

The 'consensus' fiasco

An experiment that should not have failed

Reaching consensus is not in our political DNA. That is why the prolonged effort of the National Consensus Commission (NCC) needs to be praised, but now that its mandate has ended, we need to reflect on why it has failed, not totally but principally. True, there are 84 recommendations that were agreed upon, albeit with dissent on a number of them. Where it really collapsed, however, was in the process of implementation: the NCP and Jamaat insist on an immediate decision for an early referendum, while BNP prefers a more moderate position—in favour of a referendum and the national election being held on the same day.

Two issues have now completely blocked further progress. First, the insistence of NCP and Jamaat that the referendum must be held as early as possible, certainly before the election. Second, the NCC's recommendation that the provisions of the July National Charter be automatically incorporated into the constitution if the newly formed Jatiya Sangsad, acting as a Constitution Reform Council, fails to take action within a 270-day timeframe. BNP opposes both demands. So, now there is a clear political divide.

We think there is still a possibility, albeit faint, of an agreement on the referendum, as BNP is not opposed to it in principle, only the timing. However, there exists a more serious concern about the suitability of the referendum itself. A referendum is usually held on a clear "yes" or "no" question. The three referendums held in Bangladesh before—in 1977, 1985, and 1991—all had very clear questions to which the public had to respond. The first two asked whether the public approved the tenures of Maj Gen Ziaur Rahman and Lt Gen HM Ershad, respectively, and the third asked whether the public approved the Twelfth Amendment that would restore the parliamentary government system.

But a referendum on a minimum package of 48 constitutional items in a charter is virtually unheard of. How many voters will know all the provisions? How does one vote "yes" or "no" if they agree with some items and disagree with others? And when no effort has been made to explain the charter's content to the public, how can the government or the relevant political parties justify calling a referendum on them at all?

The second issue—automatically incorporating 48 charter provisions into the constitution, bypassing an elected parliament—is even more problematic. Constitutional experts have called this an anti-parliamentary practice, asking whether such a precedent exists anywhere in the world.

Amid the confusion and uncertainty created by these divergent viewpoints and positions, one thing we firmly insist on is that the election must be held in February, as declared by Professor Yunus. The people of Bangladesh have been deprived of their right to vote since 2014, and the voters will not tolerate any excuse or manoeuvre to delay a free and fair election any longer. All political parties should realise that.

Address menstrual health crisis of tea workers

Garden owners must ensure proper toilets, sanitary facilities for women workers

It is quite concerning that women tea workers in our tea gardens continue to suffer due to the neglect of estate owners regarding their basic health and hygiene needs. Despite toiling from dawn to dusk, these workers receive a meagre wage of Tk 178 a day, with which they cannot even afford a proper meal for their families, let alone sanitary napkins for themselves during menstruation. Reportedly, most of them still use old, torn pieces of cloth during their periods, which is unhygienic. Moreover, there are no proper toilet facilities for them at work, and they are often forced to work through menstrual pain without any rest or medicine. Their harsh reality lays bare the deep-rooted gender inequality and systemic neglect that continue to plague the women of the tea gardens.

Our reporter talked to tea workers of Moulvibazar's Madhabkunda Tea Estate and found the alarming reality of women's suffering during menstruation due to a lack of support from the authorities. One worker, Geeta, said she often has to work through severe menstrual pain, knowing that any rest would mean losing her daily wage. When she once missed two days of work due to period-related illness, her supervisor withheld her pay for the entire week, which is shocking. The lack of menstrual hygiene, safe childbirth facilities, and proper nutrition in the gardens makes these women highly vulnerable to infections and long-term health complications. A 2017 survey found that nearly 44.8 percent of female tea workers lacked access to sanitary latrines.

The gap between policy and practice is also stark. The government's 2021 National Menstrual Hygiene Management Strategy promised that every girl and woman could "menstruate safely and with dignity," but implementation has barely reached the tea gardens. Meanwhile, social stigma surrounding menstruation further silences them, perpetuating a cycle of exploitation across generations.

It is time both the government and estate owners recognise menstrual hygiene as a right of workers. Tea estates must ensure separate toilets for women, access to clean water, affordable sanitary products, and paid medical leave for menstrual discomfort. They should also consider providing female workers with a special allowance to maintain menstrual health. Such measures would not cost much but would help improve the overall health of women workers, which, in turn, would enhance their productivity and ultimately benefit the estates. Additionally, NGOs and local health departments should work together to raise awareness on the issue and distribute reusable or low-cost sanitary pads free of charge to tea workers.

EDITORIAL

Why we need a two-year economic recovery agenda



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The economy of Bangladesh, once the envy of the developing world for its steady growth and poverty reduction, is now caught in a slow, uncertain transition. Growth has weakened, private investment has stalled, poverty has worsened, and job creation has lost momentum. Inflation has remained stubbornly high for more than two years, eroding real incomes and the fragile middle class that took decades to build. What is more worrying is that this economic malaise coincides with an uncertain period of political and institutional transition.

