

The London meeting has given clarity

It demonstrates political maturity and goodwill

We welcome the positive outcome of the meeting between the Chief Adviser of the interim government Prof Muhammad Yunus and BNP Acting Chairman Tarique Rahman in London, during which the chief adviser suggested that the election could take place before Ramadan—if sufficient progress is made on reforms and the trials related to the July-August uprising. This conditional acceleration reflects both sides' willingness to link the election timetable to concrete progress on judicial and institutional reforms.

We are relieved that the uncertainties regarding the election timing have been allayed by this announcement and that both sides have shown maturity and a willingness to cooperate with each other. This has significantly cooled down the tensions between the interim government and the BNP and has smoothed the path towards a more stable democratic process.

Four political parties and an alliance have welcomed the concurrence between the government and the BNP regarding the timing of the election. This is a significant breakthrough in a climate previously fraught with discord, mistrust, and ambiguity. The agreement indicates a noticeable shift from the chief adviser's earlier insistence on the polls taking place between December 2025 and June 2026, a timeline strongly opposed by the BNP, which demanded a December election.

Now there is a clear election roadmap that the nation has been waiting for—one that most parties are open to. The National Citizen Party, however, has expressed its disappointment, criticising the decision as being made to satisfy one particular party, the BNP. While their concerns regarding reforms and justice not receiving priority when making this announcement are understandable, the decision to give a definite timeline that is acceptable to most political parties has been a wise one. It has avoided the confrontational politics that was expected following growing resentment of the BNP, which is one of the largest political parties in the country. It has also opened space for dialogue.

The challenge ahead for the chief adviser and his cabinet is to start meaningful electoral reforms and ensure that the process of delivering justice for those killed in the July-August uprising is initiated with fairness and transparency. The other major challenge is to ensure that the elections are held with maximum voter turnout and participation from all major parties, including the NCP.

We condemn Israel's strike on Iran

Both sides must exercise restraint before wider war erupts

We strongly condemn Israel's pre-emptive strikes on Iran as a gross violation of the UN Charter and international law. Reportedly, Israel's strikes targeted Iran's nuclear facilities, ballistic missile factories, military commanders, and nuclear scientists. So far, 78 people have been killed—including top scientists and generals—and 329 others injured in the attacks. In retaliation, Tehran launched hundreds of ballistic missiles at Israel, reportedly killing at least three people. Alarmingly, Israel's airstrikes came at a time when the sixth round of nuclear talks between the US and Iran was scheduled to take place on June 15 in Oman. Judging from the timing of the attacks, it appears that Israel does not support negotiations or a peaceful resolution of Iran's nuclear issues, and that the strikes were intended to sabotage the US-Iran talks. Reportedly, Iran has already suspended the talks, which suggests that Israel was at least partially successful—an outcome that is deeply concerning.

Israel has a long history of violating international laws. Its aggression against Palestine has persisted for decades. The world has been watching in horror as it commits genocide against the Palestinian people, with full diplomatic and logistical support from powerful Western countries, particularly the US. This time as well, US President Donald Trump voiced his support for the Israeli attacks on Iran, describing the strikes as "excellent" and "very successful." The US president told Reuters that he was aware of Israel's strikes on Iran. Meanwhile, Israel justified the strikes as a pre-emptive measure to stop Iran from nearing nuclear weapons capability. Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu even stated to the media that the strikes marked the beginning of a prolonged operation to prevent Tehran from developing an atomic weapon. Iran, however, has consistently maintained that its nuclear programme is intended solely for peaceful purposes. Evaluations from the US, UN and independent experts have also concluded that Tehran was not actively pursuing a nuclear bomb.

Clearly, it is due to the backing of the US and other Western powers that Israel can commit such acts of aggression—and even genocide—with impunity. Such backing itself is a violation of international law. We therefore urge the US to end its blind and unconditional support for Israel. Here, the UN must also play a major role. It must take steps to de-escalate the Israel-Iran conflict and work towards bringing all sides to the negotiating table. It must ensure that tensions surrounding Iran's nuclear programme are resolved through diplomacy, not through "war." We also call on world leaders to urgently intervene in this crisis before any more violence occurs, so that no further lives are lost.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY



Magna Carta sealed by King John

On this day in 1215, Magna Carta—a charter of English liberties that occupies a unique place in the popular imagination as a symbol and a battle cry against oppression—was sealed, under threat of civil war, by King John.

Citizens lament RTI paralysis in Bangladesh

Dr Shamsul Bari and Ruhi Naz are chairman and assistant director (RTI), respectively, at Research Initiatives, Bangladesh (RIB). They can be reached at rib@cititech-bd.com.

