

## Reaching consensus shouldn't be this slow

Delays threaten the reform agenda and hard-won democratic gains

We are concerned that political parties are still stuck in disagreements over some key reform proposals and the finalisation of the July Charter. The National Consensus Commission (NCC) has been holding talks with them for months now. With the deadline to finalise the charter ending on July 31, a report by this daily indicates that there are still sharp disagreements on several issues among the parties.

The BNP, for instance, has partially agreed to the proposed reforms in the draft charter, while Jamaat-e-Islami, Islami Andolok Bangladesh (IAB), and the National Citizen Party (NCP) hold some reservations. Jamaat has termed the draft "incomplete and dangerous," while the IAB says it is "weak, lenient towards the fallen autocracy, and lacking enforceability." The BNP says it has issues with the phrasing of some sections and wants them revised, but it has no fundamental objection to the draft. Ganoshambhi Andolok shares the BNP's sentiment regarding some of the wording and language, adding that additional points should be included. The NCP wants all the consensus points to be codified into law before the next parliamentary election. The NCP, Jamaat, and the IAB have all demanded that the charter be made legally binding.

The consensus dialogues—held in two phases, the first from March 20 to May 19 and the second starting from June 2—did see some success. Through these talks, the country's political leadership reached consensus on 12 key issues, including the two-term (10 years in total) cap on an individual's service as prime minister and the formation of an independent police commission. However, on issues like the selection of chief advisers and women's representation in parliament, political parties remain divided.

We appreciate the complexity of the entire consensus-building process (with so many parties involved), as well as the prudence shown by political parties so far by making concessions to reach agreement on certain crucial reforms. That said, we expected this whole exercise to have taken less time and shown more willingness for compromise. The back and forth over these issues has been going on for months. Consensus-building, especially when everyone claims to want a nation free of discrimination and inequalities in the spirit of the July uprising, should not be this arduous.

To have such differences even after so long is quite disappointing. With the tentative deadline for the upcoming elections set in February 2026, what we need is stability and clear direction so that we can move on to the business end of this whole exercise. Therefore, we urge all political parties to see the bigger picture and act accordingly. Prolonging the consensus-building process risks not only creating further divisions and uncertainties in society but also jeopardising the future of reform initiatives. Parties, therefore, must cooperate with the NCC to reach a common ground on the unresolved issues and finalise the July Charter. They must do this to honour the sacrifices of our July martyrs and warriors and realise their dream of a new Bangladesh.

## Trafficking survivors deserve justice

Authorities must bring the traffickers to book

We are deeply concerned to see how a section of citizens, desperate to secure a better future for their families, are still undertaking perilous journeys to reach Europe. Many, however, only end up being trafficked into Libya, where they are held captive in camps, subjected to extreme forms of violence, and their families extorted for money. Reportedly, for the past three years, Bangladesh has ranked number one among countries whose citizens attempt to enter Europe by crossing the Mediterranean Sea. According to BRAC's migration programme, at least 70,000 Bangladeshi have entered Europe using this route over the past decade. While many are rescued and brought back home after immense hardship, many others remain unrescued, and some lose their lives by drowning in the Mediterranean. Though many survivors have filed cases against the traffickers, these cases have seldom ended in conviction.

Md Tanjir Sheikh and Md Alamgir Hossain are two such survivors of trafficking who returned from Libya this year—alive but mentally shattered and deep in debt. Both were lured by false promises of work abroad, subjected to inhumane conditions, and held captive for ransom by international trafficking gangs. Although they were eventually able to return home after paying hefty ransoms, many others could not even make it back. While both filed cases against the local brokers responsible for their plight, the overall slow progress of such cases doesn't give them much hope.

There are thousands of survivors like them still waiting for justice. According to the Monitoring Cell for Combating Trafficking in Human, a total of 10,917 human trafficking cases were filed between 2009 and January 2025. Of these, 5,467 cases have been resolved, and 5,450 remain pending. Traffickers were arrested in many cases, but most are now out on bail. During this entire period, only 247 cases have resulted in conviction. Experts say this is due to poor coordination among agencies, a lack of dedicated courts, and little protection for witnesses.

Given the circumstances, the government must act fast to prevent citizens being sold into modern day slavery in the name of migration. It must treat trafficking cases as a priority and take coordinated action against those responsible. Specialised trafficking courts must be set up in every district to expedite proceedings and create a safe environment for survivors and witnesses. Effective coordination between the relevant departments and law enforcement agencies is also crucial. Survivors like Tanjir and Alamgir deserve real support, and aspiring migrants need protection from exploitation.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

### Nation joins March for Justice

On this day in 2024, in response to a call by the anti-discrimination student movement, people poured out on the streets to join the March for Justice, protesting the mass killings, mass arrests, attacks, lawsuits, enforced disappearances, and murders of students and civilians by the Sheikh Hasina regime following the quota reform protests.

