

Let's transform our victory into progress

Victory Day returns with renewed hope for democracy

As Bangladesh marks Victory Day today, the national mood is a complex blend of sombre remembrance, cautious optimism, and electric anticipation. Flags fluttering from rooftops commemorate the 1971 liberation from Pakistan—a war that secured independence but left the country with colossal human loss and an economy in ruins. Like many nations, Bangladesh is shaped by its scars. Yet, it has repeatedly defied odds. This year, however, amid political upheaval, there is something more potent than resilience in the air: hope.

Traditionally, Victory Day is a tribute to the martyrs of 1971. But this December, as it did last year, the day carries an additional meaning. We honour the architects of independence, but also commemorate those whose sacrifice dismantled Sheikh Hasina's 15-year grip on power in 2024. Their deaths have expanded the moral meaning of Victory Day, linking past liberation to present resistance against misrule.

Bangladesh now stands at a rare political and economic confluence. On the one hand, the country is on the brink of economic graduation, set to shed its least developed country status next year. On the other hand, it is poised for political renewal, with a national election slated for February. The interim government has moved to steer the nation towards the ballot box despite formidable challenges along the way. As a result, the coming election is not seen merely as a procedural necessity, but as a moment of political exhilaration—and reckoning. The stakes could not be higher, because the political landscape has shifted. The young people who stood before police, water cannons and bullets in 2024 are now a political force. They will scrutinise the next government with a hawk's eye. Any new administration must resist the familiar temptation of vengeful, winner-takes-all politics.

Bangladesh has mastered the art of survival, but it has struggled with the craft of democracy. Hasina's rule proved especially corrosive: civil liberties were systematically crushed, and the key opposition party was hollowed out. This year, Victory Day, therefore, is more than a celebration. A true success story demands a nation that can argue without silencing dissent and govern without oppression.

Beyond politics, the economy demands urgent attention. Inflation now functions as a regressive tax on the poor and the squeezed middle class, while persistently high unemployment threatens to sour the optimism of the youth. Addressing these twin pressures is not just an economic imperative—it is a political one. Therefore, the message of this Victory Day is unmistakable: the work of nation-building is unfinished. The garment sector—the engine of the economy—needs a fairer deal for its workers. Minority rights must be shielded from violence and exclusion. And the environment, particularly the capital's hazardous air quality, requires immediate triage.

Victory was won in 1971 through heroic sacrifice. It will be more meaningful if we can now deliver justice, dignity, and democracy—not just endure, but govern ourselves better.

Reforms crucial for a functioning democracy

Govt must implement some key changes before election

It is disheartening that the interim government has yet to take any major initiative to implement the proposed reforms by various reform commissions. The July uprising created a rare political opening, raising public expectations that long-delayed institutional reforms would finally happen. Yet, many crucial proposals remain ignored, diluted, or quietly dropped, undermining the very purpose for which these commissions were formed. In this context, the frustration expressed by the chiefs and members of several reform commissions over the lack of implementation is justifiable.

Reportedly, a wide gap persists between recommendations and implementation, with many major reforms stalled and recommendations dropped. A telling example is the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) Reform Commission's proposal for quarterly public accountability reports. This recommendation was neither radical nor complex; it sought only to introduce basic transparency in a vital institution. Despite this being one of the commission's most important proposals, it was later removed. And despite broad political support for most other proposals, many were not enforced.

The Election Reform Commission's experience is equally disheartening. Its proposals to promote internal party democracy, ensure transparency in political financing, and strengthen candidate scrutiny were meant to address the root causes of the country's dysfunctional electoral culture. Key recommendations—such as electing party leaders from the grassroots, limiting the influence of wealthy individuals, and bringing parties under the Right to Information Act—were not adopted. While the Election Commission has taken some immediate steps, including better affidavit disclosure and expanded CCTV coverage, these fall short of tackling deeper problems like nomination syndromes, unchecked campaign spending, and weak accountability.

Perhaps most concerning is the state of media reforms. Reportedly, the Media Reform Commission proposed more than 100 reforms, yet not a single one has been implemented. Dropping the proposed Journalism Protection Act raises serious concerns about the safety of journalists, especially as the national election draws near. A free and secure media is central to any credible democratic process. The government's rejection of a plan to establish a permanent, independent media commission is also unfortunate.

While reforms cannot be achieved overnight, many of the recommendations made by the commissions could have been implemented through routine administrative orders or minor legal adjustments. The problem, therefore, is less about capacity and more about commitment. Economists and civil society leaders have rightly warned that Bangladesh's democratic decline has been driven by an alliance of political, bureaucratic, and business interests resistant to change.

Without progress in implementation, reforms risk becoming yet another missed opportunity—one the country can ill afford as it seeks a credible return to democratic governance.

EDITORIAL

Victory Day and the republic we owe ourselves



MACRO MIRROR

Dr Fahmida Khatun
is executive director at the Centre for Policy Dialogue. Views expressed in this article are the author's own.

