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Proposed draft laws are disappointing

NHRC's autonomy, fair probe into disappearances put into question

The BNP government's failure to draft better laws on enforced disappearances and the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) is indeed disappointing. The draft laws, unveiled on Sunday, seem to weaken the NHRC's institutional strength and independent oversight while placing the police in charge of investigating disappearances. Considering the law enforcement connection with most of the enforced disappearance cases during the Awami League regime, putting the probe responsibility on the police raises eyebrows. This provision appears almost like making the wolf the shepherd.

It is a well-known fact that most of the enforced disappearances were committed by security and intelligence forces during Sheikh Hasina's time. At one point, the Detective Branch of police became notorious for picking up businessmen, torturing them, and then demanding ransom from their families for their release. How can a sub-inspector be expected to probe into such crimes impartially and without fear of retribution from their seniors? But that is what the new draft law on enforced disappearance proposes, diverging from the interim-time ordinances, which tasked the NHRC with investigating disappearances and barred members of a force from investigating their own members.

In fact, the BNP government's proposed law on the NHRC strips it of its power to investigate rights violations by disciplined forces, which was given in the ordinances passed by the interim government. Per the new draft, the NHRC must seek a report from the agency chief or the government when such violations occur, and can only issue recommendations and demand response from the government if it is not satisfied with the report. In other words, the NHRC's role will be limited to paper shuffling when it comes to rights violations by law enforcers, just as it was during the Hasina government.

What's more, the selection process of NHRC members, per the draft, creates room for increased government influence in the institution. Unlike the NHRC-related 2024 and 2025 ordinances, the member selection committee will be chaired by the speaker of the House and not by an Appellate Division judge chosen by the chief justice. Besides, the inclusion of the law and home ministers on the selection committee gives the executive significant influence over NHRC appointments. Given our past experiences, how can we trust that this selection will not be partisan or that the persons selected by ruling party ministers will act impartially when investigating the state's human rights violations?

When the BNP government repealed NHRC ordinances and allowed the enforced disappearance ordinances to lapse, one of its rationales was that better laws with no ambiguity would be drafted. However, clarity in law should not come at the cost of weakening rights bodies and empowering state apparatuses with a history of oppression. This is not expected of this government, which was voted into power with hopes that it would bring real change, not merely cosmetic ones.

Govt must recognise women farmers

Their contribution in agriculture must no longer remain invisible

It is deeply disappointing that women's contribution to our agricultural workforce remains largely invisible in official records and government support systems. A recent report by this daily revealed that despite undertaking extensive agricultural labour, most women are still not officially recognised as farmers. This exclusion persists even though women now outnumber men in agricultural labour nationwide, with Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics' 2024 Labour Force Survey recording 1.7 crore women in the sector compared to 1.3 crore men. Why, then, are they still denied due recognition?

Our reporter recently visited more than a dozen villages in Nikli upazila of Kishoreganj and found that women shoulder exhausting responsibilities throughout the agricultural cycle, from irrigation and weeding to threshing, drying and grain storage, alongside their household duties. During recent untimely rains and flash floods, they also took on the burden of preserving damaged crops while continuing to manage domestic responsibilities. But because farming is still widely perceived as a male activity, their labour is often treated as an extension of household work rather than recognised as an economic activity. Women are also usually listed as farmers only if they are widowed, divorced, or if no male family member's national identity card is available. Such exclusion is unacceptable.

The result is that women remain excluded from crucial government support mechanisms. Many are left out of farmer lists, including the Farmers' Cards, which provide access to agricultural inputs, subsidies and incentives. Women accounted for only 15.05 percent of the 22,061 farmers surveyed across 11 upazilas in 10 districts in the pre-pilot phase of the Farmer's Card programme. Even among farmers affected by recent crop losses, only a small share of those identified for government assistance were women.

The lack of recognition of women in the agriculture sector reflects long-standing social and institutional barriers that continue to undervalue their work. Wage disparities further expose this reality, with women receiving significantly lower pay for physically demanding labour. Lack of land ownership, limited representation in local agricultural committees and restricted access to financing mechanisms further increase their vulnerability.

