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FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Ensure ACC remains nonpartisan

A flawed search committee risks undermining it

The formation of a search committee to appoint a new chairman and commissioners of the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), after leaving this vital institution effectively crippled for almost four months, raises critical questions about the government's intentions. It remains to be seen whether the appointment of the ACC chairman and commissioners is carried out transparently and free from partisan influence. This is because the ACC, since its inception, has repeatedly been embroiled in controversy over allegations of partisan and selective actions favouring the ruling party.

Since the newly elected BNP government has allowed the Anti-Corruption Commission (Amendment) Ordinance, 2025 to lapse, the legal framework governing the commission remains the Anti-Corruption Commission Act, 2004, which was enacted by the BNP two decades ago. Yet, in constituting the search committee, the government appears to have stretched the provisions of a law it itself enacted while in power.

According to Section 7(e) of the 2004 act, the five-member selection committee shall comprise, in addition to one judge each from the Appellate Division and the High Court Division, the comptroller and auditor general, the chairman of the Public Service Commission, and "the last retired Cabinet Secretary amongst the retired Cabinet Secretaries." The law further stipulates that if such a retired cabinet secretary is unavailable or unwilling to serve on the committee, "the next before retired Cabinet Secretary of the last retired Cabinet Secretary" shall be selected. The serving cabinet secretary may only be nominated if no retired cabinet secretary is available or willing to hold membership of the selection committee. Since it is hard to believe that no previous cabinet secretary was available for the position, the presence of a serving cabinet secretary on the committee inevitably raises concerns about whether the appointment process can remain free from government influence. A flawed selection process risks undermining both ACC's credibility and public confidence in its ability to act independently and impartially.

With the government allowing the 2025 ordinance to lapse, scepticism has grown regarding the BNP's commitment to introducing stronger legislation to ensure the ACC's independence. Although the government has yet to publish a draft of any new law, ACC officials have already put forward a draft proposal. Rather than alleviating concerns, the ACC's draft appears to deepen them. It proposes empowering the commission's secretary—a civil servant serving on deputation—to make decisions in the event that all commissioner positions become vacant. The government's silence on this proposal, instead of publicly distancing itself from it, is particularly concerning.

The government must prioritise both the reconstitution of ACC and enactment of a new law that guarantees its genuine independence. Reports of thousands of accumulated complaints and pending investigations should serve as a warning that any further delay in reforming and reconstituting the commission will only weaken and overburden this critical institution and also undermine the BNP's stated commitment to combating corruption in governance. We, therefore, call on the government to ensure that the selection committee is free from government influence by rectifying the current composition and strictly adhering to both the letter and spirit of the law.

Allocation for MPs unfair to local govt

It undermines local govt authority over rural infrastructure projects

Our political parties never miss an opportunity to espouse the idea of decentralisation and consequent empowerment of local government. But when in power, their policy-level decisions often run contrary to this very idea. For instance, the BNP's 31-point plan for structural reform stated that "local governments will operate independently, free from interference by the local administration, and any public representative or political entity." Yet, the government has decided to reserve funds that the Local Government Engineering Department (LGED) will use to execute development projects recommended by MPs in their respective constituencies.

According to a report by *Prothom Alo*, Tk 50 crore per constituency has been allocated for this purpose for 279 MPs, leaving out those whose constituencies fall entirely within city corporation jurisdiction and also those who hold reserve seats. Over the next five years, these 279 MPs can submit lists of roads, bridges or other rural infrastructure that need to be built or repaired in their constituencies on a priority basis, and the LGED will use the allocated fund to execute the projects.

The intention behind such an allocation is not ill-motivated, nor is the practice new. In fact, per the report, this practice first started in 2005-06 under Khaleda Zia's leadership. Later, the Awami League government also continued the practice, deciding to allocate Tk 25 crore per constituency for a similar purpose in FY2024-25, but the proposal never materialised due to AL's fall on August 5, 2024.

It might be argued that through this allocation, MPs can strengthen their rapport with their constituencies. But this allowance also curbs the authority of local government, which is unfair. The government has already subtly eroded the local government's power by granting MPs their own rooms in upazila parishad offices. This newest allocation, which MPs can use to recommend development projects for their constituencies, adds yet another nail to the decentralisation coffin. As mentioned in a previous column, this kind of privilege often gets abused by MPs, whose duties, according to our constitution, involve enacting laws. Deciding local development projects, per the constitution, remains the prerogative of the local government.

