

The reform drive must continue

First round of talks with political parties concludes

It is reassuring to see the conclusion of the first round of talks between the National Consensus Commission (NCC) and political parties over reforms meant to lay the groundwork for a more accountable and transparent system of governance. In a country where political deadlock is more common than consensus, the achievement of common ground across a wide spectrum of issues marks a departure worth noting. The first round—which covered 166 key reform proposals over 45 sessions—produced agreements on several major areas, while disagreements remain on others, setting the stage for the second round of talks set to begin within days. While this goes on, the NCC plans to engage the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics to conduct a survey to gather public feedback on key proposals and finalise a “National Charter” based on broader consensus by July.

Thanks to the structured and publicly accessible manner in which the discussions were held, we now know the areas where the parties agreed, partially agreed, or disagreed. For instance, all parties agreed to reinstate the non-partisan caretaker government system to oversee elections, but disputes remain over its formation, tenure, and the mechanism for appointing a chief adviser. Similarly, while there is support for a bicameral legislature and empowering the opposition through the deputy speaker’s post, disagreements remain over how members of the proposed upper house should be elected. Another crucial sticking point is the proposal to limit the prime minister’s authority—particularly preventing one from simultaneously holding the posts of PM, party chief, and leader of the House. Proposals to impose term limits on PM and reform the process of electing the president have also proven divisive. Sharp divisions remain over the proposed formation of a National Constitutional Council to oversee key appointments and uphold legal standards.

That said, the areas of consensus are significant in their own right. Parties have collectively endorsed vital judicial reforms, including the creation of a separate Supreme Court Secretariat, curbing executive control over judicial appointments, and introducing accountability mechanisms to discipline judges exhibiting political bias. There is also agreement on placing key parliamentary committees—such as those on public accounts, estimates, and government undertakings—under opposition control. On anti-corruption, all parties supported granting the Anti-Corruption Commission constitutional status, and ensuring its independence and accountability. Electoral reforms have also made notable progress. In public administration, there is strong support for automating public services, revising outdated laws such as the Official Secrets Act, and modernising the Right to Information Act.

While full consensus on all unresolved issues is unlikely, as Prof Ali Riaz, co-chair of the NCC, has acknowledged, we hope that political parties will engage sincerely in the remaining talks. Otherwise, the push for critical reforms may stall. At the same time, we must keep in mind the challenges of implementing reforms. The ongoing protests following the dissolution of the National Board of Revenue and the introduction of the Public Service (Amendment) Ordinance, 2025 show that real change will depend on our collective resolve to follow through despite the resistance these changes may provoke. All stakeholders must, therefore, rise above partisan or group interests, and act from a place of national responsibility.

Dhaka law and order must be restored

Effective measures needed to curb crime in capital city

We are concerned by the recent spate of crime in Dhaka that put its law and order situation once again under the spotlight. Since the political changeover in August last year, public security in the city has been an area of concern with a persistent rise in various criminal activities. Although the authorities have taken a number of measures to address the situation, things have proven difficult to manage. The spike in criminal incidents—with CCTV footage of several going viral on social media—is understandably fueling fear among the general public. The government, therefore, must increase its efforts to comprehensively address these security concerns.

According to data from the Police Headquarters, Dhaka witnessed a noticeable rise in violent crimes in the first four months of this year, with robbery cases almost doubling and dacoity and murder cases nearly tripling compared to the same period last year. Over time, the criminals appear to be growing more audacious, often attacking people in broad daylight. On Tuesday morning, muggers attacked a currency trader, shot him, and robbed him of currencies worth Tk 22 lakh in the city’s Mirpur area. On Sunday night, a BNP leader was shot dead by two assailants. Some perpetrators have even been seen carrying machetes, using them to intimidate or attack their victims.

What does it say about our law enforcement if gun-toting, machete-wielding criminals can roam freely in public? In some cases, police appeared reluctant to take action. For instance, a victim of mugging in Nikunja, who was attacked with machetes, reported the incident to Pallabi Police Station but no action was taken until a video of the incident went viral. Speaking to The Daily Star, he said the incident had shattered his sense of security, and—one may easily assume—that of many others.

This situation has persisted more or less since August. While the interim government has taken some initiatives, including deploying army troops with magistracy powers to assist in maintaining law and order, these efforts have often proven insufficient. Unfortunately, the police have yet to fully regain their footing, and criminals continue to take advantage of the vacuum. This is unacceptable. Law enforcement agencies must reassess control over the city’s law and order using whatever means necessary. It is unacceptable for people to continue living in fear for their safety.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Amnesty International founded

On this day in 1961, dedicated to informing public opinion about human rights and to securing the release of political prisoners, Amnesty International was founded.

