From Buriganga to the Sundarbans, BNP keeps contradicting its own environmental pledges



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Before the February election, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) made several important commitments regarding environmental protection and sustainable development. Since taking office, the BNP-led government has launched a number of initiatives to fulfil those pledges, including tree-planting programmes and the excavation of rivers and canals. Prime Minister Tarique Rahman regularly emphasises the importance of protecting rivers, forests, and the environment. However, in the meantime, the government has also taken several decisions and initiatives on environment-related matters that directly contradict the party's electoral commitments and the PM's own statements.

For example, the BNP's election manifesto pledged to take prompt, appropriate, and effective measures to protect Dhaka from pollution. It also committed to use natural low-lying areas as water retention zones. In addition, the party promised to introduce a "Green Canal Bank Model" along riverbanks and canal banks, creating a new green economy through tree planting, biodiversity conservation, and the development of ecotourism.

In September, the PM instructed his government's ministries to undertake coordinated initiatives to control pollution in the rivers surrounding Dhaka. He said, "We must strive to leave behind pollution-free rivers and a liveable environment not only for ourselves but also for future generations." Yet, the amendments made by the Ministry of Housing and Public Works to the Detailed Area Plan (DAP) are likely to benefit real estate developers and industrial owners while worsening river pollution and waterlogging around the capital and further reducing its liveability. A gazette notification issued by the ministry on October 14 announced three amendments to the DAP. Through these amendments, the government has decided to allow heavy industries to be established on open land along the bank of the Buriganga River. It has also removed the requirement to preserve designated strategic flood flow zones, thereby opening up these areas for housing project development. Remarkably, the relevant technical procedures of the Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakkha (Rajuk)—the capital's development authority—were not followed in the forming of these amendments, and no stakeholder consultation took place.

Establishing heavy industries on open land along the Buriganga would worsen water, air, and noise pollution. Constructing housing projects in flood flow zones would obstruct the natural movement of floodwater, worsening waterlogging and increasing flood risks in surrounding areas. Instead of creating the "new green economy" promised in the ruling party's election manifesto, these measures would further expand the existing "pollution-based economy".

The BNP's election manifesto also pledged to establish modern and environmentally friendly management systems for the shipbreaking industry. It promised to formulate specific policies to protect the environment and ensure workers' safety. The party committed to implementing a green shipbreaking transition to ensure safe and environmentally sound ship recycling in accordance with the Hong Kong International Convention for the Safe and Environmentally Sound Recycling of Ships (HKC). In practice, however, the BNP-led government has decided to introduce changes to the existing regulatory framework for the shipbreaking industry that could make the sector more dangerous for both the environment and for workers. On September 29, a government committee dealing with the ship recycling industry decided to downgrade shipbreaking from the "red" category to the "orange" category. The decision was taken in response to demands from shipbreaking yard owners. If implemented, it could remove the requirement for an environmental impact assessment (EIA) before establishing a new shipbreaking yard.

In August, the Prime Minister's Office formed this committee to review existing laws, regulations, policies, and related matters concerning the ship recycling industry. The committee is chaired by Environment, Forest and Climate Change Minister Abdul Awal Mintoo, and its members include the industries minister, the state minister for shipping, the cabinet secretary, the secretary of the Finance Division, and the secretary of the Legislative and Parliamentary Affairs Division. Notably, no environmental experts or representatives from environmental organisations were included in the committee.

The decision to downgrade may enable owners to establish yards more quickly than before. But rather than becoming more modern and environmentally friendly, as promised in the BNP's election manifesto, the industry risks becoming more polluting and dangerous. This would further increase environmental pollution along the coast and make the industry even more hazardous for workers.

