Farm pledges look achievable, delivery will be the real test

SUKANTA HALDER

As Bangladesh heads towards the February 12 parliamentary election, agriculture has found prominent space in the manifestos of political parties.

Major parties, including the BNP, Jamaat-e-Islami, Islami Andolan Bangladesh, National Citizen Party (NCP) and the Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB), have placed farming high on their policy agenda.

Most of the pledges appear realistic on paper. But agri economists and sector specialists say delivery will depend less on promises and more on long-term political will and a clear stand against unchecked corporatisation of farming.

According to them, genuine reform requires empowering farmers, especially small and marginal ones, rather than relying on broad commitments without clear execution plans.

While parties have spoken of incentives, lower input costs and access to agri machinery, experts note that most manifestos are somewhat vague on how these benefits will actually reach farmers on the ground.

Experts say genuine reform requires empowering farmers, especially small and marginal ones, rather than relying on broad commitments without clear execution plans.
PHOTO: **MOSTAFA SHABUJ**

POLLS PLEDGES AND REALITY

The election comes at a difficult moment for agriculture. Climate change has increased the frequency of flooding, droughts, salinity and cyclones. Heat stress is rising, while cultivable land is shrinking, adding pressure to food production and rural livelihoods.

WHAT PARTIES ARE PROMISING

In its manifesto, BNP has outlined 15 agriculture-related commitments. Major points include introducing a "Farmer's Card", ensuring comprehensive farmer protection, waiving agricultural loans up to Tk 10,000 and reviving the Barind project.

The party has also proposed setting up special cold storage facilities for mango preservation, ensuring fair prices for crops, protection of farmland

and construction of procurement centres. Other pledges include offering agri insurance, setting up agri export zones in the northern region and addressing climate risks through precision farming.

Meanwhile, Jamaat-e-Islami has proposed 16 agendas, focusing on food and nutrition security through sustainable farming.

The party's manifesto highlights lowering input costs, offering fair prices, subsidies and credit support, bolstering export growth, supporting climate resilience, utilising modern technology, offering land protection, irrigation expansion, entrepreneurship development, research and developing stronger markets to raise productivity, employment and farmer incomes.

Islami Andolan Bangladesh has presented a 22-point plan that emphasises climate-smart agriculture,

mechanisation, incentives, fair prices, easy credit and digital market access.

It also promises to reduce post-harvest losses through better storage and transport facilities, land reform, cooperative development, building direct links between farmers and buyers and stronger government procurement to protect small and marginal farmers.

The National Citizen Party (NCP) has proposed three key measures. Strengthening domestic seed research, preservation, and distribution is one of them. The other two measures are ensuring food sovereignty alongside food security and intensifying drives against food adulteration with strict penalties.

The Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB) has outlined a broad programme covering minimum crop prices, expanding government procurement, land reform, increasing the effectiveness

of cooperative-based markets, climate-resilient farming, rural infrastructure, ensuring year-round sustainable employment for agriculture-based workers, agro-industry development and participatory water and resource management.

BOLD PLEDGES, THIN EXECUTION PLANS

Abdul Bayes, former economics professor at Jahangirnagar University, said meaningful progress in agriculture is impossible without firm political commitment.

Growing corporatisation poses a serious threat to small farmers, he said, but none of the political parties clearly explain a strategy to protect farmers from corporate dominance.

Bayes also pointed out that while climate change is mentioned frequently in the manifestos, the references lack depth.

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Digital ambitions take centre stage

Rural connectivity, power outages, and skill shortages cast doubt on promises

POLLS PLEDGES AND REALITY

MAHMUDUL HASAN

With Bangladesh striving to build a digital future, information and communications technology (ICT) and telecom have moved from specialised policy areas to key issues in the electoral debate.

In their manifestos for the upcoming general election, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami, the National Citizen Party (NCP), and the Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB) have outlined broad plans for the sector, including ambitious job creation targets, digital infrastructure goals, and promises of transparency, innovation, and inclusion.

While the parties present forward-looking visions, implementing them will require systemic reforms, stronger institutions, and investment in human capital.

