

# Vision for a better Bangladesh

A policy roadmap for a new, different government

February 2026



**The Future Institute**

*Developing Winning Strategies for Emerging Nations*



# VISION FOR A BETTER BANGLADESH

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different government

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# Foreword

Bangladesh stands at an important moment in its journey. The choices it makes today about governance, the economy, social policy, and national priorities will shape the country its future generations will inherit. At such a time, leadership must be guided not by impulse or reaction, but by clear vision, sound evidence, and strong values. When governments enter office without detailed, strategic, and evidence-based plans, necessary reforms are delayed, decisions are taken hastily, and policy space is quietly shaped by unelected actors. This weakens democratic accountability and risks disconnecting public policy from the values and priorities of the people.

This is why *Vision for a Better Bangladesh* was developed. This publication is a comprehensive policy roadmap designed to support leadership with clear, practical, and research-driven strategies from day one. It brings together the work of more than twenty experts from six countries on seventeen distinct policy areas, combining international best practice with deep understanding of Bangladesh's social, political, and economic realities. Our approach is rooted not only in data and analysis, but also in enduring moral and Islamic values that emphasise justice, dignity, accountability, and service to the public good.

In this spirit, this document will be published on the Future Institute's website and made available to whichever party forms the next government in Bangladesh. That government will be welcome to adapt, improve, and fully take ownership of its contents. The Future Institute is pleased to grant full permission for the winning party to publish this work in its own name, should it so wish.

We were privileged to receive contributions from a number of very esteemed academics, senior ex-civil servants and military officers, medical professionals, barristers and experts from many different fields. Their experience and insight have been essential in shaping these policies. In particular, we would like to acknowledge and thank: Barrister Ehsan Siddiq, Khondokar Kabirul Islam, Khandaker Rashedul Haque, Nousheen Sharmila Ritu, Muhammad Ubaidul Haque, Prof. Omar Faruque, Dr Manzur Morshed, Abdullah Nazib, Dr Md. Shafiqul Islam, Capt. Moin Ahmed, Mohammed Hossain, Dr Faroque Amin, Tuhin Mozzammel Hossain, Kamal Shikder, Ezziddin Yonis, Dr Ammar Sabouni, Dr Syed Marwan, Prof. Ziauddin Sardar, Prof. Naqibur Rahman, Mohiuddin Ahmed, Colonel Ashraf Al Deen, Barrister Hamid Azad and Abdud Dayyan Mohammad Yunus. We would also like to express our sincere appreciation to Sara Pantuliano and to the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) for their openness, encouragement, and for allowing ODI to host the launch of this important publication. Their support reflects a shared commitment to thoughtful, evidence-based policy and meaningful dialogue.

We offer this work in the hope that it will contribute to a Bangladesh that is just, successful, and confident in shaping its own future.

*Dr Mohammed Abdul Aziz  
Vice-Chair, Board of Advisors  
The Future Institute*

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# Introduction

## Vision for a better Bangladesh: A policy roadmap for a new, different government

The July Revolution of 2024 opened up immense possibilities for Bangladesh. We are no longer limited to merely dreaming about our future; we now have the ability and responsibility to act to transform the country and embark on a journey towards a better, confident and successful future. The overthrow of the previous despotic regime is only the beginning of this collective journey. We have arrived at a moment in our history where we must leave no stone unturned to realise the hopes and aspirations of our youth whose sacrifices resulted in this miraculous revolution. They deserve better than a repeat of what their parents suffered through. People, young and old – indeed the whole nation – are placing their trust on a new government to bring about meaningful change way and shape a viable future for our nation.

The new government must take this trust seriously and consider its duty to be delivery, rather than letting things unfold passively. Its most urgent task is to propel the entire machinery of government, which has for so long been slumbering, into motion. 'Business as usual' cannot be allowed to continue.

The vision we are setting is realistic and transformative, not a philosophical dream or an unrealistic ideal. The public policy proposals we outline are grounded on careful consideration of our nation's history, heritage, culture and religious values and designed to address the complex challenges Bangladesh faces. It aims to ensure that the new Bangladesh after the July Revolution moves forward as a sustainable nation dedicated to honesty, integrity and dignity, and ready for whatever tomorrow has in store for us.

The government must accept the mandate bestowed on it by the people of Bangladesh with humility. It must be determined to move beyond empty promises and the selfish pursuit of power of successive governments. The nation is tired of it. The continuous betrayal of the ruling classes has led to the total loss of faith in the politicians in our country. Mismanagement, corruption and cronyism almost reduced the country to a failed state. While the ruling class and their cronies looted the country's coffers and amassed huge wealth, the people lived in poverty and fear. Such a corrupt disposition, as Adam Smith argued, is 'the great and most universal cause of the corruption of our moral sentiments'. The emphasis in all aspects of the government must be to inculcate and institutionalise a sense of morality, driven by and conscious of values of accountability, honesty and service, with a mission to rebuild a caring, compassionate and self-sufficient Bangladesh.

## Policy Framework

Policies are the essential tools of embarking upon an informed style of governance rather than struggling in the haphazard darkness of trial and error and political expediency. Policy gives the 'how' and 'what' in the craft of governance and set out the substance which can manifest the higher goals pursued by the government.

It is this concept – policy as a tool of better governance – that forms the basis of our policy framework. This includes not only analysing the challenges and the problems that Bangladesh faces, but also taking into consideration the structural advantages, resources and the potential, as well as the likely future possibilities.

## Vision

The core vision on which these policies are crafted is: *to build a better, successful and confident Bangladesh based on respect, justice and dignity, a country that embraces trust, inclusiveness and equality for all its citizens.*

## Seven Sovereignties

Bangladesh today stands at a critical juncture in its history. The country's geographic location as well as geopolitical currents and cross-currents (detailed later in this roadmap) warrant powerful measures to safeguard its independence and the ability to make decisions freely in all spheres. Bangladesh needs policies fit to ensure its total sovereignty: the supreme power or authority to govern itself without external interference.

This policy framework is designed to address on a principle of Seven Sovereignties:

- Political Sovereignty
- Territorial and Security Sovereignty
- Cultural, Educational and Social Sovereignty
- Economic Sovereignty
- Food Sovereignty
- Natural Resources Sovereignty
- Digital and Cyber Sovereignty

### Political Sovereignty

That the country is the supreme authority to make and enforce laws independently and not controlled by another power. The parliament reflects the will of the people of Bangladesh, passing laws without foreign influence.

### Territorial and Security Sovereignty

Bangladesh's control over its geographical boundaries and security. Its power and means to do so includes the armed forces which protect its borders and people from external threats or invasion.

## Cultural, Educational and Social Sovereignty

The ability of Bangladesh to preserve its identity, traditions, and values and protect its culture from being dominated by foreign influence.

## Economic Sovereignty

The country's control over its economic policies, resources, and trade, including the ability to decide how national wealth is produced, distributed, and used, by making independent decisions about taxation, currency, and trade agreements.

## Food Sovereignty

It is the absolute right of people of Bangladesh to define their own food systems, rather than external actors. It is the duty of the government to ensure strategic autonomy in food production, distribution, and consumption. Food must never be allowed to be used as a tool of control against the people of Bangladesh.

## Natural Resources Sovereignty

As a fundamental aspect of statehood Bangladesh must have *permanent sovereignty over natural resources* (PSNR) and the right to regulate and benefit from the natural resources, including water, within its territory. The country has the right to enter into treaties with foreign entities regarding resource management and employ counter measures against externally imposed obstacles and barriers.

## Digital and Cyber Sovereignty

Bangladesh must have full independence from external control regarding the country's digital infrastructure, data, and online information space, through robust cybersecurity and data privacy policies.

## Policies

This empowering vision and multi-dimensional sovereignty can only be achieved and safeguarded with a functional set of policies in every area of governance. The policy agenda presented here aims to address the current problems and requirements of Bangladesh as well its future needs and potential. The policies incorporate measures to cope with a rapidly changing, turbulent period in Bangladesh and takes into account the interconnected and interdependent nature of government. Collectively, they lay the foundation of an inclusive, dynamic and thriving society.

The policy roadmap begins with some of the most fundamental ingredients of governance, without which any policy platform will fail. A strategy to **eliminate widespread corruption** (in the words of *the Financial Times*, "Bangladesh's missing billions, stolen in plain sight") is underpinned by a public campaign to **renew values, integrity and accountability**. This is desperately needed to help heal an atmosphere of inescapable dysfunction which has long

afflicted Bangladeshi society. A dated, unmeritocratic bureaucracy and a judiciary recovering from decades of political manipulation are focused on for our sections on **reforming the justice system, creating a competent civil administration** and **restoring public trust to civilian security forces**.

We then turn to strategies for national growth, starting with an **economic policy** which is strategic, long-term, realistic and wise to the perils of sovereign debt and a new approach to **population and demography** against the background of an ominously steep fall in fertility rates globally, highlighting that births are a blessing and our population is an asset, not a liability.

Looking outward, we present a **foreign policy**, which offers way to navigate a backdrop of a crumbling international order and regional and global rivalries between India, China and the US; and a **bold defence policy** which emphasises a smart, stronger military, fit for a volatile world with no security guarantees; and

Other key areas covered include: an **education policy** which rethinks the purpose of education and offers a more holistic vision, integrating the twin needs of vocational skills and moral development; a compassionate reorganisation of **healthcare provision**; a **forward-looking digital strategy** alive to the possibilities and pitfalls in an age increasingly dominated by AI and cybersecurity; a plan to **address the environmental challenges** faced by Bangladesh, including the spectre of climate change disruption; and a **path to achieving strategic autonomy in food**, with the aim of preventing food ever again being a tool of control of Bangladesh by hostile actors. The last cluster of areas covered in our roadmap relates to **cultural policy** in Bangladesh rooted in our history and traditions, as well as how to foster **inclusivity and respect towards women and members of diverse religions and ethnicities** and a **media policy** alive to the need to protect journalists from political takeover, and to protect the public from poor journalism.

Policies are more than theoretical narratives. They must address issues in a practical way, with a pathway clearly laid out for governments and institutions, whether they ultimately decide to follow it or not. The Future Institute's network of experts in their respective subject areas have produced our roadmap in this spirit. We recognise, however, that it represents only the beginning of the complicated task that lies ahead of the new government, which will need to continuously seek out and develop policies in underexplored areas to help build a truly better Bangladesh.

# **PART ONE**

# **RESTORING INTEGRITY AND TRUST**

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# Eliminating Corruption

## A new approach to anti-corruption

### Summary

- Public life in Bangladesh is undermined by pervasive corruption. Everyday extortion, forced payments, complex licensing, and selective enforcement distort markets, increase costs, and erode public trust. Corruption is systemic, shaped by political and economic incentives, discretionary rules, and entrenched elite bargains.
- Reform must focus on enforceable, predictable, and incentive-aligned systems. The goal is not more laws or symbolic campaigns, but creating conditions in which clean behaviour is easier than corruption and enforcement is credible, transparent, and data-driven.
- The Anti-Corruption Commission must be professionalised, evidence-based, and internally disciplined. Transparent leadership selection, high integrity standards, digital investigations, regional offices with oversight, and public reporting are essential to make enforcement predictable and politically sustainable.
- Complex rules and discretionary processes must be simplified, clarified, and automated. Targeted, bottom-up reforms in high-impact sectors such as licensing, land administration, taxation, and public procurement can reduce opportunities for rent extraction and make compliance feasible.
- Everyday corruption cannot be tackled by force alone. Extortion and local rackets are sustained by fear, discretion, and political protection, but also by weakened moral sanctions and hyper-competitive values that normalise greed and rule-breaking. A national public values campaign must therefore support institutional reform.
- Together, these measures reposition governance as evidence-based, predictable, and politically feasible by aligning incentives, reducing discretionary power, and gradually breaking the cycle of corruption to strengthen trust, efficiency, and development outcomes.



