

We cannot miss this chance for change

Authorities should start work on feasible reform proposals

We welcome the submission of proposals by the Women's Affairs Reforms Commission, which provided 433 recommendations aimed at eliminating discriminatory provisions and structures in our laws, policies, and institutions. Unlike many other reform reports, this one specifies recommendations that the interim government can implement immediately. Among these is the withdrawal of Bangladesh's reservations to two articles of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which ensures legal equality in marriage and divorce.

In that regard, the commission proposed the introduction of a uniform family code, regardless of religion and ethnicity, which can be made applicable optionally during the current government's term. Other laws that require strengthening and/or amendment to make the provisions more inclusive and victim-friendly, according to the commission's proposal, include the Prevention of Domestic Violence Act-2010, the Guardians and Wards Act-1890, and rape and labour laws. The report also recommends enacting a new law on sexual harassment based on the 2009 High Court guidelines.

Rights of female migrant workers, domestic labourers, sex workers, as well as the elderly also came under the purview of the commission's recommendations. For example, it urged the government to ratify and implement the International Labour Organization's Conventions C189 and C190, which focus on domestic workers' rights and protection of workers from workplace violence and harassment, respectively. It proposed the establishment of help desks at all police stations and courts for women, children, the elderly, and people with special needs. Other recommendations include ensuring six months' paid maternity leave and two weeks' paid paternity leave in all sectors, and implementing the National Broadcasting Policy 2024 to stop mass media from presenting women in a negative light. In the political arena, the most notable recommendation was expanding parliamentary seats to 600, with 300 seats for directly elected women. Although this appears "unrealistic," the commission chief believes such an increase is necessary.

For years, rights groups have been advocating for many of these changes only to be ignored by successive governments, thus allowing the perpetuation of repressive and discriminatory laws denying women equal rights. For the first time, a comprehensive document has now been drawn up with the aspiration that we can actually move forward towards a more women-friendly society. Sadly, certain quarters, instead of presenting constructive criticism and logical arguments for or against the recommendations, are already voicing their opposition and demanding the dissolution of the Women's Affairs Reforms Commission itself. We are, however, encouraged by Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus' directive to promptly implement recommendations where possible. We hope that all political parties and other stakeholders will engage in healthy debate about the recommendations, recognising that ensuring equal rights for all genders will lead to a just, fair, and prosperous nation.

Save Shibsa River from further decline

Encroachment, short-sighted projects to blame for its condition

We are concerned about the growing trend of rivers drying up in Bangladesh. The plight of the Shibsa River, as highlighted by a recent report, is yet another example of how careless our treatment of rivers has been. Once a vital communication route linking Khulna to Kolkata, the Shibsa used to bustle with boats, launches, steamers, and so on. Today, however, it has declined drastically, reduced to a narrow stream in many parts. This dried-up condition spans roughly 27 kilometres of the river as it flows through the Paikgachha upazila. From there, it continues eastward through Soladana and Garuikhal unions before entering the Sundarbans and merging with the Pasur River. Although its 64-kilometre portion inside the Sundarbans still carries tidal water, heavy siltation is rapidly reducing its depth.

This situation cannot be attributed to any one reason alone; rather, it is the result of decades of unplanned, often illegal interventions such as the construction of polders and embankments as well as encroachment on riverbanks. For instance, around a hundred ponds and various structures have been set up along the Shibsa's banks, leading to persistent waterlogging in surrounding areas. Over the years, many rivers have been similarly choked by encroachment, pollution, and short-sighted government projects cutting floodplains off from them, increasing siltation, and eventually making rivers shallower.

Following the fall of the Awami League government, there have been noticeable efforts against illegal settlements along riverbanks, but those have proved to be insufficient in addressing the decline of our rivers. The fact is, without comprehensive measures addressing all the interlinked issues, our rivers cannot be saved. One major concern in this regard is the persistent inactivity of the National River Conservation Commission (NRCC), the so-called guardian of rivers. The delay in reactivating this commission—currently run by an additional secretary who merely holds its chairman's responsibilities on an additional basis—has compromised its ability to steer river conservation efforts.

These issues need to be resolved. Saving rivers like the Shibsa requires a holistic strategy based on sound river management principles. This includes reactivating and strengthening oversight institutions like the NRCC, implementing the Tidal River Management (TRM) system to restore natural tidal flows, preventing illegal occupation of riverbanks by local administrations, and conducting regular dredging. At the same time, there must be greater public awareness of their pivotal role in river conservation. We must also hold relevant authorities accountable for negligence and wrong policies.

SINGAPORE IN 10 YEARS?

