special Economic Zones (SEZs), implementing NID-based open data platforms similar to India's Aadhaar card, and removing political influence from the banking sector.

Our tasks aim to drive meaningful change, laying the foundation for a resilient and progressive society while addressing key issues that affect citizens' daily lives. Ultimately, the actions outlined in the report serve as an initial roadmap for economic reform, offering a vision for a transformed Bangladesh that is responsive to the needs of its people.

**TDS:** What challenges are you encountering in implementing these initiatives?

**KASM:** One of the primary constraints we face is the limited time available under the interim government. While there are numerous goals we wish to achieve, it is not feasible to accomplish them all within such a short period. Reform processes take time, and our plans must reflect this reality.

- The recommendations we are making are not intended to be fully detailed or thoroughly modelled out; instead, we are offering key concepts that can guide immediate actions.
- A Regulatory Reform Commission (RRC) is proposed to address excessive regulation and bureaucratic inefficiencies that obstruct business growth and foreign investment.
- It is recommended that the internet be recognised as a "social good" and that the 20% supplementary tax and 2% surcharge on internet services be immediately withdrawn.
- If the quality of data does not improve, it will become increasingly difficult to make informed policy decisions.
- The successful implementation of reform proposals will depend on bottom-up advocacy and activism, ensuring that any government in power feels compelled to continue them.

Our objective is not to develop a detailed, comprehensive plan but to highlight pragmatic, reasonable actions that can be implemented in the short and medium term. The recommendations we are making are not intended to be fully detailed or thoroughly modelled out; instead, we are offering key concepts that can guide immediate actions.

Our country has never had a clear and specific economic strategy. In the past, terms like "export-led growth" have been used as objectives, but these kinds of invocations have not served us well. Our actual growth has not been export-driven, and the gap is evident in the small ratio of exports to GDP.

One important perspective we aim to introduce is that, before initiating any reform, we should not spend excessive time on highly detailed plans. Many of these issues have already been thoroughly considered, so there is no need to reinvent the wheel. We should begin the reform process by taking concrete steps, starting with a few essential actions.

A significant issue we have identified is the lack of appropriate leadership in many institutions. We have seen instances where technocratic positions are filled by individuals without relevant expertise, such as recruiting someone with a background in history or English for a highly technical role. Our aim is to identify such gaps and bring about leadership changes to ensure that qualified individuals are in the right positions.

In addition, we propose the establishment of a monitoring and evaluation system to track progress in real time. This system should be accessible to policymakers and provide a mechanism for public feedback. The feedback process should be twofold: initially online, followed by a paper-based system.

One specific issue we want to address is food security. Given our reliance on imports for essential goods, it is crucial to maintain reserve stocks of critical items like fertiliser, petroleum, and edible oil. Without this, we risk becoming vulnerable to shifts in the global market. In the short term, we must ensure that reserves are established to safeguard against such dependencies. In the long term, however, we must consider strategies for reducing this reliance through import substitution. This is the kind of strategic thinking that we aim to foster.

**TDS:** What mechanisms does the task force plan to recommend for institutionalising the reforms and ensuring their long-term sustainability, regardless of regime changes?

**KASM:** This is largely beyond our jurisdiction. However, I believe that if we initiate meaningful reforms and demonstrate their positive impacts, public pressure will grow to sustain these changes. Timing is crucial in this process. While more time would have allowed us to achieve more, within the available time frame, we must make every effort to begin and practise these reforms. Successful implementation will depend on bottom-up advocacy and activism, ensuring that any government that comes to power will feel compelled to continue them.

We are also suggesting the digitalisation of various sectors to promote greater transparency. Through digital platforms, citizens could track progress, organise efforts, and suggest improvements. One of the chapters in our report focuses on youth-led citizenship, highlighting the importance of young people's involvement in positive activism.

**TDS:** Given the significant manipulation of macroeconomic data during the past regime, how does the task force plan to rebuild trust in public data and ensure its integrity moving forward?

**DKASM:** Rebuilding trust is a slow process that will take time. A central issue we face is government interference. However, if institutional leadership is strong enough to resist such incursions, it could foster long-term progress.

A significant challenge is trust in data. It is common for people to distrust data while relying on even more unreliable sources, such as social media. This, in my view, is a national issue. If the quality of data does not improve, it will become increasingly difficult to make informed policy decisions. There are alternative data sources available, such as the Household Income and Expenditure Survey, which could be reliable. Additionally, research organisations provide valuable panel data, and Demographic and Health Services offer data that is considered of good quality. Therefore, it is crucial to triangulate data from different sources, including various primary surveys carried out by research bodies. If a significant mismatch is observed, researchers must alert us.

A concern is that many of these data or reports were prepared with donor financing, and key donor agencies like the World Bank have worked closely with the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. Despite this collaboration, the emergence of such large alleged gaps in data raises questions. Since 2020, data mismanagement appears to have accelerated, which suggests that while actual data may eventually surface, those involved could claim they were coerced into the mismanagement. Ultimately, everything hinges on political commitment—if politicians are unwilling to address these issues, they will remain unresolved. Researchers may raise their concerns, but without political will, their voices go unheard.

To address this, we must build a culture of trust, accountability, and professional conduct. Supervisors must be held responsible for poor data management, particularly those in government.

VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

*The interview was taken by* **Miftahul Jannat.**

Anti-Corruption Commission.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

# Make corruption prevention a constitutional mandate

**In the long term, the ACC's Internal Anti-Corruption Committee should be replaced by an independent Internal Discipline Division. This division would ensure compliance with the ACC's code of conduct, investigate misconduct, scrutinise asset statements, and take punitive actions when necessary.**

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rotating committee membership twice a month. Committee activities should be decentralised, with recommendations made at district or divisional ACC offices, rather than being subjected to further scrutiny by the central JABAC at headquarters. For complaints related to lesser offenses (as defined by ACC guidelines), district or divisional ACC offices should be empowered to take independent action.

Despite being legally required, the ACC has failed to establish a Prosecution Unit in the past 20 years. We recommend that the ACC formulate a Prosecution Policy specifying which scheduled offenses it will investigate based on severity and public interest.

The feasibility of plea bargaining for offenses under the ACC's jurisdiction, particularly for petty corruption (e.g., small bribes in government offices), should be thoroughly examined. Many countries have found this system effective in streamlining anti-corruption processes. The ACC Reform Commission recommends conducting a comprehensive evaluation of its advantages and risks, particularly in cases involving petty corruption and money laundering. Given the complexity of standard money laundering procedures—which typically recover only 1% of laundered funds—plea bargaining could encourage offenders to return illicit assets in exchange for reduced penalties. This should be implemented incrementally or on a pilot basis.

The workforce and capacity of the Digital Forensic Lab should be expanded to strengthen financial crime investigations. The lab should report directly to the ACC Chairman, ensuring independence from other divisions. Furthermore, Section 54(2) of the ACC (Employees) Service Rules, 2008, should be abolished, as it contradicts natural justice and undermines employee independence.

Finally, the ACC must establish its own fund, with the government allocating it in the annual budget. At least 10% of fines or confiscated assets from ACC cases should be deposited into this fund. This will incentivise ACC's work, support capacity building and case investigations, and ensure proper audit oversight.

**TDS:** What specific measures are being considered to ensure the ACC's complete independence from political and bureaucratic influences?

**DI:** To ensure the ACC operates independently of political and bureaucratic influence, a series of structural reforms in the appointment process of commissioners must be introduced.

Firstly, the "Selection Committee" under Section 7 of the ACC Act, 2004, should be renamed as "Selection and Review Committee." This committee should not only nominate commissioner candidates but also conduct biannual reviews of the ACC's performance. It should be chaired by the senior-most judge of the Appellate Division and include senior judicial figures, the Chairperson of the Public Service Commission, the Comptroller and Auditor General, a nominee from both the Leader of the House and the Leader of the Opposition in Parliament, and a Bangladeshi citizen with expertise in anti-corruption and governance, nominated by the Chief Justice.

The selection process should be transparent and competitive. Candidates must be shortlisted based on qualifications, experience, and vision for the ACC. The final selection process should allow public scrutiny, with shortlisted names displayed on the ACC website for seven days before submission to the President.

Commissioners must have at least 15 years of experience in law, administration, judiciary, financial institutions, auditing, or governance. Additionally, biannual performance evaluations, including public hearings, should ensure accountability while maintaining investigative independence.

ILLUSTRATION: ANWAR SOHEL

**TDS:** What are the immediate challenges in reforming the ACC during this transitional period?

**DI:** The immediate challenge in reforming the ACC lies in overcoming the political influence that has historically shaped appointments to the Commission, thereby undermining its independence. To address this, in addition to establishing the Selection and Review Committee, we propose the creation of an Office of the Ombudsman for Anti-Corruption. This office will oversee the implementation of the National Corruption Prevention Strategy and include sectoral ombudsmen.

We have outlined 47 recommendations, categorised into short-term, medium-term, and long-term measures. While short-term recommendations can be implemented within six months, medium-term actions will require 18 months, and long-term reforms may take up to 48 months. Furthermore, the Constitution will play a critical role in enforcing anti-corruption laws and holding the ACC accountable, particularly concerning the cases it handles.

However, even if an ideal ACC, based on global best practices, is established through these reforms, success will not be possible without a cultural shift within Bangladesh's political and bureaucratic systems.

**TDS:** What measures do you propose to address internal misconduct and ensure transparency in the commission's operations?

**DI:** First, to promote accountability and ownership, the ACC's salary structure should be revised. It should have its own pay scale, at least double the national pay scale, reflecting its distinct responsibilities. Additionally, officials involved in investigations should receive risk allowances, and performance bonuses from the ACC's own fund should reward efficiency and integrity.

To combat corruption within the ACC, a high-level task force should be formed immediately, comprising officials from various investigative and intelligence agencies. This task force will identify corrupt officials at all levels, who should be dismissed and prosecuted.

In the long term, the ACC's Internal Anti-Corruption Committee should be replaced by an independent Internal Discipline Division. This division would ensure compliance with the ACC's code of conduct, investigate misconduct, scrutinise asset statements, and take punitive actions when necessary.

Finally, a comprehensive Corruption Prevention Strategy must be developed, incorporating expert input and an objective evaluation of past efforts.

**TDS:** What are the recommendations for expanding the ACC's legal framework to prosecute high-profile corruption cases, including money laundering and embezzlement?

**DI:** To strengthen the ACC's legal framework and enhance its authority in prosecuting high-profile corruption cases, Section 32A of the ACC Act, 2004, should be repealed, as it requires government approval before filing cases against judges, magistrates, or government employees. Additionally, every district must have a regional ACC office; the current presence in only 36 districts is insufficient. In districts with existing branches, a Special Judge Court must be established, while new districts should have both a regional unit and a Judge Court with the necessary expertise and logistical support.

Moreover, the absence of a legal framework to prevent conflicts of interest enables officials to exploit their positions for personal or familial gain. To address this, a comprehensive law must be enacted.

**TDS:** With the ACC's history of being used as a political tool, how do you intend to build safeguards to prevent future governments from misusing the commission for partisan purposes?

**DI:** To build safeguards preventing the misuse of the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) as a political tool, we recommend several strategic measures.

The ACC is mandated to collaborate with various institutions, but this has not been effectively implemented, leading to unhealthy competition. To prevent this, Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) must be signed, and focal persons should be designated and authorised by agencies such as the NBR, CID, BFIU, and the Directorate of Registration to assist the ACC. For high-profile corruption and money laundering cases, independent Task Forces led by the ACC, including senior officials from relevant agencies, should be established.

Additionally, Section 309 of the Income Tax Act, 2023, must be amended to exempt the ACC from its confidentiality provision, which currently prevents the NBR from providing crucial financial documents without a court order. Previously, the ACC could access such information freely, but the new law has hindered its work. MoUs with the CAG and IMED should also ensure the ACC has timely access to corruption-related findings.

To depoliticise appointments, the ACC Secretary and Director General must be selected through an open, competitive process rather than government appointment. Similarly, 60% of Director General and 75% of Director positions should be reserved for internal candidates, ensuring institutional integrity while maintaining merit-based selection. Deputation should be limited to 10% of senior positions.

Lastly, full automation of ACC operations—covering complaints, investigations, and prosecutions—will enhance transparency, minimise political interference, and safeguard the commission's independence.

**TDS:** What role can the ACC play in fostering a culture of integrity and transparency across state institutions?

**DI:** The ACC can play a central role in this regard, particularly by addressing political and electoral financing. Political parties and candidates should publicly disclose their funding and financial details. The ACC recommends mandatory verification of affidavits submitted during national polls, ensuring the consistency and legitimacy of income sources to prevent corruption and the accumulation of illicit wealth. The Election Commission, with support from the NBR and ACC, should verify candidates' income and asset declarations and avoid nominating individuals linked to corruption. Moreover, all public representatives must submit detailed income and asset statements for themselves and their family members to the Election Commission within three months of taking office, and updating them annually.

Corruption remains pervasive in key sectors such as police stations, registry offices, revenue offices, passport offices, as well as education, health, local government, district and sub-district administrations, and utility providers. The ACC advocates for the introduction of end-to-end automation in public services, which will enable the monitoring of transactions and promote accountability and transparency. This initiative should be pursued as a mid-to-long-term recommendation.

**TDS:** What strategies are being considered to engage mass people and youth as active participants in anti-corruption efforts?

**DI:** To actively engage the public and youth in anti-corruption efforts, ethical and anti-corruption content should be integrated into the school curriculum from primary to higher secondary levels using modern, engaging methods. Governance and anti-corruption courses, training, internships, and fellowships should be introduced at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The ACC's hotline (106) must be widely promoted through school textbooks, mass media, and social media. Targeted anti-corruption campaigns should be conducted via mass and social media platforms like Facebook, X, and Instagram.

Above all, corruption must be framed not only as a punishable crime but also as a socially, culturally, and religiously unacceptable, destructive, and discriminatory scourge. Innovative and appealing strategies should be used for sustainable corruption prevention.

*The interview was taken by* **Miftahul Jannat.**

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# What's wrong with BANGLADESH'S JOB MARKET?

***In conversation with AKM Fahim Mashroor, CEO of BDjobs.com.***

**AKM Fahim Mashroor**

**The Daily Star (TDS):** Considering that employment was one of the core issues fueling the recent uprising, what measures should the government implement to address this challenge?

**AKM Fahim Mashroor (AKMFM):** Firstly, the government must understand the root cause of youth unemployment. Most people, including policymakers, neither fully comprehend the problem nor show the willingness to do so. The BBS Labour Force Survey indicates that the overall unemployment rate in Bangladesh is relatively low, around 4 percent. However, what often goes unnoticed is that youth unemployment is not a nationwide problem but rather a challenge specific to a particular segment of the population—tertiary-educated youth.

