

Post-July Reform Initiatives in Bangladesh: Promises and Realities

Background:

The July 2024 uprising in Bangladesh marked a critical turning point in the country's political trajectory, creating a rare opportunity to address long-standing governance deficits and institutional weaknesses. Following the mass protests and the subsequent political transition, the interim government initiated a series of reform efforts by establishing 11 reform commissions tasked with proposing structural changes in key sectors, including the constitution, the electoral system, public administration, the judiciary, the police, anti-corruption mechanisms, the media, health, women's affairs, labor, and local government. Their reports have proposed wide-ranging changes, from restructuring the civil service and decentralizing administrative authority to reforming local government systems and revising certain constitutional provisions. However, translating these proposals into effective policy measures has proven difficult, as the reform process is constrained by political disagreements, bureaucratic resistance, legal constraints, and implementation challenges. A recurring feature of reform initiatives in Bangladesh's political history is the wide gap between the formulation of recommendations and their actual implementation. Understanding these challenges is therefore essential for assessing the prospects of post-uprising reforms and identifying policy options that can support sustainable democratic transition in Bangladesh.

This policy brief is based on the national dialogue titled "Post-July Reform Initiatives in Bangladesh: Promises and Realities," organized by Neeti Gobeshona Kendro on 17 January 2026. Dr. Shakil Ahmed, Executive Director of Neeti Gobeshona Kendro, delivered the keynote speech. The dialogue brought together representative of political parties, young leaders, academics, researchers, writers, policymakers, students, and other stakeholders to critically examine the challenges associated with implementing the proposed reform initiatives in Bangladesh, discuss the prospects of these reform proposals, assess the gap between the promises made after the July uprising and the current realities, and reflect on Bangladesh's past experiences with reform, and come up with some policy recommendations.

Key Challenges in Implementing the Post-July Reform Proposals in Bangladesh

1. Lack of Political Commitment and Consensus

A recurring challenge is the absence of strong political commitment and consensus among key stakeholders. Many reform initiatives in Bangladesh have historically failed because political actors lacked the willingness to implement them. Even when reform proposals are accepted initially, future governments may disregard or modify them according to their political interests.

"If we look back, we will see that many reform commissions have been formed in the past, yet their proposals were never implemented. The main reason is the lack of willingness among those who

are responsible for implementing these reforms. In Bangladesh, many reform proposals are made only to be forgotten later. In many cases, we have proposed overly ambitious reforms that are not even realistic, and their implementation ultimately requires strong political consensus (Dr. Salauddin M. Aminuzzaman, Professor & Adviser SIPG, North South University)”.

2. Lack of Integration of Social and Economic Reforms

The reform initiative has mainly focused on political and institutional restructuring, while economic and social reforms have received comparatively less attention. Political reform is prioritized without addressing social and economic foundations like education, agriculture, and economic structures, which are critical for sustainable change. These sectors are closely linked to the livelihoods and well-being of marginalized populations. When reforms fail to address the concerns of general citizens, public interest and engagement in the reform process remain limited.

“Generally, political transformation emerges through social and economic change. In Bangladesh, however, the attempt seems to be the opposite. Political reform cannot succeed without social and economic reform. This has not occurred anywhere in the world, and it is difficult to expect such a miracle in Bangladesh (Dr. Shakil Ahmed, Executive Director Neeti Gobeshona Kendro)”.

“In the reform proposals in Bangladesh, sufficient importance has not been given to issues such as the country’s production system and education, which are closely connected to the marginalized population. People will have little interest in these reforms if they do not experience or benefit from their outcomes. In these reform proposals, the space for public interest appears to be very limited. If reforms remain confined only to constitutional and administrative changes and fail to include the marginalized communities, then ultimately these reforms will not produce meaningful results (Monzur Ahmed, Joint-Secretary, Bangladesh JaSaD)”.

