

Why the hurry to sign deals?

Govt's haste to sign DP World deal ahead of election is perplexing

The ongoing strike at Chattogram port over the interim government's decision to hand over the New Mooring Container Terminal (NMCT) to a foreign operator has opened a Pandora's box of questions. While we are not opposed to foreign investment aimed at improving port efficiency, management, and overall trade logistics, any deal involving a strategically vital national asset like the country's principal seaport must be fully transparent. The proposed agreement with UAE-based DP World falls short on that count.

Little information is available regarding the terms of the proposal or the status of its evaluation, even though sources at the Chittagong Port Authority (CPA) indicate that the government is preparing to sign the deal ahead of the election. But why the rush to conclude such a consequential agreement when fewer than 10 days remain before we welcome a new government?

Reportedly, the deal originated during the tenure of the previous Awami League government when an MoU was signed with DP World. After assuming office following the fall of the AL government, the interim administration revived the proposal. However, the contract was not awarded through a standard public bidding process. In March last year, a civil society organisation challenged the decision by filing a writ petition with the High Court. Although the court delivered a dissenting verdict on December 3, 2025, the Supreme Court, on January 29, rejected the petition, clearing the way for the government to move forward with the deal. The apex court noted that the awarding process complied with the 2017 Procurement Policy, which allows for direct selection in certain cases, and was consistent with the MoU signed during the AL era.

However, yesterday, a fresh petition was placed before a Supreme Court chamber judge seeking an order of status quo on the government's move to award the contract to DP World. The petitioner's lawyer told *The Daily Star* that with the national parliamentary election imminent, executing the contract at such a critical juncture amounts to "executive high-handedness, arbitrariness, and malafide exercise of power." We, too, believe that such decisions should rest with an elected government operating under a functional parliament, where opposition voices can scrutinise long-term strategic agreements involving ports, energy, and other critical infrastructure. A non-political interim government, formed in the wake of a popular uprising, is better suited to pursuing reforms that have emerged from broad and meaningful stakeholder consultations. It remains unclear why, in its final days, the government is pushing through such high-value projects and deals—often without adequate consultation—that risk constraining the choices of the incoming elected administration.

Besides, CPA's decision to transfer four protesting employees to the Pangoan Inland Container Terminal raises questions. Why was punitive action the authorities' first response? Should they not instead have initiated dialogue with the protesters and addressed their concerns regarding the agreement? According to the protesters, leasing out the NMCT would result in a significant share of the port's earnings being transferred abroad. Had the interim government ensured transparency and made the contract terms public, the strike now paralysing the port might well have been avoided. The government's priority right now should not be taking steps that could trigger unrest; only the election should be its main priority.

A test for the govt before the polls

Surge in mob killings and violence raises alarm

It is quite concerning that there is a sharp rise in mob killings and widespread violence across the country ahead of the 13th parliamentary election. The latest report from Manabdhikar Shongskriti Foundation (MSF) shows that deaths from mob violence more than doubled in January, while custodial deaths, recovery of unidentified bodies, election-related clashes, and attacks on minorities also surged. These incidents reveal a serious breakdown in law enforcement and the justice system.

According to MSF, at least 21 people were killed in mob beatings in January, up from 10 deaths recorded in December. Meanwhile, 15 people died in prison custody in January, up from nine in December, alongside additional deaths in law enforcement custody. During the same period, 57 unidentified bodies were recovered, compared with 48 in December. MSF describes the overall human rights situation as "alarmingly violent and complex," noting that the state's failure to take visible action against mob killings has emboldened perpetrators.

Election-related violence has escalated sharply, with four people killed and more than 500 injured in January alone. However, it has been noted that instead of focusing on preventing violence, law enforcement agencies appear increasingly entangled in politically charged case-making. Reportedly, the number of "unnamed accused" in political cases tripled in a month, jumping from 110 to 320. Rights activists warn that this will enable blanket arrests and create fear ahead of the election. January also saw hundreds of incidents of violence against women and children, alongside a sharp rise in attacks on minority communities, including vandalism of temples and idols.

Politicians have also voiced serious concerns about the worsening law-and-order situation and the risk of increased election-time violence—concerns that the government must take seriously. It is the state's responsibility to ensure that no vested interest groups are allowed to disrupt the election or instil fear in the public mind through violence and intimidation. We urge the government to take immediate and decisive action to prevent further occurrence of such incidents. Those involved in mob violence must be identified and prosecuted, custodial deaths should be independently investigated, and perpetrators of recent political killings must be held accountable, regardless of their affiliations. Without proper action, fear and insecurity could discourage voters and affect the turnout rate, undermining the election's credibility. The government must send a strong message that violence will not be tolerated.

