

Don't leave urban poor in the cold

Govt must rebalance social safety allocations to tackle urban poverty

The paradox of Bangladesh's rapid urbanisation is becoming increasingly evident. Despite a continuous influx of people into towns and cities, social protection schemes remain largely rural-focused, leaving the urban poor and vulnerable dangerously exposed. These schemes are insufficient and misaligned with the country's demographic and internal migration realities, according to a new report from the think tank Research and Policy Integration for Development (RAPID).

Towns and cities—home to a burgeoning population grappling with the acute challenges of joblessness, housing insecurity, and rising living costs—account for only one fifth of the total beneficiaries of government social protection schemes, as per RAPID. While these programmes were originally created to combat rural poverty and vulnerability to natural disasters, they have failed to evolve at the pace of the nation's development. As a result, the exclusion rate for extremely poor households in urban areas stands at a staggering 64 percent, far exceeding the national average.

This imbalance is visible across key areas. For instance, education stipends at both the primary and secondary levels overwhelmingly benefit rural households. The same applies to allowances targeting widows, deserted women, persons with disabilities, and elderly citizens, with over 80 percent of recipients in most of these schemes residing in rural areas. There are exceptions, of course, such as pensions for retired government employees and allowances for freedom fighters, which have a larger share of urban recipients, but even then, rural beneficiaries remain significant. This is a serious policy gap, and it is widening.

While the government acknowledges the problem and claims to have plans to address it, the scale of the challenge is immense. The 23 schemes currently designated for the urban poor account for a mere four percent of the total social protection budget, while programmes for rural areas claim 27 percent. The government's own assessment suggests it is spending about \$1 billion annually on social protection in urban areas, yet the actual need is estimated to be seven to eight times that amount.

Besides funding constraints, the social protection programmes are often undermined by targeting errors and inadequate benefit levels, diminishing their impact on poverty. Resources are often misdirected, failing to reach the most vulnerable. To bridge this gap, the government must undertake a substantial policy shift, recognising that the face of poverty is changing as rural populations migrate to urban centres following natural disasters and river erosion. With its 560 urban centres, including 330 municipalities and city corporations, the country needs to rebalance its strategy to acknowledge the growing urban poverty. A modern social protection system requires a comprehensive, data-driven approach that aligns spending with these new realities and the evolving needs of both its rural and urban populations.

Assault, harassment of journos must stop

No visible step has been taken to ensure their safety

It is a shame that harassment and violence against journalists persist in the country despite the ousting of Sheikh Hasina's authoritarian regime that had taken the suppression of press and speech to unprecedented extremes. According to an estimate by the Human Rights Support Society (HRSS), violence against journalists doubled in August 2025 compared to the previous month, with at least 72 journalists affected. Among them, one was murdered, 33 were injured, five assaulted, 11 threatened, and one arrested.

Such incidents have been quite recurring. Just weeks ago, we called for better protection and safety for journalists following the killing of Asaduzzaman Tuhin and the brutal assault on Anwar Hossain in Gazipur; both were on duty when attacked. Such attacks were not just by miscreants; there were also mob attacks on media houses and journalists. The most glaring example is the incident that took place inside the Dhaka Reporters' Unity (DRU) on August 28, where a mob pounced on speakers at a roundtable. But instead of arresting the disruptors, police detained journalist Monjurul Alam Panna under the Anti Terrorism Act, along with former Awami League MP Abdul Latif Siddiqui and Dhaka University professor Sheikh Hafizur Rahman Karzon. What is even more concerning is that a TV journalist covering Panna's case in court was assaulted by several lawyers on Thursday.

The hostility being shown towards journalists goes beyond the physical. Their integrity is also continuously questioned, and their work often vilified. At a meeting on Wednesday, the Editors' Council rightly condemned the August 28 incident, and expressed concerns that the government's proposed Journalist Protection Act, drafted during the AL era, might retain provisions that undermine press freedom. It goes without saying that journalists were among the most affected groups during the AL regime.

