

A step towards restoring democracy

Return of caretaker system could ensure free and fair elections

In a welcome decision, the High Court on December 17 restored the provision for the non-party caretaker government system in Bangladesh and the provision for holding referendums to approve any constitutional amendments. The court rightly observed that the 15th Amendment of the constitution—which abolished the non-party caretaker government system—contradicted the constitution's fundamental framework and undermined key democratic principles. Emphasising that there is no legal bar to reinstating the caretaker government system, the court ruled that while the 15th Amendment is not entirely void, it has compromised the fundamental structure of the constitution. In its observations, the court stated that the core of the constitution lies in democracy, which can only be ensured through free, fair, and credible elections.

Unfortunately, since the passage of the 15th Amendment on June 30, 2011—which annulled the 13th Amendment—Bangladesh has not witnessed a single free or fair election. This has severely damaged the nation's democracy. In fact, it can be argued that democracy effectively ceased to exist under the Awami League regime, which enacted the amendment amid widespread controversy and outrage from nearly all other political parties.

The irony is that the 13th Amendment, which introduced a non-party caretaker government system on March 28, 1996—to ensure all possible aid and assistance to the Election Commission in holding general elections—was passed following intense agitation and mass street protests primarily led by the Awami League itself. Yet in 2011, despite extensive consultations carried out by a parliamentary committee led by senior lawmaker Sajeda Chowdhury, which unanimously recommended retaining the caretaker government provision, Sheikh Hasina, the sitting prime minister at the time, chose to abolish it.

Since then, three parliamentary elections have been held in Bangladesh—in 2014, 2018 and 2024—all of which were either flawed or outright farcical. The 2014 election was boycotted by the main opposition parties; the 2018 election was marred by massive vote rigging the night before polling day; and the 2024 election featured dummy candidates put forth by the Awami League to compensate for the absence of major opposition parties, that once again boycotted it.

Through these farcical elections, the Awami League government grew increasingly authoritarian over time, eradicating all political space for opposition parties and turning the country into a one-party state. Given this history and the consistent failure of partisan governments to hold credible elections, it has become evident that the caretaker government system is one of the main safeguards for ensuring free and fair elections in Bangladesh.

In light of this, we hope the High Court verdict will restore people's voting rights, establish a system for holding free and fair elections, and re-establish democracy in Bangladesh.

Reduce the costs of hajj packages

High costs are discouraging many from registering

It is unfortunate that as the registration deadline for the 2025 hajj has passed, around 51,000 hajj quotas still remain unfulfilled. Reportedly, despite efforts from both the government and private agencies, only 4,800 prospective pilgrims under government management and 71,800 under private management completed their registrations by the December 15 deadline. Reportedly, although the government extended the deadline thrice since November, it could not attract more people to register due to the rising costs associated with hajj packages. This is concerning because it will adversely impact the businesses of private hajj operators in the country, while for the aspiring pilgrims, their spiritual journey to Makkah and Madina will remain a distant dream.

Several factors have reportedly contributed to this situation. While the high registration cost has been a significant deterrent, the distance of accommodation and increased food costs have also discouraged many from registering. Reportedly, while the general package for a Bangladeshi pilgrim costs Tk 5.23 lakh and the special package Tk 7 lakh under private management, the government-managed packages begin at Tk 4.78 lakh, with an additional package available for Tk 5.75 lakh. These prices represent a reduction from last year by Tk 1 lakh and Tk 11,710, respectively. This year, however, the cost of food—Tk 40,000—is not included in the government's hajj package. While pilgrims under the government package were previously kept within 1.5 kilometres of the Haram Sharif, this year the government tried to reduce the price of hajj packages by arranging accommodation three kilometres away from the Haram Sharif. This has created significant challenges for the elderly people. Additionally, the requirement to pay a substantial amount upfront—Tk 3 lakh for registration—is particularly challenging for those from rural areas who often gather the required funds by selling assets over time.

To address the situation, the government and private hajj agencies must urgently consider further decreasing the package costs and introduce more flexible payment options. The government should also consider extending the deadlines for registration while working closely with private hajj agencies to offer financial assistance and reduce the upfront costs. Additionally, ensuring that accommodations are within a reasonable distance from the Haram Sharif will significantly aid the elderly pilgrims. We hope the government will create an inclusive and financially accessible hajj experience, ensuring that all intending pilgrims can fulfil their religious obligations without facing undue financial burden.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Slavery abolished in the US



On this day in 1865, by proclamation of the United States secretary of state, the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, outlawing slavery, officially entered into force, having been ratified by the requisite states on December 6.

