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The Daily Star

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PRIORITIES FOR TOMORROW

As we publish the fifth and final instalment of our anniversary special, The Daily Star marks 35 years of journalism with its gaze firmly set on the future. With the national election just weeks away, this concluding volume is devoted to a single, urgent question: what must be done next?

This final part, themed "Priorities for Tomorrow," turns to the responsibilities that await the next elected government. Bangladesh stands at a pivotal moment. The choices made in the coming years will shape not only the immediate political cycle but also the country's long-term trajectory in a rapidly changing world.

This issue brings together some of the country's most respected thinkers, practitioners, and policy experts to identify and examine the core priority areas that demand attention. The articles address the economy and governance, human rights and judicial independence, agriculture and food security, LDC graduation and global integration, public health challenges, urban planning and infrastructure, education reform, police accountability, foreign policy, national and maritime security, and more. Each contribution is grounded in evidence, experience, and a clear-eyed understanding of both constraints and possibilities.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Our aim is to offer a rigorous, informed framework for public debate—one that voters, policymakers, and institutions alike can engage with as the country prepares for a new electoral mandate. At a moment when noise often overwhelms nuance, rigorous analysis and deliberate prioritisation remain indispensable.

As The Daily Star completes 35 years, this final instalment reflects our enduring commitment: to serve as a platform for ideas that matter, to encourage accountability, and to contribute—through serious journalism—to the building of a more just, resilient, and forward-looking Bangladesh.

Mahfuz Anam
Editor & Publisher

VISUAL: **ANWAR SOHEL**

BANGLADESH'S ECONOMIC ROADMAP

Priorities for the next government

KAS MURSHID

Economist and Chairman of the Task Force on Re-strategising the Economy and Mobilising Resources for Equitable and Sustainable Development.

In January 2025, a 12-member task force led by Dr K.A.S. Murshid submitted a report to Bangladesh's interim government, outlining an urgent reform agenda to address the nation's economic crisis and chart a path towards sustainable development. The 550-page document represents not just a diagnosis of current challenges but also a call to action—identifying opportunities that can yield results quickly while laying the foundations for deeper structural transformation. This short article presents the core recommendations of the report.

The report emerges from a critical moment in Bangladesh's history. The country faced mounting economic pressures: depleted foreign exchange reserves, inflation hovering above 10 per cent, a fragile banking sector haemorrhaging from non-performing loans, and growing social unrest. Yet within this crisis lies opportunity—a rare window to review the glaring shortcomings of the past and an opportunity to implement vital reforms that have been stalled for decades. These reforms are needed to help build a more equitable and prosperous society and to ensure that our most valuable resource—the entrepreneurship and creativity of the people—is put to good use.

RESTORING MACROECONOMIC STABILITY

The task force identified macroeconomic stabilisation as the most urgent priority. Bangladesh's economy has been buffeted by external shocks—COVID-19, the Ukraine war, and global commodity price spikes—but domestic mismanagement has deepened the crisis. Food inflation has come down from around 10 per cent in January 2025 to 7 per cent currently, while non-food inflation remains elevated at around 9 per cent. In the meantime, the taka has depreciated by 35–40 per cent against the dollar since 2022, and the tax-to-GDP ratio languishes at just 8.67 per cent, the lowest in South Asia. A huge amount—perhaps as much as 50 per cent of total tax revenue—is used up in interest payments, a consequence of large fiscal deficits that must be financed by increased borrowing.

The report challenges conventional wisdom by recommending an accommodative monetary policy rather than ultra-tight measures. The Bangladesh Bank has raised policy rates to 10 per cent and has kept them fixed, to be adjusted once inflation comes down substantially. This approach has made domestic production costlier without adequately addressing supply-side inflation drivers. Instead, the task force advocates moderate monetary tightening combined with aggressive supply-side interventions: improving food logistics, building strategic reserves of essentials such as diesel and fertiliser, and streamlining import procedures to prevent artificial scarcity.

On the fiscal front, the report calls for immediate revenue mobilisation reforms. The government must broaden the tax base, digitise revenue collection, and eliminate discretionary exemptions that have eroded fiscal capacity. The National Board of Revenue requires fundamental restructuring, moving away from arbitrary enforcement towards a transparent and predictable tax administration that encourages, rather than punishes, compliance. It is important to point out that the private sector has time and again expressed its unhappiness with the operations of the NBR. Effective NBR reforms could, by themselves, send out a strong signal of commitment to economic recovery and reform.

KEY POINTS

1. Economic stress has opened a rare window for reforms to advance equity, stability, and creativity.
2. Recovery demands balanced monetary policy, supply-side action, and fiscal and NBR reform.
3. Export diversification, SEZ revival, and economic diplomacy are vital after LDC graduation.
4. New institutions are needed to overcome implementation failures.
5. Banking reform, social protection, infrastructure resilience, and youth engagement must ensure inclusion, merit, and accountability.

TRADE DIVERSIFICATION AS A SURVIVAL STRATEGY

Bangladesh's export basket remains dangerously concentrated, with ready-made garments accounting for over 80 per cent of merchandise exports. As the country graduates from Least Developed Country status by 2026, it will lose preferential market access that has sustained this model. The task force presents export diversification not as an aspiration but as an existential necessity.

The report recommends "cherry-picking winners"—identifying the most promising non-RMG exporters among the approximately 500 firms currently exporting over one million dollars annually and providing them with targeted policy, financial, and technical support. This approach, successful in East Asian economies, contrasts with scatter-shot incentive schemes that dilute resources without generating champions. Government support to promising exporters must, however, be linked to performance, which may initially be defined in terms of increased exports and later, in terms of improved productivity.

Critical reforms include unifying trade and investment policy to eliminate the anti-export bias embedded in the high-tariff regime, establishing a fund for backward-linkage industries, and aggressively pursuing bilateral and multilateral free trade agreements. The report emphasises economic diplomacy: broadcasting Bangladesh's capabilities through satellite television, social media, and cultural exports in Chinese, Hindi, Korean, Japanese, English, and Russian to build soft power and market access.

Particularly promising is the recommendation to revitalise Special Economic Zones. Despite considerable political attention, SEZ progress has been meagre. The task force had urged selecting a handful of zones for focused development, addressing bureaucratic hurdles and infrastructure deficits that have deterred investors. The interim government appears to have taken this recommendation seriously. Success in even two or three zones could create demonstration effects that unlock broader FDI inflows. One may note that so far less than 5 per cent of investment in SEZs is from FDI.

PILOT PROJECTS THAT SIGNAL CHANGE

Understanding that comprehensive reform takes time, the task force identifies several pilot initiatives that can generate quick wins while building momentum for deeper transformation:

Public Hospital Reform: Select one Dhaka hospital for comprehensive overhaul—appointing qualified administrators instead of generalist bureaucrats, establishing a governing board with stakeholder representation, and implementing real-time monitoring dashboards that give youth and citizen groups access to performance data and complaint mechanisms. User feedback would drive continuous service improvements.

Automatic Traffic Signals: This seemingly simple measure has been sabotaged repeatedly by vested interests. Implementing automatic traffic signalling in Dhaka, using advanced technology and data analytics, would demonstrate that the government can break entrenched interests while providing immediate congestion relief.

Single-Operator Bus Franchise: Consolidate Dhaka's chaotic bus system under a single franchise operator, shifting drivers from commission to fixed salaries. This would enhance safety, reliability, and service quality while establishing a model for urban transport modernisation.

Reviving the Buriganga River: The task force declares the Buriganga "on the brink of extinction" and urges emergency legislation to enable immediate action. Leadership should come from a dedicated minister with strong technical and legal support, backed by judicial dispensations to counter sabotage from vested interests. Restoring this river would signal an unambiguous commitment to environmental protection.

INSTITUTIONAL INNOVATION: NEW BODIES FOR NEW CHALLENGES

Beyond pilot projects, the report recommends establishing new institutions to address systemic weaknesses:

A Regulatory Reform Commission would continuously monitor and streamline the rules that are strangling business growth. Current over-regulation—excessive paperwork, arbitrary discretion by customs and revenue officials—deters both domestic entrepreneurship and foreign investment. This commission would flag inefficiencies and advocate reforms that balance facilitation with necessary safeguards.

A Center of Global Excellence in STEM, engineering, and ICT/AI should be established within five years, learning from institutions like the Indian Institutes of Technology.

SEE PAGE 8

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VISUAL: **SHEIKH SULTANA JAHAN BADHON**

ANTI-CORRUPTION drives fail, not inevitably but deliberately

IFTEKHARUZZAMAN

Executive Director, Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB).

KEY POINTS

1. Anti-corruption efforts failed due to ad hoc governance, loophole-ridden laws, and bureaucratic resistance.
2. The Interim Government squandered a historic reform opportunity despite broad consensus on ACC recommendations.
3. The ACC colluded in weakening accountability, independence, and internal integrity.
4. Kleptocracy thrived through politicised institutions, impunity, and abuse of state power (2009–2024).
5. Genuine reform requires a participatory National Anti-Corruption Strategy, strong institutions, transparency laws, and political will.

Corruption is too insidious a menace to be controlled by ad-hoc, pick-and-choose measures, the way chronic cancer cannot be helped by some selected painkillers. Our successive governments have been high on rhetoric against corruption, but low on delivery, and efficient in enabling and protecting it by piecemeal and frivolous measures, making a mockery of the purpose. In the process, the state was transformed into Kleptocracy during sixteen years since 2009. Public expectation was high of the Interim Government (IG) that it would initiate the much-needed strategic, legal, and institutional foundations against corruption that their successor regimes would carry forward. It has been just the opposite.

The IG will be remembered for unprecedented ad hocism in governance, lacking a strategic approach, that created numerous counterproductive legal and operational risks contradictory to the core mandate of state reform in general and anti-corruption in particular. Too often, the IG allowed itself to be held hostage to internal resistance as well as forces that it considered to be its powerbase, and thereby damaged the prospects of unprecedented opportunities created towards fundamental reform against corruption. In whatever reform measures they have picked and chosen, they have created self-defeating loopholes, often by design.

Specifically, in nearly every Ordinance that the IG has enacted, there are clear evidence against the true spirit and objective of the IG's own mandate of state reform. The Police Commission Ordinance, for instance, is just an eyewash for police reform that will be no more than a rehabilitation resort for retired civil bureaucrats and police officials who will hold the key to sabotaging its stated purpose. An otherwise excellent National Human Rights Ordinance has been stabbed in the back by conspiratorially inserting a provision to ensure bureaucratic control in its formation, shattering the dream of an independent and effective commission. The Ordinances enacted under the IG related to cyber security, digital space, personal data protection, and data management have ensured mutually reinforcing, unaccountable surveillance power in the hands of the government and relevant agencies to enable targeted violation of the right to privacy, free media, dissent, and civic space. Aspirations of an effective and accountable Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), parallel with independence, have been sabotaged.

It should be recalled that the transformation of an elected government into authoritarian Kleptocracy during 2009–2024 was primarily an outcome of the regime's hunger and design to unaccountably abuse power. All forms of abuse of power, including corruption, were facilitated and granted impunity by politically biased, professionally bankrupt, and dysfunctional state institutions. State power was captured by kleptocratic syndication. In order to sustain authoritarian control, various repressive measures were adopted and systems were created not only to plunder public resources, including illicit transfers out of the country, but also for widespread, multi-dimensional, and often ruthless violation of human rights and deprivation of people's access to justice. The state itself, in cohort with other state institutions like law-enforcement agencies, civil-military bureaucracy, security agencies, and judiciary, was deeply politicised and used with the same purpose of reinforcing kleptocratic control of the state structure. It was most appropriate, therefore, that the Interim Government (IG), that was entrusted with the responsibility to create the foundations of state reform, the main aspiration of the historic July movement, selected ACC reform among the first six reform commissions to be set up. But just that much.

The IG has not done anything substantive about the recommendations they collected from the ACC-Reform Commission (ACC-RC), as well as from the other 10 Commissions, with a commitment to implement them "urgently" by executive authority and in collaboration with the relevant institutions, ACC in this case. The ACC itself has also been complicit and even catalytic in this failure. Soon after the ACC-RC report was launched, the ACC at its top level confirmed their unqualified endorsement of all 47 recommendations. Both the ACC and the IG also knew that in the national consensus negotiations nearly all political parties endorsed almost every ACC-RC recommendation.

As the only stakeholder formally involved with the IG in the drafting process of the Ordinance to amend the 2004 Act, the ACC colluded with the forces of resistance in the government that took control of the reform process and conspiratorially prevented the inclusion of the provision to create the independent Review Committee to ensure accountability of the ACC. Parallel with ACC's full independence, including its internal governance and financial autonomy, this provision was proposed to enable ACC's accountability through periodic review, public hearing, and reporting on which allegations of corruption have been selected for action, on what basis, and which have not, and why. At an advocacy meeting held on November 19, 2025 involving the relevant Adviser and other stakeholders, including the ACC and relevant senior bureaucrats, everyone was persuaded about the strategic importance of the provision and agreed to retain it. However, subsequently, the joint ACC–bureaucracy forces of resistance prevailed, and the provision was finally dropped. The Cabinet of Advisers gave in, as some influential Advisers acquiesced. This showed that, despite being perceived to have no political bias or ambition, the IG succumbed and in fact upscaled the long-sustained governance deficit for which bureaucracy determines what the Cabinet Ministers (Advisers) approve. This is also just one example of how the reformist government acted against reform and set the precedent for future political governments to undermine the blood-written July Charter.

Just to mention a few more examples of lost opportunity, despite the ACC-RC's specific recommendation, the ACC has failed to take any initiative yet to cleanse itself of officials who are highly corrupt, by the ACC's own confession. Similarly, nothing has been done about the proposed independent Internal Discipline Division to ensure accountability and integrity within. Nor has it shown any interest in working with the Government to implement recommendations for its full operational and financial independence, including the proposed package of positive and negative incentives for the ACC staff. Another strategic and highly important recommendation that has been sidelined is to relieve the ACC from the clutches of deputed bureaucrats as the senior-most officials after the Commission, which has been the dominant factor over the years behind failure to act against corruption of bureaucrats and anyone associated with the ruling authority. Without ensuring the ACC-RC-prescribed upper limit of deputed bureaucrats to senior positions in the ACC, especially from administrative service, the aspiration of an operationally neutral and effective ACC will remain a pipe dream. Equally ignored are a number of other recommendations, like end-to-end automation of the ACC's overall operations, especially complaint management, investigation, undercover inquiries, and prosecution.

While these are only some of the items that both the Government and the ACC have failed to implement "immediately" as promised after the report was released, furthermore, the Government and the ACC have refrained from taking any initiative regarding the package of recommendations to build the collective strength of the key institutions of democracy and accountable governance, without which even an ideally powerful, independent, and accountable ACC cannot deliver truly effective corruption control. These are related to the corruption-friendly politico-governance eco-system that has evolved over the years, and was taken to a Kleptocratic level during 2009–2024.

A National Anti-Corruption Strategy (NACS) must be adopted through a participatory and inclusive process specifying the anti-corruption roles and responsibilities of various State and non-State institutions. NACS should include the Legislature, Executive, Judiciary, Public sector, Law enforcement, Election Commission, Ombudsman, Audit institution, Anti-corruption Commission, Local Government, Political Parties, Media, Civil society, and Corporate Sector. An Office of Ombudsman should be established, empowered to ensure oversight and reporting, including comparative naming and shaming of the institutions on performance under NACS. A specific law should be enacted to permanently abolish the practice of legalising black money. A specific legal framework needs to be created to resolve and prevent conflict of interest of power-holders and public-interest-related decision-makers at various levels. To prevent large-scale swindling of public money and property by banks and financial institutions, a beneficial ownership transparency law must be enacted, particularly applicable to ownership of companies, trusts, or foundations. Data on such beneficial ownerships must be publicly accessible through a Beneficial Ownership Register.

Robust and strictly enforceable legal provisions must be created to ensure transparency and integrity in political and electoral financing. It should specifically make it obligatory for public representatives of all levels to submit annually updatable itemised income and asset statements of themselves and their family members soon after taking office, which should be published on the Election Commission website for public scrutiny. Private sector bribery must be criminalised, consistent with Bangladesh's commitment under the UN Convention against Corruption. To ensure transparency of financial transactions at home and abroad as a means to prevent tax evasion and illicit financial transfers, including money laundering, Bangladesh must accede to the Convention on Mutual Administrative Assistance in Tax Matters and implement the Common Reporting Standard. Bangladesh should join the Open Government Partnership to facilitate adoption of international best practices in transparent governance in the public, private, and non-government sectors. We also need a comprehensive set of preventive measures against corruption, including a short-, medium-, and long-term action plan to creatively and innovatively communicate to the people at large and the new generation the narrative that corruption is not only a punishable crime but also a socially, culturally, and religiously unacceptable, destructive, and discriminatory scourge.

The victory of the July movement marked the fall of the kleptocracy, but whether it will eventually transform into a true exit from kleptocracy and enable a genuine transition towards effective corruption control will depend on the commitment and capacity of reform leaders among the power-holders now and after elections, and their capacity to overcome adhocism and forces of resistance. It will depend on whether the true spirit of the July Movement is mainstreamed in the political and governance eco-system of Bangladesh. Much will depend on whether the political forces, the key power-holders, and bureaucracy, the prime agent of the executive authority, can overcome the state of being hostage to the "our turn" syndrome.

LDC graduation should be treated as leverage rather than a reward. It creates urgency. It narrows the room for complacency.

PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

Will delaying LDC graduation address problems long ignored?

SELIM RAIHAN

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KEY POINTS

1. Graduation reflects progress, but readiness for post-LDC realities remains uncertain.
2. Trade preferences will erode, making standards compliance central for competitiveness.
3. Smooth Transition Strategy shows ambition, but lacks prioritisation, sequencing, execution.
4. Deferral debates distract from urgent reforms needed regardless of timing.
5. Graduation should leverage political will to build resilience, competitiveness, institutions.

Bangladesh is on the path to graduate from Least Developed Country (LDC) status on 24 November 2026. In 2018, and again in 2021, the country crossed all the required thresholds set by the United Nations, placing it firmly on track to formally exit LDC status in 2026. Few would deny that this achievement reflects five decades of steady progress. Income levels have risen. Health and education outcomes have improved. Export-led manufacturing has transformed the economy in ways that would have seemed improbable in the years following independence.

Yet inevitability should not be confused with readiness. Graduation is a milestone, not a destination. It marks the end of one development phase and the beginning of another that is far more demanding. The real question facing Bangladesh today is not whether it qualifies for graduation, but whether it is prepared for what comes after. Timing, preparedness, and reform priorities now matter more than celebratory headlines.

The issue of timing has returned to the centre of debate. November 2026 is fast approaching, and the global environment is far less forgiving than it was even a few years ago. Global demand is uncertain, geopolitics is tense, and trade is becoming increasingly conditional on compliance with labour, environmental, and governance standards. Graduation will imply that LDC-specific support measures, such as preferential market access and concessional finance, will be phased out. These cushions were never meant to last forever, but losing them prematurely, without adequate preparation, could expose fragile parts of the economy to sharp shocks. Graduation, by itself, does not generate growth. What matters is whether Bangladesh can function confidently in a world where LDC safeguards no longer apply.

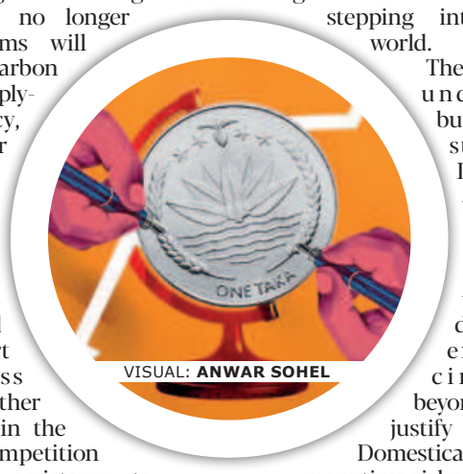
This concern brings the Government's Smooth Transition Strategy (STS) into focus. The STS, published in late 2024, was intended to serve as the country's guide through the post-graduation period. On paper, it is comprehensive and well-intentioned. It recognises risks to trade, finance, and competitiveness. It acknowledges the dangers of excessive reliance on garments and the need to diversify the export base. It is the result of lengthy consultation, and it speaks the language of resilience, productivity, and sustainability.

However, a close reading of the document also reveals an awkward distance between ambition and execution. The Smooth Transition Strategy attempts to do too many things at the same time. It enumerates priorities without ordering them, actions without prioritising among them, and reforms without confronting the political and institutional barriers that have derailed similar initiatives in the past. Hard questions are acknowledged, then quietly sidestepped. Who will bear the costs of reform? Which entrenched interests will resist change? How will accountability be enforced when implementation falters? On these issues, the STS remains largely silent.

The deeper challenge is structural. Bangladesh's graduation rests on impressive aggregate indicators, but beneath them lie persistent vulnerabilities. Income per capita has risen sharply relative to the LDC threshold, yet it remains far below the average for developing countries. Human development outcomes show progress, yet access to, and the quality of, health and education remain weak spots, while nutritional deficiencies continue to affect the majority of the population. Economic vulnerability indicators appear reassuring at first glance, but export concentration and climate exposure continue to pose serious risks. Graduation, in this sense, reflects how far Bangladesh has come, not how secure it has become.

Nowhere is this tension clearer than in trade. The export sector remains heavily concentrated in ready-made garments, which account for the overwhelming majority of export earnings and employ millions of workers. Preferential access to major markets has been central to this success. As graduation approaches, that access will gradually erode. In Europe, transition arrangements provide temporary relief, but elsewhere preferences will fade more quickly. Future access will depend not on status, but on compliance with demanding standards on labour rights, environmental protection, and sustainability. These are no longer optional extras; they are increasingly becoming the price of entry into global markets.

This shift changes the rules of the game. Competing on low wages and scale alone will no longer be enough. Firms will be judged on carbon footprints, supply-chain transparency, and worker welfare. For many exporters, especially smaller ones, meeting these requirements will be costly and complex. Export competitiveness could erode rather than strengthen in the face of global competition without focused assistance to raise standards, improve logistics efficiency, and build compliance capacity.



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

Financing conditions are also changing. Graduation will gradually narrow access to concessional finance, pushing Bangladesh towards costlier borrowing. At the same time, global lenders and investors are becoming more selective. They are scrutinising fiscal discipline, debt sustainability, and governance quality more closely. Here, domestic weaknesses become impossible to ignore. With a tax-to-GDP ratio that remains stubbornly low, fiscal space is limited. Public investment, social protection, and climate adaptation all compete for scarce resources. Without serious domestic resource mobilisation, development ambitions will increasingly outstrip available means.

Climate finance complicates matters even further. Bangladesh is unquestionably vulnerable to climate change, but access to climate funds is not automatic. It requires institutional readiness, credible project pipelines, and alignment with global best practices. Fragmented governance and weak coordination risk leaving resources untapped at a moment when adaptation and mitigation investments are becoming existential imperatives rather than discretionary policy choices.

Against this backdrop, the debate over whether Bangladesh should seek a deferral of graduation has gained momentum. The private sector has voiced concerns about preparedness, export competitiveness, and the pace of reform. Political uncertainty and macroeconomic stress have added to the unease. Supporters of deferral argue that a short delay could provide breathing space to stabilise the economy, complete key reforms, and strengthen institutions before fully stepping into a post-LDC world.

The case is understandable, but it is not straightforward. Deferral is neither automatic nor costless. Internationally, Bangladesh would need to demonstrate that extraordinary circumstances beyond its control justify postponement. Domestically, a request for more time risks being interpreted as hesitation or weakness. There is also a real danger that deferral could become an excuse for further delay rather than a catalyst for action. Time, by itself, does not produce reform. Political will does.

This is why the deferral debate can easily become a distraction. Whether graduation happens on schedule or after a brief delay, the underlying challenges remain the same. Export concentration, weak institutions, limited fiscal capacity, skill mismatches, and governance deficits do not disappear with procedural adjustments. If anything, graduation exposes them more starkly.

