

## Fast deals, flimsy scrutiny

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Together, these obligations will force elected leaders to bear financial and political burdens they had no role in designing.

As the clock ticks down to the election on February 12, the flurry of dealmaking is not merely a lapse in fiscal prudence or macroeconomic management; it is a "fundamental breach of principle," according to Debapriya Bhattacharya, a distinguished fellow at the Centre for Policy Dialogue. "It is, in principle, not morally correct," Bhattacharya said, suggesting that a transitional administration should not be tethering the nation's future to multi-billion-dollar obligations in its final hours.

"Whether by design or by default, they are making it immensely difficult for the incoming government to manage the economy, especially given the current disruptive global developments," he said, adding, "It surprises me that those who intend to come to power are not taking these developments, which will make their lives difficult, seriously enough."

By committing the state to massive expenditures, the interim government is creating what Bhattacharya calls a "difficult benchmark" for the incoming administration.

Prof Anu Muhammad, an eminent economist, said the deals with foreign entities lack public transparency, and the methods reek of those of the previous regime.

He noted that last minute scramble and ignoring opinions of political parties and the public reminded one of the last autocratic regime. "The interim government assumed power with the promise of reforming and stabilising the democratic system following the mass uprising. Yet, we see that the government itself is not adhering to reforms," he said.

"Instead, it is perpetuating undemocratic processes that will plunge the people into a deep, long term crisis," said Anu Muhammad.

"Once this government is dissolved, there will be no accountability of these advisers and special assistants. They will move on. So, who do we hold accountable?" he said.

### DEFENCE INDUSTRIAL ZONE

The interim government has moved into a sensitive arena: defence manufacturing policy, a sector intertwined with national security, foreign relations, and long-term industrial planning. At a meeting of the Bangladesh Economic Zones Authority (BEZA), chaired by Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus on January 26, the government decided to earmark around 850 acres in Mirsarai, Chattogram, for a proposed Defence Industrial Zone.

After the meeting, BEZA Executive Chairman Ashik Chowdhury said the land is currently vacant and was previously designated for the Indian Economic Zone

cancelled last year. Officials say the Defence Industrial Zone is intended to strengthen domestic military production capacity and position Bangladesh for the growing global defence manufacturing market.

But critics argue the project illustrates the interim government's broader pattern: taking long-term strategic decisions without electoral legitimacy. BEZA clarified the zone is not meant to replicate Bangladesh Ordnance Factories through state-run plants, but rather pursue technology transfer, joint ventures and supplier arrangements with foreign partners, with private sector participation.

**PAY HIKE PROPOSAL**  
Criticism intensified after the Ninth National Pay Commission, led by former finance secretary Zakir Ahmed Khan, proposed a civil service pay increase so steep that it could double the government's recurring wage bill if implemented.

The rationale for the pay hike is not entirely groundless. Civil servants have not seen a pay revision in a decade and inflation has eroded purchasing power. But implementing the proposed structure would require an additional Tk 1.06 lakh crore per year, on top of the Tk 1.31 lakh crore the state already spends on salaries and pensions for 14 lakh employees and nine lakh pensioners.

For a treasury strained by debt and missed revenue targets, economists call the proposal a fiscal landmine – especially if it becomes a political inducement rather than a disciplined reform.

**AVIATION DIPLOMACY**  
Yunus's government won a high-stakes diplomatic reprieve with Washington. Facing a protectionist Trump administration threatening tariffs of 37 percent on Bangladeshi garment exports, his team negotiated it down to 20 percent. For a country dependent on garments for the majority of export earnings, it probably averted a disaster.

But economists argue the relief came with a price. In late 2025, Biman Bangladesh Airlines was directed to purchase 14 Boeing aircraft in a multi-billion-dollar deal backed by a sovereign guarantee. What's more, the deal is proceeding without a comparative analysis between Boeing and Airbus.

