

# Can Dhaka evolve from decades of chaos and mismanagement?



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The morning sun in Dhaka struggles to pierce the haze, casting a pale glow on a city in motion and in crisis. On the streets, the air is thick enough to taste a metallic mix of dust and exhaust that clings to the back of the throat. This is not just poor air quality—one of the worst in the world, silently stealing nearly seven years from the average resident's life expectancy; the cacophony in the city is a constant assault. Traffic noise reaches 119 decibels, a level comparable to a rock concert that makes civil conversation a struggle and restful sleep a luxury. This is the sensory reality of Dhaka in 2025—a metropolis now designated the world's second-largest city, home to nearly four crore people. This designation by the United Nations is not a badge of honour for us; it is just an acknowledgement of Dhaka's current reality—a city built by relentless, unplanned accretion, not by design. We are living with the consequences of decades of reactive governance, and the crisis has become an existential threat to our nation's economic and environmental future.

Dhaka's suffocating reality stems directly from policy failures that treated urban planning as an obstacle, not a necessity. The relaxation of building regulations that began decades ago culminated in the introduction of Floor Area Ratio (FAR) regulations in 2008, which created a perfect storm of vertical congestion without the corresponding infrastructure to support it. The result is a

city of brutal contrasts. While global hubs like Tokyo thrive with an average density of 15,700 people per square kilometre, Dhaka's densest wards are crushing under the weight of 150,000 people per square kilometre. The problem is not the number of people, but the failure to distribute resources equitably. This failure was compounded when FAR limits were almost doubled in several residential areas, allowing towers to rise from alleys too narrow for a fire truck to pass.

The cost of this chaos is quantified in brutal metrics that should shock our collective conscience. Our economy bleeds \$4.4 billion annually from traffic congestion alone, a massive drain on national productivity that the World Bank has repeatedly flagged. In global liveability rankings, our capital sits near the very bottom, at 171st out of 173 cities, barely surpassing active war zones. Our natural lifeblood, the rivers, are poisoned. The Buriganga's average dissolved oxygen levels have plummeted to zero in dry seasons, far below the 6.5 milligrams per litre required for a healthy aquatic ecosystem, symbolising a city choking on its own waste. The relentless centralisation of the nation's administration, commerce, and hope into one overwhelmed metropolis has created what urban expert Adnan Morshed calls a state of *gadagadi*—a phenomenon of people living in extreme congestion without the most basic urban services.

The solution, however, is not to resist

density but to transform it from a burden into our greatest asset. The blueprint exists in cities that have turned similar challenges into triumphs. Tokyo and Hong Kong demonstrate that high population concentrations can produce remarkable economic dynamism and sustainability when properly managed. Tokyo's wards, despite their densities, remain highly liveable through meticulous planning, efficient mobility, and an equitable

comfortable walking distance. This approach, a form of tactical urbanism, reduces the city's carbon footprint by minimising cross-city movements and creating self-sufficient communities.

Transforming this vision into reality demands more than technical master plans; it requires a moon-shot level of political will and a fundamental rethinking of urban governance. The World Bank has explicitly



To save Dhaka, we must immediately protect our natural systems and halt the filling of waterways.

FILE PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

distribution of amenities. This is the model of "good density"—a revolutionary framework for Dhaka where people live in compact, affordable homes with easy access to schools, clinics, work, and parks, all within a

called on Bangladesh to address "planned urbanisation" as a core reform to sustain growth and job creation. This begins with reversing the perverse incentive structures that make violating rules more profitable than

complying with them. We must champion ward-based development, ensuring each of Dhaka's 129 wards becomes a self-contained unit with equitable access to parks, schools, and markets. Our promising metro rail system must be integrated with protected walkways and cycling lanes, recognising that the majority of Dhaka's commuters travel on foot. Simultaneously, we must launch an environmental resurrection, restoring the blue network of canals and rivers that once defined this city, to combat the urban heat island effect that has seen temperatures in many areas soar to a blistering 40.7 degrees Celsius.

The International Monetary Fund acknowledges Bangladesh's "ambitious goals for achieving environmentally sustainable economic growth," but warns that "further efforts are needed to rapidly scale up resources." This is the defining challenge of our generation. The cost of fixing Dhaka today, while immense, will be a mere fraction of the catastrophic economic, social, and environmental costs we will inevitably face if we fail to act. We must immediately protect our natural systems, halt the filling of waterways, and launch an emergency programme to restore the rivers surrounding Dhaka. We must implement transit-oriented development that prioritises people over vehicles. And crucially, we must embrace genuine participatory governance, building public trust by giving communities a direct voice in the decisions that shape their neighbourhoods. The United Nations reminds us that inclusive urbanisation can unlock transformative pathways for climate action and economic growth. We can continue to be victims of a chaotic fate of our own doing, or we can become the architects of a livable, sustainable, and economically vibrant city worthy of its people. The survival of our nation's ambition depends on the choice we make today.

