The Daily Star

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Cricket loses as politics takes the field

Bangladesh excluded from T20 World Cup in a controversial decision

We fully share the frustration expressed by the World Cricketers' Association over Bangladesh's exclusion from the 2026 Men's T20 World Cup. The cricketers' body has rightly described it as "a sad moment" for cricket, and its call on stakeholders to work towards uniting the sport rather than dividing it deserves serious consideration.

Cricket's governing body, the International Cricket Council (ICC), last week rejected Bangladesh's request to relocate its matches scheduled in India to tournament co-host Sri Lanka, citing the impracticality of altering the fixture so close to the tournament's February 7 start. Earlier, the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) sought the change after the Indian Premier League (IPL) barred Bangladesh's lone participant, Mustafizur Rahman, from joining the Kolkata Knight Riders (KKR), a franchise owned by Bollywood star Shah Rukh Khan. Both Khan and his team reportedly received threats from several right-wing groups and the West Bengal unit of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Given the nature and gravity of these threats from Hindutva groups, the BCB declined to travel to India and requested a rearrangement of its World Cup fixtures.

Bangladesh felt further aggrieved by the ICC's decision to replace it by inviting Scotland, particularly in light of past precedents where similar requests by India and Pakistan were accommodated. India's refusal to travel to Pakistan for the 2025 Champions Trophy on security grounds set such a precedent, and later the whole 2025 Men's T20 Asia Cup was relocated to the United Arab Emirates due to geopolitical tensions between Pakistan and India. This time, however, the ICC not only rejected Bangladesh's request—based on a third-party assessment of security conditions in India—but also invited a new team to take its place. The argument of logistical infeasibility is unconvincing, to say the least, as Scotland's last-minute inclusion also entails logistical preparations including arranging visas, travel, and accommodation. Add to that the very short window for the team's preparation. Scotland's entry also offers little prospect of offsetting commercial losses.

It is worth recalling that Indian diplomat-turned-politician Shashi Tharoor, chairman of its parliamentary standing committee on external affairs, recently wrote in *The Times of India* that "as citizens and sports lovers, we must stand up for the principle that the playing field should remain a sanctuary for merit, not a theatre for performative nationalism." Regrettably, performative nationalism appears to have prevailed, and the ICC has failed to shield the game from politicisation.

Cricket fans worldwide, including prominent voices within India, have expressed indignation at what they see as the global regulator's double standards. The controversy now threatens to spill further into geopolitics, with the Pakistan Cricket Board apparently threatening to withdraw from the tournament and the ICC responding with warnings of harsh penalties. The world now waits to see whether the parties involved will step back from the brink and find an amicable resolution to this deepening crisis.

A blatant lack of empathy

Bureaucratic failures over parole to Saddam raise concerns

We are shocked and disturbed by the deaths of 22-year-old Kaniz Suborna Swarnali and her nine-month-old child in Bagerhat; the mother allegedly killed her infant before taking her own life. According to news reports, she was driven by prolonged mental distress while her husband, Jewel Hasan (also known as Saddam), president of the banned Chhatra League's Bagerhat Sadar unit, remained in jail and was not granted parole. Despite family claims that they had applied for his parole, he was denied the chance to attend their janaza and could only see their bodies at the prison gate. This tragic incident exposes a serious failure of the state to show basic human compassion for prison inmates and demands proper investigation.

Reportedly, Saddam was arrested in Gopalganj following the fall of the Awami League regime and has been charged in several cases, and Swarnali had been mentally broken by despair during her husband's prolonged imprisonment. Left without meaningful support, she struggled with emotional distress, social pressure and uncertainty. According to the family members, this despair drove her to take her own life after killing her infant. While proper investigations must determine the facts, the larger question remains: who will bear responsibility for these tragic deaths?

The incident also raises broader concerns about Bangladesh's parole system and its implementation. Although existing rules allow emergency parole in the event of a close relative's death, rigid procedures and a lack of compassion often undermine their purpose, as this case painfully illustrates. While the Jashore District Commissioner's Office has stated that they did not receive any parole application, a copy circulated on social media suggests that the family did apply to the Bagerhat district authorities. It later emerged that, since Saddam had been transferred to Jashore jail last December, the application should have been submitted to the Jashore district authorities instead. Because parole was denied, Saddam was forced to bid farewell to his deceased wife and son at a prison gate. The incident demonstrates bureaucratic failure and the glaring lack of empathy on the state's part.

We must also confront the wider political reality that this case demonstrates. Under successive governments, including the authoritarian Awami League regime, political cases kept individuals in jail for prolonged periods without following due process, often with catastrophic consequences for their families. The persistence of this practice, even under the interim government, seriously questions our collective commitment to justice.

Are we getting stuck in the routine of reform?

