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FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

EU-India deal calls for proactive action

Bangladesh must safeguard its export markets from competitors

With the European Union and India signing a new free trade agreement (FTA), Bangladesh's readymade garments (RMG) exports post-LDC graduation appear increasingly vulnerable. Once the EU-India deal comes into effect in 2027, Indian apparel will start enjoying zero percent tariffs in the EU market, down from the current 9-12 percent. In other words, Bangladesh's competitive edge of duty-free access for garment products to Europe is set to disappear.

Currently, Bangladesh enjoys LDC preferential treatment in the EU, paying zero tariffs on its garment exports. Leveraging this benefit, Bangladesh has been able to expand its share in the EU's apparel market, its top destination for RMG exports. Garment exports to the EU accounted for 50.10 percent of the country's total apparel shipments in FY 2024-2025, followed by 19.18 percent to the US. However, this advantage will not last. After its LDC graduation in November this year, Bangladeshi apparel can retain duty-free access to the EU market only for three more years. Unless a successor trade arrangement is secured, it may face tariffs as high as 12 percent. In such a scenario, RMG exports may fall by around 16 percent, according to experts.

Moreover, the European market has already become a battleground for exporters following the US's reciprocal tariff imposition, which has given EU buyers greater negotiating power in terms of pricing and lead-time expectations. India's strength in raw cotton and backward linkages also provides it with a competitive advantage over Bangladesh.

Given the situation, Bangladesh has few options but to aggressively pursue bilateral free trade agreements or secure the EU's Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus (GSP+) status after LDC graduation. Bangladesh's relatively high dependence on imported fabric could also make it difficult to meet the EU's strict rules of origin requirements for apparel (for example, knitting/weaving and cutting/sewing occurring in the same country) post-graduation. Therefore, both active engagement with EU countries to relax those rules and a simultaneous reduction in import dependence should be a priority. The upcoming government in Bangladesh should also prioritise policies that help businesses diversify into higher-end products and explore new markets. Other areas requiring government support include reliable and low-cost energy, efficient logistics and ports, access to finance, and the development of a skilled workforce.

Graduation from LDC status is not going to affect only the RMG industry; leaders from several other sectors also expressed their concerns about this on Tuesday at a roundtable in the capital. While the interim government has not sought to defer graduation, political parties should make their stance on the issue clear ahead of the 13th parliamentary election. Though deferment has its challenges, the post-graduation scenario for Bangladesh, which does not yet seem ready for such a transition, also appears far from promising. Political parties aiming to form the next government must outline clear strategies to navigate these challenges. A bumpy road lies ahead for Bangladesh's economy, and businesses need to understand how the future government plans to steer through it.

Why are so many dying by suicide?

State, institutions, and communities must step up to address the crisis

It is concerning to learn of the unchecked prevalence of suicides in Bangladesh. According to a report quoting sources at the Police Headquarters, some 13,491 people took their own lives between January and November in 2025, averaging 41 deaths per day. These findings are consistent with the annual figures provided by police in recent years. For instance, in the five years between 2020 and 2024, a total of 73,597 people had died by suicide, amounting to an average of 14,719 suicides per year or about 40 per day. These numbers are stark by any measure, and demand proper intervention.

The picture we get from these figures is not just one of a public health emergency—which is apparently the second-highest cause of death in the country—but also of a social crisis unfolding largely out of public sight. Many of those who died had been reportedly struggling with family disputes, marital tensions, financial strain, social isolation, untreated mental health challenges, etc. Yet, as revealed by a *Samakal* investigation, a striking number never sought professional help. The risks also amplify when people feel uncertain about their livelihoods, disconnected from support systems, or unable to rely on institutions during moments of distress.

Some of the recent cases also reveal why both proper psychological care and social interventions are important. Housewife Hafeza Khatun (35) was perhaps the latest to die by suicide, on Monday, at a railway crossing in Pubail, Gazipur, along with her two children. Reportedly, she couldn't be deterred despite being alerted by the gateman to an approaching train. Earlier, the deaths of the wife and infant of jailed Chhatra League leader Jewel Hasan Saddam—and the subsequent denial of parole to Saddam—made national headlines. The background stories of many such incidents show that vulnerability deepens when social or state support systems fail to intervene in time. Individuals navigating hardship alone are more likely to face such tragic consequences.

