

The quiet abandonment of potato farmers



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When the interim government announced a plan in August 2025 to procure 50,000 tonnes of potatoes, it signalled an apparent concern for farmers facing a devastating price crash. Three months later, the plan was withdrawn. Instead, the government decided to provide cash incentives to the farmers to offset their losses. But that incentive has yet to come, even though harvesting of early varieties has begun.

This raises a fundamental question: does the government's handling of the potato crisis reveal systematic neglect of the farmers who produce one of the country's staple crops?

Bangladesh produced a record 1.15 crore tonnes of potatoes in the 2024-25 season, according to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, much higher than the annual demand of 90 lakh tonnes. When surplus production triggered a price collapse, farmers were left to absorb the losses. Many sold potatoes for Tk 11 per kg at the field level, well below the Department of Agricultural Extension's estimated production cost of Tk 14 per kg, and far below the Tk 20 per kg costs in the northern regions. Some farmers lost everything they had invested.

The government's response came late. Only after months of losses did the chief adviser form a review committee to examine the falling potato prices. On August 27, 2025, the agriculture ministry announced plans to purchase 50,000 tonnes of potatoes for cold storage and later sale, setting a minimum price of Tk 22 per kg at storage gates. By then, much of the damage had been done.

By November 20 last year, even this belated intervention was withdrawn. The reasons given for withdrawal reveal how disconnected policymakers are from the farmers' reality. A senior commerce ministry official, speaking anonymously, said direct procurement would primarily benefit cold storage owners and middlemen rather than farmers. Agriculture Secretary Mohammad Emdad Ullah Mian told *The Daily Star* at the time that potato prices had recovered to Tk 20-25 per kg. But this reasoning ignores the losses already incurred. Farmers who had sold potatoes at Tk 11 per kg

for potato farmers. The government reacts only after crises fully unfold, then withdraws support before it can make a difference.

The cash incentive programme tells a similar story. In early December, the agriculture ministry decided to provide more than Tk 110 crore in cash incentives to potato farmers, in addition to the Tk 150 crore already allocated for subsidies this fiscal year. These incentives were meant to

were struggling to pay off debts and prepare for the next planting season. Incentives that arrive after a new harvest has begun do little to address the financial distress they were meant to relieve.

A disparity in treatment also arises when considering how different sectors receive government support. Speaking at a workshop in Dhaka on January 28, Agriculture Adviser Lt Gen (ret'd) Md Jahangir Alam Chowdhury

incentives.

"These farmers are the backbone of the nation; we say this verbally, but it is not reflected in practice. Farmers do not receive fair prices for their produce," the adviser said, adding that when farmers fail to get fair prices, they are often forced to discard their crops. "We express sympathy for a few days, and journalists publish one or two reports. But when it comes to compensating farmers for their losses by providing incentives, we face obstacles."

The adviser's remarks capture precisely what the potato crisis demonstrates: a systematic pattern of obstacles that farmers face when other sectors receive swift, substantial support. Together, the withdrawn procurement plan and delayed incentives reveal a troubling pattern of initiatives that look promising on paper but fail in execution. Whether through reversal or delay, the result is the same: farmers left without the support they were promised.

Compare this to the government's treatment of rice farmers. Rice procurement programmes, though imperfect, operate with greater consistency and predictability, while potato farmers remain caught in an uncertain loop of announcements and reversals. The disparity suggests a hierarchy of agricultural priorities in which potato cultivation ranks lower, despite potatoes being a staple crop that millions depend on.

Are potato farmers being neglected? The evidence suggests they are. But neglect does not always mean deliberate indifference. It can manifest through delayed responses, withdrawn commitments, unenforced policies, and a lack of institutional mechanisms to protect farmers from predictable market volatility. By these measures, potato farmers have not received adequate attention from policymakers.

As a result, they lose money they cannot afford to lose. Some abandon potato cultivation entirely. Trust in government commitments erodes, making future interventions less effective. Agricultural markets require predictability, and farmers need to know the state will support them when crises occur and keep their word.

