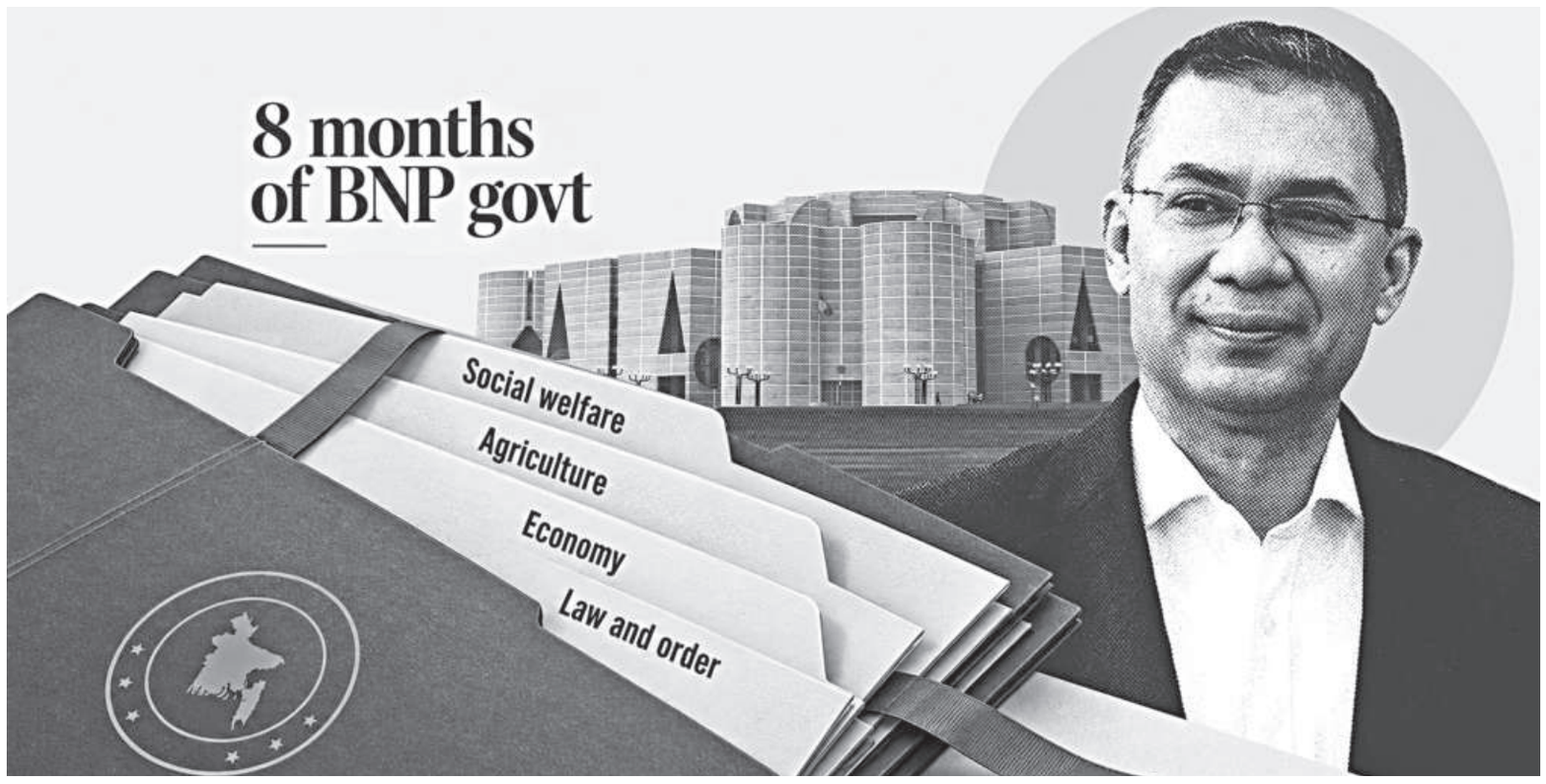
BNP's first eight months: Promise, power, and the test of change



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Eight months after BNP returned to power, the general mood in Bangladesh seems to be shifting away from euphoria. The relief of securing an elected government's return following the fall of the Awami League government is giving way to a tougher question: is the country being run differently, or are different people simply running it?

This question has much to do with the expectations created by the 2024 uprising. People did not endure so much suffering just to see new faces in familiar seats of power. They wanted institutions that can stand up to politicians, police that are accountable to the law rather than party offices, and a government that listens even when it is being criticised.

Law and order are an even more immediate test. Allegations of extortion, land grabbing, intimidation, and violence involving people connected to the ruling party have not disappeared. The BNP has disciplined some members, and that is better than ignoring the problem. But expelling someone from a party does not settle a criminal complaint. If the law genuinely applies to everyone, investigations and prosecutions must follow the evidence, regardless of political connections.

