

Dispute over July Charter must end

With the election approaching fast, both govt and parties should act wisely

In the febrile political atmosphere of present-day Bangladesh, the interim government is having to walk a high wire. Not long ago, the July National Charter was signed by nearly all major political parties, but that "unity" appears to be fraying as the charter implementation dispute drags on while the country is moving fast towards a planned February election.

The charter was meant to signal a democratic renewal. Instead, it has become a source of recrimination and brinkmanship. Consequently, the government has called on political parties to engage in intra-party dialogue and resolve their differences, but the invitation, perhaps to no one's surprise, has met with mixed reactions. Jamaat-e-Islami has cautiously endorsed the proposal but demanded that Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus act as a "referee," implying a lack of faith in the parties' ability to successfully negotiate amongst themselves. Akhter Hossen, member secretary of the National Citizen Party, was less restrained, accusing the government of playing "snakes and ladders" with reforms. He also alleged a deliberate stalling tactic and an attempt by a "faction within the government" to "sabotage the reform process and disrupt the election."

Time is not on anyone's side. The government has given the parties a seven-day window to arrive at a unanimous decision. Whether that would resolve the impasse remains to be seen. What we can say with certainty is that both the government and the political class must act with greater urgency and responsibility going forward. Any deviation from the road to the February polls is unacceptable.

In recent days, cracks around the proposed referendum on the July Charter have widened. While the BNP insists that the referendum should be held on election day, Jamaat-e-Islami wants it as early as November. This is not a minor scheduling dispute; it also reflects deep divisions over the substance of reform. Another flashpoint is the government's amendment to the Representation of the People Order (RPO), which now bans electoral alliances from using a common party symbol. Jamaat-e-Islami, the NCP and Khelafat Majlis supported the move, arguing that a shared symbol unfairly benefits a particular political party, but BNP opposed it. The government's decision to enshrine the amendment in a gazette suggests it is determined to forge ahead.

That said, Bangladesh cannot afford a relapse into its cyclical pattern of political dysfunction. The interim government must lead decisively in that respect. At the same time, the onus lies equally on political parties to rise above narrow partisan interests. Their failure to coalesce around a shared democratic project would squander a rare opportunity for renewal. Time is running out, so the path to the February election must be cleared as soon as possible. Anything less would invite the familiar spectre of crisis back into our political life.

Get rid of hospital brokers, theft gangs

End the suffering of patients at Habiganj Sadar Hospital

We are concerned about the situation at Habiganj Sadar Hospital where organised broker syndicates and theft gangs have been operating openly, harassing patients and their attendants. According to a report, these brokers, in collusion with some hospital staff, routinely exploit patients, demanding bribes to speed up treatment while luring many into costly private facilities. Meanwhile, theft gangs are taking advantage of the chaos to steal wallets, phones, and other valuables, leaving visitors in distress. Sadly, the 250-bed hospital has been functioning in this state for years, reflecting a serious breakdown of order and discipline there.

Abdul Kuddus, a patient from Baniachong upazila, told our reporter that he lost his wallet with cash and documents while accompanying his wife. Likewise, Sumona Akter from Chunarughat had her phone stolen by a man pretending to help her "get a serial." Such incidents are common at the hospital. Locals say syndicates operate freely inside and around the facility, often colluding with nearby pharmacies and diagnostic centres for profit.

Bangladesh's public health sector has long been suffering from similar corruption, mismanagement, inefficiency, and lack of accountability. The shortage of adequate healthcare facilities remains a long-standing concern, and the persistent absence of doctors and medical staff at upazila and union-level centres continues to deny rural communities access to basic treatment. Patients often come to district hospitals like Habiganj Sadar Hospital due to inadequate local services, but those mostly fail to meet their needs. The problem is also widespread across public hospitals in Dhaka and other major districts, reflecting deep flaws in governance and oversight within our public healthcare system. While the Habiganj hospital authorities took steps to evict brokers in the past, these efforts failed to bring much improvement. Hospital records show that in 2018 a subcommittee was formed, and in 2019 a list of 28 brokers was made public. Recently, following new complaints, RAB conducted a raid and detained nine brokers, but many still remain active.

