

Health sector needs a complete overhaul

Proposals by reform commission deserve serious consideration

Our health sector has long been plagued by corruption, inefficiency, and a lack of accountability and good governance. Over the past decades, while healthcare costs have significantly increased, the quality of services has not improved as expected. The lack of adequate healthcare facilities across the country has been a persistent problem, while the absence of healthcare professionals at upazila and union-level facilities has deprived rural and marginalised populations of even basic services. Against this backdrop, the Health Sector Reform Commission's proposals give us hope for building a system that will be efficient, people-oriented, and accessible to all.

Unfortunately, public health has never been a top priority for successive governments. While sectors such as public administration, energy, transport and communication, local government and rural development, and defence, among others, have received significant budgetary allocations, the health sector has been comparatively neglected. Therefore, the commission's suggestion that our total public health expenditure should rise to around 15 percent of the total budget, or at least 5 percent of GDP, is appreciable. Reportedly, countries making significant progress in achieving universal health coverage globally spend 5 percent or more of their GDP on healthcare. Greater investment is thus crucial, as it will expand healthcare services, reduce out-of-pocket expenses, and ensure financial protection for ordinary citizens.

The commission also recommends that the authorities make primary healthcare a constitutional obligation, providing it free of cost to all. It also recommends strengthening the primary healthcare system by integrating union-level health and family planning centres into fully functional primary healthcare centres. In urban areas, such centres should be managed at the ward level. We believe these reforms are crucial to ensure universal access to primary healthcare. Forming an independent Bangladesh Health Commission to ensure a transparent and effective health system is another important recommendation. Additionally, creating an autonomous Bangladesh Health Service by restructuring the current health cadre to enhance professionalism, skills, and accountability, and establishing a dedicated Public Service Commission for healthcare recruitment are steps whose time has come.

Other major proposals include forming a National Institute of Women's Health, establishing 11 regional health authorities at the divisional level to decentralise healthcare management, integrating multiple government agencies under the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), and setting up a pharmacy network to distribute essential medicines either free or at subsidised rates. Additionally, prohibiting pharmaceutical companies from influencing doctors through gifts or free samples, and encouraging doctors to prescribe medicines using their generic names, seem like well-thought-out suggestions.

That said, while the recommendations made by the commission are crucial, implementing them will undoubtedly be challenging, especially under an elected political government. We hope the interim government will help overcome these challenges with the support of political parties and work sincerely to achieve the goals set by the commission.

Cosmetic fixes won't clear Dhaka's air

Report of DNCC installing air purifiers raises questions

We're less than enthused by the news that Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC) is planning to install 25 to 30 industrial-grade air purifiers in different locations—an initiative that seems more like a publicity gimmick than a meaningful step towards resolving our air pollution crisis. True, the purifiers come at no direct cost to the city, as they are being funded through a corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiative. But quick fixes, even when seemingly "free," carry the opportunity cost of not addressing what truly matters.

The science behind this should have been illustrative enough. In Dhaka, the average concentration of PM2.5—the most harmful of air pollutants—is about 18 times the global standard. Although about one-third of these pollutants come from outside the country, the rest are generated locally, thanks to illegal brick kilns, uncovered construction sites, vehicular emissions, open waste burning, household fuel use, and so on. But instead of tackling these pollutants head-on, and at the root, the authorities are again reaching for cosmetic fixes. Just as the ill-conceived solar-powered traffic lights and escalator bridges once became symbols of dysfunction, we fear these purifiers, or smog towers, too may end up as another high-maintenance, low-impact artifact gathering dust.

There is a lesson to be learnt from the case of Delhi which, according to an article, spent millions installing smog towers in 2019. Later, the Central Pollution Control Board of India estimated their impact to be negligible. China's Beijing, in contrast, achieved a 35 percent reduction in PM2.5 over five years—not by installing purifiers, but by relocating coal-based industries, adopting clean energy, regulating emissions, and investing in public transport. The message from these examples is clear. The DNCC claims that each of the purifiers is equivalent to 80-100 trees in terms of cleaning the air. But wouldn't it make far more sense to simply plant trees instead, especially considering the maintenance and security challenges associated with air purifiers?

The truth is, the DNCC project reeks of short-term thinking. The authorities are going for feel good fixes—having failed to tackle the sources of air pollution—just like they recently greenlit a project to install traffic lights at 22 intersections across Dhaka, despite past failures of such projects. We must recognise that Dhaka's pollution crisis is too dire for short-term fixes. To reduce air pollution meaningfully, what we should do is focus on expediting efforts to close illegal kilns, enforce dust control at construction sites, phase out old vehicles, expand electric and mass transit, and strengthen our air monitoring and enforcement frameworks.

EDITORIAL

Underlying factors behind Hefazat's position



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Why do religious pressure groups like Hefazat single out women's rights for moral outrage? The answer may lie not just in patriarchy but also in the political economy of power brokerage in the modern nation-state.

One important reason why gender reform provokes outsized outrage—while violations of Islamic prohibitions on *riba* (interest or usury), elite corruption, or exploitative labour markets do not—is that family law has historically been the only legal domain where Islamic law retained formal legitimacy under colonial rule. During British colonial governance, Islamic law was displaced from public, commercial, and criminal spheres and confined almost exclusively to the private realm of marriage, divorce, maintenance, and inheritance. This circumscription effectively reconstituted religion as a moral code about domestic life and gender hierarchy, setting the terrain upon which postcolonial religious actors could assert authority.

Hefazat's reaction to these reforms is not a principled defence of Islamic law as much as it is a politically expedient and selectively enforced moral panic. It is strategically centred on gender—the one domain where they can still assert relevance and authority—rendering the struggle existential for their continued role as arbiters of public morality.

