The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: **LATE S. M. ALI**

Checks and balances key to reform success

Some thoughts on political appraisals of reform proposals

With over 15 political parties submitting written feedback on state reform proposals so far, the second phase of the reform drive can be said to be reaching a definitive point. Some of the parties have been vocal about various aspects of the drive in recent months, but this marks their first official response, which in time will be used as a basis for agreement on implementable reforms by the National Consensus Commission. Among the parties, BNP and the National Citizen Party (NCP) submitted their feedback on Sunday, while Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami submitted theirs on Thursday—with their appraisals initially covering key proposals by five reform commissions. We value their respective stances which we hope will leave room for compromise so that the desired consensus can be reached.

That said, certain aspects of these political appraisals, especially those relating to constitutional amendments and electoral system, deserve scrutiny given their potential impact. In particular, a preliminary reading of BNP's feedback shows that while the party leaves the door open for some radical changes—including a bicameral legislature with a 400-seat lower house and a 105-seat upper house—it appears less accommodating of other changes that may institute better checks and balances or limit exploitation of power using parliamentary majority. For instance, BNP does not deem it necessary to form a National Constitutional Council to handle appointments to the Anti-Corruption Commission and Election Commission. It also rejects the idea of holding the EC accountable to a parliamentary standing committee. Regarding the prime minister's tenure, it does not support the proposal that an individual cannot be PM more than twice, seemingly contradicting its own stance in its 31-point charter. It also disagrees with the proposal that one cannot be PM, leader of house, and chief of a political party at the same time. "Imposing constitutional restrictions on political parties is contrary to the core essence of parliamentary democracy," it says.

The message we get from these positions is that BNP remains hesitant to embrace institutional mechanisms that would prevent the excessive centralisation of power. But a key lesson from the history of past elected governments is that no party can be entrusted with absolute parliamentary authority, which, if unchecked, can lead to parliamentary dictatorship. Any reluctance to subject constitutional bodies to stronger oversight or to limit the authority of those in power is thus concerning. While BNP supports certain aspects of constitutional reform, its insistence that these matters be decided by elected MPs again reflects a preference for parliamentary majoritarianism. It may be good in theory, but not so in practical experience.

We think a key question moving forward is whether political parties can rise above their immediate strategic calculations and prioritise long-term national stability. Faith in parliamentary democracy is not granted automatically; it is earned through responsible governance. The overwhelming public support for structural changes after the fall of Sheikh Hasina's government is a testament to their demand for a more accountable system. Politicians must not squander this opportunity.

Fortify mechanisms to tackle TB

Govt must prioritise raising awareness, ensuring diagnosis of this disease

We are deeply concerned about Bangladesh's less-than-impressive performance in tackling tuberculosis (TB) over the last 10 years. According to a report in this daily, the country, which signed on to meet the World Health Organization's (WHO) End TB Strategy in 2015, is struggling to bring down the TB incidence rate to meet the 2025 targets. Bangladesh remains one of seven countries with high incidence rates of both ordinary and drug-resistant TB.

Per the WHO targets, by 2025, Bangladesh is supposed to reduce the TB incidence rate by 50 percent and the number of TB deaths by 75 percent from the 2015 levels. However, the incidence rate has hardly changed over the past decade (225 per 100,000 people in 2015 to 221 per 100,000 in 2023). The number of deaths has been reduced by around 60 percent during the same period. According to the National Tuberculosis Control Programme (NTP), the number of TB diagnoses has risen: 3.13 lakh people were detected with TB in 2024, compared to 3.01 lakh in 2023.

Then there is the matter of "missing" cases—the number of undetected patients. According to the WHO, Bangladesh had around 78,000 missing cases in 2023. A public health expert has warned that curbing the incidence rate will be difficult unless these missing cases are addressed. This makes raising awareness and intensifying efforts to detect them crucial, as undiagnosed patients can unknowingly spread the disease.

Compounding this crisis, national efforts have reportedly hit a snag following the US government's abrupt decision to suspend its USAID programme, which funded several TB initiatives in Bangladesh. For example, a project run by icddr,b—focused on increasing TB detection among children, drug-resistant patients, and high-risk groups—is now on hold due to the funding cut. USAID's suspension is also posing a major challenge for the NTP, which relied on these funds to accelerate its work.

Government officials claim that it won't cause much trouble, but given the situation, we remain unconvinced. What we need is a nationwide mechanism supported by local funds. The government must seek alternative funding sources to ensure that TB projects—both government and non-government—can continue uninterrupted, preventing a rise in cases and deaths. Additionally, rigorous efforts are needed to raise awareness about TB among the general populace, including disadvantaged, vulnerable, and marginalised communities, to detect and address missing cases. The health authorities must employ and strengthen all necessary measures to contain this deadly disease.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

British abolish slave trade

On this day in 1807, the British Parliament abolished slave trade in the British West Indies.

AL's crimes: What should be its punishment?

