

THE REFERENDUM TEST

Yes vote, state neutrality, and fair process



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On February 12, 2026, alongside the 13th parliamentary election, Bangladesh will also hold a referendum on the implementation of reforms proposed in the July National Charter. While public discussion around the election has been intense of late, the referendum has attracted comparatively little visible campaigning or civic engagement. Although most political parties profess support for reform, few have undertaken any serious effort to explain the referendum or mobilise voters around it.

The interim government has stepped into this vacuum, promoting the referendum through television and social media and, somewhat controversially, through grassroots outreach involving mosque imams and field-level officials from various government departments. At the same time, the government has openly advocated a "Yes" vote. Since many of the officials involved in referendum-related outreach are also likely to play roles in election administration, this has raised a question: can the government and its officials campaign for one side of a referendum without compromising the neutrality and credibility of the process?

I want to make a clear but carefully qualified claim. The interim government is not wrong, in principle, to favour a "Yes" outcome. But it risks undermining the referendum's legitimacy if it pursues that outcome through methods that blur the line between political advocacy and administrative power.

The moral and political logic behind the government's position is not difficult to see. An interim that emerged from a mass uprising is not merely a caretaker body tasked with routine administration. It exists to stabilise a rupture and to prevent a return to the political conditions that made that rupture inevitable. The present interim government was sworn in on August 8, 2024, following the fall of the Awami League government. After prolonged consultations with political parties, and on the basis of 84 proposals produced by the reform commissions, the July National Charter was prepared in October last year. Of these, constitutional reform proposals have been placed before the public in the form of a referendum, organised into four thematic questions.

Seen in this light, the government's support

for a "Yes" vote can be understood as a form of accountability rather than partisanship. The government is effectively saying: we were entrusted with the task of reform; here is the reform package we propose; and now we seek popular authorisation to proceed. This is not an alien idea in democratic practice; governments frequently advocate for constitutional or institutional reforms they believe are necessary for the future of their countries.

Comparative experience bears this out. In Turkey's 2017 constitutional referendum, the government openly campaigned for a "Yes" vote in support of constitutional change. In Colombia's 2016 referendum on the peace agreement with the FARC, the government explicitly urged citizens to vote "Yes," framing the decision as a choice between peace and continued conflict. Similarly, in Ireland's 2015 referendum on same-sex marriage, the government took a clear and public stance in favour of a "Yes" vote. In none of these cases did governments pretend neutrality about outcomes. Rather, the legitimacy of those referendums depended on whether the process itself was perceived as fair, transparent and trustworthy.

There is also a political reality that cannot be ignored. The interim government's legitimacy does not rest on electoral victory but on performance. Its authority derives from its capacity to deliver a credible transition, including meaningful reform. A failed referendum would not merely defeat a policy agenda but also weaken the government's public justification for its continued role in the transition.

Hence, the case for government advocacy is defensible so far. The problem arises when advocacy shades into the use of state power to shape consent.

A referendum is not validated by the outcome the government prefers. It is validated by the conditions under which the citizens decide. Democratic acceptability depends on transparent voting and counting, the political neutrality of the administration and law enforcement agencies, and citizens' ability to express their views freely, without fear or unequal pressure. These are procedural standards, not outcome-based ones.

This is why the method of campaigning

matters as much as the message. When advisers or political figures argue publicly for a "Yes" vote, they are engaging in ordinary political speech. But when field-level officials, especially those with administrative or electoral responsibilities, are mobilised to promote a particular outcome, the state itself begins to appear partisan. Even in the absence of explicit coercion, the perception of administrative pressure is difficult to avoid. If

infer that support for the referendum is linked to support for whichever political parties those religious figures are understood to be aligned with in the parliamentary election. In this way, referendum mobilisation risks producing spillover effects into the election—not by design, but by association. Even where the government's intention is limited to securing approval for reform, the appearance of indirect electoral signalling can undermine

implication. The interim government should confine its referendum advocacy to public-facing communication: plain-language explanations of the proposals, careful presentation of what would change under a "Yes" vote and what would remain under a "No" vote, and reasoned arguments for its preferred option. Such persuasion does not undermine citizens' freedom of choice.

That freedom is undermined when



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

such perceptions take hold, legal challenges and post-referendum disputes may become a reality.

