

A six-point strategic memo to the new government



Hossain Zillur Rahman
is executive chairman at the Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC) and a former adviser to the caretaker government.

HOSSAIN ZILLUR RAHMAN

Bangladesh passed multiple tests of its democratic credentials through the 13th parliamentary election on February 12. It was a festive and peaceful one despite widespread apprehensions, had a credible voter turnout, stands as a decisive verdict for centrism and stable transition, and saw an encouraging aftermath with contestants accepting the results.

The election was not only about the contestants. Citizens have regained a sense of ownership over the democratic process and how the state is run. First-time voters saw voting as a political assertion. Women voted in large numbers. So did minorities. The ballot did more than bring in a new government. It carried clear expectations that governance must improve, and justice must be ensured at every level of the state-society relationship.

A closer look at voting data will be essential reading for the victors. The vote share percentage signalled a much closer competition than the seat share percentage. For longer-term political dominance, the BNP must closely read the mood of the electorate. For now, parliament stands poised to take on a new journey of democratic deliberations. A new team is in place to lead and steer governance. Tarique Rahman assumes the mantle of leadership with a measure of humility and restraint that is winning wide appreciation. The start surely is grounded in optimism. In the coming days, there will be much discussion within and outside the government on prioritising challenges and determining the ways forward. At this early stage, six signals from the government are

critical.

The first signal is how BNP deals with the issue of competence, in the cabinet as well as officials manning the machinery of the state. This is less about mere academic qualifications and more about a grasp of the real world, acumen, decisiveness, and ability to move the system to produce results. Two lethal diseases have corroded the bureaucracy: sycophantic lobbying and grievances as currency. The colonial legacy of red-tapeism and prioritisation of file-moving over results on the ground has the potential to grind every well-meaning policy initiative. The interim government did not do much to address these challenges. BNP's initial steps will be closely watched to assess how the competence issue is being addressed.

The second crucial signal is how the question about the economy is being perceived and handled. The interim government did credibly restore a measure of financial discipline, but it could not engage on the larger question of galvanising the economy. Stalled growth, investment and revenue mobilisation; rising poverty and unemployment; and deepening economic disparities define the current fundamentals of the real economy, as was shown in the Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC) State of the Real Economy Report of 2025. The nation awaits a crucial signal from the new BNP economic team on how the question of economic recovery and economic equity will be approached.

Fiscal discipline remains essential, but a one-dimensional stability agenda will not

do. Momentum will come from identifying and nurturing multiple growth drivers and greater attention should be turned to mesoeconomics, the space between large corporate actors and micro-enterprises. This layer includes small and medium firms, manufacturing clusters, agro-processing networks, and service enterprises that employ at scale but often lack access to finance or technology. With the right policy support,

government is about effective compassion, which must accompany the focus on economic momentum. The recent PPRC research has shown that, on average, households across the country are barely breaking even. In urban areas, persistent budget deficits have become common, with families falling short by several thousand taka each month. Nearly 28 percent of citizens live below the upper poverty line, and for lower-income

and agency. These are agendas that found resonance in the electoral field, too.

The fourth signal is about the crucial issue of decentralisation. Rebuilding and empowering local government can be central to the political fortunes of the BNP government. Years of central dominance have widened the disparity and constrained local initiative. Decentralisation can correct that imbalance when accompanied by real authority, adequate resources, and clear accountability at the city and union levels. Regional inequality narrows when local institutions have the capacity to act. The landscape of political and economic power often resembles a Dhaka-versus-the-rest reality. A wake-up call on decentralisation has the potential to galvanise a much-needed national conversation.

The fifth signal is about healing. Autocratic rule did not merely suppress; it traumatised the national psyche. The interim period, unfortunately, somewhat dissipated the rare mood of national unity born from the July uprising. This agenda of healing is a crucial priority which will not be achieved by mere rhetoric or symbolic acts. Honesty of purpose and concrete institutional steps will be central. It cannot be achieved by the government alone, but the ruling group has to set the tone and direction.

The sixth and final signal is how the geopolitical complexities will be navigated. It is both a challenge and an opportunity, never more so than for Bangladesh at this moment of transition. Rushed agreements at the flag end of the interim government have raised some unease. The "Bangladesh first" position can be the anchoring message here. For us, engaging in the geopolitical space should not be seen as a zero-sum game. Our focus must be on positive-sum outcomes even when the geopolitical landscape is challenging and fraught with dominant power rivalries. The task here is not only for the foreign policy team, but for the entire government.

