

YUNUS-TARIQUE MEETING IN LONDON

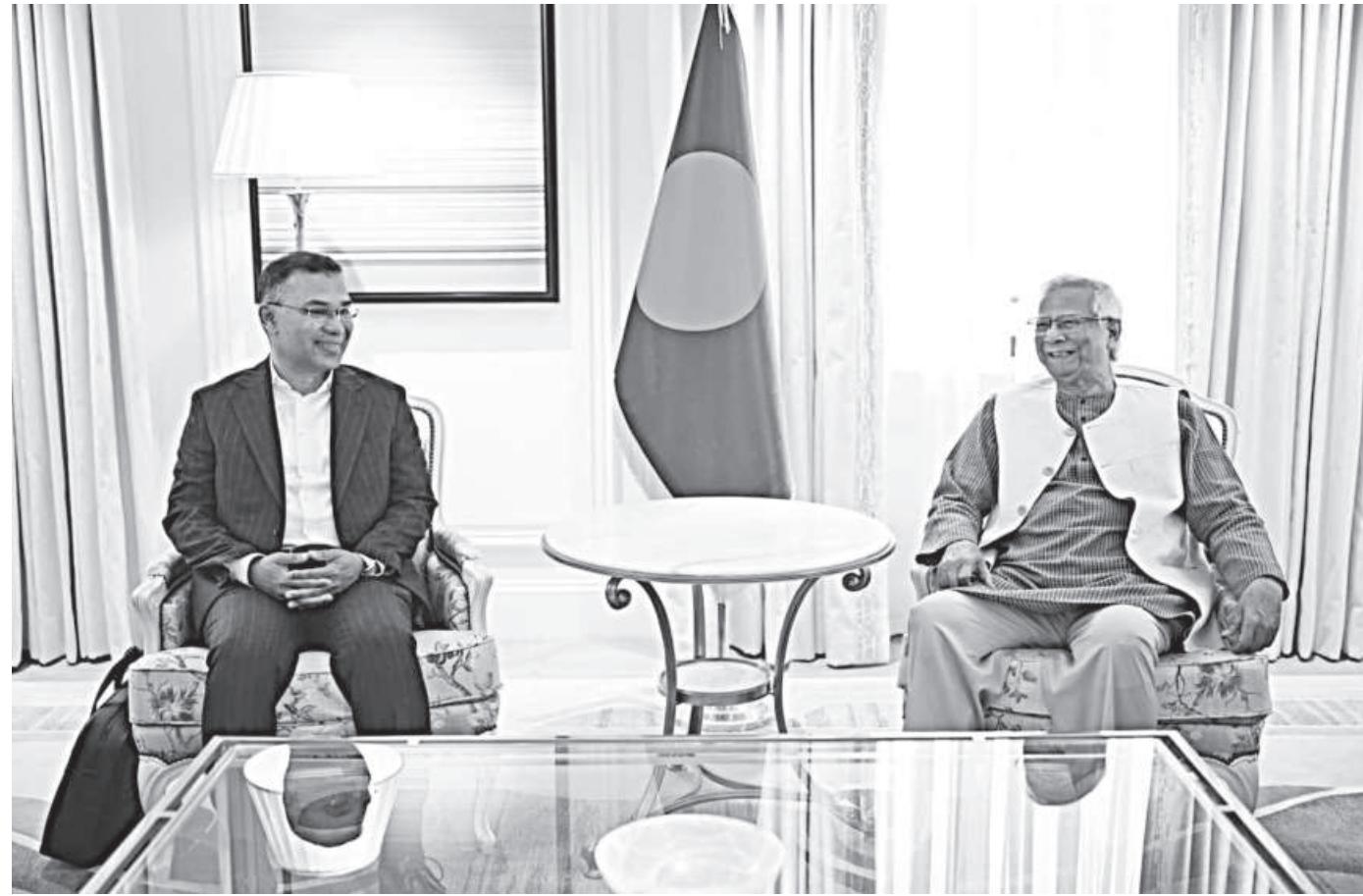
A pathway for democratic transition

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Almost a year on from the Monsoon Revolution, the euphoria of victory against the monstrous Hasina regime has faded, and the prospects for a peaceful democratic transition hang in the balance. The interim government has found itself getting entangled in various policy controversies. The National Citizen Party, formed by the youth leaders who spearheaded the uprising last July, is finding it difficult to gain political traction. Radicals within and outside the government try to seize every opportunity to push their anarchic agenda. Meanwhile, the largest democratic party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, appears unsure of its own reform agenda and vision.

