

## Reforms vital to spur business growth

### WB report on our investment prospects should be taken seriously

It is encouraging to read the latest World Bank Group report on investment prospects in Bangladesh. Prepared by the group's International Finance Corporation (IFC) and unveiled at the ongoing Bangladesh Investment Summit on Tuesday, the report identifies four strategic sectors—green ready-made garments (RMG), middle-class housing, paint and dyes, and digital financial services—as ripe for reform. These sectors, it argues, are mature and politically feasible enough to be restructured in ways that could create millions of jobs, draw both local and foreign investment, and spark a ripple effect of productivity in other interconnected sectors. The question is, can we do what's needed to bring about this change?

In recent days, there has been much talk about Bangladesh's investment scenario with the government taking steps to woo global investors. The four-day summit, somewhat overshadowed by concerns surrounding the new US tariff policy, which went into effect on April 9, is meant to provide a boost in this regard. For this, reforms are essential even while new deals and commitments are being made. With proper reforms, the WB report estimates, the construction sector alone could add over two million jobs annually by supporting new housing developments for middle-income families. A further 664,000 formal jobs could be generated by expanding local production of paint and dyes. Targeted interventions in digital financial services could also yield between 96,000 and 400,000 additional jobs.

However, achieving desired outcomes requires removing long-standing barriers to doing business in Bangladesh, such as erratic power supply, high prevalence of informal economy, high borrowing costs, our complex and inefficient tax regime, and other bureaucratic challenges. In its report, the WB also provides a roadmap of actionable reforms for the four sectors it singled out. These findings and recommendations, however, are not new. In the past, experts have often highlighted many barriers to trade and investment such as corruption, anti-competitive procurement practices, customs inefficiencies, etc. Sadly, successive governments have failed to seriously act on such findings and recommendations. Bureaucratic inertia, political instability, and weak institutional coordination frequently came in the way of progress. One statistic that can aptly portray its effect is that, while global foreign direct investment (FDI) fell by less than two percent in 2023, FDI inflow to Bangladesh dropped by nearly 14 percent.

Can the interning government do things differently? It must. As Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus said at the summit, Bangladesh is a country of "crazy ideas" that investors can trust in going forward. But ideas alone are not enough. We need meaningful transformation. We need the government to not only listen to experts but also act decisively on their counsel. It is up to the present policymakers to bring about much-needed change in prevailing business and bureaucratic practices so that Bangladesh can fulfil its potential.

## Sustain progress in maternal care

### Reduced funding threatens the quality of services

We are concerned about the ongoing and potential funding cuts by our key development partners that could seriously undermine the quality of maternal care in the country. According to a UN report, reduced funding may weaken the healthcare system by making facilities less effective, reducing the number of healthcare professionals, and disrupting critical supply chains. These setbacks would inevitably compromise both the availability and quality of maternal care. At a time when Bangladesh is striving to lower its maternal mortality rate in line with the relevant SDG target, funding cuts threaten to reverse hard-won gains.

Over the past decades, Bangladesh has made significant strides in reducing maternal and child mortality despite longstanding challenges in the health sector. Much progress has been made in addressing key causes of maternal deaths such as obstetric haemorrhage, hypertensive disorders, unsafe abortions, and other indirect complications. According to the UN, while global maternal deaths fell by 40 percent between 2000 and 2023, Bangladesh achieved an impressive 79 percent reduction—from 523 to 115 deaths per 100,000 live births. This success would not have been possible without improved access to essential healthcare services and the critical support of international donors. With funding now at risk, it will be difficult not only to sustain this progress but also to move forward. Women in remote, rural, and low-income communities stand to suffer the most.

The government, therefore, must act swiftly to mitigate the impact of these funding shortfalls. Developing a self-reliant healthcare model is crucial to safeguarding our achievements in maternal care. Increasing national budget allocations for the health sector—especially for maternal, newborn, and child health projects—must be a top priority. At the same time, collaboration with NGOs is essential to keep key initiatives alive. Securing new investments from alternative sources is equally important.

We must remember that strengthening the healthcare system overall—by ensuring well-equipped facilities, a skilled workforce, and reliable access to life-saving medicines, diagnostic tools, and essential supplies—is central to improving maternal care and preventing deaths. Parallel efforts are also needed to enhance women's economic and educational opportunities, expand access to emergency obstetric care and family planning services, increase skilled birth attendance, and strengthen the network of community health workers. With proper planning and critical reforms, we can ensure that even the most vulnerable women have access to the care they need.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

### PROCLAMATION OF INDEPENDENCE

On this day in 1971, the Proclamation of Independence in Bangladesh was issued, turning the Liberation War from a secessionist movement to a lawful claim for self-declaration.