This situation must change. Women involved in agricultural work, whether through cultivation, sharecropping, livestock rearing, seed preservation or post-harvest activities, should receive formal recognition as farmers. The government should revive and complete the abandoned digital database initiative to ensure women are properly included in official records and support programmes. Agricultural incentives must be distributed fairly and women should also be represented in local agricultural and disaster response committees. Greater investment in modern farming technologies, childcare support and other rural infrastructure is equally necessary to reduce their burden. Women's growing contribution to the agricultural sector must no longer remain invisible.

FITCH'S NEGATIVE OUTLOOK

How to navigate the storm ahead

MACRO MIRROR

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FAHMIDA KHATUN

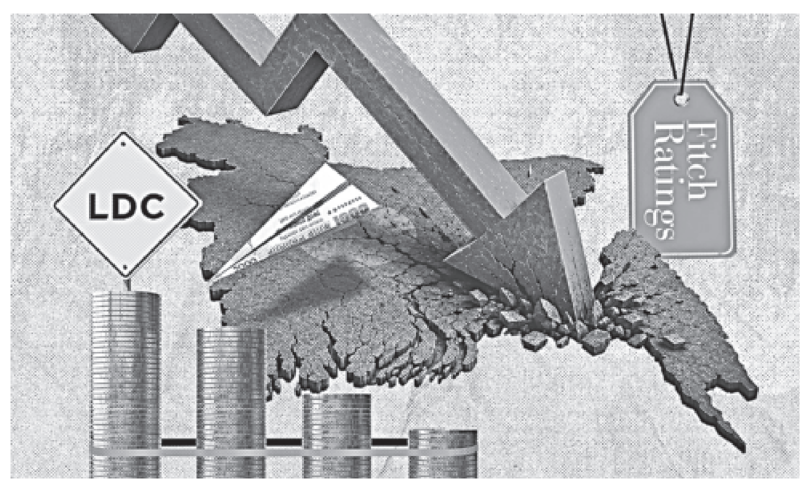
Recently, Fitch Ratings observed that Bangladesh's economic risks have increased, prompting a downgrade of the country's sovereign outlook from "stable" to "negative." It has kept the country's overall international credit rating unchanged at B+, indicating that it remains capable of repaying its foreign debts. However, the rating remains relatively low, indicating that Bangladesh remains economically vulnerable to shocks and financial pressures. When the country is facing a number of economic challenges while it awaits LDC graduation, Fitch's assessment has sent an important signal to markets, investors, development partners, and policymakers that its macroeconomic vulnerabilities are increasingly difficult to ignore.

Fitch specifically highlighted the risks posed by the escalating conflict in the Middle East, particularly the country's heavy dependency on the region for both energy imports and remittance inflows. This dual dependency creates dangerous exposure. Prolonged geopolitical instability in the Gulf region can simultaneously affect remittance earnings, energy prices, inflation, the exchange rate, and the country's balance of payments position. Bangladesh experienced a similar vulnerability during the global energy shock of 2022-23, when forex reserves declined sharply, import controls were imposed, and the taka came under significant pressure. Fitch's forecast suggests that such risks are re-emerging.

Fitch also noted Bangladesh's relatively weak external liquidity position, which is equivalent to approximately four months of external payments. While this level is not critically low by international standards, it remains modest for an economy of Bangladesh's size and import dependency. Moreover, imports are still restricted and private investment is stagnant. So, these reserves remain vulnerable to higher energy and other import bills, capital outflows, weaker export growth, and slower external finance inflows.

Fitch noted limited progress in reforms across public finance, governance, financial sector regulation, and institutional capacity. This observation is particularly significant as Bangladesh's current challenges are not merely cyclical but predominantly structural. Revenue mobilisation remains one of the weakest macroeconomic indicators in the country. Weak tax administration, extensive exemptions, low compliance, and a narrow tax base continue to undermine fiscal capacity. As a result, the government struggles to finance development expenditure, social protection, and infrastructure without increasing borrowing.