Bangladesh's ICT and telecom sector has seen rapid growth, with mobile use surging and internet penetration increasing. Yet service quality often remains poor, and digital public infrastructure has frequently failed to deliver efficient, citizen-centred services. Rural broadband reliability is uneven, power outages disrupt networks, and licensing complexity adds costs without improving services.

Against this backdrop, political parties are seeking to persuade voters they can build on past progress and tackle these challenges.

BNP AIMS TO MAKE ICT AN ECONOMIC DRIVER

BNP designates ICT as a "special priority sector" and a potential "driving force of the country's economic growth." It pledges to create a "future-oriented, dynamic and technologically inclusive Bangladesh," benefiting

citizens, students, freelancers, entrepreneurs, and businesses.

Job creation is central. BNP plans to directly generate 200,000 ICT jobs in cybersecurity, BPO (business process outsourcing), AI-data, semiconductors, and Industry 4.0, and indirectly create 800,000 more through freelancing and content creation.

The manifesto sets ambitious infrastructure targets, including reliable high-speed internet for all and

diversify exports and move up the value chain, many targets remain highly aspirational.

Currently, Bangladesh has around 300,000-400,000 ICT workers, far below the over one million tech-related jobs promised. Rural broadband is uneven, and infrastructure essential for advanced data centres and near-constant uptime is still developing.

AKM Wahiduzzaman, BNP's information and technology affairs

BNP	JAMAAT
Aims for total 1m direct and indirect ICT jobs	Targets $5b ICT exports & 2m jobs by 2030
Promises high-speed internet, AI data centres, e-wallets, start-up support	Emphasises fight against corruption, digital IDs, citizen services, cybersecurity reforms

NCP	CPB
Promises 1.5m digital jobs, citizen-focused services nationwide	Backs science, tech, ICT for public welfare with a six-month research policy
Plans unified digital ID, secure data infrastructure, cashless payments	

"99.999 percent network reliability" through a new Connectivity Masterplan developed with public and private sectors.

Additional pledges include introducing PayPal and a national e-wallet, building an AI-driven data centre campus, expanding start-up funds, and creating a national crowdfunding platform.

While the manifesto's focus on AI, semiconductors, and digital skills aligns with Bangladesh's goal to

secretary, said the party plans a phased ICT transformation with entry- to high-skill job creation, curriculum modernisation, and scalable infrastructure backed by measurable KPIs. Semiconductor and hardware development will begin with achievable clusters and phased, performance-linked investments.

JAMAAT FOCUSES ON GOVERNANCE AND ANTI-CORRUPTION

Jamaat places ICT at the centre of

its economic and governance agenda, aiming for $5 billion in exports and 2 million ICT jobs by 2030, rising to $10 billion by 2035.

These targets mirror those of the previous Awami League government, which fell short due to skill gaps, limited high-value product development, and weak global market integration.

The manifesto offers little detail on addressing long-standing structural issues, including access to global clients, quality standards, intellectual property protection, and advanced talent development, raising questions about whether these goals represent a real departure from past failures.

Jamaat prioritises anti-corruption and citizen services. Its manifesto pledges to "completely eliminate corruption" using ICT, introduce a complaint redress system within three months, implement a single digital ID for all services, and support local tech firms under a "Bangladesh First" approach similar to BNP's.

Cybersecurity plans include a national policy, strengthening CIRT (cyber incident response team), forming an ethical hacking team, and enacting international-standard laws for information confidentiality and digital rights. Telecom reforms aim to improve efficiency, reduce corruption, and ensure fair competition among operators.

Despite these initiatives, implementation challenges remain. The party's export and job targets appear overly optimistic given the current capacity limitations, including underdeveloped inter-ministerial coordination, legal frameworks, and secure databases.

Fahim Mashroor, former president of Bangladesh Association of Software and Information Services (BASIS), criticised both BNP and Jamaat for focusing heavily on creating over one million jobs "mainly through freelancing," calling it "a repeat of past government failures."

