

Is the reform drive being derailed?

Parties must resolve disputes over July Charter implementation

It is a telling reflection of our turbulent times that Bangladesh is as close to getting a July Charter (finally) as it is far from securing any political assurance of its implementation post-election. That is because while the National Consensus Commission reportedly plans to hand over a final draft to political parties within this week, it has opted to exclude its implementation process from the draft itself, as previously expected, fearing this may deter some parties from signing the charter. This cautious approach seems practical as parties still widely differ on the route to its implementation. Among the suggested routes are approval by next parliament, a referendum, presidential proclamations, and even a constituent assembly. Nearly all parties agree that some reforms can be enacted by ordinance right away, but beyond that, consensus breaks down into competing procedural preferences, especially on questions of constitutional reforms.

This state of affairs only underscores the fragility of a political patchwork that has been repeatedly strained by bitter divisions during the past months of NCC consultations. Beyond the debate on implementation, some parties also think that reforms on which there is disagreement should not even be incorporated in the charter. They have even warned that if the final draft includes anything beyond the unanimously agreed reforms, they may not sign it. This is deeply disturbing. To see this charter, in which so much time, effort, and emotion have been invested, still being dragged through such technicalities and calculations only heightens fears about the future of the reform drive.

During a recent event, the chiefs and members of several reform commissions have rightly expressed frustration at the lack of visible progress in the reform drive. Although 11 commissions were set up in two phases post-uprising—six in the first and five in the second—to drive reforms across various sectors, their outcomes so far remain negligible. The lack of progress in the 84 reform proposals earmarked for NCC consultations could be understandable, as they required broader political consensus, but how to explain the slow or zero progress on the dozens of other proposals that were not discussed and could easily be implemented? When will those proposed reforms be put into effect?

The interim government cannot blame political indecision alone for this stagnation. Bureaucratic inertia, lack of collaboration and coordination among relevant state agencies, and the absence of clear timelines and accountability mechanisms have all contributed to this delay. The lesson of these past months is that without decisive leadership to translate reform proposals into action, even the most achievable reforms risk remaining on paper. We cannot let this situation drag on indefinitely. The interim government, political parties, and civil society all bear responsibility to ensure that the reform drive is expedited so that the promise of change can be delivered.

An alarming display of toxicity

DU student's open rape threat reveals deep-rooted misogyny in society

We are shocked by the repugnant conduct of Dhaka University student Ali Husen, who recently issued a rape threat online against a fellow female student. Husen's post was aimed at BM Fahmida Alam, a candidate from a left-leaning panel for the upcoming DUCSU election. Earlier, she had filed a writ petition with the High Court challenging the nomination of SM Farhad, a general secretary candidate from the Islami Chhatra Shibir-backed panel, alleging that Farhad was involved in the now-banned Chhatra League. Following the petition, the HC had postponed the DUCSU poll to October 30, only for it to be reinstated by the Supreme Court within an hour.

While many students initially protested the HC order, it is beyond comprehension how a student from the country's most prominent university could utter such vile threats against a fellow student for exercising her legal rights. His post even stated that anyone who finds it "uncivil, deserves the same" as Fahmida. Universities are meant to be spaces where students learn moral and ethical behaviour alongside academic knowledge. But what are students like Husen, and those who supported his call to "gang rape," learning during their most formative years? This is the opposite of constructive debate that universities are supposed to teach and promote.

The distasteful masculinity that was on display also reflected the disturbing impunity surrounding sexual violence in our society. Many men continue to feel entitled to women's bodies and are emboldened to issue threats of sexual violence both online and offline. Too many still believe women can be "put in their place" for behaviours that don't conform to their beliefs. Such toxic attitudes stand as barriers to women's political, social, and economic participation, and the fact that those who threaten to commit such heinous acts are seldom held accountable only encourages this behaviour further.

In the context of the DUCSU polls—where campus safety is a major campaign issue—the latest incident is a stark reminder of the urgency of the matter. We urge DU authorities to take immediate disciplinary action not only against the main perpetrator but also against those who supported his call. A criminal case should be filed under the Cyber Protection Ordinance, 2025 to set a precedent that such repulsive conduct will not be tolerated. Finally, we call on our emerging student leaders to actively denounce such behaviours as part of the broader campaign to eradicate gender violence and discrimination. Ensuring women's safety on and off campus must be a collective priority.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY



Viking 2 lands on Mars

On this day in 1976, after nearly a year's journey, NASA's robotic spacecraft Viking 2 landed on Mars and began relaying information about the planet's atmosphere and soil as well as colour photographs of the rocky surface.

