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

Take grassroots poll reform seriously

The BNP govt must not let the reform agenda slip away

When people voted in February in the country's first genuinely contested national election in more than a decade, the promise was not merely a change of government but a change of system. Earlier, the interim administration had convened a slew of reform commissions to root out the rot, reaching down to the union parishad. Now the first big test of that promise at the grassroots is approaching. The Election Commission will hold polls in more than 4,500 union parishads in five phases between January and May. It will do so under the existing legal framework, setting aside the recommendations of both the Electoral Reform Commission and the Local Government Reform Commission. The EC says proposals requiring legislative changes are pending with the government. Responsibility now lies with parliament and the ministers who set its agenda.

The ruling BNP has been candid about its position. It will implement only those reforms that appear in its election manifesto. A party with a fresh mandate is entitled to its programme, and some of the commissions' ideas are indeed contestable. For instance, replacing directly elected chairmen and mayors with leaders chosen by members and councillors could shorten campaigns and cut costs, but it could equally shift power from voters to backroom bargaining. Holding all local elections on a single day would save money only if the state can police thousands of polling stations at once, a big assumption in a country where union polls have repeatedly turned violent and deadly.

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But several reforms are uncontroversial and overdue. There is no good reason why a candidate for UP chairman should not have to declare their assets and other records. Rotating reserved seats for women would turn token representation real. Barring government-funded MPO teachers from contesting without resigning first is a proposal the EC itself backs.

The deeper agenda will take longer. Amending Article 119 of the constitution so that the EC can schedule local elections itself, rather than waiting for a request from the government, would remove one of the oldest levers by which ruling parties have timed polls to suit themselves. A single law and election calendar for all five tiers of local government would cut a 225-day process to a month or two. Taxpayers spent about Tk 2,300 crore on local elections between 2021 and 2024. There is a serious argument about whether that money bought accountability.

Party symbols have been removed from local ballots. Yet a missing logo does not dismantle patronage. Candidates will still be known as the ruling party's men, and the incentives that made polls violent and lopsided in the past remain intact. Without wider reform, the polls risk producing a new crop of representatives elected on the old terms, running the same centralised system citizens rose against.

Timing matters. Few of the councillors elected next year will push to change the rules that elected them. If the BNP government lets it pass, it will have kept the old system—not by choice but by default.

Child marriage must see preventive actions

Close legal loopholes and punish offenders

A decade after Kaliganj in Satkhira was declared a "child marriage-free" upazila, underage girls are still being married off there. According to a recent *Prothom Alo* report, 132 child marriages were prevented across Satkhira in January-September 2026, including 11 in Kaliganj over six months. It also uncovered marriages involving schoolgirls, including a 10-year-old child. But how many have escaped detection?

According to the 2025 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics and Unicef, 47.2 percent of women aged 20-24 were married before 18, while 13.4 percent were married before 15. More worryingly, the proportion of girls aged 15-19 who were married off rose from 32.9 percent in 2019 to 38.9 percent in 2025. A crisis of this scale cannot be tackled through occasional interventions.

Particularly disturbing are tactics used to circumvent the law. Reportedly, some families secretly arrange marriages through religious clerics, while others falsify girls' ages. Unauthorised individuals allegedly pose as marriage registrars, using counterfeit registers and promising marriage certificates once the child bride turns 18. A registered kazi alleged that seven such individuals operate in Satkhira Sadar. Stopping ceremonies and obtaining parental undertakings is not enough, as some secretly complete the marriage afterwards. Existing laws must be rigorously enforced, with meaningful penalties for offenders. Section 19 of the Child Marriage Restraint Act, 2017, which permits underage marriage in "special circumstances," must also be scrapped.

It is also crucial for families who view early marriage as protection for their daughters to change their attitude. In the aforementioned report, one parent said harassment by local young men had driven him to marry off his daughter. What does it say about our society when a girl is forced to surrender her education and childhood to "secure" her life? Police, schools, and local authorities must respond promptly to allegations of harassment, provide safe reporting channels, and hold perpetrators accountable for the long term. Girls should not have to pay for boys' and men's misconduct.

Campaigns on television, in schools, mosques, and community gatherings must establish child marriage as a punishable offence, not an acceptable family decision. Religious leaders, influential in society, can urge parents to reject early marriage and explain its risks to girls' health, education, and future. Finally, keeping girls in school will require better government financial support, skills training for young women, and future pathways to decent work. Protecting girls' rights is a responsibility of the state and society alike.

What makes higher RMG wages affordable?



