

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Don't hold the public hostage via blockades

Polytechnic students must show restraint

We respect the right of students from polytechnic institutes to protest for their cause. In a country where technical education is often neglected, their six-point demand—including the removal of “controversial” craft instructors recruited after 2021, restructuring the diploma engineering programme into a four-year course, reserving 10th-grade engineering posts for diploma graduates, establishing a separate Ministry of Technical and Higher Education, etc.—merits both policy consideration and constructive dialogue. However, we cannot condone the manner in which they exercised their right to protest, infringing on the public's right to free movement.

Wednesday's road and railway blockades, halting communications in more than a dozen districts as part of a coordinated movement, were yet another example of how disruptive such protests can be. According to a report by this daily, in Dhaka, over 1,000 students from Dhaka Polytechnic Institute blocked the Satrasta intersection in Tejgaon for nearly eight hours. In Cumilla, over 500 students blocked the Dhaka Chattogram highway for hours. Similar protests were also reported in Chattogram, Rajshahi, Barishal, and elsewhere. As a result, public transport systems broke down, emergency services were delayed, and gridlocks paralysed key intersections and highways, causing massive suffering. In one instance, the military had to be deployed to disperse protesters. Whether their firing of blank shots was necessary or even authorised may be debated, but the mere fact that such measures were needed shows how unmanageable the situation had become.

While the protesters later announced a relaxation of a pre-planned “rail blockade” on Thursday, pending the outcome of a meeting with the relevant authorities, they eventually expressed dissatisfaction with the discussions and declared plans to launch even tougher programmes. If executed, it can only mean more suffering. This is not constructive activism; this is holding the public hostage with the sole intention of forcing a decision, which is unacceptable. We cannot allow legitimate grievances to be pursued through illegitimate means. We have seen this tactic used repeatedly since the July uprising, as numerous groups—students in particular—embraced their newfound freedoms of speech and assembly in ways that often caused chaos and unrest.

It must be acknowledged that this government, unlike its predecessor, has shown greater responsiveness to protest-driven demands. For instance, soon after Wednesday's protests, Mostafizur Rahman Khan, the principal of Dhaka Polytechnic Institute, was removed from his post. This is not the kind of response students would have received under the old order. So they, too, must show greater restraint, and pursue their cause through peaceful means. We also urge the government to send a stronger message against public disruptions. As the country edges closer to the next election, disruptive protests and blockades may likely continue. So the government must enable the police to act decisively in such situations. It may also consider designating specific areas for protest gatherings, which would protect both the protesters' rights and the public's.

Why is Anwara Park still occupied?

Authorities must honour their word on park restoration

It is disappointing that the metro rail authority's installations and equipment have yet to be removed from the Shaheed Anwara Park in the capital's Farmgate area. Since 2018, the park has been used by the Dhaka Mass Transit Company Limited (DMTCL) as a project site office and storage area for construction materials. Initially, it was agreed that the park would be restored to its original condition upon completion of rail construction. However, in 2023, DMTCL announced plans to construct an on-site station plaza, including shops, hotels, restaurants, entertainment centres, and so on.

Naturally, the announcement came as a shock, forcing urban planners, environmental activists, and local residents to launch a protest movement. In December, three advisers from the interim government met with the protesters. During the meeting, it was assured that all the installations and equipment at the park would be removed by March 26. However, more than two weeks have passed since the deadline, but that promise still remains unfulfilled. Moreover, the government had pledged that the park would be restored, re-greened, and reopened to the public. This is critically important given Dhaka's current state, where green spaces are rapidly disappearing, leaving few parks or playgrounds available.