## 1. Corruption in Bangladesh: Systemic Failure

Corruption affects the majority of households in Bangladesh and operates as both a social crisis and a major economic drag. Transparency International Bangladesh's (TIB) National Household Survey 2023 found that 70.9 % of households experienced corruption while accessing essential services such as passports, BRTA licensing, land administration, and law enforcement. Around half of all households paid bribes or were forced to make unauthorised payments, and total bribes across all sectors in 2023-24 were estimated at BDT 10,902 crore (about 1.44 % of the national budget and 0.22 % of GDP).

The economic costs are equally stark. Asset quality reviews by Bangladesh Bank and major audit firms are probing alleged losses of USD 17 billion in banking sector assets linked to lending to politically connected firms. TIB has also documented systematic cost escalation in public projects. In renewable energy projects, for example, collusive syndicates involving officials from the Bangladesh Power Development Board (BPDB), land registration offices, local administration, and intermediaries manipulated land acquisition and compensation processes, generating corruption worth more than Tk 249 crore.

These patterns show that corruption in Bangladesh is not mainly about individual misconduct. It is structural and incentive-driven, embedded in the way power, resources, and enforcement are organised. Institutional political-economy analysis, including work by Mushtaq Khan at the ACE Programme at London's School of Oriental and African Studies, explains corruption as part of the country's political settlement: elites tolerate or participate in rent extraction because it stabilises power, allocates resources predictably, and compensates for weak rule enforcement.

At its core, corruption functions as a system of rent extraction. Public officials, politicians, and business elites capture value that would otherwise accrue to the public through:

- Direct rents (bribes, kickbacks, misappropriation)
- Access rents (preferential contracts, loans, land, licences)
- Political rents (patronage, loyalty, and influence)

Three features of Bangladesh's political settlement shape how corruption operates and why reform is difficult:

- **Elite bargains:** Ruling parties distribute rents to maintain coalitions with bureaucrats and business groups.
- **Limited state capacity:** Institutions such as the ACC and judiciary face constrained investigative and prosecutorial ability.
- **High discretion:** Officials control licensing, procurement, and regulation in ways that enable selective enforcement and rent extraction.

The implication is that corruption persists not because rules are absent, but because enforcement is selective and incentives are misaligned. Reforms fail when they ignore power structures or demand compliance that the state cannot credibly enforce. Effective anti-

corruption strategy must therefore prioritise what can realistically be enforced, focus on high-impact corruption, strengthen the integrity of enforcement institutions, simplify rules to reduce discretion, and sequence reforms politically to build coalitions and credibility rather than aiming for wholesale elimination overnight.

## 2. Why Past Anti-Corruption Efforts Have Failed

Over the past two decades, Bangladesh has seen repeated anti-corruption drives led by government, donors, and civil society. Despite these efforts, corruption remains widespread in both everyday services and large public projects. The reason is not lack of laws or initiatives, but the failure to address political incentives, institutional weaknesses, and enforcement constraints.

A central problem has been the absence of sustained political commitment from ruling elites. Effective reform requires more than formal institutions; it requires willingness to confront networks that benefit from rents. In Bangladesh, dominant political parties, including during long periods of Awami League rule, have been deeply embedded in patronage systems that depend on discretionary access to public resources. Initiatives such as the National Integrity Strategy (2010) introduced codes of conduct and ethical frameworks, but enforcement against politically connected actors was weak. As a result, reforms remained symbolic and did not change entrenched behaviour.

Institutional reform has also fallen short. The Anti-Corruption Commission was created to provide independent investigative capacity, but in practice it has faced political interference, limited resources, and internal integrity problems. It has tended to pursue low-impact cases while avoiding scrutiny of powerful actors, which has undermined its credibility. Legal amendments on whistleblower protection, asset disclosure, and criminal procedure have similarly failed to translate into real enforcement because bureaucratic discretion and judicial constraints make complex cases difficult to prosecute. At the same time, Bangladesh's regulatory system remains overly complex, with overlapping and ambiguous rules across sectors. This encourages widespread violations and turns enforcement into a tool of patronage rather than deterrence.

Donor and NGO-led reforms have struggled for similar reasons. Digitisation of tax administration, e-procurement, and public financial management have improved systems on paper, but TIB has warned that automation in revenue administration has had limited effect because informal practices and bureaucratic incentives remain unchanged. In climate finance, TIB found that more than USD 248 million across 891 Bangladesh Climate Change Trust Fund projects between 2010 and 2024 were affected by irregularities such as inflated costs and collusive tendering. NGOs themselves are also vulnerable to pressure: foreign-funded organisations report bureaucratic interference, unofficial payments, and weak oversight, while large humanitarian programmes, including the Rohingya response, have faced coordination failures and financial inconsistencies.

The lessons are clear. Anti-corruption policy must align with the political economy of power and be carefully sequenced. Integrity and independence of institutions like the ACC must be protected from capture. Regulatory complexity and discretion must be reduced. Donor and NGO efforts must move beyond technical solutions and confront incentive and enforcement realities. These principles point toward bottom-up, targeted, and politically informed reforms, which the next sections develop.

### 3. The Regulatory Trap and Designing Enforceable Reform

#### 3.1 The Regulatory Trap: Complexity, Discretion and Rent Extraction

One of the most persistent drivers of corruption in Bangladesh is the sheer complexity and volume of rules, procedures and administrative controls. When regulations are numerous, vague and inconsistently enforced, they create a perverse incentive structure: almost everyone violates something, enforcement becomes selective, and discretionary power is converted into rent extraction. This is the regulatory trap at the heart of Bangladesh's systemic corruption.

The regulatory system spans construction, taxation, licensing, trade, land administration, procurement and financial compliance. In many sectors, compliance is practically impossible. In construction, for example, the Bangladesh National Building Code sets hundreds of technical standards, while developers must satisfy multiple agencies including RAJUK, city corporations and the Fire Service. Around 70 percent of building permits exceed official timelines, creating delays that are routinely monetised. The consequences are not only corrupt but dangerous, as shown by disasters such as Rana Plaza.

For small and medium enterprises, overlapping licensing, VAT registration and tax filing rules create similar pressure. A 2024 study found that 57 percent of SMEs cited complex tax structures as their main obstacle, 54 percent pointed to trade licence renewal, and 44 percent said regulatory complexity made compliance difficult. In trade and customs, sequential approvals from Customs, the National Board of Revenue and the Ministry of Commerce generate delays that are often resolved through informal payments. In banking and financial compliance, dozens of Bangladesh Bank circulars impose detailed reporting requirements, where minor errors can trigger discretionary inspections or fines.

Across these sectors, the pattern is the same. Rules are excessive and ambiguous, enforcement capacity is limited, and discretion becomes the main currency of power. As Khan (2017) shows, top-down enforcement fails in such contexts because rules are only enforceable when powerful organisations support them. Where influential firms and officials benefit from discretionary treatment, strict compliance has no political backing. Selective enforcement therefore becomes systemic rather than exceptional.

### 3.2 Designing Reform Around Enforceability and Incentives

Past reform efforts have often misunderstood the nature of the problem. Bangladesh already has extensive anti-corruption laws. The issue is not legal absence, but enforceability, credibility and trust. Proposals that focus on ever-stronger powers or sweeping legal changes collapse under resistance or are used selectively. If standards are set unrealistically high, no government can enforce them. If they are too low, they are easily bypassed. Politically feasible reform requires thresholds that allow gradual and credible implementation.

Effective anti-corruption design must therefore start with what can actually be enforced. The first principle is to target high-impact areas where compliance is achievable and social returns are large. Rather than enforcing every clause of the Building Code, regulators should focus first on critical safety requirements. In SME licensing, reforms should prioritise single-portal registration and basic environmental compliance for larger firms, while postponing low-impact administrative rules.

The second principle is to reduce discretion through process design. Discretion is the main mechanism of selective enforcement. Clear procedures, objective criteria and automated systems can sharply limit opportunities for rent extraction. In vehicle registration at the BRTA, for example, digital portals with standardised checks and integrated fee payments reduce face-to-face bargaining. In land registration, digitised records and fixed fee schedules replace opaque valuation and zoning practices with predictable workflows. TIB's evidence from early e-government pilots shows that automation reduces petty bribery by removing discretionary interactions.

The third principle is to focus enforcement on major rent-extraction points rather than low-value nuisance cases. Corruption in large public procurement, land acquisition and major licensing decisions distorts markets and entrenches elite power. For instance, irregularities in renewable energy land acquisition generated Tk 249 crore in rent extraction. These high-value nodes should be digitally monitored and audited, even if petty bribery persists in less critical areas.

### 3.3 Fixing Enforcement: From Discretion to Predictability

Enforcement itself must also change. In Bangladesh, discretion allows two dangerous dynamics: selective targeting of the weak, and weaponisation of rules against rivals or dissenters. At the BRTA and in procurement offices, officials exploit discretionary clauses to extract bribes or favour connected firms (TIB 2023). Predictable enforcement requires automation, risk-based monitoring and transparency.

Digital tools are essential. E-invoicing and automated tax filing allow discrepancies to be flagged without human discretion. E-procurement platforms standardise bidding and create transparent records. Centralised licensing portals reduce face-to-face negotiation. These systems do not eliminate corruption, but they shift enforcement from personal judgement to auditable processes.

Enforcement must also be consistent rather than aggressive. Proposals such as reversing the burden of proof on assets sound tough but are dangerous in weak rule-of-law environments. They invite selective use against unprotected actors while the powerful remain untouched. Illicit wealth must be defined through objective, verifiable standards such as unexplained asset growth relative to declared income. Investigations should focus on large-scale mismatches, not trivial discrepancies that overwhelm capacity and invite abuse.

Randomisation and risk-based audits can further reduce political capture. Random case selection limits targeting. Risk scoring concentrates inspection where potential gain from corruption is highest. Public dashboards make enforcement visible and politically costly to distort.

Taken together, reform must do three things at once: simplify rules, reduce discretion and enforce selectively but credibly. Bottom-up, sector-specific interventions, supported by digital systems and political sequencing, are more effective than sweeping legal drives. By escaping the regulatory trap and redesigning enforcement around feasibility and impact, Bangladesh can make corruption harder, compliance easier and public authority more predictable.

## 4. Reforming the Anti-Corruption Commission

The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) is central to any serious anti-corruption strategy in Bangladesh. The problem is not a lack of formal powers. The ACC already has wide authority to investigate and prosecute. The problem is that these powers operate within a political settlement that encourages selective enforcement, weak internal integrity and institutional capture. Reform must therefore focus not on expanding power, but on governing how that power is used.

Historically, the ACC has been vulnerable to politicised leadership, uneven investigations and weak internal standards. In this context, simply strengthening the ACC risks creating a body that is feared rather than respected. Some proposals of the ACC Reform Commission illustrate this risk. For example, universal whistleblower protection and armed intelligence units sound tough, but they assume levels of capacity, trust and control that Bangladesh does not yet have. Without strong internal discipline, such measures would either become symbolic or be abused.

A reformed ACC should be built around three principles: credibility, integrity and predictability.

- **Credibility** starts with leadership. Commissioners should be appointed through transparent, competitive processes that make political interference visible and costly, such as public advertisements, published shortlists and fixed terms with clear removal criteria. Politics cannot be removed, but it can be forced into the open.
- **Integrity** must begin inside the ACC. Asset declarations, post rotation, internal audits and lifestyle checks should apply to ACC staff first. Recruitment should prioritise

investigators with skills in forensic accounting, financial crime and digital analysis, not general administration.

