

Security lapses ahead of polls disturbing

Two bomb-related incidents within 48 hours reveal alarming gaps

We're alarmed by the reported discovery of an explosives cache in a place of learning as well as the killing of a pedestrian in a flyover bomb blast. Both incidents, occurring within a span of 48 hours in Dhaka, have come as warnings that the stability of the pre-election period is far more fragile than the government would like to admit. In South Keraniganj, a madrasa erupted on Friday, injuring two children. When police sifted through the ruins, they unearthed something sinister: four bomb-like objects and 400 litres of chemicals, believed to be hydrogen peroxide, stored in drums.

The key suspect, Al Amin Sheikh, is a man of varied identities: a madrasa director, an Uber driver and, according to police, a figure with a history of terror charges linked to the banned Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh. That a known crime suspect, previously arrested in 2017 and 2020, could quietly stockpile industrial accelerants in a residential building raises uncomfortable questions about the government's surveillance of extremists. Police suspect the chemicals were intended for "sabotage" ahead of the upcoming elections. Just two days prior to this blast, Siam Majumder, a 21-year-old shop worker, was killed on the New Eskaton Road when a crude bomb was hurled from the Moghbazar-Mouchak flyover. As Siam's father asked, "Why do bombs fall on the heads of ordinary people?"

It is a question that resonates uneasily across the capital. The two incidents, though distinct, paint a gloomy picture of the country's security apparatus, just as the hazards are multiplying. On the ground in Keraniganj, a crime den operated under the nose of a landlord who believed she was renting her house to an orphanage. On the flyover, authorities have admitted, a large section of the lights had been turned off, and CCTV cameras were absent.

Meanwhile, police have later confirmed that six individuals have been arrested with ties to the madrasa blast in a widening dragnet. A formal case has now been registered against seven named people—with the absconding suspect, Al Amin Sheikh, at the top of the list—alongside a shadowy cohort of unidentified accomplices.

Whether the danger is stockpiled in the capital's periphery or dropped from a city flyover, such violence suggests that the road to the February elections will be perilous. The government must, therefore, pivot from reactive containment to proactive vigilance. The intelligence failure in Keraniganj about the existence of bombs indicates that the government's gaze is not firmly fixed on public safety threats. Law-enforcement agencies must urgently recalibrate their priorities, ensuring that surveillance tracks criminals on the loose. It is all the more urgent because, ultimately, a successful election rests on the peace of the streets.

Govt must act now to curb air pollution

It's a public health emergency we can no longer ignore

With the arrival of winter, air pollution in Dhaka and across the country has once again reached hazardous levels. On Sunday morning, Dhaka was ranked as the world's third most polluted city, with an Air Quality Index (AQI) of 216. Classified as "very unhealthy," such air poses serious risks to children, the elderly, and people with heart or respiratory diseases. This should set off alarms at the highest levels of the government. Unfortunately, while this is every winter's grim reality, it is met with little to no action from the authorities.

While Dhaka is the hardest hit by air pollution, the rest of the country is also in a bad situation. Even more concerning is that air pollution is no longer just a seasonal problem; it affects us year-round, with Bangladesh ranked as the worst-affected country in South Asia, according to a recent World Bank report. The sources of pollution are well known: industrial emissions, brick kilns, outdated vehicles, construction dust, household cooking, agricultural burning, and polluting power plants. Moreover, about 40 percent of Dhaka's pollution is reportedly transboundary.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), air pollution causes an estimated seven million premature deaths worldwide each year, primarily from stroke, heart disease, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, lung cancer, and acute respiratory infections. Numerous studies over the years have shown that air pollution remains a silent, pervasive threat in the country. Yet the government's response remains lacklustre. While some initiatives were taken to shut down illegal brick kilns and promote environment-friendly alternatives, the goals have largely remained unfulfilled. Outdated vehicles continue to operate on city streets, and hundreds of construction sites remain uncovered, contributing heavily to dust pollution.

The impact of these failures is devastating, particularly for children. According to the recent World Bank report, 100 percent of schoolchildren in Dhaka and nearby areas are exposed to unsafe levels of PM2.5, fine particulate matter that penetrates deep into the lungs and bloodstream. Alarmingly, even modest increases in PM2.5 are linked to learning losses equivalent to several weeks of schooling. But Bangladesh still lacks clear, systematic protocols, such as school protection measures or closure guidelines, during episodes of extreme pollution.

