

## Significance of Tarique Rahman's return

His homecoming offers his party a psychological reset, and the country a moment of political recalibration

Political parties, like individuals, sometimes require a psychological reset. For BNP, that moment arrived on Thursday. For most of the past decade, the party has been steered from afar by its acting chairman, Tarique Rahman, while in exile in London. His return marks a long-awaited exhilaration—especially for grassroots supporters who, year after year, had held their breath—and a historic moment for the nation.

Rahman landed in Dhaka accompanied by his wife, Zubaida Rahman, their daughter, Zaima, and—to the delight of his social media followers—the family cat. The symbolism was heavy. Just outside the airport terminal, the 60-year-old leader paused to stand barefoot, a gesture of reverence for the soil from which he had been absent for 17 years, before boarding a bulletproof bus that carried him in a festive procession to a reception venue. There, he addressed a sea of supporters. It was a grounding moment in every sense, bringing to an end a period of suspended animation that began with his departure to the UK in 2008 and worsened under Sheikh Hasina's authoritarian rule.

His return may help restore a measure of equilibrium to a fractured political landscape, but the road home was shaped by a new reality. Following Hasina's ouster last year, Rahman was relieved of politically motivated convictions in a litany of cases. Upon landing, he thanked Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus by phone from the airport lounge for the security provided to him and his family.

When he finally addressed the crowd, the most resonant passage of his speech came when he promised to build a "safe Bangladesh"—the basic concept of security that has felt elusive recently. He painted a picture of a nation free from violence that has stalked its streets. He envisioned a nation where "every woman, man, and child can leave home and return safely."

Rahman called for unity rather than vengeance. His tone was inclusive and forward-looking as he sketched a vision of the country's recovery. Playing on the famous words of Martin Luther King Jr., he declared, "I have a plan. I have a plan for the people of my country." It was a deliberate rhetorical pivot—from grievance to governance. He also recalled the martyrdom of Sharif Osman Hadi in his struggle to restore democratic rights.

His emphasis on pluralism was also striking. "Just as there are people of the hills in this country, similarly there are people of the plain lands," he said, explicitly embracing Bangladesh's religious and ethnic mosaic—Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and Christians alike. "We all want to build such a Bangladesh, the dream of which a mother sees," he added. The metaphor is politically astute. Rahman underscored the daunting demographics of the nation he hopes to lead: millions of young people and children, and a female population that makes up half the country.

In a departure from the pomp of the past, Rahman sat on a simple, unadorned wooden chair at the reception venue. It was a calculated visual metaphor: a rejection of the "throne" mentality that has long plagued the country's leadership.

The exile is over. Rahman's physical presence now serves as a counterweight to the swelling influence of rival political actors. The challenges ahead are immense, but as his bulletproof bus wound its way through cheering crowds in Dhaka, the prevailing mood was one of palpable relief. He is rightly credited with preserving party unity through the lean years of opposition. His second act—now waiting to play out on home soil ahead of a February election—will depend on whether he can charm a new generation and convince a nation emerging from trauma that he represents a fresh start, rather than a return to business as usual.

## Enforcing tobacco law is the real challenge

New ordinance raises hope but glaring omissions remain

The government's move to approve a relatively comprehensive anti-tobacco ordinance deserves to be acknowledged at a time when tobacco consumption has visibly increased in the country. Against this backdrop, the ordinance appears to signal a renewed intent to prioritise public health and to respond to long-standing demands for tighter controls.

Several of its provisions are undoubtedly positive. Expanding the definition of tobacco products to include new forms such as nicotine pouches and banning e-cigarettes and vaping are necessary steps, although one must note the apparent double standard in not extending the same blanket ban to smoking in general. That said, the decision to prohibit all forms of tobacco advertising, including online promotions, deserves to be acknowledged, as does removing the provision for so-called "smoking zones," or banning the consumption of tobacco products in public places alongside smoking. These should strengthen the message that public spaces must be protected from tobacco exposure.

However, we must also acknowledge the omissions of the ordinance that can weaken its impact. The exclusion of several draft sections from the approved version—such as banning the sale of loose or unpackaged tobacco, hawking or unregistered sale of tobacco products, or flavouring them—has raised concerns among anti-tobacco campaigners. Loose cigarettes and flavoured products are among the most common entry points for young and low-income users, while hawking and unregistered sales allow tobacco to circulate with minimal oversight. The question is, why would the government allow this to happen?