The truth is plain: Bangladesh needs a short, sharp, and actionable two-year economic recovery agenda—a plan that stabilises, restores, and prepares the economy for a more ambitious reform phase beyond 2027. In other words, the economy needs a landing pad before it can take off again.

The political change following the July-August uprising raised hopes for renewal. The interim administration commissioned a white paper report to investigate what went wrong in the past and a task force report to chart a reform path. These documents diagnosed familiar ills: weak fiscal capacity, fragile banking governance, regulatory uncertainty, declining export competitiveness, and, above all, regressed economic and political institutions characterised by acute corruption and deeply embedded cronyism.

All these analyses were sound; the problem, as always, lies in translation—turning knowledge into policy and policy into action. Unfortunately, the interim government has not been able to launch any major reform momentum based on the recommendations of these two reports.

For too long, Bangladesh has relied on growth momentum driven by remittances and ready-made garments. Those engines are now losing steam. Private investment as a share of GDP has remained almost unchanged for a decade. New jobs are scarce, especially for the youth, whose frustration is visible in the public mood. The external sector, meanwhile, faces a double bind: limited diversification on the one hand and growing vulnerability to global shocks on the other.

In short, the economy has lost its rhythm. What it needs now is a focused, time-bound recovery plan anchored in a realistic political economy understanding of what can actually be implemented over the next two years.

Why precisely two years? Because Bangladesh faces a compressed

timeline. A general election is expected in February 2026, after which a newly elected government will take the driving seat. The country is also set to graduate from the least developed country (LDC) category in 2026, losing several preferential trade and financing facilities. Global headwinds—tight monetary conditions, geopolitical realignments, and volatile commodity prices—are adding to the pressure. Domestically, institutional inertia and public mistrust have deepened.

Fiscal policy, too, needs a dose of realism. The tax-to-GDP ratio, stuck below eight percent, severely limits public investment capacity. The two-year plan should focus on visible, implementable tax measures—expanding the VAT net through digital compliance, widening the income tax base, reducing exemptions, and accelerating automation at the National Board of Revenue. This is the time for credible actions that can raise revenue by at least one percentage point of GDP within two years.

Equally, expenditure must be reprioritised. Projects with poor cost-benefit profiles should be paused, freeing up resources for health, education, and social protection. The logic is clear: in times of fiscal stress, governments must spend not more, but smarter.

If stabilisation is the first pillar, investment revival is the second. Over

NPL list, tightening loan rescheduling rules, and improving Bangladesh Bank's independence would send a powerful signal.

Economic recovery cannot just be about aggregate numbers; it must address the lived realities of citizens. Over the past three years, real wages have stagnated while the cost of living has soared. Social protection coverage remains patchy and fragmented. A recovery plan, therefore, must include a short-term "economic relief package" that strengthens safety nets and protects purchasing power.

Digitally targeted cash transfers, subsidised basic food items through smart cards, and expanded employment programmes in rural areas can ease pressure on low-income households. Beyond safety nets, the agenda should focus on building the foundation for a "productive inclusion strategy"—linking vocational skills, MSME



FILE VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

Therefore, the next 24 months leading up to early 2026 must be treated as a bridge period—long enough to make meaningful progress, short enough to maintain urgency. The focus should be on implementing practical, high-impact measures that can restore confidence in the economy. Simply put, Bangladesh needs a compact recovery contract between the state, businesses, and citizens.

Any recovery agenda must begin with macroeconomic stabilisation. Persistent inflation, hovering around or above nine percent, has been the single biggest drain on public trust. Price stability is not merely a technical issue; it is a political and social necessity. Containing inflation requires both discipline and coordination—tightening monetary policy, maintaining prudent fiscal policy, rationalising subsidies, and improving supply chain management for essentials.

the past decade, Bangladesh's private investment has hovered around 22-23 percent of GDP—far below what is required to sustain 7.8 percent growth. The reasons are well known: cumbersome regulations, policy unpredictability, weak contract enforcement, and costly, unreliable energy supplies.

As part of the two-year recovery plan, the government could launch a "One-Stop Fast Track Investment Desk" within the Bangladesh Investment Development Authority (BIDA), mandated to process large and medium-scale investments within a fixed timeline.

Equally critical is financial sector repair. The banking system's fragility—manifested in high non-performing loans, politically connected defaulters, and poor supervision—has choked credit to productive sectors. Restoring discipline will take time, but immediate steps such as publishing a transparent

financing, and local infrastructure. In this sense, recovery and reform are not opposites; they are sequential steps in the same process.

The coming months will test Bangladesh's resilience. Political uncertainty is real; global shocks are beyond control. But paralysis is not an option. From this perspective, a two-year recovery agenda offers both a cushion and a compass—cushioning the economy from immediate shocks while steering it towards deeper reforms.

