

Are we ready for a proportional representation system?



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The interim government's reform drive, initiated last October through the formation of six commissions, has entered a crucial phase. These commissions—focusing on constitutional, electoral, judicial, administrative, and anti-corruption reforms—have submitted their reports. Now, the task of building political consensus on their recommendations rests with the seven-member National Consensus Commission, which began its work on February 15 under the leadership of the chief adviser. The commission's mandate is to facilitate dialogue and agreement among political parties on proposals that could fundamentally reshape the nation's governance framework.

One of the more contentious issues to have surfaced in recent discussions is whether Bangladesh should adopt a proportional representation (PR) system for future parliamentary elections. Political parties are divided. Bangladesh Jamaat-e Islami has publicly supported the idea and submitted proposals to that effect. Other parties have expressed similar interest, viewing PR as a route to more inclusive governance. But the BNP has strongly opposed it. Interestingly, despite the divide over PR, there is reported convergence on other structural reforms, such as the establishment of a bicameral legislature with a 100-member upper house and the assignment of the deputy speaker's role to the opposition.

To assess the feasibility of PR, one must return to the constitution. Article 65(2) provides that members of parliament shall be elected from single-member territorial constituencies by direct election. This enshrines the first-past-the-

post (FPTP) model as the basis of Bangladesh's electoral process. Any move to introduce PR for the lower house would require a constitutional amendment under Article 142, which demands a two-thirds majority vote in parliament—a hurdle that is currently insurmountable in the absence of an elected legislature.

Furthermore, the reform commissions themselves have not advocated for PR in the lower house, provided that the bicameral parliamentary model is implemented. The Constitution Reform Commission has proposed retaining the direct election model for the lower house while suggesting that the proposed upper house could be constituted through a proportional representation system (pages 51-52 of its report). Meanwhile, the Electoral Reform Commission, despite extensive consultations, refrained from making any recommendation on this issue, citing sharp political

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disagreement (pages 84-87 of its report). The Electoral Reform Commission recognised that any change in the method of election

would require a consensus that simply does not exist at this stage.

The absence of any recommendation in favour of PR for the lower house has legal and procedural consequences. The mandate of the National Consensus Commission is confined to building agreement on the proposals previously submitted by the major

that the conversation about PR is unwarranted. As a theoretical model, PR has several merits. It promises to reduce the distortions produced by FPTP, under which a party can win an overwhelming majority of seats with a far smaller share of the popular vote. It offers a more inclusive framework, potentially giving smaller and emerging parties

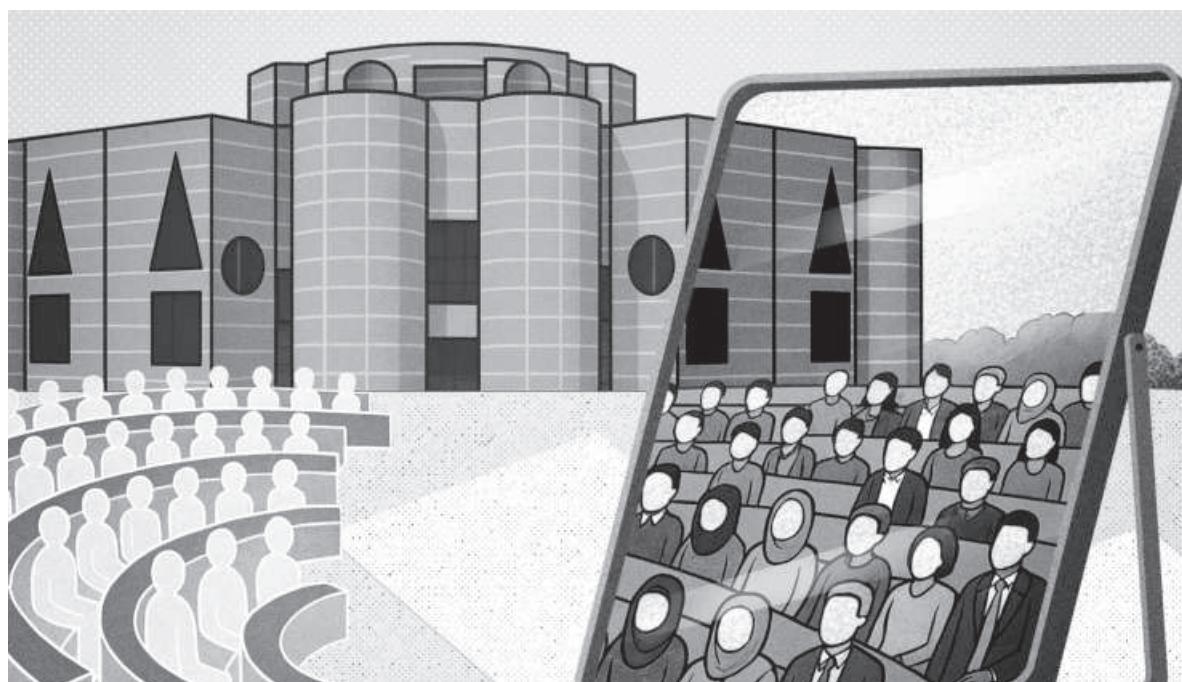
judged not in isolation but within the context in which it is to operate. Bangladesh's political culture is highly polarised. Its democratic institutions remain fragile. Electoral processes have been repeatedly marred by violence, boycotts, and allegations of irregularities. In this context, PR might introduce new complexities rather than resolve

