

## Education must be steered back on track

A priority for the next government

The quality of education has been the biggest casualty of institutional apathy and misgovernance in Bangladesh. Despite lofty rhetoric about the importance of education, precious little has been done to bring about qualitative reform in the system. As a result, it continues to drift without a clear destination. At a recent policy dialogue on SDG 4, educationists and civil society representatives warned that decades of policy reversals, weak implementation, the absence of a long-term education plan, poor learning outcomes, and low investment have resulted in the country falling behind on its most fundamental development goal: quality education for all.

It is an absurd conundrum that for decades education has been treated as a secondary issue rather than a national priority. Curricula and assessment systems have been frequently revised and changed, creating confusion, with students, teachers, and parents bearing the consequences.

While enrolment has gone up, it has not translated into better-educated citizens. Literacy levels remain as low as 50 percent. How can we hope to be ready for a technological future with such deficiencies? Poverty, child labour, child marriage, displacement due to climate change, shortages of teachers, and infrastructure gaps serve to push the most disadvantaged children—especially girls—out of school. Unless these obstacles are addressed, it will be impossible to make any real change in educational outcomes. Education spending, meanwhile, has persistently remained far below the internationally recommended 4-6 percent of GDP. As a result, teacher development, nutrition, school facilities, and foundational learning have all been severely neglected.

It is puzzling why the interim government, otherwise so vocal about reforms, failed to set up an education reform commission, which should have been a priority. Moreover, the sudden announcement of a draft Education Act, despite being just days away from the national election, only confirms the lack of attention paid to this sector. It is, however, encouraging that the draft aims, among other things, to regulate institutions and phase out coaching centres and guidebooks. But the way the process was rushed, with no significant departures from existing rules and regulations, suggests an attempt to preserve the status quo rather than reform it. As experts have pointed out, the draft does not include a rights-based approach to education, resource mobilisation, per-student allocation benchmarks, or clear mechanisms to ensure equity in education.

Bangladesh needs a stable education system that is protected from political volatility. This requires a permanent education commission to prevent policy shifts with the changes of government. Both primary and secondary education must be brought under a unified planning framework to ensure universal schooling. Investment in education must be increased to 4-6 percent of GDP. Introducing a universal mid-day meal programme at the primary and secondary levels, strengthening the capacity and status of teachers, and ensuring basic literacy and numeracy at the primary level are recommendations that the next government must take seriously.

## Protect food from hazardous chemicals

Over 33 percent of samples failing safety tests should set off alarm bells

Food safety has long been a major public health concern in Bangladesh, and the latest findings of the Bangladesh Food Safety Authority (BFSA) underscore how far we still are from ensuring food safety. According to BFSA data for FY2024-25, 33.3 percent of tested food samples—571 out of 1,713—were found to be adulterated, contaminated, or nutritionally substandard. That such a high proportion of commonly consumed food items fail basic safety and quality checks should be a matter of grave concern for both policymakers and the public.

According to the study, pickles, sauces, chips, puffed rice, fruit drinks, edible oils, dalda, and honey were among the everyday items found to be unsafe. That many of these products are widely consumed by children is particularly worrying. Some 65 percent of chips tested contained acrylamide, a chemical linked to serious health risks, in amounts often exceeding internationally accepted limits. Edible oils lacking the required Vitamin A content and mustard oil adulterated with soybean oil further expose how consumers are being cheated and put at risk. According to BFSA data, the proportion of unsafe food samples has risen sharply, from 8.5 percent in FY2022-23 to 15.4 percent in FY2023-24, and now more than doubling to over 33 percent.

Excessive use of fertilisers and pesticides in crops, hormones in livestock, and production methods that prioritise yield over safety reveal deep-rooted problems in the food system. Late last year, a study revealed the widespread use of highly hazardous pesticides in crops and vegetables. It identified at least 17 pesticides classified as dangerous by the FAO and WHO, several of which are linked to cancer, neurological disorders, and long-term organ damage. That such chemicals, banned in dozens of countries, remain available in Bangladesh exposes the glaring regulatory gaps and weak enforcement that ultimately compromise public health.