The unemployment rate among graduates is three times higher than that of non-graduates, revealing a paradox where higher education appears to make employment more difficult. This is because, over the past 10-15 years, Bangladesh has produced more graduates than the job market can absorb. The BBS Survey shows that graduate participation in the labour force rose from 3.6% in 2002 to 3.8% in 2012—a modest increase that aligned with the country's economic growth. However, by 2022, this number had tripled, demonstrating a sharp and sudden surge in the number of graduates over the last decade. Given that our economy remains largely reliant on agriculture and RMG, the demand for graduates remains low. The core issue of unemployment stems from an education system misaligned with market needs.

At present, the government can take three key steps to address the issue of tertiary-educated unemployment. Firstly, language and skill training should be provided to graduates to make them job-ready for foreign markets. The government should finance intensive training programmes, ensuring language skills and job-specific training, targeting a set number of workers per country. Currently, 90% of the workers going abroad are non-graduates, which risks creating a domestic labour shortage. The government should prioritise graduate-focused initiatives, financing training programmes to equip them with the necessary skills and language proficiency for emerging job markets.

Secondly, the government should support and encourage graduates to pursue entrepreneurship through extensive financing and conducive infrastructure. A policy should mandate banks to provide collateral-free loans, such as BDT 5 lakh, to graduates or trained individuals upon presenting their certificates.

Additionally, agriculture faces a crisis, requiring smart, educated youths to venture into agro-entrepreneurship by integrating advanced technologies, including IoT, AI, and satellite applications.

Finally, students completing HSC or intermediate education should be encouraged and provided opportunities to pursue technical and vocational training.

**TDS:** Based on your experience at BDjobs, could you elaborate on the current employment trends among young graduates in Bangladesh? Specifically, what are their preferred career paths, and what challenges do they face in securing employment?

**A.K.M FM:** In recent years, the supply of engineering graduates has surged, replacing the earlier dominance of BBA graduates. However, job opportunities in engineering have not expanded proportionally, leading to frustration among fresh graduates. Many pursued engineering inspired by the success of Bangladeshi freelancers and professionals in global tech companies rather than due to local industry growth, which remains underdeveloped. Since Bangladesh lacks a strong export-oriented technical or engineering sector, the increasing supply of graduates in this field has not been met with sufficient job opportunities, exacerbating their frustration.

The major challenge for graduates is the oversupply of manpower across professions. Data from BDjobs indicates that 60–70% of graduates struggle to secure a job even after one to two years of graduation. Most companies hesitate to hire freshers, as many leave within five to six months after basic training, which is a common trend. Unlike larger firms in countries like India, where high employee turnover is manageable, Bangladesh's SMEs, particularly in IT, operate with small teams of 20–30 employees. Losing two to three recruits out of five is a significant setback, making employers prefer experienced candidates. As a result, freshers struggle to secure jobs, limiting their ability to gain experience and trapping them in a frustrating cycle.

Additionally, many fresh graduates assume they must pursue office jobs, overlooking the importance of field sales experience. At BDjobs, we observe that most available jobs are in sales or at the field level. In sales or marketing, careers often begin in the field, but graduates' current mindset prevents them from gaining valuable experience. This generation is much more comfortable with technology, making them more inclined towards social media marketing rather than field sales jobs. This attitude is also a key barrier to their career success and job readiness.

To boost private-sector hiring and job opportunities for graduates, the government could offer financial incentives. A key reform could be subsidising up to 50% of a fresher's salary for six months, encouraging companies to recruit more graduates, a practice seen in India and Pakistan. Additionally, mandatory internships for university students—especially in industrial hubs—would enhance practical skills and employability. While challenging for National University students, targeted collaboration with industries could ensure better workforce readiness.

**TDS:** How can Bangladesh's education system be better aligned with the job market?

**AKMFM:** To better align the education system with the job market, foundational gaps in university education must be addressed. For example, students studying accounting should understand basic accounting principles. While we do not expect graduates to be fully skilled, if they lack a strong foundation, it becomes extremely difficult for companies to hire them.

To address this, both the quality of teachers and teaching styles must be improved. Over the past 10 to 15 years, both have been in decline. Universities often argue that they are receiving inadequately prepared students from schools and colleges, largely due to the prioritisation of quantity over quality in primary and secondary education, particularly in the last two decades. This gap is exacerbated by practices such as indiscriminately awarding GPA 5 or granting auto-passes during the COVID-19 period, which undermined academic rigour.

A shift in teaching methodology is essential. Leveraging AI technology for personalised learning could significantly improve teaching quality, particularly in subjects like mathematics and English, where teacher shortages exist in rural areas.

Tertiary education must build on the foundation set by primary and secondary education. Universities need to improve their collaboration with industries to ensure that curricula meet market needs. However, universities should not solely focus on producing graduates for the industry; they must also foster well-rounded individuals.

In addition, the number of general graduates should be reduced, with a greater emphasis on technical education. Non-IT technical fields should be integrated alongside IT programmes to meet the demand for skilled labour across industries. The government must also encourage industry involvement in skill development.

**TDS:** What changes must the government introduce to promote freelancing and entrepreneurship opportunities among the youth?

**AKMFM:** To promote freelancing and entrepreneurship opportunities among the youth, the government of Bangladesh should focus on addressing key barriers and creating an enabling environment for skill development, industry growth, and access to global markets.

National University (NU) colleges, however, focus primarily on non-technical fields such as history, sociology, and Islamic philosophy, which have limited demand in today's job market. This mismatch leaves many NU graduates underprepared for the workforce, with statistics from Bdjobs showing that 50-60% remain unemployed even five years after graduation.

One effective solution would be to update the NU curriculum by incorporating technical and vocational training. Even students studying non-technical subjects like Bengali or history should be required to complete a 3-6 month technical or vocational course in areas such as caregiving, hospitality management, or electronic repair.

While the NU curriculum must be updated to include technical education, TVET courses must also be elevated to enhance social acceptance. This can be achieved either through structural mergers or collaborations between NU and TVET institutions—the government must determine the best approach. What is certain is that technical education must be promoted; otherwise, we will remain trapped in a cycle of tertiary-educated unemployment.

**Youth unemployment was one of the key triggers behind the recent July uprising.**

PHOTO: PROBIR DAS

While the lack of PayPal access is often cited as an issue for freelancers, it is not the primary barrier to success. Freelancing continues to thrive without it, but a more significant challenge lies in the nature of the jobs that many Bangladeshi freelancers engage in, such as graphic design, data entry, and social media marketing. These are low-end jobs that are increasingly at risk of being automated by AI in the coming years. To ensure long-term success in the freelancing sector, the government must prioritise skill development and help freelancers transition to higher-value tasks that leverage emerging technologies.

In addition to supporting freelancers, the government must shift its focus to fostering the growth of larger, export-oriented ICT companies. Freelancing alone will not create a thriving ICT industry. The government should identify and provide targeted support to 50–100 companies with high growth potential.

Furthermore, given that seven to eight lakh graduates enter the workforce annually, the government must also consider supporting youth employment opportunities abroad. Offering loans, particularly to lower-middle-income individuals, would enable young people to access global job markets, send remittances home, and help ease the burden of unemployment. By treating remittance earners as entrepreneurs and providing them with SME-like loans—conditioned to be repaid within four years—the government can empower them to contribute to the national economy. Probashi Kallyan Bank (PKB), which boasts a low loan default rate of 6–7% among expatriates, demonstrates the success of providing loans to expats. The government should consider expanding similar loan facilities for the youth, enabling them to establish themselves as entrepreneurs in the global market while simultaneously contributing to the country's economy through remittances.

**TDS:** What measures can be taken to enhance the social recognition of TVET programmes to attract students?

**AKMFM:** To enhance the social recognition of TVET (Technical and Vocational Education and Training) programmes, technical education should be integrated into mainstream academic pathways to bridge the existing skills gap.

Currently, private universities in Bangladesh allocate 40-45% of their programmes to engineering disciplines, producing a large number of STEM graduates, whereas public universities offer only 18-19% of engineering courses.

**TDS:** What initiatives could be introduced to re-engage the large number of young people not in employment, education, or training (NEET), particularly young women?

**AKMFM:** To re-engage NEET youth, particularly young women, initiatives must address both structural and cultural barriers. The NEET population stands at around 10-15%, with young women comprising the majority. Many face challenges in continuing their careers after marriage due to socioeconomic and cultural factors.

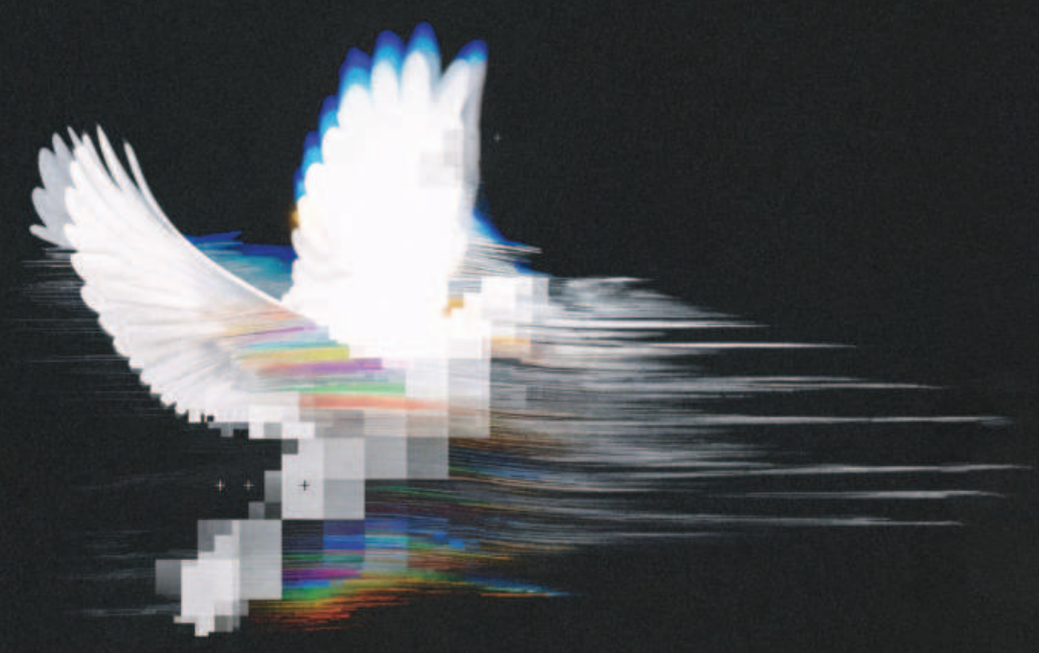
Although the number of women in education has increased, their participation in the workforce remains low, particularly in formal sectors. In contrast, rural women have higher engagement in agriculture, while urban youth are increasingly moving away from agricultural work in favour of city jobs. This results in a paradox where rural women are more actively employed, yet urban women remain underrepresented in the workforce.

One key opportunity to address this disparity is the expansion of remote job opportunities for women. Roles in online marketing, data entry, and other digital sectors offer flexibility, enabling women to balance their professional and personal responsibilities. In my own company, for instance, 60-70 employees work remotely, 60% of whom are women. We prioritise women in our remote hiring policies, and encouraging other companies to adopt similar practices could create more opportunities for women to enter the workforce without the constraints of traditional office settings.

Moreover, a broader cultural shift is necessary to challenge social norms and reduce the stigma surrounding women's employment. This shift requires joint efforts from both the public and private sectors to create an inclusive and supportive work environment. Additionally, the government could introduce policies that incentivise businesses to hire more women for remote or flexible roles while also investing in training and skills development programmes.

*The interview was taken by* **Miftahul Jannat.**

- The core issue of unemployment stems from an education system misaligned with market needs.
- The government should support and encourage graduates to pursue entrepreneurship through extensive financing and conducive infrastructure.
- A policy should mandate banks to provide collateral-free loans, such as BDT 5 lakh, to graduates or trained individuals upon presenting their certificates.
- Universities need to acknowledge that they are failing to build strong foundations for students and should not be misled by the success of a few exceptional students.
- By treating remittance earners as entrepreneurs and offering SME-like loans repayable in four years, the government can boost economic contributions.



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Hospitals often struggle to cope with patient overflow during outbreaks like dengue due to capacity shortages.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

# We need a permanent health commission

*Prof Dr Liaquat Ali, chair of the Pothikrit Foundation and a biomedical scientist and academician, shares his perspectives on health sector reforms in Bangladesh.*

Liaquat Ali

**The Daily Star (TDS):** Can you briefly outline the evolution of the health sector in Bangladesh?

**Liaquat Ali (LA):** The First Five-Year Plan (1973–78) of Bangladesh was entirely focused on the public sector, with health development prioritised in rural areas over urban centres, particularly in terms of infrastructure. Until 1980, the private healthcare sector in Bangladesh remained relatively underdeveloped. However, the following decade saw increasing commercialisation across various industries, including healthcare. The private sector chose to invest in more profitable secondary and tertiary care rather than primary healthcare. As a result, the private sector now controls nearly 70 percent of the market share.

Ongoing neglect has further weakened the public health sector. Over the past two decades, its share has declined from 38 percent to 23 percent. The Health Care Financing Strategy 2011–12 aimed to improve health financing in Bangladesh. At the time, out-of-pocket expenditure was 64.5 percent, with a target to reduce it to 40 percent by 2030. However, instead of decreasing, this figure has now risen to over 70 percent, increasing the financial burden on citizens.

**TDS:** How do you evaluate the health sector's budget allocation?

**LA:** While the public health sector has seen an increase in absolute budget allocation, its share as a percentage of GDP remains insufficient. The WHO recommends that countries allocate 14–15 percent of their GDP to healthcare to ensure universal health coverage and a robust health system. In contrast, Bangladesh allocates only 5 percent, leading to significant disparities.

Mismanagement in healthcare governance and financing has contributed to the sector's current state. At the policy level, forward-thinking reforms have been obstructed. Thus, a multifaceted approach is necessary to address the challenges we face.

**TDS:** What are the key challenges in balancing healthcare workforce distribution between urban and rural areas?

**LA:** The shortage of medical personnel undermines the goals of state institutions, making healthcare less accessible. Patients often struggle to convey their concerns, limiting their mobility within the system. At the upazila level, doctors face an overwhelming patient load, resulting in inefficiencies and an overburdened system.

Bangladesh's availability of medical personnel does not meet WHO standards, which recommend a doctor-to-population ratio of 44.5 doctors per 10,000 people, along with three nurses and five trained assistants per doctor. While there has been a recent increase in the number of nurses, the number of auxiliary healthcare personnel has declined. Proper healthcare management, including cleanliness and doctor-patient interactions, must be prioritised. Additionally, auxiliary healthcare workers in both metropolitan and smaller towns must play a more active role—an area that requires significant development.

A well-functioning referral system is essential in the medical sector. It facilitates the transfer of patients from one healthcare provider to another for specialised care or advanced treatment. However, deficiencies in our current system have led to an over-reliance on specialists, often bypassing the referral process entirely. Financial incentives have been prioritised over patient care, and within urban settings, primary healthcare remains highly disorganised.