Besides, a 2020 study by Transparency International Bangladesh on similar projects found rampant corruption and nepotism allegations against MPs. We don't want to see a repetition of such practices. The local government must not be undermined regarding rural infrastructure development. While MPs can and should voice their constituents' problems in parliament, the decision to choose and prioritise projects should rest with the respective local government authority.

A bigger ADP, but can the govt make it work?

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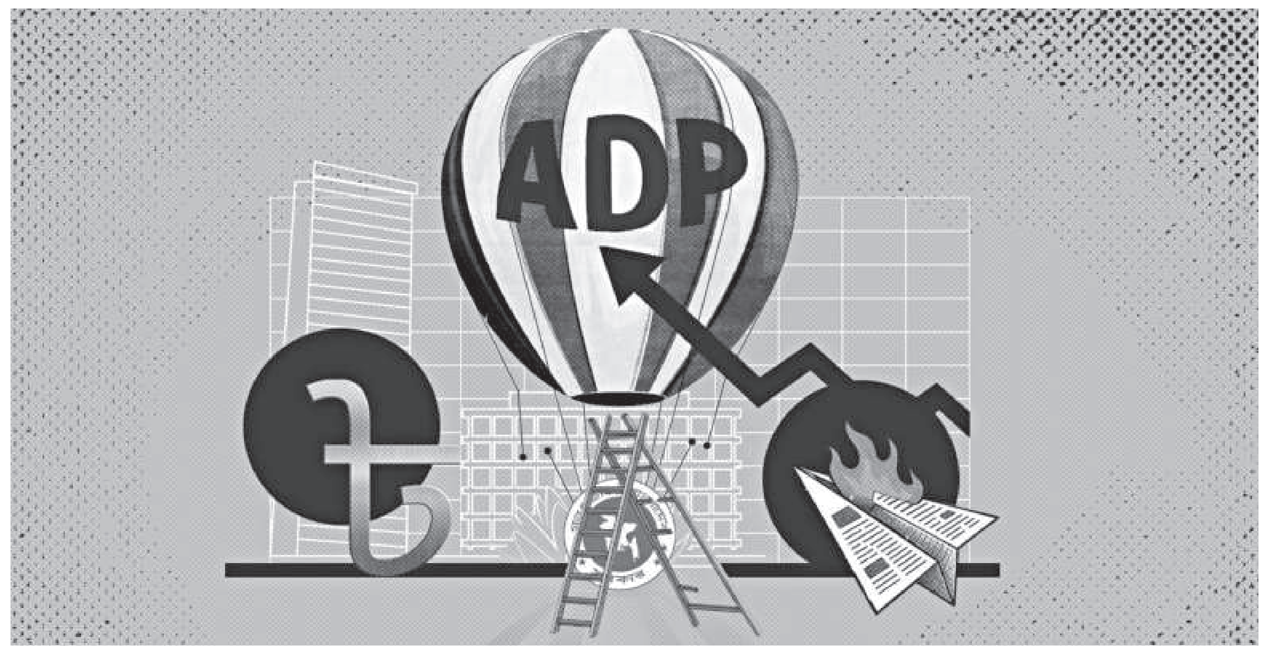
The proposed national budget for FY2026-27 is more than an outline of the government's spending plans for the upcoming fiscal year. As the first budget proposed by the administration that took office after one and a half years of interim regime, it signals how the new government intends to navigate the critical demand of economic recovery, fiscal discipline, and long-term development. It comes at a time when the economy continues to grapple with persistent inflationary pressures, fiscal constraints, and growing concerns over the country's implementation capacity and development effectiveness. As the proposed budget signals a return to ambitious development spending, the real question is whether the institutions that are responsible for selecting, implementing and financing the country's development agenda are prepared for the challenge.



