

Democratising the economy for all



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The interim government inherited a broken economy from the toppled regime, which had collapsed due to people's wrath. Serving its oligarchic clientele, the deposed regime, severed from the people's hopes and desires, robbed the economy to the point of brink.

From this suffering, the people rose in defiance against fascism. Their resistance, forged in the fires of disappearances, killings, and state terror, finally erupted in the July uprising last year. The working class and students stained the streets with their own blood in the uprising, as they sought liberation from the unrelenting crisis. The regime's brutality left deep scars.

Since 2008, a cabal of politicians, bureaucrats and business people nurtured an economy of patronage, a system where the spoils flowed to the connected while the majority languished. Institutions were hollowed out, democratic rights suffocated, and accountability tossed aside like inconvenient truths. Through the concentration of power, an extractive economic order was imposed.

The current arrangement, born of that political order, structures the economy as a gated fortress, excluding the public from meaningful participation. As a result, unemployment continues to rise. Youth unemployment has reached intolerable levels while new waves of poverty crash upon households.

Investment is stagnant; without investment, there can be no jobs. Real wages are falling. People can barely cope as inflation erodes their earnings. Social cohesion is fraying. Workers' lives have hit rock bottom. These circumstances cause inequality to thrive. Bangladesh, full of potential, continues to stumble in its journey to become a democratic state for all.



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

Breakdown and repair

The interim government cannot be expected to fully restore the economy. Yet, it has taken steps. Inflation has slightly eased. Foreign exchange reserves have increased due to higher official remittance inflow, growth in exports, external loans, and lower imports. Reforms have begun in banking oversight and legal frameworks.

The outgoing regime's budget should have been revised immediately after the

interim authority took charge. Given the absence of a parliament after the uprising, ordinances were issued under Article 93(3) of the constitution to pass the budget and related statutes. The government has held talks with political parties; it could have engaged with them on the budget. There remain deficits in the constitution concerning the people's sovereignty over public finance. A dialogue could have

helped create the blueprint of a budget-related reform agenda. The economy remains a ship adrift. According to preliminary estimates by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, GDP growth in FY2024-25 stands at 3.97 percent, the lowest in two decades outside the Covid period. Tax collection is just 7.2 percent of GDP. The NBR tax-GDP ratio fell by 0.66 percentage points compared to last year. Debt servicing has climbed. The

poverty and inequality could worsen. By 2025, national poverty could reach 22.9 percent, with extreme poverty at 9.3 percent, resulting in three million new poor. Labour demand has shrunk greatly, and private sector hiring has declined, while domestic investment remains frozen. Day labourers, farm workers, and transport workers are bleeding income. Women, especially in informal sectors, are the worst hit. According to the International Labour

Organization (ILO), from 2013 to 2022, the working-age population grew by 1.5 percent annually, while employment growth was a mere 0.2 percent. Unemployment continues to rise at an alarming rate.

From crisis to transformation

The road ahead cannot be paved with band-aid solutions. Structural bottlenecks must be addressed at the root. Massive job creation is essential. Young people must be integrated into the labour force with fair wages. Otherwise, the demographic dividend will indefinitely remain out of reach.

New waves of investment and an industrial policy built on diversification, competitiveness and productivity, rather than cheap labour, can generate jobs. But transformation is not possible without a skill-based and future-ready education system. Education must prepare young people not just to survive, but to thrive.

Structural reforms demand a coherent medium and long-term strategy. But no long-term reform can be truly realised without political legitimacy.

What the economy needs more than emergency repair is democratisation. Democratising the economy is not the job of an interim caretaker. It must be carried out by a government elected by, and accountable to, the people. The longer this transition drags, the more fragile reforms become.

Investors do not gamble in twilight; they wait for sunrise. That is why the most urgent task is to return power to the people through free, fair, and inclusive elections. Only a legitimate government can inspire trust, ensure policy stability, and create the conditions for meaningful transformation.

