

The Daily Star

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## Is a woman's death worth less?

Study on female death registration brings out painful reality

We are alarmed to learn of the persistence of a silent injustice that few people still seem to know or care about: the neglect of women when it comes to recording their deaths in Bangladesh. While death registration regardless of gender has yet to catch on in the country, despite efforts to popularise it, women seem to be particularly excluded from this process. A study by the BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health has now revealed how widespread this problem is.

Conducted in Rangpur division, where only 32 percent of all deaths recorded in 2023-24 were of women, the study shows how societal perceptions and systemic hurdles continue to erase them from public records. Some districts are in worse conditions than others. In Panchagarh, for example, just four percent of female deaths were registered. Clearly, the problem is more acute in rural and low-income areas. The BRAC study has identified multiple barriers to registration, including lack of female property ownership. In most families, a woman's death is deemed unworthy of registration unless she owned land or financial assets or had a pension or savings account that could be claimed. As one respondent bluntly put it, "My mother didn't have any land-related matters... that's why I didn't do it." The perception that a woman must leave behind something "useful" to justify her death being recorded is deeply troubling.

Other barriers include low public awareness, limited digital literacy, lack of essential documents such as digital birth certificates, and inefficiencies or coordination failures among relevant government agencies. These social and institutional problems reinforce one another, creating an environment where countless women die without being counted, thus reinforcing the marginalisation they often experience in life. While the lack of death registration is not unique to Bangladesh, with nearly 69 lakh deaths going unregistered every year across Asia and the Pacific, we surely rank among the worst performers. As experts have pointed out, when a death is not recorded, the public health system loses crucial data on causes of death, compromising our ability to respond to health crises.

We, therefore, must ensure that every death—of both men and women—is registered without exception. To that effect, experts have made a number of recommendations that should be taken seriously. First of all, we must raise awareness about the importance of death registration, with specific focus on gender-sensitive messaging. The registration process itself must be simplified and made free of cost, especially for low-income and rural communities. Registration offices should also be better equipped to improve service delivery. Health professionals, who are often the first point of contact when a death occurs, also have a vital role to play as they can inform families about the importance of registration and help them navigate the required procedures.

## Track down the prison escapees

Recover the arms looted during Narsingdi jailbreak

It is deeply concerning that even after a year has passed since the Narsingdi jailbreak on July 19, 2024, the authorities have yet to capture 177 of the 826 inmates who escaped during the incident. Moreover, 28 firearms and over 5,000 rounds of ammunition that were looted at that time have yet to be recovered. Particularly alarming is the fact that there were nine convicted militants among the fugitives. That these hardened criminals, with a large quantity of arms and ammunition in their possession, remain traceless to this day exposes the failure of our intelligence agencies and law enforcement forces, while posing serious security threats to citizens. In fact, it is more than likely that the fugitives have been involved in criminal activities ever since their escape.

Reportedly, on July 19 last year, a group of attackers stormed Narsingdi prison, stole 85 guns and over 8,000 rounds of ammunition from the armoury, set fire to key buildings inside the prison complex, and destroyed thousands of legal documents. After appeals from the local authorities, 649 inmates surrendered voluntarily. Later, law enforcers recovered 57 weapons and 3,000 rounds of ammunition through joint operations, but 177 escapees still remain at large. One may recall that around that time, multiple jailbreaks took place in the country. For instance, just a few days after the Narsingdi incident, 209 inmates escaped from Kashimpur High Security Jail and 94 fled the Kustia jail, both on the same day. After the Narsingdi incident, three investigation committees were reportedly formed by the inspector general of prisons, the Security Services Division, and the district administration. We would like to know what these committees have found and what steps have been taken so far to trace the fugitive criminals and to avoid such incidents in the future.

