

## Protect our vulnerable workers

Seven teenage lives lost at garment factory blaze reveals policy negligence

The tragic fire at the Arian Fashion factory in Dhaka's Rupnagar stands as a reminder of the regulatory failures that continue to plague the margins of Bangladesh's industrial sector. The deaths of at least seven workers—aged between 13 and 18, many of them recent school dropouts earning poverty wages—reveal how profoundly we have failed to protect the most vulnerable workers.

Under the Bangladesh Labour Act of 2006, employing anyone under the age of 14 is strictly prohibited, while adolescents, aged 14 to 18, may only engage in non-hazardous work for a maximum of five hours per day. Yet, the victims were working full shifts, often with overtime, in a building where hazardous chemicals fuelled the fatal blaze. To compound this, they were paid sub-minimum wages—around Tk 7,500 a month—a clear indication that the factory operated outside the legal framework, preying on the desperation of impoverished families to secure exploitable labour.

Since the Rana Plaza disaster in 2013, the nation has earned global recognition for improving safety standards within factories affiliated with the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association. However, Arian Fashion was not a member of this association. The fire—and its horrific aftermath, including locked exits and volatile chemicals—occurred within the vast, unregulated sector that lies beyond formal oversight. The immediate failure rests with regulators that routinely ignore such non-compliant operations, many of which function as murky subcontractors or serve domestic markets.

The lethality of the Rupnagar fire—with toxic gas responsible for instant fatalities—reveals a parallel failure at the highest levels of governance. For more than a decade, successive administrations have pledged to relocate hazardous chemical warehouses and factories from densely populated areas, following the devastating Nimtoli (2010) and Churihattia (2019) fires. Industrial units handling hazardous materials are explicitly banned in residential zones under the 1997 Environment Conservation Rules. But relocation to designated industrial zones like Munshiganj remain stalled for years amid bureaucratic inertia and commercial resistance.

This failure of prevention contributes to a massive, yet often ignored, public health crisis: government reports indicate that roughly 1,500 people die from burn injuries every year and a staggering 12.9 lakh suffer injuries annually. This vast number highlights the critical scarcity of burn treatment facilities and trained personnel outside the capital. The tragic confluence of underpaid, often child, labour and explosive chemicals in a residential area is the inevitable, lethal outcome of an institutional indifference. A swift and impartial investigation is now imperative, alongside criminal accountability for the owners and negligent officials, but lasting change demands a systemic response. The successes achieved in monitored factories must not obscure the dangers festering in the unmonitored periphery. The government must expand the regulatory net through a robust, well-funded inspection system capable of identifying and shutting down non-compliant factories. Equally vital is the establishment of comprehensive supply chain transparency, ensuring that no tier of the industry can profit from illegal, underpaid labour.

## Ensure proper access to nutritious food

Universal rationing, expansion of safety nets urgently needed

This year's World Food Day came at a time when the nation remains plagued by high food prices. Although food production in Bangladesh has increased nearly five times since independence, millions of people still struggle to afford even one nutritious meal a day. The long queues in front of open market sales (OMS) trucks clearly show that proper access to nutritious food has now become a luxury for the poor.

According to agricultural economists, food insecurity affects nearly one-third of the population. The World Bank estimates that poverty has risen to 21.2 percent in FY25, up from 18.7 percent three years ago, while extreme poverty has climbed to 9.35 percent. Inflation, which reached 10 percent in FY25, continues to erode people's purchasing power, especially for low-income workers whose real wages fell by two percent during the same period. Meanwhile, the Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC) has warned that 18 percent of households just above the poverty line are now at risk of falling below it. And for the poorest 40 percent of households, survival increasingly depends on borrowing, with household debts rising by seven percent over the past six months.

An estimated loss of 20 lakh jobs between 2023 and 2024, particularly in the service sector, has deepened the crisis. For instance, while talking to this daily, Rosy, who lost her job after the buying house where she worked closed, says she now relies on OMS trucks for food. And day labourers like Delwar survive on lentils and vegetables, often borrowing to feed their families. Across major cities, such stories are increasingly common.

While the government's OMS programme provides temporary relief, its limited reach and inadequate supply expose the weakness of our food distribution system. A recent report by the Research and Policy Integration for Development (RAPID) found that although cities host a growing number of low-income earners, 64 percent of extremely poor urban households remain excluded from state assistance. This imbalance, with policies still largely focused on rural areas in an increasingly urban economy, has left millions of city dwellers severely exposed to hunger.

The government, therefore, must act urgently to control high food inflation and adopt a comprehensive, rights-based national food policy. As experts have suggested, expanding OMS coverage, introducing a universal rationing system, increasing focus on urban areas, and investing in storage and cold-chain logistics—which can reduce food waste—should be immediate priorities. We have made significant progress in agricultural production, but true development will only come when every citizen will have access to safe and nutritious food.