Good luck to the BNP government. Good luck to Bangladesh. Good luck to all of us.



President Mohammed Shahabuddin swears in Tarique Rahman as the 11th prime minister of Bangladesh on February 17, 2026.

PHOTO: PID

these enterprises can broaden the base of expansion and reshape the pattern of growth. A structured national economic dialogue would help align public policy with these emerging growth drivers across sectors such as leather, light engineering, digital services, and regional production hubs.

The third signal needed from the new

households, more than half of monthly spending goes to food. Underemployment adds another layer of insecurity. People often endure hardship when they believe the system is fair. They resist it when outcomes appear unjust. Social protection, therefore, must do more than distribute benefits. It must reduce vulnerability while preserving dignity

Goodbye and good luck



Apurba Jahangir
is deputy press secretary to the chief adviser of the departing interim government.

APURBA JAHANGIR

On August 5, 2024, we were told that the old order had vanished into the Indian sunrise, and in its place stood a Nobel laureate, handed the impossible task of governing a country that had just been torn apart from within. Three days later, on August 8 at 2:15 pm, Professor Muhammad Yunus stepped onto the tarmac in Dhaka, not as the Hasina regime's favourite villain but as the new interim leader of Bangladesh. When he said, "I am remembering Abu Sayeed," and called this our "second victory day," promising that the fruits of this freedom must reach every corner of the country, the words did not feel like rhetoric; they felt like a hand on the shoulder of an exhausted nation.

The monsoon revolution of those 36 days had washed away the fascist machinery of Awami League, and we were offered the terrifying privilege of getting it right. It was, in every sense, our "West Wing" moment, that fleeting instant when history cracks open just wide enough for ordinary people to slip their shoulders under its weight and try, however clumsily, to steer it somewhere kinder.

It has been over 550 days since that afternoon of impossible hope. It is now February 2026. For me, to serve as deputy press secretary in this fragile, in-between time was to live in a permanent state of becoming, never quite arriving, always translating chaos into sentences the country could bear to hear, even when our own voices shook.

We were told that Bangladesh was bankrupt, not only in its coffers but also in its very spirit, and for 18 months we lived with the stubborn resolve to prove that projection wrong. We inherited a currency collapsing under its own fear and food inflation that had soared to 14.10 percent in July 2024 during the fever pitch of the uprising. Our foreign exchange reserves, which had slid below \$20 billion in 2024, now hover above \$32 billion, no longer a freefall but a fragile plateau that buys us time to think instead of panicking.

We treated the economy as one treats a trauma patient—stabilise the pulse, stop the bleeding, whisper encouragement in the dark. The vitals are steadier now, but the country still lies in a ward, not yet discharged,

surrounded by monitors that beep like small, insistent questions about what comes next. To work in those rooms was to learn a new kind of faith: that small, stubborn adjustments in policy could translate into one more child eating eggs twice a week instead of once.

In that same ward, we saw the birth of the July National Charter, a constitutional promise, fragile but real, crafted to ensure that never again will one pair of hands be allowed to clutch the entire state by the throat. Signed in October 2025 after months of arguments, walkouts, and exhausted compromises, the charter gathers more than 80 reform proposals, nearly 50 of them constitutional, and binds them to a now-held referendum that asked the country, in one breathless "Yes" or "No," whether it truly wanted to restrain its rulers. It is, at the very least, a guardrail we did not have before, a line scratched into the road by people who have seen where the cliff begins.

We also witnessed something deeply human: the return of faith from afar. In 2025, remittances reached an all-time high of around \$32.8 billion, the largest annual inflow in our history, and in the first seven months of the 2025-26 fiscal year alone, more than \$19.4 billion already came home through formal channels. These numbers live in spreadsheets, but in truth, they are love letters from millions of Bangladeshis scattered across the world, each transaction a whisper: "I believe in you again; I am willing to risk my hard-earned wages on the possibility that this time will be different."

We turned our gaze outward differently, too, refusing to lean on a single neighbour as if geography were destiny. Instead, we walked towards a more balanced, multipolar reality, securing support from the IMF and World Bank not as trophies but as lifelines woven into a broader strategy, even as published reserve data showed a slow climb back from the low twenties to the low thirties in billions of dollars. We negotiated with the United States and other partners to ease pressures on our exports, knowing that a "technical adjustment" in tariffs could mean the difference between shuttered gates and a factory's lights staying on for another year, between a pink slip and a renewed work ID, between a family slipping back into hunger and daring, quietly, to plan for a daughter's college admission.

