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No alternative to curbing PM's powers

Rebalancing of powers crucial for restoring democracy

We commend the newly formed Nagorik Coalition for bringing some critical issues related to constitutional reforms back into focus and outlining roadmaps for their implementation. Some of the proposals it has forwarded, while not new, deserve proper reflection and consideration—particularly the call to limit a prime minister's tenure to two terms. In a country where autocracy has been enabled by the excessive concentration of executive powers, the proposal seems to be a step in the right direction. However, we believe term limits alone are not enough. What we truly need is a fundamental rebalancing of power to prevent the emergence of another authoritarian regime like that of Awami League.

Sheikh Hasina's rule of 16 years remains a chilling reminder of what happens when too much power is placed in the hands of one individual. It systematically dismantled democratic checks and balances by exploiting constitutional loopholes and turning vital institutions into instruments of partisan control. This was made possible by granting the ousted PM near-absolute authority over the executive, with the legislative and judicial branches duly falling in line. Thus, setting a two-term limit may prevent a repeat of one's continued rule. However, it cannot prevent their continued entrenchment of power by proxy, such as through family members, allies, or loyalists. This distinction is important to remember given our history of dynastic/coalition politics.

Therefore, as some speakers at the Nagorik Coalition event have pointed out, more crucial than term limits is ensuring that no PM can wield unchecked authority. This means implementing robust mechanisms to distribute executive power, strengthen institutional independence, and hold those in power accountable. The proposed establishment of a National Constitutional Council, with representation from all three branches of the state, for appointments in vital institutions can also help ensure greater transparency and accountability.

The coalition's other proposals—such as introducing a bicameral parliament, reviving the caretaker government system, giving constitutional status to the four key parliamentary standing committees, political nomination of women candidates and direct elections to 100 reserved seats for women, and incorporating the July Charter into the constitution—also merit attention. However, the idea of a referendum on the July Charter and constitutional reforms, or of a Constituent Assembly to draft a new constitution, could complicate and unnecessarily delay the process. Instead, the current strategy of achieving consensus on constitutional amendments through dialogue organised by the National Consensus Commission seems to offer a quicker and more practical path. In that respect, it will be wise to have political parties sign a binding pre-election agreement to ensure the implementation of approved reform proposals.

For, ultimately, lasting reform depends on the compliance and cooperation of political parties. Regardless of which party forms the next government, fundamental agreements must be reached on key principles such as balancing of powers at all levels as well as institutional accountability. Only through such shared commitments can we ensure that our democracy does not again fall prey to unchecked rule.

Stop push-ins into our territory

India's actions violate international laws, bilateral agreements

India's unilateral push-in of around 300 individuals through various border areas of Bangladesh since May 7 is condemnable, as it violates diplomatic norms and established border management rules. Worryingly, it appears that the push-ins may continue. The BGB chief, in a recent briefing, said they learned about another 200 to 300 individuals who had been gathered on the other side of the Khagrachhari border, and that India's Border Security Force (BSF) is trying to push them into Bangladesh. Under the circumstances, the government has rightly demanded an immediate halt to these unilateral exercises by sending a protest letter to Delhi.

According to reports, between May 7 and May 9, around 300 individuals were pushed in through areas such as Panchhari, Jamini Para, and Khedachhara in Khagrachhari; parts of Moulvibazar; the Roumari char regions of Kurigram; and Mandarbaria island in the Sundarbans. Among them were at least 39 people from the Rohingya community—some had previously been registered in Bangladesh's Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals (FDMN) camps but later crossed into India, while at least five were found holding UNHCR refugee cards issued from India. Three Indian nationals were also found among the pushed-in people. The rest are Bangladeshis who had migrated to India in the last 20–25 years; many have families and children who possess Indian nationality documents. While the BGB has taken steps to send the Bangladeshi nationals to their respective home districts through local administrations, the wider impact of such random push-ins cannot be overlooked.

It is expected that any return of such individuals would be carried out through proper channels, in line with established norms and regulations. But the way India is pushing people through remote, hard-to-patrol border points into Bangladesh violates the 1975 India-Bangladesh Joint Guidelines for border authorities, the 2011 Coordinated Border Management Plan (CBMP), and decisions made during director general-level talks between the BGB and BSF. India's actions on its eastern border also set a bad precedent for its relations with neighbouring countries, especially in light of the recent conflict on its western border. And with its ties with Bangladesh already strained since the 2024 July uprising, such unilateral push-ins may only worsen the situation. Most importantly, these actions threaten our border security, which is totally unacceptable.

