

End the persistent paralysis at NHRC

Why has the government failed to reactivate it after seven months?

It is unacceptable that seven months after the resignation of its chairperson and members, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) still remains leaderless, powerless, and largely ineffective. This situation might have been expected during Awami League's 15-year rule when it functioned as little more than a silent spectator to the regime's persistent human rights violations. And that should have changed following its ouster through the July uprising. Unfortunately, the interim government—which has frequently expressed its commitment to upholding human rights—has made little, if any, progress in reforming and empowering the NHRC despite having been in power for over 10 months.

Established in 2009, the commission was intended to align with the 1993 Paris Principles and function as an independent human rights watchdog. These principles require such institutions to be autonomous, well-resourced, and capable of investigating all rights violations, including those committed by state actors. However, since its inception, the NHRC has been widely criticised as a “toothless body”, and for good reason.

By law, it cannot investigate law enforcement agencies or intervene in cases pending before the courts or the ombudsman, effectively excluding it from many of the country's most serious human rights cases. Additionally, under Sections 6 and 7 of the NHRC Act, the president appoints its chairperson and members based on recommendations from a selection committee largely composed of ruling party allies. According to rights advocates, this violates the Paris Principles, which emphasise that minimising political interference is essential to a rights watchdog's credibility. Moreover, unless the commission is capable of holding state actors accountable—which the NHRC is not, by design and by statute—its very existence becomes symbolic, offering neither meaningful protection for victims nor deterrence against future violations.

Another significant concern is the NHRC's funding. Reportedly, only 25 percent of its budget comes from the state, while 75 percent is provided by international development partners. For such an important human rights body, there must be a designated budget that ensures both its efficiency and its operational independence.

On top of these pre-existing structural issues, the interim government's failure over the past seven months to reconstitute the commission has left it limited to receiving complaints and carrying out routine administrative tasks only. This is deeply unfortunate, and totally unacceptable. In a way, the continued plight of the NHRC resembles that of the National River Conservation Commission (NRCC). For years, critics argued that the NRCC was deliberately kept weak—not only in terms of legal and executive authority but also in terms of budget, resources, and administrative power. Since the change in government, it too has remained virtually non-functional. Such dysfunctions benefitted rights and rivers violators in the past, and they continue to do so now.

For a government charged with leading the state reform drive, it is difficult to understand why it has failed not only to make these commissions functional but also to reform their structures and introduce meaningful change in their governance. It is high time the government changed its course.

Tensions at NIOH hurting eye patients

Authorities must ensure no further disruptions take place

The prolonged closure of the National Institute of Ophthalmology and Hospital (NIOH)—the country's largest public facility for eye care—is something that should never have happened, given how it not only affects ordinary patients seeking eye treatment but also worsens an already battered image of the state's handling of those injured during the July uprising. At this point, it is immaterial to debate who was or is more at fault for the paralysis—hospital staff or the protesting July Joddhas. What's important is that ordinary patients are suffering because of it.

On Thursday, outdoor services have resumed after more than two weeks, while emergency services resumed on a limited scale on June 4. But other services including tests continue to remain halted. Worryingly, the prospect of full operations being restored on Saturday is clouded by uncertainty and fear that tensions may again flare up with the likely return and remobilisation of injured protesters following the Eid holiday. Hospital closure has already caused immense hardship for low-income patients who rely on this facility for affordable care, with thousands turned away. Any further disruption will only deepen their suffering while further eroding trust in the authorities' ability to mediate convincingly in this meaningless standoff.

This latest episode in the short history of public outbursts by aggrieved July Joddhas started on May 28. That day, a group of injured protesters long receiving treatment at NIOH allegedly attacked the staff, sparking a tripartite clash involving other patients and their attendants. Several doctors and nurses were injured, and some staff residential quarters were also attacked. Meanwhile, the July protesters claimed they, too, were assaulted by hospital staff and police during the incident. All this led to the hospital services being suspended. Despite sporadic negotiations and partial service resumption afterwards, things remain tense. Fuelling the concern is the refusal of injured protesters to accept discharge letters despite many among them being cleared by a medical board on June 4.

