

REVIVING PARLIAMENT, *the heart of democracy*

July charter sets out vision for a vibrant, effective Jatiya Sangsad

The July National Charter, born out of a compact among political parties, proposes a raft of constitutional reforms to reinvigorate Bangladesh's parliament, which has remained weak and failed to function as an effective check on executive authority. The proposals include the introduction of bicameral

practices." At present, the executive holds excessive influence. If that can be curtailed, many of the problems will be solved, he noted. "The tendency to treat the opposition as an enemy needs to be corrected. The opposition plays a vital role," Riaz added.

procedural formalities. Successive ruling parties have been able to unilaterally adopt repressive decisions, facilitating arbitrary lawmaking and the centralisation of power. Two notable examples of such repressive legislation are the fourth amendment in 1975 and the 15th amendment in 2011. Additionally, the unicameral parliament has failed to adequately represent the interests of various social groups—particularly minorities and marginalised populations.

A significant number of lawmakers had either business interests or owned enterprises, further blurring the line between public service and private interest. Instead of scrutinising policy or defending public interest, many MPs spent valuable time in parliament praising party leaders, turning the chamber into a platform for pledging loyalty rather than demanding accountability.

Since the restoration of democracy in 1991, the opposition frequently boycotted sessions, and in later years, became virtually aligned with the government. It rarely mounted meaningful resistance or provided effective oversight. All this may change.

WHAT IS NEW?

Political parties have agreed that Bangladesh will have a 100-member upper house alongside the 300-seat lower house. The upper house members will be elected through proportional representation (PR) based on the votes received in the general election. The lower house members will continue to be elected under the traditional first-past-the-post system.

The qualifications and disqualifications of upper house members will be similar to those of the lower house. The upper chamber's term will be five years from the date its members are sworn in. However, if the lower house is dissolved, the upper house will automatically cease to exist.

Political parties will be required to publish lists of candidates for the upper house simultaneously with the final lists of candidates for the general election. At least 10 percent of the candidates must be women.

FUNCTION OF UPPER HOUSE

The upper house will review legislation proposed by the lower house but will not have the power to initiate bills. However, it may propose laws to the lower house on matters of national importance. All bills passed by the lower house,

except for money bills and votes of confidence, must be presented to the upper house. The upper chamber cannot sit idle on a bill indefinitely; if a bill is held for more than two months, it shall be deemed approved.

Once the upper house approves a bill, it will be sent to the president for signing, provided it has already been passed in the lower house. If the upper house returns a bill with recommended amendments, the lower house will have the discretion to accept or reject them in full or in part.

If the lower house passes the same bill for a second time, it will be sent directly to the president for signing.

Any bill related to constitutional amendments must be passed by a simple majority in the upper house.

Political scientists explained that the creation of an upper house introduces a second tier of legislative scrutiny. It holds the authority to review and recommend amendments to bills. This mechanism will ensure that legislation undergoes deliberate and thorough vetting, reducing the risk of hasty or partisan law-making.

An upper house based on proportional representation guarantees that minority and opposition parties secure representation in line with their share of votes in the national election. This breaks the monopoly of majoritarian control and ensures that dissenting voices are structurally embedded in the legislative process.

Nizam Uddin Ahmed, an expert on parliamentary affairs, said, "An upper house would ensure a degree of balance. No party would be able to amend the constitution at will; they would have to justify it to their opposition."

The Consensus Commission said the upper house would play a supportive role in legal scrutiny and establish a significant check on executive power.

OTHER CHANGES

Each chamber will have a deputy speaker from the opposition or from among members not affiliated with the ruling party. Chairs of key parliamentary committees—public accounts, privileges, estimates, government institutions—will come from the opposition bench. Besides, members of ministry-related standing committees on public interest will be elected from opposition in proportion to their seats in parliament.

Political parties also agreed that Article 70 will be amended to allow MPs to vote against party lines except for money bills and votes of confidence.

WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION

The existing 50 reserved seats for women will remain. To gradually increase women's representation, each political party will be urged to nominate at least five percent women candidates for the lower house in the upcoming (13th) general election.

Political parties will be required to nominate at least 10 percent women candidates in the 14th general election. This process will continue until 33 percent women's representation is achieved.

CHANGE OF POLITICAL CULTURE

Political scientists remain sceptical about the prospects for change, citing the entrenched political culture surrounding party nominations and the prevailing attitudes of politicians.

Sabbir Ahmed, professor of political science at Dhaka University, said that in Bangladesh's context, elections are largely determined by who receives party nominations, and most nominees tend to be businesspeople.

"There is a clear correlation here: if the nomination process continues to be driven by party loyalty and patronage, the broader political culture will remain unchanged. But if candidates are selected based on merit, we might begin to see meaningful reforms and a more effective parliament," he said.

In the country's political system, the party chief typically holds sole authority over nominations. This creates a single peak structure where democratic practices are scarcely visible, Sabbir noted.

"That's the core issue. Yet no one has seriously taken up the challenge of reforming political parties. Without internal party reforms, democratic progress will remain stalled," he added.

