

Commissions for police a good move

Govt must make sure they deliver real change, not cosmetic reform

It is encouraging to learn about the interim government's decision to establish two separate commissions for the police—the Independent Investigation Services and the Internal Complaints Commission—to usher in long-awaited accountability within the force. This decision signals a renewed commitment to reform the force long plagued by impunity, politicisation, and public mistrust. However, while the intent behind forming the commissions is commendable, the structure and execution of these commissions must be carefully scrutinised to ensure they can bring real change.

The Police Reform Commission first proposed the formation of an independent police commission in January, as part of a broader set of recommendations to overhaul the force. These included aligning police's use of force with the UN peacekeeping standards, curbing custodial torture, extortion, arbitrary arrests, and enforced disappearances, and amending outdated police laws to ensure accountability and human rights compliance. Now that two separate commissions are supposed to be formed instead of one, some believe that this may create obstacles in the reform process. The differences of opinions among various stakeholders about the commissions' formation, therefore, must be resolved through proper discussion.

Reportedly, the Independent Investigation Services, which will be chaired by the law adviser or minister according to the government's decision, will be tasked with probing misconduct within the police, without external interference. This is a critical development, especially given the force's history of shielding its own members from scrutiny. To be effective, the commission must be legally empowered to conduct impartial investigations, free from political or bureaucratic pressure. The Internal Complaints Commission, meanwhile, will be chaired by the home adviser or minister, with the inspector general of police (IGP) as member-secretary. Its mandate includes building a people-friendly and transparent police force by resolving internal grievances, ensuring accountability in recruitment and promotions, and overseeing training, welfare, leadership selection, structural reforms, and policy development. While its scope is broad, its credibility also hinges on its independence.

Over the past decades, public confidence in our police has steadily eroded due to widespread corruption and its political misuse. Particularly during the Awami League regime, the force saw a significant decline in credibility. This loss of trust intensified during the July uprising last year, when police brutality reached unprecedented levels through indiscriminate shootings and the killing of protesters. Therefore, following the regime's collapse, demands for meaningful police reform grew louder.

With the formation of these commissions, we hope to get a more accountable and people-friendly police. However, for the commissions to work independently, robust legal safeguards and genuine political will are needed. Without them, they risk becoming another missed opportunity. But if formed with sincerity and determination, they have the potential to transform the police from a force of coercion into a public service rooted in protection and trust.

Declining press freedom concerning

Journalists must be protected, press freedom must be upheld

The state of press freedom around the world, as depicted in a report by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), is gravely concerning. Per the report, global press freedoms have significantly declined between 2019 and 2024, reaching their lowest level in 50 years. Afghanistan, Burkina Faso and Myanmar are the worst affected, while South Korea is ranked fourth due to increased government-led defamation lawsuits and raids targeting journalists. The IDEA secretary general has rightly voiced alarm over this sharp deterioration in a key indicator of democratic health. According to the think tank, governments are increasingly resorting to coercive measures to control the media, which is a worrying development.

Although Bangladesh's press freedom has improved slightly—from 165th to 149th position—according to this year's World Press Freedom Index, the situation in the country is still classified as "very serious." During the 15 plus years of the Awami League's rule, journalists faced severe harassment and violence and media freedom was heavily curtailed. Unfortunately, that atmosphere of fear and insecurity still persists even after the AL's fall. Journalists continue to be targeted and assaulted across the country. According to a report by the Human Rights Support Society (HRSS), incidents of violence targeting journalists surged in August this year, doubling from the previous month. One journalist was killed and another brutally attacked while carrying out their professional duties.

Journalists are also being targeted by violent mobs in Bangladesh. The recent attack on speakers at a roundtable inside Dhaka Reporters' Unity (DRU) by a mob is a case in point, where instead of the attackers, journalist Monjurul Alam Panna was detained under the Anti-Terrorism Act. Legal harassment of journalists continues even after the fall of the fascist government, with 266 journalists implicated after August 5, 2024. The entire situation exposes the current government's failure to ensure the safety of journalists. We urge the government to thoroughly investigate all incidents of violence against journalists and bring the perpetrators to justice. Likewise, legal harassment of journalists must come to an end. The government must also implement the recommendations made by the Media Reform Commission to improve the overall state of journalists and press freedom in the country.

We also urge the world leaders to work on improving the state of press freedom in their respective countries. Media outlets must be given the space to work independently so they can speak truth to power. We must remember that to build and maintain a functioning democracy anywhere in the world, ensuring press freedom and protecting journalists are essential.