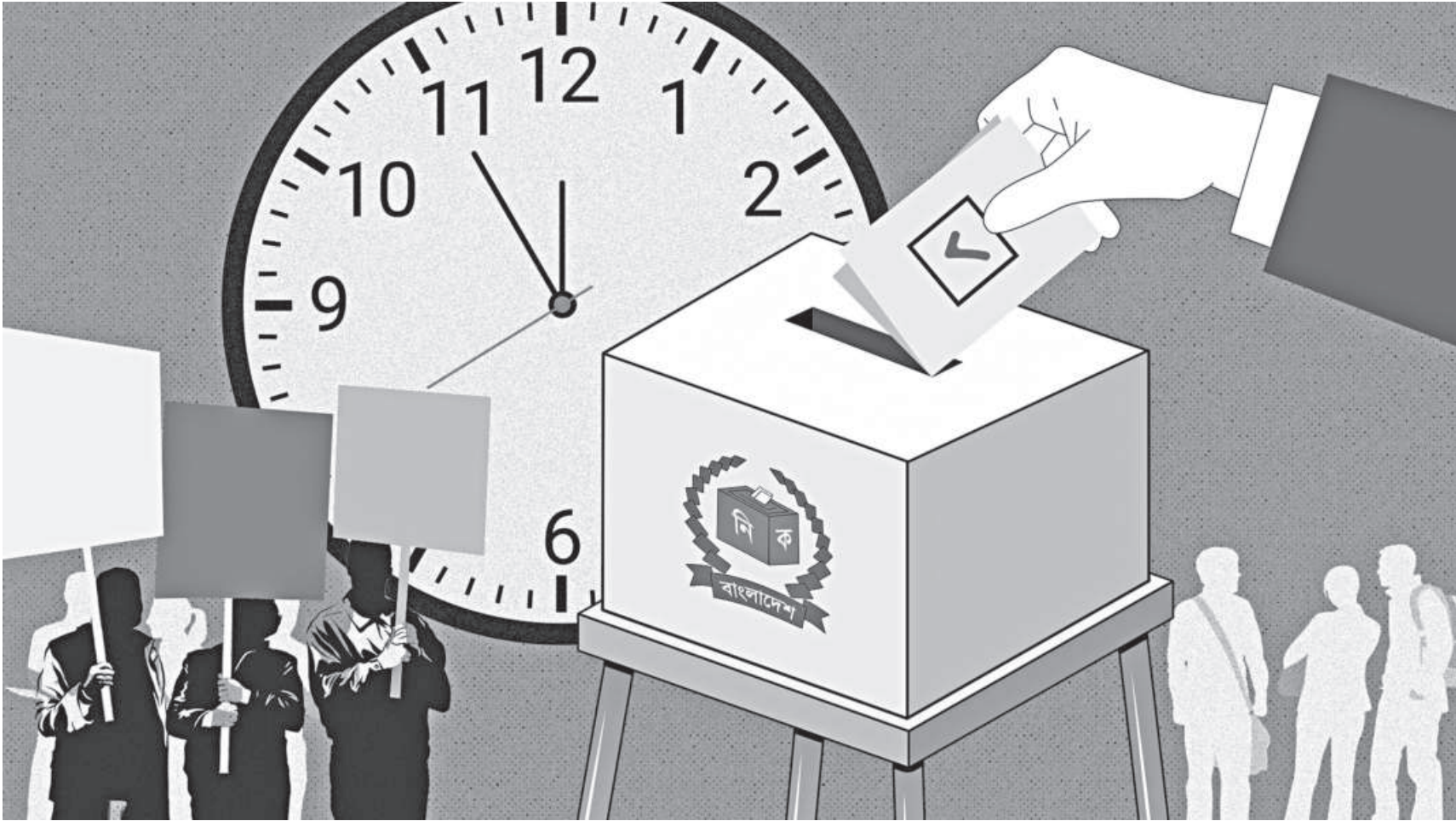
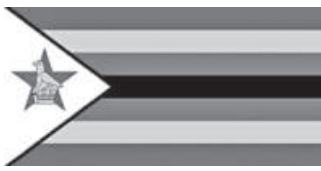
According to urban planners and environmental activists, the metro installations and equipment currently occupying the park could be cleared within a week if the will existed. Even if twice that time were required, there can be no justifiable reason for the delay in clearing the site and reopening it to the public. What is equally concerning is that the authorities have offered no clear explanation for the delay being caused. Speaking to *Prothom Alo*, Fauzul Kabir Khan, adviser to the Ministry of Road Transport and Bridges, said he had consulted the relevant officials, claiming that some remaining work in the park was yet to be completed. They are now saying that the western part of the park will be vacated by June.

