

Promise and peril of the new party

by Kazi ASM Nurul Huda

IN THE shadows of the July-August uprising, the streets of Dhaka that once echoed with chants for freedom are now witnessing a new phase of political engagement. The students who risked their academic futures to challenge an authoritarian regime have established a political party, named the National Citizens' Party, to formalise their aspirations. What began as a protest movement fuelled by frustration over the quota system in government job recruitment has evolved into an organised effort to reshape the political landscape through electoral means.

This transition from activism to governance is not just a shift in approach but the forging of a new political frontier in Bangladesh. The momentum that once drove mass mobilisation must now be directed toward institution-building, policy-making, and strategic planning. While this endeavour is both ambitious and necessary, it carries challenges that will determine whether the party emerges as a force for meaningful change or fades into the cycle of political disillusionment.

The emergence of this party reflects a deeper demand for political renewal. For years, young people in Bangladesh have grown disillusioned with mainstream parties, perceiving them as corrupt, ineffective, or disconnected from their aspirations. The student-led movement harnessed this frustration and transformed it into action by demonstrating its ability to mobilise en masse and demand accountability. However, building a political party requires more than mass protests; it demands sustained leadership, coalition-building, and a concrete vision. The opposition alone can energise a movement, but governance depends on the ability to craft and implement solutions.

Already, early tensions within the party highlight the difficulties of maintaining ideological consistency while navigating political realities. Allegations of discrimination in leadership selection within the newly formed political party and its *de facto* student wing — orchestrated by the uprising's organisers — particularly highlight the under-representation of both non-Dhaka University public and private university students. This situation reflects a longstanding pattern of exclusion and factionalism in Bangladeshi politics. The irony is unavoidable: a party founded on principles of fairness and inclusion is now struggling to practise those very ideals. If left unaddressed, such internal conflicts could undermine the party's credibility before it even gains a foothold in the electoral arena. True reform must begin within, and the party's ability to resolve these early disputes will serve as a litmus test for its commitment to justice and transparency.

The challenges facing the new party are not unique. Similar movements around the world have grap-



Nahid Islam, convener of the newly formed National Citizens' Party, speaks as students shout slogans during the launch of the new political party, in Dhaka on February 28. — Agence France-Presse/Munir uz Zaman

pled with the difficulty of translating popular support into effective governance. Pakistan's Tehreek-e-Insaf, for instance, rose to power on a platform of anti-corruption and political reform but struggled with economic management and internal divisions once in office. India's Aam Aadmi Party initially gained traction through its focus on transparency and grassroots governance but has faced accusations of power consolidation and a drift away from its founding ideals. These cases serve as a reminder that movements built on public discontent must develop governance strategies that balance ideals with the practical demands of statecraft.

For the National Citizens' Party to sustain itself, ethical leadership must be its foundation. It cannot afford to mimic the same patterns of opacity and exclusion that have long defined Bangladeshi politics. Ensuring internal democracy, where decision-making is transparent and leadership roles are fairly distributed, will not only strengthen its credibility but also attract a broader base of support. The party must also recognise that governance is not a battle waged solely against the old establishment but a process that requires negotiation, adaptability, and the ability to build alliances without compromising core values. If it remains confined to student circles and urban activism without engaging rural populations, labour groups, business communities, and experienced political figures, its reach will be limited, and its influence in policy-making will remain marginal. Broadening its base to

include professionals, grassroots organisers, and senior citizens who have long been disillusioned with mainstream politics could strengthen its credibility and expand its appeal beyond university campuses.

As the National Citizens' Party prepares for its first electoral test, it faces a crucial strategic choice. Unlike traditional opposition parties, it has to avoid alliances, at least for now, in an effort to maintain ideological purity. This approach is both pragmatic and risky — pragmatic in the sense that it allows the party to test its manifesto without external influences, but risky in that it limits its immediate electoral prospects. It may secure only a handful of seats, but if its message resonates, it could establish itself as a credible alternative in future elections. However, ideological rigidity alone will not be enough to sustain long-term success. Political movements that fail to adapt often find themselves sidelined, unable to exert meaningful influence where it matters most.

However, there is an unexpected concern that the emergence of a student-led party could further fragment the opposition and inadvertently strengthen the prevailing establishment. While this concern is valid, it overlooks the potential for new political forces to drive necessary change. Even if the party does not immediately gain power, its presence could compel mainstream parties to reassess their policies, implement reforms, and respond more effectively to public demands. The risk of fragmentation exists, but so does the opportunity to revitalise a political landscape long

dominated by entrenched interests.

To mitigate these risks, the National Citizens' Party must actively find ways to compensate for its lack of political experience. Forming a robust advisory body consisting of experienced policymakers, professionals, academicians, intellectuals, economists, grassroots organisers, and legal experts could offer valuable guidance without compromising its youthful origins. Drawing lessons from successful political movements worldwide, it should also prioritise long-term institutional development over short-term electoral gains. Internal cohesion, strategic expansion beyond student networks, and a commitment to ethical governance will determine whether it remains a fleeting experiment or a lasting force for change.

The emergence of the National Citizens' Party is more than just another attempt at political reformation — it is a test of whether youthful idealism can be institutionalised into meaningful governance. By embracing both the passion of its movement and the wisdom required for long-term political engagement, it has the opportunity to reshape Bangladesh's future. Yet the road ahead is uncertain. Will this initiative redefine political ethics in Bangladesh, or will it fall victim to the same patterns it seeks to break? The coming months will determine whether this is a passing moment of defiance or the beginning of a new chapter in the nation's democracy.

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