# EDITORIAL

## What recent scandals reveal about student activism and our politics



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There is something painfully ironic when those providing leadership to a movement, built on the premise of justice and reform, become the subject of criminal investigations. That irony is now manifesting in the public sphere as multiple individuals associated with Bangladesh's recent anti-government student platforms—particularly the Anti-Discrimination Student Movement (SAD), Bangladesh Ganatantrik Chhatra Sangsads (BGCS), and the political camp National Citizen Party (NCP)—face serious allegations of extortion, impersonation, and criminal misuse of power. The accusations are not just isolated headlines; they speak to a deeper, structural pattern that has historically tainted Bangladesh's student and political activism. The past, it seems, is catching up with the present once again.

The shocking episode unfolding in Dhaka's Gulshan neighbourhood has cast a long shadow over these platforms. Five individuals, including prominent student leaders, were arrested for allegedly demanding Tk 50 lakh from a former ruling party MP. Police say they were caught in the act of collecting a second instalment, after allegedly receiving Tk 10 lakh already. The implications go far beyond a single extortion case. In the days that followed, more complaints surfaced across the country: coordinators, organisers, or self-declared activists tied to the July movement allegedly using their newfound political capital to engage in extortion, intimidation, and even sexual violence.

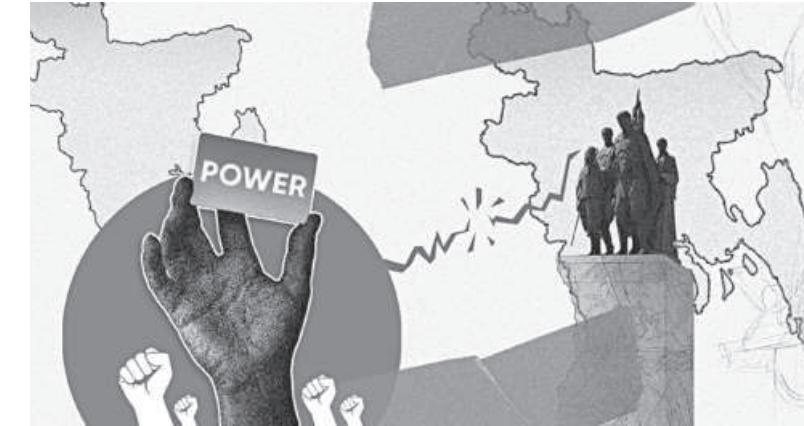
For movements that once championed equality and accountability, these developments are not just reputational blows—they are existential threats. As various leaders scramble to issue statements, suspend local committees, and distance themselves from the accused, the public is left wondering: how did we get here? More importantly, what does it say about the nature of political transitions and grassroots mobilisations in Bangladesh?

Political activism in this country, especially at the student level, has always been a double-edged sword. On the one hand, students have played a historic role in shaping national discourse—from the Language Movement of 1952 to the anti-Ershad protests of the late 1980s. But on the other, student wings of political parties have often devolved into hubs of patronage, muscle power and, frequently, corruption. As such, when a movement like SAD emerged

with a focus on inclusive democracy and citizens' rights, it was seen by many as a refreshing break from the entrenched party politics that dominates university campuses and civil discourse.

But idealism, no matter how noble, is not immune to co-option.

What we are witnessing now is the familiar pattern of transformation: a moral crusade turning into a power mechanism, and then eventually into a money-making enterprise. In many ways, it mirrors the lifecycle of movements globally, where momentum and mass mobilisation attract not only the idealists but also opportunists. Once a movement grows powerful enough to influence public narrative or policy, it becomes a magnet for those seeking leverage—access to power, favours, money or



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

prestige. The difference lies in whether the movement has internal safeguards, a culture of transparency, and structural accountability to prevent its degradation.

Clearly, in this case, the structures were either absent or grossly inadequate.

The fact that student activists were able to demand ransom, pose as law enforcement officials, and infiltrate high-profile networks suggests not just personal greed but systemic vulnerability. In the aftermath of the Gulshan scandal, former spokespersons and prominent figures from the movement have come forward to say they had long sensed the rot within. Allegations of internal harassment, threats, and coercion were previously raised but never acted upon.

If that is true, then the current outrage must be tempered with a dose of self-critique: were these organisations too eager to expand, too reliant on

symbolic unity, too dismissive of warning signs?

Even more troubling is the reaction from some of the organisations' leadership, which appears focused more on damage control than soul searching. Announcements of suspensions and promises of zero tolerance, while necessary, feel inadequate in the absence of genuine institutional reform. When the BGCS or NCP speaks of spontaneous committee formations and lack of screening during the movement's peak, they unintentionally underscore how a powerful civic force has been allowed to operate without internal checks. In their eagerness to harness discontent and mobilise youth, structure was sacrificed for speed, and ideology for expediency.

But perhaps we are expecting too much from student-led movements in a broader political environment that rewards power over principles. In a country where criminal cases are often filed and withdrawn based on political alignments, and where the phrase "coordinator" can grant access to government offices and police stations, it's not surprising that ambitious individuals, regardless of ideology, would be tempted to exploit their roles.

and democracy last year are now becoming what they opposed: a new elite with old habits.

