

Persistent gas crisis calls for bold policies

Invest in our own resources for energy sustainability

At a time when households are already grappling with high food prices, the persistent gas crisis has added to their hardship. On Saturday, a pipeline leak led to a complete or partial gas shutdown in many Dhaka neighbourhoods, leaving families unable to cook. This comes amid an ongoing LPG shortage driven by flawed policies and a nexus of opportunistic suppliers, dealers, and distributors, which made cylinders unavailable even at prices far above the fixed rate. The gas shortage also forced most autogas stations to shut down, affecting private car owners and ride-sharing drivers. While middle- and upper-income groups managed through electric cookers or takeaways, the poor and marginalised are having to bear the brunt of the crisis, highlighting the country's energy vulnerability.

According to media reports, Saturday's natural gas shortage in Dhaka was caused by a valve explosion on a distribution line near Gono Bhaban. Titas Gas Transmission and Distribution had to shut down several adjacent valves to repair the damage. This came at a time when some neighbourhoods have already been receiving almost no gas supply for a couple of months due to a leaking pipeline under the Turag River. In recent winter sessions, low gas pressure has become a common phenomenon, forcing families to adjust household routines around an erratic supply while continuing to pay full bills.

In the last fiscal year, the country experienced a demand-supply deficit of more than 130 crore cubic feet of natural gas. According to a *Bonik Barta* report, year-on-year gas supply on January 10 this year was 17.60 crore cubic feet lower. To bridge this gap, the government increased LNG imports, but that too failed to prevent the current crisis.

Meanwhile, a handful of companies controlling LPG imports appear to have created a supply shortage, citing vessel unavailability and high shipping costs. In some cases, they charged inflated wholesale prices, which distributors and retailers passed on to consumers. Distributors have also alleged that refilling empty cylinders has become increasingly difficult. This is partly attributed to the reduced presence of some influential LPG importers who once controlled a large share of the market during the Awami League government.

While we cannot expect the interim government to initiate long-term solutions with only about five weeks left in its tenure, we must say that it could have done more than conduct ad hoc drives against small retailers to control the LPG market. That said, the government's recent decision to reduce and exempt VAT at several supply and distribution stages to expedite LPG shipments, directing the central bank to ease the LC opening process and removing LPG import ceiling, is welcome. In the long run, the next government must heed expert opinion and enact bold policies to reduce dependency on energy imports. Investment in natural gas exploration, renewable energy, and the strengthening of public institutions in the energy sector should be among its highest priorities.

Rein in brick kiln growth in Satkania

Protect agricultural land, hills and livelihoods

We are alarmed by the unchecked expansion of brick kilns along the Dhaka-Chatogram Highway, particularly in Satkania upazila. Once home to lush hill forests and fertile farmlands, the area is now dominated by rows of brick kilns. Similar trends have been reported in the neighbouring upazilas of Patiya, Chandanaish and Lohagara. Despite clear provisions in the Brick Manufacturing and Kiln Establishment (Control) Act, most kilns in these areas continue to use fertile topsoil from agricultural land, excavate hills, and emit toxic smoke with little fear of consequences. A recent report in this daily shows that at least 70 brick kilns operate in Satkania alone, 41 of them illegally, highlighting the routine flouting of regulations.

Reportedly, both licensed and illegal kilns are stripping fertile topsoil from farmlands and hills to produce bricks, undermining food security in an already land-scarce country. According to the local agriculture office, at least 75 acres of cultivable land have been damaged over the past five years. Farmers report declining yields as smoke, soot and ash blanket their fields, forcing many to abandon traditional crop farming. Hill-cutting to supply soil for kilns continues openly in areas such as Aeochia union, increasing the risk of landslides during the monsoon. Despite claims of surveillance and sporadic enforcement by the authorities, action remains weak and inconsistent, as locals say. Restrictions on burning firewood and coal are also frequently violated. Locals complain that fruit trees no longer bear fruit, homes must remain shut during the kiln season, and entire communities are forced to live under a toxic haze.

Another report by this daily recently highlighted how brick kilns continue to operate in Bandarban, despite being prohibited in the hill districts by a High Court directive. Clearly, the current government measures are failing to address the problem.

Therefore, the government must act decisively. Illegal brick kilns should be permanently closed, while syndicates involved in illegal soil extraction must be dismantled and held accountable. At the same time, strict monitoring is essential to ensure that licensed kilns comply with environmental laws. Protecting fertile land and vulnerable hills must be treated as a priority. Equally urgent is the transition from traditional, polluting brick kilns to cleaner, more sustainable construction alternatives. Achieving this requires both a clear policy shift and rigorous enforcement. If decisive action is not taken now, the cost will be far too high on our agriculture and the environment.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Haiti hit by an earthquake

On this day in 2010, an earthquake of 7.0 magnitude devastated Haiti, killing more than 300,000 people, according to the country's official count, and creating a prolonged humanitarian disaster.

