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FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Desperate journeys of hopeless Rohingyas

Rohingya plight getting harder to address with shrinking funds

At least 900 Rohingya refugees were reported dead or missing in the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea in 2025. The number, revealed by the United Nations refugee agency, UNHCR, accentuates the increasingly wretched circumstances the Rohingyas find themselves in as they continue to live in camps in Bangladesh with no hope of repatriation in sight. While Bangladesh, with the help of international and local donors and organisations, is hosting more than one million Rohingyas, the recent drastic cuts in international funding and the influx of more than 150,000 Rohingyas since last year, fleeing the latest civil war in Myanmar, have worsened the crisis.

The birth of thousands of babies in the camps every year since 2017 has also increased the Rohingya population significantly. The World Food Programme (WFP) is now struggling with critical shortfalls in funding, forcing a reduction in food assistance from \$12 per person per month to a three-tiered system where \$12, \$10, and \$7 are given based on their perceived levels of vulnerability. This has exacerbated hunger and malnutrition. In 2025, 6,400 learning centres were closed down, leaving more than 400,000 children with no access to education. More than 4,000 Rohingya teachers lost their jobs along with their Bangladeshi colleagues.

The funding shortfall is attributed to the drastic reduction in humanitarian aid by the US, which provided over half of the total funding for Rohingyas in the last few years. This year, more than 2,800 Rohingyas have attempted hazardous sea journeys in the hope of reaching Malaysia or Indonesia. Over half of those who make these journeys are women and children who run the risk of being trafficked.

At this time, Bangladesh and all donor agencies must put pressure on the international community to increase funding and find long-lasting solutions. The US-Israel war on Iran has made it even more challenging to raise funds. But the global community must realise that the burden of the Rohingya crisis is not Bangladesh's to bear alone, but rather a collective responsibility. Until the crisis is solved, the Rohingyas will continue to make these dangerous journeys, with many of them dying and thousands ending up on the shores of other countries, which will then have their own refugee crisis to handle.

These countries as well as other influential global players must get together and join Bangladesh to stop these deadly journeys. Funds must be increased for food, education, and medical care in the camps. Learning centres and skills training centres must be reopened. The Rohingyas must be given opportunities to earn within the camps. The government must also enhance security, especially for women and children. Human trafficking agents must be identified and given appropriate punishment. As challenging as it is, until the civil war in Myanmar ends, Bangladesh may continue to host the refugees who are already here, but resettlement of some Rohingyas to other countries, and their eventual repatriation to Myanmar, must be on the cards.

Streamlining hawker markets a must

Authorities need to respond promptly to keep footpaths clear

Despite a massive drive by the Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) to clear Dhaka's footpaths of hawkers not long ago, a recent report by *The Daily Star* has found many areas reoccupied already. This suggests that the DMP's promise to conduct follow-up operations to prevent reoccupation is not being fulfilled. Worse, the informal mechanism keeping hawkers on the streets is still in full swing, as they are reportedly paying tolls to so-called linemen in order to occupy spots in some areas of the capital. We must ask, what is the point of such drives if the authorities won't try to sustain their effect?

Dhaka is infamously unwalkable, and the presence of hawkers and roadside shops, along with construction materials, contributes largely to this reality. It is no doubt commendable that the government has taken notice of the issue and moved to action. Still more admirable is the Dhaka South City Corporation's plan to regularise such businesses by providing licences, designating operations schedules, and introducing "holiday markets" and "night markets." Already, the DSCC has issued a public notice banning the placement of goods on footpaths in front of markets—warning of strict legal action—including cancellation of trade licences. The Dhaka North City Corporation, too, has plans to make alternative arrangements for small-scale traders and introduce a token system to eliminate extortion.

However, we agree with experts that only a comprehensive plan can make changes sustainable and humane at the same time. While creating alternative employment and reducing poverty can be the long-term measures that reduce the overall number of hawking businesses, it is equally important to go for measures that are grounded in our current reality, such as creating alternative spaces for hawkers instead of providing them licences to operate on sidewalks. True, the prevalence of small informal ventures signals a lack of formal employment opportunities, but it is ultimately a symptom of a system that has been able to thrive partly because it serves local politicians by allowing them to extort the small business owners.

Shooing hawkers off footpaths without holding extortionists accountable and without first arranging an alternative space or employment for hawkers defeats the purpose of such drives. So we urge the authorities to not only clear footpaths but also keep at it by increasing oversight and developing rehabilitation plans for hawkers. It must also be ensured that larger businesses and private residences are not allowed to use pedestrian walkways as an extension of their warehouse or driveway.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

American Revolution begins

On this day in 1775, British troops confront 77 minutemen under Captain John Parker in Lexington, a shot is fired, and the brief clash leaves eight Americans dead and marks the beginning of the American Revolution.

