

New school year begins with a lesson in disorder

Govt must stick to textbook distribution deadline, discipline extra-charging schools

January is a stressful month for students and parents. It is the time when the promise of a fresh academic year often collides with a shortage of books and extortionate admission fees. As of January 11 this year, some three crore secondary textbooks—roughly 10 percent of the total required—had yet to reach the classrooms. The shortage is most acute in classes 7 and 8, where a new curriculum has rendered older, second-hand books obsolete, according to a *Prothom Alo* report. The National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) officials claim deliveries will be complete “within a few days,” a phrase that can mean anything from a week to several weeks. Printing is reportedly close to finishing, and the binding and inspection remain undone. For NCTB, however, the inability to move books from press to pupil has been a persistent failure.

If the book shortage is a failure of supply, the inflated fee is a failure of oversight. Technically, the government caps admission fees for state-subsidised schools. According to the admission policy for the current academic year, the maximum admission fee for MPO-listed educational institutions in the Dhaka metropolitan area is Tk 5,000. For partially MPO-listed institutions, the limit is Tk 8,000, while for the English version, it is Tk 10,000. In practice, these rules are often treated as mere suggestions. A report by *Samakal* describes the fee frenzy as “extreme anarchy.” Institutions appear to be tacking on “development charges,” “session fees,” and other vaguely defined fees to extract sums far beyond the legal limits. Parents at a Dhaka-based school complained that they faced bills of Tk 40,000 for nursery admission—eight times the regulated cap. At another school with 28,000 students, total admission fees are estimated to have amounted to crores of taka.

The authorities appear to be acting as silent spectators. When confronted with evidence of extra fees at a government primary school in Mohamadpur, the local education officer offered the passive defence of waiting for a “written complaint” before acting. This regulatory inertia leaves the middle class squeezed. Parents are desperate to secure spots in perceived “good” schools to guarantee their children’s future, giving these institutions monopolistic pricing power they are all too happy to exploit.

It’s an irony that the government promises free textbooks to democratise education but fails to deliver them in time. Simultaneously, it mandates affordable tuition, yet refuses to police the price. Students and parents are thus left in a costly limbo. To restore credibility, the government must first meet its own January 15 deadline for book distribution. Beyond that, it must confront the fee anarchy. If top schools insist on charging premium rates, they must be forced to justify them through transparent, standardised financial reporting. Breaking the pricing power of these institutions requires the government to firmly enforce its own rules, ensuring that the academic year does not begin with a lesson in disorder.

Stop illegal sand mining from Padma

Govt must enforce court orders, dismantle syndicates

We are concerned by the illegal sand extraction along the Padma River in Kushtia, which has persisted despite a High Court ban and repeated government restrictions. Reportedly, large-scale dredging continues in the district’s Daulatpur and Bheramara upazilas guarded by armed gangs and allegedly backed by certain political and business quarters. These activities have put vast stretches of riverside farmland, residential homes, and protective embankments at risk.

According to a *Banik Barta* report, multiple dredging machines are extracting sand day and night at various points in Daulatpur and Bheramara, altering the river’s natural course there and increasing the risk of erosion. In several areas, fertile croplands have already been swallowed by the river, while others have been rendered unusable. Thousands of families in Philipnagar and Moricha unions have reportedly lost homesteads and cultivable land over the years. Violence linked to sand mining has also increased, including a recent shooting incident that left a local resident injured. Moreover, sand extraction is occurring dangerously close to the protective embankments, weakening their foundations and raising the risk of flooding. The entire situation is deeply worrying and demands urgent government intervention.

Unfortunately, Kushtia is not the only region facing this threat. A 2023 study by the River and Delta Research Centre found illegal sand extraction at 132 unauthorised sites across 77 rivers in the country, including major waterways such as the Padma, Jamuna, Meghna, Brahmaputra, and Surma. Local political figures were, and remain, involved in many of these operations. Influential business groups are also reportedly involved in some cases.

Experts warn that riverbed sand acts as a natural shield against strong currents, helping prevent erosion and supporting aquatic ecosystems. Unplanned and excessive dredging at specific points destabilises the entire river system, disrupts fish breeding habitats, and can permanently alter a river’s course. As experts caution, if illegal extraction continues, not only Kushtia but also other downstream regions such as Pabna may face widespread agricultural loss and displacement.

