

'We still hope a solution on the reforms will arise out of parliament'

Nahid Islam, founding convener of National Citizen Party (NCP) and a first-time parliamentarian, sits down with Zyma Islam of The Daily Star to discuss his experience in the House, the repeal of key ordinances, and the ongoing impasse on the implementation of July National Charter.

You wanted to go to parliament to implement the July charter. Will you succeed?

I think the current government has ruined all possibilities for reform, but we still hope that a solution will arise out of parliament. We are talking about waging a movement, but for how much longer will people sacrifice their lives? It would not be responsible behaviour on our part as politicians to keep asking people to take to the streets.

We are not regular lawmakers going to parliament to simply talk about roads and culverts. This parliament is a legacy of the July uprising. If we cannot come to a consensus about the reforms in parliament, we will have to wage a movement outside the House.

Since you say that you don't want any more bloodshed, what will this movement look like?

It will be a political movement, and we hope that those who voted "Yes" in the referendum will join us, because they want to see their vote implemented. I believe they, particularly the youth, are disappointed because their vote has not been upheld.

We are walking out only temporarily, and we don't plan on walking out for good, given that the commitment to implement the July charter is upheld.

The treasury bench is talking about forming a Constitutional Amendment Committee instead of the Constitutional Reform Council. Will NCP join?

The Constitutional Amendment Committee will be a ruse, set up only to implement the ruling party's agenda. Our experience at the special parliamentary committee created to analyse the interim-era ordinances was not very pleasant. Three members from the opposition bench were in that committee, but their

voices were trampled, and crucial ordinances were either repealed or allowed to lapse.

The proposal for a Constitutional Amendment Committee has a fundamental flaw. A committee of a few individuals lacks the mandate to decide on the major reforms we demand.

I don't know why they are doing this. These debates took place during the sessions of the National Consensus Commission, and we came to an agreement.

Did you really reach an agreement at the National Consensus Commission, or is that an assumption?

I thought we had agreed on the need for a new constitution, to be decided by parliament, and that the parliament must be empowered to make those decisions, because otherwise, it can be challenged and scrapped by the courts, like the caretaker government system.

Even parties currently allied with the BNP had suggested a body to deliberate on constitutional changes during the consensus commission sessions; the BNP then requested a referendum.

They, too, asked people to vote "Yes" in the referendum during their election campaigns; the chairperson of the party himself did that.

Within the current framework of the parliament, can you truly be an effective opposition?

Current parliamentary rules restrict the opposition's power. Since bills pass with a simple majority, the opposition cannot block legislation. Its role is limited to shaping public opinion and convincing the populace. The government can either respond to these arguments or ignore them and face potential political consequences.

We tried talking to BNP lawmakers about the ordinances on enforced

disappearance and the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), but Article 70 prevents members from voting against their party.

The law minister challenged the legitimacy of the ordinances on enforced disappearance, the NHRC, and judicial independence by picking apart certain clauses. Did the opposition present an adequate rebuttal?

I think we tried our best. But the parliament is making decisions by browbeating the opposition. The decisions were already made prior to entering parliament, and the arguments presented by the treasury bench are simply being done for the sake of maintaining the semblance of a debate.

The current law minister, who is a former attorney general, knows all the doors and windows of the ordinances, and because he knows them, he is closing them for us. The optics of it look like the ruling party does not care about establishing a system of checks and balances. They want undeterred power, not accountability.

You are now in an alliance with the right wing. Are you also moving right of the spectrum?

We have not taken any such policy after entering this alliance that is different from our ideology. We are still upholding the "centrist" political ideology we pledged to do. Our alliance with the right revolves around common objectives surrounding reforms, and we are also in conversation with a few other political parties not in the alliance concerning these.

Why did you not support Jamaat-e-Islami's objection to the Jatiya Muktijoddha Council Act?

Just because we are in an alliance does not mean we are on the same

page on all issues. We are a separate party. We have a lot of ideological differences, and this will not be the last time we will vote differently from them. That's why we believe in floor crossing—so that a lawmaker can vote against their own party.



NAHID ISLAM
PHOTO: ZIAUDDIN SHIPLU

What complications arise from being allied with the right?

Every party wants to flourish on its own. Parties build alliances when faced with political realities. Our alliance has a party which has more seats than us, whose organisational distribution is stronger. We are often seen in the same "framing" as them. This is a challenge when building our identity. It allows others to spread propaganda about us. If we had participated in the election alone, we would probably have a stronger grassroots network nationally.

But we stand by our decision to enter the electoral alliance, and this realisation became even stronger after the election.

There was a lot of resistance even within your party concerning this alliance, especially from female politicians. Do you see a gender divide?

