Parties must practise what they preach

Lack of intraparty democracy threatens the future of governance

The findings of a new study by Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) have again shed light on a long-ignored state of affairs: the dearth of good governance, transparency, accountability, and democratic practices within our political parties. While not entirely shocking, these revelations should be instructive for the parties concerned. For decades, these parties have been run with authority concentrated in the hands of a few at the top. Regular party elections, transparent candidate selection processes, and integrity have hardly been a priority for them. If the very institutions entrusted with upholding democracy fail to practise it themselves, how can they possibly help advance it?

Reviewing the activities of 32 registered parties, the TIB study found that they are increasingly operating like power-centric businesses. Businesspeople accounted for 59.9 percent of elected MPs in the 2026 parliamentary election. Dynastic politics dominates leadership in at least 10 major parties, including the ruling BNP, Awami League (currently banned from politics), and Jatiya Party. National councils are irregular in at least 16 parties, while most elect their leaders largely through voice votes rather than secret ballots. And only one party constitution sets a limit on the number of terms an individual can serve as party chief.

Meanwhile, most parties don't follow the RPO requirement to form candidate panels based on proposals from local committees. Wealth, muscle power, and local influence often outweigh merit in candidate selection. Grassroots members have little influence over decision-making, while women's active participation in leadership remains shockingly inadequate.

In a functional democracy, political parties represent citizens' interests. But when they are held hostage by money and patronage, capable leaders are pushed aside while business interests gain disproportionate influence.

In the February election, for instance, women constituted just 4.09 percent of the candidates. These shortcomings undermine the very foundation of representative politics that is essential to a functioning democracy.

Party finances form another troubling part of the picture. TIB estimated that a party maintaining offices and conducting regular activities down to union or ward level could spend Tk 1,532 crore to Tk 2,188 crore annually, excluding election expenses. However, the highest expenditure reported in the published 2025 accounts of four parties was only Tk 23.91 crore. While TIB's estimate is a model of potential organisational costs, rather than verified spending, the enormous disparity underscores the need for credible financial disclosure. The study also found that none of the 16 active party websites reviewed published financial reports or election expenditure accounts, making the case for stronger oversight even more compelling.

In a functional democracy, political parties represent citizens' interests. But when they are held hostage by money and patronage, capable leaders are pushed aside while business interests gain disproportionate influence. We, therefore, support TIB's recommendations for regular secret-ballot leadership elections, independent audits of party finances, and greater grassroots and women's participation. To this end, relevant RPO and party registration rules must be amended and strictly enforced, and the Election Commission must be equipped to scrutinise party accounts. Above all, parties must undertake meaningful internal reforms. They cannot expect citizens to trust their ability or willingness to deliver good governance if they cannot uphold democratic practices within their own ranks.

Whose interests is BERC protecting?

Frequent LPG price hikes demand transparency

The country's LPG cylinder industry is mired in allegations against companies of showing artificial shortages, hoarding products, and overcharging. Meanwhile, the Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission (BERC) seems more than willing to appease the businesses that threaten sales shutdowns and regularly press the authority for higher commissions and other charges. A report by this daily shows changes in the official pricing of LPG cylinders since January, when the price for a 12-kg LPG cylinder stood at Tk 1,306. With the latest hike, the official price set by BERC is Tk 2,060—the first time the official retail price has been set above Tk 2,000.

What is even more frustrating is that consumers are forced to buy LPG cylinders at much higher prices than the official rate. According to this daily, as recently as in September, 12-kg LPG cylinders were being sold for Tk 1,900 to Tk 2,500, even when the official rates ranged between Tk 1,585 and Tk 1,837. While LPG imports have been declining since 2024, for years now, only 10-12 of the 35 licensed companies have been active importers. Due to the rule that prevents companies from refilling cylinders of rival brands, consumers and retailers are often left with empty cylinders and are compelled to purchase new ones from companies that still import LPG, thus having to spend more.

Despite the myriad reasons businesses cite for hiking LPG cylinder prices every other month, audit reports by BERC show that most LPG companies are profitable. The new price is also higher than the Tk 1,976 per cylinder that was proposed by BERC's technical evaluation committee at a recent public hearing. This begs the question of why the regulatory body is always so quick to increase LPG companies' prices instead of fulfilling its duty, which is regulating energy prices to protect consumers from being overcharged. Instead, we only see the opposite happening, and too frequently.

From BERC, we demand greater transparency in terms of why LPG cylinder prices are hiked so frequently. The commission must also investigate allegations of artificial shortages, hoarding, and the informal overcharging that has become the norm in this market. Nearly one crore consumers depend on this essential good to run their households daily. Authorities cannot remain so compliant with the whims of private companies in this regard.

What the LDC deferral means for Bangladesh at COP31

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Bangladesh's graduation from the least developed country (LDC) category has rarely been treated as anything more than a trade question in our policy discourse. On October 29, the UN General Assembly extended our preparatory period to November 24, 2029 without objection. Nepal was granted an identical extension. However, the first test of the decision will come in Antalya, Türkiye, where COP31 begins on November 9. There, Bangladesh will negotiate for the first time as a country granted extra time. In climate negotiations, LDC status decides which negotiating bloc a country sits in and which pools of money it can draw from.