FAHMIDA KATUN

December 16 returns each year as a solemn river of memory, carrying the sound of marching feet across muddy fields, the echo of gunfire, whispered prayers, and the tears of mothers who waited, uncertain whether their sons would return. Victory Day marks the moment when people long denied dignity rose to claim their place in history, declaring they would no longer live as subjects but as citizens. The 1971 Liberation War was fought for the right to speak, to choose, to dream, and to live with justice. It was the culmination of a long struggle against economic exploitation, political exclusion, and cultural repression under Pakistani rule.

From the 1952 Language Movement to the 1969 mass uprising and the denial of the 1970 electoral verdict, each injustice reinforced the conviction that emancipation could no longer be deferred. When independence finally came after nine months of bloodshed, it was infused with an extraordinary vision: Bangladesh would be a republic founded on democracy, equity, social justice, and respect for human dignity.

Fifty-four years later, that vision remains incomplete. Bangladesh has endured, advanced, and surprised the world in many ways. At the same time, the road from 1971 to 2025 has been uneven and often painful. The years following independence were marked by deep instability. Assassinations, coups, counter-coups, and long stretches of military and quasi-military rule disrupted the democratic experiment. Governance weakened, corruption deepened, and institutions failed to develop the resilience needed to withstand political shocks. Time and again, the promises of liberation have been repeatedly tested by political turbulence, institutional fragility, and missed opportunities.

The restoration of parliamentary democracy through the 1991 election offered a moment of collective hope. Yet, that hope proved fragile. Politics failed to mature into a system governed by rules rather than rivalries. Elections increasingly became winner-takes-all contests, in which power meant exclusion rather than accountability.

The erosion of democracy became most pronounced between 2014 and 2024. Elections continued, but genuine participation steadily diminished, and voting lost its meaning for millions. Power grew

increasingly centralised, dissent was constrained, and fear displaced public debate. Accountability weakened as institutions were reshaped to serve those in authority. As democratic space narrowed, public trust eroded. Rising hardship, especially among unemployed and frustrated youth, eventually transformed quiet disillusionment into open resistance.

contain mob violence and maintain public order, raising concerns about citizens' safety and security. Investment has failed to recover, businesses continue to face high operating costs, and policy uncertainty has damped confidence. Job creation, particularly for young people, remains elusive, despite youth unemployment having been a central trigger of the July uprising.

Economic growth has slowed to around four percent in fiscal year (FY) 2025 (provisional), down from 4.2 percent in FY2024. Private investment has remained stagnant for years, with its share of GDP falling from 24 percent in FY2024 to 22.5 percent in FY2025 (provisional). Employment generation has stalled, and unemployment rose to 3.6 percent in 2024 from 3.35 percent a year earlier. Domestic resource

remain a huge challenge. Regulatory reforms remain unfinished, accountability systems are fragile, and public institutions often fail to serve citizens fairly. Development driven mainly by growth targets, without strengthening institutions accordingly, has reached its limits.

The political moment ahead is therefore critical. The announcement of the national election on February 12, 2026, has brought cautious relief. After more than 17 months of unelected rule, a return to electoral legitimacy is essential. However, early incidents of violence have raised doubts about whether the election can be conducted freely, fairly, and peacefully. The interim government faces its most critical test not in managing economic indicators but in safeguarding the democratic process itself, because



FILE VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

without democracy, economic growth is meaningless for the majority.

As Bangladesh celebrates its 55th Victory Day this year, the commitment of future leaders must be evident. Democracy must be restored not only through elections, but through institutions that ensure accountability and inclusion. Economic reforms must prioritise job creation, fairness, and resilience. Social progress, especially for women and girls, must be protected and deepened. Politics must rediscover restraint, dialogue, and respect for dissent.

The martyrs of 1971 did not sacrifice their lives for managed participation or selective justice. They fought for a republic where citizens would be sovereign, power would be held accountable, and progress would be shared. Victory Day urges us to honour that legacy not just with remembrance but with determination.

The 2024 July uprising was, therefore, neither accidental nor sudden. Citizens across generations and social groups returned to the streets not for partisan advantage but to reclaim agency and dignity. The fall of the former regime raised expectations that the accumulated governance distortions would finally be addressed through genuine reforms.

The aftermath, however, has been complex and sobering. The interim government inherited an economy under strain and a deeply polarised polity. It succeeded in stabilising key macroeconomic indicators. Foreign exchange reserves have improved, the exchange rate stabilised, and inflation has begun to ease, albeit slowly. Some steps have been taken to address long-standing weaknesses in the financial sector, preventing further deterioration and restoring stability. However, the state struggles to

mobilisation has weakened as the tax-to-GDP ratio declined from 7.4 percent in FY2024 to 6.8 percent in FY2025. Poverty has begun to rise again, according to World Bank estimates. Social stresses are also deepening, with progress on ending child marriage remaining alarmingly slow.