We urge the government to take concrete measures in this regard. Occasional drives against illegal sand mining will not suffice. The local administration, police, and the Kushtia Water Development Board must coordinate effectively to curb this environmentally destructive practice. Allegations of collusion, whether involving the local administration or river police, must also be investigated properly. Most importantly, the High Court’s directive in this regard must be enforced without exception. Sand should be extracted only from authorised sites, and those involved in illegal mining must be held accountable.

Three economic priorities for the upcoming political government

MACRO MIRROR



Dr Fahmida Khatun
is executive director at the Centre for
Policy Dialogue (CPD).
Views expressed in this article are the
author’s own.

FAHMIDA KHATUN

The upcoming parliamentary election, scheduled for February 12, is of exceptional political and economic significance for Bangladesh. For many years, elections failed to serve as genuine instruments of democratic choice. The lack of meaningful opposition participation, allegations of vote manipulation, and ritualistic voting practices weakened democratic institutions and entrenched an increasingly authoritarian system. A generation of young citizens grew up without getting to exercise their right to vote, leading to political disengagement, erosion of public accountability, and a collapse of trust in state institutions. The election, therefore, offers a historic opportunity to restore democratic legitimacy, rebuild public confidence, and reset the relationship between citizens and the state.

However, restoring electoral credibility alone will not be sufficient. The next government will inherit an economy under severe strain after years of policy complacency, institutional erosion, and weak macroeconomic management.

In recent years, Bangladesh’s economic momentum has weakened. Growth has slowed, inflation has remained stubbornly high, and the banking sector continues to struggle under the weight of rising non-performing loans. Low private and foreign investment, inefficient public investment, rising public debt, declining real wages, and weak employment generation are placing a lasting strain on the economy.

Against this challenging backdrop, the newly elected government will inherit a daunting reform agenda aimed at restoring economic discipline, strengthening governance, and delivering better outcomes for ordinary citizens. The list of priorities is long and complex. However, three urgent and interconnected issues stand out and require immediate, decisive attention. These will shape not only the direction of economic recovery, but also the credibility and effectiveness of the new administration.

First, controlling inflation must be the new government’s top economic priority. Over the past several years, the country has experienced persistently high inflation, driven mainly by rising food and energy prices. As food accounts for more than half of household expenditure for low-income

families, rising prices have significantly reduced purchasing power and increased financial pressure across income groups. Wage growth has lagged inflation, leading to declining real incomes and eroding household savings, while middle-income families have reduced spending on education, healthcare and nutrition.

High inflation also weakens overall



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

economic performance. It creates uncertainty for businesses, discourages long-term investment, puts pressure on the exchange rate, and undermines confidence in economic management. Once inflation expectations become entrenched, restoring price stability becomes more difficult and costly.

Inflationary pressures reflect both global shocks and domestic policy weaknesses. While higher global commodity prices raised import costs, exchange rate controls delayed adjustment and encouraged speculation. Energy prices were kept below cost for years and then adjusted sharply, raising production costs. Heavy government borrowing from the banking system added demand pressures, while weak competition, poor storage facilities and inadequate transport infrastructure constrained food supply.

The next government must adopt a comprehensive and credible anti-inflation strategy. Bangladesh Bank should be granted clear operational independence to prioritise price stability, supported by a transparent interest rate framework aligned with economic conditions. Fiscal discipline must be restored by reducing reliance on bank borrowing and strengthening

revenue mobilisation, so that monetary policy can operate effectively and inflationary pressures are contained.

Food market reforms should focus on strengthening competition, dismantling syndicates and hoarding, improving storage and transport infrastructure, and raising agricultural productivity. Energy pricing should follow a predictable, rules-based adjustment mechanism to avoid abrupt shocks. A transparent, automatic pricing formula, linked to global fuel prices and exchange rate movements, would allow gradual adjustments, reduce fiscal risks from subsidies, and provide greater certainty for households and businesses.

Second, private investment is essential to restoring growth, productivity, and job creation.

Infrastructure development must prioritise efficiency and reliability over scale alone. Persistent weaknesses in power supply, ports, customs, and logistics continue to drive up business costs and undermine export competitiveness. Without modern infrastructure and predictable regulation, the country will struggle to integrate into global value chains and diversify its economy.

Third comes job creation. Bangladesh stands at a demographic crossroads. Around two million young people enter the labour force each year, yet employment growth has lagged far behind. Youth unemployment is more than twice the national average, and most new jobs are informal, with low productivity. Educated unemployment is rising, exposing a growing mismatch between education and labour market needs. This is not only an economic failure but also a social and political risk.

