

Unclogging the country's arteries

Canal-digging drive must resist partisan influences

Rivers and canals are to Bangladesh what arteries are to the human body. The country is uniquely blessed with a vast, intricate capillary network of waterways, including rivers and canals. Yet its natural circulatory system has suffered severe sclerosis for decades, falling victim to myopic development. Siltation, rampant illegal encroachment, and chronic institutional neglect have choked these channels. In their absence, farmers have been forced to relentlessly draw down the country's precious and finite groundwater reserves to keep agricultural production afloat.

The formal inauguration of a nationwide canal excavation and re-excavation programme by Prime Minister Tarique Rahman is thus a necessary intervention. By breaking ground on a 12-km stretch of the Sahapara canal in Dinajpur, the government has taken aim at a mounting environmental and economic threat. The launch—coordinated with simultaneous excavation efforts led by ministers and lawmakers in 54 districts—marks the first phase of the implementation of a colossal election manifesto pledge made by BNP to restore 20,000 km of rivers and canals across the country.

The economic and ecological rationale behind the initiative is compelling. Redirecting the agricultural burden back to surface water will strengthen rural water management. A freely flowing canal network serves a dual purpose: it functions as a drainage system to mitigate severe monsoon waterlogging while also acting as a reservoir to combat drought. Officials at the water resources ministry are right to note that better use of stored surface water could improve irrigation, boost agricultural productivity, and create employment opportunities for rural communities. More importantly, it could halt the dangerous depletion of the water table in northern districts.

Yet embedded within the DNA of this ambitious initiative is a political risk that the government must carefully navigate. Infrastructure and environmental projects in Bangladesh endure only when they achieve broad social consensus. If this colossal excavation effort is treated merely as a partisan agenda, it will inevitably fall short of its potential. The government must ensure that excavated canals do not fall into familiar traps: corruption, lack of maintenance, and swift re-encroachment by the politically connected. For the project to achieve genuine transformation, the effort must be deliberately and visibly depoliticised. It should evolve from a top-down government directive into a truly nationwide civic campaign. The state possesses the heavy machinery, initial capital, and hydrological expertise needed to break ground. But the long-term stewardship of these waterways must ultimately return to the communities that rely on them.

This requires fostering a profound sense of collective ownership. When a farming community feels that a canal belongs to them—rather than to a distant bureaucracy in Dhaka or a local political patron—they will be more inspired to protect its banks from encroachers and ensure its waters remain clear. The government has taken a commendable first step in recognising the crisis and mobilising the state's apparatus to address it. The next step is to ensure that the effort grows into a shared national mission—one in which citizens, regardless of political creed, help carry the work forward.

False cases must not undermine justice

Govt must expedite the process of clearing innocent people's names

A report published in Prothom Alo has once again exposed the existence of arbitrary and harassing cases filed in connection with the July uprising killings. An investigation into 100 such cases has revealed that, alongside political leaders and activists, many ordinary citizens were also indiscriminately named as accused. These accusations were often driven by ulterior motives, ranging from property disputes and business rivalries to extortion and personal vendettas. Reports also suggest that some political activists, dishonest lawyers, police personnel, and case-filing syndicates may have been involved in inserting the names of innocent people, which is deeply worrying.

Take, for instance, the case of businessman Ismail Hossain Pradhania. Arrested from a hospital shortly after the birth of his daughter on May 5, 2025, he was accused of involvement in a murder linked to the uprising. Police statements even identified him as a leader of Jubo League—a claim that was later proved baseless. His name, as it transpired, had been inserted in some cases due to a dispute over control of a shopping complex and an apartment building. The fact that he was shown arrested in a new case immediately after obtaining bail in another raises serious questions about due process. Overall, Pradhania spent 109 days in jail before securing bail finally.

In 32 cases, as per investigations, plaintiffs themselves admitted that they had included the names of people they did not even know, saying the lists were supplied by others. There were also instances where the same incident led to multiple cases in different police stations, and in two cases, three deceased individuals were listed as accused. Applications have reportedly been filed in at least 47 cases seeking to remove more than 600 names from the lists of accused. Allegations have also surfaced that money ranging from Tk 20,000 to Tk 400,000 was exchanged in connection with removing names or securing relief from such cases. This is deeply concerning.

We therefore urge the new government to ensure that every case related to the July uprising is carefully reviewed to determine its credibility. According to police sources, a total of 1,841 cases have been filed, including 791 murder cases, in connection with the uprising. However, among the murder cases, charge sheets have been submitted in only 46 so far. The process therefore must be expedited to ensure justice for the victims. While individuals against whom there is no evidence should be cleared without delay, those responsible for filing or facilitating false cases must be held accountable. Justice for the victims of the uprising cannot be ensured if the legal system is misused to pursue personal vendettas or financial gain.

