

Election must be held on time

No obstruction should be tolerated

As things stand, the nation seems firmly headed towards an election in February 2026, while the Election Commission (EC) plans to announce the schedule in November. This is the most important event for post-uprising Bangladesh as it strives to make a proper, smooth democratic transition. Nothing, therefore, should be done to disrupt it in any way, and any attempt to do so should be condemned. An election, despite all the challenges it entails, is the best way forward for the country to chalk out its future directions.

The NCP's demand for a new EC is both disruptive and poorly conceived. The party's claim that the EC is not neutral—because it refused to approve their demand for “Shapla” as a party symbol—is as partisan as possible. The EC has repeatedly explained that the flower is a national symbol enshrined in our constitution, and no one party can be permitted to use it for election purposes. Jamaat's concerns over EC neutrality seem similarly unsubstantiated.

The latest amendment to the Representation of the People Order (RPO)—which makes it mandatory for members of an electoral alliance to contest under their own party symbols, rather than the coalition leader's—is something that we welcome. We agree with the law adviser that using one's own party symbol gives the voter a far better idea about the candidate and what their party stands for. Fighting under a bigger party's symbol does not give voters a clear understanding of individual candidates and parties. The fear expressed by some—that if BNP's coalition partners, for example, do not fight under its symbol of “sheaf of paddy”, they may not win seats—is precisely why they should not be allowed to do so. If a party or candidate does not command the support of voters, then why should they be allowed to ride on the shoulders of a bigger party? If a party cannot win even in one constituency under its own symbol, it is clearly indicative of their actual strength and support among voters.

In fact, parties should welcome a shift where alliances are formed *after* the election is held, so that any partnership forged is among groups that have proven the strength of their support base and, as such, can rightly claim their place in the governance process. BNP's discomfort with this idea is understandable, but it also shows the value of the party symbol, and it should not be allowed to be misused.

We urge the interim government to use its full force, which it appears to have, to ensure a proper election process leading to a fair and participatory election on time. This is the most important national priority at the moment.

Protect the rivers surrounding Dhaka

Resolve legal and other complications in river demarcation project

It is disappointing to see the poor state of the four rivers surrounding Dhaka amid continued disregard for environmental laws, regulations, and directives. In June 2009, the High Court ordered the relevant authorities to demarcate the original boundaries of the Buriganga, Turag, Balu, and Shitalakkhya rivers to prevent their encroachment and pollution. The Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) was assigned to install over 10,000 boundary pillars and build 220 km of circular walkways along both banks of the rivers. However, since the project began in 2014, BIWTA has completed only 72 km of walkways and installed 6,200 pillars so far, falling far short of the target. That such a crucial conservation project could not be completed even in 16 years is alarming, to say the least.

Reportedly, the first phase of the project cost the government Tk 142 crore. The second phase began in 2018, with an estimated cost of Tk 845.55 crore. However, in July 2022, the deadline was extended to June 2024, raising the cost to Tk 1,181.10 crore. But that deadline was also missed, leading to further cost escalations. The new deadline is now June 2026, with the project cost revised up to Tk 1,275 crore.

Besides inflated budgets, another effect of delayed project implementation is that the walkways that were built along the riverbanks are already in bad shape. During a recent visit to Shyampur, our correspondent found that due to poor maintenance, the boundary walls along some parts of the walkways had collapsed. Environmentalists blamed corruption for this situation, claiming the authorities had carried out faulty river demarcation and conducted only sporadic eviction drives to reclaim encroached areas, leaving the foreshores and riverbanks mostly in the hands of grabbers, which is most unfortunate. The project director has, however, claimed that the work has remained suspended as grabbers obtained court orders to halt construction in many areas, and that they have sought HC intervention in this matter.

We urge the government to take initiatives to complete this crucial river protection project. It must probe the causes of delay and hold to account those responsible for it. Most importantly, the legal complications hindering the completion of the work must be resolved without delay. These time and cost overruns in development projects have long been an issue in the country, particularly during the tenure of the ousted Awami League regime, when the practice of indefinitely delaying important public projects became commonplace. This must not be the case any longer. We must protect the four rivers surrounding Dhaka, as well as others across the country, for our own survival.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Stonehenge gifted to the British

On this day in 1918, Baronet Cecil Chubb, the last private owner of Stonehenge, gifted it to the British people. He had purchased the monument for £6,600 at an auction in 1915.

Women's political rights and a revolution deferred

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The national conference of the Forum for Women's Political Rights (FWPR), held on October 9, functioned less as an event and more as a political intervention. It brought together activists, scholars, labour organisers, civil society actors, and political party leaders who have long challenged the gendered boundaries of Bangladesh's democracy. The discussion unfolded within a feminist framework that views women's political representation not as benevolent inclusion, but as a struggle over who counts as a political subject and whose voice shapes the national agenda.