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Essential medicines and policy reality

MD ABU ZAFOR SADEK

To improve access to public health services in underdeveloped and developing countries, the World Health Organization (WHO) first published a list of 200 medicines in 1977, identifying them as essential medicines.

The WHO medicine selection process is based on three core criteria: priority public health needs, relevance to population health, and the efficacy, safety and affordability of medicines. Under WHO guidelines, essential medicines should be available in appropriate dosage forms to meet patient needs, be of assured quality and be accessible at affordable prices. The concept of essential medicines serves as the foundation for public sector medicine procurement and supply, insurance reimbursement, medicine donations and local pharmaceutical production. The WHO updates its essential medicines list every two years in response to evolving needs. The current list contains about 500 medicines.

Recently, with the aim of expanding healthcare access for a larger share of the population, Bangladesh increased its national essential medicines list to 296 items by adding 135 new medicines. This is a commendably positive step. However, two accompanying policy measures raise serious concerns about the sustainable development of the pharmaceutical industry. The first is the requirement that at least 25 percent of a company's total medicine sales must come from essential medicines. The second is the imposition of strong price controls.

Bangladesh currently has about 1,500 generic medicines, of which roughly 20 percent are classified as essential. In most cases, essential medicines are priced several times lower than non-essential medicines, and many also have market alternatives.

Expecting companies to generate 25 percent of total sales from medicines that make up only 20 percent of products and are significantly lower priced is unrealistic for most manufacturers.

Capacity constraints further complicate the situation. Not all companies can produce every dosage form. Firms with limited dosage form capabilities may face even greater difficulties, as they would be forced to make new investments to meet government targets while operating in low-price segments. From a business perspective, this is an impractical expectation. Market dynamics add another layer of complexity. Growth does not necessarily follow the structure of the essential medicines list. In 2025, the pharmaceutical market in Bangladesh grew at an average annual rate of 9.2 percent. Yet the largest segment, anti-ulcerants, grew by only 7.2 percent. By contrast, cardiovascular and nervous system medicines expanded faster than the overall market, at 14.42 percent and 10.36 percent respectively.

These therapeutic classes are not evenly represented in the essential medicines list. It is therefore natural for companies to prioritise higher growth segments to ensure survival. Market momentum is increasingly driven not by large established segments, but by medium and small specialised therapies, pointing to gradual diversification within the industry. Many specialised therapy medicines are priced several hundred times higher than the average essential medicine. Not all companies manufacture these products, nor do all need to. Firms that depend mainly on technologically advanced, high-value medicines will find it almost impossible to meet a 25 percent essential medicine sales requirement.

Another question merits attention: does Bangladesh actually need an annual essential medicine market approaching Tk 10,000 crore, equivalent to 25 percent of total sales across all companies? This issue requires a proper survey-based assessment. Price regulation also deserves careful scrutiny. The cost of pharmaceutical raw materials varies widely depending on sourcing and import volumes. Operational, production and transportation costs differ across companies and directly influence final prices.

Against this backdrop, it is worth examining whether markup-based or direct price control mechanisms can adequately reflect these business realities. Excessive price control can have negative short and long-term effects, including reduced incentives for quality improvement, supply shortages, distorted competition and weaker investment. Rather than rigid price controls, a rational and realistic pricing framework, developed through inclusive participation of all stakeholders, could better protect consumers while supporting the long-term sustainability of Bangladesh's pharmaceutical industry.

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Gold ticks lower

REUTERS

Gold prices eased on Tuesday, as improved risk appetite lifted global equities, while investors awaited a series of US economic data later this week that could shape the outlook for US interest rates.

Spot gold fell 0.5 percent to $5,040.47 per ounce by 0900 GMT. It had scaled a record high of $5,594.82 on January 29.

US gold futures for April delivery lost 0.3 percent to $5,062.60 per ounce.

"The start of the week has been marked by a resurgence in risk appetite across financial markets, reflected in gains in equity indices, which has weighed on gold prices," said ActivTrades analyst Ricardo Evangelista.

Global stocks advanced in Asian trade, led by an extended rally in Tokyo after Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's decisive election victory over the weekend.