The private sector sits at the heart of this transition. Bangladesh's growth story has been driven by domestic entrepreneurs, yet many firms remain trapped in low-productivity activities. Access to finance is constrained, especially for small and medium enterprises. Regulatory complexity raises costs and discourages investment. Technology adoption is uneven, and links between firms, research institutions, and training systems remain weak. Without deliberate efforts to upgrade productivity, diversify outputs, and build skills, the private sector will struggle to compete in a post-preference world.

Addressing these constraints requires more than policy statements. Reform in the financial sector will have to expand access to credit while restoring discipline and confidence. Industrial policy must move beyond protection and incentives towards genuine upgrading, innovation, and clustering. Skills development needs to respond to evolving technologies and labour market requirements, especially for women and young people. None of this is easy, but postponing it only raises the eventual cost.

At its core, the graduation challenge is a political economy challenge. Bangladesh has never lacked reform ideas. What it has needed are the appropriate incentives for those ideas to be translated into action. Rent-seeking networks, bureaucratic resistance, and short-term political calculations have repeatedly diluted reform efforts. Strategies are drafted, committees are formed, and reports are published, but execution stalls once vested interests feel threatened.

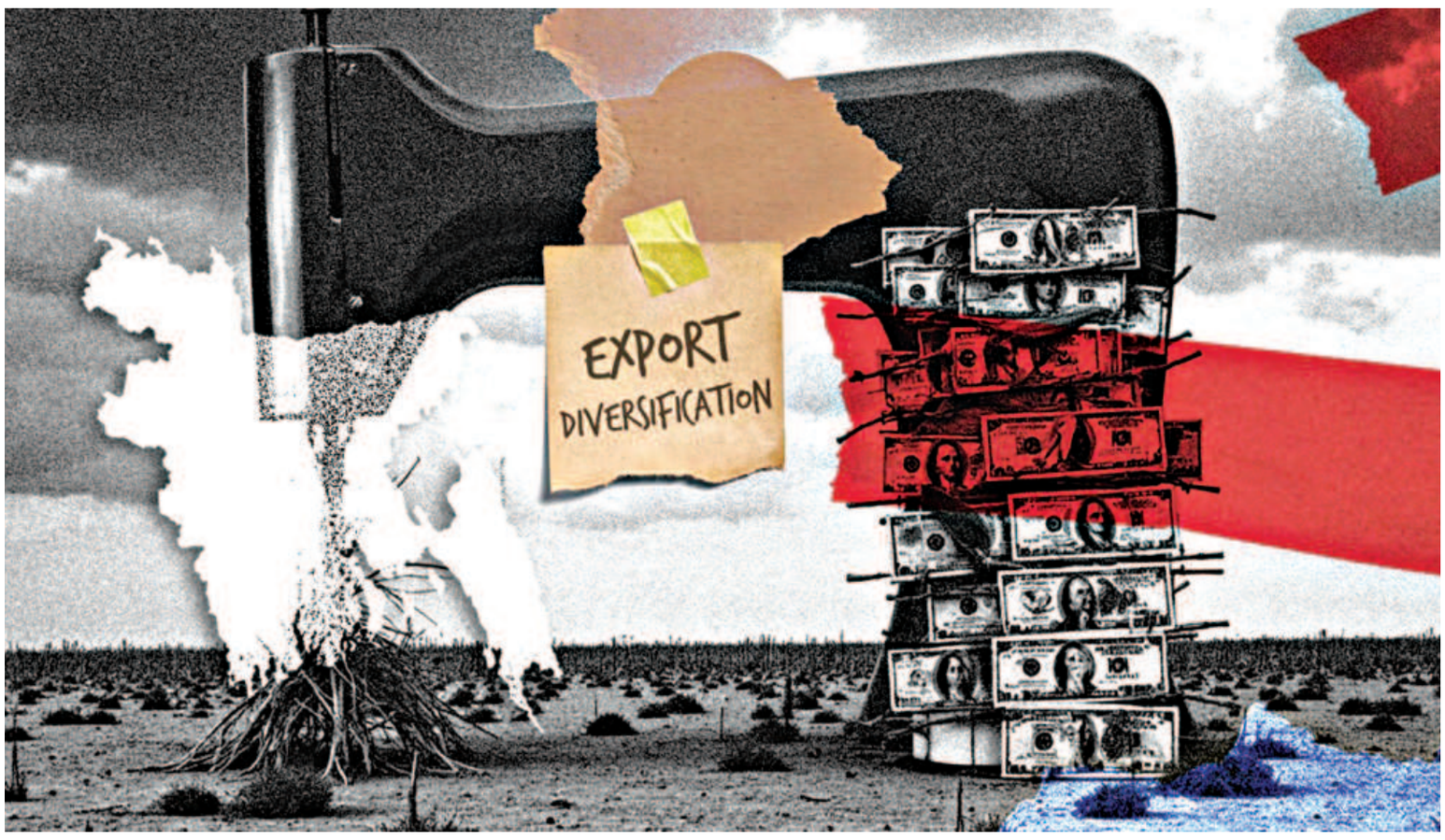
Breaking this cycle requires a different approach. Reforms must be prioritised and sequenced, not scattered across wish lists. Early wins that build credibility and public support matter. Mechanisms for accountability need to be strengthened if these commitments are to be translated into action. Reform coalitions must extend beyond the state, involving business, civil society, and the media to generate pressure for change. Above all, leadership matters. Without sustained political commitment, even the best-designed strategies will falter.

Seen in this light, graduation should be treated as leverage rather than a reward. It creates urgency. It narrows the room for complacency. It forces difficult conversations about competitiveness, governance, and inclusion. Used wisely, it can anchor reforms that might otherwise be postponed indefinitely.

The choice facing Bangladesh is therefore not a simple one between graduating now or later. The real choice is between drifting into an unprepared graduation or using that moment to redefine the country's development trajectory. Deferral, if pursued, should be framed as a tool to accelerate reform, not to avoid it. Graduating on time, if chosen, needs to be supported by concrete actions that reassure citizens, investors, and partners alike.

Bangladesh has come a long way. That achievement deserves recognition. But the harder work lies ahead. Graduation does not end vulnerability; it reshapes it. The challenge now is to ensure that the next stage of growth is built on stronger institutions, wider capabilities, and a more sustainable model. Then graduation, rather than a ceremonial exit, will be remembered as the start of a more resilient future.

Priorities for the next government



As the country prepares to graduate from the LDC status in 2026, accelerating export diversification initiatives and strengthening the country's export competitiveness have become urgent needs.

VISUAL:
SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

FROM PAGE 2

This would attract international scholars while upgrading local research capacity, positioning Bangladesh as a regional knowledge hub.

The report also proposes fundamentally reassessing Biman Bangladesh Airlines, which has failed to meet modern standards despite five decades of operation. If performance targets are not met, a new carrier—Bangladesh Airways—should be created using half of Biman's assets but managed by independent, world-class operators. Competition between the two airlines would improve service or result in market exit for the non-performer. Rethinking implementation hurdles has emerged as the single most critical institutional barrier to development. The task force report discusses this threadbare, particularly in the context of infrastructure projects that are systematically bedevilled by time and cost overruns, poor quality delivery, and inadequate scrutiny due to weak monitoring and implementation. A priority task would be to create a new, high-calibre, and truly independent monitoring and evaluation entity as a fully autonomous, well-resourced body.

TRANSFORMING KEY SECTORS: AGRICULTURE, ENERGY, AND DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Agriculture remains vital despite its declining GDP share, employing much of the workforce. The task force advocates a dual strategy: deploying cutting-edge technologies like precision agriculture, improved crop varieties, and smart financial instruments, while strengthening both traditional and modern extension systems. Corporate agriculture and modern retail have assumed importance. These developments require careful management to balance innovation with smallholder protection.

Energy policy requires urgent correction. Misguided quick rental policies have created overcapacity, enormous capacity charges, and crushing financial burdens. The report recommends closing rundown plants, transitioning to renewable energy (particularly solar installations on degraded tea garden lands and unused public property), and establishing diesel security reserves to buffer against global price volatility. Regional power trade offers significant potential and should be pursued immediately.

Digital infrastructure holds transformative potential. The task force urges immediate withdrawal of the 20 per cent supplementary tax and 2 per cent surcharge on internet services, recognising internet access as a "social good" essential for equitable development. Current taxation exceeding 50 per cent directly contradicts commitments to inclusive growth. Bridging the digital divide through lower data costs, affordable smartphones with appropriate safeguards, and fostering domestic ICT industry growth would accelerate digital economy development across education, health, agriculture, and governance.

BANKING SECTOR: FROM CRISIS TO RESILIENCE

Bangladesh's banking crisis demands immediate attention. Non-performing loans have surged, weak governance has enabled massive capital flight, and public confidence has eroded. The report advocates strengthening both private and state-owned banks, upholding Bangladesh Bank independence, and creating a conducive legal environment with professional accounting standards.

Critically, the task force recommends removing political influence from banking—dismantling vested interest groups that have weakened the sector for decades. Single individuals or groups should not control multiple banks. No new licences should be issued on political grounds. Using public funds to recapitalise poorly governed banks must stop. An exit policy for troubled banks should protect depositor interests while preventing moral hazard. It is noted that very few bank defaulters have been brought to book or have had their assets confiscated—which signals weak commitment and excessive leniency. A major constraint is the weak legal system that seems unable to restrain massive corruption.

SOCIAL PROTECTION AND INEQUALITY: BUILDING HUMAN CAPITAL

The current social protection framework is fragmented, inadequately funded, and plagued by targeting inefficiencies. The report advocates streamlining budget allocations, consolidating overlapping programmes around a lifecycle-based framework, and focusing resources on the most marginalised groups. Priority should go to old-age allowances, disability benefits, mother and child schemes, and food security interventions.

A crucial but under-emphasised recommendation is expanding urban coverage, bringing vulnerable urban households under the Public Food Distribution System (PFDS). This requires developing an official database of poor and vulnerable households nationwide through community participation, validated by sample checks and updated periodically. Modern blockchain technology could ensure efficient, seamless distribution. In the medium term, we need to put in place a comprehensive, universal food distribution system. We can recall that even in the sixties, seventies, and eighties we had universal rationing. There were many problems with the Ration System as it was then known. Now we are much better resourced and already have a huge, complex, cumbersome, wasteful, and inefficient social safety net programme. Better planning with the use of digital technology

SEE PAGE 9

Bangladesh's economic roadmap

Despite moderate improvements in inflation, commodity prices have remained elevated, posing a challenge for the economy.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

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And blockchains and modest additional resources could transform the PFDS into a powerful social safety net vehicle. The conversion of the National Identity Card into an open data platform like the Aadhar Card in India could make PFDS distribution far more effective and efficient, including opening up many other avenues of change, particularly in the sphere of banking, finance, and credit access.

On inequality, the task force advocates not just progressive taxation but ensuring equitable access to quality public services at reasonable cost—a seemingly simple goal that has proven maddeningly difficult. Structural constraints related to gender, rural-urban divides, asset distribution, and social class require an intergenerational approach: building human capacities in health and education while opening markets and non-market spaces to broader participation. It would be a great step forward if all public sector appointments and transfers were based on merit and not on patronage and bribery.

INFRASTRUCTURE

Huge infrastructural gaps continue to hamstring investment. A major focus on energy and connectivity is required with a view to spur growth, especially in the economic zones and in more remote areas. However, a major deficit in policy has been the neglect of investment in operation and management required to protect and preserve the value of infrastructural investments already made. This problem has now assumed urgency given the recent seismic activity experienced in the country, especially in Dhaka. Major initiatives need to be taken urgently to safeguard both public and private infrastructure, keeping in mind that protection will be far less expensive compared to rebuilding, should an earthquake of higher intensity strike.

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT: FROM PROTEST TO PARTNERSHIP

The July uprising demonstrated youth potential as agents of change. The report proposes channelling this energy through youth councils and forums with community service mandates, linked to city councils and municipalities. Mentorship and capacity development programmes outside formal education would encourage activism promoting better public services.

Youth representatives suggested using cartoons and anime to target young people with sensitive messages on mental and sexual health—creative approaches that resonate with digital-native generations. This youth engagement framework represents a fundamental reimagining of citizenship, moving from passive recipients of services to active participants in governance.

The next government must encourage platforms that create space for youth participation and civic action to give purpose and motivation to a vast, restless section of society that has high aspirations but relatively limited avenues to meet those.

CONCLUSION: SEIZING THE OPPORTUNITY

The task force characterises the current moment as crucial. If not firmly grasped and appropriately leveraged, Bangladesh risks being set back by years, if not decades. The recommendations represent not wishful thinking but pragmatic, actionable measures drawn from successful experiences in comparable economies.

Success requires shared responsibility between government officials and citizens. Strong leadership and strategic planning can transform challenges into opportunities, fostering a prosperous, equitable, and resilient nation. The alternative—returning to crony capitalism, weak governance, and the drift that characterised the previous era—would betray the hopes and aspirations of millions who will be electing a new set of leaders into power, hoping against hope that this time, finally, we will be able to move away from the catastrophic 'business as usual' approach of the past.

The path forward is clear. What remains uncertain is whether Bangladesh's leaders and citizens possess the will to walk it. The task force has provided the map. Now comes the harder part: the journey itself. We highly recommend the establishment of a results-oriented consultative mechanism through which stakeholders will help identify reform priorities from the report, refine some of the proposals if needed, and monitor progress in implementation.

The Task Force Report on Re-strategising the Economy and Mobilising Resources for Equitable and Sustainable Development was submitted to Chief Adviser Professor Muhammad Yunus in January 2025. The full report is available at https://gedkp.gov.bd/task-force-report-on-re-strategising-the-economy-and-mobilizing-resources-for-equitable-and-sustainable-development/

When policy lacks a development philosophy, failure follows

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KEY POINTS

1. Anchor policy choices in a clear, inclusive development philosophy.
2. Raise farmers' incomes instead of suppressing agricultural wages.
3. Break supply-chain syndicates and curb interest-group capture.
4. Prioritise agriculture-based industries and domestic value addition.
5. Retain domestic capital through coordinated, accountable state action.

Every elected government sets certain goals once it comes to power. Most of the time, these stated goals sound impressive. They literally set expectations among the citizens. When governments fail to meet those expectations within a few years, dissatisfaction grows among the public. In this scenario, we regularly see that election pledges have little influence on voter decisions. Instead, people come to trust their chosen government when their quality of life improves. Those state initiatives that may swiftly bring about improvements in the level of living lay the foundation for a government's legitimacy.

The new government's priorities following the election should be determined by its development philosophy. Regardless of whichever party takes power, some populist demands persist, such as lower commodity prices, higher purchasing power, and increased employment. However, these are not inherently development philosophies. These commitments are the outcome of a development philosophy. A development philosophy answers questions such as, "For whom is development?" What type of development? And "How could progress be achieved?" In other words, the questions are: how will employment grow? How will inflation go down? How will people's incomes increase? Because in a market system, none of these things can be controlled without government intervention. If there is a war, a natural disaster, or a pandemic, all countries are affected to some degree. A country's economy is regarded as stronger if it has a higher economic capacity to swiftly use its own resources to satisfy its residents' primary needs.

Farmers spray pesticide on a potato field in an attempt to save the remaining plants from late blight disease. The photo was taken from Barunagaon village in Thakurgaon Sadar upazila. PHOTO: STAR

In today's capitalist economy, greater emphasis is placed on efficiency and productivity, be it manufacturing, agriculture, or services. Efficiency is important, but efficiency can be achieved in numerous ways. The more important question today is how to achieve efficiency and at what cost. When discussing development, economists currently argue that foreign investment should be increased, new factories should be built, cheap local labour should be used, exports should expand, and remittances should be increased. Apart from this discussion, there is virtually little debate about development. The reason for this is that a large section of economists has been indoctrinated to believe that we only have competitive advantages in industries where cheap labour can be employed and profits can be maximised. We must go beyond these repetitive platitudes. We must question why, over the previous fifteen years or more, while our guiding force was achieving efficiency, the country's wealthiest have become richer and poverty has risen once again.

During the interim government, we observed how various interest groups created resistance against reform initiatives. The syndicate in the agricultural supply chain could not be eradicated. We noticed how the market was dominated by a few edible oil importing companies, and the government had little influence over them. We observed that rental and quick rental power plants, built through a government–business nexus, have not been shut down. Despite the fact that rural electricity reform is desperately required, we saw how contractors and businesses colluded with the Rural Electrification Board to impede reform. We discovered that merely subsidising fertiliser is not sufficient. If dealers are not monitored, farmers do not benefit from subsidies. Even with a 70% subsidy for agricultural mechanisation, marginal farmers could not access the machinery. Brokers acquire agricultural equipment using farmers' identities and sell it at higher market prices, while farmers fail to receive the subsidy. As a result, we already know where the barriers to reform lie and why cosmetic initiatives are ineffective. We have come to realise that without keeping these varied interest groups under control, reform will not be possible. Therefore, the real task is not making a checklist of what to do, but identifying how to do it.

In the five decades since Bangladesh gained independence, a wave of new technologies has transformed the agricultural landscape. As the population grows, so too does our agricultural production. The push for greater production capacity has led to an increased dependence on chemical fertilisers over organic alternatives. With growing dependence on pesticides, our food is increasingly contaminated by harmful chemicals in the water. Farmers are facing rising health risks from fertilisers and pesticides, while toxic chemicals in food endanger public health nationwide. Seeds are being commercialised, yet escalating prices are burdening farmers with higher production costs. The rising need for irrigation has highlighted the importance of utilising surface water, alleviating the strain on groundwater supplies. Recent advancements in irrigation technology are transforming agricultural practices. The demand for innovative technologies to preserve agricultural products is on the rise.

Despite all these technological advancements, farmers' quality of life has deteriorated even further. Production costs have surged, compelling farmers to sell crops at a loss. Farmers not only battle harsh weather but also suffer from unfair market prices. They face escalating production costs and delayed crop sales, forcing them to rely on high-interest loans to manage expenses.

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When policy lacks a development philosophy, failure follows

Bangladeshi farmers, living on the frontlines of climate disruption, are pioneering solutions that are shaping a new blueprint for survival.

FILE PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

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Failure to repay loans on time forces individuals to seek additional loans from other NGOs to cover their obligations. Farmers ensnared in debt often abandon their land, migrating to cities as transient labourers. For many, daily labour or pulling rickshaws to settle debts takes up a considerable part of their existence. Children are being denied access to education. The burden of debt has driven some individuals to tragic ends, including suicide. Therefore, we need to make a choice: should we increase efficiency by ensuring higher income and greater security for farmers, or should we try to decrease production costs by lowering agricultural wages?

In Bangladesh, so far, the marginalisation of farmers has helped maintain a steady flow of cheap labour to urban areas and migrant labour abroad. The emigration of our youth in search of jobs abroad brings back valuable dollars, bolstering our reserves amidst rising unemployment. Much of this funding is allocated to cover substantial mega-project loans and to support imported energy costs. Development narratives have long centred on mega-projects and large-scale infrastructure initiatives. Despite the Sheikh Hasina administration's plans for 100 special economic zones, leading to significant land acquisitions, investment remains elusive. High production costs, driven by soaring electricity and gas prices, are significantly dampening potential growth in the industrial sector. In the future, a significant imbalance may persist between supply and demand. Decisions are made erratically, without considering long-term consequences. Often, these decisions are made to serve the interests of some dominant interest groups. In such cases, the absence of coordination leads to spending billions of takas with no beneficial outcomes for farmers. On the other hand, those who need capital do not have access to it.

The next government must prioritise addressing the coordination issues. The agricultural sector requires alignment with an integrated development philosophy, rather than a mere checklist of tasks. Making inconsistent policy choices will not address the real issues. The agricultural sector must evolve in tandem with the industrial sector for balanced growth. The shrinking agricultural land and the transformation of farmers into transient labourers threaten the potential for a robust consumer goods market in this country. The nation's industrial growth hinges on fostering local industries alongside export-oriented production. It is imperative that we prioritise agriculture-based industries. The garment industry heavily relies on imported raw materials, while agriculture does not. In the case of the garment industry, the nation's input is confined to the value added by its workforce. On the other hand, agriculture-based industries, such as jute and sugar, have different layers of value addition. Unfortunately, these sectors have experienced a steady decline over the last two decades.

When a nation relies entirely on foreign raw materials, it undermines its own economic stability. Such circumstances foster chaos and unpredictability. For example, the government's failure to control commodity prices highlights its subservience to market forces. If domestic industries decline, Bangladesh will risk becoming overly dependent on imports, jeopardising its economic stability. Rising import and export costs will only exacerbate the government's diminishing control over the economy.

The next government must prioritise building an economic base for the country. Over the past five decades, the sources of capital have been bank loans and the surplus from unscrupulous and unethical practices. For capital accumulation in the country, domestic sources of capital are also necessary. If the profits from foreign investment do not get reinvested and instead leave the country, there will be a continued shortfall of domestic capital. There must also be discretion regarding foreign investment opportunities. Not all sectors are equal. We need to think about how to keep domestic capital within the country. In this regard, it is urgent to increase farmers' incomes. When farmers' incomes rise, they can contribute to the economy as consumers of many domestic products, and reinvestment of surplus can also contribute to capital accumulation in the country. Instead, in our country, NGOs and microfinance institutions are benefiting. Farmers are being exploited from all sides only to generate capital for others. The government must take initiatives to improve farmers' healthcare and gradually introduce a pension system for farmers.

It should be remembered that there have been technological advancements over the past fifty years. Technology can be utilised to improve farmers' living standards. There was a time when sugar mills incurred losses as farmers were reluctant to supply sugarcane because they did not receive timely payments. Now, with various digital technologies, there is an opportunity to ensure that they receive their dues on time. Many of the crises in sugar mill management can now be addressed through investments in technology, allowing for more efficient management. There are now various ways to ensure accountability that did not exist before. In marketing agricultural products, technology can be used to ensure farmers receive fair prices. In all these areas, the government can form committees to review and plan anew.

For a long time, certain memorised knowledge and ideas remained acceptable, while anything that builds national capacity remained neglected and rejected. Without considering the changes of the past few decades and assessing the real needs, policies have been highly influenced by external actors. The new government's task will be to prioritise exploring new ideas, conducting experiments, and encouraging innovations in every sector. However, this does not mean that these actions should be taken on a massive scale without scrutiny. Instead, they should start on a small scale, with coordinated planning to gradually address each complexity.

The government's core development philosophy dictates how the government may control and regulate. The incoming government must decide how control will be maintained across sectors, which sectors can be left to the market, and how much control should be retained to maintain an appropriate balance. Rather than making a checklist of random policies, if the policies are guided by a specific development philosophy, a more consistent political infrastructure may support the effective implementation of policies.

Public health is failing, act now

TAHMEED AHMED

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Bangladesh stands at a critical juncture in its public health journey. While the country has made remarkable progress since independence, deep structural gaps, rising disease burdens, and growing inequities continue to undermine the health of millions. If we consider the existing healthcare system in Bangladesh, it becomes clear that we need many more hospitals to serve the urban population. Dhaka alone now has a population of nearly 36.6 million (UN Report 2025), yet the number of large public-sector hospitals has barely increased since independence. Apart from facilities such as Dhaka Medical College Hospital, Sir Salimullah Medical College Hospital, and Shaheed Suhrawardy Medical College Hospital, there have been very few major additions.

At the same time, there has been a mushroom growth on private clinics. However, they are largely unaffordable for people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. For low-income urban residents, government hospitals remain the primary, and often the only, place to seek care. This makes it crucial to expand and strengthen hospital-based care for urban populations.

FILE PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

KEY POINTS

1. Bangladesh faces persistent public health gaps, with rising non-communicable diseases, urban overcrowding, and inequitable access to care.
2. Expanding and decentralising hospital and primary healthcare services is critical, especially for low-income urban residents and rural populations.
3. Out-of-pocket health expenditure is high; ensuring availability of diagnostics, essential medicines, and surgical supplies can reduce financial burdens.
4. Malnutrition, poor dietary diversity, and climate-related health risks continue to threaten children, women, and vulnerable populations.
5. Strong governance, effective implementation, and ethical practices in prescribing medicines are essential to translate investments into tangible health outcomes.

