

The Daily Star

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Next govt must prioritise health

Do what is needed to achieve Universal Health Coverage

Despite repeated promises of reform, poor governance, inadequate financing, and weak leadership continue to undermine progress in the health sector. A recent policy dialogue on Universal Health Coverage (UHC) has once again highlighted the deep structural weaknesses that have persisted in our healthcare system for decades. Experts have stressed that meeting the target of achieving UHC by 2030 will require strong political will from the next government.

According to the data presented, Bangladesh's service coverage index stands at 54 out of 100, well below the global average of 71 and ahead of only Pakistan and Afghanistan in South Asia. This is a reminder that without comprehensive reform measures, millions will continue to be deprived from access to essential healthcare, while high out-of-pocket expenditure will continue to push families further into poverty. As reported before, primary care, long recognised as the most cost-effective and equitable pathway to UHC, remains weak, underfunded, and unevenly distributed in the country, especially in urban areas. At a time when non-communicable diseases are rising sharply, this imbalance is particularly concerning. Strengthening primary healthcare, therefore, must be at the centre of the reform efforts.

Thailand's Universal Coverage Scheme provides an important lesson for us. It started in 2002 and has continued because of the strong political commitment behind it. The programme reduced out-of-pocket health spending from about 50 percent to almost 10 percent. We also need such long-term political commitment that goes beyond elections and party politics. Financing remains a major challenge, though. Experts have repeatedly called for increasing health expenditure to at least 15 percent of the national budget or around five percent of GDP, which is needed for real progress towards achieving UHC. However, higher allocations alone will not deliver results unless accompanied by efficient utilisation, transparency, and accountability.

In this context, the recommendations of the Health Sector Reform Commission deserve renewed and serious attention. Proposals such as making primary healthcare a constitutional obligation, reorganising governance structures, decentralising service delivery, and establishing independent oversight bodies provide a credible roadmap for reform. Equally important is addressing chronic weaknesses in leadership, manpower planning, and regulation.

As experts have pointed out, health has not been sufficiently framed as a strategic national priority, despite its profound implications on poverty reduction, economic growth, and social equity. While many of our political parties have outlined health sector plans in their manifestos, the real test will be in their implementation. The next government must demonstrate genuine commitment to prioritising health sector reforms, otherwise the 2030 UHC target will remain out of reach.

Ensure enactment of tobacco control law

The government has no reason not to stamp down on tobacco use

The unceasing prevalence of tobacco-related cancer in the country should be of deep concern to us all. Reportedly, 46 percent of the cancer patients in Hossainpur upazila of Kishoreganj suffer from tobacco-related cancers. This number emerges from a study conducted by Bangladesh Medical University (BMU) on 245 cancer patients in Hossainpur, which has found that around 73 percent of male cancer patients there have a history of smoking, while about 60 percent of female patients have a history of using smokeless tobacco. To add to this, tobacco consumption prevalence among people aged 15 and above in Bangladesh stood at 31.4 percent last year, according to the WHO. This is higher than both the global and Southeast Asian averages.

Beyond these numbers, what is most troubling is the insidious stronghold of tobacco companies in our surroundings and even within the government. According to a study by the Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC), an average of 5.5 tobacco points-of-sale (POS) were found within 100 metres of 121 schools, with nearly 70 percent advertising tobacco products. Meanwhile, the government remains actively and passively responsible for the dismal regulation of tobacco companies. This is evident in the government's holding shares in tobacco companies and in Bangladesh Economic Zones Authority giving approval to Philip Morris Bangladesh for setting up a factory in Narayanganj to produce nicotine pouches last year.

The recently approved Smoking and Tobacco Products Usage (Control) (Amendment) Ordinance, 2025 provides hope to anti-tobacco advocates. Among other commendable provisions, the new law bans the production, import, sale and use of electronic nicotine delivery systems like e-cigarettes and vapes, as well as banning the sale of tobacco products within a 100-metre radius of educational institutions, hospitals, playgrounds, and children's parks. But the success of this ordinance will depend on the next government enacting it into a law and implementing it rigorously.