Air pollution has become a full-blown public health emergency, and the government must treat it as such. Ensuring access to clean cooking fuels, modernising industries and transport, improving fuel quality, and strictly controlling construction dust are urgent priorities. The government must also take immediate policy measures to protect schoolchildren from toxic air. Clean air is a basic right, and the government must act decisively to protect it.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

US Army conducts Wounded Knee massacre

On this day in 1890, in one of the final chapters of long wars with Native Americans, the US Cavalry killed 146 Lakota Indians at Wounded Knee on the Pine Ridge reservation in South Dakota.

The interim failed to curb inflation and unemployment



OPEN SKY
Dr Birupaksha Paul
is professor of economics at the
State University of New York at
Cortland in the U.S.

BIRUPAKSHA PAUL

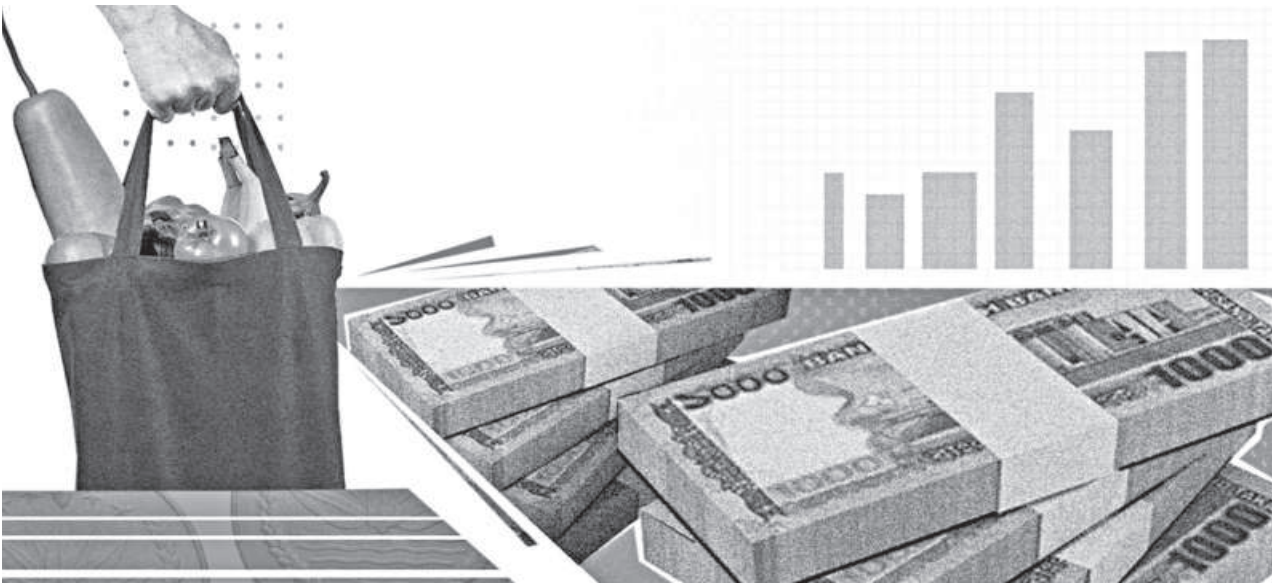
If the national election does take place in February, a new government will face dire quandaries for the economy, mainly in the lines of inflation and unemployment—the two notorious vices for any economy. As economics textbooks suggest, hitting these two culprits simultaneously is a terrible task because of the typical trade-off between them. As the central bank raises the policy interest rate to tame high inflation, high interest rates, in turn, increased unemployment by discouraging investments. If interest rates are slashed to boost investment and decrease unemployment, the ensuing cheap money will fuel the fire of inflation further up.

This situation is akin to reducing the speed of a car to minimise risks and thus enduring delays in hitting your destination. On the other hand, speeding up will increase the risk of accidents. Bangladesh's current situation with high inflation and rising unemployment is thus quite difficult to solve. Bangladesh Bank has raised policy rate to near 10 percent which has made credit expensive because other banks are charging lending rates at around 15 percent or higher. Private credit growth, which supposed to stay at around 15 percent or higher has now fallen to as low as around six percent—never seen in the last two decades. This puzzling conundrum rarely appears in the economy, heralding the advent of stagflation which Bangladesh's economy never saw in the last quarter century since 2000.