3. Bureaucratic Resistance and Institutional Conflict

Many reform proposals directly challenge the existing power structure within the bureaucracy, which leads to strong institutional resistance. Reform proposals that aim to restructure authority or introduce greater accountability often encounter internal resistance. A clear example is the proposal for a 50:50 quota between the administration cadre and other cadres in deputy secretary positions. Similarly, the proposal to remove education and health services from the BCS cadre system has generated strong opposition from professional groups.

“There was also a need to reorganize the police force. The aspiration to establish an independent Police Commission has remained unfulfilled. As a result, in the future as well, the police are likely to continue looking toward the political government for direction (Dr. Dilara Choudhury, Academic and Political Analyst)”.

4. Questions regarding Legal Authority

The legitimacy of the reform process itself has also been questioned. According to some discussants, meaningful reforms require legitimate political authority, which is usually derived either from an electoral mandate or a revolutionary political transformation. The absence of such a legalized authority of the interim government weakens the acceptance and implementation of reform proposals, as they would be totally dependent on the next elected government.

“To bring about any reform or change, legitimate authority is essential. Without legitimate authority, meaningful change is not possible. I have doubts about whether the interim government possesses that kind of legitimacy. Such legitimacy is usually obtained through two paths: a revolutionary process or through a constitutional process, such as elections (Maruf Kamal Khan, Former Press Secretary to the Chairperson, Bangladesh Nationalist Party)”.

5. Traditional Political Culture:

Another significant challenge lies in the entrenched nature of traditional political parties and the prevailing political culture in Bangladesh. The political landscape is largely dominated by long-established parties whose organizational structures, leadership patterns, and decision-making processes tend to prioritize partisan interests over long-term institutional reforms. As a result, reform proposals that aim to introduce structural changes, transparency, or new governance practices face resistance or limited enthusiasm within the broader political environment. Consequently, even well-designed reform recommendations may struggle to move beyond the proposal stage when they conflict with established political practices and interests.

“Most of these political parties are traditional in nature and are interested in maintaining the existing system rather than changing it. They do not genuinely wish for transformation. If the parties that have expressed dissent come to power in the future, they may not be willing to accept these proposals (Maruf Kamal Khan, Former Press Secretary to the Chairperson, Bangladesh Nationalist Party)”.

“As long as we continue to operate within a family-centered political system, reforms such as separating the positions of head of government and party leader will have little practical effect. Questions also remain regarding the implementation of Article 70. In a political system dominated by family-based parties, it is uncertain whether any Member of Parliament would actually vote against their party line or whether this article would truly be applied in practice (Professor Sk. Tawfique M. Haque, Trustee Member, Neeti Gobeshona Kendro).”

6. Colonial Legacy and Dependence on Foreign Models

A key challenge is the continued influence of colonial institutional legacies and the tendency to rely on foreign governance models without sufficient adaptation to local realities. Many reform proposals often draw inspiration from international best practices or institutional frameworks developed in different political, economic, and social contexts. While such models can provide useful guidance, their direct transplantation into Bangladesh’s governance system may overlook the country’s historical experiences, political dynamics, and societal needs. The persistence of

colonial-era administrative and legal structures further complicates reform efforts, as these frameworks were originally designed to serve centralized control rather than participatory and accountable governance.

“We often assume that whatever we observe or learn from abroad should simply be applied here. In doing so, we continue to carry forward our colonial legacy. We remain confined within their laws and their ways of thinking. In many ways, we have become so conditioned by this dependence that we struggle to think independently or develop new ideas of our own (Farhad Mazhar, Writer & Thinker)”.

“A deeply rooted colonial political culture still exists here. Over the past 56 years, an oligarchic structure has been established, and breaking that entrenched system will be extremely difficult (Brigadier General (Retd.) M. Sakhawat Hussain, Advisor, Ministry of Shipping (Maritime Affairs) & Ministry of Labour and Employment Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh).”

7. Weak Institutional Capacity and Governance Challenges

Many reform reports present ambitious structural and policy recommendations, but their implementation often requires strong administrative capacity, financial resources, technical expertise, and coordinated governance mechanisms. In many cases, reform proposals lack a detailed assessment of whether existing institutions possess the necessary capacity to carry out such changes or how these capacities will be strengthened over time.