The interim government's historic task will be complete only when it ensures a peaceful transfer of power. The election must not be treated as a procedural formality, but as a democratic necessity.

The economy is not just about interest rates or revenue targets. It is about people and their right to shape their future. Reclaiming that right is the most profound economic incentive and stimulus. It is time for the people to have their say, and for the journey of transformation to begin through democratic practice.

Symbolism isn't enough: What Bangladesh can and must do now



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Twelve months after the uprising that upended Bangladesh's political landscape, the interim government (IG) has successfully sustained a fragile stability—steady food prices, a functioning budget, a stabilised foreign reserve, etc. We may recall that, during its first 100 days, the government made symbolic strides that hinted at a new direction. From stabilising central bank reserves to enabling peaceful religious celebrations and reopening universities, these gestures signalled a break from fear-based governance. Equally significant was the return of robust criticism across media and social platforms, suggesting that democratic discourse had regained public space.

On the diplomatic front, a former diplomat emphasised that "the government managed to maintain a coalition that included student leaders, reformist bureaucrats, and mainstream political actors while still keeping lines open to key international players." An expatriate pointed to dialogues with China and Pakistan as part of an effort

to diversify Bangladesh's diplomatic options. Prof Yunus's August 2024 speech struck a hopeful chord: transparency, justice, and national healing. The symbolic steps hinted at a new trajectory.

Symbolism, however, alone cannot sustain legitimacy, especially in a nation that rose to transform after waiting for meaningful change for so long. People did not expect quick fixes, but many hoped Prof Yunus would serve not merely as an international figurehead, but as a principled pragmatist—capable of translating vision into action for a new Bangladesh. A year later, for many, the outcomes have fallen short of those expectations.

One of the biggest failures, several observers agreed, was the IG's inability to deliver a clear, timely, and actionable agenda. "They needed to speak to the nation—not with ambiguity, but with urgency and honesty—about the state of collapse they inherited," said one entrepreneur. That early silence allowed rumours to fester, opposing forces to regroup, and public expectations to spiral.

Admittedly, the IG inherited a deeply compromised bureaucracy. "The fascist players are everywhere—from academia to the courts," said a senior civil servant. The government's quiet resistance has slowed down even the most well-intended reforms. "Despite scattered initiatives—from repatriation of siphoned money to anti-graft investigations—there has been little public evidence of breakthrough reforms," said another person.

Justice, too, has faltered. "The IG should've gone for something like a Nuremberg-style tribunal—quick, symbolic, and decisive," lamented a retired academic. Instead, the system allowed many perpetrators to fade into bureaucratic anonymity. A leading physician echoed this frustration, observing that the momentum of the uprising was squandered when its youth leaders were "absorbed into a king's party framework," derailing their credibility and weakening the movement's long-term prospects. The failure to adequately address the needs of injured revolutionaries and victims' families remains a moral blemish. "We cannot build a new Bangladesh by forgetting those who bled for it," said one technocrat.

Leadership style has also drawn pointed critiques. "Dr Yunus is too academic, too symbolic. He seems more concerned with his private legacy than reshaping the nation's future," said one expatriate. While some credited him with using his global stature to inhibit a military takeover, others questioned his lack of decisiveness. The core advisory

team, many noted, remains drawn from a tight personal circle—well-meaning but lacking the depth and practical governance experience needed for a nation in flux. "This required political savvy and pragmatic muscle," said one tech entrepreneur.

I likened this journey of the IG to the metaphorical road from Tetulia to Teknaf—a long path toward democratic and institutional reform. It is supposed to be difficult. However, the IG seems stuck in Bogura, losing momentum and direction.

Those who hold a hopeful vision for Bangladesh believe that it should use this moment not just to move beyond international dependency, but also to bridge the divide between elites and working people by investing in innovation-led development that delivers tangible benefits for all. However, the sceptics are more cautious. "The same corrupt networks could return, wearing new masks," warned an expatriate physician.

