

Protect the referendum's integrity

Civil servants must remain neutral

That the government employees have been campaigning for a "Yes" vote in the upcoming referendum on the July charter, scheduled to be held alongside the 13th parliamentary election on February 12, in violation of the law is deeply concerning. Government advisers and senior officials have reportedly been actively promoting a "Yes" vote for the referendum, raising concerns about legality, neutrality, and the overall credibility of the process. Now the EC has clearly stated that government employees may inform the public about the referendum, but they must not campaign for a "Yes" or a "No" vote. The government must take cognisance of this.

According to Section 21 of the Referendum Ordinance, 2025, and Article 86 of the Representation of the People Order, 1972, any misuse of official position to influence the outcome of a referendum or election may constitute a punishable offence, carrying imprisonment of one to five years along with fines. Reportedly, the EC has issued letters to returning officers, cabinet secretaries, and secretaries of all ministries and divisions, reminding them of their legal obligations. Election officers, while on deputation under the EC during this period, are explicitly bound to prioritise electoral responsibilities over other duties. The EC, however, did not address the role of the advisers. Banners advocating a "Yes" vote are being displayed in government offices nationwide, and senior government advisers have publicly urged citizens to vote "Yes" in the referendum. When civil servants campaign for one side, it seriously undermines the credibility and fairness of the referendum process.

Understandably, a "Yes" vote in the referendum will open the door for an array of significant reforms. The new parliament, alongside its regular duties, would function as a constitutional reform council to oversee these changes. While proponents of the "Yes" campaign argue that there is no legal barrier to such advocacy, the EC's letter, grounded in the existing law, makes it clear that campaigning by civil servants would constitute a punishable offence. However, we have yet to learn of the government's clear position in response to the EC's letter.

We believe it would be unwise for the government to create any situation that renders the referendum controversial. It must ensure that the law is not violated by its advisers and senior officials, who must fully respect the EC's directives. The EC, for its part, must remain vigilant and ready to enforce the law decisively, sending a clear message that violations will not be tolerated. Only by keeping the civil servants neutral and the state machinery impartial can the referendum and the general election be conducted in a manner worthy of public trust.

Stop unnecessary C-sections

Ensure better labour care, rein in profiteering private facilities

We are deeply concerned by the reckless rise in births by Caesarean section in the country, even when there is no medical need for the surgeries to be performed. Last year alone, around 17 lakh children were born through unnecessary C-section surgeries, according to a recent seminar. Research further found that almost one in two children is born via C-section, as opposed to the global average of one in five children being delivered through surgery. A 2018 estimate by Save the Children suggests that over Tk 5,000 crore is lost every year to these unnecessary procedures.

The number of C section births has been allowed to rise exponentially over a number of years, mainly due to the absence of any meaningful government action to check it. In the meantime, private healthcare facilities have been able to count crores of taka in profits each year by performing unnecessary C-sections. At present, more than half of all births in Bangladesh happen surgically. While many institutions lack sufficient capable staff, emergency medical support and standard labour rooms, surgical delivery is also opted for (even by patients themselves in many cases) due to being less time-consuming than normal delivery. Additionally, patients' and families' lack of awareness regarding the best option for them is another barrier to preventing a C section where a normal delivery would be sufficient. According to research, eight or nine out of every 10 deliveries in Bangladesh's private hospitals are done via C-sections.

According to experts, unnecessary C-section birth could negatively impact a child's immunity and long-term health. Natural birth allows beneficial microbes or the mother's microbiome to be transferred to the newborn, and also allows for immediate skin-to-skin contact between mother and baby, which is recognised by the World Health Organization as a fundamental aspect of neonatal care.

It is up to the healthcare authorities to put a monitoring system in place to oversee the activities of private hospitals, as that is where the ratio of normal to C-section deliveries is the most dismal. Community-based campaigns must also be initiated to raise awareness against unnecessary C sections. Most importantly, healthcare facilities across public and private sectors must be bolstered to ensure that patients receive the best possible prenatal and postnatal care, while not being charged dubious amounts in hospital bills.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY



Soviet Union launches LUNA 9

On this day in 1966, the Soviet Union launched the uncrewed Luna 9, the first spacecraft to make a soft landing on the Moon.