Procurement systems must be guided by clear production forecasts and price thresholds. Minimum price mechanisms must be enforced, not just declared. Incentives should be disbursed promptly and linked to documented losses. Most importantly, policymakers must treat potato farmers with the same seriousness they afford to other agricultural sectors.



Bangladesh appears to lack the institutional commitment to use price stabilisation and other similar tools effectively to provide support to potato farmers in times of crisis.

FILE PHOTO: MOSTAFA SHABUJ

could not reclaim that money even though prices recovered later. The minimum price policy of Tk 22 per kg, announced with such fanfare, was never enforced. For farmers, it became another empty promise.

The pattern extends beyond this single crisis. State procurement and storage are recognised tools for price stabilisation in agricultural markets worldwide. Yet, Bangladesh appears to lack the institutional commitment to use these tools effectively

compensate farmers for losses incurred in the 2024-25 season. Yet, as the harvesting of early varieties has begun, the money has not reached farmers till date.

The delay raises troubling questions. If the government recognised potato farmers' losses to be severe enough to warrant Tk 110 crore in compensation, why has the disbursement been so slow? Farmers who sold potatoes at Tk 11 per kg last season needed this support months ago, when they

highlighted this imbalance directly, saying, "There are no barriers when incentives are given to big businessmen. But when it comes to providing incentives to farmers, many obstacles arise."

He pointed out that industry owners take loans from banks but often fail to repay them, while farmers struggle to access credit. At the same time, industrialists receive bank loans at an interest rate of only two percent and are granted waivers, along with various other

What has Ducsu done so far?



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My mother, an economics student at Dhaka University (DU) in the 1990s, filled my childhood with stories about the Dhaka University Central Students' Union (Ducsu). Years later, as a student at the same university, I encountered that inheritance in a far more prosaic setting: a voting booth.

I cast my vote for candidates who, in my judgement based on what they had done before and what they claimed they would do next, seemed capable of governing student affairs. Student politics matters here because DU remains one of the few institutional spaces where student voices can still be heard. Hence, after September last year, I have been keeping tabs on what Ducsu and the elected representatives of student voices have been up to.

Four months into its tenure, Ducsu presents a picture that is far from settled. There is a growing unease about how authority is being exercised on campus. Eviction drives against both hawkers and non-students have altered the texture of DU in ways that merit scrutiny. Long described as a people's campus and deeply entangled with the city around it, DU

now risks becoming a more insulated space. These efforts, often justified in the name of security, recast ordinary people as threats rather than constituents of campus life. Order may be returning, but it comes at the cost of proximity, and with it a reshaping of the university's moral boundaries.

The discomfort deepens when placed against commitments articulated before the election. SM Farhad, the Ducsu general secretary (GS), was explicit in rejecting authoritarian politics, torture, violence, and guest-room practices. On multiple occasions, he drew clear lines against coercion and moral policing, insisting that no one should be compelled into conformity through fear, whether in matters of dress or conduct. However, those assurances sit uneasily beside the viral video of Ducsu Executive Member Sarba Mitra Chakma forcing boys to do squats at the central playground—a scene of public humiliation enacted in the name of discipline.

Sarba Mitra has since apologised, but the incident indicates more than an individual lapse. Regardless of the person in charge, corporal punishment follows the same logic

of oppression. It creates a habit of following orders out of fear, which is the opposite of what is needed for a healthy democracy.

What is equally troubling is how slowly this behaviour was challenged. University authorities did not intervene. Student peers looked on. Condemnation followed only after public outrage erupted. A leadership that fundamentally claims to be opposed to torture and arbitrary force cannot afford such latency. In moments like these, silence functions as the green light to continue abuse.

However, the material conditions under which Ducsu assumed office are worth noting. Every academic session, each DU student pays Tk 60 to Ducsu and another Tk 60 to their hall union. By calculation, since the last Ducsu committee's term ended in 2020, at least Tk 90 lakh should have been accumulated for Ducsu, with another Tk 90 lakh for hall unions. The most striking fact about the new Ducsu committee is that it began its tenure broke, depleted by years of mismanagement and neglect, with no bank balance and no inherited funds. And yet, within four months, Ducsu leaders were standing before microphones listing renovations worth millions, alumni donations, and even a Chinese-backed hall project regained momentum.