WHO cites tobacco use as the single most preventable cause of death globally. Yet, at least 1.6 lakh people die in Bangladesh each year due to tobacco use. The newest ordinance can be crucial for controlling tobacco use across the country. Most importantly, it is up to the government officials to address the severe threat that tobacco use poses to public health by employing the relevant legal and policy measures.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

'British Invasion' begins in the US

On this day in 1964, the musical British Invasion began when the Beatles landed in New York, and two nights later, as Beatlemania stormed the US, their performance on The Ed Sullivan Show was watched by 73 million viewers.

Truth, power, and the strained teacher-student dynamics



BLOWN' IN THE WIND

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When asked to comment on the recent trend of teacher harassment and forced resignation across university campuses, the University Grants Commission (UGC) chair and former vice-chancellor of Dhaka University, Prof SMA Faiz, observed that rules alone could not ensure healthy teacher-student ties. "The relationship falters when teachers don't view students as their own children, and vice versa," he said.

The idea of viewing the campus through a familial lens is an insufficient evaluation of the strained relationship between two key stakeholders at our universities. The spectacle of students chasing teachers, drafting resignation letters for deans, and making arbitrary lists of "fascist enablers" is politically charged. It exudes power as memories are conveniently selected and weaponised to "ban" or "blacklist" teachers—not as guardians of the students but as ideological entities. This crisis is not moral or generational but political and biopolitical, marked by a collapse of institutional authority, unilateral punishment, and the weaponisation of memory intensified by electoral calculations. The display of power to control and regulate our campus life can even be explained through Michel Foucault's concept of biopower. Some of the student leaders, emboldened by their win in the recent student union elections, which may have some impact on the national election come February 12, are not simply repressing a section of teachers, but working together with other technologies of power.

On the surface, the student leaders present themselves as the voice of resistance, assuming ethical singularity by daring to speak truth to power. They would like to claim the fourth category of truth-tellers, the *parrhesiastes* (fearless public speakers). According to Foucault, the prophets are the first category of truth-tellers, revealing their arcane knowledge of the truth of destiny. The second category involves the sage who unwillingly shares their understanding of the essential truth of our being. Teachers belong to the third category with the professional obligation to



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perpetuate the truth they inherit. Foucault distinguishes the teacher, who reproduces inherited truth, from the parrhesiast, who risks everything to speak it. What we see on campuses today is neither.

Teachers hold institutional positions for which they remain both publicly visible and individually accountable while structurally tied to continuity. Their role is to reproduce knowledge and institutional order, not to mobilise crowds or wage moral crusades. Salahuddin Ammar, general secretary of Rajshahi University Central Students' Union, is currently confronting some of these teachers as a self-appointed daring truth-teller. He is committed to "disciplining" the teachers accused of their purported involvement or silence during the fascist regime. But this "truth-telling" probably falls short of the Foucauldian fourth category. Socrates is a prime example of Foucault's courageous parrhesiast, willing to risk both his reputation and his life. Today's campus "truth" is spoken under the protection of numbers and political patronage.

Student leaders justify their actions by accusing the targeted teachers of their "fascist" past, silence or engagement with violence during the July uprising. These accusations are criminal in nature, warranting an independent investigation and potential punishment if proven guilty. Instead, we are seeing teachers being

dragged, manhandled, named, and humiliated.

To return to the family metaphor used by the UGC chair, I cannot help recalling William Wordsworth's axiom, "The child is the father of the man." It seems the inherent paradox captures our campus plight with uncomfortable precision. What we are witnessing resembles an Oedipal impulse

Nazism and Stalinism, relies on collective belief and consent. Once authority fails to command obedience, violence erupts. The July uprising is an example. But in the last one and a half years, we have not seen any solidifying of power. The scenes playing out on the campuses suggest not an abundance of student power, but its fragility. What sustains it is coercion: the so-called mobocracy. Education Adviser CR Abrar's admission in *The Daily Star* report—"I am walking a very thin line"—confirms a similar fragility. It signals a state unwilling or unable to intervene, citing the autonomy of the universities while condemning assault. This hesitation allows intimidation through normalised governance. And the "governmentality" of the students before the national election exhibits a desire to prove ideological dominance with far-reaching impact. What works inside the university may later be exported beyond it. The election results across campuses overwhelmingly in favour of one party have excited such a possibility.

The narrative controlled by the students gets further established in the absence or the weakness of teachers' associations. Teachers are fragmented and politicised, and they cannot collectively respond to their professional humiliation. There is no countervailing force to the coercion, no institutional buffer between accusation and punishment. Accountability becomes unilateral.