We urge the government to strongly raise these issues with the Indian authorities, question why Rohingya people were sent to Bangladesh instead of Myanmar, and, most importantly, why proper procedures were not followed in India's actions. If necessary, the government must involve the international community to put an end to such actions.

We must reduce deficit for sound budget management

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Practically, in budget preparation of government accounts, three methods are commonly used: balanced, deficit and surplus budget. When government spending for a given fiscal year equals anticipated government revenue, the budget is considered balanced. This method is typically followed by economically sound countries such as Germany, South Korea, and Switzerland. The balanced budget is also referred to as a zero-based budget, where all expenses must be justified for each new period and are analysed for their needs and costs. On the other hand, a surplus budget occurs when government revenue exceeds expenditure. It is a rare occurrence. However, such budgets are occasionally observed in resource-rich countries such as Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, Denmark, Brunei and the UAE. But a budget deficit occurs when government expenses exceed revenue, and budget deficits affect the national debt and revenue collection by the tax authority. A budget deficit can lead to higher levels of borrowing, higher interest payments, and lower reinvestment, which will result in lower revenue during the following year. Economist John Maynard Keynes strongly favoured a deficit budget during the Great Depression of the 1930s. He argued and advocated for government intervention to curb unemployment and economic recession. He also debated that increased government spending was necessary to decrease unemployment, even if it meant a budget deficit.

Bangladesh, like many other developing countries, is experiencing a deficit budget due to limited fiscal resources mobilisation from internal sources. Besides, many industrialised countries also face similar long-term budgetary challenges and have run persistently large budget deficits in recent decades. These large and persistent budget deficits have

generated considerable concern. There is a widespread perception that they reduce growth, and could lead to a crisis if they continue for long or become too large. Thus, it is important to examine the sources and effects of budget deficits.

Taking the last 30-years' total budget and deficit figures for Bangladesh from 1995 to 2024, a steady increase was found. The budget has grown from Tk 209.48 billion in 1995 to Tk 7,617.85 billion in 2024 (Budget data MoF). Similarly, the deficit also expanded significantly, from Tk 7.84 billion in 1995 to Tk 2,617.85 billion in 2024, indicating higher expenditure compared to revenue generation. It

reflecting varying fiscal challenges over the years. The early years (1995-2000) show relatively lower deficits, the period from 2002 to 2010 exhibits moderate but volatile deficits, averaging around 30 percent, suggesting ongoing budgetary constraints. A gradual decline is observed from 2011 to 2019, with deficits stabilising below 30 percent. On the other hand, post-2020, the deficit accelerated again, peaking at 36.14 percent in 2023 before slightly decreasing in 2024.

Bangladesh's budget largely relied on deficit due to rising operating expenditures, import dependency, infrastructure development, and

figure due to possible exaggeration in GDP calculations (White Paper on Bangladesh Economy Report 2024). In reality, the actual deficit budget-to-GDP ratio is likely higher than the reported level.

Bangladesh should prudently shift towards a more balanced budget approach, incorporating zero-based budgeting to ensure maximum value from public funds. Furthermore, project selection, financing, and implementation must be administered with due diligence. Aside from operating expenses, capital expenditures under project financing should align with global cost competitiveness and incorporate



FILE VISUAL: REHNUMA PROSHOON

is also noticeable that, every five to eight years, the budget size more than doubled.

Bangladesh's budget has been experiencing a substantial deficit since the very beginning. The data between 1995 and 2024 also reflects this pattern on a year-to-year basis. Between 1995 and 2000, the largest deficit occurred in 1998 and the trend continued, with the deficit in 2024 marking a new peak.

When viewed from another perspective, the deficit as a percentage of the total budget from 1995 to 2024 highlights significant fluctuations,

corruption-induced administrative inefficiencies. Consequently, the deficit-to-total-budget ratio remains high. However, despite this significant budgetary gap, the deficit-to-GDP ratio remains within the standard threshold of five percent. To offset this shortfall, the government borrows from both domestic and foreign sources. As a result, Bangladesh's vicious cycle of national debt has been accelerating year after year. Ironically, it is claimed that our deficit budget-to-GDP ratio remains within the standard level of five percent; however, there are concerns about the credibility of this

appropriate technical expertise.

In 1925, US President Calvin Coolidge said, "I favor the policy of economy, not because I wish to save money, but because I wish to save people. The men and women of this country who toil are the ones who bear the cost of the Government. Every dollar that we carelessly waste means that their life will be so much the more meager. Every dollar we prudently save means that their life will be so much the more abundant. Economy is idealism in its more practical form." We strongly believe our policymakers will act accordingly.

