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State must shun the machinery of erasure

Report on enforced disappearances reveals systematic political purges

A harrowing final report by the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances again confirms that this heinous practice under the Sheikh Hasina regime was not an aberration but a deliberate tool used against political opponents. The findings of the commission, submitted to Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus on Sunday, also negate the notion that these abductions were the work of rogue officers. What emerges instead is a tightly coordinated system of political purging where disappearance became a primary instrument to silence dissent and physically eliminate opposition.

The commission verified 1,569 cases, although it estimates the real number may exceed 6,000. The pattern disclosed is unmistakable: nearly 97 percent of victims with known political affiliations belonged to opposition parties. For Jamaat-e-Islami and its student wing, it was particularly harrowing. They accounted for 75 percent of political victims, their members repeatedly cycled through secret detention and the criminal justice system, a process designed to harass, exhaust, and neutralise. For BNP, the principal challenger to Awami League's dominance, the objective was equally sinister. Though fewer in number, BNP activists constituted 68 percent of those who "never returned."

The victim list thus reads more like a curated hit list, with the overwhelming concentration of disappearances among Jamaat, BNP, and their affiliates laying bare the operation's true nature. This was indeed systematic targeting by an authoritarian regime. As Awami League tightened its grip on power, the pace of disappearances accelerated, peaking at 215 cases in 2016. This unfolded as the security apparatus operated with near-total impunity, and continued through 2017 and 2018, hollowing out the opposition ahead of the elections. For three consecutive years, to put the scale in perspective, the state abducted nearly one person every two days.

Such an extensive programme of erasure could not have functioned without the corrosion of the entire security establishment. Rab, for example, became the regime's execution arm. Intelligence agencies, including DGI and Detective Branch, worked in concert, coordinating cross-agency abductions that the inquiry commission concludes could not have occurred without explicit authorisation from the Prime Minister's Office. The "centralised style of decision-making" implicates Hasina directly. It means the orders did not merely end at the top; they often began there. The regime also constructed fictitious stories to disguise political cleansing as law enforcement. Sometimes victims killed in mangrove forests were labelled "pirates"; those in coastal regions were branded "drug dealers." These fabrications lent legal camouflage to extrajudicial executions.

The chief adviser has rightly credited the inquiry report for documenting the "collapse of democratic institutions." It is also a moral indictment of a state that abandoned its role as guardian and became a predator of its own citizens. The task now is to dismantle this culture of impunity that allowed people to vanish without a trace or accountability. The lesson could not be clearer—when state machinery is politicised, it ceases to serve the public and becomes an instrument of terror, leading to gross human rights violations. Future elected governments must shun these practices entirely.

Preventable deaths on roads must stop

Road safety must be made a priority in political manifestos

We are shocked and dismayed by the latest road crash data released by Bangladesh Jatri Kalyan Samity, revealing that at least 9,111 people were killed in 2025. According to their report, there were 6,729 road crashes last year, injuring a further 14,812 people. Beyond statistics, these numbers represent real lives lost and the persistent failure of the state to protect citizens on its roads. Road crashes are entirely preventable, yet they remain one of the most serious threats to public safety in Bangladesh. Students, transport workers, drivers, and teachers were among the victims of this catastrophe.

What is also alarming is the economic cost. Road crashes are estimated to drain around Tk 60,000 crore from the economy every year. This loss, stemming from deaths, injuries, medical expenses, and productivity setbacks, is a heavy burden on Bangladesh and its already strained public services. Yet, road safety continues to be treated as a peripheral issue rather than a national priority.

Compared to 2024, crashes rose by nearly seven percent, deaths by almost six percent, and injuries by a staggering 15 percent. Given the known politicised nature of the transport sector under the previous government, we had hoped that there would be significant changes in governance, enforcement, and accountability under the interim government. Instead, the numbers have worsened along with the everyday risks faced by ordinary citizens. Despite a change in power, the policies governing road transport remain largely unchanged. Poor enforcement, unfit vehicles, untrained drivers, dangerous overtaking, flawed road design, and a culture of impunity continue unchecked. Meanwhile, fare extortion and the dominance of owners' associations have made daily travel both unsafe and expensive.

What makes this situation even more unacceptable is that solutions are well known and have been discussed and publicised over many years. The Bangladesh Jatri Kalyan Samity has identified a number of causes of road crashes and put forward concrete recommendations over time. These include increasing the road safety budget, establishing a road safety wing under the Ministry of Road Transport and Bridges, strict enforcement of the mandatory training of drivers at BRTA approved driving schools, and ensuring good governance in the transport sector by ending monopolies of owners' associations, corruption, irregularities, and extortion. We urge that these recommendations be taken seriously. As the country moves towards another national election, political parties must commit to road safety reforms and improved public transport in their manifestos to curb the loss of lives from road crashes.