# Collapse of Hasinomics and the fight for real growth



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The human psyche is wired for justice—this is not metaphor but science. When injustice accumulates beyond a threshold, it does not dissipate; it detonates. That is what happened in July 2024. For a fleeting moment in those days, it seemed as if the country might finally locate its collective self. But rage, on its own, cannot rebuild; it merely exposes the wound. And here we stand again—precariously close to square one.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh's labour productivity stagnated because capital never returned to the factory floor. Politically connected conglomerates understood that higher returns lay in loan-capture, land speculation, and public contracts rather than genuine industrial upgrading. By 2024, this diversion had produced a Tk 7.56 lakh crore distressed-asset crater—capital that should have financed innovation and diversification.

Let me state the argument plainly: Hasinomics did not collapse because it was authoritarian; it collapsed because it destroyed the engines of sustainable development. It hollowed out the structural drivers of productivity, mobility, and resilience. By 2024, these fractures converged into a complete blockade on social mobility, ultimately triggering the political explosion we witnessed.

The clearest indicator of this extraction-driven stagnation lies in wages. In 2024, real wages fell across the board: two percent for low-skilled workers, 0.5 percent for high-skilled. Despite rising exports, wages declined because productivity did not rise. The economy generated two kinds of jobs: low-skill sewing line roles or high-skill managerial positions often filled by foreign-educated elites. Domestic graduates were trapped in the "missing middle": overeducated for factories, underprepared for elite roles, and excluded by insider networks. That missing middle is not a theoretical abstraction; it is the very real absence of the technicians, supervisors, digital operators, and process controllers that every modern industrial economy needs to thrive.

Bangladesh's production base remained fundamentally weak because both of the main sectors, agriculture and RMG, were stuck in a low-productivity equilibrium. Agriculture, still employing nearly 40 percent of the labour force, consistently grew at a slower pace than inflation. For over a decade, rural incomes declined in real terms even as GDP increased. When a sector that employs the majority of labour produces less output per worker, transformation becomes mathematically impossible.

What makes this more tragic is what never occurred. Peer economies built the basic infrastructure of modern agriculture: cold-chains, storage ecosystems, agro-processing hubs, salinity-resistant seeds, and digital commodity platforms. Bangladesh built none of these at a meaningful scale. Capital that should have funded this transition was diverted into choreographed megaprojects and loan defaults.

The RMG sector followed identical logic. Comparable economies such

as Vietnam boosted their exports by shifting into higher-value textiles, synthetics, technical fabrics, automated processes, and design-rich manufacturing. Bangladesh remained locked in low-value stitching lines. Data suggest Vietnam's textile and apparel exports are approaching \$44 billion, a growth model predicated on value-addition and upgrading, not bare labour advantage.

As we move forward, we must confront the wrong in its totality.

Yet while the horror was visceral, the remedy cannot be. The challenge before us is not emotional. It is structural.

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The extraction machine operated at peak efficiency. First, politically connected groups received enormous loans from state and private banks, often without meaningful collateral or even a door to hang their signboard above. Second, those loans were systematically defaulted, creating a ballooning distressed-asset hole. Third, when banks began to falter, the state intervened with taxpayer funds to recapitalise them—turning private theft into public liability. Fourth, the same networks siphoned money abroad—an estimated \$16 billion annually—draining the country of the investment capital needed for industrial upgrading. Fifth, inflated megaprojects and politically allocated contracts provided an additional rent pipeline. Finally, the liquidity that remained inside the country pooled at the very top. This was not mismanagement—it was a weaponised political economy brutally calibrated

for extraction.

But we must stop attributing novelty to Hasinomics. Its genius lay in perfecting an extractive machinery with roots traceable to colonial administration—centralised, coercive, and designed to drain. Just because the regime has fallen, it does not follow that the

machine has been destroyed.

A sustainable development strategy must begin with a simple and non-negotiable principle: growth must be productive, inclusive, and resilient. That means diversifying beyond low-value sectors, building middle-skill industries, investing in community-level climate adaptation,

and rewiring finance so that capital circulates through the real economy rather than escaping it.

The window of Bangladesh's demographic dividend closes by the mid-2030s. Time is not on our side. If we hesitate, the system will revert. We would be another generation that wasted a generational opportunity.

