

## A moment to unite and deliver

Govt, opposition must work together for the sake of the country

With hope and aspiration for a better tomorrow, we welcome Bangladesh's new prime minister, Tarique Rahman, his cabinet members, and the members of the 13th parliament from both the ruling coalition and the opposition. The oath-taking ceremony of the new legislative and executive bodies on Tuesday marked the beginning of our country's transition back to parliamentary democracy. Empowered by ballots, they now bear the responsibility of shaping the nation's future for, hopefully, the next five years.

The greater responsibility, however, rests with the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), which formed the government with a two-thirds majority. Given our less-than-encouraging experience with majoritarian governments, particularly in the recent past, the new ruling party must take care not to misuse that power. Encouragingly, Tarique Rahman's measured words and gestures following the election results signalled a positive shift. So far, both the victors and the opposition alliance have shown relative restraint in their post-election reactions, something that has often been absent during previous transitions.

BNP's decision to refrain from taking the oath as members of the Constitution Reform Council may create some confusion. Under the July National Charter (Constitution Reform) Implementation Order, 2025, members of the 13th parliament are also to serve on the Constitution Reform Council. While several independent MPs, along with lawmakers from Jamaat-e-Islami, the National Citizen Party, and Islami Andolon, took the oath as council members on Tuesday, BNP MPs and independent Rumeen Farhana did not. BNP leader Salahuddin Ahmed told reporters that once parliament constitutionally approves the council, rules regarding members' swearing-in can be framed. He further argued that, under the existing constitution, lawmakers were not elected specifically as members of the Constitution Reform Council. While this justification merits consideration, as the ruling party the BNP must make sincere efforts to bridge differences with the opposition on this issue through dialogue. All the parties must remain resolute in their commitment to the principles and spirit of the July Charter, which they have all signed, the BNP included, who placed notes of dissent regarding some clauses.

Aside from the minor hiccup regarding the Constituent Reform Council, the new government's start has been promising. The decision by BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami lawmakers to forgo duty-free vehicles and government-allotted residential plots is commendable. At a time of inflationary pressure, such restraint could translate into meaningful national savings. We hope this spirit carries over into broader public expenditures as the executive assumes office.

As we watched emerging young leaders and seasoned stalwarts pledge to make our voices heard in the halls of democracy—the Jatiya Sangsad—we were reminded of the thousands whose sacrifices led to the ouster of an authoritarian regime during the July 2024 uprising. The 18-month interim administration that followed, despite its failure to implement many promised reforms, did deliver a credible election, and for that it deserves acknowledgment. Now, both the ruling party and the opposition must ensure that this hard-won democratic renewal does not falter again.

## Contain price hike during Ramadan

Authorities must act swiftly to stabilise supply before prices spiral further

With Ramadan approaching, prices of essential goods have started to rise again. This is happening even though imports have increased in recent months. Traders say the rise is due to goods being stuck at the port, delays in unloading, and higher demand following the election holidays. According to a report in the daily *Samakal*, a total of 110 ships are stranded on water waiting to unload at Chattoogram port. Half of these vessels are loaded with rice, lentils, chickpeas, dates, sugar, edible oil, and other daily necessities.

A prolonged work stoppage at the port, followed by the election holidays and restrictions on vehicular movement, has caused severe congestion. Normally, around 5,000 TEU (twenty-foot equivalent unit) containers are cleared daily. During the disruption, that number fell to nearly one-third of the usual volume, and on some days, no containers were cleared at all. As a result, around five million tonnes of goods are now stuck aboard vessels, while container backlogs at the jetties have climbed to over 41,000, making the situation worrying. Importers had reportedly brought in goods early this year, anticipating the proximity of Ramadan and the election. However, many have been unable to release their consignments on time. Even though port authorities say they are prioritising Ramadan goods, traders say that it may take another week, or even longer, to clear the backlog.

The impact is already visible in wholesale markets such as Khatungani. Within a week, prices of onions, garlic, ginger, chickpeas, lentils, and vermicelli have increased. Date prices have risen by Tk 50-100 per kg, chickpeas by Tk 5-10 per kg, garlic by Tk 15, and vermicelli by up to Tk 150 per maund. Onions and lentils have also become more expensive. Together, these increases place significant pressure on household budgets.

There are reports that some traders may be deliberately holding back goods or exploiting the port congestion to raise prices. Weak market monitoring during the election period appears to have allowed such practices to go unchecked. If syndicates or unscrupulous traders are manipulating supply to drive up prices, authorities must act quickly to identify and stop them.

The government must ensure the uninterrupted clearance of essential commodities at the port. Special logistical arrangements, extended working hours, and coordinated transport support may be necessary to clear the backlog. Equally importantly, market monitoring must be strengthened. Authorities should verify stock levels, enforce transparent price displays at wholesale and retail markets, and take swift action against hoarding or collusive practices. If imports are indeed higher than last year and demand forecasts are clear, there is little justification for excessive price volatility ahead of the holy month of Ramadan.

# The govt will be stronger with more women at the table



NO STRINGS ATTACHED

Aasha Mehreen Amin is joint editor at The Daily Star.

AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

The 2026 election has been touted as one of the most historic in the country, remarkable for many reasons. It is the direct outcome of a bloody mass uprising led by students. It kept Awami League completely out of parliament, allowed Jamaat-e-Islami—a party bearing the unresolved legacy of 1971—to emerge as the main opposition, and brought BNP back to power with a two-thirds majority, giving Tarique Rahman the opportunity to demonstrate that he is the right leader to steer the country towards stability and progress.

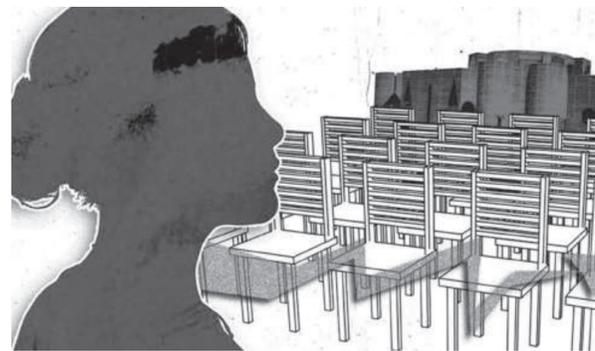
Despite all this, what this election has not achieved is a respectable representation of women at the highest levels. Only 85 women contested in the election, including 66 with party nominations and 19 as independent aspirants. Eventually, only seven made it to parliament, including six from BNP and one formerly attached to BNP politics. It has been disheartening to see that candidates as accomplished and dedicated to public interest as Tasnim Jara, Taslima Akhter, and Manisha Chakraborty, among others, did not secure the required votes.

The continued sidelining of women in the country faded into near invisibility by the time the election came. A movement born in the name of justice and equality has eventually resulted in a parliament less representative of half the population than ever before.

Tragically, the interim government, despite being a product of an anti-discrimination movement, ended up discriminating against women's political participation. This occurred through its overindulgence of parties openly opposed to women's role in governance or their equal rights in public spaces. Political parties, meanwhile, did not bother to adhere to the minimum 5 percent representation despite pledging to do so by signing the July National Charter. The result, therefore, is hardly surprising.

But does this mean there is no way out of this absurd situation? Perhaps not.

A practical starting point would be



'Women MPs must have resources, visibility, and the mandate to influence decisions in their constituencies.'

FILE VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

the women's reserved seats, which can provide at least some immediate corrective. Ideally, as recommended by the Women's Affairs Reform Commission—whose proposals, by the way, received zero attention during the Consensus Commission talks—proper representation in elections would have significantly strengthened women's political participation by giving them a direct mandate from voters. Since that has not happened, a more logical course is available: instead of adhering to the age-old practice of "rewarding" party loyalists by selecting their wives, daughters, or other female relatives, why not fill the reserved seats with competent women already invested in politics? These seats are allocated according to each party's proportion of parliamentary seats, a formula that gives parties both responsibility and opportunity.

BNP, because of its parliamentary majority, is in a particularly strong position and can choose more women candidates than other parties. This is an opportunity it should not miss. By selecting honest, competent, qualified women committed to public service, the party can send a powerful message that merit, not patronage, will shape the new chapter of governance.

Similarly, despite the general

sentiment within Jamaat to keep women out of leadership positions, it could serve the nation, and surprise many, by selecting accomplished professionals for the reserved seats.

However, merely allocating reserved seats to capable women will not bring meaningful change unless those seats come with real empowerment. Women MPs must have resources, visibility, and

and the entrenched influence of money and muscle. They campaigned on terrain hostile to their very presence. Their clean image, resilience, and steadfastness signal political courage.

Tasnim Jara, a physician and former member of the National Citizen Party (NCP), raised campaign funds through crowdfunding and built support by directly engaging ordinary people in her constituency. Her manifesto pledged to ensure improved healthcare and education, public safety, and greater accountability of MPs. Her campaign demonstrated organisational skills, public trust, and financial transparency, qualities essential for effective governance.

Manisha Chakraborty, another physician from the Bangladesher Samajtantrik Dal (BSD), contested in Barishal-5. A familiar face who had run as a mayoral candidate before, she raised funds through small public donations by distributing clay banks and secured 22,486 votes, which she rightly views as evidence of a growing vote bank seeking change from the "politics of plunder, corruption and communalism." Her appeal to young, middle class, and working-class voters suggests the capacity to build broad-based coalitions.

Taslima Akhter, an activist, photographer, president of Garments Workers Solidarity, and member of the NTCC and Labour Reform Commission 2024, ran from Ganosambhati Andolon in Dhaka-12. Her campaign focused on transparency and accountability and advocated for a "citizen council" through which voters could hold representatives responsible.

These are just some of the names that immediately come to mind. There are many others who also deserve consideration. It is encouraging that three women MPs have already been given ministerial positions. We hope to see more in the top tiers of the government.

Imagine a parliament and cabinet with a significant number of competent, capable, and honest women members. Such inclusion would not weaken the government; it would make it stronger, more credible, and better equipped to address the developmental and economic challenges ahead. A government born out of the sacrifices and aspirations of ordinary people should reflect the full strength of its people. Empowering qualified women is not charity or concession; it is sound political judgment.