The presence of two women advisers of the interim government—both veteran campaigners for women's rights—was symbolically significant yet analytically revealing. It underscored a paradox at the heart of Bangladesh's democratic transition: that women may occupy certain spaces of power, counsel, and activism, but remain marginal to actual decision-making. The question is: how can a democracy claim renewal while half of the citizens remain structurally excluded from political power?

Since the release of our reform commissions' reports and subsequent debates within the National Consensus Commission, women's parliamentary representation has remained a key site of contention. The Election Reform Commission had proposed 100 reserved seats for women to be filled through rotation-based direct elections—an arrangement that could have conferred genuine democratic legitimacy on women's participation. Yet the consensus commission, dominated by political parties, rejected the proposal. What eventually appeared in the July National Charter was a diluted compromise: maintaining 50 reserved seats, gradually increasing to 100, and requiring parties to nominate only five percent women in general seats, rising incrementally to 33 percent by 2043.

This approach reflects what scholar Nira Yuval-Davis calls the “gendered logic of citizenship”, a system that welcomes women's symbolic presence but limits their real participation in power. When women make up 50 percent of the population, offering only five percent representation is not inclusion; it is a new form of exclusion. Against this backdrop, the FWPR's demands were both principled and practical—direct election of 100 women's seats in the next parliamentary cycle—arguing that once women gain voter-based legitimacy, the need for separate quotas will naturally diminish. The FWPR also insisted that all political parties be legally required to nominate at least 33 percent female candidates, rising

to 50 percent through amendments to the Representation of the People Order (RPO). Complementary measures, such as state funding for women candidates, legal protection against political and online violence, and decentralisation of power, were proposed as structural correctives to the patriarchal logic of party politics.

Underlying these proposals is a core feminist insight: women's exclusion from decision-making is not an accidental absence but a product of institutional design. Representation, therefore, cannot be seen as a favour extended to women; it is a vital measure of constitutional equality and democratic legitimacy for all.

The discussions and demands of the FWPR conference also foregrounded intersectionality as central to democratic reform. Working-class women, informal-sector workers,

Their advice to “stay organised, train young leaders, and sustain pressure” sounded as much like encouragement as an admission of limited power. This exposed a recurring feature of Bangladesh's political order: women are visible as advocates and advisers, yet remain excluded from the central spaces where decisions are made. Their limited influence over the charter reveals the deep gendered boundaries of reform, even within moments that claim to be transformative.

The July Charter reproduces the same patriarchal structures that continue to hinder women's political empowerment. By retaining the reserved-seat system and indirect nomination, it preserves an undemocratic mode of selection in which women's access to parliament depends on party loyalty rather than public legitimacy. This sustains the

also reflected how deeply divided Bangladesh's political class remains on women's participation. Most agreed that party “mindsets” must change, yet none said what their respective party would do to achieve the change.

Jamaat-e-Islami, for instance, boasted of having many women organisers but rejected the idea of direct elections—a textbook case of presence without power. Several left-leaning parties expressed support for rotation-based or direct elections but failed to hold their ground during the consensus commission's negotiations. These contradictions show how even progressive rhetoric often collapses under the weight of patriarchal political culture.

The challenge, then, is not just quantitative but also qualitative. A nominated woman represents her patron; an elected woman represents



VISUAL: ALIZA RAHMAN

women with disabilities, and Dalit or Indigenous women face overlapping barriers to political participation. One participant from the Dalit community described being repeatedly denied electoral nomination by political parties, revealing the systemic nature of exclusion. For these women, the promise of reform often remains abstract. Without addressing class, caste, and regional inequality, representation risks reproducing the very hierarchies it claims to dismantle. Gender justice, therefore, must intersect with social justice, requiring electoral mechanisms that make political participation accessible to women beyond elite networks.

The two advisors present at the conference, Farida Akhter and Sharmeen Murshid, voiced strong support for FWPR's proposals. They endorsed the call for direct elections but could not say whether they would be able to influence the July Charter or ensure the reforms were carried through.

culture of patronage politics, where representation is mediated through male party elites. The charter also maintains the gatekeeping power of male leadership—a “fraternal contract” that determines who is deemed electable. Without sanctions for non-compliance, parties can nominate women in unwinnable constituencies, turning quotas into performance rather than reform. Equally troubling, the charter lacks any intersectional vision, treating women as a single category and erasing class, caste, and regional inequalities.

