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FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

BNP must reconsider its reserved-seat plan

Assigning its reserved-seat MPs to opposition seats may undermine elected representatives

The ruling party's recent decision to assign its reserved-seat women MPs to constituencies won by opposition parties is unfair and undemocratic. Reportedly, this is being done to keep the ruling party's grassroots activities active in constituencies where BNP lost. But this move is likely to overlap with the role of a constituency's elected parliamentarian and may lead to a conflict of authority and potential undermining of the elected opposition MP.

An elected MP's duty is to represent their constituency by voicing the constituents' concerns in the House. Though controversial, the existing local government laws assign MPs an advisory role in local government decisions regarding development work. In our current political culture, the ruling party MPs' advice effectively functions as executive orders for local government, particularly in rural areas, whereas the opposition lawmakers' advice is often disregarded, especially when the local government is controlled by ruling party representatives. Constituencies represented by the opposition also historically receive less development allocation. Now, if the ruling party's reserved-seat MPs start overseeing development work in opposition constituencies, would local administration even pretend to heed the elected MP's advice?

The risk becomes clear in the words of reserved-seat MP Dr Sunsila Jabrin Priyanka, who gave the example of issuing a demi-official (DO) letter for a Chhatra Dal activist. Local party members often use this document to gain an unfair advantage and win government contracts. A BNP activist is less likely to get a DO letter from a Jamaat-e-Islami or NCP MP. But if the DO letter comes from a ruling party reserved-seat MP, it would undoubtedly be preferred in the bidding process, given our political culture. As a result, grassroots activists and local power brokers may have an incentive to align themselves with the ruling party, even in areas where the BNP has traditionally been weak. In other words, competition for local influence and patronage is likely to tilt further in the ruling party's favour.

If BNP's intentions were solely to test the political performance of its reserved-seat members to prepare them for future nomination in election, the party would have also assigned them to constituencies won by BNP candidates. But the current distribution, according to a report by this daily, suggests that the ruling party's main focus has been on seats where Jamaat has a strong presence. According to a *Samakal* report, this is not the first time that reserved-seat MPs have been tasked with the responsibilities of opposition constituencies. Sheikh Hasina carried out a similar strategy in 2009, which did not end well, *Samakal* reported quoting a Jamaat leader.

While no official gazette or legal procedure supports this assignment, which is but a party strategy, it carries unofficial weight and would impact local governance. It not only prioritises partisan interests but also reflects a tendency to adopt undemocratic practices, which is concerning. We expect better from a party that fought for a functional democracy in the country for decades.

Failure to clean up our air is costing lives

Govt must adopt multi-pronged strategy to counter air pollution

It is extremely concerning how Dhaka is consistently ranked among the cities worldwide with the most polluted air. Even despite frequent rainfall during the past few days, the capital ranked as the fourth most polluted globally on Wednesday morning in terms of air quality. But this is hardly news. For years now, Dhaka's air has been deadly, with at least 2.36 lakh people reportedly dying due to air pollution in 2021 and the number of patients suffering from respiratory diseases rising consistently year on year. In 2025, Swiss air quality technology company IQAir ranked Bangladesh second after Pakistan among countries with the most polluted air in terms of annual average PM2.5 concentration (µg/m³). That the severe air pollution in Dhaka division is human-made is an established fact. Despite the measurable impact of air pollution on citizens, why is it that we see little action from the government to tackle it?

In major urban areas, the lack of greening allows dust to accumulate on the roadside and dividers, spreading to commuters' lungs. This is especially prevalent during drier weather. But some sources of pollution remain constant throughout the year. According to 2024 data from the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA), more than 25,000 old vehicles are running in the capital, exuding toxic fumes. Another largely ignored source of pollution is the inadequate and open recycling of dangerous lead-acid batteries (used by battery-run rickshaws and discarded every year or so), which releases lead into the surrounding air. Moreover, in Dhaka especially, the brick kilns operating on the city's outskirts cause massive levels of air pollution. Despite the government declaring Savar a degraded airshed in 2025 and restricting kiln activities, enforcement has been lax.

The consequences of poor urban air quality should be of urgent concern to the government, as the impact on public health is grave. Vulnerable groups such as children and the elderly, as well as people who have to spend time commuting or work in busy outdoor areas, face the highest risk.

Given the varying causes of urban air pollution, a coordinated intervention strategy is needed. Transport authorities such as the BRTA must clamp down on outdated vehicles. City corporations must focus on greening busy sections of the capital, not just affluent neighbourhoods. There should also be campaigns to raise awareness about respiratory diseases and preventive measures, such as wearing good-quality masks. Most importantly, existing guidelines such as the Air Pollution (Control) Rules, 2022, must be properly implemented and renewable energy phased in wherever possible. If not tackled in time, poor air quality will remain yet another highly preventable cause of death for many people in Bangladesh.

Will the budget deliver on the uprising's promise of equality?

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ALTAF PARVEZ

Today, the Tarique Rahman government will present its first budget plan. Meanwhile, the first budget session of the newly formed parliament began on June 7. One can say that, after about four months, parliament is finally entering discussions on the country's political economy. This was needed since right after the mass uprising in 2024. Nearly two years later, Bangladesh is entering that important chapter.