The country cannot fix everything in two years, but it can start fixing something, and that would be progress. Restoring economic stability, unlocking investment, protecting citizens, and signalling credible reform—these four priorities should define the recovery agenda.

Every crisis hides an opportunity. The question is no longer what needs to be done, but whether we have the determination to do it.

Dhaka's gridlock is a crisis of coordination



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For millions of commuters in Dhaka, daily life is a relentless crawl due to the seemingly incurable congestion. The cost is measured not only in frustration but also in staggering economic losses. Comprehensive analyses and reports revealed that this inefficiency translated into an estimated loss of \$6.5 billion in 2020 alone, with millions of productive hours vanishing into exhaust-filled air.

For decades, we looked for the solution in more flyovers, wider roads, and grand new projects. But it lies under the layers of failed plans and bureaucratic inertia, as Dhaka's traffic crisis is not a failure of engineering but a catastrophic failure of governance.

The city's transport sector is managed by an alphabet soup of agencies with unclear, overlapping, and often conflicting mandates. The Dhaka Transport Coordination Authority (DTCA) is meant to coordinate; the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) to regulate; the Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) to enforce; and the city corporations (DNCC and DSCC) to build and maintain. Yet, in practice, these bodies operate in silos, often at cross-purposes. This institutional chaos ensures that even the most well-intentioned plans fail before they begin.

This is not a recent issue. As early as 1981, the Dhaka Metropolitan Area

Integrated Urban Development Project (DMAIDP) predicted the city's slide into severe congestion and recommended a north-south mass transit corridor. The plan was technically sound but drafted by a commission without the power to implement it. It was shelved, and its foresight ignored—setting a tragic precedent for decades of technically brilliant plans defeated by a lack of political will and executive authority.

Our planning also long failed to recognise the city's intrinsic nature. Dhaka was, and for much of its population remains, a city of non-motorised transport. Rickshaws once made up as much as 85 percent of vehicular traffic. Yet, for decades, policy has focused almost exclusively on private cars, often by sidelining or banning the very modes of transport that serve the majority and are best suited to our dense urban fabric.

Furthermore, over the past two decades, hundreds of crores have been spent on installing modern traffic signal systems. The World Bank-funded Dhaka Urban Transport Project (DUTP) installed them—they became dysfunctional. The Clean Air and Sustainable Environment (CASE) project upgraded them with solar panels and timers—they too failed. A recent pilot for an advanced traffic management system saw its crucial

software stolen from a warehouse before it could even be installed.

Why do these expensive systems consistently fail? The city corporations own the hardware but lack manpower and resources for maintenance. Meanwhile, utility companies routinely dig up roads for repairs, severing underground signal cables without coordinating with police or city authorities.

The result is the absurd sight of traffic police manually directing vehicles. The only place in Dhaka where signals function reliably is the Cantonment area—where a single authority, the military, manages planning, operation, and maintenance. This proves that the problem is not technological but institutional: our civilian agencies simply cannot work together.

This dysfunction extends to the highest levels. The DTCA was legally established as the supreme coordinating body for all transport projects, yet it is routinely bypassed by powerful implementing agencies. The Dhaka Mass Transit Company Limited (DMTCL), responsible for the metro rail, has been publicly accused by the DTCA of ignoring its coordination mandate—allegedly due to bureaucratic rivalries and seniority clashes.

In the face of such governance failure, our default response has been to build. Thousands of crores have been poured into flyovers—the Mohakhali, Khilgaon, and Mayor Hanif structures stand as towering monuments to this approach. While they offer localised relief, these are expensive, tactical fixes that do little to address the strategic disease of an uncoordinated transport system. They are "concrete solutions" offering the illusion of progress while the underlying institutional decay

deepens. The metro rail and planned Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) lines represent a historic investment in the city's future. But this infrastructure will be squandered without a revolution in governance.

The path forward requires bold structural reform. The DTCA must be transformed from a toothless coordinating body into a powerful Urban Transport Authority (UTA), equipped with the legal authority, executive power, and bureaucratic seniority to enforce its mandate and compel inter-agency cooperation.

Legally binding protocols must govern all work affecting road networks: a utility company that severs a signal cable without clearance should face immediate and substantial penalties. Coordination also must be mandatory.

We must also invest in institutional capacity, not just construction. The DTCA needs in-house technical expertise to guide and validate projects. The BRTA requires resources to enforce vehicle fitness standards and overhaul the chaotic bus route permit system. The DMTCL must be supported with reliable technology and modern training to manage Dhaka's streets effectively.

Finally, transport planning must be integrated with land use. The new mass transit corridors should catalyse smart urban growth. The Detailed Area Plan's vision for transit-oriented development must be rigorously implemented to ensure high density, mixed-use communities around transit hubs. For too long, institutional silos and bureaucratic rivalries have held Dhaka hostage. It is time to stop building over the problem and start fixing the broken system beneath.