Why we need a balanced fuel pricing policy



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The global energy market is again in turmoil, this time because of the US-Israel war in Iran. The Middle East has long been the central hub for worldwide energy supply. About a quarter of the global seaborne oil trade is carried through the Strait of Hormuz alone, according to UNCTAD. At the same time, Qatar and the UAE are major suppliers of liquefied natural gas (LNG). Any military escalation in this region therefore threatens the stability of the entire global energy supply chain.

This situation is especially worrisome for countries like Bangladesh that are heavily dependent on imported energy. Our electricity, industry, transportation, and agriculture sectors all rely on imported energy such as crude oil, refined petroleum, and LNG from the Middle East. The ongoing war has caused significant swings in global oil prices. Fears of supply outages led Brent crude to temporarily rise to about \$119 per barrel before falling back slightly. These price hikes put immediate economic strain on import-dependent nations like Bangladesh. A prolonged conflict in the region could severely impact the country's energy security, put pressure on foreign exchange reserves, increase inflation, and threaten long-term economic stability.

The immediate effect on the country's economy would likely be an inflation spike. In February, overall inflation stood at 9.13 percent. A spike in fuel prices means transportation, agricultural costs, electricity production, and industrial processes becoming more expensive. This leads to higher food prices and consequently a higher inflation rate. This impact is felt quickly in Bangladesh because diesel is extensively used for food transport, irrigation, and power generation in a number of industries.

A second significant impact involves import costs and forex reserves. As of March 12, our gross reserves stood at \$29.64 billion (according to the BPM6 method). A sharp increase in international oil prices could rapidly raise the country's import costs, further straining the reserves and risking exchange rate instability. The trade deficit, on the other hand, might expand even more, adding to the already deteriorated export performance in the July-January period of FY2026 which registered a negative year-on-year growth of (-)1.93 percent.

The fiscal implications are

significant as well. Bangladesh has historically used energy subsidies to shield consumers from volatile global prices. Such subsidies come at a cost. They put significant strains on the government budget, and the fiscal deficit might also grow, limiting financial flexibility. Indeed, the government's fiscal space has been shrinking over the last several years. As a result, the tax-GDP ratio dropped to 6.8 percent in FY2025 from 7.4 percent in FY2024.

At the same time, the total subsidy expenditure stayed high, estimated at around 2.2 percent of GDP in FY2025. The energy sector—mainly the state-owned Bangladesh Power Development Board (BPDB)—received



Commuters wait in long queues at a refilling station in Dhaka, amid the government's decision to ration fuel in the face of global energy supply disruption, on March 12, 2026.

PHOTO: MEHEDI HASAN

most of these subsidies. Increasing fuel import costs raised electricity generation costs, yet end-user tariffs remained unchanged to prevent further inflation. The government also paid off some overdue amounts owed to independent power producers. Additionally, fertiliser subsidies continued to be substantial and remittance incentives were expanded amid rising inflows.

Given the current high energy prices in the international market, if Bangladesh adjusts domestic fuel prices to match global rates, it could cause a quick increase in inflation and living costs. Therefore, policymakers must carefully balance maintaining the country's fiscal health with ensuring price stability.

In this context, it is crucial to seek alternative energy sources. We primarily import oil and LNG from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, and Qatar. Diversifying these sources can help reduce reliance on geopolitical stability. In the short term, importing refined diesel from India and China could be viable, especially with the Bangladesh-India Friendship Pipeline providing key infrastructure support.

Financing high-cost energy imports may also become a major challenge for Bangladesh. In this regard, international trade finance mechanisms could play an important role. The Islamic Trade Finance Corporation has been providing trade finance support to the country, particularly for oil and gas imports. The financial capacity of Petrobangla and Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC) is a key factor here. Petrobangla is not fully self-funded and has occasionally struggled while importing LNG due to forex issues. Meanwhile, despite being relatively strong financially, the BPC has also experienced periods of foreign currency shortages, resulting

in inflation in the transportation, agriculture, and food supply sectors. On the other hand, keeping prices artificially low through extended subsidies would increase fiscal deficits. A better solution might be a gradual price adjustment system, where luxury fuel users encounter larger price hikes while vital sectors like agriculture and public transportation receive targeted support.

Understanding Bangladesh's specific energy usage is vital. Diesel predominantly powers agricultural irrigation, transportation, industrial generators, and certain power plants. Petrol and octane are mainly for private vehicles and motorcycles. Furnace oil is used in specific power plants, whereas LNG and natural gas are crucial for electricity, industry, and fertiliser production. Consequently, an interruption in diesel supply could quickly affect agriculture, transportation, and food distribution systems. In this context, Bangladesh must implement several immediate and medium-term policy actions. Short-term measures should include increasing strategic fuel reserves, securing alternative supply sources, and prioritising energy distribution for essential sectors. Simultaneously, reducing reliance on the unpredictable spot market by expanding long-term supply agreements would improve supply stability. Over the medium term, strengthening energy storage infrastructure, promoting energy efficiency, and boosting investment in renewable energy are key steps to enhance resilience.

