

Young voters will decide the winner

Parties must commit to a better future for the youth post-polls

There is little doubt that young voters are a decisive demographic force, particularly in the context of the upcoming general election that people expect to be free and fair. With 5.56 crore out of 12.76 crore voters—about 44 percent—being between 18 and 37 years of age, young people make up nearly half of the electorate. They could, therefore, end up deciding the outcome of the February 12 election, making it all the more crucial for political parties to connect with their thought processes and expectations from a future government.

Unlike the last three elections, widely regarded as farcical or non-competitive, this election follows the youth-led uprising of July 2024 and will be conducted under a non-political interim government committed to reform, justice for crimes committed under the Awami League regime, and credible polls. Having been denied meaningful voting opportunities in 2014, 2018, and 2024 due to intimidation and rigging, young voters are participating seriously for the first time in many years. The apathy of the past has been transformed into a determination to reclaim their right to vote, as recent surveys have also demonstrated. One survey by the Bangladesh Youth Leadership Centre found that 97 percent of respondents aged 18 to 35 intend to vote. Another survey, conducted by the International Republican Institute, found that 89 percent of respondents were likely or somewhat likely to vote.

Young voters link voting to real life issues and concerns, one of the most pressing being the number of jobless graduates. Bangladesh had nearly nine lakh unemployed graduates in 2024, according to the Labour Force Survey 2024 released by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS). Young voters want to know how the next government will tackle unemployment, improve the quality of education, reduce the cost of living, provide security to citizens, eliminate corruption, establish good governance and accountability, etc.

Political parties, therefore, must appeal to them with sincere and credible commitments. Universities are powerful spaces capable of shaping and influencing national politics. Recent student council elections in major universities have shown that youth groups who were able to connect meaningfully with the general students secured the largest victories. The BNP's student wing, by contrast, suffered repeated defeats, indicating that the party needs to work harder to appeal to the youth. Young people want an end to the status quo in which the state remains unaccountable, ordinary citizens feel powerless, and corruption erodes basic rights. Young women, in particular, will vote for a safer Bangladesh, one in which they can participate fully in all aspects of public life. Political parties must align themselves with these aspirations.

We believe that the country's democratic transition largely depends on youth turnout. With nearly half of the electorate being young, their participation will be the real test of whether Bangladesh is entering a new democratic phase. It will also determine whether, after years of erosion, public trust in elections can be restored.

A sheer waste of public resources

Activate non-operational health facilities, deliver services to local communities

It is quite concerning that at least 80 government health facilities across 18 districts have remained non-operational for years, reflecting persistent systemic failures in healthcare governance. According to a report by this daily, of these facilities, 17 are hospitals (including four children's hospitals), 14 are community clinics, and 12 are extensions to existing hospitals, while the rest comprise structures such as quarters for health workers. Built over years at enormous public expense, these facilities remain unused due to shortages of manpower, lack of equipment, and bureaucratic delays. As a result, basic healthcare services are being disrupted in these districts.

One such facility is the 20-bed hospital in Gazipur's Talia village. Built at a cost of around Tk 20 crore in 2020, it remains unutilised to this day. A local family even donated two acres of land in good faith in the hope of ensuring access to medical services that never materialised. Similar situations exist in Rangpur, Madaripur, Savar, and other districts, where completed facilities continue to lie idle. Several trauma centres, meant to respond to the rising incidence of road accidents, remain non-functional, while the children's hospitals stand empty despite paediatric wards elsewhere struggling under pressure. In some cases, facilities have remained unused for over a decade.

Health ministry documents obtained by *The Daily Star* show that the construction of 41 facilities was completed by 2024, while the rest were built earlier. The documents cite lack of manpower, equipment, and medicines as the main reasons for their continued non-operation. This raises a fundamental question: why were these structures built without a comprehensive operational plan? Constructing them without ensuring staff recruitment, budgetary allocation, and service readiness reflects a serious disconnect between infrastructure development and healthcare delivery. That some of the facilities were built even without feasibility studies further underscores how poor planning and weak accountability have plagued the sector. The consequences have been undoubtedly severe, as patients in rural and semi-urban areas are forced to travel long distances to already overstretched hospitals, incurring high costs and risking dangerous delays in treatment.

Decades of inefficiency, mismanagement, and corruption have thus rendered large parts of our health sector incapable of delivering essential services. Restoring order to this ailing sector requires proper planning, coordination, and accountability at every stage—something that we have, unfortunately, yet to see under the interim administration. We urge the health authorities to urgently audit all idle facilities, fast-track recruitment and staff deployment, and hold those responsible for non-functional projects to account. We also hope the next elected government will prioritise the sector and implement the reform proposals put forward by the Health Sector Reform Commission to build an efficient, accountable, and people-oriented healthcare system.

