

EC's accountability is key to Bangladesh's electoral reform



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In recent discourse in Bangladesh, terms like *independence, empowerment, and accountability* have often been used interchangeably in the context of elections and institutional reforms related to the Bangladesh Election Commission (EC). While these concepts are interconnected, it is critical to understand that they differ significantly in legal and operational terms, each requiring distinct reform measures.

The Electoral Reform Commission's report, with its 200-plus recommendations across 18 key areas, underscores the breadth of electoral reforms needed. Yet, a specific focus on the EC's institutional reforms is critical, as Bangladesh's broader reform context stems from the systematic erosion of democratic institutions, with the EC at the core. The success of wider electoral reforms, whether in full or in part, depends heavily on the EC's willingness to adopt reforms enhancing its independence, empowerment, and accountability.

This article aims to emphasise accountability—a glaring systemic gap; but first, it is worth clarifying the linked concepts of independence and empowerment to frame the EC's institutional challenges.

First up, independence. The EC, established under Article 118 of the constitution, is mandated to operate independently in fulfilling its duties. Independence means the EC has been given the *ability to function and operate free from external influence*, be it government, political parties, or other vested interest groups. While the EC does possess features supporting its autonomy, the Electoral Reform Commission's recommendations aimed to strengthen this further by integrating national context and global standards.

Next up, empowerment. This refers to equipping the EC with the capacities, resources, and tools necessary to effectively carry out its mandate. Unlike independence, which ensures freedom from interference, empowerment focuses on the EC's capacity to act decisively—enforcing electoral rules and addressing challenges without legal or practical constraints. Here too, the Electoral Reform Commission proposed measures to reinforce institutional empowerment such as mandating EC clearance for executive decisions that may have an impact during elections, granting staffing autonomy, etc.

Finally, we turn to accountability of the election commission. Accountability requires the EC to be *answerable to an oversight body and, ultimately, the public, ensuring transparency in delivering on its mandate*. As a constitutional entity tasked with safeguarding a critical democratic process, the EC is indeed granted independence from the executive branch, in particular. However, this independence does not exempt it from the broader governance framework of the State. Every national institution, whether constitutional, statutory, or regulatory, typically operates within a clear accountability structure.

Astonishingly, since its inception 52 years ago, the EC, a key democratic institution, has operated without any accountability mechanism, free from oversight regardless of election outcomes. This has allowed political governments to manipulate the constitutionally "independent" EC—glaringly obvious in the last three national elections—with no repercussions for subverting fair polls, violating the institutional mandate, or the commissioners violating their oath of office. Despite repeatedly failing to deliver on its mandate of fair elections, there was no mechanism in place to hold the EC accountable. The Electoral Reform Commission's in-depth analysis revealed that this gap has directly and indirectly fuelled many of the persistent issues undermining Bangladesh's electoral system.

In parliamentary democracies like Bangladesh, a common and effective accountability model for Electoral Management Bodies (EMB), such as election commissions, is oversight by a multi-partisan parliamentary committee. Such a body would review the EC's performance, approve and monitor its budget, and investigate any misconduct. To prevent dominance by the ruling party, these committees are typically balanced with equal representation from both majority and opposition groups, ensuring fair and impartial scrutiny. This approach, recommended by the Electoral Reform Commission, aims to close the critical accountability void in our electoral process.

To expedite the implementation of a comprehensive accountability mechanism, the Electoral Reform Commission drafted a law (annexed in its report) to introduce accountability and oversight—the first of

such effort in 52 years. This draft legislature addresses, among other factors, key issues such as transparent appointments of commissioners, budget accountability of the EC to parliament (not the executive), parliamentary probes into oath breaches by commissioners with recommendations sent to the president, etc.

Public feedback, reviewed alongside Bangladesh's electoral history and

these foundational reforms.

It is, therefore, extremely unfortunate that the EC should choose to reject or oppose some of these most critical reforms proposed by the Electoral Reform Commission, both institutional and beyond, rather than embrace this opportunity as technical collaborators to jointly transform the electoral landscape. The Electoral Reform Commission has meticulously tackled the formidable task

accountability is not just about punishing missteps; it is about proving that the EC can be held to a higher standard.