Governance concerns grew further after a sudden reshuffle of Biman's board weeks before the election. Three officials were appointed to the board of the state-run airline: Khalilur Rahman, the national security adviser and high representative on the Rohingya issue; Faiz Ahmad Taiyeb, special assistant to the chief adviser; and Akhtar Ahmed, senior secretary of the Election Commission.

**RECRUITMENT AGENCY LICENCES**  
The expatriates' welfare ministry approved licences for 252 new overseas recruitment agencies, swelling the total to 2,646, the highest in South Asia.

The ministry claims more competition will break syndicates, but analysts interviewed by The Daily Star argue that oversight is already weak and the expansion will worsen corruption.

The human cost is visible. With markets like Malaysia and the UAE restricted or suspended due to past abuses, illegal migration has risen. The International Organisation for Migration reports Bangladesh ranked first in illegal sea crossings to Europe in 2025, with over 22,000 attempting the dangerous Mediterranean route.

### ELECTION-EVE SPENDING SURGE

In perhaps the clearest example of the interim government's end-of-tenure decision-making, the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (Ecneec) on January 25 approved a sweeping package of infrastructure and social spending, authorising 25 new and revised development projects worth a combined Tk 45,191 crore.

While officials argue the decisions were necessary to clear administrative backlogs and sustain economic momentum, the timing has sparked debate about whether a transitional administration should commit the state to major financial obligations so close to a transition.

A key driver of this late-stage spending surge is the first major revision of the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant project, which Ecneec approved with a massive Tk 25,592 crore cost increase, raising the total to Tk 138,685 crore. The project deadline has also been extended by two and a half years, pushing completion to June 2028.

The committee also approved the Bangladesh-China Friendship General Hospital, a 1,000-bed facility for the northern region costing Tk 2,459 crore, with most of the funding expected from China.

The interim government has also moved quickly on massive energy procurement

– an area that carries heavy fiscal risk for future administrations. On January 27, the government's purchase committee approved a proposal to procure five LNG cargoes in 2026, citing the need to meet rising domestic energy demand. Petrobangla will procure LNG directly from Aramco Trading Singapore. That's just the latest in a series of energy purchases.

### RAB VEHICLES AHEAD OF POLLS

The interim government has given initial approval to purchase 163 vehicles for the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) through direct procurement, citing the need to strengthen the force's operational capability ahead of the national election. The procurement would include three Jeeps, 100 pickup trucks, and 60 microbuses. The final cost will only be known after approval by the government purchase committee.

The move has drawn

scrutiny because the Rab has faced serious domestic and international criticism over alleged human rights violations. The interim government's own Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances recommended abolishing this unit in a report to the chief adviser. Rights organisations, including Human Rights Watch, have also called for the force to be disbanded.

Against this backdrop, questions have been raised over why the interim government is approving such procurement as it approaches the end of its tenure. Home Ministry Senior Secretary Nasimul Gani defended the decision to bypass open tenders, saying the ministry wanted to purchase the vehicles from state-owned Pragati Industries. "We are keeping government money within the government," he added.

### SOCIAL SAFETY PLANS FOR FY27

The interim government has also decided to increase monthly allowances and expand beneficiary coverage for 15 social safety net programmes (SSNPs) for the upcoming fiscal year, which begins on July 1. This move has also drawn criticism from policy experts who noted that implementation will fall to the next elected government, which may have different priorities.

In an earlier interview with The Daily Star, Mustafa K Mujeri, executive director of the Institute for Inclusive Finance and Development (InFM), said such decisions are difficult to justify at this stage. He added that if the government intended to cushion low-income groups amid persistent inflation, it could have increased allowances and expanded coverage during the current fiscal year.

### PROMOTIONS ACCELERATED

In another significant administrative move, the government promoted 118 joint secretaries to the rank of additional secretary on January 27.

The timing of these promotions has drawn attention as the interim government prepares to hand over power, raising questions about whether such large-scale bureaucratic reshuffles should be finalised at the last minute.

