

The Daily Star

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Iran war calls for prudence at home

We must be cautious and frugal to weather any economic disruptions

The US-Israel war on Iran may be playing out far from Bangladesh's border, but it is certainly on our economic horizon. Like many other countries, Bangladesh is already reeling from its immediate impacts, including a surge in oil prices, disruption of a major trade route, and the cancellation of hundreds of flights. However, it is the mid- and long-term aftermath that we must prepare for. And that calls for prudent monetary and fiscal choices at the policymaking level, while individuals must remain frugal without succumbing to panic.

The biggest concerns, understandably, lie with fossil fuels—oil and gas. According to officials, the country still has adequate fuel stocks as expected of normal times. However, Bangladesh may have to pay higher fuel prices in the mid-term even if the war is short-lived, as prices are unlikely to fall anytime soon. Moreover, the virtual closure of the Strait of Hormuz has caused disruptions in global supply chains that will not be resolved immediately, leading to increased logistics and transportation expenses for exports—in other words, reduced export earnings. Both of these factors would place additional pressure on our foreign exchange reserves.

Furthermore, the war in the Middle East could reduce remittance flows that, over the last one and a half years, had increased to help strengthen reserves. The suspension of some ongoing projects in the Middle East may result in the temporary layoff of migrant workers, including Bangladeshis. In addition, due to flight cancellations, thousands of our migrants have had to stay back, unable to return to or reach their overseas workplaces. These factors are likely to translate into lower remittance inflows in the mid- to long run.

To keep the economic wheel turning, the first instinct might be to pay for costly imports using forex reserves, as the Awami League government did in the past. However, experts suggest that Bangladesh should avoid such a strategy and instead explore alternatives, including negotiating deferred payment arrangements with oil exporters, seeking financing from the Islamic Development Bank for fuel imports, and finding alternative fuel sources. The government should also pursue faster disbursement of previously promised loans from multilateral lenders. Indeed, countries of the Global South, which often bear the greatest brunt of global economic crises, could collectively come up with creative strategies to face the imminent economic whirlwind.

The government must also heed economists' advice not to cut the policy rate or pass on higher energy prices directly to consumers. A lower policy rate may boost investment but it would also push up the already high inflation rate. At the same time, to keep agricultural production running smoothly, the government should look for alternative sources of fertiliser imports. So far, the decisions taken by the government have demonstrated reasonable caution and restraint. However, at the individual level, the public must also practise frugality and voluntarily reduce energy consumption. The government alone cannot weather the difficult times ahead; citizens must understand the war's impact and support national resilience in their own way.

Female joblessness rate is quite worrying

Remove barriers for women to join the workforce

While Bangladesh has made remarkable strides in expanding women's access to education, it is concerning that many female graduates still struggle to find suitable employment. Universities and colleges now produce more female graduates than ever, reflecting decades of progress in girls' schooling and higher education. But this achievement has not translated into equal opportunities in the labour market.

According to government data, women accounted for 47 percent of all public university graduates in 2023, up from just 14 percent in 1973. Yet the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics' Labour Force Survey (LFS) 2024 shows unemployment among female graduates at 20.39 percent, compared with 11.31 percent for men. The disparity is even sharper among those aged 15 to 29, where 34 percent of women are unemployed, against 26 percent of men. These figures expose a widening gap between educational progress and economic participation.

The problem is further compounded by a mismatch between available jobs and the expectations or qualifications of highly educated job seekers. Beyond the shortage of employment, social and institutional barriers continue to limit women's participation. Safety concerns, long commutes, rigid working hours, and limited housing options often discourage women from pursuing certain jobs. The labour market remains segmented along gender lines, with women concentrated in a narrow set of sectors such as education and healthcare, where growth is limited. Even when women enter the workforce, advancement remains constrained: only about 6.2 percent of managerial positions are held by women, showing that educational gains have yet to translate into equal representation in high-skill and decision-making roles.

Inadequate childcare facilities, inflexible working arrangements, and the absence of family-friendly policies often push women out of the workforce, particularly during motherhood. A BRAC survey found that around 75 percent of women leave work primarily due to family responsibilities and motherhood, and many struggle to return. Entrepreneurship is often offered as an alternative, but women frequently face bureaucratic hurdles, limited access to finance, and inadequate market support.

When educated women are excluded from the workforce, the country loses vital human capital, and decades of progress in women's empowerment are undermined. Economic growth and productivity also falter when half the population cannot fully contribute. Tackling this challenge demands coordinated reforms to create meaningful employment opportunities for women, alongside inclusive workplaces offering childcare support, flexible hours, and stronger protections against discrimination.