PRIMARY TEACHERS' STRIKE

Is reform stumbling?



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MANZOOR AHMED

Assistant teachers at government primary schools across Bangladesh began an indefinite work abstention from Sunday, demanding that their entry-level pay be at the 11th grade of the national pay scale. Is the government’s reform initiative to settle many long-standing problems in primary education unravelling?

On February 10, a government-appointed consultation committee presented a set of recommendations for reform and development in primary and non-formal education to the chief adviser, who said the committee’s report deserved serious consideration and early action. A key recommendation was about teachers’ and field education workers’ status and professional development. It proposed a career path for teachers, shifting from the present pattern of being recruited as assistant teachers, a majority of whom retire from the same position without any career progression.

The proposal was to make “teacher” the entry-level post with salary at 12th grade of the pay scale. They would then become “senior teacher” at salary grade 11 after serving a probationary time. Assistant headteachers and headteachers would be recruited exclusively from serving teachers and would have the chance to be recruited into supervision and management posts. In addition, recommendations were made about easing promotion, transfer, and continuous professional development in response to various complaints.

Importantly, the committee considered the recommended actions as interim measures within the present structure. It proposed that in the longer term, work should be urgently undertaken to provide all schoolteachers (both primary and secondary) a higher status, recognition, and remunerations.

The committee’s main concern has been improving children’s learning and well-being. It looked upon teachers as the pivot of change, and thus teachers’ working conditions and well-being had to be improved. The reforms included over a hundred urgent, medium and long-term actions critical to children’s learning outcomes. Some of the recommendations that focus on foundational skills, one-shift

schools, remedial learning, student and school assessment, reducing the families’ economic burden, preventing corruption and mismanagement, and piloting decentralisation of planning and management are detailed here.

Primary education activities and objectives must focus on building children’s foundational skills in Bangla reading and writing and basic arithmetic. The learning content, teaching time, teacher preparation, and assessment of students should



Teachers are the pivot of change, and thus their working conditions and well-being have to be improved.

FILE PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

be organised around the objective of foundational learning outcomes. To ensure enough learning time, all schools should have only one shift, with enough teachers and classrooms, through a high-priority time-bound plan.

Remedial learning should be arranged for the section of students who remain behind others in coping with class lessons. Apart from classroom care, extra help should be offered to these students beyond class hours, planned and organised by each school, employing para-teachers and cooperating with local education NGOs as needed. Budgets should be allocated for this purpose.

Continuous classroom assessments and annual assessments of students are needed along with assessments

of a school’s performance. Methods and tools should be developed and disseminated online; teachers should be oriented and supported. Applying criteria, each school, along with the upazila education office, can assess itself, marking itself as green, yellow or red (good, problematic or bad, respectively), and plan to reach or maintain the green status.

Mid-day meals and essential learning supplies (paper, pen, schoolbag) should be provided to all students, starting with the country’s poorest areas. Increased and targeted cash support should be considered instead of the general stipend at present. A hotline for complaints from citizens or education personnel should be set up along with a system to attend adequately to complaints and periodically report to the public about actions taken and analysis of trends.

Recognising the complexity of the problem, a pilot project of upazila-

and with stakeholder consultation about recommendations; iii) determining steps for implementation of early and medium-term actions; iv) urgent consideration of long-term and relevant matters related to the total education system; and v) financing and budget allocations for reforms (especially, in the upcoming financial year).

Four months since the submission of the committee’s report, government actions, as much as are publicly known, have been fragmented, partial, uncoordinated, slow, and few. We are not aware of a mechanism for an overall review and consideration of the report as well as measures taken along the lines mentioned above. Media reports about some sporadic actions do not inspire confidence. Cases in point: a unit in the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education has categorised and notified some schools as “red,” “yellow” or “green” (turns out very few are “green”). Developing criteria for assessment and engaging schools in a self-assessment process have obviously not happened. Circulars have been sent to some upazilas that schools must not organise any out-of-class hours coaching or tutoring of students, apparently for the safety of female students. This also prevented schools from charging parents any payment. Obviously, well-considered policy guidance for remedial lessons in schools and adapting these to local circumstances are needed but not ad hoc and uncoordinated actions. Besides, contrary to reform ideas, it is reported that the discontinued scholarship examinations at the end of Class 5 is to be re-introduced.

