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Have reforms lost the way?



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Views expressed in this article are the author's own.

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Public memory is often short, and public judgement is unforgiving when people begin to sense that their expectations are being slighted. Nine months since the interim government took over, where are we, especially in respect of the “state repair” goal proclaimed by the youth-led masses when they toppled the long-entrenched autocratic regime?

Responding to the call for “state repair,” the interim government appointed various reform commissions and committees on institutions and areas of work of the state, including electoral reforms. However, a bout of amnesia appears to have affected sundry pundits and analysts vocal in the media. The political class, especially the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the presumptive government in waiting, impatiently demands an early parliamentary election. It forgot that the principal demand voiced during the July uprising was for reforms that would prevent the return of symptoms of fascism in the state and political parties.

Political and public amnesia is at work when the record of political parties in power prior to the last regime does not come under as much scrutiny as it could. Similarly, little is said now about how the interim government brought the country back from the brink of a failed state and a meltdown of the economy.

At the same time, disaffection about the interim government is widespread. A nationwide survey of more than 10,000 people in February-March this year provides evidence. Among respondents, 55.05 percent said price hikes of daily necessities were badly managed by the interim government, while 58.2 percent felt law and order did not improve enough. Over two-thirds did not see enough signs of progress towards a fair electoral process. They hope a fair election may help meet these expectations.

Not to be gainsaid that the Advisory Council, collectively and as individuals, have not been the epitome of efficiency, decisiveness, and coordinated action. For instance, emergency actions, such as pending judicial measures, were not taken in time to seize accounts, cancel passports, and ban the travel abroad of suspects involved in horrendous financial and other crimes, until they managed to empty their accounts, transfer assets in some cases, and many fled the country. The so-called “syndicates” that control the supply and import of daily necessities and manipulate the whole-sale markets have not been restrained and no perpetrator has been punished, though the characters are known.

Bringing the culprits of repression and killings during the July uprising to book is a matter of emotion and justice for the nation. However, the old ways of handling charges and cases with countless anonymous accused and mindlessly implicating people in murder cases still continue.

The Advisory Council has let the political parties construct and control the public narrative on reforms—letting them shift the discourse away from initiating reforms in political, economic, and state institutions to the election and the electoral process. The BNP has projected the election of a national parliament, not necessarily of

local bodies or a constituent assembly as first steps, as the panacea for all ills.

Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus has been preaching a message of consensus-building as the precursor to democratic transition. The National Consensus Commission was formed on February 13, and it commenced work on February 15 with a six-month time table. The first phase of the consultation is set to end on May 15. One consensus-building aim is to agree on “July Proclamation” as a manifesto of the anti-fascist coalition that may guide Bangladesh’s democracy journey.

The interim government appears to have put on the back burner the reports of a dozen other commissions, task forces, and committees on various aspects of state functions and institutions.

A government installed by a student-led popular movement against discrimination created a deluge of reform commissions, but not one on education. Only a consultative committee on primary education was appointed by the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education; its report was submitted to the chief adviser on February 10. It appears, however, that the top officials lack the enthusiasm for transformative change or are devoid of the imagination to comprehend the significance of the changes proposed. So far, we have seen only partial, fragmented, uncoordinated and slow steps, which are creating a negative momentum.

More importantly, there is no overall initiative to address the quality, relevance, and equity in the education sector as a whole with its many sub-sectors, such as school, technical and vocational, tertiary, and madrasa education. Are complexity, sensitivity of issues, and the difficulty of making change in the sector reasons for shying away from dealing with it? The authorities are now busy with firefighting as students, teachers, and other stakeholders boycott classes, lock up buildings, and take to the streets. This reactive approach can only compound the problems down the line.

What is the prognosis for reforms, then? Political and higher-level governance recommendations (some 166 items) in six reform reports are the focus of attention of the political parties and the consensus commission. From separate consultations with some 39 large and small political parties or groups, the outlines are emerging of the fault lines on major issues. These range from establishing balance between principal pillars of the government, forming an overseeing constitutional council, designing the local government’s role and power, and agreeing on the shape and representation of the legislative bodies. Even the idea of pluralism and rejection of theocracy—the fundamental rationale of a free Bangladesh—have become divisive topics. I doubt that a unanimously agreed July charter will emerge from the consensus dialogue, unless major protagonists are willing to be in a magnanimously compromising mood.

