The Daily Star
FOUNDER EDITOR: **LATE S. M. ALI**

Reset priorities to help the vulnerable

WB report on poverty risk should push govt to act now

The World Bank's recent warning that 6.2 crore people in Bangladesh are just one shock away from poverty should wake our policymakers up. The multilateral lender's latest Bangladesh Development Update paints a grim economic picture for the current fiscal year, marked by rising poverty and inequality, weak economic growth, and high inflation. According to the report, national poverty is expected to rise to 22.5 percent in 2026 from 21.4 percent in 2025, and 21 lakh people are estimated to fall into poverty. Meanwhile, the Gini coefficient that measures inequality is estimated to rise to 34.9 from 34. In other words, not only will more people become poor, but the gap between the rich and poor will also increase.

What's more concerning is that the design of the national programmes intended to help the poor is contributing to the rising inequality. The World Bank report highlights inadequate coverage, low support relative to living costs, disjointed eligibility rules, overlapping beneficiary lists, and convoluted delivery in our patchwork of social safety net programmes.

The report should push the government to focus on the real vulnerable and marginal groups, who do not enjoy the security of public sector jobs. It should also delay costly deals, fix the social safety net programmes, and pursue reforms to boost domestic investment and create jobs.

While the Family Card initiative aims to bring the numerous programmes under one umbrella, the World Bank warns it will do little to reduce poverty if the administrative inefficiencies persist. Similarly, design failure in both fertiliser and energy subsidies, which benefits the wealthy more than the poor, must also be addressed.

While these structural issues have existed for years, the current and last fiscal years have been particularly difficult for middle- and low-income groups because of the fertiliser and energy crises, caused mostly by external shocks. To ease the fiscal strain, the government raised electricity, fuel and LPG prices—some more than once. But the hikes cannot be attributed entirely to the shocks; syndicates and artificial shortages within the country also played a role, while the government failed to control the market. It has also failed to boost investor confidence, while sluggish private sector growth, aggravated by the energy crisis, has limited job creation. In fact, production slowdowns and cuts sometimes resulted in lay-offs. The spillover effects may already be visible in the deteriorating law and order situation.

Under such circumstances, the government's decision to roll out ambitious revenue targets and overstretch the budget to accommodate large non-development expenditures was not prudent. Even if it somehow failed to see the warning signs on the economic horizon after taking office in February, the World Bank's latest report should at least make it tighten their purse strings now. More importantly, the report should push the government to focus on the real vulnerable and marginal groups, who do not enjoy the security of public sector jobs. It should also delay costly deals, fix the social safety net programmes, and pursue reforms to boost domestic investment and create jobs. It should not wait until the next disaster hits us and create the 6.2 crore newly poor.

Alarming rise in cancer cases, deaths

Govt must urgently expand treatment capacity

The growing number of cancer patients and deaths in the country is very concerning. According to estimates by the International Agency for Research on Cancer, the number of new cases increased by about 12 percent between 2022 and 2024, from 167,256 to 187,263. The number of cancer deaths rose even higher by about 19 percent, from 116,598 to 138,906. While these figures are estimates, they are nonetheless alarming. The severe shortage of treatment facilities and high cost of care are putting an enormous strain on our already inadequate cancer-care system.

At the National Institute of Cancer Research and Hospital (NICRH), the country's only public specialised cancer hospital, more than 100 people routinely crowd outside the radiotherapy rooms, while up to 8,000 patients are currently waiting for treatment. This reflects the severe gap between the number of radiotherapy machines needed and those available. According to WHO recommendations, the country needs at least 170 radiotherapy machines, but there are only 30, including 23 under the health ministry. Of these, only seven are currently functional. There is also a severe shortage of radiation oncologists, radiotherapy technologists, medical physicists, and oncology nurses.

In such a situation, the cost of cancer treatment is placing an unbearable burden on many families. Costs for treatment can force families into selling land, exhausting savings, and taking on debt, with travel and living costs adding to the burden. For instance, a mason from Kishoreganj had to sell his only piece of land for Tk 5 lakh to pay for his treatment. Another patient from Patuakhali spent about Tk 4 lakh on treatment before learning that his cancer had already spread to several parts of his body.

The government's plan to install 17 new radiotherapy machines at public hospitals by June next year is, therefore, welcome. Authorities must ensure that the new machines are installed where they are most needed. The severe workforce crisis must be addressed. There is also an urgent need to strengthen cancer screening and early diagnosis, as delays in diagnosis and referrals can cost precious time. Most importantly, we need a comprehensive national cancer control strategy based on reliable data, prevention, early detection, equitable access to treatment, and palliative care. The government must also establish a population-based cancer registry without further delay. We have been calling for such measures for years. With cancer cases and deaths rising and thousands of patients waiting for treatment, there is no more time left to lose.

Ruling party-opposition relations key to institutionalising democracy

Are we open to learning from our past mistakes?

