

Time running out for a deal with US

Govt should have been better prepared, more proactive

The concerns raised by trade experts and private sector representatives regarding the interim government's handling of the US tariff negotiations are quite justified. At a roundtable organised by this daily, they expressed frustration over the government's poor preparation, lack of transparency, and minimal private sector involvement in the trade talks with the US. They warned that a steep 35 percent tariff on Bangladeshi exports including garments to US markets—scheduled to come into effect from August 1—would have greater ramifications for the apparel sector and the wider economy than the government appears to realise. The lack of urgency displayed by it in the face of this enormous threat, and the limited progress made as time runs out to conclude the negotiations, has therefore placed our economic future in a precarious position.

Dhaka is now preparing for a third round of negotiations with the US, but it remains unclear when the talks will take place. While other countries, including our direct trade competitor Vietnam, have either already secured a favourable deal or made significant progress in that direction, Bangladesh still seems to lack any concrete plans. Until recently, the government kept the private sector largely at arm's length. And with very little time left before August 1, how much of the sector's input it can incorporate remains a major question. What the government should have done is establish both a steering committee and a working committee to ensure stakeholder inclusivity and proper preparation.

Moreover, inter-ministerial issues relating to the negotiations also appear to remain unresolved. At this stage, it is not even clear who exactly is leading the talks on Bangladesh's behalf. According to experts, the uncertainty surrounding a deal may prompt buyers to adopt a "wait and see" approach when considering orders from Bangladesh. This could leave businesses idle for several months. Small and medium-sized enterprises, in particular, will struggle to absorb such losses, potentially leading to factory closures and significant job losses.

The uncertainty triggered by the threat of harsher US tariffs will likely have spillover effects in other markets as well. Garment suppliers from other countries may also move quickly to capture European and other export markets, posing further risks to Bangladesh's market share.

Bangladesh, being heavily dependent on garment exports, has always been vulnerable to such external shocks. Despite repeated warnings, little has been done over the years to diversify the export basket, resolve longstanding structural bottlenecks, and enhance overall competitiveness. Given the current global trade landscape, experts believe Bangladesh now has no choice but to reduce trade and business costs through improved logistics and a more enabling business environment, while also boosting productivity through investments in technology and skills development.

However, such changes cannot be achieved overnight—they require consistent, long-term commitment. In the meantime, what the government must urgently do is bring all stakeholders on board and use all possible diplomatic and institutional channels to secure a win-win deal with the US.

Rangamati needs improved healthcare

Sadar hospital needs proper

infrastructure, manpower to serve patients

It is deeply concerning that people in Rangamati are being deprived of critical medical services due to the absence of basic facilities and a shortage of doctors and staff at the Rangamati General Hospital. Reportedly, critically ill patients are being transferred to Chattogram regularly as the district hospital does not have the capacity to treat them. Established in 1984, the hospital still lacks vital facilities such as an ICU, CCU, or even a dialysis unit. As a result, patients suffering from heart disease, kidney failure, or other serious conditions are referred to the Chattogram Medical College Hospital, located about 60 kilometres away. In many cases, patients even need to travel to Dhaka for better treatment. Reportedly, 100 to 150 critical patients are sent to Chattogram for treatment every month. These patients have to face high medical expenses including additional costs of transportation, accommodation, and food, along with the physical strain of travel. This is unacceptable.

As per an estimate, Rangamati General Hospital serves approximately 650,000 residents across the 10 upazilas. Although it has only 100 beds, 200 to 250 patients are often admitted at a time. Due to overcrowding, patients frequently receive treatment on the floor. Moreover, shortages of doctors and support staff have been a persistent issue, causing many to be denied care. Reportedly, despite there being 31 sanctioned positions for doctors, only 22 are currently serving. Furthermore, the hospital lacks the infrastructure needed to provide intensive care. A six-storey building constructed near the hospital in 2009—to house a CCU for cardiac patients—is now being used by Rangamati Medical College, as its permanent campus is yet to be built. In 2021, another initiative was undertaken to introduce ICU, CCU, and dialysis units, and increase the number of hospital beds, with the foundation of an 11-storey building laid. However, that project remains incomplete.

This situation mirrors the long-standing mismanagement and systemic irregularities witnessed across our healthcare sector, and has real impacts for struggling districts like Rangamati. We, therefore, urge the government to ensure the General Hospital is fully equipped to provide comprehensive care. The authorities must establish ICU, CCU, and dialysis units there to serve critically ill patients, while the ongoing crisis of doctors and medical staff must also be resolved. For the overall improvement of our health sector, the reform proposals forwarded by the Health Sector Reform Commission must be implemented.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

UN adopts Rome Statute

On this day in 1998, the United Nations adopted the Rome Statute, the treaty that founded the International Criminal Court. The court began sittings four years later.

