

EC must not allow any fake observer

Guidelines should be applied diligently in the screening process

Investigations conducted into the authenticity of election observers provisionally registered by the Election Commission (EC) by two Bangla dailies—*Prothom Alo* and *Samakal*—have been quite revealing. These investigations expose a startling failure of the EC to properly verify the expertise and capability of aspirant poll-monitoring organisations. According to a *Prothom Alo* report, the EC received 300 applications for enrolment as election observers. After initial scrutiny and some field-level verification, it published a preliminary list of 73 organisations deemed eligible for registration.

But barring a handful of exceptions, as both newspapers reveal, most of these organisations do not fulfil the required criteria for becoming election observers. Some exist only on paper; they could not be traced at their listed addresses. Quite a few are linked with political figures, which is clearly against the EC's prescribed preconditions. Unfortunately, this echoes the scandals of fake observers seen during the last three elections held under the previous regime of Sheikh Hasina. It may be recalled that in those elections, the phenomenon of fake observers was not confined to national boundaries but extended to groups imported from abroad.

The EC's guidelines on election observation clearly state that organisations registered with the government and engaged in promoting democracy, good governance, and human rights are eligible to apply for accreditation as poll monitors. They are also required to submit reports of their organisational activities over the past two years. The media probes show that the EC did not rigorously apply its own guidelines when compiling the preliminary list of observer organisations, whether due to its lack of capacity or negligence. Neither is acceptable, and this must be rectified immediately. Bangladesh cannot afford to let fake observers again distort the credibility of its elections.

There is little doubt that election observation by neutral monitors with expertise in detecting manipulation, undue interference, and partisan behaviour of polling officials is crucial for ensuring electoral credibility. The infiltration of fake observers into election processes is not unique to Bangladesh—it has become a global problem. National and international actors with vested interests often use fake observers to influence public perception of the fairness and quality of an election. As such practices pose a serious threat to democracy and may legitimise manipulated outcomes, a number of leading international and regional bodies have developed toolkits to detect and counter fake observers. The EC should consider seeking technical assistance on detecting such groups from international organisations, including the United Nations and the European Union.

Since 1991, Bangladesh has experienced both the best and the worst of election monitoring. With the weakening of democracy and rise of authoritarianism, we witnessed staged elections and the proliferation of fake observers. Following the student-led mass uprising of 2024, we hoped that such practices would not be repeated. We, therefore, urge the EC to diligently scrutinise the suitability and integrity of any potential poll monitoring organisation.

Protect children from abuse, violence

State must ensure our children grow up in a safe environment

We are alarmed by how our children are increasingly becoming victims of physical and sexual abuse despite there being enough laws and policies to protect them. According to the Local Education and Economic Development Organization (LEEDO), child rape cases rose by nearly 75 percent in the first seven months of 2025 compared to the same period last year. Between January and July, 306 girls were raped, up from 175 in the same period of 2024 and already exceeding the year-total of 234, according to Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK). Moreover, there have been many instances of children being murdered or suffering abuse, including physical assault, sexual violence, and corporal punishment.

The recent rape of a teenage girl in Khagrachhari, the sexual assault of a 7-year-old madrasa student in Cumilla, and the rape of a 12-year-old domestic worker in Gaibandha are just some of the cases reported in the media. The list goes on. The question is: how long must our children grow up in such an unsafe environment?

Children are being abused not only outside but also within their own homes. According to UNICEF, nine out of 10 Bangladeshi children aged 1-14 experience violent discipline at home at least once a month, which is quite troubling. Unfortunately, such harmful practice of parental violence is rarely discussed in our society. Moreover, online abuse has also increased alarmingly with the growing internet usage among children. Incidents of children being exploited to create online content have also emerged in the media. Meanwhile, a 2025 study by SpringerLink found widespread physical abuse among child labourers in rural informal sectors. Additionally, child marriage remains a major driver of both physical and sexual abuse. The situation is disturbing.

We, therefore, urge the government to take decisive steps to reduce all forms of abuse and sexual harassment of children. It must ensure safe environments and counselling support in schools, implement effective monitoring to prevent domestic abuse, end child labour by providing families with social protection and alternatives, and prioritise the investigation and speedy trial of child sexual abuse and rape cases. Raising awareness among parents, teachers, and employers is also essential. Equally important is the role of the media in promoting child rights and protecting children's identities while covering incidents of abuse. With online abuse on the rise, cyber laws must also be strengthened, and child-friendly helplines established to prevent further harm. Without such decisive actions, the safety and future of our children will remain at grave risk.