- **Predictability** means shifting from politically driven cases to evidence-based enforcement. Investigations should begin with data, not rumours or signals from above. Case selection should be driven by anomalies in tax and VAT records, land registries, procurement contracts, customs data and banking transactions. Digital trails should determine priorities, reducing discretion and making selective targeting harder.

Regional presence also matters. Much corruption occurs in land offices, licensing desks and municipal services. The ACC needs professionally staffed regional units, but with strong central oversight to prevent local capture. Local autonomy without integrity controls would simply decentralise corruption.

Finally, public accountability is essential. The ACC should regularly publish data on cases opened, sectors targeted, investigation timelines and prosecutions. This is not about naming individuals. It is about making the institution predictable and visible. Transparency raises the political cost of interference and builds public trust.

In short, the ACC does not need more power. It needs better governance, stronger internal standards and data-driven enforcement. Power without credibility and integrity does not fight corruption. It reproduces it.

## 5. Tackling Everyday Corruption and Strengthening Public Values

For most citizens and small businesses, corruption is experienced not through large contracts but in daily life: extortion, forced “donations”, and racketeering in markets, transport, construction sites, and local offices. These practices make economic life costly and unpredictable, normalising the idea that power, not rules, governs access to basic services. Extortion is often framed as fees or subscriptions but enforced through threats or denial of services, supported by local political networks and segments of law enforcement. Over time, repeated exposure makes bribery feel routine, weakening social sanctions and reporting.

Extortion thrives where enforcement is weak, discretion is high, and local political protection exists. Officials and intermediaries exploit discretionary powers over permits, inspections, and public spaces. Local rackets are embedded in micro-level political settlements, financing patronage and control. Heavy-handed enforcement is often counterproductive, risking selective application, violence, and further abuse.

### 5.1 Disrupting rackets

Tackling everyday corruption requires changing incentives and improving information. Key steps include:

1. **Transparency and predictability:** Publish official fees, timelines, and service standards in markets, licensing offices, and police stations.
2. **Target organisers:** Focus investigations on the political and financial nodes of rackets rather than low-level collectors.
3. **Support collective action:** Protect market associations, transport unions, and business groups that report together to raise political costs for retaliation.

## 5.2 Social norms and moral barriers

Everyday corruption persists because moral sanctions have weakened. Bribery is tolerated as survival strategy, reporting is rare, and ethical behaviour is often punished by the system. Hyper-competitive, zero-sum pressures further normalise rent-seeking. When wealth and power are celebrated without regard for legality, corruption is reframed as ambition rather than wrongdoing.

## 5.3 Public values as a reform pillar

Law and enforcement alone cannot succeed without legitimacy. Citizens must trust that rules are fair, power is accountable, and honesty is not punished. A national public values campaign can rebuild trust, raise the social cost of corruption, and make ethical behaviour respected and visible:

- **Leadership by example:** Political leaders and officials must visibly uphold ethical standards through asset disclosure, conflict-of-interest rules, and transparent discipline.
- **Integrity campaigns:** Use media and community platforms to highlight principled officials, business owners, teachers, and citizens, challenging "ends justify the means" thinking.
- **Education and youth engagement:** Integrate ethics, civic responsibility, and empathy into school curricula, madrasa education, and community service initiatives.
- **Workplace ethics and recognition:** Encourage codes of conduct, training, and public recognition for integrity.
- **Safe reporting channels:** Strengthen whistleblower protections with confidentiality, follow-up, and credibility.
- **Community involvement:** Engage neighbourhood groups, religious institutions, and civil society to restore informal accountability.

## 5.4 Linking values to broader reform

Success does not mean eliminating all extortion overnight. It means fewer informal payments, predictable services, reduced political protection for rackets, and stronger willingness to report abuse. Combined with simplified rules, predictable enforcement, and credible institutions, a public values campaign makes honesty easier, safer, and respected, supporting sustainable systemic change.

## 6. Political Economy: Managing Resistance and Sequencing Reform

Anti-corruption reform in Bangladesh fails not from lack of ideas, but because corruption is politically useful. Rents finance organisations, sustain loyalty networks, and stabilise the political system. Any serious reform therefore threatens entrenched power, and resistance is structural rather than accidental. Effective strategy must start from this political economy: the state is not neutral, and enforcement is not automatic.

### 6.1 Who resists and why

Corruption benefits political actors, bureaucrats with discretionary authority, businesses reliant on informal deals, and local intermediaries who profit from extortion. Resistance usually appears as delays, selective implementation, or dilution of reforms rather than open opposition. Big-bang reform fails because it threatens too many interests at once, exceeds enforcement capacity, and relies on formal rules without political backing.

### 6.2 Building coalitions and sequencing reform

Reform survives when it creates new beneficiaries. Potential allies include export-oriented firms needing predictable rules, SMEs harmed by extortion, professional civil servants, urban citizens, and young entrepreneurs reliant on digital systems. Sequencing reform strategically, starting with enforceable, high-impact areas, builds credibility and political support. Early wins, such as digitising licensing, automating tax and customs processes, or cleaning up land records, create data trails and institutional habits that are difficult to reverse. Overpromising must be avoided: gradual, visible improvements build trust and prevent cynicism.

### 6.3 Protecting the vulnerable

Reform can disrupt informal coping mechanisms. As bribery and extortion are constrained, some groups may temporarily lose access to services. Legal and digital alternatives must be functional before removing informal channels. Small traders, low-income households, and other vulnerable groups must be safeguarded from retaliation.

### 6.4 Phased roadmap

#### *First 100 days*

- Suspend or simplify the most abused procedures in land registration, BRTA services, business licensing, and customs.
- Launch flagship digital reforms automating high-discretion processes (SME tax filing, permit applications, property record searches).
- Require asset declarations for all ACC staff and senior enforcement officials.
- Establish a central ACC data and analytics unit and publish operational priorities.
- Communicate that reform is about predictability and fairness, not punishment.

#### *First two years*

- Expand digitalisation across land, taxation, procurement, and customs for interoperable audit trails.
- Simplify and rationalise licensing, construction, and environmental regulations.

- Introduce risk-based and automated enforcement to replace discretionary inspections.
- Professionalise ACC leadership selection and regional offices with strong central oversight.
- Shift ACC investigations to data-driven case selection.
- Build coalitions with business associations, professional bodies, and civil society to defend reform.

*First five years*

- Integrate real-time auditing, risk scoring, and cross-agency data matching.
- Fully professionalise the ACC as a financial crime and corruption analytics agency.
- Implement enforceable political finance transparency and senior official asset disclosure regimes.
- Strengthen coordination between tax authorities, banks, and regulators.
- Expand citizen-facing digital services to reduce dependence on brokers.
- Develop long-term institutional capacity in forensic accounting, digital investigation, and regulatory analytics.

By combining political economy awareness, phased sequencing, early wins, and measurable enforcement, reform can gradually shift incentives, build constituencies, and make corruption riskier while rewarding compliance.

## 7. Conclusion

Corruption in Bangladesh is not merely a matter of individual wrongdoing. It is embedded in a system where power, rents, rules, and survival are tightly linked. Excessively complex laws and weak institutions make rule-breaking normal, enforcement selective, and corruption systemic rather than exceptional.

Effective reform must start from realism. Laws that cannot be enforced, agencies that cannot maintain integrity, and strategies that ignore political incentives only produce symbolic commitments, uneven enforcement, and new opportunities for rent-seeking. Central to this is the regulatory trap: too many vague, discretionary rules create universal violations, which in turn make enforcement selective and turn the law into a tool of fear and favour. Breaking this cycle requires fewer, clearer rules, predictable enforcement through digital systems and risk-based monitoring, and institutions built around evidence, professionalism, and transparency.

Institutional reform alone is insufficient. Everyday corruption, including extortion, forced payments, and local rackets, persists because it is embedded in local power structures and normalised by social pressures. A culture that celebrates success regardless of how it is achieved reframes greed as ambition, making corruption rational rather than shameful.

Anti-corruption reform must therefore also rebuild public values. Enforcement gains legitimacy only when citizens believe that rules are fair, power is accountable, and honesty is safe. Leadership by example, ethical education, public recognition, safe reporting channels, and community engagement are not optional extras; they are essential to creating the social and political foundation for lasting change.

When reform is carefully sequenced, targeted at high-impact areas, and designed around Bangladesh's actual state capacity, corruption can be reduced in ways that are durable and politically feasible. Clean behaviour must become easier than corrupt behaviour, and the costs of abuse must outweigh its rewards. Only then can trust, economic growth, and effective governance be restored.

# Judicial Reform

## Restoring independence and accountability to our judiciary

### Summary

- Bangladesh's judiciary is formally independent but functionally compromised. Politicised appointments, supersession of Chief Justices, corruption in the Bar, selective case handling, and under-resourced courts have eroded public trust, weakened legal accountability, and allowed executive influence to shape judicial outcomes.
- Reform must restore institutional integrity, impartiality, and predictability. The goal is not merely formal independence, but a judiciary that operates transparently, enforces the rule of law consistently, and provides equitable access to justice for all citizens.
- Appointments and leadership must be insulated from political influence. The seniority convention should be reaffirmed, deviations publicly justified, and a Judicial Appointments Commission established with representation from the judiciary, Bar, and civil society to ensure merit-based, transparent, and credible elevation processes.
- Judicial accountability requires clear, fair, and open mechanisms. The Supreme Judicial Council should codify procedures, continue investigations post-resignation, publish inquiry summaries, and report annually on complaints, disciplinary outcomes, and institutional performance.
- Court operations and access must be strengthened. Digitised case management, standardised administrative procedures, expanded alternative dispute resolution, permanent benches in divisional headquarters and specialised courts for high-volume case types will reduce delays, improve transparency, and make justice accessible to rural and marginalised populations.
- The legal profession must be depoliticised and regulated. Bar Council and Supreme Court Bar Association elections should be free from party influence, ethical standards enforced, corrupt practices investigated, and merit-based licensure and promotion maintained to ensure professional integrity.
- Together, these reforms establish a judiciary that is independent, transparent, and capable of administering justice impartially. Strengthening institutional structures, procedural safeguards, and operational efficiency will restore public confidence, protect rights, and reinforce the rule of law in Bangladesh.



## 1. Introduction

In Bangladesh, the courtroom has too often mirrored the battlefield of politics. Over the past three decades, judicial institutions have been repeatedly drawn into partisan conflict, security campaigns, and regime survival strategies. The result is a justice system in which courts are no longer widely seen as neutral forums for the protection of rights, but as arenas where power is exercised, contested, and sometimes abused.

The symptoms of this crisis are clear. Chief Justices have been superseded or removed amid controversy. High Court judges have resigned while under investigation, without transparent accountability. Constitutional and politically sensitive cases, including the abolition of the caretaker government system and prosecutions related to the 21 August 2004 grenade attack, have produced outcomes widely perceived as shaped by partisan interests rather than consistent legal reasoning. At the lower levels, litigants routinely confront delay, corruption, and procedural opacity, while mass case-filing campaigns and night-time hearings have turned the courts into instruments of political pressure. Together, these practices have hollowed out the constitutional promise that law should bind rulers as well as the ruled.

This is not simply a problem of individual misconduct. It is a structural failure. Executive influence over judicial appointments and discipline, politicisation of the Bar, weak internal accountability mechanisms, and an opaque court administration have combined to create a system in which independence exists more on paper than in practice. When judges are selected, promoted, or sidelined through informal political channels, the entire judicial hierarchy becomes vulnerable to pressure. When misconduct is handled in secrecy, public confidence collapses. When access to justice depends on money, connections, or party affiliation, legality becomes a privilege rather than a right.