BIDA chairman's optimism vs economic reality



OPEN SKY
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BIRUPAKSHA PAUL

The Bangladesh Investment Development Authority (BIDA) recently organised an international investment conference, which more than 400 investors attended. The BIDA chair, Chowdhury Ashik Mahmud Bin Harun (more popularly known as Ashik Chowdhury), in his eloquent presentation, claimed that Bangladesh would turn into a regional manufacturing hub and thus become a country like Singapore or Thailand by 2035. His English language proficiency and oratory skills eventually became the talk of the town. All the government advisers who attended the BIDA chair's address seemed to be mesmerised, deeply gratified, and immensely proud as they enjoyed the 12-minute presentation. The media kept pouring praise on the interim government, which has done an exemplary job by picking a brilliant non-resident Bangladeshi to lead BIDA.

The Sheikh Hasina regime often picked retired bureaucrats to head most financial institutions so they could guarantee unconditional obedience and little merit. We are proud, too, of the new BIDA chair's performance, because no BIDA chief could speak so eloquently about attracting investments in the past. But marketing excellence is not enough to pull in foreign investors, who mainly judge the ground reality of the country—something not always palatable given the recent rise in mob violence, vandalism, and animosity towards foreign companies. The *New York Times* added salt to the wound by painting Bangladesh as a home of growing extremism. The law-and-order situation is also under question. Mr Chowdhury didn't do enough justice to economics in his stunning presentation, making the outcomes of the hugely publicised summit quite uncertain.

BIDA's claim that Bangladesh will

become like Singapore or Thailand in a decade is reminiscent of Hasina's claim that Bangladesh will become a developed nation by 2041. We are not sure which quack economist gave this idea to the former prime minister. But the politicians in power echoed the tune without understanding its feasibility. It requires double-digit growth for 25 years in a row. Economists who raised this point were seen as "anti-development" agents. Mr Chowdhury's dream is even more euphoric at an uncomfortable time when the interim



BIDA Chairman Ashik Chowdhury during a presentation at the Bangladesh Investment Summit 2025 on April 9, 2025.

FILE PHOTO: CA PRESS WING

government is heading towards an election, and political stability, the precondition for FDI growth in a developing nation, is lacking.

When Mr Chowdhury mentioned two countries to model our targets on, it didn't make much sense either, because Singapore is far more advanced than Thailand. According to the World Bank (WB) data, Thailand's per capita income was \$7,182 in 2023, while Singapore's was \$84,734, almost 12 times higher. WB data also shows that in 2023, Bangladesh's growth was 5.8 percent, Thailand's 1.9 percent,

and Singapore's 1.1 percent. Based on GDP and growth rates, the "catching-up calculations" show that it will take Bangladesh another 27 years to catch up with Thailand, while catching up with Singapore will take as long as 77 years.

What kind of background maths Mr Chowdhury did before manufacturing the dream of Bangladesh becoming a country like Singapore in just 10 years remains a big question. Given the dataset, Bangladesh requires at least a 13 percent growth rate for 10 years in a row to reach Thailand's per capita GDP. However, to reach the Singaporean level, Bangladesh must grow annually at 43.5 percent for 10 years in a row—which has never been seen in the history of mankind.

Imagination can supersede fantasy at times, but that is not how an economist should speak. Policymakers must speak more responsibly by engaging rigour and professionalism

first time. It exceeded one percent in 2005 and peaked at 1.7 percent in 2013, marking the start of a downturn since then. From a fishermen's society, Singapore turned into a paragon of development primarily by enhancing its institutions, which are highly substandard in Bangladesh, mainly because of political corruption across all regimes. And that is the main reason why Bangladesh can't become Singapore overnight.

Foreign investors are prudent and cautious. Historically, Bangladesh experienced higher volumes of FDI whenever an elected government took office since 1991, suggesting that political stability is the mantra for drawing foreign investments. Simple rhetoric and marketing gimmicks may impress the audience temporarily, but investors will investigate economic rationales, which were starkly missing in Mr Chowdhury's presentation. The prognosis of making Bangladesh a regional manufacturing hub seems odd at a time when the country's relationship with its neighbours remains strained.

Chowdhury even went so far as to claim that all imagination and vision for a "Singapore-bound Bangladesh" began just eight months ago, defying all the achievements of past regimes. The country embarked on a new path of growth and development in the early 1990s with the inception of the market economy and economic openness. Bangladesh achieved average growth rates of 3.54 percent in the 1980s, 4.71 percent in the 1990s, 5.6 percent in the 2000s, and 6.6 percent in the 2010s. This story of growth acceleration could have been the strongest point for investment advocacy, which Chowdhury's smart presentation either missed or ignored. Highlighting the growth dynamics since the early 1990s would have added more strength and justification for investing in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh need not be like Singapore right now. Rather, it needs to understand how a country like Vietnam has been accelerating its pace of development—by ensuring law and order, improving infrastructure, expanding social safety nets, nurturing better relationships with regional partners, and building stronger institutions that value knowledge and expertise.

Does K2-18b really have alien life?



