

## Women in the hills need greater safety

Arrest and punish the perpetrators of the Khagrachhari gang rape

We are outraged by the recent gang rape of an Indigenous girl in Khagrachhari. According to the survivor's father, his daughter, a class-eight student, used to attend private tutoring every evening and would return home by 9pm. However, on September 23, when she did not return at the usual time, her family went to the tutor's house to look for her, only to learn that the tutoring had ended as scheduled. Later, with help from local residents, they began searching the surrounding area and eventually found the girl bruised and unconscious in a crop field. This incident underscores the vulnerability of young girls and women of Indigenous communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

While women and girls across the country are increasingly facing insecurity and violence, those from Indigenous communities remain especially vulnerable due to their identities and the complex local politics at play. In the CHT, sexual violence against women and girls is reportedly often weaponised as a tool to further marginalise Indigenous communities and facilitate land grabbing. The non-Indigenous identity of the perpetrators is also a well-known fact in these incidents. Over the past year, numerous cases of violence against women, including rape, have been reported, yet justice has rarely been served. In June, for instance, the rape of a 14-year-old girl in the same district brought people to the streets. While some arrests were made in the case, the momentum quickly faded as protests subsided.

Political and rights organisations who are now holding protests across the CHT, demanding justice for the recent rape survivor in Khagrachhari, point out that rape, torture, and persecution have become routine due to a culture of impunity. Focusing on the overall lack of security for women in the hills, they are saying that crimes like rape are on the rise mostly because justice has not been served in previous incidents. They also point out that the non-implementation of the CHT Peace Accord is another key reason for the unchecked rise in violent crimes. These grievances are quite legitimate and should be addressed properly.

As regards the Khagrachhari case, we call on the authorities to conduct a thorough and impartial investigation and ensure immediate arrest of those involved. The perpetrators of this heinous crime must be brought to justice. Only by delivering swift justice can we hope to end the cycle of such crimes against Indigenous women and girls and restore a sense of safety in the region.

## The Rohingya need more than aid

Leaders must move beyond rhetoric, ensure political solutions to end the crisis

The tragic saga of the Rohingya people stranded in Bangladesh, now in its eighth year, has been defined as much by an extraordinary humanitarian response as by a glaring political failure. While the international community has mobilised aid on an unprecedented scale to sustain over a million refugees, a new report from the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) reiterates what has long been clear to us: that charity alone is not a solution. The crisis requires a political resolution, and the voices of the Rohingya themselves must guide the way.

The OHCHR study, based on interviews with 125 Rohingya men and women, cuts through the geopolitical inertia to reveal a simple truth. The refugees' desire is not to reside indefinitely in camps, but to return home to Myanmar. This aspiration hinges on obtaining full citizenship, recognition of their Rohingya identity, and guarantees of equal rights, education, and freedom of movement. For them, justice means land restitution, compensation, and accountability for past crimes. The international community has been painfully slow to deliver on these core demands, however.

This is further complicated by the deeply fraught situation on the ground. The OHCHR report highlights a deep distrust of the Arakan Army (AA), an armed group that has gained significant territorial control in Rakhine State. The majority of respondents, comprising over 70 percent, fear the group is seeking to "erase" the Rohingya from Arakan. That's a major obstacle to any repatriation efforts. The ongoing conflict between the Arakan Army and Myanmar's military junta also creates a security vacuum that leaves the Rohingya trapped between hostile forces. Rohingya respondents have, therefore, called for active leadership from the UN, regional powers, and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation to pressure Myanmar's political actors so as to provide guarantees for any repatriation agreement. Their plea for self-determination extends to a clear demand for direct engagement with educated Rohingya representatives, signalling their belief that a new leadership is needed to navigate their future.

As the international community convenes for a high-level conference on the crisis at the UN Headquarters in New York on September 30, the findings of this report must serve as a wake-up call. The focus must shift from a purely humanitarian approach to a political one, which addresses the root causes of the crisis—the ingrained racism and religious intolerance that 65 percent of the respondents cited. The call for UN peacekeeping missions or internationally protected safe zones in key townships like Maungdaw and Buthidaung shows that physical security is the first precondition for any return.

The time is overdue for the UN and regional powers to move beyond rhetoric and provide the political pressure, security guarantees, and platforms for dialogue that will enable a truly voluntary, safe, and dignified return. The future of the Rohingya cannot remain confined to aid dependency; it must be anchored in the restoration of their rights, recognition of their identity, and the ability to live safely and with dignity in Myanmar.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

### First televised US presidential debate

On this day in 1960, the first in a series of historic televised debates (seen by some 85 to 120 million viewers) between US presidential candidates John F. Kennedy and Vice President Richard M. Nixon was broadcast.

# EDITORIAL

## Limiting majority power requires a watchdog, not bicameralism

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Following the ouster of the Awami League government in August 2024, the interim government established a number of reform commissions with a key focus being on remaking the political system. Bicameralism, proportional representation, and non-partisan constitutional appointments were among the formal recommendations. However, whether these prescriptions can pierce the entrenched dominance of the executive or disrupt the winner-takes-all culture of Bangladesh's politics remains a question. This article discusses whether creating an upper house in parliament would ensure accountability of the majority party or, in other words, whether it would create checks and balances in legislative, executive, and judicial processes.