A related, though distinct, concern arises from the reported involvement of religious preachers in referendum advocacy. The issue here is not religion or belief, but authority and perception. In Bangladesh's political landscape, mosque imams often operate within social and communal networks that are widely perceived as having political affiliations. Unlike civil servants, they are not subject to formal state oversight, nor should they be. Religious autonomy is itself a democratic value. Yet, precisely because imams are independent of the state and embedded in morally authoritative community roles, their mobilisation in support of a "Yes" vote risks entangling referendum advocacy with partisan electoral agendas.

At the grassroots level, voters may reasonably

confidence in both the referendum and the broader electoral process.

The lesson is not that governments must be silent during referendums. It is that the state must remain restrained.

Some will argue that an interim government must be strictly impartial. That claim is too blunt. When the stakes involve fundamental constitutional architecture, a government may reasonably defend the reforms it believes will prevent regression into authoritarianism. What is required is not neutrality of belief, but neutrality of the rules and of the referees. The distinction is crucial. The government may argue for a "Yes" vote, but the state must guarantee a process in which citizens can say "No" without intimidation, disadvantage or fear. This requires a strict separation between the government as advocate and the state as guarantor of a fair and neutral process.

That distinction yields a clear practical

government employees involved in election administration are enlisted in advocacy, which may be experienced as administrative pressure, and when religious figures are engaged, given their widely recognised social and political associations at the grassroots level. In these contexts, referendum advocacy risks being received not merely as guidance on the reform question, but as either pressure from the state or implicit electoral signalling in favour of particular political parties in the concurrent parliamentary election.

The core principle, then, is simple: a government may have a view, but it must not rig, tilt or even appear to tilt the conditions under which citizens decide whether that view deserves endorsement. In a transitional moment, this discipline is not optional. It is the difference between reform as democratic consolidation and reform as a new form of managed politics.

Rebutting again: The wrong lens for our interim economy



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Economics is not a museum of immortal models. It is a diagnostic discipline whose tools must match the condition of the economy under examination.

Dr Birupaksha Paul's January 8 response to my earlier rebuttal, dated January 4, clarifies his attachment to the Phillips curve and its expectations augmented variants. That clarification is welcome. Yet it also confirms that our disagreement is neither, as he suggests, about whether the Phillips curve exists in the abstract, nor about whether it has evolved. The disagreement concerns whether invoking that framework is an appropriate diagnostic tool for evaluating Bangladesh's interim government under conditions of deep institutional breakdown.

At no point did my rebuttal claim that the Phillips curve has been "abolished," nor did it deny its historical importance, its theoretical refinements, or its occasional empirical reappearance. Invoking Samuelson, Solow, Friedman, Lucas, Phelps, Akerlof, Mankiw, or Krugman does not settle the

issue at hand. The question is not whether the Phillips curve can be rehabilitated in carefully specified empirical settings, but whether it meaningfully explains inflation and unemployment outcomes in a crisis-ridden economy where policy transmission itself is impaired.

Dr Paul argues that I "slaughtered" the Phillips curve to credit the interim government. This imputes a motive that does not exist. My critique was not a defence of the interim by theoretical fiat; it was a warning against attributing macroeconomic outcomes to policy failure when the underlying mechanisms required for those policies to operate were structurally compromised.

One may praise or criticise the interim government, but such judgment must rest on an accurate diagnosis of constraints, not on the persistence of familiar theoretical instruments.

The core problem with Dr Paul's rejoinder is that it conflates the existence of a theoretical relationship with its applicability

as a performance metric. Yes, modern macroeconomics has augmented the Phillips curve with expectations, supply shocks, and price rather than wage inflation. But those augmentations presuppose functioning institutions: a credible monetary authority, enforceable contracts, competitive markets, reliable data, and reasonably intact financial intermediation. In Bangladesh, these were precisely what the interim government did not inherit.

Dr Paul correctly notes that he mentioned extortion, mob violence, fiscal weakness, and loan recovery failures in his original article. But acknowledging institutional failure is not the same as integrating them analytically. If inflation is driven primarily by cartelised supply chains, administered pricing, exchange rate pass-through, and speculative hoarding, then the inflation-unemployment trade off ceases to be the binding constraint. In such a setting, high interest rates can coexist with persistent inflation and rising unemployment without implying policy incoherence. That coexistence reflects structural dislocation, not the collapse or resurrection of a curve.

Much of Dr Paul's defence rests on the claim that the Phillips curve "reappears" once expectations, shocks, and data choices are handled correctly. That may be true in economies where monetary transmission is impaired only at the margin. Bangladesh's problem has been deeper. When banks are burdened with politically protected non-performing loans, when liquidity circulates

outside productive channels, and when regulatory credibility is thin, monetary policy becomes blunt. Tightening discourages formal credit without disciplining informal market power. Easing risks fuelling rent-seeking without stimulating investment. In such circumstances, debating the slope of the Phillips curve risks mistaking noise for signal.