INTERNATIONAL MIGRANTS DAY

Actions, not slogans, are needed for migrant workers' welfare



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Around 18,000 aspirant migrant workers could not fly to Malaysia this year before the May 31 deadline, when Malaysia closed its doors to Bangladeshi workers. Many paid lakhs of taka to recruiting agencies and received emigration clearance but failed to get a ticket due to mismanagement by the recruiting agencies and government authorities.

Even though the government instructed recruiting agencies to refund the money to the aspiring migrant workers by a set deadline, which was revised three times, none of the workers have been reimbursed yet.

In October, during his visit to Dhaka, Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim promised that the migrant workers who failed to meet the May 31 deadline would be given priority when the country reopens recruitment of Bangladeshi workers. Yet, nobody knows when this will happen.

Over the past four decades, Malaysia has repeatedly shut down its labour market because of various irregularities, corruption, and syndicates. The last time the country resumed hiring Bangladeshi workers was in 2022. According to a survey conducted by Verite Incorporated and four other companies (May 2023), the syndicate charged an average of Tk 5,44,000 per worker instead of the government-specified cost of Tk 79,000. Allegations have been raised that Tk 1,07,000 has been taken as a syndicate fee from each worker, and approximately Tk 50 billion has been laundered in this way. Moreover, Tk 37.5 billion has been laundered in the name of visa trade.

Such irregularities have constantly raised the cost of migrating to Malaysia. In fact, the migration cost from Bangladesh is almost the highest in the world for most destinations, while the earnings of our migrants remain among the lowest. A 2020 survey by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics and ILO found that the average migration cost for a Bangladeshi was Tk 4.17 lakh, requiring a migrant worker to work for 18 months to recover the cost.

Though the government has fixed the migration cost to 14 countries at a maximum of Tk 1.66 lakh, job seekers often had to pay six times higher because of bribes, corruption, visa

trading, and intermediaries at every stage. Despite the high costs, people are desperate to go abroad. Nearly one million Bangladeshis have already gone abroad this year, compared to 1,305,453 last year, a record for the last 53 years.

Like last year, Saudi Arabia (KSA), Malaysia, Qatar, Singapore, and Kuwait have been the top destinations for Bangladeshis in 2024.

A 2018 IOM report data shows that over 12 million Bangladeshis have gone abroad in the last four decades. In the last fiscal year, they sent approximately \$22 billion with the highest amounts coming from UAE, USA, UK, KSA, and Malaysia.



FILE PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

Despite being one of the largest contributors to our GDP, migrant workers face harassment at home and exploitation abroad.

According to a 2022 International Organization for Migration report, Bangladesh is the sixth-largest labour-sending country and the seventh-largest in terms of earning remittance. But despite such contributions, are Bangladeshi migrants getting the respect they deserve?

The answer is no; instead, they are harassed while getting a passport, completing medical check-ups, paying for tickets, etc. After facing all these barriers in the country, when a migrant finally reaches their destination, they are often exploited. They are given low or no salary, inhuman workload, and are made to live and work in dire

conditions, which even results in death. Last year, a record 4,552 Bangladeshi workers died abroad, with a majority in Gulf states. According to Wage Earners' Welfare Board (WEWB), Bangladesh received more than 50,000 corpses of migrant workers since 1993. Also, nearly one million migrants have returned as deportees almost empty-handed in the last 15 years. This year, nearly 85,000 have already returned, with half of them deported from KSA, according to airport sources.

Many of them endured physical injuries and mental torture, while many women migrants were sexually exploited, leading to severe trauma. To mitigate these challenges, the government can consider establishing standard operating procedures (SOPs) at the airport and setting up welfare desks and lounges for migrant workers in the new third terminal. Besides, a more comprehensive reintegration service is essential for the returnees. However, high migration costs—fees paid to intermediaries and recruitment agencies by migrants—

The government can also upgrade its training centres to provide sector-specific skills based on labour market needs abroad in collaboration with private institutions. Emerging sectors such as technology, healthcare, care economy, and engineering should be more focused on.

Proper information and services are still a challenge at the grassroots. Migrant workers and their families often lack accurate and reliable information about the migration process and this makes them more vulnerable to exploitation and the risk of trafficking or irregular migration. In fact, in 2024, Bangladesh has once again emerged as the top country for migrants undertaking risky sea journeys to reach Europe, surpassing war-torn nations like Syria, which is a shame for Bangladesh.

To raise awareness against this, the government can conduct nationwide awareness campaigns, particularly in rural areas. Making formal migration pathways more accessible and affordable will help curb irregular migration by giving workers safe and legal options.

While the government has indeed taken various positive initiatives in the field of migration, there is still a long way to go. The Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment should lead and ensure that the Wage Earners Welfare Board's fund management is transparent, BMET is corruption-free and Bangladesh Overseas Employment and Services Limited and Probashi Kallyan Bank more effective in serving millions of migrants every year.

