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Is it the usual politics of convenience?

NCP's alliance with Jamaat leaves many disenchanted

The National Citizen Party's (NCP) decision to enter an electoral alliance with Jamaat-e-Islami has triggered a crisis within its own ranks and among those who once placed great hope in it. While a major segment of the party has rallied behind the move, a number of important members and supporters have voiced disappointment and disillusionment through public resignations and social media statements. For a party that emerged from the July 2024 uprising promising to break with politics as usual, this alliance represents a moment of reckoning.

The resignations of Tasnim Jara and Tajnuva Jabeen have been particularly striking. Both are prominent figures, and their departures alongside criticism from other leaders—especially women—deal a blow to the NCP's carefully cultivated image as a democratic and inclusive force committed to resisting discrimination. More resignations are expected to follow. Born from a student-led movement that helped unseat an authoritarian government, the NCP claimed moral authority rooted in sacrifice, courage, and a pledge to redefine political culture. The alliance, spearheaded by convener Nahid Islam and other senior leaders, has inevitably raised questions about whether that ideological commitment has been traded for parliamentary seats.

Nahid Islam has sought to downplay these concerns, insisting that the pact with Jamaat is "strictly electoral" and has nothing to do with ideology. He maintains that the party's reform, justice, and anti-hegemony agenda remains intact. He has also pointed to the security risks faced by NCP leaders and activists, particularly after the killing of Sharif Osman Hadi, arguing that an alliance with Jamaat could offer protection for grassroots workers. While it is true that electoral politics in Bangladesh can be brutal and new parties face both structural and security challenges, are these risks sufficient to justify alienating key members and supporters?

The party's justification, moreover, does little to address the deeper unease. The NCP did not ask to be judged by narrow electoral logic alone. It positioned itself as a moral alternative to the entrenched culture of convenience and compromise. The abrupt shift, from contesting countrywide to capping nominations at around 30 seats, has reinforced the perception that key decisions were taken without consultation or transparency. Jabeen has alleged that the arrangement was pre-planned and that aspiring candidates were sidelined. Undoubtedly, women leaders—who have been constantly harassed and threatened online by right-wing groups—appear to have been disproportionately excluded from this consequential decision.

The party's move has left many questioning what, if anything, fundamentally distinguishes the NCP from the very political culture it once condemned. With many central committee members loudly opposing the alliance, and influential figures such as Mahfuj Alam expressing disenchantment, the NCP's future as a credible party of change looks uncertain. Instead of chasing seats at the cost of its credibility, it could have chosen patience, accepting electoral defeat if necessary while preserving its ideological integrity. That restraint, rather than this alliance of convenience, might have demonstrated that it truly is a party of real change.

Must textbook delays recur every year?

This continuation exposes systemic failures, weak accountability

It is disheartening that thousands of secondary-level students will be attending classes in the new academic year without a complete set of textbooks. According to a report in this daily, more than 40 percent of the 21.43 crore textbooks for secondary-level students are yet to be delivered to schools. While primary-level students are expected to receive all their books on time, those in Classes 7 and 8 are facing the worst of the crisis, with many likely to get only a few of the 12 textbooks they need at the start of the year. In contrast, classes 6 and 9 are relatively better off. This exposes an uneven and poorly managed printing and distribution process.

The National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) officials have pointed out several reasons for the delays, including cancellation of tenders for printing textbooks for Classes 6, 7, and 8 at a late stage, followed by retendering, delayed approvals from the ministry and procurement bodies, and slow contract finalisation. These setbacks were further compounded by inadequate manpower at the NCTB, the absence of a full-time chairman for months, and weak coordination with printing presses. Not anticipating these challenges, even after repeated failures in previous years, raises serious questions about institutional preparedness.

Printers have also pointed to systemic problems. Reportedly, most of the printing work was assigned to a small number of presses—nearly 80 percent of the total workload has been concentrated among a small group of around 20 printing presses—making it difficult to finish on time. Moreover, poor monitoring led to quality problems, and many substandard books had to be discarded after inspection, causing further delays. These failures show weak oversight and a lack of accountability at different stages of the process.

For the students, the impact of these failures will be severe. Starting the academic year without essential textbooks will disrupt their teaching plans, hamper learning continuity, and place unnecessary stress on both students and teachers. Regrettably, students are being told by the authorities to rely on PDF versions of textbooks, even though digital access remains uneven. The entire situation is frustrating.

Textbook delays have become a recurring problem in the country, with some schools in previous years receiving books months after classes began. This pattern must end. The authorities need to ensure timely tender finalisation, balanced allocation of printing work, stricter monitoring, and clear accountability for delays. Providing every student with a full set of textbooks on the first day of the academic year should be a basic obligation of the authorities. Students must not pay the price for administrative failures.

