A new chief justice at a crucial crossroads

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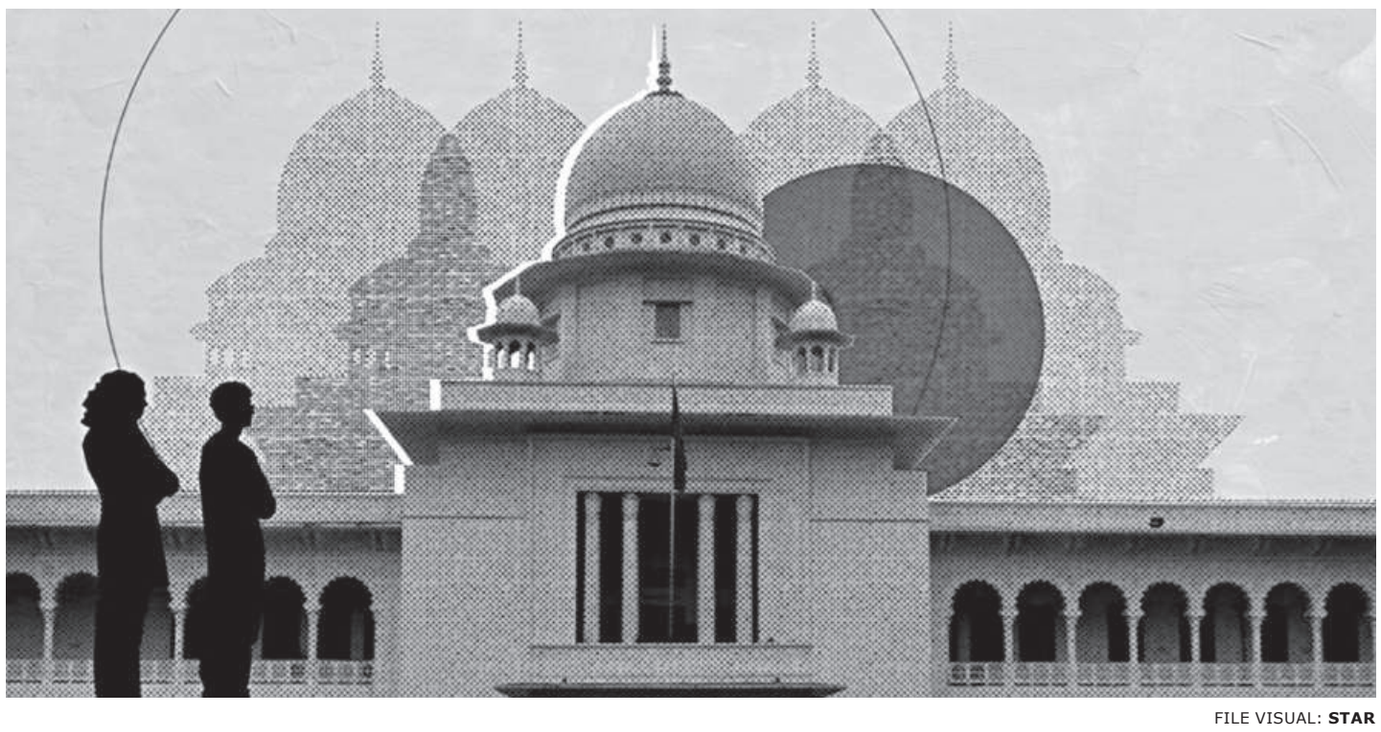
When the new chief justice (CJ) took oath on December 28, 2025, he did so at a moment of acute constitutional importance. Bangladesh is navigating a fragile democratic transition under a interim government, following landmark judicial decisions that revived the constitutional provision for a caretaker government during elections. Promises of judicial independence that have long existed on paper are now being tested against institutional reality. Public expectations are, therefore, high that the newly sworn-in CJ will uphold the rule of law, steering the courts through reforms that are long overdue.

