



Why small-talk in Dhaka feels like a vanishing act

ASHIF AHMED RUDRO

As "the melting pot" of Bangladesh, the capital city has certain characteristics that might as well be tagged as 'culture.' Some of them commendable, some are prevalent everywhere, and some on the verge of fading away. It feels like small talk is one of those cultures.

SMALL TALK FADING AWAY

It's not just Dhaka. Small talk is fading away everywhere. The whole world is facing this phenomenon where small talks are becoming a memory of the past. We are not going into the discussion of the necessity and merits of small talk culture, but rather acknowledging how something that was once so common now almost unheard of (Pun intended).

There are a number of things that took its place. Having a smartphone in everyone's hand is probably the biggest of them all. People nowadays would rather be tuned into their favourite playlist instead of small talk.

On the other hand, Dhaka is not what it used to be. Now, there are too many people, too many vehicles, too much noise, and everyone is too busy to care about anyone else. So small talk really has no place in people's schedule anymore.

RARE BUT STILL HERE

While it is indeed rare, it still can be spotted.

Most people who engage in small talk are acquaintances. In public transport, you see people who often commute



ILLUSTRATION: ASHIF AHMED RUDRO

together engage in discussion about how much traffic there is on the road. People complain about how difficult it is to get a seat on one of the public transports and the other person nods in agreement, probably adding some comment that you can't hear over the noise of the honking traffic.

The usual small talk includes asking about the family, where the kids go to school. Then pretty soon, it ends up in politics these days; even though small talk is supposed to be a casual conversation.

Sometimes, you get a glimpse of a few young adults who truly engage in small talk. Football, wrestling, TV shows are usually their topic of conversation. If it's none of the above, then it's gossip.

"Did you hear what Ashif did yesterday?" one of them begins and

soon, a chatter starts. People around them will give them an annoyed look but they don't care.

THE KING OF SMALL TALK

A middle-aged man on a public transport; this is the ultimate king of small talks.

From asking you details about how you are doing, where you are coming from, where do you study and how many siblings you have, this man will switch up faster than you can answer.

If you are on a bus, they will invite you in small talks about how terrible the roads are and curse the drivers, hoping you join in. Next thing you know, he is criticising the government, criticising the average person for their dishonesty and blaming the general public for anything he can think of.

Younger people usually refrain from

such conversations with strangers. This is an interesting factor that shows the generational gap.

ALWAYS DRAMATIC, NEVER BORING

This culture of small talk is many things but it's never boring. All you have to do is take off your earbuds for a moment and listen.

You will find how fast these small talks start, how suddenly they change topic and how abruptly they can turn sideways sparking a conflict. Raised voices are usually escalated small talks that did not remain so small.

It is ironic, somewhat entertaining, and a culture that might become scarce with time but it will never disappear. And it's not just Dhaka. As long as there are civilisations standing, small talks will remain.

Tenure ends

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Bangladesh Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD), and Bangladesher Samajtantrik Dal (Marxist) -- did not sign the charter.

Contacted yesterday evening, NCP Joint Convener Javed Rasin told The Daily Star that his party would sign once the government issued the referendum order.

The four leftist parties said they could not sign any document, even with dissent notes, that risks altering the constitution's four fundamental principles: democracy, socialism, secularism, and nationalism.

CPB General Secretary Abdullah Al Kafi Ratan said the party opposed any move preventing future legal challenges to the charter.

When The Daily Star approached Prof Ali Riaz, vice-president of the commission, yesterday, he said that with the commission's term now over, he would return to academic work but "continue monitoring developments in a personal capacity".

Asked if the NCP could still sign, he said that since the commission no longer exists, the party could now sign directly with the government.

According to the Chief Adviser's Office, Monir Haider, special assistant (consensus) to the chief adviser, will now oversee matters related to charter signing.

Contacted for comments, Monir told The Daily Star, "I will do whatever the chief adviser advises me to do."

The government formed the seven-member commission on February 13 to build political consensus on the recommendations of six reform bodies.

Chaired by the chief adviser, it included Prof Ali Riaz, head of the Constitutional Reform Commission; Abdul Muyeed Chowdhury, head of the Public Administration Reform Commission; Safar Raj Hossain, head of the Police Reform Commission; Badul Alam Majumder, head of the Election Reform Commission; Justice Emdadul Haque, head of the Judiciary Reform Commission; and Dr Iftekharuzzaman, head of the Anti Corruption Reform Commission.