# EDITORIAL

## July National Charter: A consensus in name only?



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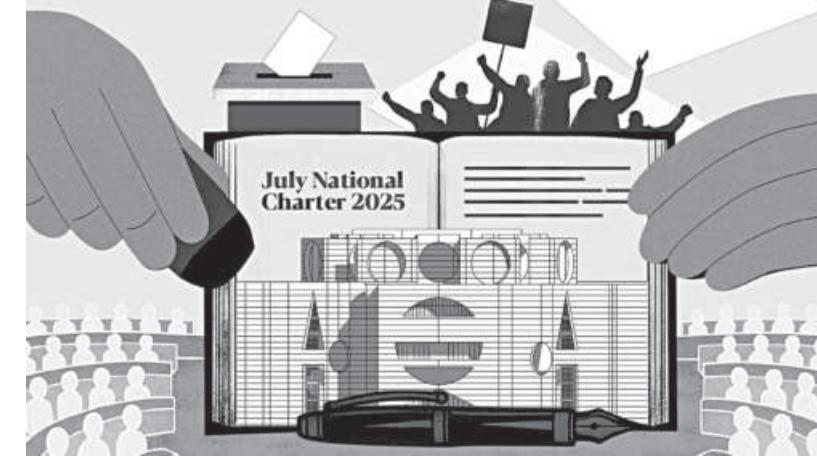
As the nation waits for the final draft of the much-discussed July National Charter 2025 to be signed by the representatives of various political parties at a grand ceremony on Friday, it has become clear that what many had hoped for—a genuine national consensus on the path to democratic renewal—has fallen short of expectations. Uncertainty surrounding its implementation has left several parties hesitant to sign, despite an eleventh-hour intervention by Chief Adviser Professor Muhammad Yunus.

As of writing this column, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) remains the only major party to confirm its readiness to sign the charter, although it has added a caveat that its support has limits, and that it opposes any attempt to hold a referendum before the general election. In contrast, Jamaat-e-Islami has insisted that a referendum should precede the election, while the National Citizen Party (NCP) has said that they will not endorse it until the charter's legal foundation is ensured.

The National Consensus Commission, which produced this landmark document after nearly eight months of extensive consultations, deserves recognition for bringing together diverse and often opposing political forces. It is particularly commendable that the commission has managed to engage parties traditionally seen as adversaries—Islamist groups and secular left-wing parties alike—in respectful and patient dialogue under its guidance.

Yet these encouraging efforts now appear to be at risk. The unity once observed among democratic forces, and the shared aspiration to rebuild a truly representative political order,

have largely faltered. Many parties have shown themselves to be unable to bridge their differences over the nation's future direction. Since the circulation of the final draft, some have questioned whether the exercise produced any meaningful consensus. Hasnat Quaiyum, president of the left-leaning Bangladesh Rastro Songskar Andolon, described the draft as



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

"weaker" than the accord reached among the three alliances during the 1990s uprising against the late military ruler General HM Ershad. Several other parties have already announced that they will not endorse the charter.

According to the final version of the July Charter, when the consensus commission began its rounds of dialogue, representatives from 33 parties participated. However, only 30 are reflected in the final document. Of the 84 reform pledges included, only about one-third were unanimously agreed upon. Even among these, one or two parties abstained from

Disagreements persist over the powers of the proposed second chamber in parliament, eligibility criteria for its members, provisions for amending or suspending the constitution, appointments to key constitutional and regulatory bodies, the president's impeachment process, nominating a deputy speaker from the opposition, and parliamentary ratification of international treaties. Several major parties have appended notes of dissent to these and other proposals.

Interestingly, although the charter's introduction notes that the spreadsheet the commission shared with parties after the first phase

of consultations did not include proposals for police reform, the final 84-point agenda now features a clause calling for the establishment of an independent Police Commission, complete with a detailed formation process. This proposed body would oversee internal disciplinary matters and public complaints. While 30 parties supported this single policing reform, the fate of other recommendations from the Police Reform Commission remains uncertain.

In an effort to curb the concentration of power in the Prime Minister's Office, the consensus commission proposed granting the president independent authority to appoint the heads and members of six regulatory bodies. Yet, it seems questionable that the Bangladesh Press Council was included among these, given the Media Reform Commission (MRC)'s findings that the press council has long failed in its mandate due to partisanship and limited scope.

Originally established to safeguard press freedom and regulate newspapers, the press council has become obsolete amid the evolution of technology and the rise of digital and broadcast media. The MRC recommended replacing it with a permanent media commission to ensure comprehensive oversight. By retaining the outdated press council, the July Charter not only disregards the MRC's recommendations but also risks obstructing essential reforms in the media sector.