The major reform commission proposals, besides the prioritised politics-governance sphere, are unlikely to receive the collective attention of the chief adviser and his team at this juncture. It is a pity,

because these areas of reform can, if genuinely pursued, have a greater and longer term impact on the life of citizens and promote the culture and values of a democratic society.

Looking ahead and hoping for a positive scenario, Prof Yunus and his team, not ignoring many limitations they face, may concentrate on the following outcomes:

- * A consensus is to be reached on the process and rules of engagement for constitutional change, rather than the substantive content of the new constitution. This implies election of a constituent assembly, which may be turned into the parliament after the constitution is adopted. Whatever agreement on the content reached now or positions of parties stated clearly would facilitate the work of the constituent assembly.

- * The Election Commission’s structure, capacity, and management should be strengthened; necessary changes in the Public Representation Order have to ensure a fair election, eliminating muscle and money power; and the Election Commission should be provided the budget and administrative support to hold model elections, as promised by Prof Yunus. Public representation regulations should be developed/refined and enforced regarding political parties’ internal governance, finance, and reporting of election expenditures.

- * If Prof Yunus and his team are willing to be resolute and bold, they should hold the local body elections as soon as possible as a trial for a fair and peaceful national election, an exercise in people’s participation in genuine democracy, and for improved local public services.

- * Reform proposals, besides the six under discussion, should be reviewed to identify the recommendations that can be promulgated by ordinance, and should be so promulgated. The respective ministries/agencies should be instructed to begin concerted and systematic implementation steps on these reforms.

- * In the health sector, a consultative committee should be appointed to examine and guide steps towards implementing the Health Reform Commission’s proposals. The committee can be replaced eventually by a permanent statutory health commission as proposed by the commission.

- * In the education sector, a consultative committee should be formed with sub-committees for sub-sectors to initiate a process of situation analysis and formulating reform proposals, starting with proposing early actions. The consultative committee can be turned into a permanent statutory education commission similar to the proposed health commission.

- * Given the disappearing external assistance for non-governmental development activities, the interim government should demonstrate its bona fides on citizens’ and communities’ roles in social/economic development reforms. An independently managed trust fund for NGO activities can be established to serve marginalised people. A beginning can be made by allocating a tiny fraction of 0.05 percent of the national budget to this fund, which may amount to approximately Tk 4,000 crore in FY2025-26.

Setting aside public amnesia and harsh judgements on the interim government, Prof Yunus and his team need not be too apologetic for their record, given the history of elected and unelected governments over the last 54 years. But it would be a shame not to make the best of the opportunity history has bestowed them.

Why we need an elected government soon



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In the history of nations, moments arise when the choices made by a people define the trajectory of their collective destiny. Bangladesh now stands at such a critical juncture. The interim government, ushered in amid throes of mass movements and political upheaval, was meant to serve as a temporary custodian of stability—a bridge to democratic restoration. Instead, delays in holding the national election and growing discontent have threatened to turn this fragile bridge into a perilous path. For Bangladesh, the only way forward is through a legitimate, timely, and widely participatory democratic election.

Political scientist Samuel P Huntington, known for his incisive works on democracy and political order, once noted, “The most important political distinction among countries concerns not their form of government but their degree of government.” In other words, legitimacy is not simply conferred by structure, but by people’s will. Without democratic elections, Bangladesh’s government remains suspended in an uncertain limbo, unable to claim the authority necessary to govern effectively.

The aspirations that fuelled Bangladesh’s Liberation War in 1971 remain deeply unfulfilled. Two fundamental promises—democratic governance and social justice—have eluded realisation all these years. Mass movements that began as calls for administrative reform have evolved into broader cries for political representation. The chants heard in the streets—“We want democracy”—are not just slogans; they are pleas from a nation yearning for agency.

Philosopher John Stuart Mill, one of democracy’s staunchest proponents, said the best form of government is one that enables its citizens to “participate in the management of affairs” and thereby grow in virtue and intelligence. Bangladesh’s current political arrangement, however well-intentioned, denies its people this essential civic experience. By delaying elections, the interim authority deprives citizens of their right to shape their nation’s course.