The importance of tracking down the escapees cannot be stressed enough. We urge the government to also prioritise the recovery of the stolen arms and ammunition, particularly given their security implications ahead of the next election. Equally important is reforming our prison system. Overcrowding, which is a long-standing issue in our jails, including the Narsingdi jail, should be urgently addressed. Moreover, hardened criminals should never be kept in the same wards as general inmates as it increases security risks as well as the threat of radicalisation of ordinary prisoners.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY



### World gets first woman PM

On this day in 1960, politician Sirimavo Bandaranaike became the world's first woman prime minister when she took office in Ceylon (later Sri Lanka).

## BANGLADESH IN TRANSITION: A FORESIGHT OUTLOOK

# A unique approach to looking at the future

This is the first instalment of a three-part series based on a foresight analysis centred on Bangladesh's transition, outlining the context and approach to 'foreseeing' Bangladesh's future a few months ahead.

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"It is better to be roughly right than to be precisely wrong."

A year after the July uprising, the above-mentioned insight by John Maynard Keynes resonates deeply as Bangladesh faces growing restlessness for reforms, political consensus, and national elections amid volatile social, political and economic circumstances. It is maintained that the real risk lies not in being wrong but in acting too late. Anticipating what lies ahead, even if imperfectly,

**The current foresight analysis discusses the possibility of articulating a minimum working consensus for reforms, not their delivery, in the upcoming months. As such, the aim is to anticipate potential developments that may underpin successful articulation of a minimum (working) consensus for reforms ahead of the national elections. It also aims to help identify the potential strategic moves of relevant key actors to realise their respective 'desirable' outcomes.**

articulation of a minimum (working) consensus on reforms look like in the next few months, in the run-up to the national elections? What would be the defining economic, social and political conditions in such a future? What will the roles of key actors be in enabling a pathway to a minimum (working) consensus on reforms?

The current foresight analysis discusses the possibility of articulating a minimum working

this analysis focuses on the period leading up to the national elections. As such, to adapt to "foreseeing" in the short term, the future scenarios are built around social, political and economic factors that are both critical to the country's context and certain in their implications in the coming months. Moreover, given the accelerated pace of national, regional and global change, scenarios may become outdated. To mitigate this,

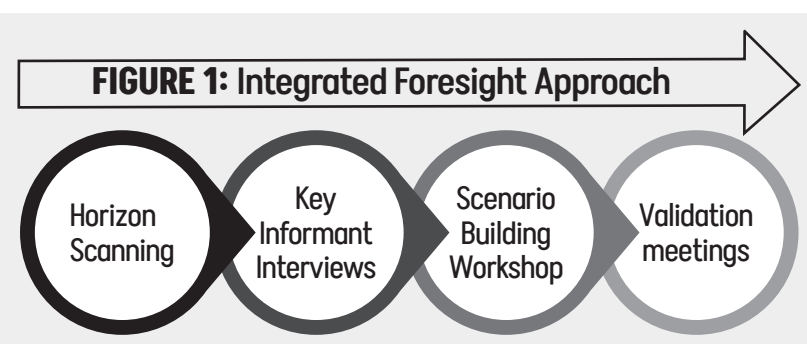
economic one, scoring particularly higher in the areas of "criticality" and "relevance." This was perhaps a reflection of the uncertain and fragmented sociopolitical landscape at the time of the workshop.

More importantly, the close scores of many drivers suggested there was no clear front-runner. In light of this, the experts consolidated the closely scored drivers into two composite drivers: one for economic (horizontal or x-axis) and one for sociopolitical (vertical or y-axis) factors (Figure 2). This approach did not exclude the remaining important drivers; instead, they were incorporated as cross-cutting dynamics shaping each of the plausible future scenarios.

The resulting 4x4 scenario matrix is defined by these two composite drivers. The horizontal axis, Economic Conditions, captures three interrelated elements: the cost of living in Bangladesh; the availability of meaningful jobs; and the extent of labour discontent across the country. It was first debated whether there should be emphasis on the availability of decent jobs. While "decent" jobs typically entail employment that offers minimum wages, job security, and standard worker safety, it is considered not to fully capture the realities of the current job market in Bangladesh. Many of the available jobs are considered not to match the qualifications, skills or expectations of new labour market entrants. As such, many of them experience underemployment or prolonged periods of unemployment due to a lack of meaningful jobs.

