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## Is LDC graduation deferment logical?

Dialogue at home and abroad will determine that

Bangladesh's graduation from the Least Developed Country (LDC) category to developing nation status is no longer a matter of if, but when. The country has met all criteria for graduation set by the UNDP. But while this may bring us prestige, we must be pragmatic about the timing, for graduation also carries significant economic and developmental implications. It is crucial to assess whether we are fully prepared to absorb the economic shock that may accompany the transition. This requires dialogue at home and careful negotiation abroad. In this context, the new government's plan to seek a deferment of at least three years (business leaders have asked for six) seems logical.

Undoubtedly, graduation will have huge impacts on major industries such as apparel and pharmaceuticals. Currently, under LDC provisions, Bangladesh enjoys zero-duty access for 73 percent of its exports. The apparel sector alone accounts for over 80 percent of export earnings. After graduation, exporters will face tariffs of nearly 12.5 percent in the European Union once the temporary extension expires. Bangladesh could lose up to 14 percent of its exports, equivalent to \$8 billion annually, once it no longer has LDC's preferential trade benefits. In addition, there may be stricter compliance obligations in labour and environmental and intellectual property standards.

Another concern is the US trade agreement that has created an additional layer of uncertainty. The combined impact of losing LDC privileges and facing high tariff or compliance conditions imposed by the US trade policy will intensify pressure on exporters. The government should, therefore, review specific components of the US trade agreement and re-engage with the Trump administration to amend certain provisions, thereby better safeguarding Bangladesh's economic sovereignty.

The withdrawal of the TRIPS waiver—a temporary waiver by the World Trade Organization (WTO) allowing flexibility on intellectual property patent rules—will also affect local pharmaceuticals, which currently produce affordable generic versions of life-saving medicines such as cancer treatments and HIV antiretrovirals. Once patent protections are enforced, medicine prices will rise sharply, affecting not only profits but also public health. A deferment could give local pharmaceutical companies the leeway to produce active pharmaceutical ingredients domestically. Regulatory frameworks could be strengthened, and smoother transitions in intellectual property compliance could be negotiated.

Business chambers, banking leaders, and sectoral associations have cited existing bottlenecks—such as energy shortages, high borrowing costs, and regulatory inefficiencies—that challenge graduation preparedness. A national dialogue is therefore urgently needed to bring together the voices of relevant ministries, Bangladesh Bank, export associations, pharmaceutical representatives, economists, and civil society. Preparedness must include a smooth transition strategy, trade diversification plans, bilateral trade negotiations, central bank reforms, and infrastructure improvements.

Bangladesh also needs to negotiate with the UN and coordinate with co-graduating countries such as Nepal and Laos. There are precedents for postponing graduation: Myanmar, Timor-Leste, and the Solomon Islands have all deferred under compelling circumstances. Bangladesh, too, has faced economic turbulence before and after the July uprising, which must be taken into account. Negotiations to seek deferment will require a credible roadmap backed by data and reform commitments from the government.

## Can students afford to lose more school days?

Schools, colleges must make up for disruptions in academic activities

At a time when our education sector is struggling to recover from repeated disruptions, the announcement of long Ramadan and Eid holidays in schools and colleges does raise concerns. According to the 2026 academic calendar, schools and colleges are to remain closed during Ramadan from February 18 till March 26, combining Ramadan, Eid-ul-Fitr, and summer holidays, before reopening on March 29 (Sunday). While religious and cultural observances are integral to our national life, the prolonged closure at this point demands careful review.

Over the past one and a half years, students across the country have endured frequent disruptions in academic activities caused by political unrest, administrative chaos, climatic events, forced teacher resignations, and other issues. Clashes between students at several institutions have also caused disruptions. The cumulative effect has been devastating, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds who lack access to private tutoring, digital resources, or supportive learning environments at home.

Last year's HSC results starkly revealed the deterioration in college education standards. The pass rate was only 58.83 percent, the lowest in 21 years, and more than five lakh students failed. While school enrolment rates may have improved over the years, the learning outcomes remain alarmingly weak. A significant proportion of primary students struggle with basic literacy and numeracy. At the secondary level, rote learning continues to dominate classrooms, while critical thinking and problem-solving skills remain underdeveloped.

In this context, prolonged closures in educational institutions will have serious negative consequences. Long holidays inevitably reduce the time for meaningful teaching and assessment. As a result, teachers are forced to rush through syllabi, and students rely more on guidebooks and coaching centres, leaving learning outcomes weak and uneven. The government must therefore carefully reassess whether such duration and structure of breaks truly serve the best interests of students. If it is serious about achieving quality education for all, learning outcomes must guide policy decisions. Education must be treated as a national priority, and the government must commit to genuine systemic reforms required to strengthen the sector.