While technological interventions to boost production are necessary, they must not come at the cost of people's health. The government therefore must take strict measures to ensure that all food items are safe for consumption. This includes strengthening inspections, enforcing penalties against violators without exception, and ensuring that safety standards are rigorously applied in practice. It is encouraging that the BFSA plans to create a database compiling test results and making them public. Greater transparency can empower consumers and put pressure on producers to comply with standards, but to achieve real results, all relevant authorities must coordinate their efforts effectively.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY



### Senate acquits Trump

On this day in 2020, after being impeached by the House of Representatives over his actions in the Ukraine scandal, US President Donald Trump was acquitted in the Senate.

# Youth vote and the limits of democratic absorption



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"We dreamt of a country where all people, regardless of gender, race, religion, would have equal opportunity... We expected policy changes and reforms, but it is far away from what we dreamt of." A 25-year-old student who participated in the 2024 mass uprising said these words to Reuters late last month while commenting on the February 12 election, in which he and his peers are expected to vote. These are not words of withdrawal or even of anger. The mood is rather one of subdued disappointment or cautious realism.

This election will not be a test of whether young Bangladeshis care about politics. They do. On the streets, in classrooms, online, and often at considerable personal cost. What this election will test is something more difficult: whether the political system has found a way to accommodate them.

Nearly 44 percent of Bangladesh's electoral roll—more than five crore voters—are between the ages of 18 and 37. It is the largest youth electorate the country has ever seen, a fact that is often presented as evidence of Bangladesh's democratic vitality. But numbers alone do not confer democratic legitimacy. Political systems do not fail when citizens stay away; they fail when citizens arrive in large numbers and still feel politically unmoored.

This is the paradox shaping the current moment. Youth turnout is expected to be significantly high, with some estimates even putting it above 90 percent. And yet, enthusiasm about the political choices on offer remains strikingly thin. Many young voters who demanded a "new Bangladesh" after 2024 now describe being pushed back toward familiar parties by default rather than choice. Others hover in a space of uncertainty, participating without a real sense of ownership, voting without conviction.

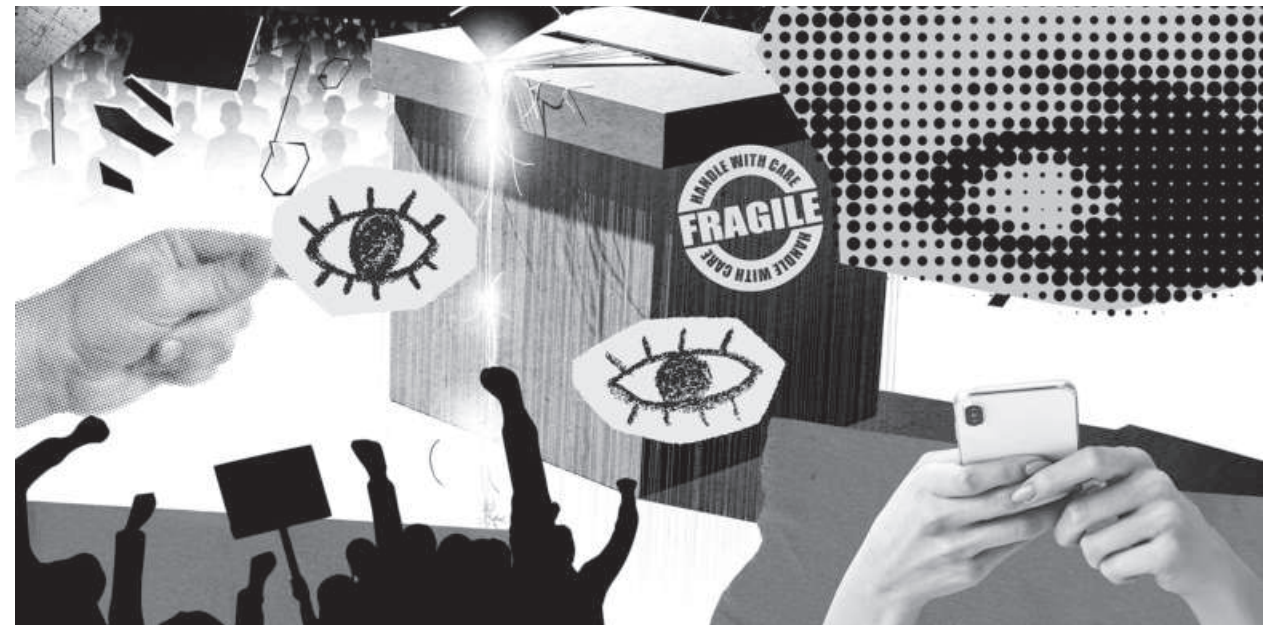
Political legitimacy rests on more than procedure. As German philosopher Jürgen Habermas warned, systems can work on paper and still fail if they cease to be responsive. British social theorist David Beetham made a similar point: consent must be justified, not assumed. In Bangladesh, young people are participating, but many do not feel their political language—of opportunity, quality, dignity, fairness—has been absorbed into how politics operates. While participation grows, integration of youth voices lags. Voting shifts from ownership to a tick-box exercise, and verdict becomes fragile.