It is worth questioning whether government plans in the 1970s adequately considered future demographic shifts. Contemporary challenges indicate that healthcare planning must be integrated, incorporating medical professionals and experts from various fields. For example, tackling the spread of dengue requires a multidisciplinary approach that extends beyond traditional healthcare.

A patient undergoing cancer treatment at a local hospital.

VISUAL: STAR

In the 1980s, urbanisation in Bangladesh accelerated, with the urban population rising to around 15 percent by 1985, driven by industrialisation, rural-to-urban migration, and city expansions. As of 2025, approximately 41 percent of the population resides in urban areas.

Regarding the urban-rural divide, functional deficiencies are more prevalent in rural areas. However, government initiatives such as community clinics, union health centres, and upazila-level institutions have played a role in mediating these gaps, particularly in referral processes. On the other hand, in urban areas, a large proportion of the population bypasses the referral system entirely, contributing to inefficiencies in healthcare delivery. The shortcomings in urban planning serve as a stark reminder of our current realities. Moving forward, there needs to be a shift in awareness—one that does not place sole blame on medical practitioners but instead addresses systemic issues such as the absence of a well-structured referral system.

**TDS:** How does the current pricing of medicines and medical equipment impact accessibility and affordability in healthcare?

**LA:** Dr Zafrullah Chowdhury played a key role in formulating Bangladesh's National Drug Policy in 1982, aiming to make essential medicines affordable and promote domestic pharmaceutical production. This policy strengthened the local industry, reducing reliance on imports and eventually enabling exports.

However, despite these achievements, medicine prices have surged, with studies indicating a 300% increase due to promotional costs rather than production expenses. The shift from multinational to local dominance has not significantly benefited the masses, as drug prices remain high. Additionally, there is growing concern over excessive prescriptions, driven by industrial interests rather than medical necessity.

**TDS:** Is our medical personnel receiving adequate salaries and benefits?

**LA:** Doctors spend years acquiring expertise, yet their compensation does not always reflect their qualifications. The Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) structure, within which many doctors operate, provides annual increments, but this may not be competitive internationally. Bangladesh needs to invest more to retain top talent. Financial, social, and regional factors must all be taken into account when addressing salaries, private practice, and professional dignity.

**TDS:** What is the current state of medical education in Bangladesh?

**LA:** Medical education is at the centre of shaping the future healthcare industry, influenced by both public and private institutions, economic and political forces, and various interest groups. In Bangladesh, the training of medical professionals, including doctors and nurses, often appears unstructured. Many institutions actively promote themselves as prestigious despite significant gaps in faculty expertise, infrastructure, and manpower. The issue is not with students but with the need for comprehensive development—strengthening medical education, ensuring quality accreditation across all institutions, and addressing workforce shortages.

**TDS:** What steps can be taken to improve preparedness for future pandemics?

**LA:** Preparedness is critical as climate change and environmental crises continue to threaten public health. The rise of genetic diseases and persistent infection-based illnesses necessitates urgent planning for manpower and infrastructure. Contact tracing and isolation, essential public health strategies, must be systematically implemented. For instance, if a virus is reported in China, Bangladesh must be ready for cross-border transmission with buffer manpower and infrastructure. Currently, the medical sector faces significant workforce shortages, highlighting the need for systemic reforms in emergency response, border screening, and vaccination access.

Bangladesh's health sector remains fragmented, with multiple authorities—such as the Ministry of Local Government, city corporations, law enforcement agencies, and the Ministry of Health—operating in silos. The One Health concept has struggled due to a lack of unified leadership. Establishing a permanent health commission could provide the necessary oversight, ensuring coordinated policies, fair pricing of medicines, and a more resilient healthcare system.

*The interview is taken by* **Priyam Paul**

- The WHO recommends that countries allocate 14–15 percent of their GDP to healthcare to ensure universal health coverage and a robust health system. In contrast, Bangladesh allocates only 5 percent, leading to significant disparities.
- The shortage of medical personnel undermines the goals of state institutions, making healthcare less accessible. Patients often struggle to convey their concerns, limiting their mobility within the system.
- Medicine prices have surged, with studies indicating a 300% increase due to promotional costs rather than production expenses.
- Bangladesh's health sector is highly fragmented, with various authorities—including the Ministry of Local Government, city corporations, law enforcement agencies, and the Ministry of Health—operating in isolation. The lack of coordination has hindered the effective implementation of the One Health concept, highlighting the need for unified leadership.
- The rise of genetic diseases and persistent infection-based illnesses necessitates urgent planning for manpower and infrastructure.

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# Restructure local governance from a presidential to a parliamentary system

***An insightful discussion with Dr Tofail Ahmed, head of the Local Government Reform Commission (LGRC) and an expert on local government, on key reforms shaping grassroots governance.***

Tofail Ahmed

**The Daily Star (TDS):** What are the commission's core recommendations for reforming local government?

**Tofail Ahmed (TA):** Comprehensive reforms require time, but certain critical areas, particularly the legal and structural framework of local governance, demand immediate attention. In the past, even less-educated local chairmen and members maintained ethical standards, with limited funds keeping corruption in check. However, in the post-independence period, credibility declined, and corruption became more widespread. This has resulted in an increasingly centralised, single-person (Chairman or Mayor)-dominated administration, with mayors making decisions without formal council meetings. Dhaka City Corporation, for instance, rarely held discussions for years, and councillors often passively accepted decisions for personal gain. Large-scale projects funded by the ADB and WB are poorly planned, leading to mismanagement and wasted resources due to city corporations' lack of capacity to manage these projects once completed.

Given these challenges, our report presents concrete recommendations, particularly where urgent reforms are necessary. One key proposal is to establish a permanent Local Government Commission to oversee and implement reform initiatives, as most will require gradual implementation.

An immediate reform is restructuring local governance from a presidential to a parliamentary system, ensuring participatory decision-making and collective leadership. Currently, councillors lack authority, discouraging capable individuals from these roles. Empowering them to elect the Chairman or Mayor would attract more qualified candidates. This will also indirectly incentivise competent individuals, creating a natural progression—those aspiring to become mayors would first serve as councillors, fostering leadership development at the grassroots level.

We also propose allowing government employees to contest local elections, provided they do not assume chairman role, as it requires full-time commitment. However, structural changes alone are insufficient—political culture must also evolve. While a commission report cannot achieve this immediately, it must establish a process that initiates lasting cultural change.

- Establish a permanent Local Government Commission to oversee and implement reform initiatives, as most will require gradual implementation.
- One of the key proposals is to replace the single-person-dominated model with a collective parliamentary system.
- The Constitution mandates the separation of executive and judicial functions, and we aim to extend this principle to local governance.
- Currently, different structures exist for zila, upazila, and union levels, requiring separate elections, which is not a viable system. We propose a unified structure for all tiers.
- The commission will resolve inter-organisational disputes, such as conflicts between bureaucracy and local government. Moreover, it will define the services provided by local government, which are often unclear.

Local government currently operates in a de facto system, where many practices persist as traditions rather than legal mandates (de jure system). For example, in Union and Upazila Parishads and City Corporations, project budgets are often distributed among members who act as both contractors and implementers, despite this not being legally sanctioned. Instead, budget allocations should be based on strategic planning, ensuring funds are used for specific initiatives rather than individual discretion.

One of the key proposals is to replace the single-person-dominated model with a collective parliamentary system. In the current Union Parishad (UP) structure, a legislative system is absent. We propose a separate legislative body comprising all elected members, led by a *Sabhadhipati*, who will function as a council moderator. Decisions made by this body will be implemented by the executive body, consisting of the Chairman, executive officers, and field extension staff. Ensuring that the *Sabhadhipati* leads council meetings is essential to prevent undue influence from the Chairman. This model should be extended to all levels, including Upazila, Union, and City Corporations, to ensure more accountable governance.

Under this framework, the legislative council will deliberate and make decisions, the executive body will implement them, and the legislative wing—through standing committees—will provide oversight and feedback. Currently, standing committees exist in name only, but under our proposed system, they would function as active, full-time oversight bodies. Additionally, a secretary would be appointed to support committee operations, a role that was previously absent. Moreover, the parliamentary system will facilitate debates among equal candidates competing in elections.

Another key reform is the removal of judicial responsibilities from the UP. Instead of the existing Village Court (Gram Adalat) system, we propose a structured legal framework comprising a Civil Court, a Criminal Court, and an ADR (Alternative Dispute Resolution) Magistrate to oversee Salishi practices. The Constitution mandates the separation of executive and judicial functions, and we aim to extend this principle to local governance. Regional disputes would be resolved through formal judicial processes rather than by a politically appointed chairman. Removing Village Court duties from the UP will allow for a greater focus on governance, reinforcing cultural change. Under the new system, the rule of law will be firmly established, preventing chairmen from passing verdicts at their discretion in regional disputes.

Additionally, we propose expanding UP staff by adding five to six administrative personnel while maintaining the current number of village police officers. Each upazila-level officer should oversee a specific Union—not for administration but for guidance and monitoring. They would attend legislative council meetings to ensure proper governance.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 25

# Restructure local governance from a presidential to a parliamentary system

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Council meetings should consider all opinions while maintaining agendas and making informed decisions. These reforms require training and gradual cultural adaptation.

**TDS:** What challenges do you foresee in transitioning from a presidential-style local governance system to a parliamentary-style system, and how can these challenges be addressed?

**TA:** The first challenge is the reluctance of former Chairmen or Mayors to accept this new system, along with resistance from higher-level officials. However, members, councillors, and civil society representatives, who form the majority, support the proposed model. Political parties also hold differing views, adding complexity.

Another concern is the potential for vote manipulation in the Chairman election. In a 15-member council, securing 7–8 votes unethically is possible. However, given the local nature of the election, such malpractice would likely be noticed by the community. To prevent this, any member found guilty of vote-buying or selling should lose their membership. Additionally, an affidavit with compliance conditions and penalties should be required.

Moreover, some may question why direct elections are not being implemented. The reason is to ensure broader participation through a two-phase voting system. This indirect election process prevents power from being concentrated in a few hands, promoting a more balanced distribution of authority.

**TDS:** What changes are proposed in the local government election system, particularly concerning women representatives?

**DTA:** Local government elections will be more efficient if the parliamentary system is implemented alongside a few legal amendments. Currently, different structures exist for zila, upazila, and union levels, requiring separate elections, which is not a viable system. We propose a unified structure for all tiers.

During elections, unions and *paurashavas* will follow a similar strategy. People will vote for the Zila Parishad (ZP) ward, which was previously not mandated. The number of wards under ZP will match the number of upazilas in that zila, with three wards per upazila. Similarly, there will be three wards per union under Upazila Parishad (UZP). If an upazila has 10 unions or a zila has 10 upazilas, both UZP and ZP will have 30 wards. This ward formation is solely for elections, not for other local government activities.

A voter at the union level will cast one vote for their UP ward and two to three votes for UZP and ZP wards, respectively, depending on the size. All three elections will be held on a single day with separate ballots, reducing costs. Through this streamlined process, the total budget for local government elections could be capped at BDT 600–700 crore.

Regarding women's representation, opinions are divided. A minority strongly advocates for eliminating reserved seats for women. However, from the perspective of many women, direct competition in elections remains challenging, making reserved seats necessary. That said, the current reservation system has proven largely ineffective.

We propose a rotational system for women's seat reservations across different wards, applicable for one term only. After serving in a reserved seat, female representatives must contest the next election like any other candidate. After three election cycles under this system, the fourth could be held without reservations as a trial, with the long-term goal of phasing them out.

**TDS:** Can you elaborate on the role and structure of the proposed permanent local government commission?

**DTA:** The recommendation for a permanent local government commission was consistently made by the previous three commissions led by Rahmat Ali, Nazmul Huda, and Shawkat Ali. However, they were not implemented. The Constitutional Reform Commission has already proposed a permanent commission with constitutional status for local government, reinforcing our recommendation.

The commission will resolve inter-organisational disputes, such as conflicts between bureaucracy and local government. Moreover, it will define the services provided by local government, which are often unclear. One such service is registration—birth and death registration, *warisan* (succession) certificates, and marriage registration—currently handled under the Ministry of Law. However, these should fall under the purview of local government.

**The permanent commission should also play a role in land management. It should maintain records on the types of land in each area, such as agricultural land, high or low land, water bodies, forests, and khas land. The commission must be consulted before khas lands, forests, or water bodies are used for any purpose.**

Revenue generated from these services will be divided into three parts: one portion for the UP, the other two portions for the Marriage Registrar and the central government. However, all records and documents will be kept at the UP level, as divorce and other marital disputes will be resolved at the local level through the newly proposed judicial process.

Moreover, a household data system must be established, linked to NID and birth registration, to build a unified database. If implemented, the Election Commission (EC) could update the voter list within a single day. The EC, with its advanced server facilities, can provide technical support to the permanent commission in achieving this. Thus, comprehensive population data will be available to local government, and this database must be updated every three months by the permanent commission.

The permanent commission should also play a role in land management. It should maintain records on the types of land in each area, such as agricultural land, high or low land, water bodies, forests, and *khas* land. The commission must be consulted before *khas* lands, forests, or water bodies are used for any purpose.

Furthermore, there is currently a provision for tax exemption for those owning up to 25 *bighas* of land. However, we propose that land tax must be collected from all landowners. Every landowner should have a legal land registration document and be required to pay tax.

The commission must also oversee land transfer and pricing to ensure that each land parcel has a legally registered price reflecting its actual value. Revenue from this process will be divided between central and local government. At present, the land pricing system is highly flawed. Land is sold at one price, while a different price is recorded in the registration document. To eliminate this differential rate system, local government must assume responsibility for these matters.

**TDS:** How can local governments be better funded, and what steps should be taken to enhance their capacity?

**DTA:** We have several major recommendations for local government financing. Along with project financing, there must be a provision for 'tax sharing'. While the central government can retain a significant portion of tax revenues, it must allocate a share to local administrations, as taxes are collected from local sources. The exact proportion of tax sharing can be determined by the government, but it is crucial that a portion is distributed to local governments. Furthermore, VAT applies to all individuals, including those in rural areas. Therefore, a share of VAT revenue should also be allocated to local governments. For example, the central government could retain 70% of VAT and tax revenue, while 30% is shared among all local governments across Bangladesh.

This system of tax sharing would help align the National Development Plan with local development plans. The central government need not carry out all development activities itself; it can finance and delegate certain projects to regional governments, monitoring their implementation. It is essential that the national plan clearly defines which projects will be handled by the central government and which will be managed by local governments.

**TDS:** What mechanisms does the commission plan to recommend for institutionalising the reforms and ensuring their long-term sustainability, regardless of regime changes?

**DTA:** We cannot guarantee the implementation of all proposed reforms when there is a change in government. However, we are hopeful that the interim government will establish a comprehensive committee to thoroughly analyse our recommendations in consultation with political parties. Through consensus, they can implement the reforms that are immediately feasible, while those requiring more time can be addressed in the future.