There is some good news. The elected government has brought back a measure of stability after years of disruption. Parliament is back in session, the executive authority has a democratic mandate, and the country has regained something it badly needed: a sense of political direction. None of that should be dismissed.

Prime Minister Tarique Rahman himself has been different in certain ways. His relatively modest public manner, resistance to unnecessary privileges, and willingness to bring new faces into government are welcome. In a political culture that often confuses authority with grandeur, even small changes in tone can matter.

But tone is not the same as change. A prime minister can reject excessive protocol while an ordinary citizen still needs political contact to get work done at a government office. The real test is what happens away from the cameras, where people encounter the state in everyday life.

Some of the government's social initiatives deserve fair hearing. The Family Card and Farmer Card programmes could genuinely relieve households under pressure. Canal restoration and agricultural support are also practical priorities in a country where political debate too often obscures rural livelihoods. What matters now is who benefits. Are people selected because they need help, or because they know someone? Are these programmes financially sustainable and properly monitored? If assistance becomes another form of political favour, a promising initiative will have been wasted.

The economy gives the government little room for comfort. It inherited weak banks, stubborn inflation, sluggish investment, and tight public finances. Nobody should expect those problems to disappear in eight months. Still, the scale of the challenge demands more urgency than the public has seen so far. September inflation reached 8.34 percent. The World Bank projects growth of only 3.4 percent for FY2026 and FY2027, alongside worrying signs of rising poverty, weak employment, and banking sector instability.

These figures may sound abstract, but their consequences are painfully familiar: families cutting back on groceries, graduates searching endlessly for decent jobs, and small business owners postponing expansion because the future looks uncertain. People need to see and experience the fruits of political stability in everyday life. They need a believable plan to restore confidence, repair the banking system, secure energy supplies, and create jobs. More importantly, they need evidence that the plan is working.

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The attacks on journalists as reported in recent months are equally troubling. A party that benefited from demands for democratic freedom should understand why a critical press matters as well as the importance of taking measures to ensure that it not only survives but also flourishes. Democracy means allowing people to question those in power, even when their questions are uncomfortable.

Then there is the question of political reform. Let us set aside the persistent disputes over the July Charter and referendum for a moment. What about BNP's own 31-point reform agenda and the promises made in its election manifesto? The party pledged to limit the concentration of power, strengthen democratic institutions, ensure judicial independence, and make the government more accountable. These were not demands imposed by its opponents; they were commitments BNP itself made to the people. Now that it holds power, the question is simple: how much of its own reform agenda is it genuinely prepared to implement? Surely, the public has every right to expect the party to honour its own promises.

Parliament must be able to scrutinise the executive, courts must remain independent, and elections, including local government polls, must be free, credible and, of course, violence-free. These should be common democratic commitments, not bargaining chips in a contest between political parties or other prevailing forces.

On foreign policy, it has been a mixed bag so far. Closer engagement with China, Japan, and other international partners makes sense, but the India question seems to remain as unresolved as during the interim government's tenure. Diplomacy, however, should ultimately be judged by the investment, trade opportunities and jobs it brings home, not the number of meetings held or agreements announced. So where does that leave the government?

The PM has shown an understanding of the public mood. There is greater stability, a less extravagant leadership style, and some useful policy initiatives. Yet the old problems—political influence, public insecurity, economic anxiety, and institutional weakness—remain close to the surface.

Eight months is too soon for a final verdict. But it is long enough to see what a government tolerates, what it challenges and what it is genuinely prepared to change. Bangladesh has had powerful prime ministers before. What it has lacked are institutions strong enough to restrain them. That is the lesson its political history keeps teaching, often at a heavy price.

PM Tarique Rahman's greatest achievement would not be to become another powerful prime minister. It would be to build a system where no prime minister, including himself, could exercise power without effective oversight and accountability. That would be a legacy worth remembering, and a change Bangladesh could finally believe in.

Give SSC students who failed a second chance, but fix the learning gaps too



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Last week, Education Minister ANM Ehsanul Hoque Milon announced that SSC examinees who failed two subjects could retake those exams within 15 days of the results. Such a decision, if implemented, would be a positive step for students, because those who fail one or two subjects should not have to wait an entire year to try again, after passing every other paper. But a retake only addresses the immediate individual problem of failure; it does not answer why so many students failed in the first place. The latter is what the government must look into, and it is a harder task than allowing students to retake exams sooner.

Before the minister's announcement, the education boards had informed the ministry that they could hold supplementary examinations within three months of the results, beginning with this year's HSC and equivalent candidates. For SSC students, this could begin next year. The minister has now proposed a much shorter time frame. These are encouraging signs, but for either proposal to become policy, the ministry must clarify which students qualify, when the proposed system will begin, and how it will affect admissions.