Dr Paul invokes the Lucas supply function and the psychology of wage bargaining to argue that the Phillips curve is rooted in human behaviour rather than statistical accident. That observation is well taken, but incomplete. Human psychology does not operate in a vacuum. When labour markets are segmented, informality is dominant, union bargaining is weak, and wage indexation is absent or politicised, the behavioural foundations of the curve weaken. Bangladesh's labour market is not a textbook arena of marginal productivity bargaining; it is shaped by informality, migration, remittances, and political mediation. Psychological regularities alone cannot rescue a model whose institutional scaffolding is missing.

The reference to the re-steepening of the Phillips curve in the post-Covid United States further illustrates the problem of misplaced analogy. The US reencountered a Phillips-type relationship after unprecedented fiscal stimulus, intact financial plumbing, and rapid labour market recovery. Bangladesh entered the interim period with depleted trust, distorted credit allocation, and weakened enforcement. One cannot infer from one

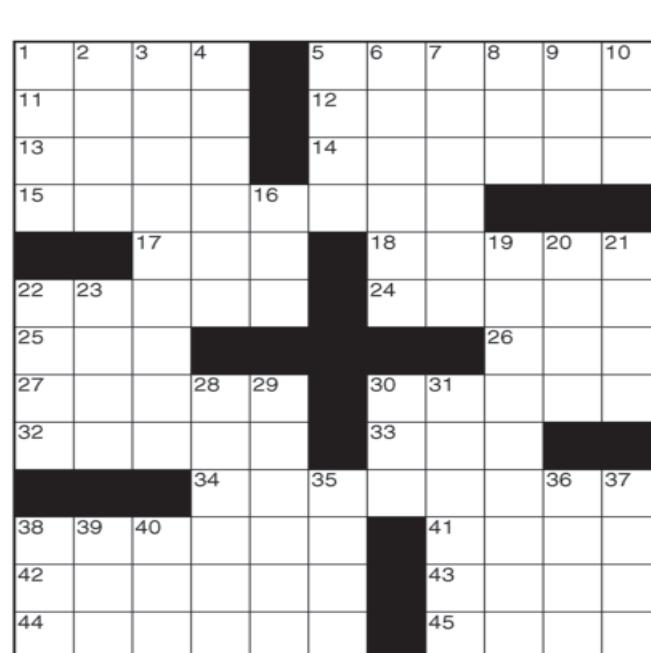
context to the other without committing precisely the abstraction error my rebuttal cautioned against.

Finally, Dr Paul suggests that my argument seeks to lower the bar for accountability by redefining success as mere stabilisation. This misreads the point. Interim governments are not absolved of responsibility, but they must be evaluated against crisis appropriate benchmarks. Arresting deterioration, restoring minimal discipline, and repairing transmission mechanisms are prerequisites for any subsequent optimisation. Judging short-horizon outcomes as if those prerequisites already existed confuses lagged structural damage with contemporaneous failure.

This debate, therefore, is not about defending or discarding the Phillips curve. It is about choosing the right diagnostic lens for the patient in front of us. Economics is not a museum of immortal models; it is a toolkit whose instruments must be matched to conditions. When institutional realism is absent, even elegant theory can mislead. My rebuttal argued precisely that—not that the curve is dead, but that it was the wrong instrument for diagnosing Bangladesh's interim moment.

A serious public discourse should move beyond defending favourite frameworks and instead ask harder questions: what constraints bind, which channels are broken, and what benchmarks are appropriate to the phase of governance being assessed. On that ground, the disagreement remains analytical, not ideological, and it remains unresolved.

ACROSS
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24 Trap
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26 Vault part
27 Comic tribute
30 Diamond side
32 TV awards
33 Rap's Dr.
34 Humiliating failures
38 "Jane Eyre" writer
41 Browser button
42 Opera's Stratas
43 "What's ___ for me?"
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4 Explorer Hernando
5 Place for a coin
6 Major nations
7 2012 Olympics host
8 Mamie's husband
9 Sedan or SUV
10 UFO pilots
16 Unrefined
19 1992 Olympics host
20 Huron neighbour
21 Owed amount
22 Farm unit
23 Hotel offering
28 2000 Olympics host
29 Dreaded fly
30 Govt. health watchdog
31 Jughead's friend
35 Rosary unit
36 Give off
37 Workout units
38 "Dynamite" K-pop group
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