

Sabotage or not, govt must account for fires

Repeated fire incidents expose governance failures

Three devastating fires occurring at three different sites within five days—each with significant economic implications—have raised serious concerns about our state of governance and preparedness. In particular, Saturday's blaze at the cargo village of Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport (HSIA) in Dhaka has exposed how ill prepared the authorities were: even after deploying almost all available fire service units, it took about seven hours to contain the fire. By then, everything at the cargo complex had turned to ashes, disrupting national and international flights and leaving hundreds of passengers stranded.

It has been alleged that the HSIA authorities were initially hesitant to accept support from fire units rushed in from other parts of the capital, preferring to rely on the unit stationed within the airport compound. The Dhaka Customs Agents Association stated in a press release that a lack of coordination between the fire service and HSIA caused delays in the emergency response.

It is understandable that, as a key point installation (KPI), the HSIA complex would have extremely sensitive security protocols. But that must not prevent emergency services from accessing a disaster zone—especially in circumstances where those protocols lack sufficient provisions and capacity. According to former director of the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh, there was no hydrant installed at the cargo village. This is both shocking and unacceptable. Evidently, airport authorities have not learnt any lessons from the past fire incidents occurring in 2013 and 2017 at the same cargo village.

In the wake of the recent spate of fires, some leading business figures have expressed fears that these disruptions, coupled with slow and poorly equipped responses to emergencies, could further undermine confidence. The statement issued by the chief adviser's press wing—that if these incidents prove to be "acts of sabotage" meant to sow panic and division, they will succeed only if we allow fear to overtake reason—rather raises the question of why the government is suspecting foul play in the first place. We expect the government to act on its words that any credible evidence of sabotage or arson will be met with a swift and resolute response."

The other two fires—one at the Chittagong Export Processing Zone (CEPZ) and the other in Dhaka's Mirpur area, both linked to garment production—have again exposed the failure to enforce fire safety laws and building codes. It is beyond comprehension how the CEPZ authorities could have allowed production to commence in a building that did not have a safety compliance certificate.

Whether these fire incidents were acts of sabotage or not, one thing is clear: in all three cases, there have been governance failures on multiple counts. Lack of enforcement, inadequate inspections, and poor contingency planning do not bode well for our capacity and competence. It also raises questions of accountability: why have officials in charge, for instance, failed to take appropriate precautionary measures in time? Installations vital to the nation, such as airports and EPZs, must take all possible precautions to prevent any repetition of such disasters.

A tariff schedule that hurts businesses

It does not make economic sense

The possibility of an indefinite transport owners' strike in the wake of the Chittagong Port Authority's (CPA) revised tariff schedule—which imposed a punishing 41 percent average increase in service charges—was a predictable crisis. The result is that the transport of import and export cargoes has come to a standstill since October 18, with transport owners protesting the fourfold hike in vehicle entry fees. The CPA increased entry fees for all types of vehicles. For instance, heavy vehicles such as trucks and covered vans will have to pay Tk 230 per vehicle from Tk 57.50 earlier.

Business leaders are frustrated by what they believe is an arbitrary government move that has made Chattogram port prohibitively expensive and will likely severely affect Bangladesh's competitiveness. What is most puzzling about the tariff hike is that the government did not hold any proper dialogue with all stakeholders, leading to anger and suspicion within the business community. Some have alleged that the hike was enforced to favour foreign operators who are set to take over port operations. Transport owners are similarly worried as they are also having to absorb the shock of the enhanced fees.

According to a report, prior to the imposition of the new tariffs, the shipping adviser had a meeting with port users on September 21 when he deferred the decision to enforce the new tariff structure for a month, assuring further negotiations. But those negotiations did not take place, and the government declared the new tariffs effective from October 14. We fail to understand why the government chose to impose such a heavy financial burden on businesses and services linked to the Chattogram port at a time when they are already under considerable strain with the country graduating from the Least Developed Country (LDC) status in 2026, while absorbing the impact of increased US tariffs.

The RMG sector, in particular, is likely to be heavily affected by this unprecedented rise in the cost of doing business. Already, during the recent devastating fire at the cargo village of Dhaka airport, businesses—including RMG exporters—have suffered monumental losses worth an estimated one billion dollars.

