

## A landmark ordinance, but execution is key

Govt approves revised labour law with sweeping changes

The biggest problem with Bangladesh's reform drive isn't a crisis of laws but rather the opposite of it. We have perhaps more laws than could be expected—and certainly more than some other countries do—but where they often come undone is in their inadequate and uneven implementation. Add to that the questionable provisions and omissions in some of the more critical pieces of legislation dealing with crimes, rights, and other aspects of governance. Enactment alone, therefore, cannot guarantee desired outcomes. It must be done right and followed through on properly.

The approval of the Bangladesh Labour Act (Amendment) Ordinance, 2025, has once again brought these issues to the forefront. On paper, the revised law represents a sweeping reform measure, incorporating a total of 184 changes to its previous iteration. For instance, for the first time, it recognises domestic workers, seafarers, and employees of non-profit organisations, granting legal protections previously denied to these groups. Equally important is the criminalisation of blacklisting, a practice that long allowed employers to punish workers for raising grievances. Moreover, stricter measures against sexual harassment have been introduced, maternity benefits expanded, and gender-based wage discrimination prohibited. A dedicated fund for accident compensation and rehabilitation has also been created, while mandating private-sector employers to establish provident funds or enrol workers in a universal pension scheme.

The simplification of trade union formation is another significant development. By allowing unions to be formed with as few as 20 workers in smaller factories, the law strengthens the ability of workers to collectively bargain and assert their rights. Prior to its approval on Thursday, the interim government also ratified three key ILO conventions on occupational safety, health, and freedom from workplace violence and harassment, making Bangladesh the only South Asian country to ratify all ten fundamental ILO conventions. Together, these measures demonstrate a policy commitment to align national standards with international labour norms, and have the potential to make our workplaces more equitable, humane, and just.

But after enactment comes implementation, and this is where the main challenge lies. From that perspective, Bangladesh has only done half the work, making any complacency premature. For decades, we have seen how our workers, especially in labour-intensive sectors, were often left unprotected, enduring unsafe working conditions, delayed or withheld wages, and minimal legal recourse to address any grievances. Sadly, this pattern continued even during the tenure of the interim government formed after the July uprising, despite the sacrifices of workers in that revolution. This is why there are reasonable doubts that even this new landmark ordinance may come undone if the authorities, labour institutions, employers, and of course, political parties do not commit to rigorous enforcement going forward.

We must, therefore, view the amended law as but the first step in achieving workers' rights. In the coming days, the nation will be observing carefully to see how faithfully its provisions and commitments are honoured. In the new Bangladesh promised by the uprising, workers must be properly empowered, their voices duly respected, and their safety and welfare genuinely protected.

## Why can't we stop illegal sand mining?

Political will and decisive action a must to stop this organised looting

Illegal sand extraction has emerged as one of the gravest forms of environmental plunder in recent years, and recent reports reveal the sheer scale of this destructive trade. Along the Meghna River in Munshiganj Sadar upazila, politically backed groups—allegedly led by local BNP leaders—are operating outside their licensed zones, dredging sand perilously close to fertile farmlands. Despite repeated drives, fines, and arrests by the administration, and protest by farmers, the extraction continues unabated, accelerating erosion and swallowing tracts of the farmlands. According to a *Prothom Alo* report, the sand extractors are often getting tipped off before raids, which allows them time to move their machine from the unauthorised zone. This reflects deep-rooted collusion and a failure of governance.

Similar patterns of environmental degradation, administrative inertia, and political protection have been reported from Narsingdi, Moulvibazar, Sylhet, Chandpur, and Rangpur in recent months. In Narsingdi's Raipura upazila, sand traders—who are allegedly part of an organised armed gang linked to politically influential groups—have turned the Meghna into their field, attacking villagers and even firing upon mobile court teams. In Moulvibazar, despite over 50 raids and Tk 17 crore worth of confiscated sand, the illegal extraction continues to devastate roads and riverbanks. These accounts reveal not isolated lawlessness but an entrenched and lucrative black economy sustained by political muscle and administrative compromise.