Repeated rail freight failures are no longer acceptable



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Every few years, Bangladesh Railway's (BR) container services collapse under the same explanation: a shortage of locomotives. Each time, the consequences extend far beyond the railyard, reaching factories, ports, shipping lines, and buyer offices overseas. The most recent disruption between Chattogram Port and Dhaka's Kamalapur Inland Container Depot (ICD), widely reported in the press, is not an isolated operational failure. It is the predictable outcome of a system that still does not fully appreciate what international cargo logistics require: predictability over promises.

I spent more than a decade working at ICD Kamalapur, for much of that period heading the facility on behalf of the Chittagong Port Authority. During those years, locomotive crises occurred repeatedly. Each episode disrupted container movements between Chattogram and Dhaka, undermined service schedules, and gradually eroded customer confidence. The pattern has never fundamentally changed—only the scale of the damage.

Railway officials often argue that they have little choice but to prioritise passenger trains due to political and social sensitivities. While that reality cannot be ignored, it also exposes a core contradiction. Container freight generates significantly higher revenue than passenger services, yet freight operations are consistently the first to be sacrificed whenever resources are constrained. Short-term optics continue to override long-term economic logic, even though the costs of that decision are borne by exporters and, ultimately, by the national economy.

For international cargo, particularly exports, reliability is non-negotiable. Global supply chains operate on fixed shipping windows, vessel cut-off times, and contractual delivery obligations. If transport services are not predictable, exporters will not use them—regardless of price or stated capacity. This is precisely what happened at ICD Kamalapur.

Once the ICD failed to provide scheduled and dependable rail services, exporters—especially from the ready-made garments sector—began to withdraw. Volumes declined sharply. Regaining those users proved far more difficult than attracting new ones would have been. In logistics, trust is cumulative but fragile; once broken, it does not return easily.



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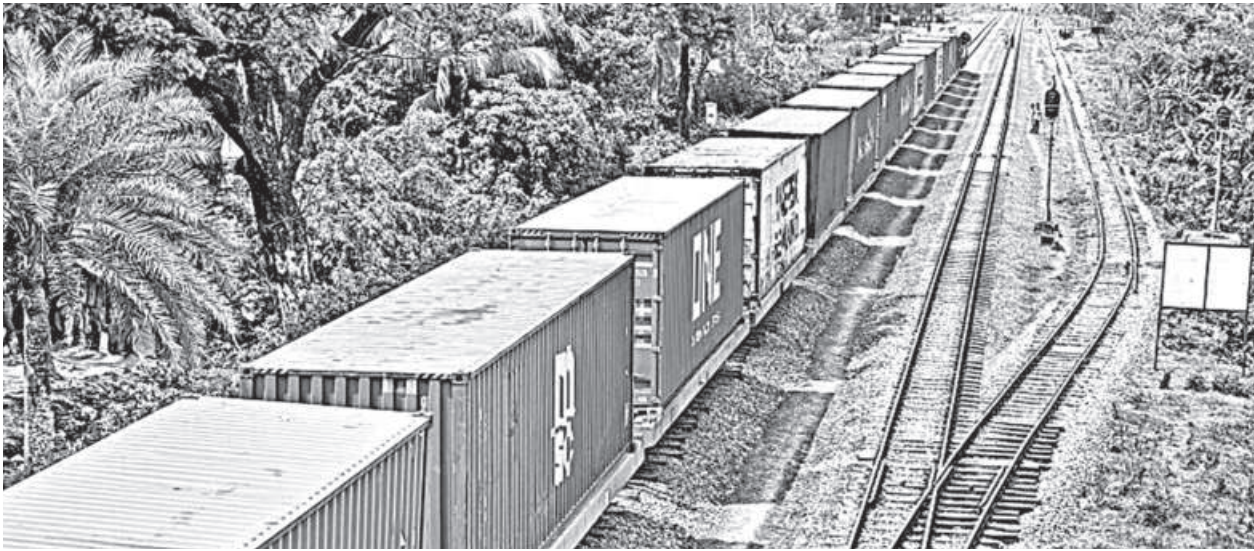
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During the still hours of the morning before daylight, some women in Dhaka take to the streets to perform a vital task. They sweep roads, drains, and clear open areas of rubbish to keep the city healthy and habitable. They do not alter great destinies, perhaps, but they frame everyday life in meaningful ways, yet their work goes unobserved, although it is worthy of appreciation.

These women keep our city clean, safe, and clear for its constituents, despite the challenges they face due to climate change. In Dhaka, the rising heat makes every outdoor task a test of endurance and determination. Studies have found that dehydration and health stress are common among women engaged in informal work, such as waste picking and street cleaning, who often spend long hours at dangerous levels of heat exposure. However, they continue doing what they must, no less dutifully.

Since garbage buildup leads to disease, clogged drains during monsoons and cause traffic hazards, these women address these risks before

Today, the RMG sector barely uses ICD Kamalapur for exports and does not use it at all for imports. The ICD's remaining users are primarily commercial importers, whose decisions are influenced less by transit reliability and more by customs administration behaviour. When customs enforcement is strict, import volumes shrink; when it is more accommodating, volumes flow despite delays and inefficiencies. These users tend to be price-insensitive and, as a result, they rarely raise formal complaints. Their tolerance has masked deeper structural failures.