At the same time, debt-servicing pressures are mounting. Although the country's public debt level remains moderate at around 38 percent of GDP, the quality of fiscal management is becoming a greater concern. Low revenue means even moderate debt levels can become difficult to manage over time.



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

The state of the country's banking sector also remains a major concern. Fitch warned that vulnerabilities remain elevated, especially among state-owned banks, and cautioned that non-performing loans could increase significantly once regulatory forbearance measures are withdrawn. The banking sector has long suffered from weak governance, politically influenced lending, poor recovery mechanisms, inadequate supervision, and capital shortfalls in several institutions. These weaknesses undermine investor confidence and constrain productive private sector investment.

Inflation constitutes another major challenge. Fitch expects inflation to remain around nine percent in FY2027, driven partly by shortages of essential commodities and possible increases in fuel prices. Persistently high inflation not only reduces purchasing power and increases poverty pressures but also weakens macroeconomic credibility. High inflation alongside slowing growth creates a particularly difficult policy environment because the authorities must simultaneously support growth and maintain stability.

Fitch forecasts Bangladesh's GDP growth at 3.7 percent in FY2026 and 3.5 percent in FY2027. These projections are significantly lower than the country's historical growth trajectory and well below the levels required to generate sufficient employment and sustain poverty reduction. Fitch specifically highlighted weakening RMG exports due to redirected global orders, reciprocal tariffs, softer demand, and rising domestic production costs.

How does the Fitch Ratings for Bangladesh compare with regional peers? India retains an investment-grade BBB- rating with a stable outlook from Fitch, supported by strong growth prospects, infrastructure investment, and resilient capital inflows, despite public debt exceeding 55 percent of GDP. Vietnam also has a stronger credit profile than Bangladesh, underpinned by diversified exports, sustained foreign investment, and deeper integration into global supply chains.

The task before the new government

Barely three months into office, the new government is already facing inherited structural weaknesses alongside growing external economic pressures. In this context, Fitch's negative outlook carries significant implications and highlights the urgent need for credible reforms, strong policy commitment, and decisive measures to restore confidence and strengthen economic resilience. Sovereign ratings affect borrowing costs, investor confidence, access to external financing, and perceptions of economic stability. A deterioration in ratings can increase the cost of international borrowing for both the government and the private sector. It can also discourage foreign investment at a time when the country urgently needs to diversify investment ahead of LDC graduation.

Addressing these challenges requires more than just immediate crisis response. Bangladesh requires a clear medium-term reform plan to rebuild trust, enhance resilience, and boost institutional credibility. First, macroeconomic stabilisation must remain the immediate priority. Inflation control should receive central attention through prudent monetary policy, improved supply chain management, and careful energy pricing adjustments. Inflation cannot be allowed to become structurally entrenched.

Second, reforms in revenue mobilisation are imperative. Bangladesh cannot fulfil its development ambitions given its position among the lowest-tax countries globally. The government is required to expand the tax base, curtail exemptions, digitise tax administration procedures, enhance compliance efforts, and fortify institutional capacity within the revenue authorities. In the absence of enhanced domestic resource mobilisation, fiscal pressures are expected to persist and escalate.

Third, the banking sector needs comprehensive structural reform. This includes asset quality reviews, stricter loan classification standards, enhanced regulatory independence, better governance of state-owned banks, and credible resolution mechanisms to restore confidence. Regulatory forbearance cannot continue indefinitely.

Fourth, Bangladesh needs to accelerate export diversification and enhance competitiveness before graduating from the LDC status. Relying heavily on RMG exports makes the economy susceptible to external demand shocks. To attract new industries and maintain export growth, key areas such as logistics, energy reliability, trade facilitation, skills development, and investment climate must be improved.

Fifth, energy security should be a central macroeconomic priority. The country's heavy reliance on imported fossil fuels has led to the ongoing external vulnerabilities. Increasing investment in domestic renewables, regional power links, energy efficiency, and diverse fuel sources can help minimise exposure to global shocks in the long run.

Finally, the credibility of policies and strength of institutional governance are critically important. Investors and rating agencies consider not only economic indicators but also factors such as policy consistency, reform progress, transparency, and institutional effectiveness. Repeated policy reversals, postponed reforms, and poor governance undermine confidence.