# Decisive action is needed to deliver on education pledges



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Views expressed in this article are the author's own.

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The overwhelming support of voters received by the BNP thrusts upon the new government a special responsibility and a challenge to meet people's expectations. The party's election pledges include a good number of education objectives and targets. Whether these promises reflect what is needed for essential education reform and how they can be turned into action and results are burning questions on people's minds.

Listed under the general tag line of "Achieving Equitable Socioeconomic Development and Sustainable State Capacity," with the heading "Education and Human Resource Development," the education objectives cover budget and infrastructure, primary and secondary education, higher education and research, madrasa and technical education, and teachers and overall reform.

Regarding the education budget, BNP has pledged to raise the allocation to five percent of GDP (from the current allocation of less than two percent) as well as to promote digital technology (free Wi-Fi, multimedia classrooms, a tab for each teacher) and provide free school lunch and sanitation facilities for girls. Presumably the increased budget will pay for these items.

On school education, the items mentioned include providing students with school uniforms, expanding pre-primary education, a compulsory third language instruction (beyond Bangla and English), and focusing on extracurricular and "creative talent development." The "one child, one tree" initiative is aimed at raising environmental awareness.

In higher education, key items include introducing student loans and support for higher education abroad, tax exemption for private universities, and upgrading the National University which regulates (very poorly) the academic quality of more than 2,200 colleges. Industry-academia collaboration and internship for students will be promoted.

Madrasa education and technical education are bracketed (in line with the current education

ministry administrative structure). Modernisation of madrasas is a goal. The certificates of Qawmi madrasas are to be recognised and priority to be given on jobs. "Technical and vocational education for all" is promised.

In the "Teachers and Reform" section, an education reform commission for overall quality improvement is promised. Curriculum reform, recruitment of meritorious



FILE VISUAL: SHAIKH SULTANA JAHAN BADHON

teachers, and simplifying the payment of retirement benefits for teachers and granting them state honours are mentioned. Special assistance will be provided to students injured in the July mass uprising.

An election manifesto, by its very nature, consists of pledges made to the public based on a general perception of key problems and popular demands. It is not expected to be a well-developed action plan and strategy for a sector, especially one as complex and critical as education. Nonetheless, the pledges made by the newly elected governing party deserve scrutiny for what is included and excluded, and the feasibility of fulfilling them.

In Bangladesh, raising the budget allocation for education, which is one

of the lowest in the world in terms of GDP ratio, has been a long held demand. Increasing it to five percent has to be a long-term commitment, which can be met as the tax-GDP ratio grows from the current level (6.8 percent). However, to signal the government's sincerity, public investment in education must be increased in real terms year to year. Equally urgent is to direct funds to activities that demonstrably impact classroom learning, reduce inequity, and ensure better efficiency and accountability. The spending on digital technology emphasised in the pledge will be helpful only if it produces the outcome in better student learning. So far, the track record has been far from satisfactory.

Regarding school education, one would have liked to see a commitment to a time-bound plan for universal

structure.

Civil society discourse on education and consultations held across the country with parents, teachers, students, and education activists, conducted by the Campaign for Popular Education and its partner organisations, have brought out some key education decisions that the new government should address to make a head start towards reform. Among these are three early actions recommended for the new government:

- Appoint a high-level education development task force to guide the formulation of a five-year education sector development plan and a 10-year education perspective plan.

- Bring all school education, from pre-primary to pre-university, under a single ministry to promote universal, inclusive and high quality education for all children.

- Launch a comprehensive early childhood care and development (ECCD) programme to progressively serve all children from birth to pre-primary, ensuring their healthy growth, development, and school readiness; this programme can be implemented through community-based organisations and NGOs with government support.

The education manifesto responds, as expected, to populist demands and perceptions, some of which may be difficult to implement or may not produce the intended outcome. It is necessary to examine if and how the sundry list becomes part of an education philosophy, vision, and a comprehensive plan for educational development. A total action plan with priorities, phasing, resource planning, implementing mechanism, designation of responsibilities, and the means of assessing progress has to be developed.

The two advisers of the interim government for the primary and mass education and education ministries, before their eventual departure, belatedly asked two consultation committees to provide recommendations on necessary reform in primary and secondary education. Another committee prepared a "vision" statement on future school education in the country. The reform ideas emanating from these committees do provide a reform agenda for the newly elected government. These can be regarded as the necessary groundwork for shaping the government's education development agenda. Education advocates and the civil society expect to make education an urgent topic for discourse with the new government.