The crisis of the judiciary is inseparable from the broader crisis of democratic governance in Bangladesh. A state that cannot guarantee neutral courts cannot credibly promise free elections, accountable government, or meaningful rights. Conversely, any serious attempt to rebuild democratic life must begin with the restoration of judicial credibility.

Reform must go beyond rhetoric. Bangladesh does not lack constitutional language about judicial independence; it lacks institutions that make that language real. The sections that follow examine five core pillars of the justice system: appointments and independence; judicial accountability; politicisation and abuse of law; court administration and transparency; and the governance of the legal profession.

Rebuilding trust in the courts will not be quick. But it is unavoidable. Without a judiciary that is visibly independent, procedurally fair, and institutionally credible, no government, however well-intentioned, will be able to govern through law rather than through force, favour, or fear.

## 2. Historical Background

The judicial system of Bangladesh has deep roots in the legal frameworks of British India. Formal courts were first introduced in the presidency towns of Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay in the early 18th century, culminating in the establishment of the Supreme Court of Judicature at Fort William in 1774. These institutions combined civil and criminal jurisdiction and laid the foundation for a hierarchical judiciary guided by English common law principles. The Indian High Courts Act of 1861 further reorganised the system, creating High Courts with original and appellate jurisdiction across the subcontinent.

Following the 1947 partition, the Dhaka High Court was established under the High Court of East Bengal Order, assuming jurisdiction over the region formerly covered by the Calcutta High Court. Under the 1956 Constitution of Pakistan, the Supreme Court of Pakistan became the apex authority over East and West Pakistan, including Dhaka. After independence in 1971, the Constitution of Bangladesh formally established the Supreme Court, comprising the Appellate Division and the High Court Division, and tasked it with upholding constitutional governance, protecting fundamental rights, and supervising lower courts.

During the early years following independence, judges were widely respected for their impartiality and commitment to the rule of law, and (apart from a small number of cases arising from martial law periods) the judiciary was largely permitted to operate independently. This began to change from the mid-1990s. With the introduction of the caretaker government system in 1996, under which the last retired Chief Justice headed the interim administration, judicial appointments and career trajectories became politically sensitive. Successive governments increasingly sought to shape the composition of the higher judiciary, placing pressure on the convention of seniority in appointing Chief Justices and allowing political considerations to influence judicial promotion and sidelining. These shifts were accompanied by growing executive involvement in appointments, heightened sensitivity around politically charged cases, and a weakening of informal norms that had once protected judicial independence. Together, they laid the groundwork for the institutional problems examined in the sections that follow.

## 3. Judicial Accountability and the Supreme Judicial Council

The legitimacy of any judiciary depends not only on the independence of its judges but also on the credibility of the mechanisms that hold them accountable. In Bangladesh, the Supreme Judicial Council (SJC), constitutionally empowered under Article 96 to investigate judicial misconduct or incapacity, is intended to serve as the cornerstone of judicial accountability. In practice, however, the SJC has struggled to function effectively, leaving transparency and public confidence severely undermined.

### 3.1 High-Profile Investigations and Transparency Deficits

In the aftermath of the mass uprising against the Awami League regime in July 2024, significant protests continued to unfold across Bangladesh. On 16 October 2024, a large

group of demonstrators gathered outside the premises of the Supreme Court of Bangladesh. They called for the removal of judges perceived to be aligned with the former ruling party, the Awami League, from the High Court Division. In response to these public demands, twelve judges of the High Court Division were placed on compulsory leave.

While some subsequently resigned (such as Justices Shahed Nuruddin, Ashish Ranjan Das, and Md Akhtaruzzaman), others, including Justices Md Aminul Islam and SM Masud Hossain Dolon, were not confirmed as permanent judges. Justices Khizir Hayat and Khandaker Diliruzzaman were removed by presidential order following SJC recommendations, yet the public was never informed of the allegations or evidence underlying these decisions. Investigations into Justices Muhammad Khurshid Alam Sarkar, Naima Haider, Sheikh Hassan Arif, and SM Maniruzzaman remain ongoing, again with no disclosure of the nature of the complaints or evidence considered.

These gaps are not new. In 2019, three High Court judges were suspended over corruption allegations but continued to receive full salaries and benefits for years without formal disciplinary proceedings. In 2025, former Chief Justice ABM Khairul Haque was arrested for allegedly manipulating Supreme Court judgments, including politically sensitive cases. Similarly, Justice Muhammad Khurshid Alam Sarkar was removed citing “incapacity,” without explanation.

Such cases illustrate that even the apex of the judiciary is not immune from controversy, but mechanisms for transparent, fair adjudication of misconduct remain severely underdeveloped. When such critical matters are handled without transparency, public confidence in the judiciary and its oversight mechanisms is inevitably weakened. The principle that *justice must not only be done but must also be seen to be done* is especially relevant in matters involving judicial accountability.

Greater transparency would not only enhance the credibility of the Council but also strengthen its role as an effective guardian against judicial misconduct. When the public sees that complaints are handled fairly, openly, and without bias, they are more likely to trust the system and come forward with credible concerns. Ultimately, the legitimacy of the judiciary depends on the perception that no individual, regardless of position, is above the law. Ensuring openness in the Council’s work is therefore critical to safeguarding both the rule of law and the credibility of the justice system in Bangladesh.

### 3.2 Institutional Weaknesses

Several structural weaknesses exacerbate the problem of accountability:

1. The SJC operates largely in private, with no mandated publication of inquiry summaries or procedural steps. While confidentiality may be necessary during investigations, the absence of even high-level transparency undermines trust.
2. There is no codified standard of proof, timeline, or procedural rule for handling judicial misconduct. Notices, opportunities for representation, and evidence assessment remain inconsistent across cases.

3. Judges who resign during an investigation currently evade formal accountability, allowing perceived or actual misconduct to go unaddressed while retaining reputational and financial benefits.
4. The President, who acts on SJC recommendations, has sometimes exercised discretion in ways that appear influenced by political considerations, further eroding the separation of powers<sup>89</sup>.

### **3.3 Implications for Public Confidence**

The cumulative effect of these weaknesses is a judiciary whose credibility is compromised in the eyes of citizens. Allegations of misconduct appear tolerated or concealed, judges may perceive immunity from consequences, and the public is increasingly inclined to seek informal or extrajudicial resolutions. The opacity of the SJC therefore does not merely shield individual judges; it corrodes institutional legitimacy, making judicial independence appear synonymous with impunity. High-profile controversies, including the arrest of former Chief Justice ABM Khairul Haque, underscore how the lack of robust accountability mechanisms threatens both the perception and reality of impartial justice.

### **3.4 Recommendations**

- Mandate publication of inquiry summaries setting out allegations, procedures followed, and general findings, using a tiered disclosure model that protects confidentiality during preliminary inquiries but ensures public reporting once formal proceedings begin and conclude.
- Codify investigation procedures covering notice, representation, standards of proof, and timelines.
- Close the resignation loophole by requiring investigations to continue after resignation or retirement.
- Require annual reporting by the SJC on complaints received, inquiries opened, and outcomes.
- Oblige public reasoning whenever a judge is removed, stating the legal grounds and basis of decision.
- Limit presidential discretion by legally requiring that action on SJC recommendations strictly follow the Council's findings.
- Introduce public hearings in appropriate cases, subject to due-process and reputational safeguards.
- Align SJC practices with international best-practice models from other common law jurisdictions.

## **4. Appointment and Supersession of Chief Justices**

The authority and legitimacy of the judiciary depend heavily on how its leadership is selected. In Bangladesh, the appointment of the Chief Justice has historically followed the convention of seniority within the Appellate Division, a principle intended to insulate judicial leadership from political bargaining and to preserve internal coherence, morale, and

impartiality. Over the past two decades, however, this convention has been repeatedly breached, allowing executive discretion to shape the highest judicial office in ways that undermine both institutional integrity and public confidence.

#### **4.1 Supersession as a Political Tool**

Since the early 2000s, multiple Chief Justices were appointed over more senior colleagues, often following contentious or politically sensitive rulings:

<b>Serial</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Start of Term</b>	<b>Superseded Judges</b>	<b>Notes</b>
<b>13th</b>	Khondokar Mahmudul Hasan	23 Jun 2003	Md Ruhul Amin  Mohammad Fazlul Karim	Early example of executive influence in appointments
<b>14th</b>	Syed J. R. Mudassir Husain	23 Jan 2004	Md Ruhul Amin  Mohammad Fazlul Karim	Reinforced perception of political influence over succession
<b>16th</b>	M. M. Ruhul Amin	1 Jun 2008	Mohammad Fazlul Karim	During military-backed caretaker government period
<b>17th</b>	Md. Tafazzul Islam	23 Dec 2009	Mohammad Fazlul Karim	During military-backed caretaker government period
<b>19th</b>	A. B. M. Khairul Haque	1 Oct 2010	Md Abdul Matin  Shah Abu Nayeem  Mominur Rahman	Controversial junior appointment  Widely perceived as politically motivated reward by Awami League following Haque's critical remarks against BNP and its founder in his judgment declaring the Fifth Amendment to the Constitution unconstitutional
<b>20th</b>	Md. Muzammel Hossain	18 May 2011	Shah Abu Nayeem  Mominur Rahman	Continued executive discretion overriding seniority
<b>22nd</b>	Syed Mahmud Hossain	2 Feb 2018	Md Abdul Wahhab Miah	Superseded for dissenting judgments in politically sensitive cases (International Crimes Tribunals and Thirteenth Amendment)
<b>23rd</b>	Hasan Foez Siddique	30 Dec 2021	Muhammad Imman Ali	Superseded for dissenting opinion in Thirteenth Amendment case

## 4.2 Consequences for Judicial Independence

Supersession has profound effects beyond symbolism. Judges aware that promotion depends on political loyalty rather than legal reasoning are more vulnerable to pressure and self-censorship. Senior judges lose authority when bypassed, weakening internal discipline and collegiality, while younger judges calibrate their behavior to align with anticipated preferences of political actors. Because Chief Justices control bench formation, case assignment, and administrative governance, politically contingent appointments render the entire court system susceptible to manipulation, transforming leadership from a source of institutional guardianship into a tool of executive influence.

## 4.3 Structural Vulnerabilities

Three features enable this pattern to persist:

1. **Absence of a binding appointment framework:** There is no independent body responsible for recommending candidates for Chief Justice based on merit, integrity, and seniority.
2. **Executive discretion without justification:** Deviations from seniority are not accompanied by public reasons, creating opacity and suspicion.
3. **Lack of institutional consultation:** Neither the judiciary nor the Bar has a formal role in scrutinising leadership appointments.

Together, these weaknesses convert what should be a professional succession process into a politically negotiated outcome.

## 4.4 Recommendations

- Reaffirm the seniority principle as a binding constitutional or statutory rule for appointing Chief Justices.
- Create a Judicial Appointments Commission with representation from the judiciary, Bar, and civil society to recommend senior appointments.
- Require public disclosure of selection criteria and written justification whenever seniority is bypassed in any judicial appointment.
- Establish transparent criteria based on competence, integrity, and experience for elevation to the Appellate Division and Chief Justice.
- Insulate bench formation powers from political influence by codifying internal rules under judicial control.
- Prohibit political affiliations from being considered in judicial promotions or leadership appointments.