These pools are sizeable, at least on paper. The LDC Group under the UN climate convention represents 44 countries and is currently chaired by Timor-Leste. The Least Developed Countries Fund (LDCF), managed by the Global Environment Facility (GEF), finances adaptation in LDCs only; during its last four-year cycle, the cap per LDC was $20 million. The Green Climate Fund aims to direct at least half of its adaptation resources to LDCs, small island states, and African countries, while the Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage (FRLD) has reserved a minimum of 50 percent of its start-up resources for LDCs and small island states. The extension therefore keeps Bangladesh inside these earmarked windows for three more years of negotiations.

The terms upon which the extension was granted, however, deserve a closer reading in Dhaka. Speaking for the European Union, Ireland backed the extension but cautioned that repeated delays for countries already meeting the graduation criteria could erode the process's credibility, adding that LDC-specific concessional resources should remain with countries facing the most severe structural challenges. Canada, speaking also for Australia and New Zealand, asked for regular progress reports. Australia presides over the negotiations at COP31.

A week earlier, when the FRLD set aside $20 million for flood-stricken Nepal, its first allocation to any country, developed-country board members, including the EU's, stated that the decision should not be treated as a precedent. These remarks suggest that Bangladesh, by far the largest economy among the LDCs and the largest user of LDC trade preferences, will be watched more closely than its peers. Few countries have as many people exposed to floods, cyclones, and rising seas, but size invites a level of scrutiny that some smaller members escape.

Besides, earmarked funds are shrinking relative to demand. A pledging session for the LDCF planned at COP30 was called off after donors indicated contributions would be too small, and seven technically cleared projects, one of them from Bangladesh, were left out of the fund's final work programme for want of resources. The FRLD's start-up window of $342 million has received 176 funding requests worth $2.8 billion, with 41 LDCs alone seeking a little over $1 billion. When money is this scarce, a large claim from Bangladesh means a smaller share for other LDCs.



VISUAL: **ALIZA RAHMAN**

The LDC tag, moreover, has brought in less money than is often assumed. Since its inception, the LDCF has provided Bangladesh with $48.19 million, less than Nepal's $55.38 million and Bhutan's $60.39 million. In the 2022-2026 cycle, Bangladesh accessed the fund only through its final work programme, with a $9.8-million coastal adaptation project in the Greater Sundarbans, which is less than half of the per-country cap. The extension's value in climate terms will therefore depend less on the status itself than on whether we can prepare fundable projects in time.

More importantly, the GEF's ninth funding cycle runs from July 2026 to June 2030. At COP29, parties requested the LDCF to support recently graduated countries, and the GEF's draft strategy for the cycle proposes support for countries that graduated during the previous two cycles. Bangladesh, now set to graduate in November 2029, would fall late in the current cycle, and how such countries will be treated in the next is not clear yet. The FRLD, meanwhile, is designing its long-term operating model. Its board will take up its first funding requests in Manila in December. The rules determining our access after 2029 are being drafted now, while Bangladesh still has a say as an LDC. Dhaka should therefore approach COP31 as the start of a three-year climate transition. Three measures are worth considering.

First, Bangladesh should coordinate formally with Nepal. A joint statement in Antalya could commit both to publishing an annual report on climate finance during the transition, alongside the progress updates already owed to the UN Committee for Development Policy (CDP). The two countries should then push for a graduation clause in GEF-9 programming and in the FRLD's long-term model, so that a country graduating midway through a funding cycle remains eligible for LDC floors for at least three years after graduation.

Second, Bangladesh should contribute to the bloc instead of merely drawing from it. The LDC Group's Dili declaration calls for pledging events for the LDCF and the Special Climate Change Fund at COP31. Bangladesh should back it openly. It can also offer adaptation training to other LDCs through the Dhaka-founded LDC Universities Consortium on Climate Change. As the FRLD drafts rules for rapid disbursement after the Nepal case, Dhaka should support provisions that prioritise the smallest and poorest members.

Third, Bangladesh should ground its vulnerability argument in existing instruments. In 2015, the CDP recommended allocation of new climate finance on the basis of its economic vulnerability index, irrespective of LDC status. In 2024, the UN General Assembly adopted a multidimensional vulnerability index by consensus. Dhaka should table a specific proposal that the FRLD's long-term allocation system and the LDCF's support for graduating countries use these indices to inform allocation alongside the existing floors. It should check its own scores first, however, since Bangladesh met the CDP's vulnerability threshold for graduation. At home, the Economic Relations Division and the environment ministry should ensure that Bangladesh's project, left out of the last LDCF work programme, is resubmitted as soon as GEF-9 programming opens and that any request from us in the FRLD pipeline is ready for the board's consideration in December.

Prime Minister Tarique Rahman is expected to attend COP31. His address would be most useful if it sets out how Bangladesh plans to use the extension in the climate arena and what it is prepared to offer the LDC Group in return. A 2019 column in this newspaper noted that LDC negotiators had once floated renaming the group the "G47", since vulnerability does not end with graduation. The idea deserves a second look.