EDITORIAL

When campus politics takes the centre stage



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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The landslide victory of the Islami Chhatrabshibir-backed panel in the Dhaka University Central Students' Union (Ducusu) election on Tuesday came as a shock to many. (The results of Jucsu polls at Jahangirnagar University, held on Thursday, was pending as of 7:30pm Friday.) Ever since the transition to parliamentary democracy in 1991, our political establishment has gotten used to a musical chair with the Awami League and BNP as the main contenders in national politics. Politics in the public universities reflected those in power; student unions were confined overtly to debates over dining hall menus, dormitory allocations, and cultural activities, and covertly to construction commissions and controlling rented properties in the vicinity. The disproportionate attention given to student polls exposes the political vacuum created by the country's eroded electoral culture. The media's hunger for symbolic contests catapulted student elections to the centre stage, as if they were national referendums.

Ironically, while the hype pitches student unions as "proxy parliaments," the unions' constitutions limit them to nothing more than a welfare body under the vice-chancellors' authority. Five student representatives of the unions will join the university senates for a year or until their successors step in, provided they have a valid student status. In a changed political landscape, students are likely to seek more stakes in the governance of the universities. Even so, the coverage of these student elections cannot be justified.

The only justification is that these elections are test cases for the interim government, which has promised a just transition to the democratic process. The shrinking space for competitive electoral politics caused by successive national elections being rigged, suppressed, and boycotted has made citizens lose faith in the ballot box. Such a vacuum allowed campus elections as a rare space where voters found agency. The campaigns looked like some rituals to revive democracy from its deathbed. The spectacles

created by newspapers, podcasts, and social media platforms satisfied our longing for democracy.

The lopsided attention given to DU poses another Orwellian riddle: why is one institution more of an institution than the other? Given DU's image in the national imagination as a site of every political movement, such emphasis is understandable. Then again, it highlights a problem for democracy, where too much weight is



FILE PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

The Ducusu election this year saw a significantly large voter turnout, figures suggesting that it was the highest turnout in several decades.

placed on one institution to mirror the pulse of an entire nation.

We often perceive campuses as miniature representations of the country. However, universities, with their educated demographics, may not fully represent the actual voters. But the momentum created during the elections may impact the decision-making process. That is why Shibir went for a tactical rebranding and scripted the performance to present themselves as a new finalist in the political game. They started their campaign by promoting the decoupling of student politics from national bases. They demanded a ban on party-leaning student politics and the declaration of hall committees by students' organisations. They aimed

to achieve two objectives: to dissociate themselves from the stigma associated with their parent body, Jamaat-e-Islami, and to destabilise Jatiotabadi Chatrada (JCD) return to campus after a long absence. Shibir opted for both a new name and a new optic, while JCD was caught off guard with its hands buried in the cookie jar of old politics. They were presented as the main actors in the ongoing culture of extortion, usurpation, vandalism, and underhanded dealings.

For those of us who have seen the violent phases of Shibir activism in the 80s and 90s, this is a surprising twist. To broaden their reach, they fielded a progressive female candidate and even a candidate from the Indigenous community. This strategic gesture portrays the organisation as an inclusive force.

What the progressive camps have

narrative of being martyrs of the present, especially in the July uprising.

It is time that other student bodies learnt from the student-centric initiatives. JCD took an oath to abolish bullying in the public room, which has become a nightmare for all incoming students. Yet it was somewhat too late. The recruitment strategy of Shibir involved mentoring students for admission and providing them with subsidies, off-campus jobs, tutoring services, medical and legal aid, and basic utilities, such as water filters in halls. The source of the funding remains a significant and unresolved question. However, while mainstream wings flexed their muscles, Shibir focused on providing welfare.

JCD, in contrast, was crippled by its parent organisation's indecision. Unsure of whether to contest campus polls before securing a national electoral breakthrough, they delayed, dithered, and ultimately joined under pressure. Students read this hesitation as weakness—a reflection of a party more obsessed with national power games than student welfare. Swing voters shifted to Shibir not out of ideological alignment but to punish JCD and send a message to the BNP.

The greatest loser in this battle, however, is the National Citizen Party (NCP). Given their close ties to the government, their decline is truly tragic. Yet, amid this hype, one must confront the sobering fact: Ducusu's or Jucsu's constitutional powers are limited. Under the 1973 act, the VCs are the ex officio presidents of these bodies. The very functions over which national parties battle for symbolic control are not legally within the mandate of student unions. The hype, amplified by social media algorithms, manufactured the illusion of a mandate. What Shibir won was not a parliament but a stage with the whole world watching.