Back, again, to the cycle of broken promises?



Altaf Parvez is a researcher and political analyst.

ALTAf PARVEZ

In Bangladesh's political history, perhaps the most defining years are 1971, 1990, and 2024. Much has been said about the political, military, and social dimensions of these watershed moments. People made supreme sacrifices at these junctures to realise their political aspirations, but came up short each time. Curiously, the shortcomings receive little scrutiny in our history. We revel in glory, but avert our gaze from the erosion that follows. We hesitate to confront failure with honesty.

The Italian thinker Antonio Gramsci spoke of two interrelated spheres within the state: political society and civil society. At present, Bangladesh's civil society finds itself unsettled, even paralysed, by the conduct of the political society. Efforts at state reform and institutional renewal seem to have faltered, with the new parliament making it clear that the reformist demands of civil society will not be fulfilled so easily, nor is there a roadmap as to when or how those might be realised.

Members of the ruling BNP, despite campaigning for a "yes" vote in the referendum, have yet to take oath as members of a Constitution Reform Assembly. The gap between political commitment and action, further exemplified by the dilution, expiration, or repeal of key ordinances passed during the interim period, has left civil society largely disillusioned. More than 20 months after the uprising, it finds itself with diminishing agency, unable to either advance the reform agenda it once championed or meaningfully process the trauma of the uprising.

A similar pattern unfolded in the years after 1971. Freedom fighters and freedom-loving people who defeated the Pakistani military gradually lost ground to the entrenched bureaucratic order that effectively absorbed and neutralised the promise of transformation. The same policing system, the same DC offices, the same land administration, the same hierarchical structures returned, as if in a tribute to their colonial masters.

Similarly, the post-1990 period saw little substantive change. Military rule was overthrown, pro-democracy students and protesters handed a "ten-point" programme to the two leaders, but subsequent decades saw major parties alternate in practising the same politics of power, leaving the British-era bureaucratic order intact.

Alongside came political corruption, organised patronage networks, enforced disappearances, killings, the erosion of electoral systems, etc. So, civil society had to begin from scratch again. This time, school and college students stepped forward, their demand for safe roads taking aim at the dysfunction and injustices of the state. These students would later return to the streets to resist quota-based inequalities that subsequently evolved into a broader mass uprising.

So, another "December 16" moment came, powered by people's aspirations for building an inclusive society. Its



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

continuity led to the February 12 election and referendum. The interim government conducted various experiments on the ideas of reforms before finally placing a portion of uprising-induced demands before the nation through the referendum. Despite procedural flaws and signs of coercion in the reform process, the majority of voters endorsed it as an expression of collective will and necessity, including support from BNP. Yet BNP persistently refuses to join the Constitution Reform Assembly. Of the ordinances issued by the interim government, as per Law Minister Md Asaduzzaman, 97 have been ratified without changes, 13 amended before becoming law, and seven repealed, with the remaining 16 left to face further scrutiny and change. It is the fate of key ordinances that has caused particular concerns.

The message emerging from the conduct of the government and parliament over the past two months is

difficult to ignore. The last election, to them, seems little more than a regime-change vote. As if the "Red July" did not happen. As if hundreds were not killed to bring about this moment. As if thousands of young people did not want something through their defiance and ouster of an autocratic regime. During the interim period, BNP functioned as a principal political actor, deeply embedded in the process. The interim government could scarcely act without its consultation and consent. But since the election, many structural legal reforms have been diluted, dismantled, or stand at risk of meeting either fate. Ordinances aimed at preventing enforced disappearance, improving human rights conditions, and strengthening judicial independence have been lost to political inertia.

The contradictions are striking. At the outset of its election manifesto, BNP had pledged to implement its "31-point" reform programme alongside the July charter. It promised

have now been rendered ineffective through the repeal of Supreme Court-related ordinances.

Meanwhile, had a strong and independent human rights commission existed during the long Awami League period, it might have mitigated some of the widespread abuses committed then. Interim ordinances created space for independent investigations into allegations against security forces. But that, too, has now been stalled. Among the victims of such abuses, BNP leaders and activists form a significant proportion; one wonders what the families of those victims felt as these reform measures were quietly undone in parliament.

At its core, meaningful reform requires a transformation of political culture—a departure from entrenched hierarchies and colonial legacies. It demands an undiluted commitment to change. Recent parliamentary experience suggests that Bangladesh remains trapped within its old structures and tendencies. Political parties themselves do not appear ready for genuine transformation. When one party holds an absolute majority in parliament, the opposition can hardly do anything beyond protests and walkouts to impact outcomes. But after decades of bitter experience, people no longer wish to see the parliament reduced to a platform for rhetorical speeches without effect. We have yet to see meaningful reform legislation emerging with bipartisan support through discussions between the government and the opposition. Instead, there are growing signs that the aspirations of July are being sidelined.

