

We cannot afford any election delay

Political parties must put aside divisions, help restore stability

There seems to be a broad consensus by now that the nation cannot afford to have the next national election delayed beyond February, as doing so would further undermine stability. At a *Prothom Alo* roundtable, participants also stressed that the government must play a more decisive role in ensuring that the polls take place on schedule to avoid the risk of a plunge back into chaos. One speaker even warned that delaying the election could endanger national security.

The prevailing uncertainty is already taking a toll on the country. Beyond politics, it is fuelling an economic crisis marked by rising poverty and unemployment. The interim government, inherently weak as it is, cannot provide the long-term stability needed to tackle these challenges. Public confidence in governance in general seems quite low. The cost of a delayed democratic transition has also been evident in rising social unrest.

The core challenge right now is not the lack of reform ideas, but the failure to implement them. Leaders across the political spectrum appear to agree on the need for change, but their unity must translate into concrete action. We acknowledge that this moment is an opportunity for a proper transition to democracy, not simply a change in leadership. It is about building a system that reflects the aspirations of the people. A prolonged interim period without a clear mandate would, however, make it difficult to carry out the necessary constitutional and institutional reforms. The longer the delay, the harder it will be to implement those changes.

Political parties, therefore, must rise above their divisions and petty interests. The responsibility for ensuring a peaceful transition through elections also rests with them. They cannot allow their disunity to become a pretext for delaying the election. Against this backdrop, the fresh demands raised by Jamaat-e-Islami and like-minded parties underscore the underlying complexities of that endeavour. These groups are seeking to tie the polls to a four-point agenda, including the implementation of the July Charter and a proportional representation (PR) system for an Upper House. Their demands, which also include a call to ban the Jatiya Party, introduce a new layer of tension in an already delicate process.

But these demands, whether justified or not, should not be allowed to derail the election in the larger national interest. Politicians must accept that the election is a matter of national urgency in which any partisan demands, while significant to the parties involved, should not be viewed as absolute preconditions. For the sake of stability, these issues must be addressed through dialogue—and swiftly—not through actions that could jeopardise the ongoing process.

Political parties must try to look beyond their immediate demands and divisions. The time for arguments over various demands has passed; the time for action is now. The election is the first and most vital step towards a democratic future. All other demands, no matter how important, must be pursued within that framework, not as a barrier to it. The government must also facilitate an enabling environment for this transition.

Don't abandon kids with special needs

Govt must not remove specialist doctors from Shishu Bikash Kendras

We are concerned about the government's plan to cut specialist care for the 35 Shishu Bikash Kendras that have long provided affordable care to children with special needs in the country. Reportedly, under the Health, Population and Nutrition Sector Programme, the health ministry set up these centres in 2008–24 in medical college hospitals and 11 in district hospitals—while appointing developmental paediatricians, therapists, and child psychologists to provide treatment and therapy to children aged up to 16. Over the years, these centres have transformed the lives of countless children with autism, Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, ADHD, epilepsy, delayed speech, intellectual disabilities, and other disorders. But since the project's term expired last June, the future of these centres now hangs in the balance.

Reportedly, the health ministry proposed a two-year initiative to run these centres. However, when the finance ministry forwarded the plan to the Planning Commission, the posts for developmental paediatricians were dropped. Instead, it suggested outsourcing 35 therapists and 12 psychologists. According to those associated with the centres, specialist doctors have to devote a significant amount of time to each patient. If they are replaced by general doctors, the centres' core purpose will be lost. Experts warned that cutting specialist care may save money in the short term but will lead to higher long-term costs, as children deprived of early treatment risk growing up dependent on state support.

The importance of these centres with specialist care cannot be overstated. Since the project was launched, a total of 243,000 children have received treatment in these centres, with more than 1,000 patients receiving treatment daily. What is unique about these facilities is that they provide treatment to children from low- and middle-income families—for only a fee of Tk 10—who otherwise cannot afford the expensive treatment for their conditions.

We, therefore, urge the government to develop a comprehensive plan to run these centres smoothly. If the government does have a plan to integrate them into the mainstream system, it should be implemented without compromising the standard of treatment. We may recall that the Health Sector Reform Commission recommended establishing multidisciplinary child development centres in all district and medical college hospitals, while also proposing a Child Development Centre Act to ensure sustainability. The government must pay heed to these suggestions and act accordingly. Since there are very few facilities for children with developmental needs in the country, the existing ones must not be discontinued or weakened under any circumstances.

After Ducsu polls, Shibir has its work cut out for itself



WINKERS AWEIGH!