After 32 years, arsenic still threatens rural Bangladesh



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Thirty-two years ago, Bangladesh's first groundwater arsenic was discovered in Chamagram village of Chapainawabganj by the Department of Public Health Engineering (DPHE). At the time, it was labelled as the largest mass poisoning in human history. Since then, hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent on testing tube wells, promoting alternative water sources, and raising awareness. And yet, millions of people in Bangladesh continue to drink water contaminated with arsenic every day. The question is: why?

The answer is not simple. The persistence of arsenic exposure is not due to a lack of scientific knowledge or technological solutions. It is the result of a complex set of barriers, such as hydrogeological, social, institutional, and economic factors, that continue to undermine mitigation efforts. Arsenic contamination is patchy and unpredictable. In a single village, some wells may be safe while others situated just metres away are highly toxic. This spatial heterogeneity in groundwater arsenic distribution in aquifers makes it difficult to apply one-size-fits-all solutions. Without regular and comprehensive testing, it is almost impossible for communities to know whether their water is safe.

Moreover, initial testing efforts in the early 2000s were large-scale but

short-lived. Many wells that were once labelled safe have never been retested, and others have deteriorated over time. As a result, many families unknowingly drink from contaminated wells, either because the last test was conducted some 10 or 15 years ago, or because new wells were installed under the assumption that they were arsenic-free.

Institutional weaknesses also play a major role. There is no centralised groundwater authority in Bangladesh responsible for monitoring and managing drinking water quality. Different government agencies (e.g. Bangladesh Water Development Board, DPHE) often operate in silos, with little coordination between the departments of health and local governance. As arsenic mitigation projects come and go, communities are often left with infrastructure they cannot maintain or without the technical support needed to sustain safe water practices.

Social and behavioural factors are equally important. Many families prefer the convenience and control of their own household tube well, even if a safe community source is available further away. Women, who are typically responsible for collecting water, are reluctant to walk long distances or queue for water every day. Risk perception is low, especially because

arsenic-related diseases take years to manifest. Without visible symptoms or immediate consequences, the urgency to switch to safer sources fades.

Meanwhile, the cost and maintenance of mitigation technologies remain prohibitive for many rural households. Filters often clog or break down, and community treatment plants fall into disuse without adequate maintenance or oversight. Rainwater harvesting systems, while effective in theory, often fail in practice due to poor design, insufficient storage capacity, or user disinterest. Piped water schemes have made progress in urban and peri-urban areas, but are still far from being universal in rural Bangladesh.

A new national-scale survey of tube wells is urgently needed to detect not only arsenic but also salinity, faecal contamination, and other chemical hazards that may compromise water safety.

Yet, there are reasons for cautious optimism. DPHE has continued its nationwide efforts to reduce arsenic exposure, particularly in rural areas. One major project had focused on identifying high-risk communities, testing arsenic levels in existing wells, installing deep tube wells (such as No. 6), promoting rainwater harvesting systems, and building the capacity of local government institutions and communities to provide safe drinking water. These efforts reflect the government's continued recognition of the seriousness of the crisis and its

long-term impacts.

To truly end the arsenic crisis in Bangladesh, several additional actions must be taken beyond the lifespan of any single mitigation project. A new national-scale survey of tube wells is urgently needed to detect not only arsenic but also salinity, faecal contamination, and other chemical hazards that may compromise water safety. This must be followed by the establishment of a monthly or seasonal monitoring system at strategic locations across the country to track changes in groundwater arsenic and water quality over time.

Recent advances in artificial intelligence offer a powerful opportunity to support these efforts. Machine learning models can be used to develop high-resolution arsenic risk maps, enabling more targeted interventions. These data-driven tools can help prioritise areas for well-testing and safe water provision more efficiently than ever before.

Public awareness must also be significantly enhanced. This means not just campaigns, but formal inclusion of groundwater science and arsenic health risks in national primary and secondary education curricula. Educating the next generation is critical to breaking the cycle of exposure. This is currently missing in the primary school textbooks.

Finally, collaboration between the water and health sectors must deepen. Institutions with expertise in public health, such as icddr, b and others, should work in tandem with groundwater experts and engineers to monitor health outcomes, promote safe water behaviours, and respond to emerging risks. Only through such an integrated and sustained approach can Bangladesh achieve its goal of arsenic-free drinking water for all.