Why seaport reforms must begin at the customs house

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The ongoing debate over seaport reforms in Bangladesh is largely centred on the long-term leasing of terminals to foreign operators to modernise port infrastructure. However, high-tech docks and foreign management can only do so much if the "brain" of the operation, the customs clearance process, remains bottlenecked by partial digitalisation.

During the period of 2009-2024, the Digital Bangladesh campaign successfully introduced bespoke software and automated platforms to nearly every government office. But nowhere was early digitalisation as critical as at Customs House, Chattogram (CCH), the country's premier tax collection gateway.

CCH, which supports the Chittagong Port, accounts for 70-80 percent of total customs revenue and serves nearly 700 shipping agents, 1,000 freight forwarders, and 4,000 clearing and forwarding (C&F) agents. On average, CCH processes 7,000 to 8,000 bills of entry (BEs) for exports and imports daily. In the first five months of the current fiscal year, CCH collected Tk 31,602 crore in revenue. In FY 2024-2025, its collection was Tk 75,432 crore, which is eight times the amount it collected in FY 2003-2004.

Since its introduction in 1993, CCH upgraded the UNCTAD Automated System for Customs Data (ASYCUDA)—an integrated customs management system for international trade—several times. Currently, it is using ASYCUDA World, which was intended to reduce the time, cost, and physical visits required to process thousands of BEs manually. However, there are debates among business communities about the system's data accuracy and reliability, and it is often alleged that it leads to significant clearance delays.

The initial payoff of automation and subsequent upgrades were clear: in the 2012-13 fiscal year, CCH attained 90 percent of its revenue target, and by 2016-17, it hit 100 percent. Yet, by 2022-23, this figure dropped back to 82 percent. The current fiscal year's revenue collection for the first five months was 13 percent below the target. End-to-end automation remains elusive. While the core system is digital, several critical checkpoints remain manual. Currently, only 39 percent of submitted BEs (documents filed by importers for tax/duties/legal compliance/clearance assessment) are processed on the same day, while 19 percent take more than four days. Alarmingly, only five percent of imports are processed before arrival, often due to a lack of coordination with port authorities regarding the auction of unclaimed containers.

While ASYCUDA is designed to scrutinise only up to 10 percent of BEs through risk-based inspection, allowing the remaining 90 percent to receive clearance based on documentary checks, this is rarely the case in practice. Inspections of weight and nature of goods remain manual, as do many certification processes. Furthermore, ASYCUDA lacks interoperability. Customs officials are still compelled to rely on physical paperwork because various certifying entities do not work within an integrated system.

These so-called non-tariff barriers are compounded by the "Time, Cost, and Visit" (TCV) burden associated with outside agencies. Obtaining a simple No Objection Certificate (NOC) from the Bangladesh Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (BCSIR) or Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institution (BSTI) can take over a week. Frequent changes in import/ export policies by the commerce ministry and adjustments to the Tariff's First Schedule by the finance ministry create further challenges in the process.

According to representatives of the Chittagong Customs Agents Association, the server struggles to take the load when thousands of agents log into the ASYCUDA modules simultaneously. Moreover, the lack of interoperability—where an importer shares bank documents with a C&F agent who then manually enters the data into ASYCUDA World—creates a "broken link" in the digital chain. This backlog wrongly places the blame on CCH officials, though the root cause often lies in "broken cross-project connectivity."

In addition, the internet connection at CCH is frequently disrupted, despite being provided by the state-owned Bangladesh Telecommunications Company Limited (BTCL), the country's largest Nationwide Telecommunication Transmission Network (NTTN) entity. BTCL management is often slow to respond to queries, and because CCH lacks access to Network Management System (NMS) data, monitoring rests

A fully automated customs authority backed by a responsive governance system is needed to support the trillion-dollar economy Bangladesh expects to become.

FILE PHOTO: STAR

solely with the National Board of Revenue's central IT office in Dhaka.

To partly circumvent this "BTCL conundrum," CCH relies on a private ISP for its primary ASYCUDA services. While this private vendor is functional and responsive, it highlights a hidden vulnerability: the lifeblood of our national trade is indirectly dependent on a private vendor and the country's NTTN duopoly (Fibre@Home and Summit hold NTTN licence, operating a network spanning around 50,000 kilometres and 40,000 km of optical fibre). The main reason for the vulnerability is the erratic service of state-run primary source—BTCL.

This strategic interdependence calls for an immediate intervention. Beyond BTCL's questionable balance sheet, the actual damage is the TCV loss incurred by key strategic fiscal entities like CCH. This legacy of the Digital Bangladesh campaign—where software and hardware issues in public offices are left unaddressed—has paradoxically slowed down service delivery and day-to-day operations, creating new hidden costs for taxpayers.

However, some issues stem from the ASYCUDA software itself, including technical glitches during system upgrades that stall customs clearance and leave import/export items idle at the port. This strains the relationship between customs officials and trade agents, damaging the credibility of CCH. C&F agents have noted that software complexity occasionally "scrambles" critical data—such as product types and weights—from the BEs.

