

What was the point of a white paper?

Govt must take steps based on its recommendations

It is frustrating to know that more than a month and a half after the submission of the white paper on Bangladesh's economy, the government has yet to take steps based on its recommendations. This inaction—pointed out by the very man who led the 12-member committee that prepared what Chief Adviser Prof Yunus then called a "historic" document worthy of being taught in universities—not only questions the rationale for commissioning such a report but also risks deepening the present economic crisis. At a recent symposium, Dr Debapriya Bhattacharya also lamented the lack of critical discussions on this issue.

True, our economic problems did not emerge overnight, nor can they be resolved by the interim government alone. These issues stem from years of mismanagement, entrenched corruption, and systemic regulatory failures, particularly during the Awami League's 15-year rule. The 30 chapter, 400-page white paper—submitted on December 1—unearthed the scale of these problems in exhaustive detail. For instance, it revealed that a staggering \$234 billion was laundered from Bangladesh between 2009 and 2023. Meanwhile, distressed assets in the banking sector soared to Tk 6,75,030 crore, leaving banks under provisioned and vulnerable to financial shocks. The report attributed these regulatory failures to the influence of business conglomerates, bureaucrats, and politicians, showing how laws and regulations were "tailored and retrofitted" to serve vested interests.

It also exposed the dire state of "technically bankrupt" and "illiquid" banks and how Bangladesh, lost in a "data fog," "sleepwalked" into the middle-income trap. Beyond banking and financial mismanagement, the white paper also offered an in-depth review of the macroeconomic and fiscal situation, alongside key sectors like education, health, energy, taxation, mega projects, poverty, and inequality. The question is: what is the government doing about its recommendations?

Among its key proposals, one was to establish an independent prosecution body to pursue follow-up actions on the stolen funds. The committee also urged the government to formulate a two-year mid-term economic plan and a six-month short-term strategy. Yet, there is no indication that these recommendations are being taken seriously. Instead, despite the paper's critical assessment of the existing tax regime, the government has opted to raise value-added tax (VAT) and supplementary duty (SD) on over 100 products and services rather than boosting direct tax collection—suggesting a preference for short-term fixes over structural reforms. Equally concerning is the continued ad hoc approach to banking and energy sector reforms.

This has to change. We urge the government to take ownership of the white paper's findings and incorporate them into policy decisions. Given the enormity of our economic challenges, it must make the most of its limited time before elections to lay the groundwork for reforms while establishing discipline in macroeconomic management, as Prof Rehman Sobhan suggested at the symposium. The importance of phased, strategic action cannot be overstated.

Make police a pro-people force

Reform commission's proposals should be reviewed carefully

We welcome the Police Reform Commission's recommendations to implement extensive measures to transform the police force into an institution of accountability. The commission's report, submitted to Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus on January 16, includes crucial proposals to curb excessive use of force, prevent abuse of power, and abolish the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab), among other reforms. It also proposes the formation of a statutory body—the Independent Police Commission—to ensure accountability and neutrality within law enforcement agencies. These recommendations are both timely and necessary, but they will only yield positive results if implemented effectively.

Over the past decades, particularly during Awami League's 15-year rule, public trust in the police has eroded drastically due to corruption and political meddling. This distrust deepened during the July uprising when police brutality—including indiscriminate shootings and killings of protesters—further exposed deep seated systemic flaws. Following the fall of the regime on August 5, the need for police reform gained renewed urgency. Against this backdrop, the Police Reform Commission's report outlines strategies to rectify these issues and establish genuine accountability.

Its emphasis on precise, proportional, and rule-based use of force—similar to UN peacekeeping standards—is a crucial step forward. Aligning our policing with international norms by allowing the use of force strictly in self-defence will help reduce undeserved harm to life. Assessing Rab's necessity by reviewing its past human rights violations is equally essential for restoring public trust. Furthermore, introducing "clear-walled" interrogation cells to prevent custodial torture, and mandating GPS trackers and bodycams for officers on raids, will help curb extortion, arbitrary arrests, and enforced disappearances.

Other practical measures such as a citizen hotline for reporting police misconduct—including refusal to disclose identity during searches—will address some of the concerns about police. Ensuring the presence of a magistrate or a local government representative during arrests between dusk and dawn will serve as an additional safeguard against misuse of power. Moreover, increasing the number of female police officers is crucial, particularly given the rampant violence against women in our society and the harassment they face when seeking legal assistance.

However, we must remember that any success of such initiatives hinges on the cooperation of political parties, particularly the ruling one. Resistance from within the police force and other vested interests could also pose obstacles to proper implementation. Nonetheless, with strong commitment and support from all stakeholders, these reforms could lead to a more accountable, rights-focused police force and help restore public confidence.