EDITORIAL

FROM FORCE TO SERVICE

Rethinking policing in Bangladesh



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The police in Bangladesh, a remnant of colonial design, became militarised during the recently deposed regime. Established under the Police Act, 1861, drafted in response to the 1857 uprising, the force was never meant to protect citizens but to control them. Its model followed the Royal Irish Constabulary, a centrally directed, armed, quasi-military institution created to suppress dissent rather than foster trust.

The deposed administration cemented this institution not as a service for the people, but as an instrument for clinging to power. The July uprising in 2024 brutally exposed this legacy when police responded to unarmed protesters with semi-automatic rifles, submachine guns, and battlefield-grade ammunition. As a result, the leading figures of the police had to flee away as a party to the collapsed regime.

An investigative report by The Daily Star revealed how police stockpiled lethal weapons in the years preceding the uprising. Between 2021 and 2023, Tk 240 crore was spent on firearms such as submachine guns and semi-automatic rifles, while Tk 191 crore was allocated to non-lethal equipment. The ratio of lethal to non-lethal procurement was seven to one.

When crowds filled the streets in July last year, these arsenals were unleashed. Semi-automatic rifles were fired into unarmed gatherings. Hundreds of young lives were lost, and a generation was traumatised. Recent incidents, too, show no signs of corrective measures within the police force. It still remains a force of coercion, not a protective civil service.

History offers a different path. In Northern Ireland, following the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, the Patten Commission fundamentally redesigned and decentralised policing to ensure inclusivity and establish accountability mechanisms through a policing board, placing community engagement at the heart of policing.

In Britain, the originator of this archaic system, policing has evolved into a devolved model, with no national police. Instead, 43 territorial police organisations are overseen by locally elected police and crime commissioners (PCCs), with powers

including control over the budget and appointment of the chief constable. This creates direct accountability to the community from police leadership, founded on the principle that police derive legitimacy from public consent rather than state power.

Other societies have also showcased how policing can shift from repression to service. For example, in Japan, children greet police officers with trust rather than fear. In Denmark, Germany

and Canada, community policing fosters partnerships between officers and citizens, emphasising prevention over punishment. Surveys in Finland consistently rank the police among the most trusted public institutions.

Closer to home, in Sri Lanka, which recently experienced political turmoil, the establishment of an independent National Police Commission represented a step towards depoliticisation through oversight of recruitment, promotions and discipline.

India's Supreme Court issued binding directives in the 2006 Prakash Singh case, calling for state-level Police Complaints Authority, fixed tenures for officers, and separation of investigation from law and order duties. However, most Indian states have only

partially complied after nearly two decades, demonstrating how reform falters without political will.

In Africa, Sierra Leone undertook comprehensive post-war reform, creating an Independent Police Complaints Board and community-based "Local Needs Policing" that shifted emphasis from enforcement to partnership.

Following the 2014 killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, The President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing formed by the Obama administration recommended body cameras, community oversight, and demilitarisation. While some cities implemented changes, resistance from police unions and political divisions limited reform momentum.

Acknowledging public anger, the interim government in Bangladesh formed the Police Reform Commission in October 2024. The commission's

to the communities the police are meant to serve. Without independence, reforms risk remaining cosmetic, subject to vested interests, as decades of politicisation have hollowed out the police institution.

Transforming police into a civil service requires more than new training or equipment. It demands, at least, four structural changes: creation of an independent police commission with constitutional authority, free from the home ministry's control; repeal of the colonial Police Act, 1861 and the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1898 by rights-based legislation; an institutional cultural shift, treating citizens as partners rather than adversaries; and a pragmatic phase-wise pathway for devolution.

The fear expressed by home ministry officials that "there will be no controlling authority" if an independent commission is created



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

exposes the problem. Authority should not rest in a monolithic ministry but in the people, expressed through democratic, community-led institutions at multiple levels. A centralised entity can be easily manipulated for vested purposes. A devolved civil service, rooted in community, is more resilient to abuse.