Creating a second chamber in parliament to diffuse power, introducing proportional representation to prevent winner-takes-all outcomes, and establishing non-partisan appointment mechanisms to strengthen oversight are largely visionary proposals. Since institutions are mostly politically captured, bicameralism risks becoming a vehicle to reward party loyalists rather than enhance accountability, as it expands offices and seats without curbing entrenched executive dominance. Without mechanisms for independent oversight and enforcement, the proposals, even if accepted, offer limited potential to improve parliamentary scrutiny or restrain majoritarian excesses.

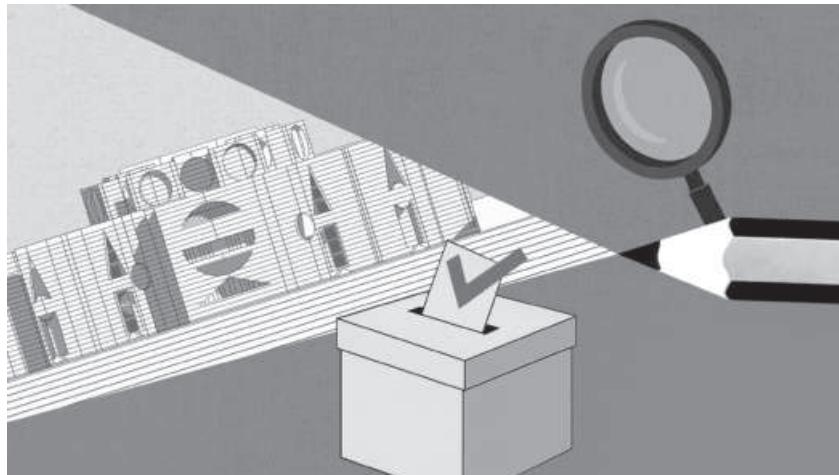
Bangladesh faces a complex political reality in which polarised politics and a dominant majority party undermine the independence of the legislature, while opposition participation remains inconsistent due to boycotts and structural barriers. Although committees and procedural checks exist, they still lack the capacity and enforcement power to function effectively. In this context, bicameralism or proportional representation are unlikely to succeed without independent enforcement mechanisms.

Therefore, Bangladesh needs an out-of-the-box solution to ensure sustainable accountability practices given the prevailing political reality. The Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) has recently conducted a study on parliamentary reform and proposed an independent parliamentary commission for democracy, legislative, executive, and legal affairs. Unlike ad hoc reforms, this

would stand alongside parliament as an impartial watchdog, offering expertise, scrutiny, and balance where political actors themselves refuse to do so.

### Establishing a commission for oversight

The Jatiya Sangsad, in principle, holds extensive powers over legislation, finance, and oversight. In practice, these powers are heavily curtailed by majority-party dominance. Parliamentary committee leadership is mostly partisan, proceedings



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

are hurried, and opposition MPs face systemic barriers. Budgetary oversight is superficial. Audits are delayed, and recommendations ignored. Even procedural reforms, such as referring bills to committees after the first reading, have not been translated into substantial scrutiny. Parliament is structurally incapable of holding the majority party accountable.

A dedicated commission may give parliament the oversight it lacks. It could review bills before introduction to ensure they follow the constitution, serve public interests, and respect democratic principles. It could also monitor laws after they are passed, identify gaps, and suggest corrections. Committees would gain research and advice to strengthen scrutiny. Budget oversight would become meaningful, as financial committees gain the tools to spot irregularities and demand transparency. Most importantly, by promoting pluralism, the parliamentary commission could encourage opposition participation, reduce boycotts and walkouts, and push for genuine cross-party cooperation. Without such a body, accountability would remain mostly a promise.

through financial autonomy. It would be provided with a separate budget free from executive manipulation, and through transparent reporting, its findings would be made public to enable citizen oversight and media scrutiny. Additionally, consultative engagement with civil society, academic experts, and the private sector would ensure any recommendations are grounded in empirical realities, while a dedicated secretariat would support research, documentation, and coordination, allowing commissioners to focus on substantive evaluation. This structure positions the commission not merely as an advisory entity but as a credible oversight institution where expert neutrality and evidence-based analysis can influence parliamentary practice and curb executive overreach.

### A case study from Europe

The CPD proposes taking lessons from the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe, also called the European Commission for Democracy through Law. It was established in 1990 to strengthen democratic institutions, promote the rule of law, and support member states in upholding

constitutional norms. Its success rests on three pillars: independence, expertise, and functional flexibility. Members are experts in law, political science, and human rights, serving in a personal capacity rather than as political appointees, thus ensuring impartiality.

The commission provides pre-legislative reviews, advises on constitutional amendments, drafts guidelines, evaluates the functioning of democratic institutions, and supports citizen participation in governance. Its opinions cover legislative, constitutional, and administrative matters.