This is unacceptable. The authorities must understand that seven years have already passed since the park was closed. So, they must expedite the efforts to clear the park of all stored materials, proceed with restoring it as promised, and reopen it to the public at the earliest opportunity. The lack of importance placed by the authorities on preserving open spaces and parks in Dhaka must also change.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Zimbabwe gains independence

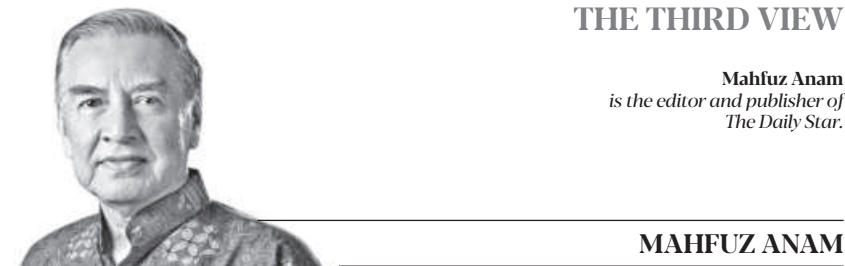
On this day in 1980, Zimbabwe achieved independence from the United Kingdom.



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

Unhealthy election controversy must be resolved

It is creating uncertainty, suspicion, and discord



THE THIRD VIEW

Mahfuz Anam
is the editor and publisher of
The Daily Star.

MAHFUZ ANAM

The eagerly awaited meeting between Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus and the BNP ended, as expected, with a major difference of opinion on the election dates. The CA stuck to his well-known stance that the election will be held anytime between December 2025 and June 2026, and the BNP stuck to its position that the polls must be held by the end of this year. In contrast to most of their previous meetings, the BNP, for the first time, expressed serious dissatisfaction afterwards.

However, Dr Asif Nazrul, law adviser to the interim government had his own narrative that the BNP did not “appear dissatisfied” and stressed that “under no circumstances will the

that only an elected government with the people's mandate can provide.

At present, the world is dealing with us mostly because of the personal prestige and stature of one person, Prof Yunus, and not due to the legitimacy of the government he heads. Whatever the extent of our pride for having a leader of his stature may be, it cannot substitute for the prestige and acceptance of a government with people's mandate. Genuine democracy has been our source of pride from the time of our Liberation War, and we condemned Sheikh Hasina for having deprived us of that. Thus, restoration of democracy and getting an elected government

strong and should by no means be ignored. Whatever we do, we must incorporate the fundamental values—democracy, freedoms, rights of all groups and individuals, equality, anti-discrimination, a nation under law, political accountability, etc—that the uprising tried to evoke in all our future actions.

But the need for reforms, which is

The election proponents think setting up a democratically elected government is the most important task at hand. It will restore the people's right to choose their own leaders, to get a parliament where policies will be transparently discussed and adopted, and to get a government that can be held accountable.

a widely accepted notion, should not be used as an excuse to postpone the election. Just as these fundamental reforms are necessary, so is an elected government. This author and this newspaper have repeatedly written about how we need and *can* have both the reforms and election by December.

We have not been able to decipher why the CA insists on the six-month time variation. One could understand this position during the early days, when it was uncertain how much time would be required by the reform commissions. But now all the reform recommendations are in. The follow-up process—dialogue with the political parties—has also been very efficiently started. We think Prof Yunus's approach has so far been hugely effective. If the same pace is followed, then within the eight months that is left before the December deadline, significant reforms can be agreed upon and instituted. If we accept the two and half months delay as proposed by Jamaat—till before next Ramadan—then the interim government should have no reason not to announce the election roadmap. The Election Commission has announced its preparedness.

From this newspaper's point of view, June does pose a lot of challenges for holding the elections in terms of weather conditions. Except for one election in June 1996—following the resignation of Khaleda Zia's government in February 1996 and the constitutional requirement to hold an election within 90 days—all the elections since the fall of military rule in 1990 have been held in winter months. The arguments for elections in winter are solid: no rain, no floods and pleasant temperature, all of which contributes to giving the national polls a festive colour and mood. So why the CA wants to take the risk of facing natural calamity that may jeopardise his fundamental commitment to the people is not really clear.