## 5. Judicial Corruption and Politicisation in Courts

A judiciary can be formally independent yet functionally captured. In Bangladesh, the courts have increasingly served not only as forums for legal adjudication but also as instruments of political strategy. Through selective prosecution, mass case-filing, expedited proceedings,

and subtle or overt pressure on judges, the legal system has been deployed to marginalise opposition actors while shielding those aligned with the ruling party. This politicisation has been accompanied by persistent allegations of corruption at multiple levels of the court system, eroding public confidence and undermining the rule of law.

### 5.1 Political Influence in Court

High profile, politically sensitive cases reveal the extent to which legal processes have been subordinated to political objectives:

- **Former Chief Justice A. B. M. Khairul Haque** was arrested on 24 July 2025 under Sections 219 and 466 of the Penal Code, relating to misconduct by a public servant and forgery/fabrication of documents. The charges allege that he manipulated a Supreme Court judgment concerning the caretaker government system. The 2011 verdict, passed by a narrow 4–3 majority, abolished Bangladesh's caretaker system, destabilising a neutral electoral framework and conferring a significant political advantage on the then-ruling Awami League. Critics argue that the judgment facilitated the perpetuation of power without impartial electoral oversight. The timing of the full verdict's publication shortly before his retirement, and the grant of valuable land to him, further fueled public concerns about judicial integrity and possible political influence.
- **21 August 2004 grenade attack case:** Initial investigations under the Awami League government were widely criticised for shielding politically connected figures. High-profile opposition leaders, including Tarique Rahman and Lutfozzaman Babar, were targeted but later acquitted by the High Court Division following the change in government in August 2024. These reversals demonstrate how politically influenced investigations can distort the pursuit of justice.
- **A.T.M. Azharul Islam case:** A senior leader of Jamaat-e-Islami was acquitted by a seven-member Supreme Court bench, which found that the original war crimes conviction lacked proper evidentiary assessment and violated fundamental principles of criminal jurisprudence. The verdict highlighted the risks of politically motivated prosecutions resulting in miscarriages of justice.
- Similarly, prosecutions under the **International Crimes Tribunal** against opposition figures under the Awami League have raised questions about selective application of justice, with domestic and international observers noting deficiencies in procedural fairness and evidentiary consistency.
- **Former Chief Justice Surendra Kumar Sinha** resigned under pressure from military intelligence after a controversial Supreme Court verdict restored the Supreme Judicial Council, curtailing the executive's control over judicial oversight.

### 5.2 Mass Case-Filing and Procedural Abuse

From 2009 to September 2023, 141,636 cases were filed against 4,926,494 leaders and activists of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and its affiliated organisations, according to BNP

records. Similarly, over 14,000 cases targeted Jamaat leaders, alongside 9,500 against Chhatro Shibir members, resulting in more than 90,000 activists and leaders imprisoned during this period. Authorities conducted seven night-time court hearings over just two months, rushing trials ahead of elections.

These cases were often minor or politically motivated. Many were processed through rapid remand orders and limited access to counsel, transforming courts from venues of adjudication into instruments of intimidation. Judges operating under political pressure, or fearing career consequences, were incentivised to facilitate such practices, reinforcing the perception that legality was applied unevenly and that the courts served power rather than principle.

Beyond political influence, routine corruption further undermines daily court operations. Litigants and lawyers report informal payments to secure case listings, adjournments, favourable orders, or access to files. These practices distort outcomes, delay justice, and entrench inequality before the law. Corruption intersects with politicisation: those with political connections can bypass both legal and financial barriers, while ordinary citizens face compounded disadvantages.

The cumulative effect of these dynamics is corrosive. Citizens lose faith in legal remedies, political competition shifts from ballots to courts and coercion, and judicial authority becomes contingent on alignment with ruling interests rather than constitutional mandate. Without systemic reform, the courts risk being seen as arenas of political control and transactional justice rather than as neutral arbiters of law.

## 5.1 Recommendations

- Criminalise and prosecute political interference in judicial decision-making.
- Establish a Judicial Ombudsman to receive complaints of corruption, intimidation, procedural abuse, or administrative misconduct, including missing files.
- Digitise case management to reduce discretionary control over listings, files, and adjournments, including implementing e-filing, digital cause lists, and electronic case-tracking systems.
- Enforce strict timelines for publication of all judgments, especially politically sensitive cases, to improve transparency and public confidence.
- Abolish night-time court practices except in narrowly defined emergency circumstances.
- Protect judges and lawyers who resist political pressure through security of tenure and whistleblower safeguards.
- Introduce confidential peer-review assessments of judges based on integrity, conduct, and quality of judgments, to provide an objective basis for disciplinary action and professional development.
- Introduce randomised bench assignment to limit manipulation of case outcomes.

## 6. Bar Council and Legal Profession Integrity

The Bangladesh Bar Council (BBC) is the statutory body responsible for regulating the legal profession, enrolling advocates, enforcing professional discipline, and upholding ethical standards. In theory, it is meant to function as an independent guardian of legal integrity. In practice, however, the Bar Council and associated bodies such as the Supreme Court Bar Association (SCBA) have become deeply politicised and vulnerable to corruption. This has undermined professional ethics, weakened internal accountability, and eroded public trust in the justice system.

### 6.1 Politicisation of the Bar

The politicisation of the Bar Council is now one of the most visible features of Bangladesh's legal landscape. Elections to both the Bar Council and the SCBA increasingly resemble national political contests rather than professional exercises in self-governance. Panels aligned with the major political parties compete for control, with campaigns focused less on legal reform and more on party loyalty. National newspapers routinely describe these elections as "miniature versions" of parliamentary elections, reflecting the broader polarisation of the country.

The 2024 Bar Council election illustrates this trend. An Awami League-backed panel won a landslide victory over a BNP-Jamaat-supported slate, a result widely interpreted as mirroring national political alignments rather than differences in professional vision. As a consequence, leadership of the Bar is increasingly viewed through a partisan lens rather than as an expression of independent professional judgment.

Executive interference has further compromised institutional autonomy. In May 2025, the Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs constituted an ad hoc Bar Council for a one-year term and appointed the Attorney-General as its ex officio Chairman. This effectively placed the Bar's regulatory leadership under direct executive influence. Many members of the legal profession viewed the move as a serious encroachment on the independence of a body that is supposed to regulate lawyers without political pressure.

Transparency International Bangladesh has also warned of entrenched partisanship across the justice sector. In its 2023 assessment, TIB identified the political capture of the Bar as a growing problem, describing the Bar Council as one of the most politicised institutions in the legal system. The result is a professional environment in which lawyers aligned with minority political blocs are more likely to face discrimination in appointments, licensing, and disciplinary proceedings. Merit and ethics are increasingly subordinated to political loyalty.

### 6.2 Corruption and Malpractice

Closely intertwined with politicisation is corruption within the legal profession. This manifests in bribery, nepotism, and manipulation of professional processes such as advocateship examinations, enrolment, and court procedures.

A particularly stark example emerged in March 2024, when five candidates were banned for five years after being caught offering Tk 500,000 in bribes to an examiner during the Bar

Council's advocateship examination. The incident exposed serious vulnerabilities in professional certification and raised questions about how easily entry into the profession can be bought.

Corruption is not confined to examinations. Investigative reporting in 2025 revealed widespread bribery in Supreme Court procedures, with lawyers alleging that court staff routinely demand Tk 300–500 simply to move case files and Tk 20,000–25,000 for processing bail or appeal documents. Practitioners reported that files often "go missing" unless payments are made. Such practices distort outcomes, delay justice, and entrench inequality before the law.

There have also been instances of direct ethical breaches by licensed lawyers. In one notable case, the Bar Council suspended the licence of a district-level lawyer affiliated with Jamaat-e-Islami after he attempted to bribe a judge to secure bail in a rape case. While the disciplinary response was appropriate, it also demonstrated how deeply corruption can penetrate the profession.

Administrative malpractice further compounds these problems. Reports have shown that the Bar Council has, at times, enrolled advocates without administering the mandatory examinations, prompting legal challenges to the enrolment process. These irregularities raise serious concerns that personal connections or political considerations influence professional certification decisions.

Taken together, these patterns reveal weak institutional governance. Ambiguous enrolment procedures, political patronage, and tolerance for bribery create a vicious cycle: merit is discouraged, corrupt networks are empowered, and the public is alienated from the legal system. Over time, this erodes not only the credibility of the Bar but also the legitimacy of the judiciary itself.

#### 6.4 Recommendations

- Depoliticise Bar Council and SCBA elections through independent election oversight and restrictions on party endorsements.
- Limit executive control by repealing ad-hoc appointments and ensuring the Bar remains self-governing.
- Enforce strict ethical standards for advocates, including conflict-of-interest rules and mandatory ethics training.
- Conduct regular audits and transparent financial reporting to strengthen accountability.
- Investigate corruption and malpractice through an independent disciplinary committee empowered to act impartially.
- Standardise the enrolment process for advocates, ensuring mandatory exams and merit-based certification.

## 7. Access to Justice and Operational Efficiency

A judiciary cannot be credible if citizens cannot access it efficiently or fairly. In Bangladesh, systemic inefficiencies, geographic disparities, and under-resourced courts have created significant barriers to justice, particularly for rural and marginalised populations.

Bangladesh faces a chronic backlog of cases. As of 2025, over 4.3 million cases were pending across the judicial system, with the vast majority in subordinate courts. Prolonged delays in adjudication undermine public confidence, create opportunities for informal payments, and incentivise extrajudicial dispute resolution. High-profile and politically sensitive cases are sometimes expedited, while ordinary disputes languish for years, reinforcing perceptions of inequity and selective justice.

The administrative functioning of courts suffers from under-staffing, inconsistent procedures, and delays in judgment publication. Judges are frequently overburdened, and court staff shortages compound inefficiencies. Many filings, case listings, and record-keeping remain manual, creating opportunities for errors, delays, and discretionary influence. Alternative dispute resolution (ADR) mechanisms, which could relieve pressure on formal courts and expedite justice, are unevenly implemented and underutilised.

Further, access to courts outside divisional headquarters is highly constrained. Many districts lack permanent High Court benches, requiring litigants to travel long distances for appeals. At the upazila and union level, the number of functioning courts is insufficient to meet demand. Rural populations face not only logistical challenges but also higher exposure to informal payments and exploitation by middlemen, further limiting meaningful access to justice.

The combination of backlog, limited access, and operational inefficiency has wide-reaching consequences. Ordinary citizens experience justice as slow, costly, and uncertain, weakening the social contract and incentivising informal settlements. Corruption and political influence flourish in opaque, overburdened systems. Inefficiency undermines public confidence not only in individual courts but in the judiciary as a whole.

## 7.5 Recommendations

- Establish permanent High Court benches in all divisional headquarters to reduce geographic inequities.
- Increase the number of judges and court staff in subordinate courts to alleviate overburdened dockets.
- Digitise case management and filing systems to reduce delays, improve record-keeping, and limit discretionary influence.
- Develop and expand Alternative Dispute Resolution mechanisms, including mediation and arbitration, with formal recognition and enforcement.
- Standardise administrative procedures for case listing, judgment publication, and court operations to increase transparency and predictability.
- Introduce specialised courts for commercial, family, and land disputes to expedite resolution of high-volume case types.

## 7. Phasing Reform

Restoring judicial credibility in Bangladesh requires a deliberate, phased approach that balances immediate, visible reforms with deeper institutional change. The following plan synthesises recommendations across judicial independence, accountability, politicisation, operational efficiency, and Bar governance.