The vertical axis, Political Alignment, represents the agreement on scope, sequencing and speed of reforms; a consensus on the timeline for national elections; and the level of inclusivity in electoral processes. Here, "inclusivity" does not only refer to the participation of the immediate past ruling party in the upcoming national elections, but the participation of all political parties to compete and all citizens to vote without fear of repercussions or intimidation.

The scenarios emerging from this exercise offer a lens through which to understand the rapidly shifting sociopolitical landscape within Bangladesh and the future of reforms. The synthesis of economic and sociopolitical drivers into two composite drivers of change—Economic Conditions and Political Alignment—has set the ground for developing four distinct future scenarios. As the country edges closer to the national elections, examining potential future trajectories and recognising the related weak



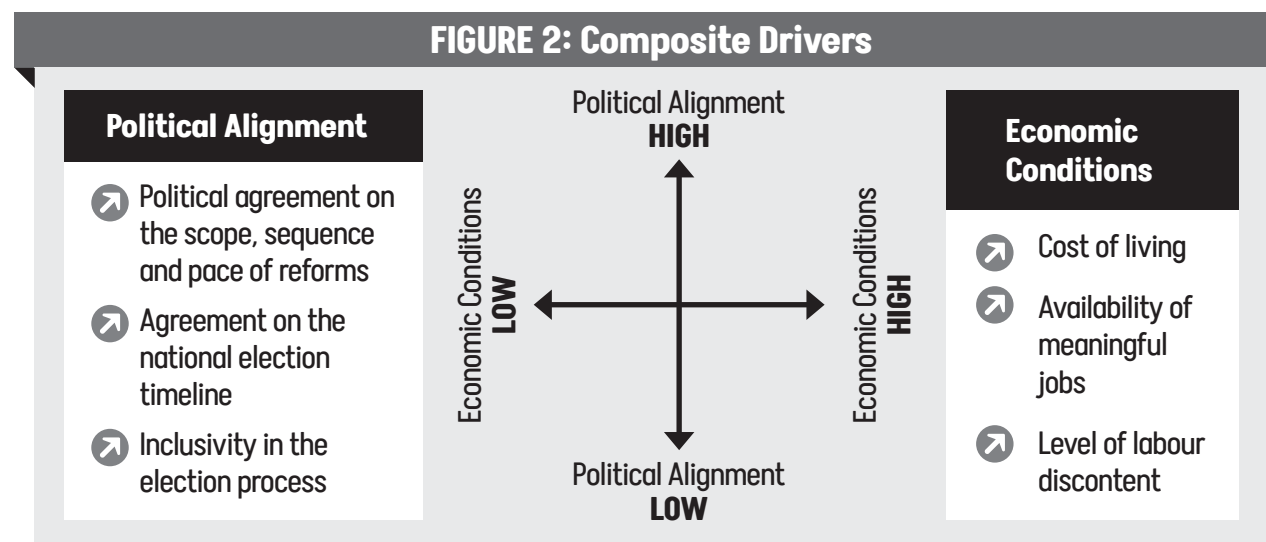
consensus for reforms, not their delivery, in the upcoming months. As such, the aim is to anticipate potential developments that may underpin successful articulation of a minimum (working) consensus for reforms ahead of the national elections. It also aims to help identify the potential strategic moves of relevant key actors to realise their respective "desirable" outcomes.

The critical questions are guided by the assumption that a country's political space and the stability of its economic circumstances are mutually reinforcing—engaged in a dialectical relationship, where each shapes and is shaped by the other. However, in a country where reliable and relevant data and information are scarce, waiting for facts and figures that adequately reflect economic realities risks missing crucial opportunities for timely intervention. Instead of

the future scenarios are continuously validated for relevance through continuous stakeholder engagement and feedback.