Taken together, these features make the charter not a rupture, as many had expected it to be, but a reassertion of patriarchal continuity. Its drafting process mirrored its outcome, with negotiations led by male party elites. Major political parties chose caution over courage, signalling that even in transition, reform remains bound by male consensus. Political party representatives at the conference

her people. Direct election grants women independence and legitimacy. Take the cases of Nepal and Rwanda, where direct election and parity laws not only increased women's presence in politics but also transformed policy priorities, expanding health budgets, land rights, and local accountability. By contrast, Bangladesh continues to choose symbolic participation and concession while excluding women from real political power. Sadly, instead of addressing this reality, the July Charter only serves to perpetuate it, leaving women's representation confined within the same procedural limits that have long defined post-independence politics.

The path ahead lies not only in revising the charter but also in re-politicising citizenship—making women's representation a core measure of democratic health. Until this happens, Bangladesh's reform moment will remain what the FWPR aptly called it: a revolution deferred.

An investment boom hidden in plain sight



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Bangladesh's rural economy is now experiencing a significant influx of capital from returning migrant workers, who are largely invisible in official data. The same remittance that policymakers have regarded for decades as a foreign exchange lifeline is emerging as an informal driver of rural enterprise, as returnee savings become a primary source for newly established businesses.

In the FY2024-25 alone, Bangladesh received a record remittance of \$30.32 billion, coinciding with funds flowing into major rural districts such as Sylhet, Noakhali, Cumilla, and Jashore. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, about 466,666 expatriates permanently returned over the two years around 2021-22. The World Bank's Bangladesh Return Migration Survey (BRMS) revealed that a large share of returnees prefer self-employment, with many starting small businesses and micro-enterprises such as grocery shops, mills, transport services, and fisheries, financed by foreign earnings.

A socio-economic survey conducted in 2024 shows that in some upazilas, 54.3 percent of returnees invested their savings in small businesses, and

one in every three new businesses is established by returning migrants. If even a fraction of the savings that returnee migrants bring home were systematically channelled into small enterprises, the economic impact could be substantial. These returnee-financed ventures form part of the rural grey economy—legal but operating outside formal registries and policy frameworks. Such ventures create a ripple effect of diversified incomes, local employment, and new rural supply chains. However, because these entities remain unregistered, they are not included in national investment statistics, receive no formal credit, and make little contribution to GDP.

The major problem lies in the absence of policies. There is virtually no structure for reintegration once a worker returns. In one study on 270 returnees, 74 percent had brought back savings of at least Tk 100,000, and over 80 percent expressed a desire to set up businesses in their village. However, most face the common barriers of no collateral for loans, no policy recognition or entrepreneurial training.

While some commendable support

programmes exist to assist returnees, they are very few in number and have the capacity to reach only a fraction of the returning migrant population. Even for the beneficiaries who receive seed funding or formal training, the ventures they establish tend to remain small. This is largely because the broader economic system offers no clear pathway for these micro-enterprises to scale up.

Conservative estimates suggest the informal returnee capital formation is now significant enough to rival the country's entire foreign direct investment (FDI). While Bangladesh attracted approximately \$3 billion in FDI in 2023, the cumulative, on-the-ground investment from its own returning citizens is believed to be operating on a comparable scale.

To put this potential in perspective, total remittances soared to a record \$30.32 billion in the 2024-25 fiscal year, contributing over six percent of the nation's GDP. While most of this income supports families, the savings brought back by permanent returnees represent a massive, untapped pool of investment capital. This indicates that while Bangladesh actively pursues foreign investors, a domestic investment boom could be ignited simply by recognising and empowering its own returning citizens.

If policymakers are serious about efforts to reduce rural inequality and dependence on Dhaka-centric industries, returnee investment must be focused on as one of the central economic policies. The Recovery and Advancement of Informal Sector Employment (Raise) project, a

government-led initiative supported by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and the World Bank, aims to create welfare centres and a database of returnees. A comprehensive data registry must also include metrics on savings amounts, vocational skill sets, investment preferences, asset ownership, and business sectors. The government's “Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)” under the Raise project also offers support to a large number of returnees to validate skills gained overseas. Expanding RPL and combining it with business training will significantly reduce failures among new businesses and increase access to formal markets.

Additionally, lending schemes must be simplified and tailored to returnee needs to minimise the disparity between informal savings and formal investment, especially in rural regions. Financial instruments must also include matched grants for start-up capital, low or zero-interest small business loans, possibly via Probashi Kallyan Bank, and a returnee SME credit window. Small rural enterprises founded using returnee capital should be subject to simplified or tiered registration regimes, reduced fees, and tax relief.

While economists debate how to attract more foreign investors, Bangladesh's own investment opportunities are hardly recognised due to the lack of acknowledgement in policy frameworks and economic statistics. For a nation aspiring to upper-middle-income status, this is an economic necessity that can turn into a powerful homegrown strategy.