Job creation depends on restoring macroeconomic stability and reviving investment. High inflation erodes real wages, weakens consumer demand, and discourages hiring. Low private investment limits firm expansion and the formation of new enterprises. A stable macroeconomic environment, predictable policies, and a business-friendly regulatory regime are therefore essential foundations for employment growth.

Targeted labour market reforms are equally critical. Education and training must align with industry demand, with a major expansion of well-funded technical and vocational programmes. SMEs, the main source of employment globally, need easier access to finance, stronger market linkages, and simplified regulations. A focused SME growth strategy can rapidly create large numbers of jobs.

If employment opportunities grow, the gains will be transformative: higher incomes, lower poverty, stronger domestic demand, a broader tax base, and greater social cohesion.

The upcoming election is not only about who governs Bangladesh but also about how it is governed. Democracy must be matched by economic discipline, leadership and accountability. If the new government governs with courage and responsibility, the country can begin a new chapter of stability, opportunity and trust.

A comprehensive reform agenda

Gender balance at work depends on women’s power in politics



Farah Kabir
is country director at ActionAid Bangladesh.

FARAH KABIR

Across the world, women are underrepresented. Globally, fewer than one in four parliamentarians are women. In many Asia-Pacific countries, including Bangladesh, systemic barriers continue to limit women’s political participation. Social norms, structural bias, and unequal access to political networks constrain both candidacy and success. Yet, without women’s meaningful representation in politics and decision-making spaces, gender balance at work is not possible. Upcoming elections highlight this critical juncture: unless parties actively support women candidates, workplace policies that enable equality will remain underdeveloped and inequitable.

It is a direct correlation. Women in Bangladesh face barriers in entering formal employment, remaining in workplaces, and advancing to leadership. Many are concentrated in informal, low-paid, and insecure jobs, often exiting the labour market due to lack of childcare, unsafe commuting, or rigid working arrangements. These

workplace realities are shaped by political choices—decisions about budget allocation, labour laws, social protection, and urban safety—made predominantly by male leadership.

The unequal burden of unpaid care work offers a clear illustration. Across the Asia-Pacific, women perform several times more unpaid domestic and care work than men, limiting their ability to sustain careers. Without political advocacy and legislation, unpaid care remains invisible, rarely funded or supported, and workplaces continue to be designed around uninterrupted, male career trajectories.

Countries with stronger female political representation demonstrate the transformative potential of inclusive governance. In Vietnam, women hold around 31 percent of National Assembly seats, which coincides with investment in social services, labour protections, and education, enabling greater female workforce participation. Globally, Rwanda, where women hold over

60 percent of parliamentary seats, illustrates how women legislators can drive policies on healthcare, social protection, and gender-based violence, creating environments where women can engage in formal work. Similarly, the Nordic countries achieved gender-balanced workplaces after securing near-equal political representation, which enabled universal childcare, paid parental leave, and flexible working norms.

For Bangladesh, the message is clear: encouraging and supporting women candidates is not a matter of tokenism; it is a prerequisite for equitable workplaces. When women can shape policy, budget priorities, and legislation, workplaces become safer, more flexible, and more supportive of women’s careers. Political exclusion, on the other hand, perpetuates male-centric policies that leave women’s labour undervalued, unsafe, and precarious.

Women must have genuine influence in decision-making processes. This includes the ability to set agendas, allocate resources, and challenge entrenched norms. Parties and institutions must create pathways for rural and working-class women and women with disabilities to participate meaningfully, ensuring that labour policies reflect the realities of the workforce.

Workplace safety further underscores the stakes. Sexual harassment and abuse remain pervasive barriers to women’s

participation. Robust safeguarding laws and enforcement mechanisms require political commitment. Without women in political and oversight roles, these protections are weak or absent, driving women out of leadership pipelines and formal employment.

Gender balance is not only a woman’s issue. It is a governance issue, a democratic issue, and an economic imperative. Offices, factories, and public institutions mirror the political environment in which they operate. Achieving workplace gender balance requires women at the top: equality at work cannot be delivered solely from the bottom up.

As Bangladesh approaches elections and considers political reform, promoting women’s candidacy and meaningful participation must be a priority. Without women in decision-making spaces, workplace policies will continue to reflect male experiences and priorities. With women empowered to shape political outcomes, workplaces can be redesigned to ensure dignity, safety, and opportunity for all.

Across the Asia-Pacific and globally, from Vietnam to Rwanda, from the Nordic countries to local communities, experience shows a simple truth: women in politics create the conditions for women at work. Ensuring women can contest, win, and influence policy is not just a political imperative; it is the foundation upon which equitable workplaces are built.