After the July uprising, the DU campus was charged with expectations. The election of a new student union led by Vice-President Shadik Kayem and GS SM Farhad carried significance beyond the routine cycle of student politics. There have also been a series of tangle interventions. The medical centre

has been upgraded with new equipment, including X-ray and ECG machines and an ambulance. Free sanitary napkins have been distributed in halls and academic buildings, a modest intervention with daily consequences. The central mosque has been renovated and air-conditioned. Plans have been announced for electric shuttles, expanded bus services, and improved transport routes. These are the basic mechanics of student welfare and dismissing them would be disingenuous. After years of being asked to wait while funds

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vanished into opaque systems, students are encountering visible outcomes.

Kayem's insistence that the union did not "sit on the pretext of budget" marks a departure from a familiar culture of deferral. And yet, competence does not resolve deeper

questions about power. The Ducsu leadership's silence reappeared when a Jamaat leader publicly described the university as a "den of drugs and prostitution," with particular hostility directed at female students. Protests erupted. Effigies were burnt. Yet, the absence of a clear and immediate response from male Ducsu representatives was conspicuous. Gendered vilification is neither incidental nor rare on campus, so the male leaders' reticence can resemble evasion. Their ability to distinguish right from wrong seems to vanish the moment they have to confront ideas that align with their own ideological circles or senior leadership.

Four months is not a long time. No serious observer expects a student union to repair decades of institutional decay or to resolve entrenched ideological conflicts in a single semester. But it is long enough for patterns to emerge. The question emerging in many minds is whether Ducsu is cultivating a different political ethic or refining the operational efficiency of familiar hierarchies. Infrastructure can be upgraded relatively quickly. Democratic habits, however, take longer to develop, and they require a willingness to interrupt comfort, including one's own.

For those watching closely since September, the picture remains unresolved. The improvements are tangible. DU has a long history of confronting authoritarianism beyond its gates, yet it is a difficult task to prevent that impulse from reappearing, subtly and efficiently, within them.

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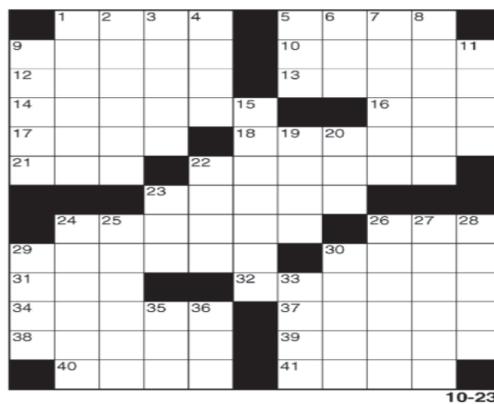
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- 9 Berry of "X-Men"
- 10 Massage targets
- 12 Of service
- 13 "Keen!"
- 14 Warning
- 16 Overly
- 17 Cornfield bird
- 18 Unmoored
- 21 Egg layer
- 22 Back of the neck
- 23 Hymn of praise
- 24 Grant
- 26 Old horse
- 29 Charitable aid
- 30 String tie
- 31 FBI worker: Abbr.

DOWN

- 1 Mocking work
- 2 Tie type
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- 4 Sailing hazard
- 5 Skillet
- 6 Star pitcher
- 7 Speculative question
- 8 Start a journey
- 9 Box for rabbits
- 11 Chimney grime
- 15 Hockey game

start

- 19 Sketch
- 20 Use the track
- 22 Fill completely
- 23 Letter before omega
- 24 Ask out of
- 25 Matador's foe
- 26 Pasta bit
- 27 Bruce Wayne's butler
- 28 Errand runner
- 29 Hindu hero
- 30 Civil War photographer
- 31 Mathew
- 33 Surrounded by
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