The authorities must take strict measures to rid the hospital of brokers and thieves with the help of the local administration. They must ensure permanent surveillance, stricter security, and a functional complaint mechanism, so that any hospital staff collaborating with brokers or thieves face exemplary punishment. The authorities must also establish a system where patients can receive the services they need without interference or suffering. Most importantly, our entire health system must be reformed to ensure that patients receive proper care without facing unnecessary hardship.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Donald Trump wins the presidential election

On this day in 2016, Donald Trump won the US presidential election, defeating Kamala Harris. He became the first convicted felon to be elected to the office and the second president to win a second non-consecutive term.

EDITORIAL

An informed referendum or a mere rubber-stamp?



WINKERS AWEIGH!

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TANIM AHMED

A referendum on 48 key proposals of the National Consensus Commission seems almost inevitable. It will either be held on the same day of the general election, or earlier, as Jamaat-e-Islami and several like-minded Islamist parties are demanding.

The consensus commission proposed that key proposals relating to the constitution be put to a referendum with the following question: "Do you approve the July National Charter (Constitutional Reform) Implementation Order, 2025, and the proposals for constitutional reforms included in the first schedule of this order?"

Alternatively, the referendum question will refer to a draft bill containing these proposals. This bill will provide the incoming parliament, which will double as a constituent assembly, 270 days to address the proposals and incorporate them into the constitution or, presumably, reject them. However, the bill will stipulate, if there is no decision within 270 days, then these proposals will be considered to have become part of the constitution by default.

This article does not intend to address the absurdity of such a proposition that contemplates the possibility of sweeping changes in the constitution taking effect even while there is a sitting parliament. However, such a spectacular travesty begs to be mentioned even if in passing.

Coming back to the referendum, both alternatives boil down to essentially the same thing. Voters would have to either say yes or no to the entire set of 48 proposals in one go. This article argues that it is not just impractical but also undemocratic.

Let us begin with why it is impractical.

The 48 proposals in question are a result of months-long negotiations between the parties, and yet, some have only relented with notes of dissent to register their disagreement. There are different viewpoints about several proposals. Some consider them too bold, some not bold enough. The underlying rationale during the political negotiations was, of course, how these would play out in real life and encumber or facilitate governance,

which made agreement even more complex.

For instance, while the upper chamber of the parliament was widely accepted, the current proposals do not give it sufficient power to shut down a bill. The upper chamber can, at best, refuse to ratify a bill that the lower chamber floats. But it will be up to the lower house to amend it as per the upper house's recommendations or send it directly to the president

The point is, no two people can agree on such a set of 48 proposals, each of which has nuanced answers. One might agree with 47 of the proposals and not agree with one, which would then result in a "no" vote, cancelling out the whole exercise. Instead, citizens must be allowed to express their opinion on each of the proposals individually. Putting up a set of proposals carries an implicit message of "take it, or leave it," which is hardly the attitude to adopt with the sovereign citizens of a republic. Such a question on the referendum is, in fact, inviting the electorate to come back with a resounding "NO."

Now, about the undemocratic nature of the referendum.

The constitutional proposals are complicated and have profound ramifications. They need reading and rereading to grasp the meaning of the proposals. Even for many, who have



FILE VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

for approval, provided the bill passes a second round of votes in the lower house. Parties have even objected to the upper house having any say in constitutional amendment if it is constituted based on proportional representation.

Even a simple proposal that people of Bangladesh will be called Bangladeshi, omitting the mention of "Bangalee," as a nation, will face opposition from some people, as it would seem to be doing away with a core element of their identity. Several parties have already objected to changing the basic principles of the state, insisting that the original democracy, nationalism, socialism and secularism be kept.

covered the consensus commission exhaustively, read the entire July charter several times, and keenly followed the entire process from the constitution reform commission, a fair bit of confusion about the significance of the proposals remains. One can only imagine how difficult it would be for a lay person to understand them.

A sound understanding of the proposals could have been achieved through discussions and debates coupled with an active dissemination programme across the country. There has been nothing of the sort. Neither the government nor the parties, which endorsed the proposal for the referendum, took any steps to explain

to practicalities, then, parties would simply campaign for voters to say "yes" or "no" based on their rhetoric from the podiums and social media posts without explaining why.