The responsibility, therefore, cannot rest on families or individuals alone. While there is no alternative to raising awareness of mental health challenges and providing timely treatment, it is equally important that we build a strong support network so that troubled individuals do not feel abandoned. This requires coordinated efforts from the state, communities, educational institutions, and healthcare providers to ensure accessible counselling, early intervention, and the removal of stigma surrounding psychological care. Equally, strengthening social safety nets and fostering a culture of empathy can help people recognise that any crisis, however overwhelming, can be addressed with collective support.

Media reform in Bangladesh needs precision, not pressure



Dr S.M. Rezwan Ul-Alam is associate professor and chair of Media, Communication, and Journalism Department at North South University.

S.M. REZWAN-UL-ALAM

Bangladesh is entering a decisive phase in its approach to governing its media. The proposed Broadcasting Ordinance, 2026 and the National Media Commission Ordinance, 2026 make this evident. Together, these proposed Ordinances signal the aspiration to update an old regulatory system to suit a media environment that has changed faster than the laws have been able to keep pace.

The ambition deserves recognition. Media regulation is no longer a simple matter of managing television channels and radio frequencies. Digital platforms, online journalism, and hybrid forms of broadcasting have reshaped how information circulates. Governments across the world are struggling to keep pace. Bangladesh is not late to this conversation. In fact, in some ways, it is arriving at the right moment—when lessons from elsewhere are already becoming apparent.

The real question, then, is not whether reform is necessary. It is whether reform is being calibrated carefully enough to make it sustainable. There is much in the draft laws that point in the right direction. Moving away from scattered, informal oversight towards commission-based regulation is a structural improvement. It replaces uncertainty with institutional order. The focus on professional standards, ethical conduct, and dispute resolution also reflects an understanding that media quality, and not just media control, matters. Even the decision to bring digital and online media into the conversation shows an awareness that regulation cannot stay trapped in the analogue age.

These are not small steps. They form a solid base. But a solid base still needs careful design above ground. One area where the drafts feel unfinished is their treatment of freedom of expression. The laws acknowledge constitutional guarantees of free speech and press freedom, but mostly in passing. What they do not do in their current form is make those freedoms an active guide for regulatory action.

In practice, effective media regulation works on a simple logic. Regulators intervene only when the law clearly allows it, there is a genuine public interest factor, and only to the extent necessary. This idea—often described as legality, necessity, and proportionality—is not an abstract theory. It is how regulators in countries

like the UK justify decisions that restrict content while still protecting free expression.

When these principles are written directly into the operational parts of a law, they protect everyone. They protect journalists from arbitrary interference, regulators from accusations of overreach, and governments from legal and political fallout. Including such guidance would not weaken Bangladesh's regulatory hand. It would steady it.

Another issue lies in institutional



FILE VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

design. Under the proposed framework, both the Broadcast Commission and the National Media Commission are given broad responsibilities. Licensing, content oversight, ethics, dispute resolution, and directive powers all sit within a relatively small institutional space.

Coordination is essential, but overlap can be risky. When mandates blur, confusion follows—about who decides what, who is accountable, and where authority begins and ends. European regulatory systems tend to avoid this by drawing more precise functional lines. Broadcasting regulation is often kept narrowly focused, while broader ethical or professional issues are handled through separate or co-regulatory mechanisms. This is not about ideology. It is about administrative clarity. Clear boundaries reduce conflict, make

standards—defined broadly. Flexibility is functional, but vagueness carries risks. It opens space for uneven interpretation and discretionary enforcement, which benefits no one. Many European systems handle this by pairing general legal principles with detailed codes developed through consultation. That approach allows standards to evolve without leaving everyone guessing. Bangladesh could move in a similar direction with relatively minor technical adjustments.

Due process is another quiet but essential concern. The proposed commissions have the power to issue directives and resolve disputes, yet the laws do not consistently spell out basic procedural safeguards. Notice, the right to be heard, reasoned decisions, and access to judicial review are not luxuries. They are what make regulation legitimate in practice.

drafts offer limited scope for structured consultation or public reasoning behind decisions. Yet experience from the UK and Europe shows that open consultation does not slow regulation; it strengthens it. When rules are explained and stakeholders are heard, compliance improves, and conflict decreases. None of these points argues against reform. They say to get it right.

