The Daily Star
FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Fix NBR crisis before it does more damage

Why is this issue being dragged on for so long?

It is deeply alarming that even after around 40 days, the stalemate at the National Board of Revenue (NBR) remains unresolved. We must say that this crisis—along with the Nagar Bhaban paralysis that continued almost simultaneously until Thursday—has set a bad precedent, even by the standards of our often fractious and crisis-ridden public administration. And the longer it drags on, the more it disrupts administrative functions, damages the economy, and undermines public trust in the government's ability to handle sensitive reform processes.

According to media reports, the protesting NBR officials issued an ultimatum that if the NBR chairman was not removed by this Friday, they would go for a total shutdown from Saturday. The protesters—comprising officers across income tax, VAT, and customs departments—have been staging daily pen-down strikes and sit-ins in front of the NBR headquarters for several hours since June 22. Earlier protests in response to the NBR bifurcation ordinance announced on May 12 had failed to yield any result. Since Wednesday, most NBR offices across the country have also observed work abstention, with only export processing and international passenger services remaining operational.

The wider effect of such disruptions cannot be overstated, with vital revenue collection activities being halted at a time when the government needs every taka to replenish its coffers and maintain macroeconomic stability. With a full shutdown now being threatened, the situation could deteriorate even further. Perhaps this is what the protesters intended—using the disruption and the resulting losses and suffering as a bargaining chip—but as we have warned before, there can be no justification for the way they have chosen to protest. What troubles us more is how preventable this crisis was from the outset. The government should have adopted a more consultative approach when drafting the NBR ordinance. Even after protests had dragged on for weeks, it failed to engage properly with the protesters' demands for prioritising revenue cadre officers in key positions and withdrawing recent punitive transfer orders.

This has only fuelled resentment among protesters who are now doubling down on their forceful tactics. This is totally unacceptable. An administration cannot be held hostage by its employees, nor can it remain blind to their legitimate grievances. It is possible, as some experts say, that the stalemate is being prolonged due to "ego clashes." Whatever the reasons may be, we believe it is high time the chief adviser intervened directly to resolve the issue. A clear roadmap, including a timeline for any ordinance revision, must be announced without delay so that everyone can return to work.

Stop the sewage pollution in Dhaka

Protect water bodies, rivers from unchecked contamination

It is most unfortunate that a megacity like Dhaka still does not have a proper sewage management system. A recent survey has revealed that 59 percent of households in Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC) dispose of their sewage (human waste) directly into drains and canals, as they are outside Dhaka WASA's sewer network. Although buildings are required to use septic tanks for sewage treatment, these households or owners rarely do. Instead, they secretly discharge waste into drains, which then flows into canals, eventually contaminating our rivers and other water bodies. Surprisingly, many of these buildings are located in posh residential areas such as Gulshan, Banani, Baridhara and Niketan. Reportedly, among the 524 houses surveyed in Gulshan, 367 had direct drainage lines connected to water bodies.

A decade ago, Dhaka WASA adopted a master plan to bring all buildings under a sewage network. As the plan has not been implemented, around 90 percent of the city remains outside this network. This has resulted in rampant pollution of water bodies in and around the city. As a recent study by the River and Delta Research Centre has revealed, pollution sources have nearly doubled over the last five years. The study, based on field surveys and satellite imagery, found severe pollution in the Buriganga, Turag, Shitalakkhya, and Balu rivers, all connected to Dhaka. It also identified 393 discharge points, including 102 industrial sources, 75 municipal sewer connections, and 216 smaller private outlets—all discharging untreated waste directly into rivers. Moreover, contaminants were found to be channelled to the rivers through 38 sluice gates and 62 service canals, alongside 441 dumping stations and points. The level of pollution thus generated is extremely worrying.

Due to Dhaka's high population density and space constraints, building and maintaining large-scale treatment infrastructure is a challenge. The authorities, therefore, should discard the old master plan and develop a new one prioritising localised, executable solutions, such as mandatory septic tanks in each building, small-scale treatment plants, and strict enforcement of building regulations. Since the Dasherkandi plant, which took a decade to construct, currently operates outside the sewerage network, it should be urgently integrated into WASA's system. Additionally, there must be clear provisions ensuring that every large housing project installs its own treatment plant. Only well-planned and coordinated efforts can help curb Dhaka's widespread sewage pollution.