"Now that the countdown is there, and they are running out of gas. They should have concentrated on completing the reforms they had committed to," Bhattacharya said.

He questioned whether these decisions represent the "whole government" or are being steered by specific individual interest groups looking to secure personal gains before the transition.

"These developments lack transparency, lack stakeholder discussion or professional discussion," he said, continuing, "so the question is, are they creating this difficult benchmark for the next government by design or by default?"

## Will take ruthless action against extortionists

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In his speech, Shafiqur stressed the need for establishing justice in society alongside restoring equality. "Extortionists, land grabbers, case manipulators and the corrupt swoop on ordinary people like birds of prey."

At one point, he called upon businesspeople to stand up against extortion, adding that the signs surrounding the election were not encouraging.

"Women are being harassed, people are being killed in attacks, offices are being set on fire, election campaigns are being obstructed, and attempts are being made to provoke clashes," the Jamaat leader said.

He called on the

government and the Election Commission to take appropriate steps to gain public trust.

Addressing rivals, he said they should respect others and practice the democracy they so loudly preach.

### CORRUPTION

Since the start of the campaign, Jamaat leaders, including the party ameer, have repeatedly been saying that the BNP government of the past was riddled with graft and pointed out Bangladesh ranking top on global corruption indices at the time.

In this context, BNP Chairman Tarique Rahman, hinting at Jamaat, told a rally in Mymensingh, "My question is, from 2001 to 2006, two members of a

party were also in the BNP government. If the BNP was so bad, why didn't those two resign?"

Jamaat chief yesterday responded by saying, "We did not leave so that at least three ministries could be saved and protected from corruption."

Earlier around 11:00am, the main election office of Shafiqur's constituency, Dhaka-15, and a "multimedia bus" for Jamaat's digital campaign were inaugurated in the Water Tank area of Mirpur-10.

At the event, the Jamaat ameer spoke about the death of Maulana Rezaul Karim, secretary of Jamaat's Sreebardi upazila unit, who was killed in a clash between Jamaat and BNP activists in Jhenaigati,

Sherpur. When a reporter asked him about the incident, Shafiqur said, "It indicates intolerance. It indicates a lack of confidence in the people. It indicates an inability to tolerate others' victory."

He added that the incident raised questions about a level playing field during the election. "We will not allow anyone to trample on it."

The Jamaat chief said their electoral fight was not for any party, individual or family, but for the welfare of 180 million people. "We don't seek Jamaat's victory alone, want the people's collective victory."

Shafiqur later joined rallies in Dhaka-14, Dhaka-16 and Dhaka-17.

## People of Dhalghata want homes alongside growth

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When asked what kind of candidate they want in the upcoming election, local residents said they had largely accepted the need to give up land for development projects. However, they are unwilling to completely abandon their birthplace. Their main demand is for the government to establish a planned township in the area so that affected families can continue living there despite land acquisition.

Ward No. 3 member Jomir Uddin said the government had taken over land, leaving many residents unemployed. He said the primary demands of local people are employment opportunities and assured housing.

From an economic standpoint, the Cox's Bazar-2 seat (Moheshkhali and Kutubdia) is considered one of the most important constituencies. The island-based constituency in the Bay of Bengal is viewed as a future economic hub, which is why heavyweight candidates traditionally contest elections here.

There are 3.88 lakh voters in Moheshkhali and Kutubdia region, as per EC data.

In the 13th parliamentary election, four candidates are in the race. However, local voters say the main contest will be between BNP-nominated candidate Alamgir Mohammad Mahfullah Farid, a two-time former lawmaker contesting with the Sheaf of Paddy symbol, and Jamaat-e-Islami Assistant Secretary General and former MP Hamidur Rahman Azad, contesting with the "Scales" symbol.

## US resumes food aid to Somalia

**AFP, Nairobi**  
The United States yesterday announced the resumption of food distribution in Somalia, weeks after the destruction of a US-funded World Food Programme (WFP) warehouse at Mogadishu's port.

