

NCP MANIFESTO DEBATE

# A manifesto misread: A rejoinder to 'Bold on youth, silent on inclusion'



Istiaq Akib is secretary of the Manifesto Sub-committee under the Central Election Steering Committee of the National Citizen Party (NCP).

ISTIAK AKIB

Kamal Ahmed recently wrote an opinion piece in The Daily Star titled "The NCP manifesto: Bold on youth, silent on inclusion." Public scrutiny of any electoral manifesto is both legitimate and essential in a democracy. However, critique must begin with an honest reading of the content in question. Unfortunately, Ahmed's article suggests that he might not have read the National Citizen Party manifesto, an 84-page document, and more worryingly, may not even have read the 36-point priority pledges carefully.

The column's headline and concluding paragraph claim that NCP's manifesto is silent on inclusion, which Ahmed identifies as "the most glaring disappointment." He makes a particularly bold assertion: "None of the NCP's 36 pledges address the concerns of religious minorities or ethnic communities, including Adivasis." This claim is factually incorrect.

The third point of the NCP's 36-point manifesto proposes the formation of a special cell under the Human Rights Commission authority to conduct independent investigations into incidents of violence, oppression, and persecution against minorities. This is an explicit and actionable pledge, not a vague commitment to "harmony," as is often the case in political rhetoric. The detailed version of the manifesto includes plans for the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and its communities (page 19), historically marginalised groups including Dalit, Harijan, and Scheduled Castes (SCs) (page 25), and pledge on access to learning mother tongue in primary education (page 51). Even if we put aside the full version, missing the third point of the 36-point manifesto is not a minor oversight; it seriously undermines the credibility of the entire critique, especially when the author goes on to accuse the party of a "troubling lack of empathy and understanding."

Ahmed also questions NCP's

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commitment to lowering the voting age to 16, suggesting ambiguity about whether it applies only to youth councils or to all elections. NCP clearly states that the voting age will be reduced to 16 for all elections (page 46). The rationale is explained, and comparative references are provided, including examples from the United Kingdom, Austria, Brazil, and Argentina. In fact, this has been NCP's position for a long time, as reflected in formal proposals to reform commissions and in public speeches by the party leadership.

The article further compares NCP's pledge to create one crore jobs in five years with BNP's commitment of creating one crore jobs in 18

months, arguing that the emphasis on "decent jobs" makes NCP's target more ambitious. However, BNP's proposal translates to roughly 9.5 percent annual job growth, which has never occurred in modern economic history. Historical instances of high job growth, such as post-war reconstruction or recovery from major crises, typically range from 4 to 6 percent annually. By contrast, NCP's promise requires approximately 2.7 percent annual job growth, modestly above the average 2.2 percent job growth Bangladesh saw between 2010 and 2023. Yet Ahmed considers NCP's pledge more ambitious. But ambition is not the issue; clarity and planning are. And this is precisely where his

critique seems to fall short again, as the manifesto provides a sector-wise breakdown of job creation, detailing how employment will be generated across industries. Pages 48-50 of the manifesto outline the job-creation plan, its structure, and implementation logic.

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All these create an unavoidable impression: the author either did not consult the full document or did so superficially. Such a lack of diligence is especially disappointing



VISUAL: ABIR HOSSAIN

when it comes from an experienced journalist who previously led the Media Reform Commission.

A manifesto is ultimately a public pledge that is open to scrutiny, debate, and improvement. NCP welcomes rigorous and fair-minded engagement, including on its pledges about inclusion, youth participation, employment, taxation, and governance reform. However, such engagement must be anchored in an accurate reading of the manifesto. We remain ready to participate in any constructive public discussion in the spirit of strengthening democratic accountability and advancing a more just and inclusive Bangladesh.

# Response to rejoinder: If this is inclusion, we need to relearn politics



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KAMAL AHMED

The response from the National Citizen Party's (NCP's) secretary of the manifesto subcommittee, Istiaq Akib, to my analysis of their manifesto is a welcome development and a positive step towards fostering civilised dialogue—an essential element of democracy. It is also reassuring to see that good sense still prevails among aspiring young political actors who seek to bring fresh air into politics, rather than unleashing social media mobs. I must admit that, after reading the response, I went back and reread the manifesto more carefully and critically.