Media reform shouldn't be left out of the July Charter

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

KAMAL AHMED

As political negotiations intensify across party lines, the possibility of a national reform consensus—once unthinkable—now appears within reach.

Over the past weeks, Bangladesh has witnessed a marathon of political dialogues involving all openly active parties, ranging from allies to adversaries, aimed at reaching common ground on vital constitutional, electoral, and institutional reforms. These discussions, under the aegis of the National Consensus Commission created by the interim government, mark a significant departure from past political norms.

Until recently, talks were verging on a deadlock, particularly over key constitutional issues: limiting the prime minister's terms, creating a National Constitutional Council, and establishing a second chamber in Jatiya Sangsad. Encouragingly, parties have begun softening their stances, suggesting that consensus may be possible. Such agreement is essential for drafting what is being called the July Charter, a foundational document based on cross-party consensus.

However, the final shape of this charter remains unclear.

In a nationally televised address on June 6, Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus expressed hope that the charter would be finalised and presented within the month. Calling it "a pledge," Yunus explained that it would codify agreed reform proposals from the reform commissions. Political parties, by signing the document, would commit to implementing these reforms.

Yunus also pledged immediate government action on key reforms outlined in the charter. "We are committed to implementing the urgent reforms according to the July Charter," he said. "We also want to begin working on other parts. Hopefully, the remaining parts will be carried forward by the next elected government."

Following the mass uprising that toppled Sheikh Hasina's autocratic regime las year, the interim government launched 11 reform commissions—six initially, and five more later. However, the staggered timeline meant that only the first six commissions' proposals entered the consensus-building process.

These six commissions, focusing on the constitution, election, public administration, judiciary, police and anti-corruption, form the basis of current negotiations. The remaining five, covering media, labour, women's rights, health and local government, have been sidelined. The National Consensus Commission has not formally reviewed their findings, raising critical questions: are these areas considered less urgent? Or is consensus assumed, with implementation deferred?

The late submission of these second-phase reports (two to four months after the formation of the consensus commission) prevented their integration into the core discussions. This omission has had real consequences.

Take the Media Reform Commission, for example. It recommended limiting restrictions on the freedom of expression—especially those related to national security or foreign relations—to wartime only. This proposal was excluded from the Constitution Reform Commission's summary and thus not debated. It also suggested legal protections for journalistic integrity, including source confidentiality and privacy rights, modelled after Sweden and Switzerland. Despite support from at least one major party (BNP), these proposals have not entered the consensus framework.

Similarly, the media commission recommended a clear legal definition of contempt of court to ensure freedom of the press. This concern was raised with the Judicial Reform Commission, yet it is missing from the current judicial reform summary.

Another major gap involves reforming the colonial-era Official Secrets Act of 1923. While the Public Administration Reform Commission called for updating the law, it failed to specify how. The Media Reform Commission went further, proposing changes to Section 5 to both protect national security and legally safeguard investigative journalism. These recommendations, too, remain unaddressed.

Even the Constitution Reform Commission's 40-point list of fundamental rights and freedoms has been compressed into five general categories by the National Consensus Commission. If party leaders rely only on the summary instead of reviewing the full report, critical elements may be left out of the final draft.

