

New govt faces tough economic tests

It must resist the temptation of populism

The new government faces a gauntlet of critical economic tests, beginning with the immediate goal of taming rampant food inflation during the Ramadan period. With overall inflation elevated at 8.58 percent in January—and food inflation accelerating to 8.29 percent—the political honeymoon for the new administration may be exceptionally brief. In most countries, public faith in the government's economic management rises and falls with food prices.

Besides, the new government inherited an economy tethered to external lifelines and suffering from deep structural decay. Since entering an IMF rescue programme in early 2023 following a severe balance-of-payments crisis, Bangladesh has staggered from one review to the next. When an IMF mission arrives in Dhaka next month, it will bring with it the cold calculus of fiscal discipline and monetary tightening. Stabilising the foreign exchange reserves has offered a semblance of stability, but in the meantime, investment has stalled, imports have shrunk, and credit growth in the banking sector has plummeted to historic lows. Should the government succeed in reigniting growth, the demand for foreign currency will swiftly return, putting pressure on the reserve buffer.

If the external picture is precarious, the domestic fiscal ledger is dismal. Total public debt has surged by roughly 60 percent over the past three years, reaching Tk 21.5 lakh crore by September 2025. The state's growing reliance on the banking sector to finance its deficit has a side effect: it absorbs liquidity through treasury bonds and crowds out the private enterprise needed to drive recovery. Worse still, a colossal fiscal burden looms on the horizon due to the Pay Commission's proposal to raise civil service salaries. Implementing the raise would require a recurrent amount of Tk 1 lakh crore on top of the Tk 1.31 lakh crore spent on salaries and pensions for government employees a year.

The administration's energy must be directed towards revenue mobilisation. Bangladesh remains chronically under-taxed. The value-added tax (VAT) system is plagued by open-secret leakages. Modernising VAT collection and combating evasion require political courage, but they are the only sustainable alternatives to endless borrowing. Long-promised structural reforms, including granting genuine autonomy to the central bank and overhauling the National Board of Revenue, are urgently required. Finally, there is the ticking clock of global trade. Although the government's request for a three-year delay to the planned exit from Least Developed Country (LDC) status may be a pragmatic step, a delay is not a strategy. It merely buys time that must be used to diversify exports and improve competitiveness.

For Prime Minister Tarique Rahman's government, the temptation to build early popularity through subsidies, salary hikes, and delayed reforms will be immense. But yielding to it would be a wrong step. The authorities must use their first months in office to communicate hard truths, enforce fiscal discipline, and dismantle the cronyism choking the banking sector.

Strict action must follow strong words

Govt must curb mob tendencies, check disturbances by party activists

The new home minister's statement on his first day in office about ending mob culture—a tactic increasingly used by various quarters in the recent past—is encouraging. However, strong words must be followed by firm action, because the mob mentality does not appear to have shifted much even though the interim government, during whose tenure mobs almost enjoyed free rein, has departed. Some groups continue to display mob or violent behaviour, imposing decisions on others while disregarding rules and due process.

While we appreciate that maintaining law and order has been included in the government's 180-day priority plan, it must ensure that respect for rules and procedures is continuously upheld, and that no unruly conduct is tolerated even when carried out by those claiming genuine grievances. In fact, the new BNP government must be particularly vigilant to ensure that it does not condone such behaviour by its own party activists and supporters. It will be worthwhile to remember the words Prime Minister Tarique Rahman uttered in his first official address about "operating according to established laws and regulations" and without any "partisan influence or coercion." Enforcing this pledge will be a considerable challenge for his team, but they must not falter in this commitment.

We must also remind BNP that, historically in our country, supporters of winning parties often display a retaliatory impulse post-poll. Indeed, according to data from the Human Rights Support Society (HRSS), three people were killed and over 300 injured in more than 200 clashes on February 13 and 14, after the poll results were announced. The clashes involved supporters of BNP, Jamaat-e-Islami, and NCP. The opposition alliance has made several claims of retaliatory attacks by BNP supporters. These allegations should be taken seriously, investigated thoroughly, and the perpetrators, regardless of their party affiliation, must be brought to justice.

Furthermore, the government should be wary of certain social media influencers whose hateful rhetoric was instrumental in inciting mob violence in the past. Intelligence agencies must be adequately equipped to identify such disruptive elements online and take appropriate action. Habitual instigators will receive a clear message about the government's intolerance of mob violence when past incidents are investigated and those responsible are held accountable. Monitoring and curbing online hate speech, misinformation, and disinformation—without infringing upon people's freedom of speech, of course—is essential to maintaining law and order. The challenges facing the government are formidable, so it must be both resolute and prudent as it navigates this difficult path.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Ireland allows sale of contraceptives
On this day in 1985, in a highly controversial vote, the Irish government defied the powerful Catholic Church and approved the sale of contraceptives.