BNP policymakers insist they will implement reforms in their own way. It is also true that a government barely two months old requires time. Civil society, too, must exercise patience.

But if the civil society is sceptical, it is because it has endured repeated cycles of hope and betrayal before. Since 1972, it has waited to see the realisation of the ideals of the Liberation War; since 1991, the implementation of the ten-point programme; and for the past 21 months, the fulfilment of the promise of "Red July." This prolonged uncertainty risks pushing society towards extremism on one hand, while allowing entrenched power structures to continually reproduce themselves on the other.

These commitments echoed the spirit of earlier reform agendas. The interim government's ordinances reflected similar intentions. For instance, provisions were introduced for a Supreme Judicial Appointment Council to recommend judicial candidates independently to the president. Measures were proposed to ensure that decisions on appointments, promotions, transfers, and discipline of judges would fall under a separate secretariat, reducing political interference. But such reforms

also raises an uncomfortable question: how much of our independence and uprisings since 1971 can still be claimed as unqualified achievements? Are we, in reality, still struggling to move beyond zero? For the country's oligarchic structures, neither 1971, nor 1990, nor 2024 appears to have posed a fundamental challenge. It is time for the citizens to look closely in the mirror and determine a workable course.

What's holding women back from riding bicycles?



Nazma Sultana manages business development of several strategic business units of Aki Venture Group.

NAZMA SULTANA

Stand on any road in Dhaka. Men and boys cycle freely, weaving through traffic with ease. Now look for women—you will see very few. And when you do, they draw stares. This is not just cultural; it reflects a persistent economic exclusion the country has been facing for decades.

The stigma is rooted in perceived immodesty and a stubborn assumption about where women are meant to exist. Half the population is locked out of one of the cheapest and most liberating forms of transports available. According to a 2018 IMF estimate, reducing gender disparity in labour force participation could raise Bangladesh's GDP by almost 40 percent. Another figure by the Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) shows that only around 42.5 percent of working-age women participate in the labour force in the country, against some 81.3 percent of men. Here, the reason is not that the women are not as

qualified or educated as men, but the fact that men are allowed to have more access and more freedom to move.

According to a programme by the Women's Empowerment for Inclusive Growth (WING) of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) that connects women across five different districts to build their entrepreneurial skills, physical mobility is among the most pressing constraints for female entrepreneurs. Distance is also one of the main causes of dropouts among schoolgirls in the country and ensuring mobility could effectively tackle that problem. For example, India's Mukhyamantri Balika Cycle Yojana in Bihar—launched in 2006—was an initiative aimed at solving the distance problem many girls faced by providing them with bicycles. A study in the American Economic Journal found it raised girls' enrolment by up to 59.8 percent and cut the gender education gap by 51.2 percent. In Zambia, a UN-documented programme found girls

with bicycles experienced 22 percent less sexual harassment while travelling to school.

One of the barriers to women not using cycles to commute to and from their places of education or work is a lack of institutional support and infrastructural capacity. For example, the Netherlands—known for its cycling culture—heavily invested in safe

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infrastructure including dedicated bike lanes with speed limits up to 50 kph to close the gender gap among people using cycles. So, one thing is fairly clear: infrastructure does not follow demand, it creates it.

There is also a public health lens that can be considered here. For example, a ten-year Swedish cohort study of 23,732 adults found that those who cycled to work had significantly lower odds of obesity, hypertension, and

elevated blood sugar. Another 2023 study found that active commuting reduces cardiovascular risk by around 11 percent, with stronger protective effects for women. In light of recent unrest in the Middle East, Bangladesh is facing a structural energy strain, with 46% of supply imported and costs rising and more people switching to cycling might help to solve this problem.

So, what methods can Bangladesh adopt to ensure more people—especially women—can safely pick up their bikes to make regular journeys? Well, three actors must stop waiting for each other. First, the private sector, especially the ready-made garment industry where women are the workforce majority, can introduce subsidised bicycle access for female employees. Development organisations can also come forward by initiating schemes like "Cycle to Work". The government can play the most important role by making roads safer, building cycling lanes, ensuring safety lighting, and running public campaign that would normalise women using cycles. It is worth remembering here that Bangladesh has shifted norms before—from girls' education to women's work. A bicycle has the potential to unlocks access to markets, schools, and healthcare. Keeping women off bicycles is not only cultural, it is an economic and social cost the country can no longer ignore.