Keep politics out of school textbooks



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Few aspects shape a nation's future as profoundly as what it teaches its children. That is why Education Minister ANM Ehsanul Hoque Milon's pledge to revise textbooks with the help of "high-quality experts," and without any party consideration, carries particular significance. It is a welcome declaration. But it also raises an important question: can Bangladesh finally reform its school curriculum without political interference and majoritarian or far-right pressures?

If we are honest with ourselves, we must acknowledge that our education system has undergone repeated changes and experiments over the past two decades. With nearly every change of government, the curriculum has been revisited—not always out of pedagogical necessity, but often to serve ideological or partisan priorities. The content of schoolbooks, particularly in history and literature, has been revised, reframed and, at times, rewritten. The result has been confusion, inconsistency, and generations of students growing up exposed to shifting narratives and experimental systems.

Both the Awami League and the BNP, during their respective past tenures, revised the content of school textbooks. Those changes often drew criticism from educationists and public intellectuals of the time. In 2017, the Awami League government introduced sweeping textbook revisions, removing essays and poems by progressive writers. Critics argued that those revisions were made to accommodate the demands of Hefajat-e-Islam. Whether viewed as compromise or concession, the move was widely perceived as political rather than pedagogical. There was also criticism that history books placed overwhelming emphasis on Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's role in the 1971 Liberation War, with comparatively limited

mention of other key figures.

Five years later, in 2022, the Awami League government rolled out a new curriculum up to the secondary level. It promised a shift from rote learning to competency-based education, emphasising creativity and critical thinking. The reforms included removing exams for up to Class 3, scrapping public exams before secondary school, and abolishing the division of students into science, humanities, and business studies streams in Classes 9 and 10.



FILE ILLUSTRATION: REHNUMA PROSHOON

Introduced in phases, the initiative was bold and ambitious on paper. Yet its rollout was rushed. Teacher training was insufficient, assessment methods were unclear, and many schools struggled to adapt. Confusion reigned in many classrooms, while parents voiced concern. This new curriculum, however, could not survive the political upheaval of 2024.

Following the student-led mass uprising that led to the fall of the Awami League government, the interim administration under Dr Muhammad Yunus declared the curriculum impractical and unimplementable,

initiating yet another overhaul. Decisions were made to revise textbooks at all levels. The three academic streams were reinstated, and the evaluation system reverted to the framework of the National Curriculum 2012. Symbolic changes accompanied structural ones. The message from former prime minister Sheikh Hasina was removed from the back covers of most textbooks and replaced with graffiti created during the July-August 2024 movement. Content related to the student-led July uprising and the mass uprising of 1990 was incorporated into secondary-level textbooks, alongside references to the contributions of national leaders like Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, Tajuddin Ahmad, and late president Ziaur Rahman. At the same time, some historical content, including Bangabandhu's March 7 speech, was removed from most textbooks.

Thus, students were once again

out of curriculum reform must be honoured not merely in rhetoric, but in institutional practice. That requires resisting the temptation to erase, elevate, or reinterpret history to suit contemporary political narratives. A genuinely independent curriculum development process demands broad consultation with educators, researchers, and practitioners. Reforms should be carefully piloted, rigorously evaluated, and implemented gradually. The BNP government had promised in its 2026 election manifesto to form an "Education Reform Commission" for overall quality improvement, with the primary goal of modernising the curriculum. We hope that it will follow through with that pledge and that the commission will function truly independently.

In this regard, a fundamental question that needs to be considered is: what kind of curriculum does Bangladesh need in 2026 and beyond? The world our children are entering is being shaped by rapid technological advancement, artificial intelligence, global competition, and shifting labour markets. A modern curriculum must prioritise skills—critical thinking, problem solving, digital literacy, and communication—over rote memorisation. And once developed, it must be supported by rigorous teacher training and adequate resources.

Bangladesh has made notable progress in expanding access to education. Enrolment rates have risen, gender parity has improved, and textbook distribution—the timing of which has often been unreliable at the start of the academic year—has been reassuring for students and guardians. The next frontier is quality, which cannot be achieved in an environment of perpetual revision. The education minister's assurance that party considerations will not shape upcoming reforms is encouraging. But the real test lies in building structures that ensure transparency, professionalism, and continuity. If this government truly seeks to avoid repeating past mistakes, it must commit to a depoliticised, forward-looking, and stable education framework. Our children deserve an education system that prepares them for the future, not one that mirrors the fluctuations of political power.