How to overcome the impasse on July Charter



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The idea of what we now call the July National Charter was born of collective sacrifice. In the July uprising in 2024, many people gave their lives and many more were injured or braved the risks of repression and mortal danger, for nothing more radical than what should have been theirs by right. For 15 and a half years, their voices had been stifled, their votes suppressed, and their futures mortgaged by an extractive state. Through their sacrifices, they hoped that democracy could be restored, not as a hollow form but as a living practice.

The charter was supposed to have been adopted in July this year, but that moment passed without resolution. Instead, it remains stalled over disagreements on how it should be implemented. The term of the commission entrusted with building consensus has already been extended twice. With its tenure now stretched to October 15, the nation hopes the task will finally be completed. Otherwise, uncertainty may deepen and further political instability may follow.

The lure of misplaced proposals

A pervasive sense of mistrust, fuelled more by political calculation than by reality, has paralysed the charter's progress. The current dispute is not about its content but about the mode of implementation. The anxiety that the party winning the next election will simply disregard the charter has been politically manufactured, providing cover for proposals that veer towards impractical or even dangerous shortcuts.

One such proposal is the adoption of proportional representation (PR) system. The PR system works in settings with strong institutions and independent electoral management bodies, developed after years of mature discourse. Bangladesh, by contrast, has weak institutions as well as an electoral administration still struggling to regain public trust. In such a context, PR has proven to

be rather destabilising. In Sri Lanka, for example, experimentation with mixed systems failed to reduce polarisation. In Nepal, PR produced fragile coalitions that collapsed repeatedly, with 13 administrations in just over a decade since 2008, not counting the current one that emerged from a recent mass uprising.

Another suggestion is for the charter to be enacted through a decree or "constitutional order" by the interim government. While superficially appealing, such an approach suffers from a legitimacy deficit. International experience demonstrates that extra-constitutional decrees often backfire. In Pakistan, the state's repeated resort to constitutional orders by military-backed regimes eroded democratic institutions. In Latin America, presidential decrees imposed without parliamentary oversight triggered prolonged constitutional crises.

Constituent power of the people

The interim government, with the Supreme Court's advisory reference under Article 106 of the constitution, operates under the doctrine of necessity, since power cannot remain in a vacuum after the fall of a discredited regime. The constitution remains in force, neither suspended nor abrogated. This is, therefore, not a revolutionary government.

The constituent power lies with the people, and it is through elections that this power is to be exercised. Any attempt to bypass electoral and parliamentary legitimacy would contradict the very spirit of the July uprising, which sought to reclaim democracy, not dilute it. A durable settlement, therefore, requires a return to the ballot box.

Therefore, a decent way forward is to place the charter before the people. There could be a referendum on the consensus points, which would give it unassailable legitimacy, after which the next parliament could

implement its provisions if endorsed. On contentious issues where political parties disagree, the electorate must arbitrate through their votes on party manifestos. This is the essence of democratic politics: compromise in some areas, contestation in others, with the people serving as the final judge.

A legal nuance can be advanced here. Some provisions of the charter touch upon the "basic structure" of the constitution. Jurisprudence across South Asia, most famously the Indian Supreme Court's *Kesavananda Bharati* case of 1973, holds that the basic structure cannot be altered by ordinary amendment. The Supreme Court of Bangladesh has also adopted similar reasoning.

according to an estimate by the Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC). Meanwhile, youth unemployment is escalating, with one in three graduates remaining jobless for up to two years, according to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics' recent Labour Force Survey. Inflation has eroded real wages, particularly in the informal sector that sustains about 85 percent of the workforce. Global experience shows that prolonged political paralysis under such economic stress risks social unrest. Bangladesh cannot afford another erosion.

Election is the only way out

The July Charter embodies the people's aspirations for a democratic, accountable and inclusive polity.



VISUAL: ALIZA RAHMAN

To overcome this, the referendum could include a clause asking for authorisation for the next parliament to amend those provisions relating to the basic structure.

Comparative experiences reinforce the importance of sequencing reform through electoral legitimacy. In Egypt, President Mohamed Morsi's attempt to impose constitutional changes by decree in 2012 sparked mass protests and political turmoil, contributing to his ouster and paving the way for renewed authoritarianism. The lesson is clear: legitimacy cannot be manufactured; it must be conferred through votes.