## গণপ্রজাতন্ত্রী বাংলাদেশ সরকার

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### জনস্কৃত/বিবিধভাবে আহরিত বনজমুদ্রা বিক্রয়ের পনঃদরপত্র বিজ্ঞপ্তি

এতদ্বারা সর্বাধারামন্ত্রের অবগতির জন্য জানানো যাচ্ছে যে, পার্বত্য চট্টগ্রাম দক্ষিণ বন বিভাগীয় রাজ্যামাটি সদর রেঞ্জের বিভিন্ন রেঞ্জ/বিট/স্টেশন অফিস প্রাণ্যদে জনস্কৃত/বান্ধবপ্রেরণ/বিবিধ উপায়ে আহরিত কর্তৃ আকারে মানুষ সেন্সুর ও বিবিধ প্রজাতির বনজমুদ্রা/কাঠসমূহের নিম্নলিখিত শর্তাবলী দ্বারা তুর আহরণ করা যাচ্ছে। দরপত্র ও লট সম্পর্কে (লটের পরিমাণ, অবস্থা, অবস্থান ইত্যাদি) যাবতীয় জাতের বিষয়াবলী নিয়মাবলীকৰণ দ্বারা রেঞ্জ কর্মকর্তা, রাজ্যামাটি সদর রেঞ্জ/কাঞ্চাই/রেঞ্জ/কর্মকর্তা অফিস এবং স্টেশন কর্মকর্তা, বরকল/বড়ইছত্তি/ধাগড়া/ রাইংবিহুংমুখ বনশূরু ও পরীক্ষণ ফার্মাচুটি অফিস হতে অফিস চলাকালীন সময়ে দেখতে ও জানতে পারা যাবে।

ক্র. নং	সিডিউল ক্রেতের সর্বশেষ সময়	দরপত্র দাখিলের তারিখ ও সময়	সিডিউল বিক্রয়ের স্থান	যে স্থানে দরপত্র প্রস্তুত করা হবে	দরপত্র মোলার সময় ও স্থান
০১	৩০/১২/২০২৫ খ্রিষ্টাব্দ	৩১/১২/২০২৫ খ্রিষ্টাব্দ	রেঞ্জ কর্মকর্তার কার্যালয়-১। রাজ্যামাটি সদর রেঞ্জ ১। কর্মসূচী রেঞ্জ, কাঞ্চাই ৩। কাঞ্চাই রেঞ্জ, কাঞ্চাই	১। জেলা প্রশাসকের কার্যালয়, রাজ্যামাটি ২। পুরিশ সুপারের কার্যালয়, রাজ্যামাটি ৩। বিভাগীয় বন কর্মকর্তার কার্যালয়, পার্বত্য চট্টগ্রাম দক্ষিণ বন বিভাগ, রাজ্যামাটি	৩১/১২/২০২৫ খ্রিষ্টাব্দ ২,৩০ টক্কা। বিভাগীয় বন কর্মকর্তার কার্যালয়, পার্বত্য চট্টগ্রাম দক্ষিণ বন বিভাগ, রাজ্যামাটি।

- ১। উপরোক্ত প্রতিক্রিয়া দাখিল করে বাস্তব বাস্তব রেঞ্জ থানার মধ্যে দরপত্র দাখিল করতে হবে।
- ২। দরপত্রদাতাগনে দরপত্র বাস্তব খোলা র সময় ইচ্ছা করলে উপরোক্ত প্রতিক্রিয়া দাখিল করতে পারবে।
- ৩। নির্ধারিত সিডিউলে দরপত্র দাখিল করতে হবে। দরপত্র সিডিউল পার্বত্য চট্টগ্রাম দক্ষিণ বন বিভাগীয় রেঞ্জ কর্মকর্তা, রাজ্যামাটি সদর রেঞ্জ, রেঞ্জ কর্মকর্তা কর্মসূচী এবং কাঞ্চাই-এর অফিস হতে প্রতিটি সিডিউল ৮০০/- (চারশত) টাকা অফেরতযোগ্য মূল্যে ৩০/১২/২০২৫ খ্রিষ্টাব্দ রেঞ্জ কর্মকর্তা অফিস চলাকালীন সময়ে ক্রয় করা যাবে। উক্ত সময়ের পর আর কোন সিডিউল বিক্রয় করা হবে না।
- ৪। প্রতিটি খুপের জন্য পুরুষ পুরুষ সিডিউল ক্রয় করতে হবে। প্রতিটি খুপের বিপরীতে পুরুষকার্যকলার দরপত্র প্রে-অর্ডার/ব্যাক ড্রাফট (এমআইসিআর) প্রাথমিক করতে হবে।
- ৫। দরপত্রদাতাগনকে দরপত্রের সাথে নিয়ন্ত্রিত প্রত্যাগ্রহণ দাখিল করতে হবে।
  - (ক) দরপত্র সিডিউল ক্রেতের সাথে নিয়ন্ত্রিত প্রত্যাগ্রহণ দাখিল করতে হবে।
  - (খ) প্রতিটি খুপের বিপরীতে উক্ত প্রত্যাগ্রহণ দাখিল করতে হবে।
- ৬। উপরোক্ত নং-৫ ক্রমাক্রমে 'হ' পর্যন্ত শর্তে বর্তিত রেঞ্জ পর্যন্ত বাস্তব দাখিলকৃত দরপত্র গঠণ করা হবে না।
- ৭। ইহাতো দরপত্র বিজ্ঞপ্তির অন্যান্য সকল শর্তাবলী অতি দরপত্র বিজ্ঞপ্তির শর্ত বলে গণ্য হবে।

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