The Daily Star
FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Implement only essential reforms

Govt should prioritise key reforms aligned with election timeline

Given the current political situation, wherein the call for an election roadmap has become louder than ever, it is important that the interim government only carry out some essential and practical reforms that can be backed by political consensus.

Since taking office on August 8 last year, the interim government has formed 11 commissions to reform the constitution, judiciary, election commission, police, public administration, local government, anti-corruption, health, women's affairs, mass media, and labour. All of them have submitted their reports, with many proposing more than 100 recommendations. Since March 20, the National Consensus Commission (NCC) has been holding talks with various political parties and other stakeholders to reach a common ground on the recommendations. While it is understandable that an agreement will not be reached on every single recommendation, some can be left behind for consideration at a later time by an elected government. In fact, during their dialogue with NCC members on May 25, civil society members urged the interim government to refrain from amending the constitution and leave the task to elected representatives. There are other such reform recommendations that are best addressed by a parliament rather than an interim administration, since such action may be viewed as crossing a constitutional boundary.

The interim government should also consider, while selecting recommendations, what is feasible within its tenure. For example, the police commission's report urges immediate implementation of a Supreme Court directive regarding arrests, searches, and questioning. This kind of recommendation can easily be implemented in the short term. Therefore, the government should carry out such reforms if doing so helps with holding a free and fair election. When the NCC was formed on February 12, its tenure was fixed for six months; in other words, we can expect the NCC to complete the discussions and deliver a summary of agreed-upon recommendations by August/September. If the election is going to be held anytime between December 2025 and June 2026, there may not be sufficient time left to implement even all the agreed-upon recommendations.

With that in mind, the interim government should prioritise recommendations that will make the return to democracy and a parliamentary system smoother. As such, the focus should be on the reports of the election, police, judiciary, public administration, and local government reform commissions. However, the government must be careful not to leave out key stakeholders in their attempt to implement the reforms. While the consensus of political parties is crucial, there are groups who will be impacted by the reforms, and they must be consulted as well. Ultimately, we hope all stakeholders will rise above their individual concerns and prioritise greater national and democratic interests in reaching an agreement on the necessary reforms.

Listen to primary teachers' demands

Govt should be prompt in resolving the issue

We are concerned about the protest currently being carried out by the assistant teachers of government primary schools. The teachers, who have been observing partial work abstention since May 5, started a full work abstention programme yesterday. They plan to continue their protest indefinitely to press home their three-point demand: setting their starting salary at the 11th grade of national pay scale; resolving complications in availing higher grades after 10 and 16 years of service; and ensuring faster promotions, including promotion of assistant teachers to fill 100 percent of headteacher positions. After the interim government took office in August last year, the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education formed a nine-member consultation committee to improve primary and non-formal education in the country. The committee submitted its report on February 10, proposing over a hundred recommendations, including pay scale upgrades and promotions for assistant teachers of primary schools. The teachers are staging their protest seeking revisions to some of these recommendations.

There are currently more than 65,000 government primary schools in the country, which employ around 3.75 lakh teachers. Among them, headteachers are in the 11th pay grade, while assistant teachers fall under the 13th grade, with a starting basic salary of Tk 11,000, plus benefits. The consultation committee recommended eliminating the "assistant teacher" position and introducing "teacher" as the entry-level designation. Under this change, the initial pay grade for teachers would be the 12th, with a starting basic salary of Tk 11,300, plus benefits. After two years, their jobs would be made permanent, and following another two years, they would be promoted to senior teacher, moving to the 11th pay grade. The committee also recommended upgrading headteachers to the 10th grade and suggested that all headteacher positions be filled through promotions. Currently, 65 percent of headteachers are promoted, while 35 percent are recruited directly.

Under the circumstances, we urge the government to address the primary schoolteachers' grievances through dialogue and take prompt action. Rising living costs are affecting these teachers, too, making it increasingly difficult for them to manage their expenses. During the previous regime, promised salary increases were not properly implemented, while promotions to the headteacher positions remained stalled since 2009. Many primary schoolteachers retired in the same position they joined. We, therefore, call on the government to recognise the urgency of the issue and act swiftly to resolve it.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

St Petersburg founded

On this day in 1703, Peter the Great founded St Petersburg. It played a vital role in Russian history and is especially known as the scene of the 1917 revolutions and as a fiercely defended city during World War II.

How the FY2026 budget can make a difference amid challenges

MACRO MIRROR

Dr Fahmida Khatun
is executive director at the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD).
Views expressed in this article are the author's own.

FAHMIDA KHATUN

The national budget for the 2025-26 fiscal year, set to be published on June 2, comes at a critical economic crossroads. It assumes crucial importance in steering the country towards a stable economic condition. Weak management and lack of governance during the previous government's time left the economy in a deep crisis, the burden of which is currently being shouldered by the interim government. The country has been facing formidable economic challenges, including persistent inflation, low revenue generation, low investment, low employment generation, high non-performing loans (NPLs) in banks, rising external debt-servicing obligations, and poor utilisation of public funds.