The BNP's election manifesto pledged to take strict action against deforestation, forest encroachment, and the destruction of mangrove forests. It also promised to discourage the establishment of industrial facilities in wildlife habitats and sanctuary areas. The party committed to taking appropriate initiatives to revitalise the country's forests alongside protecting the existing ones. In addition to launching an initiative to plant 25 crore trees, the PM has directed the identification and protection of "mother trees" in existing forests. He has also called for measures to expand forest cover in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

However, despite pledging to take strict action against the destruction of mangrove forests, the BNP-led government has itself been pursuing plans that could harm the environment of the Sundarbans. The Sundarbans is already under pressure from various sources, including pollution caused by industries around Mongla and the Rampal power plant. Against this backdrop, reports indicate that the government is planning to construct a floating storage and regasification unit (FSRU) for liquefied natural gas (LNG) at the ecologically significant Akram Point inside the Sundarbans, as well as in Nalian village adjacent to the forest, along with a gas transmission pipeline from the area to Mongla. Within two kilometres of Akram Point lies the Sundarbans South Wildlife Sanctuary on one side and the Sundarbans East Wildlife Sanctuary on the other. Both sanctuaries are components under the Unesco World Heritage Site.

Constructing an LNG terminal and associated gas pipelines within the Sundarbans poses severe risks to the mangrove ecosystem and its unique biodiversity. The terminal would increase the movement of large commercial vessels, escalating noise and water pollution that would inflict long-term negative impacts on endangered Irrawaddy and Ganges river dolphins, mangrove flora and fauna, and the overall environment. Furthermore, excavation during the construction of the pipeline from Akram Point to Mongla would damage the forest floor and destroy the specialised breathing roots (pneumatophores) of mangrove plants which are embedded deep in the soil. Chilled, chemical-laden liquid waste discharged from the LNG plant would also disrupt the thermal and chemical balance of the Sundarbans' river water. In addition, sudden technical failures, pipeline leaks, or natural disasters causing fires or explosions could place the sensitive Sundarbans ecosystem at grave risk.

The fire incident at a floating LNG terminal in Maheshkhali in July of this year demonstrated that such concerns are not unjustified. Moreover, what could happen if the Sundarbans region is industrialised and commercial shipping traffic is expanded has already been made clear by past accidents involving oil tanker spills and capsized coal vessels in the Sundarbans' rivers.

There are also questions as to how positively a new LNG terminal could contribute to resolving the country's energy problems. The government is struggling to even import sufficient LNG to supply the two existing terminals. Building another terminal for expensive imported LNG would certainly place additional pressure on the national economy. If that terminal were to be built inside the Sundarbans, it would impose environmental and economic burdens as well.

Prime Minister Tarique Rahman has spoken of leaving behind pollution-free rivers and a liveable environment for future generations. But if decisions made by various ministries under his government pave the way for heavily polluting industries to set up along riverbanks, housing developments to take place in flood flow zones, crucial environmental safeguards being relaxed for the shipbreaking industry, and LNG infrastructure being constructed inside the Sundarbans, they will do little to serve either the present or future generations.

More than planting trees or excavating rivers and canals, fulfilling environmental commitments requires taking a firm stand against projects and policies that damage the environment. The effectiveness of the prime minister and his party's environmental pledges will ultimately depend on whether the ministries under his leadership reverse their recent environmentally harmful decisions.



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FILE PHOTO: **BNP MEDIA CELL**

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Children must not pay the price for institutional silence



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In ancient Athens, citizens could vote to exile another citizen for 10 years. Each voter scratched a name onto a piece of pottery. The practice, called ostracism, required no criminal trial or finding of guilt and only a restricted group—male citizens—could take part. Historians debate its precise purpose. It was a blunt political device, shaped by the narrow democracy it served.

Ostracism was a public check on political influence. However, other forms of influence or authority can be harder to challenge because they are woven into trust, care, and everyday relationships. Power does not reside only in money, office, or force. It also lies in the ability to define obedience, sin, discipline, and truth—and whose account of an event will be believed and whose will be dismissed. Here, religious authority can carry particular weight because it is sustained by a community's trust. In South Asia, religious authority is often reinforced by social hierarchies involving age, gender, family standing and class. Children are generally expected to obey elders, influential religious figures may enjoy unquestioned respect, and poorer families may depend on religious institutions for education and care. A religious teacher may therefore be an educator, moral guide, and authority figure all at once. A child in their care may depend on that same adult for discipline, safety, and support, making it particularly difficult to report abuse or have their account taken seriously.