While it appears that space for dissent has opened under the interim government, the reality for journalists remains grim. A suicide note left by senior journalist Bibhuranjan Sarker last month exposed the harsh conditions media professionals face. They continue to feel pressured to comply with various political parties, security forces, and corporate entities. No tangible steps have been taken to secure their safety, job security, or create an environment where they can work without fear of assault, harassment, or intimidation. The media reform commission's report, which proposed changes that could positively impact the community, also remains unimplemented. We, therefore, urge the government to expedite efforts to implement these recommendations so that journalists' safety and professional freedom can be safeguarded.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Mother Teresa dies

On this day in 1997, Mother Teresa, who was awarded the 1979 Nobel Peace Prize for her charitable work with the poor, especially in India, passed away in Calcutta (Kolkata) at age 87.

EDITORIAL

Why are we trying to make the election uncertain?

Partisan interests are being pushed above those of the people



THE THIRD VIEW

Mahfuz Anam
is the editor and publisher of
The Daily Star.

MAHFUZ ANAM

Once again, our politics is back at the stage where it has mostly been: self-destructive. As before, our political parties are trying to impose their partisan interests above those of the people. Once again, all sorts of untested demands are being made, threatening language is dominating what otherwise should be a discourse, and, most sadly, the most vital institution of democracy—a free and fair election—is being made uncertain. Many of us knew it, some of us allowed our optimism to ignore it, but now the chief adviser himself is warning us against it.

During a meeting with some political parties on Tuesday, Prof Muhammad Yunus warned that "those who do not want the interim government to reach the stage of election will obstruct the process in every possible way... Their utmost efforts will be to foil the election and create such a situation that the election cannot be held."

Are we back to square one? If so, why? Why are we falling into the same old trap, getting entangled in the same web of confusion and self-interest? Sadly, we are repeating the mistakes we made before—playing with the polls.

If we are to make any progress, we have to learn from our past mistakes, and most relevantly, learn from Sheikh Hasina's. We don't miss a single opportunity to term her regime fascist, in many ways deservedly so. But then why don't we think twice when we try to repeat some of her fascistic actions? Arbitrary arrests, keeping people imprisoned for months (in many cases, for nearly a year) without an inch of progress in investigation, stigmatising anyone who disagrees as the "enabler of fascism," endorsing mob violence—the list goes on. We justifiably condemned past politicisation of bureaucracy, but now we are replacing officials who are loyal to the other side. It is just a change of guards and beneficiaries, not of the system.

Our focus today is on the demand to ban Jatiya Party and partners of the Awami League-led 14-party alliance. Gen Yahya Khan banned the Awami League (AL) when he launched Operation Searchlight and started the genocide in March 1971. In 1972, all religion-based parties including Jamaat-e-Islami were banned. The Purbo Banglar Sarbarha Party and Purbo Banglar Communist Party, two Maoist extremist parties, were banned under the Special Powers Act, 1974. In January 1975, with the formation of

Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League (BAKSAL), all political parties including the AL were banned. In 2005, Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) was banned. Four days before her fall, on August 1, 2024, Sheikh Hasina banned Jamaat and Islami Chhatra Shibir, which were reinstated by the interim government; both are now big players in our politics.

Have these bans ever worked? Should such a practice be allowed to continue? The recent ban on AL's activities took place surrounding former President