Against this backdrop, expectations from the FY2026 budget are high, which are further compounded by the repeated promise from the interim government to undertake reforms in order to establish a discrimination-free society. Understandably, the interim government is now expected to demonstrate this commitment through its budget formulation, which should not aim to chase ambitious growth targets, but should prioritise macroeconomic stability, inflation control, and welfare enhancement of the common people.

Reports suggest that the size of the upcoming budget will be Tk 7.9 lakh crore, which is 0.88 percent lower than the outgoing budget. Similarly, the Annual Development Programme (ADP) will be set at approximately Tk 2.3 lakh crore—13.2 percent less than the original allocation in FY2025. This downsizing underscores the government's objective to restore fiscal discipline and curb inflationary pressures. The budget aims to lower the fiscal deficit to around 3.6 percent of GDP—the lowest in more than a decade, signalling a serious attempt at prudent financial management. However, the challenge lies in ensuring that fiscal consolidation does not come at the cost of investments in critical sectors such as health, education, and social protection.

In Bangladesh, budget allocation for health remains underwhelming, with spending still below one percent of GDP, a figure that has stagnated for decades. Similarly, the allocation for education continues to fall short of the targets outlined in the Eighth Five-Year Plan, undermining efforts to build human capital. These shortcomings highlight a tension between fiscal austerity and the urgent need to invest in social sectors to build human capital and promote equity.

As before, the challenge for the interim government will be strengthening revenue mobilisation, which remains significantly low compared to the potential for higher collections. Amid low revenue collection for about a decade, the government aims to increase revenue collection in FY2026 by 7.6 percent compared to the revised target for FY2025, which seems unrealistic. It has to address this challenge not by raising tax rates but by expanding the tax base, enhancing compliance, and digitalising tax collection systems. Bringing high-income earners and the informal sector into the tax net is critical. The postponed restructuring of the National Board of Revenue (NBR) into two separate divisions—a move designed to improve tax administration but met with protests from officials—demonstrates the complexities of reforming revenue institutions. While political resistance has delayed this reform, it remains imperative that the interim government modernises tax administration, enforces compliance, and combats tax evasion.

Subsidy reform is another area demanding immediate attention. Blanket subsidies, particularly in energy and agriculture, contribute significantly to fiscal pressures and distort market signals. The budget has to phase out such subsidies and adopt targeted support to ensure that the vulnerable population are protected, while promoting efficient resource allocation.

Monetary policy will need to work in tandem with fiscal measures to stabilise the economy. The adoption of a market-driven exchange rate regime—a condition for IMF loan disbursement—has been a significant reform. However, it could lead to volatility of the currency market, which should be addressed through careful management. The Bangladesh Bank has adopted a contractionary monetary policy to control inflation, which has to be pursued for a few more months as the inflation rate is still high. However, the productive sectors should have access to sufficient liquidity support. Coordinated fiscal and monetary efforts are necessary to stabilise the exchange rate, manage external borrowing, and strengthen foreign exchange reserves. The balance of payment situation has improved due to higher exports and remittances in recent months. Efforts to increase formal remittance inflows and prudent foreign debt management will play crucial roles in maintaining BoP stability.

VISUAL: **SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR**

The other part of the budget is judicious public spending. With fiscal space constrained, the budget should not rely excessively on commercial borrowing from banks that could crowd out private investment and make borrowing expensive for the private sector. Concessional external financing should be pursued wherever possible. However, careful assessment of repayment capacity and project returns is required in this case. Efficiency in public spending is paramount. The government must focus on high-impact, socially beneficial projects while excluding politically motivated, low-return projects. The planning adviser mentioned that the ADP would be more realistic and efficient in FY2026.

The national budget is also expected to prioritise employment generation. Bangladesh faces rising youth unemployment and underemployment, compounded by structural challenges in the labour market. Therefore, the upcoming budget must also consider measures to bolster employment generation. It should prioritise labour-intensive sectors such as RMG, agriculture, ICT, and construction. Investment in skills development, digital literacy, and entrepreneurship support will be vital to prepare the workforce for meeting the market demands. Micro, small, and medium enterprises should be provided with support in areas such as access to finance, capacity-building, and market linkages.

The FY2026 budget should also clearly present a roadmap of economic measures in view of Bangladesh's graduation from the Least Developed Country (LDC) status in November 2026. The loss of duty-free, quota-free (DFQF) market access and concessional financing will necessitate proactive strategies to maintain export competitiveness and financial stability. The budget should support productivity enhancements, strengthen trade facilitation mechanisms, and invest in export diversification to reduce dependency on a narrow range of products and markets. Additionally, in view of the US reciprocal tariff and LDC graduation, the budget must rationalise tariff structures to align with global trade norms and enhance competitiveness. In the case of finance, Bangladesh should explore alternative sources of concessional financing, such as climate funds, green bonds, and public-private partnerships for sustainable infrastructure development.

While stabilisation and reform are essential, the budget must not lose sight of social equity. The interim government's proposed streamlining of social safety nets, reducing the number of schemes while increasing beneficiary coverage, reflects a move towards efficiency. However, allocations for social protection remain inadequate. The new budget must ensure that reforms translate into tangible benefits for the most vulnerable segments of society, supported by robust implementation and monitoring mechanisms.