Holding on to the support won in New York will take more work at the climate table. Smaller LDCs may still be heard on status alone. Bangladesh will need to bring more than that to Antalya.

Why do some resent garment workers' demand for a living wage?



Maisha Islam Monamee is a contributor to The Daily Star.

■ **MAISHA ISLAM MONAMEE**

A strange phenomenon seems to influence public discourse whenever garment workers demand higher wages. Why, many ask, should a garment worker demand Tk 30,000 when educated young people are earning so little? The wage debate seems to have acquired a new benchmark: if a university graduate is underpaid, others are somehow expected to moderate their demands for better wages.

The frustration of young graduates is real. Our graduate labour market is deeply dysfunctional. Years of education, often financed through considerable family sacrifice, do not necessarily translate into economic independence. Employers demand experience, offer inadequate salaries, and expect professional commitment in return. But acknowledging one form of economic hardship does not require diminishing another. Comparing a graduate's Tk 15,000 salary with a garment worker's Tk 12,500 overlooks the different financial circumstances, living costs and responsibilities that determine how far each income can stretch.

A fresh graduate earning Tk 15,000 might still live with their parents, eat meals prepared at home and depend on their family for rent, healthcare, or emergency expenses. Their education and opportunities may have been financed by their parents. A garment worker might be supporting two children, paying rent in an industrial neighbourhood and sending money to elderly parents in their village. These are not interchangeable economic circumstances.

This does not mean every graduate receives parental support or every garment worker supports a family. But the structural distinction matters. To have family support to fall back on is itself an economic resource that is distributed very unevenly across society. This is where our classism appears, disguised as professional ambition, meritocracy and, occasionally, concern for economic fairness.

We have developed a hierarchy of whose labour deserves respect. We attach social prestige to the person sitting behind a computer while treating the person operating industrial machinery for 10 hours as an interchangeable unit of production. One's salary is discussed in terms of qualifications and market competitiveness. The other's is discussed in terms of how much the factory can afford. A university education is an achievement. But it is not a certificate granting its holder a superior claim to economic dignity. Nor does the absence of a degree make someone else's labour less valuable. A garment worker does not need academic credentials to justify being able to afford food, housing, and healthcare.

It is worth considering how we discuss the garment industry. It is routinely celebrated as a national economic success story. But when the people physically producing those exports demand higher wages, the conversation changes. When workers cannot afford necessities, the conversation is about whether they are asking for too much. It is perhaps also worth asking why the economic anxiety of a factory owner is so readily understood as a structural problem, while the economic anxiety of a worker is so often reduced to an individual demand.

Perhaps we should also ask why the road is where these workers have to make themselves heard. Many of us complain about garment workers disrupting traffic while happily participating in a consumer culture whose affordability depends, in part, on highly competitive global manufacturing costs. We want clothes to remain cheap, factories to remain profitable, export figures to keep rising and roads to remain clear. But we are not enthusiastic about discussing who absorbs the cost of making all four things possible.

This is not to suggest that factory owners face no genuine difficulties. Manufacturers operate under pressure from international buyers, rising input costs, energy shortages, and competition from other sourcing destinations. But recognising these pressures does not require treating workers' wages as the industry's most convenient adjustment mechanism. International brands exercise considerable influence over purchasing prices and production arrangements. Local manufacturers retain responsibility for employment practices and wage payments. Workers, meanwhile, occupy the weakest position in this arrangement, with limited bargaining power and few effective avenues to negotiate.

When formal mechanisms fail to deliver, street protests become one of the few remaining ways to make grievances visible. And visibility is precisely what these demonstrations deserve. A road blockade inconveniences thousands of people. These frustrations are legitimate. But perhaps we should also ask why the road is where these workers have to make themselves heard. Many of us complain about garment workers disrupting traffic while happily participating in a consumer culture whose affordability depends, in part, on highly competitive global manufacturing costs. We want clothes to remain cheap, factories to remain profitable, export figures to keep rising and roads to remain clear. But we are not enthusiastic about discussing who absorbs the cost of making all four things possible.

Young graduates should absolutely demand better salaries. They should challenge exploitative employers, question unpaid internships, and reject the idea that poverty is a necessary rite of passage into professional life. But why should that grievance require them to compete with garment workers? Perhaps the better question is: why does a garment worker's wage demand provoke resentment among people who are dissatisfied with their salaries? The garment workers' demand for a dignified life is not an insult to their degree.

The Daily Star Reg. No. DA 781 | **EDITOR & PUBLISHER: Mahfuz Anam** Printed by him on behalf of Mediaworld Ltd at Transcraft Ltd, 229, Tejgaon Industrial Area, editor@thedailystar.net | **Registered & Head Offices:** The Daily Star Centre 64-65 Kazi Nazrul Islam Avenue, Dhaka-1215 Phone: 09610222222 | **Newsroom:** Fax- 58156306 reporting@thedailystar.net | **Advertisement:** 01711623910 advertisement@thedailystar.net GPO Box: 3257 | **Subscription:** 01711623906 | thedailystar.net bangla.thedailystar.net/