Khaleda Zia's economic legacy, lessons, and the road ahead

MACRO MIRROR



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Over the 55 years since Bangladesh's independence, the processes of state-building, political transformation, and economic reconstruction have unfolded in deeply interconnected ways. During this period, the country has traversed multiple political turning points, each leaving a lasting imprint on its economic direction and institutional architecture. Within this long and complex history, Begum Khaleda Zia's leadership represents an important phase, particularly regarding economic reform and policy realignment.

First, her tenure, which began in 1991, coincided with a critical phase as Bangladesh gradually shifted from a state-controlled economic framework towards a market-oriented, export-led development model. This was not merely a moment of policy adjustment. It marked a broader reconfiguration of the relationship between the state, the market, and society. One may recall that the major impetus for this came from the Bretton Woods Institutions (BWIs), notably the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, through the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) introduced during the 1980s. These programmes emphasised macroeconomic stabilisation through fiscal and monetary discipline, reduced state intervention, trade liberalisation, and greater openness to global markets. SAPs, however, attracted widespread criticism for their uniform policy prescriptions, which were often linked to rising inequality, weakened social protection, and pressures on domestic industries with weak institutional capacity. While debates over SAPs remain part of a broader ideological and developmental literature, Bangladesh's reform trajectory led to improved macroeconomic performance in the mid-1990s. However, the BWIs recognised the need for improved governance and further reform to achieve better outcomes. Any assessment of Khaleda Zia's economic role must therefore situate her leadership within this wider national transition, as part of an evolutionary reform process rather than an isolated intervention.

Second, in 1991, Bangladesh had recently emerged from military rule and returned to democratic governance after a long period. At the time, low productive capacity, a weak revenue base, and heavy reliance on regulatory controls constrained the economy. Against this backdrop, her government placed the private sector at the centre of the development process by expanding the role of markets, fostering an investment-friendly environment, and redefining the state as a facilitator rather than a direct controller.



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

Third, the RMG industry, which emerged in the 1980s, received crucial structural support in the 1990s through policy instruments such as export performance benefits, bonded warehouse facilities, back-to-back letters of credit, cash incentives and trade facilitation measures. These policies were pragmatic, enabling Bangladesh to rapidly secure a significant position within global apparel value chains, a success that continued to drive economic growth in subsequent decades.

Fourth, one of the most consequential initiatives of Khaleda Zia's first term was the enactment of the Value Added Tax (VAT) Act in 1991, marking a fundamental shift in

Bangladesh's tax system. The reform aimed to replace a narrow, inefficient revenue structure with a modern, broad-based framework. Although implementation encountered obstacles and later required further adjustments, the initiative strengthened the foundations of revenue administration, essential to financing development expenditure, expanding social protection, and supporting infrastructure investment.

Fifth, two significant changes in the external sector were introduced during her time in office. In 1994, Bangladesh adopted current account convertibility, which energised import and export activity. This was followed in 2003 by the transition to a floating exchange rate regime. Together, these reforms enhanced flexibility in trade and monetary policy and deepened Bangladesh's economic integration with the global economy, contributing to greater macroeconomic resilience and stability over the long run.

Sixth, financial sector reform

emerged as one of the most critical yet complex chapters of this period. The enactment of the Bank Companies Act (1991) and the Financial Institutions Act (1993) was aimed at strengthening regulatory oversight, while the Financial Sector Reform Programmes (FSRP) and Financial Sector Adjustment Credit (FSAC) were implemented with support from development partners, including the World Bank. The Bangladesh Bank Amendment Bill 2003 was enacted to allow autonomy to the central bank. Although outcomes fell short of expectations, the reforms laid critical structural foundations. The establishment of the Bangladesh Securities and Exchange Commission (BSEC) in 1993, under the Bangladesh

Securities and Exchange Commission Act, was also a notable reform, providing an institutional framework for capital market development and strengthening the financial system's architecture.

Seventh, economic growth during this period, driven by export expansion and rising remittance inflows, created new employment opportunities. From the 1990s through the mid-2000s, gross domestic product (GDP) increased, and poverty rates declined significantly. Programmes aimed at poverty reduction, such as rural employment schemes, food security initiatives, and targeted assistance, were expanded. At the same time, the gradual extension of social safety nets sought to strengthen state support for vulnerable and low-income groups. Together, these initiatives helped reinforce the foundations of social progress. It must be acknowledged that this achievement cannot be attributed to any single government. It reflects the cumulative impact of sustained policy continuity. Nevertheless, the relative policy stability during Khaleda Zia's tenure helped accelerate this process.

These economic policies and reforms collectively constitute Khaleda Zia's economic legacy. Despite several achievements on the economic front, governance deficits, political polarisation, and uneven enforcement limited the full impact of the reforms. Notwithstanding the implementation challenges faced, these measures remain an important chapter in Bangladesh's development trajectory.

The lessons from that period remain relevant today, when governance weaknesses continue to be unaddressed. A lack of discipline in the banking sector, persistent political influence, and weak enforcement mechanisms have slowed the pace of reform. These challenges are structural and long-term. They remind us that reform is not merely a matter of policy design. It requires political commitment, institutional continuity, and a sustained, long-term vision working in concert.