THE THIRD VIEW



Mahfuz Anam is the editor and publisher of The Daily Star.

MAHFUZ ANAM

The result of the election held in February 1991 surprised both BNP—for winning—and Awami League—for losing—because the latter thought they were all set to come to power. The joke was that AL leaders were ironing their clothes for the oath-taking ceremony.

Bangladesh started with the parliamentary system in 1972, which was changed to a presidential one as part of the BAKSAL model in 1975, and reverted to the former in September 1991, thanks to Khaleda Zia, the first prime minister in the post-autocracy period. She accepted what was the demand of AL and other opposition parties, even though BNP's party manifesto still adhered to the presidential system.

This, in my view, was a singular opportunity to begin a collaborative working relationship between the ruling party and the opposition. It should have come naturally because the ruling party accepted the opposition's view and changed the form of government. Khaleda Zia, as the leader of the House, could have opted to be president following her illustrious husband—the father of the current prime minister—but chose a new direction. This should have set us on a constructive journey with collaboration between the ruling party and the opposition at its heart.

Unfortunately, it did not. Like in some other South Asian countries, the opposition here has never received its due recognition, space and rights. We never tried to understand why the opposition is called "the government in waiting" or expected to form what is called a "shadow cabinet" in the Westminster system. All this means that in the parliamentary system, the ruling party and the opposition together form the overall governance process, in which the opposition plays a crucial part through a structured, principled and accountable functioning of parliament.

In 1991, we got off to a wrong (better still, opposite) start as Sheikh Hasina called the election an instance of "shukkho karchupi" (subtle rigging). Since the election was not seen as a "people's verdict", the opposition's moral obligation to accept it was ignored. AL as the opposition did not see BNP's acceptance of the parliamentary system as a "compromise" or "a gesture of cooperation" but as a defeat. Thus, instead of a constructive attitude from the opposition, we saw a far more aggressive and obstructionist attitude, leading to an approach of "disabling the government" and making it look not only unsuccessful but also incompetent and undeserving to rule, thus implying that forcing it to relinquish power was justified.

In those early days of The Daily Star, I used to literally go everywhere—press conferences, seminars, discussions and parliamentary sessions (for my column "From the Gallery"). On one such occasion, probably in '92 or '93, I ventured into the room of the leader of the opposition, Sheikh Hasina, during a recess. As we talked about the issues at hand, the bell rang, signalling the resumption of the session. Suddenly, she shouted, "Walk out, walk out," asking some in the room to tell the others. A little later, two MPs, Matia Chowdhury and Tofail Ahmed, walked in and asked why, since nothing had happened to justify such an action. After a little while, she retorted, "Ja khushi koren" ("Do as you feel"), clearly indicating that she was not happy.

This was my first direct exposure to how trivial the opposition leader's attitude was towards the functioning of the "people's house". Later, we saw the start of the demand for a caretaker government to conduct the next election due in 1996, which was years away. This demand led to frequent walkouts, later to boycotts, and finally to resignations, totally making parliament one-sided and, as such, dysfunctional. While this was the scene within, outside the House there were street violence, relentless clashes with police, and chaos on the roads. There were frequent calls for hartals that started with one, two or three days and then went so far as the whole week. To ordinary citizens, this brought in an attitude of disrespect for parliament. Because of such long breaks, we unknowingly became casual about tasks at hand, work schedules and timelines—all of which had an impact on our work ethic, something from which we have yet to recover.

For any success in strengthening our democratic institution-building, we have to learn from our past failures and start with making parliament truly functional. The July uprising has given us a clean slate; we have to make the most of this opportunity to restart our democratic journey.

Ironically, however destructive the opposition's practices were, they won the subsequent elections—AL in 1996, BNP in 2001, and AL again in 2008. Under the caretaker government system, the pattern appeared to be that the ruling party always loses. Thus, a negative message became entrenched in the opposition's mind that regardless of how destructive their politics was, it worked to dislodge the sitting government. The opposition had no responsibility to work for stability and societal peace.



VISUAL: **BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY**

AL predicted that, if that pattern continued, it would lose the next election, so after assuming power in 2009, it abolished the caretaker government system in 2011. It legalised elections under the ruling party, which led to what we saw in 2014, 2018 and 2024—all totally manipulated elections.

The process of election manipulation triggered the politicisation of almost all our institutions—the police, bureaucracy, intelligence agencies, lower judiciary, public universities, etc. There was also tremendous pressure on the private sector to fall in line.

Coming to the present, for any success in strengthening our democratic institution-building, we have to learn from our past failures and start with making parliament truly functional. The July uprising has given us a clean slate; we have to make the most of this opportunity to restart our democratic journey.

However, our start in the new parliament has not been the best, to put it mildly. The divide between BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami has begun with the former's refusal to take a separate oath to form a constitutional reform council as stipulated by the referendum held on February 12. The order by the interim government envisaged lawmakers serving simultaneously as MPs and members of the reform council.