It holds four plenary sessions per year, appoints rapporteurs for country-specific opinions, and engages with governmental bodies, civil society, and academic experts. Reports are confidential until adopted, ensuring candid evaluation, and once finalised, they are published to maintain transparency. A secretariat supports its operations, providing technical assistance, drafting documents, and facilitating research.

Over decades, the Venice Commission has thus become a trusted arbiter of democratic reform, mediating political disputes, strengthening parliamentary procedures, and promoting judicial and institutional independence across Europe and beyond.

The lesson for Bangladesh is clear: combine structural independence, technical capacity, and impartial authority for real accountability. Without these, parliament remains a symbolic body, incapable of challenging the executive, scrutinising legislation, or enforcing transparency.

An independent commission, as the CPD proposes, could address the root problem: it could inject impartial expertise, pre-legislative and post-legislative scrutiny, and technical capacity into the system. It could strengthen the architecture of accountability itself. With independence, expertise, structural safeguards, and operational capacity, it could provide the much-needed oversight.

If Bangladesh is serious about ensuring accountability of the majority party, strengthening parliamentary scrutiny, and safeguarding democratic legitimacy, it cannot rely on symbolic reforms or additional chambers alone. It must build institutions capable of functioning independently, impartially, and effectively. Without such a commission, the promise of accountability will remain aspirational, and the cycle of fragile parliamentary governance will continue. Finally, Bangladesh needs an independent mechanism that can hold the majority party accountable, not just another chamber in parliament. Anything less will be political theatre, not democracy.

## Rohingya crisis: Refugees without a country, a world without excuse



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Bangladesh cannot carry this weight alone. Hosting over one million Rohingya refugees is not a bilateral matter. It is a regional crisis and a global issue.

This is a tragedy Bangladesh did not invite. Families fled to save their lives, crossing forests, rivers, and rough roads. Days passed without food. Children sobbed until their voices faded. Mothers gave the last drops of water to their babies. The pain of hunger became a dull, constant ache. Yet they kept walking, because they knew turning back meant death.

They did not become refugees by choice. Their villages were burned, women and girls were raped, and men were tortured and killed. Generation-old homes were erased. This brutal reality is something I have listened to in the voices of Rohingya people—young and old, women and adolescent girls speaking in Cox's Bazar and on different international platforms. Their stories are heart-wrenching. Each has lost a loved one. Each carries

invisible scars.

I remember a young Rohingya man in the camps once asking, "Where do I belong? In Rakhine, they say I do not belong there. Here, I am only a refugee. Why am I stateless? I wanted to be a computer engineer. Now I survive as a volunteer. I want to thrive." This struggle echoes among thousands, struggling to cope with grief and helplessness in the nooks and alleys of the camps in Cox's Bazar.

This sense of helplessness has only deepened over time. Eight years have passed, and the population has grown to over a million. Since January 2024 alone, 150,000 more have arrived, living in camps with the bare minimum. Space is shrinking and resources are stretched, yet many remain unregistered. Amidst this, the Rohingya people are not allowed to work, and children and youth have no access to formal education. Their potential remains locked away.

In the face of this locked potential, experts speak of "self-reliance," but

what does that mean without a real plan? Bangladesh cannot shoulder this alone. Donors, the United Nations, the international community, and regional leaders must design and finance a model that benefits both the displaced Rohingya population and host communities.

While such a model is crucial for survival, the ultimate goal of repatriation remains a distant dream. Without citizenship, rights, and security, a safe return is impossible. The question is, who will create the necessary conditions? Experts, humanitarians, and policymakers discuss the need for a durable solution, but the Rohingya refugees speak of only one thing: going home.

This singular focus on home is a constant, powerful reminder for those of us on the ground. Every day, I see people working tirelessly to support the Rohingya refugees. We feel their pain, yet we cannot truly experience it. We do not sleep in crowded, makeshift shelters, and our children are not out of school. Fire and violence do not burn down our homes every year. Only they know how it feels to live with that loss and uncertainty every day—to wake each morning with no country to call home, to carry memories of terror while facing a future with no clear path.

This profound uncertainty is now compounded by a harsh financial reality, as resources are shrinking sharply, adding more challenges to the

lives of both camp dwellers and hosts. It is estimated that over \$5.9 billion in aid has flowed since 2017, while Bangladesh has also spent nearly \$568 million of its own.

These staggering figures underscore why this burden is not Bangladesh's alone to bear; it is a shared responsibility. Without continued support, the situation will worsen—already cramped shelters will become more crowded, food security will become a bigger concern, and stretched services will deepen suffering and frustration. That is why we humanitarians must commit to more than delivering aid. We must invest efforts in amplifying refugee voices, push for lasting solutions, and stand with them until they can return home safely and with dignity.

To achieve this, regional leaders, donors, and the international community must also act now to share the responsibility, provide sustainable support, and ensure that refugees can survive today while building a path toward safety, dignity, and an eventual return to their homeland. If the world waits or fails to ensure justice, despair will deepen and frustration will grow.

And that helps no nation. The Rohingya refugees deserve to return home safely and with dignity. They deserve the birthright of citizenship in Myanmar. Until that day, the region, the world, and host states must stand with them.