'Exports run on predictability. Our railways must learn to do the same.'

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Exporters operate under entirely different constraints. RMG shipments are time-sensitive, buyer-driven, and penalty-exposed. A missed sailing can result in airfreight costs, order cancellations, or loss of buyer confidence. For such exporters, an ICD that cannot guarantee train schedules is not a support mechanism but a risk.

This is particularly unfortunate because ICD Kamalapur possesses a critical structural advantage for exports. Once containers are stuffed and sealed at the ICD, they move directly into Chattogram port terminals without intermediate handling. The risk of pilferage in transit is virtually nonexistent, barring extraordinary situations within restricted port areas. This should have made the ICD a preferred gateway for garment exports. Security, however, cannot compensate for uncertainty.

under a public-private partnership involving Shasha Denim and Incontrade, reportedly under a design, build, finance, operate, maintain and transfer (DBFOT) model. These developments suggest that new financing and operating structures are being considered. Yet, whether an ICD is built at Dhirasram, Pubail, or Ghorashal, its success will not be determined primarily by location or contractual form. It will depend on whether it is operated as a genuine logistics enterprise, with enforceable service standards, professional management, and insulation from ad hoc operational decisions.

If new ICDs are run under the same institutional assumptions that have constrained Kamalapur—where passenger trains routinely get priority over freight services—then larger yards and modern equipment will deliver

little improvement. Infrastructure alone does not create reliability. Governance does.

Any future ICD intended to serve the RMG sector must offer scheduled block trains, guaranteed cut-off times, transparent disruption management, and full integration with customs and port systems. It must be accountable to its users. Only under such conditions will exporters consider rail a dependable component of their supply chains.

Equally important is location. Kamalapur's constraints are no longer limited to rail capacity; they are geographic and structural. Situated in the heart of Dhaka, it is encircled by severe road congestion, restricted truck movement, and zero scope for expansion. Any new ICD must be outside the city core, connected to bypass roads, and designed to support uninterrupted cargo flows.

If these principles are applied, a professionally operated ICD—whether public, private, or PPP—could finally align rail transport with the needs of exporters, creating the path for the

RMG sector to return to rail and rely on it.

This, however, requires BR to confront its central contradiction. Freight cannot continue to be treated as expendable. As long as locomotives assigned to container services can be withdrawn at short notice to cover passenger shortfalls, no ICD will earn the trust of time-sensitive exporters. That is not simply a logistical misfortune; it is a policy failure.

Repeating that failure at new locations would be far more costly. The question facing policymakers is no longer whether Bangladesh needs more ICDs. It is whether Bangladesh is prepared to operate them as international trade infrastructure, rather than as peripheral extensions of a passenger-focused railway.

Exports run on predictability. Our railways must learn to do the same.

Why women cleaners deserve recognition in city planning

because they are the key agents in responding to those hazards. The National Action Plan on climate change should prioritise the health of women and children, and take into consideration community-based adaptation actions. Such recognition at the national policy level can be strengthened through the inclusion of street cleaners in planning and resource allocation.

In fact, there is evidence that women at the grassroots are leading the way to climate adaptation interventions by creating seed banks, agri-resilience, and promoting and practicing safe birthing during natural disasters, as health and food security are at risk. This shows that community-based female action has value and that women acting outside formal authority can make a real difference to climate resilience.

This notion is directly applicable to the women street cleaners in Dhaka. Although they do not directly organise climate-resilient projects, their daily work keeps dangers at bay and ensures environmental well-being. Therefore, they should be integrated into climate action plans. They need to gain tangible benefits and clear standards of recognition and be valued in accordance with the Women, Peace, and Security principles. This would make their contributions meaningful.

Urban planning should also incorporate these women. Policy interventions can include shaded rest spaces, vending sites, or cleaning

points with water facilities, portable toilet stalls, shelter, providing kits of protective equipment and access to healthcare during heatwaves.

By recognising and empowering the women who are sweeping Dhaka and keeping it clean, the city will demonstrate its commitment to values founded on dignity, equity and interdependence.

But recognition cannot, of itself, be the end of the line. Real inclusion would mean that women cleaners are considered in the vision of Dhaka as a smart, climate-resilient, and peaceful megacity. With the government aggressively pushing to realise ambitious projects for greener roads, digital services and inclusive growth, it is time to simultaneously integrate the potential of women cleaners in city planning. Trees planted along their morning routes, water stations to keep them hydrated, and sanitation facilities would be much more than infrastructure; these would be a true demonstration of care and respect.

WPS agenda expands the vision of what "peace" means, challenging states to see peace as everyday actions that are safer and fairer for both genders. In Bangladesh, such visions led women to join peacekeeping, disaster resilience and grassroots leadership. Extending this culture to the women street sweepers is a natural next step. In acknowledging them, Dhaka can demonstrate a new definition of humanity, security, and prosperity.