A 10-point roadmap for logistics transformation

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With a fresh public mandate in hand, the new administration enters office at a pivotal moment, ready to convert the prime minister's pre-election pledges into a concrete roadmap for economic transformation. Among the many priorities demanding attention, logistics reform stands out as a foundational lever—capable of accelerating trade competitiveness, stabilising markets, attracting investment, and strengthening national resilience.

Bangladesh has invested significantly in physical infrastructure over the past decade. Yet infrastructure without governance coherence, regulatory modernisation, and digital integration cannot deliver competitiveness. Logistics today is not a single-sector concern; it is an interconnected ecosystem involving more than 20 agencies under different ministries. Without unified institutional authority and coordinated implementation, systemic efficiency will remain constrained. If the government seeks a time-bound fast-track reform agenda, logistics offers one of the highest-impact starting points.

First, establish a statutory national logistics commission under the Prime Minister's Office with a full legal mandate to implement the National Logistics Policy 2025. The commission must function as the apex body for arbitration, dispute settlement, grievance redress, tariff oversight, performance monitoring, and multimodal coordination. It should serve not merely as an advisory entity but as a regulatory commission with enforcement authority.

Second, vest the standardisation and licensing authority for all logistics service providers under the commission. Seaports, terminals, inland container depots, off-docks, freight forwarders, trucking operators, rail freight operators, warehouse operators, air freight stations, and multimodal operators should operate under harmonised national standards. Fragmented licensing regimes create uneven compliance and operational inefficiencies. Regulatory coherence is essential for building trust and accountability.

Third, launch a nationwide, interoperable, blockchain-enabled port

community system as the digital twin of the commission. This platform must integrate all seaports, inland ports, river terminals, off-docks, Bangladesh Railway, the National Board of Revenue (NBR), Bangladesh Bank and commercial banks, airlines, freight forwarders, and transport operators through secure API-triggered data exchange. Blockchain architecture can eliminate interagency trust deficits by creating tamper-proof documentation and transaction trails. Real-time cargo visibility, electronic bills of lading, automated customs clearance, and digital payment integration will reduce dwell time, eliminate duplication,



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A competition-based legal framework to appoint global terminal operators at Chittagong Port Authority would ensure productivity and public interest.

and curb discretionary practices. Governance reform without digital integration will remain incomplete.

Fourth, operationalise direct mother vessel services from Matarbari Deep Sea Port. The deep-sea port represents a generational opportunity to reduce transhipment dependency, shorten lead times, and integrate Bangladesh into primary global shipping routes. Competitive tariff frameworks, coordinated hinterland connectivity, and proactive engagement with global carrier alliances must be prioritised. Direct services will enhance export competitiveness and strengthen Bangladesh's maritime standing.

Fifth, amend the Railway Act to open national rail tracks to licensed private freight operators under regulated track-access charges. The persistent crisis of locomotive shortages and limited locomotive capacity within Bangladesh Railway cannot be resolved solely through public recruitment or procurement. A network-access model—where the state

owns the infrastructure but permits regulated private freight operations—would unlock private capital, modern rolling stock, and service efficiency. Rail liberalisation will also reduce road congestion, lower fuel imports, and promote environmental sustainability.

Sixth, develop rail-based Inland Container Depots (ICDs) either in Pubail or Dhirasram to serve the greater Dhaka industrial belt, and another in Nilphamari to connect Uttara Export Processing Zones (EPZ) efficiently to seaports. Container consolidation must shift away from congested urban corridors towards rail-linked hubs. Dedicated ICDs will decentralise

legitimate operators and cargo owners alike while improving efficiency across supply chains.

Ninth, move cargo beyond the airport fence by delivering licensed Air Freight Stations (AFS) through credible public-private partnership models. Despite modernisation at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport, cargo congestion within the airport perimeter constrains throughput. Under a decentralised AFS model, cargo consolidation, palletisation, screening, and documentation would occur off-airport, digitally linked to customs, airlines, and banks through the national port community system. Only sealed and pre-cleared shipments would enter the airside terminal. This reform would reduce dwell time, enhance airline confidence, and strengthen Bangladesh's competitiveness in time-sensitive exports.

Tenth, empower the national logistics commission as a circulation authority to regulate lighter vessels, barges, and floating warehouses operating in inland and coastal waterways. Unregulated floating storage and speculative holding practices can distort supply-demand balance and create artificial market volatility. Oversight of cargo circulation is therefore not merely an operational issue but a matter of economic stability. Transparent monitoring mechanisms under the national logistics commission will ensure that logistics practices do not contribute to price distortions.