This fragility did not emerge overnight. The 2024 uprising represented a rupture in political order, but not a redesign of political pathways.

Protests disrupted power. Institutions under the interim regime responded by restoring routine to some extent. Elections were scheduled, procedures resumed. In doing so, the system demonstrated a capacity for survival, but not for learning.

This is not a failure of youth mobilisation. Movements are rarely designed to build parties. They surface to express grievances and force visibility. The deeper failure lies in the political field itself: its narrow leadership pipelines, its closed organisational cultures, its inability to translate mobilisation into durable institutional change.

US political theorist Iris Marion



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

Young warned against precisely this form of exclusion: systems that include citizens numerically while excluding them structurally. Representation, she argued, is not simply about counting voices but about whether social perspectives are incorporated into decision-making processes. By that measure, many young Bangladeshis are present but unheard. They are inside the system, yet lingering at the margins.

This is evident in how different actors speak about the election. The old guards and institutions tend to frame the moment in the language of order, stability, legitimacy, and reform that is suspended somewhere in the future. Youth speak instead about employment, equity, and change more in the present. They are not arguing about the same things. They are speaking different political languages.

An editorial in The Daily Star

captured this misalignment very precisely: "The old way of doing electoral politics—simply dumping empty promises into manifestos—is unlikely to work with this increasingly vocal voter population." The observation is understated but consequential: traditional electoral rituals no longer command automatic credibility.

Youth voices are explicit about the distance they feel. Voters who wanted a "New Bangladesh" free from the baggage of the past now feel they are being forced to choose between the old guard and alliances, which does not reflect their aspirations, said a 23-year-old archaeology student interviewed by Reuters. Another, reflecting on the aftermath of 2024, put it more starkly: "After a year, I feel the spirit of the July revolution is completely lost. Violence has increased... and the interim government is not taking steps that make us feel secure."

These are not radical demands or calls for ideological reinvention. They are pleas for institutional seriousness, for politics that takes lived experience as a starting point rather than an inconvenience.

compromise, adjustment, survival within imperfect systems. Gen-Z learned politics through rupture: visibility, collective action, and moral clarity. One seeks entry; the other seeks redesign. The tension between these orientations explains why some young voters settle, others resist, and many hesitate.