“Although several important reform proposals have been made regarding local government, their implementation remains uncertain. It raises a valid question: Is it really the responsibility of a Member of Parliament to build roads? If local governments and local representatives were stronger, people would not have to approach MPs with demands for road construction. Yet in reality, MPs often become involved in such matters, and as a result, they are unable to properly fulfill their own duty (Sarwar Tushar, Joint-Convener, National Citizen Party)”.

Policy Recommendations:

- Political reforms should be complemented by reforms in critical sectors such as education, health, agriculture, and the broader economy to ensure that institutional changes translate into tangible socio-economic improvements.
- Reform initiatives should involve broader public participation and open dialogue with citizens, civil society, and stakeholders beyond political parties in order to build legitimacy, public ownership, and long-term sustainability.
- Reform agendas should prioritize the development of domestic policy expertise and reduce excessive reliance on foreign governance models by adapting reform frameworks to Bangladesh’s historical, political, and socio-economic realities.

- Reform commissions should avoid overly ambitious or idealistic recommendations and instead focus on practical, phased, and achievable reform measures that align with the country's institutional and resource capacities.

*“If the July Charter turns out to be similar to the framework of the Three Alliances, whose main problem was that it offered many commitments without a clear mechanism for implementation before moving toward elections, then the promises that were once made will again remain only as documents on paper. We do not want the July Charter to meet the same fate as the Three Alliances’ framework (**Sarwar Tushar**, Joint-Convener, National Citizen Party)”*.

- Reform party structures to break traditional and family-based political dominance and strengthen internal democracy, thereby addressing the leadership crisis.

*“Reforming political parties is extremely important. There is a lack of internal democracy within political parties, which is why the voices of grassroots members are often not taken into consideration. Our country is facing a leadership crisis largely because internal democracy does not exist within these parties (**Dr. Dilara Choudhury**, Academic and Political Analyst)”*.

- Sustainable reform requires a strong economic base; therefore, priority should be given to restructuring financial institutions, improving trade frameworks, and strengthening economic governance.

*“We must sharpen our focus on our own national priorities. What we need most is economic transformation. The first focus should be on financial institutions (**Farhad Mazhar**, Writer & Thinker)”*.

- Civil society organizations and citizens should actively monitor reform commitments and continuously pressure elected governments to uphold their promises, ensuring that reform agendas remain on the policy agenda and are implemented effectively.

*“The reports and effectiveness of reform commissions are somewhat like an elephant’s tusks. An elephant has two pairs of teeth. The first pair is visible from the outside—long and impressive—but they serve little real purpose and are largely for display. The second pair remains inside the jaw and performs the actual work. In much the same way, our discussions often remain limited to the visible ‘tusks’—the publicly presented reports of reform commissions (**Dr. Shakil Ahmed**, Executive Director Neeti Gobeshona Kendro)”*.

*“The fact that we are discussing and critically examining the report of the Reform Commission does not mean that the commission has no effectiveness or that the report has no future. We are talking about it because we want to know, understand, and analyze it more deeply as a research organization to determine what the real future of reforms in Bangladesh might be. We must look back at the history of reforms in our country. If we do not understand why reforms failed in the past or why they did not achieve success before, it will be difficult for us to explain why the outcome would be different this time (**Professor Sk. Tawfique M. Haque**, Trustee Member Neeti Gobeshona Kendro)”*.

Conclusion

While the post-July reform initiatives in Bangladesh reflect a rare opportunity for structural and institutional transformation, their success will depend on more than the proposals themselves. Political will, inclusive decision-making, and alignment with the country's social and economic realities are critical for translating recommendations into tangible outcomes. Overcoming entrenched political practices, bureaucratic resistance, and weak institutional capacity requires realistic, phased reforms supported by public engagement and domestic expertise. Without these measures, even well-intentioned reforms risk remaining aspirational, rather than achieving meaningful and sustainable change.

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