THE STREET VIEW
Mohammad Al-Masum Molla
is a journalist at The Daily Star. He can be reached at masumjrn@gmail.com.

MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

The recent statement by National Citizen Party (NCP) leader Hasnat Abdullah has stirred a significant political debate in Bangladesh, adding a new layer of complexity to the country's already volatile political landscape. Hasnat's claim that an effort is underway to create a "refined Awami League" as part of a broader "Awami League must come back" strategy, allegedly backed by India and the military, has caught many by surprise. It is not just his statement that has raised eyebrows, but also the manner in which it has been delivered. His remarks have not only exposed deeper political tensions but also raised critical questions about the future of democratic politics in Bangladesh.

The demand to ban a major political party raises fundamental questions about the limits of democratic competition and the long-term consequences of political exclusion.

To understand the weight of Hasnat's comments, it is essential to reflect on the origins of the current political turmoil. The mass movement in July-August last year, which forced Sheikh Hasina out of power, was driven by public frustration with the government's autocratic tendencies and corruption. The movement was built on four key demands: annulment of the quota system in public service; resignation of Sheikh Hasina; restoration of democratic norms; and establishment of political balance within the government. The protests were marked by intense public mobilisation and sacrifice, as protesters faced violence and government-sponsored repression in their push for political reform.

However, it is important to note that at no point during the July mass movement was there a call to ban the Awami League altogether. The essence of the movement was to restore political balance and ensure accountability, not to dismantle political pluralism. The movement's broad support base reflected a shared commitment to democratic principles rather than a call for political vengeance. This raises an important question: would the movement have attracted the same level of public support if the goal had been to eliminate the Awami League as a political force? The movement sought political reform, not political elimination.

Despite the fall of Sheikh Hasina's government and the departure of several high-ranking Awami League leaders, the party still has some support in Bangladesh. In every competitive election—not the ones held under Sheikh Hasina—the party has consistently secured at least 35 percent of popular vote. This is a significant figure; it reflects the party's historical, social and political roots. Political support for the Awami League extends beyond individual leaders; it is embedded in the party's historical legacy, particularly its role in Bangladesh's liberation struggle. It is true that Hasina destroyed the party hierarchy, but it still remains a potent force.

Can such a deeply rooted political entity be banned out of existence? Even if the government were to outlaw the Awami League, its political base would not disappear overnight. Political bans have historically fuelled underground movements and radicalisation, rather than eliminating political influence. Furthermore, not all Awami League leaders have been implicated in corruption or human rights violations. Is it justifiable—or even constitutional—to deny them political participation solely because of their party affiliation? Political accountability should target individual wrongdoing—they can be tried and punished—rather than dismantling entire political structures.

History offers valuable lessons on the consequences of political bans. After the 2013 military coup in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood was declared illegal and banned from political participation. Far from restoring stability, the ban triggered new waves of political violence and radicalisation. The political vacuum left by the Brotherhood's dissolution led to greater instability and state repression. Bangladesh faces a similar risk. Banning the Awami League could push its supporters to align with extremist groups or form underground movements, thereby fuelling unrest and long-term political volatility. Political bans tend to create martyrs rather than resolving political conflicts. The forced dissolution of the Awami League could generate sympathy among its supporters and strengthen opposition to the interim government.

From a legal standpoint, banning the Awami League would directly contradict both domestic and international democratic principles. Bangladesh is a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which guarantees the right to political association. Outlawing a major political party would violate these commitments and draw sharp criticism from the international community. Domestically, the right to political association is protected under the constitution—specifically under Articles 37, 38, and 39. Any attempt to ban the Awami League would face serious constitutional challenges and undermine the legitimacy of the interim government. It would also contradict the principles of democratic pluralism that the July movement sought to restore.

The call to ban the Awami League also raises questions about the political motivations behind such a dramatic statement. The July uprising united a broad coalition of political and social forces, but that unity appears to be unravelling. Hasnat's statement could be an attempt to regain political relevance by appealing to anti-Awami League sentiment. Alternatively, the proposal could reflect internal divisions within the NCP itself. If Hasnat's faction is struggling to consolidate power, targeting the Awami League could serve as a unifying strategy to rally support. However, this strategy risks alienating moderate voters who supported the July uprising's call for political accountability—not political revenge.

If banning the Awami League is not the solution, then what is? The answer lies in political accountability rather than political purges. Awami League leaders involved in corruption, human rights abuses, and political violence should be prosecuted through the judicial system. Financial crimes, including bank fraud and smuggling, must be investigated and punished under existing legal frameworks. Democratic reforms aimed at strengthening political transparency and accountability should be prioritised. Political elimination rarely leads to long-term stability. Accountability, not erasure, is the foundation of democratic governance. Political competition and ideological diversity are essential for maintaining a democratic balance.