The foundation of any society and state is its economy. Since the mass uprising, there has been much discussion about various reforms. However, the two reports on economic reform have largely been ignored. Even the July charter contains no significant recommendations on this issue. This is surprising because the central demand of the mass uprising was to reduce inequality. Yet, the government that followed largely avoided the subject.

Of the five main chapters in the BNP's 39-page election manifesto, two focused on economic reconstruction. They spoke of rebuilding and restoring a "fragile economy." At the same time, "social development free from inequality" (p. 11) was promised. While making this promise, the party referred to the country's 28 percent poor population and stated that "poverty is not a personal failure; it is a structural crisis." Naturally, one would expect to see efforts to address this structural crisis now.

The manifesto also stated that wages would be adjusted in line with inflation, referred to as "price-index-based wages." Under the latest approved Bangladesh Labour (Amendment) Act, 2026, wages in 13 sectors are due for revision this year. It is therefore reasonable to expect that the new wage structures in these sectors will be based on price indexing.

Not only the BNP, but Jamaat-e-Islami also devoted several chapters of its 90-page election manifesto to economic development. It presented a vision of raising per capita income to $10,000 by 2040. It also stated that, to address what it described as one of Bangladesh's main problems—unemployment—it would create employment opportunities for seven crore working-age young people.

Both the governing party and the main opposition party placed the fundamental issues of the economy at the centre of their goals and aspirations. They made promises accordingly and presented visions for the future. These promises and visions were offered only four months ago. One hopes that the policymakers from these parties still remember them. Bangladesh will now want to see the implementation of those election commitments. Since both parties claim to be champions of the 2024 mass uprising, reducing inequality through economic development is their shared responsibility.

The reality of inequality in Bangladesh is genuinely ugly, despite constant efforts to conceal or downplay it. Many may recall that the Global Inequality Report 2026 by the Paris School of Economics found that the wealthiest 10 percent of Bangladeshis own 58 percent of the country's total wealth. Within that group, the richest one percent alone hold a quarter of all national wealth. Meanwhile, the bottom 50 percent of the population own only 4.7 percent of the national wealth. A similar pattern holds for income. Forty-one percent of national income goes to the top 10 percent of earners, while the bottom 50 percent receive only 19 percent.

During Sheikh Hasina's megaproject economy, these inequalities in wealth and income did not decrease. Behind the megaprojects, "giga corruption" was consuming the benefits of economic growth. The response to that was the anti-discrimination mass uprising of 2024. The moment students came out with anti-discrimination banners, workers and shopkeepers in places such as Ashulia, Savar, Gazipur, and Jatrabari joined them in large numbers, shedding blood and giving their lives spontaneously. The families of these martyrs, their colleagues, and the disadvantaged people in our society will examine this budget very closely. They will want answers and follow related news carefully. Then, they will evaluate whether BNP has kept its promises or not.

People will also follow budget-related debates and observe whether the opposition can genuinely secure measures to reduce unemployment and inequality. They will want to see if the highly active and vocal customers of Islami Bank are equally committed to reducing the economic deprivation faced by the millions who voted for *daripalla*.

In many countries, national budgets showcase examples of economic creativity from policymakers and politicians. In Bangladesh, where the budget usually means higher prices, ordinary people often view the event with anxiety. Our governments have recently become artful in dealing with this. For example, the current government increased fuel prices twice even before the budget. Gas prices rose once; electricity prices were not spared either. As a result, production and transport costs are rising, leading to an increase in the cost of goods.

FILE VISUAL: **REHNUMA PROSHUN**

Inflation currently stands at over nine percent. However, workers' wages are not increasing accordingly. This means that their real wages are continuously declining.

Millions of people naturally view the budget through the lens of their own economic realities. Their main concern is whether budgetary measures will affect their real wages, improve their children's access to education, widen their family's access to healthcare, and address their housing and transport struggles.

The largest share of our population works in the informal sector. Additionally, formal and informal sector workers constitute the country's largest social group. Yet, the Ministry of Labour and Employment receives one of the smallest budget allocations every year. In 2025-26, it received Tk 438 crore. In the previous fiscal year, it received Tk 346 crore. In 2023-24, the ministry was allocated Tk 347 crore. During the last 15 years, the ministry's allocation has never exceeded 0.10 percent of the total national budget. Likewise, the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare & Overseas Employment, also closely linked to labour economics, has consistently received less than 0.25 percent of the total allocation across all ministries and divisions.

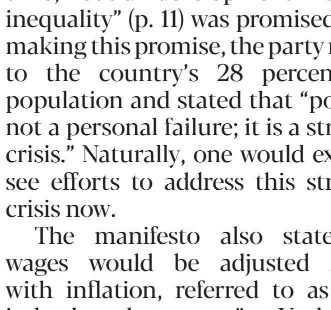
These figures demonstrate the state's lack of emphasis on improving the labour sector. In a country where the ministry responsible for the interests of over seven crore working people receives less than one percent of the total budget, how can politicians' promises to the poor be seen as anything but rhetorical?