Three cardinal rules for building democratic governance



RASHED AL MAHMUD TITUMIR

As Bangladesh approaches the 13th parliamentary election scheduled for February 12, the nation is not merely preparing to elect a new government. It is also being called upon to rebuild the state itself. The autocratic dispensation overthrown by the 2024 mass uprising did not collapse just because of its electoral illegitimacy; it fell because power was centralised, institutions were captured, accountability was extinguished, and democratic norms were systematically dismantled.

If the upcoming election is treated as an end in itself, history is likely to repeat itself. If, however, it serves as a gateway to a genuine reset for a durable democratic transition, the country may finally break free from the cycle of authoritarian relapse. In my view, achieving this goal requires adherence to at least three cardinal rules or governing principles, drawn from global experience as well as Bangladesh's own painful lessons.

Resetting parliamentary and bureaucratic functions

The first rule is that the elected executive (parliamentarians) will be in full control of policymaking while the permanent executive (bureaucrats) will be responsible for execution—both playing their part within the bounds of their respective mandates. This distinction, however, has rarely been respected in Bangladesh. Ministers are constitutionally responsible for laws and policies, yet real power often resides in an entrenched bureaucracy that shapes policy, controls implementation, and operates with limited accountability.

This is not accidental. Bangladesh's bureaucracy is a direct descendant of the colonial state designed by the British Raj to extract revenue and control subjects, not to serve citizens. Independence did not dismantle this extractive system; it merely transferred it. Over time, bureaucratic discretion became a source of power and rent, while democratic oversight weakened, creating a vast resource-distributing ecosystem involving corrupt or compromised politicians, bureaucracy, judiciary, and business under the fallen regime.

The result of this erosion has been immense and multidimensional. Bangladesh's tax-GDP ratio hovers around six to seven percent, which

is among the lowest globally. Public investment suffers not only from fiscal constraints but also from bureaucratic gatekeeping and delay. Annual Development Programme implementation repeatedly falls behind schedule, with cost overruns reflecting persistent administrative failure. A survey conducted early last year by the Public Administration Reform Commission found that 66 percent of people thought that civil servants behaved like “rulers,” while an overwhelming 80 percent believed they were not friendly to the general



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

public—a perception that remains more or less unchanged.

Global experience offers a clear contrast here. Beyond the pre-World War II democracies, countries such as South Korea and Indonesia restored democratic governance by professionalising their civil services while reasserting political control over policy. Singapore's merit-based bureaucracy, protected by constitutional safeguards, illustrates how insulation from partisan capture can coexist with strong accountability. Pakistan's repeated governance failures, by contrast, demonstrate the cost of a politicised administration.

Bangladesh can establish the parliamentary-bureaucrat boundary through law and practice: clearly demarcated roles, independent oversight of the civil service, and firm parliamentary control over policy direction. Elected officials must lead policymaking, while bureaucrats must execute professionally, neutrally,

and transparently. In this regard, a concrete remedy would be the enactment of a Constitutional Service Act to legally demarcate functions, shield the bureaucracy from partisan rotation, and establish an independent oversight authority.

Activating the judicial hierarchy to ensure justice delivery

The second rule requires a functional judicial pyramid to end the tyranny of delay in, or denial of, access to justice. Over the years, the systemic politicisation and under-resourcing of subordinate courts have destroyed public trust, often compelling citizens to bypass them and, at times, even resort to extrajudicial means out of frustration.

As of June 30, 2025, pending cases at the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court stood at 37,002, while the High Court Division's burden grew to 6.16 lakh. Meanwhile, across all tiers of the judiciary, the total number of pending cases stood at 46.52 lakh. An

overburdened apex court struggling with so many pending cases is a stark warning of what happens when the judicial hierarchy collapses. No legal system can function this way. Justice must be delivered at the appropriate level, not perpetually escalated to the top.

Here, we must acknowledge the key judicial reforms rolled out in recent months, including the establishment of a Supreme Court Secretariat to safeguard and streamline judicial authority, transferring control over promotions, postings, and transfers of lower court judges from the law ministry to the apex court. Civil and criminal courts have been separated at the district level. There will also be permanent High Court benches in every division. These measures are intended, among other things, to streamline judicial functions and reduce case backlogs. They also reflect the urgency of activating the judicial pyramid. For without a functioning

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Climate leadership demands thinking beyond today



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On January 7, President Donald Trump withdrew the US from 66 international organisations, including the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). This made the US the first nation stepping back from the foundational frameworks of global climate science.

The implications are consequential. The IPCC depends on international scientific cooperation. US federal agencies—Nasa, NOAA and others—have been essential to building the global datasets governments use for climate assessments. Withdrawing means individual scientists may still contribute, but the US will no longer help guide the scientific consensus that shapes policy worldwide.