SHAMSUL BARI and RUHI NAZ

"I think there is a deliberate attempt to downgrade the use of the RTI law. There are no protection mechanisms in place to protect whistleblowers, and we hear about so many incidences of corruption and malpractice daily, but how do you raise the alarm?"

This is a typical lament of an activist who uses Bangladesh's Right to Information (RTI) Act 2009 to unearth corruption and hold the government to democratic account. Since the departure of the three Information Commissioners soon after the 2024 July uprising, this column has sought to draw the interim government's attention to the urgent need to appoint a new set of commissioners. We emphasised that, apart from the urgent reform of various institutions and mechanisms of governance destroyed through past misrule, there was an overriding need to uphold the importance of citizens' role in monitoring the work of all public authorities for better governance. This, we argued, can be advanced by conscious citizens' unhindered use of the RTI law. We underlined that the emergence of an alert group of youthful citizens who spearheaded the uprising was propitious for better and more effective use of the law and for taking it forward.

RTI applications, especially those affecting transparency and accountability, remain unanswered in most cases. As there is no recourse without the Information Commissioners, the recalcitrant officials could not be brought to book. The frustrated adherents of the RTI Act saw the delay in appointing commissioners as a deliberate act by the authorities to weaken transparency and accountability in governance.

An activist from North Bengal described his frustrations as follows: "I had engaged myself in utilising and promoting the RTI Act because I

believe that, in doing so, we, as citizens, can make a great contribution to the affairs of the state, but now I feel discouraged because I see there are no commissioners. So, there is no remedy in case of any dispute arising from

huge expenses on a commission that has been sitting idle for so many months. This is all taxpayers' money they are wasting."

Another was more aggressive: "I am surprised that the present regime is



FILE VISUAL: SHAIKH SULTANA JAHAN BADHON

an application. On the other hand, public authorities have become very casual about compliance with the law; I am not getting responses to my RTI requests. This is very frustrating—I no longer feel the excitement that I am contributing."

An irate RTI user said, "We are faced with a dismal situation. We file RTI requests, but Designated Officers (DOs) do not bother to respond because they do not care about compliance. One reason is that they know there are no Information Commissioners at the moment, so the likelihood of them imposing fines or recommending departmental action does not exist. This gives the DOs enough leeway to get away without compliance. As a result, a backlog of pending cases with the commission, applications and appeals pile up without resolution, discouraging citizens from filing RTI requests."

Another bemoaned: "It seems no one is bothered that so many complaints are piling up at the commission without any action. This is absolutely not acceptable. On top of that, the government is incurring

not realising the importance of such a transparency law, though they never fail to talk about their determination to reform all important governance sectors. But how much reform is possible by strategically keeping this most important law on the back burner and making it redundant?"

Other observations reveal the practical difficulties users face. One applicant said, "When I submitted RTI applications in recent months, a few authorities reprimanded me for using the law. They told me that I must stop all this nonsense now. They asked me to forget the RTI law, saying it is no longer in force. Some even mock us. Many of us are already disheartened. We feel sorry that the law, which saw some progress, is going backwards now."

Another observed: "We all know that the law prescribes Tk 2 as a photocopy charge for each page, but now the authorities demand excess fees from us, and when we challenge them, they misbehave with us." Similar problems are revealed in another observation: "There has been a rise in cases in recent months in

which exorbitant fees are demanded for the information requested, just to harass the applicants. And we know that applications are being returned on the plea that the office address is incorrect, though that was not the case. In some cases, the information is denied, citing Section 7 as a reason, without any justification as required by the law."

There seem to be differences in response depending on the authorities' location. According to some users, authorities who know there are no commissioners deliberately avoid responding to RTI applications. This applies mainly to government offices at the divisional and district levels. However, upazila-level offices, which are unaware, tend to respond as before.

The RTI community perceives the delay in appointing commissioners as deliberate neglect and considers it a tactic to weaken transparency efforts. Some journalists felt that they faced risks when filing RTI applications. Without an active commission, they lack protection or recourse in cases of harassment or denial. According to others, public authorities are under no pressure to comply with proactive disclosure requirements without a functioning commission.

The frustration and dismay in the statements quoted above reveal the concern of our citizens committed to promoting transparency and accountability of public offices in the country, as envisioned in the RTI Act. The longer such frustrations continue, the greater the danger that the gains made over the years in creating awareness and implementing the law will be largely lost. We know that measures for improving the existing RTI Act are included in the recommendations of one or more reform commissions set up by the interim government. While their approval and implementation will take time, attention must be given immediately to the appointment of the three Information Commissioners so that the law does not perish in the meantime through neglect and inaction.