The first step, "horizon scanning," involved desk research to identify emerging trends, issues, and "drivers of change"—the underlying domestic or external forces potentially shaping Bangladesh's prospects of articulating a minimum (working) consensus on reforms. Drivers can be said to be the root causes of trends, while a "weak signal" is the early indicator of a trend that has disruptive potential to grow in scale and geographic distribution.

Second, "key informant interviews" were held with experts in the field of politics and governance to supplement horizon scanning. The third step was a "scenario building workshop," which was held in April 2025. This workshop, where we employed the Delphi method, brought together 16



is a better choice than waiting for the "correct" answer in times of high uncertainty. Unprecedented times require an unprecedented approach to "foreseeing" the near future.

The uprising in July-August 2024, sparked by the reinstatement of government job quotas amid dismal job prospects, ended a 15-year authoritarian regime. The country's transition has been uneven since then. On the one hand, several economic indicators have shown improvement, with robust growth in remittance inflows, resilient export growth, and consolidation in foreign exchange reserves. Concurrently, economic performance continued to falter in terms of high inflation, stagnant private investment and sluggish employment. Moreover, law and order concerns persist with frequent episodes of mob violence. Intensifying geopolitical tensions in the region and disruptive developments across the globe (including the new tariff policy US and the war in the Middle East) are amplifying domestic economic uncertainties. Meanwhile, public expectations for national elections are growing, while political fragmentation—if not outright chaos—has only deepened since then.

Nevertheless, with national elections expected in early 2026, there is now a narrow window of opportunity for all state and non-state actors to act on the nation's reform aspirations. The country is confronted with several critical questions: What might the

traditional forecasting, a method that relies on extensive historical data, this analysis uses "foresight." This approach systematically leverages expert and non-expert knowledge and experiences to build potential "futures" and is better suited for data-scarce and volatile environments. There are many foresight approaches, such as horizon scanning, stakeholder analyses, and the Delphi method, which help develop multiple potential futures and explore the various opportunities and challenges that could occur in unpredictable circumstances.

Foresight offers advantages in situations with limited or absent relevant data and evidence, but it also has its fair share of critics. First, it has been criticised for its reliance on subjective judgements and the perceived lack of a coherent theoretical foundation. Second, communicating and engaging stakeholders and decision-makers with findings from a foresight exercise can present challenges. Third, the approach's heavy reliance on qualitative methods has raised concerns about the potential for foresight scenarios to be influenced by biases or specific perspectives.

To tackle these inherent challenges, we employed an "integrated" foresight approach, combining horizon scanning, Delphi survey, and a scenario building workshop (Figure 1). Typically, foresight is used for building future scenarios at least 10-30 years into the future; however,

(multidisciplinary) experts spanning economists, political analysts and politicians, and representatives from the private sector as well as civil society and NGOs. These experts came together to develop multiple plausible (future) scenarios, along with associated opportunities, challenges and strategic options. However, it is worth noting that the scenarios developed reflect the information and context available at the time of their development.

Finally, a set of dedicated "validation meetings" began with a session with a broad group of international development partners, followed by separate meetings with three groups of leading political parties. These meetings provided the final inputs for fine-tuning the scenarios obtained.

From extensive horizon scanning, key informant interviews, and expert feedback during the scenario-building workshop, 34 drivers—13 economic and 21 sociopolitical drivers—were identified. Experts scored each driver in two rounds across three dimensions: i) how "certain" is this driver to produce an outcome within the next 6 months?; ii) how "critical" is this driver in the context of Bangladesh's current sociopolitical and economic landscape?; and iii) how relevant is this driver to influence or shape the articulation of a minimum working reform consensus?

Curiously, the higher-ranked drivers were mostly from the sociopolitical group rather than the

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signals may help key actors not only anticipate the future but also act in time to shape it. The second instalment will unpack four different future scenarios that may emerge, along with the early signs of change—or weak signals—that may suggest the future trajectory we may be headed towards. Some scenarios may emerge as the most desirable future, marked by stability, while others may be completely improbable. Others may be closer to reality than they appear.

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