Sk Tawfique M Haque, professor of political science and sociology at North South University, also emphasised the need to reform the nomination process to ensure the election of capable and qualified MPs.

"When we talk about reforming political culture, it's clear that genuine political will is essential. Without it, nothing will change. In recent parliaments, nearly 70 percent of MPs were businesspeople—and the trend is likely to continue," he said.

"Written reform proposals are important. But I am doubtful that documents alone will bring change. Reform must begin with the nomination process itself, and with a commitment to democratic practices within political parties," he concluded.

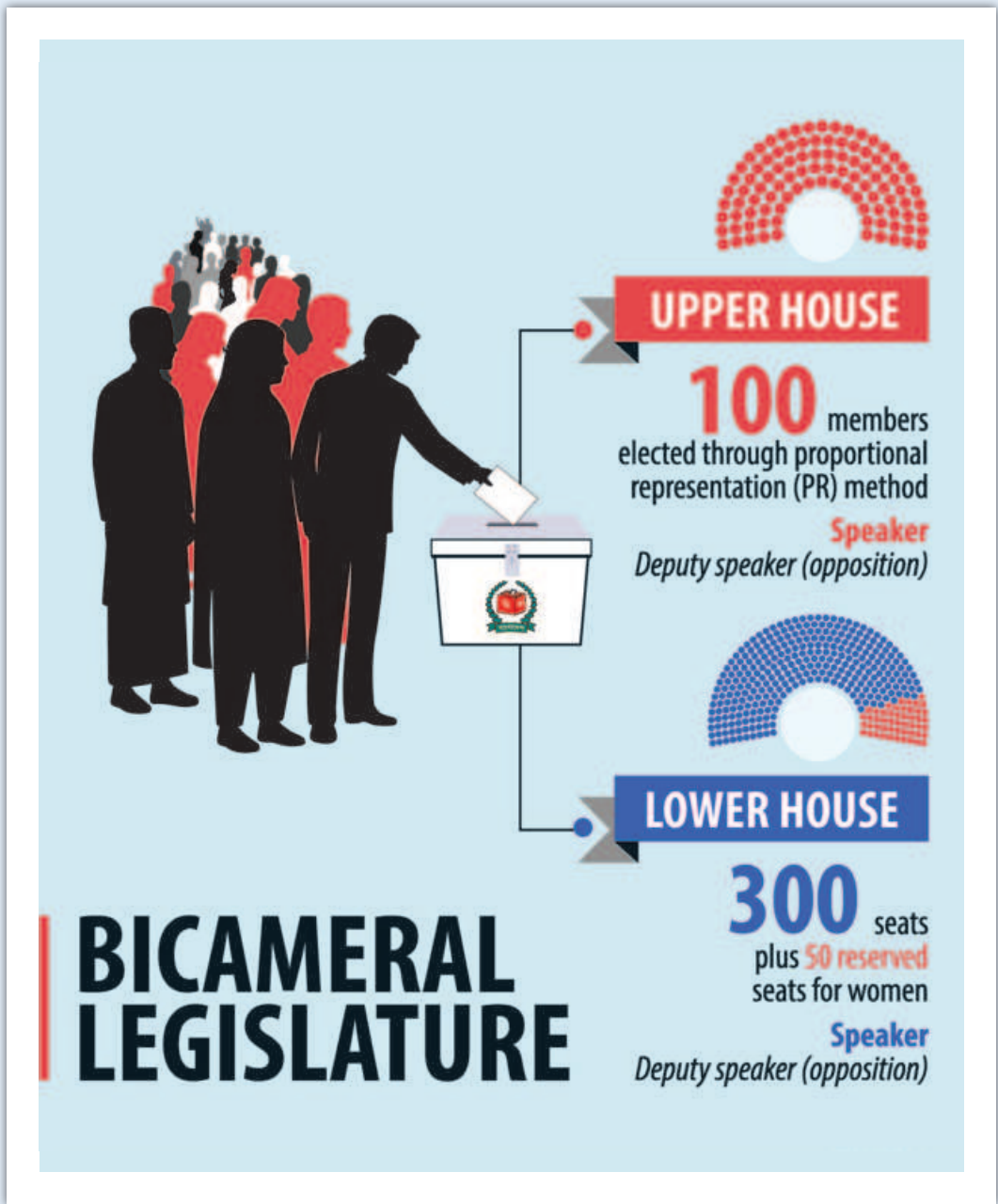


ILLUSTRATION:
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legislature, a stronger opposition bench, institutional oversight, and checks and balances at the heart of parliamentary democracy.

National Consensus Commission Vice President Ali Riaz said the focus is to make parliament effective and the centre of all democratic discussions.

"The most important thing is to shift your focus towards the parliament, given that you are adopting Westminster-style

Perennially dominated by the ruling party, the legislature has often functioned as a rubber stamp for the wishes of the treasury bench leader, rather than as a deliberative body.

On numerous occasions, bills were passed within minutes, with MPs merely casting votes for or against proposals without meaningful debate. Parliamentary proceedings frequently lacked substance, reducing legislative sessions to