While the interim government has attempted some reforms and garnered international sympathy for its efforts, its Achilles’ heel is its lack of electoral legitimacy. Political psychologist Seymour Martin Lipset famously argued that “legitimacy involves the capacity of the system to engender and maintain the belief that existing political institutions are the most appropriate or proper ones.” When that belief erodes, unrest is inevitable. Bangladesh now teeters on such a precipice.

Inflation has surged, unemployment festers, and lawlessness permeates the streets. The so-called “mob culture” and the rise of juvenile gangs underline a deeper problem: an absence of institutional authority. These are not mere

as a repellent to both domestic and foreign investment. The World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) have both highlighted the importance of political stability in ensuring sustainable economic growth. Without a credible, elected government, Bangladesh risks a slide into economic stagnation.

Political scientist Francis Fukuyama, in *Political Order and Political Decay*, observed that “modern political institutions are not born fully formed; they are forged through struggle and shaped by context.” For Bangladesh, the struggle now is to consolidate its institutions through a recommitment to electoral democracy. That struggle cannot succeed under a prolonged interim arrangement.

Some voices have called for a “national government” or an extended caretaker system as a solution to the crisis. But this model, too,

Opponents of early elections argue that reform is a prerequisite for meaningful voting. Yet, the converse is equally true: constitutional liberalism without elections is merely an illusion of democracy. Elections do not guarantee perfect governance, but they offer a mechanism for accountability. Elected governments, by their very nature, are more responsive to the needs of their constituents. They have deep-rooted connections to grassroots networks and are bound by the pressure of re-election. An unelected interim regime, however virtuous, lacks the same incentive structure.

is fraught with risk. Such arrangements dilute accountability and blur the lines of responsibility. In developing nations, where democratic culture is still in a formative stage, power-sharing without clear electoral mandates often becomes a recipe for deadlock and dysfunction.

Moreover, national governments formed outside the electoral process often become a safe haven for opportunists and power-brokers—political chameleons who switch allegiance for personal gain. The danger is not just theoretical; it has played out in Bangladesh before. When governments form through backroom deals rather than ballot boxes, the people are always the losers.



FILE PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

To delay the election is to deny people the power to reflect and to choose their own government.

symptoms of economic malaise but signs of political vacuum. Economist Amartya Sen, in his work *Development as Freedom*, emphasised that political freedoms, including free and fair elections, are not just instruments of development but its constitutive elements. Without elections, development in Bangladesh becomes a house built on sand.

Interim administrations are meant to be brief custodians, not long-term stewards. History shows that prolonged transitional governments in developing nations often breed instability, corruption, and even authoritarian regression. The 1/11 crisis of 2007-08 remains a frightening reminder of what can happen when democratic processes are suspended under the guise of reform.

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Bangladesh’s economic indicators are already showing stress. Inflationary pressures have eroded purchasing power, while investor confidence continues to wane. Political uncertainty acts

Bangladesh’s youth, the lifeblood of its mass movements, have spoken clearly. They demand a future rooted in justice, transparency, and democratic participation. Their voices echo the words of Vaclav Havel, the Czech dissident and later president, who believed that “the salvation of this human world lies nowhere else than in the human heart, in the human power to reflect, in human meekness, and human responsibility.”

To delay elections is to deny people the power to reflect and to choose. The interim government must now do what it was originally tasked to do: create a level playing field for all political actors, initiate essential reforms to ensure a fair election, and hand over power to an elected government. This process must be time-bound, transparent, and inclusive. It must culminate not in vague promises but in a specific date for the election, announced publicly and adhered to.

Bangladesh’s revolution did not end in 1971—it merely began. The revolution continues in every protest, every slogan, every vote. Let it not be betrayed by political indecision or bureaucratic inertia. In the words of political philosopher Hannah Arendt, “The most radical revolutionary will become a conservative the day after the revolution.” Let the current leaders not become what they once opposed. Let them lead Bangladesh not back into the shadows, but forward into the light of democratic legitimacy. Only through elections can Bangladesh reclaim its future. The bridge to democracy is not meant to be a destination—but a path. Let us not turn it into a dead end.