It is also important to remember that migrants are not just money-making machines; they are human beings who deserve dignity and better care, which we often forget as they don't have voting rights. Most countries around the world now provide voting rights to their expatriates. Yet Bangladeshi expatriates, who make up a significant portion of the country's voting population, do not have the right to vote.

The irony is felt more today as the world observes International Migrants Day to recognise and celebrate the contributions of millions of migrants and protect their rights. This year, Bangladesh is observing this day along with National Expatriates' Day. The slogan for this year is, "Migrants' rights are our commitment; discrimination-free Bangladesh belongs to all." It's a good slogan, but we see good slogans every year rather than actions. The concerns for migrants and the actions taken should not be limited to just one day. Rather, our real unsung heroes should be celebrated every day, both within the country and abroad.

Recalibrating for inclusive growth in Bangladesh



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This is an opportune time for Bangladesh to recalibrate structural transformation towards an inclusive and greener economy. The policies that enabled the country to increase its footprint in manufacturing—albeit mainly in the ready-made garment sector (RMG)—may not work in the future. Policymakers must choose whether to continue a selective export-driven focus while protecting the rest of the economy, or opt for a more outward alignment of the economy for growth and jobs.

There is empirical evidence that export-driven growth was one of the major drivers of economic development in East and Southeast Asia. Several countries in the region started their industrial journey with RMG, but over time diversified and moved vertically along the value chain. Although export-led growth was pursued as a policy objective, the degree of economic openness varied. With a relatively smaller consumer base, Singapore followed largely *laissez-faire* economic regulations while limiting foreign capital to strategic sectors. Larger economies such as Indonesia pursued a dualistic

approach by opening parts of the economy for exports and investments while protecting some sectors from competition through state-owned enterprises or investment restrictions.

In Bangladesh, there is a strong correlation between exports, more specifically RMG exports, and economic growth. The share of RMG exports in the national output increased from less than six percent in 1990 to over 13 percent in 2023, after peaking at 20 percent in 2012, according to the World Bank. Although weakening, the positive relationship between RMG exports and jobs is also visible.

It is fair to say that Bangladesh's export-led growth story has essentially been an RMG story. There have been limited spillover effects for other sub-sectors. RMG products still represent around 85 percent of Bangladesh's exports. There are also worrying signs that the RMG-led growth has already peaked. In the last decade, the share of private sector investment has remained stagnant at around 22 percent of GDP.

Given its population size and potential, Bangladesh has not been

able to attract enough foreign direct investment (FDI). Between 2010 and 2022, annual FDI inflow averaged \$2.2 billion, significantly lower than Vietnam and Indonesia, where it averaged \$12 billion and \$18 billion, respectively, according to UNCTAD. An overly regulated economy, red tape, and weak enforcement of business regulations have often been cited as barriers to domestic and foreign investments in Bangladesh.

From 133 in 2003, Bangladesh's ranking on the Ease of Doing Business Index improved to 119 but fell as low as 168 out of 190 countries in 2020, the last year before the report was discontinued. On the Global Competitiveness Index, Bangladesh's ranking was 102 in 2023, which is quite low and has barely improved in the last five years. Bangladesh performs poorly on trade, investment, and financial indicators, broadly indexed as economic freedom. Between 2013 and 2023, the economic freedom score of Bangladesh increased from just 52 to 54.

A narrowly defined export-led growth model can limit the diffusion of technology and learning into other sectors of the economy. Protecting selected industries and businesses to build domestic capabilities is justified if measures are time-bound and not too distortionary for the economy, which can result in skewed distribution of income and wealth.

Relying on a few export goods without gradually opening and reforming the rest of the economy is bound to run its course. Many analysts

have pointed out the anti-export bias that a long period of protection has created for the non-RMG sectors in Bangladesh. There is a need for change, but the sequencing of reforms and timing is also critical.

The first task should be to address regulatory bottlenecks, making it easier for businesses to invest and operate in the country. These can be followed by a gradual rationalisation of import tariffs that should be underpinned by a rigorous cost-benefit analysis. These reforms can go alongside trade facilitation support, incentivising already established local companies to start looking outwards.

The geo-economic factors also necessitate a change in the current course of action. We are living in a world markedly different from the 1990s when Bangladesh's RMG sector took off. Many low- and middle-income countries are vying to be the supplier of choice for global buyers. Rapid technological changes are also profoundly affecting the economy. And, increasingly, businesses are required to adhere to higher environmental, social, and governance (ESG) standards.

Bangladesh's dualistic growth model must be adapted to meet these new demands. Recent political changes have created momentum for economic and business reforms, providing a unique opportunity for policymakers to recalibrate the economic model and make it fit for the future—a model of economic growth that is good for shared prosperity and the natural environment.