Such a rise of religion-based student forces can reverberate beyond campus walls. It can pose a fundamental question: are the youth genuinely shifting towards faith-based politics, or merely fleeing the rot of mainstream student wings? This is where the election is likely to have a broader national impact. The Shibir-backed panel's Ducusu win matters, but not in the way headlines suggest. It signals the exhaustion with mainstream party proxies, the power of disciplined rebranding, and the political hunger created by the absence of credible national elections. It shows how a campus can become a stage when the national theatre remains closed.

Trial by fire

The Gen Z movement now has to unite to take the lead in reconstructing the Nepali state



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This article was published before it was reported on Friday that former Chief Justice Sushila Karki would take oath as the interim prime minister of Nepal.

Many young Nepalis at the Gen Z rally on September 8 carried banners that read, "Enough Is Enough."

But by the end of the day and into

September 9, the arson and mayhem had gone out of control of the idealistic young activists. As Parliament, Singha Darbar, the Supreme Court, public and private property were torched and looted, "Enough Is Enough" took on a new meaning.

What started out as a hashtag-led campaign exposing the luxurious lifestyle and extravagance of the scions of powerful political figures soon snowballed into a larger movement against corruption and impunity. #Nepokids in Nepal metamorphosed into a political reform campaign, which again transmuted on Tuesday into class rage.

The Oli-led coalition government's ban on social media last week forced what was essentially an online movement into the streets. Hami Nepal and the Gen Z platform organised the rally at Mandala on Monday

despite information that controversial political forces and other elements planned to infiltrate it. Which they did.

By Tuesday afternoon, Kathmandu was being firebombed. The three pillars of state—the legislative, executive, and judiciary—were reduced to ashes. Even the fourth estate was not spared, and became the target of unnamed arsonists.

The damage was not just to physical

buildings, but to the national psyche. But just like Hami Nepal emerged from the rubble of the 2015 earthquake, the Gen Z movement now has to take the lead in rebuilding from the cinders of 2025. Nepal needs to rise from the ashes, and be reconstructed from the ground up by a new generation with accountable government, equitable and inclusive growth, and an open society.

What this week's upheaval showed, aside from the tragedy of the lives lost and physical destruction, is that Nepalis value freedom of expression and can use it to stand against injustice and keep fighting for reform and progress.

But there are pitfalls ahead. Some of the same forces that piggybacked on the Gen Z rally are now outside the gates of Army Headquarters opposing the consensus candidate for interim prime

minister. There are scores of imitation Gen Zs across the internet with familiar cast of characters from the past.

The army must have learnt from the February 1, 2005 experience that it should remain as a non-political institution of last resort—there cannot be wannabe prime ministers applying loudly for the job at the gates of its headquarters in Tundikhel.

The army was needed on the streets on Tuesday night, when the situation spiralled out of control. But it should now be President Ram Chandra Poudel who must take a more proactive role than he has so far in re-establishing stability. He cannot waste time in appointing an interim government led by a caretaker prime minister of unquestioned integrity to oversee elections.

This is also the demand of Gen Z activists, who want parliament dissolved and changes in the constitution to allow wide-ranging reforms.

Changing the constitution now will mean another shaky rimerole like the 2008-2015 period. The amendments can be made after new elections.

Our common ground

A transformative transition like this also means a lot of uncertainty with competing interest groups trying to take advantage of the fluid situation. Nepal has gone through these upheavals before (although not on the scale we saw this week) with the 1990 People's Movement or the 2006 Peace and Democracy Movement. Each time, there was hope that finally elected leaders who fought and suffered for liberation and freedom would deliver.

Alas, the Nepali people have been let down every time. It has to be different this time. And who better to lead it than a new generation with hopes, aspirations, energy and resolve to build Nepal anew, led by a caretaker prime minister known for her independence, courage, and honesty.

In this edition, we carry two op-eds by Sri Lankan and Bangladeshi writers about similar youth-led movements that toppled governments in their countries in 2022 and 2024. Both have important lessons for Nepal's Gen Z.

If former Chief Justice Sushila Karki is appointed to head the interim government, she will be our Muhammad Yunus. But as we saw in Bangladesh, it did not go as smoothly as everyone had hoped. Similar story in the aftermath of Sri Lanka's Aragalaya movement.

There were different triggers in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal, but one common strand was a neglected and disempowered citizenry which could not take it anymore. They organised organically through social media to push for change.

The wildcard in all three countries is geopolitics, and the competing strategic interests of the India, China, United States triangle—especially with the Trump-Modi tiff.

Time is now of the essence. The longer this drags on, the more difficult it will be to find common ground and start rebuilding. Ending the violence does not mean keeping things in a political vacuum.

This article first appeared in the Nepali Times on September 11, 2025.