The chief justice comes to the office with formidable credentials and a reputation for integrity. Educated at Dhaka University, where he obtained both his LLB and LLM, and later in the UK with a master's degree in international law, he has served on the bench for more than two decades. Appointed to the High Court Division in 2003 and elevated to the Appellate Division in 2024, he has earned respect for legal rigour and restraint. Notably, despite his seniority and qualifications, he was overlooked for elevation during the previous regime and rose only after the political changeover, strengthening the perception that his appointment is grounded in merit rather than patronage.

That perception is reinforced by his judicial record. Earlier in 2025, he authored a strongly worded verdict criticising what he described as a "troubling trend" of judicial bias in favour of the executive, warning that such conduct was incompatible with constitutional governance. In open court, he has spoken with unusual candour about the historical marginalisation of the judiciary, observing that successive law ministers have shown disregard for judicial independence once in power. Such remarks are rare in Bangladesh's judicial culture and have enhanced his credibility as a judge willing to speak truth to power. Upon assuming office, he issued firm directions to lower court judges to deliver judgments without delay and maintain professional discipline, signalling zero tolerance for corruption or complacency.

One of the most immediate challenges before the CJ is translating a historic structural reform into tangible institutional change. In November 2025, Bangladesh established a separate Supreme Court Secretariat, ending decades of executive control over judicial administration. Widely described as a milestone in the separation of powers, the reform places responsibility for postings, promotions, discipline and administration of the lower judiciary under the authority of the Supreme Court rather than the law ministry. This has the potential to transform judicial independence from a constitutional aspiration into an operational reality. But symbolism alone will not suffice. The secretariat must evolve into an effective administrative backbone capable of improving efficiency, accountability and professionalism within the courts.

The new chief justice now effectively oversees this nascent institution. That responsibility requires clear administrative rules, adequate resources, and resistance to bureaucratic inertia. It also requires vigilance against future executive encroachment, particularly since the ordinance established that the secretariat must still be ratified by the next parliament to become permanent law. The CJ must, therefore, demonstrate its practical value through measurable improvements. If it fails to deliver, the reform risks being dismissed as cosmetic. If it succeeds, it may become one of the most enduring institutional changes in the judiciary's history.



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Equally consequential is the Supreme Court Judges' Appointment Ordinance, 2025. For decades, appointments to the higher judiciary were criticised for opacity and political influence. The new ordinance seeks to introduce a merit-based and structured process by establishing a Supreme Judicial Appointment Council chaired by the CJ. He now sits at the centre of the appointment process, with significant influence over who ascends to the bench. This offers an opportunity to rebuild public confidence by prioritising competence, integrity and independence.

The council has already recommended several appointments to both the Appellate Division and High Court, easing long-standing vacancies. However, the ordinance has also attracted criticism regarding the structure of the process, including the use of inflexible age criteria, as well as the concentration of decision-making authority within a limited institutional framework. These concerns do not negate the reform but underline the importance of transparent and principled implementation. The CJ's conduct as chair will therefore be decisive. By ensuring openness and resisting informal influence, he can help turn a contested reform into a credible and lasting framework for judicial appointments.

Beyond internal reform, the new CJ must guide the judiciary through sensitive constitutional and public interest disputes. In recent months, the Supreme Court has demonstrated an assertiveness unseen in years, restoring the caretaker government provisions removed in 2011, reaffirming judicial control over lower court administration, and addressing questions of judicial accountability. These decisions have served to reposition the judiciary as an active constitutional guardian, while also exposing it to political controversy. The CJ was part of the benches that made these decisions, reinforcing expectations that he would continue to defend constitutional principles even when doing so invited resistance.

Further challenges lie ahead as Bangladesh transitions towards an elected government. Disputes over electoral processes, accountability for past abuses, freedom of expression, and the rule of law will test judicial independence and restraint. Although the interim authorities have withdrawn thousands of politically motivated cases, deeper structural injustices remain unresolved. The CJ must ensure that courts remain forums for impartial adjudication rather than instruments of political retribution or protection. His repeated emphasis that the judiciary must never be politicised now demands institutional follow-through.