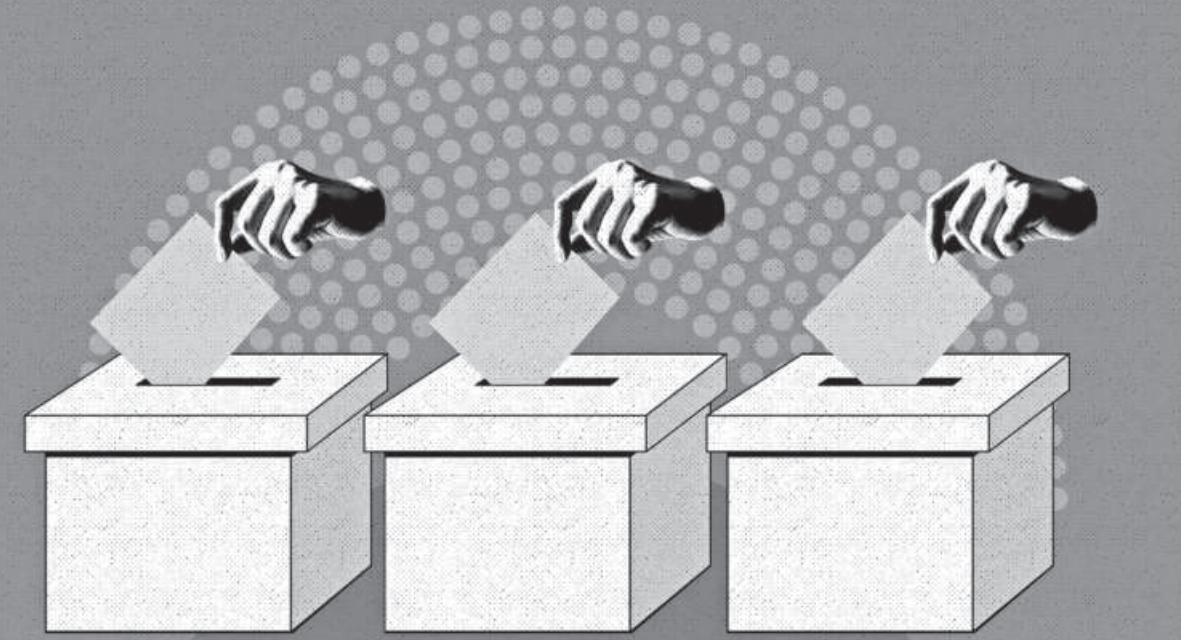
as opposing us banned? JP has been a political party for many years. It was the ruling party under its founder HM Ershad and a major opposition party during both Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina regimes.

Let us recall here that a grand alliance of political parties led the mass movement in the 1980s and toppled Ershad—who was the supreme villain to all—and his party from power in December 1990. But the grand alliance did not ban Ershad, who contested from prison and won seats from five constituencies, or JP, which got 35 seats in the parliament that followed.

If there are specific evidence against JP leaders and those from the AL-led alliance who took illegal and undue benefits from the former prime minister, then let specific and evidence-based charges—not the type that we regrettably see now—be brought against them, let a fair trial take place and punish them accordingly.

democracy and have seen how we have been prevented from establishing it by parties too focused on power rather than national interests. Every political party has the freedom to make their own calculations and forge alliances to win an election, and strengthen their position within parliament. But to demand the ban of a party or parties just so that the opposition's vote don't get registered is no less anti-democratic.

All political parties must understand that the best option for Bangladesh today is to hold a proper, free and fair election and move towards a representative government with an elected parliament as the repository of people's will. An election is not only necessary to chalk out our political future but also to determine our economic march forward. Without the election, there will be no confidence-building, which is a precondition for both domestic and foreign investment.



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

Abdul Hamid's trip to Thailand for health reasons. Rumours spread that Hamid's trip on medical grounds was a ploy and that he would try to revive AL from outside the country. The former president returned to the country, now basically bed-ridden, proving that the rumours were baseless and contrived. But AL stands functionally banned.

Now, as the election time appears clear, the demand for banning Jatiya Party (JP) has been raised. The reason: because the JP allowed the Hasina regime's "legitimacy" by participating in the elections. For the same reason, the parties that were under the fold of the AL-led alliance must also be banned, as the claim goes.

Is this how we are going to hold an inclusive, free and fair election, one that Prof Yunus said would be the best in our history? So we want an election with the parties whom we see

The point we are making is that the demand for banning JP and members of AL-led alliance during Hasina's regime will not only discredit our claims to rebuild democracy, but also destroy the credibility of the scheduled February 2026 election.

Some observers believe that the demand to ban JP and others is not springing from love for justice and fairness, but from cool-headed political calculations of occupying the opposition's chair in the new parliament. Those who are demanding the ban calculate that the JP may emerge as the main opposition. So nipa that prospect in the bud.

We are pointing this out not because we have any love for JP, a party that triggered corruption in the early 80s and one we always found to be opportunistic and devoid of ethical values, but because we love that prospect in the bud.

