

## Build on investment summit gains

Both broad and targeted interventions necessary

We're heartened by the successful conclusion of Bangladesh Investment Summit 2025 that reportedly drew in some 450 foreign investors and representatives from 40 countries. During the four-day event, two investment deals were signed, while many pledged future investments. The government has rightly expressed its intent to capitalise on the momentum. As per the organisers, a "pipeline" of potential investments will be created based on the companies and individuals who have shown interest, and a roadmap with a timeframe of 18-24 months will be drawn up to ensure the summit's promises translate into real, long-term gains. It goes without saying that the success of this much-hyped event will be determined by how well the authorities can follow through. The challenge is not just to concretise the investment commitments, but also to uphold the post-July economic reform agenda to create an enabling environment for sustainable growth.

In this connection, we want to reiterate the importance of addressing long-standing barriers to doing business that have been repeatedly flagged by experts. While there are sector-specific concerns and vulnerabilities—such as those affecting the RMG industry, which just recently received a reprieve from a tariff scare triggered by the US—barriers cutting across all sectors must be addressed with priority. Participants at the summit, for instance, raised concerns about policy inconsistency, political instability, corruption, bureaucratic red tape, lack of coordination, crises of gas and electricity, and complex approval procedures. Some of these were also reflected in a recently unveiled World Bank report that highlighted Bangladesh's top five business obstacles, including its inefficient tax structure and informal economy. Many of these problems require political commitment, so political parties, too, must step up in creating the kind of environment investors need.

The fact is, Bangladesh has significant investment potential that cannot be realised without addressing these underlying challenges. While the interim government's efforts in this regard have borne some fruit, much more needs to be done. At the same time, we must acknowledge the promise shown of late by some sectors. For instance, in its report, the World Bank identified four sectors—green RMG, housing for middle-class families, paint and dyes, and digital financial services—as ripe for reform. These sectors, it argues, are mature and politically feasible enough to be restructured in ways that could create millions of jobs, draw investments, and spark a ripple effect of productivity in interconnected sectors. Among them, the RMG industry deserves particular mention. As the founder of Korean EPZ said at the summit, if overhauled and properly supported, it could become the top global apparel exporter even as we try to diversify our export basket.

To capitalise on all such promises, we need sustained efforts from the Bangladesh Investment Development Authority (BIDA) as well as targeted interventions and broad reforms from higher authorities. The recent summit was an attempt to dispel the negative perceptions many foreign investors still hold about our investment climate because of past experiences. We can project a new, reformed image through our actions going forward.

## Political violence has to stop

Parties, govt have a greater role to play in addressing it

We are concerned about the ongoing trend of political violence that has gripped the country in recent months. According to a report by the Human Rights Support Society (HRSS), at least 23 people lost their lives and 733 others were injured in over 97 incidents of political violence in March. Meanwhile, there were at least 40 cases of mob beatings resulting in 12 deaths and 44 injuries—some of which were also reported to have been driven by political motives and personal grudges. As for the parties involved in political violence, we are told that the majority of attacks were confrontations between rival factions of BNP activists. Of the 23 people killed in such violence last month, 18 were reportedly affiliated with BNP.

What has led to this surge in political violence? Why can't political parties control their errant members and establish discipline? The manner in which some of the attacks were carried out shows how out of control many political activists and leaders have become. On March 12, a BNP activist was killed during a clash at an iftar programme. Earlier, a BNP leader was beaten to death by his rivals right in front of his wife. It is clear that criminal elements embedded within some of the parties are feeling emboldened by the normalisation of such violence over time and the lack of legal or political consequences. This is unacceptable.

The BNP, in particular, must take responsibility for the surge in intra-party violence. Although it has expelled quite a number of party members for their involvement in violent incidents, these actions have proven insufficient as a deterrent. The BNP, therefore, must take stronger measures and send a clear message to all its members and supporters that any involvement in political violence will have immediate and dire consequences. Equally importantly, law enforcement agencies must act decisively to curb violence and refrain from favouring any party or individual while doing so.

All stakeholders of post-uprising Bangladesh should come together to help restore the rule of law. This means the police should act with greater resolve, political parties should take responsibility for the crimes of their members, and community and religious leaders should actively discourage mob violence. A new Bangladesh demands a new political expression that doesn't involve impulsive violence.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

### Launch of first space shuttle

On this day in 1981, NASA launched the first space shuttle, Columbia, which was designed to orbit Earth, transport people and cargo to and from orbiting spacecraft, and glide to a runway landing on its return to Earth.