Its mandate was to engage political parties and stakeholders from the 2024 uprising and forge national agreement on reforms in elections, public administration, the judiciary, anti-corruption systems, and policing.

In the July charter, the commission drafted 84 proposals after two rounds of negotiation. Half of the proposals were related to constitutional reforms, with the BNP and allies recording dissent on at least nine points.

In a rare show of unity, 24 parties signed the charter on October 17 at the South Plaza of the Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban. The Gonoforum added its signature two days later.

The final draft went to all parties on September 10, followed by a third round of talks on implementation.

Parties agreed that non-constitutional reforms would proceed via ordinances and executive orders, while constitutional changes would go to referendum, though no consensus was reached on the referendum's timing, procedure, or framework.

BB seeks legal overhaul for full autonomy

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Speaking to The Daily Star by phone, Mansur said he wrote to clarify the rationale for reform and "the basis of the central bank's autonomy". He had yet to hold formal talks with the government, having left for the IMF-World Bank Annual Meetings on October 10; he is due back this week.

When asked if the proposals are ambitious, he replied, "I think it's not at all ambitious; it is overdue, long overdue."

Asked whether the interim government could implement the changes, he said it could if it wants.

On IMF conditions, he noted, "We will try our best to get it approved by the advisory council before November. If the government doesn't want to do it, that's on them."

APPOINTMENT, REMOVAL

In his letter, Mansur proposed forming a three-member search committee, led by a former finance or planning minister or adviser, or a former or outgoing BB governor, to appoint the governor and deputy governors, under rules defining its mandate.

The main goal of the proposal is to ensure merit-based appointments free from political interference, which is "a fundamental condition for a modern and autonomous central bank", he wrote.

He cited examples of countries like the Bank of England, Reserve Bank of India, Bank of Canada, South African Reserve Bank, and European Central Bank.

Allegations requiring removal of

top officials would be examined by a three-member Court of Inquiry headed by a justice of the Supreme Court's Appellate Division, ensuring removal only through due legal process.

The letter cites global practice, including the Bank of England, where removal requires proof of misconduct or incapacity under law.

Contacted by this newspaper, Mustafizur Rahman, distinguished fellow at the Centre for Policy Dialogue, said the proposed amendments are essential for strengthening the central bank's autonomy.

However, he noted, the genuine autonomy of the central bank will ultimately depend on the governor's individuality, independent mindset, and performance -- particularly in how the officeholder independently exercises the responsibilities entrusted to them with independence and integrity.

BOARD RESTRUCTURING

The letter proposed reducing government-appointed directors from three to one, while the number of independent experts would rise from four to six, strengthening regulatory and policy independence.

Many leading central banks, including the Bank of England, operate with predominantly independent boards, the letter noted.

The Bank of England's board is formed with 12 members, including the governor, two deputy governors, and nine non-executive members.

Currently, the BB's board has eight members, including the governor, one

deputy governor, three secretaries, two economists and a leader of the business chamber.

GOVERNOR'S STATUS

The governor's rank would be elevated to that of a full cabinet minister, matching peers in Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Sri Lanka, and India, which helps them maintain policy independence and decision-making authority.

This will also help ensure the central bank's stature, international representation, and effective coordination with other government agencies involved in economic policymaking.

NEW OVERSIGHT POWERS

New sections proposed by Mansur would cover whistleblower protection, prevention of monopolistic practices, oversight of credit rating agencies, collateral valuation, and legal vetting.

These measures aim to enhance discipline, transparency, and accountability in the banking sector by preventing irregularities, mismanagement, and conflicts of interest.

These will also enable Bangladesh Bank to establish a modern, integrated supervisory framework, which will play an effective role in curbing unethical practices, information concealment, nepotism, and monopolistic behavior in the banking sector.

The letter cites the World Bank's 2022 Global Financial Development Report, which highlights whistleblower protections as a powerful guard against corruption and moral hazard.

He also said some proposals, including the one for establishing a bicameral parliament, are directly contradictory to the constitution.

Khurshid Alam Khan, a senior lawyer of the Supreme Court, told this newspaper that there is no provision in the constitution for the formation of a constitution reform council and passing a bill in 270 days.

"I think it is a very risky provision. It may be challenged in the higher court. Such provisions cannot be covered by our constitution," he said.