lower house is limited. Recently, 60 eminent citizens publicly called for a PR-based upper house to enhance inclusion and accountability. However, they were cautious about replicating that model for the lower house, fearing legislative gridlock and excessive fragmentation. Their view aligns with the Constitution Reform Commission's recommendation: preserve direct elections in the lower house but use PR for the proposed upper chamber to ensure a balance between local representation and proportional fairness.

That, perhaps, offers a way forward. Bangladesh could consider a mixed electoral system in the future, combining FPTP and PR models. Such systems are used successfully in countries like Germany and New Zealand, where some parliamentary seats are filled by direct constituency vote and others by party list based on national vote share. Alternatively, Bangladesh could introduce PR incrementally, first at the local government level or in a newly created upper house, allowing for institutional adaptation and political learning.

For now, however, the road to a PR system in parliamentary elections remains closed—legally, politically, and procedurally. The current constitution does not allow it. The reform commissions have not endorsed it. The political consensus required to amend the constitution is absent. And the mandate of the National Consensus Commission technically does not extend to issues beyond the submitted reform proposals.

It is tempting, in moments of democratic disillusionment, to look for structural fixes. But electoral systems are not magic wands. Their effectiveness depends on the political culture, institutional maturity, and level of public trust within which they operate. PR may well be a worthy goal for the future. For now, Bangladesh must focus on restoring the credibility of its existing system, ensuring free and fair elections, and gradually building the conditions under which more ambitious reforms like PR could eventually take root.



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

reform commissions, as it was established specifically to foster consensus around those earlier reform recommendations. Since the relevant commissions have not proposed PR for the lower house, this issue technically falls outside the scope of the current dialogue. More importantly, the Constitution Reform Commission has in fact proposed preserving the existing direct electoral system for the Jatiya Sangsad. It would therefore be institutionally inconsistent and procedurally misplaced for the National Consensus Commission to entertain a proposal that contradicts the reform roadmap already submitted.

This, however, does not mean

a fair chance at representation. It can encourage coalition governments, reduce political alienation, and better reflect the diversity of public opinion. In principle, PR systems also allow for greater representation of women, religious minorities, and other underrepresented groups. Unlike the existing system, which reserves seats for women through indirect party nominations, a well-designed PR system could enable women to be elected directly from party lists. Many countries that have adopted PR, such as Sweden, Nepal and South Africa, have seen marked improvements in the descriptive and substantive representation of marginalised groups.

Yet any electoral system must be

existing ones. Far from encouraging stable coalition governments, it could lead to fragmented parliaments filled with single-issue or regionally entrenched parties, making coherent governance difficult.

Another concern is institutional capacity. Implementing PR would require significant administrative reform, voter education, and legislative clarity. Public understanding of how votes translate into seats would need to be built through large-scale civic education programmes. Without careful preparation, the transition could create confusion and mistrust, further damaging an already strained electoral system.

Even among civil society, support for a blanket introduction of PR in the

WORLD POPULATION DAY

A fairer future depends on the empowerment of young people



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which is remarkably high when compared to other countries in the South Asian region, highlighting a significant challenge to early marriage, early childbearing, and associated health and social issues for young women. There is a significant gap between the total fertility rate (TFR) of 2.3, whereas the desired fertility rate is 1.3 (BDHS 2022).

aged 15-49 is 64 percent. The CPR rate for those aged 20-24 is also low (58.3 percent). The unmet need for family planning is highest among those aged 15-19 (12.3 percent) and 10.8 percent among those aged 20-24 (BDHS 2022). This leads to unplanned pregnancies, unsafe abortions, and poor maternal health outcomes. To empower youth, family planning



In building a fair and hopeful Bangladesh, we must place young people—especially young women—at the centre of family, policy, and development planning.

