

New pay scale needs more scrutiny

Proposed government pay hike risks destabilising public finances

A hefty pay raise proposed for government employees may appear, at first glance, to be a matter of fairness. However, it also stands to become a fiscal landmine for the next administration. The Ninth National Pay Commission set up by the interim administration argues that a revision has been due for a decade, during which high inflation has steadily eroded real incomes. The issue here is not whether government employees deserve better pay, but how the increase is designed, financed, and how large it should be. The commission has proposed raises by up to 142 percent, at an estimated annual cost exceeding Tk 1 lakh crore. This single decision would absorb roughly a quarter of the current annual tax revenue at a time when the tax-GDP ratio is at a historic low and public debt pressures are intensifying.

The state already relies heavily on borrowing, not only to fund development spending but also to service existing debt. Adding a recurring expense of this scale would almost certainly require even more borrowing. The consequences are predictable: higher inflation, reduced space for private investment, and cuts in essential sectors such as health, education, and infrastructure. More worrying is the absence of a credible plan to finance the proposal sustainably. Without a significant expansion of the tax base and stronger revenue collection, the burden will simply be shifted forward. The next government would inherit a sharply reduced fiscal space, limiting its ability to honour its promises or respond to economic shocks.

This brings us to a deeper flaw in the commission's approach. Pay revisions are often presented as a cure-all for inefficiency and corruption, based on the assumption that better-paid officials will perform better. History suggests otherwise. Following the last major pay hike in 2015, the tax-GDP ratio fell, and corruption, by all perceptions, showed little improvement. As Towfiqul Islam Khan, an economist, pertinently asks, where is the analysis of why this happened? And where are the reforms to ensure that higher salaries actually translate into better governance? A pay scale disconnected from accountability, productivity benchmarks, and institutional reform is simply a larger bill for the same results. Without changes in how the civil service is evaluated, promoted, and disciplined, higher pay will become a bloated expense rather than an investment in state capacity.

The political context further complicates the issue. For an interim administration at the twilight of its tenure to commit the country to such a sweeping and permanent fiscal decision is questionable. A policy of this magnitude requires democratic legitimacy and public debate. It also demands careful sequencing.

A more responsible path would be for the next elected government to examine any new pay scale. Increases should be phased and explicitly linked to performance. Revenue targets must be met before subsequent adjustments are triggered, and pay growth should be tied to measurable improvements in efficiency, service delivery, and accountability. The state cannot wish money into existence. Without discipline and reform, a well-intentioned pay hike could worsen fiscal stress.

Parties must go for real police reform

Political control must end to restore public trust in the force

As political parties prepare to unveil their manifestos ahead of the national election scheduled for February 12, a critical opportunity has arisen for them to confront one of the country's most persistent governance failures: the political use or abuse of the police force. Whichever party forms the next government, if it is serious about restoring public trust and ensuring law and order, the depoliticisation of law enforcement must be at the top of its agenda. Law enforcement experts and rights activists also stress that without meaningful police reform, promises of democracy, public safety, and the rule of law will ring hollow.

For decades, policing in Bangladesh has been deeply compromised by political interference. Political parties, when in power, have repeatedly been accused of treating the police as an extension of their partisan machinery. The Awami League's 15-plus years of rule represent the most extreme manifestation of this trend. During that period, enforced disappearances, deaths from so-called gunfights, and custodial torture severely eroded public trust in the police as well as other security and intelligence agencies. The violent suppression of protesters during the 2024 mass uprising—when nearly 1,400 people were killed, according to UN estimates—only worsened police and security agencies' public image.

People had hoped that similar human rights violations would not recur during the interim government's tenure. However, the law and order situation over the past 17 months has been deeply unsatisfactory, marked by murders, robberies, abductions, and a surge in mob violence. In 2025 alone, at least 197 people were killed in mob attacks, up from 128 the previous year, according to Ain o Salish Kendra. Moreover, corruption within law enforcement agencies continues to exacerbate the situation.

The utmost priority for the next government, therefore, should be establishing a truly independent police reform commission. Although the interim government issued a gazette in December 2025 to establish a police commission, experts argue that the ordinance is flawed and undermines the commission's independence. The next government must rectify these flaws through the proper procedures. An independent commission should be able to investigate complaints against police personnel impartially, both from the public and within the force, while also implementing other key recommendations of the Police Reform Commission.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Madeleine Albright sworn in as US secretary of state

On this day in 1997, Madeleine Albright, who had earlier served as US ambassador to the UN, assumed under President Bill Clinton the office of secretary of state, becoming the first woman to hold that cabinet post.



People take part in the 'Hands Off Greenland' protest, held in Copenhagen, Denmark on January 17, 2026, after the White House said that the US was considering a range of options to acquire Greenland. FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

US-EU tensions over Greenland may have serious effects for us

THE THIRD VIEW

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MAHFUZ ANAM

We are now justifiably focused on the upcoming general election, which will hopefully give us an elected and accountable government and restart our journey towards democracy.

However, the world is focused on something else. It wants a restoration of the existing world order, or a more rational one than the one we are forced to face now. Europe's latest dilemma—physical attack by Russia on the east and the threat by the US to take “full control” of the island of Greenland on the west—has changed the world as we knew it after the Cold War. Europe may have been prepared militarily, economically, psychologically, and emotionally for aggression from Russia. But to be threatened by their most trusted ally—which, after World War II, has stood by them and which, through the Marshall Plan, has helped rebuild their devastated countries—is something these nations find extremely hard to live with. Thankfully, US President Donald Trump's statement in Davos on Wednesday, that he will not use force to acquire Greenland, may have calmed European nerves a bit. But the shock still persists, and so does a serious doubt about the reliability of the transatlantic alliance.