As Bangladesh approaches the February 12 national elections, political parties must move beyond rhetoric and reflect seriously on the economic policies of all governments in power to understand what worked well, what failed, and why. The credibility of future agendas will depend on translating these lessons into reforms that strengthen institutions, restore discipline, and address citizens' everyday economic needs through inclusive and accountable governance.

Democracy cannot survive on silence and fear



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ZILLUR RAHMAN

After a long stretch away from the country, Tarique Rahman's return to Bangladesh marks the beginning of a tougher chapter, one that's about real responsibility, not symbolic. Naturally, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and its followers are feeling a mix of excitement and hope. But it's important to remember that this moment isn't just about one leader or party. It is a time when the democratic environment in Bangladesh appears unstable.

There had been a troubling trend in the weeks leading up to Rahman's return: attacks on political figures and the very institutions that support democratic life. Two major independent media outlets, *Prothom Alo* and *The Daily Star*, faced grave dangers. Journalists found themselves trapped in their own office, which was set on fire. Many were caught in chaotic situations, while others had to escape. Cultural institutions tied to Bangladesh's secular and pluralist heritage, like Chhayanaut and Bangladesh Udichi Shilpigoshthi, were also destroyed.

These attacks didn't happen in isolation. They were accompanied by targeted intimidation against individuals. Nurul Kabir, a respected editor and journalist, faced harassment and threats. In a particularly tragic

event, Dipu Chandra Das, a citizen from the Hindu community, was brutally killed. This raised serious concerns about the safety of minorities and highlighted a growing atmosphere of impunity. All these incidents together seem to send a clear message.

When minorities feel unsafe, and journalists are intimidated, it sends a signal meant for those beyond the directly affected. It tells society who is allowed to speak and who isn't. Democracies can erode gradually when intimidation is normalised, silence is mistaken for stability, and fear replaces open dialogue.

Elections aren't standalone events. They depend on a wider ecosystem that includes enforcement of law, free flow of information, and protection of dissenting voices. When citizens are targeted based on their identity, newspapers are attacked, and editors face threats, elections risk becoming mere formalities rather than democratic milestones. While there is no alternative to a credible election, votes alone can't compensate for a compromised public sphere.

This isn't a new issue for Bangladesh. For over a decade, journalism has faced restrictions, opposing views have been silenced, and cultural expression has been stifled, both publicly and privately. Many viewed the July uprising as a

reaction to this suffocation. It wasn't just about changing power; it was a call for accountability and dignity.

That's why the rise of mob violence is particularly alarming. It suggests that bigotry persists, even if political loyalties shift. Mob politics is inherently destructive. Once violence is justified as "public anger," accountability disappears. Mobs create chaos instead of supporting causes. They target minorities and journalists today, and tomorrow, they could go after political figures, ultimately consuming society as a whole.

Leadership today requires more than just words and mobilisation. It demands self-restraint. Clear boundaries need to be established and communicated. In these contexts, silence is often interpreted as complicity rather than neutrality. And in politics, interpretations can have serious consequences.

A genuine commitment to democratic renewal can't coexist with uncertainty about violence. A different tone is necessary, one that firmly opposes communal targeting, unequivocally defends media freedom, and clearly condemns attacks on journalists. These messages matter not just for party supporters but also for the broader public, who are weary of political cycles marked by retaliation and escalation.

However, it's important to recognise that no single person can shoulder this responsibility alone. Despite its constitutional ambiguities, the current interim government has a fundamental duty to uphold law and order fairly. Protecting citizens like Dipu Chandra Das, safeguarding journalists, and defending institutions that support free speech represent the

bare minimum needed for effective governance.

Given the inconsistent responses to recent attacks, concerns about commitment outweigh worries about capability. When those who break the law aren't held accountable, while critics face intimidation, a troubling message emerges which even elections can't erase. Over time, these issues weaken institutions.

Internationally, speculations about Bangladesh's political future have grown. It's not just outsiders meddling. When democratic protections seem weak, foreign governments, human rights organisations, and multilateral bodies will inevitably take notice. Weak systems don't enhance sovereignty; strong systems that do.

But this situation isn't just a test for politicians or governments. It's a test for society as a whole. Journalists aren't the only ones affected when a newspaper is burned. When an editor faces threats, it silences many voices. The social contract starts to break down when a citizen is attacked because of their identity.

The upcoming election won't be judged solely on results and turnout. It'll be evaluated based on how freely journalists can operate, how safe dissenting voices feel, how secure minorities are, and whether law enforcement serves the public interest rather than those in power.

Tarique Rahman's return is undoubtedly significant. Yet, its true impact won't be measured by celebrations or conflicts but by what comes next. Democracy can't thrive in an atmosphere of silence and fear. How Bangladesh responds now will shape not just this election, but public trust for many years ahead.