VISUAL: **ANWAR SOHEL**

The Tk 9.38 lakh crore budget is the largest in the country's history, 19 percent higher than the revised budget of the outgoing year. Within this package, Tk 3 lakh crore has been allocated for the Annual Development Programme (ADP), which is also the largest allocation ever. This is a significant shift from the recent trends of restrained development spending. After remaining around Tk 2.6 lakh crore in FY2023-24 and FY2024-25, the ADP allocation was reduced to Tk 2.38 lakh crore in FY2025-26 to aid fiscal consolidation efforts. The 30 percent increase proposed for ADP allocation signals a return to large-scale public investment after a period of fiscal restraint.

The sectoral composition of ADP reveals both continuity and change in Bangladesh's development priorities. Transport and communication remains the largest recipient with Tk 50,093 crore, accounting for 16.7 percent of the allocation, reflecting the government's continued emphasis on infrastructure development. Education and health together is getting Tk 83,121 crore, nearly 28 percent of the total ADP, signalling a notable shift towards human capital development. The Local Government Division has been allocated Tk 33,735 crore, highest among all ministries and divisions, underscoring the importance of local service delivery and rural development.

While these priorities deserve recognition, the effectiveness of the proposed allocations must be assessed against the country's broader development challenges. Persistent weaknesses in private investment, infrastructure quality, regulatory efficiency, and access to finance, continue to constrain economic growth and employment generation. Whether the proposed ADP can meaningfully address these structural bottlenecks will be a more important test of success.

However, the most debated feature of the proposed ADP may not be its size or sectoral priorities, but its structure. Nearly Tk 97,300 crore, about one-third of the allocation, has been earmarked as block allocation for projects yet to receive final approval. Though some flexibility may be necessary, the scale of block allocation provision is unprecedented and raises critical questions regarding development effectiveness, transparency, and accountability. Effectiveness of public investment significantly depends on transparent project appraisal and prioritisation even before resources are committed. When such a significant share of development spending remains outside the conventional approval framework, the link between planning and allocation becomes vague. This is not just a governance concern. The country's development experience has long shown that project selection can be influenced by political and administrative considerations, particularly when oversight and transparency are weak. The risk, therefore, is not merely whether resources are spent, but whether project selection is guided by demonstrable development impact or by political, administrative and other non-economic factors.

The question, thus, is whether the proposed ADP targets can be implemented effectively. Recent experiences have shown a noticeable deterioration in ADP implementation, the rate declining from 92.7 percent in FY2021-22, to 85.2 percent in FY2022-23, to around 80.6 percent in FY2023-24 and only 68 percent in FY2024-25, the lowest rate recorded in 49 years. In the first 10 months of FY2025-26, ADP implementation stood at only 41 percent, the lowest in the last five years, reflecting continued weaknesses in the execution of development projects. The obstacles are familiar—procurement delays, land acquisition bottlenecks, cumbersome approval procedures, weak interagency coordination, and capacity constraints—resulting in repeated revisions and time and cost overruns. Without removing these obstacles, the decision to raise ADP allocation by 30 percent raises a legitimate question: what has fundamentally changed within the state's implementation machinery to justify such a massive expansion? If the existing institutional constraints remain largely unchanged, larger allocations are bound to widen the gap between development ambition and implementation reality.

A further concern relates to financing credibility. The proposed budget sets the revenue collection target at Tk 6.95 lakh crore against the total expenditure of Tk 9.38 lakh crore, resulting in a fiscal deficit of Tk 2.43 lakh crore, one of the largest gaps in the country's budget history.

Revenue mobilisation remains a persistent weakness, though. The National Board of Revenue (NBR) reportedly fell more than Tk 1.04 lakh crore short of its target by April of FY2025-26, and revenue collection is identified as one of the principal risks to proper budget implementation. If the NBR once again fails to reach its target in the upcoming fiscal year, development expenditure may become the primary adjustment mechanism, as evidenced by the repeated downward revisions of ADP in recent years, where in FY2024-25, the government reduced the ADP by Tk 49,000 crore, and FY2025-26 witnessed a further cut of around Tk 30,000 crore. In this scenario, the plausibility of increasing ADP allocation depends on the government's ability to mobilise the resources required to finance it.

Returning to a bigger ADP undoubtedly signals renewed development ambition, but ambition alone cannot deliver results. The success of the proposed ADP depends on whether projects are selected transparently, implemented effectively, and financed credibly. Until then, this development ambition will continue to draw scepticism.