This is not to say that the entire movement is tainted—far from it. Many who were involved continue to push for meaningful reform, justice, and civic empowerment. But the credibility of such efforts now depends on how seriously the movement and its offshoots treat this crisis—not as a PR disaster, but as a moral reckoning.

The silence—or worse, deflection—of some political actors risks reinforcing the public's growing cynicism. When citizen-led movements start to mirror the very systems they sought to reform, people begin to lose faith not just in politics, but in the possibility of change itself. That is the real tragedy. Because when good people grow disillusioned, the space is ceded to those who thrive in chaos.

Bangladesh cannot afford that. The country's youth have long been both its conscience and its catalyst for progress. But they have also been weaponised by those in power, too often. Each wave of student activism has brought hope, and later disillusionment. The lesson is that they must mature institutionally and morally, even as they grow politically.

Perhaps it's time to rethink how these movements evolve from protest to politics. Can a movement be built on democratic values if its internal operations are opaque and hierarchical? Can it claim to represent the people if it does not vet its own representatives? Can it pursue justice without upholding it within?

The stakes are too high to allow these questions to remain rhetorical.

Bangladesh stands at a juncture where public anger at governance failures coexists with deep suspicion of new political actors. That is a dangerous equilibrium. For true transformation to occur, it is not enough to change slogans or swap out faces. As history has shown—from the French Revolution to the Arab Spring—if movements don't reform themselves from within, they are destined to repeat the failures of those they replaced.

Political capital, once spent on coercion and corruption, rarely regenerates. It dissipates, leaving behind apathy and anger. And in that vacuum, authoritarianism finds fertile ground.

The crisis unfolding today is not just a test of individual guilt or innocence. It is a referendum on the integrity of the very platforms that once promised a new political dawn. If these movements are to survive and remain relevant, they must act swiftly—not only to punish wrongdoers, but to reform themselves.

That means introducing transparency, democratic accountability, and, above all, a renewed commitment to the values that first brought people to the streets.

Because in the end, it is not the protests that matter—it is what comes after.

## Uncle Sam wants you and your social media accounts



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They say love means never having to say you're sorry, and apparently, visiting America means having to say, "Here's my Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, TikTok, Reddit, YouTube, Pinterest, MySpace revival fan page."

Because in 2025, if you're a bright-eyed Bangladeshi student dreaming of the Ivy League or just hoping to pose with a pumpkin spice latte on a New England campus, you'd better come armed not just with academic transcripts or SAT scores, but with public social media profiles, sparkling clean and whiter than the visa officer's poplin shirt.

Yes, the land of freedom, fireworks, and filtered liberties has spoken: your feed shall be examined, dissected, and judged like a reality show contestant who dared to post #DeathToHomework in 2019. It's all part of the US State Department's new diplomatic love language: "I trust you... but let me check your digital footprint anyway."

Under the new rules, all F, M, and

J visa applicants—from Fulbright scholars to exchange students—must make their social media public. Because nothing establishes "national security" like trawling through someone's 2018 throwback to a Baishakh selfie with the caption "Dhaka heat is not for the weak."

And what are they looking for, exactly? Evidence of "hostility towards American values." Which is funny, considering how many Americans seem hostile to those same values these days. But I digress.

To be fair, we Bangladeshi know a thing or two about surveillance. We come from a land where criticising the wrong tree on Facebook might lead to a phone call from the forest department. But at least we were subtle about it. The Americans, bless them, are now just upfront: "You want our visas? Strip for the algorithm."

applicants to make their accounts public "to facilitate vetting." Because God forbid someone use their private settings to, you know, protect their privacy. In 2025, privacy is the new profanity. And don't even think of deactivating your account—that's the

spicy. Did you share a meme that made fun of Trump in 2017? That might be a problem. Did your cousin post a rant about American drone strikes and tag you by mistake? Ruh-roh. Did you once like a reel featuring Palestinian keffiyehs and sad violin music? Pack your bags.

Naturally, the US Embassy in Dhaka has chimed in, reminding Bangladeshi

digital equivalent of setting fire to your fingerprints.

Some say this is just bureaucracy gone wild. Others say it's the globalisation of paranoia, where every border post now doubles as a behavioural psychologist, data analyst, and moral judge. Either way, it's ironic that the same country that gave us Facebook is now penalising us for using it freely.

And what about the geopolitics of it all? Let's be honest: had this rule applied to American tourists going the other way, entire flights to Bali would be grounded over their spring break antics alone. But alas, the power dynamics are clear: we post, they prey.

The Bangladeshi student, once a symbol of ambition and soft diplomacy, is now a walking, talking Excel sheet of hashtags, likes, and filtered sunsets. You are no longer just a human being—you are a risk profile. Did you post too much? You're suspicious. Too little? Also suspicious. Only shared cat videos for five years straight? Definitely hiding something. And let's not even get into the heartbreak of losing your right to "Close Friends" stories.

But take heart, dear applicants. All is not lost. This too shall be archived. Until then, smile, sanitise your timeline, and say a little prayer to the algorithm gods. Because in this new age of diplomacy, your social media isn't just your highlight reel—it's your visa application.

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