EDITORIAL

Education needs decisive actions, not empty promises



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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Days before the election, promises abound. The education sector has also received its quota of electoral promises. But one recent report reveals a significant lack of new thinking and structural imagination in preparing students for a world changed beyond recognition. The electoral pledges, summarised in the report, includes BNP's commitment to allocate five percent of GDP to education, promote research and knowledge centric education with a focus on the mother tongue, and emphasise learning a third language for the expanding job market; Jamaat-e-Islami's proposal for interest-free loans for meritorious students, scholarships to study abroad, and merger of three prominent women's colleges to form a national women's university; and NCP's promise to prioritise STEM, vocation, and skill development projects. Ironically, we still need to reiterate the constitutional right to education as an electoral slogan, despite nearly 55 years of independence.

Election slogans like "equal education across streams," "skills for the future," "research-based higher education," or "technical training for employment" lack credibility due to the failure of successive governments to establish education within a rights-based framework. While our constitution mentions a "uniform, mass-orientated and universal system of education" and free, compulsory schooling, education remains a "principle of state policy." In other words, the state is morally obligated but not legally accountable. The election manifestos do not address the deep structure that is responsible for social inequality.

Bangladesh, by default, has designed inequality in education through its multiple streams. Children are sorted into public, private, madrasa, English medium, or vocational groups mostly based on their socioeconomic conditions. From the very first years of schooling, they are exposed to different curricula, teacher quality, costs, and cultural capital. By the time they reach university, the concept of "equal opportunity" has already become a myth. The subheadings of "Education" in the electoral manifestos casually mention "uniformed standards," "foundational subjects," and "equal

dignity." They stop short of spelling out how learning outcomes will be equalised when teacher deployment, funding, assessment, and institutional incentives remain radically unequal. Equity needs to be engineered in education so that the minimum learning standard in language, numeracy, science, and civic reasoning is attained. Reforming national pedagogy and assessment procedures is the only way to implement these changes.



VISUAL: SHAIKH SULTANA JAHAN BADHON

The pandemic has altered many of our long-held ideas and practices.

A national policy today must not overlook the damage done by the pandemic. We saw the controversial "auto-pass," shortened syllabi, diluted examinations, and prolonged institutional closures as pragmatic emergency responses. But their impacts are visible almost everywhere.

Those who obtained higher CGPA without demonstrating their competence are the ones who are at the forefront of student movements. We have led an entire generation to believe that examinations are negotiable and learning is elastic. When combined with our reliance on coaching centres, rote-driven curricula, and AI-prepared responses, we see a culture that demands or expects grades and certificates without mastering the required knowledge or acquiring the necessary skills. None of the political manifestos have mentioned any national learning recovery diagnostics. There is no roadmap for restoring

certification systems trusted by employers.

Currently, the expansion of education has resulted in a large number of "educated" young individuals being rejected by the "quality control" departments of the job market. Their frustration is our frustration. The electoral promises of jobs, stipends, loans, and allowances for graduates may offer short-term relief, but they do not show the intent to correct the system that generates unemployability.

The gap between promises and preparedness is the most visible in higher education. The popular pursuit of universities in every district has resulted in their proliferation by administrative decree. This "universitisation" has produced campuses with teachers without pedigree, researchers without orientation, laboratories without equipment, and degrees without depth. There is no labour market mapping to discern which areas of

specialisation and skills our students need for career mobility. The crisis of the seven colleges, along with the churn of National University affiliations, serves as a prime example of making superficial changes without addressing the underlying problems.

What we require from the new government is not the declaration of more buildings, but institutional clarity. We require universities to distinguish between research-intensive postgraduate institutions, teaching-focused undergraduate universities, and applied and vocational graduate institutes connected to regional labour markets.

The bedrock of the education system is the teacher. We cannot expect the promises of "world-class" universities to materialise with underpaid, overburdened, and under-supported teachers. We should prioritise a teacher's workforce strategy. The curriculum and assessment reforms mentioned earlier can only happen if there is transparent teacher recruitment, training, pay, accountability, and autonomy.

The key factor in all these developments is the availability of funds. The pledge of higher budget allocations is encouraging. We need to question the incoming government about the source of funding, its spending strategy, and the trade-offs involved. Inarguably, the most damaging aspect of Bangladesh's education governance is the absence of continuity. Policies are discarded, curricula rewritten, and institutions restructured to align with changes in the political make-up. These changes are not based on evidence. Students become the ultimate victims of such drastic changes. Future preparedness requires cross-party agreements on what will not change abruptly. Education needs insulation from short-term political cycles, not their amplification. We as a nation need to agree on foundational curricula, assessment standards, teacher recruitment systems, and institutional classifications.