EDITORIAL

Why the July Charter matters



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A charter is never just a document. It is a declaration of intent, a mirror of the times, and a manifesto for the future. From the Magna Carta of 1215 to the Atlantic Charter of 1941, history tells us that when societies reach moments of rupture—when old systems crumble under the weight of public discontent and new possibilities shimmer just beyond the horizon—a charter becomes a lodestar, a moral and political compass. Today, in the throes of political transition and institutional uncertainty, Bangladesh faces such a moment. The July Charter, currently being negotiated under the stewardship of the National Consensus Commission, could very well become the most important political document of this generation. But that is only if it survives the weight of competing interests, ego-driven politics, and the absence of moral imagination.

The July Charter is being crafted in the aftermath of a mass upheaval that unseated the long-standing regime of Sheikh Hasina on August 5, 2024. That movement—driven by students, workers, professionals, ordinary citizens, and the politically disenfranchised—was not merely a revolt against a particular government, but a rejection of a broken system. Authoritarian control, erosion of constitutional accountability, manipulation of the legal system, and strangulation of public institutions had long replaced democratic norms. When the people finally erupted, they were not simply protesting against a regime—they were protesting against the wreckage of a republic.

It is in this context that the interim government initiated a national reform process through 11 thematic commissions and a consensus commission tasked with building inter-party agreement. The July Charter, as envisioned, is supposed to be the crystallisation of the recommendations and agreements achieved through this expansive dialogue. So far, at least 80 of the 166 proposals have achieved consensus, according to a BBC Bangla analysis, with some critical reforms still awaiting agreement.

But to understand why this charter matters, we must turn to history. When the Magna Carta was drafted by the rebellious English barons, King John had little choice but to accept its conditions. While the immediate goal was protection of aristocratic privilege, over the centuries the document became a bedrock for

of 1966 was not called a "charter," but in essence, it was one. It laid out a clear political blueprint for economic autonomy and federalism within Pakistan. Likewise, the Proclamation of Independence in April 1971 provided the first written basis of a sovereign state of Bangladesh. These documents were not born of luxury or leisure. They emerged from resistance and resilience, from moments when existing structures could no longer contain the democratic aspirations of a people.

The July Charter sits within that historical continuum. Yet, unlike its predecessors, it arrives in a digital, polarised, and dangerously impatient age. The consensus commission has

intent and light on implementation? Because implementation, of course, is where many dreams go to die.

How will the July Charter be implemented, then? The consensus commission has offered several pathways: through ordinance,

through referendum, through a constituent assembly, or through a post-election parliament acting in both legislative and constituent roles. But here again, divisions emerge. The BNP and CPB BASOD want parliamentary adoption. The NCP

wants a constituent assembly. Jamaat and other right-wing parties want full consensus before committing to anything. And looming over all

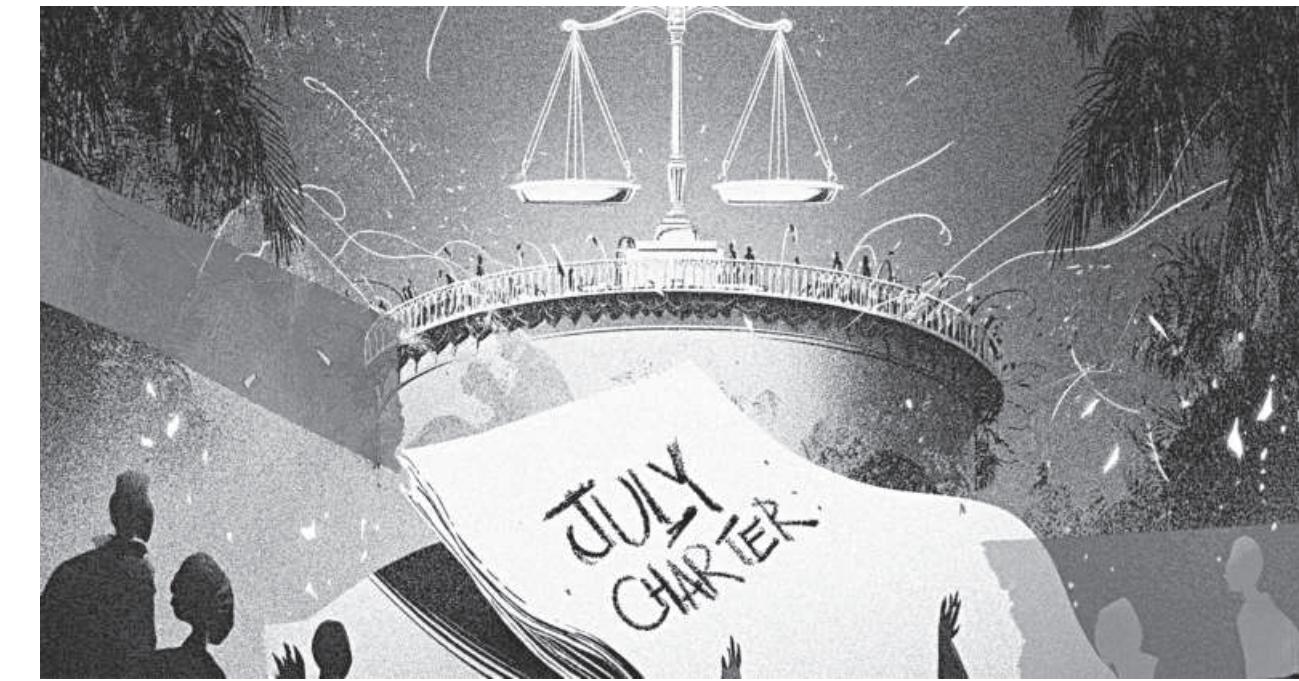
of this is a ticking clock: the interim

government's mandate is temporary, and public patience is not infinite.