Still, Bangladesh's longer-term achievements deserve recognition. Over the five decades since independence, the economy has expanded substantially. Per capita income has risen, exports have strengthened, and remittance inflows have remained robust. Dependence on foreign aid has declined significantly and for many poverty was going down. These accomplishments were built on sustained investments in human development, the labour of millions of workers, particularly women, and the perseverance of households, striving for better lives.

However, institutional problems

The war I never saw, but inherited



Sifat Afrin Shams
is a member of the editorial team at The Daily Star.

SIFAT AFRIN SHAMS

I belong to a generation that did not witness the Liberation War. The war, regardless, has meant a great deal to me for as long as I can remember. I inherited stories of the war and the fear, pain and anxiety from a generation for whom it remains the most destructive, yet defining experience of their lives. As I see people speak of the war as though it mattered less than it did—as if questioning the statistics could legitimise it—I feel compelled to share some of the stories I grew up hearing from those who experienced it firsthand.

Mymensingh, where my paternal grandfather, a postmaster, lived with his wife and six children, was occupied by Pakistani forces on April 23, 1971. Anticipating danger amid rising political tension, he sent my grandmother and four of their children to their village home in Madhupur, where the situation was comparatively calmer.

In March 1971, as the country stood on the brink of eruption, my father—then a class nine student at Mymensingh Zilla School and the second of six siblings—got into a car driven by a former army official. The

man was gathering people to go to the then East Pakistan Rifles (EPR) camp to support Bangladeshi officials revolting against West Pakistani officers. My father and the others were told they would be given firearms to fight. As the car neared the camp, it was caught in a crossfire between Pakistani and Bangladeshi officers. Like any terrified teenager, my father prayed only to return home safely. At home, my grandfather waited anxiously, the air heavy with impending danger.

When my father returned, rather unharmed, my grandfather asked where he had been. He told the truth that he had gone to collect a gun to fight in the war. The punishment that followed, my father still admits, was not entirely undeserved. My grandfather then decided it was no longer safe for my father and my aunt, who was one-year older than him, to stay behind in the town with him. They, too, would be sent to Madhupur, where the rest of the family had already gathered.

However, the roads were unsafe, and transport was scarce. My grandfather managed to hire a rickshaw. He made sure my aunt was covered from head to toe. Listening to this story as a child and imagining the unspoken

possibilities, I always felt a lump in my throat and chills run down my spine.

The trio—a father and a brother, a sister and a daughter—were nothing but Bangladeshi to the Pakistani forces; people who could be ruled over and violated at will. From the stories of 1971, I learnt the meanings of war, monstrosity and injustice. I heard of fear—fear of losing loved ones, of losing a country, of losing one's own life. I heard from children who are adults now, who still remember what it felt like to live under the shadow of doom, with no means to protect themselves or their families.

When they started the journey to Madhupur, Tommy, the family's pet dog, ran behind the rickshaw for almost 20 kilometres, all the way up to Muktagacha. My grandfather stopped, bought two parathas for the dog, and then resumed the journey. Hungry and exhausted, Tommy could run no further and there was no way to take him along. My grandfather and aunt eventually managed two seats on a bus, while my father followed behind on his bicycle for more than 40 kilometres.

The war has affected us all, those who witnessed it directly and those who did not. The trauma of surviving a genocide is passed down through generations. I felt safe sitting beside my grandfather, listening to these stories in the very house where, years ago, he and his three sons had dug a trench to protect the family from airborne attacks. Such realities were unimaginable to someone who had never lived under occupation. I knew I would never fully understand what my family had endured. What I did

know was that I felt deep gratitude towards the freedom fighters who laid down their lives to liberate the nation.

My father also recalled sheltering a group of around 20 starving freedom fighters in his paternal grandfather's house. The commander, armed with rifles and Sten guns, asked for food. My father sacrificed a pet duck, and with a neighbour's help, fed the group. They were ordinary villagers, some were farmers, whose lives were transformed the moment they took up arms. They chose independence as their legacy, even if it meant not surviving the war. From these stories, I learnt about bravery, resilience, and the difference between right and wrong.

My father also remembers the razakars and the Al-Badr Bahini. Two senior students from his school joined the Al-Badr and roamed the city with firearms. They abducted those suspected of links to freedom fighters, tortured them on the banks of the Brahmaputra, and dumped their bodies in the river.

How many families, then, endured this devastating war with hope in their hearts? Millions longed for freedom because they were exhausted by oppression. Memories of trenches, abandoned pets, and starving fighters are not folklore; they are the scar tissue of our nation's history. It is devastating to see attempts to rewrite or deny this past. The Liberation War, the sacrifices Bangladeshis made, and the independence we inherited define us as a free nation. Without acknowledging that past, we risk losing our identity.