Decentralisation is equally important. When specialised hospitals are only concentrated in Dhaka, patients from districts such as Noakhali or Kurigram are forced to spend significant amounts of time, money, and effort to seek treatment in an unfamiliar city. This is neither appropriate nor sustainable. Medical colleges and medical college hospitals outside Dhaka must be well equipped and adequately staffed so that patients can receive quality care closer to home.

Of course, the country also needs a much stronger healthcare system for the rural population, which still outnumbers those living in cities. Bangladesh has an extensive primary healthcare infrastructure, including upazila health complexes, union sub-centres, and community clinics. Each community clinic caters to a population of around 10,000–12,000 people and is staffed by a community healthcare provider. However, the system as a whole needs revitalisation. Facilities must be functional, well-staffed, and properly equipped so that people can seek treatment for common and basic health problems. Strengthening primary healthcare at the grassroots level is essential to reducing pressure on higher-level facilities.

Another major concern is the rapid increase in non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, and chronic respiratory illnesses. This trend is visible across both urban and rural populations. Surveys show that 6–10 percent of the population is living with diabetes, many without knowing it. The situation with high blood pressure is even more alarming: around 20–25 out of every 100 people are affected.

These individuals are at a much higher risk of complications and premature death. Strengthening primary healthcare services is therefore critical so that chronic diseases can be detected early and managed with simple, low-cost treatments that prevent complications.

Urban slums are another major public health hotspot. In Dhaka and other cities, an estimated one-third of the population lives in slum settlements under extremely poor conditions. These communities are deprived of many basic healthcare services.

While rural populations have access to community clinics and other primary healthcare platforms, similar fixed-site facilities are largely absent in urban slums. Establishing community clinic–type facilities near large slum settlements could dramatically improve access to care. Even basic services, such as checking blood pressure or blood glucose, can make a meaningful difference by enabling early detection and prevention of diseases and complications.

Out-of-pocket health expenditure in Bangladesh remains persistently high, exceeding 70 percent. For diagnostic tests, this share often climbs to 80–90 percent or even higher, placing a severe financial burden, particularly on people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

To address this, we must ensure the availability of basic diagnostic services such as blood tests and X-rays at public facilities. Although X-ray machines exist in many rural areas, they are often out of order or lack essential supplies. Why should a low-income patient be forced to seek a chest X-ray from a private facility? Community clinics should have basic equipment—such as blood pressure machines, blood glucose meters, and essential medicines—provided free of charge. Ensuring these services would significantly reduce out-of-pocket spending.

Access to affordable surgical care is another critical issue. Procedures such as caesarean sections or appendicectomie remain expensive even in public hospitals due to the cost of medicines and other supplies. Suppose a rickshaw puller in Dhaka develops acute abdominal pain and is taken to a hospital, where he is diagnosed with appendicitis and advised to undergo an appendicectomie. Surgery is essential, but there are very few facilities that provide it free of charge.

Even when surgery is offered at no cost, patients often face unforeseen expenses. To truly reduce out-of-pocket health expenditure, it is crucial to ensure that all necessary components—

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Public health is failing, act now

Around 25% of children under five still suffer from stunting, raising their risk of death three- to fourfold. PHOTO: COLLECTED

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antibiotics, essential surgical supplies, and other critical elements—are readily available. Crushing financial burdens on patients can be eased only if basic medical needs are reliably met.

Reducing out-of-pocket expenditure also requires more rational prescribing practices. Too often, medicines are prescribed that are not strictly necessary, adding to patients' financial burden. Pressure from pharmaceutical companies can further encourage the prescription of expensive drugs when cheaper, equally effective alternatives exist.

This problem is particularly evident in the management of non-communicable diseases such as diabetes and hypertension. While Bangladesh has made progress in antibiotic stewardship, enforcement remains weak. Higher-generation antibiotics such as ceftriaxone, ceftazidime, and meropenem should never be sold without a prescription. If restrictions can be enforced for sleeping pills, they can certainly be enforced for higher antibiotics. Ultimately, all antibiotics should be brought under prescription control. Educational institutions and pharmaceutical companies also have a responsibility to promote ethical practices that prioritise public health alongside profit.

Bangladesh does not suffer from a lack of policies or institutions in the health sector. What we lack is effective implementation. We already have a Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, along with the Directorate General of Health Services, the Directorate General of Family Planning, and offices overseeing community clinics and nursing education.

The real issue is ensuring that allocated funds are justifiably spent, which requires good governance. Although significant resources are allocated to health, weak planning and delayed execution often prevent effective utilisation. There are people assigned specific roles, and the key is to make sure they actually perform their duties. Effective governance is therefore essential. We must also improve budgeting processes, ensure timely planning, and establish strict monitoring throughout the year so that allocated funds are actually spent for their intended purpose.

When Bangladesh became independent in 1971, the country faced severe food insecurity. Today, despite a much larger population, we no longer face the same level of staple food shortages. However, nutritional inequity remains profound. Around 24–25 percent of children under five still suffer from stunting, placing them at three to four times higher risk of death and limiting their cognitive development. Childhood wasting is an even greater concern. Recent surveys show that wasting has increased from 8 percent to 13 percent nationally—dangerously close to the WHO emergency threshold.

Malnutrition often begins before birth. Poor nutritional status among adolescent girls and pregnant women leads to inadequate pregnancy weight gain, low birth weight, and persistent childhood undernutrition. Improving the nutrition of adolescent girls and women of reproductive age must therefore be a top priority.

Dietary diversity also remains inadequate. Although Bangladesh has made progress in producing fish, eggs, milk, and poultry, many households cannot afford these foods. Targeted social safety net programmes are essential to support vulnerable populations, particularly pregnant women and families in hard-to-reach areas.

Climate change poses serious long-term threats to health and food security. Rising salinity in southern Bangladesh is already linked to increased rates of hypertension and other chronic conditions. Ensuring access to safe drinking water with low salinity is critical. Bangladesh has developed strong disaster response systems, but routine healthcare services in climate-vulnerable areas remain inadequate. Community counselling, improved housing ventilation, and awareness of heat-related health risks are increasingly important as temperatures continue to rise.

Additionally, mental health is one of the most neglected areas of public health in Bangladesh. Nearly 19 percent of the population suffers from some form of mental illness, yet stigma and limited access to care prevent many from seeking treatment. Expanding community counselling services—alongside psychiatric care—is essential. Family members, class peers, teachers and work colleagues could be made aware to positively interact with the patients.

Bangladesh's public health challenges are deeply interconnected, spanning governance, nutrition, environment, and equity. Addressing them requires a holistic approach that strengthens preventative primary healthcare instead of hospital-based care, enforces existing policies, and prioritises the most vulnerable.

The foundations of a strong health system are already in place. What is needed now is decisive leadership, good governance, and a sustained commitment to implementation. If we can ensure these, Bangladesh can translate its investments into real and lasting health gains for all.

This article is based on an interview with **Dr Tahmeed Ahmed**. *The interview was conducted and transcribed by* **Miftahul Jannat**.

VISUAL: **ANWAR SOHEL**

Faltering education is a national emergency, fix it now

MANZOOR AHMED

Professor Emeritus, BRAC University; Chairperson, Bangladesh ECD Network and Adviser to the Campaign for Popular Education.

When the foundation of governance of the state is shaky, public services such as education and healthcare also become weak and tottering. The general dysfunctionalities of state operations in Bangladesh are copiously reflected in the education system. The impact of failures in education, however, is much graver than just dysfunctional services. It puts in jeopardy the life prospects of the next generation and places at risk the future of the nation.

LONG-STANDING REFORM CRISIS

The crisis in our education has been much discussed for a long time. A quick historical sketch will bear this out.

There are idealised and romanticised narratives of the ancient education system of the subcontinent from the Hindu, Buddhist and Islamic past – the residential monastic and gurukul institutions and maktabs and madrasas -- under monarchies and kingdoms. In the feudal societies of the time, education was the preserve of a tiny privileged elite. Moreover, emphasising theology and religion, it failed to promote new knowledge and discovery that would nurture science and technology and adapt to the evolving modern world. It is the Western colonisers who introduced modern education in our part of the world in the 18th century, but with a limited scope and aim to serve the purposes of the colonial administration. The quasi-colonial rule of Pakistan since 1947 saw essentially the colonial system continuing, keeping the opportunities, scope and purposes of education restricted.

In independent Bangladesh, the education commission headed by Dr. Qudrat-e-Khuda was tasked in 1972 to design an education system appropriate for a new nation. The commission submitted its report to the government in 1974. The assassination of President Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975 and the political shift that followed sent the Khuda Commission report to the archive. Since then every military and elected political regime has appointed one or more education reform commissions. We may recall the long list of these commissions – Kazi Zafar Commission (1978) under General Ziaur Rahman, Mazid Khan Commission (1983) and Mofizuddin Ahmed Commission (1988) under General H.M. Ershad, and Shamsul Haq Commission (1997) under the first Sheikh Hasina Government (1996-2001). Two commissions were appointed -- M.A. Bari Commission (2001) and Moniruzzaman Mia Commission (2003) -- by the BNP-Jamaat coalition government (2001-2006). The last was the Commission co-led by Prof. Kabir Chowdhury and economist Quazi Khaliquzzaman Ahmad appointed in 2009 during Sheikh Hasina's second term. The 2010 National Education Policy based on the commission's proposals still remains in operation.

In retrospect, it can be said that none of these commissions foresaw a basic change in the education system; they anticipated incremental change and some reform essentially within the existing structure. There was no vision of transformative change in respect to the right to education, the state's obligation to fulfil this right, new thinking about the status and role of teachers, and decentralised education governance. It was also interesting that none of these were debated and approved by Parliament except the last one, and a systematic and concerted effort was not initiated to implement the recommendations.

In the case of the Shamsul Haq Commission, established during the first Hasina administration, the report was submitted to the government in 1998. Subsequently, a government-appointed committee drafted a national education policy in 2000, taking the Commission's recommendations into account.

FALTERING REFORM DECISION-MAKING

The national education policy of 2000 approved by the government did not anticipate basic change in promoting the right to education, bringing about qualitative change in public provisions or structural changes in education management. Its claim to fame may be that this policy gave legitimacy to the introduction of teaching English from class one in primary school, which was introduced by a diktat of General Ershad in the mid-1980s. Until then, English as a language was introduced lightly at the primary level, starting at class three, with lessons based on letters, numbers and rhymes. Proficiency in English was supposed to be acquired at the secondary level because a qualified English teacher could be appointed at that level. At the primary level up to class five, teachers are not appointed subject-wise; they are expected to teach all subjects with a focus on literacy in the main national language and numeracy.

The reality is that most primary teachers lack the proficiency to teach English. English as a compulsory subject throughout the primary school years became a waste of time and effort and a cause of much frustration for both students and teachers. More harmfully, it took precious learning time away from teaching the foundational literacy and numeracy skills, thus adversely affecting all of primary education.

The General's populist argument in deciding to start teaching English from class one in all primary schools was that it should not be only the privileged kids going to private kindergartens who have the chance to learn English. It didn't matter that the decision to teach it from class one in primary school became a false promise and a farce and distorted the purpose of primary education. Moreover, the syllabus for English was framed for the secondary level on the assumption that students enter class six with five years of instruction in English, which turned out to be a problem, since the children learned little English in their primary classes. The result is that most of the high school graduates today cannot read, write or communicate in English even at a basic level. The secondary public examination results also show a high percentage of failing scores in English, affecting the total pass rate.

Once a populist decision is proclaimed, it becomes difficult to have a rational reconsideration of the issue. The half-truth that a foreign language has to be learned early as a child is propagated and used to justify the futile toil of teaching English from class one, despite the worldwide evidence that a language can be learned by a motivated learner at any age.

This particular episode on English in primary school is symptomatic of the education decision-making process, often based on populist arguments and diktats from high-ups rather than evidence-based analysis with stakeholder participation, especially those involved in the education system. Political and partisan advantage or other vested interests, rather than educational logic and children's interest, are frequently the dominant consideration in educational decision-making.

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KEY POINTS

1. Weak governance has driven long-term education failures, threatening national development and future generations.
2. Successive commissions delivered only incremental reforms, lacking transformative vision and effective implementation.
3. Populist, top-down decisions, such as compulsory early English, have weakened foundational learning.
4. The 2010 policy recognised key problems but retained fragmented, centralised structures.
5. Missed reform opportunities demand urgent, coherent, and participatory system-wide education reform.

VISUAL: **MAHIYA TABASSUM**

Faltering education is a national emergency, fix it now

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

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The 2010 education policy adopted during the second Hasina regime was the only one that was approved by the national parliament, though with little debate, on the last day of the session in December 2010. To what extent did this policy, which is still in effect, reflect the aspirations for education reform and change? Politics and statecraft in Bangladesh since its birth have failed to subsume the spirit and aspirations that inspired the liberation struggle – equality, human dignity and social justice as inscribed in the proclamation of independence, and democracy, nationalism, socialism and secularism, as enshrined in the constitution. As mentioned, this failing has affected state operations including the education sector.

REFORMS – EXPECTATIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Total consensus cannot be expected in policy for a complex and multi-faceted area such as education. The 2010 Policy is replete with compromises, and to a degree, it contains contradictions. For instance, the 2010 policy departed from the Khuda Commission recommendation of the primacy of Bangla as the medium at all levels of education. The policy accorded legitimacy to educational developments that emerged during the military and military-backed regimes from 1975 to 1990 – such as the rapid growth of the two types of madrasas as a parallel education system from pre-primary to university, and the acceptance of the multiple streams of schooling with quite different objectives, learning content and learning experience for the young people of our country. The policy mentioned the critical role of teachers in the education system and the need for major change in enhancing skills, capabilities, incentives and status of teachers. It recognized the problems of an over-centralized education governance and management and the importance of responsive and decentralized planning and decision-making. It recommended substantially larger public investment in education in line with the state 's obligation for children's education. However, the policy did not indicate specific strategic steps that would redirect the trajectory of reform and thus, contradictorily, acquiesced to the continuation of the existing structure.

Education reform is complex and difficult, requiring alignment on many fronts for sustained progress. A 2010 policy recommendation was to set up a permanent high-level education commission that could guide, monitor and inform the public about the course of education reform. The political and administrative decision-makers were averse to acting on this proposal. Arguably, they were content with the status quo and concerned about their authority and control being contested or challenged by an independent body answerable to the public.

The July-'24 uprising and the Interim Government (IG) in the wake of July '24 had raised expectations for significant change in education as in other spheres of national development. High-level commissions were set up in key areas of political, economic and social issues. It is an irony that there was no commission for education reform, even though discrimination in education outcome in respect of job quotas was the spark for the uprising. Soon, the long-accumulated problems in various subsectors of education led to protests and demonstrations that spilled out on the streets. Some response from the government could not be avoided.

A consultative committee was set up in October (2024) last year, tasking it to present reform recommendations for primary education within a timeframe of three months. The Chief Adviser personally received the report of the 9-member consultative committee on 10 February (2025) this year, promising due attention and action on the recommendations. The education community is disappointed that the report has not yet prompted a systematic consideration of reform actions.

PHOTO: STAR

A year later, the Ministry of Education also appointed a 10-member consultative committee this October (2025) for making recommendations on secondary education, again allowing a three-month timeline. The committee is hard at work and expects to submit its recommendations based on consultation with stakeholders, visits to schools in different parts of the country and review of relevant research and analysis.

The Interim Government, with its tenure coming to a close and being burdened with its routine functions, as well as with setting the stage for the national referendum and election, does not have much opportunity to consider the suggestions of the two consultative committees on the two stages of school education. Had the IG established an education sector reform commission along with the other commissions, progress could have been made towards much-needed education reform. That opportunity has been lost.

The upcoming election and a newly elected political government will offer another opportunity for resuming the deliberation on education reform. The work of the consultative committees on school education is not necessarily the last word on reform in this area, which is the foundation for the total edifice of education. But the work already done can be the take-off point for a serious and systematic rethinking about the whole education system. That opportunity must not be lost.

WITHOUT THE RULE OF LAW, nothing else will work

JYOTIRMOY BARUA

Advocate, Bangladesh Supreme Court

VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

The mass uprising that toppled Bangladesh's authoritarian regime ushered in a profound moment of new hope. However, the path to a restored democracy has proven far more arduous than anticipated. The interim government, which took charge on August 5, 2024, quickly eroded public trust through its frustrating failure to meet core objectives. Its performance was defined by an inability to ensure economic stability or maintain law and order—basic expectations for any caretaker administration. Notably, its strategy of appointing advisers with strong economic backgrounds yielded no positive results, highlighting a deeper crisis of governance rather than one of mere technical expertise.

Amid these failures, a performative drive to claim achievements took hold. The Adviser to the Law Ministry, for instance, maintained a high-pitched rhetoric of progress. Yet beneath this impressive edifice, a foundational tremor persists: the continued weakening of the rule of law and judicial independence. This erosion strikes at the very bedrock upon which sustainable prosperity and genuine democracy are built. Consequently, for the upcoming government, regardless of its political composition, addressing this crisis cannot be treated as a peripheral legal issue. It must be the central, unifying priority. This is not merely a moral imperative but an existential necessity for the nation's future.

KEY POINTS

1. Restore judicial independence through transparent appointments and public scrutiny.
2. End impunity by ensuring equal application of law, regardless of political identity.
3. Dismantle mob justice and enforce lawful, evidence-based prosecution.
4. Tackle corruption by empowering independent courts and prosecutors.
5. Restrain executive power and repeal laws that undermine fundamental freedoms.

The narrative of Bangladesh's recent decades is often, and rightly, framed as one of remarkable economic growth and poverty reduction. However, this narrative is increasingly shadowed by a parallel story of institutional erosion. The symptoms are visible to all: the blurring of lines between the executive and the judiciary; the use of legal instruments for political convenience; the slow pace of justice that denudes it of its meaning; and a culture of impunity that, for the powerful, renders the law a suggestion rather than a mandate. The most acute manifestation of this crisis is the compromised perception of judicial independence. The judiciary is not merely a dispute-resolution mechanism; it is the guardian of the Constitution, the protector of fundamental rights, and the ultimate arbiter that ensures all power, including state power, is exercised within legal bounds. When public confidence in this institution wavers, the social contract frays. Concerns over appointments, transfers, and the perceived influence of the executive branch have produced a chilling effect. The justice system, overburdened and frequently undermined, struggles to serve as the people's shield.

The mass uprising promised a return to order under expert, impartial legal authority. Instead, it produced a dangerous transmutation: the implementation of law was replaced by a sanctioned mob culture. Organised acts of retribution and crime were often euphemistically labelled as "mob attacks", a terminology that served to obscure their orchestrated nature and evade formal accountability.

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On November 29, 2025, the government issued an ordinance to establish the long-desired Supreme Court Secretariat, with a view to ensuring the independence of the judiciary.

FILE VISUAL: **SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR**

Without the rule of law, nothing else will work

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This created a perilous dual reality: the façade of legal process alongside the brute-force enforcement of political will. Most critically, this erosion fatally compromised the institution designed to be the final bulwark—the judiciary. The principle is sacrosanct: once a case is before a court, only the law and the facts should matter. Yet in countless instances following the regime's fall, courts across the hierarchy failed this basic test of objectivity. The political identity of the accused, particularly their association with the fallen regime, became an overwhelming, if unspoken, factor in judicial decision-making.

This represents more than partiality; it is the judicialisation of the political victor's justice. When courts cannot separate individual culpability from collective political identity, they cease to be arbiters of law and become instruments of political consolidation. The promise of the uprising—a new foundation built on justice and law—is thus hollowed out, replaced by a system in which the forms of legality mask a continuation of polarised conflict, merely with reversed beneficiaries. The failure to establish genuine, neutral legal authority is the single greatest threat to the durable democracy that was sought.

Furthermore, the rule of law deficit directly fuels the pervasive corruption that every political party vows to fight. Corruption is not merely a moral failing; it is a structural outcome of a system in which legal accountability is selective. When the law can be bent, bypassed, or weaponised, rent-seeking becomes a rational strategy. The upcoming government must understand that anti-corruption drives, without an overarching, immutable framework of law applied equally to the powerful and the weak, are destined to be seen as political theatre. A truly independent judiciary and a robust, impartial prosecutorial body are the only engines for sustainable anti-corruption, not temporary commissions or rhetorical campaigns.

The erosion of the rule of law also stifles the very creativity and civic vitality Bangladesh needs for its next chapter. A society in which dissent is criminalised through opaque legal processes, in which civil society operates under a spectre of surveillance and restriction, and in which the media fears overreach, is a society that loses its capacity for self-correction and innovation. The vibrant intellectual and entrepreneurial spirit of Bangladesh cannot reach its full potential in an environment of legal uncertainty and fear. The right to speak, to associate, and to hold power accountable are not Western imports; they are enshrined in Bangladesh's own Constitution and are prerequisites for a resilient, adaptive, and just society.

Therefore, for the incoming government, prioritising the rule of law and judicial independence is not a concession but a strategic masterstroke. It is the key that unlocks success in all other priority areas. How can this be translated from a lofty principle into a concrete governance agenda?

By invoking contempt of court, the judiciary has long shielded itself from criticism, often to mask its own failings. This resistance to scrutiny has impeded the development of a truly independent judicial system. Courts must instead learn to endure critique as a necessary part of progress. It is fundamentally unjust to deny ordinary citizens—the very people subjected to open trials—their right to question the institution. An entity charged with delivering justice cannot itself act unjustly. Ultimately, the judiciary will only course-correct when the public is empowered to actively question its functioning. Therefore, a key goal for the next elected government must be to foster this public empowerment and enable deeper citizen engagement with judicial processes.

The recruitment process for Supreme Court judges remains opaque, despite new legislation permitting prospective candidates to apply directly and establishing a committee to oversee the recruitment process. The specific criteria and selection procedures continue to lack public transparency. Moreover, key provisions of the ordinance appear to contradict established constitutional principles, notably by diminishing the traditional primacy of the Chief Justice in judicial appointments. The elected government must therefore endeavour to scrutinise the ordinances passed during the interim administration and refrain from mechanically endorsing them without due examination.

The next government must embark on a war against the case backlog and judicial delay. This requires massive investment in court infrastructure, digitalisation of case management, an increase in the number of judges and court staff, the provision of adequate training, and the streamlining of procedures. Speedy justice is a fundamental right; delay is a denial of justice. A special focus must be placed on lower courts, where most citizens encounter the legal system, to ensure they are adequately resourced and insulated from local power dynamics.

The government must demonstrate an unwavering commitment to ending impunity. This means allowing and empowering law enforcement and anti-corruption agencies to operate without political interference, even when investigations touch powerful interests within, or aligned with, the ruling structure. High-profile, credible prosecutions and convictions in corruption and abuse-of-power cases would do more to restore public faith than a thousand speeches.

It must undertake a comprehensive review and repeal of laws that curtail fundamental freedoms and are prone to abuse. Laws pertaining to digital security, sedition, and civil society regulation should be aligned with international human rights standards and the spirit of the Constitution. The law must protect citizens, not the state from its citizens.

The government must practise restraint. The executive must lead by example, voluntarily submitting itself to the jurisdiction and scrutiny of an independent judiciary. It must refrain from using legal tools to settle political scores or silence critics. This political will from the very top is the single most important catalyst for change.

Critics will argue that in a developing nation facing immense pressures, a strong, unfettered executive is more effective in delivering results. This is a dangerous fallacy. Authoritarian efficiency is illusory and ephemeral. It builds towers but weakens foundations, leading to catastrophic fragility in the long term. True, sustainable strength is derived from institutions that command universal respect, from a legal system that citizens trust, and from a social order in which every individual, from the street vendor to the cabinet minister, is equally accountable.