It is against this backdrop that the Chief Adviser of the interim government Prof Muhammad Yunus and the BNP's Acting Chairperson Tarique Rahman met in London on June 13. The nation waited with bated breath for the outcome of the meeting. Our history is full of such meetings where the principals fail to find common ground. The early signs suggest that this time might be an exception. It seems that the two leaders have agreed to work towards a smooth democratic transition, with agreements on reforms paving the way towards a pre-Ramadan



Chief Adviser of the interim government Prof Muhammad Yunus meets with BNP Acting Chairman Tarique Rahman in London on June 13, 2025.

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Our history is full of such meetings where the principals fail to find common ground. The early signs suggest that this time might be an exception. It seems that the two leaders have agreed to work towards a smooth democratic transition, with agreements on reforms paving the way towards a pre-Ramadan election. The Nagorik Coalition—a civil society platform advocating reforms related to citizen's rights and building democratic institutions—has proposed a clear, feasible pathway that can lead to a peaceful, durable democratic transition by next Ramadan.

requires two things: a high-turnout election and consensus on some critical reforms. Let us take these elements in turn. Election timing is not just a matter of polling day. A set of activities required for the election must begin immediately. An ordinance needs to be issued by the end of July allowing those who have turned 18 in

2025 to be enrolled in the voter roll. The voter list could be finalised by the end of October. This could pave the way for the announcement of the election schedule in late November, with the election taking place before Ramadan.

And it is critical for a democratic transition that the election takes place before Ramadan, not afterwards. Bangladesh has not had a large-scale national election since 2008. It is well understood that the functioning of government machinery, and indeed of society as a whole, changes during the month of fasting. Eid is arguably the biggest celebration for most Bangladeshi families. Furthermore, April is the exam season, and educational institutions play a vital logistical role in the conduct of elections.

That the chief adviser even floated a post-Ramadan April election, defying these basic social realities, is difficult to fathom. Back in August, he had said the timing of elections would be determined

by politicians. Well, most politicians who would actually campaign for election on the ground—as opposed to shouting on social media—would welcome a pre-Ramadan election.

It is therefore welcome news that the chief adviser has indicated that, if sufficient progress is made on the reform front, a pre-Ramadan election is very much possible.

The democratic political parties are not as far apart on critical reforms as one might believe from the daily din of disinformation on social media. For example, there is general agreement on a hundred member upper house, one hundred female MPs, an election-time non-partisan government, and the strengthening of parliamentary committees and institutions such as the Election Commission. The disagreement is about the mechanisms.

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avoiding the difficulties we have had in the past with caretaker governments or weakening institutions. On the other hand, if the upper house simply reflects the seats won in the lower house—as preferred by the BNP—then the risk is that, over time, its members will resemble the party hacks that made up Hasina's parliament.

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A similar point can be made about the one hundred female MPs.

Politically, there is nothing for the BNP to lose from agreeing to a proportionally represented upper house with a role to play in the formation of the election-time non-partisan government, and in ensuring

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better parliamentary oversight and the strengthening of institutions. Indeed, as the largest democratic party, the BNP is likely to maintain the largest number of upper house members in the foreseeable future under proportional representation.

And as a party that is expected to govern, it has everything to gain from better institutions. Similarly, the party stands to benefit most from directly elected female MPs, simply because it is the largest democratic party with a nationwide presence.

That is, there is both national interest and narrower partisan logic for the BNP acting chairperson to agree in principle to these key reform ideas.