I don't think this alliance should be seen through the lens of a gender

divide. A lot of men were also against this alliance. Similarly, a lot of women sided with our decision. They contested the election with the NCP ticket. The female politicians who left NCP were not in decision-making positions as women or because they were women. They were our top brass and I don't think we can assume that they dissented because they are women.

The more common opinion among the dissenters was that since NCP is a new party, it would be better for us to contest the election on our own. There may be some isolated opinions. However, the majority of the party believed that it was far more important to get a seat in parliament.

Will you contest the local government elections as an electoral alliance?

As of yet, we are thinking of contesting the local government elections alone. We have given the nod to five candidates for the upcoming city corporation elections, and they are already in the field. But we believe in grassroots leadership, and since the party symbol will not be a factor in local government elections, there are sometimes alliances at the local level. We want to support the candidates.

Gen Z came to power in Nepal. Why did that not happen in Bangladesh?

All of the traditional political parties in Nepal became unpopular at some point. In Bangladesh, popular traditional political parties supported the movement, and they have their own vote banks. We had to wage a cold war with the traditional parties.

But after some self-reflection, I believe that right after the uprising, we spent more time fighting for reforms instead of building our own party. The fact that more than 60

percent of the voters voted "Yes" in the referendum is the outcome of our movement. As a result, we contested the election almost unprepared.

You led the population to the streets during the July uprising. Certain factions remained on the streets, sometimes taking the identity of a violent mob. Your critics often conflate the party with them. Will you take any stronger steps to distance your party from them?

Our group has consistently acted during such crises, and we have addressed this issue publicly.

We maintained a firm stance on all incidents, including the attacks on *The Daily Star* and *Prothom Alo*, even during the interim government. But even after all that, there is an attempt to smear the NCP.

To prevent mob violence, you must accurately identify the root causes of the mob's actions, rather than just involving any group. The responsibility for stopping the "mob" lies with the law enforcement agencies. This is entirely a law enforcement issue.

Yes, after any uprising or revolution, the law enforcement agencies are very lax. From our side, since August 5, 2024, we have played a responsible role. We told everyone to go home; we told everyone to guard the temples; we warned people against taking the law into their own hands. After the uprising, whether it was traffic management or activating the police stations, the students did it all.

Taking advantage of this, many opportunists from various interest groups have used the name of the student masses to implement their agendas. We have never indulged them; we are always against it. However, we have always said that legitimate protests should not be called mobs.

From degrees to jobs: Rethinking higher education in Bangladesh



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MD AKTARUZZAMAN

Over the past decade, I have closely observed how leading universities around the world design their programmes to contribute to their national economies. My experiences have led me to one clear conclusion: Bangladesh urgently needs a paradigm shift in higher education.

Across the globe, education and work are increasingly converging. Education can no longer remain limited to the traditional idea of knowledge acquisition alone. Instead, it must embrace work-oriented learning that prepares graduates for real-world employment. In today's global knowledge economy, education is not merely a public service but also a strategic sector that drives national development. Bangladesh must therefore rethink how universities operate and how they contribute to employment and economic growth.

One possible solution is the "unitec" model, which proposes closer collaboration between universities, polytechnics, and industries. The aim of this model is not to commercialise education, but to make universities sustainable institutions that produce job-ready graduates. Once the system matures, it may also attract international students and generate significant revenue.

At the same time, we must recognise an important reality. Out of every 100 students completing higher secondary education, only about 10-20 become engineers, doctors or high-ranking officers. What happens to the remaining students? Often, employment outcomes are not directly linked to academic results. Many cite India as an example of success in sending skilled professionals abroad. However, a closer look shows that for every highly skilled migrant, several

others migrate as general workers. This suggests that Bangladesh must plan not only for the top-performing students but also for the majority who require practical and marketable skills. Its economy still relies heavily on RMG export and remittances. In this context, skilled workers are just as important as officers. Therefore, this is the right time to rethink higher education and align it with systems such as the National Intelligence for Skills, Education, Employment, and Entrepreneurship (NISE3) to measure its impact nationally and internationally.

Under the "unitec" model, students would complete two accredited skill or certification programmes alongside their academic degree. In the first year, students would achieve an internationally recognised proficiency level in English instead of taking traditional general English courses. During the second and third years, students would complete two practical certification programmes. For example, a mechanical engineering student might learn automobile maintenance or driving skills; an electrical engineering student might complete training in electrical wiring or plumbing. Similarly, a social science student could learn graphic design, animation, or video editing alongside carpentry or other practical skills. In the final year, students could undertake internships, or learn additional languages if they aim to work in international markets.