# The price of the vote must be reform



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The political conversation in Bangladesh today is sharply divided between two dominant camps—those demanding immediate elections and those insisting that structural reform must come first. On one side, BNP leaders are calling for swift elections, warning against a return to authoritarian practices disguised in the language of "development," "reform," and "investment." On the other side, some argue that without deep institutional change, any election would merely replicate a broken system. They view the current government, born of a mass uprising, as having a unique mandate to pursue transformative reform before handing over power through a vote.

These two narratives, each grounded in real concerns, appear locked in conflict. But this binary framing—election first or reform first—misses the deeper challenge: how can we ensure that democratic transitions lead not just to a change in leadership, but to a transformation of the system itself?

As someone who believes in the urgency of restoring democratic consent, yet also sees the necessity of foundational reform, I propose a middle path. Elections should happen without delay, provided they take place within a framework that obliges the next government to implement a clear and enforceable reform agenda. These reforms must not be left to political convenience. They must be time-bound, mandatory, and tied to the government's continued legitimacy.

Bangladesh has seen too many instances of democratic decline cloaked in claims of national interest. The argument that elections can be delayed for the sake of stability, economic growth, or technical preparation is not new, and it is perilous. When unelected authority lingers under the pretence of reform, the principle of consent is gradually undermined. Democratic institutions grow brittle, public trust wanes, and technocratic efficiency replaces participatory governance. That is neither sustainable nor just.

At the same time, holding elections under an unreformed system risks

repeating the very dysfunctions that provoked the current crisis. Flawed electoral institutions, unchecked executive power, and the absence of meaningful decentralisation have all contributed to a political culture in which elections settle little and reform remains elusive. We cannot afford to repeat that pattern.

To understand the stakes, we must revisit the unfulfilled promises of Bangladesh's last major democratic transition: the post-1990 period. The mass uprising that ousted HM



FILE VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

Ershad marked a decisive rejection of authoritarianism and a call for genuine democracy. But while elections followed, deeper reforms were quietly shelved. Electoral processes remained vulnerable, political power remained overly centralised, and democratic norms steadily eroded. The spirit of that movement—captured in slogans like "let democracy be free"—was honoured in form but not in substance.

That historical memory informs the scepticism many feel today. There is a well-founded fear that even if elections are held and power changes hands, reforms will once again be delayed, diluted, or dismissed. The burden is now on us to ensure that does not happen.

So how do we break this cycle? My proposal is simple but, I believe,

effective: hold elections soon, but within a structure that binds the next government to a reform mandate. This can be achieved in one of two ways.

First, a pre-election constitutional amendment could be enacted, specifying a timeline—perhaps six to 12 months—within which essential reforms must be completed. These may include restructuring the Election Commission, strengthening judicial independence, placing checks on executive power, and ensuring protections for civil liberties and political opposition. Failure to comply would place the government in breach of constitutional responsibility, triggering consequences such as judicial intervention or the possibility of early elections.

Secondly, if constitutional amendment is not feasible before the vote, a broad-based political accord could be negotiated and publicly formalised. This agreement, endorsed by major parties and civil society,

is not merely a function of electoral success; it can and should be tied to the fulfilment of constitutional obligations.

In Bangladesh, this model offers a path forward that neither dismisses the demand for elections nor ignores the urgency of reform. It meets the opposition's call for democratic legitimacy while addressing the concerns of those who fear another empty transition.

This approach also calls for a deeper cultural transformation. It asks citizens to see themselves not just as voters who participate periodically, but as guardians of a constitutional project that must be renewed and defended. It challenges political leaders to abandon the winner-takes-all mentality that has hollowed out our institutions. A government elected under this framework would be bound not only by its promises, but by structural commitments embedded in law or public accord. There would be no excuse for delay and no room for betrayal.

Some may dismiss this proposal as overly ambitious or politically unrealistic. But in truth, the real illusion is the belief that elections alone—without binding reform—can resolve our current crisis. Equally naive is the notion that unelected authority, however well-intentioned, can govern indefinitely without undermining the very foundations of democratic legitimacy.

Realism today demands more than resignation to broken cycles. It requires imagination anchored in accountability. And more than that, it demands a politics in which outcomes are tied to commitments, and power is matched by responsibility. If we are to be realists in the best sense, then we must refuse both cynicism and complacency.

The real danger now is not that we will choose the wrong side in the "election versus reform" debate. It is that we will accept the debate on its current, limiting terms. This false binary must be rejected. We need both: elections that restore the people's voice, and reforms that prevent its silencing in the future.

What is needed most urgently is a credible mechanism—constitutional, political, or both—that ensures the next government, whoever forms it, cannot simply walk away from its obligations once in office. The days of promising reform only to abandon it after securing power must come to an end.