From 1969 to 2024: Echoes of resistance through the ages



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Mass uprisings played a significant role in Bangladesh's history. For instance, during the Language Movement of 1952, a situation akin to a mass uprising arose, leading to the formal recognition of Bangla, although, in reality, that spirit has yet to be fully embraced even today. However, the movement, which went on to claim several lives, marked a major turning point in our history.

The next major mass uprising occurred in 1969, leading to the fall of Ayub Khan, the military general of Pakistan. That event significantly advanced Bangladesh's path to the Liberation War. Then came the mass uprising of 1990, which ended the autocratic regime of Ershad. And after that, the mass uprising of 2024 overthrew the authoritarian Sheikh Hasina government.

This means that political mobilisation of people against injustice, oppression, or authoritarianism often manifested in mass uprisings in Bangladesh's history, taking the form of a cultural and political language of resistance. However, mass uprisings are not always national in scope. Sometimes, they occur locally. For example, in 2006, the Phulbari incident saw a localised mass uprising, forcing a multinational corporation to withdraw from the area and compelling the government to sign an agreement with the people. There is no precedent for such an incident where a multinational company was forced to leave a region and the government was compelled to negotiate directly with its people. This only happened because of the mass uprising.

At the national level, when comparing the mass uprisings of 1969, 1990, and 2024, several similarities emerge, although critical differences exist among these events. Let us analyse the differences between the mass uprisings of 1969 and 2024.

We can see some parallels between the events of the 1969 uprising—which reached its peak on January 20 of that year—and those of 2024.

The 1969 uprising was directed against a military general who had

established a powerful autocratic regime and was globally recognised as an "Iron Man." In 2024, we witnessed the fall of another autocrat widely known as the "Iron Lady." Another commonality is that both uprisings occurred at the end of a perceived period of development. During Ayub Khan's era, significant development was showcased, with 1969 marking the celebration of the "Decade of Development" that ostensibly began in 1958. Major infrastructure projects were undertaken, such as



Unlike the 1969 movement, the 2024 uprising emerged from a decentralised, spontaneous rejection of authoritarian rule.

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the construction of Islamabad as Pakistan's new capital, the building of dams, the expansion of rural and district roads, etc.

During this period, political protests and resistance in East Pakistan led to the Pakistani government designating Dhaka as the second capital. This resulted in significant infrastructural development in Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, including the National Parliament building designed by Louis Kahn. The Bangladesh Agricultural University and Jahangirnagar University were also established, and land reforms were introduced—all part of the "Decade of Development" narrative.

Similarly, under Sheikh Hasina's government, we saw the implementation of significant infrastructure projects such as

By contrast, during Hasina's regime, while inequality was not regional, class-based disparities worsened significantly. The suppression of dissent by law enforcement agencies including the police, RAB, and BGB became rampant, along with widespread extra-judicial killings, enforced disappearances, and abductions. Furthermore, the ruling party's student and youth wings, such as the Chhatra League and Jubo League, were notorious for their acts of violence and oppression—much deadlier than the student mercenaries of the Ayub regime.

The protests of 1969 reached a turning point with the killing of student leader Asaduzzaman on January 20. A political activist affiliated with Maulana Bhashani's

NAP and the underground communist movements of that time, Asad was shot dead while leading a procession. He became a symbol of the mass uprising, bolstering people's resolve and inspiring cultural expressions, including Shamsur Rahman's famous poem *Asader Shrit*.

Similarly, in 2024, the death of Abu Sayeed marked a turning point. On July 16, Abu Sayeed was shot dead during a peaceful protest at Begum Rokeya University. His death sparked widespread outrage, with cultural and artistic responses emerging in the form of sketches, graffiti, poems, and songs. This parallels the cultural impact of Asad's death, showing how the deaths of individuals at critical points can galvanise a movement.

A major difference between the 1969 and 2024 uprisings, however, lies in the political leadership that backed the movements. The 1969 movement was buttressed by organised political forces and their demands, such as Awami League's Six-Point Movement, Maulana Bhashani's Fourteen-Point Programme, and the Eleven-Point demand of the *Sarbadaliya Chhatro Sangram Parishad*. There was a centralised leadership, involving known political figures such as Maulana Bhashani, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Moni Singh and student leaders affiliated with the movement.

In contrast, the leadership of the 2024 movement was decentralised; the protests were largely driven by the collective anger of ordinary people rather than any coordinated political strategy. While activists from left and right-wing political groups participated in the uprising, no specific political party took on a leading role. This lack of structured leadership has left the outcome of the 2024 uprising uncertain, in contrast to the clear trajectory of the 1969 uprising, which eventually led to the Liberation War in 1971.