The current crisis also underscores another key issue: lack of domestic energy exploration efforts. It is crucial to expand exploration activities in the country, particularly in the Bay of Bengal, including joint projects between Bangladesh Petroleum Exploration and Production Company Limited (Bapex) and international energy firms. The government has already announced plans to drill several exploration wells in the coming years. If these plans are carried out effectively, they could help reduce the country's reliance on imported energy.

The ongoing conflict in the Middle East has once again exposed the weaknesses in Bangladesh's energy security. An energy infrastructure that relies heavily on imports, coupled with limited forex reserves and tight fiscal capacity, makes the economy vulnerable to global energy market fluctuations. This crisis should be viewed not just as a temporary issue but also as a prompt to revisit the country's long-term energy approach. By diversifying energy sources, enhancing financial mechanisms, and increasing investment in domestic exploration and renewable energy, Bangladesh can strengthen its energy independence and economic resilience against possible global energy disruptions in the future.

Piety, protest, and the search for a sacred public life



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I do not think the contemporary public mood in Bangladesh can be explained only through the old argument between secularism and religion. Something else is going on, and it feels deeper. Across campuses, in political speeches, in reform talks, even in everyday frustration with corruption and disorder, I sense a search for moral seriousness. People are seeking a public life that feels cleaner, weightier, more answerable to conscience. That is why the language of this moment so often sounds ethical before it sounds ideological.

Andrew Samuels had a name for this kind of atmosphere: resacralisation. He did not mean a simple return to religion, but a broader attempt to move a sense of holiness, dignity, and ethical meaning back into the ordinary world of politics and institutions. He saw it as a response to collective disgust with public life and as a search for a new ethical basis for society. I find that idea

useful in Bangladesh, because what many people seem to want now is not merely a change of rulers, but politics that can recover some moral gravity.

You can hear this most clearly in the generation shaped by July. When The Daily Star spoke to students at Begum Rokeya University ahead of the election, they did not speak in the tired vocabulary of patronage. They spoke about democracy, merit, justice, freedom of speech, unfinished trials, and the feeling that the spirit of July had not yet been honoured in practice. One student answered the question of what mattered most after graduation with a single term: "A job." That combination matters to me. It shows that idealism here is not abstract. It is moral and material at once.

The same longing now appears in formal politics. The ruling party's recent orientation for MPs and ministers focused on parliamentary rules, legislative procedure, and

governance priorities suggests an awareness that power must be taught to behave differently this time. The health minister's drive to remove "dalal syndicates" from public hospitals, with visible help desks and accountable officials, carries the same moral charge. These are administrative measures, yes. Yet, they also speak to a deeper public hunger for institutions that do not humiliate ordinary people.

Ramadan has exposed the contradiction with unusual clarity. A recent opinion piece published by The Daily Star put it bluntly: in much of the Muslim world, the month brings discounts and solidarity, while in Bangladesh it often brings a predictable surge in prices. A season meant to cultivate restraint becomes, in practice, a season of extraction. That detail matters far beyond the market. It tells us that public piety on its own does very little unless it is matched by a moral economy. Otherwise, holiness stays in speech while daily life remains organised by opportunism.

Still, this search for a sacred public life can fail. It fails when moral language floats above institutions. It fails when purity becomes more important than procedure. It fails when reform speaks in noble tones while old habits slide quietly through the back door.

Dhaka University's appointment of yet another unelected vice-chancellor is one such warning. A recent editorial

by The Daily Star noted Transparency International Bangladesh's claim that, after the uprising, key university appointments were divided among major political actors and influenced by public pressure. That is exactly how moral aspiration gets emptied out.

It also fails when the language of national renewal leaves whole constituencies outside the room. Only around four percent of the candidates who contested the 13th national election were women, and only seven women were elected. So, I cannot take any rhetoric of ethical rebirth seriously unless it widens participation, especially for those who helped carry the country through its hardest moments. A sacred public life, if the phrase is to mean anything, has to be more inclusive, more procedural, and more patient than the politics we already know.

I am not calling for sanctimonious politics. I am saying that Bangladesh is clearly searching for a public sphere that people can respect again. July gave that search a new urgency. Ramadan has shown its contradictions. Reform debates are giving it institutional language. The real question now is whether we can build a politics where dignity is not ceremonial, morality is not selective, and conscience does not end where power begins. That, to me, is the real struggle underneath the noise.