Such a model requires strong collaboration between universities, polytechnics, and industries. In Australia, universities such as Victoria University, RMIT University, Swinburne University, and Federation University operate alongside

affiliated Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutes, which function similarly to polytechnics in Bangladesh. In the US, many universities maintain partnerships with community colleges that offer vocational and technical programmes. These institutions provide flexible certification programmes that anyone, even PhD graduates or senior professionals, can take to upgrade their skills. While one may not pursue multiple PhD degrees, professional certification and skill development can continue throughout a career. Our universities should therefore consider establishing affiliated polytechnics and stronger industry partnerships to produce graduates aligned with national and international labour market demands.

University curricula should be flexible, demand-driven, and time-efficient. One option is to introduce block-mode learning, in which students take one course intensively over a short period rather than multiple courses simultaneously. Such systems already exist in many developed countries and allow students to work part-time while studying full-time, gaining valuable experience before graduation. Similarly, many universities now emphasise master's by coursework rather than master's by research, reserving intensive research training primarily for PhD programmes. These coursework-based programmes attract millions of international students and produce graduates ready for the workforce. Certification programmes could also be recognised under an "academic bank of credits" system. For example, a student holding a Cisco Certified Network Associate credential could receive credit for introductory networking courses.

Higher education financing must also become more sustainable. In countries such as Australia, the UK, Canada, and the US, the total cost of a bachelor's degree can range from Tk 1-3 crore, depending on the discipline. Bangladesh could introduce a tiered system where universities are classified by a framework and tuition fees vary accordingly. Students would continue

paying their standard tuition fees, while the remaining portion would be recorded in their student records. Once graduates begin earning above a certain income threshold, they would gradually contribute back to their universities. Importantly, this would not necessarily be a loan but a contribution towards strengthening higher education. The funds could support career counselling, research projects, technical skill development, internships, job fairs, and international study opportunities.

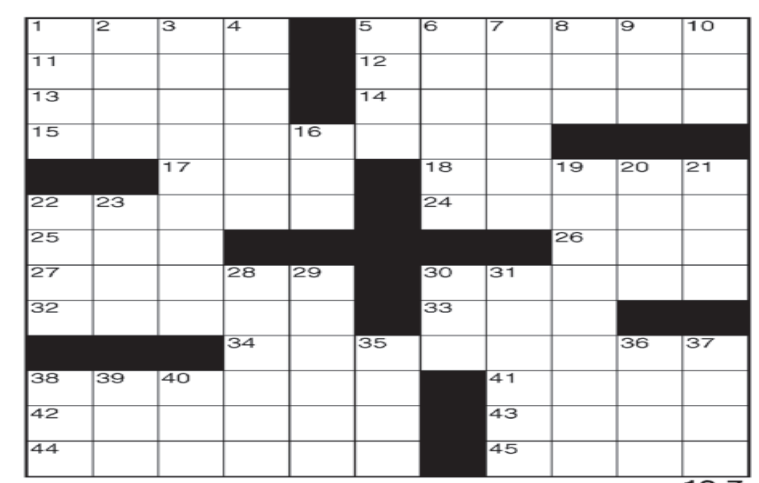
If implemented effectively, such a higher education model could significantly improve graduate employment outcomes. Even a modest increase in employment rates could transform the national economy through higher productivity and increased remittances. Within a decade, Bangladesh could also attract international students by offering quality education and practical training through online and blended learning systems. This could eventually help build a global brand.

As the Fourth Industrial Revolution advances, some jobs will change or disappear. Yet many essential technical skills will remain indispensable. Artificial Intelligence may automate many tasks, but it will not come to our homes to repair electrical lines, gas systems, or water supply networks. The demand for skilled technical workers will continue to grow worldwide. For universities with limited resources or impact, consolidation or stronger vocational orientation may be necessary to ensure sustainability.

Bangladesh aims to become a developed country by 2050. Achieving that goal will require strong educational institutions capable of producing skilled graduates who can compete globally. If policymakers adopt innovative approaches such as the "unitec" model, we can realistically expect that at least 50 Bangladeshi universities could position themselves competitively on the global stage by 2050. The time has come to connect education, employment, and the economy to ensure prosperity for the country and meaningful opportunities for its young people.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
1 Massage target
5 Hams' needs
11 Sound of agony
12 To do list
13 Shed feathers
14 Struck out
15 "The Mikado," for one
17 Oxygen: Prefix
18 Chaser of Bugs
22 Patisserie array
24 Long attack
25 One - kind
26 Sinking signal
27 Corbin Bernsen series
30 Wild party
32 Vestige
33 Gun, as a motor
- 34 Neighboring
38 Wee amount
41 Pine or palm
42 Depends
43 Balder's father
44 Finally
45 Tenant's fee
- 10 Blue
16 Hosp. parts
19 National park in Colorado
20 Big heads
21 Take a breather
22 Future stallion
23 Miles off
28 National park in Maine
29 Cheese buys
30 Lingerie item
31 Church reader
35 Witty remark
36 German denial
37 Circus sight
38 Mrs., in Madrid
39 Ran into
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