And without investment, there will be no job creation. Remember the quota movement, which was related to jobs, and which laid the foundation for the July uprising. Lack of jobs will only perpetuate the deep resentment and frustration that afflict our youth. Many indicators show that we are slipping backwards in areas where we registered impressive growth before. Our employment is falling, poverty is rising, quality education is sliding, crime and lack of security rising, and women's rights backsliding.

Those who are working to prevent the election should question themselves as to how the people will be empowered without one. There is only one way to start the rejuvenation process, and that is to give power to the people so that they can determine who will govern us and be answerable to us.

The internet is making us reactionary



Nawshin Flora
is a writer and poet based in Dhaka.

NAWSHIN FLORA

Once upon a time, the internet was a beautiful place to foster connections with strangers, engage in forums dedicated to niche interests, and discover critical information. That version of the internet has long been dead. Today, the internet, and social media in particular, has become a poisoned well for our psyche, doing more harm than good. What was once a medium for connecting with like-minded people and sharing tidbits of our lives has turned into a nightmare for our safety with the rise of the surveillance state. Everything we cherished about the internet of our childhood and teenage years has faded into obscurity.

In this hyper-fast technological era, where two days offline means missing an entire discourse, it has become rare for us to look up from our dopamine-inducing devices and notice what's happening around us. We now live in a perpetual present, with no respite for our minds. Boredom has vanished, replaced by constant distraction as

we chase the next easily accessible dopamine hit. Our hands are conditioned to reach for our phones the moment we wake. We share every milestone, hundreds of photos from family holidays, and every scrap of information that makes us who we are.

Getting addicted to things has always been easy for us, whether opium, gambling or internet use. Validation on social media is a low-hanging fruit, yet many of us are desperate for it and often mistake it for genuine connection. "Touch grass" has become an insult because so many of us live inside our phones, our identities reduced to pixels on social media platforms, searching for connection with someone thousands of miles away. We yearn to belong to a group to deflect from the horrors of the surveillance state. Everything we cherished about the internet of our childhood and teenage years has faded into obscurity.

The most unnerving part of today's internet is that it makes us reactionary. Social media algorithms are designed to keep us hooked with small doses of dopamine, while flooding our timelines with news designed to anger or upset us. The idea that we must have opinions on everything under the sun is pernicious, uncharitable, and leaves little space for nuance, particularly as the lines blur between the virtual and the real in a world of growing surveillance. Not every breaking story warrants a reaction. In fact, it is unnatural to feel five different emotions in the span of 60 seconds. Increasingly, we cannot even sit with our emotions anymore.

Social media often brings out the worst in people, with the anonymity of many platforms fuelling hostility towards strangers. Consuming hate-filled content poisons our hearts with apathy towards those who may not look or think like us. Engaging only with news and content that affirm our beliefs, while attacking those who challenge them, sets us up for failure. The internet becomes an echo chamber, fuelled by the aggressive algorithms of tech companies, for whom users are nothing more than free products generating endless data to sell to third parties. This dynamic

makes people oblivious and insensitive to cultural norms and realities outside their own bubbles. We already see its consequences: consent for mob violence is manufactured online, with truth distorted and marginalised groups targeted.

Overconsumption of mindless content has already shortened attention spans and deteriorated cognitive function—so much so that the 2024 Oxford Word of the Year was "brain rot," describing the intellectual decline of the chronically online. On top of this, the rise of AI-generated images has worsened the disinformation crisis—no one knows what is real anymore. Worse still, the phenomenon of "AI chatbot psychosis" has fuelled a surge in mental health crises. People with no history of illness are suffering psychosis and breakdowns, while for those with serious mental health conditions, interacting with AI chatbots is proving even more dangerous.

While social media remains a useful tool for staying informed and for community organising, its drawbacks now far outweigh the benefits. We have allowed a device designed to erode cognitive function to steal our time. The profit margins of companies like Meta and X depend on users having knee-jerk reactions to the mildest transgressions. So, before we lose the last remaining shred of our sanity, perhaps it's time we log off and reconnect with people in real life.