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For millennia, we thought that our solar system was the only planetary system in the universe. We even thought that it was home to the only planet in the cosmos where intelligent life evolved. This perspective changed in the early 1990s when astronomers began identifying planets that orbit stars beyond our Sun. To date, over 5,000 such planets, referred to as exoplanets, have been discovered.

Given the vast number of exoplanets, it is only natural to ponder: are we the only beings in the universe? Current scientific consensus suggests that it is highly unlikely we are alone. Researchers estimate that within our galaxy, the Milky Way—which contains approximately 100 billion stars, there may be hundreds of thousands of planets that could support extraterrestrial life.

In the quest to discover extraterrestrial life, astronomers have concentrated their research on red dwarf stars. The vast quantity of these stars—estimated to be at least 75 billion within the Milky Way—significantly enhances the likelihood of finding habitable planets orbiting some of them. While red dwarfs, which possess masses ranging from 0.08 to 0.60 times that of the Sun, are crucial targets in the search for alien life, they present challenges for observation due to their faintness, emitting only 0.05 percent of the Sun's luminosity. Nevertheless, they are relatively more luminous in the infrared part of the electromagnetic spectrum. This is where the recently launched James Webb Space Telescope (JWST) comes into play as it is specifically engineered

to detect infrared light.

In a remarkable advancement that has stirred the scientific community, JWST has uncovered what could be the most compelling evidence of extraterrestrial life on a planet designated K2-18b, which orbits within the habitable zone of the red dwarf star K2-18. The habitable zone refers to the region around a star where conditions are suitable for the existence of liquid water, avoiding extremes of heat and cold that would render a planet inhospitable. Initially identified in 2015 by the Kepler satellite, this exoplanet has a radius approximately 2.6 times that of Earth and is 8.6 times more massive, making it roughly half the size of Neptune. It is situated 124 light-years from Earth and falls into the category of "sub-Neptune" planets, which are larger than Earth but smaller than Neptune. The distinctive features of this planet have prompted scientists to suggest that it may be classified as a new category of celestial body: a Hycean planet. This type of exoplanet is primarily composed of a vast ocean of water, enveloped by an atmosphere rich in hydrogen and helium.

The existence of an atmosphere is crucial for life as we know it. Therefore, one of the main goals of the JWST's observations was to perform "atmospheric reconnaissance." The JWST is well-equipped to measure a planet's atmosphere. Specifically, when a planet passes in front of its star, its atmosphere absorbs some of the starlight. The JWST can collect this modified light to detect the unique signatures that signify the presence of an atmosphere.

What about the possibility of intelligent extraterrestrial life? The telescope has the capability to detect signs of extraterrestrial life through the identification of atmospheric pollution on exoplanets, particularly greenhouse gases and industrial emissions such as chlorofluorocarbons and nitrogen dioxide. These are indicators of alien life, similar to how we are recognised on Earth by our environmentally harmful emissions. However, researchers caution that there are constraints to JWST's ability to detect atmospheric pollutants. For instance, if a planet's host star is excessively bright, it may obscure the signals from the planet's atmosphere. Additionally, if a planet orbits too

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closely to its star, it may experience violent outbursts that could further complicate detection efforts.

Initial examination of the data collected by JWST points to the possible existence of dimethyl sulphide and dimethyl disulphide in the K2-18b's atmosphere. On Earth, these molecules are exclusively produced by biological activity, primarily by phytoplankton. Besides, other telltale signs of life water, methane, and carbon dioxide were detected earlier by JWST in K2-18b's atmosphere.

Recognising potential signs of intelligent extraterrestrial life is a

complicated task, and confirming such discoveries presents even greater difficulties. Additionally, even if planets like K2-18b host intelligent life, it does not guarantee the existence of civilisations capable of interstellar communication. This is due to the requirement that a species must evolve to a level of intelligence sufficient for developing such communication. In essence, the planet must support a species with intelligence comparable to our own. Furthermore, this species would need to establish a civilisation with technology that is at least as advanced as ours.

Although certainty eludes us, the prevailing view among scientists is that achieving a level of "sufficient intelligence" is a challenging prospect. A core principle in contemporary science is the belief that humanity is not uniquely exceptional. We inhabit a relatively ordinary planet that orbits an ordinary star within a typical galaxy, and it is posited that any life forms existing elsewhere—regardless of their rarity—would experience evolutionary pressures akin to those that have shaped life on Earth. Hence, if intelligent species comparable to ours have emerged elsewhere, it is reasonable to assume they would possess similar social motivations that could ultimately drive them to develop the technology required for interstellar communication.

Finally, while the discovery made by JWST is undeniably a "revolutionary moment" for us, it is not an Archimedes-type "eureka" moment, or a smoking gun. It is the detection of a potential biosignature, rather than confirming the existence of actual alien life forms. Further investigation is needed to determine whether K2-18b is inhabited or has the potential to support life. Should future observations validate the current findings, the consequences will extend well beyond the realm of astronomy. It will transform our comprehension of life, the universe, and most importantly, redefine our place in the universe.