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In the final analysis, the comprehensive victory for Shibir-backed candidates in the Dhaka University Central Students' Union (Ducsu) election was not a surprise. Their margin of victory, however, was sobering for many who had thought that Jamaat-e-Islami's student wing would never win. This result may not be an exact reflection of how the youth might vote in the national election, but it certainly does provide some indication. That is one takeaway. However, the new Ducsu office-bearers will have their work cut out for them. But before delving into that, a few other takeaways.

With the voter turnout hitting close to 80 percent, it does not appear that there was any feeling of disenfranchisement in the absence of Awami League's student wing, the Chhatra League (now a banned outfit). If anything, the results underscored just how irrelevant the outfit has become, having failed to build a loyal following to counter Shibir despite its sometimes brutal campaign against the latter (the killing of Buet's Abrar Fahad comes to mind).

The National Citizen Party's (NCP) student wing also hardly made a ripple, or dent. In hindsight, they were never a force to reckon with in this election. The currency that the July uprising leaders thought they still carried seems to have fizzled out on the very campus that was the cradle of that movement. Since young voters are presumed to be the NCP's natural support base, the Ducsu result warrants serious scrutiny over whether this debacle also signals waning popularity for the parent party.

BNP's student wing came in for the rudest awakening. Chatra Dal appeared to have been riding on the hope that, no matter what, students of this university would not vote for

a platform backed by Shibir, given its controversial past. That only showed how out of touch with the ground reality they were. Clearly, that controversial past did not matter to the general students, many of whom seemed to fear that voting for Chatra Dal would simply recreate another Chhatra League-style atmosphere on campus.



From left, Abu Shadik Kayem, SM Farhad, and Mohiuddin Khan of the Shibir-backed Oikyaboddho Shikharthi Jote gesture triumphantly after winning the top three posts in the recent Ducsu election. FILE PHOTO: STAR

Coming back to Shibir, this was the first time in Bangladesh's history that Jamaat's student wing openly contested an election on the DU campus. Although the panel's name, Oikkoboddho Shikharthi Jote (or United Student Alliance), suggested a broad union of general students, it was essentially Shibir-backed—a signature strategy it has long used to mask direct

links. Whether it was expedience or genuine commitment that drove Shibir to include non-Muslims, members of ethnic minorities, and women in the panel, the stratagem paid off. Shibir announced its arrival in style with commanding leads and, more notably, without pomp. For Jamaat, it must have been very encouraging to see Shibir's groundwork pay off so handsomely, emboldening its hopes for a similar showing in the national polls.

Not only did Shibir refrain from bringing out a victory procession, but their leading duo—the vice-president elect and the general secretary elect—have both been humble and measured in acknowledging the results. One emphasised that the victory was not their panel's alone, but belonged to the

desperately inventing conspiracies and schemes to explain the debacle. There have been allegations of irregularities that are hardly convincing. Shibir's years of welfare activities—helping poor students with coaching, accommodation, and even tuition—were neither covert nor secret. They were playing the long game. Instead of the same old brand of “student politics” that revolved around gaining muscle and establishing supremacy, Shibir was able to project themselves as helpful and approachable. They were seen as a party that would work towards the welfare of students, a perception that outweighed Shibir's past.

Students were willing to overlook that cadres of this party's predecessor had once turned against professors of the university and led them to death camps during the dying days of the Liberation War. Jamaat or Shibir's past record did not matter. Nor did it matter that barely a month or so before the election, Shibir had organised an exhibition (which they took down within a day) of “martyrs” in memory of Jamaat leaders convicted of the most heinous war crimes.

But the new Ducsu office-bearers do inherit unresolved questions over the legacy of Shibir's predecessors. Perhaps for the first time in a long while, Ducsu leaders do not enjoy the unquestioned confidence of a large section of the general populace. Detractors will be quick to point out even the smallest misstep. Their victory, therefore, cannot be read as a blanket endorsement of past misdeeds or violence, nor as validation of their historical stance against Bangladesh.

Instead, this win is a mandate for demonstrating competence, responsibility, and genuine commitment to student welfare. The battle may have been won for now, but the real test lies ahead. Shibir must prove that they can translate electoral success into meaningful actions, show fairness in governance, and earn the trust of a student body that remains apprehensive and watchful. Only by delivering on these expectations can they reshape the perception of their role on campus.

What must be done before Rooppur begins operation



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Nuclear power carries both immense promise and immense peril. With the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant (NPP) expected to begin operation early next year, Bangladesh stands on the threshold of becoming a nuclear energy-producing nation. If successfully implemented, this project will not only expand the country's clean electricity supply and support its climate goals but also strengthen long-term energy security, sustainability and international credibility.

Yet, nuclear power can bring severe risks if not managed properly. An accident could have far-reaching consequences beyond national borders, eroding public trust and damaging international confidence. To avoid this peril, Bangladesh must uphold certain non-negotiable obligations: an unwavering commitment to safety, institutional independence, professional competence, transparency, a strong safety culture and long-term planning. Without these, the risks could outweigh the benefits.