Against this backdrop, the hospital authorities, as one of the involved parties, may find it difficult to broker a solution alone. The onus, therefore, lies with the higher authorities to mediate a solution that ensures uninterrupted treatment for both the July injured and the general public. This will require clear communication of discharge procedures and addressing the protesters' grievances about neglect or malpractice. The July Joddhas deserve proper care and respect. But so do the thousands of ordinary citizens who come to this hospital for treatment.

CLARITY FROM ONE LONDON DIALOGUE

Will the other follow suit?



Kamal Ahmed is head of the Media Reform Commission in Bangladesh and an independent journalist. His X handle is @ahmedkat.

KAMAL AHMED

Even if the much-anticipated meeting between Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus and Tarique Rahman, acting chairman of the BNP, the leading political party in Bangladesh, fails to fulfil the high expectations of bridging differences over the recently unveiled election roadmap, London has nonetheless emerged as the place where the interim government's strategy gained much-needed clarity. This was largely due to the Royal Institute of International Affairs, commonly known as Chatham House, hosting Prof Yunus for a discussion and Q&A session focused on Bangladesh's future trajectory. The conversation addressed both domestic issues, such as elections, democracy, and institutional reforms, and foreign policy concerns, particularly relations with India and the Rohingya refugee crisis.

This context underscores a glaring issue: the Chief Adviser's Office still lacks an effective communication strategy. Had similar interactive press sessions been held in Dhaka over the past 10 months, many unanswered questions might have been addressed. Of course, no one desires a return to the fawning praise and suppression of dissent that characterised Sheikh Hasina's rule over 15 and a half years. However, meaningful engagement with the press—beyond selective interviews or statements by a frequently seen spokesperson—is long overdue.

At Chatham House, while most questions came from the moderator and sympathetic expatriates, the chief adviser's responses were clear and direct. His categorical rejection of any future political role and dismissal of the idea of a referendum are especially significant. Critics and conspiracy theorists have long speculated that the delay in holding elections beyond December 2025 is driven by his personal political ambitions. A referendum, they argued, could be used as a means to extend his mandate under the guise of enacting reforms. His unequivocal stance helps dispel those suspicions.

Yunus reiterated that the interim government has three core mandates: a) reforming institutions that enabled the rise of authoritarianism; b)

ensuring accountability for those involved in killing protesters and committing grave human rights violations; and c) holding a free and fair election. While these goals are widely supported, the question of a timeline remains contentious. The consultation



Prof Muhammad Yunus, chief adviser of the interim government in Bangladesh, during a Q&A session at Chatham House in London, UK on June 11, 2025.

SOURCE: CHATHAM HOUSE/FACEBOOK

process involving stakeholders and the complexities of judicial procedure make it nearly impossible to fix definitive deadlines for the first two objectives.

His declaration—“None of our cabinet members (of the interim government) would like to do that (stay in power)... Our job is to manage a smooth transition and ensure the people are happy when we hand over power to an elected government”—was reassuring. It addresses concerns raised by senior BNP figures who question the interim government's neutrality, particularly due to the continued presence of two former student leaders in ministerial positions.

for crimes against humanity. His observation that “none of that party has ever expressed remorse” leaves a narrow window for a reformed entity to seek national forgiveness—though such a transformation would demand genuine contrition and structural overhaul.

This puts pressure on international observers and allies of the Awami League, particularly India, who continue to call for the party's inclusion in future elections. They now face a stark choice: either persuade the Awami League to acknowledge and rectify its past, or accept the reality that the Bangladeshi public has decisively turned away from it. Even

public sentiment. Recorded interviews with the party's General Secretary Obaidul Quader and former minister Rezaul Karim openly acknowledging their illegal border crossings further expose their disregard for legal norms.

While it would be speculative to draw a direct connection between the Chatham House event and the Yunus-Rahman meeting, the former served as a timely opportunity to clear the air and possibly mend perceived rifts between the interim government and BNP. As BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir hinted, this meeting could well mark a turning point in Bangladesh's political trajectory—if all goes as intended.