The government, therefore, must recognise the punitive consequences of sudden tariff increases at a time when businesses dependent on the port are struggling on multiple fronts. We urge it to impose a moratorium on the new Chattogram port tariffs and hold meaningful dialogue with all stakeholders before enforcing such a decision. The country's competitiveness in the global market is at stake.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Muammar al-Gaddafi killed

On this day in 2011, Libyan de facto leader Muammar al-Gaddafi was killed by rebel forces following a revolt that ended his rule.

EDITORIAL

Constituent power and a pathway for implementing July Charter



Dr Rashed Al Mahmud Titumir
is professor at the Department of Development Studies in University of Dhaka.

RASHED AL MAHMUD TITUMIR

The much awaited signing of the July National Charter on October 17 represents a defining moment in Bangladesh's long struggle to restore democracy. Emerging from the popular uprising of July 2024, the charter embodies the collective aspirations of citizens who sought to replace authoritarian repression with participation and accountability. Nearly all major political parties have now endorsed the charter. There are some who have not signed it owing to concerns about the charter's implementation rather than its content. This last bit indicates a broad recognition that the charter belongs to the nation as a whole.

Despite such consensus, divisions remain. The unresolved dissents on issues such as the composition of the Upper House, the appointment of the Election Commission and the framework for constitutional bodies threaten to become fault lines that could derail the entire process. But forcing through these contentious provisions would not be a solution either.

At a time when the economy is under strain, youth unemployment is rising, and institutions remain fragile, Bangladesh cannot afford another instability. The central question, therefore, is not whether the charter should be implemented, but how.

People as the source of constituent power

Following the Indian precedent in the *Kesavananda Bharati* case of 1973, the Supreme Court of Bangladesh sided with the doctrine of the basic structure, meaning constitutional elements such as democracy, the separation of powers, and the rule of law cannot be altered through ordinary amendment.

In any democracy, a distinction exists between "constituted power" and "constituent power." Constituted power refers to authority exercised within the framework of an existing constitution. Constituent power denotes the authority to make or remake that framework. The constituent power resides exclusively with the people. No government, commission, nor political party can claim it on their behalf. The July uprising reaffirmed this fundamental truth: legitimacy must originate from the people, and not from the state.

The optimal constitutional and unifying way forward is, thus, to place the charter before the citizens for

a referendum since there is a broad agreement on holding a referendum. The design of this referendum is, however, critical. A referendum with multiple, complex questions on specific provisions risks confusion and political manipulation, as seen, for example, in the failed 2022 constitutional referendum in Chile. Instead, such a referendum should ask one foundational question: whether the people of Bangladesh endorse granting constituent power to the next parliament. This simple process would allow citizens themselves to authorise their representatives to translate the charter's principles into a new constitutional framework. By doing so, Bangladesh would root its democratic renewal in the consent of the governed, transforming the charter from a negotiated political document into a legitimate social contract.

The July National Charter already provides a moral and political base for reforms. The challenge lies in determining the appropriate procedure for its implementation. Given the diversity of parties and persistence of disagreement, the charter can be put before the people,

approval while preserving space for parliamentary deliberation.

The election with such a referendum would not be an ordinary contest for power but an exercise in democratic renewal. The parliament emerging from it would function as authorised to give constitutional form to the aspirations expressed in the charter.

The democratic legal path

A referendum that authorises the next parliament to exercise constituent power would provide the necessary legal foundation to address the constraint while maintaining constitutional continuity. The parliament, deriving its constituent power directly from the people, would also ensure that reform remains rooted in the consent of the people rather than negotiation between parties.

Any attempt to impose it through decrees or administrative orders would violate both the constitutional principle of popular sovereignty and the moral legacy of the uprising. Only through a fair and transparent referendum can the charter acquire enduring legitimacy.

Democracy is not a gift conferred by those in power, but a continuous expression of the people's constituent



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

Similarly, the call for a constituent assembly, while appealing, is fraught with risks. Historical examples, including the French Revolution's descent into terror, exhibit exclusion and conflict in the absence of a popular mandate. These showcase that legitimacy cannot be manufactured, rather it shall be conferred by the citizens.

The optimal constitutional and unifying way forward is, thus, to place the charter before the citizens for

the sole authority. The proposed referendum elegantly resolves this. It does not ask citizens to vote on technically complex issues but to make a sovereign decision.

Then the provisions of the charter, where consensus was reached, would form the core mandate for the new parliament, while the contested provisions can be placed by the parties in their manifestoes, seeking mandate from the electorates. It would allow reforms to proceed with public

authority. The referendum offers citizens the opportunity to decide whether the next parliament should possess the mandate to reshape the constitutional order.

