

Measles outbreak and the politics of convenience



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“For the past two months, innocent children have been dying, and there has been no discussion about it in parliament. No one is taking responsibility. No one is admitting failure. All the blame is being placed on the mothers and the children. Why were these children born in this country? Why did the mothers give birth to them?” wrote Farzana Islam, who recently lost her eight-month-and-18-day-old child to measles, on Facebook.

According to the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), since March 15, confirmed and suspected measles deaths among children reached 424 as of May 12. Measles is neither unfamiliar nor uncontrollable; it is preventable with vaccines, and Bangladesh made significant progress in containing it through sustained immunisation programmes. So, its re-emergence at this scale signals a complete breakdown in systems that once functioned with relative stability.

Public health accounts link this deterioration, in part, to disruptions in vaccine procurement during the transitional period following the 2024 upheaval. Reports suggest that Bangladesh’s long-standing procurement system—previously supported through structured international partnerships, including with UNICEF—was modified in favour of a more open tender-based approach. Health experts warned that such a shift could disrupt supply chains, introduce delays, and undermine the predictability needed to sustain immunisation coverage. Over time, these structural vulnerabilities appear to have translated into declining vaccination rates in several regions, creating conditions for measles to resurge.

At the same time, the government’s own data reveals another painful reality: nearly half of the 60 children who died from confirmed measles were below nine months of age, meaning they had not yet become eligible for routine vaccination. Their deaths complicate attempts to reduce the crisis to a

single explanation.

Yet even as the causes of the outbreak continue to unfold, it is the political response or the lack thereof that has revealed a different kind of fragility—not of capacity alone, but of framing, narrative, and responsibility.

The BNP, less than three months in office, is still operating in a sensitive phase of governance. It would be unrealistic to expect them to have the full systemic stabilisation or immediate repair of disrupted administrative and procurement structures. The legacy of transition, especially in health logistics and vaccine supply chains, has certainly constrained the government’s room for rapid manoeuvre. Still, the government seems to be playing an unnecessarily safe game. Its handling has remained largely procedural: emergency procurement, catch-up vaccination drives, and administrative adjustments. None of this translates the scale of child mortality into a forceful political assertion of urgency. There has been little effort to elevate the crisis into a defining national emergency that demands sustained political leadership beyond routine bureaucracy. It has also not launched any large-scale public awareness programme to encourage parents to bring their children for vaccination.

Equally significantly, even though an investigation has been launched recently, with plans to work with international agencies, the government appears to be engaging in a careful politics of distancing. Referring to the outbreak as an inherited consequence of the transitional period and Prime Minister Tarique Rahman addressing the issue less frequently than public expectations demand, the BNP government seems to be avoiding full political ownership of the present situation. But it cannot deny its own shortcomings either. In a surprising turn of events, the DGHS on May 10 increased the official death toll to 409 from a previously reported 352, indicating that a significant number of deaths were not captured in

earlier counts. Whether these gaps stem from administrative inefficiency or systemic delays, they point to weaknesses that must be addressed immediately, as accurate data remains essential not only for public trust but also for effective outbreak response and planning.

The opposition—including the National Citizen Party (NCP) and Jamaat-e-Islami—has also struggled to generate sustained

made during their tenure. Professor Sayedur Rahman, former special assistant to the chief adviser for the health ministry, provided a written response to The Daily Star’s queries amid the ongoing controversy, claiming “UNICEF message was not a measles outbreak warning.” But the former health adviser Nurjahan Begum is yet to say anything about it.

This whole pattern is best understood



The government has yet to launch any large-scale public awareness programme to encourage parents to bring their children for vaccination.
PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

pressure around the issue. Criticism exists, but it remains strategically measured. This restraint is partly shaped by the crisis’s proximity to the transitional period: questions about procurement and administrative restructuring cannot be raised without inviting scrutiny of these opposition actors’ associations with that phase. As a result, their criticism tends to focus on immediate government performance rather than deeper systemic accountability.

Former interim government figures, meanwhile, have mostly kept mum, despite growing public discussion about decisions

as a politics of convenient silence—not the absence of response, but a selective and strategically calibrated form of engagement, where responsibility is acknowledged only when politically useful and softened or displaced when it carries political cost. Meanwhile, segments of the banned Awami League’s support base have responded, perhaps not surprisingly, with open mockery and partisan gloating. Across sections of social media and sympathetic digital spaces, they have cynically turned the deaths of children into material for political point-scoring, using the crisis to ridicule the

current government. Through this grotesque politicisation, they have further weakened the possibility of a unified public response, even as hundreds of children continue to die.

Interestingly, leaders of the Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB) have also been vocal, as they recently demanded punishment for former chief adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus and former health adviser Nurjahan Begum in connection with the measles outbreak. However, given the party’s limited political influence, the demand did not meet with serious attention.

Taken together, the responses from the country’s major political forces lay bare a grim reality about our political culture even in the face of major public crises. The 2024 uprising was widely seen as a moral rupture in Bangladesh’s political trajectory—a brief unsettling of an order long defined by power, control, and institutional survival over public welfare. In its aftermath, a cautious but real hope emerged: that governance might reorganise around a different ethic, one where public crises would no longer be absorbed into cycles of blame shifting but would instead demand urgency, coordination, and shared responsibility.

That hope carried into the political transition that followed. When the February elections restored parliamentary democracy and brought the BNP to power, the country formally returned to a familiar framework of elected governments and opposition politics. In theory, such a system strengthens accountability: governments act, oppositions scrutinise, and institutions translate crisis into responsive policy. Democratic restoration, thus, is associated not only with legitimacy but also with better crisis governance.