To facilitate this process, we have proposed the establishment of a permanent commission to ensure that the implementation and detailing of our recommended reforms continue over time. Given the widespread recognition of inefficiencies in local government, there is strong momentum for reform. Since local government directly affects people across the country rather than just at the central level, nationwide engagement is expected.

*The interview was taken by* **Miftahul Jannat.**

# Pathways for reforms in Bangladesh

## Perspectives from public administration and local government

**Musleh Uddin Ahmed, Ph.D**
*is a Professor in the Department of Public Administration at the University of Dhaka.*

**MUSLEH UDDIN AHMED**

In 1971, the people of Bangladesh earned their independence through blood and sacrifice. Since the Liberation War, repeated attacks on our sovereignty have been rejected by the general populace, who have built resistance against authoritarian rule. Likewise, July 2024 will remain etched in our memory as another mass uprising to protect that hard-won freedom. Moreover, in this struggle for human rights and liberty, history has presented us with brave figures such as Abu Sayeed and Mir Mugdho, as well as opportunities to dismantle and restructure the systems built by fascists and despots.

The politicised administrative system, a major obstacle to good governance, has impaired state operations and eroded public trust in Bangladesh. Despite numerous promises of reforms across all sectors, various commissions have failed to deliver substantive solutions, often stirring controversy instead. They tend to overlook the fact that, to fulfil the aspirations of the people, a strong and capable local government system is essential. If we balance investments between administrative and local government reforms, it will enable a more contextualised approach to local needs, ensuring tangible benefits for the people.

The administration of Bangladesh is deeply rooted in history and has undergone political, social, and economic transformations over time. However, the structural weaknesses and challenges that have emerged over the past few decades have severely impacted its effectiveness today. Key administrative functions such as recruitment, promotion, posting, retirement, and discipline of civil service officials are carried out in the name of the President. In reality, however, these decisions are dictated by the political government. Consequently, the civil service has become subservient to political interests. It is important to remember that the civil service is not merely an administrative tool of the political government but a strategic institution of the Republic.

The politicisation of administration has not only diminished the quality of public services but has also obstructed transparency and accountability within the government. The growing distrust and disconnect between government officials and the public highlight the urgent need for a mindset shift among administrative officials. However, the current crisis did not arise from a single regime; rather, it is the cumulative result of decades of partisanship, weak oversight, and rampant corruption.

Several initiatives have been undertaken in the past to establish a pro-people administration, but none have materialised. After independence, in 1972, the Administrative and Services Reorganisation Committee (ASRC), headed by Professor Muzaffar Ahmed Chowdhury, proposed the first set of reforms. The report, submitted in two phases—in October 1972 and March 1973—recommended a 'Unified Grading Structure' and a 'Classless Civil Service' to create a bureaucracy that would serve an independent nation. However, this groundbreaking proposal, led by a renowned political scientist, was never implemented. The report remained shelved due to opposition from the elite Pakistani-era civil service class, the 'CSP' officers, who sought to maintain their privileged positions and obstruct administrative changes.

Later, with the establishment of the Pay and Services Commission in 1976, the civil service—particularly the administrative cadre—was further reinforced. The influence of the CSP and PSP groups became more entrenched in civil and police administration, a trend that continued until 1981. Subsequently, during the Ershad regime in 1982, some changes were introduced through the Committee for Administrative Reform/Reorganisation (CARR) to decentralise power. Around 60 circle officers, along with other administrative cadre officials, were given expanded responsibilities and deployed to 'upgraded police stations' at the grassroots level. This initiative laid the groundwork for the Upazila system, aimed at bringing administrative authority closer to local communities.

Between 1983 and 1990, under the Ershad regime, Brigadier Enam oversaw the formulation of a new administrative structure. In the years that followed, various reports were prepared with financial support from the United Nations and other development partners, yet their recommendations were seldom implemented. After the restoration of democracy, Khaleda Zia's government in 1991 attempted another round of administrative reforms.

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- The highly politicised administrative system, a significant barrier to good governance, has undermined state operations and eroded public trust in Bangladesh.
- Local governments should be granted financial autonomy, including the ability to collect taxes, to ensure the provision of civic services.
- The concept of self-government should be revitalised to strengthen local governance in a new Bangladesh.
- The true purpose of local government is to serve the people with its own agency—an aspiration that remains unfulfilled.
- If local public representatives take proactive measures to address local issues, it could reinforce the country's democratic framework.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

# Pathways for reforms in Bangladesh

**If the local self-government structure cannot be properly implemented now, then abolishing it entirely may be a more appropriate course of action. The concept of self-government should be revitalised to strengthen local governance in a new Bangladesh.**

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In 1993, the 'Administrative Reorganisation Committee (ARC)' was formed under the leadership of former secretary Nurun Nabi to overhaul the civil service and administrative structure. However, this initiative, too, failed to materialise. Similarly, the Public Administration Reform Commission (PARC), established by the Sheikh Hasina government between 1997 and 2000, put forward various recommendations, but these were never fully implemented. During the caretaker government in 2007, additional reform efforts were undertaken, but they also failed to achieve meaningful success.

Various commissions established during the 2007–2008 caretaker government were intended to promote public welfare. While their policy drafts were well-structured, they ultimately became tools for manipulation. As the next government assumed power, the effectiveness of these commissions gradually diminished, with bureaucracy becoming further entrenched. Although many commissions remained active, the local government commission seemingly disappeared, as the bureaucratic machinery, driven by self-interest, prioritised expanding its control at the local level over facilitating the election of public representatives.

Furthermore, our local government system remains shrouded in opacity, with 'accountability' existing in name only.

People waiting in line to access essential public services.

PHOTO: STAR

ILLUSTRATION: STAR DIGITAL GRAPHICS

When unrest and apprehension abruptly destabilise the country's law-and-order situation, the local government becomes virtually dysfunctional—reduced to a mere puppet under the enduring dominance of central political and administrative power. The Local Government Division's decision to grant Upazila Nirbahi Officers (UNOs) full authority in the absence of elected chairmen only reinforces the perception that local government is nothing more than an extension of the central administration. However, the true purpose of local government is to serve the people with its own agency—an aspiration that remains unfulfilled. At this critical juncture, if local public representatives take proactive steps to address local issues, it could strengthen the country's democratic framework.

If the local self-government structure cannot be properly implemented now, then abolishing it entirely may be a more appropriate course of action. The concept of self-government should be revitalised to strengthen local governance in a new Bangladesh. It is time to distribute government-allocated funds more judiciously. Local governments should be granted financial autonomy, including the ability to collect taxes, to ensure the provision of civic services. The shortcomings of previous local government systems can be rectified by renovating the existing structure rather than overhauling it completely—because change does not always necessitate starting from scratch.

Some issues, however, must be reconsidered in response to present demands. For example, the presence of elected representatives in the local government structure is crucial, alongside the cooperation of administrative officers. A dedicated office and some permanent institutions should be established through this framework. Planning, tax collection, local development, and social protection initiatives can be effectively tailored to regional characteristics through such coordinated efforts. Additionally, local governments should conduct social surveys to ensure policies are informed by ground realities. These surveys could be managed by expert advisors in social research, involving students in the process. If state reforms can be structured around the interests of the younger generation, they can be directly engaged in policymaking.

Notwithstanding, governance in Bangladesh is experiencing a deep crisis, exacerbated by entrenched partisanship, politically motivated appointments, and internal divisions. In political science, government consists of two core components: a permanent government (bureaucracy) and a provisional government (political leadership). The permanent government—comprising bureaucrats—implements and supervises state policies, whereas the provisional government leads political decision-making. However, prolonged political interference has destabilised the permanent government, leading to widespread instability and disorder. Therefore, it is imperative to establish a transparent and accountable recruitment process by adopting and implementing short-, mid-, and long-term plans for administrative reform in Bangladesh.

Furthermore, the unelected segment of local government—namely divisional commissioners at the divisional level, deputy commissioners (DCs) at the district level, and UNOs at the upazila level—should be integrated into a balanced governance structure. First, their designations should be standardised, either as commissioners or executive officers. Second, the division of power and responsibilities between elected and unelected officials in local government should be clearly defined, ensuring that people receive services through a unified framework. Implementing such reforms will take time, but the groundwork must be laid now to facilitate the transformation of state structures. Perhaps this is the horizon of a new vision for progress. Now is the time to reshape the governance landscape. The journey of change may be long, but it must begin here and now.

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# Prioritising profits over the environment is costing us dearly

***The Daily Star speaks with Dr Ainun Nishat, professor emeritus and advisor at C3ER, BRAC University, about the future of climate resilience and environmental policy in Bangladesh.***

Ainun Nishat

**The Daily Star (TDS):** How would you assess the current state of Bangladesh's environment, and what are the most pressing challenges?

**Ainun Nishat (AN):** We do not follow rules or obey regulations. Factories are set up indiscriminately, dumping liquid waste into nearby canals. Even wealthier residential areas contribute to pollution, with toilets directly connected to rivers, lakes, or canals. For instance, sanitary waste from Gulshan ends up in nearby lakes. Bangladesh lacks a proper sewer system. In Dhaka, Wasa treats only 5–10% of liquid waste at the Pagla sewage treatment plant, while the Dasherkandi Sewage Treatment Plant (STP) remains unconnected. The situation is absurd—like constructing a ten-storey building without installing an elevator or staircase. How would people use it? Similarly, pollution—whether soil or water—remains uncontrolled.

Yet, all the necessary laws are in place. Article 18A of the Constitution commits the country to protecting the environment, ecosystems, biodiversity, and wetlands. On paper, we have national commitments and legal frameworks for sustainable management. In practice, however, we do not uphold them. Wetlands are depleted, forests are cut down, and civic responsibility is lacking—both among businesses and communities in their daily activities and operations.

To illustrate this point, let me share an experience. During my visit to Tashkent, Uzbekistan, last year, our guide took us to various places, including a traditional local market that had existed for around 3,000 years and remained largely unchanged. It was a circular market, divided into seven sections. Despite having a fish section, there was no dirty water anywhere. The poultry section had properly processed chickens, neatly stored in refrigerators. Vegetables were displayed in an orderly manner. The market was even a tourist attraction, demonstrating how a well-maintained market should function.

Now, compare that to Bangladesh. If you visit a wet market here, you risk ruining your shoes—or even your trousers. Our behaviour is reckless and unhygienic. People litter, spit, and urinate anywhere. There is little awareness of the need to protect public property, water bodies, or the environment. Even breathing in our cities has become hazardous.

The poorest communities suffer the most from our environmental negligence. Many live in slums next to drains or canals. If these waterways were properly maintained, their homes wouldn't flood every rainy season. But since canals are encroached upon and clogged, water cannot drain, leaving their homes submerged. While lower-income groups also contribute to pollution, they do so out of necessity rather than choice. If our country were better managed and free from pollution across all sectors, their circumstances would improve as well.

**TDS:** Do you think our problem is a lack of awareness, or do we simply not care?

AN: It is not about awareness; rather, we are knowingly irresponsible. We understand what is wrong. However, the focus on maximising profits, often disregarding the long-term consequences for the environment, puts us at a disadvantage.

Monitoring is crucial. If you look at the garment factories now, many of them are becoming responsible. However,

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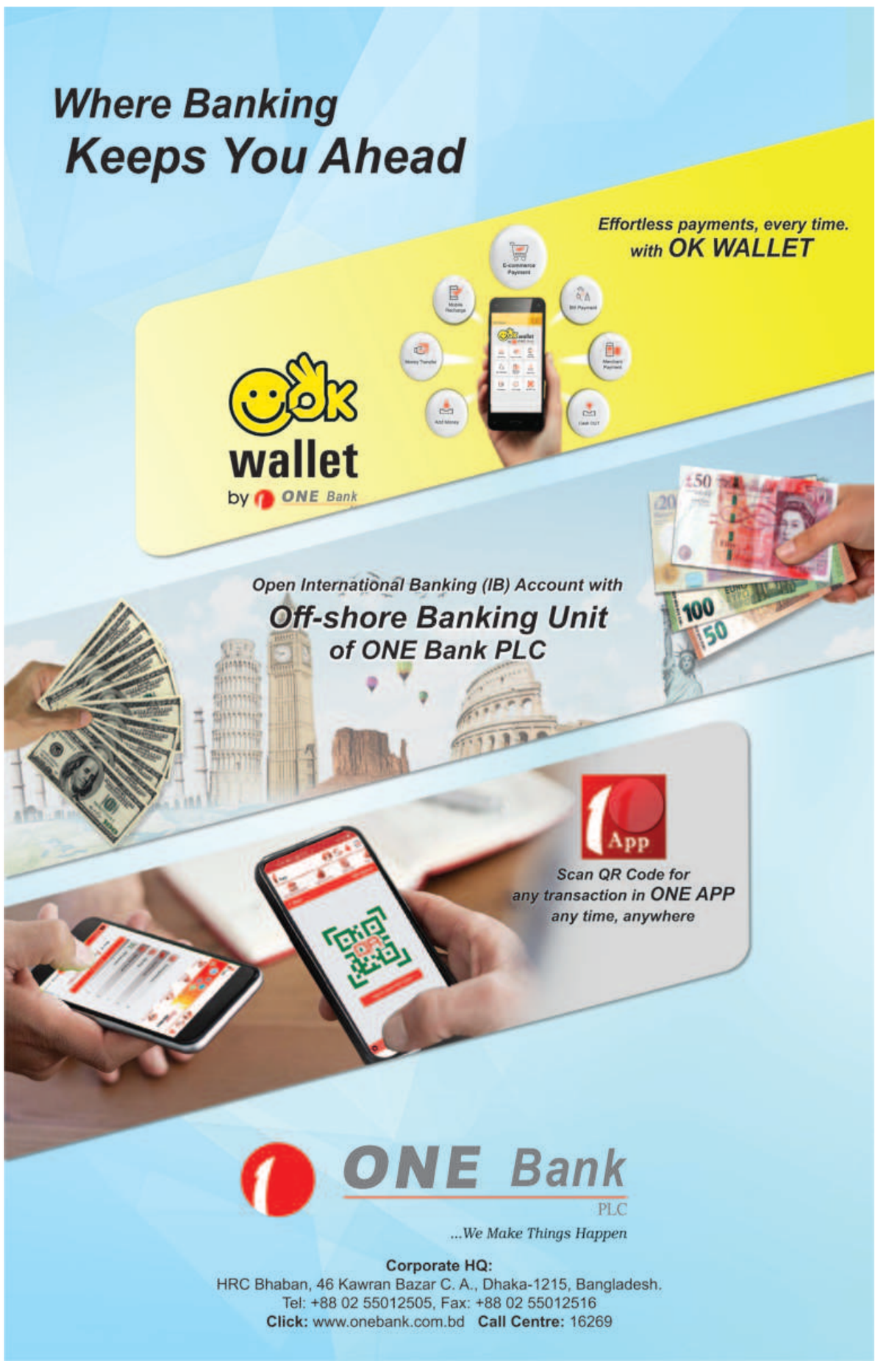
The reckless dumping of waste—from tanning factories to city sewage—has left much of the Buriganga River biologically dead.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

- Factories that produce liquid waste—such as the dyeing industry, pharmaceutical plants, and cosmetic industries—should all have effluent treatment plants (ETPs).
- On paper, we have national commitments and legal frameworks for sustainable management. In practice, however, we do not uphold them.
- If we install water quality sensors in these factories and connect them to a central system via satellite, we can see the pollution levels in real time. This way, pollution monitoring will be more effective.
- We keep collecting reports—ministries prepare reports every year—but no one analyses them. The data collected is not used effectively to learn from those reports. There needs to be proper analysis and appropriate corrective actions.
- Wherever pollution is detected, the local community should be informed and encouraged to put pressure on the polluters. Similarly, monitoring officials must also be held responsible if they fail to enforce regulations.