The call for mutual respect invoked by the UGC chair, although noble in its intent, is impossible in the present context. Respect is a reciprocal relationship. Prof Faiz understands this concept well, as he adds "vice versa" while using the parent-child metaphor. But how can we consider our campuses to be a family where justice is equated with humiliation and legitimacy with dominance? The long-term damage extends beyond the election cycle. Universities that cannot protect their staff or students cannot safeguard academic freedom. Students trained to equate political agency with coercion will struggle to practise democratic restraint. True, rules alone may not ensure healthy relationships. But without enforceable rules, ethical limits, and institutional courage, universities don't become moral families; they turn into arenas where power is practised prematurely. Students exercise authority even before they have a real-life job. If universities are reduced to rehearsal spaces for domination, they will cease to function as institutions of learning long before they produce employable graduates or democratic citizens.

Bangladesh needs more than just a 'free and fair' election



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Bangladeshis deserve a government and an opposition willing and able to work together to address the problems of greatest concern to the country. A free and fair election should be a first step towards that result, but it's a mistake to think that a credible, competitive, peaceful and participatory election automatically guarantees a well-functioning government. In fact, history shows us the opposite.

No election can be perfect, but international and domestic election observers awarded high marks to Bangladesh's ninth parliamentary election in December 2008. Voters expressed overwhelming satisfaction with the process in public opinion surveys conducted before, on and after election day. Whether you consider the 2008 election the best in the country's history, or just its most recent credible election, it provides a cautionary tale for citizens today.

In that election, the Awami League won a majority of seats large enough to amend the constitution at the direction of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. The BNP-led parliamentary opposition chose to boycott their seats soon after the Jatiya Sangsad convened

in 2009. To be fair, the parliamentary opposition would not have been able to block the passage of any laws or constitutional amendments had opposition MPs been present, but their willful absence from the legislature began the period of de facto one-party rule in Bangladesh.

Many sacrificed their lives to end the abuses of that one-party regime in 2024, but with a new elected government to be chosen in just a few days, Bangladesh is in danger of looping back into that downward spiral. We shouldn't confuse a legitimately elected ruling party delivering the candidates that voters pick with a legitimately performing ruling party delivering the results that voters seek. The speed with which the country raced from a highly credible election to the consolidation of power under an authoritarian system is shocking when we look back.

Hopes are high for the rapidly approaching 13th parliamentary election and referendum on the July National Charter. A survey by Innovation last month found that 72 percent of Bangladeshis expect the interim government to administer the election impartially, and 82 percent

feel they can safely cast their ballots. In fact, in a survey by the International Republic Institute conducted in September-October 2025, citizens named "ensuring free and fair elections" as the top reform they wanted from the interim government.

It's natural to want to over-emphasise the quality of the election process itself, especially when the

the offices they campaigned for, use their voice and votes in parliament and its committee rooms to advance the promises made in their electoral manifestos, cooperate with like-minded individuals for common cause regardless of party affiliation, and keep working to improve the lives of Bangladeshis for the duration of their terms.

A free and fair election does have intrinsic value because it honours people's rights. But it's just the starting point. More weight must be placed on how the winners of the February 12 election work together when the next parliament convenes, and throughout their five-year terms thereafter. Using that metric to assess the quality of an election won't be popular with the winning or losing political parties because it is performance-based. It won't be popular with journalists hounding observers to announce if the election was "free and fair" as quickly as possible. For the same reasons that all reputable professional election observation organisations have quietly discarded that hollow phrase, we need a better results-based way to assess whether an election has "worked."

Elections aren't held for the benefit of the political parties. They allow voters to assign responsibility for solving problems through good governance, meaningful allocation of public resources, safeguarding people's rights, and ensuring the rule of law. Don't assume that a free and fair election makes that automatic. For that, we require a government and an opposition willing to work on the issues people care about most.

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context is novel and the stakes are high. A free and fair election is important for the country at this time, but it's not the only important thing. Bangladesh's 12.77 crore registered voters deserve to hear from the candidates openly, make their decisions free of pressure, and cast their ballots in safety knowing that they will be counted accurately. But the same voters also deserve to know that the men and women they choose to run the government will serve in