# EDITORIAL

## Popular mandate and the road to consensus and change



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The country finds itself at a defining crossroads. Political parties have begun engaging with the National Consensus Commission by submitting their recommendations across six critical areas. Differences of opinion are inevitable in any meaningful dialogue about systemic change. The true test lies in navigating these divergences to arrive at a common minimum reform programme (CMRP) that can steer the country forward.

Two critical questions now loom large over this transition. First, will political parties genuinely engage in dialogue to reach consensus? The answer lies in recognising that all stakeholders stand to gain more from cooperation than confrontation. The experience of other transitional democracies shows that when political survival becomes tied to reform implementation, even rival parties can find common ground. The current crisis has created sufficient mutual vulnerability to compel dialogue, provided mediators maintain neutrality and the process remains inclusive.

Second, how can resistance from vested interests be overcome? The entrenched opposition from these groups represents perhaps the most formidable obstacle. Counter-strategies must combine institutional restructuring with popular mobilisation. Establishing independent oversight bodies with public participation can check bureaucratic obstruction, while transparent asset declarations and conflict of interest regulations can weaken the rentier system. Crucially, sequencing reforms to create early wins that demonstrate tangible public benefits will build momentum against resistant factions.

The oligarchic model of governance has left Bangladesh's political institutions weakened, its economy distorted, and its bureaucratic apparatus compromised. The only viable escape from this quagmire is through the restoration of genuine popular sovereignty, where the electorate becomes the ultimate arbiter of the nation's trajectory. No sustainable reform can take root without first securing the people's trust and explicit mandate.

The case for an elected government with an undisputed mandate extends beyond political legitimacy to economic necessity. History shows that only administrations born from credible elections can deliver the stability required for social cohesion and economic rehabilitation. Nations that fail to establish such legitimacy invariably grapple with institutional paralysis and escalating public frustration. Before returning to the polls, however, Bangladesh must first establish the groundwork through a negotiated reform framework. This requires political actors to move beyond rigid positions and embrace pragmatic solutions through good-faith compromise.



FILE VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

The immediate priority for the interim government is creating conditions for free and fair parliamentary elections, supplemented by a binding commitment from all political parties to respect the electoral outcome.

Such an accord would serve as a crucial safeguard against post-election turmoil. Several key reforms demand urgent attention in the pre-election phase. The electoral process itself requires fundamental overhauling through measures like transparent voter registration, biometric verification systems, and enhanced security protocols to protect voters.

Democratic governance needs strengthening through constitutional reforms like a bicameral legislature, greater women's participation, and

devolved power to local governments. The welfare state vision must transition to reality with investments in education, healthcare, social housing, and food security. Climate resilience must be mainstreamed. To ensure accountability, mechanisms like independent audits, whistleblower protections, and robust freedom of information laws should be established. Institutional depoliticisation, particularly for the judiciary, anti-corruption bodies, and law enforcement, is crucial. Digital governance tools can enhance transparency, while cybersecurity frameworks protect data rights.

Additionally, the following public-interest issues could be considered by political parties for inclusion in the electoral manifesto for public scrutiny:

#### Foundation of a welfare state

The foundation of a welfare state can truly embody the spirit of our glorious Liberation War, which calls for equality, human dignity, and social justice. The 2024 mass uprising was a movement against discrimination. Building a welfare state requires more than just economic development. Universal civil,

political, economic, social, and cultural rights are fundamental conditions of a civic state.

Firstly, education must be universal. Ensuring quality education at all levels, from primary to higher education, is the call of the hour. Particularly, affirmative actions for girls and marginalised communities are warranted. Secondly, ensuring free primary healthcare and affordable specialised treatment for every citizen is a first step towards a universal health system. Thirdly, housing is a fundamental right. Affordable social housing can be arranged in both urban and rural areas through collaborations with NGOs. Fourthly, modernising agriculture and reforming the food distribution system are necessary to ensure food security, as millions are

plagued by hunger, malnutrition, and stunting. Fifthly, a life-cycle-based universal social security system, including maternity, child, youth unemployment, and elderly allowances, is a dire necessity. For uplifting millions out of poverty and achieving Sustainable Development Goals, the system must also include communities affected by climate change. These allowances will ensure the fulfilment of basic needs at every stage of a citizen's life and reduce inequality.

#### The economic revival

Economic revival demands a shift from over-reliance on ready-made garments towards diversified industrialisation, agricultural modernisation, and robust labour rights protection. Industrial diversification into sectors such as agro-processing, pharmaceuticals, and technology will generate decent employment and leverage our demographic dividend. Increased investment in vocational and technical education enhances productivity and expands opportunities for both domestic employment and overseas remittances. Simplifying bureaucratic processes and reducing regulatory burdens augments competitiveness and attracts foreign investment. Providing incentives and credit facilities for small and medium enterprises is crucial for job creation and economic stability.