The danger of delay in this regard cannot be overstated. The country's economic condition is deteriorating. Extreme poverty has risen to 9.35 percent this year,

But those aspirations will remain unfulfilled if the charter is held hostage to mistrust or political manoeuvring. The process has already run past its original July deadline, so October 15 must mark the point of its completion. Anything less would prolong uncertainty, weaken public confidence, and risk squandering the momentum of the uprising.

The charter must not be imposed or toyed with; it must be owned and respected. That ownership comes only through the constituent power of the people. An election, to be held in the first week of February through consensus and with the charter as the central agenda, is the only viable path to overcome the impasse. This is a historic opportunity to unlock Bangladesh's untapped democratic potential.

When the law of the crowd takes over



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It often starts with a whisper. The whisper grows louder, the crowd gathers, and soon, violence erupts. By the time the police arrive, if they arrive at all, someone suffers serious injuries; sometimes, a life is lost. Since the July uprising, Bangladesh has witnessed scenarios like these repeatedly. Very recently, in Narayanganj, a suspected thief was beaten to death before law enforcement could intervene. In Bogura, a rumour of blasphemy sparked deadly violence that left a man dead and shops destroyed. On the outskirts of Dhaka, political disputes spilled into mob attacks. Together, these incidents tell a deeper story of a nation grappling with fear and uncertainty.

History shows that mob violence is not unique to Bangladesh. Communities under stress have long lashed out at their own. In 1692, in Salem, Massachusetts, US, fear of disease and religious anxiety turned neighbours against each other. Accusations of witchcraft spread, trials were staged, and more than 20 innocent people were executed. The trials were never truly about "witches." They were about a community overwhelmed by fear and desperate to reassert control. A century later, revolutionary France followed a similar path. The monarchy fell, but joy gave way to paranoia. Fear transformed into the Reign of Terror.

Thousands were executed, not just as punishment but as public reassurance. The people, unable to shake their dread, tried to find safety in blood. Both Salem and Paris reveal the same pattern. When fear dominates, societies look for scapegoats. Violence becomes a way to quiet anxiety, even as it tears communities apart.

A crowd lynching a man in a marketplace is not only committing violence; it is claiming authority, declaring who belongs and who does not. When state institutions falter, this diffuse power takes over. Fear and rumour become the new law.

French philosopher Michel Foucault helps us see why. In *Madness and Civilization*, he explained that societies mark certain people as "dangerous" not only because of what they have done but because punishing them reassures everyone else. Excluding or attacking them draws a symbolic line between order and disorder. Foucault also reminded us that power does not belong only to kings or governments. It seeps into everyday life. It is exercised in schools, workplaces, and, in times of chaos, in mobs. A crowd lynching a man in a marketplace is not only committing violence; it is claiming authority,

police. And as faith erodes, reliance on mob action grows. It is a vicious cycle in which fear fuels violence and violence deepens fear.

History warns us of the cost of leaving fear untreated. Salem destroyed its own trust before realising the frenzy had gone too far. Revolutionary France spiralled into terror, and in the end, exhausted citizens gave up freedom for Napoleon's authoritarian stability. Violence meant to reassure ended up suffocating liberty. Bangladesh must not repeat those mistakes. The answer cannot only be force. Policing mobs is necessary, but why mobs form must also be addressed. The deeper task is to rebuild trust so people no

longer feel compelled to take justice into their own hands. That means institutions must work faster and more fairly. Communities must also play a role. Schools and universities can equip young people with the skills to question rumours, test information, and resist mob mentality. A generation trained to pause before condemning is less likely to join in violence.

Perhaps the most important step is to recognise that mob violence is not just about crime. It is also about fear and psychological stress. Economic hardship, political upheaval, and long-term frustration create a climate where people act on dread rather than reason. To treat mob violence only as a legal problem is to miss the root of the issue. Bangladesh must begin to treat mental health as part of its national resilience. Counselling services should be expanded in schools, workplaces, and local clinics. Public awareness campaigns can challenge the stigma around seeking help. Community dialogues can give people safe spaces to express grievances before they erupt.

The July uprising showed the power of ordinary people to demand change. But the harder test comes now. Can that power be turned into stability? If Bangladesh can rebuild institutions that deliver justice fairly, if communities can speak against rumours before they escalate, and if citizens are given the tools and support to process uncertainty without violence, then this moment need not be remembered for mob killings. But if fear is left to spread, whispers will keep turning into shouts, and shouts into blows. The uprising will then be remembered not for what it promised but for what it lost. Bangladesh must decide whether it will let crowds rule through fear, or whether it will build the trust and resilience needed for lasting freedom.