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SHAPING BANGLADESH'S FUTURE:

Students Perspectives on
Governance and Reform Priorities



SHAPING BANGLADESH'S FUTURE:

Student's perspective on Governance and reform priorities



BACKGROUND

On 5 August 2024, Bangladesh experienced a major political shift with the removal of the sitting government following demands by the student-led 'Anti-Discrimination Student Movement'—a mass uprising between July and August 2024 against injustices. An interim government was established in the immediate aftermath which has since prioritized reforms in key areas, including the Election Commission, judiciary, public administration, security forces, and anti-corruption, while committing to human rights and international legal obligations. To support this reform process, 11 commissions were established including six commissions focusing on electoral management, anti-corruption, judiciary, public administration, police administration, and constitutional reforms.

As the driving force behind Bangladesh's critical turning point, students remain central to the discourse on reform; understanding their priorities is key to shaping a new governance framework for the country that reflects the aspirations of its youth. In this context, the Centre on Budget and Policy at the University of Dhaka with support from United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) conducted a perception study to integrate student insights into the reform agenda; it aimed to capture their priorities and expectations to ensure that their voices inform the evolving governance framework. A distinguishing feature of this effort is active student involvement across research planning, design and reporting under faculty supervision, ensuring methodological rigor and academic integrity. The study focuses on student perspectives on the following reform areas: i) public security and police; ii) public administration; iii) judiciary system; iv) reform of Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC); v) electoral system; vi) freedom of expression; vii) higher education and viii) employment opportunities. This policy brief highlights some of the key findings from the report.



OBJECTIVES

- **Gather** student perspectives on state reform agendas.
- **Provide** actionable insights for reform to policymakers and reform commissions, ensuring that student-driven priorities are integrated into the national reform agenda.



METHODOLOGY

Research Design: This study employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative component consisted of a survey conducted with 2,040 students from 10 institutions, including public and private universities, national university-affiliated colleges, and madrasahs. The qualitative component involved 20 focus group discussions (FGDs) to capture in-depth perspectives and contextual insights.

Respondent Profile: Socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents reflected a diverse population, with a nearly equal gender distribution (52% male and 48% female) and a religious composition consistent with the national demographic structure. 80% were aged between 20 and 25 years, with a significant number coming from families reliant on private sector incomes, including private jobs, businesses, and agriculture. Most respondents attended government primary schools during their early schooling years, and over half reported having access to both mobile phones and televisions in childhood. This suggests a blend of low- and medium-income families with relatively stable access to information.



FINDINGS

1. Public Security and Police Reform

In this section, respondents shared their perspectives on various aspects of public security and police administration in Bangladesh, revealing nuanced insights into potential areas for improvement in law enforcement.

- Respondents highlighted significant challenges in accessing police services: among respondents who attempted to access services, 38% received services but faced harassment, 31% reported on the need for bribes to receive services while 11% did not receive any service. This reflects deep concerns about the quality of police services and distrust in the system.



Recommendations

- Enhance transparency and accountability in police services by establishing public complaint centers, increasing use of technology, like CCTV, to

enhance public security, providing regular updates on investigations through websites, publishing relevant information, installing body cameras on police officers and holding monthly public hearings at police stations.

- Develop a professional police force by improving salaries, enhancing training programs, and objectively evaluating performance.
- Strengthen police-public relations by enacting laws to protect officers from political interference, provide training in ethics and human rights, and adopt community policing strategies.
- Create an independent Police Commission to oversee police recruitment, ensuring fairness and reducing political interference.

2. Public Administration Reform

In this section, respondents shared their perspectives on the current state of administrative functionality, including how well the system operates and how accessible it is to citizens.