The interim government's reform agenda conveniently sidelined education for one and a half years. But for a government riding on the desires of students, it should have ensured that a system is in place that prepares our students for the future. And the government that will swear in must be willing to invest in an ecosystem that addresses the underlying problems of our education sector. Our students do not need empty slogans. They need consistency. They need institutions that know their purpose, where teachers are supported and trusted, and curricula are aligned with the real world.

Can the new government get the renewables policy right?



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Bangladesh relies primarily on fossil fuels, especially coal and natural gas, to generate power. In addition to jeopardising the nation's long-term viability and harming the environment, this reliance leaves it vulnerable to fluctuations in the world's energy prices. The expansion of the renewable energy sector is challenged by high upfront prices and a lack of supportive regulations, despite notable advancements, especially in solar household systems and grid-connected solar projects. In this context, the government adopted the Renewable Energy Policy (REP) 2025 to facilitate a sustainable energy transition. Though this policy marks a strategic pivot towards sustainable energy, aligned with national plans such as the Integrated Energy and Power Master Plan (IEPMP), Delta Plan 2100, and international climate commitments under the Paris Agreement, it has several critical limitations.

The targets of the REP2025 are ambitious and unrealistic. The policy sets a goal of 20 percent of electricity generation from renewable sources

by 2030 and 30 percent by 2040. It also sets ambitious capacity targets of 6,145MW by 2030 and 17,470MW by 2041. In the REP2008, a modest target of 10 percent power by 2020 was set. That deadline came and went. As of September 2025, the country's installed renewable energy capacity was 1,636.5MW, or 5.22 percent of its total capacity. To meet the 2030 goal, the country must add 750MW annually. However, only 400 MW of utility-scale projects are under construction, and foreign investment remains limited due to policy instability. Even China, a global leader in renewables, has set a target of achieving 25 percent non-fossil fuel by 2030. This raises serious doubts about the feasibility of achieving similar targets, as Bangladesh lacks the financial resources, infrastructure, investment, and technological capacity compared to China.

The policy also does not clearly specify mechanisms for financing in the renewable energy sector. An assessment by the Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis (IEEFA) reveals that Bangladesh will

require up to \$980 million annually to meet its renewables goal of 2030. And during the next decade, the country will need up to \$1.46 billion a year. In that case, we will require to increase the current annual investment flow of \$238 million by four to six times in the next 5-15 years.

Another big obstacle to renewable energy expansion is the continued high dominance of fossil fuel subsidies. Bangladesh allocates nearly \$4 billion in subsidies to the energy sector each year. Capacity payments to idle plants and fuel subsidies continue to consume a large share of public resources, leaving very little for renewable energy investment. Furthermore, currency instability, frequent regulatory changes, and the lack of reliable guarantees discourage many foreign investors from committing long-term capital. Domestic finance is also constrained as local banks offer short-term lending horizons, which are not well-suited for projects requiring financing over 15-20 years. Besides, the country faces a lack of strong bankable projects due to the absence of feasibility studies and unresolved issues around land or rooftop access.

The policy lacks clarity too. There is no strong approach to foreign direct investment (FDI). Achieving national energy goals requires a balanced mix of both FDI and domestic financing. Additionally, the incentive structure under the current policy is uneven and not inclusive enough. While companies implementing renewable energy projects are granted full income tax exemptions for 10 years

and partial exemptions for five years, solar panel user households get no incentives. In contrast, many countries provide direct financial support of up to 30 percent for rooftop solar panel installations. The absence of similar provisions limits the potential for decentralised renewable energy adoption in Bangladesh.

The country needs to set realistic and feasible electricity generation targets from renewables that are aligned with existing capacity, financing potential, and institutional readiness. The government should reduce taxes on components like solar panels, inverters, batteries, etc. It also needs to adopt a unified total tax incidence reduction strategy across sectors (solar, wind, biomass, nuclear) to improve affordability and attract investment. Encouraging grid-integrated solar irrigation pumps (SIPs) with subsidies for smaller farms, enabling energy export during off-peak times and revising the duty structure for electric vehicles are also vital. Feed-in tariff is another policy to accelerate domestic and foreign investment in renewable energy technologies by providing a tariff above the retail power rate.

Ultimately, REP2025 represents a vital strategic intent, but its success hinges on moving beyond ambitious rhetoric towards practical execution. To bridge the gap between five percent and 20 percent renewable capacity, the government must prioritise fiscal reforms, incentivise private and household investment, and overhaul the current financing infrastructure.