## The economics of everyday extortion



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In its idealised form, an economic system such as capitalism—often known for rewarding productivity, risk-taking, and innovation—is one in which profits follow value creation, competition disciplines excess, and institutions protect exchange. Yet across much of the developing world—and in several middle-income economies—what operates under the label of capitalism increasingly functions through coercion rather than production. Markets exist, money circulates, and transactions occur, but the logic animating them has shifted. Value is no longer primarily created; it is extracted. This is not a mere market failure, but a sophisticated, predatory mutation of the system.

This phenomenon draws from my ongoing research identifying ten slightly overlapping faces of capitalism, each shaped by institutional design and power relations. One of these distorted offspring I describe as "extortion capitalism". It emerges when systematic coercive extraction replaces productive accumulation as the dominant economic logic. In such systems, the pursuit of profit is no longer tethered to efficiency, innovation, or service delivery. It is anchored instead in control over permits, roads, ports, files, licenses, and ultimately, fear. The gatekeeper replaces the entrepreneur; the innovator, by the enforcer.

In Bangladesh, extortion is not a marginal deviation or an underground aberration; it is embedded in the very

architecture of everyday economic life. Transport operators, traders, contractors, and small businesses face payments that are neither taxes nor fees, but compulsory extractions enforced through political muscle, bureaucratic discretion, or outright intimidation. Economic survival depends less on entrepreneurship than on compliance with informal toll regimes. The price of doing business is not innovation, but submission. Markets function, but they function as corridors of rent extraction rather than arenas of competition.

The abstraction becomes concrete when one examines mass-contact state institutions. The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics Citizen Perception Survey 2025, as reported by *The Daily Star* on December 25, 2025, shows that nearly one-third of citizens paid bribes to obtain public services, with the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority and passport offices emerging as the most corruption-prone interfaces. These are not elite gateways; they are universal points of contact that citizens must face repeatedly. When routine access to mobility and legality itself depends on informal payments, coercion ceases to be episodic and becomes structural. The citizen is not paying to break the law, but to access it. Formal compliance costs more than informal negotiation. In such a setting, corruption is not merely a moral failure; it is an economic toll. Citizenship becomes conditional, and a silent lesson is learned: voice does

not work—money does.

A closely comparable pattern appears in Nigeria, where police checkpoints, port clearances, fuel distribution, and public procurement operate as layered extraction points. Businesses factor bribes into operating costs much as they would electricity. Political power becomes a mechanism for monetising access to markets rather than regulating them. The distinction between public authority and private predation blurs, producing an economy where compliance is rewarded more reliably than competence.

In Pakistan, the mechanism is more institutionalised but no less coercive. Access to land records, utilities, and judicial relief frequently requires unofficial payments mediated by politically connected intermediaries. Elections rotate elites and slogans evolve, yet the extraction structure remains remarkably stable. What persists is not ideology but incentive: controlling chokepoints yields higher returns than producing goods.

The logic becomes starkly visible in Haiti, where armed groups openly control roads, ports, and fuel depots. Tolls are imposed on movement, trade, and basic survival. While the institutional form differs from South Asia or West Africa, the economic principle is identical: income is generated through coercive control rather than production. The absence of a functioning state does not eliminate capitalism; it mutates it into a raw system of enforced extraction.

In Afghanistan, this system has persisted across radically different regimes. Whether under warlords, transitional governments, or religious authority, trade routes are taxed, and households coerced. The continuity reveals an uncomfortable truth: extortion capitalism is not tied to doctrine. It is tied to the profitability of coercion. A hybrid version is evident in Myanmar, where businesses face overlapping demands from military-

linked firms and informal enforcers. Participation requires continuous payments, crowding out efficiency and innovation. Capital accumulation becomes defensive rather than productive—aimed at survival, not expansion. Even in Venezuela, access to foreign exchange and licences has long depended on political loyalty and unofficial payments. As output shrank, the state compensated not by reforming, but by tightening control over remaining economic arteries.

These countries differ in culture and geography, yet they converge on a common pattern. When coercive extraction becomes more profitable than production, capitalism mutates. Markets still exist, prices still signal scarcity, and money still changes hands, but the engine has changed. Value creation gives way to predation. Entrepreneurship narrows into rent-seeking. Innovation withers because its returns are appropriated before they can compound. Labeling this simply as "corruption" understates the problem. Corruption implies deviation from a norm; extortion capitalism is a stable economic equilibrium. Once entrenched, it does not self-correct through market forces because the market itself has been repurposed as an extraction device.

Recognising this pattern is essential because policy remedies fail when the diagnosis is wrong. Privatisation, deregulation, and investment incentives cannot work where coercion—not competition—sets the rules. Development strategies premised on market efficiency collapse when the market rewards access over ability. Understanding extortion capitalism is therefore not an academic exercise. It is a prerequisite for meaningful reform—and for distinguishing capitalism's productive potential from its most corrosive deformation. Until we dismantle the checkpoints of coercion, we are not building markets; we are merely financing their hijackers.