Our digital future can't be built without addressing women's fear

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Bangladesh dreams in digital. From mobile banking to e-governance, the country has spent a decade building the foundation of a modern, connected nation. The aspiration is genuine. But beneath this gleaming vision lies a truth that demands urgent attention: for millions of women, the digital world has become another unsafe street.

Violence against women now travels through phone screens, invades inboxes, and mutilates reputations through fake profiles and manipulated images. The question Bangladesh must confront now is not whether it is connected, but whether that connection is safe—and for whom.

The scale of the crisis is global, and the data is unambiguous. A landmark April 2026 study by UN Women on the impacts of online violence, conducted across 119 countries, found that more than 27 percent of women had received unsolicited sexual advances or unwanted intimate images, and at least 12 percent had their personal images shared without their consent. Perhaps most chilling is what the abuse accomplishes: more than 40 percent of women said they had self-censored on social media to avoid abuse, while 19 percent had pulled back from speaking out in a professional context. Researchers found that the attacks were often deliberate and coordinated, designed not simply to hurt but to expel women from public life entirely.

The psychological toll is not metaphorical. One in four women surveyed reported anxiety or depression, and 13 percent had been diagnosed with PTSD. These are clinical diagnoses stemming from digital interactions—evidence that the old dismissal of online harm as "not real violence" is not only wrong but dangerous. Artificial intelligence has made the crisis dramatically worse. Deepfake tools, which can superimpose a person's face onto fabricated sexual imagery, have become faster, cheaper, and nearly effortless to deploy. The UN Women study's lead author, Professor Julie Posetti, described the phenomenon as "AI-assisted virtual rape," now available at perpetrators' fingertips, accelerating harm to women in public life and fuelling what she called the reversal of women's hard-won rights in a climate of rising authoritarianism and networked misogyny.

The harm extends even further into immersive virtual environments. Legal scholars Clare McGlynn and Carlotta Rigotti, writing in the *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies*, have proposed the concept of "meta-rape" to describe sexual violence in metaverse spaces. Women users increasingly report non-consensual touching, image-based sexual abuses, and novel forms of gendered harm—experiences often trivialised and inadequately addressed by current laws. In a 2024 case that drew global headlines, a teenage girl's avatar was sexually attacked by strangers in a virtual space, leaving her with the same psychological and emotional trauma as someone who has been physically sexually assaulted. The boundary between the virtual and the real is dissolving, and women are absorbing the consequences.

Governments elsewhere are beginning to respond urgently. In May 2026, London's Mayor Sadiq Khan, calling tech-enabled violence a global emergency, announced a six million pound fund to support victims. Refuge, a charity that works with victims of domestic abuse in the UK, reported a 207 percent increase in tech abuse referrals between 2018 and 2024, with a further 62 percent increase between 2024 and 2025 alone. In England, more than 123,000 violent offences against women and girls with a technology-enabled element were recorded in a single year.

Bangladesh is not insulated from this reality. During the July movement, women who participated visibly in protests became targets of coordinated cyber campaigns—fake screenshots, morphed images, and sexual rumours deployed as weapons to push them back from the public space. The pattern aligns with what researchers document worldwide: technology is being consciously weaponised to silence women who dare to be visible. What makes Bangladesh's position particularly urgent is the gap between its digital ambitions and its protective infrastructure. Legal frameworks addressing cybercrime exist, but institutional responses have been largely ineffective. According to a 2022-23 study by ActionAid, nearly 65 percent of women who filed complaints about online harassment saw no action taken. Many survivors also described being made to feel responsible for what happened to them.

The solution cannot rely on law alone and must also include cultural reforms. Platform design must be reformed. Media ethics must be rebuilt so that women's trauma is no longer packaged as entertainment. Digital literacy curricula must include discussions of consent, privacy, and the real harm of virtual abuse. Ultimately, a digital Bangladesh should inspire freedom, not fear. A country cannot celebrate technological progress while half its population navigates the internet like a minefield. Until women can exist online without the threat of humiliation, harassment, or violence, the promise of a digital future remains precisely that: a promise not yet kept.

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