The police represent the state's most visible face. For too long in Bangladesh, that face has triggered fear as a force, rather than trust as a civil service. Reform requires transforming the very meaning of policing in a democratic republic from an authoritarian order. Imagine a future where schoolchildren greet police officers with confidence rather than anxiety. That makes the police a civil service.

Lessons to be learnt from the CU violence



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The recent clashes between the students of Chittagong University and locals from the nearby Jobra village left more than 240 students injured, among others, with at least two fighting for their lives in hospital. The scale of violence, the absence of law enforcement at a critical moment, and the lack of foresight from the university authorities have raised several questions. Why was this violence allowed to erupt in the first place? Could it have been prevented if the university administration and law enforcement had acted promptly? And how can we ensure such incidents do not happen again?

The violence was first triggered by the alleged assault of a female student by a security guard at her private mess.

Apparently the guard refused to let the student into the mess when she returned at around 11pm on Saturday and found the gate locked. When he finally did, he allegedly shoved her and made insulting remarks about her returning late. Once her fellow students heard about it, emotions ran high. In universities, solidarity among students is strong; an insult to one is often felt as an insult to all.

But the situation spiralled out of control because of how both sides—students and the locals—reacted.

Instead of dealing with the situation calmly, villagers and students began confronting each other. And what began as a case of alleged harassment against a single student turned into a mass clash involving sharp weapons, sticks, and brickbats.

The deeper reason behind these clashes lies in the fragile relationship between CU students and residents of the nearby villages like Jobra and Fatepur. Over the years, small disputes over rent, transport, politics, and social behaviour have created mistrust between these two parties. This mistrust meant that when the female student alleged assault by the guard at her mess, it did not remain an isolated issue. It tapped into long-standing grievances.

Could this violence have been prevented? The short answer is yes. If the university authorities and law enforcement agencies had acted quickly on Saturday night, instead of coming in several hours later, the clashes could have been avoided. The guard should have been detained promptly and handed over to police, and the allegation should have been investigated. Had the authorities acted promptly, the students would not have felt that justice would not be served; they would have trusted the system

rather than taking matters into their own hands.

If police or university security had been deployed around the mess and campus gates immediately after the initial altercation, larger groups would not have gathered and violence would not have escalated. Senior university officials—vice chancellor, Pro VC, and proctor—should have gone to the scene to dissipate the tension; their late arrival the next day shows a lack of urgency.

The lessons from this incident are clear. University authorities and the government must act decisively to prevent such violence in the future.

The CU authorities have filed a case in connection to this incident, accusing nearly 1,100 people including activists of the banned Bangladesh Chhatra League. The government must form an independent, transparent probe committee to look into this matter—not just one controlled by CU itself. If the probe finds that students initiated or escalated the violence, they must face trial. At the same time, locals who attacked the students with machetes, rods, and brickbats must be brought to justice. There are videos and photos using which the attackers can be identified. And if negligence by the CU administration is proven, those responsible must step down.

A 21-member committee has reportedly been formed to improve ties between students and locals. This should not be a symbolic move. The committee must meet regularly, address grievances, and establish trust between students and the local population.

This entire crisis began with the allegation of mistreatment of a female student. The university authorities

as well as local administration—not just at CU but every university—must adopt a zero-tolerance policy towards any form of harassment, and such complaints should be dealt with swiftly through proper mechanisms. Protecting female students on campus must be non-negotiable.

To this end, some training for professionalism and gender sensitivity at our universities is also in order. The CU proctor has drawn severe criticism over his misogynistic remarks about female students on at least two occasions, and has walked away without any consequences. When the proctor, the person responsible for campus security, can get away with making such remarks about the students he is supposed to protect, what does it say about the university authorities' sincerity about students' safety?

There are a number of lessons to be learnt from the latest spate of clashes at CU. And if these are not duly noted, such incidents will recur—in Chattogram, and in Dhaka, Rajshahi, Khulna, and elsewhere. Universities are places for enlightenment and wisdom; they must not be allowed to turn into battlegrounds. Students deserve safe campuses. Parents deserve assurance that their children will return home alive. Teachers deserve an environment where they can teach without fear.

The violence at CU should therefore be seen as a wake-up call. Immediate medical support for the injured, counselling for traumatised students, a transparent investigation, and swift justice are non-negotiable first steps. But beyond that, deeper reforms in student-community relations, campus security, and administrative accountability are urgent.