The interim government inherited an inflation of 10.87 percent in August 2024. It was 8.29 percent in November 2025. Achieving this drop in inflation after one and a half years cannot be considered as a big success for the interim government, when it is compared to neighbouring countries' success in inflation control. India's inflation, 6.21 percent in October 2024, fell to below one percent in November 2025, suggesting that price hikes are not a concern at all for India's consumers and investors. Pakistan's inflation, which rose to 38

percent in May 2023, fell below one percent in April 2025. Although it was 6.1 percent in November, it ascertains price normalcy given Pakistan's macro situation. Sri Lanka's inflation was 50 percent in March 2023, but its central bank made it fall so precipitously to 1.3 percent within six months. It was 2.1 percent in November 2025.

Despite achieving credible successes in external sector areas particularly foreign reserves, Bangladesh's central bank failed to display a success story similar to other South Asian central banks. Monetary treatments, including high policy rates above 10 percent, almost failed to tame inflation because of other rogue institutional failures such as extortions, mobocracy, fiscal debility, and declining loan recovery.



FILE VISUAL: REHNUMA PROSHOON

Hence, 2025 has been marked by worsening economic conditions which will pose challenges to the new government's economic management capabilities in 2026.

Since unemployment was the triggering factor for the student-led July-August uprising, the interim government's main attention should have flowed into addressing this issue.

Is the NCP becoming what it once rejected?



Arafat Rahaman
is a journalist at The Daily Star.

ARAFAT RAHAMAN

The National Citizen Party (NCP) was born with a claim that it would not practise politics as usual. Emerging from the ashes of the July uprising, it asked to be seen as a break from the old habits of convenience and compromise, pledging to distinguish itself through its political language, practice, and a sharper sense of responsibility.

That claim now faces an existential test.

Speculations swirling around a potential Jamaat-NCP alliance finally ended on Sunday afternoon when, at a press conference at the National Press Club, Jamaat-e-Islami Ameer Shafiqur Rahman officially announced a new electoral front. The NCP, alongside Colonel (Retd.) Oli Ahmed's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), has now joined Jamaat's existing coalition—a definitive moment of reckoning for NCP.

A series of developments leading to the formal announcement has turned this coalition into an existential crisis for the party. Earlier, Tasnim Jara, a highly visible leader of NCP, resigned from her post as senior joint secretary to contest the Dhaka-9 constituency as an independent. The crisis then deepened with the resignation of Tajnuva Jabeen, a joint convener, and also a formal letter from 30 central committee members opposing any

political alliance or seat-sharing arrangement with Jamaat.

Seat-sharing is not unusual in Bangladesh's politics. Elections are fought constituency by constituency, and any success depends on organisation, polling agents, and the capacity to protect votes. New parties often struggle because such structures take years to build. From a narrow electoral perspective, alliances can appear practical, even necessary. But the NCP did not enter politics asking to be judged by that standard alone.

Since its inception, NCP presented itself as the political expression. Its leaders spoke against shortcuts, recycled alignments, and moral ambiguity. They promised a new arrangement, repeatedly invoking "noya bondobosto" as a governing principle. That positioning mattered. It is why many young people, first-time participants, and politically unaffiliated citizens placed their trust in the party. The question is: what has changed then?

The official announcement validates the disturbing allegations made by Tajnuva Jabeen in a Facebook post upon her resignation. In it, she argued that the drastic cut in nominations, from 125 to a mere 30-40, was not an emergency measure, but a trap. The timing of Sunday's press conference—just a day before the final nomination

That did not happen. Rather, the government's attention was sporadic and thus diluted with regards to economic aspects such as private investment, financial reforms, credit growth, women empowerment, rural opportunities, and above all law and order. According to the General Economic Division's State of the Economy 2025, the overall unemployment situation in 2024 has slightly deteriorated compared to 2023. The highest unemployment rate is 13.54 percent among university graduates as BBS labour force survey reports.