Yet more astonishing is the EC's refusal to fully accept reforms designed to increase its empowerment and independence as an institution. While it accepts minor enhancements (e.g., appointing its secretary), it rejects broader powers—like suspending elections or redrawing constituencies—citing concerns about resource strain or political backlash.

While its resistance to institutional reforms remains a central concern, what remains inexplicable is its continued public pushback, rejecting vital reforms across other electoral domains. For instance, reform recommendations regarding the political party registration, designed to increase transparency in candidate nominations, reduce the influence of money politics and tackle persistent systemic flaws, have been sidestepped entirely. Instead, the EC has pressed ahead with the old, defective registration process, with justifications that hardly defend the status quo over a clearly needed overhaul.

Globally, reforms typically follow a three-step process with distinct roles: first, a commission (or a similar body) provides expert recommendations; second, stakeholders like political parties provide input and build consensus; and third, the institution (here the EC), implements them. Here, it appears as though everyone but the EC grasps their role, oddly taking on all three roles—crafting, consensus building, and implementing reforms as it pleases.

The Electoral Reform Commission, comprised of experts with extensive national and international experience in elections and democratic reforms, crafted these recommendations through rigorous analysis, which then have been validated by widespread stakeholder consultations, nationwide surveys, and review of feedback from hundreds of thousands of citizens. As such, the reform report is firmly rooted in Bangladesh's contextual realities with broad-based public support that also mirrors people's perspectives.

Therefore, these recommendations are not mere burdens, they are a lifeline to legitimacy. After decades of flawed elections, we stand at a rare juncture to overhaul our electoral system, a reset that could shape our democratic future for generations. This is not a moment to be myopic or recalcitrant. This is a moment to embrace the transformative potential of reforms, propelling Bangladesh onto the next level. We, the people of Bangladesh, are ready for free, fair, and credible elections. Hence, its current actions notwithstanding, if the EC fails to deliver, we will not relent in holding it accountable. The stakes are too high, and our resolve is unshakable.

international standards, places accountability as one of the top reform needs. Without accountability, history risks repeating. Though institution-specific reforms represent only a fraction of the Electoral Reform Commission's recommendations, their adoption is pivotal as a robust EC will determine the broader reform agenda's fate. Clarity regarding these concepts, therefore, is also vital for stakeholders, as they need to ask the right questions to ensure such reforms are duly implemented.

The EC's stance

Assuming that by now, relevant and interested stakeholders have had time to potentially review the recommendations put forward by the Electoral Reform Commission, no analysis would be complete without considering the position of the EC—the entity responsible for adopting and implementing

of pinpointing the precise reforms needed to align Bangladesh's electoral process with democratic standards—an effort that significantly lightens the EC's burden and positions the current commission favourably, handing them a detailed blueprint for progress. Yet, casting itself as a stakeholder opposing critical, well-justified reforms is deeply disturbing.

The EC's opposition to relatively standard accountability mechanisms such as setting up a parliamentary oversight committee or investigations by such committee into misconduct, mandatory transparency in vote reporting, removing financial control from the executive or making the process of appointment more transparent—all puts it at a risky position of being misunderstood as refusing to confront its own legacy. This stance ignores the broader picture:

How our youth can leverage Bangladesh-China ties

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exchanges, local government collaboration, and think tank partnerships. At this historic juncture, Bangladesh now has a strategic opportunity to leverage these strengthened cultural and interpersonal ties to unlock sustainable economic and social benefits—particularly addressing critical issues such as employment opportunities for youths through modern skill development.

Recently, research findings shared at a seminar titled "National Image of China in

existing cooperation with China also opens up entrepreneurship opportunities for many youths—a path actively encouraged by Professor Muhammad Yunus, who consistently urges the youths to become job creators rather than job seekers. Such entrepreneurial efforts, enabled by fluency in Chinese and a deeper understanding of Chinese culture, could open new avenues of hope, economic empowerment, sustained career growth, and global opportunities for

emerging sector, notably strengthened by China's recent decision to designate hospitals in Kunming specifically for Bangladeshi medical tourists. Youths fluent in Chinese can capitalise on opportunities as medical interpreters, healthcare logistics coordinators, and medical tourism entrepreneurs.