Riverbank erosion, habitat destruction, and waterway destabilisation are destroying ecosystems and livelihoods simultaneously. Farmlands once yielding multiple crops are vanishing, as seen in Munshiganj's Charmsura, where farmers have already lost significant portions of their ancestral land. The unregulated dredging also disrupts fish breeding cycles, thus violating ministry bans during the Hilsa spawning season. Such degradation not only undermines local food security but also erodes public trust in state institutions tasked with environmental protection.

The persistence of these practices points to a crisis of enforcement. Local administrations cite budget constraints or lack of manpower, but these excuses have been given for many years. By now authorities should have solved these issues. In fact, accountability must begin with political will: leases should be revoked immediately upon violation, and administrative officers who fail to act decisively should face disciplinary measures. Transparent reporting and coordination among the land, fisheries, and environment ministries are equally essential. The government must dismantle the networks that protect these illegal operations, enforce strict penalties, and ensure that licensed extraction remains within legal and ecological limits.

# EDITORIAL

## 'Sir, I am a teacher': The paradox in the cry



### BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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Last week, when police were seen dragging a man with a torn shirt in their effort to clear the road from a blockade imposed by teachers, we heaved a heavy sigh. The man was heard pleading, "Sir, I am a teacher. Don't beat me," while we as a nation took a walk of shame. But the shelf-life of any reaction today is shorter than the whisker of a foxtail. These short reels, which have become de facto news sources, simply scratch the surface and move away to find new bait.

They do not tell us the full story of how these teachers under the "Leaders of the Alliance for Nationalisation of MPO-Listed Educational Institutions" banner protested for a week and a half in the streets, seeking a 20 percent salary housing allowance, along with an increase in medical and festival allowances. After the police attack and public humiliation, the government initially offered five percent and then reluctantly agreed to raise allowances to 15 percent in two phases: 7.5 percent from November 1, 2025, then a further 7.5 percent from July 1, 2026. The partial concessions for teachers under duress are in contrast with the various plans to revise the pay structures for the cadre services by the National Pay Commission 2025. Privileges for recruiting and promotional activities, including holding examinations, interviews, setting questions, are being increased for government officials. Bangladesh Bank, too, has adopted a talent retention programme by increasing increment amounts for candidates with better results and performance in the foundation trainings.

These recommendations have reignited the old contest between administrators and educators. The moment, when a teacher addressed a police constable as "Sir," symbolised not only the pay disparity but also the erosion of teachers' dignity. For the university teachers, the cry is quieter than that of MPO or primary teachers—a muffled whisper in private chat groups. The absence of university teachers' associations after the fall of the previous regime

has forced teachers to speak only in private. The mood in our WhatsApp groups is that of disappointment and resentment. University teachers, a potpourri of mismatched factions, lack the shared voice that school and college teachers or bureaucrats possess. They complain about the way civil servants are swiftly securing their interests. Even the online stakeholders' consultations organised by the pay commission do not interest public university teachers, as they

a political government with a crowd-pleasing electoral agenda.

It is very likely that the major restructuring may be delayed, and the teachers may continue to be deprived. Teachers are held in low esteem in our country. An assistant primary teacher still sits in Grade 13, the same as a computer operator and one step below an upazila accountant. A college professor ranks below a joint secretary. For the state, education is nothing more than clerical work—acknowledged only with certain reservations but never exalted.

Following the sharp decline in the HSC pass rate, criticism was directed towards teachers. A staggering 202 colleges had zero pass rates, most of which were non-Monthly Pay Order (MPO) institutions. They relied mostly on the low tuition fees without any additional government support. One editorial in this daily cites a teacher



FILE PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

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consider them a chronicle of an outcome foretold. I am not aware of any initiative taken by the university administration to contact the interim pay commission, which has a six-month mandate to draft a new salary structure by December, with rollout likely in early 2026. Some proposed changes include keeping the pay ratio between the highest and lowest grades at 8:1 to 10:1. The commission wants to trim the existing 20 grades and increase medical and education allowances, which is a welcome move. For public university teachers and other members of semi-governmental institutes, there are supposed to be "targeted" supplements. Sceptics, however, doubt any drastic change, as the current administration is not

from one of these colleges who has been working for seven months without any pay. No wonder desperate teachers come to Dhaka to stage protests and face daunting water cannons or sound grenades, that too probably for a Tk 2,000-Tk 3,000 raise. Therefore, I have mixed feelings when government officers propose Tk 6,000 for an exam-related role, prompting university teachers to seek the same if not more.