Much to people's disappointment, the trepidation of losing jobs took the centre stage rather than prospects of getting jobs or upliftment in the quality of jobs in the labour market. More than one lakh garment workers in Bangladesh lost their jobs over the past year following the closure of at least 258 factories, according to a new survey by the Asia Floor Wage Alliance (AFWA). Although the pace of job creation was often slow in Bangladesh where 84 percent jobs belong to the informal sector, the pace of job loss during the interim regime was high because of abrupt factory closures.

sector that can generate high growth in both employment and output, and that side has remained excruciatingly disturbed during the interim regime.

The results of industrial perturbation have been manifested in three areas: i) around six percent growth in private credit; ii) an abrupt rise in unemployment; and finally iii) the unholy reversal in the so-far declining trend of poverty. Reports say that women job creation has been one of the slowest during the interim regime while it should have been the opposite as a nation strides forward.

It is worth mentioning that the interim government of 2007-2008 primarily focused on law and order without publicising big talks on reforms, and it succeeded in maintaining macroeconomic stability and people's deep sense of security. These two aspects are deeply missing in the current interim regime, making it a prime task for the next government of 2026.

Bangladesh's current growth performance, around four percent in FY2025 and expected five percent in FY2026, is much below its potential. The demographic dividend, which will expire for the nation by 2035, must



be utilised quite properly to catch the last train of growth acceleration. Otherwise, it will be Bangladesh's both institutional and structural failures for not translating growth into inclusive development and prosperity. The new government's long-term target will be to rediscover the secrets of decent economic growth which will lower income inequality and regional disparity.

The new government must work on how to reverse this inauspicious pattern of factory closures and job losses. While the government is pleased to display significant export growth in FY2025, unrest and panic in the whole garments industry have remain prevalent. Agriculture, being only 11.15 percent of GDP, employs over 40 percent of the workforce, and that is not a good sign. Industry is the only

deadline—confirms this view. By stalling the announcement until the eleventh hour, the NCP leadership effectively checkmated their own aspirants. Candidates who spent months campaigning, believing they were part of a nationwide effort to contest all seats, have been abandoned with no time to regroup as independents.

This procedural play is, in many ways, more damaging than the ideological one. As Jabeen pointed out, trust matters more than ideology. Inviting nominations with public fanfare, only to discard grassroots organisers in favour of a deal yielding fewer seats than even smaller Islamist factions are negotiating, signals a deep betrayal. It suggests the "July force" was willing to sacrifice the aspirations of the many to secure safe passage for a select few at the top.

The alliance with Jamaat-e-Islami also carries a weight that goes far beyond seat arithmetic. Jamaat's opposition to independence in 1971 and its role during the Liberation War are part of Bangladesh's mainstream political history. That history and resultant trust gap cannot be neutralised through electoral mathematics alone.

Tasnim Jara's decision brings the evolving tension into sharp focus. Announcing her independent candidacy, she acknowledged the disadvantages of running without party infrastructure, an organised worker base, or institutional access to security and administration. Yet she chose that path, citing her commitment to a new political culture and the promise she had made to voters. Her exit, alongside Jabeen's, also exposes a widening gender fault line. Reports suggest that other women leaders in senior positions feel similarly alienated. For a

party that prided itself on the inclusive spirit of the barricades, the quiet and potentially growing exodus of women leaders represents a serious failure of representation.

The NCP central committee letter also makes it impossible to dismiss the issue as personal dissent. The 30 signatories invoke the party's declared ideology, the historical responsibility of the July uprising, and democratic ethics. They explicitly cite Jamaat's political past, particularly its role in 1971, as incompatible with the NCP's values. The letter further accused the prospective partner of engaging in espionage and sabotage within other parties and of conducting character assassination campaigns against the NCP's own female members through online platforms. That such warnings from leaders have been ignored is quite telling about the direction of the party.

Funding adds another layer of complications. The NCP presented itself as a citizen-funded alternative to patronage politics. Crowdfunding is not just a financial mechanism here; it is a political contract. Many contributors donated on the assumption that the party would not compromise with forces they consider historically and morally discredited. If the party now moves in a direction that violates that understanding, the cost may extend well beyond this election. Warnings came from within the broader July movement as well. Former coordinators like Abdul Kader cautioned that any alliance could damage the future of youth politics.

The NCP claimed to represent a new arrangement. Instead, it has silenced its own aspirants through procedural traps, trading its political promise for short-term expediency. The *shapla koli* has now officially been planted in Jamaat's garden. What will it do next?