#### A peaceful, prosperous rise of the Bay of Bengal

In the global economic and geopolitical context, the Bay of Bengal region will play a significant role. Strengthening cooperation among Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia could transform the region into a vital economic hub. Trade, investment, and technology exchange must be prioritised alongside collaborative climate action initiatives. Simultaneously, Bangladesh must expand its export markets beyond traditional sectors, with China, India, the United States, Japan, Korea, the European Union, and the Middle East securing new free trade agreements while ensuring that national interests and workers' rights remain protected.

Ultimately, the Bangladeshi people—through their historic movements and political consciousness—have repeatedly demonstrated their role as the true architects of national progress. The coming electoral exercise will once again test their collective wisdom in choosing leaders capable of stewarding the economic revival, translating the welfare state vision into tangible reality, and positioning the country as a dynamic player in the Bay of Bengal region. The future hinges on their informed choice.

## Are we truly against discrimination?



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"Students Against Discrimination" (SAD) sounded like a dream when we first heard about it. This "anti-discrimination" platform, comprising both male and female students, emerged in response to the widespread social and institutional discrimination faced by various groups within society, particularly students.

Since the July 2024 uprising and the subsequent ousting of the Awami League government, numerous bodies, platforms, and committees have been formed—either as extensions of SAD or as entirely separate entities. All these groups make similar promises: to root out discrimination and work for the betterment of the country. However, they share one glaring flaw—discrimination within their own ranks against women, private university students, and others, which is evident in the poor representation of these groups.

Looking at the central executive committee of SAD, 12 members were from Dhaka University, three from private universities, and seven from other educational institutions. Of the 22 committee members, only four were women. When the top leadership of the movement was announced, three of the four members hailed from Dhaka University and only one from Jahangirnagar University. The leadership included just one woman. First, let us reflect on the crucial

role women played in the July 2024 uprising. From the very beginning, women were at the forefront of the protests. They organised and led demonstrations, provided essential support such as food and medical aid, and used online platforms to raise awareness about the movement.

Their presence was particularly visible among university and high school students, who mobilised in large numbers to demand political change. Iconic images from the protests show women confronting police and political forces, armed with sticks and stones—a testament to their bravery and determination. Despite such exceptional displays of courage and resilience during the movement, most women have been sidelined in the post-uprising political landscape.

This marginalisation underscores an ongoing issue: women's contributions are often recognised during times of political struggle but overlooked when it comes to governance and decision-making. This remains a fundamental challenge to achieving gender equality in Bangladesh. In recent months, violence against women has not only persisted but escalated at an alarming rate.

While women were undeniably central to the uprising, their struggle for equal recognition and political empowerment continues. This is a stark reminder that participation in

revolutionary movements does not always translate into lasting societal change.

Alongside these brave women, private university students also emerged as pivotal participants in the movement. Their significant role can be traced back to July 18, 2024, when they intensified the movement by taking to the streets and directly confronting government forces.

Although public university students initially led the protests, the involvement of private university students marked a turning point. When some student leaders were arrested or forced into hiding for their safety—when the movement, under pressure from law enforcers and the then government, appeared to be losing momentum—it was private university students who kept it alive and thriving.

Despite having less direct stake in government jobs compared to their public university counterparts, they rallied for political change, thus broadening the movement's support base.

Can we forget the day BRAC University students poured onto the streets to face law enforcers armed with lethal weapons, to protest the deaths of their fellow students—regardless of which university they were from? Can we forget how students of East West, North South, IUB, and others joined them?

Their involvement was key to expanding the protests' appeal, attracting a wider demographic, including urban youth and professionals. These students organised and participated in significant actions, including the Dhaka Blockade, helping to sustain momentum and escalate the protests.

Given this vital role, it is puzzling that a group of private university

students felt compelled to protest the launch of the new independent body, Bangladesh Gonotantrik Chhatra Sangsad. Their protest aimed to highlight their exclusion. Does the word *chhatra* (student) lose its meaning when applied to them?

It is difficult yet crucial to be genuinely "anti-discrimination." Discrimination is pervasive, and often we are unaware that we are perpetuating it. However, when we ourselves are discriminated against, we are quick to label ourselves as "anti-discrimination" advocates.

If you judge or shame someone based on their race, appearance, religion, caste, class, or language, you are reinforcing discrimination—not fighting it. Can we truly claim to have moved beyond these biases, or is the real work still to be done?

For decades, society has failed to confront these issues with the seriousness they deserve. It is time to stop hiding behind labels and start looking inward. We must recognise our own shortcomings and take responsibility for the changes that need to happen within ourselves before we can hope to bring about transformation in the broader society.

The road ahead is one of deep reflection and significant social reform. True "anti-discrimination" efforts require more than simply calling out injustice—they demand a genuine commitment to addressing the prejudices we each carry. We must not only acknowledge the exclusion of certain groups from political spaces but also challenge the deeply ingrained biases in our everyday interactions.

It is time to set aside our hypocrisy and take meaningful steps towards a more inclusive and just society, where the voices of all are heard, respected, and valued in shaping the future of the country.