A CLOSER LOOK

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At first glance, the interim administration appears to be doing what transitional governments are expected to do. The ground has been steadied. An election date has been announced and is nearing. Charters and ordinances have been drafted. The language of restoration circulates freely, carrying the reassurance that the rupture of July is being responsibly managed.

However, beneath this surface calm, something feels unresolved. Not because politics is loud—if anything, it has grown quieter compared to past election cycles—but the space in which politics is meant to unfold feels narrower than the promise of reform would suggest.

Power does not always govern through force or repression. Often, it governs through mundane procedure—timelines, expert bodies, administrative sequencing, the framing of choices as technical necessities rather than political decisions. And this is experienced not as coercion but as delay, deferral, and the gradual closing of options: through notices, legal ambiguity, and the repeated assurance that reform will follow. The talk of reforms becomes a way of managing uncertainty.

Following the 2024 uprising, reform was presented as both a moral obligation and a political promise. The near-dozen reform commissions and their recommendations, the consensus-building exercises, and finally the adoption of a national charter all pointed towards a reimagining of the state and its power structure. The language was ambitious, suggesting not merely a transition between governments but also a recalibration of how power would be exercised and contested.

But ambition alone does not transform institutions. What matters is where reform is placed in the political timeline and how it is sequenced, controlled, and insulated from political contestation. In Bangladesh's case, many of the major reform measures proposed have been procedurally deferred, their fate and likely impact all but suspended in a future that may or may not arrive.

Since August 2024, the interim government has announced reforms across nearly every major institution of the state. Constitutional amendments were promised through the July National Charter. Electoral, judicial, anti-corruption, police, and public administration reforms were placed under review. Yet few of the reforms have crossed the threshold from proposal to enactment. The constitutional changes remain tied to future decisions, while many of the police and anti-corruption reforms remain at nascent stages. Meanwhile, electoral reform has focused largely on administration rather than political inclusion.

This pattern has a measurable outcome: reform largely as architecture, not action.

In fact, Iftekharuzzaman, executive director of Transparency

FILE VISUAL: **SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR**

International Bangladesh, remarked not long ago that the interim government effectively "surrendered" to bureaucratic power, with many reform targets largely missed. His critique was not that reform ideas were not substantive, but that resistance within the administrative machinery was never meaningfully confronted while pursuing them. Powerful interests embedded in the bureaucracy diluted or excluded key provisions, including those aimed at strengthening the Anti-Corruption Commission. Despite early expectations, proposals to meaningfully reinforce ACC's independence, particularly its appointment and oversight mechanisms, have yet to materialise. Reform, when it arrived, lost its momentum; authority continued to circulate through familiar, entrenched channels.

This pattern—reform on paper, power elsewhere—is not incidental.

It mirrors a familiar failure in change management: systems are redesigned on paper, processes are updated, but the underlying power structures and practices that sustain the old order are left undisturbed.

Nowhere is this perhaps more visible than in the design of the election itself. The interim government has delivered many of the administrative components expected of it. Timelines are in place. Preparations are underway. From a logistical standpoint, order prevails. Campaigning remains cautious, alliances tentative, and political speech unusually restrained for a moment meant to invite contestation.

But elections are not merely administrative events. They are reconstitutive moments, occasions when political space is reopened, legitimacy renegotiated, and participation meaningfully expanded. It is here that the reform promise has thinned most visibly. Take, for instance, the nomination of women candidates contesting in the election—a mere four percent.

In the reform project, legitimacy was meant to be restored by opening up political space; instead, procedures have closed off participation, constrained whose voices matter, and regulated how political competition is allowed. Simply prosecuting the past regime's political actors or barring them from returning to politics, on its own, does not amount to political reform.

By treating the election as a procedural exercise rather than a reconstitutive moment, the interim government has narrowed reform precisely when political possibility was meant to expand. The result is an election that may function smoothly but yet struggle to carry the burden of expectations placed upon it.

Other areas of reform reveal similar tensions between promise and practice. As the Human Rights Watch noted in late July 2025, while some of the most visible abuses associated with the previous regime have eased, systemic reforms to protect civil liberties and human rights remain incomplete. Arbitrary detention, politically motivated prosecutions, and threats to journalists and vulnerable groups have persisted.

Economist Debapriya Bhattacharya has made a similar point recently, but from another angle, arguing that reforms remain superficial when they rely on institutional blueprints without strengthening the social forces that sustain democratic norms. His observation matters because it exposes a deeper contradiction at the heart of our reform project. Reform was expected to be inclusive, to draw legitimacy from public participation. Instead, it has largely remained insulated: managed at a distance from the society it claims to renew. In this disconnect, the purpose of reform risks defeating itself.

