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

Critical rights reviews reveal systemic failures

Govt must improve law and order as election approaches

It is quite unfortunate that the practice of reviewing human rights has become contentious after Press Secretary Shafiqul Alam recently questioned the methodology of rights groups compiling data on the law and order situation. Controversially, Alam blamed the media for inflating rights violations, as it has "received very great freedom" under the interim government, which he said was evident in rights groups' estimations based on media sources. Such an assertion presumes that the government's own account—that the reality "is much better" than being portrayed—is more credible than that of witnesses, victims, NGOs, or independent journalists. This is dangerous because the state is not a neutral observer but a party to the very story being told, with a vested interest in managing its image. One may recall how the Awami League government similarly insisted, against evidence, on its record of human rights defence.

The reason we allude to this episode is the release of another unflattering rights review, not unlike the one unveiled in the press secretary's presence. While we don't think human rights reporting is above mistakes or flawed interpretations, the fact that similarly alarming numbers are surfacing makes critical assessments more realistically grounded than the government would have us believe. According to just-released data from the Human Rights Support Society (HRSS), between January and September, at least 107 people were killed in political violence and 130 others in mob beatings. While both surveys—covering different periods—acknowledged improvements in terms of enforced disappearances and crossfire killings, their overall findings make any complacency misplaced given the persistently high occurrence of other violent crimes.

The HRSS, for instance, has documented 239 incidents of mob violence and 692 incidents of political clashes, most stemming from internal feuds within the BNP and its affiliated organisations. Meanwhile, 1,511 women and girls reportedly faced violence—663 of them victims of rape, including 393 children, with at least 152 gang-raped and 19 killed afterwards. During the same period, at least 340 journalists were subjected to murder, torture, or harassment. There were also considerable numbers of deaths in custody, attacks on religious minorities, shrines, and mazars, violent border incidents involving India's Border Security Force, and incidents of violence against workers. Tellingly, even Human Rights Watch—one of the international bodies cited by Shafiqul Alam to validate rights violation claims—has recently warned that the government is "increasingly using" the recently amended counterterrorism law to arrest alleged supporters of the ousted regime.

True, the government's failure alone cannot account for the full range of these violations, as there are many other actors and underlying influences. But it is ultimately the state's responsibility to ensure justice and protect all citizens. This responsibility cannot be deflected by questioning research methodologies or drawing convenient comparisons with AL-era crime figures and state-sponsored abuses. What we are currently witnessing is largely the fallout of persistent systemic failures that the government was expected—but ultimately failed—to address. This must be fixed. With the country approaching its next election, we urge the government to double down on improving law and order through stringent measures, regardless of the identities of the perpetrators.

Empower local govt for inclusive growth

Job and industrial growth must be even across regions

The World Bank's (WB) latest Bangladesh Development Update offers both a promising and cautionary picture of the country's growth trajectory. The report identifies a "trident-shaped" growth corridor, stretching across Dhaka, Chattogram and Rangpur, which captures how Bangladesh's industrial and job growth has become increasingly concentrated along a few economic poles, highlighting a polarised growth trend where certain urban centres are thriving and others remain left behind. The spatial concentration of industry has thus intensified regional disparities. This uneven progress, if unaddressed, risks straining existing infrastructure and constraining inclusive economic progress.

The WB study attributes the growth pattern to market-driven "bottom-up" forces, which often outpaced planning and infrastructure support. While this unregulated expansion enabled rapid absorption of labour and investment, it has also created congestion and pressure in Dhaka and Chattogram, pushing industrial development to suburban and peri-urban areas with fewer services. Municipalities like Madhabdi-Narsingdi, Brahmanbaria, and Noakhali have seen notable industrial spillovers, yet their growth remains uneven. Meanwhile, Export Processing Zones (EPZs), such as Mongla in Bagerhat and Uttara in Nilphamari, struggle to attract investors despite incentives, reflecting a misalignment between policy focus and actual economic activity. The WB identifies this as a major "policy blind spot," meaning urban development policies have not evolved in tandem with actual growth patterns.

This geographic disparity is mirrored in social outcomes. According to WB, labour force participation has fallen from 60.9 percent to 58.9 percent, with women disproportionately affected, and poverty has risen between 2023 and 2024. The WB cautions that sustained growth alone will not ensure inclusive prosperity unless it is paired with spatially-aware planning, infrastructure development, and targeted investment in emerging regional centres. Strengthening local governance and enhancing the fiscal and technical capacities of municipalities are critical for enabling efficient, decentralised development.