Both candidates are actively campaigning door to door. Hamidur Rahman Azad, a resident of Kutubdia, has been staying in the Matarbari area of Moheshkhali since Monday to conduct campaign activities. He has been meeting voters, shaking hands and exchanging greetings.

At around 11:30am on Tuesday, Azad arrived in the Nasir's Dail area of Dhalghata with two convoys. Jamaat leaders and supporters gathered in large numbers, chanting slogans in favour of the Scales symbol. He greeted familiar voters

Bangladesh's economic transformation. If implemented, it will significantly boost employment generation, industrialisation, power production, port-centric trade and international investment in the Maheshkhali-Kutubdia area."

Dr Hamidur Rahman Azad further said that the launch of the Matarbari deep seaport would open a new horizon for the country's import and export sector. He added that through ensuring energy security, establishing special economic zones and industrial parks, and



in the local market, embraced supporters, and urged them to work for his victory. Later, he entered residential areas along a narrow coastal road, visiting homes and speaking with women voters to seek support.

At a street rally at Matarbari on the same day, Azad said that if the Moheshkhali Master Plan is implemented, South Chattogram will emerge as one of the country's most important commercial hubs.

He said, "The Moheshkhali Master Plan is not just an infrastructure project; it is a blueprint for

developing improved connectivity, the region would make a major contribution to the national economy.

At the event, he alleged that certain opportunistic syndicates have been formed to deprive local people of jobs. He assured that if elected, such irregularities would be stopped and employment would be ensured for locals on the basis of priority and merit.

Meanwhile, BNP candidate Alamgir Farid is also campaigning intensively, visiting different localities with his supporters. He has been

meeting voters, exchanging greetings and seeking votes in favour of the Sheaf of Paddy symbol.

About the upcoming development projects, Alamgir said once they become operational, local people would benefit economically. "... after the deep seaport becomes functional, local youths would be provided with jobs there."

Speaking against the projects, Moheshkhali Rakkha Andolon Organiser Abdul Mannan Rana said, "Moheshkhali is not just an island; it is one of Bangladesh's most resource-rich natural regions. Nearly five lakh people here depend on agriculture, fisheries, salt production and betel leaf cultivation for their lives and livelihoods. If the government's Moheshkhali Integrated Development Authority project is implemented, it will bring a devastating impact on this traditional and nature-based way of life."

He said that under the project, there is a plan to acquire more than 34,000 acres of land from the region. "Around 12,000 acres have already been acquired, where several development projects are currently underway."

He added that in areas where development projects are ongoing, most of the land is salt fields, and so far about 200 families had been relocated from these areas.

Rana warned that if the project is implemented, nearly two lakh people could be displaced within the next 10 years.

## Govt, EC at odds over civil servants' push for 'yes/no'

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regarding the issue.

According to Section 21 of the Referendum Ordinance, 2025 and Article 86 of the Representation of the People Order (RPO), 1972, any person engaged in the service of the republic may inform and make the public aware of the referendum. "However, none shall in any way call upon the people to vote 'yes' or 'no' in the referendum, because such activities may affect the result of the referendum," the letter said.

Contacted, Election Commissioner Anwarul Islam Sarkar told The Daily Star, "According to the Referendum Ordinance, government officials cannot campaign for either 'yes' or 'no'. If they do, it will be a punishable offence."

Section 21 of the Referendum Ordinance states that in the 13th parliamentary election, any action deemed an offence or a violation of the electoral code of conduct under

the RPO, 1972 and related rules shall also, as far as applicable, be considered an offence or a violation in the referendum.

Article 86 of the RPO, 1972 says a person in the service of Bangladesh is guilty of an offence, punishable with imprisonment for a term which may extend to five years and shall not be less than one year, and also with fine, if they misuse their official position in a manner calculated to influence the result of the election.

Under the Election Officers (Special Provisions) Act, 1991, the EC appoints government officials to election duties. Deputy commissioners and divisional commissioners are appointed as returning officers, while upazila nirbahi officers and other officials serve as assistant returning officers.