In his rejoinder, Istiaq Akib accuses me of misreading the manifesto and lacking diligence, questioning whether I had even read the 36 points, let alone the

entire document. He challenges my critique regarding the NCP programme's lack of inclusivity and the robustness of its proposed economic planning. Specifically, he alleges that by stating, "None of the NCP's 36 pledges address the concerns of religious minorities or ethnic communities, including Adivasis," I ignored what he describes as an "explicit and actionable pledge," which he insists is "not a vague commitment to harmony."

He cites the third point of the 36-point manifesto, which states: "A special cell with the authority to conduct independent investigations will be created under the Human Rights Commission to prevent any discriminatory acts, persecution, or oppression based on religious hatred, communalism, minority oppression, or ethnic identity."

If a party believes that merely stating that the Human Rights Commission will take special measures to investigate and remedy the persecution and oppression of minorities is sufficient to make its manifesto "inclusive," then we will indeed have to relearn politics altogether. The very mandate of the Human Rights Commission is to investigate violations of the human rights of all citizens—regardless of religion, race, or ethnicity—and to ensure redress. It is not meant to wait for the intervention or directives of any political party. Moreover, if a system is introduced whereby the commission forms special cells or initiates investigations at the behest of the ruling party, it would cease to

inclusivity must be questioned.

Upon reviewing the manifesto again, I concede that I did not adequately consider the yearly implementation targets outlined in the document. Initially, I observed that the aim "to reduce inflation to six percent and raise the tax-to-GDP ratio to 12 percent" by the end of a parliamentary term was "both

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vague and inconsistent." A closer examination, however, reveals how hollow these targets truly are. The manifesto promises that necessary legal reforms (amendments) will be completed within the first year, despite the well-known reality that parliament will likely spend its first 180 working days functioning as a constituent assembly, significantly limiting its capacity to pass new legislation. Likewise, the plan to increase the number of taxpayers by more than six-fold within five years is so unrealistic that delving deeper into it seems futile. Anyone can examine the record to see how much success the interim government achieved by making TIN mandatory for certain services.

And what explanation has been offered for "decent work"? The manifesto provides figures for creating more than one crore jobs, but offers no clarity on how we are to know that these will not simply be low-wage positions. If these one crore jobs are indeed "decent work," then why is it unacceptable to describe this plan as more ambitious than the BNP's promise of one crore jobs? When the BNP unveils its manifesto, we will certainly scrutinise its employment plan to determine whether those jobs are decent or poorly paid, full-time or seasonal, and so forth.

On the issue of lowering the voting age to 16, there was no criticism in my analysis; rather, I called for clarity. This clarity is necessary because of the proposed establishment of an elected youth council. If young people are able to represent themselves directly in parliament, then the creation of a parallel representative body could generate unnecessary tension and conflict.

Overall, my assessment of the NCP manifesto acknowledged that its special focus on young people was predictable, given that the party was organised and launched by young activists who led the July uprising that ousted an autocratic regime. Once again, I reiterate that the NCP deserves appreciation for being the first party to unveil its manifesto ahead of the February 12 election.

CROSSWORD  
BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Castor or Pollux
- 5 Olympian in a sled
- 10 Keyed up
- 12 Laughable
- 13 Skip a ceremony
- 14 Japanese assassin
- 15 Relay section
- 16 That woman
- 18 Clinic nickname
- 19 Wall art
- 21 Debt reminder
- 22 Starfish's cousin
- 24 Columbus's home
- 25 Come around, say
- 29 Coop group

DOWN

- 1 Library sight
- 2 First family of 1842
- 3 Orbit point
- 4 Workout unit
- 30 Small quake
- 32 Leaf lifter
- 33 Cart puller
- 34 Part of college addresses
- 35 Water softener
- 37 Mystery writer
- 39 Fuming
- 40 Flower girl, often
- 41 VCR inserts
- 42 Seine summers

- 5 Script bit
- 6 Numerical prefix
- 7 Kingsley role
- 8 Legally prohibit
- 9 Gasp, say
- 11 Hero, often
- 17 Charlotte team
- 20 Wise ones
- 21 Pursue
- 23 Make rough
- 25 Lady of Spain
- 26 Catch
- 27 Brunch dish
- 28 "Forget it!"
- 29 Custom
- 31 Tricks
- 33 Symmetry lines
- 36 Noshed
- 38 olf position

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MONDAY'S ANSWERS

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