Fitch's negative outlook should be viewed with caution, not alarm or complacency. Bangladesh maintains key strengths, including moderate debt, a resilient remittance sector, entrepreneurial vigour, and a dynamic export industry. Nevertheless, the scope for policy mistakes is decreasing. The country is entering a more challenging development stage where resilience, institutional strength, and reform credibility will be crucial.

Aid dependency is undermining coastal water security

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In the coastal regions of Bangladesh, access to safe drinking water remains one of the country's most urgent and complex development challenges. Salinity intrusion, cyclones, tidal flooding, arsenic contamination, and groundwater failure continue to affect millions of people. In response, governments and NGOs have invested heavily in rainwater harvesting systems, pond sand filters, reverse osmosis (RO) plants, and deep tube wells.

Despite decades of intervention, many projects struggle to remain functional in the long term both for technical failures and a growing culture of dependency surrounding development projects in coastal communities.

During my PhD fieldwork across coastal villages in Khulna, Satkhira, and Bagerhat, I came across an interesting pattern among the household I surveyed. Most of the respondents assumed that anyone conducting research must be connected to an NGO or aid project. Some also expected immediate benefit and asked whether I would provide rainwater harvesting tanks, financial assistance, or NGO support. Others questioned the value of sharing information if no tangible return was offered. These reactions should not simply be dismissed as opportunistic behaviour. They reveal decades of externally funded projects in ways that unintentionally weaken community ownership.

Many coastal residents have become accustomed to seeing water infrastructure as something provided, financed, repaired, and maintained entirely by outside organisations. This expectation has limited the development of local responsibility and ownership. When a system breaks, communities often wait for another NGO or government project instead of organising local repair or maintenance efforts themselves, creating sustainability problems.

For example, in Betbunia village of Paikgachha in Khulna, a reverse osmosis plant stopped functioning after a critical component was stolen, but it was not replaced. The issue was not only technical but also institutional. No local mechanism existed to protect, finance, or collectively maintain the infrastructure. At the same time, demand for rainwater harvesting tanks remains extremely high even in some areas where groundwater is naturally safe for drinking.

For instance, in Dashalia village of Koyra in Khulna, residents have access to naturally drinkable groundwater through deep tube wells. Yet, some households still demand rainwater tanks because neighbouring saline-affected villages received them free of cost through government or NGO programmes. The tank itself becomes a symbol of entitlement and development access, rather than a response to actual water vulnerability.

Ironically, many residents in saline-prone areas still prefer harvested rainwater over RO-treated water. Some believe RO water does not suit their bodies or that it tastes unnatural. Such perceptions matter and highlight a gap between technical planning and local perception because water solutions fail when communities do not trust or culturally accept them.

This shows infrastructure alone does not solve water insecurity. Social behaviour, local awareness, trust, participation, and community ownership are equally important.

For years, development interventions in coastal Bangladesh have largely followed a distribution model that goes like this: install infrastructure, deliver technology, complete the project cycle, and move on. But when communities remain passive recipients rather than active stakeholders, long-term sustainability becomes fragile.

This does not mean poor communities should be blamed for expecting assistance. Safe drinking water is a basic human right and many coastal households face severe economic hardship. Their expectations are shaped by historical experience. If aid repeatedly arrives as free distribution without local accountability mechanisms, dependency becomes a rational social response.

Therefore, future coastal water interventions must move beyond charity-driven approaches toward shared responsibility models. Communities must become co-owners of systems. Even small symbolic financial contributions, community water committees, or locally managed maintenance funds can strengthen accountability and collective ownership.

Researchers and development practitioners also need more transparent communication with communities, explaining clearly that research does not automatically bring material assistance. Most importantly, development organisations must acknowledge an uncomfortable truth: decades of aid practices have sometimes created dependency alongside assistance. The coastal water crisis is not only a technical challenge but also a social and behavioural one. Without community ownership, even expensive infrastructure can quickly become abandoned, damaged, or unsustainable.

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