## By proxy or post?

The long wait for Bangladesh's expatriate voting rights



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Following decades of authoritarian rule, Bangladesh has embarked on an ambitious and necessary process of constitutional and electoral reform. Among the priorities for the upcoming 13th parliamentary elections is the long-overdue enfranchisement of approximately 10 million Bangladeshi expatriates, primarily labour migrants, systematically excluded from participating in national elections.

While the country's electoral framework normatively recognises the voting rights of its overseas citizens through an out-of-country voting (OCV) mechanism based on postal ballots, the system has never been effectively implemented. Despite its de jure existence, Bangladesh's OCV framework remains de facto inoperative due to a range of persistent challenges. These include procedural and administrative complexities, a lack of timely voter information and outreach, logistical constraints in ballot distribution and return, political controversy over dual citizenship, and broader concerns over democratic deficits and legitimacy of past elections. These obstacles have collectively silenced politically a large segment of the country's eligible electorate.

With national elections anticipated by the end of the year, public and political attention has increasingly turned towards identifying feasible OCV mechanisms. The Election Commission has reviewed several

options—postal ballots, online voting, and proxy voting—and has provisionally favoured proxy voting as the most operationally viable method within the limited timeframe. This method allows a registered voter to authorise another person—typically residing in the same constituency—to cast a ballot on their behalf. Commonly used in countries such as the UK, France, Belgium, Canada, and India, proxy voting is often employed when voters are unable to attend their polling station due to travel, illness, or overseas residence. Its appeal lies in its relative simplicity, offering a workaround in contexts where digital infrastructure or reliable postal systems are lacking. The use of proxy voting, however, in some of these jurisdictions is very limited.

Proxy voting presents obvious benefits. It facilitates participation for overseas voters, those unable to physically access polling stations, accommodates persons with disabilities or mobility challenges, and provides a flexible option for last-minute changes in personal circumstances. It is especially useful in low-infrastructure settings where postal or electronic voting may be unreliable or unfeasible.

Nonetheless, its adoption comes with significant risks and limitations. Key among them is the potential compromise of electoral integrity. Unlike supervised or assisted voting at polling stations, there are limited

means of verifying whether the proxy acted according to the voter's actual preference. This opens the door to abuse—such as vote buying, undue influence, coercion, or manipulation—particularly in systems where a proxy may cast votes on behalf of multiple individuals.

The secrecy of the ballot is another concern. It is difficult, if not impossible, to ensure that the proxy vote reflects the true intent of the voter. The risk of delegitimising the principle of "one person, one vote" is also heightened when proxies fail to vote in accordance with the original voter's will. The proxy voting system in Vanuatu, for example, has been facing these challenges.

Moreover, while perhaps logistically simpler than other OCV methods, proxy voting requires rigorous procedural oversight, including secure voter-proxy registration, robust authentication mechanisms, and monitoring to prevent fraud or multiple voting. In highly politically polarised contexts such as Bangladesh—where past elections have been plagued by irregularities, violence, and widespread mistrust—unless proxy voting is rigorously regulated, it may be perceived as particularly vulnerable to manipulation and thus incapable of generating public or stakeholder confidence.

Striking the right balance between accessibility and integrity remains a critical challenge as efforts to make proxy voting broadly accessible may unintentionally weaken safeguards, while overly stringent regulations could make the process inaccessible and thus ineffective.

Lastly, international best practice suggests that introducing new, untested voting methods to enfranchise large numbers of voters shortly before a major transitional election is rarely advisable. Often, late-stage reforms face serious logistical,

legal, and political constraints, which can undermine their credibility and effectiveness.

It would be prudent for the EC to prepare alternative OCV mechanisms as contingency options should proxy voting prove unfeasible. Postal voting—though less ambitious in its reach of overseas voters—appears to present a more pragmatic alternative. As it is already legislated—other than extending several timelines of the election to allow the delivery and collection of postal ballots—its implementation would not require major legal reform, but rather a more effective operational strategy.

To make postal voting viable for the next general election, the EC would need to act with urgency. Key steps could include establishing a secure overseas voter registration process, taking stock of which countries have viable postal service, conducting extensive outreach through diplomatic missions and diaspora networks, and addressing operational constraints such as ballot printing, dispatch, and return timelines. Robust verification mechanisms and stakeholder consultations will be essential to uphold electoral integrity and build trust in the process.

While proxy voting offers a short-term solution for the inclusion of overseas voters, its introduction does not come without considerable risks. A dual-track approach—prioritising proxy voting with a parallel plan for postal voting as contingency—would provide Bangladesh with a more balanced, credible path towards electoral inclusion and reform. Following the next elections, the adoption of a stronger, more permanent, viable, accessible, and sustainable OCV system can then be more comprehensively explored as part of a long-term electoral reform agenda.