The eighth pay scale (2015) stripped university teachers of increments for results, retirement benefits, timescales, and selection grade promotions and downgraded their equivalence with senior bureaucrats. During the July uprising, teachers were seen demanding not only

equally vital is the system of listening to the collective grievances. Reviving independent, apolitical professional bodies is essential not just for negotiating pay, but for reclaiming dignity. We do not want our teachers touching the feet of a policeman, saying, "Sir, I am a teacher!"



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During a national election, the state offers a single public holiday. However, one solitary day is not sufficient for all citizens to wake up, travel hundreds of kilometres, cast their votes, return, and resume work the next morning. In our migration-shaped country, where many travel from rural to urban areas for work, it entrenches disenfranchisement.

After three widely criticised elections that failed to attract voter participation, the upcoming one is being promoted as a turning point—a chance to finally let citizens reclaim their political rights. But legitimacy cannot be restored through empty gestures. When most voters are "absent" from their registered hometowns, a single day off is a symbolic gesture, not genuine access.

Bangladesh's internal migration is massive as thousands of people move to Dhaka, Chattogram, Gazipur, and Narayanganj—the industrial lungs of the economy—while their voter registration remains tied to ancestral addresses. Millions of registered voters live far from where they are originally registered. In the 2014 election, turnout was around 40 percent nationwide and as low as 22 percent in some constituencies of Dhaka. That

low participation was not only due to political boycotts but also due to logistical impossibility. It is unrealistic to travel hundreds of kilometres after work, vote the next day, and be back at the workplace by morning. Buses are overbooked, transport runs on a skeletal schedule, and workers bound for shifts cannot afford two full days off. As a result, millions of urban workers are quietly excluded from democracy.

For the upcoming election, the Election Commission (EC) is reportedly considering a postal voting system for Bangladeshi expatriates. However, the far larger and politically disenfranchised population of internal migrants is missing from this consideration. They build the highways, run the factories, and perform various blue and white-collar jobs that sustain the GDP trend. Yet their votes, unlike those of expatriates, are not being considered.

One might think a public holiday ensures everyone's access. Factories and offices often do not let staff leave early; an extra day off can cost wages or even jobs. Return bus and train tickets can double or triple in price. For low-income urban migrants, that alone is enough to make them surrender their franchise altogether. A "national day

off" is a gesture—gestures do not put ballots into voters' hands.

Instead of pretending that one day solves everything, we must reimagine the mechanics of access. For this election, a practical step would be to extend the voting holiday to include the day before or after polling, staggered by division, to reduce economic disruption while giving voters a travel

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buffer. Bangladesh Railway and BRTC could run reserved services on key routes—such as from Dhaka to the north and south and from port cities to the interiors—ensuring schedules are announced early and tickets remain affordable. Satellite booths could be set up in dense worker zones such as industrial estates, export-processing

zones, economic zones, and portside neighbourhoods, with limited booths tied to voters' home constituencies. Employers, too, should be required to grant paid or unpaid leave for travel to vote, beginning with large export industries and urban service sectors.

In the medium term, reforms could include enabling internal migrants to request ballots by post or via secure drop boxes in their city of residence, with biometric verification and a transparent chain of custody to ensure security. Voters should also be allowed to temporarily shift polling stations within their constituency or current city without permanently changing registration. Countries with high internal mobility—India, Indonesia, the Philippines—have already experimented with advance polling, multi-day voting, or absentee ballots to reach internal migrants. Bangladesh can similarly shift from ritual holidays to practical enfranchisement.

Democracy is not about a ceremonial day off; it is about practical access. For a nation that prides itself on development metrics, our electoral logistics remain stubbornly primitive. We can send satellites into orbit and export billions in garments, yet somehow we cannot guarantee a worker two extra days or a bus seat to exercise a constitutional right.

The upcoming election is expected to restore public faith in institutions. But a credible poll needs more than open competition—it needs inclusivity. Nothing says "this election belongs to the people" if millions are left stranded between work and home, between eligibility and access. We must make time, transport, and logistics part of the rights we promise.