Judging by the government's enthusiastic attempts not to ruffle anyone's feathers, it will probably shirk away from its responsibility of disseminating and explaining the proposals. As such, all that we are heading for in the name of a referendum is a mere rubber-stamp on the much-vaunted reforms from those who would be most affected—the people. Sadly, the political parties and the government are all complicit in this treachery. That is hardly the spirit of July.

Is reducing women's worlds our fix for their lack of safety?



MIND THE GAP

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NOSHIN NAWAL

Somewhere between Dhamondi and Mohammadpur, a young woman fought for her dignity on a moving bus with nothing but her sandal. The bus helper was harassing her while the other passengers sat frozen in silence. She did not have a weapon or backup. She had her sandal, her voice, and her refusal to be silent. The video went viral, of course. We Bangladeshi love a bit of drama, as long as it is happening to someone else.

But here is the part that keeps gnawing at me: the women on that bus, the ones who stayed quiet, watched, and did not move. Because while the man's act was criminal, the silence of the women was cultural. Conditioned. Generational. The kind of silence handed down like heirloom jewellery, wrapped in fear and polished with caution. And that silence is exactly what is being weaponised now, not just on buses but in politics. Take a political party's latest offering to womanhood: five-hour work shifts for mothers. A new policy to "honour" women by reminding them their primary job is motherhood, not survival. How

kind. How thoughtful. Nothing says empowerment like shorter shifts and longer sermons on modesty.

They insist they are not forcing women to adhere to a particular dress code. They are simply pointing out how "ninety percent of the girls [in Dhaka's industrial areas] go out dressed modestly." Translation: We did not make the rule; we are just applauding the obedience. And when they say women will "choose what to wear," they really mean "choose whatever we approve of." All this talk of protecting women's "honour" is starting to sound less like policy and more like public relations. Because when you reduce women's working hours, lecture them on decency, and talk endlessly about how fragile their "honour" is, you are not protecting them. You are isolating them. You are shrinking their world until the safest place left is silence.

When that girl on the bus screamed, no one stood by her. Not one woman said "stop." Not one voice joined hers. Maybe they were afraid. Maybe they thought, "better her than me." But here is the truth: today it is

her, tomorrow it is you. The war on women does not need an army. It thrives on apathy. We keep saying "not all men," but let us start saying "not enough women." Not enough women are standing up, speaking up, linking arms, or even offering a hand when another is humiliated. Not enough of us are refusing to stay quiet when patriarchy gets a microphone and we get a curfew.

When political parties start deciding when we can work, what we can wear, and when it is appropriate to exist, women must stand by women. Loudly. Uncomfortably. Publicly. Because the only antidote to a society that silences women is a sisterhood that shouts back. This constant obsession with regulating women's behaviour has become the perfect distraction from everything else going wrong in the country. The economy is gasping for air, inflation is eating through people's savings, public transport is a daily battleground, and justice is something you only see on posters. But somehow, the biggest topic of national debate has become whether women are being "modest enough."

It is almost clever. If you keep women busy defending their clothing, they will not have the time or energy to demand fair wages, safe roads, or functioning courts. If you tell them they must work less to protect their dignity, you also quietly cut them out of leadership and opportunity. And if you preach "modesty" as a virtue, you ensure that every time a woman

is harassed, someone will ask, "What was she wearing?" instead of "Why was he not stopped?" This is how control is disguised as protection. They will not build safer buses or train transport workers on harassment prevention, but they will tell you to dress modestly before boarding a bus.

The truth is, women's honour has never been under threat because of what women wear. It is under threat because of what men get away with. It is under threat because when women raise their voices, other women are too scared to echo them. Bangladeshi women have marched for independence, fought dictatorships, and built industries. But now, as politics becomes more regressive and public spaces more hostile, women seem to be shrinking again—not because we lack courage, but because we have been trained to face danger alone.

That girl on the bus should not have had to fight alone. She should have been surrounded by a chorus of women saying "enough." Women in this country owe that to one another. Because no policy, no prayer, and no paternal sermon will save us from a culture that tells us our safety depends on silence. The next time a woman raises her shoe, her voice, or her truth, do not just film her. Stand beside her. Because silence is not safety. Silence is surrender. And in a country where women are told to work less, talk less, and wear more, standing by one another is not rebellion. It is survival.