

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

EC is failing to do its due diligence

Parties' delay in submitting social media details is unacceptable

With the polling day just around the corner, it is mind-boggling that the Election Commission has still not been able to launch its social media monitoring, because it does not have the list of social media handles and pages being used by the parties and candidates for electioneering. As of 4pm on February 9, the EC had yet to begin this task, even though official campaigning is set to end on the morning of February 10. This is a clear violation of the electoral code of conduct, one that the EC has failed to proactively prevent.

According to the code of conduct published on November 10, political parties and candidates contesting the 13th parliamentary election, as well as their agents, were required to submit the names of the social media platforms they use, their account IDs, email addresses, and other identifying information to their respective returning officers before campaigning began on January 22. However, none of the 67 returning officers appointed across the country has been reportedly able to submit these details to the EC.

What's more worrying is the apparent lack of seriousness on the EC's part. That disinformation would be a major challenge during this election season was known to all, including the EC itself. Why, then, did it not act more proactively to obtain the social media details from the contestants? When asked, an election commissioner said that the "time has not ended yet" and that the commission would "sit and get an overall idea of the matter" in a day or two. One cannot help but ask: what purpose would that serve now, with the election just a couple of days away?

The EC claims to have mechanisms in place to monitor campaigning across electronic, print, and social media. But these mechanisms seem to have been ineffective judging by the reports on deliberate disinformation campaigns and the onslaught of fake and misleading content. In fact, according to a study by Transparency International Bangladesh, the EC has failed to prevent several violations of the electoral code. The study found that candidates spent large sums on social media campaigns to create instability, manipulate narratives, and influence voters through AI-generated images and video clips. Many of these campaigns targeted women and opposition candidates, using slurs to demean and intimidate them. Unfortunately, the EC has failed to prevent these abuses.

Overall, in terms of upholding the electoral code of conduct and keeping candidates in check, the EC's performance has been abysmal. It should have been far better prepared to tackle these challenges and to ensure that this election, given its significance, would be beyond reproach. We hope it is much better equipped to ensure that the election day passes without any disruptions, and that voters are able to cast their ballots safely and peacefully. As for the electoral code, the EC must ensure that all violators are penalised accordingly.

Stop the inflow of illegal arms

The government must take urgent measures to maintain poll-time law and order

We are deeply alarmed by reports that illegal firearms are entering the country through at least 30 border routes ahead of the national election on February 12. A recent *Prothom Alo* report reveals that firearm dealers and smugglers are exploiting poorly guarded sections of the borders with India and Myanmar to bring in foreign-made pistols, ammunition, and other weapons. These arms are then being used in violence, murder, turf wars, and extortion.

Recent arrests expose how entrenched and organised this illicit trade has become. Per the report, on January 22, police detained a man with two pistols and 21 rounds of ammunition brought in through Benapole. Earlier on December 1, another arms dealer was caught in Chapainawabganj with one foreign pistol, five rounds of bullets, and two magazines imported via Monakasha. Interrogations revealed that these weapons were intended to be used for election-time violence. Weapons are also entering via fishing trawlers and boats. Smugglers often allow small consignments to be seized by law enforcers while larger shipments pass through, underscoring how sophisticated these networks are.

Equally worrying is the failure to recover the looted firearms during the July uprising in 2024. Reportedly, of the 5,847 firearms taken from police stations and prisons, 1,362 still remain unrecovered. The recovery of 11 sophisticated foreign-made firearms and 394 rounds of ammunition from a house in North Badda also highlights the severity of the threat. Recent reports of political violence across the country further highlight the threat posed by illegal arms. According to the Human Rights Support Society, at least five people were killed and 970 injured in election-related violence nationwide in the two months following the announcement of the election schedule.

The government, therefore, must remain extra cautious and step up efforts across the country to prevent further violence. It is reassuring that nearly 10 lakh law enforcers have been deployed to maintain law and order during the February 12 polls. However, this must be complemented by proactive and coordinated action to stop the inflow of illegal arms. Strengthening border and intelligence surveillance, dismantling smuggling networks, and recovering looted firearms are urgent priorities now. The borders must be secured by all means, and constant vigilance must be ensured during and after the polls to maintain law and order in the country.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY



Kasparov wins chess match against computer

On this day in 1996, world chess champion Garry Kasparov began a six-round match against Deep Blue, a chess-playing computer built by IBM, in which Kasparov claimed a 4-2 victory.

Can election manifestos deliver on economic pledges?



MACRO MIRROR
Dr Fahmida Khatun
is an economist and executive director at the
Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD).
Views expressed in this article are the author's
own.

FAHMIDA KHATUN

For a long time, manifestos have held little significance in Bangladesh's political culture. Parties often forgot about them once elections were over, and the public paid little attention. Manifestos have historically been seen as mere formalities, having little influence on voting preferences. But the situation is different for the upcoming 13th parliamentary election. Political parties are making a true effort to present more appealing manifestos, and citizens are also showing increased interest in the promises within.