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■ **M NIAZ ASADULLAH**

Bangladesh's garment factory wage debate has raised several questions. What does it cost a worker's family to live decently? How much of a pay rise can factories absorb? Could higher pay itself improve productivity? The government wage board needs to weigh these questions as it prepares a new pay scale.

But another question has received less attention. How can it still be expensive to make and deliver a garment from Bangladesh when the people who make it are paid so little? The answer matters because some of the costs that limit what factories can pay to workers are within the control of government agencies, global buyers, and factory owners.

Imagine two RMG factories, one in Bangladesh and one in Vietnam, making the same garment. The factory in Bangladesh pays lower wages. Does it deliver the order at lower cost? That depends on how many saleable pieces each line produces, how much the fabric costs, and what it takes to ship on time.

On November 9, garment workers proposed a monthly minimum wage of Tk 32,000, up from Tk 12,500 for the lowest regular grade. Our factory owners, on the other hand, warn that higher wages could cost Bangladesh export orders. Employer and worker representatives have already agreed to finalise a new pay scale by December, with workers expected to receive the higher pay in January 2027. The wage board must assess what workers need and what different factories—depending on their size—can afford.

A recent column in *The Daily Star* argues for putting workers' living costs at the centre of the wage review. Others are insisting on an evidence-based revision. One calculation suggests about Tk 16,200 monthly would restore the purchasing power of the minimum wage (Tk 12,500) set in December 2023, without justifying whether the 2023 wage itself was adequate. The 2025 living-wage estimates were higher, at Tk 25,166 in Dhaka's surrounding industrial cities and Tk 30,459 in Dhaka city. There are also calls for considering evidence on labour costs, operating margins, and buyer prices across different types of factories.

The wage board has to assess what factories can afford today. Industrial policy must ask why higher wages are so hard to sustain and which costs that constrain them can be changed.

The cost of making a garment

For many in Bangladesh, Vietnam has become a natural comparison case. A 2018 Asian Productivity Organization comparison put annual garment value added per worker at about $12,700 in Vietnam and $10,400 in Bangladesh. Some of that gap may reflect the kinds of garments each country makes. For factories making the same garment, the more revealing measure is how many pieces that pass quality checks workers produce per hour of paid work.

Factories in the two countries also compete for different orders. Vietnam supplies a wider range of products, including technical outerwear and swimwear. Bangladesh has built strong local supply chains in cotton knitwear and has begun to diversify, including into performance outerwear. Moving into more demanding products takes reliable access to specialised inputs, technicians who can work with new fabrics, and supervisors who can maintain quality as production changes.

What it takes to ship on time

A delay in clearing fabric can leave a line idle or force a factory to build up inventory. If the order deadline holds, the factory may end up paying for air freight. None of these costs shows up in a comparison of monthly wages.

A World Bank study estimated that a package of improvements to port dwell times, highway speeds and logistics services could cut logistics costs for tradable goods in Bangladesh by 26 percent. That estimate covers tradable goods broadly, but the mechanism is easy to see in garments. A factory that can predict when its fabric will arrive can plan production more tightly and tie up less cash in stocks. An investor may get help from Invest Bangladesh Authority (IBA) in opening a factory, but once production starts, the reliability of customs, ports and other services becomes crucial for every factory, local or foreign.



'Better management at RMG factories can create room for higher pay.' FILE PHOTO: **MEHEDI HASAN**

Extortion adds a further cost. In October 2025, *The Daily Star* reported that factory owners in Gazipur, Narayanganj and Savar faced demands for cash and pressure to sell "jhut", or fabric scraps, below market prices. A Gazipur owner said he paid Tk 1 lakh after being threatened with closure. Such demands add to the cost of doing business, while the threat of shutdown makes production less predictable.

Who can make room for higher pay?

There is academic evidence that pay and profits can rise together. Better management can create room for higher pay. Whether workers share in those gains depends in part on their ability to bargain.

The commercial terms matter just as much. A study by economists Julia Cajal-Grossi, Rocco Macchiavello, and Guillermo Noguera found that garment exporters in Bangladesh earned higher markups on comparable orders from buyers that rely on ongoing supplier relationships than from buyers sourcing on the spot market. How much of that margin reaches workers is a separate question.

Bangladesh's new wage board should publish the living cost benchmark it uses and show, in aggregate, what different wage proposals would mean for payrolls and operating margins across factory types. The government can act in parallel by making clearance times more predictable and improving access to the inputs that factories need to take on more complex orders. Factory owners also need a safe way to report extortion and a police response they can count on. Buyers should show how their prices and order commitments account for labour costs. Workers should have a voice in deciding how the gains from higher productivity are shared.