# Prioritising profits over the environment is costing us dearly

FROM PAGE 28

many factories—chemical factories, dyeing factories, and jeans factories—continue to pollute without following compliance regulations.

Take our leather industry, for example—it could have been the most important sector after garments since we produce a lot of raw leather. Bangladesh is capable of making high-quality processed leather goods with an abundance of raw materials and labour. But we are unable to export because our processed products do not meet environmental standards, which is a concern. The five or six leather industries that do manage to export succeed because these businesses comply with regulations and have their own effluent treatment plants (ETPs).

We have laws and regulations such as the Bangladesh Environment Conservation Act, 1995, and the Environment Conservation Rules, 1997, which mandate that every industry must have a wastewater treatment system. According to Regulation No. 94 of the Environmental Assessment Regulations 2012, ETPs are mandatory. But are they being implemented? No. As citizens, we have not fully grasped the importance of these regulations.

Factories that produce liquid waste—such as the dyeing industry, pharmaceutical plants, and cosmetic industries—should all have effluent treatment plants (ETPs). Now, garment industries have started implementing them because their buyers demand it. Similarly, some chemical companies, like Unilever, and shoe manufacturers, like Bata and Apex, who are involved in export markets, at least try to treat their waste.

But it is still insufficient because the number of export-oriented companies is small. The Export Processing Zones (EPZs) lack ETPs, as the foreign companies operating factories in these zones do so without ETPs.

We do have monitoring systems, but enforcement is weak. Moreover, the monitoring, evaluation, and learning processes are inadequate.

We already have sectoral policies in place for different industries—agriculture, fisheries, manufacturing. Every sector has guidelines. But the problem is that we do not comply with them. That is the core issue.

**TDS:** Bangladesh consistently records some of the worst air quality levels in the world, posing severe health risks. What urgent measures should be taken to combat this crisis?

**AN:** The government needs to take a stronger stance. The black smoke from vehicles, brick kilns, or improperly stored construction materials causes air pollution. They have no right to pollute the air.

There are four main sources of air pollution in Dhaka. Brick kilns are major polluters. Construction materials—where is the sand stored? Where is the cement kept? How are the bricks stored? If not handled properly, they contribute to dust pollution. Dust on city roads and vehicle emissions generate air pollution.

We know the causes. We need to implement solutions accordingly. Take Mirpur Ceramics, located next to the Mirpur Cantonment. It does not cause pollution. If it did, the cantonment authorities would take action. Mirpur Ceramics uses modern technology, and there are even better technologies available. Thus, technology is not even an issue here.

The brick kiln owners refuse to adopt advanced technologies because of the high initial investment. This again brings us to the fact that we are knowingly irresponsible. We understand everything, yet we do not act.

**TDS:** Plastic pollution is a major issue. What steps should we take to address it?

**AN:** Plastic and polythene are severely damaging our environment—rivers, coastal areas, and farmland are all suffering. We must stop this.

It is a matter of habit. I use a car, and in my car, I always keep reusable bags. When I shop, I use my own bag. People should carry reusable bags. The problem is with single-use plastic.

In Europe, if you ask for a shopping bag, they charge you one or two euros. That forces people to bring their own bags. The bag must be durable. In Bangladesh, our plastic bags are flimsy and non-durable. Plastic is not the issue—single-use plastic is. We need to enforce policies strictly.

You need a bottle to drink water? Just carry a small glass bottle. Now there are multiple options that nullify all the excuses. If people try a little bit, it can bring big changes.

**If a factory is polluting, we should hold the owner accountable. If a brick kiln is causing pollution, we should enforce regulations on the kiln owner. If domestic pollution is a problem, we should engage local households in waste management. Globally, there is a strong emphasis on involving local communities and youth in environmental action.**

In developed countries, waste is separated at the source. For example, households have four bins—one for plastic, one for paper, one for glass and metal, and one for organic waste. Paper waste, glass, and metal are all separated. Organic waste, such as kitchen scraps, is also disposed of separately. And the garbage collectors do not clean the streets daily—maybe once every two or three days. But waste is disposed of in an organised manner. This way, recycling becomes easier.

In Bangladesh, raw materials for recycling are collected at almost zero cost. Three to five years ago, Chinese businessmen were buying plastic bottles from Bangladesh and taking them to China. The recycling process was so profitable that they could afford to cover transportation costs from Bangladesh to China and still make a profit.

But we, as a nation, have a habit of arguing against anything beneficial. Instead of taking responsibility, we are always defensive without being proactive. Whenever a rule is introduced, we protest against it instead of following it.

Our garbage collection system is non-existent. A mayor once introduced tin trash bins in different areas, but people broke them. Disposal points were installed at street corners, but those too were misused. We do have two landfills—one in Aminbazar and one in Matuail. But in reality, we have 15–16 unofficial dumping sites. And if garbage is dumped without proper lining underneath, the leachate seeps into the ground, contaminating water sources. Everyone—the municipality, city corporations, and public health officials—knows this. Our problem is not a lack of knowledge. It is that our national character lacks discipline in practice.

**TDS:** What changes can be made to ensure that existing laws are properly enforced?

**AN:** Whether it is the garment industry, dyeing industry, leather industry, or chemical industry, they are all dumping untreated liquid waste into rivers, canals, and wetlands, polluting the water bodies. Now, let us assume that a factory owner has installed an Effluent Treatment Plant (ETP). But when an inspector arrives, they turn it on just for the inspection. Once the inspector leaves, they turn it off again.

We can monitor this in real time. If we install water quality sensors in these factories and connect them to a central system via satellite, we can see the pollution levels in real time. This way, pollution monitoring will be more effective.

The Department of Environment's staff should be held accountable. Wherever pollution is detected, the local community should be informed and encouraged to put pressure on the polluters. Similarly, monitoring officials must also be held responsible if they fail to enforce regulations. We must enforce monitoring, and based on that, evaluation must be conducted. Unfortunately, we stop at this point.

We keep collecting reports—ministries prepare reports every year—but no one analyses them. The data collected is not used effectively to learn from those reports. There needs to be proper analysis and appropriate corrective actions.

For example, if a factory is polluting, we should hold the owner accountable. If a brick kiln is causing pollution, we should enforce regulations on the kiln owner. If domestic pollution is a problem, we should engage local households in waste management. Globally, there is a strong emphasis on involving local communities and youth in environmental action.

**TDS:** How can local communities and youth contribute to positive environmental change?

**AN:** Take any village as an example. A union typically has nine wards. If you focus on just one ward, local elected representatives, school headmasters, madrasa principals, and mosque imams can all come together to form a community management committee.

Kitchen waste should be used to produce compost. Streets should be kept clean. People should be discouraged from littering—plastic bottles, paper, and other waste should not be thrown on the streets. Globally, there is now a strong emphasis on locally led adaptation. If we keep our local water bodies and drainage systems clean and allow water to flow freely, there will be no waterlogging or flooding. Local efforts and empowered local representatives are essential.

*The interview was taken by* ***Saudia Afrin****.*

# Human welfare must be at the centre of development thinking

***Dr KAS Murshid, former Director General of BIDS and head of the Task Force on Economic Strategy Redesign, discusses pivotal reforms to reshape Bangladesh's economy.***

**KAS Murshid**

**The Daily Star (TDS):** What is the scope of responsibilities defined for the Task Force on Redesigning Economic Strategy?

**KAS Murshid (KASM):** Our task force was mandated with the responsibility of rethinking economic strategy and recommending policies and interventions in the short and medium term. Our intention was to propose pragmatic, actionable interventions with a strong public interest component.

There are numerous initiatives that cannot be completed in the short term. We felt that we should identify measures that could be acted upon almost immediately—the "low-hanging fruits"—in addition to policies that are urgent but need to be anchored within a longer timeframe.

Our report consists of two parts: Part I examines sectoral issues, while Part II focuses on cross-cutting issues. The sectoral discussions include macroeconomics, trade, agriculture, industry, education, and health, while the cross-cutting issues address critical concerns such as food and energy security, leveraging digital and AI technology, reducing the digital divide, reforming the planning process, combating everyday extortion, and improving government efficiency.

One of the main challenges we identified is diversification. We aimed to address diversification in agriculture, industry, and manufacturing, as well as in exports. These areas are vital, and our work involves identifying where policy adjustments can support and encourage diversification. While some issues can be addressed through policy changes, others require additional support, such as improvements in infrastructure or energy.

**Although export growth, foreign reserves, technology and services are essential, these must be seen as tools to facilitate human development.**

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

We have proposed recommendations to reduce income and wealth inequality, including a progressive tax system, improved education and skills development, expanded financial inclusion, stronger social safety net programmes, labour market reforms, regional development, good governance, gender equality, innovation, and increased public awareness.

Moving forward, I believe human welfare must be at the centre of all development thinking. Although export growth, foreign reserves, technology, and services are essential, they must be seen as tools to facilitate human development. To expand and nurture this, we need to invest in skills, capacity, the physical and social environment, and a well-functioning, competitive market backed by an efficient governance regime. For a resource-poor country like ours, our most significant asset is human capital. Therefore, our best strategy is to focus on building human skills and capacities. This is the perspective the task force has adopted.

**TDS:** Could you provide an overview of the key initiatives you intend to implement, including those aligned with the economic white paper, as well as a detailed plan and timeline?

**KASM:** The issues outlined in the white paper have resonated with us. The white paper highlights several critical concerns: poor governance, high levels of corruption, mismanagement, significant money laundering, inflation, high unemployment, and a particularly alarming rate of graduate unemployment. It also points to a lack of skills, a shortage of dollars, depleted reserves, and insufficient gas supplies. These are the pressing challenges we currently face.

The white paper primarily evaluated the actions of the previous government. The task force, on the other hand, has drawn up a list of policy interventions in critical areas of the economy that could be implemented relatively quickly. There is no contradiction between the two reports.

We have recommended launching pilot projects to develop scalable governance models for future reforms, such as selecting a public hospital, a community clinic, the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA), and even an entire ministry for comprehensive reforms. Reviving the Buriganga River has been identified as a high-priority project to prevent its extinction.

Additionally, we have proposed establishing several new institutions, such as a Centre of Global Excellence in STEM, Engineering, ICT, and AI, and a Centre for Social and Behavioural Change Communication and Research. The former will help position Bangladesh as a regional hub for advanced research and studies in STEM, while the latter will assess behavioural patterns and dynamics that promote or constrain socio-economic development.

Given Bangladesh Biman's failure to meet modern aviation standards, the task force suggests establishing a new airline, tentatively named Bangladesh Airways. This new airline would utilise half of Biman's existing assets but would be managed by an independent, world-class management company.

To address the urgent need for tax and customs reforms, we call for the National Board of Revenue (NBR) to expedite its automation process. We also recommend the establishment of an independent, high-powered oversight body to drive these changes. A Regulatory Reform Commission (RRC) is also proposed to tackle over-regulation and bureaucratic inefficiencies that hinder business growth and foreign investment. The commission would monitor, evaluate, and streamline regulations across various sectors, improving the ease of doing business in Bangladesh and attracting both domestic and foreign investment.

For urban transportation, the task force recommends implementing automatic traffic signalling and transitioning to a single-operator bus franchise system. The report also suggests opening up the health sector to foreign investment, waiving cash-out fees for remittance earners, recognising the internet as a "social good," and immediately withdrawing the 20% supplementary tax and 2% surcharge on internet services.

The closure of the Indian medical market has highlighted the need for high-quality healthcare within Bangladesh. To meet this demand, liberalising foreign direct investment (FDI) in the health sector is essential. This move would reduce the need for expensive medical tourism abroad, foster competition, and improve healthcare services in the country.

Selected polytechnics could be upgraded to technical colleges, offering a two-year BA (Tech) degree to equip students with the necessary competencies and help eliminate the perception of an "inferior" academic degree associated with polytechnic certificates. In other words, technical education requires gentrification.

In line with efforts to diversify exports, the task force proposes "cherry-picking" high-potential firms for policy, financial, and technical support. This approach targets selected non-RMG (ready-made garment) export performers from approximately 1,500 entities currently exporting a minimum of $1 million annually.

Further recommendations include enhancing the one-stop service system, revitalising Special Economic Zones (SEZs), implementing NID-based open data platforms similar to India's Aadhaar card, and removing political influence from the banking sector.

Our tasks aim to drive meaningful change, laying the foundation for a resilient and progressive society while addressing key issues that affect citizens' daily lives. Ultimately, the actions outlined in the report serve as an initial roadmap for economic reform, offering a vision for a transformed Bangladesh that is responsive to the needs of its people.

**TDS:** What challenges are you encountering in implementing these initiatives?

**KASM:** One of the primary constraints we face is the limited time available under the interim government. While there are numerous goals we wish to achieve, it is not feasible to accomplish them all within such a short period. Reform processes take time, and our plans must reflect this reality.

- The recommendations we are making are not intended to be fully detailed or thoroughly modelled out; instead, we are offering key concepts that can guide immediate actions.
- A Regulatory Reform Commission (RRC) is proposed to address excessive regulation and bureaucratic inefficiencies that obstruct business growth and foreign investment.
- It is recommended that the internet be recognised as a "social good" and that the 20% supplementary tax and 2% surcharge on internet services be immediately withdrawn.
- If the quality of data does not improve, it will become increasingly difficult to make informed policy decisions.
- The successful implementation of reform proposals will depend on bottom-up advocacy and activism, ensuring that any government in power feels compelled to continue them.

Our objective is not to develop a detailed, comprehensive plan but to highlight pragmatic, reasonable actions that can be implemented in the short and medium term. The recommendations we are making are not intended to be fully detailed or thoroughly modelled out; instead, we are offering key concepts that can guide immediate actions.

Our country has never had a clear and specific economic strategy. In the past, terms like "export-led growth" have been used as objectives, but these kinds of invocations have not served us well. Our actual growth has not been export-driven, and the gap is evident in the small ratio of exports to GDP.