While Jamaat-e-Islami was not banned for most of Sheikh Hasina's tenure, the Awami League for long used the idea of banning Jamaat as a political tool. Eventually, when it did move to ban Jamaat, the political outcome was not what the party had anticipated. Hasnat's call to ban the Awami League holds the same risk. If the Awami League is banned, it could emerge stronger as a political martyr. Public sympathy could shift towards the party, and the political vacuum created by its dissolution could destabilise Bangladesh further. Banning the Awami League would not erase its deep political roots; instead, it would likely drive its supporters towards greater political mobilisation. Political accountability—not political elimination—remains the key to resolving the country's political crisis.

VISUAL: **SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR**

A vision for Dhaka's Aminbazar Waste-to-Energy project

Dr Sultan Ahmed
is associate director at Bangladesh Institute of Governance and Management (BIGM). He can be reached at sultan.ahmed@bigm.edu.bd.

Fatema Tuz Zuhra
is research associate at BIGM. She can be reached at fatema.zuhra@bigm.edu.bd.

SULTAN AHMED and **FATEMA TUZ ZUHRA**

Dhaka, a city of nearly 20 million people, is struggling under the weight of an escalating waste crisis. Every day the two city corporations generate approximately 6,500 metric tonnes of solid waste, which is projected to reach 6.6 million tonnes annually by 2050. Most of this waste ends up in landfills, streets, and natural habitats, creating severe health hazards and degrading the urban ecosystem. The uncollected waste clogs the drainage system, pollutes water bodies, and releases methane—a potent greenhouse gas. This mismanagement degrades the urban habitat and creates breeding grounds for diseases underscoring the urgent need for efficient waste removal and recycling processes. It is critical to address this issue to create a sustainable and livable environment for the city.

What is Waste-to-Energy (WtE)?
Waste-to-Energy (WtE) is a process that converts municipal solid waste through incineration. With this technique, garbage is burned at high temperatures to create steam, which drives turbines to generate electricity. WtE recovers valuable energy from waste and reduces reliance on landfills. Some key materials that are essential for WtE are high-calorific value waste, such as plastics, paper, textiles, dry organic matter, and non-recyclable waste. Furthermore, the process works better when wastes are adequately separated to prevent non-combustible or hazardous materials from interfering with energy creation. Advanced incineration plants are equipped with pollution control mechanisms to minimise harmful emissions.

The Aminbazar WtE project
Dhaka consumes 46 percent of the country's total electricity. While WtE may not revolutionise power generation, it offers a modest yet meaningful contribution to the city's power supply. More importantly, its primary benefit lies in tackling Dhaka's overwhelming waste problem. The under-construction Aminbazar WtE project, the first of its kind in Bangladesh, is designed to process thousands of tonnes of municipal solid waste from landfills daily. The facility will consist of four incineration lines, two sets of 35-megawatt turbo-generator systems, and a six-kilometre transmission line connecting to the Savar substation. What stands out is that the project aligns with European Union's pollutant emission standards. According to the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, it will implement Best Available Technology to ensure environmentally responsible operations. Equipped with advanced filtration and scrubbing systems, the plant will effectively eliminate hazardous pollutants and make it a sustainable waste management solution.

To guarantee long-term viability, the initiative is backed by several key agreements: an Implementation Agreement with the Government of Bangladesh to establish regulatory frameworks, a Power Purchase Agreement with the Bangladesh Power Development Board to secure electricity sales, a Waste Supply Agreement with Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC) to ensure a steady supply of municipal solid waste and a Land Use Agreement with DNCC for plant construction and operation. These agreements create a strong foundation for collaboration between government bodies and private sector stakeholders.

No scarcity of waste
There won't be a shortage of waste in Dhaka for the WtE plant operations. People are already eager for cleaner roads and a healthier environment. If they are made aware that their waste is being transformed into energy for their own use, they will be motivated to separate trash, especially materials with higher calorific value. Moreover, unlike many other cities where waste remains exposed to the environment for long periods, Dhaka's waste is frequently collected during which much of the moisture is already separated, leaving behind drier, more energy-rich waste. This makes the waste arriving at the WtE plant more suitable for incineration, requiring less pre-treatment and increasing overall efficiency. By utilising this advantage, the city can enhance the effectiveness of its WtE initiatives which will make projects like the Aminbazar more viable and productive.

Call for urgent action
The Aminbazar WtE project must begin operations without further delays by addressing existing obstacles. Dhaka can learn valuable lessons from other cities in the world that have successfully implemented WtE initiatives. For example, Shanghai has integrated WtE into its circular economy strategy, improving efficiency and profitability by extracting recyclables before incineration. Singapore's Tuas Nexus Plant combines waste-to-energy with water treatment, maximising resource recovery and reducing emissions. New Delhi, despite initial setbacks, secured both government backing and private sector involvement to successfully operate the Ghazipur plant.

With strategic investments in waste segregation, clear policy frameworks, and public-private partnerships, Dhaka can avoid missing out on the potential of WtE.