Admittedly, revenue consideration is a big factor. According to our report, the omission proposals came from the National Board of Revenue and the finance ministry as the draft prohibitions could reduce revenue generation. Thus opposition from the health ministry was ignored. That revenue considerations can override public health concerns is deeply alarming. Tobacco-related illnesses already impose an enormous economic burden on us through healthcare costs, lost productivity, and premature deaths.

So while we agree with public health experts who welcomed the ordinance as being comprehensive, we must urge a reconsideration of the omission decisions and also stricter enforcement of anti-tobacco provisions, since new regulation will mean nothing without proper enforcement.

# EDITORIAL

## Short-term profit should not drive our shipping policy



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Recently, Bangladesh Shipping Corporation (BSC) has reported its highest net profit in 54 years, an achievement that has understandably generated optimism among policymakers and maritime stakeholders. After decades of operating largely at a loss, the corporation's return to profitability feels like a long-awaited vindication. Riding on this momentum, the government has signalled its intention to procure new vessels for BSC, with the stated goals of carrying more national cargo, saving foreign exchange, and creating seafaring jobs.

While these objectives are valid and important, the policy direction chosen to achieve them deserves careful scrutiny. Shipping is one of the most volatile and capital-intensive industries in the global economy. Decisions taken during a cyclical upswing can lock a country into long-term financial and operational risks long after favourable market conditions have faded.

BSC's recent profit, though welcome, must be seen in its proper context. Global freight rates surged unusually in the aftermath of the pandemic due to supply chain disruptions, port congestion, and vessel shortages. This exceptional market environment benefited shipowners worldwide, not just BSC. In Bangladesh's case, part of the reported profit also stemmed from one-off factors rather than recurring operational efficiency. A single profitable year, particularly after more than five decades of losses, does not automatically indicate a structural turnaround or long-term competitiveness.

Shipping history offers sobering lessons. Freight markets are cyclical by nature. Periods of high earnings are often followed by sharp downturns, during which revenues fall rapidly while fixed costs—loan repayments, crew wages, insurance, and maintenance—remain unchanged. Even globally renowned shipping companies, backed by modern fleets and professional management, have gone bankrupt when market cycles turned against them. Publicly funded shipping ventures are especially vulnerable because their losses ultimately fall on taxpayers.

Over the past three decades, most developed maritime nations have drawn clear conclusions from these realities. Governments gradually stepped away from owning and operating commercial shipping lines, not due to ideological preference, but

because state ownership proved ill-suited to an industry that demands speed, flexibility, and ruthless cost discipline. Former national flag carriers in Europe and Asia were privatised, merged, or allowed to be acquired by larger private operators once it became clear that emotional attachment to national ownership could not outweigh commercial logic.

Bangladesh's own maritime trajectory reinforces this global lesson. The country already has a growing private shipping sector operating dozens of ocean-going vessels without sovereign guarantees or exclusive cargo privileges. Several private groups today operate fleets far larger than BSC's, demonstrating that

because state ownership is neither the most efficient nor the most scalable solution. Each vessel creates a limited number of onboard positions while requiring enormous capital outlay. Meanwhile, thousands of maritime graduates struggle to secure practical sea time not because global opportunities are absent, but because structured pathways to international employment remain weak. As I have argued in a previous article, the core challenge lies in training quality, international accreditation, and placement mechanisms—not in the number of state-owned ships.

Countries such as the Philippines became global leaders in seafarer employment without owning a large national merchant fleet. They invested instead in internationally trusted training systems and global placement networks, enabling their mariners to serve across the world's commercial fleets. Bangladesh could follow a similar path, generating foreign exchange and employment at a fraction of the cost of buying ships.

Another overlooked risk is the long-term financial burden of fleet

could deliver broader benefits than state ownership alone.

Many of the world's most successful maritime nations generate revenue, jobs, and influence by hosting ships under their flag rather than owning them outright. Such models allow governments to regulate standards, earn income, and promote national seafarer employment without bearing full commercial risk.

Bangladesh is also investing heavily in ports, logistics corridors, and energy infrastructure. These assets can anchor a strong maritime ecosystem if supported by the right policies. A competitive port system, efficient customs processes, access to ship finance, and skilled human capital will attract shipping activity far more reliably than a state-owned fleet operating in isolation.

None of this suggests that BSC has no role to play. The corporation can serve as a strategic participant, a benchmark for standards, or a partner in specific national interests. But expansion should be cautious, phased, and firmly grounded in commercial viability rather than short-term profitability.



Shipping ambition must be guided by prudence, not momentum-driven commitments.

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local entrepreneurship, when given policy stability and market access, can compete internationally. Expanding state ownership risks crowding out this private capacity rather than complementing it.