- Among those who attempted to contact government officials, 75% perceived contacting officials to be difficult, time-consuming and inefficient. Marginalized communities (i.e. ethnic minorities, impoverished groups, and women) further face discriminatory attitudes and practices. This raises concerns about government responsiveness with impacts for citizen trust.
- Respondents identified lack of awareness about citizen rights and information as a key factor contributing to their limited access to services. Existing social accountability tools (i.e. citizens' charter, public hearings) are seen as inefficient and ineffective.
- Respondents highlighted significant concerns about political interference in government official duties: 43% reported that government officials are not free from political interference while 48% reported that officials are only partially independent. This highlights the existence of a deep bureaucratic-political nexus, which significantly undermines the impartiality, effectiveness and trust on government services.



Recommendations

- Establish hotlines and suggestion/complaint boxes for citizen feedback to improve government accessibility and responsiveness.

- Raise public awareness about citizens' rights and available government services for fair and equitable access.
- Arrange regular public hearings in government offices to enhance citizen engagement.
- Increase citizen participation in policymaking processes through public consultations and participatory budgeting.
- Explore digital platform-based solutions alongside improving digital literacy especially among marginalized communities.
- Enact laws to protect government officials from political interference, train them on moral standards and maintaining political neutrality and increase public engagement with government officials.
- Ensure performance-based promotion of government officials to motivate them to perform their jobs more effectively.

3. Judiciary Reform

In this section, respondents shared their insights on the accessibility and efficiency of the judiciary system, with recommendations to reduce the costs and time required to achieve justice, along with alternative dispute resolution mechanisms that could be overseen by the courts.

- Respondents expressed strong concerns about the high costs and complexity of the legal system limiting access to justice, particularly for marginalized groups.
- Among those who reported needing legal services from the court, 58% reported significant difficulties in accessing legal services, pointing to the nexus between police, court officials and lawyers as the key barrier when seeking judicial services.



Recommendations

- Increase access to legal aid (i.e. access to government lawyers, reduced court fees), especially for marginalized and vulnerable groups who often lack resources to navigate the legal system. Make laws and regulations comprehensible in simple language for everyone.
- Activate out-of-court arbitration settlement procedures, improve case management systems, enhance coordination among court, police and lawyers, and provide judicial training to streamline the processes and ensure timely justice.

- Ensure judicial independence of both lower and higher courts from the executive branch for fair and impartial justice.
- Strengthen accountability mechanisms to prevent political interference and ensure that judges are free to decide based on law.

4. Reform of Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC)

In this section, respondents shared their perspectives on the status of Bangladesh's Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), responsiveness to public complaints and potential areas for improvement to enhance its effectiveness and independence.

- 55% of respondents perceived the Commission to be ineffective in combating corruption; further insights identified ACC's lack of autonomy from the executive branch as a key factor contributing to its poor performance.
- Several transparency issues were identified: 48% of respondents highlighted that public complaints are ignored or mishandled. 44% reported lack of available information from ACC regarding action taken on filed complaints and 30% highlighted that individual's face harassment after filing complaints. Respondents also noted that many were unaware of how to lodge complaints.



Recommendations

- Hold regular public hearings to provide a platform for citizens to voice concerns and help ensure that the Commission remains accountable to the public.
- Publish regular updates on the progress of ACC's ongoing activities via its website so that citizen's remains informed about its efforts and ensure greater visibility into its work.
- Regarding leadership appointments, search committee overseen by the judiciary can be created to ensure impartiality and prevent political interference.

5. Electoral System Reform

In this section, respondents shared perspectives on key aspects of the electoral process in Bangladesh, especially considering high irregularities in previous national elections.

- Respondents highlighted widespread dissatisfaction with the current state of the election process in Bangladesh, particularly regarding the need for law enforcement officials to maintain impartiality during elections.

- 74% of respondents reported that they abstained from voting in the 2024 parliamentary election, citing perceived lack of independence of the Election Commission, absence of major political parties including the opposition and security concerns as key deterrents.

- The current candidate selection system faces a clear crisis of confidence, with only 8.33% of respondents supporting its continuation. This remarkably low support suggests widespread dissatisfaction with existing practices and underscores the perceived need for substantial reforms to enhance transparency and representativeness in the candidate selection process.