Farmers have faced similar neglect from policymakers. One major reason behind the structural deprivation of the agricultural sector is the disappearance of farmers' organisations from national politics. Although farmers have been given special cards, it is still unclear what long-term solutions these cards will provide. Experience from one upazila in Bogura suggests that the money provided through these cards is quickly spent on purchasing small amounts of things from designated dealers.

Affidavit data show that 59 percent of elected MPs are businesspeople. In the first parliament after independence, this figure was 18 percent. In 1991, it was 38 percent. Evidently, our parliament is increasingly being dominated by the business community. The markets for agricultural inputs and crops have largely shifted to the private sector. Given the extent to which business groups in Bangladesh operate through syndicates, it is difficult to see how a ruling party dominated by business interests could ensure a fair market. Besides, 80 percent of current MPs are millionaires. Among the elected members of the governing party alone, 189 are millionaires. Some of them are even billionaires. It is difficult to predict how interested a parliament dominated by wealthy businesspeople will be in bringing about the structural reforms necessary to improve the lives of workers and farmers and to reshape production relations accordingly. According to basic economic logic, one would not expect such interest to be low. A parliament dominated by business interests is more likely to favour maintaining the existing "stability."

"Bangladesh First" is an attractive slogan. But Bangladesh is a class-divided society. It consists of people who own thousands of crores of taka, as well as workers in the industrial sector earning only Tk 180 a day, if that. The interests of these groups are not the same. In many cases, their interests may even be opposed. Therefore, the budget will reveal who the government truly chooses to prioritise—the aspiration to reduce inequality or the old arrangement?

Raising tobacco taxes is in Bangladesh's own interest



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AHMED JAMSHEED MOHAMED

The world is facing growing economic uncertainty. Rising energy prices and supply shortages are pushing up costs and straining economies. In Bangladesh, this comes at a critical moment: budget season. The country already faces major health and development challenges that continue to hold back productivity and long-term human capital development. At the same time, public debt is rising and is expected to exceed 45 percent of GDP in the coming years, narrowing fiscal space just as the need for investment in health and development becomes more urgent.

One clear opportunity to address both challenges is stronger tobacco taxation, a WHO-recommended best-practice policy that protects public health while strengthening public finances needed to invest in future growth.

Every year, tobacco use kills nearly 200,000 people in Bangladesh, around 25 percent more than a decade ago. It remains a major driver of cardiovascular disease, cancer, and chronic respiratory illness, and a major risk factor for tuberculosis, increasing both the likelihood of developing the disease and poorer treatment outcomes.

The economic burden is equally severe. In 2024 alone, tobacco use imposed an estimated burden of Tk 875 billion through healthcare expenditure, lost productivity, premature death, and environmental damage. This is more than double the tax revenue generated from tobacco consumption.

Despite these harms, tobacco use remains widespread. More than one in three adults in Bangladesh use tobacco. Particularly concerning is the early uptake of tobacco use among young people: almost 10 percent of students aged 13-17 already use tobacco.

A key driver of this is affordability. Cigarettes in Bangladesh are among the cheapest in Southeast Asia and globally. Low- and mid-priced brands dominate the market. A popular pack (of 20 sticks) costs about $1.20, and 100 packs can be purchased for less than four percent of an individual's income on average. The solution, therefore, is simple: reduce affordability by increasing retail prices and simplifying the tax structure to eliminate the artificial division between low- and medium-segment cigarettes.

Tobacco taxes are already a major source of revenue for the National Board of Revenue, while the tobacco industry continues to argue that higher taxes will fuel illicit trade and reduce government revenues. These claims have helped slow stronger reform efforts. So, the real challenge is not taxation itself, but enforcement. Stronger tax administration, supply-chain monitoring, licensing systems, and track-and-trace tools can effectively curb illicit trade while strengthening compliance, protecting revenues, and expanding the tax base.

Bangladesh is already moving in this direction, with plans to introduce QR codes on tobacco packaging. As a party to the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, the country already has a strong foundation to build on. Joining the Protocol to Eliminate Illicit Trade in Tobacco Products and implementing its global best practices would be a logical next step to strengthen enforcement and support stronger tobacco taxation reforms.

Importantly, stronger tobacco taxation should be accompanied by equally strong regulation of emerging nicotine and tobacco products, including e-cigarettes and nicotine pouches. For a country with a very young population, recent policy changes, including lighter regulation and regulatory carve-outs for these products, risk undermining progress in tobacco control while creating new opportunities for industry manipulation and the targeting of young people.

The stakes are particularly high because nicotine addiction increasingly begins early. Industry marketing strategies such as flavoured products, attractive packaging, and digital promotion are specifically designed to appeal to adolescents and young adults. Evidence shows that young people who use e-cigarettes are more likely to start smoking conventional cigarettes later, threatening to reverse decades of public health progress.

For both public health and public finances, and for both present and future generations, Bangladesh now faces a critical moment for action. Stronger tobacco taxation, combined with robust regulation and enforcement, offers one of the clearest opportunities to reduce preventable deaths, lower long-term healthcare costs, and generate additional domestic resources for development priorities. Bangladesh cannot afford inaction in this regard.

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