The task is Herculean, and the path will be resisted by vested interests that thrive in the shadowy gaps of a weak rule-of-law framework. It will require a statesmanship that transcends the political cycle, viewing national interest through a generational lens. The upcoming government faces a historic choice: to continue papering over these deepening cracks with the plaster of short-term development metrics, or to undertake the courageous, patient work of repairing the foundation.

Bangladesh's journey from liberation to development is an epic of resilience. Yet the symphony of its potential remains unfinished. The notes of economic growth, infrastructural marvels, and cultural richness are all present, but they lack harmony and coherence without the conductor of a just rule of law. It is time for the government to pick up that baton, not to silence the orchestra, but to allow every instrument—every citizen, every institution—to play its part in perfect, fearless harmony. The next chapter of Bangladesh's story must be written not on concrete and steel, but on the immutable parchment of justice. For in the end, a nation's greatness is measured not by the height of its skyscrapers, but by the depth of its commitment to law.

Bangladesh High Court.

FILE PHOTO

FROM FEAR TO TRUST

Why policing must change now

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ILLUSTRATION: **BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY**

WHEN INSTITUTIONS SERVE POWER, NOT PEOPLE

In Why Nations Fail, Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson argue that countries suffering from poor governance do so not because of geography, climate, environment, or culture, but because of the extractive nature of their institutions. Such institutions are designed to serve narrow elite interests, repress the broader population, and often carry deep colonial legacies. Bangladesh fits this diagnosis in many respects, particularly in the functioning of its state institutions.

The police, as an institution inherited from and shaped by colonial governance, was never designed to serve citizens as rights-bearing individuals. Instead, it evolved as an instrument to protect power and maintain control, rendering human rights largely irrelevant to its operational logic. Over the years, this extractive character has manifested in grave abuses: extrajudicial killings — most notably through the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), enforced disappearances, kneecapping, fabricated cases, and inhumane torture. In many instances, these practices were deployed not to uphold law and order, but to suppress political opposition and silence dissent. In this sense, the police force has functioned less as a public service and more as an extractive arm of state power.

The July uprising exposed this reality in its most brutal form. One of its most painful revelations was that the police — an institution meant to protect citizens — had instead become a symbol of repression. The widespread use of force against protesters shattered any remaining public illusion of neutrality or professionalism. This rupture pushed police reform into the national spotlight and compelled the interim government to establish the Police Reform Commission, one of six reform commissions formed in the early phase of the transitional administration. The uprising thus did more than trigger political change; it forced a reckoning with the extractive foundations of policing itself and raised a fundamental question that Bangladesh can no longer avoid: can an institution built to serve power be transformed into one that serves the people?

REFLECTIONS FROM THE POLICE REFORM COMMISSION: INSTITUTIONAL RESISTANCE AND THE LIMITS OF REFORM

When work on the Police Reform Commission began, two key agendas dominated the table. The first was the formation of an Independent Police Commission. The logic was clear: such a body would insulate the police from political interference by acting as a buffer between the Ministry of Home Affairs and the police command structure. The brutal crackdown during the July–August mass uprising underscored how deeply political influence has eroded the credibility of the police.

The commission's report did recommend the establishment of an Independent Police Commission, though it noted the dissent of the Ministry of Home Affairs. At the same time, the commission refrained from outlining a detailed structure or legal framework, stating that the idea "requires further examination by experts". This hesitation attracted criticism for a lack of specificity. Yet the recommendation has, in effect, already been implemented: the interim government has passed the Police Commission Ordinance, 2025. Its effectiveness, however, remains an open question.

Another widely discussed demand in public discourse has been the repeal or updating of the colonial-era Police Act of 1861. Police representatives have repeatedly argued that a law designed to maintain colonial control — rather than democratic accountability or human rights — remains a troubling relic. While Police Headquarters submitted detailed reform proposals to the commission (annexed to the report), the commission itself stopped short of endorsing them directly, instead recommending that "outdated laws should be reviewed or replaced".

Curiously, the Consensus Commission — tasked with harmonising the recommendations of all six reform commissions — initially sidelined police reform altogether, arguing that it could be achieved through executive orders alone. Only after sustained public pressure did the issue of a Police Commission re-enter the agenda and ultimately find a place in the July Charter.

FROM TECHNICAL FIXES TO TRANSFORMATIVE REFORM

Through executive decisions, the interim government has also begun implementing several technical reforms recommended by the Police Reform Commission: the nationwide introduction of online GDs, the passage of the Code of Criminal Procedure (Amendment) Ordinance, 2025, and the decision to conduct remand in glass-walled rooms, among others.

FILE PHOTO: **AFP**

The commission further proposed a five-tier model for the use of force in crowd control, aligned with UN guidelines. The first two stages emphasise non-contact measures — verbal communication, negotiation, and physical barriers. The third stage introduces limited non-lethal force, including batons, gas sprays, water cannons, tear gas, sound grenades, smoke launchers, stun canisters, soft kinetic projectiles, pepper spray, shotguns, and electric pistols. The interim government has stated that training is underway to ensure police officers can properly follow these steps.

The home affairs adviser has also announced that police will no longer carry lethal weapons — a significant step forward. However, no official list clarifies what constitutes lethal versus non- or less-lethal weapons. This ambiguity must be addressed through sustained public scrutiny. If, for instance, pellet guns (chhorra guli) are classified as non-lethal, there must be strong civic resistance. Research by Sapran has already documented the devastating effects of such weapons: Abu Sayed, Tahmid, and many other July protesters lost their lives or eyesight to pellet injuries.

Yet beyond these technical reforms lies a set of far more transformative recommendations — largely overshadowed by debates over the Police Commission, the Police Act, and higher-profile reforms such as constitutional and electoral change. These overlooked proposals represent a paradigm shift in policing itself.

They appear in the report's section titled "From Power-Centric Policing to People-Centric Policing" (pp. 68–78).

KEY POINTS

1. Establish independent oversight to insulate policing from political interference.
2. Replace power-centric policing with rights-based, people-centric practices.
3. Institutionalise community policing as a genuine accountability mechanism.
4. Embed police–citizen trust-building through education and regular public forums.
5. Ensure reform through sustained resources, transparency, and citizen oversight.

THE REFORM REPORT'S OVERLOOKED SHIFT: FROM POWER-CENTRIC TO PEOPLE-CENTRIC POLICING

The section begins with a stark premise: the relationship between the police and the public is fundamentally broken. Many citizens do not understand their rights during police interactions, leaving them vulnerable to harassment and bribery. Over time, public perception has hardened to the point where the police are seen less as public servants and more as agents of coercion — a perception reinforced by their actions during the July uprising.

BUILDING POLICE–CITIZEN TRUST FROM THE CLASSROOM

One of the most practical yet transformative recommendations is to introduce public–police relationship content into the school curriculum. The goal is to build basic awareness of laws, fundamental rights, and the role of law enforcement from an early age. Such education could act as an icebreaker, nurturing empathy and dismantling mutual suspicion between future citizens and the police.

While curriculum reform is a medium- to long-term goal, immediate steps are possible. District-level police officers could begin visiting schools to hold awareness sessions, while selected students could visit police stations to observe everyday policing. These exchanges would humanise police officers in the eyes of young people — and remind officers of the communities they are meant to serve. Many superintendents of police, additional superintendents, and deputy commissioners we have spoken to are enthusiastic about this idea. What is needed now is a formal directive from the Ministry of Home Affairs to implement it nationwide.

REFORMING COMMUNITY POLICING AS A SYSTEM OF CHECKS AND BALANCES

Another critical recommendation concerns the restructuring of community policing. In practice, community policing in Bangladesh has often been captured by local elites, turning committees into shields for misconduct rather than mechanisms of accountability.

The report calls for a paradigm shift: community policing must function as a system of checks and balances. Committees should be composed of diverse, credible, and non-partisan members, with clear mandates to monitor police conduct, convey public grievances, and bridge the gap between citizens and law enforcement. Rather than acting as political operatives or passive informants, members must become active participants in ensuring accountability.

This model is reinforced by the proposal for regular town hall meetings bringing together teachers, students, religious leaders, political representatives, and police officers. These forums would review local safety conditions, share police performance data, and document community concerns. Institutionalised as monthly meetings with public scorecards and incident reports, such forums could significantly strengthen trust through transparency and participation.

RESOURCES AND INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

The report also emphasises the need for proper budgetary allocation and infrastructure at the district level. Community policing training, school–police engagement, and public awareness campaigns require sustained institutional support. Without resources, even the most well-intentioned reforms risk remaining paper promises.

ACCOUNTABILITY FROM BELOW: RECLAIMING POLICING FOR CITIZENS

For these reforms to succeed, coordinated leadership is essential — across the Ministry of Home Affairs, Police Headquarters, the Ministry of Education, local administration, civil society, and the media. The media, in particular, must go beyond episodic coverage and actively track the implementation of citizen-centric reforms.

Some may argue that reducing distance between police and citizens will weaken authority. But in a healthy democracy, discipline flows from respect for the law, not fear of law enforcement. A professional, rights-based police force earns legitimacy through accountability and service, not coercion.

The citizen-oriented proposals in the Police Reform Commission's report must not be forgotten. If implemented seriously, they could lay the foundation for a policing model rooted in trust, transparency, and shared responsibility. As members of the Police Reform Commission, we carry a responsibility to bring these overlooked recommendations into public conversation — especially as elections draw near.

Real reform does not endure through executive orders or elite consensus alone. As Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson remind us, societies escape repression not by changing rulers, but by transforming the institutions that concentrate power in a few hands. Reform begins when institutions are forced to become inclusive — when citizens are informed, empowered, and prepared to hold authority to account. In the case of policing, this transformation cannot be imposed from the top down. It must grow from below, through public awareness, participation, and oversight. And if our laws fail to restrain the police, then it is the responsibility of citizens to do so. Only when policing is anchored in citizen accountability can Bangladesh move away from extractive control towards an institution that protects rights, commands legitimacy, and truly serves the people.

WHAT THE NEXT GOVERNMENT must get right on national security

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REPRESENTATIONAL PHOTO

A key priority for the post-February government is to establish a comprehensive national security framework suited to modern warfare and hybrid threats.

As Bangladesh enters a new political phase ahead of the February parliamentary election, its domestic security outlook is increasingly shaped by divisive historical baggage, competing narratives, and fragmented identity. Such a polarisation of the national imagination regarding our past has profound implications for national integration and for Benedict Anderson's famous concept of an "imagined community." Coupled with this, the country's regional and global strategic environment has become more militarised, fragmented, and unpredictable.

The February parliamentary election marks more than a political transition for Bangladesh; it represents a strategic moment that will shape the country's security trajectory for the coming decade. The post-election government will inherit a security environment shaped by accelerating militarisation in South Asia, unresolved conflicts along its periphery, and the diffusion of warfare into non-kinetic domains.

Security in today's environment is no longer defined solely by troop numbers or territorial defence. It is shaped by air dominance beyond visual range, layered air defence, maritime control, cognitive resilience, and the capacity to deter coercion while retaining diplomatic flexibility. For Bangladesh, the challenge is to develop credible deterrence without provoking insecurity, and to modernise defence capabilities while remaining anchored to development priorities.

REGIONAL MILITARISATION AND BANGLADESH'S STRATEGIC SETTING

South Asia remains one of the most militarised regions globally, characterised by asymmetry, unresolved disputes, and nuclear deterrence dynamics. India's rapid military modernisation, Pakistan's sustained emphasis on strategic deterrence, and Myanmar's increasing reliance on military force as an instrument of state survival collectively shape Bangladesh's strategic environment. According to widely cited military balance assessments, Bangladesh occupies a mid-tier position, with limited power projection capability but growing responsibility for securing maritime and airspace interests. The eastern theatre is of particular concern. Myanmar's Tatmadaw has continued its military modernisation despite internal conflict, acquiring advanced aircraft, air defence systems, and surveillance assets. Simultaneously, ethnic armed organisations such as the Arakan Army have expanded operational capacity and territorial influence along Bangladesh's southeastern frontier. This evolving landscape complicates border security, refugee management, and counter-insurgency calculations. Bangladesh faces the challenge of managing spillover risks without becoming entangled in Myanmar's internal conflicts. In this context, Bangladesh's security policy must be rooted in preparedness rather than threat inflation. A clear understanding of regional military trajectories is essential not to mirror competitors, but to ensure that capability gaps do not invite coercion or strategic vulnerability.

KEY POINTS

1. Bangladesh's post-election moment is a strategic inflection point requiring a coherent national security framework.
2. Regional militarisation and Myanmar's instability demand credible deterrence and clearly defined red lines so that restraint is not misread as acquiescence.
3. Security today extends beyond troops to air defence, maritime control, and the capacity to deter coercion while retaining diplomatic flexibility.
4. Defence modernisation must prioritise mission clarity, selective diversification, and long-term strategic autonomy.
5. Confidence-building measures, information sharing, and coordinated responses to non-traditional threats such as piracy and trafficking should complement deterrence.

INDIA–BANGLADESH SECURITY RELATIONS IN A SHIFTING INDO-PACIFIC CONTEXT

India will remain a central security actor in Bangladesh's strategic calculus, but the relationship is entering a more unsettled phase. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar's recent visit to Dhaka coincided with a period when bilateral trust has been strained by political rhetoric, media-driven narratives, and an increasingly fraught information environment. In India, repeated claims regarding the treatment of minorities in Bangladesh—often amplified through partisan media without verification—have shaped public opinion and complicated diplomatic engagement. In Bangladesh, these narratives have fed perceptions of external pressure rather than partnership.

Viewed from the Indo-Pacific lens, this erosion of confidence is not a minor irritant. India's ambition to play a stabilising role in the Bay of Bengal and its eastern maritime flank depends heavily on credible relationships with immediate neighbours. The growing gap between the language of "Neighbourhood First" and its practical execution has weakened that promise. For Bangladesh, the task is to engage India on regional stability while safeguarding strategic autonomy. Enduring cooperation will require mutual respect for each other's sovereignty, restraint, reciprocity, and a clear separation between domestic politics and regional security imperatives.

WHY THE POST-ELECTION MOMENT DEMANDS A NATIONAL SECURITY FRAMEWORK

One of the most consequential tasks facing the post-February government is to formulate a comprehensive national security framework aligned with modern warfare and hybrid threat environments. Bangladesh's existing security posture is built on sectoral policies and incremental modernisation, but it lacks an overarching doctrine that integrates military, diplomatic, economic, and societal dimensions of security.

Modern warfare increasingly hinges on beyond-visual-range air combat, integrated air and missile defence, electronic warfare, cyber operations, and real-time intelligence fusion. Bangladesh's air defence posture remains limited, and its ability to deny airspace or protect critical infrastructure against advanced threats is constrained. Without a coherent air defence architecture, investments in air platforms risk being strategically incomplete.

A national security framework should therefore prioritise layered air defence, early warning systems, and command-and-control integration across services. These capabilities are not inherently offensive, but they are central to deterrence. A state that can credibly protect its airspace and critical nodes possesses greater diplomatic leverage and strategic confidence.

The post-election period provides political legitimacy to undertake such a strategic reorientation. A national security framework introduced early in the government's tenure would signal intent, reassure partners, and guide resource allocation. More importantly, it would enable Bangladesh to shape its own security narrative rather than respond to external pressures.

DEFENCE PROCUREMENT, DIVERSIFICATION, AND STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

Bangladesh's defence procurement strategy reflects pragmatic diversification, drawing platforms and systems from China, Russia, Turkey, and selected Western suppliers. This approach has reduced overdependence on any single partner but has also generated interoperability and sustainment challenges. The dilemma facing policymakers is not whether to diversify, but how to manage diversification in a manner that supports long-term operational coherence. Procurement choices increasingly carry geopolitical implications. Suppliers offer not only hardware but also training regimes, maintenance ecosystems, and political expectations. Over-reliance on any single source risks strategic dependency, while excessive fragmentation strains logistics and doctrine. The solution lies in selective diversification guided by a long-term force development plan rather than ad hoc acquisitions. Equally important is the question of technology transfer. Without structured pathways for local assembly, maintenance, and eventually indigenous production, Bangladesh will remain locked into dependency cycles. Defence procurement must therefore be linked to industrial policy, workforce development, and research capacity.

BUILDING A SELF-RELIANT DEFENCE INDUSTRY THROUGH EDUCATION AND STEM

Defence self-reliance is not achievable through procurement alone. It requires an ecosystem that connects education, research, and industry. Bangladesh's ambition to develop a domestic defence industry must be integrated with national education policy, particularly in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. Without a skilled technical workforce, technology transfer remains symbolic rather than substantive.

Universities, technical institutes, and research centres should be aligned with long-term defence and security needs, including aerospace engineering, materials science, cybersecurity, and artificial intelligence. Defence manufacturing should be viewed not as an isolated sector but as a catalyst for broader industrial upgrading. Countries that have successfully built defence industries have done so by embedding them within civilian innovation ecosystems.

For Bangladesh, such integration would serve multiple objectives: reducing external dependency, creating high-value employment, and strengthening national resilience. It would also signal strategic seriousness to international partners without projecting militaristic intent.

MARITIME SECURITY, NAVAL POWER, AND THE BAY OF BENGAL

The Bay of Bengal is central to Bangladesh's economic and security future. Its exclusive economic zone contains vital resources, while its sea lines of communication (SLOC) underpin trade, energy imports, and connectivity. Securing these interests requires a naval force capable of sustained presence, surveillance, and deterrence.

Bangladesh's naval modernisation reflects growing awareness of maritime imperatives, but capability development must be aligned with mission clarity. The objective is not power projection but sea denial, EEZ protection, and SLOC security. A credible naval posture enhances bargaining power in diplomatic engagements and reassures commercial stakeholders.

Maritime security also intersects with regional cooperation. Confidence-building measures, information sharing, and coordinated responses to non-traditional threats such as piracy and trafficking can complement deterrence. However, cooperation is most effective when underpinned by a credible national capability.

CREDIBLE DETERRENCE AS A DIPLOMATIC ASSET

Deterrence is often misunderstood as inherently aggressive. In reality, credible deterrence enables diplomacy by reducing the likelihood of coercion. For Bangladesh, deterrence does not imply matching regional powers' weapons for weapons, but rather ensuring that vulnerabilities are not exploitable.

A state perceived as militarily defenceless faces constraints in negotiation, whether on border issues, maritime rights, or humanitarian crises.

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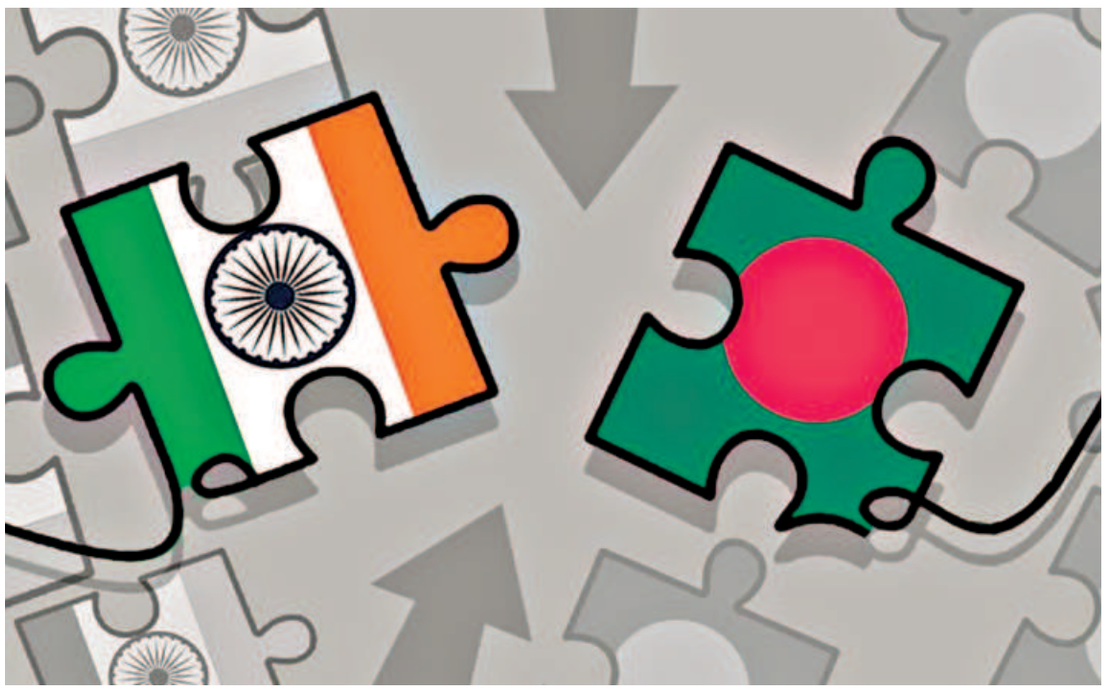

India will continue to be a pivotal security actor in Bangladesh's strategic calculus, even as the relationship moves into a more unsettled phase.

What the next government must get right on national security

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Conversely, a state with credible defensive capability can engage diplomatically from a position of confidence. Deterrence and diplomacy are therefore mutually reinforcing rather than contradictory.

RESPONDING TO MYANMAR AND ARMED NON-STATE ACTORS

The idea of credible deterrence brings the Myanmar question to Bangladesh's eastern security theatre, which demands particular attention in the post-election period, not only because of Myanmar's unresolved internal conflict, but because the erosion of authority across its border regions has begun to test Bangladesh's sovereignty in tangible ways. Myanmar's conflict shows no immediate signs of resolution, and the expanding influence of armed groups such as the Arakan Army has altered the security calculus along Bangladesh's southeastern frontier. These actors are no longer peripheral insurgent formations; they are increasingly capable, territorially embedded, and transnational in outlook.

For the incoming government, the challenge lies in managing instability without normalising violations of sovereignty. While restraint has been a defining feature of Bangladesh's approach, restraint must be clearly bounded. Drawing and communicating red lines is essential to prevent ambiguity from being misinterpreted as acquiescence. Incidents such as the abduction of Bangladeshi fishermen in coastal waters, disruptions to maritime activity, and the rerouting of tourist vessels between Teknaf and Cox's Bazar due to security concerns illustrate how non-state violence and cross-border instability can directly affect livelihoods, commerce, and public confidence.

The Bay of Bengal is central to Bangladesh's economic and security future. FILE PHOTO: STAR

Bangladesh faces a growing array of non-traditional security challenges that directly affect social cohesion and institutional strength. FILE ILLUSTRATION: ANWAR SOHEL

Airspace violations originating from Myanmar during periods of heightened conflict further underscore the risks of spillover. Even when unintentional, such incidents carry symbolic and strategic significance, as they challenge the state's control over its sovereign domain. If left unaddressed, they risk establishing precedents that weaken deterrence and invite further encroachment.

The post-election government must therefore adopt a calibrated approach that combines enhanced border security, intelligence coordination, and sustained diplomatic engagement, while making clear that certain actions will not be tolerated. A purely militarised response would risk escalation and humanitarian consequences, particularly in a region already burdened by refugee pressures. Yet excessive restraint carries its own dangers, potentially emboldening armed actors and complicating future crisis management.

Managing this balance will be among the most complex security tasks facing the new administration. It will require institutional clarity, rapid decision-making mechanisms, and credible signalling—both domestically and internationally—that Bangladesh remains committed to peace while remaining equally resolute in exercising its sovereignty.

NON-TRADITIONAL SECURITY THREATS AND COGNITIVE VULNERABILITY

Beyond kinetic threats, Bangladesh faces a growing array of non-traditional security challenges that directly affect social cohesion and institutional strength. Cognitive warfare, misinformation, and disinformation campaigns exploit societal fault lines and undermine trust in institutions. Distorted historical narratives, identity fragmentation, and norm erosion can polarise society and weaken democratic resilience.

These threats are particularly insidious because they operate below the threshold of armed conflict. They do not trigger conventional defence responses, yet their cumulative impact can be destabilising. Addressing them requires strategic communication, media literacy, institutional credibility, and political restraint.