Strengthening research in science and engineering in the post-LDC era



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Bangladesh is on its way to graduate from the Least Developed Country (LDC) status. However, to become a prosperous nation, it must adopt new strategies for accelerated economic growth. Conventional factors of production cannot provide the required growth rate to achieve the targets. Postgraduate education affects Total Factor Productivity (TFP), the portion of economic growth driven by technological innovation. Bangladesh needs to adopt a growth strategy powered by technological innovation, and to become a technology innovator, this nation needs a critical mass of talent in science and engineering trained at the postgraduate level.

Undergraduate education primarily focuses on disseminating knowledge to students. But postgraduate education involves creating new knowledge through research and disseminating advanced knowledge. Postgraduate students research at the frontiers of knowledge. They write theses that contain newly created knowledge that can lead to innovation. The benefits of postgraduate education are manifold. It prepares professionals to adopt, adapt, and assimilate advanced technology, manage high-tech projects, and develop national policies. Master's and PhD graduates, while working on their theses, can concentrate on problems of national interest and generate indigenous solutions. For Bangladesh to become

a "technology producer" rather than a "technology consumer", it should depend on postgraduate education as a primary mechanism.

Higher PhD density represents the depth of the talent base and the intellectual capability of a country. Intense knowledge-based economies like Switzerland and Nordic countries have a PhD density of over 10,000 per million. Other advanced countries—the US, UK, Germany—have PhD densities of 3,500-6,000. The PhD density in countries like China, India, and Brazil is 200-1,000. In countries with high PhD density, the degree holders work not only in laboratories but also in areas like policymaking, management and marketing, in the public and private sectors. This helps raise the IQ of the entire economy. Countries like China, Malaysia and Vietnam have set targets to increase their PhD density.

At this juncture, the new government should establish a strong postgraduate education and research base in science and engineering. To achieve this, the government should convert a few top-performing universities into research universities, which will put emphasis on postgraduate education and research as the primary objective, and act as national problem-solving hubs. The government should establish them with clear mandates, set key performance indicators, provide them with incentives and adequate funds to

build a strong research infrastructure.

Research universities must focus on research topics related to the vital needs of the critical sectors of the national economy. For example, topics for postgraduate research can be on circular economy centred around garments and textiles, development of active pharmaceutical ingredients (API) for our pharmaceutical sector, creation of our own Bangla GPT, precision agriculture, climate change mitigation technologies, etc.

Universities must target the highest global academic standards, while finding solutions to national problems. There must not be any compromise on quality for the sake of quantity. Strict quality control measures, regular monitoring, and provision of appointments of international experts as PhD examiners must be in place. Quality issues must be fixed at the initial stage, which is critical to sustaining quality and ensuring ethical practice.

The success of converting postgraduate research into innovative solutions crucially depends on effective industry-academia collaboration. In the context of postgraduate education, industry should share its problems with academics so that these can be adopted as research topics for master's and PhD theses. The university should initiate innovative industry-focused postgraduate programmes, like industrial PhD and industrial master's degrees. Qualified industry experts can become co-supervisors or expert members of thesis committees. The synergy between academia and industry must be facilitated by the government.

We must attract meritorious students into postgraduate programmes with adequate incentives. The nation must create the right environment where these highly qualified professionals can

contribute to nation-building. There are many ways postgraduate degree holders can be fruitfully employed. Our industry should employ these high-calibre professionals to innovate and contribute to their growth. Big business groups should create sections like R&D, design, policy, which will be manned by PhD graduates. If done properly, this will reduce our dependence on foreign professionals in the long run. A higher number of qualified postgraduates can boost the confidence of investors and attract Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). The government must play a supportive role by providing the industry with adequate incentives, like tax holidays.

The government should also employ PhD-level professionals in increasing numbers in schemes like specialised scientific civil services and integrated advisory cadres. By doing so it can transform administration into knowledge-driven governance. Variations of such schemes exist in advanced economies like the US, the EU, etc. Government agencies with technical functions must recruit postgraduate degree holders, particularly PhD graduates in science and engineering.

As Bangladesh graduates from the LDC status, it must adopt technological innovation as a vital economic growth strategy. To achieve this, Bangladesh needs a critical mass of talent. Master's and PhD students in science and engineering will research national problems and generate indigenous solutions, leading to technological innovation. Increasing the number of well-trained postgraduates is a strategic necessity, not a luxury, to maintain economic momentum. The nation must create the right environment in which these highly qualified professionals can be meaningfully employed to contribute to nation-building.