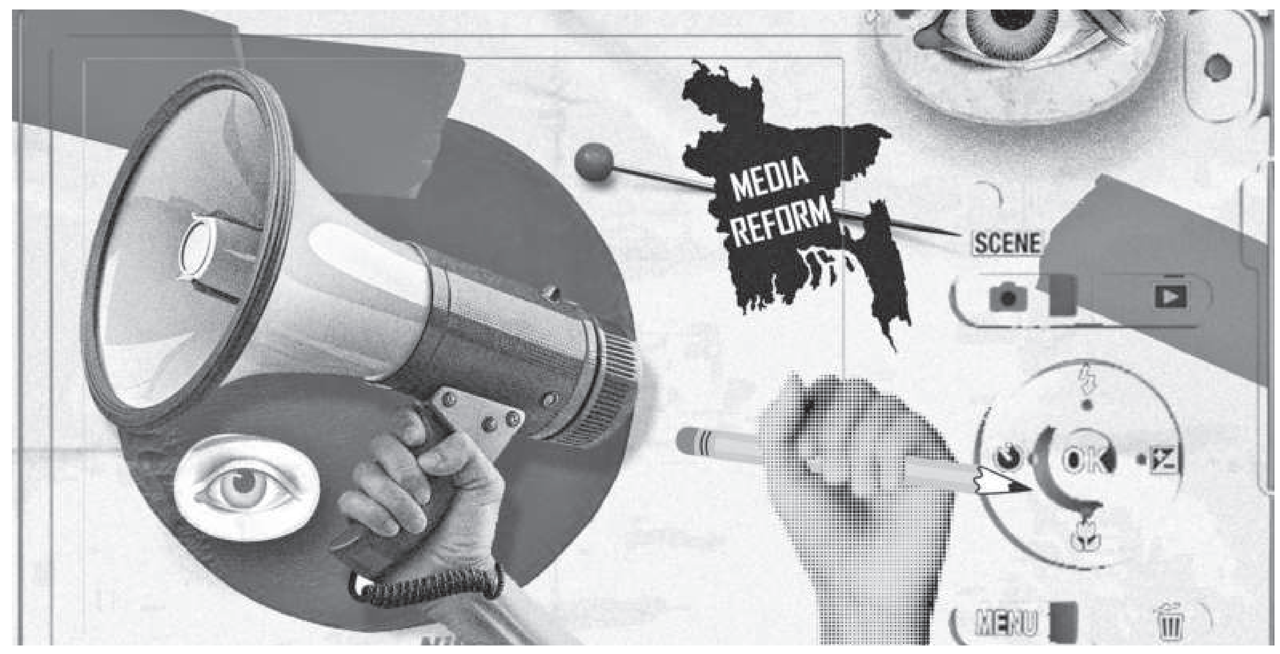
Some issues, like granting autonomy to the state-run Bangladesh Television and Bangladesh Betar, have long enjoyed public support and are part of the historical reform agenda. Yet, despite repeated promises, implementation remains elusive.

Other proposals remain politically sensitive or require sustained commitment. For example, while the right to form trade unions is enshrined in the constitution, real progress on minimum wage laws, labour rights, and workplace safety remains slow. In a reformed political order, will workers have recourse—or even the voice—to demand justice?

At its heart, the July Charter aims to replace entrenched authoritarianism with accountable, democratic governance. But institutions such as parliament, the judiciary, public administration, law enforcement, and even the media have often served narrow interests. Without meaningful reform, they risk doing so again.

In the current market-driven environment, state-run media's autonomy is not enough. Private media must also be held to ethical standards. The Media Reform Commission warned about the corrosive effects of black money, media monopolisation, and editorial bias on democratic processes, particularly elections. The absence of media reform from these discussions is especially troubling, given its importance not only for democratic renewal but for ensuring free and fair elections. The Media Reform Commission provided detailed documentation on how media manipulation can impact electoral outcomes—something still fresh in many citizens' memories.

Ignoring media reform now would be a serious strategic misstep. At minimum, long-term reforms with urgent democratic implications must be accompanied by firm political commitments. So the central question persists: will the July Charter include them?



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

A quiet shift in South Asia's energy landscape

Md. Ibrahim Khalilullah
is vice-president of Bangladesh Law Alliance. He can be reached at ibrahimkhalilullah010@gmail.com.

MD. IBRAHIM KHALILULLAH

Not many people paid attention when, on a humid June morning, 40MW of electricity began making its way from the rivers in central Nepal to the grids of northern Bangladesh. There was no grand summit, but make no mistake: this unassuming cross-border trade could be the opening act of something far more ambitious, possibly even transformational.

The idea is simple on paper. Nepal, long known for its snow-fed rivers and hydro potential, now finds itself in a position to export power. Bangladesh, in need of diversifying its energy sources and weaning off an overdependence on fossil fuels, has emerged as a willing buyer. India, which sits geographically between them, agreed to let the current pass through its territory.

The wires, in a very literal sense, are now connected. Electricity started flowing on June 15, 2025, under a deal signed eight months ago. And with that, South Asia saw the first instance of a functioning, trilateral power trade arrangement.

Forty megawatts will not rewrite anyone's energy future overnight. But that's not the point. This moment isn't about the size of the deal; it's about its structure, its precedent, and the quiet tectonic shift it represents in how the region could approach energy cooperation going forward.

For decades, South Asia has struggled to build the kind of shared infrastructure that's taken for granted in other parts of the world. Energy, in particular, has remained largely siloed within national borders, even though the logic for integration has always been relevant.