One important perspective we aim to introduce is that, before initiating any reform, we should not spend excessive time on highly detailed plans. Many of these issues have already been thoroughly considered, so there is no need to reinvent the wheel. We should begin the reform process by taking concrete steps, starting with a few essential actions.

A significant issue we have identified is the lack of appropriate leadership in many institutions. We have seen instances where technocratic positions are filled by individuals without relevant expertise, such as recruiting someone with a background in history or English for a highly technical role. Our aim is to identify such gaps and bring about leadership changes to ensure that qualified individuals are in the right positions.

In addition, we propose the establishment of a monitoring and evaluation system to track progress in real time. This system should be accessible to policymakers and provide a mechanism for public feedback. The feedback process should be twofold: initially online, followed by a paper-based system.

One specific issue we want to address is food security. Given our reliance on imports for essential goods, it is crucial to maintain reserve stocks of critical items like fertiliser, petroleum, and edible oil. Without this, we risk becoming vulnerable to shifts in the global market. In the short term, we must ensure that reserves are established to safeguard against such dependencies. In the long term, however, we must consider strategies for reducing this reliance through import substitution. This is the kind of strategic thinking that we aim to foster.

**TDS:** What mechanisms does the task force plan to recommend for institutionalising the reforms and ensuring their long-term sustainability, regardless of regime changes?

**KASM:** This is largely beyond our jurisdiction. However, I believe that if we initiate meaningful reforms and demonstrate their positive impacts, public pressure will grow to sustain these changes. Timing is crucial in this process. While more time would have allowed us to achieve more, within the available time frame, we must make every effort to begin and practise these reforms. Successful implementation will depend on bottom-up advocacy and activism, ensuring that any government that comes to power will feel compelled to continue them.

We are also suggesting the digitalisation of various sectors to promote greater transparency. Through digital platforms, citizens could track progress, organise efforts, and suggest improvements. One of the chapters in our report focuses on youth-led citizenship, highlighting the importance of young people's involvement in positive activism.

**TDS:** Given the significant manipulation of macroeconomic data during the past regime, how does the task force plan to rebuild trust in public data and ensure its integrity moving forward?

**DKASM:** Rebuilding trust is a slow process that will take time. A central issue we face is government interference. However, if institutional leadership is strong enough to resist such incursions, it could foster long-term progress.

A significant challenge is trust in data. It is common for people to distrust data while relying on even more unreliable sources, such as social media. This, in my view, is a national issue. If the quality of data does not improve, it will become increasingly difficult to make informed policy decisions. There are alternative data sources available, such as the Household Income and Expenditure Survey, which could be reliable. Additionally, research organisations provide valuable panel data, and Demographic and Health Services offer data that is considered of good quality. Therefore, it is crucial to triangulate data from different sources, including various primary surveys carried out by research bodies. If a significant mismatch is observed, researchers must alert us.

A concern is that many of these data or reports were prepared with donor financing, and key donor agencies like the World Bank have worked closely with the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. Despite this collaboration, the emergence of such large alleged gaps in data raises questions. Since 2020, data mismanagement appears to have accelerated, which suggests that while actual data may eventually surface, those involved could claim they were coerced into the mismanagement. Ultimately, everything hinges on political commitment—if politicians are unwilling to address these issues, they will remain unresolved. Researchers may raise their concerns, but without political will, their voices go unheard.

To address this, we must build a culture of trust, accountability, and professional conduct. Supervisors must be held responsible for poor data management, particularly those in government.

VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

*The interview was taken by* **Miftahul Jannat.**

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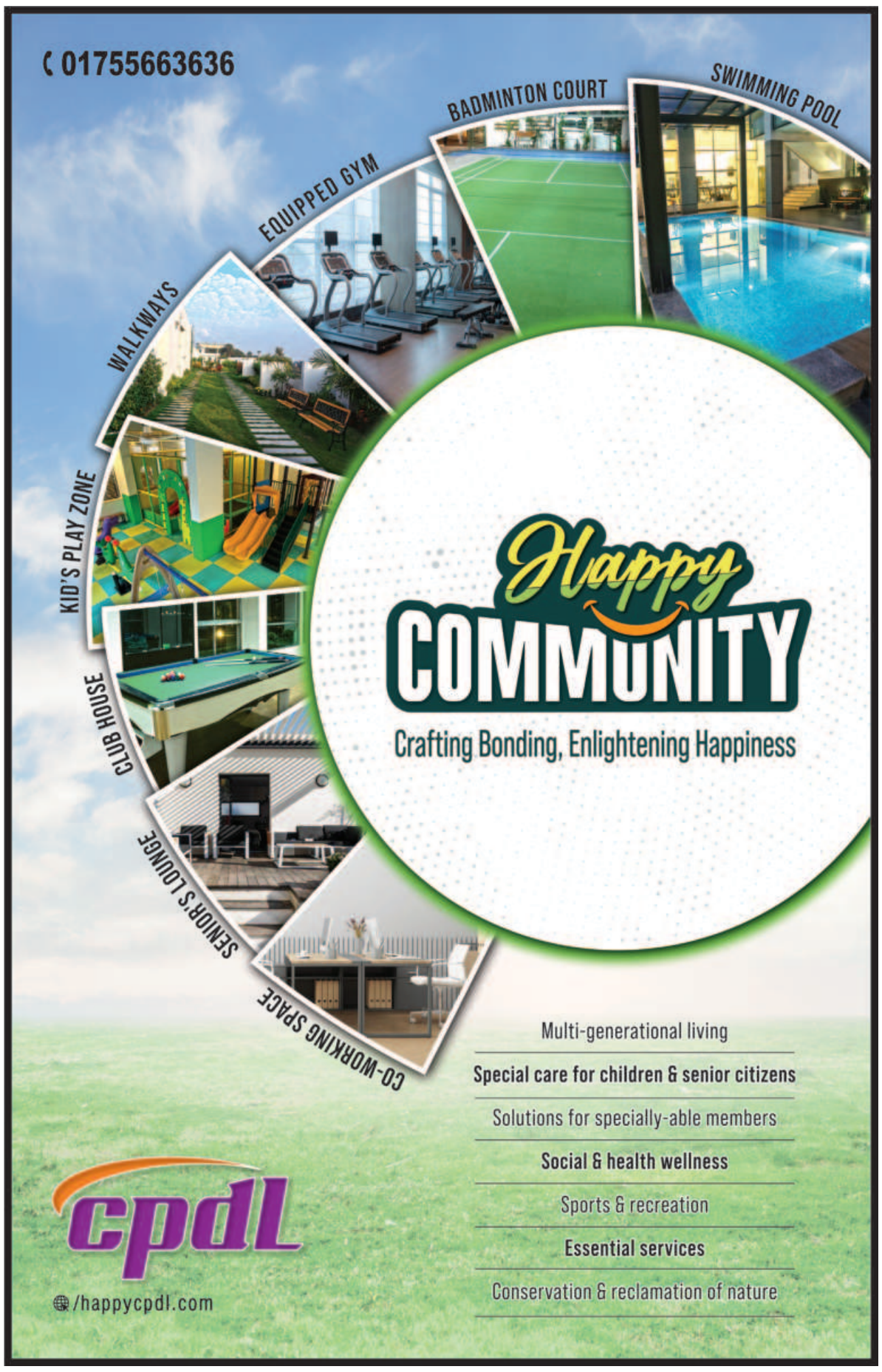

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# Cultural interventions required to reform deep-rooted patriarchal norms

*In conversation with Dr Fauzia Moslem, president of Bangladesh Mahila Parishad.*

Fauzia Moslem

**The Daily Star (TDS):** After August 5, women and female coordinators of the movement appear to have gradually become less visible in initiatives and discussions. This raises an important question: can the discourse on state reforms truly represent the approximately 51% of Bangladesh's population who are women, particularly in state-building and equitable resource distribution?

**Fauzia Moslem (FM):** The core issue is society's flawed mental framework. The ideologies at play behind this are the main reason. Throughout history, women have actively participated in movements but remain unrecognised.

Olympe de Gouges, a key figure in the French Revolution, challenged the exclusion of women from the Declaration, which only referred to "citizens of France" without specifying women. Instead of recognition, she was executed. Ironically, working-class women ignited the revolution, yet their contributions were erased. The belief that women should not hold power persists even in the 21st century.

Women are actively mobilised during movements but are often sidelined once they conclude. Throughout history, movements such as those in 1952, 1969, 1971, and 1991 have propelled women forward, yet their struggle for recognition persists. Now, women must take the initiative to solidify their position in society, actively advocating for their rights and continuing to push for progress.

In this context, a sectoral approach focusing specifically on women is needed, as society as a whole often fails to accept them. This is precisely where the importance of the women's movement lies.

The reform committees lack female representation, prompting Mahila Parishad to submit recommendations. Our key proposals include direct voting for reserved women's seats in Parliament, equal property inheritance rights to reduce financial dependence, and legal protections against gender-based violence and child marriage.

Most reform commissions have to address these issues in some form. While the Constitution guarantees equal rights in public life, this should extend to personal life, where women face the most discrimination in inheritance, marriage, and divorce. Religious discourse often limits women's opportunities, reinforcing systemic inequalities. True reform demands women's inclusion in decision-making and policies that uphold their rights.

Quota reform demonstration held by students at Shahbagh on July 10, 2024.

PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

- Societal transformation cannot happen in isolation; both men and women have roles to play in ensuring human rights. The broader fight for human rights must go hand in hand with the fight for gender equality.
- Understanding society and how to shape activism within it is crucial, and women must play an active role in this process, thereby establishing their position in society themselves.
- Maternity should be recognised as a social responsibility, and the state must act accordingly to ensure supportive policies.
- While the Constitution guarantees equal rights in public life, this should extend to personal life, where women face the most discrimination in inheritance, marriage, and divorce.
- Women must be proactively included in policy making—through quotas if needed—to ensure their voices are heard and their concerns addressed.

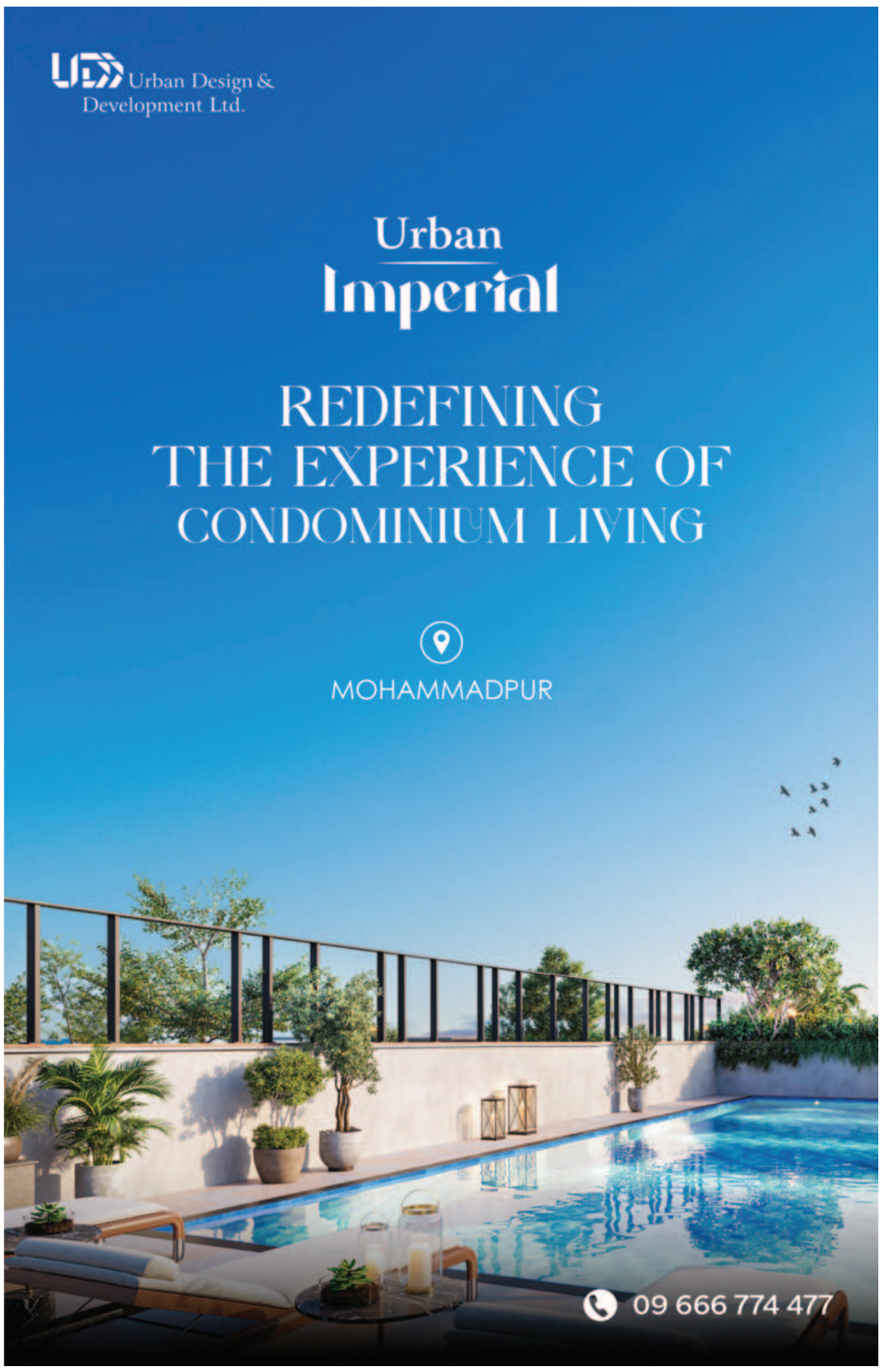
**TDS:** How do you assess the situation for women following August 5?

**FM:** Misogyny has become more visible in Bangladesh, particularly following the August 5 incident, which marked a significant increase in anti-women rhetoric. Misogynistic forces, along with a conservative societal mindset, have started to dominate certain spaces. If you observe social media, you'll notice a shift.

By discussing issues like clothing and religious sentiments, these forces are attempting to claim control of this space. They are trying, and while I would not say they have succeeded yet, their attempts are undeniable. We must remain vigilant about this growing communal and misogynistic group. It is not just the women's community, but society as a whole must stand up.

The problem is twofold: while women have made significant strides, society as a whole still has not evolved in its understanding of women's independence. Some individuals may have, but many still proudly say, "I allow my wife to work." Why should a husband have the authority to permit or forbid his wife from working? That decision should belong to the woman alone.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 34



# Cultural interventions required

**The biggest obstacle is the lack of state accountability, which is not just a concern with the current government, but a systemic issue across all administrations. Despite international conventions, women's rights remain inadequately protected.**

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In the past, when we fought for women's rights, we were told, "Don't bring the movement into the household." But now, if you tell a woman not to bring the movement into her home, she will not sit quietly. If society had evolved collectively, women's progress would not face such resistance.