Teachers’ grade and salary level are clearly a sensitive matter. Media reports about a new salary level proposed by the primary education directorate to the public administration ministry, without explaining the context and other ancillary proposals regarding teachers’ grades and promotions, have generated resentment and led to protests by the teachers. The committee members voluntarily offered to discuss with the concerned planners the intricacies of incorporating the proposed recommendations into the PEDP5 design, but so far there has been no interaction, as far as we can tell. Unless there is a change in the way decisions are made and implemented, the reform results will not be achieved.

It appears that top officials of the government lack the enthusiasm for transformative change or are unable 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.

Global lessons to redesign social protection in Bangladesh



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Like many other streams, the July uprising has opened up new opportunities for redesigning the social protection mechanism in Bangladesh. High income inequality and changing dynamics in the labour market necessitate the adoption of pertinent policies that are appropriate considering the country’s socioeconomic climate. The National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) was initiated in 2015 to institutionalise a well-grounded social security policy in the country and to prioritise the needs of the most vulnerable segment of people. Despite the strategy being quite thorough in restructuring the outlook of social safety nets in Bangladesh, incorporating best practices globally would possibly make the mechanism more methodical.

Polices taken in countries having a similar societal fabric as Bangladesh can be considered for implementation in our context. For example, in 2024, India came up with a medical insurance coverage of \$6,000 per family for citizens aged 70 years and above, which, in the perspective of Bangladesh, can be crucial to refurbish the old-age-specific health insurance policies. The Indian government also

approved a pension scheme which guarantees the federal employees 50 percent of their base salary as a pension, a move away from previous schemes where the payouts were intrinsically linked to the market returns, something which can also be considered in the case of Bangladesh to improve the current Universal Pension Scheme. India also has the Code of Social Security adopted in 2020, which holistically expands the social security benefits to the gig and platform workers. Bangladesh lacks any such system that can be one of the most instrumental measures in bringing this spectrum of the workforce under the umbrella of social protection.

As the global landscape of the labour market is changing, holistic benefits for employees are becoming a prerequisite of a sound social protection mechanism. The Indonesian government implemented a programme for job loss security, which systematised various incentives for the employees, including cash benefits, access to labour market information and online or offline job training. The incorporation of similar policies in our NSSS can be crucial in

expediting better working conditions. Indonesia also has a law on mother and child welfare that aims to ensure the well-being of mothers and children during the first 1,000 days of the children’s lives, starting from conception, enhancing the benefits of maternity leave, something Bangladesh doesn’t have a legislative equivalent of. When it comes to maternal and child social protection policies, Argentina passed a law in 2021 which can be considered a benchmark, as it ensures that women can earn the equivalent of a year of social security contributions for every single child they have raised. And in the case of an adopted or disabled child, the benefit extends for two years. Bangladesh is still far behind regarding the undertaking of innovative social safety net practices for mothers and children, and these global practices can be a baseline for the country to follow.

Social safety nets specifically enforced for women of minority ethnic origins are not uncommon in the world as well. Mexico has implemented the “Pensiones Mujeres Bienestar,” a programme which provides a monthly financial support of 3,000 pesos to women aged 60-64 years, particularly those belonging to the Indigenous and Afro-Mexican communities,

a policy that can be regarded as a cornerstone in financially supporting women belonging to Indigenous communities in Bangladesh.

Meanwhile, having a lot of frameworks for a specific law can turn out to be quite cumbersome for policymakers. Egypt, in this regard, has unified various social insurance

schemes under one framework: Social Insurance and Pensions Law of 2019. Such a unified, comprehensive outline for social insurance schemes can also be looked into in the context of Bangladesh.

Nigeria, Kenya, and Thailand have welfare policies specifically laid out for senior citizens. Kenya has a universal social pension scheme from 2018 for persons over the age of 70 years, an age-specific threshold that can be incorporated into the existing social protection mechanism of Bangladesh. Nigeria, on the other hand, established the facilitation of a National Senior Citizens Centre in order to cater to the needs of senior citizens above the age of 70 years, a model which can be followed by Bangladesh, specifically to cater to the needs of elderly people residing in urban areas. Thailand has had the provision of a non-contributory pension scheme for elderly citizens since as early as 2009. Bangladesh can emulate the coverage and the non-contributory nature of this allowance.

Social protection policies throughout the world are rapidly evolving, taking into account the needs of an ever-changing world where the principles of leaving no one behind are stronger than ever. As a paradigm shift has occurred in Bangladesh, considering the climate of reform and the undertaking of new and innovative practices, there is no better time for reconditioning the current laws and policies in the domain of social protection as well as replacing outdated policies with modern ones that have turned out to be effective in the global context.