Overall, the outcome suggests that the consensus commission may have overreached. Its decision to bypass specialised reform commissions while unilaterally advancing measures misaligned with broader democratic priorities has made the charter less convincing. Propositions on women's representation in parliament have been included in the charter without listening to their voices. How can we build an inclusive democracy without formulating any roadmap for overhauling our local government system? A more measured, consultative, and inclusive approach might have yielded a more enduring and meaningful national consensus.

## Proportional representation and the politics behind it



WINKERS AWEIGH!

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While there have been sporadic demands in recent months for implementing the proportional representation (PR) system in the next election, it has never quite seemed to be the deal-breaker that Jamaat-e-Islami and its allies are now making it out to be. On Monday, during a meeting with the top officials of the Election Commission, Jamaat leaders insisted that the election (to the lower house) should be held under PR.

This was not part of the July National Charter either. The proposal for a bicameral legislature was premised on the assumption that the lower house, with 300 MPs, would retain the first-past-the-post (FPTP) system, while the upper house would comprise 100 members based on the proportional representation of votes received in the election. The Islamist parties accepted this arrangement.

BNP and four other parties put in a note of dissent, but we will come to that later. But first, it should be pointed out that the Islamist parties now demanding proportional representation in the lower house had already consented to the charter proposal, and their acceptance of the prevailing electoral system was therefore implicit.

Of late, however, they have mounted a campaign portraying the PR system as a panacea as if it would resolve all our problems, from vote rigging to abuse of office to corruption. It will not.

There have been extensive discussions about the pros and cons of the PR system. This article will not reiterate those points, but it should be apparent that under PR, the choice

of MPs would largely depend on the central leadership of respective parties since voters would be casting their ballots for a party symbol rather than an individual. Given the general lack of transparency among parties in selecting their nominees, the PR system would concentrate even more power in the hands of a few leaders at the top. Aspiring MPs, for their part, would then shift their focus from pleasing voters to gratifying party leadership, even more than they now do. It can be argued that a prerequisite for an effective PR system is internal democracy within political parties, so as long as the parties themselves remain undemocratic, this new system would hardly bear any fruit.

Jamaat and its allies are presumably championing PR because it would give them an electoral advantage as smaller parties often lack sufficient votes to win in individual constituencies, but collectively they might have enough to secure some seats in parliament under PR. However, pressing for PR now is like insisting on changing the rules of the game after the date of the match has been finalised, the teams have chosen their squads, and some have already decided not to compete.

Understandably, proportional representation benefits smaller parties; it could also help fringe groups—environmentalists, animal rights activists, women's groups, ethnic minorities, etc—who might have decided to float their own platforms and registered with the Election Commission.

existing parties simply to remain relevant in electoral politics.

Although the Islamist parties

make it out to be a simple, straightforward system, PR would

require considerable time just to

agree on the rules and regulations.

For example, let us assume that one

party wins 0.5 percent of votes and

another 1.5 percent—how would their

**Understandably, proportional representation benefits smaller parties; it could also help fringe groups—environmentalists, animal rights activists, women's groups, ethnic minorities, etc—who might have decided to float their own platforms and registered with the Election Commission. They have not. Moreover, PR would preclude the possibility of independent MPs, potentially forcing many to join existing parties simply to remain relevant in electoral politics.**

seats be distributed? One cannot have half a seat in parliament. In that case, would there be a minimum threshold to qualify for parliamentary representation? What would that threshold be? And what happens to the fractions? How would those be resolved?

These matters will have to be discussed at length among the parties before the Election Commission could find a workable solution and draft appropriate regulations. That would

require time—presumably more than the few months remaining before the election.

While the idea of an upper house in parliament was largely accepted as a means of ensuring greater checks and balances in parliamentary proceedings, the July Charter proposes proportional representation for its formation as a guiding principle. If the seats of the upper house are distributed according to the proportion of votes received in the national election, it would almost certainly produce a different composition in which the ruling party could not wield as much influence as it does in the lower house. Consequently, bills from the lower house would likely face more vibrant debate and perhaps stronger criticism, if not outright opposition.

However, BNP has dissented, advocating an unusual interpretation of proportional representation. Instead of basing it on the proportion of votes received, it has proposed that the upper house be constituted according to the proportion of seats parties win in the lower house. That would essentially make it a mirror image of the lower chamber and thus render it superfluous. Of course, provisions could be introduced to make it a more balanced deliberative body, with a designated number of non-partisan nominees sitting in the upper house. But without such measures, there would be little point in having an upper chamber that merely replicates the lower one. In that scenario, the ruling party would retain the same level of influence, and in practice, the upper house would fail to fulfil its intended purpose. Not that the proposed system guarantees a dramatic improvement, but it is at least a modest step towards restraining majoritarian dominance in parliament.

So, Jamaat's insistence on PR can be seen, at best, as a tactic to pressure BNP to relent from its stance about the upper house. At worst, it is a ploy to delay the polls.