Bangladesh has an opportunity to show that strong regulation and media freedom are not opposites but partners. With a few careful, low-cost refinements—embedding guiding principles, clarifying mandates, strengthening procedural safeguards, and improving transparency—the country can build a media governance framework that is firm, fair, and ready for the future. That kind of balance is more complex than passing a law. But it is also what lasts.

Confrontational election politics shows that little has changed

Azman Rahman is a political commentator.

AZMAN RAHMAN

It has been about a week since the window for official campaigning for the upcoming election opened, and things are already settling into a familiar pattern. The slogans sound updated, and social media is louder than ever. Still, the behaviour, language, and logic of competition remain largely unchanged. This does not feel like the start of a new chapter in politics, as many had expected after the uprising, but like a return to an old routine.

Recent incidents during electioneering supports this notion. With the election getting closer, personal attacks are frequently replacing serious debate, and symbolic insults are forming political messages. These incidents are not trivial; they shape how politics is practised on the ground. When leaders speak without restraint, supporters get the message that restraint is optional, leading to the shift in political discourse from persuasion to dominance.

This change is already evident. In Sherpur, a Jamaat-e-Islami leader named Md Rezaul Karim died after sustaining critical injuries in clashes between activists of BNP and Jamaat. Even before this incident, there was a turn towards confrontation in campaigning: scuffles broke out

between rival supporters and activists, and even alliance partners, over trifling matters. This suggests that what should have been a contest of ideas is turning, again, into a cycle of intimidation despite the changed hopes and dreams following the uprising.

The Liberation War has once again become a tool to be used to score political brownie points. Rather than serving as a common ground for national unity, it is being pulled into partisan disputes. Questions of loyalty and legitimacy are resurfacing. Identity politics is also playing a central role. The Jamaat-led alliance seems to be leaning heavily on anti-India sentiment as a campaign theme. Jamaat leaders have accused the BNP of making a deal with India. BNP has rejected the claim and responded in equally sharp language. These exchanges are not about foreign policy or national interest, but about mobilising fear and suspicion. India becomes a symbol rather than a subject of serious discussion—an external enemy, to avoid accountability for domestic failures.

Religion is also being used. Jamaat leaders have publicly claimed that those who vote for them will go to *jannah*. BNP has responded by saying that no party has the authority to issue entry to heaven and that such claims are tantamount to serious moral and religious violations. This exchange shows how far the campaign has drifted from democratic reasoning. Faith is being turned into a political incentive, insulting both religious sentiments and

politics. It also places pressure on many voters instead of encouraging informed choice.

These messages spread quickly online, turning social media into a second battleground. Coordinated networks circulate false or misleading content. The goal is not always persuasion; often, it seems to be exhaustion. When people stop trusting what they see, they disengage. That disengagement benefits organised

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groups that rely on pressure rather than broad consent.

Online spaces are filled with memes and trolling, yet constructive discussion is largely absent. At the same time, distrust is reinforced by early claims of vote-rigging and fears of the capture of polling stations. BNP has urged supporters to reach polling centres

early in the morning, even before voting begins. These concerns may be valid in some cases, but when raised in advance, they create panic and shape expectations in risky ways. Some voters decide that participation is pointless. Others prepare for confrontation. In both cases, confidence in the process weakens.

To be fair, this is not the most repressive or electorally disruptive period in the country's history. Yet, the promise of a new political era was not about being slightly better than before. It was about doing politics differently. If old tactics continue to deliver results, parties will keep using them. If religious pressure, blaming foreign interference, or intimidation tactics continue to work, political reform will remain a dream. Real change requires more than new alliances or leadership. It requires breaking habits that reward division and aggression. Elections should be about choice, not fear. Faith should guide personal ethics, not determine ballots. Foreign relations deserve facts, and political competition should never cost lives.

For now, the promise of change remains a promise. What was described as an uprising in 2024 is beginning to look less like a turning point. The confrontational language, behaviour and logic of political actors during this electoral campaign season suggest that without a conscious effort to reset the tone, the nation risks rehearsing the very politics it once vowed to leave behind in the July uprising.