How extortion is strangling businesses

AN OPEN DIALOGUE

Dr Abdullah Shibli is an economist and employed at a nonprofit financial intermediary in the US. He previously worked for the World Bank and Harvard University.



ABDULLAH SHIBLI

Last week, I was chatting with my friend Shuvro, who had just come back from Indonesia for a short visit to celebrate Eid in Bangladesh. I asked him if he had noticed any changes in Dhaka while he was away. This was his first visit after the July uprising. Shuvro, a businessman, said ruefully, "Well, it is tough to do business here now because the incidence of *chandabaji* (extortion) has increased."

I knew what he meant. I have seen newspaper reports about the prevalence of *chandabaji* (which is a genteel word for extortion). One can hardly open a Bangla newspaper without coming across a news item on the ferocity of this practice at bus stations, kitchen markets, and other transport hubs.

The scourge of *chandabaji* has been eating away at business profits and also depleting the take-home wages of workers. Shuvro said that he saw the extortionists operating through their agents or collectors, known as "linemen," in all the major inter-district bus terminals located in the busiest areas of the capital—Gabtol, Sayedabad, and Mohakhali. The situation is even worse outside Dhaka. It manifests itself under different names and forms: tax, fees, contribution, fundraising, crowdsourcing, rent-seeking, crowdfunding, etc.

At a recent conference, Taskeen Ahmed, president of the Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DCCI), declared, "Extortion has become an abscess for businesses. Even now, businesspeople cannot

operate without fear."

Chandabaji is a form of corruption and affects poorer people more severely. In a recent book, David Jackman of Oxford University, who has years of research experience in the slums and informal labour markets of India and Bangladesh, provides a fascinating account of the modus operandi of extortionists in Kawran Bazar, a major marketplace in Dhaka.

The book, entitled *Syndicates and Societies: Criminal Politics in Dhaka*, based on Jackman's socio-anthropological work, also sheds light on the role of syndicates in crime and politics, "revealing the world of the extortionist."

Jackman is unequivocal in his critique of the major political parties, including Awami League and Bangladesh Nationalist Party, for sustaining the operations of the extortion network and how it adversely affects both business and the working class.

Since coming to power last August, the interim government has been working to address corruption and has taken measures to reduce the influence of power brokers in national politics. However, it soon became clear that various elements of the groups dominating the current political scene have taken over the reins from the AL extortionists. In the name of "levy," "collection," or "contribution," the new operators of various scams are resorting to extortion and exploiting vulnerable populations.

A prominent local daily reported that an investigation by an intelligence

agency found that local influential figures and political party leaders, especially those linked to the BNP, are involved in extortion. In the past, AL members used various tools such as tokens, receipts, and stickers for extortion. But the new extortionists have introduced a novel method to avoid the risk of detection.

An alarming story in September

levels of organised crime in a country and assess its resilience to such activity, identified several rackets and syndicates engaged in nefarious activities.

Researchers concluded that organisations are not transparent about how donated funds are used or distributed in Bangladesh, raising concerns about accountability and the



FILE ILLUSTRATION: BIPOB CHAKROBORTY

2024 gained national prominence. Activists aligned with the BNP took control of the Shimulia ferry terminal, the fish market, and trawler docks at Lauhajang in Munshiganj, allegedly by threatening and assaulting the rightful leaseholders.

Various reliable sources confirmed that, in Bangladesh, fundraising cartels have created a menace, raising concerns that these forces could be engaged in the potential misuse of funds. These campaigns might falsely claim to be raising money for a specific cause or exaggerate the needs of Bangladesh, potentially leading to scams.

The role of organised crime in fundraising was confirmed by a 2023 study funded by the US government. The "Organised Crime Index," an innovative tool designed to measure

effective use of resources.

Fundraising efforts might be used to support specific political or ideological agendas within Bangladesh, potentially undermining genuine humanitarian efforts and exacerbating social divisions.

Some individuals or groups might exploit the vulnerability of people in Bangladesh by creating false narratives or misrepresenting their needs to raise funds for personal gain.

Sumon Howlader, president of the Bangladesh Poultry Association, said extortion was a major reason for the price hike of eggs and chickens.

The prevalence of extortion fees has been cited as a reason why small and medium businesses in Bangladesh are not willing to pay income tax, and these fees also contribute to high production costs in the country.