Before these announcements, I had the opportunity to hear what the existing system of having to wait a year to retake exams meant for unsuccessful candidates. They shared their experience at a conference, organised by the Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE) and Plan International Bangladesh. A student from Munshiganj, who passed her other subjects but failed chemistry, blamed curriculum changes and delayed textbooks for disrupting her preparation. She added that she had completely broken down when the results came out. So distressed was she that she did not seek re-scrutiny of her answer script. Meanwhile, a mother shared how her daughter's ambition to study nursing was almost crushed when she failed to obtain pass marks in chemistry.

Students, teachers, and guardians described different difficulties but called for the same change: retakes within three months instead of a year's wait. The demand is reasonable. Supplementary examinations need not weaken academic standards; students would still have to earn passing marks. An early opportunity to retake the exams would help students avoid a prolonged interruption to their studies, additional costs, and uncertainty over admissions. For poorer households, losing a year can threaten a child's prospects of continuing his/her education altogether.

This year, 6,90,608 candidates or 37.75 percent of all candidates, were unsuccessful in SSC and equivalent examinations. However, after answer-script re-scrutiny, 4,585 of the 6.9 lakh candidates were declared successful. The proposed retakes would cover only those who failed up to two subjects, not all unsuccessful candidates. But the high failure rate demands an examination of what these students learnt during their years at school, whether they received adequate teaching, and what support was available to those struggling academically.

Poverty, illness, irregular attendance, and curriculum changes can affect examination performance. Schools and education authorities nevertheless have questions to answer. Did students have qualified subject teachers? Were lessons completed? Were those struggling academically identified and helped before the public examinations? Failure should not be treated solely as a measure of inadequate individual effort when the conditions of learning vary so widely in the country.

An investigation by *The Daily Star*, based on Education Management Information System records published on October 9, found that 3,861 secondary schools and higher secondary colleges had no ICT teachers, 2,744 had no mathematics teachers, and 2,625 had no English teachers. Many teachers taught subjects outside their areas of expertise, practical classes were disrupted, and some students turned to coaching centres or YouTube to compensate for gaps in classroom instruction. Another concerning picture came from the National Assessment of Secondary Students 2023, which recorded an average science score of just 32 percent among 26,601 pupils in Class 8. The assessment did not examine teacher shortages as a cause, but it showed that weaknesses in learning were visible well before the SSC.

These findings do not prove that teacher vacancies caused particular students to fail, nor do they fully explain the results across all education streams. They do, however, provide grounds for investigation. Do schools without mathematics or English teachers have higher failure rates in those subjects than adequately staffed institutions? A school-level result comparison, staffing records, and attendance could help distinguish the effects of teaching shortages from other disadvantages. It would also show where support is most urgently needed.

Teachers, too, must answer for the instruction they provide. However, they do not have the power to resolve recruitment delays; that is the administration's responsibility. Similarly, families should not have to pay for private coaching to compensate for inadequate classroom lessons. The ministry must identify schools with persistent learning difficulties and ensure that students receive help before their next public examination, rather than simply allowing them to retake exams early. Moreover, the findings should be published and deadlines should be set for resolving persistent shortages, so that progress can be assessed.

Lastly, the proposed 15-day interval for retests calls for scrutiny. A candidate who narrowly misses the pass mark may be ready to try again quickly, but someone who has struggled throughout the year may need more time. Remedial classes, feedback and accessible materials should accompany retakes. Otherwise, students could be examined again without a meaningful chance to improve.

The education minister also said students who fail the retest could be directed towards technical and vocational education. At the CAMPE conference, Prime Minister's Adviser Mahdi Amin said that the PM had directed the ministry to develop career options for unsuccessful candidates, including technical training, language courses, and possible entrepreneurship support. Such opportunities are welcome. But vocational education should be a choice, not a destination assigned to students after two failed examinations. Students should receive guidance based on their interests and be allowed to pursue general education, if they choose to do so.

Besides, in April, the education minister told parliament that 8,770 of the 15,844 sanctioned teaching posts at technical institutions were vacant. Directing more students into that stream without adequate teachers and facilities risks reproducing the shortages affecting general education. How, then, would the vocational institutions accommodate additional students if unsuccessful SSC candidates were enrolled in this stream?

What the education ministry should do now is decide on eligibility for retaking exams, fees, preparation time, and admission deadlines, and explain whether this year's unsuccessful SSC candidates will benefit. The government's response should extend beyond arranging another test. The objective of this reform should be to identify why so many students failed, improve the teaching available to them, and prevent the same problems from recurring.