The NCP manifesto: Bold on youth, silent on inclusion



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Globally, there is a never-ending debate over whether voters are driven more by policies or personalities. In Bangladesh, where most political parties are leader-centric rather than bottom-up democratic organisations, experience suggests that leaders—not policies—win elections. Policies rarely influence the masses. Manifestos, therefore, receive little serious scrutiny as tools to judge a party, its candidates, or a leader's electability. It is no surprise that manifestos have become the least of priorities in the February 12 election for major parties vying for power. So far, leaders have been announcing policies at campaign rallies in a fragmented manner rather than releasing them as a cohesive package, selectively targeting different segments of the electorate.

The National Citizen Party (NCP), which emerged as a new political force following the mass uprising of 2024, deserves credit for unveiling its manifesto first. On Friday—just 13 days before the vote—the NCP, largely dominated by young activists of the uprising, announced the "Manifesto of Youth and Dignity." The 36-point document's most distinctive feature is its strong emphasis on young people's political aspirations. Among its youth-centric pledges, the most striking is the proposal to lower the voting age to 16.

While the idea sounds exciting, it requires a broader societal consensus. Universally, individuals under 18 are considered children—expected to be in classrooms, barred from full employment, and often requiring guidance in financial decision-making. Whether extending voting rights to this age group would meaningfully advance democratic governance remains debatable. Moreover, the manifesto's dual pledge to lower the voting age to 16 and establish a youth civic council to institutionalise youth participation in policymaking leaves ambiguity as to whether voting rights would apply only within this council or extend to all elections.

Targeting young voters, the NCP

has pledged to create one crore jobs in five years—numerically similar to the BNP's promise but arguably more ambitious in quality, as it claims these will be "decent jobs." However, questions arise about what constitutes a decent wage when the manifesto proposes an hourly minimum wage of Tk 100.

In education, the NCP proposes establishing a long-overdue reform commission—an initiative



PHOTO: BSS

NCP convener Md Nahid Islam talks during the party's manifesto unveiling programme ahead of the 13th national election on January 30, 2026.

conspicuously absent from the reform agenda of the interim government led by Professor Muhammad Yunus, despite its wide-ranging efforts across social, economic, and constitutional domains. However, the education reform commission's mandate should go beyond merely "rationally coordinating" existing systems. It must modernise education to align with global developments, scientific and technological advancement, and the evolving needs of the national economy. The proposal to link higher education with careers—by making a six-month full-time internship or thesis research mandatory at the undergraduate level—is a bold and

commendable step.

The proposed reverse brain drain programme, aimed at attracting expatriate researchers through seniority recognition and one-time lab funding, would be a novel addition to national policy. Allowing lateral entry into the bureaucracy could also incentivise skilled professionals to return home. However, the plan to establish an independent promotions commission to ensure 100 percent performance-based government promotions lacks practical clarity. The Public Service Commission already plays this role, yet allegations of nepotism and corruption persist. Another innovative attempt to court expatriate voters is the proposed one-stop "diaspora digital portal," offering essential services along with investment and pension benefits tied to remittance inflows and "RemitMiles" travel rewards.

extortion and political levies through hotlines and strict enforcement—tools that have long existed within policing frameworks but have delivered limited success. Its strong stance against loan defaulters is more promising, particularly the proposal to revoke their voting rights, which could deter them from seeking public office. However, such a policy requires a specific judicial process to ensure that a strict judicial process will be followed in identifying defaulters.

As a fledgling political party, the NCP appears to lean heavily on nationalist rhetoric, especially in defence policy. It proposes expanding the armed forces by creating a reserve force of five lakh, establishing a UAV (unmanned aerial vehicle) brigade, and acquiring several medium-range surface-to-air missile batteries. Whether these measures are necessary or sufficient for a comprehensive national defence strategy is debatable. Worse, such proposals could be perceived by adversaries as provocative rather than stabilising.

Other notable initiatives include pledges to establish an independent commission to monitor reform commitments, form a truth and reconciliation commission to investigate past atrocities and extrajudicial killings, and require ministers, MPs, and senior officials to publicly disclose assets and income. Proposals for digitising health records to facilitate access to medical services and national health insurance are commendable. Subsidies for farmers, six-month maternity leave, and one-month paternity leave are also welcome offers. However, their financial implications and resource-mobilisation strategies remain unanswered.