The geography alone suggests potential: hydropower-rich nations like Nepal and Bhutan upstream, densely populated and energy-hungry economies like India and Bangladesh downstream. But until now, politics, red tape, and mistrust have kept those connections mostly theoretical.

This deal changes that. It's modest, seasonal, and very much pilot in nature—power will only flow during Nepal's monsoon months, when river-fed turbines are at their peak. Yet, it proves something many had quietly doubted: three countries with distinct interests can make cross border power trade work. The electricity is drawn from Nepal's Trishuli and Chilime hydropower stations. It then travels through a 400kV line stretching from Muzaffarpur in India to Bheramara in Bangladesh. Nepal handles the losses and logistics up to the Indian border; Bangladesh takes over from there.

The pricing is competitive, pegged at $0.064 per unit—enough to justify the costs on both ends, but not so high as to discourage future expansion.

Nepal, a country that was dealing with daily power cuts not too long ago, now sees hydro exports as a ticket to broader economic transformation. Its energy sector is scaling fast: installed capacity has nearly tripled in under a decade, and the potential still dwarfs what's currently online.

With more than 40,000MW considered economically viable, the possibilities are enormous. Revenue from exports could help ease the trade deficit, attract foreign investment, and breathe life into local economies where many hydropower projects are based.

Bangladesh, for its part, needs this kind of diversification. Its power system has grown rapidly, but it remains tethered to gas and imported petroleum, which are becoming more volatile. Hydropower from Nepal offers cleaner energy, as well as a hedge against global price swings and supply disruptions. Even small amounts of imported clean power help chip away at emissions, which is no small consideration for a country so vulnerable to climate impacts.

India's role is significant. By facilitating the trade, not just diplomatically, but also by allowing its grid to serve as a conduit, Delhi signals that regional energy cooperation is no longer just a talking point. Stability and growth in neighbouring economies serve India's long-term interests, especially energy security and climate resilience across the subcontinent.

But none of this is smooth sailing. The arrangement, while promising, is still fragile. It depends on a narrow seasonal window when Nepal's rivers run high. Once the dry months arrive, the surplus dries up. Grid balancing, load forecasting, and backup generation all become harder. And that's before you get to the regulatory entanglements: every cross-border energy transaction still needs to navigate a maze of licences, tariffs, and political risks.

The recent delay in Bangladesh's letter of credit, which pushed back the timeline by months, is a case in point. These are not just bureaucratic hiccups; they can threaten confidence in the entire model. Add in climate variability—flash floods, glacial shifts, and erratic monsoons—and even the most carefully laid plans start to look uncertain.

Then there's the question of scale. Forty megawatts is an important start, but South Asia's energy future will be written in thousands, not dozens, of megawatts. Nepal has outlined ambitious goals: over 28,000MW in generation capacity and 15,000MW in exports by 2035. Whether that vision materialises will depend not just on hydropower output but on transmission capacity, investment appetite, and—perhaps above all—trust among neighbours.

What happened on June 15 may seem small, but it matters precisely because it's real. It's not a memorandum or a vision document—it's electricity, flowing today, thanks to years of diplomacy, engineering, and patient negotiation. In a region often defined by its fractures and flashpoints, the current moving through these lines carries more than power. It carries proof that cooperation, when grounded in mutual benefit and quiet persistence, is possible. And perhaps, in a warming, wired world, that's exactly the kind of energy South Asia needs most.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Prelude to World War I


HEIR TO AUSTRIAN THRONE ASSASSINATED; WIFE BY HIS SIDE ALSO SHOT TO DEATH; EARLIER ATTEMPT ON THEIR LIVES FAILED

On this day in 1914, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, and his consort, Sophie, were assassinated by Gavrilo Princip in Sarajevo, Bosnia, precipitating the outbreak of World War I.

The Daily Star
Reg. No. DA 781

EDITOR & PUBLISHER: Mahfuz Anam
Printed by him on behalf of Mediaworld Ltd at Transcraft Ltd, 229, Tejgaon Industrial Area, editor@thedailystar.net

Registered & Head Offices: The Daily Star Centre
64-65 Kazi Nazrul Islam Avenue, Dhaka-1215
Phone: 09610222222

Newsroom: Fax- 58156306
reporting@thedailystar.net

Advertisement: 01711623910
advertisement@thedailystar.net
GPO Box: 3257

Subscription:
01711623906

thedailystar.net
bangla.thedailystar.net/