For many citizens, the question is no longer whether reform will be completed, but whether it will ever touch daily political life at all. If reform is to mean more than reassurance, the logic must shift.

Electoral credibility must be treated as a matter of political architecture, not merely administrative efficiency. Transitional moments require mechanisms that widen participation, protect contestation, and prevent dissent from being neutralised as a technical inconvenience. Reform cannot be deferred to post-election promises alone. Within their limited window of authority, interim governments must establish irreversible guardrails—on administrative neutrality, prosecutorial restraint, freedom of expression, and bureaucratic accountability—that shape the way forward.

Resistance to reform must also be confronted. Bureaucratic inertia does not dissolve on its own, and reform fails mostly when power is allowed to hide behind complexity. Institutional change must be socially anchored. Minority representation must be mandated when reforms are being planned. None of this requires dramatic confrontation. But it does require a willingness to treat reform not as a sequence to be managed, but as a political space to be protected.

True, the interim government has restored a degree of calm. The harder task now is to ensure that calm does not harden into closure.

Power does not always close doors outright. Sometimes it keeps people waiting at the threshold, through the routine of procedures, reviews, and assurances. The measure of reform will not be found in the calm of election day, but in whether politics is eventually allowed to cross that threshold, long after the moment of transition has passed.

How to fix digital public service delivery in Bangladesh

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Digital Public Services (DPS) are now an everyday element in citizens' lives. From land records and health appointments to general diaries and transport services, digital platforms increasingly shape how people interact with the government. Yet, the success of these digital services is not guaranteed by their existence alone; it is defined by how they perform when citizens actually try to access them at union, upazila, and district levels.

Across sectors, one challenge emerges repeatedly: fragmentation. Multiple digital systems often operate in parallel without sufficient integration. As a result, citizens are asked to submit the same information multiple times, and service providers struggle with verification and delays. In land administration, for example, gaps between historical records, mutation registers, and digital ledgers complicate verification and slow down service delivery. These issues are not always apparent at the national level, but they are acutely felt by citizens who must return repeatedly to government offices to complete a single application.

Infrastructure constraints further complicate service delivery. Unstable servers, slow internet connections, and limited ICT equipment disrupt services at union and upazila offices. When systems go offline, local officials have little control over resolution, but must also be on the receiving end of citizens' frustration. For citizens, infrastructure constraints result in additional travel, lost time, and increased reliance on unofficial intermediaries.

The effectiveness of digital systems largely depends on the people who operate them. Shortages of skilled staff, limited training opportunities, and frequent transfers weaken institutional memory and confidence. Even well-designed platforms lose effectiveness when frontline officials lack the support or authority to use them efficiently. On the citizens' side, limited digital literacy and lack of awareness about procedures and the correct official fees discourage direct use of digital services. Fear of making mistakes pushes many people towards informal intermediaries, undermining equity and transparency.

Lack of inclusion also remains a central concern. Persons with disabilities, elderly citizens, and residents of remote areas face additional barriers related to accessibility, connectivity, and communication. Digital platforms that do not account for these realities risk widening, rather than narrowing, existing gaps. Inclusion is not achieved by technology alone; it requires deliberate attention to how services are communicated, supported, and delivered at the local level.

Furthermore, delays, unclear processes, and lack of feedback weaken confidence, while timely responses and transparent communication bolster it. Citizens perceive services not only by the outcomes they receive, but by how they are treated during the process. Timely responsiveness (listening, explaining, and acting) is a big part of efficiency.

Meanwhile, informal intermediaries take advantage of complex systems, unclear procedures, and weak capacity. Reducing dependency on such intermediaries requires simplifying processes, improving communication, and strengthening local support mechanisms. When citizens understand procedures and feel confident navigating services, the space for undue influence reduces.

One promising approach lies in practical, light-touch improvements rather than large-scale system overhauls. Union Digital Centres, municipal offices, land offices, and health facilities can become more citizen-friendly through simple measures: clear display of service steps and fees, basic help desks during peak hours, and improved coordination among local offices. Such changes may appear modest, but they directly improve citizen experience.

Temporary or mobile service delivery at union or ward levels via service camps can reduce travel burdens and reach populations that struggle to access fixed offices. These initiatives are particularly valuable for elderly citizens, persons with disabilities, and those living in remote areas.

Many citizens are unaware of available services, required documents, or official fees. Campaigns using multiple channels like courtyard meetings, Union Parishad offices, video displays, social media, and mobile messaging can help bridge this gap. Clear, simple information empowers citizens and reduces misinformation.

Citizen-centric digital transformation is not a one-time effort, but should be an ongoing process of adjustment, learning, and trust-building. Systems must be supported by capable institutions, informed citizens, and responsive leadership. Ultimately, digital public services succeed when they align with local realities.