The true purpose of education



EDUCATING EDUCATION

Dr Rubaiya Murshed is an education economist and assistant professor in the Department of Economics at the University of Dhaka.

RUBAIYA MURSHED

“Are you an education major?” someone asked me, a hint of admiration in her voice. It had been a hot humid afternoon in July; we were sitting on the field under the bot gachh at our bot-tola school, gathered for our regular classes with the homeless street children on the Dhaka University campus. She was a foreigner visiting from a social work NGO, and seeing my engagement with the children, she assumed I had specialised in the field of education.

At the time, I was a second-year student in economics, and I began to wonder: can an economist focus their skills and knowledge on matters of education? I Googled “economics and education” and found my answer. I finished my economics degrees and journeyed to the University of Cambridge, where I found a group of economists who had set up their platform working on education issues.

The dream to someday work on reforms in Bangladesh's education system became my inspiration. I day-dreamed about working on education for underprivileged children, and I set out to learn all that I could so that I could do something to make a difference when I returned to Bangladesh. The more I learnt, the harder it seemed. I decided that the first step would be to begin raising questions.

Today, it all rounds up with one last question: what is the purpose of education? The answer will ascertain that we're not like a train with competence that runs on time, but like one that doesn't know where it's going or why it's going there.

Philosopher and mathematician Bertrand Russell once cautioned that different stakeholders of education would naturally have different ideas on education's purpose, because they'd have different interests to serve. The powerful are more likely to have a different agenda altogether—they don't want education to create a workforce that can think for themselves. If we are an “educated” workforce and if we want the best collective interests of the majority to be reflected in educational policy-making, we must think, ask questions, and demand answers.

Importantly, our answers should be research-driven. We need to invest in conducting our own research and make the system of grants and funding efficient, not connection-driven. We need to fix our education system so that it mitigates socioeconomic differences, rather than reproducing it. We need to do better for the children coming from lower-income families to balance out inequities at home. We need to de-politicise education.

The truth remains that nothing

is above politics. During a visit to Cambridge while I was a student there, the then Indian education minister said, “One thing I believe is behind the change in the education system is the political will behind it.” With so much political difference persisting historically in our country, we need to unite and rise above politics for the sake of the state of our education.

We need to do our own re-imagining and remember that the true goal of education is ‘intelligence plus character,’ as Dr Martin Luther King, Jr said. Those of us who have seats at the table, who are policymakers and politicians, we need to care more—even if our own children are safely abroad studying in other education systems.

Like separation of church and state, we need separation of education and party politics. We need to ask: who sets our education policies? Who gets a seat at the table?

We need to institutionalise this process so that qualified people, not just famous people, comprise a team and so that quality work continues regardless of a change in political regime. Rabindranath Tagore, as much an education enthusiast as a writer, wrote, “What we understand by school is just a factory for providing education... There are rules in the factory, but no soul. Teachers are working, students are working, but

neither knows what this working is for.” You see, we've been yearning for a change for a long time, and this need surpasses who is in government.

If we are to revolutionise our education system, we have countless examples from around the world to draw inspiration from, many quite close to home. The likes of the Himalayan Institute of Alternatives Ladakh, combining the best of the East and the West, where students don't pay for education but work for it, where education is contextual and experiential and values the culture that has developed over a thousand years as part of it. The likes of the “Happiness Curriculum” launched in Delhi, where students learn to develop critical thinking and inquiry while also learning to express themselves independently and creatively. The likes of education reformists such as Sonam Wangchuk, the real life Phunsukh Wangdu, and Gitanjali J Angmo, whose lecture on reimagining the philosophy of education shook me to the core.

We need to do our own re-imagining and remember that the true goal of education is “intelligence plus character,” as Dr Martin Luther King, Jr said. Those of us who have seats at the table, who are policymakers and politicians, we need to care more—even if our own children are safely abroad studying in other education systems. As novelist and poet Thomas Hardy said, “All the little ones of our time are collectively the children of us adults of the time and entitled to our general care.” I end this series here in the hope that, if anything, my writings have sparked, in my soul and yours, a stronger yearning for change—for a society that lets us learn because we love to learn.