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Young people must be empowered to choose. Delaying marriage gives girls and boys the opportunity to complete their education, become financially independent, and make informed decisions about family life. Empowerment begins with freedom of choice and is supported by laws, communities, and families that uphold the dignity of young people.

Many young people in Bangladesh lack access to youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services and rights (SRHR). The current contraceptive prevalence rate (CPR) is the low among those aged 15-19 (53.9 percent), as evidenced in the BDHS 2022, whereas the total CPR for those

services must be available, accessible, affordable, equitable, of high quality, and confidential. The BDHS 2022 reports that decision-making about family planning is the lowest among those aged 15-19 (85.5 percent) and 20-24 (81.6 percent). Community health workers, clinics, and other stakeholders should be trained and encouraged to serve adolescents.

Government and NGOs must collaborate to raise awareness and combat harmful myths and taboos. When young people are healthy and informed, they can make decisions that benefit both their families and their communities.

There is also an absolute need to

ensure gender equality and shared responsibility. Traditional gender roles often place the burden of childbearing and family care solely on women, limiting their freedom and opportunities. Empowering young women means giving them equal rights in marriage, parenting, and decision-making. Empowering young men means helping them learn to take responsibility, develop empathy, and offer support to their partners. In a fair Bangladesh, creating a family should be a shared, respectful partnership, not imposed by cultural or economic constraints.

Education and knowledge are considered the first line of defence. For that, access to quality education, especially for girls, is one of the most powerful tools for empowering youth to plan their futures. Girls who stay in school are more likely to marry later and have fewer, healthier children. Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) can help both girls and boys understand

Young people are considered powerful agents of change, as evidenced by our country. The student- and youth-led July uprising has proven it again. However, young people are also very vulnerable, particularly when it comes to forming families.

their bodies, relationships, rights, and responsibilities, which are essential knowledge for building healthy families. Expanding education to reach remote and marginalised communities remains a crucial step towards achieving

equal opportunities to address the Sustainable Development Goals.

Moreover, there is a need to ensure economic stability and a sense of hope for the future. Young people cannot build strong families without financial stability. Yet many Bangladeshi youths face unemployment, job insecurity, and lack of access to credit or training. Youth unemployment is high. The PHC 2022 reports that 34.26 percent of the youth aged 15-24 are NEET (not in education, employment, or training). Adequate employment generation is strongly needed. Programmes like skill development, vocational training, microcredit, and entrepreneurship should be expanded for the youth, particularly young women. Social protection policies, such as maternity leave, childcare support, and affordable housing, can help young families thrive. A hopeful Bangladesh must provide real opportunities for youth to support the families they want to create.

Strong roles should be played by the government, private sector, and other key stakeholders in moving forward to build a more equitable, sustainable, and caring world where young people are empowered to pursue the lives they want for themselves. Government, civil society, and families must work together to enforce laws against child marriage and gender-based violence and promote youth participation in community and policy-making. More investment in education, healthcare, and job creation for young people is needed.

Finally, empowering young people to create the families they want is about more than reproductive rights; it is about justice, dignity, and opportunity. It means giving every young person, regardless of gender, income, or background, the tools and freedom to shape their future.

Since 1990, the UN and other organisations have commemorated World Population Day (WPD) on July 11 of every year in partnership with governments and civil society to raise awareness about population issues, including their connections to the environment and development. This year's WPD theme is "Empowering young people to create the families they want in a fair and hopeful world."

This theme is particularly relevant for Bangladesh, where over one-third of the population is under the age of 25. According to the Population and Housing Census 2022 (PHC 2022), there are approximately 31.56 million people aged 15-24 years, who are considered youth by the UN. For the 15-29 age group, the figure is 45.94 million (PHC 2022).

These youths represent significant numbers, challenges, and possibilities. We recognise that rights and choices are crucial concerns in development, particularly in population and development, as outlined in the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in 1994. At the heart of human development lies the freedom to choose, and one of the most profound choices a person makes is whether, when, and how to create a family.

For young people around the world, especially in developing countries, this freedom is often limited by inequality, lack of access to education and healthcare, gender norms, and economic hardship. One