The FY2026 budget must be more than a mere fiscal statement. While budgets are annual by design, they must reflect the country's long-term ambitions, grounded in its medium-term strategies like five-year plans and sectoral policies. By focusing on prudent fiscal management, targeted social protection, and strategic investment in infrastructure and human capital, policymakers can navigate Bangladesh's current economic challenges and foster economic opportunities for citizens.

Ways to tackle medical negligence and malpractice in Bangladesh

A M Shamim
is founder and managing director of Labaid Group.

A M SHAMIM

Medical negligence or failure by a healthcare provider to meet the accepted standard of care, resulting in harm to the patient, has reached a new level in Bangladesh. It is now eroding public trust in the local health system despite tremendous achievements, especially in the private sector. Recent high-profile cases, such as the death of a five-year-old during a routine circumcision at a hospital, the tragic demise of a young, expectant mother during childbirth at another hospital, and the death of a young male during an outdoor endoscopic procedure, underscore the gravity of the issue. Incidents like these, often attributed to profit-driven motives, unregulated practices, and a lack of accountability, reflect a healthcare system under strain. The widespread apathy and lack of legal due process for victims of medical negligence also result in frequent violence against healthcare professionals. In September 2024 alone, newspapers reported separate attacks by angry "mobs" at four major hospitals—Dhaka Medical College Hospital, Mugda Medical College Hospital, Cox's Bazar Sadar Hospital, and Shariatpur Sadar Hospital. These do not include the incidents that happen in smaller clinics and health centres in the nooks and crannies of the country.

One of the key challenges is, Bangladesh lacks a unified law addressing medical malpractice. While provisions in the Penal Code, 1860 (Sections 304A, 336-338) and the Consumer Rights Protection Act (CRPA), 2009 (Section 53) offer remedies, enforcement is weak. The burden of proof rests heavily on plaintiffs, requiring expert testimony and facing procedural delays. Besides, the Bangladesh Medical and Dental Council (BMDC) Act, 2010 allows disciplinary action against professionals, but its scope is limited to registration issues of the concerned healthcare facility and practitioners.

Victims often resort to violence or settle out of court due to distrust in the legal system. A 2008 report by Ain O Salish Kendra documented 504 cases of medical negligence between 1995 and 2008, yet few resulted in convictions. There is also a general lack of understanding that in medical practices, adverse outcomes, despite following standard protocols, are not uncommon, even in developed countries. Hence, the difference between negligent misconduct and honest error is often overlooked, creating antipathy towards healthcare providers.

Comparison with India's approach to medical negligence offers instructive insights. While both nations face similar challenges, India's legal framework and judicial precedents provide a more structured pathway for redress.

India explicitly includes healthcare under the term "services," enabling patients to seek compensation through consumer courts. The country also applies the Bolam Test to assess whether a doctor acted in line with peer-approved practices, reducing subjectivity in negligence claims. Besides, bodies like the Maharashtra Medical Council adjudicate complaints, streamlining resolution without prolonged court battles.

In Bangladesh, addressing medical negligence requires a multi-pronged approach combining legal overhaul, institutional strengthening, and cultural shifts as follows: i) codify negligence definitions, compensation standards, and penalties. Include guidelines akin to the UK's Ogden Tables for calculating damages based on injury severity; ii) amend the Consumer Rights Protection Act, 2009. Explicitly classify medical services under "service" provisions to empower consumer courts; iii) establish Quasi-Judicial bodies. Create medical tribunals under the BMDC, which should outline the standard procedures to expedite cases; and iv) separate the responsibility of the doctor and the hospital. A doctor should be held responsible when any professional misconduct is proven by comparing it to the standard procedure. A hospital is accountable, but to what extent (for example, if the incident happened during outdoor practice, etc.), that also needs to be outlined.

Systematic improvements are also required, which includes: mandating a national accreditation system for clinics and hospitals; empowering the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) to penalise unethical practices, including unnecessary tests and kickbacks from pharmaceutical companies; increasing health spending in the GDP; aligning with World Health Organization recommendations; and allocating funds for infrastructure, training, and rural healthcare access.

We should also focus on building trust with transparency by enhancing doctor-patient communication and running public awareness campaigns.

Bangladesh's healthcare situation demands urgent action. By integrating legal rigour, adopting global best practices, fostering institutional accountability, and awareness building, the nation can transform its healthcare landscape. Reforms must prioritise patient safety, equitable access, and trust-building to curb medical tourism and restore faith in local facilities.

The Daily Star Reg. No. DA 781 | EDITOR & PUBLISHER: Mahfuz Anam Printed by him on behalf of Mediaworld Ltd at Transcraft Ltd, 229, Tejgaon Industrial Area, editor@thedailystar.net | Registered & Head Offices: The Daily Star Centre 64-65 Kazi Nazrul Islam Avenue, Dhaka-1215 Phone: 09610222222 | Newsroom: Fax- 58156306 reporting@thedailystar.net | Advertisement: 01711623910 advertisement@thedailystar.net GPO Box: 3257 | Subscription: 01711623906 | thedailystar.net bangla.thedailystar.net/