Europe's shock started with a sudden and irrational imposition of US tariffs, that too without any discussion or negotiations (the latest report says that Nato members have been exonerated from that). They were, and are, also disturbed by President Trump's thoughts on peace in Ukraine. Is it to allow Russia to keep the territories conquered so far? What price will Ukraine have to pay for peace? Russia is clearly the aggressor here, but Trump's attitude towards President Vladimir

from heavy dependence on the US and seeking diversification.

The members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (Nato), whose protection its members enjoyed for the last eight decades, are now in danger of being bullied by its principal founder with the threat of occupying part of the territory of one of its members: Denmark. The Nato Charter says that an attack on any one of them is to be considered an attack on all. So, how the US's demand for the ownership of Greenland will ultimately work out is the central question in all European leaders' minds. Yes, at Davos, President Trump said he would not use force, but he reiterated the US's need for the Danish territory.

What Trump has set in motion is to make meaningless the most important pillar on which the modern international system functions: the notion of national sovereignty.

The Peace of Westphalia of 1648 initiated the modern-day practice of interstate relations, though the concept was more centred around the rights of the state and the ruler. The notion of popular sovereignty was articulated by philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who stated that “sovereignty resides with the people.” Thus, the focus was shifted from the ruler to the people, a crucial transition towards making democracy meaningful. Through the process of decolonisation and the idea of self-determination of nations and peoples, the principle of people-centred sovereignty got further currency.

The defeat of Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini and the total destruction of fascism after World War II greatly strengthened the notion of sovereignty, which was given the most widespread

of the rise of the destructive powers, in an overall sense, the demise of a law-based international order will mark the beginning of the end of our civilisation. It is an existential question that we are now facing.

The Russian attack and occupation of Ukraine's territory stand as a total violation of the idea of national sovereignty. The abduction of Venezuela's president and his wife, and President Trump's declaration that the US will “run” Venezuela for as long as necessary, are again a very dangerous breach of the notion of sovereignty. Trump's wish to take over Greenland, a territory belonging to Denmark (which may not materialise as recently indicated), has added to concerns about the transatlantic treaty's stability. *The Wall Street Journal's* report on Wednesday that the US plans a regime change in Cuba by the year's end, and similar other rumours concerning other Latin American countries, are adding to global concerns about the rights of nations to exist as independent states. All this further jeopardises the very structure on which the modern international system operates.

Our civilisation's most laudable “journey”, among a few others, has been

like ours?

Specifically, the most important area of concern for Bangladesh is that the two contesting parties of the present tension, the US and the EU, are the two biggest markets for our ready-made garment export, which accounts for 80 percent of our export earnings. If these two destinations become embroiled in various trade issues, tariff wars, and,

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PHOTO: REUTERS

US President Donald Trump attends the 56th annual World Economic Forum (WEF) meeting in Davos, Switzerland on January 21, 2026.

that from “might is right” to the notion that what is morally, ethically, and legally right is far mightier than might itself. The fundamental precondition for the modern international system to operate and survive is a rules-based international system in which every country has equal rights and every country, however powerful, obeys the same laws. The post-World War II world has more or less proven its validity.

We must never lose sight of the fact that the modern world's prosperity, the rise in global wealth (however maldistributed), and the spread of the notion of universal human rights, freedom of speech, and democracy all depend on the rules-based international system. Equally important is the right of every nation to be the owner of its natural resources, which is dependent on an international order. If this collapses, then big powers will wreak havoc on smaller countries, and we will have nowhere to go to seek redress. It will mean a return to the colonial era, during which natural resources of the colonies were looted and indigenous people were literally turned into slaves—something which, whatever be the price, developing countries will never accept.

What does all this mean for countries

God forbid, military confrontation, then the impact on us will be an economic disaster.

If the relations between the EU and the US become volatile, it is not inconceivable that special conditions may be imposed on us by one side or the other, such as arbitrary taxes, forced price reduction, or a ban if we trade with certain countries that are blacklisted by some other, etc. Thus, the absence of a rules-based international trading order will be a serious threat to countries like ours.

It is not inconceivable that geopolitical factors may come into play. We may come under greater pressure to choose sides. Our own region may become a playground for others. The Indo-Pacific zone, South China Sea, Bay of Bengal, etc may become pressure points of our foreign policy. We may be asked not to accept investment from countries that are not in the good books of a powerful one. When power becomes the final arbiter instead of rights, the needs and demands of smaller countries like us are likely to be flouted.

The groups that are celebrating at the moment are the arms producers and suppliers. Every European country is increasing their defence spending. Asia is not far behind. Even smaller countries are falling in line in this regard. We, whose resource constraints are well-known, could end up doing the same.

Just when the whole world should be diverting its resources to fight climate change, we are spending many times more in preparing to destroy ourselves in the name of protection. What the present situation is doing is diverting our attention and resources from serving humanity to serving the spread of suspicion, instability, hatred, and, if not war, then definitely rearmament. Experience of the past decades proves that it is the wrong policy to pursue. Having seen and experienced all that, how can we repeat the same scenario? How can we be so short-sighted?

Greenland may be far in distance, but not so far in terms of geopolitics and geoeconomics.