### 7.1 First 100 Days

- Mandate publication of SJC inquiry summaries for ongoing and recent cases, including general findings and procedures.
- Reaffirm the seniority convention in judicial appointments and justify any deviations publicly.
- Freeze night-time court proceedings except in emergencies and implement randomised bench assignments in politically sensitive cases.
- Establish a Judicial Ombudsman to receive complaints of judicial corruption, intimidation, or procedural abuse.
- Depoliticise Bar Council elections by enforcing independent oversight and restricting party endorsements.
- Begin immediate digitisation of case management for high-profile and politically sensitive cases to reduce discretionary control.

### 7.2 Next 2 Years

- Codify investigation procedures for the SJC, including notice, representation, standards of proof, and timelines.
- Close the resignation loophole by continuing investigations post-retirement or resignation.
- Create a Judicial Appointments Commission with representation from the judiciary, Bar, and civil society.
- Introduce transparent criteria for appointments to the High Court, Appellate Division, and Chief Justice positions, covering competence, integrity, and experience.
- Conduct regular audits of the Bar Council and SCBA, including enrolment processes, financial management, and disciplinary enforcement.
- Expand access to justice by establishing permanent divisional High Court benches and increasing staffing in subordinate courts.
- Implement e-judiciary systems for case filing, tracking, and judgment publication.

### 7.3 Next 5 Years

- Strengthen the independence of the judiciary and Bar through constitutional or legislative reform, reducing executive discretion in appointments and oversight.
- Institutionalize peer review and performance evaluation mechanisms for judges, linking accountability to transparent standards.
- Expand alternative dispute resolution frameworks to relieve court backlog and enhance access to justice in rural areas.

- Introduce ethics, conflict-of-interest, and continuing professional education requirements for all advocates.
- Embed a culture of transparency by requiring annual public reporting from the SJC, Bar Council, and courts on performance, case statistics, and disciplinary outcomes.
- Monitor and evaluate reform implementation continuously, creating feedback loops to refine policies and ensure durability.

## 7. Conclusion

The Bangladeshi judiciary faces a convergence of structural, political, and operational challenges. From politicised appointments and supersessions of Chief Justices, to opaque accountability mechanisms, corrupt Bar governance, court inefficiencies, and uneven access to justice, the system struggles to uphold the constitutional promise of impartial, reliable, and accessible adjudication.

These problems are not merely individual or episodic; they reflect deep institutional weaknesses. Executive influence over appointments, secrecy in misconduct investigations, pervasive political and financial pressures, and inadequate resources collectively create a judiciary that is formally independent on paper but functionally compromised in practice. Citizens, lawyers, and judges alike experience a system in which fairness is contingent, predictability is limited, and legal remedies can be delayed, distorted, or denied.

Yet reform is possible, and essential. The evidence presented in this paper points to targeted, actionable interventions. Strengthening the Supreme Judicial Council, codifying and insulating judicial appointments, depoliticising and regulating the Bar, modernising court administration, expanding access, and implementing safeguards against political interference can restore credibility, impartiality, and efficiency. Reform must be both immediate and sustained: certain measures, such as transparency in judicial investigations or digital case management, can yield rapid improvements, while deeper cultural and institutional changes, such as re-establishing the seniority convention and depoliticising Bar elections, require consistent oversight and commitment over years.

The stakes extend far beyond courts themselves. A judiciary that is perceived as impartial, accountable, and capable protects not only individual rights but also democratic governance, the rule of law, and social stability. Conversely, without decisive action, continued politicisation, corruption, and inefficiency will perpetuate public distrust, erode democratic accountability, and make law a tool of power rather than a foundation of justice.

Restoring trust in Bangladesh's judiciary demands a coherent strategy that combines legal reform, institutional strengthening, procedural transparency, and cultural change. The recommendations outlined in this report offer a roadmap for immediate and long-term action. With political will, institutional cooperation, and sustained public oversight, it is possible to rebuild a judiciary that fulfills its constitutional mandate, safeguards rights, and commands the confidence of all citizens.



# Civil Service Reform

## Creating a competent civil administration

### Summary

- The Bangladesh civil service faces entrenched challenges that limit its ability to design, coordinate, and implement policies. Historical centralisation, elite dominance, prolonged donor influence, weak analytical capacity, fragmented training, and politicisation have collectively constrained professional autonomy, evidence-based decision-making, and institutional stability. Reform must strengthen capacity, professional norms, and governance to enable an effective, accountable, and context-sensitive bureaucracy that develops policy rather than merely implementing it.
- Policy and analytical capacity is weak, limiting evidence-based decision-making. The civil service should develop in-house policy and research units and reform training to include applied policy analysis, economic appraisal, negotiation, and inter-sectoral coordination, linked to career progression, with mentorship and peer-learning to preserve institutional memory.
- Professional norms are eroded and promotions often do not reflect competence. Promotions and career advancement should be linked to demonstrated competence, training completion, and analytical contributions, while legally enshrining civil service neutrality through a Civil Service Code and transparent recruitment and promotion criteria.
- Political interference and patronage undermine accountability and institutional trust. Governance reforms should combine stronger auditing, reporting, and whistleblower protections with transparent, rules-based appointment systems for senior posts, including the use of a Public Appointments Commission for fixed-term, merit-based leadership roles.
- These reforms aim to build a professional, meritocratic, and evidence-informed civil service capable of coherent policy design and effective implementation, improving governance, equity, and service delivery for citizens across Bangladesh.



## 1. Introduction: Context and Evolution of the Civil Service

The contemporary challenges of the Bangladesh civil service are best understood as the cumulative outcome of historical legacies, the post-independence political settlement, and prolonged dependence on externally driven development interventions. Bangladesh inherited a highly centralised, rule-bound, and elite-oriented administrative structure from the colonial period (Jahan 2006; Davis and McGregor 2000), which was only partially reformed after independence (Sarker 2004). Rather than effecting a decisive shift toward a developmental and policy-leading bureaucracy, successive governments retained a system prioritising control and loyalty over professionalism and institutional autonomy. This continuity has contributed to persistent perceptions of the civil service as an obstacle to responsive governance and as a legacy institution with limited adaptive capacity (Jahan and Shahan 2012).

Since the 1970s, the civil service has operated within a donor-dominated environment where major development partners promoted New Public Management-style reforms and supplied technical assistance and policy frameworks. External aid became a primary source of policy ideas, expertise, and financing, particularly during periods of fiscal stress and structural adjustment (Rahman 2017). Analyses of this period highlight that such externally shaped reform agendas often undermined domestic policy ownership, discouraged indigenous research and strategic planning, and reinforced procedural compliance at the expense of institutional innovation and autonomy (Rahman 2012; Sarker and Zafarullah 2019).

Politicisation has further shaped the civil service's orientation by embedding partisan influence in key administrative functions. Appointments, promotions, and postings have frequently been determined by political considerations rather than strictly meritocratic criteria, weakening professional autonomy and neutrality. Independent assessments of public administration under recent transitional governments describe widespread instability, frequent reshuffles, and a lack of coherent leadership that have compounded organisational unease and hindered effective governance (Transparency International Bangladesh 2025; Dhaka Tribune 2026).

Efforts to reform public administration have been elevated recently, most notably through the Public Administration Reform Commission established by the interim government. The Commission's comprehensive report articulates structural reforms aimed at improving accountability, professionalism, and organisational efficiency, including proposals for ethical safeguards such as a Civil Service Code to protect bureaucratic neutrality, reconfiguring cadre structures to enhance equity and skills alignment, and rationalising ministries and divisions to improve coordination and focus. However, implementation has been uneven and politically mediated. While reform rhetoric has intensified, actual administrative actions have often prioritised short-term political management such as large-scale reshuffles and enforced exits over systematic institutional change. This divergence reflects the continued dominance of political logic over technocratic reform, and helps explain why many Commission recommendations remain only partially realised (Public Administration Reform Commission 2025; Transparency International Bangladesh 2025; Dhaka Tribune 2026).

Against this backdrop, the core problems facing the civil service can be grouped into three interrelated domains: (i) institutional and policy dependency, (ii) professional and capacity constraints, and (iii) political interference and patronage. Historical legacies and contemporary dysfunctions have combined to entrench structural weaknesses that shape both the constraints and opportunities for meaningful reform.

## 2. Political Interference and Patronage

### 2.1 Analysis

The Bangladesh civil service has long been subject to systematic politicisation. Successive regimes have used bureaucratic appointments, transfers, and disciplinary mechanisms to consolidate political power, transforming the bureaucracy into an administrative extension of the ruling elite rather than an autonomous institution serving the public interest. Bureaucrats are frequently deployed during electoral processes and in regulatory bodies to influence political outcomes, undermining institutional neutrality and professional autonomy (Quddusi 2013; Jacobs 2009; Zafarullah 2025).

This political instrumentalisation has fostered a culture of patronage-based governance, where loyalty to political actors is rewarded with postings, promotions, and career advancement. Such practices are closely linked to rent-seeking and corruption, as civil servants, politicians, and business actors become mutually dependent. Weak rule of law, selective enforcement, and ineffective accountability mechanisms allow these practices to persist, further eroding public trust and administrative effectiveness (Kochanek 2000; Mollah 2011; Quddusi 2013; Zafarullah 2025).

Efforts to reform the Bangladesh bureaucracy have been a recurring policy ambition since independence, yet the gap between reform rhetoric and outcomes remains substantial. The Mujib government (1972–1975) proposed the National Pay Commission (1973) to modernise pay structures, but senior officials resisted changes that curtailed colonial-era perks and amenities. Under Zia (1975–1981), the introduction of 28 cadres and the Senior Services Pool prioritised generalist over specialist officers, disheartening skilled bureaucrats and opening avenues for corruption. Ershad (1982–1990) attempted decentralisation to the sub-district level, yet these reforms largely reinforced the ruler's control rather than empowering citizens. After the restoration of democracy in 1991, successive governments neglected reforms initiated by predecessors, focusing instead on political competition (Shah, Bukhari and Rahim 2020). These patterns illustrate that repeated failures reflect not only technical limitations but also structural factors, including entrenched political factionalism, clientelist networks, and the prioritisation of regime interests over professional norms. Internal struggles for power have consistently shaped policy and reform outcomes, rather than purely technical considerations.

Historically, scholars have noted that material rewards alone do not reliably ensure professional ethics. Non-material interventions such as professional pride, recognition, and a sense of institutional responsibility have been more effective in promoting integrity and

ethical behaviour among officials (Maniruzzaman 1979; Shah, Bukhari and Rahim 2020). However, the persistence of patronage networks and political interference continues to undermine these mechanisms.

All major reform efforts since independence have faced recurring stumbling blocks (Maniruzzaman 1979; Sarker 2004; Shah, Bukhari and Rahim 2020):

- Inadequate political commitment, with regimes prioritising survival and clientelist interests.
- Limited state capacity to enforce rule of law and maintain institutional discipline.
- Bureaucratic resistance to reforms that threaten entrenched privileges.
- Intractable corruption permeating multiple sectors of government.
- Factionalism within the bureaucracy exploited by regimes to divide and control officers.
- Donor-driven reform packages that amount to cosmetic changes and fail to address local realities.

Together, these factors create a self-reinforcing cycle: political interference fosters patronage, which discourages meritocracy and weakens professional norms, in turn undermining the effectiveness of reform initiatives. Understanding these dynamics is critical to designing feasible strategies for civil service reform that move beyond symbolic measures toward sustainable institutional change.

## **2.2 Recommendations**

Insulating the civil service from partisan politics is a necessary precondition for reform. Clear legal provisions are needed to restrict overt political activity by civil servants, protect tenure, and ensure transparent recruitment and promotion processes. Such laws, however, have limited impact in the absence of credible enforcement mechanisms. Effective reform therefore requires not only legal change but also independent oversight bodies with real sanctioning power (Ahsan 2010; Jacobs 2009; Zafarullah 2025).