**TDS:** How effective is our legal framework in safeguarding and protecting women? Is it sufficient, or are there areas that need improvement?
**FM:** Legally, while existing laws are insufficient, they are not insignificant. If properly enforced, they could offer substantial protection for women's rights. However, the gap between legislation and implementation remains a major challenge.

For instance, the High Court directed all educational institutions to establish committees for addressing violence against women. However, this directive was never enacted into law.

Similarly, although the two-finger test for rape survivors has been legally banned and the Ministry of Health has issued protocols for proper medical examinations, the practice persists. This continues due to a lack of awareness among doctors and even lawyers and a misguided belief that the test is necessary.

Another example is the Family Protection Law, enacted in the early 1990s, which provides women with legal recourse within the family structure in cases of threats or violence. Yet, in all these years, only a handful of cases have been filed under this law—largely because people are unaware of it, and legal professionals seldom invoke it. The core issue is the severe limitations in accessing justice. The judicial system is in crisis, creating significant barriers, and women face these challenges even more acutely.

**All women's movements must find common ground and unite, though there are still significant barriers to this unity.**

ILLUSTRATION: BIPLOB CHAKRABORTY

**TDS:** What do you think are the main obstacles that hinder women's representation, empowerment, and access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities?
**FM:** The biggest obstacle is the lack of state accountability, which is not just a concern with the current government, but a systemic issue across all administrations. Despite international conventions, women's rights remain inadequately protected. This is not just due to religion but also communalism and state involvement in religious affairs.

The National Women Development Policy has never been fully implemented. Even under pro-Liberation governments, it was constrained by Islamic law. Another barrier is the institutionalisation of religious fundamentalism in governance.

Education must be gender-sensitive to drive societal change. Child marriage forces many girls to drop out, and the system must intervene to reintegrate them. Gender quotas are essential in education, employment, and leadership to combat systemic discrimination.

Media representation must also improve to reflect women's issues accurately. Without these reforms, meaningful progress in women's rights remains unattainable.

**TDS:** Despite the challenges, what positive changes have you observed?
**FM:** Overall, I see a positive shift in one important aspect—women now want to be empowered. In the past, many women stayed hidden, thinking, "Whatever little I get within my family is enough for me."

Women are now eager to claim their space in society. This desire for empowerment is growing across all levels of society, from grassroots to elite.

Women's movements have become a collective force in some ways. More women are now engaged in various organisations. However, even though there is a growing focus on patriarchy as a central issue, we must remember that societal transformation cannot happen in isolation. Both men and women have roles to play in ensuring human rights. The broader fight for human rights must go hand in hand with the fight for gender equality.

I believe that the continuity of the movement, the relationship between the national movement and the women's movement, and how women should progress can be understood through past experiences and applied to today's actions. Ultimately, the goal remains the same: to dismantle patriarchy and establish equality. To achieve this, all women's movements must find common ground and unite, though there are still significant barriers to this unity.

**TDS:** Which key areas should we prioritise to ensure women's access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities, while also promoting their participation in all sectors, including politics and society?
**FM:** First, we need to identify immediate steps that can effectively put an end to violence against women. Second, education must be prioritised. We need to ensure 100% primary school enrollment and increase women's participation in higher education, particularly in STEM fields. Third, employment opportunities must be expanded.

Advancing women's rights is essential to fulfilling international commitments like the SDGs. Women must be included in policy making, using quotas if necessary, to ensure their voices are heard.

Women's empowerment and the establishment of their rights are not tasks that can be completed overnight; they are ongoing processes that will persist as long as human civilisation exists. A significant gap remains between legal equality and lived reality. Women often face an impossible choice between career and personal life.

Historically, motherhood came with severe restrictions—women were confined, isolated, and subjected to rigid customs. Maternity should be recognised as a social responsibility, and the state must act accordingly to ensure supportive policies. While some of these traditions have faded, many patriarchal norms persist.

Transforming societal norms remains a major challenge for women's rights movements. Such deep-rooted patriarchal norms can only be reformed through cultural interventions, yet there remains a significant void in this area. Historically, literature, music, and cinema fueled social movements, yet such cultural expressions are now lacking. Reviving these mediums is essential for challenging outdated norms and achieving true social transformation.

*The interview was taken by* **Saudia Afrin**.

# Deep-rooted stigmas hinder social inclusion of persons with disabilities

FROM PAGE 39

Even when hired, persons with disabilities often face inaccessible work environments and lack of reasonable accommodations, hindering their job retention. Additionally, employers often fail to recognise the skills and potential of persons with disabilities, and there is a lack of patience in providing necessary support.

**TDS:** What are the primary challenges in mitigating skill gaps, and what needs to be done to address them?
**MP:** The challenges in addressing skill gaps for persons with disabilities are multi-faceted, including the lack of tailored training programs, inaccessible TVET institutes, and a disconnect between training providers and employers. Many TVET institutes lack necessary accessibility features such as ramps, sign language interpreters, and Braille materials, preventing enrollment. Additionally, training programs often fail to align with job market demands.

To address these challenges, TVET institutes must offer accessible, inclusive programs with accommodations like adaptive technologies and trained instructors. They should also collaborate with local employers to align training with market needs and facilitate job matching. OPDs can play a vital role in bridging these gaps by advocating for inclusive training, mentoring trainees, and raising employer awareness.

Women in wheelchairs engage in a game of basketball.

PHOTO: SHEIKH MEHEDI MORSHED

At Access Bangladesh Foundation, we actively work on skills development and employment for persons with disabilities. We offer training, organise job fairs, and collaborate with local TVET institutes, employers, and government agencies for job matching and self-employment initiatives. In my office, we have three employees with disabilities who perform exceptionally well, proving that with the right support and training, persons with disabilities can be valuable assets to any team.

**TDS:** How far are we from achieving an inclusive Bangladesh?
**MP:** When I started, awareness about disabilities was minimal, but over the last three decades, societal integration has improved. However, we are still behind in providing adequate facilities for an inclusive society. To build an inclusive Bangladesh, we must adopt universal design, as 99% of our infrastructure is inaccessible.

While persons with mild disabilities are finding jobs, those with severe disabilities like visual, intellectual, or cognitive impairments, along with those with hearing or speech disabilities, face barriers despite their education and skills.

TVET institutes must prioritise disability inclusion, enhance accessibility, and offer tailored training to boost employability. Additionally, reasonable accommodations should be made in education, health, and employment. Technology has opened job opportunities, especially for freelancing in fields like content writing and web development. Despite ongoing efforts, the employment rates for persons with disabilities, both in government and private sectors, remain low.

**TDS:** How effective do you think current policies and laws are in supporting inclusivity, and what areas need immediate reform?
**MP:** The Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act 2013 is a good law but lacks certain provisions. When the law was made, the sexual and reproductive health and rights aspect as well as disability inclusive climate change adaptation aspects were not addressed separately, though it should have been. Moreover, the law has not been fully implemented. In light of this act, the action plan was made in 2019, which will end in 2025. However, only minimal work has been done, even as the five-year period is about to end.

We also have National Employment Policy 2022, National Skill Development Policy 2022, Bangladesh National Building Code 2020, Standing Orders on Disasters 2019, which cover different areas to ensure the meaningful participation of persons with disabilities. It is high time we started implementing these policies as per their action plan.

A middle-aged man with a physical disability is seen heading home after buying fresh produce. We must improve accessibility for people with disabilities in every aspect of life.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

**TDS:** Which areas should the government address to eliminate the discrimination faced by people with disabilities?
**MP:** I believe that the implementation of existing laws must be ensured with an action plan and target. The target should be set for all government and non-government offices. I have been advocating for a long time that if offices are instructed that out of every 10 employees, one must be a person with a disability. According to law, employers could receive tax rebates for hiring them. If employers focus on these issues, more employment could be created.

The cases of physical and sexual abuse against women and children with disabilities linger for years. There should be a timeframe to resolve these cases. I know a girl whose case of rape has been ongoing for 7 to 8 years.

Besides, if a person with disabilities is not properly educated, they will be left out of the mainstream. The government should invest more in the education and employment sectors. If a person has a job, they can take care of their family, manage their own expenses, and gain respect.

**TDS:** What role can the young people play in building a more inclusive Bangladesh?
**MP:** Young people have a crucial role to play in fostering inclusivity. They can start by changing their own attitudes and perceptions about persons with disabilities. Simple acts of support, such as helping a classmate with disabilities to access study materials or accompanying them to educational institutions, can make a big difference.

When I was young, I saw many young volunteers doing social work willingly. I often get very disappointed that the support I received during my youth is rarely seen nowadays. But I believe bringing back that spirit is important and today's youth have the ability to bring that spirit.

Young people can also advocate for policy changes and participate in initiatives that promote disability inclusion. For example, they can volunteer with organisations working for persons with disabilities or organise awareness campaigns in their communities. By standing with their peers with disabilities, young people can help create a more inclusive and equitable society.

During the July Uprising, many young people became persons with physical or visual disabilities due to injuries. If their peers stand by them and ensure they are not forgotten, it will send a powerful message of solidarity and can contribute to achieving a truly inclusive Bangladesh.

*The interview was taken by* **Saudia Afrin**.

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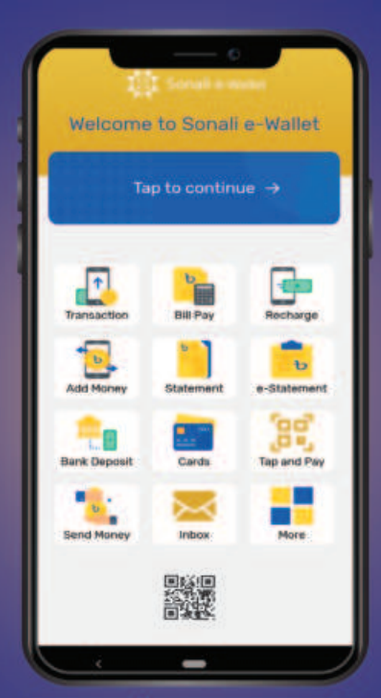


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# Missing policy reforms in Bangladesh's transport sector

**Md Hadiuzzaman**
*is a transport expert and professor at the Department of Civil Engineering, BUET.*

MD HADIUZZAMAN

In a densely populated country like Bangladesh—especially in Dhaka, the mega city with its unique characteristics—addressing issues such as infrastructure, traffic control, and safety requires more than just physical development. This is a complex issue, and solely focusing on infrastructure will not provide a solution. Instead, comprehensive policy reform is essential. At present, significant loopholes exist in policy. We have not prioritised policy development, which is why, despite having infrastructure, we are not fully reaping its expected benefits.

Policy formulation and implementation are crucial for infrastructure development. When major transport infrastructure is built without policies for vehicle control, registration, or appropriate vehicle models, informal transport systems emerge. As a result, despite extensive infrastructure development, Dhaka has become an immobile city—something we experience daily. While a significant amount of infrastructure has already been constructed, the urgent need now is a policy on vehicle regulation and its effective implementation.

Dhaka already has strong connectivity with divisional and district cities. To enhance the public transport system, priority should now be given to selecting the appropriate types and numbers of vehicles. While the required investment is relatively low, the impact could be highly significant.

The current and future governments, along with policymakers, must recognise that investment should be distributed across divisions and districts rather than being concentrated in the capital. By developing workplaces in these areas, we can help decentralise economic opportunities and reduce the influx into Dhaka, ultimately reversing the trend of overpopulation in the city. Only then will we see a meaningful return on the infrastructure built over the past 15 to 20 years.

We often highlight that Dhaka contributes 35% to our GDP. However, it is equally important to acknowledge that this economic output is significantly offset by the costs associated with traffic congestion. This should be considered when evaluating the city's economic impact.

View of Padma Bridge.
PHOTO: SK ENAM

Additionally, the role of the Planning Commission is crucial. It must be strengthened, as it plays a vital role in shaping policies for both Dhaka and the entire country. Reforming the commission is necessary, particularly in how development projects are planned and approved, as this falls directly under its jurisdiction. At present, the commission lacks professional planners who have the expertise to assess whether a project will be truly beneficial. It is essential to include such professionals in the planning process to ensure that projects are effectively designed and yield long-term benefits.

Another critical issue is the strain on our road network, particularly regarding connectivity between Dhaka and other cities and districts. While it may seem that expanding roads—such as converting two-lane roads into four lanes or four-lane roads into six lanes—would reduce travel time and improve mobility, this approach exposes a fundamental flaw in planning. Roads such as the Dhaka-Sylhet Road or the Dhaka-Chattogram Road serve as connecting roads rather than dedicated mobility corridors. Even though widening these roads may provide temporary relief, the long-term impact will be minimal as they are not designed for sustained, efficient mobility.

The current approach to road development in surrounding areas, particularly road widening, often results in displacement and significant harm to local businesses. Moreover, expanding roads cannot be effectively managed by simply installing barricades, as these fail to address the strong social and economic ties between communities on both sides. For instance, despite barriers, people continue to cross the Dhaka-Mawa Expressway horizontally. This happens because these are connecting roads rather than dedicated mobility routes. Therefore, road planning must incorporate the development of a separate mobility network—an entirely distinct road system designed for improved transportation efficiency.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 37

- Dhaka is often credited with contributing 35% to the national GDP. However, it is equally important to recognise that traffic congestion significantly offsets this economic output. This factor must be taken into account when assessing the city's overall economic impact.
- Expanding roads—such as widening two-lane roads to four lanes or four-lane roads to six—may appear to reduce travel time and enhance mobility, but this approach reveals a fundamental flaw in planning.
- A paradigm shift is needed—mobility networks must be separate from existing roads. While current roads offer accessibility, they lack efficiency, requiring comprehensive planning reforms for future demands.
- Public transport should be the backbone of Dhaka's transport system. Instead of bus route franchises, a government-owned company should be established to oversee and manage operations efficiently.
- Our strong river connectivity, if effectively integrated with utilities, could greatly improve accessibility and streamline urban mobility.

সহজ ও নিরাপদ রেমিট্যান্স সেবায় রূপালী ব্যাংক

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|---|---|---|
| ১৪,৫০০ | ৫ বছর | ১০,২৫,৫৭৪ |
| ৬,২০০ | ১০ বছর | ১০,৩৯,৩৩৪ |
| ৩,৫০০ | ১৫ বছর | ১০,৫১,৪১০ |
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* শর্ত প্রযোজ্য

# Missing policy reforms in Bangladesh's transport sector

**A paradigm shift is needed—mobility networks must be separate from existing roads. While current roads offer accessibility, they lack efficiency, requiring comprehensive planning reforms for future demands.**

FROM PAGE 36

We need not look far for successful models; India has already implemented a solution with its Golden Quadrilateral, a separate mobility network with full access control. This network allows for speeds of 120 to 130 km per hour and is designed to minimise accidents by eliminating sudden access points. In contrast, merely widening existing roads in Bangladesh damages infrastructure, displaces communities, and fails to deliver sustainable improvements. This approach cannot be considered a viable solution for an effective mobility network.