These uprisings, however, demonstrate commonalities in their resistance to authoritarianism, a legacy of infrastructural development concealing inequalities, and the symbolic impact of individual sacrifices. However, the differences in political leadership and clarity of goals between the two movements highlight the unique challenges of the 2024 uprising. Though it emerged from a decentralised, spontaneous rejection of authoritarian rule, it lacks a clear roadmap for the future. It has its strength as a grassroots movement but is vulnerable in terms of long-term direction.

Malaysia migration crisis shows where reforms are needed



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On December 29, 2024, a group of Bangladeshi workers who had failed to migrate to Malaysia gathered for a protest in front of the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment. They demanded the government's support in retrieving their passports and recruiting fees from the concerned agencies. Some of these agencies had falsely promised to send them to Malaysia in future, while others had closed their offices or pressurised the migrants to settle for lump sum payments. Despite the government's repeated assurances of reimbursing the recruitment fees, a majority of the workers have neither received their money nor their passports back from the recruiting agencies.

Although Malaysian Premier Anwar Ibrahim promised to consider the entry of these 18,000 workers into Malaysia during his visit to Bangladesh on October 4 last year, the matter appears to have stalled.

From 2009-2024, Bangladeshi migrant workers' access to the Malaysian labour market was restricted multiple times and, on every occasion, a syndicate was blamed for the debacle. Due to the repeated closure of the market as a direct impact of the infamous syndicate system, Malaysia-bound workers who failed to migrate had to suffer psychologically

and financially. The operation of the Foreign Workers Centralised Management System (FWCMS), a web-based platform owned by the private company Bestinet in Kuala Lumpur that facilitates recruitment of migrant workers to Malaysia from different countries, has been alleged to be the key instrument of a syndicate involving powerful agencies in that country. Out of the 15 countries allowed to recruit migrant workers in Malaysia through Bestinet's system, only in the case of Bangladesh is there a separate arrangement restricting the participation of all recruitment agencies from the country.

The founder of the company, a Malaysian Dato of Bangladeshi origin, is alleged to be the mastermind behind the syndicate along with his accomplice, a former secretary general of the Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (BAIRA). When the Malaysian labour market was set to reopen in 2022 after four years and an MoU was signed between the two countries, the Bangladeshi government relinquished the responsibility of selecting Bangladeshi recruiting agencies to Malaysian authorities. No specific guidelines were put in place for the selection of the agencies, which allowed unscrupulous agencies

to form the syndicate. As a result, out of the list of 1,520 agencies submitted by the Bangladeshi government, only 25 agencies were initially selected. Later, the number was increased to 101 in different phases. This primarily facilitated individuals linked to the fallen regime—such as MPs, councillors, and government officials—in setting up recruitment

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businesses. A section of the 101 agencies selected has been alleged to receive Tk 150,000 per worker from agencies not enlisted in the syndicate.

Media reports inform that the syndicate single-handedly increased the migration cost to Malaysia, raising it from the government-set Tk 78,990 to an average of Tk 5,44,000. The misery of those, who were unable to board flights to Malaysia even after paying the full migration costs, knows no bound. Now some of them have to bear the brunt of loans they incurred for trying to go abroad for a livelihood. Many migrant workers do not receive the promised jobs upon arrival at the destination country. Other issues they face include unavailability of quality food and living conditions, wage theft, prolonged joblessness, mental and physical torture and being jailed under false charges.

Realising the damage caused by Bestinet to migrant workers, it is of utmost importance that the perpetrators be brought to book. Media reports further inform that Bangladesh has recently requested Malaysia for the extradition of the two businessmen wanted for alleged money laundering and human trafficking crimes. Since then, the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission has also detained a Bangladeshi company director with a Datuk title on charges of corruption.

On Bangladesh's part, a case was filed against 103 individuals, including a former minister and secretary. In addition, immediate steps should be taken to ensure that agencies reimburse the full recruitment fees charged to migrants and return passports to the approximately 18,000 migrants who were unable to travel to Malaysia. Experts suggest that migrant workers who are unable to secure jobs despite paying hefty fees should receive compensation five times the amount they paid.

The syndicate system not just causes sufferings to migrant workers but also tarnishes the country's image. The interim government took several positive steps to protect the interests of migrant workers, but the issues associated with the syndicate system of the Malaysian labour market must be addressed. Ensuring accountability should be the first step. Furthermore, the government should negotiate a bilateral agreement with provisions to ensure that all eligible recruiting agencies participate in the recruitment process when the market reopens, the errant agencies are penalised and the exploitation of migrants both at home and abroad is prevented.