Perhaps the most daunting task confronting the new chief justice is the overwhelming backlog of cases. By the end of 2025, more than 46 lakh cases were pending nationwide. The country's judge-population ratio remains among the lowest in the region, compounding delays caused by procedural inefficiencies and weak case management. The CJ has already emphasised discipline, timely judgments, and full utilisation of court hours. These measures are necessary, but not sufficient. Sustainable progress will require credible appointments, expanded judicial capacity, alternative dispute resolution mechanisms, and effective use of technology. The Supreme Court Secretariat can play a central coordinating role, but success will depend on consistent leadership.

The new CJ begins his tenure with rare momentum. Structural reforms, judicial assertiveness, and public goodwill have converged in a way few of his predecessors experienced. But expectations can be unforgiving. His legacy will be measured by the delivery of outcomes long desired by the nation: a judiciary that is independent in fact, transparent in appointments, efficient in administration, and capable of delivering justice within a reasonable time. At this crucial crossroads, Bangladesh needs judicial leadership equal to the moment.

Why the fate of Venezuela matters to us all

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ANU MUHAMMAD

Earlier last week, the Trump administration carried out a military assault on Venezuela, abducting President Nicolás Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores, and taking them to New York. There, a series of cases was filed against them, and a judicial farce is being staged in the name of justice. The spectacle of attacking the capital of a sovereign country and forcibly removing its elected president has stunned the world. It offers a chilling glimpse into the kind of global disorder we are living in. Donald Trump's statements in this context sound less like those of a head of state and more like the threats of a neighbourhood bully. He shows no respect for independent countries or elected governments, not even for the citizens of his own country.

The citizens of the United States are grappling with deep and widening crises. Tens of millions have no health insurance, hunger is rising, and many are forced to rely on food stamps to survive. Wealth is increasingly concentrated in the hands of the top one percent, and inequality continues to grow. This top one percent—closely tied to oil companies, banking, and the military-industrial complex—controls nearly 90 percent of the economy. The Trump administration consistently acts in its own interests, while bearing no real responsibility towards the remaining 99 percent of the population. It is precisely to protect the interests of this small but powerful oil-and-arms-linked segment that the attack on Venezuela has been launched.

The conflict between the US and Venezuela dates back to the late 1990s, beginning with the election of Hugo Chávez as president. Before that, power in Venezuela alternated between two parties, both loyal to Washington. As a result, US companies exercised near-total control over Venezuela's oil resources. The vast revenues generated from oil helped a wealthy elite population grow wealthier. This elite group became the main pillar of US imperial influence in the country.

Both multinational oil corporations and Venezuela's domestic elites found themselves in trouble when Hugo Chávez began taking steps to establish national control over oil resources. He started the Bolivarian Revolution. In 2002, an attempt was made to overthrow him through a military coup and install an alleged puppet government. After Chávez was detained, mass resistance erupted. This was an alleged US-backed project that collapsed, and Chávez was subsequently freed, returning to power stronger than before.

Under the leadership of Chávez, oil revenues were channelled into education, healthcare, and broader public welfare, while millions of poor Venezuelans found a path towards a more dignified life. This trajectory suffered a major setback with Chávez's death. The Bolivarian Revolution was then carried forward by Nicolás Maduro. Time and again, attempts were made to remove him. Military threats were escalated in neighbouring countries. Having failed on other fronts, the US has now resorted to the disgraceful act of invading a sovereign nation and abducting its president and his wife.

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However, the question of Nicolás Maduro being an autocrat and Venezuela being devoid of democracy cannot be ignored, especially since he is widely seen by opponents within his country as well as by foreign governments as having illegitimately won Venezuela's 2024 election.

The US accuses Maduro of running a "narco-terrorist" regime, a claim he denies, and no credible evidence has been presented either. However, he has frequently been accused of repressing opposition groups and silencing dissent in Venezuela, at times with the use of violence. The danger of speaking out against Maduro is still very real within Venezuela, as the National Assembly—which is dominated by Maduro loyalists—passed a law a few weeks ago declaring anyone who expresses support for US naval blockades a "traitor," reports BBC.