Alam said it is the president who can promulgate an ordinance in the absence of parliament. "If the ordinance is promulgated, it has to be placed within 30 days. If the parliament does not pass the ordinance in 30 days, it will be automatically cancelled," he said.

Barrister Jyotirmoy Barua said, "First of all, I'm not clear why they thought of keeping such an option."

He also said the move was unconstitutional.

Citing article 80 of the constitution, he said any bill other than a money bill must be sent to the president for assent. The president has 15 days to approve or return it with objections; if no action is taken within that time, the bill is deemed to have been passed.

SC lawyer Barrister Rasheda Imam said, "The consensus commission's proposals to implement the July charter through an order followed by a referendum raise serious constitutional and procedural concerns."

"Today, Bangladesh remains a

'Proposal unconstitutional'

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something unheard of in legal history."

"You cannot bind a future parliament to do something. One parliament may pass a law, but it cannot say that the next three parliaments cannot amend it. That's not how the law works."

He added, "Every parliament is sovereign. The current one may pass or reject a law, but it cannot dictate what future parliaments can or cannot do. Yet now we're saying that if a decision is not made within 270 days, the bill will automatically be considered passed. Then what's the point of 270 days of discussion if the outcome is already predetermined?"

"Accordingly, the consensus commission proposes a middle path: if reforms are not completed, they shall be deemed enacted. This approach serves as a deterrent while relying on the political commitment of all parties to make the penalty unnecessary."

Barrister Imran Siddiq

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"Today, Bangladesh remains a

AL leader found dead on rooftop of Sylhet home

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Sylhet

An Awami League leader was found dead on the rooftop of his home in Sylhet's Dakshin Surma upazila yesterday.

The deceased, Abdur Razzak, 55, was vice-president of the South Surma upazila unit of the AL.

Police said there were several stab wounds on his body. "The incident likely took place between 6:30am and 9:00am," said Mohammad Saiful Islam, additional deputy commissioner of Sylhet Metropolitan Police.

Family members said Razzak went to the rooftop for his usual morning walk but did not return. Around 9:00am, relatives went upstairs and found his blood-stained body lying in a corner, said Mizanur Rahman, officer-in-charge of Dakshin Surma Police Station.

They also said CCTV footage from the house showed no sign of anyone entering the premises before the incident.

Sylhet Metropolitan Police Commissioner Abdul Quddus Chowdhury said both the Police Bureau of Investigation and the Criminal Investigation Department have visited the scene and are investigating the incident.

Trump sets refugee ceiling at record-low 7,500

REUTERS, Washington

US President Donald Trump set the refugee admissions ceiling at 7,500 for fiscal year 2026, the lowest cap on record, a White House document published on Thursday said, part of a broader effort to reshape refugee policies in the US and worldwide.

Trump said in an annual refugee determination dated September 30 that admissions would be focused largely on South Africans from the country's white Afrikaner ethnic minority.

Trump has claimed Afrikaners face persecution based on their race in the Black-majority country, allegations the South African government has denied.

Trump paused all US refugee admissions when he took office in January, saying they could only be restarted if they were established to be in the best interests of the US.

Weeks later, he launched an effort to bring in Afrikaners, sparking criticism from refugee supporters. Only 138 South Africans had entered the US by early September, Reuters reported at the time.

constitutional democracy, however imperfect, and any mechanism that overlooks this fundamental reality risks eroding the legitimacy of our constitutional order."

"While referendums can serve as tools of direct democracy, they require clear, singular issues and broad public participation. The July charter, however, contains multiple complex matters on which political parties themselves remain divided, and, more critically, the process has thus far excluded meaningful participation of the broader public."

"Equally concerning is the reported exclusion of notes of dissent submitted by various political parties on different reform proposals. This omission erodes the credibility of the commission's proceedings".

"The commission's current trajectory threatens to erode public trust and whatever constitutional stability we have today. For the July charter to serve as a genuine instrument of national renewal, its implementation must be grounded in broad-based political consensus, transparent procedures, and constitutional continuity, not expedient shortcuts or imposed mechanisms."

Contacted, Barrister Imran Siddiq, one of the legal experts consulted by the consensus commission, told The Daily Star that several countries provide that their constituent assemblies are dissolved if they fail to adopt a constitution within a specified period -- a penalty meant to ensure timely completion.

"However, such a provision may be unsuitable in our context, as dissolving parliament for non-implementation could trigger