There is also a structural concern about market distortion. When government cargo or regulatory advantages are reserved for a state-owned entity, private investment incentives weaken. Such policies also do not encourage competition and efficiency, undermining the very national capacity policymakers seek to build.

One of the most frequently cited justifications for expanding BSC's fleet is the need to create jobs for Bangladeshi seafarers. This concern

ownership. Ships depreciate, require periodic dry docking, and eventually must be replaced. These costs do not pause during market downturn. If freight rates decline or operational inefficiencies emerge, BSC may find itself unable to service debt without renewed government support. Bangladesh's experience with other state-owned enterprises should caution against assuming that shipping will be different.

A more sustainable vision for maritime strength lies in policy reform rather than asset accumulation. As I have argued in another article published in this daily, expanding Bangladesh's presence through an internationally competitive registry and public-private partnership model

Any further fleet growth should be accompanied by strict governance reforms, transparent performance benchmarks, and a clear exit strategy if market conditions turn unfavourable.

Shipping ambition must be guided by prudence. Profits earned during exceptional market conditions should prompt strategic reflection, not momentum-driven commitments. Public investment decisions in shipping are not easily reversible, and mistakes can linger for decades.

Bangladesh's maritime future will be strongest if it is built on competitiveness, private sector vitality, and globally employable human capital. One profitable year is worth celebrating, yes, but it should not decide the country's shipping destiny.

### TRIBUTE TO BIR UTTAM AK KHANDKER

## Adieu to a frontliner of our Liberation War



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On December 20, 2025, Bangladesh lost Bir Uttam Abdul Karim Khandker, Liberation War deputy chief of staff and the first chief of the Bangladesh Air Force. His death is not only the passing of a decorated officer; it is the loss of a living bridge to the Liberation War. With him goes a voice that carried memory, discipline, and moral weight from 1971 into our uncertain present.

AK Khandker belonged to a generation that chose risk and duty over fear. When the country needed structure, he helped build it. When the war demanded courage with restraint, he offered both. His leadership was not loud, but it was firm. In a time when survival itself was unsure, he believed that victory had to be organised, ethical, and rooted in service to the people.

As the deputy commander, his role went beyond command during the war. He helped coordinate, plan, and sustain a resistance that was often outmatched in resources but not in resolve. On December 16, 1971, he was present during the Pakistani forces'

surrender at the Race Course Maidan as the representative of Bangladesh. The Liberation War was won not just by the courage of millions but also by leaders like him who could think clearly under pressure and turn scattered bravery into collective strength. AK Khandker was one of those leaders.

After independence, his responsibility did not end. As the first chief of the Bangladesh Air Force, he faced a mammoth task—building an institution from almost nothing. It demands patience, vision, and integrity. He helped shape the Bangladesh Air Force as a professional body grounded in discipline rather than politics, and service rather than spectacle—standards still relevant. He also served as a diplomat, and became the planning minister after being elected to parliament from Pabna-2 constituency in 2009.

What makes his passing especially heavy is the time we are living in. Our public life is often noisy, divided, and impatient. We speak of development, reform, and national pride, yet we

rarely pause to listen to those who built the foundations we stand on. AK Khandker represented an increasingly rare leadership. He believed that power should be accountable, that institutions should outlast individuals, and that patriotism is measured by service, not slogans.

His life also reminds us that the Liberation War was not a single



Bir Uttam AK Khandker. (January 1, 1930–December 20, 2025)

moment frozen in textbooks. It was a process, filled with hard choices and moral tests. Leaders like AK Khandker carried those lessons forward. They understood that independence was

not an ending. It was a beginning that required constant care. When such figures leave us, the risk is not only forgetting their names, but forgetting the values they lived by.

We often say that we honour our freedom fighters. But honour is more than ceremony. It is the willingness to protect institutions, reject violence as a political tool, and value competence over loyalty. It is the courage to defend truth even when it is inconvenient.

These were principles that shaped AK Khandker's public life.

As the nation mourns him, we should ask ourselves what we are doing with the inheritance he and his peers left behind. Are we strengthening the republic they imagined, or are we slowly eroding it through neglect and short-term thinking? Are we building leaders who see power as responsibility or as entitlement?

AK Khandker's death marks the fading of a generation that knew the cost of freedom firsthand. With each such loss, the distance between us and 1971 grows wider. That distance makes memory fragile. It makes distortion easier. It makes duty feel optional. That is why remembering him matters.

We have lost a leader and a frontliner of the Liberation War. But we still have a choice. We can let his legacy become a line in history, or we can let it guide our conduct. If we choose the latter, then his life will continue to speak, quietly but firmly, to a nation that still needs its compass.