Internal security concerns further complicate the picture. The emergence of armed groups such as the Kuki-Chin National Front in the Chittagong Hill Tracts highlights the enduring challenge of managing peripheral regions where governance deficits, identity grievances, and transnational linkages intersect. Militarised responses alone risk aggravating tensions; sustainable solutions demand political engagement, development, inclusion, and intelligence-driven law enforcement.

A STRATEGIC WINDOW THAT WILL NOT LAST

The post-February election period offers Bangladesh a rare strategic window. The new government begins with political legitimacy, regional attention, and relative internal stability. Whether this moment is used to articulate a coherent national security framework or allowed to pass through incrementalism will shape Bangladesh's security posture for years to come. In an era of militarised competition and hybrid threats, security is no longer a background concern. It is a central function of statecraft. The choices made in the early months of the new administration—on doctrine, deterrence, resilience, and institutional coherence—will determine whether Bangladesh remains merely stable or becomes strategically secure.

> Defence self-reliance is not achievable through procurement alone. It requires an ecosystem that connects education, research, and industry.

BANGLADESH'S OLD DIPLOMACY WON'T SURVIVE NEW REALITIES

HUMAYUN KABIR

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In the post-July 2024 situation, Bangladesh has been facing several new strategic realities. At the domestic level, a generational shift has been redefining the political landscape and articulating the urge for justice as well as an equitable economic order. The graduation of Bangladesh in 2026 will again frame and reset our external relations with practically all partners. Such a reset will obviously demand corresponding reforms in many areas of our domestic policy and practices. Old mindsets and behaviours may have little relevance in the evolving actualities.

At the same time, several layers of geopolitical challenges are also greeting Bangladesh on the external front. The growing interest of global and regional powers in domestic issues, and their tendency to view them through a geopolitical lens, have added a new dimension of complexity. There is already strain between Bangladesh and India, and this tension is beginning to affect the broader geopolitical landscape. On its part, the Rohingya issue has already raised a red flag regionally and still requires a solution. Big-power competition is also heating up in the Indo-Pacific region, with a direct impact on the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean region. Needless to say, the effective management of these hugely powerful geopolitical trends is essential to protect our identity, security, progress, and prosperity.

In its foreign policy, Bangladesh must maintain a middle-ground approach rather than leaning too heavily towards any one side.

KEY POINTS

1. Bangladesh must recalibrate diplomacy to navigate post-2024 domestic geopolitical shifts.
2. Graduation in 2026 demands policy reforms and interest-based strategic partnerships.
3. Proactive reputation management and multilateral engagement are essential for interests.
4. Bangladesh must manage geopolitics with nuance through objective, coordinated diplomacy.
5. Effective domestic coordination strengthens economic diplomacy, credibility, and negotiating capacity.

Against this backdrop, it may be useful to review some of the tools and techniques Bangladesh could employ in the near future to safely navigate these evolving challenges and build a new structure of mutually beneficial relationships with its partners. A few priorities could be considered for this purpose.

1. PURSUING PROACTIVE DIPLOMACY

Managing perception and rebuilding reputation: Over the years, our reputational repertoire has suffered due to a poor human rights record, a fractured political process, serious governance deficits, and an overreliance on the promotion of personality cult. In the process, the real strength of the nation, as represented by the huge entrepreneurial spirit of the common people, the power of the youth and women, as well as the strong determination of people to resist oppression and cultivate resilience against all odds, has lost visibility.

In the context of the recent changes in Bangladesh, the need for reputation management has acquired a new salience. While it is easy to blame others for many of our problems, it is important to pay attention to how we define ourselves, what priorities we set for ourselves as a nation, how we pursue them, and what kind of company we keep. In the world of statecraft and diplomacy, signals, narratives, gestures, and initiatives can frame perception, which in many cases may shape reality as well.

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Bangladesh's old diplomacy won't survive new realities

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Our friends and foes read them through their own lenses, not through ours! Extra care is therefore warranted in charting our course, especially in volatile times.

Playing a role in addressing non-traditional security issues, such as climate change, transnational crimes like drug smuggling and extremism, disaster management, migration issues, and humanitarian initiatives, could perhaps enhance the regional and global standing of Bangladesh.

Calibrated and interest-based bilateralism: Bangladesh must make every effort to maintain a dignified, equitable, and mutually beneficial bilateral relationship with India and other South Asian neighbours, based on the principles of respect for sovereign equality, territorial integrity, non-interference in each other's domestic affairs, and a no-harm-to-each-other-or-to-a-third-party approach. Given the growing complexities in South Asia, it is extremely important for us to carefully and dispassionately weigh the value of our relationships with all our immediate and extended neighbours through the prism of our own national interest and our shared and common needs and priorities.

Pursue strategic partnership: As the volatility in the regional and global scenario intensifies, Bangladesh must review its approach and redesign its engagement strategy with a strategic focus on its relationships, with particular attention to the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, the EU, Japan, South Korea, ASEAN, and GCC countries, among others.

Prioritise new ideas: In this context, Bangladesh may continue to promote Open Regionalism with wider connectivity in all its dimensions and forms. On the horizontal level, Bangladesh may pursue cooperation within the framework of SAARC, BIMSTEC, IORA, the Colombo Security Conclave (CSC), ASEAN, and RCEP, among others. It could also aggressively pursue building vertical-level connectivity in the form of digital connectivity, energy connectivity, scientific and educational connectivity, and forging partnerships on health, climate, and other forms of connectivity. South-South collaboration could be the key driver for such cooperation with a view to synergising the linkages and maximising mutual and collective benefits.

Support robust multilateralism: Given the global uncertainty, Bangladesh must continue to promote the value of multilateralism, as embodied in the United Nations and other multilateral organisations. As the only universal platform to safeguard global peace, security, and progress, Bangladesh must support suitable reforms of the United Nations and other multilateral institutions to reflect the interests of all member States. At the same time, Bangladesh must not hesitate to pursue other forms of multilateralism, including mini multilateralism and issue-based ad-hoc multilateralism, and engage in multi-alignments to promote its national interests.

2. MANAGING GEOPOLITICS WITH NUANCE

Given the heavy reliance of Bangladesh on the international environment for maintaining its identity, security, economy, and prosperity, any change in the regional and global environment could seriously affect the lives of its people in myriad ways. It is therefore imperative to understand and appreciate the strategic shifts taking place domestically, regionally, and globally, and accordingly chart a coordinated and calibrated strategy, and, if possible, develop an action plan to respond to them appropriately. It is worth noting that Bangladesh has never seen such turmoil in the regional and global environment, except perhaps in the wake of our Independence in 1971.

In concrete terms, our response must start with a good understanding and appreciation, at the political level and in policy-making circles, of the linkages between our developmental objectives and the urgency of pursuing an objective and proactive diplomacy to neutralise potential risks and harness resources from our partners to achieve our national goals. Examples of good practices pursued by other States to manage geopolitical chaos could be reviewed and appropriately used as lessons for protecting and promoting our national interests and objectives.

3. VALUE DIPLOMACY AS A TOOL FOR PROMOTING NATIONAL INTEREST

A word to clarify a wide-ranging misperception about the role of diplomacy and the role of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs within our government structure and in our national development and progress. It is worth noting that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) is not just a Ministry as such; it is the symbol of our sovereignty and independence, alongside the Ministry of Defence. Indeed, these are the two new institutions which emerged after our Independence. At the same time, MOFA and our missions abroad are a veritable window of Bangladesh to the outside world, representing Bangladesh as a nation. Therefore, it is important to appropriately support its professional work and provide the required resources to perform its mandated work to a high standard of professionalism.

On its part, MOFA also needs to significantly improve its professionalism and performance to analyse strategic shifts, forecast risks, and prepare the nation to overcome challenges and harness benefits. In the process, it must also review its performance periodically to identify gaps and be ready to embrace changes with a view to recasting its approach and engagement with other stakeholders. A new set of tools, such as public diplomacy, economic diplomacy, digital diplomacy, diaspora diplomacy, and climate diplomacy, could be effectively used to reach out to a wider set of constituencies, both at home and abroad.

4. STRENGTHENING DOMESTIC COORDINATION

Coordination has been a major Achilles' heel in our governance structure for a long time. There are several dimensions to it. First, our understanding of the outside world is still very limited and generally framed by our own worldview. Such a limited worldview restricts our ability to make meaningful outreach to and engagement with outside actors. It is worth noting that such a mindset is partly responsible for our inability to adequately capitalise on existing opportunities for expanding our vital interests in many areas, including trade, tourism, manpower export, and the inflow of foreign capital and technology, among others.

Second, hardly any coordination exists between policy makers in various Ministries within the government itself. At least a dozen Ministries are now involved in interactions with the outside world, but there is hardly any coordination among them. In some cases, they work at cross purposes, thereby negatively affecting our outreach externally.

Third, likewise, the coordination between government institutions and other outside stakeholders—who are the main actors in the management of economic diplomacy and those who could contribute to improving collective understanding of opportunities and challenges—is no better. One heard complaint from the business community of not being adequately consulted and engaged during the last tariff negotiations with the US in August 2025.

Indeed, a deep-seated silo mentality prevents any objective and serious evaluation of the effectiveness of such a coordination mechanism. It is extremely important to note that, to the outside world, Bangladesh is one entity, and it is treated as such. If we cannot coordinate our positions and actions within ourselves, nobody will take us seriously, and in the process, our ability to secure our fair share in any negotiations will be badly compromised!

A clear road hierarchy is crucial for regulating vehicle types, speed limits, and defined spheres of movement on each road. PHOTO: STAR

AFTER BILLIONS SPENT, STILL GRIDLOCKED
What the new government must do

In conversation with Md. Hadiuzzaman.

MD HADIUZZAMAN

Professor, Department of Civil Engineering, Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET)

The Daily Star: What should the upcoming government immediately do to make Bangladesh's communication infrastructure—particularly in Dhaka—functional beyond just building more roads and megaprojects?

Md Hadiuzzaman: To make our existing road network functional, an immediate priority of the new government should be management and enforcement. It is tragic that, even after all these years, Dhaka still lacks a clearly defined road hierarchy. Within the city's roughly 3,000-kilometre road network, we must first determine the function of each road—which ones are meant for mobility and which for accessibility. Without this classification, it is impossible to decide what types of vehicles should operate on which roads, or to what extent.

Establishing a road hierarchy is something that can be done immediately. It is not an investment issue; it is a matter of commitment. Once the hierarchy is defined, vehicle types, speed limits, and spheres of movement can be clearly set for each road. Simultaneously, it can also be enforced to remove unregistered, unlicensed, and illegal vehicles—especially from primary roads, whose main function is mobility.

Over the years, massive investments have been made in roads and flyovers with the sole objective of creating mobility. Yet we continue to fail because illegal vehicles prevent roads from functioning as intended. We have built around seven flyovers in the past decade and added expressways as well. However, these grade-separated structures must eventually meet the ground, where their effectiveness depends on how well intersections and junctions are managed.

I often describe intersections and junctions as the "heart" of the road network. Just as the heart pumps blood through veins, junctions direct vehicles in different directions. If, after defining the road hierarchy, we manage junctions properly, many traffic problems will be resolved. Again, this is a question of commitment, not investment. Why should illegal parking exist at every junction? Why should ride-sharing hubs cluster at crossroads? Why should illegal or non-motorised vehicles such as rickshaws and auto-rickshaws occupy these critical points? If the "heart" does not function, widening roads will achieve little.

For roads to function, vehicles must be able to move freely. Yet pedestrians are often forced onto the roads because footpaths are occupied or unusable. Despite investing hundreds of thousands of crores, the output remains poor. Dhaka has only about 3,000 kilometres of roads, of which just 200 kilometres are primary roads. It is entirely feasible to create a high-quality footpath network across the city.

Around 25 million trips take place in Dhaka daily, and nearly 25 percent people walk to their workplaces. Yet nothing has been done for them. Of the roughly 400 kilometres of footpaths in Dhaka, 60 percent are occupied and 40 percent are not walkable. With only an investment of around Tk 3,000 crore, Dhaka could have an excellent footpath network—keeping pedestrians off the road and allowing traffic to flow smoothly.

Another urgent issue is the absence of a functional mobility network due to hybrid trip patterns, where office and school trips collide on the same roads. In developed cities, school trips are typically separated from office commuting. Dhaka urgently needs a school zoning system with defined catchments so that students do not have to travel across the city—for instance, ensuring that a child living in Motijheel does not have to attend school in Uttara. Our research shows that 20 percent of trips in Dhaka are school-bound. Removing even this 20 percent from main roads would significantly ease congestion. This too requires commitment, not large investments. There are lots of examples to draw from to implement the school zoning concept.

Finally, Dhaka lacks any fully functional ring road. Most major roads here are aligned north–south, while the concept of peripheral ring roads exists largely on paper. Both the Strategic Transport Plan (STP) 2005 and the Revised Strategic Transport Plan (RSTP) 2015 clearly outlined an 88-kilometre inner ring road, followed by middle and outer ring roads. Yet, these remain incomplete. As a result, an estimated 30–40 percent of traffic in Dhaka is "through traffic"—vehicles merely passing through the city to travel from north to south of the country without any destination in Dhaka. The new government should urgently prioritise completing the inner and middle ring roads, which have already been partially implemented. As long as the full ring is not completed, north–south traffic will continue to pass through Dhaka, further worsening congestion.

It is particularly unfortunate that major infrastructure such as the Padma Bridge and the Dhaka–Mawa Expressway were completed without first completing the ring road system. The ring roads should have been operational before the expressway so that traffic travelling between North Bengal and South Bengal could bypass Dhaka altogether. Instead, we have rapidly funnelled even more traffic into the already overburdened city.

The inner and middle ring roads were partially implemented but failed to progress to a stage where through traffic could realistically avoid entering Dhaka. Additionally, the Dhaka Elevated Expressway was meant to connect with the Ashulia Expressway. If this connection is completed, the need for vehicles to enter the city would be significantly reduced.

Rather than initiating new megaprojects, the government should focus on completing these critical, half-finished projects. Partial implementation does not deliver real benefits. Cities such as Shanghai, with three ring roads, and Beijing, with seven, demonstrate the importance of such infrastructure. Dhaka, despite its population pressure, has none. As long as all highways remain Dhaka-bound, traffic issues will persist.

These five priorities are ultimately matters of political commitment, management, and enforcement—not investment.

TDS: Despite heavy investment in transport infrastructure, congestion keeps worsening. Where has planning gone wrong, and what policy corrections are most urgent?

MH: I believe our policymakers have failed to understand priorities and opportunities. There is often greater interest in projects where more money can be spent, rather than in addressing root causes. Dhaka generates nearly 2.5 crore daily trips, and traffic congestion of this scale cannot be solved through road-based transport alone. The next government must seriously think in terms of "integrated multimodal transport".

Dhaka is naturally blessed with a river loop of about 110–112 kilometres, formed by the Buriganga, Turag, Shitalakkhya, Bangshi and the Tongi canal. We must utilise this asset. We frequently talk about "sustainable transportation," but policymakers need to understand what it truly means. Sustainable transport ensures long-term returns on investment and accessibility for all. River transport, in this context, is the cheapest and safest option.

However, previous circular waterway initiatives failed because they focused only on purchasing boats and vessels without proper planning. Integrated multimodal planning is essential. It is not just about water transport; it requires identifying appropriate landing stations, ensuring seamless connectivity with road networks, and addressing challenges such as river pollution, siltation, and low bridges with inadequate headroom. If this river loop is properly utilised, road traffic pressure will reduce significantly.

The concept of a "Blue Network," which is included in the Detailed Area Plan (DAP), remains largely on paper. If implemented, it could connect rivers, canals, and lakes within the city into a 550-kilometre network. In a city where even a 10-kilometre new road is nearly impossible, this offers a massive opportunity and could offload 30–40 percent of road traffic. But again, simply buying boats without an integrated plan will only lead to another failed project.

We can also draw lessons from cities like Kolkata, where a million people arrive at Howrah Station every morning, use the Metro, and return home via commuter trains. A similar synergy between MRT and commuter rail could reduce the need for people to live inside Dhaka. While we have undertaken many megaprojects, seamless connectivity is missing, and several projects remain partial. If the MRT Line 6 that goes towards Kamalapur is connected to commuter routes towards Narsingdi, Gazipur, and Narayanganj, the system would be far more efficient.

Our planning remains fragmented. We damaged a major highway for a BRT project while failing to launch a functional commuter rail system between Dhaka and Gazipur. Dhaka is a mature city; we cannot widen roads endlessly. We inherited a strong rail network from the British and an excellent river loop from nature. The new government must prioritise integrating and utilising these assets properly if we truly want to make Dhaka liveable.

TDS: How can vehicle regulation and the public transport system be strengthened more in fixing Dhaka's mobility crisis, and what policy actions should be prioritised?

MH: Vehicle regulation is not only about numbers; it must also consider vehicle types and areas of movement. The number of vehicles must be proportionate to road capacity. Planners often say that a city needs 25 percent road space to be livable, but I disagree. With a strong public transport system, a city can remain livable with just 7–8 percent road space.

This is where the new government has a major opportunity. What we currently call public buses in Dhaka cannot truly be described as public transport. Public transport must be schedule-based and frequency-based, which our buses are not. Metro rail qualifies as public transport precisely because it follows a defined schedule and frequency.

We can learn from Singapore, where registration policies ensure that vehicle numbers never exceed 70 percent of road capacity, reserving 30 percent for future generations. For every new vehicle registered, one old vehicle is removed. In Dhaka, however, the number of vehicles is estimated to be eight to ten times higher than road capacity, compounded by illegal, unregistered, and unlicensed vehicles. This is why establishing a proper road hierarchy is essential, as it allows for science-based regulation.

Globally, cities are shifting towards research-driven transport systems, but we are living in a fallacy. Our roads have become sites of informal job creation and dumping grounds, which undermines functionality. Roads cannot compensate for the government's failure to create jobs. Keeping roads overburdened ensures that even large investments fail to deliver results.

Transport development must follow stages: functional footpaths first, then public transport, followed by BRT, and finally MRT. Developed countries followed this sequence. We tried to impose advanced systems on top of a chaotic base, and unsurprisingly, productivity suffered.

Public transport works as the backbone for any city, then MRT is built on top as a high-capacity layer while public transport works as a feeder system. Because we lack proper feeder systems, MRT stations are now surrounded by informal transport such as ride-sharing vehicles and battery-run or paddled rickshaws. Our public transport system is so poor that informal transport ends up competing with buses—something virtually unheard of anywhere in the world. Informal modes are not compatible with buses and we must address the root cause here.

In Dhaka, only about 200–250 kilometres of roads are suitable for buses, out of a 3,000-kilometre road network, other roads are too narrow for buses to enter. So, there is no need for thousands of buses, routes, and owners for such a limited network. Currently, there are around 300–350 bus routes, which is far beyond what is required. The system cannot be fixed unless this is addressed.

We need bus route rationalisation and a franchise model with only five to

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KEY POINTS

1. Immediately establish a clear road hierarchy, enforcing vehicle regulation, removing illegal vehicles, and fixing junction management to make existing infrastructure functional.
2. Complete the ring roads urgently to divert the 30–40% 'through-traffic' away from Dhaka.
3. Create proper footpath network and school zoning, which could instantly reduce congestion without heavy investment.
4. Adopt an integrated multimodal transport system by seamlessly linking roads, rail, and urban waterways.
5. Establish public transport as the backbone of urban mobility through bus route rationalisation and a franchise-based model with only 5–6 operating bus companies.

After billions spent, still gridlocked

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six companies, as seen in developed cities and neighbouring countries. This is not a technical challenge—it is a political one. We are investing Tk 3–3.5 lakh crore in a metro system that carries only about 20 percent of passengers, while a dysfunctional bus system already carries around 40 percent. Our research shows that with just Tk 5,000 crore, we could introduce a fleet of modern double-decker, low-floor, air-conditioned buses like those in London.

If we had 40–42 rationalised routes operated by five to six companies, Dhaka could have an excellent bus network. Once road transport is properly functional, metro expansion can ensure seamless connectivity. Fragmented projects without a network concept will never deliver efficiency.

Regulation must also distinguish between mobility and accessibility. Some roads are high-speed mobility corridors and should not allow slow or unfit vehicles, while others serve accessibility. Vehicle types, routes, and numbers must be regulated accordingly.

Our research suggests that if public transport truly becomes the backbone, it could carry 50–60 percent of passengers, reducing reliance on private vehicles. Combined with MRT, this would create a smooth network—something currently missing.

Finally, coordination with regulatory bodies is crucial. Roads are built by City Corporations or RAJUK in the case of Dhaka, while vehicle registration is handled by BRTA, often without much idea of road capacity. Anyone with money can buy a car, but this cannot continue. Numbers of registered vehicles must be proportionate to our road capacity.

Additionally, traffic management through hand signals is outdated for a city with metros and expressways. We must move towards digital signalling, but that will only work after regulating vehicle types, numbers, and routes. Digital signals are not a magic solution—they require prerequisites and time. People have almost forgotten that they should be mindful of signals while driving, and that behaviour change will not happen overnight.

PHOTO: STAR

Once road transport is properly functional, metro expansion can ensure seamless connectivity.

TDS: Is widening existing highways an effective strategy for long-term mobility, or should Bangladesh invest in a separate, access-controlled mobility network, and how realistic is this for Bangladesh right now in your opinion?

MH: Our existing highway network is primarily designed for accessibility, and in my view, we cannot simply widen highways from two lanes to four or six and expect them to function as mobility networks. Take the Dhaka–Chattogram Highway, for example. It is now being planned as an eight-lane road, but widening alone cannot transform an accessibility network into a high-speed mobility corridor.

Whenever we widen roads, we create development-induced displacement, which has serious social and economic consequences—business losses, joblessness, land loss, and social marginalisation. We have already seen this with the Dhaka–Mawa–Bhanga Expressway. Despite being an expensive project, it gained a poor reputation due to frequent accidents. In trying to convert existing roads by breaking and rebuilding them, we are destroying valuable assets, yet they are still not working as intended.

If we want to develop controlled-access mobility networks, challenges are inevitable, especially land constraints. However, we must carefully assess the costs of widening or dismantling existing roads—particularly the displacement they cause—and compare them with the land acquisition, capital costs, and investments required to build a new network. This feasibility analysis must begin now.

All our national highways are Dhaka-bound, following a radial pattern. While this provides accessibility, it does not create a true mobility network. If we want to accelerate economic and GDP growth, we must think beyond passenger movement. Where are our freight corridors? Currently, passengers and freight share the same routes, which is highly inefficient. Without dedicated freight corridors, mobility and economic efficiency suffer.

Most developed countries have separate economic or freight corridors. Although the Dhaka–Chattogram Highway has been widened to four lanes, it has not become an economic corridor. Simply widening an accessibility road does not achieve that—and widening it further is unlikely to change the outcome. If freight cannot move efficiently, passenger transport alone will not drive economic growth.

It is time to seriously weigh the costs and benefits of creating dedicated mobility and freight networks instead of repeatedly widening existing roads. This requires feasibility studies, land acquisition planning, and long-term investment—but continuing the current approach is already causing displacement without delivering efficiency. The new government must begin this planning now; delaying it will only make future implementation more difficult.

Finally, true mobility networks must be controlled-access corridors. Markets, schools, and other roadside developments cannot coexist along such routes. Otherwise, accidents and congestion are inevitable—as we are already witnessing today.

TDS: What reforms are needed within institutions like the Planning Commission to ensure communication projects are professionally evaluated, policy-driven, and aligned with long-term mobility goals rather than short-term political considerations?

MH: The Planning Commission has a wide mandate, but the way it currently functions lacks efficiency. At present, project-implementing authorities approach the Planning Commission only at the final stage for approval, which reduces the process to a formality. However, the Planning Commission's role should go far beyond approval. It should prioritise projects based on actual needs, especially since it has a comprehensive view of who is doing what across sectors.

While different authorities may propose projects, the Planning Commission should have the ultimate decision-making power. I believe there should also be periodic reviews even after approval. Currently, projects return to the Commission only when there is a request for time extension or cost escalation. Instead, the Commission must have the authority to oversee, monitor, and hold implementing agencies accountable throughout implementation to prevent the overruns we see so often. Project initiation, approval, and monitoring should be led by the Planning Commission—because planning is its core responsibility, not just approval.