The July National Charter thus stands not only as a political agreement but as a pivotal opportunity for a renewed social contract. In reaffirming that power belongs to the people alone, Bangladesh can transform the promise of the uprising into a durable democratic order.

National unity is key to Bangladesh's success



Dr Sibbir Ahmad
is a development economist and president of Socchar—Torture WatchDog Bangladesh, a US-based human rights research and advocacy organisation. He can be reached at president@socchar.com.

SIBBIR AHMAD

The signing of the July National Charter, which brought together 24 political parties, represents a significant, albeit incomplete, step towards national consensus. This event, the culmination of extensive negotiations between the National Consensus Commission and 30 political parties, is noteworthy in the context of Bangladesh's deeply fractured political history, as it placed ideologically opposed parties on a unified platform.

This coalition, which is rare in our history, comes following the projection of a united front in another recent event on the world stage. When Chief Adviser Professor Muhammad Yunus led the delegation to the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) this year, he introduced this unprecedented political culture. For the first time, six senior leaders from the country's three major political parties joined the official delegation, standing alongside government representatives. This was not merely a symbolic gesture, but a deliberate effort to show the world that Bangladesh's democratic transition is not the project of one interim

administration alone, but a collective national commitment.

In New York, when party leaders and government officials sat together in meetings with investors, diplomats, and global stakeholders, they sent a message of trust and reassurance: the democratic process will continue beyond February's election, no matter who comes to power. Investors and development partners could see that political stability and continuity are now shared priorities across the spectrum. This new approach reduced the sense of uncertainty that often clouds Bangladesh's business climate, while projecting political maturity and responsibility to the outside world.

The impact was twofold: economic and political. On one hand, the presence of leaders from across the political divide gave foreign investors confidence that Bangladesh would not allow partisan rivalry to disrupt long-term business interests. On the other hand, it also reshaped the country's global image. Instead of being seen as a deeply polarised and conflict-ridden democracy, Bangladesh presented itself as cooperative, united, and

forward-looking. For a young democracy, such unity on the world stage is a strong sign of maturity.

The Foreign Ministry and the Bangladesh Investment Development Authority (BIDA) also jointly organised "NRB Connect Day," where non-resident Bangladeshis were invited. Once again, leaders from major political parties shared their visions for the country directly with the diaspora. NRBs were given a platform not only to be courted as investors but also to be engaged politically as stakeholders in Bangladesh's future.

Considering the diaspora's immense contributions through remittances and knowledge networks, this was a powerful shift towards inclusion.

What Dr Yunus's initiative in UNGA achieved was much more than diplomatic optics. It broke with decades of exclusionary practice. By bringing opposition voices into the delegation, he transformed external representation into a shared national duty rather than a partisan privilege. This simple act holds the potential to reduce political polarisation at home. If leaders can sit across from one another abroad, engaging constructively with international stakeholders, it becomes harder to sustain toxic "us versus them" narratives in Dhaka.

The initiative also planted the seeds for something even more significant: institutionalising political consensus on core national issues. Democracy, economic reforms, climate action, and foreign policy are too important to be rewritten every election cycle. The interim government has set a precedent that future governments should institutionalise. National unity in external representation must not remain a one-time experiment; it should become a permanent practice of Bangladesh's statecraft, at home and abroad.

By jointly presenting Bangladesh to the world, the major political forces began to outline a minimum consensus that could provide policy continuity beyond electoral politics. Such continuity is essential to attract foreign direct investment, strengthen bargaining power in international negotiations, and build long-term resilience.

In this sense, the all-party delegation was not only about representing Bangladesh abroad but also about reshaping Bangladesh's domestic political culture. It showed that rival parties can cooperate when national interest demands it, which we saw at the signing ceremony of July charter. It offered citizens a glimpse of what inclusive politics could look like: less confrontational, more dialogic, and more attuned to the country's collective needs.

For Bangladesh, a country that needs both foreign investment and global goodwill to sustain its growth, this unity could not have come at a more important time.

The significance of these events cannot be overstated. By breaking tradition, reducing polarisation, engaging the diaspora, strengthening global bargaining power, and signalling political maturity, the interim government has set a precedent that future governments should institutionalise. National unity in external representation must not remain a one-time experiment; it should become a permanent practice of Bangladesh's statecraft, at home and abroad.