Anthropologists like Talal Asad have encouraged us to view the invocation of religion not as a static set of beliefs but as a "discursive tradition" rooted in power struggles and negotiations. This helps us see that the very concept of "Islamic law" invoked by Hefazat is strategically mobilised in moments when power over social authority—particularly over gender—is threatened. Crucially, the reforms they oppose displace religious actors from their traditional roles as custodians of morality and law in family life. Reform efforts like the Women's Affairs Reforms Commission become an existential threat because they signal



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

a shift in normative authority from mosque to ministry, from imam to bureaucrat in the one area where they were able to retain sole authority.

In other words, Hefazat's selective moralism reflects not theological fidelity, but strategic power preservation. Financial systems, though profoundly un-Islamic in their operation of *riba*, are opaque, deeply entrenched, and implicate the very elites who fund and protect Hefazat's institutions. Challenging them would mean confronting powerful economic interests and dismantling networks that benefit both secular and religious actors. Women's rights, by contrast, are a soft target: they offer a public spectacle through which Hefazat can perform guardianship of religious morality, mobilise popular support, and assert relevance—without threatening the economic status quo. This selective indignation is not

Nor is this instrumentalisation confined to religionists. Secular authoritarian leaders like Sheikh Hasina have similarly deployed women's rights as a strategic façade—championing gender reforms not to dismantle patriarchal power, but to legitimise unelected, increasingly autocratic rule. Her regime has consistently used gender equality indices and the optics of female empowerment to attract donor funding, deflect international scrutiny, and frame her rule as uniquely progressive in a male-dominated region. Gender is currency for power preservation on both sides.

Yet when politically expedient, these seemingly antagonistic forces—Hasina's secular authoritarianism and Hefazat's religionist traditionalism—entered into an unholy alliance. In the aftermath of the 2013 Shahbagh protests, Hasina's government made

This partnership was mutually beneficial: Hasina displaced Jamaat as the dominant arbiter of religious legitimacy by empowering a politically non-partisan, discursively Islamic actor in Hefazat, while Hefazat gained unprecedented state recognition and a new platform to regulate morality in the public sphere without contesting elections. Ironically, in the post-ouster landscape of Hasina's rule, we now witness former adversaries from Hefazat and Jamaat realigning—revealing not a principled commitment to doctrine, but a fluid opportunism rooted in survival, influence, and realpolitik.

In such circumstances, the task is not to take either side's rhetoric at face value, but to look past the charade—whether cloaked in piety or progress—and ask who benefits, who speaks, and whose lives are being regulated in the name of piety or progress.

What Khaleda Zia's return means for the BNP



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After four months of advanced medical treatment in London, former Prime Minister and BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia, one of Bangladesh's most resilient political figures, has returned to Dhaka. Her return is not merely a personal event. It arrives at a turning point in Bangladesh's political evolution, following the 2024 mass uprising and amid the uncertainties of a transitional government.

More significant than her return is the fact that she is recovering. For a woman long portrayed by her rivals as terminally ill and politically irrelevant, her gradual physical revival offers not just hope to her supporters but a quiet rebuttal to the cynicism and cruelty that previously surrounded her treatment. Years of resistance to her medical care abroad, and the mocking public rhetoric that accompanied it, shook the conscience of many.

In the aftermath of the student-led uprising that forced Sheikh Hasina to flee and cleared the way for an interim government led by Prof Muhammad Yunus, Khaleda Zia's reappearance carries symbolic weight. Once placed under house arrest, she now walks into a different political moment—one marked by uncertainty, recalibration, and a chance to redefine democratic participation. Yet, despite all she endured, she has shown no bitterness. She did not attack her political rivals by name. Instead, she called for patience, dialogue, and national unity.

This new role—more reflective than



After four months of treatment in London BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia has returned to Dhaka.

PHOTO: BNP MEDIA CELL

active, her presence is bound to draw attention from party members and observers alike. What shape the BNP will take in the coming days, and how its leadership will evolve, may soon become clearer.

The broader political climate remains fragile. The interim government has yet to offer clarity on electoral reforms or a transition

intra-party feuds—often driven by rivalry for influence, financial control, or access to leadership—have damaged the BNP's credibility in several districts. Without strong internal discipline and renewed commitment to reform, the party risks squandering the public goodwill that Khaleda Zia's return and symbolic stature have helped rekindle.

And yet, through all of this, Khaleda Zia stands as a reminder of resilience in the face of repression. Her political journey, beginning reluctantly after the assassination of her husband, President Ziaur Rahman, has spanned coups, jail terms, boycotts, and ballot box triumphs. She led mass movements against dictatorship, served as prime minister three times, and holds the rare distinction of winning every seat she ever contested. Through personal losses and political isolation, she never chose exile—even when offered. Her strength has not just been organisational but moral.

Still, reverence must not replace reason. For the BNP to remain relevant in the coming years, it must go beyond symbolism. It must modernise, listen to the youth, embrace reform, and articulate a vision that speaks to today's Bangladesh—one that includes jobs, justice, rights, and reconciliation.

Khaleda Zia's return opens that window, not as a reset to the past but as a passage towards a more balanced and inclusive political future. She remains one of the few figures respected across partisan lines—viewed by some as a symbol of sacrifice, by others as a survivor of injustice, and by many as a stateswoman who refused to give up.

In a nation long fatigued by polarisation and rhetoric, her silence is instructive. It reminds us that sometimes, restraint is the most powerful political statement of all.

What she chooses to do next may very well shape how history remembers this moment, and how Bangladesh chooses to move forward.