A major challenge is the lack of professional planners and technical capacity within the Planning Commission. It oversees projects nationwide, but without sufficient technical expertise, it cannot properly evaluate feasibility studies or hold implementing agencies accountable. Often, one authority plans a project without knowing another authority is planning something nearby, leading to conflicts during implementation. This is precisely why project initiation must come from the Planning Commission, which has a holistic view of water, rail, and road projects across the country. Strengthening technical and professional capacity within the Commission is essential.

Post-evaluation of projects is also critical. Many projects have failed to meet their financial or economic expectations, and without learning why, we risk repeating the same mistakes. There is also a misconception about "mega projects." A project is not mega because of the size of investment, but because of its impact—it improves living standards of thousands of people, creates jobs, and accelerates economic growth.

Additionally, I want to emphasise that the new government must urgently work towards capital relocation or administrative decentralisation. Dhaka occupies just 0.2 percent of the country's land but accommodates 15 percent of its population. This imbalance cannot be fixed by more projects in Dhaka. Claims that projects will "reduce traffic congestion" in the city are misleading, because new projects in the city only attract more people.

Many countries have taken bold steps. India has shifted its capital three times, while Pakistan, Malaysia, and Indonesia have also relocated their capitals. Indonesia's capital is twice the size of Dhaka but has half the population. It has already passed legislation to move its capital from Jakarta to Borneo. That is forward-looking policy, and our policymakers must think the same way.

We cannot continue concentrating investment in Dhaka, which already generates 40 percent of GDP. Demand and supply will never balance this way. The new government must prioritise job creation in other districts and economic zones so people do not need to migrate to Dhaka. Even if capital relocation is not immediately possible, administrative decentralisation—relocating institutions that do not need to be in the capital—must begin now. Redirecting population flow away from Dhaka is no longer optional; it is urgent.

The interview was taken by **Miftahul Jannat** *and transcribed by* **Ystiaque Ahmed**.

Our disasters, 'their' management

Need to break the chain of complacency and 'not questioning'

GAWHER NAYEEM WAHRA

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The present state of disaster management in Bangladesh reflects both substantial progress and ongoing challenges. The government, guided by the Disaster Management Act (2012) and the National Disaster Management Plan (2021–2025), has strengthened legal and strategic frameworks to enhance preparedness, early warning, emergency response, and recovery systems at national and local levels. Institutional coordination has improved through mechanisms such as the Humanitarian Coordination Task Team, which brings together the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief, UN agencies, NGOs, and other stakeholders to streamline response and planning. Community-based approaches, including the Cyclone Preparedness Programme and local disaster committees, play a central role in translating early warnings into lifesaving action, especially in coastal and rural areas. Investments in forecasting and hazard monitoring—such as enhancements by the Bangladesh Meteorological Department and flood forecasting systems—have also strengthened anticipatory action. Despite these advances, challenges remain in terms of resource limitations, infrastructure resilience, climate change impacts, and capacity gaps at subnational levels, underscoring the need for continued policy implementation, community engagement, and international cooperation to build long-term resilience.

To swiftly assess the magnitude of disasters and address gaps in the government's response capacity, cooperation with the Department of Disaster Management is essential to ensure accurate information.

FILE PHOTO: STAR

KEY POINTS

1. Bangladesh's disaster management has advanced institutionally but remains constrained by top-down decision-making.
2. Community engagement remains weak despite its critical role in effective disaster response.
3. Indigenous knowledge, long central to resilience, has been increasingly marginalised.
4. Colonial and donor-driven interventions often produced serious unintended consequences.
5. Sustainable resilience requires inclusive, people-centred, and locally grounded approaches.

The evidence and urge for consulting the local people on the preparedness mechanism is almost nil. The tendency of ignoring the native expertise and local wisdom to combat natural or complex disasters creates problems rather than strengthening the capacity of fighting back. People living in this land are not stupid people.

Khana was not the only person who had the capacity of predicting weather and crop yields. In fact, people living in this disaster-prone delta are known for their rich indigenous knowledge and nature-based solutions. This knowledge and wisdom developed over thousands of years. They know how to live with abundant water and to protect life when water is scarce. With their indigenous knowledge, they cope with cyclones and erratic weather conditions (changes in climate). Traditional practices like raised homesteads, floating gardens, selecting the right seeds and keeping them in the right places created the backbone of resilience. Folk wisdom helps them to build community resilience, even when formal aid is delayed. This local wisdom, passed down through generations, includes understanding local ecosystems and developing unique survival techniques, making them highly adaptable to frequent natural hazards:

Khana (or Khona), the legendary poet, philosopher and astrologer from medieval Bengal (9th–12th century CE), is famous for her insightful couplets, Khanar Bachan, offering practical advice on agriculture, health and daily life, deeply rooted in Bengali rural wisdom and folklore, with tales linking her to the astrologer Mihir. She is a key figure in Bengali culture, known for her prophetic accuracy in predicting weather and crop yields, and her sayings (Bachan) are still followed by farmers today.

With the aggression of colonisation, we started undermining local culture, wisdom, and indigenous knowledge. We devalued the golden heritage of our resilience capacity. We also forgot the needs of the people; rather, we are building on the foundations laid by the past masters. Here we will examine some of our disaster management instruments to see how much they are helping, firing back, or creating a more vulnerable situation for the country and the people. To begin with, we can discuss the cyclone warning system. Ports and ships were much more important to the rulers than the people of the land. After the partition of 1947 and our independence in 1971, our cyclone signals are still primarily issued for seaports and seagoing vessels to indicate the intensity of a storm, its possible direction, and the level of impending danger.

For cyclones, we have 11 signals. They are:

- Distant Cautionary Signals: 1, 2, 3 (forecast of squally weather or a storm).
- Local Cautionary Signal: 4 (a storm is approaching, but the danger is not yet severe).
- Danger Signals: 5, 6, 7 (a storm is approaching or moving toward the port).
- Great Danger Signals: 8, 9, 10 (a severe or very severe storm is approaching; final and highest level of warning).
- Communication Failure Signal: 11 (communication disrupted; actions to be taken based on local judgment).

All Danger Signals (5, 6, and 7) refer to wind speeds of 62–88 kph, while Great Danger Signals (8, 9, and 10) refer to wind speeds of 89 kph or more. To make it clearer, Signal No. 5 means the storm will pass leaving the port on its left side; Signal No. 6 means the storm will pass leaving the port on its right side; and Signal No. 7 means the storm will pass directly over the port or very close to it. The water vessel operators (Sarang or Captain) can easily translate that and take the necessary action. But the general people can hardly understand the background of why 5, 6, 7 refer to the same wind speed. So, when the signal suddenly shifts from 5 to 8, they become confused and lost. The same applies to the Great Danger Signals.

Contrary to our eleven signals, the Philippines managed their cyclones (they face more cyclones than we do) with only five signals, with a higher signal number associated with higher general wind strength and shorter warning lead time. We all know this but still love to stick with what our colonial masters introduced.

After the partition of India, many of our development and vulnerability reduction projects were also prescribed by agencies who lent the money. Among them, here I would like to discuss two such initiatives:

a) Introduction of Polders and Ring Embankments

b) Introduction of Malaria Eradication Programme

INTRODUCTION OF POLDERS AND RING EMBANKMENTS

In the name of preventing tidal flooding, controlling salinity, and enabling year-round crop cultivation in the coastal area, polders and ring embankments were introduced under the Coastal Embankment Project (CEP, 1960s and 1970s) with technical and financial support from international development partners. These structures enclosed large tracts of low-lying land with earthen embankments and sluice gates. In the initial years, the intervention led to increased agricultural output and improved livelihood security, but over the years, it proved to be a counterproductive exercise and created irreversible damage to nature and livelihoods.

Over time, however, the south-west region began experiencing severe waterlogging, particularly from the 1980s onward. Large areas remained inundated for months or even years, damaging crops, infrastructure, and settlements. Waterlogging emerged due to several interconnected factors:

DISRUPTION OF NATURAL SEDIMENTATION

Embankments prevented tidal flows from entering floodplains, stopping natural sediment deposition inside polders. Meanwhile, sediment continued to accumulate in riverbeds, causing river channels to become shallower.

Reduced River Drainage Capacity

Silted riverbeds lost their ability to drain monsoon rainfall effectively, leading to prolonged stagnation of water inside polders.

Malfunctioning Sluice Gates

Poor maintenance, siltation, and mismanagement of sluice gates reduced their effectiveness in releasing excess water.

Land Subsidence

Enclosed polders experienced gradual land subsidence, making them lower than surrounding river levels and further aggravating drainage congestion. Increased risk of certain cancers Hormonal and endocrine disruption Reproductive and developmental health problems.

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Our disasters, 'their' management

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SOCIO-ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS
The waterlogging crisis resulted in:

- Loss of agricultural land and livelihoods
- Increased poverty and forced migration
- Damage to roads, houses, and public facilities
- Long-term ecological degradation

Communities in the region faced chronic hardship due to persistent inundation.

Cyclone evacuation notice. PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

PUBLIC RESPONSE AND ADAPTIVE MEASURES

In response to waterlogging, local communities initiated Tidal River Management (TRM) practices from the 1990s onward. TRM involves temporarily opening embankments to allow tidal water and sediment to enter selected floodplains, raising land levels and restoring river depth. The government later adopted TRM as a partial mitigation strategy.

The introduction of polders and ring embankments in south-west Bangladesh initially achieved its objectives of flood protection and agricultural expansion. However, the unintended consequence of chronic waterlogging highlights the limitations of rigid structural interventions in dynamic deltaic environments. The experience underscores the need for adaptive, ecosystem-based water management approaches that balance flood control, sediment dynamics, and community participation.

MALARIA ERADICATION PROGRAMME

Malaria was a major public health threat in undivided Bengal during the mid-20th century, particularly in rural and forested regions. High transmission rates caused widespread illness, reduced productivity, and significant mortality. In response, the then East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) adopted DDT (dichloro-diphenyl-trichloroethane) spraying as a primary vector-control strategy, in line with global malaria eradication efforts promoted during that period.

INTRODUCTION OF DDT SPRAYING

DDT spraying was introduced in the 1950s under the global malaria eradication programme supported by international agencies. Indoor residual spraying targeted malaria-carrying Anopheles mosquitoes, aiming to interrupt transmission. The intervention initially proved highly effective, leading to a dramatic reduction in malaria incidence and mortality and an immediate public health success.

The use of DDT resulted in:

a) Rapid decline in mosquito populations
b) Significant reduction in malaria cases
c) Improved public health outcomes and economic productivity

At the time, DDT was considered a cost-effective and powerful solution for vector control. On the other hand, over time, extensive and prolonged DDT use produced serious unintended consequences:

DESTRUCTION OF BENEFICIAL INSECTS

DDT is a broad-spectrum pesticide. Along with mosquitoes, it killed beneficial insects such as pollinators and natural predators of crop pests, disrupting the ecological balance.

ENVIRONMENTAL PERSISTENCE AND BIOACCUMULATION

DDT does not break down easily. It accumulated in soil, water, and the food chain, affecting fish, birds, livestock, and ultimately humans.

DEVELOPMENT OF PESTICIDE DEPENDENCY

As mosquito populations developed resistance to DDT, higher doses or alternative chemical pesticides became necessary. This led to increasing reliance on chemical pest control in both public health and agriculture, trapping the country in pesticide dependency.

HUMAN HEALTH IMPLICATIONS

Long-term exposure to DDT has been associated in scientific studies with:

While DDT was not the sole cause of cancer, its widespread and uncontrolled use increased population-level exposure to carcinogenic and toxic substances, raising long-term health risks.

POLICY SHIFT AND BAN

By the 1970s–1980s, growing global evidence of DDT's harmful effects led to its restriction and eventual ban in many countries, including Bangladesh. Malaria control strategies gradually shifted, but by that time it was too late to reverse the situation. To fight malaria, we are now trying with a) Integrated Vector Management (IVM), b) Use of insecticide-treated bed nets, and c) Environmental management and surveillance.

The experience underscores a critical public health lesson: disease control strategies must balance immediate benefits with long-term ecological and human health consequences.

There are many more examples of 'backfires'; actually, so-called 'unintended impacts' swamp the intended impacts of the apparently useful initiatives. To address another public health crisis, Bangladesh promoted the use of hand-pumped tubewells as a safe drinking water solution. This intervention was strongly supported by international agencies and development partners and was implemented on a large scale from the 1970s. However, by the 1990s, a serious unintended consequence emerged. Scientific investigations revealed that groundwater in many regions of Bangladesh contained naturally occurring arsenic at levels exceeding safe limits. Long-term consumption of arsenic-contaminated water led to widespread arsenicosis, a chronic condition caused by arsenic poisoning.

THE TALE OF SALT IODIZATION

To stop the aggression of goitre, we went for a blanket solution named 'iodized salt' for all, forgetting the people who are suffering from hyperthyroids. Iodine is nothing but poison to such people. In 1989, Bangladesh enacted the Iodine Deficiency Disorders Prevention Act, making the iodization of all edible salt mandatory. The programme was implemented under the framework of Universal Salt Iodization (USI) during the early 1990s. Salt was selected as the vehicle for iodine supplementation because it is universally consumed, affordable, and easy to fortify without altering taste or quality.

Alongside some positive outcomes, an increase in the detection and prevalence of certain thyroid disorders has been observed. For the sake of argument, one can say this 'unintended' development does not indicate a failure of salt iodization but reflects complex physiological and epidemiological factors associated with changes in iodine intake. This also reflects our mindset of following the advice of those who give funds without questioning or analysing the possible intended and also unintended impacts on life and livelihood.

INTRODUCTION OF HIGH-COST CYCLONE SHELTER: MEGA PROJECT SYNDROME

According to government project budgets, Bangladesh is constructing three-storied multi-purpose cyclone shelters at a total cost of about Tk 636.09 crore under a coastal resilience programme. This means each shelter costs roughly around Tk 7 crore on average (636.09 crore ÷ 90 shelters = ~7.07 crore per shelter), though actual costs vary by site and amenities. Using the funding needed to construct one cyclone shelter could result in the construction of 35–40 cyclone-resistant houses, which can accommodate many more people during a disaster without the need to travel to a shelter in dangerous conditions. ActionAid, in consultation with BUET experts and BRAC, has already successfully piloted such housing. Another alternative is increasing the number of raised earthen platforms, known otherwise as Kella or Mujib Kella, which can house people and livestock during cyclones. Investing in such alternatives, with provisions for local communities to construct and manage these structures themselves, will also create opportunities for work in the coastal areas. While the Government has taken initiative to build new 'Mujib Kellas', it is also important to maintain Kellas so that they do not become vulnerable during cyclones owing to landslides.

We also have success stories in building and maintenance of flood/cyclone protection embankments. Laxmipur (Char Alexander) and Bhola (Char Fassion) embankments are still protecting the vulnerable communities since 1992, while the other high-cost embankments could not survive as they should have. There was no trick or deception behind this. In both cases, marginalised people living in the vulnerable area were consulted from the very inception of the project. They were involved in building the embankments and were given ownership of the embankment, and in return they protected it on their own initiative, sometimes risking their lives.

To make disaster management in Bangladesh more people-sensitive and responsive, greater emphasis is needed on community-centred and inclusive approaches rather than a predominantly top-down system. Local people—especially women, persons with disabilities, the elderly, ethnic minorities, and the urban poor—should be meaningfully involved in risk assessment, planning, and decision-making so that warnings, shelters, and relief reflect real needs and social realities. Early warning messages must be simplified, localised, and delivered through trusted channels and local languages to ensure last-mile reach. Strengthening local government institutions with adequate resources, trained manpower, and decision-making authority can significantly improve rapid response and accountability. Disaster shelters and recovery programmes should prioritise dignity, privacy, livelihoods, and long-term resilience rather than only emergency survival. Finally, transparent data sharing, feedback mechanisms from affected communities, and stronger coordination between government, NGOs, and community groups can help ensure that disaster management systems respond quickly, fairly, and with empathy to the people they are meant to serve.

A BLUE ECONOMY moment we can't miss

NUR AHMED

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Bangladesh's maritime space supports a growing fisheries sector vital to food security, employment, and economic growth. PHOTO: STAR

KEY POINTS

1. Bangladesh's maritime resources are underutilised despite vast potential in fisheries, energy, and minerals.
2. Fisheries are declining due to overfishing, while deep-sea resources like tuna remain untapped.
3. Offshore energy resources offer strategic resilience but exploration and IOC participation are slow.
4. Effective maritime management requires inter-agency coordination, Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA), and regional cooperation.
5. A roadmap and prioritisation are needed to sustainably harness the blue economy.

The typical discussion on maritime resources has long been tailored to exploring the huge potential of Bangladesh in this sector. A considerable time has passed since 2014, which may be taken as the reference point following maritime boundary delimitation, to effectively tap into these potentials. However, it is high time that we took a retrospective look at the accomplishments and identified the major shortcomings.

EMBEDDED ANOMALIES IN DEFINING AND UTILISING POTENTIAL

Although there are overwhelming discussions on potential, there is still a dearth of comprehensive assessments of maritime resources, leading to data scarcity. Fisheries resources are perhaps the most familiar, as the livelihoods of coastal communities have depended on them for decades. However, marine fish catches have been signalling a downward trend. According to data from the Department of Fisheries (DoF), the lowest catch in nine years was recorded in FY 2023–24, with 628,622 tonnes of fish. This does not imply that fisheries resources are abundant; rather, unregulated and unreported fishing practices have led to a decline in fish stocks.

A recent survey reports that fish stocks in the Bay of Bengal have dropped by 80 per cent within a span of seven years due to overfishing and targeted fishing practices. This has resulted in a decline in large deep-sea fish stocks, in addition to alarmingly decreasing shallow-water stocks. The survey also indicated an abundance of tuna in the deep sea, which was confirmed by earlier surveys as well. However, deep-sea tuna fishing is virtually non-existent in Bangladesh, despite the confirmed presence of skipjack tuna—the most abundant commercial species globally—within the country's EEZ.

The commercial viability of tuna fishing is often cited as the main obstacle in Bangladesh, but the export prospects of this resource are promising. This exposes an underlying dilemma in the sector, where one segment of resources is being overexploited while other segments remain almost unexplored. This situation depicts unsustainable resource management at all levels, where overall potential, untapped resources, and ecological damage are not being adequately assessed. This is a cyclical process, and at this stage, intervention is needed at all levels to prevent further damage and utilise the full potential in a sustainable manner.

Another important resource for a country's survival and prosperity is its energy resources , for which the maritime domain is an important source. These are broadly categorised under the non-living maritime resources encompassing both renewable and non-renewable energy resources. For a country like Bangladesh, energy supply from maritime sources would have been vital in meeting the increasing demands of both households and industries. However, this sector is also overshadowed by the prospects of having huge potential in the maritime area of the country. In 2022, the potential presence of around 17–103 trillion cubic feet (TCF) of gas hydrate was announced. In 2024, a seismic survey also revealed the likely presence of large amounts of oil and gas in both shallow and deep waters of the Bay. It also underlined the similarity between the shallow waters of Bangladesh and Myanmar's offshore area , where the latter has already started extracting gas.

The peril for Bangladesh in this case is that underground hydrocarbons know no geographical boundary and , therefore, the country exploring first from a transboundary offshore gas discovery will get the most out of it. Bangladesh's activities in this regard are unfortunately very slow and the country is yet to attract International Oil Companies (IOCs) to explore its offshore blocks for hydrocarbons. In the face of growing LNG imports and volatility in the global energy supply chain, offshore resources could have been the country's benchmark resilience against an energy crisis. The prospect immediately needs to be translated into proper utilisation and there is a long pathway resembling some notable stumbling blocks.

THE UNTAPPED POTENTIALS: NO LUXURY TO MAINTAIN THE STATUS QUO

The discussions on the blue economy potential of the country are obviously needed, but they largely generalise the potential on a global scale due to the lack of required comprehensive assessments of national capacity. If these outweigh the actions taken in this sector, then progress can hardly be traced. It is good to be amazed by the huge potentials the maritime domain holds for us, but it will not yield anything if we do not make the best use of them. Many of the aspects of our lifestyle, economy and industries can be sourced from maritime resources. The field of marine biotechnology explores the use of marine resources in sectors such as health, cosmetics, food, aquaculture and various industrial processes. There are sources of life-saving medicines to daily essentials such as food additives, paper, cloth, emulsifiers, gel, and skin-polishing materials in the sea.

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Seabirds over Bangladesh's coast, showcasing rich marine biodiversity and untapped fisheries potential. PHOTO: STAR

PRIORITIES FOR TOMORROW

SEGMENT 5
ANNIVERSARY SUPPLEMENTS 2026
DHAKA SUNDAY JANUARY 25, 2026
MAGH 11, 1432 BS
31

For a country reliant on maritime trade for over 90 percent of its economic throughput, Bangladesh remains paradoxically ill-prepared for the future of the ocean economy.
FILE PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

A blue economy moment we can't miss

Many of our traditional food habits can also be turned into healthier ones if we turn to items sourced from the sea. The recent survey discovered sixty-five new marine species in Bangladesh's maritime area that had not been identified earlier. There are so many untapped areas in terms of our maritime resources that it almost leaves one confused as to where to start. In addition to hydrocarbons, the maritime domain is also a major source of renewable energy as the kinetic, potential, chemical or thermal properties of seawater can be transformed into power generation facilities. Oceans are also great sources of minerals for which a great deal of effort needs to be undertaken to identify the potential sources in the coastal area and under the sea, implying seabed mining.

SHIFTING THE PARADIGM OF PERCEIVING MARITIME RESOURCES

In order to realise the full potential of Bangladesh in the maritime domain, there needs to be some fundamental shifts in how we perceive maritime resources. The metaphorical term 'sea blindness' best describes the phenomenon, as we are yet to turn the rhetoric of being a 'maritime nation' into reality. This explains the disconnect between the identification of potential and regularising it into the national economy, which is also dubbed the blue economy. The market economy of maritime resources is extremely important, since its dynamics will attract investments and generate a sustainable value chain. Failing to mainstream the ongoing initiatives in this sector and remaining stuck in land-centric ideas will further impede growth in this sector.

Experts advise that Bangladesh should not abandon the idea of building a genuine deep sea port in Sonadia Island. PHOTO: STAR

The maritime domain implies extensive inter-agency cooperation, for which Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) is required. This concept entails a comprehensive understanding and coordination of responsibilities relating to the maritime domain, which would impact safety, security, the economy, and the marine environment. Keeping the maritime area under surveillance and properly governed is fundamentally different from traditional border management. Effective cooperation with neighbouring littoral states is also necessary, alongside robust national capacity to surveil the maritime area. The strategic connotation of maritime resources is often reserved for niche geopolitical aspects, but there are strong interlinkages between these issues.

COORDINATING THE LEAD – A FAR CRY

The required roadmap for the future necessitates a multi-pronged approach. It requires substantial investments, technological advancements, skills development, socio-cultural changes, and the list is far from exhaustive. However, in the absence of any effective coordination mechanism, there will be no progress in any aspect of the maritime domain. The twenty-six sectors of the blue economy identified in the context of Bangladesh require robust coordination among different government and non-government entities.

There is an important issue to be resolved in terms of leading the maritime affairs of the country. In practice, the Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock appears to be the most engaged, as fisheries resources have so far been prioritised among marine resources. The Ministry of Shipping is another important agency in terms of augmenting blue economy activities. A dedicated agency, named the 'Blue Economy Cell', has been established, involving different ministries. It was shifted from the Cabinet Division and later repositioned within the Ministry of Power, Energy and Mineral Resources. Given the nature of its work, it might be prudent to relocate it to the Ministry of Planning, as the ministry specialises in acting as the apex planning body.