And yet, revolution is never clean. It leaves fingerprints and fractures on everything it touches, and we would betray our own commitment to transparency if we pretended the porcelain did not crack in our hands. When the old police state vanished almost overnight in August 2024, it did not leave behind a ready-made rulebook; it left behind a gaping vacuum that reforms could not fill quickly enough. The official record of "mob justice" cases may read as a smaller number, but it obscures a larger catastrophe unfolding in the spaces between policing and justice, in the streets where some people became judge and executioner because the law had not yet learned to write itself in a new, credible voice.

Awami League remains banned from

contesting. The streets demanded this, and many of the wounded and grieving saw it as the only way to keep the old nightmares from slamming the door open again. I get it, and I agree with it. But the historian in me cannot quiet the unease: did we build an essential firebreak, or did we plant a future grievance that will one day return as flame? Was this our necessary safeguard or our greatest misstep? Only time, and the people living in it, will be able to say.

We came here knowing we were meant to be a parenthesis in the long, complicated sentence of Bangladesh's history, a brief interruption rather than the final clause. That parenthesis now closes. The files are packed, the nameplates taken down, the rooms we briefly filled with arguments, laughter, and midnight drafting sessions return to their old, indifferent neutrality. The idea of "New Bangladesh" that we dared to speak of in headlines and speeches is no longer ours to hold, or to protect, or to disappoint; it passes, trembling and unfinished, into other hands.

It has been a privilege to speak for a government that understood from the beginning that its highest duty was to steward a transition, and then step aside. To those who won the election, good luck. You will need every ounce of courage, humility, and imagination you can find, because the ghosts of July are still here—watching, whispering, and waiting to see what you do with the house we are leaving behind, its walls still smelling of smoke and fresh paint, its doors finally, mercifully, unlocked.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Digging tool
 - 6 Chest muscles, for short
 - 10 Hayride transport
 - 11 Visibly shocked
 - 13 On --- (trying to lose)
 - 14 Be very successful
 - 15 Sprint
 - 16 Fury
 - 18 Stretch of years
 - 19 They might include rabbits or cards
 - 22 Bee follower
 - 23 Like stallions
 - 24 Baseball's Roger
 - 27 Merchandise
 - 28 Genesis garden
 - 29 Droop
 - 30 Rewards for Fido
 - 35 S&L offering
 - 36 Building wing
 - 37 Halloween cry
 - 38 To the time that
 - 40 Japanese port
 - 42 Silver or gold
 - 43 More adorable
 - 44 River stoppers

- DOWN**
- 1 Bee group
 - 2 "The Taming of the Shrew" city
 - 3 Getting on
 - 4 Buck's mate
 - 5 Tempts
 - 6 Pocket beeper
 - 7 Sense of self
 - 8 Spot for snacks on a train
 - 9 Glisten
 - 12 Wipes off
 - 17 Numbered hwy.
 - 20 Cake coating
 - 21 Mirror sight
 - 24 T-shirt size
 - 25 Decorated
 - 26 Yacht contest
 - 27 Spell caster
 - 29 Cardinal cap letters
 - 31 Cries
 - 32 Ease up
 - 33 Game piece
 - 34 Flies high
 - 39 "___ a Rock"
 - 41 Take to court

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
10					11				12
13					14				
15				16	17			18	
19			20				21		
			22				23		
24	25	26			27				
28					29				
30				31			32	33	34
35				36			37		
38			39			40	41		
42						43			
	44					45			

SUNDAY'S ANSWERS

C	E	D	E	S	T	I	R						
L	E	V	E	L	H	O	N	E	S				
A	T	A	L	L	O	M	A	N	I				
B	E	D	T	I	M	E	F	A	R				
O	R	E	P	A	S	T	I	M	E				
R	A	D	I	S	H	O	X	E	N				
					B	E	A	S	T				
A	B	L	E	T	H	O	M	A	S				
T	E	A	T	I	M	E	A	R	T				
B	A	M		R	A	G	T	I	M	E			
A	M	I	G	O		O	U	T	I	E			
T	E	N	O	N		A	D	R	E	P			
					D	A	V	Y		T	E	E	S

WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO dsopinion@gmail.com.