The reality is that CCH is between a rock and a hard place. The Anti-Corruption Commission frequently examines allegations of revenue evasion via forged documents but often limits investigations mostly to CCH officers, while the business community accuses CCH of harassment through arbitrary duties and inaccurate valuations. Both of these undermine the morale of CCH officials. Correct and timely examination of the customs database is the only way to minimise both corruption and trade losses.

There is, however, room for optimism. Recent steps toward disciplining officials, changes in top leadership at CCH, a functional National Single Window platform, the Bond Management Automation project, and the introduction of E-Auctions, E-Tenders, and E-Payments are beginning to pay dividends. CCH's revenue achievement target is improving. To consolidate these gains, the NBR must invest in strengthening the governance of CCH, including the ability to implement regular software upgrades without system shutdowns, rather than phasing out the ASYCUDA system altogether.

Furthermore, NBR should introduce a TCV measurement tool for all port authorities to identify inefficiencies from a citizen-centred perspective. Also, lobbying for lucrative CCH postings must be stamped out to stabilise the CCH's core administrative workforce.

Lastly, the number of sanctioned posts needs to increase alongside actual appointments to cope with rising demands for timely and proper examination of the custom consignments and the BEs.

Let's not forget that as Bangladesh eyes a trillion-dollar economy by 2030, modernised seaports are only half the equation. We need a fully automated customs authority backed by a responsive governance system that ensures technology facilitates trade rather than obstructing it.

The slow death of Test cricket

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In the blink of an eye, the Boxing Day Test was over. For the second time this summer, an Ashes Test concluded in barely two days, with England sealing a four-wicket win at the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG) on December 27, 2025. For many of us, this felt almost unreal.

The Boxing Day Test has long been one of cricket's great traditions. It is always played at the MCG, beginning on December 26, and features Australia against a visiting team, most often England. Over the decades, it has become far more than a sporting fixture. It is part of the rhythm of the Australian summer.

The Ashes themselves represent one of the oldest and most storied rivalries in world sport. There were times when these contests produced epic struggles that entered cricketing folklore. Don Bradman dominated attacks with a mastery rarely matched before or since. In response, England devised the infamous Bodyline tactics under the leadership of Douglas Jardine. Even without protective helmets, Bradman endured and prevailed. His name became immortal, while that of Jardine faded into history.

Test aficionados will never forget the historic match between Australia and the West Indies, which ended in a tie, with both teams finishing on the same total. Played at Brisbane in 1960, it remains one of the rarest results in the game's long history. Frank Worrell captained the match for the West Indies and Richie Benaud for Australia, and it came to symbolise a profound turning point in cricketing history.

That moment carried a deeper resonance because, only a short time earlier, Frank Worrell had been excluded from the West Indies side altogether. During both the home series against Pakistan in 1957–58 and the subsequent tour of Pakistan, the team was captained by Gerry Alexander, a white Jamaican. Worrell's omission had little to do with form or merit and much to do with the racial hierarchies that still governed West Indian cricket. Leadership was reserved for those deemed socially and racially acceptable. When Worrell was finally appointed captain for the Australian tour, it marked not merely a sporting decision but a moral turning point. It signalled the beginning of the end of colonial deference and the emergence of a more confident Caribbean identity.

There were other great eras as

> **The rise of limited-overs cricket, and more recently the T20 format, has transformed the game. Batsmen attack from the outset. Run rates soar, but wickets fall just as quickly. The patience, rhythm, and long-form strategy that defined Test cricket are steadily eroding. And now we arrive at the present moment. What has become of Test cricket? Matches that were designed to last five days are finishing in two. A friend of mine bought tickets for the fourth and fifth days of the Boxing Day Test, only to find the match over before those days arrived. Once, drawn Tests after five days of attrition were common. Today, they are increasingly rare.**

well. The rise of the West Indies in the 1970s and 1980s transformed the game. Their fearsome pace attacks and flamboyant batting humbled Australia on home soil in a 5–0 whitewash. This period coincided with the upheaval of World Series Cricket, when Kerry Packer broke the establishment and sent teams, controversially, to apartheid-era South Africa. That episode reshaped the global game in lasting ways.

For much of its history, Test cricket was an exclusive club. Australia, England, the West Indies, India, Pakistan, New Zealand and South Africa formed its core, with South Africa later excluded and then readmitted. Over time, new nations such as Sri Lanka, Zimbabwe and Bangladesh joined the ranks, with varying degrees of success.

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For those of us who grew up in what now feels like a golden age of Test cricket, who memorised statistics and followed every tour with devotion, this change brings a sense of quiet loss. It feels like the closing of a chapter.

Perhaps this is simply the nature of time. Games evolve, just as generations do. And perhaps the fading of the five-day Test mirrors something deeper, the gradual realisation that an era we once inhabited so fully is passing into memory.

Such is life.