The year 2024 was the hottest on record, while sea levels rose 5.9 mm last year alone, with the rate doubling from 2.1 mm per year in 1993 to 4.5 mm per year today. Without immediate action, the UN Environment Programme projects 2.3 to 2.8 degrees Celsius of warming this century. The IPCC's latest assessment warns of sea levels potentially rising two metres by 2100 and five metres by 2150 under high-

emission scenarios.

But the US withdrawal reveals something deeper than a policy failure: humanity's fundamental leadership crisis. Climate processes unfold across centuries. Our decision-making operates in quarters and election cycles. This mismatch between the timeframes of our challenges and the horizons of our thinking is driving us towards catastrophe.

Over the years, while training thousands of young leaders across the world, I have learnt that it is not their passion that sets them apart, though it's abundant—it is their temporal thinking. When a 23-year-old from Khulna designs a climate adaptation programme, she is planning for her grandchildren's world, not the next quarterly report. When youth delegates from small island nations advocate at COP negotiations, they are fighting for outcomes decades beyond their own lifetimes. They think in generations while politicians think in election cycles. This points towards what I call thousand-year leadership: a framework that matches decision-making timeframes to the actual timeframes of climate processes.

Withdrawing from the IPCC strips

the US's ability to shape assessments governments worldwide depend on. As former climate envoy John Kerry noted, this is a “gift to China” and “a get out of jail free card” for polluters. But it's more than lost influence; it fragments global scientific cooperation precisely when coherence matters most.

The leadership we need is already taking shape. At COP27, youth

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delegates secured the establishment of a loss and damage fund. At COP30, young negotiators from Africa and Latin America have demanded transparent accountability, climate education in school curricula, and protection for climate-induced displacement. Their priorities span generations because they will inherit the consequences.

Thousand-year leadership requires three shifts. First, recognise that climate leadership emerges from mobilising people across boundaries, not from holding office. Second, institutionalise long-term thinking through governance structures and economic incentives that

lower judiciary, constitutionalism itself becomes fragile and selective. The challenge now is in ensuring proper implementation of these and other recommended reforms.

Confining political contests to parliament

The third cardinal rule is to install Jatiya Sangsad as the centre of democratic politics by constitutionally embedding a meaningful opposition. Democracy functions through structured disagreement and sustained scrutiny.

Bangladesh's recent parliamentary history reveals a dangerous pattern: following deeply flawed elections, parliament effectively became a one-party system with minimal debate and negligible amendment of legislation. Between 2008 and 2024, fewer than one percent of bills were substantively altered through opposition input. Unsurprisingly, opposition politics shifted from the chamber to the streets.

Street politics is not a cultural inevitability but rather an institutional failure. When opposition is denied space in parliament, it seeks relevance and redress elsewhere. Hartals, blockades, confrontations, and disruptions impose heavy economic and social costs, particularly on informal workers and the poor.

The true test of a democracy is its ability to institutionalise opposition. In mature democracies, opposition is formalised through mechanisms such as a “Shadow Cabinet,” ranking members, guaranteed “Opposition Days,” etc. For Bangladesh, the imperative is clear: constitutionalise the opposition. This means not only granting the opposition leader in parliament statutory status and resources but also legislating opposition chairmanship of key oversight committees, guaranteeing parliamentary time for opposition business, and forging a social contract that establishes parliament as the exclusive and effective arena for any political struggle and disagreement.

The mass uprising of 2024 was a call not merely for a change of rulers, but also for the institutionalisation of rules-based governance. The dysfunctions of the deposed regime—politicised bureaucracy, judicial paralysis, and a hollowed-out parliament—must not be reproduced under a new mandate.

Citizens want elected leaders to govern properly, a professionalised bureaucracy to implement properly, an activated judicial hierarchy to adjudicate properly, and an empowered parliamentary opposition to scrutinise properly. This architecture is essential to transform the hope of the uprising into an enduring and legitimate democracy that the people of Bangladesh rightly demand.

make extended temporal horizons emotionally resonant. Third, accept that effective climate action requires thinking across centuries while acting with the urgency the next decade demands.

America's withdrawal is not America First—it's America Alone. Our interconnected world needs leaders who can work across boundaries, think globally, and plan for horizons beyond their lifetimes. Politicians with short-sighted vision won't change the world. They will drive us towards destruction, not security.

The young leaders inheriting this crisis need partners, not politicians walking away from the tables where solutions are built. They deserve decision-makers whose temporal horizons match climate's actual timeframes. They deserve leaders who recognise that legacy is not built in monuments but in the futures we make possible. The solutions exist, and young people worldwide demonstrate the capacities we all need. What we lack is political courage to think beyond the next election and moral imagination to care about futures we will never see.

The US can rejoin these frameworks. The Senate's 1992 ratification provides a pathway. But the deeper question is whether we are willing to transform how we think about time itself. The climate crisis is ultimately a crisis of temporal imagination: our inability to grasp that today's decisions shape human civilisation for centuries.

The science is clear. The impact is visible. Denial should no longer be an option.