The US accuses Maduro of running a "narco-terrorist" regime, a claim he denies, and no credible evidence has been presented either. FILE PHOTO: **REUTERS**

Nonetheless, for the US, attacking weaker states, carrying out massacres, and assassinating national leaders is nothing new. Since the end of World War II in 1945, the US has led the capitalist world, relying on aggression, mass violence, occupation, and intimidation to expand imperial dominance. Iraq was torn apart during the presidency of George H. W. Bush. Libya met a similar fate under Barack Obama. Earlier administrations carried out interventions across Asia, Africa, and Latin America. More than a million people were killed in Vietnam, and similar atrocities occurred in Indonesia. Chile offers another stark example where an elected president, Salvador Allende, was overthrown in a US-backed military coup and died fighting. What followed was a decade of brutal rule under General Augusto Pinochet, marked by killings, disappearances, and torture.

On the other hand, some of the world's most notorious dictators have flourished under US protection, looting national wealth and unleashing brutal repression on their people. Whenever countries have attempted to chart an independent economic and political path outside the US imperial orbit, they have been attacked under one pretext or another. This pattern has persisted across successive US administrations, but under Donald Trump, it has reached an extreme.

A convicted Honduran drug lord was recently released from a US prison to counter anti-imperialist leftist forces in that country. In Ecuador, too, drug traffickers and smugglers have been granted various forms of protection and benefits. María Corina Machado, a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, has openly stated that US companies stand to make enormous profits from Venezuela's resources, and that if she comes to power, all such opportunities will be handed over to them.

If global drug networks, aggression, and mass killings were to be put on trial, US leaders would be the first to face justice. Donald Trump should be prosecuted for war crimes, the escalation of violence, abductions, and sowing chaos across multiple countries. Instead, the Trump administration is putting Maduro on trial, thereby pushing the entire world towards greater disorder.

What is particularly alarming is that the United Nations has become an ineffective institution. At moments when decisive action was required, it failed. The European Union, too, appears spineless, reduced to a subordinate of the US. Yet there is a source of hope: across the world, countless people have taken to the streets in protest. This popular resistance remains our greatest hope today. It matters for Bangladesh as well, where hegemonic forces are also laying their traps. This is a global struggle, and it demands that all of us remain alert, informed, and actively engaged.

CROSSWORD
BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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14 Morphine, for one
15 Constantly changing
17 Sewing aid
18 Like amphitheaters
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21 Atkins of country music
22 Secret supply
25 Selected
26 Dull pain
27 That woman
28 Sgt., e.g.
29 Least decorated
33 Gumshoe
34 Capsize
35 Choice
37 Cap for de Gaulle
38 Go hungry
39 Lake near Buffalo
40 Sugary
41 Cockpit guesses

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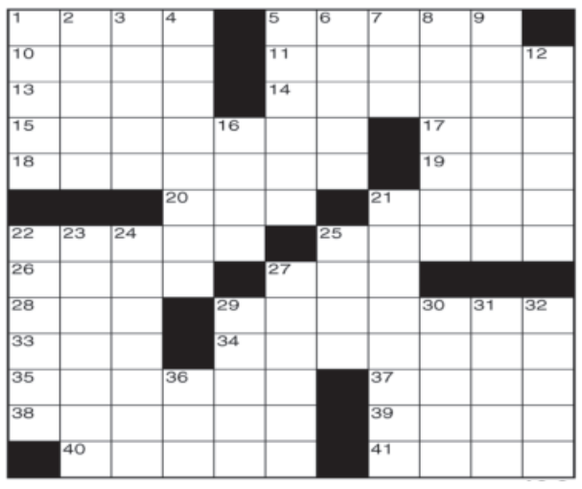
1 San Antonio mission
2 Illuminated
3 Ham it up
4 Southwestern people
5 "Settle down!"
6 Top
7 "— Mir Bist Du Schön"
8 Plains people
9 Indigenous group
12 Capitol group
16 Headquarters
21 Southeastern people
22 Epic poem divisions
23 Believes
24 Southeastern people
25 Bloke
27 Small piano
29 Kitchen appliance
30 Tennis star Chris
31 Old photo tint
32 Attempts
36 Fury



SATURDAY'S ANSWERS

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