The danger here is *déjà vu*. Bangladesh has seen countless reform pledges fade into dust. The Electoral Reforms of 2007-08, the caretaker government compromise of 1996, even the aspirations of the 15th Amendment—all began with hope and ended in co-option. What makes the July Charter different, if at all, is its proximity to a grassroots revolt. Unlike previous reform cycles that were elite-driven, the present reform moment has a legitimacy born of public rage.

But legitimacy is a wasting asset. If the charter takes too long, or emerges too diluted, it will lose the momentum of the mass uprising. Worse, it will embolden the reactionary elements lurking in the wings—those who never accepted the interim transition, those nostalgic for strongmen, those who see democracy as a luxury Bangladesh cannot afford.

For this reason, the July Charter must be both ambitious and realistic. It cannot do everything, but it must do enough. It must tackle the deep rot in institutional appointments. It must claw back parliamentary authority



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

from the grip of party high commands. It must give the judiciary breathing space. And most importantly, it must offer a clear mechanism for its own implementation—before or immediately after the upcoming parliamentary election.

None of this will be easy. The forces of inertia are strong. Every reform means someone somewhere will lose the privilege of operating without oversight. But the price of inaction is greater. Without meaningful structural reform, the next government—whatever forms it—will merely inherit a broken vehicle with shinier paint.

If we fail to grasp this moment, we may not get another soon.

A call to fill up Bangladesh's empty transparency chairs



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Bangladesh's dedication to transparency is in a state of jeopardy. The core of the country's right to information (RTI) system, the crucial Information Commission, has been stuck in a limbo for months. Following the political changeover last year, the then chief information commissioner and one information commissioner resigned, and the third commissioner was later removed. These vacant positions are a direct blow to the spirit of government accountability.

The annual report for 2024—a legally required document summarising the previous year's activities—is unavailable on the Information Commission's website. The timeframe of the government's strategic plan to implement the RTI Act expired in 2021. Bangladesh passed its RTI Act in 2009 with high hopes, but its global ranking has been stalled

at 27th since 2022. The law looks good on paper, but people still struggle to access information easily.

Only 7.7 percent of citizens were aware of the law, according to the Bangladesh Right to Information (RTI) Survey 2019; two-thirds of designated officers said they had not received any applications. Although the law requires vigorous campaigns and severe penalties, their actual application and effectiveness are woefully inadequate. There is a persistent disconnect between the RTI law and the people it intends to serve. Its implementation is still hampered by "red tape" and a deeply rooted "culture of secrecy." Information commissioners, frequently drawn from senior civil servants, have had difficulty letting go of their previous gatekeeping responsibilities and adopting a pro-citizen stance.

There are also concerns about the implementation of the Information Commission's budget. The notable underspending in its 2023 annual report suggests possible inefficiencies or a lack of clear direction.

It is now imperative to infuse the genuine spirit of the July Charter into the RTI-specific reform recommendations that the interim government considers implementing, as envisaged in the Public Administration Reform Commission's report. This entails giving people's demands for accountability and transparency a top priority.

The interim government must take decisive action to close the gap between the law and lived reality. By bringing in new viewpoints and questioning established bureaucratic conventions, the appointment of information commissioners—particularly those with research experience on the RTI—can create a truly pro-citizen atmosphere. Rebuilding trust, upholding democratic values, and ensuring that the RTI empowers every Bangladeshi citizen are the goals here, not just filling vacant seats.

The Information Commission also needs to rethink how it communicates. This entails embracing dynamic, citizen-centric outreach in place of bureaucratic notifications.

Public awareness campaigns that are easy to understand and are run across various media platforms, including social media and local radio, are crucial. To foster trust and enable citizens to exercise their right, the commission must aggressively streamline application processes, showcase success stories, and engage with communities.

Finally, it's time to make the right to information more than just a legal requirement. A clear commitment to openness at the highest level of government would be demonstrated by making RTI a fundamental constitutional provision. While the current law offers a legal framework, a constitutional guarantee would strengthen the foundation for judicial enforcement and bring Bangladesh into line with international best practices where access to information is increasingly acknowledged as an intrinsic part of democratic freedoms, much like freedom of speech. This critical step would make transparency an indisputable principle.

The interim government must show its steadfast dedication to accountability and transparency. Implementing the RTI Act and reviving the Information Commission are its litmus tests.