Against this backdrop, the measles outbreak has emerged as the first major political and institutional test of Bangladesh’s post-transition order. Ironically, though, the response so far suggests that while the democratic form has returned, the underlying culture of crisis management has hardly changed. Even after hundreds of preventable child deaths, the country has failed to produce a unified political reckoning, with responsibility continuing to dissolve into institutional transitions, partisan calculation, and cautious deflection.

Until that balance shifts and public suffering is met with unified political urgency, the gap exposed by this outbreak will remain unresolved, and each crisis in the future will risk repeating the same pattern.

The elite’s blind spot is deepening our education crisis



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Talking to the Bangladeshi elite—the people with real power and influence—you might think they recognise the education crisis facing the country. Some would shake their heads despairingly and offer examples from their own experience. “I hired someone with a master’s degree, and they could not write a paragraph.” Or, “Nobody is capable of critical thinking or problem-solving.” Or, “Our recruits can’t use the machinery we have invested in.”

Yet, the most privileged groups in our society are blinkered about Bangladesh’s learning crisis. They fail to grasp its most significant dimensions, not least its urgency. Deep down, they do not seem to believe the crisis can be tackled and are instead resigned to the sad fact that the majority of the nation’s children learn little at school.

The facts speak for themselves: Bangladesh’s education system is failing most and has been measurably doing so for quite some time. Over 60 percent of the third graders and 70 percent of the fifth graders don’t have the proficiency in maths appropriate for their grades, while 51 percent of the third graders and 50 percent of the fifth graders lack grade-level competence in Bangla. The overwhelming majority still pass their exams, enter the world of adulthood, and work without the basic foundational, social, and emotional learning needed to survive or thrive. This is a national catastrophe. But this crisis has not yet generated the urgency to drive through the tough system reforms needed.

These facts are regularly rehearsed in op-eds, talk shows,

and social media. Prominent experts have produced reams of rigorous analysis and robust recommendations. The messages are clear and consistent: children need to spend more time learning with trained teachers who are incentivised to ensure they succeed. Despite multiple major investments, the system has remained more or less the same: in a stable state of very poor performance.

There are a few things that often get lost in translation about this protracted disaster. First, there is a lingering hope that Bangladesh’s much-praised successes with primary education enrolment will somehow spare the sector from total disaster. For years, we celebrated Bangladesh’s achievement of universal primary education. But those successes were about expanding the system, building schools, recruiting teachers, and reaching girls and poor children. These were broadly popular policies, but no one paid much attention to the fact that, while children were indeed going to school, they were learning little there.

Second, few among the elite understand the gravity of the harm inflicted on the country by abysmal public education, falsely believing they are not adversely affected by it. But many members of the upper class have themselves attended or sent their children to public schools. This is increasingly true of the middle class. Some of the new MPs are themselves recent students, some from public schools. However, it remains to be seen if this personal experience will encourage them to champion real solutions to the crisis.

Our learning crisis affects business, too. In the readymade garments sector, middle managers are recruited from abroad or painstakingly trained in-house. Factory floor recruits have adequate skills for the tasks they perform, even if they are unlikely to cope well with automation as the sector tries to move up the value chain. The “manpower” industry in Bangladesh has historically been a volume sector, not one that sends skilled workers abroad to earn high wages. Yet in industries that require a higher average level of skill in their workforce, notably footwear, leather, tech and electronics, business leaders are clear that their industry already suffers from the effects of the crisis.

Thirdly, few realise how badly Bangladesh fares against its comparators, or potential competitors. On several international indices, average educational attainments position Bangladesh firmly among the low-income and least developed, far below what would be expected of an education system in an aspiring middle-income country.

According to an estimate that merges indicators of quality and quantity of education with data from the World Bank (2024) and Our World in Data to estimate the average level of learning achieved across the world, Bangladesh lurks in the lowest quadrant, closer to war-torn Liberia—one of the poorest, least developed countries in the world. On average, Bangladeshis receive six years equivalent of schooling, compared to almost 12 years in Singapore.

Not only does Bangladesh perform poorly, but comparator and competitor countries also possess natural and economic resources such as oil, minerals, timber, and tourism that Bangladesh lacks. Our economy is extremely, perhaps unusually, dependent on its primary resource: the labour power of its people. This means skills matter even more for Bangladesh.

A fourth factor may be the recognition that it is hard to change the system. Organised interests—the guidebook and private tuition industries, the teacher associations primed to mobilise around pay and conditions—make it politically difficult to require teachers to train, attend, and perform as needed. Out of frustration with the system’s failings, many among the privileged embark on personal philanthropic education initiatives. These are laudable, but perhaps also defuse their sense of the crisis facing the one crore students not attending their schools.

When I speak with industrialists, people with the wealth, networks, and collective power to shape government policy, I am struck that there is no

policy space or tradition holding the government accountable for the state of education. In other countries with high-performing public education systems, business leaders have made it plain that they need a higher average level of basic skills, not just in maths and writing, but also in collaboration, communication, and critical thinking. That pressure from powerful quarters has been critical for learning reforms to be adopted and implemented in countries with better learning outcomes.

In Bangladesh, recognising that it is both developmentally necessary and popular with citizens, the BNP government has signalled that they take education seriously. The Awami League government acted like a weak

authoritarian when it came to the learning crisis: too insulated against public opinion to listen to parents and students, and too dependent on the support of teacher associations and the bureaucracy to push through much-needed reforms. We will soon be at the point at which we sacrifice our demographic dividend and, as one elite interviewee told me, “go from being a poor young country to being a poor *old* country.”

It is time for the elite to remove their blinkers about the learning crisis, help build a consensus about the kind of education we want and need, and push the government to act. Bangladesh cannot afford to sleepwalk into the future, squandering its sole asset: its creative and resourceful people.