The most glaring disappointment, however, is the manifesto's silence on inclusivity. None of the NCP's 36 pledges address the concerns of religious minorities or ethnic communities, including Adivasis. These groups have long demanded equality, fairness, and respect for their rights, faiths, cultures, and ways of life. Is this omission the result of political compromise with newly formed allies in the 11-party alliance? Or does the NCP simply fail to recognise the needs of Bangladesh's diverse citizens? Either explanation suggests a troubling lack of empathy and understanding—qualities essential for uniting the nation towards collective progress and advancement.

Why we need more 'techies' in our newsrooms

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From the invention of the printing press to the rise of broadcast media, every major shift in communication technology has reshaped how news is produced, distributed, and consumed. Journalism has survived for centuries not because it resisted change, but because it adapted to it.

Each phase of journalism's evolution, shaped by wider social changes such as industrialisation, urbanisation, and mass education, brought new formats, audiences, and business models. When telegraph and photography appeared, news organisations were quick to adopt them. Speed and visual evidence became central to journalism. Later, radio and television transformed news into a real-time experience.

However, as these technology companies like Facebook and Google captured the advertising market that once sustained legacy media, news outlets became dependent on platform algorithms for visibility, audience reach, and income. Headlines began to chase clicks, content formats shifted towards virality, and editorial decisions began being shaped by content algorithms rather than newsroom judgement.

Artificial intelligence has intensified this crisis. AI systems are now crawling with news content, summarising and redistributing it without compensation to media companies. This has further weakened the link between journalism and revenue. For many newsrooms, it

feels like the final blow to an already fragile business model.

In this context, survival demands a new path. News organisations now cannot afford to treat technology as a fringe factor. Yet in Bangladesh, most media outlets have not invested seriously in experimenting with new products, formats, or technologies. As a result, a strong and paying reader-base never developed here. News has long been perceived as a free good. Audiences are willing to pay for data, cable connections, or devices, but not for journalism.

This mindset is further reinforced by the structure of the media industry. Many outlets are subsidised by parent businesses and are not expected to be financially independent. Profit orientation, innovation, and long-term sustainability often take a back seat. Only a few top outlets actively explore new models, while the rest continue with business as usual.

This is precisely why newsrooms need technologists, or "techies." Editors, reporters, and producers alone cannot solve today's structural challenges. Newsrooms also need data analysts, developers, designers, and AI specialists who can help build new products and revenue streams.

Around the world, media outlets are already moving in this direction. A clear example is Kontinentalist, a data-driven media startup in Singapore. Alongside publishing in-depth, data-based stories with long-form journalists, it generates income by training organisations in data visualisation and building interactive content for partner organisations. Journalism remains central, but technology enables diversification. Established public broadcasters are

also investing heavily in technology. Munich-based radio and television broadcaster Bayerischer Rundfunk, for instance, uses artificial intelligence to moderate audience comments and understand public demand.

Across global newsrooms, AI is being tested for tasks such as news alerts, verification support, and workflow efficiency, always with human editorial oversight. Geographic Information System (GIS) experts work on cartography and spatial reporting. User Interface (UI) and User Experience (UX) designers build news apps and interactive experiences.

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Web developers create "scrollytelling" projects that combine narrative storytelling with code. AI specialists explore ways to improve newsroom productivity without compromising editorial values.

Of course, such investments are difficult, especially for resource-constrained newsrooms. There is no guarantee that every experiment will succeed. However, refusing to experiment is far riskier. Bringing technologists into newsrooms can introduce new ways of thinking, encourage collaboration, and slowly build a culture of innovation within

the Bangladeshi media ecosystem.

A practical challenge remains: how can news organisations attract skilled technologists when large tech companies offer better pay and prestige? Universities can bridge this gap by partnering their engineering or computer science wings with media outlets. Workshops, joint projects, internships, and bootcamps could expose students to real newsroom problems and demonstrate the potential social impact of their skills.

Another possible source of support can be media development funding. For years, NGOs and international organisations have funded training in basic reporting skills. Redirecting some of this support towards technology-focused capacities such as data journalism, verification tools, or newsroom automation could be a more forward-looking approach. This would not replace traditional journalism training, but complement it.

Ultimately, what is needed is collaboration. Media outlets, universities, and media development organisations must work together to modernise journalism in Bangladesh. Shared labs, joint fellowships, and collaborative innovation projects could reduce risk while building collective capacity.

Media history shows that those who fail to adapt eventually fade away. Bangladesh's once-popular FM radio stations are a reminder of what happens when formats and business models remain static. So, spending to hire "techies" is an investment. If a newsroom wants to remain relevant, independent, and sustainable, technology must move from its margins to the centre of its journalistic practices.