The chief adviser had expressed his desire to see the Rohingya celebrate Eid-ul-Fitr 2026 in their homeland. There is little chance that he would see that wish fulfilled. Perhaps he would be better off focusing the next few months solely on the mechanism of elections.

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Why we must catch up with global disability commitments

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The Global Disability Summit (GDS), held in April 2025 in Berlin, Germany, ended with a renewed global push to advance and protect disability rights and inclusion. At the heart of the summit was the adoption of the Amman-Berlin Declaration on Global Disability Inclusion, a powerful and unified call to action by the global community. For the first time, governments and development actors collectively committed to ensuring that at least 15 percent of international development programmes implemented at the country level explicitly target disability inclusion. This "15 percent for the 15 percent" principle—ensuring inclusive development for the estimated 15 percent of the world's population living with disabilities (WHO)—has the potential to transform lives and make the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (SDGs) truly inclusive.

The declaration, endorsed by over 100 governments, development agencies, financial institutions, and multilateral organisations from both the Global North and South, sets a timeline: this 15 percent target is to be met by 2028, coinciding with the fourth Global Disability Summit. This global consensus represents more than a numerical target; it is a call for justice, equity, and practical policy shifts that can break the cycle of exclusion faced by people with disabilities worldwide.

Yet amid this global awakening, Bangladesh was noticeably absent. Bangladesh's absence from the GDS 2025 was both symbolic and troubling. A country once known as a disability rights champion in South Asia—having made



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eleven ambitious commitments during the previous summits in 2018 and 2022—has now retreated into silence. Historically, Bangladesh's commitments on the global stage had been inspiring, positioning the nation as a beacon for inclusive development.

But the failure to participate in this critical global event reflects a stark decline in national priority on disability issues under the current interim government.

This retreat is particularly alarming given the fact that, as per the World Health Organization (WHO), over 15 percent of Bangladesh's population lives with some form of disability. These are not peripheral figures—they represent over 25 million citizens. The interim government, which took charge with the promise to eliminate discrimination and rebuild a just and more equal society, was expected to bring fresh commitment and urgency to such issues. Instead, it has allowed disability rights to

fall into neglect. In the last nine months, not a single meaningful policy or initiative has been introduced to address the needs and rights of people with disabilities.

Even with the existence of the Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2013, which explicitly guarantees equal rights and protection for persons with disabilities, the government continues to treat disability through a charity lens. Institutional structures meant to implement the law have been paralysed—no meetings of the National Coordination Committee or the National Executive Committee have taken place in the past nine months. This policy inertia has led to a tangible worsening of conditions: people with disabilities now face increased barriers in accessing education, health services, livelihoods, and employment. The interim government's failure to act is not just a policy lapse; it is a breach of its own legal obligations and a

betrayal of millions of citizens living with disabilities.

The Amman-Berlin Declaration should serve as a roadmap for Bangladesh to realign with global disability rights standards. It reflects a collective recognition that inclusive development is not an afterthought—it is imperative. Bangladesh's silence and its failure to endorse the declaration signal a concerning lack of commitment at a time when global partnerships and shared accountability are more important than ever. It is essential that Bangladesh immediately endorses the Amman-Berlin Declaration and commits to the 15 percent for the 15 percent target. Such an endorsement must not remain symbolic. It should be accompanied by concrete actions to integrate disability inclusion into the fabric of all development efforts.

The 15 percent for the 15 percent concept is both simple and powerful. It demands that 15 percent of all development programmes—particularly those supported by international cooperation—directly address the needs of people with disabilities,

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who themselves comprise around 15 percent of the world's population (WHO). This model is rooted in fairness and equity. It aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the principle of "leaving no one behind," especially in countries like Bangladesh where socio-economic exclusion is disproportionately high amongst persons with disabilities.

rights; otherwise, the country will continue down a path of indifference and neglect towards disability inclusion. The Global Disability Summit 2025 was not just another diplomatic gathering. It was a clarion call to rethink inclusion, refocus on rights, and reimagine development. Bangladesh's absence was a missed opportunity; but the door is not yet closed.