In this context, we can examine some of the economic pledges made in the election manifestos of the two major parties: Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Jamaat-e-Islami. The BNP has pledged to transform Bangladesh into a one-trillion-dollar economy by 2034, while Jamaat has pledged to elevate Bangladesh to a two-trillion-dollar economy by 2040. How realistic are these ambitions?

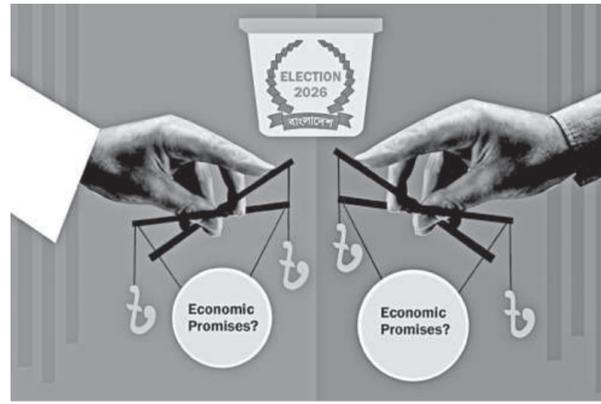
Bangladesh's GDP in the fiscal year 2025 was \$461.63 billion. If the country aims to reach a \$1 trillion economy by FY2034, the economy would need to more than double over nine years. To achieve this, Bangladesh would require an average annual GDP growth rate of around nine percent over the entire period. This means the economy would have to grow at a much faster pace than in recent years and maintain that momentum consistently.

Reaching a \$2 trillion economy by FY2040 as targeted by Jamaat would be even more demanding. Building on the FY2025 base, Bangladesh would require an average annual growth rate of about 10 percent for a prolonged period. However, with such an ambitious target, the party aims for a seven percent growth rate gradually. This is inadequate for reaching the target of a \$2 trillion economy by 2040.

It should be noted that sustained double digit growth has been achieved by only a few countries globally and would demand major improvements in investment, productivity, exports, and overall economic management.

Achieving such high growth and sustaining it long term demands a stable investment environment, technological capacity, skilled human resources, and transparent governance. These are areas where Bangladesh continues to face significant shortcomings.

Private investment hovered at around 24 percent of GDP for about a decade. Then, in FY2025, Bangladesh's total private investment declined to 22.5 percent of GDP. The growth trajectories of most countries indicate



VISUAL: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

that double digit growth cannot be sustained without private investment amounting to at least 30-35 percent of GDP. Beyond private investment, several domestic and external factors also play critical roles in GDP growth. Even China, which saw growth momentum for several years, could not sustain it despite having private investment amounting to over 30 percent.

Although neither BNP's nor Jamaat's manifesto sets concrete targets for private investment (which is critical for growth and employment generation), both have set targets for foreign direct investment (FDI). BNP aims to raise FDI to 2.5 percent of

GDP while Jamaat-e-Islami aims to increase FDI to \$15 billion within five years. In FY2025, Bangladesh received FDI of approximately \$1.69 billion. So, achieving BNP's FDI target would require annual FDI inflows of about \$25 billion, meaning that FDI would need to grow at a rate of roughly 35 percent per year for nine consecutive years. To fulfil Jamaat's FDI target, the average annual growth rate of FDI would have to be about 55 percent.

Achieving such rapid growth in FDI would require major improvements in policy certainty, infrastructure, regulatory efficiency, governance, and overall investor confidence. Without deep and sustained reforms, these targets would be very difficult to realise in practice.

Another important area is the tax-to-GDP ratio. Both parties correctly highlighted the need for higher tax revenues to finance development programmes. The BNP has promised

administrative weaknesses, a culture of tax evasion, technological limitations, and corruption will require deep political and institutional reforms.

Some of the social sector targets in the manifestos involve resource allocation and warrant discussion. BNP aims to raise both education and health spending to five percent of GDP within five years. Jamaat aims to raise education spending to six percent of GDP, and health spending to triple over the next five years. Budget allocation for education in FY2026 is about two percent of GDP, and that for health is only 0.75 percent of GDP. To meet BNP's goal, education spending will have to grow by about 20 percent per year. The greater challenge is the health sector target, as raising spending to five percent of GDP would require an average annual increase of around 46 percent. Meanwhile, Jamaat's ambition to raise education spending implies that education spending as a share of GDP would need to increase by about 25 percent every year on average. Tripling health spending over the same five-year period also requires an average annual increase of about 25 percent.

One of the most attractive pledges from the BNP is to provide family cards to four crore marginalised families, who will receive Tk 2,000-2,500 per month. Initially, 50 lakh poor rural families will receive this card. However, the central challenge lies in financing such a massive programme. Providing 50 lakh cards would cost Tk 12,000-15,000 crore per year. For four crore family cards, an amount of Tk 96,000-120,000 crore per year will be needed. While this is a much-needed proposal for poverty reduction, it is also a significant fiscal commitment requiring a clear financial plan.