To ensure Rooppur becomes a success story rather than a cautionary tale, reforms across government, regulatory, operational and policy levels are essential, not optional. These steps are critical to maintaining the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) safety standards.

In this regard, the IAEA has recently conducted a Pre-Operational Safety Review Team (Pre-OSART) mission involving 14 international experts. The mission provided important recommendations to be addressed before the plant begins operation, including enhancing fire safety systems for effective prevention and response; strengthening leadership

and operational standards; and improving equipment preservation during commissioning to safeguard systems and components. The mission also identified good practices of global significance, such as the Rooppur Training Centre's use of a state-of-the-art simulator for training in refuelling machine operations.

The Pre-OSART mission focuses solely on operational safety. It is neither a nuclear governance review, nor a regulatory inspection, nor a design review, nor a substitute for a comprehensive assessment of the plant's overall safety status. Before Unit-1 begins operation, the following issues must be addressed properly to ensure robust nuclear safety and to uphold both national and international confidence in Bangladesh's nuclear journey.

Strengthening governance and independence

Good governance is the cornerstone of nuclear safety. At present, the Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission (BAEC), the Nuclear Power Company of Bangladesh Ltd (NPCBL) and the Bangladesh Atomic Energy Regulatory Authority (BAERA) all operate under the Ministry of Science and Technology (MoST). This structure undermines regulatory independence, a principle emphasised by the IAEA. To align with global best practices as well as the IAEA's recommendations, BAERA must operate independently, reporting to the prime minister, the president or a separate ministry. The chair of BAERA should have a proven track record in nuclear expertise.

Additionally, the National Technical Committee should be strengthened with high-level experts from engineering, public health,

law enforcement and emergency management, and must meet regularly to monitor project progress and timelines, identify causes for delays, and mitigate risks through prudent and prompt decisions.

BAERA must evolve into a truly credible regulator. That requires establishing a strong management system, cultivating a culture of safety and training staff according to IAEA standards. Most of the regulations necessary for the operation of Rooppur are yet to be developed, which includes regulations covering every stage of the nuclear lifecycle, from construction to decommissioning. Enforcement of these regulations must also be ensured.

Equally important, BAERA should open official channels of communication with relevant nuclear safety and security stakeholders and with the public. Nuclear safety and security are not only technical matters but also depend on transparency, sharing best practices, collaboration and trust among stakeholders.

As the operator of Rooppur, NPCBL holds the primary responsibility for daily safety. This calls for leaders chosen on merit, not patronage, and for a workplace culture guided by technical competence and accountability. When management issues arise, root-cause analysis—not ad hoc dismissals—should be the norm.

Transparent communication, especially with residents near Rooppur, is essential to ensure they receive accurate information about safety measures and emergency preparedness. At the same time, both on-site and off-site safety systems must be in place for normal operations and potential emergencies.

BAEC, as the parent and facilitating organisation, must be strengthened with competent manpower and expertise. It should expand its capacity in nuclear safety analysis, security and safeguards, radiation protection, waste management, instrumentation and control, and nuclear economics. Building domestic expertise will reduce overdependence on foreign partners and enhance the long-term sustainability of the country's nuclear

power programme.

Bangladesh must take a long view of nuclear fuel and waste. Relying solely on one country for lifelong fuel supply is risky. A long-term nuclear fuel cycle policy should ensure a secure supply for at least 80 years by diversifying sources through competitive markets.

At the same time, a radioactive waste management company should be established to handle operational wastes safely and to develop long-term storage and disposal facilities. Identifying a permanent site for intermediate-level waste disposal should be treated as a strategic priority, not a distant concern.

Preparing for emergencies and technical support

Even the safest Generation III+ VVER-1200 nuclear plant must prepare for robust emergencies. Before Rooppur becomes operational, Bangladesh must establish a fully functional Nuclear and Radiological Emergency Preparedness and Response Centre. This centre should be equipped with trained staff and modern equipment and vehicles to coordinate rapid responses in a crisis.

After Rooppur's commissioning, Bangladesh should also establish a Technical Support Organisation (TSO) capable of providing timely expertise in troubleshooting, system upgrades and specialised safety analysis. The TSO may be structured as a public entity, a private organisation or a public-private partnership, but it must have the necessary expertise and sufficient capacity in nuclear technology. Otherwise, the country will have to depend on Russian or Indian assistance, which is often costlier and more time-consuming.

Rooppur is not just another mega-project. It represents a commitment to fostering a culture of safety, security, transparency and long-term responsibility in the peaceful use of nuclear technology. The reforms outlined above are the minimum requirements to ensure its safe, secure and sustainable operation. Therefore, there is no need to rush bringing the reactor online until the recommended issues are properly addressed.