A revised wage floor is due now. By the next review, the government, buyers, and factory owners should be able to show what they have done to make higher wages easier to sustain. The test is whether factories can deliver more valuable orders, spend less exporting them and pay the people who make them a wage they can live on.

Our banking future cannot come at the cost of data privacy



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In August 2025, at least 54 customers of a multinational bank in Bangladesh reported that a total of Tk 27 lakh had been fraudulently transferred from their credit cards to unknown bKash and Nagad accounts without any OTP being shared. The bank initially refused to treat the transactions as fraud because they were OTP verified. If fraudsters can compromise the very systems responsible for delivering our security codes, how safe is the data we hand over to banks every day?

This question becomes more urgent as the country's banking sector embraces artificial intelligence. From detecting suspicious transactions to assessing loan eligibility, AI is transforming financial services. However, this smartness comes with the invisible risk to the security of personal and financial data. Bank balances, transaction histories, and shopping patterns all become part of the database that AI learns from. As mobile financial services expand, data accumulates on bank and fintech servers. The more centralised the data, the more catastrophic a single leak becomes.

Banks rely on National ID information for customer verification. The 2023 leak of NID and birth registration data of millions of citizens from a government service exposed its vulnerability. When names, addresses, and dates of birth fall into criminal hands, fake bank accounts and fraudulent loans become easy. A 2025 Financial Consumer Protection Survey found that nearly 30 percent of digital financial service users in Bangladesh did not have a PIN or password on their phone to protect their accounts. Among those who did, 45 percent shared it with others, typically family members.

Article 43 (b) of the constitution recognises citizens' right to the privacy of correspondence and communication. But informational privacy has yet to become a standalone right. The Personal Data Protection Act, 2026 covers identifiable financial information but lacks AI-specific provisions, such as the right to explanation for automated decisions or mandatory algorithmic audits. Section 7 of the Bankers Books Evidence Act, 2021 imposes strict restrictions on disclosing customer information without prescribed conditions, but enforcement remains weak. Chapter 14 of the Bangladesh Banks Guideline on ICT Security (4.0) warns about AI risks, including flawed algorithms, biased outcomes, and cyber attacks, However, it is a guideline, not a binding law. The Bangladesh Bank began drafting an integrated AI policy for the banking sector in late 2025, forming a seven-member team to prepare guidelines and announcing plans to develop its own large language model (LLM) to reduce dependence on foreign AI tools. However, the broader policy had yet to be officially published as of November 2026. On November 1, the central bank reiterated that it was working on a separate AI-focused cybersecurity policy for banks and financial institutions.

In June 2026, the central bank instructed its officials not to input confidential or sensitive banking information into AI tools like ChatGPT, Gemini or Claude, citing cross-border data transfer risks. Meanwhile, a study by the Bangladesh Institute of Bank Management found that nearly 60 percent of local banks lack any policy for using AI in cybersecurity.

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Internationally, three cases offer lessons. In Germany in 2023, the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) ruled in *OQ v Land Hessen (SCHUFA)* that an automated credit score constitutes an automated individual decision when a lender relies heavily on it to determine whether to grant credit. For Bangladesh, this means automated credit scores used in loan approvals should be subject to legal safeguards for automated decision-making, including customers' right to understand how these scores influence lending decisions. In 2025 in Austria, the CJEU clarified in *CK v Magistrat der Stadt Wien (Dun and Bradstreet)* that trade secrecy cannot be used as a blanket excuse to deny a customer meaningful information about the logic of an AI decision. The data protection law must close the path for banks to refuse a customer's right to explanation by citing trade secrets. In Poland, Toyota Bank Polska was fined approximately Tk 1.6 crore in 2025 for failing to properly document customer profiling and for not ensuring the independence of its data protection officer. This means mandatory data protection impact assessments must be conducted before AI-driven profiling, and the DPO must report directly to the board.

Three things become clear. First, despite laws and guidelines, practical enforcement and accountability are lacking. Second, citizens often don't know who is taking their data, how long it is kept, or whether it is being used to train AI models. Third, without an independent and empowered supervisory body, laws remain on paper.

There is a path forward. First, banks must stop collecting excessive data, ensure strong encryption and limited access, and conduct regular security audits. Second, data usage terms with third-party technology providers must be clarified. Third, in automated decisions, customers must have the right to an explanation and access to human review. Fourth, Bangladesh Bank must finalise and publish its long-delayed AI policy for the banking sector. And last, digital literacy must be expanded. Mass awareness must be built about keeping OTPs secret, not clicking unknown links, and checking app permissions. A protection framework combining law, technology, and awareness is essential, one where the banking sector becomes modern but citizens' personal data remains intact.

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