The Bangladesh Navy and the Bangladesh Coast Guard are two important agencies, as they are engaged in almost every aspect related to the sea. Given the existing scenario among relevant stakeholders, it is not necessary to create a new overarching body to oversee all aspects of the maritime domain. Rather, effective coordination can be enforced by redesigning responsibilities among existing stakeholders.

There have been extensive suggestions and recommendations, in addition to efforts to decipher the potential of Bangladesh in utilising its maritime resources. Thus, potential and the suggestive narrative have dominated so far. It is high time the concerned agencies reviewed these recommendations and identified the mammoth tasks ahead. Without devising a roadmap or concerted coordination efforts, valuable resources may be expended on initiatives that are not aligned with national interests.

AN URBAN BREAKING point we can no longer ignore

ADIL MOHAMMED KHAN

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Bangladesh is currently grappling with the severe consequences of unplanned urbanisation. Key metropolitan hubs—including Dhaka, Chattogram, Gazipur, Narayanganj, Mymensingh, and Cumilla—have expanded in a manner that is increasingly unsustainable for both people and the environment. Consequently, Dhaka is now frequently ranked among the world's most unliveable and air-polluted cities. Fifty-five years after independence, and following decades of administrative inertia, a significant milestone has finally been reached: the approval of the National Urban Policy (NUP) 2025. This represents Bangladesh's first comprehensive framework designed to steer rapid urban growth towards a planned and sustainable future.

Despite the fact that nearly 40 percent of the population—nearly seven crore people—now live in urban centres, this critical policy was delayed for decades. With its implementation, the government now has a long-overdue mandate to rectify the structural failures of our cities and prioritise the well-being of its citizens over haphazard expansion. In Bangladesh, about forty percent of people in cities live in slums or poor housing with inadequate infrastructure and services. This is especially true in large cities like Dhaka, where more than a third of the population lives in informal settlements that lack proper sanitation. This situation is the result of rapid, uncontrolled urban growth and a previous lack of urban planning.

As cities continue to grow, market-driven housing alone cannot meet the needs of the majority. PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

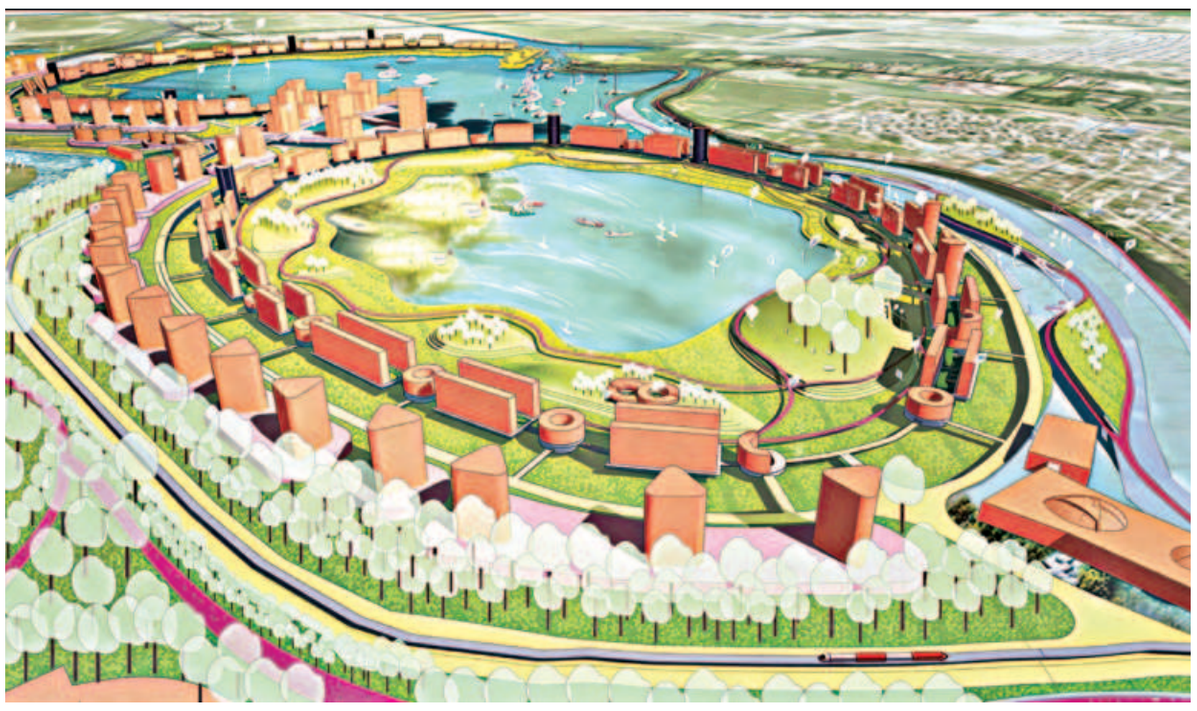

ILLUSTRATION: AFREEN AHMED ROCHANA/BENGAL INSTITUTE

A new urban form for Dhaka that works with canals and wetlands.

Against this backdrop, another national parliamentary election is approaching, shaped by the July 2024 mass uprising that emerged from demands to eliminate discrimination across different strata of society. This context raises critical questions: what priorities should political parties place in their election manifestos, what paradigm shifts should the upcoming government adopt to reverse current urbanisation trends towards sustainable and inclusive development, and how can the severe challenges faced by millions of urban residents living in slums or slum-like conditions be effectively addressed? These questions clearly warrant serious and focused attention from both the government and policymakers.

Dhaka is undeniably heading towards collapse, yet this reality is often overlooked as other urban areas across Bangladesh quietly follow the same path. Unplanned urban expansion, weak enforcement of planning laws, poor governance, and aggressive interventions by business and corporate interests that distort urban laws and plans are the key drivers of unsustainable and destructive urban development in cities throughout the country.

URBANISATION, LIVEABILITY CHALLENGES, AND PLANNING GAPS

Due to the increasing rate of urbanisation and unplanned urban growth, liveability challenges in Bangladesh's cities are continuously intensifying. At the same time, urban areas make a highly significant contribution to the national economy. Bangladesh currently has around 530 urban centres, including city corporations, district towns, municipalities, and upazila towns. In many of these cities, unplanned housing and uncontrolled urbanisation are causing severe environmental degradation, requiring urgent and adequate preparedness.

Despite the existence of master plans and detailed area plans for major cities such as Dhaka and Chattogram, implementation rates remain extremely low. In many cities, the absence of master plans and the failure to enforce urban, building construction, and environmental laws have resulted in serious soil, air, water, and noise pollution, placing urban liveability under grave threat. In this context, ensuring adequate and quality housing, services, and civic amenities for all has become a major challenge for urban authorities. As a result, many marginalised, low-income, and lower-middle-income residents are deprived of decent housing and urban services. At the same time, disparities in services and amenities between developed and underdeveloped urban areas are widening.

SPATIAL PLANNING OF BANGLADESH FOR BALANCED AND SUSTAINABLE URBANISATION

To ensure inclusive urban development, it is essential to prepare appropriate spatial plans, master plans, population density plans, and other planning instruments so that quality housing and civic services are available for all. Sustainable urbanisation and balanced development must be ensured through comprehensive planning frameworks. The Interim Government has recently formulated the National Spatial Planning Ordinance, 2025, which establishes a framework for comprehensive spatial planning, aiming for sustainable, balanced development through national, regional, and local spatial plans to guide land use,

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Only a sustainable, inclusive, and people-centric strategy can rescue Bangladesh's urban future. Concept plan for a new public space by Bengal Institute.

An urban breaking point we can no longer ignore

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infrastructure, housing, and environmental management, integrating economic growth with social equity and climate resilience. This initiative seeks to address rapid urbanisation and environmental challenges by creating planned, liveable cities and resilient ecosystems across the country.

REDISTRIBUTING URBAN DENSITY ACROSS BANGLADESH FOR DECENTRALISING DEVELOPMENT

Although Bangladesh's level of urbanisation is still lower than that of many developed countries, its rate of urbanisationis among the highest globally and has increased significantly in recent years. In 1961, the urban population was 2.6 million, which was about 5 percent, and in 1974, only 9 percent of the population lived in cities. According to the 2022 Census, the urban population reached 53.7 million, about 32 percent of the total population. According to a recent World Urbanisation Prospects 2025 report by the United Nations, Dhaka is the world's second-largest city by population, with about 36.6 million people, behind Jakarta and ahead of Tokyo, with projections suggesting it could become the largest by 2050. The World Bank's World Development Indicators report states that despite rapid urbanisation, Bangladeshi cities are unprepared to accommodate the growing population. Excessive density has pushed cities like Dhaka far beyond their carrying capacity, resulting in traffic congestion, waterlogging, air pollution, and public health crises.

Urban economies contribute nearly three-quarters of Bangladesh's GDP, with Dhaka alone accounting for 40 percent. However, Dhaka-centric growth has stifled the economic potentialofothercities.Accordingtothe Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS), excessive growth of Dhaka causes losses equivalentto 6–10 percent of GDP annually due to congestion, inefficiency, and hampered development in other regions. This Dhaka-centric growth hinders national economic potential, slows job creation, and strains urban infrastructure.

To address this, Bangladesh's Eighth Five-Year Plan prioritises development decentralisation. Major infrastructure projects—such as the Padma Bridge and the upcoming Jamuna Rail Bridge—create opportunities to stimulate regional urban economies through plannedurbanisation. Redistributing urban density in Bangladesh is no longer just a policy preference; it is a geographic and economic necessity. With nearly 32 percent of the country's urban population currently concentrated in Dhaka, the capital has reached a breaking point. The transition towards a "multi-centric" urban model involves moving from a single dominant mega-city to a network of vibrant divisional cities, secondary cities, and smart rural hubs.

REDUCING THE PRIMACY OF DHAKA AND DEVELOPING THE DIVISIONAL AND DISTRICT TOWNS

The core of decentralisation in Bangladesh lies in empowering divisional cities (like Khulna, Rajshahi, and Sylhet)and district towns.Currently, resources often bypass these mid-tier cities, flowing either to Dhaka or directly to rural areas—a phenomenon experts call the "missing middle." Key pillars of density redistribution could be industrial and administrative de-concentration. Moving the garment industry and manufacturing hubs towards specialised economic zones (SEZs) in under-densified regions (e.g., Mirsarai, Mongla) could be prioritised. Relocating certain government offices and specialised institutions to divisional headquarters and district towns could reduce the "pull" of Dhaka for legal and administrative needs. Additionally, the government's vision to provide modern urban amenities (better education, healthcare, internet, community facilities) at the village level to reduce the "push" factors that drive rural-to-urban migration should be given special emphasis as well. Spatial analysis of the Annual Development Programme (ADP) budget is also required to ensure that the development budget is targeted at lagging regions to pull them up.

NATURE-BASED SOLUTIONS ARE NEEDED FOR URBAN REVIVAL

Our cities are dying, as traffic jams, waterlogging, and all sorts of pollution—such as air, water, and soil pollution—are common phenomena in Dhaka, Chattogram, and many other cities. A healthy urban ecosystem requires 20–25 percent green space and 10–15 percent water bodies to effectively manage drainage and recharge groundwater. Yet, Dhaka's core has been entombed in 80 percent concrete coverage, leaving a measly 5 percent for water and less than 10 percent for greenery. We have effectively turned our city into a giant, non-porous bowl. The situation in other urban areas is not much more encouraging either. Canals and water bodies have been destroyed in the name of urban development over the past decades in most urban centres in Bangladesh. Hence, waterlogging is seen on urban streets after even moderate rainfall.

The systematic filling of canals and the replacement of natural waterways with rigid box culverts has proven to be a catastrophic error. Nature-based solutions—preserving wetlands, restoring canals, and increasing permeable softscapes—are not "aesthetic luxuries." They are the only sustainable drainage infrastructure we have left. If we continue to prioritise concrete over canals, no amount of pumping technology will save us from the next monsoon. We must restore our city's blue and green arteries before the "heart of Bangladesh" stops beating under the weight of its own stagnant water.

Excessive density has pushed cities like Dhaka far beyond their carrying capacity. FILE PHOTO: STAR

FROM LARGE AND MEGA PROJECTS TO PEOPLE-CENTRIC PLANNING: VOICE OF THE PEOPLE MUST BE HEARD

Bangladesh stands at a critical juncture. With nearly forty percent of the population already urbanised, the transition from unplanned sprawl to sustainable living is no longer a policy choice; it is a prerequisite for national survival. Therefore, political parties intending to participate in the next election should focus on the actual needs and aspirations of urban residents of the country. We must shift from a "concrete-only" mindset to one that restores natural drainage systems, prioritising mass transit such as BRT, commuter rail, light rail, monorail, MRT, and pedestrian-friendly roads over private car infrastructure to reduce the carbon footprint and improve air quality.

Parties must pledge to empower City Corporations. Currently, urban governance is fragmented across various central agencies. True reform requires a "single-window" authority where elected mayors have the budgetary and legal autonomy to manage their cities. Manifestos must treat the urban poor as economic engines rather than "encroachers." This involves formalising the status of informal workers and ensuring that urban growth does not come at the cost of mass displacement. To decompress Dhaka, parties must propose fiscal incentives for "growth poles"—secondary cities like Mymensingh, Cumilla, Bogura, Faridpur, and Moulvibazar—ensuring they do not replicate Dhaka's chaotic blueprint.

PRIORITISING AFFORDABLE HOUSING IN BANGLADESH: A STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK FOR THE UPCOMING GOVERNMENT

Affordable housing is a critical national challenge in Bangladesh due to rapid urbanisation, land scarcity, widespread informality, and low-income realities. As cities—particularly Dhaka—continue to grow, market-driven housing alone cannot meet the needs of the majority. The upcoming government must therefore adopt a comprehensive and Bangladesh-specific approach that treats affordable housing as a social and economic priority rather than a purely commercial product. Clear and detailed guidelines for affordable and social housing are essential. The government should define affordability based on income groups and set benchmarks such as limiting housing costs to no more than 30 percent of household income. This policy must align with the National Urban Policy,Five-Year Plan, and SDG 11 to ensure coherence across development goals.

Land reform is the most decisive factor in reducing housing costs. Government-led land banking, the use of underutilised public land near transit corridors, higher-density zoning, and measures to curb land speculation are necessary to expand affordable housing at scale. Without land reform, affordability will remain unattainable. A shift towards public and rental housing is equally important. Public rental housing and social housing authorities should be developed in major cities, with rent-controlled units for low-income households and essential workers. At the same time, slum upgrading should be prioritised over eviction through in-situ improvements, secure tenure, and community-led housing initiatives, which are more humane and cost-effective than relocation.

Inclusive housing finance and subsidy reform are needed to reach low-income groups. Low-interest loans, government-backed guarantee funds, targeted subsidies, and support for incremental housing can make housing finance accessible to those currently excluded. The private sector must be engaged through incentives such as Floor Area Ratio (FAR) bonuses and tax benefits, combined with mandatory inclusionary zoning and strong regulation to ensure quality and price control. The Detailed Area Plan (DAP 2022–35) for Dhaka city has introduced FAR incentives for affordable housing that can be a good step if implemented properly.

Transit-oriented affordable housing should be promoted near MRT, BRT, and rail corridors to reduce transport costs and improve overall affordability. To reduce pressure on Dhaka, the government should promote secondary cities through decentralisedhousing, industry, and infrastructure development. Additionally, construction cost reduction and innovation, streamlined approvals, and the use of local materials can lower housing prices.

PARADIGM SHIFTS ARE REQUIRED FOR THE PLANNING AND DESIGN OF CITIES IN BANGLADESH

Bangladesh needsa paradigm shift in planning, designing, and reorganising urban areas. Strong institutional coordination, governance reform, and legal enforcement are essential to implement urban plans. Engaging communities in the formulation of various plans and projects for urban areas is also essential. In the wake of the July Uprising, which demanded an end to systemic discrimination, political parties must pivot their manifestos. The focus should shift from high-visibility large or mega projects to the fundamental civic facilities and amenities of the urban dweller. Bangladesh has never lacked plans; it has lacked the political will to enforce them. The government must insulate urban planning bodies from the "capture" of powerful real estate, industrialist, and corporate lobbies that frequently bypass the spatial, physical, and detailed plans of urban and regional areas. Only a sustainable, inclusive, and people-centric strategy can rescue Bangladesh's urban future. Without a radical shift in planning, our urban areas are destined to mirror the stagnation and crisis currently paralysing Dhaka.

KEY POINTS

1. Rapid, unplanned urbanisation has made cities like Dhaka among the world's most unliveable, with severe air pollution, congestion, and informal settlements.
2. The National Urban Policy (NUP) 2025 and National Spatial Planning Ordinance 2025 provide a framework for planned, sustainable, and inclusive urban growth.
3. Prioritising secondary cities through decentralised housing, industry, and infrastructure development is essential to reduce pressure on Dhaka.
4. Nature-based solutions, green spaces, and waterway restoration are critical to managing drainage, reducing pollution, and improving liveability.
5. Transit-oriented affordable housing, community-led planning, and governance reform are necessary for equitable, people-centric urban development.

THE UNFINISHED PROMISE of July in the Chittagong Hill Tracts

ILIRA DEWAN

Human rights activist and a former member of the Local Government Reform Commission.

Following the August 2024 uprising, every peace-loving citizen of the country hoped for radical change at all levels of state governance. There was an expectation that corruption, nepotism, partisan bias, and red-tape within the administration would be reduced; that party-backed musclemen would be stopped from capturing large domestic and foreign project contracts; and that national development sectors would see fair and balanced distribution. Law and order were expected to improve, with extortion, snatching, robbery, and the menace of local thugs curtailed.

Yet, even after the political change in August, over the past year we have observed quite the opposite: corruption, snatching, extortion, muscle power, mob violence, and fundamentalism have surged alarmingly. Incidents of rape, abuse, harassment, and attacks on women are occurring regularly. Anyone expressing a dissenting opinion is indiscriminately branded a 'collaborator of fascism' and attacked—sometimes even through the creation of violent mobs leading to killings. Attacks on marginalised communities and religious minorities continue in the same fascistic manner as before.

At a time when the world is emphasising environmental protection to combat climate change, we are witnessing politically connected local strongmen, operating right under the nose of the administration, indiscriminately extracting stones at night from natural sites such as Bholaganj in Sylhet, leaving rivers stripped bare of stones. This is happening despite the fact that the Adviser to the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change in the current interim government, Syeda Rizwana Hasan, is internationally recognised for her long-standing environmental activism. Even while holding one of the highest responsible positions in government, she has been unable to take exemplary action against these forest-destroying, stone-extracting criminals. This inevitably raises the question: is this the return for which so much blood was shed and so many lives were sacrificed during the 2024 uprising? Has the spirit of 2024 faded so quickly, within a year? Those of us who carried the ideals of the 2024 movement—who took to the streets to free the country from a decaying system of governance, or who supported the movement morally—now see our dreams, hopes, and aspirations slipping away. We did not want a society ruled by mob terror in exchange for so much blood and so many lives.

During the July movement, Adivasi students had stood shoulder to shoulder with their peers against the oppression of the then-authoritarian government. PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

The very purpose of the July 2024 uprising was to free the country and its people from the grip of authoritarianism. It was a movement to restore democracy; to reclaim press freedom and the people's right to free speech and expression; to regain the right to hold peaceful assemblies to realise legitimate demands; to ensure that no one would be forced to show identity papers arbitrarily or face harassment while moving freely. It envisioned equitable distribution of opportunities and resources based on equality rather than discrimination, and the building of an inclusive state where all communities—regardless of ethnicity, religion, or race—would be partners in national development.

Regrettably, as days pass, the discrimination-free spirit of July is being steadily undermined. The first major blow to this drifting spirit came with the consecutive communal attacks in Khagrachhari and Rangamati in September 2024. These incidents left five people dead and caused extensive damage to homes, shops, business establishments, and the offices of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Regional Council through arson and attacks. Exactly one year later, in September 2025, violence erupted again in Guimara, Khagrachhari, where three Indigenous people were killed. This violence occurred during a road blockade protesting the gang rape of an Indigenous schoolgirl.

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All hopes will lose steam without a sustainable energy plan

M. TAMIM

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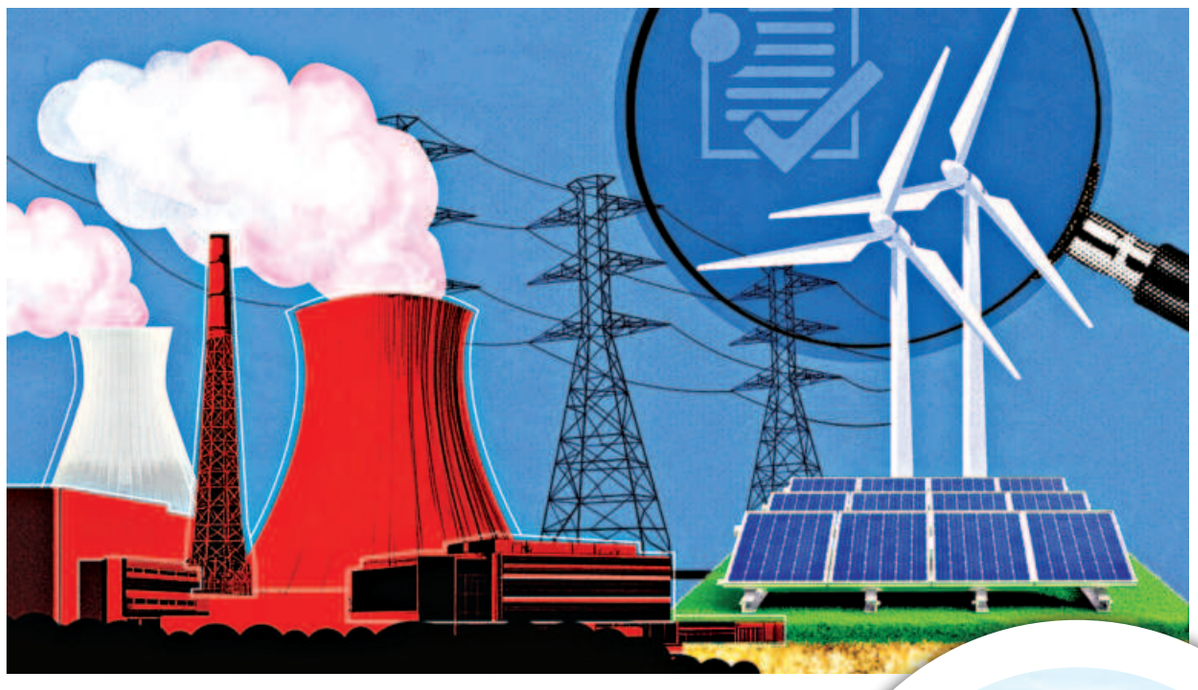
KEY POINTS

1. Bangladesh faces severe energy crisis due to gas dependency and shortages.
2. Indigenous gas production, exploration, and coal diversification are urgently needed.
3. Renewable energy development remains inadequate, requiring government-backed projects and investment.
4. Industry and households suffer from rising energy costs and limited access.
5. Balanced energy strategy must ensure sustainability, affordability, and national energy security.

Bangladesh stands at the brink of a major energy crisis, the consequence of decades of emphasis on power generation without securing a sustainable supply of primary energy. As early as 1996, the nation's energy policy warned against single-fuel dependency on natural gas and recommended developing coal resources in the northwest to diversify supply and serve the energy-starved western region. Yet, despite clear signs of gas shortages by 2007, exploration efforts remained minimal. Since the Bibiyana discovery, the "BAPEX-only" policy has yielded negligible additions to reserves, while production has steadily declined since its peak in 2016–17. Current output from national oil companies and IOCs is about 1,500 mmcfd (70%), supplemented by just over 1,000 mmcfd of LNG imports (30%), against a demand of 4,000 mmcfd. Industries, long reliant on cheap indigenous gas, are now struggling under severe shortages.

The most pressing concern is the decline of Bibiyana, which supplies nearly 40% of total gas. At 18 years old, the field is nearing depletion, and output could collapse within the next few years. Bangladesh lacks the infrastructure to expand LNG imports beyond current capacity, and no new facilities are expected before 2029. Any disruption to the existing FSRUs would have equally devastating consequences.