A paradigm shift is needed—mobility networks must be separate from existing roads. While current roads offer accessibility, they lack efficiency, requiring comprehensive planning reforms for future demands.

Beyond improving the road system, Dhaka should be developed as a model city. Despite being the capital, it lacks a coherent structure. To address this, road infrastructure and transport-related projects must be kept free from political influence. The backbone of Dhaka's transport system should be public transport. Rather than relying on bus route franchises, a government-owned bus company should be established to oversee and manage operations effectively. This company would operate all buses, with the government responsible for purchasing and phasing out outdated vehicles. Existing private bus companies could become shareholders, with both public and private investment facilitating the introduction of new, modern buses. This approach would lead to a more sustainable mobility system. If we continue to rely on companies operating outdated buses, we risk perpetuating an inefficient and unsustainable transport model.

We have presented this proposal to Chief Adviser Dr Mohammad Yunus. While Dhaka has already established sufficient infrastructure, it is now crucial to create a new ecosystem for buses. This is not just about purchasing new buses and forming a company. All 4,000 existing buses in Dhaka should be upgraded, and a variety of new bus models should be introduced to enhance service quality. A unified transport company could be established to manage operations, ensuring better coordination and efficiency. Shareholders would benefit financially, while the government would maintain overall control, leading to an improved and more sustainable system.

Despite the complexity of mass transport in Dhaka, we have yet to establish a government-enlisted company to manage the system, even though we rely on such entities for linear metro or major infrastructure projects. That is why we have created a metro rail company and a BRT company, which currently operates only one line from Dhaka to Gazipur. However, Dhaka's bus system remains fragmented and inefficient. A comprehensive reform is necessary, ensuring that all buses operate under a single company for better functionality.

We are fortunate to have excellent river connectivity, which, if properly integrated with utilities, could significantly enhance accessibility and streamline urban mobility. A coordinated planning approach is essential, as water transport offers a sustainable, comfortable, and safe alternative with minimal environmental impact. However, development must not lead to further pollution or encroachment. While policies exist to prevent such damage, their strict implementation is necessary.

Dhaka's rail connectivity with other districts has long been discussed, particularly the commuter train system, yet little has been done to realise its potential. Kamalapur and the Airport should be developed as major railway hubs to strengthen connectivity and reduce pressure on roads. The railway sector must shift its focus from expansion to maintenance, ensuring that existing stations and services operate efficiently.

However, the most crucial reform needed is a shift in mindset. No country can achieve safe roads or resolve traffic congestion solely through infrastructure development—effective planning, policy implementation, and a change in public perception are equally essential.

*This article was transcribed by* **Raisa Nanjiba**.

▲ **Dhaka Metro Rail.** PHOTO: **STAR**

**Dhaka Elevated Expressway.** PHOTO: **PRABIR DAS**

# We aim to channel, understand, and revitalise culture

***In conversation with professor Dr Syed Jamil Ahmed, director general of Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy, and a distinguished playwright and theatre director.***

**Syed Jamil Ahmed**

**The Daily Star (TDS):** Considering the significance of the July Movement, how do you perceive the overall concept of culture, particularly its role as a force for social transformation and identity formation?

**Syed Jamil Ahmed (SJA):** First, it is crucial to define 'culture', which can be understood in two senses—anthropological and functional. The anthropological aspect refers to the people's way of life—their values, norms, knowledge, and beliefs, which cannot be changed overnight. The functional aspect refers to an organised sector of human intellectual and artistic creativity, including arts, literature, and cultural institutions.

The July movement has highlighted an overlooked aspect of Bangladeshi culture. While secularists separate religion from public life, cultural nationalists (myself included) must acknowledge that Islam, an integral part of Bangladeshi culture, influences daily life. The movement has also demonstrated the political awareness of Gen Z, showing they are deeply engaged rather than indifferent.

Rather than driving social transformation, the uprising is about identity formation, bringing unresolved questions to the forefront—such as Islam's role in daily life and artistic expression. For instance, should sculpture continue figurative representation, or should it be abandoned? We live in a time when these questions are being actively discussed making this moment both exciting and significant. Unfortunately, incidents such as attacks on Baul communities and vandalism of mazars (shrines) have occurred, which are unwanted expressions of the movement.

Despite external pressures, including media narratives and political threats from India, Bangladesh remains stable. Cultural nationalists must now accept that religion influences all aspects of life, including the arts. This does not signal Talibanisation, rather it simply means that religious expression is a personal choice—someone who wishes to wear a hijab should have the freedom to do so, just as someone who does not want to should have the same right.

Identity formation has been debated since 1905, 1947, and 1971, yet remains unresolved, signaling its importance. The uprising has unleashed long-suppressed energy and vibrancy. With an interim government in place, major political decisions may be delayed, but these crucial questions must be addressed for the future.

**TDS:** As a national center for art and culture, what role do you believe Shilpakala Academy can play in this regard?

**SJA:** I believe the arts plant new ideas—like seeds that grow into trees, guiding the way forward. Our role is not to provide answers but to create an environment where questions can be raised—through discussions and the arts. We have a dedicated forum called Bahas, where people from diverse ideologies come together to discuss, debate, and raise questions.

We embrace all artistic expressions. Just as Bangladesh is a land of a thousand rivers, it should also be a land of a thousand ideas, colours, and identities, where everyone—majority or minority—has equal rights.

Through music, theater, and performance, we present alternative perspectives, inspiring thought and introspection. Shilpakala Academy celebrates life and diversity and envisions making Bangladesh a country of festivity including festivals with ethnic communities in the north, south, and beyond.

To make the arts people-oriented, we take performances beyond auditoriums to open spaces. I attended a performance in Tangail where rickshaw pullers, after a long day's work, joined the audience. Among them sat the Deputy Commissioner and other community members—a gathering of 400 to 500 people, united by art. This is what we strive for. Our goal is to make culture as vital as air or food—a central part of everyday life.

When I joined, this institution was plagued by financial and administrative indiscipline. My priority was stakeholder engagement, identifying two areas requiring urgent attention: administrative discipline and financial transparency.

Reforms have been implemented—event expenses are now uploaded online, and strict compliance ensures no files are processed without meeting regulations. The administration was in disarray, but we have restored order by enforcing procedures and guidelines to create a more systematic structure. In a major reform, we transferred 34 cultural officers—some after 11 years, despite the three-year rotation policy. Our chain of command is now more transparent.

We are fostering a vibrant cultural atmosphere, expanding outreach to remote villages and districts. Our approach to culture is not mere preservation—because culture is dynamic by nature, constantly evolving like a river. Instead, we aim to channel, understand, and invigorate it. Where revitalisation is needed, we provide support, and where barriers hinder growth, we work to remove them.

**'Mangal Shobhajatra (procession of good wishes)' on the Dhaka University campus marking the Bangla New Year.**

PHOTO: **PRABIR DAS**

> » We embrace all artistic expressions. Just as Bangladesh is a land of a thousand rivers, it should also be a land of a thousand ideas, colours, and identities, where everyone—majority or minority—has equal rights.
>
> » We have significantly increased our events from 36 in December to 76 in January, with further expansion planned. This year's BDT 46 crore program budget supports year-round activities.
>
> » Our exploration of digital art is ongoing, with future plans including a Comic Fest, robotics, AI, and new Photography and Film departments, pending approval and funding.
>
> » Identity formation has been a subject of debate since 1905, 1947, and 1971, yet it remains unresolved, underscoring its significance. The uprising has ignited long-suppressed energy and vitality.
>
> » We seek to take more small, meaningful steps in the cultural sphere, reducing resentment and suspicion and motivating people through the power of the arts.

We have significantly increased our events from 36 in December to 76 in January, with further expansion planned. This year's BDT 46 crore program budget supports year-round activities.

Talent development is key—district branches train children in dance, music, theater, and painting. By January, I had visited 16 districts, witnessing emerging talent. Institutions like Kochi Kachar Mela once played this role, but Shilpakala Academy is now filling that gap, with some districts training up to 600 students. Talent-hunting competitions, halted last year, will resume soon.

Training remains central—our new workshop program launched on January 20 covers all 64 districts, ending in a final festival (Feb 21-28). We aim to modernise Jatra plays and introduce band music, rap, monthly Baul evenings, and digital arts. We recently held a poster exhibition on the July uprising and integrated digital arts—VR and AR—into our gallery, transforming 20 of Debashish Chakrabarty's posters.

Our exploration of digital art is ongoing, with future plans including a Comic Fest, robotics, AI, and new Photography and Film departments, pending approval and funding.

**TDS:** What challenges have you faced so far while implementing these reforms in fulfilling Shilpakala Academy's mission?

**SJA:** Challenges have been immense—both internal and external. Internally, I faced resentment, much of it justified as merit was often overlooked in favour of political ties or proximity to the Director General. We have worked to change this, but after 15 years of oppression, mistrust was inevitable.

I have no personal agenda—only a commitment to ensuring that the sacrifice of 1,500 people in the July uprising is not in vain, which is why I accepted this responsibility, though I initially declined. Leading Shilpakala Academy has since become a 24-hour commitment.

Despite my clear intentions, suspicion persists—fueled by deliberate misinterpretations, as seen in the Desh Natok incident. Still, I remain focused on engaging with the people.

Surprisingly, bureaucracy has not been a hurdle. I made it clear upon joining that there should be no unnecessary intervention since Shilpakala Academy is an autonomous body. While the ministry has the right to advise us and question any unconstitutional or illegal steps, there should be no undue interference—which they have respected. Now, things are stabilising—internally, externally, and with the ministry. Hopefully, we can now entirely focus on our work.

**TDS:** How can Shilpakala Academy collaborate with other cultural institutions, both nationally and internationally, to enhance its impact on cultural preservation and exchange?

**SJA:** We collaborate with Alliance Française, staging a performance in Khulna and planning another play. A major initiative is creating a professional repertory theater company at Shilpakala Academy, including a French play in translation, marking a significant cultural exchange.

Internationally, we hosted a Chinese traditional opera on January 21 and are negotiating with the Chinese government to establish a dormitory and workshop facility at Shilpakala Academy. If approved, it will accommodate district artists, international guests, and provide a workshop space for theater practitioners. We are also exploring partnerships with UNESCO and the British Council.

In collaboration with the Rainbow Film Festival and Dhaka Film Festival, we plan to showcase Middle Eastern films across Bangladesh, highlighting Muslim women's participation in the arts to promote intercultural dialogue. Additionally, we aim to create a South Asian cultural event fostering regional collaboration and ensuring equal representation from all South Asian countries.

**Nrityanchal Dance troupe perform Rai Krishna Padabali at Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy.**

PHOTO: **SHEIKH MEHEDI MORSHED**

Collaboration is essential to our mission. We plan to bring VR and AR exhibitions to schools in regions like Rangpur, offering interactive experiences to inspire students. We are also developing a new framework for collaboration with national art institutions to produce performances and facilitate nationwide showcases.

For too long, ethnic communities have been marginalised. We aim to help them stage their own plays to voice their grievances. A recent Marma festival in Bandarban featured their first performance in 12 years, in their own language, among their own people. Initially met with tension, the event ended in joy, with a Brigadier General dining in a Marma household—an unprecedented act of trust—attended by the Deputy Commissioner and one of our advisors.

We seek to take more small, meaningful steps in the cultural sphere, reducing resentment and suspicion and motivating people through the power of the arts.

*The interview was taken by* **Saudia Afrin**.

# Deep-rooted stigmas hinder social inclusion of persons with disabilities

*In conversation with Mohua Paul, co-founder & chairperson of Access Bangladesh Foundation.*

Mohua Paul

**The Daily Star (TDS):** What is the current status of the initiatives aimed at identifying the unique needs of persons with disabilities?

**Mohua Paul (MP):** The Joint Secretary of the Jatiyo Protibondhi Unnoyon Foundation (JPUF) under the Ministry of Social Welfare has initiated a plan to conduct 12 workshops targeting different types of disabilities, as outlined in the Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act 2013. These workshops aim to identify the unique needs of persons with disabilities and develop a plan based on the findings.

In the initial meeting, discussions focused on the participants. The JPUF is introducing a new approach, asking experts working with various disabilities—such as autism, cerebral palsy, down syndrome, intellectual, visual, hearing, and speech disabilities—to provide updates on the current situation to help develop a comprehensive plan. This approach is more inclusive and participatory compared to previous methods, where consultations were limited to specific days of celebration like Autism Day or International Day of Persons with Disabilities.

This new strategy actively involves stakeholders from disability groups, OPDs (Organisations of Persons with Disabilities), and disability-focused organisations, ensuring their voices are integral to the planning process. Additionally, OPDs and disability organisations are adopting a twin-track approach (mainstream and disability-specific) to foster inclusion. Besides OPD leaders and disability activists, we formed a Disability Watch Group, from that group we also met with the honorable Chief Advisor to share the current scenario and recommendations to include disability inclusion aspects in different reforms.

**TDS:** What are the most pressing barriers people with disabilities face in accessing basic rights, particularly education, employment, and public spaces in Bangladesh?

**MP:** A major challenge is the negative attitudes of families, society, and policymakers, who often believe persons with disabilities cannot contribute or be independent. These stigmas severely limit their access to education, employment, and public spaces.

Persons with severe disabilities, particularly those who use assistive devices like wheelchairs, crutches, or tri-cycles, often face significant mobility challenges due to inaccessible environments. Lack of accessible transportation and infrastructure prevents many from leaving their homes, hindering access to healthcare and education.

Persons with visual disabilities face challenges in education, with limited availability of accessible formats like Braille and digital versions of textbooks. While some progress has been made at the school level, gaps remain in higher education, with textbooks and teachers lacking necessary training in universal design for learning.

Similarly, persons with speech and hearing disabilities struggle with communication barriers in education. The absence of sign language interpreters in most institutions limits their ability to follow lessons.

In employment, negative attitudes and inaccessibility persist. Many employers lack awareness about disability inclusion. The current 1% quota for third-gender individuals and persons with disabilities in government jobs is inadequate and should be separated to ensure at least 1% is specifically allocated for persons with disabilities.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 34

**Build an inclusive society for individuals with disabilities.**

PHOTO: SAZZAD IBNE SAYED

- The current 1% quota for third-gender individuals and persons with disabilities in government jobs is inadequate and should be separated to ensure at least 1% is specifically allocated for persons with disabilities.
- Despite the introduction of Braille and digital textbooks at the school level, higher education lacks accessible materials and teachers trained in universal design for learning.
- To promote inclusive education, proper facilities and support systems, such as accessible infrastructure, sign language interpreters, and Braille materials must be made available.
- TVET institutes must design and implement training programs that are accessible and inclusive, providing accessible classrooms, adaptive technologies, and trained instructors who understand the needs of persons with disabilities.
- It should be mandated by law that employers hiring persons with disabilities will receive tax rebates and government incentives.
- During the July Uprising, many young people became persons with physical or visual disabilities due to injuries. If their peers stand by them, it will send a powerful message of solidarity.

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