

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

## Khulna's tremor should shake us into action

New govt must prioritise this

Yesterday's 5.4-magnitude earthquake in Satkhira is yet another warning that Bangladesh cannot afford complacency. The tremor, felt across several districts, including Dhaka and even Kolkata, triggered panic as people rushed out of homes, offices and schools. Buildings shook, and some were damaged. Just a day earlier, a 3.2-magnitude quake struck Kaliganj in Jhenaidah, neighbouring Satkhira. In the past 27 days alone, nine earthquakes have hit the country.

The immediacy of these events makes it clear that our first priority must be to strengthen emergency response capacity. Investing in an effective early warning system could provide crucial seconds for evacuation and allow essential systems to shut down. We need specialised, well-equipped urban search and rescue teams, which means training thousands of civilian first responders.

Coordination must also improve between civil authorities, the armed forces and medical services. The government should run sustained awareness campaigns through radio, television and digital platforms, alongside regular community and institutional drills.

Beyond immediate response, a fundamental step is conducting a modern, nationwide seismic survey. Bangladesh's last major seismic mapping was done in 1979. While major fault lines have been identified, many internal faults remain unmapped. A precise, updated seismological map is essential for realistic risk assessment and planning.

At least half of Dhaka's buildings could collapse in a major quake. Experts have long stressed the need to strictly enforce the national building code, penalising violations in design and construction quality. Here, Rajdhani Unnayan Karttripakkha (RAJUK), the primary regulatory authority, must fulfil its mandate. A glance at Dhaka's skyline shows how unplanned urbanisation has flourished under its watch.

The greatest danger lies in old and poorly constructed buildings, particularly in dense areas. In November last year, RAJUK identified around 300 small and large buildings in Dhaka as vulnerable following earthquakes. We would like to know what has been done about this so far.

The government's plan should include comprehensive structural safety audits, identification of high-risk schools, hospitals and residential blocks, and phased retrofitting programmes. Retrofitting is costly; incentives or subsidies may be necessary to help private owners strengthen their properties. Yet the cost of inaction would be far greater.

All new construction—public and private—must incorporate earthquake-resistant techniques. Engineers, architects and contractors require training in updated standards. Countries such as Japan, the United States, and Turkey have demonstrated that strictly enforced modern building codes save lives.

Preparedness demands investment and strategic planning. But we cannot be lackadaisical about a threat that could claim thousands of lives. The recent tremors in Khulna and other places are warnings. We cannot prevent earthquakes, but we can prevent them from becoming national catastrophes.

## Expedite CMCH burn unit project

Govt must establish more burn units in the country given heightened risks

In a country where over 12 lakh people sustain burn injuries annually, a single, fully equipped burn institute in the capital is clearly not enough. People with burn injuries from outside Dhaka are especially disadvantaged in this regard, as they must travel for hours on unpredictable roads, battling traffic to reach the 500-bed National Institute of Burn and Plastic Surgery (NIBPS). The journey often costs lives, as seen in the case of a family from the Haliashahar area in Chattogram.

Nine members of the family suffered 25 to 100 percent burn injuries in the early hours of February 23, when a gas leak inside their flat in the port city caused an explosion. The victims were rushed to Chattogram Medical College Hospital (CMCH) but then had to be transferred to Dhaka, 250 kilometres away, because the burn unit there lacked a specialised intensive care unit (ICU) and high-dependency unit (HDU) for severely burned patients. Even that transfer was not easy, as moving critically burned patients requires ICU ambulances, which are limited in both availability and affordability.

While ICU ambulances at public hospitals often suffer from manpower shortages, hiring a private ICU ambulance for a trip from Chattogram to Dhaka costs between Tk 25,000 and Tk 30,000. In some areas, a patient's fate is further complicated by the presence of ambulance syndicates. Although friends and relatives of the Haliashahar family managed to hire an ICU ambulance within a few hours, two of the severely burned patients died before reaching the gates of NIBPS.

This tragedy raises the question of why, nearly a decade after its establishment in 2016, NIBPS remains the only fully equipped burn treatment facility in the country. Work is reportedly underway to build a 150-bed burn unit with modern equipment in Chattogram, funded by the Chinese government. However, as with many infrastructure projects in Bangladesh, completion is certain to be delayed. The agreement for the Tk 285 crore project was signed in 2023, with completion initially set for June 2026. The fall of the Awami League government in August 2024 delayed the process, and physical construction did not begin before June 2025.

The new government must expedite this crucial project, which will serve four crore people in the Chattogram region. At the same time, initiatives to establish additional burn institutes or fully equipped burn units in public hospitals nationwide should proceed. The shortage of specialised healthcare professionals in this field must also be addressed. Finally, measures are needed to make ICU ambulances more accessible and reliable. Such action is urgent, particularly as the risk of fire incidents rises alongside increased seismic activity in the country.