There is also no specific plan in either manifesto addressing Bangladesh's imminent graduation from the Least Developed Country category in November 2026. This transition will lead to loss of preferential, duty-free access to international markets, and require the country to reduce import tariffs, thereby placing additional pressure on government revenue. It is therefore surprising that the manifestos lack any strategies to manage the risks associated with this crucial structural transition.

When ambition is disconnected from reality, public trust erodes. A manifesto becomes meaningful only when it is realistic, accountable, and aligned with the economy's real needs.

Our coasts demand more than recycled political pledges

Jashim Uddin
is independent researcher and writer on climate
change and coastal resilience.

JASHIM UDDIN

As Bangladesh approaches another parliamentary election, political rhetoric is intensifying, development pledges are being recycled, and candidates are once again courting voters with familiar promises. Yet for the people of the southwestern coast—particularly Khulna's Koyra-Paigachha belt—this election arrives with more anxiety than optimism. For many coastal residents, voting feels hollow because electoral promises have rarely translated into tangible improvements in their lives. Instead, they continue to live in a state of chronic vulnerability.

This southern coastal region remains one of the most disaster-prone zones in the country. Government and international studies consistently identify it as highly exposed to cyclones, tidal flooding, storm surges, salinity intrusion, and river siltation. Cyclones Sidr (2007), Aila (2009), Amphan (2020), and Yaas (2021) were not isolated calamities but part of a persistent pattern of climate-induced crisis that has steadily eroded livelihoods, infrastructure, and human security. In Koyra and Paigachha, entire villages have been inundated, embankments have repeatedly collapsed, and families have lost homes, farmlands, and shrimp enclosures built with years of toil and savings.

The official figures from Cyclone Amphan are stark: more than 51,000 houses were damaged in Koyra alone, 4,500 hectares of

shrimp farms were washed away, and over 1.7 lakh people were affected. But beyond these numbers lies a deeper humanitarian tragedy. Rising salinity has undermined agricultural productivity, while asset loss has pushed fishing and farming households into predatory debt. Many families are forced to change occupations during prolonged floods, disrupting social stability and economic security. Flooded schools have deprived a generation of children of consistent education, while saline water has created an acute drinking water crisis—placing an unfair burden on women who must travel long distances for safe water. Waterborne diseases, including diarrhoea, spike during flooding, disproportionately

term resilience. Rice distribution and emergency aid, though necessary, do little to address the structural vulnerabilities that keep these communities trapped in perpetual risk. Equally troubling is the political economy of flooding: local elites have sometimes benefited from waterlogged lands for commercial shrimp cultivation, while ordinary farmers bear the losses—an unjust outcome shaped more by power than public interest.

In the spirit of the July uprising—which demanded equity, justice, and inclusive development—such neglect can no longer be tolerated. The next member of parliament (MP) from this region must move beyond symbolic concern and adopt a clear,

Coastal residents—especially women, farmers, and fishermen—possess invaluable knowledge about their environment and must have a formal role in planning and decision-making. Bangladesh cannot claim inclusive development while sidelining its coastal population. The coast protects the nation from the Bay of Bengal's ferocity; in return, it deserves dignity, security, and opportunity.

affecting women and children.

Compounding this suffering is weak governance and ineffective flood management. Coastal protection remains largely reactive rather than preventive. Fragile earthen embankments are repaired only after breaches occur—often by local communities using bamboo, sandbags, and their own labor—while promised durable embankments and integrated river management projects remain delayed or poorly implemented.

Policy responses continue to prioritise short-term relief over long-

people-centred coastal agenda. What the coast needs is not charity, but representation and justice.

Coastal communities expect concrete commitments from their leaders. For instance, constructing climate-resilient embankments using modern engineering, combined with community-based monitoring and properly managed sluice gates to regulate salinity and flooding, would bring tangible benefits to the community. A transition towards salinity-resilient agriculture—including salt-tolerant rice varieties, floating gardens, and an introduction

to diversified livelihood options would enable farmers to not be dependent on a single, risky occupation.

A stronger regulation of coastal aquaculture to prevent environmental degradation and land grabbing, while promoting eco-friendly shrimp farming practices, would greatly benefit coastal communities. Furthermore, responsible coastal ecotourism around the Sundarbans that genuinely benefits local communities rather than outside investors alone should be encouraged. An improved transport and communication infrastructure, including elevated roads and safer cyclone shelters are instrumental in local community development, and stronger digital connectivity is essential for early warning systems.

The coastal residents would also benefit from urgent investment in safe drinking water systems, such as rainwater harvesting and desalination, alongside better local healthcare services during flood seasons.

Most importantly, policymaking must be participatory. Coastal residents—especially women, farmers, and fishermen—possess invaluable knowledge about their environment and must have a formal role in planning and decision-making. Bangladesh cannot claim inclusive development while sidelining its coastal population. The coast protects the nation from the Bay of Bengal's ferocity; in return, it deserves dignity, security, and opportunity.

What the region needs is a leader who will truly represent the coast—one with a vision for sustainable water management, flourishing ecotourism, quality healthcare, and reliable education. The coast has waited too long; it is time to move from crisis response to coastal justice.