Given this scenario, Bangladesh could benefit substantially from Chinese President Xi Jinping's vision of "mass entrepreneurship and innovation," emphasising the empowerment of ordinary citizens, particularly youth, to innovate, start businesses, and drive economic growth. The broader vision outlined through President Xi's Global Development Initiative highlights inclusive growth, poverty alleviation, and innovation. It perfectly aligns with Bangladesh's immediate needs. China's model of "Common Prosperity" and sustainable development, known as "Ecological Civilisation," echoes the vision of Bangladesh's Chief Adviser Professor Muhammad Yunus's concept of a "World of Three Zeros"—Zero Poverty, Zero Unemployment, and Zero Net Carbon Emissions. Leveraging ideas from both President Xi and Professor Yunus could become instrumental in addressing Bangladesh's youth unemployment crisis through innovation, entrepreneurship, and green jobs, ensuring "high-quality development."

Recent comments from Chen Huaiyu, chairman of the China Export-Import Bank (China Exim Bank), during the sidelines of the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference 2025, suggest even brighter prospects. Chen said that China Exim Bank is eager to support relocating Chinese manufacturing plants to Bangladesh, positioning Bangladesh as an export platform serving Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and beyond. Emulating the transformative experience of Vietnam, Bangladesh could substantially boost employment by attracting Chinese and other international manufacturers. This would necessitate improvements in Bangladesh's business environment—a goal already

endorsed by Professor Yunus.

The commitments made by China during the recent bilateral dialogues—including plans for high-quality Belt and Road cooperation, modernisation of Mongla Port, joint development of the China Economic and Industrial Zone in Chattogram, and expedited negotiation of a Free Trade Agreement—offer practical and significant economic benefits for Bangladesh's youths. Furthermore, Bangladesh's active participation in global expos, such as the China International Import Expo and China South Asia Expo, provides young entrepreneurs direct access to international markets. The joint press release also shows that China will import more goods than ever from Bangladesh. Partnership with China's steady and pragmatic development approach—built on non-interference, mutual respect, and a "win-win" cooperative approach—represents stability, growth, and hope. Embracing President Xi Jinping's vision of building a "Community of Shared Future for Mankind" gives Bangladeshi youths a unique opportunity to participate actively in global development and diplomatic efforts.

Just as historical figures like Zhang Qian, Fa Xian, Atish Dipankar, and Admiral Zheng He once illuminated paths between two great civilisations, today's youth stand at the threshold of a similarly profound opportunity—to become modern-day torchbearers of this timeless friendship. As 2025 marks the golden jubilee of diplomatic ties and celebrates the "Year of People-to-People Exchanges," it is not just a ceremonial milestone. It shows a beacon of immense promise. To truly grasp the rich possibilities, our youth and educational institutes must recognise that language and culture are not just fields of study. They are bridges of empowerment, keys to global understanding, and doors to lifelong prosperity. Thus, investing strategically in Chinese language and cultural education may become Bangladesh's most powerful tool, enabling its youth to craft a shared future of lasting harmony, boundless opportunity, and mutual development with China.

Bangladesh" showed overwhelmingly positive sentiment among Bangladeshis towards China in nurturing friendly relationships, sharing technological development, opportunities for higher education, medical tourism, and creating a strong trading partnership with China.

China is Bangladesh's largest trading partner, facilitating \$16.63 billion in imports and just \$715.37 million in exports to and from Bangladesh, respectively, in 2024. On the other hand, Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) from China to Bangladesh was \$2.67 billion as of September 2024. Nearly 1,000 Chinese enterprises and multinational corporations operate in Bangladesh, creating tremendous employment opportunities.

In this context, youths in Bangladesh could further enhance their employment opportunities in Chinese enterprises and multinational corporations by acquiring practical knowledge of the Chinese language and culture, China-related studies, and technical education in various areas. The

Bangladeshi youths.

Fluency in Chinese is more vital than ever. For people to people friendship and mutual prosperity, communication barriers must be overcome. Systematic Chinese language education, available through universities, Confucius Institutes, and specialised China Studies programmes, is a transformative tool. Nearly 20,000 Bangladeshi students are studying in China, and around 3,000 students are trained annually through two Confucius Institutes at North-South and Dhaka University, as well as one Confucius Classroom in Bangladesh. These can open significant career paths for youth, including employment opportunities in Chinese companies in Bangladesh, entrepreneurship linked to China's global market and Belt and Road Initiative, higher education and research opportunities in China, and participation in governmental and development projects under the Global Development Initiative framework.

Medical tourism is another significant