The election uncertainty has been further exacerbated by a social media

campaign that Prof Yunus should continue in power for several more years. This, of course, is a tribute to his stature, prestige, and the public confidence in his leadership. But there are many other forces, with not the best of intentions for the CA, who may be working behind it. There is a public perception that a section of his interim cabinet, who will have to relinquish their coveted position the moment the CA hands over power to an elected government, is adding fuel to this campaign. This suspicion has unnecessarily been given credence by the home affairs adviser, who said people had gone to him saying, “Prof Yunus should prolong his stay for five years.” Social media campaigns are one thing, but comments made by a senior cabinet member—which he tried to explain saying that it was not his opinion and that he was only repeating what ordinary people were telling him—generate doubts.

Whether such a step, however well-intentioned, is politically wise, institutionally possible, legally acceptable, and good for Prof Yunus's national and global reputation, is something that should be seriously thought about. As we all know, the legal thread on which the legitimacy of this government hangs is an opinion (not a judgment) by the Appellate Division, made to address a special circumstance. As his lifelong admirer and sincere well-wisher, I think that an undue extension of his tenure would mire Prof Yunus into unnecessary and, for him, undignified controversies.

We understand the BNP's eagerness for an early election, and that not all of it is based on altruism. We also understand that the reluctance of the National Citizen Party (NCP) regarding the election being held before significant reforms and trials of Sheikh Hasina and others has a lot of partisan considerations behind it. Jamaat's ambivalence is also based on partisan factors. So our national interests are not getting the priority that they deserve.

We have three stakeholders on the issue of election: the interim government; the political parties of all shades; and the voters. The viewpoints that we have so far heard belong to the first and second groups of stakeholders. As to what the general public wants, we do not yet know and have heard very little. That has been a major flaw of us journalists. We cannot claim to know. On the bases of our past reporting and experience, we can make an educated guess that they would want their right to vote—which they have been deprived of since 2014—restored. But they would also want stability, economic growth, price stability, employment, etc, all of which is linked to the economy, which in turn needs stability to bear fruit. So both the right to vote and economic growth can be triggered and sustained mainly through the return of an elected government.

Hence, our argument is in favour of an election by December 2025, with an additional six weeks to accommodate Prof Yunus's wish for more time, till the middle of February 2026.



A delegation of BNP led by Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir meets with Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus and other members of the interim cabinet to discuss the election schedule on April 16, 2025. PHOTO: PID

election go beyond June next year.” Prior to that, he said the election cannot be held until the trial for the crimes against humanity committed during the July uprising is completed. This raises the legitimate question: can a judicial process be set in a time-barred manner, and if so, will it be acceptable internationally? The chief prosecutor of the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT), Advocate Tajul Islam, had objected earlier when such a time limit was set for the crucial trials.

The Jamaat-e-Islami ameer, on his part, has said that the election should not go beyond the next Ramadan, which, in calendar terms, means that it should occur before the last quarter of February 2026. It sounds like a well-thought-out middle ground.

The election proponents think setting up a democratically elected government is the most important task at hand. It will restore the people's right to choose their own leaders, to get a parliament where policies will be transparently discussed and adopted, and to get a government that can be held accountable. The interim nature of our present governance process will come to an end, and we will be able to relaunch our democratic journey. Most importantly, the feeling of uncertainty will come to an end and be replaced by a sense of stability

Those who are opposed to having the election by December this year feel that time is inadequate for reforms and holding the election will mean restoring the rotten practices of the past, which included dynastic politics and one-person rule. The argument they use—one which has a strong emotional appeal—is that moving to the old-style politics will make a farce of the sacrifice of 1,400 lives during the uprising.

should not be unnecessarily delayed.

Those who are opposed to having the election by December this year feel that time is inadequate for reforms and holding the election will mean restoring the rotten practices of the past, which included dynastic politics and one-person rule. The argument they use—one which has a strong emotional appeal—is that moving to the old-style politics will make a farce of the sacrifice of 1,400 lives during the uprising. This sentiment is very