The recent allegations of sexual abuse in some madrasas in Bangladesh bring this imbalance into sharp focus. The Daily Star reported allegations of rape, attempted rape, and sexual abuse at six madrasas over 16 days in October, involving boys and girls as young as seven. In Gazipur, an eight-year-old residential student informed his mother after allegedly being abused on three consecutive nights. In Savar, a 13-year-old student was allegedly threatened with death by her headteacher if she spoke about the assault. These allegations must be investigated fairly, leading to accountability for proven offenders and protections for vulnerable children.

Figures reported by bdnews24, based on monitoring by JusticeMakers Bangladesh in France (JMBF), offer a wider but still incomplete picture. From January 1 to October 24, JMBF recorded 172 media-reported incidents of alleged sexual violence against boys, involving 235 children. It said 153 of the boys were madrasa students, and 91 incidents involving 137 boys took place in madrasas. Of the 201 people accused in the monitored cases, 103 were madrasa teachers. The figures come from media reports, not court findings; JMBF said only one of the cases it tracked had reached trial at the time. Its reports also included incidents in neighbourhoods, schools and mosques.

These figures cannot measure abuse across every madrasa, nor do they establish that religious belief causes abuse. They do show why the concentration of authority matters. A person may have access to children, the deference of families and the standing to shape how a child understands what has happened. Threats, dependence and fear can make disclosure difficult; reverence can make it harder for others to believe the child.

The misuse of religious authority takes different forms across faiths. A 2021 report by an independent commission in France estimated that 2,16,000 minors had been sexually abused by Catholic clergy or members of religious orders between 1950 and 2020. In India, a Mohali court convicted Christian pastor Bajinder Singh in March 2025 and sentenced him to life imprisonment the following month for rape in a case registered in 2018; the judge said he had misused his position as a preacher. Allegations against Hindu spiritual leader Swami Chaitanyananda Saraswati surfaced in August 2025. He was arrested in September, and Delhi Police filed a chargesheet in November accusing him of sexually harassing 19 women at the institute where he was chancellor. In Asaram Bapu's case, the alleged rape of a minor that dates to 2013 led to his conviction in 2018, and in May 2026, the Rajasthan High Court upheld his life sentence while setting aside his convictions for gang rape and aggravated penetrative sexual assault.

Taken together, the above cases show religious authority operating through both a leader's access to people in their care and an institution's power to decide whether complaints are acted on.

In Bangladesh, accountability must go beyond investigating the allegations and scrutinising the madrasas involved to also address how the public responds to such incidents. The Daily Star reported calls for fair investigations alongside protests that included assaults on accused teachers, vandalism and even arson. Public anger cannot justify mob violence, which risks interfering with accountability measures. The accused are entitled to due process, while children are entitled to immediate protection and to have their accounts taken seriously.

But defending a community from blanket blame must not become a way to defend authority from scrutiny. Criticism of an institution's safeguarding failures is not an accusation against every believer. When it is recast as an attack on faith, attention shifts from the child who may have been harmed to the institution said to be under attack. That shift protects reputation but does not protect children.

Defending faith cannot depend on asking children and families to protect it through silence. Religious standing should bring greater responsibility, not exemption from accountability. A child must be able to name harm without being made to feel that they have betrayed their family, community or faith. The credibility of a religious institution rests on whether it can hear the child, act on the complaint and hold those in authority accountable.

Power will always gather somewhere: in the state, the family, the school, the pulpit, the committee. The question is whether those subject to it have a safe way to challenge it. The Athenians wrote names on pottery; we have laws, safeguarding systems and institutions of oversight. Their forms are different, but the problem remains: how can a society prevent authority from becoming untouchable?



FILE VISUAL: **STAR**