Bangladesh's projected GDP growth of 4.8 percent in FY26, rising to 6.3 percent in FY27, reflects a positive trajectory, but the opportunity to convert growth into inclusive development is time-sensitive. Empowering secondary cities to host manufacturing and service hubs, improving transport connectivity, and fostering cluster economies can relieve congestion in core urban areas while reducing the east-west divide in industrialisation. Bold spatial strategies, fiscal discipline, and investment in human capital are essential to ensure inclusive job growth across regions, particularly for youth and women seeking formal employment. Without such reforms, long-term economic resilience could be undermined.

Has the interim government delivered on climate as expected?

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Over a year has passed since the interim government took office under a Nobel laureate whose widely recognised "Three Zeros" concept placed the environment at its centre, envisioning a world with zero net carbon emissions as the foundation for sustainable and equitable growth. Climate activists had high hopes as, for the first time, a globally prominent environmental advocate was leading a country facing urgent climate crises, with the environment ministry entrusted to one of its most respected environmentalists. Activists worldwide closely followed the government's actions, anticipating dynamism and innovation in confronting Bangladesh's pressing challenges. Now, as elections approach, the question remains: how far has the government met these expectations in addressing climate change, and what lessons might it leave for the next administration?

When the interim government assumed office, Bangladesh had already integrated climate and environmental priorities into national planning, beginning with the Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan in 2009 and advancing to the Mujib Climate Prosperity Plan 2022-2041. In FY 2023-24, a total of 917 projects had been launched under the Climate Change Trust Fund. Solar power had expanded rapidly, with more than six million home systems installed in off-grid areas, bringing electricity to rural households. Cyclone preparedness had also improved, with new shelters and stronger early warning systems reducing fatalities from hundreds of thousands in 1991 to only a few dozen in recent severe storms. Yet, serious challenges persisted: limited fiscal space, reliance on loan-based financing, unchecked pollution, and weak enforcement of environmental regulations. The World Bank's 2022 Country Climate and Development report identifies near-term policy and investment priorities and highlights the need to build institutional capacity to deliver on climate commitments, underlining that strategy is not enough without resource mobilisation and effective governance.

In this context, the interim government's climate actions can be assessed across four key environment and climate governance domains: (a) energy transition, (b) climate finance, (c) pollution control and conservation, and (d) disaster resilience.

Regarding energy transition, public expectations were high that the interim government would phase out costly quick rental power plants and accelerate renewable expansion. Instead, its decision to retain rentals sparked controversy for prolonging dependence on expensive fossil-fuel-based electricity rather than moving towards a clean energy shift. The draft Renewable Energy Policy 2025, which sets ambitious targets of 20 percent renewable power by 2030 and 30 pecent by 2041, has drawn scrutiny. The draft lacks structural support, adequate financing, and clear implementation strategies, cautioning that without critical revisions, the draft policy risks being another well-intentioned but ineffective document.

With regards to climate finance, the government secured significant international support, including $900 million from the World Bank for climate resilience and sustainable urban infrastructure and $270 million for flood recovery. Domestically, the 2025-26 budget earmarked Tk 41,208 crore for climate-related activities, amounting to over 10 percent of the total national budget and 0.67 percent of the GDP. Compare this climate finance's share of the GDP in FY20, which was 0.81 percent. The environment ministry, most directly responsible for climate governance, received only Tk 1,380 crore, or about 0.3 percent of the national budget, an amount widely viewed as inadequate. Compounding the challenge, most of the international funds came as loans rather than grants, raising concerns about debt sustainability.

In terms of pollution control and conservation, the government's steps have been largely symbolic, producing little real impact. It announced a ban on single-use plastics in government offices and introduced limited enforcement measures in public spaces. Nationwide plastic use continues to climb in the absence of a comprehensive regulatory framework. The government also launched drives to evict illegal encroachers from forest land, yet these have been sporadic and narrow in scope, with little lasting effect on conservation. Meanwhile, the "white stone" extraction and looting in Sylhet triggered controversy, exposing weak governance and lax enforcement in forest and mineral conservation.

Meanwhile, in disaster resilience, the government pledged significant climate funds for embankments, shelters, and early warning systems. However, in reality, delivery has been uneven, with resources tied up in bureaucracy and a disproportionate share directed toward large visible infrastructure rather than community-based adaptation.

In conclusion, the interim government's record on climate change reveals more symbolism than substance. Its activist credentials and high-profile pledges raised hopes of a transformative shift, but progress on the ground has not been as expected or much different from those in previous regimes. Bangladesh continues to demonstrate strong leadership on climate justice at the global stage, but domestically, the gap between promise and delivery remains wide. As elections approach, the real challenge lies in whether the next leadership can move beyond ambitious rhetoric and demonstrate the statesmanship needed to deliver tangible outcomes for communities on the frontlines of climate change.