No development strategy can succeed without resolving this primary energy crisis. Shortages will intensify after LDC graduation, compounding industrial, financial, and trade challenges. Decades of neglect cannot be reversed overnight: import infrastructure, exploration, fuel switching, and renewable deployment all require time. In the short term, LPG and oil remain the only viable stopgap solutions. The critical task for policymakers is to manage a transition from entrenched usage patterns to more market-based alternatives.



While there are signs of improved planning and greater transparency in the power sector, long-term success remains uncertain due to the slow growth of renewable energy and continued reliance on fossil fuels.

FILE VISUAL: **ANWAR SOHEL**

Sectoral dependency on gas (excluding electricity) is significant: industry 44%, residential 13.5%, commercial 12.7%, and transport 17.7% (SREDA, April 2024). Industry, the largest consumer, is most vulnerable. Although only 13.5% of households rely on piped gas for cooking, these belong to the most privileged groups, and shortages could spark social unrest. In transport, shifting from CNG to petrol or LPG would be relatively painless, while commercial use can be redirected to LPG. Piped gas must be metered and priced at import parity, with households choosing between LPG and electricity depending on affordability. These transitions demand careful planning.

Industry's heavy reliance on gas makes it the sector most at risk. While low-energy industries may adapt to LPG, costs will be prohibitive for energy-intensive sectors such as textiles, cement, ceramics, and steel re-rolling. Rising energy costs, combined with higher labour expenses and shrinking margins, could force garment factories to close, undermining export earnings. Currently, 41% of natural gas is used for grid electricity and 17% for captive power. If the planned 2,400 MW of nuclear power and 9,000 MW of coal-fired plants operate at full capacity, gas could be redirected to industry. Painful though it may be, reallocating gas is unavoidable. In the short run, Bangladesh may need to rely again on oil-based plants, while scaling up LPG supply and distribution is essential.

These measures may ease the crisis but will not reduce import dependency or the strain on foreign currency reserves. Indigenous gas production must be prioritised, alongside exploration for new reserves. Since Bibiyana's discovery in 1999, Bangladesh has failed to find another significant field. Governments have favoured quick fixes like rental power and imports, while underfunding BAPEX, which lacks the resources and expertise to succeed. This policy must change. International reservoir management companies should be engaged to reassess production and exploration using existing geological data. Coal and renewable energy also offer potential to reduce import dependency.

The Barapukuria underground coal mine has been a disappointment, producing only one million tons annually—less than 5% of proven reserves in 20 years. Agricultural land was damaged despite underground mining being chosen to protect it, with subsidence of 20–30 feet rendering large areas unusable. The shallow sections of Barapukuria and Fulbari could be reassessed for surface mining, though aquifer management remains a major challenge. Despite coal's environmental drawbacks, Bangladesh will rely on it to generate 9,000 MW over the next 25 years, requiring 33 million tons annually.

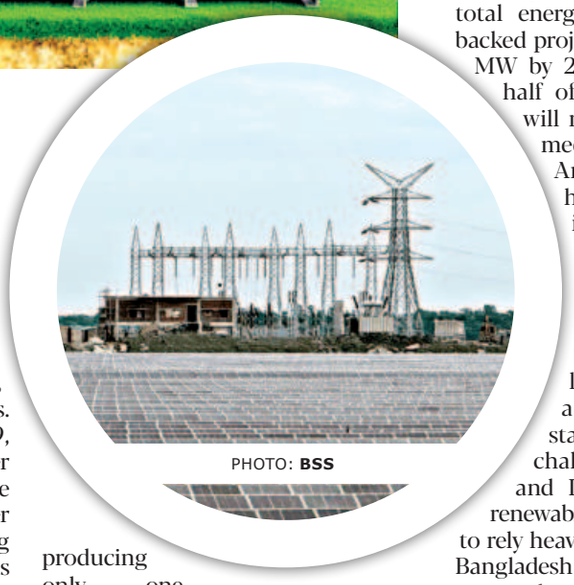


PHOTO: **BSS**

Renewable energy has never been seriously pursued. Government efforts have been tokenistic, leaving the sector to private investors who struggled with land acquisition and rigid power system controls. Early government participation could have set the system on the right path. Neglect of grid automation and the absence of an independent system operator have further slowed renewable deployment. Rising electricity costs have pushed industries toward rooftop solar, which is expanding rapidly, but grid-connected solar parks remain underdeveloped, with less than 1,000 MW capacity producing under 1% of total energy. Without government-backed projects, reaching even 5,000 MW by 2030 is unlikely. At least half of new renewable projects will require battery storage to meet evening peak demand. Any renewable addition, however, reduces fuel imports and strengthens energy security.

Globally, the transition to carbon-free power is accelerating, but for Bangladesh—with limited resources and a low-emitting, energy-starved population—the challenge is steep. China and India, despite leading in renewable deployment, continue to rely heavily on coal to bridge gaps. Bangladesh must adopt a similar approach: expand renewables as quickly as possible, but fill the shortfall with fossil fuels. Energy starvation leads to greater environmental degradation, and shortages cannot be allowed to stall economic growth. Energy must be not only sustainable but also available, affordable, and accessible to all citizens, in line with SDG 7.

The violence that Indigenous women face is unique to them and needs better understanding on our part.

FILE PHOTO: **RASHED SHUMON**

The unfinished promise of July in the Chittagong Hill Tracts

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In recent times, attacks and arson at the offices of Prothom Alo and The Daily Star, as well as vandalism and attacks on Chhayanaut—one of the foremost institutions of Bengali culture—clearly demonstrate that the spirit of July has reached its lowest point.

Many of us are also aware, to varying degrees, of the repression faced by the Bawm community in Bandarban. Following the bank robbery organised by the Kuki-Chin National Front (KNF) in Ruma and Thanchi in April 2024, widespread repressive state actions were launched against the Bawm people. Even after the July uprising, the Bawm community has not been spared from this repression. In the name of counter-terrorism and on allegations linked to the bank robbery, innocent villagers—including women and children—have been detained and kept in prison without trial for nearly twenty months. During this period, two detainees have died in custody due to a lack of proper medical treatment, while another died on the way home to Bandarban from Chattogram Medical College Hospital after being granted bail in critical condition.

Despite repeated appeals by human rights activists and organisations to senior figures in the current interim government regarding these inhumane actions against the Bawm community, no meaningful response or initiative has been taken—apparently for some inexplicable reason. The only progress so far has been the release on bail of two Bawm women, one of whom is a minor. We, too, want those genuinely involved in the bank robbery to be brought under the law and punished. However, collective punishment of an entire community in connection with this incident must end immediately, and the right to a fair trial for innocent Bawm villagers detained in prison must be ensured. If the right to justice continues to be denied as it has in the past, who can guarantee that the entrenched culture of impunity in the Chittagong Hill Tracts will not one day engulf the entire country? We firmly believe that no development can be sustainable without representation and participation of all ethnic communities in the country's overall progress. Mere cosmetic gloss can never produce lasting sustainability.

PHOTO: **ORCHID CHAKMA**

As part of the celebrations for International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples at the Central Shaheed Minar, youths of the Bawm community staged their own protest demanding an end to the persecution of their people.

The tourism industry can create immense opportunities for the Chittagong Hill Tracts. However, for tourism to develop and expand in the region, special attention must also be paid to protecting its environment and ecology. In the name of tourism and driven purely by the lure of profit, the indiscriminate cutting of hills, destruction of forests, and construction of resorts must be stopped immediately. The growth of tourism must take place in a manner that respects ecological balance as well as the customs, values, and culture of the local communities.

If the hills are to be truly enlightened, the educational environment in the region must be made more creative and vibrant. Policy formulation alone is not enough. Taking into account the socio-economic and geographical realities of the hills, the education system of the three hill districts must be comprehensively restructured. The quality of teaching must be improved, and incentives, allowances, and facilities aligned with the demands of the present time must be expanded for teachers.

The thirteenth national parliamentary election is drawing near. While there is no shortage of enthusiasm, excitement, and curiosity among the general public surrounding the election, there is also a deep sense of apprehension and anxiety. Across the three hill districts, there are many remote and inaccessible areas with no motorable roads, no civic amenities, and no access to proper healthcare or education—yet people have lived in these areas for generations. Many residents of these regions are registered voters but are deprived of their right to vote due to communication constraints. Others remain poorly informed about who the electoral contenders are, simply because of the region's remoteness. Therefore, priority must be given to the balanced development of these remote areas and to addressing the deprivation faced by disadvantaged communities.

Our demand is clear: the election manifestos of all parties participating in the thirteenth national election must include explicit commitments to these marginalised and deprived populations.

It is essential for voters to know what candidates and their parties envision for establishing lasting peace in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, as voters' choices will ultimately depend on these pledges. In the past, political parties may have succeeded in keeping voters pacified with false assurances, but this time voters are far more aware. There is no scope left to treat them as naïve or ignorant. In the age of technology, voters can easily assess the past records of each candidate and possess the discernment to judge who is truly qualified. The days of ballot rigging or manipulating voters into casting their votes are over. Voters will exercise their precious franchise guided by reason and judgement, in the interest of regional development and lasting peace.

Finally, regardless of which party comes to power, as residents of the hills our expectation is that the elected government must come forward with an inclusive and generous outlook to restore lasting peace in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and rebuild harmony between hill communities and Bengalis, creating a shared space of trust and a smooth path forward for all.

The Chittagong Hill Tracts issue is a long-standing political problem and must not be treated lightly. Achieving lasting peace in the hills requires not only the efforts of the elected government, but also the collective engagement of all political parties, social institutions, and individuals, irrespective of party affiliation. The law enforcement and security forces—key actors in the hills—must also play a special role in restoring peace by maintaining strict neutrality. The armed forces and law enforcement agencies have earned global recognition for their exemplary service in peacekeeping missions around the world. If unrest prevails within our own country, that shame and failure will not belong to those forces alone—it will be a stain on the entire nation.

Through the July uprising, we sought to bring change to a long-decayed system. The people of the country responded to that call for transformation. Therefore, we must uphold the spirit of July 2024 and build a discrimination-free nation. Losing the spirit of July would mean pushing the country further backwards. Learning from history, we must become more flexible, patient, and generous in outlook.

In conclusion, we must change our perspective. Change must begin with ourselves. If I change, the country will change automatically.

The article has been translated by **Samia Huda.**

KEY POINTS

1. July's promise of reform has stalled amid rising violence and corruption.
2. Indigenous communities face repression, killings, and prolonged detention without justice.
3. Environmental destruction continues under political protection despite climate commitments.
4. Peace and development require inclusion, fair trials, education reform, and sustainable tourism.
5. Lasting peace demands political neutrality and genuine reconciliation.

An aerial map showing encroachment on Dhaka's wetlands.

PHOTO: STAR

A CRY FOR A LIVABLE CITY

In conversation with Adnan Morshed

ADNAN MORSHED

Architect, architectural historian, urbanist, and columnist. He teaches at the Catholic University of America in Washington, DC, and serves as Executive Director of the Centre for Inclusive Architecture and Urbanism at BRAC University. He can be reached at amorshed@bracu.ac.bd.

KEY POINTS

1. Dhaka's rapid, unplanned urbanisation reflects weak governance and inadequate planning.
2. "Good density" promotes compact, walkable, mixed-use neighbourhoods rather than overcrowding.
3. Urban justice requires equitable access to parks, transport, and services.
4. Decentralisation and protection of rivers/wetlands are essential for sustainability.
5. Lessons from Seoul and Tokyo show how planning, mobility, and civic culture shape livable, resilient cities.

An aerial view of Dhaka city.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

The Daily Star (TDS): How do you evaluate the development of Dhaka over the centuries, particularly after independence? Since the 2000s, with massive expansion, how would you describe the city's character in comparison to neighbouring cities such as Kolkata, Delhi, or Karachi?

Adnan Morshed (AM): Dhaka's urban history over the centuries has been complex. There is a curious dearth of authoritative, peer-reviewed histories of pre-Mughal Dhaka. As I argued in an article in Places Journal, this lack of research limits our understanding of the city's historical evolution. The Mughals were great monument builders but not great city planners. They did not create a good urban template on which Dhaka could develop into what we might recognise as a functioning city. However, we should remind ourselves that Mughal rule in India ended before industrial cities emerged in the 19th century in Europe and elsewhere in response to the environmental challenges posed by the Industrial Revolution.

The modern growth of cities in non-western territories was deeply intertwined with both colonialism and the impacts of the Industrial Revolution. The British colonial administration created some effective urban institutions and infrastructures in Dhaka. Examples include the establishment of the municipality (1864) and the construction of the Buckland Embankment (1860s), which both helped prevent flooding and created a riverfront promenade for the city's residents.

The trajectories of Delhi and Kolkata are unique in their own ways. Delhi has a well-documented history as a political and administrative centre since the Mauryan, Kushan, and Gupta empires, continuing through the Sultanate, Mughal, and colonial eras, and into its post-independence emergence as a metropolis. From 1772 to 1911, Kolkata served as the capital of British India, growing into a robust political, commercial, and cultural hub of the empire, second only to London. Kolkata retains the urban footprint—and the nostalgia—of an imperial city, dotted with iconic neoclassical buildings that embodied the British Raj's "civilising mission." In the final decades of colonial India, Delhi replaced Kolkata as the imperial capital, with the Viceroy's House—designed by British architect Edwin Lutyens—at its centre.

By comparison, Dhaka's Mughal and colonial footprints are modest. Until Bangladesh's independence in 1971, Dhaka remained a quaint city with a rural ambience and little more than two million people. Things began to change with the country's "industrial revolution" in the late 1980s. As the Berlin Wall fell and the neoliberal world order loosened trade barriers, encouraging global capital to flow more freely than ever, urbanisation arrived with force in a society that had been largely agrarian. For Dhaka it was almost a kind of "reluctant urbanisation," one in which the capital was ill-prepared and lacked adequate policy instruments to absorb the massive influx of rural migrants flooding the city in search of factory jobs—particularly in the garment industry.

Dhaka's population grew by nearly ten per cent in the following decades. Unfortunately, there were neither effective housing policies nor coordinated urban transport planning. Urban expansion has been ad hoc and laissez-faire. By 2020, Dhaka had joined New York City, Tokyo, Shanghai, Beijing, Mexico City, São Paulo, Lagos, Cairo, Delhi, and a handful of others on the list of global megacities. The "rural city" remade itself into a cacophonous megalopolis. Its haphazard growth reflected the country's fractious political culture. One of the most glaring failures has been the inability to manage the city's exploding population density.

TDS: You emphasise the idea of "good density," which contrasts with the common perception of Dhaka's overwhelming overpopulation as a barrier to modern amenities and the main cause of the city's chaotic nature. Could you elaborate on this perspective?

AM: Conventional wisdom holds that high population density is a burden and the root cause of many social, economic, and political problems. I argue that density becomes a burden and a paralysing problem only if it is not managed well or distributed equitably with a fair allocation of resources. Walking around Dhaka, density surely feels overwhelming, maddening, and claustrophobic—and this is because we have not been proactive or creative in managing it. What we face is not "density," but rather gadagadi—a phenomenon of people living in extreme congestion which poses a threat to public health.

In contrast, "good density" is a form of tactical urbanism that addresses the problem of overcrowding. In other words, good density presents a mixed-use urban lifestyle, one that ensures people live in compact and affordable housing units with easy, walkable access to the basic services they need, such as schools, healthcare, work, markets, outdoor public spaces, and parks—all within comfortable walking distance. When I say, "good density," I actually mean "good society density." Managing population density well presents the opportunities for creating a good society.

It is a given that our cities will always be high-density because of our country's land-to-population ratio. We simply have too many people on a relatively small piece of land. For context, about 70 million people live in the UK's total area of 250,000 km², whereas 180 million live in Bangladesh's 150,000 km². In Thailand, 72 million people occupy over 500,000 km². Bangladesh's density is comparable to half the U.S. population living in just the state of Iowa. Our cities will always be dense, so imagining low- or mid-density cities with picturesque parks will remain a perpetual false dream.

The question we must ask is: why have we not been able to harness our density dividend? Several policy failures are to blame. One of them is both philosophical and tactical: the uncritical acceptance of a historical Western fear of population density, rooted in the urban pathologies of 19th-century industrial cities such as London, Manchester, and New York. Describing the wretched urban conditions in mid-19th-century Manchester—nicknamed "Cottonpolis"—in The Condition of the Working Class in England (1845), Friedrich Engels portrayed the modern fear of unhygienic urban density. Modern urban planning as a discipline internalised this 19th-century fear, which we inherited when planning our own cities at the tail end of the 20th century.

What we failed to account for are the late-20th-century South Asian urban realities: the inevitability of rural-to-urban migration, ultra-dense conurbations, the informal economy and settlements, and the looming threat of climate change. Urban policymakers, planning communities, and local governments have generally treated population density as a burden—a problem to be solved—rather than as an opportunity to create a new type of urban lifestyle marked by compact living, economic dynamism, a low-carbon footprint, resilient environmental adaptation, and walkable neighbourhoods.

TDS: Instead of pursuing democratic and inclusive development across the city, we increasingly see fortification through gated communities, while private enterprises and government facilities remain concentrated in affluent areas. Yet Dhaka still struggles to become a truly livable city. Why is that?

AM: In an ideal world, good urban planning promotes democratic growth and inclusive development, meaning the interests of all city dwellers are prioritised as part of a general social contract, which is then spatialised through land-use instruments such as the Detailed Area Plan (DAP). Unfortunately, however, we have knowingly or unknowingly accepted planning as an elitist tool to produce cities "of the privileged, by the privileged, for the privileged."

One way to understand this discriminatory practice is through our approach to footpaths. We are reluctant to invest in them as soft infrastructure that benefits the majority of daily commuters. Yet we are often eager to invest in flyovers, whether or not they are the best and most affordable mobility option for the city. Flyovers are costly and serve only a small portion of daily motorised movements, yet they are celebrated as triumphant political symbols that drive our vision of development.

The sad truth is that our urban development model presents a highly pixelated landscape of unevenly distributed privilege. While the parks in Gulshan boast walkways, cafés, libraries, and basketball courts, 37 of Dhaka's 129 wards have neither a park nor a playground. So, when you say, "we increasingly see fortification through gated communities, while private enterprises and government facilities remain concentrated in affluent areas," we should not be surprised. The problem is that we fail to recognise how misguided we are in packaging this gross spatial injustice as progress.

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A cry for a livable city

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TDS: Could you elaborate on the idea of urban justice in the context of Dhaka, especially considering the decline of parks, footpaths, and public spaces for walking, playing, and recreation — and, most importantly, the lack of adequate public transport?

AM: While "justice" is a complex political concept—whose justice or injustice we are talking about, or what the ultimate goal of justice is, as Aristotle would demand—we can narrow it down to a working model for our cities. By urban justice, I mean several things: using resources at our disposal in ways that benefit the majority of the city's population; managing population density to democratise access to services such as healthcare, education, and transportation; protecting the city's environmental DNA to ensure long-term sustainability, particularly in the era of climate change, for the benefit of present and future generations; and creating urban spatialities that nurture democratic values, civic awareness, and respect for the rule of law among city dwellers. Achieving these goals will, of course, require sincere collaboration among all stakeholders.

TDS: Given that much of the city's infrastructure — both planned and largely unplanned — has become deeply entrenched and may seem irreversible, how can we prevent tragedies such as the recent Milestone School fire or building collapses or fire incidents, and mitigate such massive losses?

AM: The Milestone School tragedy was heartbreaking. Even though it felt like a bolt from the blue, it was, unfortunately, inevitable. It resulted from unchecked greed to extract profit from every square inch of city land, a blatant failure to adhere to commonsense land-use policy (why place a school in the flight path zone, knowing well the danger of crashes and the air pollution from jet fuel emissions?), and the air force's disregard for public safety. Someone in the administration should have anticipated this tragedy and acted to prevent it. That didn't happen. Planning should be pre-emptive rather than reactive. We keep repeating mistakes that cost lives. We can begin to prevent tragedies like this by holding those in charge accountable, enforcing safe land-use policies, and depoliticising the enforcement of law.

PHOTO: **SAURAV DEY**

A man rests under the shades of a tree in Ramna Park, one of the few public spaces available to Dhaka residents.

TDS: Decentralisation has long been discussed but rarely implemented effectively to ease the burden on Dhaka. With the added challenges of climate change, how can Dhaka maintain its surrounding rivers sustainably and ensure the capital remains liveable in the future?

AM: Decentralisation has become a political problem with no immediate or formulaic solutions. It is a policy challenge for both the executive and legislative branches of government, as well as for local governments and planning communities. We have reduced "decentralisation" to a feel-good slogan, while Dhaka has grown into a colossal primate city, disproportionately larger than the next three major cities combined. By allowing Dhaka's unchecked expansion to consume the rivers and wetlands that sustain it, we are not only damaging Dhaka itself but also diminishing the potential of other cities across the country.

To decentralise the capital, we must first recognise that mid-sized cities represent our new urban frontier. A resilient and adaptable urban development policy for these cities is not only essential to reducing pressure on Dhaka but also offers an effective and equitable model of economic growth for the entire nation. Several incentives support this approach. First, high living costs are encouraging residents of the capital to relocate to smaller cities in search of a more affordable lifestyle. Second, the growing economies of mid-sized cities are fostering opportunity-rich start-up ecosystems. Third, these cities help narrow the urban–rural and agriculture–industry divides, creating a range of hybrid forms of work for their labour force. Fourth, because mid-sized cities have not yet reached a frenzied stage of development, their entrepreneurial classes have the opportunity to shape climate-resilient, human-centric, economically vibrant, and inclusive cities.

It is time to be proactive. Safeguarding Dhaka's rivers and wetlands will require a new generation of context-specific urban policies, greater environmental literacy, depoliticised enforcement of environmental laws, and, ultimately, a degree of soul-searching about the kinds of cities we aspire to build for the greater good of society.

TDS: Could you share examples of locally developed solutions, or lessons from other cities around the world, that might help address Dhaka's urban problems?

AM: The best solution to Dhaka's problems is to cure ourselves of excessive Dhaka-centrism in our national thinking. We need to start imagining a future beyond Dhaka.

One of the most instructive cases for Dhaka is Seoul, a city I have had the opportunity to visit and study. Like Dhaka, it is a primate city, but since the 1970s the South Korean government has developed satellite towns around it to ease population pressure on the capital. These new towns, located 20–30 miles from Seoul, are connected by highways, subway extensions, and later by high-speed rail. Regional development policies also prohibited the excessive concentration of industry in Seoul. Furthermore, the establishment of Sejong Administrative City, 120 kilometres south of Seoul and home to many government ministries and agencies, as an ambitious decentralisation project has eased pressure on the capital and spurred growth in the Chungcheong region.

Why can't we pursue commonsense solutions, such as relocating several government ministries to other cities and reducing the burden on the capital? What is stopping us?

There is another city from which we can learn much: Tokyo. If you are there, the first thing you notice is that public transport is everywhere and widely used. The system crisscrosses the city so thoroughly that owning a car becomes unnecessary. This culture of devaluing car ownership helps make dense cities like Tokyo both sustainable and livable. Some of Tokyo's 23 wards—Shinjuku and Toshima, for example—have a population density of more than 20,000 people per square kilometre. Despite this, they offer a vibrant mix of housing, shopping, restaurants, businesses, parks, and culture.

Tokyo's streets and subways are always full of people. While riding the subway in Tokyo, I recalled the words of Gustavo Petro, president of Colombia since 2022: "A developed country is not a place where the poor have cars. It's where the rich use public transportation." Despite its enormous population, Tokyo doesn't feel claustrophobic. The reasons are population management, efficient mobility options, equitable distribution of amenities, and a culture of self-discipline as a philosophy of urban life. This last point is the most important. For a city to function well, its people must believe in the collective good. Good cities and good people shape each other.

ILLUSTRATION: **BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY**

The interview was taken by **Priyam Paul**.