Recommendations

- Appoint universally acceptable election commissioners to ensure institutional credibility and prevent political influence in the functioning of Election Commission. Strengthen existing laws to enhance accessibility of elections, ensuring that all registered political parties can participate freely.
- Respondents also expressed support for reforms aimed at improving the balance of power between government and opposition, favoring a shift in parliamentary seat allocation from the current system to proportional representation. This will help ensure more inclusive governance by fairly reflecting the votes for smaller parties. There was also strong preference for a mixed electoral system, combining elements of proportional representation with the existing system.
- Ensure meaningful gender representation in parliament including allowing direct elections for reserved seats for women and supporting policies requiring political parties to nominate a specific number of women candidates in general elections.
- Respondents highlighted supporting candidate selection through local-level voting mechanisms. This reflects a desire to shift power from central party leadership to local party members and constituents. Furthermore, respondents highlighted the need for establishing defined eligibility criteria for candidacy by political parties.

6. Freedom of Expression

In this section, respondents examined critical issues surrounding freedom of speech and expression, exploring perspectives on safeguarding fundamental rights, fostering tolerance, and navigating the challenges posed by digital and cyber laws.

- 71% of respondents reported on the need to abolish laws that infringe on free speech; 51% reported on the need to ensure access to information; 38% supported decriminalizing freedom of speech cases to treat these issues as civil or administrative matters. Respondents further emphasized on minimizing government interference in media to safeguard transparency and accountability.
- 67% of respondents highlighted on reforming the Cybersecurity Act by repealing the current law and re-enacting a revised law aligned with international best practices. Key suggestions for the new law included clarifying terms such as "sexual harassment" and "deepfake," expanding the scope of digital crimes, and incorporating insights from evolving technological challenges.
- At the university level, respondents identified measures to increase freedom of expression and tolerance in the campus, such as by creating platforms for inclusive dialogue, enforcing rules against hate speech and violence, and providing training to students and faculties to foster a culture of respect and inclusivity.

7. Higher Education: Current Status and Reform Issues

In this section, respondents focused on the state of higher education practices, focusing on the course curriculum, IT and communication skills, teaching quality, and availability of resources.

- 52% of respondents reported on the need for changes to their curriculum to include courses, programs, or training in line with market demands. Insights also highlight on broader systemic issues, such as outdated curricula, inadequate resources, and politicization in faculty recruitment, which undermine educational quality.



Recommendations

- Introduce formal teacher evaluation systems, including anonymous assessments, to improve teaching quality and accountability. Implement project-based learning and IT-based teaching tools to better prepare them for the workforce.
- Introduce training on civil rights, environmental awareness, and moral education to prepare students as responsible citizens.

8. Employment Opportunities

In this section, respondents reflected on the alignment of academic programs with current job market demands.

- 34% of respondents reported that their fields of study offer limited job opportunities in both public and private sectors, with some believing that pursuing double majors at undergraduate level or masters in another field could significantly enhance their job market prospects.
- 46% of respondents reflecting on their current internship structures and practices identified the lack of internships as a pressing issue, emphasizing the need for their introduction. Among those who had access to internships, 27% reported that the opportunities provided were not effective in helping them gain valuable work experience.
- Respondents also highlighted challenges of accessing overseas job markets, noting that international opportunities often require further education abroad and specialized work experience, which many recent graduates lack.



Recommendations

- Strengthen career services, support systems for international job markets, and internship frameworks to enhance students' employability. Incorporate digital literacy and coding skills into the core curriculum across various disciplines.



WAY FORWARD

As Bangladesh moves forward with its reform agenda, the unique youth perspectives captured in this policy brief reflecting their priorities and aspirations can add value towards informing national reform processes. Through critical student perspectives on each of the reform areas highlighted above, the findings offer insights broadly for strengthening transparency and accountability mechanisms, safeguarding fundamental rights and democratic values, enhancing legal and institutional reforms and improving education and employment prospects. To translate insights into actionable change, the policy brief calls for implementing immediate measures with support of relevant stakeholders as next steps.

Policy Brief
Student Consultation 2024
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