### THIS DAY IN HISTORY



#### Salem Witch Hunt begins

On this day in 1692, the Salem witch hunt began as three women were charged with witchcraft in Massachusetts, sparking mass accusations and trials.

## CENTRAL BANK SHAKE-UP

# Why is BNP undermining its reformist legacy?



Kamal Ahmed is consulting editor at The Daily Star. He led the Media Reform Commission under the immediate past interim government. His X handle is @ahmedkal.

KAMAL AHMED

The removal of Bangladesh Bank Governor Ahsan H Mansur, widely credited with steadying an economy that was on the brink of potential collapse, has been described by many as nothing short of a blunder by the new government. Of course, any government has the legal authority to appoint or remove a governor in pursuit of its economic agenda. Yet two aspects of this episode have shocked observers. First, the manner of Mansur's departure, marked by public humiliation rather than a well-earned vote of thanks. Second, the appointment of a businessman burdened by apparent conflicts of interest and lacking expertise in banking and macroeconomic management.

This mishandling of central bank leadership by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) government warrants close scrutiny. However, responsibility does not rest with the current administration alone. The immediate past interim government also bears some blame. A draft law granting operational autonomy to Bangladesh Bank remained with the finance ministry for over four months. The proposed reform would have removed three government officials from the central bank's governing board. Unfortunately, then Finance Adviser Salehuddin Ahmed—himself a former governor—reportedly yielded to bureaucratic pressure and shelved the reform agenda.

It is worth recalling that the interim administration led by Professor Muhammad Yunus, which emerged from the 2024 mass uprising against a toxic blend of autocracy and kleptocracy long accused of plundering banks and laundering funds abroad, had pledged sweeping reforms in the banking sector. But Bangladesh Bank was conspicuously absent from its long list of more than 180 ordinances.

Had the interim government enacted a measure to restructure the central bank and secure its independence as an effective regulator, the present controversy might have been avoided.

A glance back at 2003 offers a striking contrast. During BNP's earlier tenure in power, late Finance Minister Saifur Rahman moved to strengthen the central bank's authority. On March 1, 2003, he introduced amendments to the Bangladesh Bank Order of 1972,



Ahsan H Mansur is seen leaving Bangladesh Bank premises on February 25, 2026.

SCREEN GRAB: NTV

enhancing the institution's powers to curb loan defaults. Three additional bills, including reforms to the Artha Rin Adalat Ain (Money Loan Court Act), were passed through Jatiya Sangsad that same week.

On March 10, a group of employees under the banner of Jatiyatabadi Officers' Association tried to create chaos at the central bank and disrupt then Governor Fakhruddin Ahmed's routine, with further plans for the next day ("Pro-BNP officers likely to besiege governor today," *The Daily Star*, March 11, 2003). On that day,

presidential assent to those four bills related to banking sector regulation was received. The following day, *The Daily Star* carried another report with a stark warning from Saifur Rahman that no one would be allowed to create any trouble at the central bank or derail reforms.

At that stage, those officers retreated. However, within a few months they again organised a protest against certain administrative measures. On October 28, they besieged Fakhruddin Ahmed in his office for about an hour. Saifur Rahman extended strong support to the governor and, on October 30, 10 officers, including the president and general secretary of the Collective Bargaining Agent (CBA) union, were dismissed. Rahman's firm stance restored order and underscored BNP's commitment, at the time, to insulating the central bank from partisan interference.

Khaleda Zia, BNP enacted important reforms, including the Bangladesh Bank (Amendment) Act, 2003, aimed at curbing loan defaults. The appointment of Md Mostaqur Rahman as the new governor seems inconsistent with that legacy. Some observers, including the Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB), have noted that the appointee was previously a loan defaulter and later benefited from rescheduling "under special consideration." Moreover, clause 10, sub-clause 9(d) of the amender order clearly states that no individual who has defaulted on payments to the government, a banking company, or a financial institution is eligible to serve as governor or deputy governor. This raises a critical question: was the appointment an oversight then, or was it a disregard for the very reforms once championed by BNP?

According to his official profile, the new governor previously served as chairman of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association's (BGMEA) Standing Committee on Bangladesh Bank and held memberships in several trade bodies, including the BGMEA, the Real Estate and Housing Association of Bangladesh (REHAB), the Association of Travel Agents of Bangladesh (ATAB), and the Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DCCI). These organisations primarily advocate for the interests of their respective members. It is therefore reasonable to ask whether a former trade representative can impartially regulate sectors with which he has been so closely associated, especially if former colleagues seek special considerations similar to those he once received.

The finance minister's response of "no comment" to questions surrounding the appointment has only deepened public concern. Why not affirm unequivocally that the most qualified candidate was selected? Why not assure the public that due diligence was rigorously applied? Above all, can it be said with confidence that this decision does not undermine BNP's earlier reformist legacy?