This is not an unfamiliar challenge. Other large, power-holding institutions have confronted similar generational tensions without mistaking participation for satisfaction. In many multinational corporations, differences between millennials and Gen-Z are treated less as attitude problems and more as questions of organisational design. Cultures are recalibrated, feedback loops are redesigned, and strategies are revisited when engagement falters. The point is not that politics should borrow corporate models, but that systems capable of learning respond to misalignment by altering their architecture, not by celebrating participation while deferring change.

What makes this election pivotal is not merely that youth votes could

swing outcomes. It is that youth participation has raised the moral stakes of democratic performance. High turnout combined with low integration produces a volatile form of legitimacy, one that can unravel quickly if post-election governance fails to respond substantively and quickly.

This is where democratic theory becomes uncomfortably practical. Legitimacy, as Habermas reminded us, cannot be banked indefinitely. It must be reproduced through responsiveness. Elections can restore order. They cannot restore trust on their own.

The ballots will be counted. A new government will be formed. Stability may well be achieved. The unresolved question is whether the expectations carried into polling stations by millions of young voters will be absorbed into how power is exercised, or whether those will once again be deferred, managed, and normalised away.

# True patriotism means confronting our environmental crisis



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When Gita Gopinath, former deputy managing director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), recently stated at Davos that pollution kills millions of Indians annually and makes investors hesitant, she was accused of being unpatriotic. But the uncomfortable truth is, if stating facts about environmental degradation is considered unpatriotic, then we are choosing nationalist sentiment over national survival.

Gopinath's central message was economic reality: pollution costs India between five to nine percent of GDP through health losses and reduced productivity. Bangladesh faces an equally severe reality.

Bangladesh ranks second globally for air pollution and harbours the world's largest arsenic groundwater contamination crisis, affecting 50 million people, and our rivers are

systematically degraded through industrial and untreated sewage. The Dupi Tila aquifer, located beneath the Madhupur Clay, is rapidly running out of water. The recent November 2025 5.7 magnitude (M) Narsingdi earthquake revealed that seismic waves were amplified in places due to anthropogenic modification of the subsurface. These are physical realities operating according to chemical and geological principles that do not yield to political pressure.

Such environmental degradation directly influences national economic performance, as when companies move capital, they move people—executives, technical experts, skilled workers. If environmental conditions threaten health, high-value investment hesitates regardless of tax incentives. This is why environmental restoration must be comprehensive, requiring

four integrated elements: compliance, decisive action, restoration, and sustainability.

Compliance means enforcing environmental standards based on scientific understanding. Bangladesh has environmental laws; what is missing is consistent enforcement. Decisive action indicates moving beyond studies to actual implementation. Restoration means actively remediating contaminated sites, not accepting existing contamination as permanent. Sustainability signifies maintaining environmental quality while meeting development needs.

A practical, cost-effective measure to convert contaminated industrial sites into restored landscapes is EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) corrective action frameworks adapted to local conditions. It starts with identifying hotspot sources through compliance inspections, facility assessments, and systematic site characterisation using geophysical methods integrated with targeted drilling. Then, pollution is controlled through chemical and biological treatment of wastewater and industrial effluents, potentially including constructed wetlands for additional treatment before discharge.

Pollution is later contained using

engineered barriers with locally available clay materials; biological barriers using biochar and indigenous microbes; pump-and-treat systems; in-situ treatment technologies; bioremediation with native plant species; and monitored natural attenuation where appropriate. These approaches, detailed in EPA's regulatory framework, have successfully restored thousands of sites globally while building local technical capacity.

So, real patriotism would be fixing problems, not shooting messengers. When environment experts validate concerns about river degradation, when seismologists warn about earthquake vulnerability, when researchers document arsenic poisoning, they present evidence and recommend solutions based on data, not political convenience.

Bangladesh's choice is stark. We can face our crises with courage, implementing comprehensive management based on the four aforementioned elements—compliance, decisive action, restoration, and sustainability—or we can continue with rhetoric about sustainable development while practising environmental destruction until crisis forces restoration under far more difficult conditions.