The act states that when any person is appointed as an election officer, he shall, from the date of such

appointment until relieved of his election duties, be deemed to be on deputation under the EC, in addition to his regular employment.

During this period, the election officer remains under the supervision of the commission and, as applicable, the returning officer, and must comply with all lawful orders or instructions issued by them. Election-related responsibilities take precedence, and other duties may be performed only if they do not conflict with election work.

If an election officer willfully fails or refuses to comply with any order or instruction issued by the EC or violates any provision of election law, they shall be deemed to have engaged in misconduct, which is punishable under the service rules.

Despite this, several advisers and senior government officials are campaigning in favour of a 'yes' vote.

According to a Press Information Department (PID) handout issued yesterday night, Religious Affairs Adviser AFM Khalid Hossain urged everyone to build public opinion in favour of voting 'yes'.

If 'yes' passes, dictatorship will never again emerge in the country, he said, speaking at a views exchange meeting at the Dharmarajik Buddhist Monastery in Basabo, Dhaka, organised jointly by the Buddhist Religious Welfare Trust and the Christian Religious Welfare Trust to promote the referendum and encourage voter participation.

Speaking at the same programme, Prof Ali Riaz, special assistant to the chief adviser, also urged everyone to vote 'yes' to prevent fascism.

On January 7, the Cabinet Division directed secretaries of all ministries and divisions, divisional commissioners, and deputy commissioners to use the referendum

logo in all government communications, including letters, orders, circulars, and gazettes, and to display two banners at all government, semi-government, and autonomous offices.

The division also provided the text for the banners, to be displayed vertically. One reads, "Poribortoner Jonyo Ha" (Yes for Change).

The other lists issues that could be incorporated into the constitution if the 'yes' vote wins and states, "By casting a 'Yes' vote, you will get all these things mentioned here; if you vote 'No,' you will not get anything."

Following the directives, government offices have been displaying the banners.

The Daily Star yesterday contacted Prof Riaz, who is also the chief coordinator of public awareness campaign activities related to the referendum and national polls, for his comments on the matter.

"We have seen the EC letter. We will give our

reaction after analysing it and consulting with lawyers," he said, without elaborating.

He had earlier said there was no legal barrier preventing government officials from campaigning in favour of a 'yes' vote.

He made the remarks at a meeting organised by the Sylhet divisional administration on January 24 to promote the referendum and encourage voter participation.

Prof Riaz had headed the National Consensus Commission that drafted the July charter after months of discussions with political parties.

Speaking at the Sylhet meeting, he said the referendum is a major step toward realising the rights for which people sacrificed their lives in the July uprising, while families are still searching for the unclaimed bodies of their loved ones.

"Neither the existing constitution, the

Representation of the People Order, the July National Charter Implementation Order 2025, nor the ordinance related to this referendum contains any provision barring public servants from speaking in favour of positive change," he said.

Government officials from divisional headquarters, districts, and upazilas, along with representatives of private organisations, attended the event.

"No one can show any legal reference that prohibits such campaigning. Those who claim otherwise are spreading confusion with ulterior motives," Riaz said.

Responding to questions about the moral grounds of such campaigning, he said, "What morality are you talking about? The morality that denies the fresh blood of young people and their supreme sacrifice?"

He further said the interim government is

working under three mandates – reform, justice, and election.

"Elections are not organised by the government; the government creates a favourable environment, while the Election Commission conducts the polls. Similarly, justice is administered by the courts, while the government only ensures a supportive environment. Therefore, the core mandate of the government is state reform," he said.

Addressing claims that such a referendum has never been held before, Riaz noted that between 1972 and 2024, a total of 48 referendums took place worldwide, and in most cases governments campaigned in favour of a 'yes' vote.

"Therefore, internationally this is an accepted practice. Morally, it is our duty and responsibility, and legally there is no barrier," he said.