These are not partisan questions. They go to the heart of the institutional integrity and independence of Bangladesh Bank—principles that are indispensable to economic stability and public trust.

# What's in a word? The battle for cultural authority



Ahmed Ashfaque Shahbaz is a PhD candidate in political economy at the University of Exeter in the United Kingdom. He can be reached at aashahbaz9@gmail.com.

AHMED ASHFAQUE SHAHBAZ

The crisis in Bangladesh today is not only political. It is civilisational, linguistic, and epistemic. What we are witnessing after the collapse of a dominant political order is an open contest over cultural authority: who has the right to define the nation's language, moral vocabulary, historical memory, and acceptable public speech.

For years, political domination was accompanied by an attempt to stabilise a particular cultural hegemony. This was not merely about elections, institutions, or the security apparatus. It was also about shaping the symbolic universe through which people interpreted themselves. In that order, certain ways of speaking were treated as refined, modern, progressive, and "authentic," while other vocabularies were dismissed as backward, communal, vulgar, or alien. The point was not simply linguistic preference. The point was control over legitimacy.

This is why the present struggle cannot be reduced to a debate over a few words. The return of terms such as *insaf*, *zulum*, *mazlum*, *faisala*, *inquilab*, and *zindabad* in public speech is significant not because these are "new" words, but precisely because they are not. These words belong to older layers of Bangla's history, shaped through long interaction with Persian and Arabic vocabularies before

colonial language engineering and elite canon formation narrowed what counted as respectable Bangla in many institutional settings. Their renewed circulation today signals not linguistic decline, but political reopening. It reflects a wider struggle over who gets to speak for the nation and in what moral language.

A Foucauldian reading is especially useful here. Foucault teaches us that power does not operate only through visible coercion from the top. It also works through discourse, institutions, classification, and the production of "truth." In this sense, the old power centres are not merely defending grammar; they are attempting to police the truth. They are trying to prevent ideational competition by preserving their authority to decide what is proper Bangla, what is civilised expression, and what forms of speech can enter the public sphere without stigma.

This is what makes the current contest so intense. It is not simply a contest between two political camps; it is a contest between competing regimes of truth. One regime seeks to maintain a monopoly over cultural legitimacy by presenting its historical preferences as neutral standards. The other seeks to reopen the field by restoring suppressed vocabularies and alternative moral idioms to public

life. The language question, therefore, is also a question of power and knowledge: who names, who classifies, who excludes, and who is forced to defend their own tongue as if it were an intruder.

The July uprising made this contradiction impossible to hide. It was not a movement with a single centre, ideology, or social base. It was a multi-centred political eruption. Public university students mobilised over jobs, quota reform, and justice. Private university students stood in solidarity and amplified the call for accountability. BNP entered the moment with its own political equation. Jamaat and other Islamist actors dealt with it through different calculations. Left-leaning activists read the crisis through exploitation, repression, and the language of people's rights. Liberals and conservatives alike opposed authoritarian domination for different reasons. The significance of this multiplicity is profound: a broad social coalition emerged not because it shared one worldview, but because it encountered a common structure of domination.

In Foucauldian terms, this was a biopolitical order under stress. The Hasina regime did not merely seek obedience; it sought to regulate life, aspiration, visibility, and the terms through which citizens could imagine justice. Students demanding jobs and reform, citizens demanding accountability, and groups demanding moral recognition were all confronting a system that had extended power across social life. Once that order fractured, the battle moved immediately to discourse. When the state-centred order weakens, the struggle over cultural authority intensifies.

That is why the current anxiety

among old cultural elites is so revealing. If they now insist that the re-entry of Persianate/Arabic-inflected words will lead to "distortion" or "impurity" of Bangla, they are not making a neutral philological intervention. They are drawing a boundary around legitimacy. They are attempting to preserve a hierarchy of speech and, with it, a hierarchy of speakers. This is precisely where the language of "purity" becomes politically suspect. No living language is pure. They are layered, borrowed, adaptive, and contested. To demand purity is often to demand obedience to a cultural canon maintained by institutions of prestige.

The public debate around Professor Tariq Manzoor's statement that Bangla is being "deliberately distorted" has become emblematic of this wider struggle. Whether one agrees with him or not, the political significance of such interventions lies in their timing and function: they emerge at a moment when previously marginalised vocabularies are re-entering mainstream political speech. The issue is therefore not only language quality; it is cultural gatekeeping in a transitional period.

Bangladesh is now in a period where the long-standing political authority has been destabilised, but cultural authority has not yet been democratised. That is why the language question feels so charged. It condenses a larger conflict over memory, class, ideology, religion, and national identity. The central issue is not whether Bangla will remain "pure"—no language is. The central issue is whether Bangladesh can move towards a more plural public culture in which no single elite bloc can monopolise the right to define the nation's speech, history, and truth.