The second issue was when BNP allowed 16 important ordinances out of 133 to lapse without taking the opposition's views into consideration, especially when these ordinances dealt with crucial issues like the independence of judiciary, enforced disappearances, strengthening the Anti-Corruption Commission and National Human Rights Commission, etc.

The gap between the ruling party and the opposition further widened during the third parliamentary session, which passed six bills that the opposition party objected to, especially criticising those dealing with the very issues covered by the ordinances allowed to lapse: enforced disappearances, the NHRC, etc.

Then came the shocker: out of the chairmanships of 50 parliamentary standing committees, only one was given to the opposition—the Public Accounts Committee—whereas the demand was for 26 percent of the posts.

BNP's initiative to form a 17-member parliamentary committee on constitutional amendments, proposing five seats for the opposition, was not accepted by the latter, as it claimed that this was a deviation from the July charter. So far, the committee has invited all parties that signed the July charter to present their views, but the opposition-led alliance has abstained.

It is clear that the ruling BNP could have been more circumspect in handling some of the issues raised by the opposition. I think there are reasonable grounds to see the opposition's logic, and some of the early signs have been concerning. It is also natural that differences will exist between the two sides. It is also entirely justified that critical anti-government views will be expressed by the opposition.

But, as we said before, the opposition's threats to take to the streets are highly premature. The government's inadequacies should be pointed out, its partisan appointments revealed, and any instance of corruption exposed. But any threats to destabilise the government or create an atmosphere of uncertainty—and any fear in the public mind that we are going to face political uncertainty even after a globally accepted election—is neither justified nor acceptable.

We request the ruling party to be more receptive to the opposition's demands, and the opposition to be more restrained and mature in its actions and declarations, if we really want Bangladesh to move forward. This is also essential for our parliamentary democracy to serve its intended purpose.

Cyber policing needs expertise, safeguards



Md. Nazmul Hossain Sefat is a researcher and former lecturer of law.

NAZMUL HOSSAIN SEFAT

The government's recent initiative—an independent Cyber Police Unit with more than 4000 officers—is undoubtedly a notable institutional development. Bringing cybercrime functions under a single structure could help address a problem that has become hard to overlook.

However, the key question is not how many officers have been appointed to tackle cybercrimes, but whether those officers will have specialised knowledge, logistical support, legal safeguards, and institutional independence.

Fortunately, the proposed structure allows specialists to be appointed on a contract basis and provides for advanced training. But with the rapid growth of Artificial Intelligence, cybercrime is no longer simply about hacking. Offenders can now use AI tools to craft manipulative phishing texts, images, and audio, and automate parts of malicious activity. Interpol has warned that deepfake impersonation and AI-enhanced fraud are becoming significant challenges for law enforcement.

This creates a difficult legal problem. Suppose a victim receives a threatening video, or an audio recording sounds like an official authorising a financial transaction, or a photograph shows an accused person at a particular location.

In the past, the question might have been whether the digital file was genuine. In the age of generative AI, investigators must also ask whether something was artificially created. Proving the authenticity of digital evidence in court is just as crucial as collecting it at the police station. While Bangladesh's Evidence (Amendment) Act, 2022 legally recognises electronic records, relying on digital proof raises complex challenges around manipulation, integrity, and chain of custody. Merely being able to extract digital files does not mean an investigator is equipped to defend their reliability before a judge.

Thus, the new unit needs a strong forensic architecture. The whole process from seizure to presentation of the digital evidence before the court should be handled with caution. Investigators should have sufficient knowledge about metadata, logs, device imaging, cloud storage, and the limitations of AI detection tools.

While AI tools can help detect manipulated data, they can also make manipulated materials harder to differentiate from original evidence. Interpol has pointed out that AI tools could create false evidence or make original evidence appear fake.

Effective cyber policing requires a careful balance—greater enforcement power must be matched with stronger legal safeguards. While the Cyber Security Act, 2026 explicitly incorporates AI tools and AI-generated data into its definition of cyberspace, it also grants police specific authority to address hacking, unauthorised access, and threats to digital evidence.

These powers may be necessary for effective investigation. But cyber investigations can also expose enormous amounts of private information, including messages, photographs, financial records, location data, and personal communications. Therefore, the new unit should operate under clear rules concerning search, seizure, data retention, access to personal information and the handling of irrelevant private material.

Cyber policing can easily affect journalists, researchers, whistleblowers and ordinary citizens whose online activities may be misunderstood or taken out of context. The government's current effort to further modernise cyber-security legislation should therefore prioritise precise definitions, judicial oversight and meaningful procedural safeguards. Moreover, our country needs a multidisciplinary institution that can bring together investigators, prosecutors, digital forensic experts, computer scientists, financial investigators, legal professionals and cyber security specialists.

Technological advancement can boost functions, while legal provisions can give authority, but nothing will change without strong accountability, real expertise, and full respect for the process.

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