Taken together, these ten priorities form an integrated fast-track reform agenda. The establishment of a powerful national logistics commission ensures governance coherence. The blockchain-enabled port community system delivers digital transparency. Direct deep-sea connectivity, rail liberalisation, ICD development, and structured port competition expand capacity and efficiency. Trucking reform and air cargo decentralisation modernise operational flows and circulation oversight safeguards market stability.

Infrastructure builds physical capacity, but governance builds credibility. Digital systems build transparency, while competition builds efficiency. Without institutional reform, even world-class infrastructure cannot deliver world-class logistics performance.

The opportunity now is not an incremental adjustment, but a structural transformation. Logistics reform offers the government a chance to translate its pre-election plan into visible, measurable execution—swiftly and decisively.

WORLD DAY OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

How multispecies justice supports social justice



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"Multispecies justice"—quite a mouthful, I know. I remember the first time I heard about it: I was freezing, sitting in my 19th-century classroom, which always managed to maintain a subzero temperature no matter the season. When this phrase reached my ears, I was instantly fascinated. Having my higher education broadly focus on human justice, the fact that justice could transcend beyond humans still wasn't something I was deeply aware of. And ever since that class, I have carried around the idea of multispecies justice quite closely. So, what exactly does "multispecies justice" mean, and how does it relate to social justice?

Multispecies justice is a concept that rejects human exceptionalism and recognises the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman lives. It challenges the historical and contemporary idea of justice that has largely been reserved for humans. It is an emerging idea in the field of social and ecological justice that can be best understood by taking the poly-crisis of the 21st century into account and by rejecting the notion that humans are at the top of the non-existent social and ecological pyramid; by actively moving away from anthropomorphism

that evaluates nonhumans through a purely human-centric lens; and by acknowledging that injustice, even across species, often follows a core logic rooted in exploitation and indifference.

In layman's terms, multispecies justice is a lens that enables us to see ourselves as part of the wider natural world and to realise that all networks of violence and destruction might have their roots in extraction-focused, profit-oriented ideas pushed by colonialism and capitalism. And by shedding light on that very problem, it offers us a way out: by rethinking how we engage with the world around us and by demanding an inclusive, thoughtful, and kinder approach in our everyday interactions with life that's all around us; and that's exactly where its goals align with those of social justice.

Social justice is about ensuring humans, regardless of gender, class, or sexual orientation, have fair and equitable access to rights, resources, and opportunities that allow them to have dignity and unobstructed participation in social, economic, and political life. Now, when we normalise harm committed against nonhumans,

it has a way of affecting humans too, especially those living on the peripheries of society. For example, as we approach summer, we are increasingly dreading the unforgiving sun and the inevitable sweaty, sticky inconvenience it will turn us into. While the heat affects everyone, people working in informal sectors—day labourers, rickshaw-pullers, street vendors—whose livelihoods depend on being outside and who cannot retreat indoors the way more privileged people can, suffer disproportionately more.

When streets are waterlogged, or monsoon floods arrive, the most affected are those who live on the streets without shelter—both humans and our nonhuman neighbours. When industrialisation takes over habitats, it deprives animals of their homes, and they are often forced to relocate to heavily urban areas where conflict between humans and nonhumans ensues. And, even when affluent human neighbourhoods can afford to drive those they deem "others" away, marginalised neighbourhoods are often left to grapple with a conflict not of their choosing. Even our most shared resource, the air, is heavy with pollution and refuses to acknowledge class boundaries, as we see increasing headlines of an ever-deteriorating, hazardous quality of air, children with asthma, and adults with persistent respiratory diseases.

When all this translates into headlines of increasing mental health issues, suicide rates, and crimes, one argument that becomes difficult to ignore is this: if we had just built our cities to be inclusive of more than

just one species, could we have been slightly better off?

Imagine a city with more trees to provide us essential shade that supports biodiversity, unencroached water bodies to protect us from floods, and buildings built following proper codes that allow airflow and reduce disaster risks. Imagine open spaces and bluer skies, and room to take a nature walk with those we love, a city with limited light, noise, and air pollution where birds don't have their routines disturbed by impatient horns and rampant fireworks, where trees are allowed to live out their full, uninterrupted lives, where crows don't disappear, and where policymaking begins with kindness and understanding. So, maybe, if cities were built for more-than-human needs in mind, we wouldn't have to be trapped in an urban jungle in a constant state of crisis, trying to masquerade everything as "normal".

Multispecies justice, then, is not abstract but a very practical way of achieving many of the outcomes promised by social justice: a society with fairer distribution of resources, safety, livability, and dignity. And Dhaka is the perfect playground to test this inclusive approach as a dense, diverse, and young city constantly improvising to survive, care, and perhaps even thrive. And at a moment when our democratic rights and scope for accountability are back on the table, and a younger generation of lawmakers signals the possibility of different priorities, it is worth redefining our idea of what justice includes and whom it is for.