The IG has yet to show that it grasps this divide between elites and the working class, let alone how to close it. After decades of political betrayal, people are sceptical. Earlier, when advisers responded directly to protests by our injured heroes, offering compensation and rehabilitation, some of this scepticism began to thaw. But that momentum has since been stalled. Without a transparent mechanism, the moral contract between the state and citizen remains fragile.

A revitalised Bangladesh must translate symbols into actionable systems. First,

the IG must prioritise credible electoral reform. This includes codifying term limits, establishing a clear and binding electoral calendar, and guaranteeing the independence and resourcing of the Election Commission.

Second, the restoration of law and order must move beyond elite enclaves. For too many citizens, daily life remains shaped by extortion, harassment, and fear—often at the hands of local enforcers, complicit officials, or political thugs. The IG must dismantle protection rackets, ensure impartial policing, and make the rule of law visible where it matters most: in the lives of the working poor.

Third, the youth who sparked the uprising must be heard. Student unions such as DUCSU must be freed from party patronage and revitalised as platforms for civic engagement and democratic oversight.

The uprising brought down a regime, but regime change is not transformation. In August 2024, the country stood united in its demand for justice. A year later, that unity has splintered into political horse trading while public frustration is growing. Dreams of a just and inclusive Bangladesh 2.0 now compete with fears of returning to the tyranny people rose to reject.

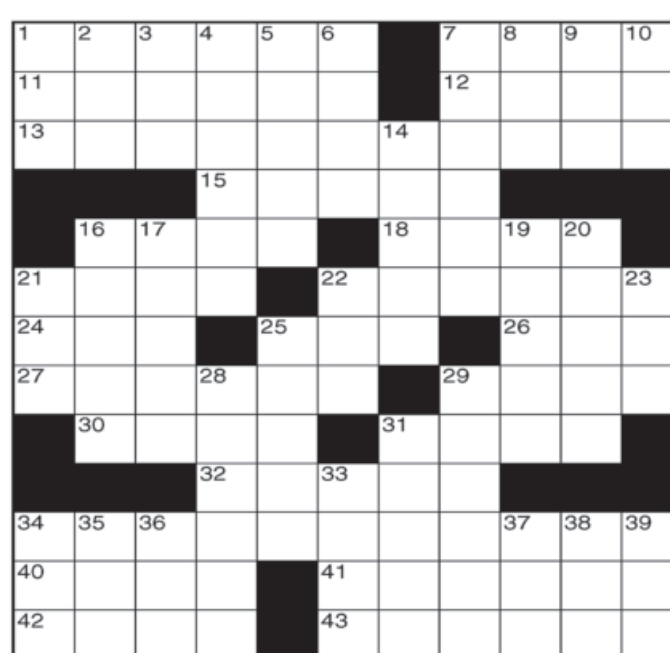
Whether this moment becomes a turning point or a lost opportunity will depend on whether the IG delivers more than symbolism. At the core, there must be functional electoral and constitutional reforms.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
1 Low points
7 Kalfiyeh wearer
11 Broad street
12 Long skirt
13 Supported
15 Debate topic
16 "In - veritas"
18 Golf bunker
21 Join the choir
22 Latitude
24 Refinery supply
25 Black goo
26 " - you for real?"
27 Sack material
29 Sacred chests
30 Mix up
31 Entreaty

- 32 Shopworn
34 Reactivated
40 Words of understanding
41 Canada's capital
42 Rock group
43 Put online
- DOWN**
1 Arrest
2 Gardner of movies
3 Last mo.
4 Comic book work
5 Rene of "Get Shorty"
6 Collections
7 Current unit
8 Grammys category
9 Chopping tool
10 Bridge action
14 External

- 16 Computer woe
17 Like argon
19 In the know
20 Winter coat
21 Cry loudly
22 Napkin spot
23 "You bet!"
25 Bakery buys
28 Had a speech problem
29 Tips off
31 Student of Socrates
33 On the pinnacle of
34 Triangular sail
35 "Born in the -"
36 Fellows
37 Skin art, for short
38 She sheep
39 Pop



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