## Increasing investment in public health must be a top priority



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What a new government chooses to fund, plan for, or ignore in its first months reveals its level of priority or seriousness about its commitments to the people. In the health sector, Bangladesh's newly sworn-in administration faces that test against two closely linked threats that quietly undermine households nationwide: medical debt driven by high out-of-pocket health spending and climate- and disaster-related shocks, both of which expose the fragility of the health system. Health protection is also economic protection, and the new government must treat it as such.

Bangladesh's health financing model has a gaping structural flaw. According to the Bangladesh National Health Accounts 1997-2020, nearly 69 percent of total health expenditure is paid directly by households out of their own pockets, one of the highest shares in South Asia. Global evidence consistently shows that heavy reliance on out-of-pocket payments exposes families to catastrophic health expenditure and financial hardship.

A technical consultation hosted by the World Health Organization in Dhaka in November 2025, reviewing the draft Universal Health Coverage (UHC) Roadmap 2026-2035, reported that about 41.7 percent of the population, roughly 70 million

people, had experienced financial hardship due to health costs. The same consultation noted that Bangladesh's UHC service coverage index stands at just 54 out of 100, reflecting major gaps in access to essential services. When illness strikes, many families are forced to sell assets, borrow from informal lenders, or pull children out of school. A single, relatively prolonged hospitalisation can push a household from fragile stability into poverty.

This burden is not limited to rural areas. Urban informal workers like rickshaw pullers, day labourers, and small traders face the same exposure, often with higher living costs and no safety nets. In recent years, health sector allocations have hovered around five percent of the national budget, while public spending on health has remained below one percent of GDP, according to World Bank data. Research on health financing and universal coverage consistently shows that such low public investment constrains service coverage and leaves households to absorb risks individually, with long-term consequences for economic growth and inequality.

No serious observer would argue that Bangladesh can build universal health insurance overnight. But it is unacceptable when institutional inertia pushes even the prospect

of phased implementation into the background. The draft UHC Roadmap 2026-2035, developed jointly by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and the World Health Organization, outlines a long-term strategy centred on population coverage, service coverage, and financial protection through pooled financing. The new government should adopt this roadmap as a binding policy commitment rather than leave it as another draft. An initial focus on low-income households, informal urban workers, and disaster-exposed communities linked to existing social protection programmes would stabilise household finances and protect labour productivity effectively.

The second half of this crisis receives far less attention. Bangladesh's disaster preparedness has rightly earned global recognition, particularly for cyclone early-warning systems that have saved countless lives. But these successes share a critical blind spot: health system continuity is still treated as secondary. A WHO inception meeting held in Cox's Bazar in December 2025 on integrating noncommunicable disease and mental health care into emergency preparedness acknowledged that while Bangladesh has strong systems for infectious disease outbreaks and trauma response, preparedness for chronic disease care during disasters remains limited. Health facilities often lack contingency planning, medicine supply chains are vulnerable to disruption, and frontline responders are not equipped to manage chronic conditions during crises.

Urban seismic risk compounds these vulnerabilities. Experts warn that a 7.5-magnitude earthquake in Dhaka could generate more than 31 million tons of debris and severely disrupt critical services. Bangladesh's

first-ever sub-national earthquake risk assessment has mapped hazards down to the upazila level and assessed exposure of buildings and critical infrastructure, including health facilities. Yet preparedness planning remains focused on building codes and search-and-rescue, with limited attention to whether hospitals and clinics could function after a major shock.

Community-level preparedness offers a practical and cost-effective solution. Bangladesh has more than 13,200 community clinics staffed by community health workers, widely recognised as the backbone of primary healthcare delivery. During COVID-19, these workers maintained essential services and community trust under extreme pressure. But their role in disaster response has never been formally embedded in preparedness planning. Integrating community health workers into disaster management structures would strengthen service continuity rather than forcing systems to improvise after failure.

Three priorities, therefore, should guide the first 18 to 24 months of the new government: adopt the UHC roadmap as a binding national commitment with clear phases and accountability; embed health system continuity into disaster planning, including backup power, medicine supply chains, and trained frontline workers; and reframe public health spending as economic stabilisation, setting a credible, time-bound target to raise public investment in health. Bangladesh's public healthcare has long suffered from poor planning and execution; it is time to make some progress in this regard.