Despite a ban on single-use plastics, nationwide plastic use continues to climb in the absence of a comprehensive regulatory framework.
FILE PHOTO: STAR

The real test of our progress begins after LDC graduation

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In November 2026, Bangladesh is set to graduate from the United Nations' Least Developed Country (LDC) category. It is a moment many have called historic—a badge of honour earned through decades of hard work and resilience. An economy once synonymous with famine and aid dependency has become the world's second-largest garment exporter, lifting millions out of poverty in the process.

But celebrating the graduation without addressing the challenges that come with it would be misleading. Graduation is not a fairy-tale ending; it comes with real risks, new rules, and the potential for painful shocks if we fail to prepare.

Drawing reference from what BNP's Tarique Rahman recently remarked, graduation is not just a milestone—it comes with risks and challenges which we need to be honest about. Preferential trade deals will expire, concessional loans will dry up, and intellectual property rules on medicine will tighten. These are not distant hypotheticals; they are certainties. The question is whether we will treat graduation as a springboard to greater opportunities or stumble into a trapdoor of economic fragility.

The most urgent challenge lies in trade. At present, nearly 85 percent of Bangladesh's export earnings come from one source: ready-made garments. For millions of workers, most of them women, this industry represents not just a pay cheque but survival. Yet, once LDC graduation takes effect, the tariff-free access to Europe, Canada, and Japan that enabled our garments industry to flourish will gradually disappear.

Economists often use the metaphor of a chair: a country that depends on one or two sectors is like a chair with only two legs—it can stand, but not steadily. To stand firmly, a country needs four legs. Vietnam, once our direct rival in garments, understood this well. It diversified into electronics, ICT, and even shipbuilding, transforming itself into a manufacturing hub. If we do not follow suit, our chair may wobble and fall.

For years, as an LDC, Bangladesh has benefited from soft loans—low interest, long repayment periods, easy terms. Graduation will end this privilege. From then on, we will borrow like any other middle-income country, at a much higher cost.

The numbers are already daunting. Bangladesh's external debt has surpassed $100 billion. Ministries and state-owned enterprises, such as Biman and the power sector, also carry their own heavy debt burdens. Without proper fiscal discipline, the risks will accumulate rapidly.

Sri Lanka's experience should worry us. After losing access to concessional finance, it filled the gap with costly loans and, within a few years, spiralled into crisis. The lesson is clear: cheap credit disappears after graduation, but the bills keep arriving. Unless we modernise revenue collection, broaden the tax base, and attract more foreign investment, we could find ourselves cornered in the same way.

There is another dimension of graduation that strikes closer to home: medicine. Under the World Trade Organization's (WTO) rules, LDCs are allowed to produce generic versions of essential drugs. This has kept life-saving medicines affordable for ordinary people and enabled Bangladesh to build a thriving pharmaceutical industry.

But graduation ends this waiver. Without it, prices will rise, and many families will struggle to pay for drugs they currently buy at a fraction of the cost. Unless Bangladesh negotiates an extension or develops the capacity to produce advanced biosimilars and patented medicines, the health of millions will be at risk.

Behind all these issues—trade, debt, and medicine—lies a deeper concern: are our institutions ready? Too often, policymaking is fragmented, debt data is scattered across ministries, and reform is sidelined by politics.

For Bangladesh to thrive after graduation, its institutions must step up. Courts and regulators need to enforce contracts efficiently. Customs systems should be digitised to reduce costs and delays. Workers must be offered opportunities to reskill and transition into higher-value industries. Without this foundation, graduation will only expose the cracks.

Finance Adviser Salehuddin Ahmed recently emphasised the situation, stating that other countries are moving ahead, and we must make sure our country does not fall behind. While the remark is certainly true in some respects, we must also consider both sides of the coin.

Botswana built strong institutions and turned diamonds into lasting prosperity. Mauritius escaped the "sugar trap" by investing in services and tourism. Yet the Maldives, despite booming tourism, remains vulnerable to climate shocks, and Sri Lanka's debt crisis demonstrates what happens when finance races ahead of reform.

Bangladesh still has a choice. We can sprint through the next two years, negotiating smarter trade deals, creating a sovereign stabilisation fund, and reforming our tax and governance systems. Our story has always been one of resilience—of people refusing to give up in the face of adversity. But resilience alone cannot carry us forever. LDC graduation must not become an empty badge of honour that ordinary people end up paying for.

We need new industries, stronger institutions, and smarter governance. Only then will graduation be more than a milestone—only then will it mark the beginning of a new chapter, where Bangladesh competes in the world not as a fragile exception, but as a confident peer.

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
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