Merit-based recruitment and career planning remain central to restoring professionalism. Systems that link promotion to performance, training, and demonstrated competence are more likely to attract and retain skilled officers. Introducing transparent criteria and reducing discretionary political influence are key mechanisms for restoring professionalism (Ferdous, 2015; Zohara, 2017; Ehsan, 2008; Aminuzzaman, 2013; Shishir and Sakib 2025).

Civil service reform is likely to face resistance from entrenched political and bureaucratic interests. Opposition often comes from actors who benefit from existing patronage networks, as well as from external partners accustomed to weak state oversight. Reform strategies therefore need to be incremental, politically informed, and supported by broad coalitions involving senior bureaucrats, political leadership, and civil society. Without sustained political commitment, even well-designed reforms are unlikely to succeed (Kochanek 2000; Tabassum et al. 2025; Masud 2013; Sarker 2008; Khaled 2025; Khan 2003; Sarker 2004; Quddusi 2013).

Summary:

- Legally enshrine civil service neutrality through a Civil Service Code, tenure protection, and transparent recruitment and promotion criteria.
- Establish a Public Appointments Commission to oversee senior appointments and fixed-term tenures.
- Build coalitions across parties, senior bureaucrats, and civil society to support incremental reform with political buy-in.
- Anti-patronage mechanisms: Strengthen auditing, reporting, and whistleblower protections to detect and deter rent-seeking.

### 3. Professional and Capacity Constraints

#### 3.1 Weak Policy and Analytical Capacity

The limited analytical and research capacity of the civil service directly constrains the design and implementation of policies. There is a notable absence of strong in-house policy research units, and empirical evidence is rarely used systematically in decision-making. As a result, civil servants often lack the technical confidence and institutional support needed to critically assess donor proposals or generate viable, context-sensitive policy alternatives. This knowledge asymmetry strengthens donor leverage and perpetuates patterns of dependency, limiting national ownership of policy decisions and constraining long-term strategic planning (Rahman 2012; Zafarullah and Banik 2016; Zhang and Bhattacharjee 2023). Research on evidence-informed health policymaking in Bangladesh suggests that policymakers are more likely to use evidence that aligns with global priority frameworks or is readily accessible to them, whereas gaps in locally generated data and research limit the influence of context-specific evidence on policy design and implementation. In the absence of strong local evidence, external datasets and global models often shape policy, crowding out the development of national analytical capacity (Dodd et al. 2019).

#### 3.2 Training Systems and Professional Development Gaps

While multiple training institutions and programmes formally exist, they are often overly theoretical, weakly linked to career progression, and poorly aligned with national development priorities. Training institutes are frequently staffed by officers sidelined from core decision-making roles, undermining their credibility and effectiveness. There are notable gaps in competencies such as policy analysis, economic appraisal, negotiation with donors, and inter-sectoral coordination. Training programmes rarely address these skills systematically or in an applied manner. As a result, civil servants are underprepared to operate effectively in a complex policy environment dominated by powerful external and domestic actors (Parvin 2019; Ehsan 2008; Habib and Rubby 2022). These gaps are compounded by fragmented career development structures, where learning opportunities are not consistently integrated with promotion or posting decisions.

#### 3.3 Erosion of Professional Norms

Politicisation has historically and structurally eroded professional norms within the Bangladesh civil service. Bureaucratic careers are often shaped by factional alignments,

patronage networks, and political considerations, rather than strictly meritocratic criteria. Promotions, postings, and transfers have frequently been influenced by regime priorities, which undermines the development of a stable, professional bureaucracy capable of implementing evidence-based policies (Mollah 2011; Rashid 2014).

This structural politicisation discourages initiative and fosters a culture of compliance, as officers learn that adherence to political directives often carries more weight than technical competence. It also affects institutional memory, as frequent transfers and politically motivated assignments disrupt continuity in policy implementation and weaken the cumulative knowledge base within ministries (Rahman 2023).

Addressing the civil service's capacity constraints requires comprehensive reforms in training, analytical support, and performance management. Weaknesses in professional development, in-house policy research, and integrity frameworks limit evidence-based decision-making and reduce policy ownership, underscoring the need for systemic strengthening of these functions (Ehsan 2008; Rahman 2018; Turan and Rahman 2025; Sarker et al. 2017).

### **3.4 Implementation and Coordination Capacity**

Past reform cycles in Bangladesh have often failed not because policies were flawed, but because administrative execution was uneven and inter-agency coordination weak. Overlapping mandates, fragmented accountability, and political interference have routinely undermined cross-ministry initiatives. Strengthening institutional architecture is therefore critical to improve the civil service's capacity to implement complex policies.

### **3.5 Recommendations**

#### *Strengthening Policy Capacity and Professionalism*

- Develop in-house policy and research units within ministries to provide locally generated evidence and analytical support, with collaborations with domestic academic institutions.
- Reform training curricula to include applied policy analysis, economic appraisal, negotiation, and inter-sectoral coordination linked to career progression.
- Establish mentorship and peer-learning schemes to strengthen institutional memory and reinforce professional norms.
- Link professional development to performance by incorporating training completion, demonstrated competence, and analytical contributions into promotion and career progression criteria.
- Recognition of professional ethics: Institutionalise non-material incentives such as awards, public recognition, and career credit for integrity and evidence-based performance.

### *Enhancing Implementation and Coordination*

- Establish a National Economic Commission (NEC) or equivalent high-level technocratic body to align decisions with national priorities, monitor reform progress, resolve inter-ministerial conflicts, and ensure evidence-based policymaking.
- Introduce a Prime Minister's Delivery Unit to track key performance indicators, identify bottlenecks, and enforce timelines, drawing on proven international models.
- Build transparent, rules-based mechanisms for cross-agency coordination, integrating these units with existing ministries and planning authorities to reduce discretionary decision-making and improve policy implementation.

Together, these reforms aim to build a professional, evidence-informed, and coordinated civil service capable of effectively implementing national policies and leading context-sensitive development initiatives.

## **4. Donor Dominance and the Erosion of Policy Ownership**

### **4.1 Analysis**

Bangladesh's policy process has long been shaped by external development partners, who often act as agenda-setters through pre-packaged policy frameworks, conditional financing, and technical assistance that align more closely with global templates than domestic priorities. This form of donor dependency has systematically constrained domestic policy ownership, with bureaucrats frequently positioned as implementers rather than designers of policy. Mechanisms such as donor-driven project formats, parallel monitoring systems, and the widespread use of external consultants have limited the civil service's capacity to develop in-house expertise, analytical skills, and long-term strategic planning (Zafarullah and Huque 2001; Rahman and Quadir 2018; Talukdar, Islam and Ferdaus 2022; Jamil 1998).

The consequences of this dependency are evident in the reactive nature of policy processes in Bangladesh. Civil servants are often compelled to respond to immediate crises or donor-driven priorities rather than pursue integrated, long-term development goals. Short project cycles and fragmented interventions undermine policy coherence, continuity, and the state's ability to engage in proactive, evidence-based policymaking.

Health sector policy offers a clear example of these dynamics. Evaluations of the health sector in Bangladesh show that external aid constitutes a large share of health financing and therefore strongly shapes priority setting and program design. While donor funding has contributed to important advances in immunisation and maternal and child health, research on evidence-informed policymaking in Bangladesh also finds that global priorities and donor frameworks such as the Millennium and Sustainable Development Goals have driven policy agendas, sometimes at the expense of developing a coherent, nationally owned policy process that balances multiple health needs and evidence streams (Behague et al. 2009; Shiffman and Sultana 2013; Uddin et al. 2013).

More broadly, externally framed benchmarks such as the SDGs, while providing a comprehensive development framework, can reinforce donor influence in ways that are not fully aligned with Bangladesh's institutional capacities or locally defined policy priorities. Goals framed as universal, such as gender equality, non-discrimination, and universal education, are often implemented through generic models without sufficient adaptation to local values and realities. This misalignment can exacerbate fragmentation, reduce domestic ownership, and place additional burdens on civil servants tasked with implementing initiatives for which national structures and data systems are underprepared.

Taken together, these patterns demonstrate that donor-driven frameworks, even when well-intentioned, can limit the civil service's ability to lead a coherent, context-sensitive policy agenda. Observations from the Public Administration Reform Commission report reinforce this conclusion, highlighting weakened policy ownership, fragmented planning, and the absence of strong in-house analytical capacity across ministries, including health (Azizuddin 2011; Public Administration Reform Commission 2025). Strengthening domestic policy leadership and analytical capacity is therefore essential to ensure that externally supported reforms align with national priorities and institutional realities.

## 4.2 Recommendations

Developing a coherent national framework for aid negotiation and management would allow the government to assess the strategic value of proposed assistance and align it with domestic priorities. Strong central coordination and clear rules governing donor engagement are essential to restoring policy ownership (Rahman, Sadath and Giessen 2016).

- **Strengthen domestic policy leadership:** Establish in-house policy units within key ministries to generate context-sensitive research and reduce over-reliance on donor-provided models.
- **Institutionalise evidence-based planning:** Develop systematic mechanisms to integrate local data, academic research, and citizen feedback into national policy processes.
- **Enhance coordination of donor interventions:** Create a centralised framework for aid alignment to ensure projects support national priorities and minimise duplication.
- **Capacity-building for negotiation and planning:** Train civil servants in economic appraisal, policy analysis, and donor negotiation to enable more effective ownership of externally supported initiatives.
- **Strategic adaptation of global frameworks:** Tailor benchmarks and frameworks from NGOs and international organisations to local administrative capacities and societal norms, including culturally sensitive implementation of gender, education, and health initiatives.

## 5. Conclusion

The Bangladesh civil service faces intertwined structural and institutional challenges that limit its ability to design, coordinate, and implement policies effectively. Historical legacies of

centralisation and elite control, coupled with prolonged donor influence, have constrained domestic policy ownership and reinforced dependence on external models and expertise. Weak analytical capacity, fragmented training systems, and the erosion of professional norms further restrict evidence-based policymaking, while political interference and patronage continue to undermine neutrality, meritocracy, and institutional stability.

Addressing these challenges requires a holistic reform strategy. Strengthening professional capacity through in-house policy research, applied training, mentorship, and performance-linked career development is essential. At the same time, institutionalising merit-based appointments through a Public Appointments Commission, enhancing accountability mechanisms, and insulating the bureaucracy from partisan influence will help restore professional norms.

Reform efforts that integrate capacity-building, professionalisation, and effective implementation mechanisms, while remaining sensitive to political realities, provide the most realistic pathway to a capable, accountable, and context-sensitive civil service capable of driving Bangladesh's development agenda.

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# Civilian Security Forces Reform

## Strengthening Accountability and Restoring Public Trust

### Summary

- Bangladesh has one of South Asia's largest civilian security systems, with immense potential to protect citizens, uphold the rule of law, and support national stability. Yet politicisation, corruption, and impunity weakened moral legitimacy, turning parts of the police and intelligence services from public guardians into instruments of partisan power and eroding public trust.
- Reform must shift policing from control to service. The goal is not more force, but better authority: restraint, professionalism, and accountability grounded in constitutional rights and moral responsibility, so that people can live without fear and sleep in peace.
- Corruption and politicisation are the system's binding constraints. Recruitment, promotion, pay, and postings must be fully merit-based and insulated from political interference, while the Police Commission must be restructured to prevent institutional capture and ensure real independence.
- Use of force must be governed by a civilian doctrine, not colonial law or warlike frameworks. A new Civilian Use-of-Force Code should prioritise de-escalation, necessity, and proportionality, supported by independent investigation of all serious incidents and strict limits on lethal and military-style equipment.
- Oversight must be civilian, independent, and protected by parliament. The National Human Rights Commission and a new Independent Police Investigations Directorate should audit, investigate, and publicly report on abuse without fear or favour, with financial and legal autonomy from the executive.
- Community policing must become the backbone of public safety. Rooted in local social structures, it should replace coercion with cooperation and rebuild trust through daily engagement and problem-solving.
- Together, these reforms reposition security forces as a national asset for justice, social order, and dignity.



## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Bangladesh's Civilian Security Forces

Bangladesh possesses one of the largest and most extensive civilian security and law enforcement systems in South Asia. Properly governed, these institutions have immense potential to protect citizens, uphold the rule of law, and support national stability, development, and democratic governance.

At their best, civilian security forces are not instruments of fear but pillars of public trust. They deter crime, resolve disputes, protect vulnerable communities, respond to emergencies, and safeguard constitutional order. When professionally led and politically neutral, they are among the state's most valuable public assets.

Bangladesh's civilian security architecture includes several distinct institutions with different mandates:

- **Bangladesh Police:** The Police are the primary law enforcement agency responsible for maintaining internal security, investigating crime, and preserving law and order nationwide. With 220,000 officers across districts, metropolitan areas, and specialised branches (Criminal Investigation Department, Detective Branch, Special Branch, Traffic Police, Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime Unit), the Police form the backbone of everyday public safety.
- **Rapid Action Battalion (RAB):** RAB is a specialised, multi-force unit composed of around 12,000 police, military, and paramilitary personnel. It focuses on serious crime, counter-terrorism, and high-profile investigations. When used lawfully and professionally, such units can strengthen the state's ability to deal with organised crime and violent threats.
- **Bangladesh Ansar and Village Defence Party (VDP):** Ansar and VDP together constitute the world's largest auxiliary and volunteer-based paramilitary force, with over 6 million members. They play a critical role in rural protection, community security, disaster response, and election duties, especially in areas where regular police presence is limited.
- **Special Security Force (SSF):** The SSF is an elite unit responsible for the physical protection of the President, Prime Minister, and other VVIPs. It consists of a few hundred carefully selected military and police personnel and plays a key role in ensuring constitutional continuity and state stability.
- **Civilian Intelligence Agencies:** Key civilian intelligence bodies include the National Security Intelligence (NSI) and the Special Branch (SB) of the Police. Their mandate is to assess national security threats, political and extremist risks, and foreign intelligence concerns, and to provide early warning to civilian authorities.

Together, these institutions represent one of Bangladesh's most important national resources. If properly governed, insulated from partisan politics, and anchored in

constitutional principles, they can protect democracy, enable economic growth, and ensure that citizens live without fear.

## 2.2 The Right to Live Without Fear

In a healthy society, people should be able to sleep in peace, secure in the knowledge that the state exists to serve and protect them, not to intimidate or control them. Yet in recent years Bangladesh has witnessed a profound breakdown in this relationship. Civilian security institutions were not merely weakened; they were politicised, corrupted, and weaponised to consolidate authoritarian power rather than uphold justice. Instead of acting as guardians of public safety, sections of the police and intelligence services became instruments of coercion, repression, and impunity.

The Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances found that several key paramilitary and civilian agencies – including the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), Detective Branch (DB), Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime Unit (CTTCU), National Security Intelligence (NSI), and Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) – were complicit in state-sanctioned human rights violations during the Awami League regime. These agencies, along with certain military bodies such as Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI), played distinct yet complementary roles in expanding the state's coercive capacity to suppress political opposition and dissent. While civilian intelligence bodies such as NSI and police Special Branch provided operational and informational support, law enforcement units including RAB and the Police were directly involved in unlawful arrests, secret detention, torture, and enforced disappearances. Collectively, these actions enabled the detention, torture, and disappearance of an estimated 1,850 individuals, as documented by the Commission.

Beyond enforced disappearances, the Bangladesh Police and specialised units such as the DB, SB, CID, and RAB have also been implicated in widespread extrajudicial killings, often justified under the pretext of counter-terrorism and anti-drug campaigns. In November 2019, Amnesty International reported that at least 466 people were allegedly killed during the 2018 "war on drugs."<sup>1</sup> Ain o Salish Kendra has documented at least 1,926 extrajudicial killings in so-called "crossfire" incidents during the fifteen-year rule of Sheikh Hasina.<sup>2</sup> The lethal use of force against protesters during the July 2024 uprising further exposed the arbitrary power and deep impunity enjoyed by law enforcement agencies over the past decade.

These patterns did not emerge because Bangladesh lacks laws or institutions. On paper, there are already legal frameworks intended to regulate police conduct and prevent abuse of power. The real problem is corruption, politicisation, and institutional capture, which have blocked implementation and destroyed public trust. Without restoring moral legitimacy, accountability, and independence in the security sector, no political, social, or economic reform can succeed.

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<sup>1</sup> Amnesty International. (2019) *Killed in "Crossfire": Allegations of Extrajudicial Executions in Bangladesh in the Guise of War on Drugs*.

<sup>2</sup> Hasan. M. (2024) "At least 1,926 killed extrajudicially in 15 years of AL govt". Prothom Alo.

This paper therefore argues that the next government must place reform of civilian security forces at the heart of national renewal. It outlines a reform agenda aimed at ensuring that law enforcement in Bangladesh is as it should be: professional, not partisan; accountable, not immune; and community-centred, not coercive, so that citizens can once again live without fear.

## 2. Tackling Corruption and Politicisation of Security Agencies

### 2.1 Analysis

Under the Awami League's regime, civilian security and law enforcement agencies were increasingly drawn into partisan politics through recruitment and promotion practices that rewarded loyalty over merit, integrity, and professionalism. As a result, the ruling party effectively became the arbiter of "legitimate force," conferring upon law enforcement agencies unlawful jurisdiction and coercive authority to suppress political opposition and dissent.

This transformed the police and other security bodies from neutral servants of the public into instruments of partisan power. When officers are rewarded for obedience to political patrons instead of service to citizens, corruption becomes systemic. It is not merely a financial problem; it destroys discipline, distorts incentives, and breaks the moral contract between the state and society. No reform in use of force, human rights, or professionalism can succeed unless corruption and politicisation are addressed directly.

The Police Reform Commission has outlined several recommendations, including enhanced training on human rights, ethics, and standard operating procedures (SOPs). These are valuable but insufficient on their own. Training must be embedded into the structures that govern promotion, posting, and transfer, so that integrity and competence, rather than political conformity, determine career progression. At the same time, inadequate pay and poor welfare conditions continue to incentivise bribery and abuse of authority, making honest service economically difficult for many officers.

In this context, the Police Commission is a crucial institution for ensuring the independence and impartiality of the police. The Police Commission Ordinance, gazetted on 9 December 2025, was intended to prevent past malpractices of corruption and the erosion of accountability. However, the Ordinance has been widely criticised for conceptual and structural loopholes that risk institutional capture and further entrenchment of executive control.

Under the Ordinance, the five-member Commission is to include a retired Supreme Court judge as Chair, a retired district magistrate, a retired Additional Inspector General of Police, a university professor, and one expert with at least fifteen years' experience in human rights and good governance. Members are to be selected through a search committee comprising a judge of the Appellate Division (nominated by the Chief Justice), the NHRC Chair, the BPSC Chair, the Cabinet Secretary, the Home Secretary, and two parliamentary representatives.

However, the dominant role of the Home Ministry and senior bureaucrats in this process undermines the very independence the Commission is meant to secure. The Ordinance does not adequately define or operationalise “independence,” nor does it address the risks of capture through the Law Ministry, Home Ministry, or senior police officials.<sup>3</sup> This creates a clear conflict of interest and a major risk that the Cabinet and Home Secretaries will control appointments in line with ruling party interests. For similar reasons, the internal public complaints system remains vulnerable to political manipulation and organisational bias.

Without structural safeguards against capture, the Police Commission risks becoming another instrument of control rather than a guardian of public accountability. Independence must not only be declared in law; it must be engineered into appointment rules, budgets, and reporting obligations. Without this, the Commission cannot protect good officers from political pressure or bad officers from accountability.

## 2.2 Recommendations

### *Recruitment, promotion and incentives*

- Reform recruitment and promotion systems so they are fully merit-based and insulated from political interference
- Link promotions, postings, and transfers to ethics, service record, and professional training
- Embed human rights, ethics, and SOP training into all performance evaluations
- Reform police pay and welfare to reduce vulnerability to bribery and political pressure
- Make honest service economically viable for officers and their families
- Reward integrity, discipline, and service to the public

### *Preventing capture of the Police Commission*

- Amend the Police Commission Ordinance to reduce the Cabinet Secretary and Home Secretary to non-voting or advisory roles
- Introduce public, parliamentary confirmation hearings for shortlisted commissioners
- Define legal independence, operational independence, and financial independence in law
- Establish transparent and non-partisan criteria for commissioner selection
- Provide the Police Commission with a protected budget approved by Parliament

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<sup>3</sup> Transparency International Bangladesh. December 2025. *The police commission ordinance is an eyewash at best.*

### 3. Use of Force and Misconduct: From Coercion to Restraint

#### 3.1 Analysis

There are several existing legal and administrative mechanisms in Bangladesh intended to address police misconduct, including custodial and non-custodial torture and the unlawful use of force. Legal provisions such as the Police Officers Ordinance 1976, the Police Regulations, Bengal 1943, and the Government Servants Rules 1985 provide procedures for initiating disciplinary action against police officers.<sup>4</sup>

On paper, these frameworks appear comprehensive. In practice, however, implementation has been weak and inconsistent. Disciplinary processes are conducted internally, creating a built-in conflict of interest: senior officers are often reluctant to hold subordinates accountable, especially when abuses occur under their command or with their knowledge. This has allowed a culture of impunity to take root.

Bangladesh's policing framework also remains anchored in colonial-era laws such as the Criminal Procedure Code 1898 and the Police Act of 1861. These laws were designed primarily to maintain order through coercive authority in an imperial context, not to protect citizens' rights in a democratic society. Their provisions on use of force, dispersal of assemblies, and police powers grant wide discretion to executive authorities without strong safeguards for necessity, proportionality, or accountability.

The Police Reform Commission has proposed a "five-step plan of force" for mob control, drawing on the Criminal Procedure Code 1898, Police Act 1861, Bengal Police Regulations 1943, and UN Peacekeeping Force Policy. While the reference to UN peacekeeping doctrine signals an intention to align with international standards, its relevance to domestic civilian policing is limited. UN peacekeeping policies are designed for conflict and post-conflict environments involving armed actors and multinational forces operating under special mandates. They are not designed for routine public order management in civilian contexts.

UN doctrine prioritises minimum use of force and protection of civilians, which are normatively valuable principles. However, directly transplanting peacekeeping use-of-force frameworks into domestic policing risks conceptual confusion. Police in Bangladesh are civilian law enforcement officers accountable to constitutional and criminal justice systems, not combatants operating in warlike conditions.

Recent events, especially the July 2024 protests, demonstrated how quickly law enforcement escalated to lethal force even when not under serious threat. This reflects a culture of domination rather than protection. A more effective approach is to develop a context-specific, civilian use-of-force framework grounded in constitutional rights, moral restraint, and public accountability, prioritising de-escalation, negotiation, and independent review of all serious incidents. This framework should treat lethal force as a last resort, not a routine policing tool.

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<sup>4</sup> United Nations Committee Against Torture. (July 2019). *Common core document forming part of the reports of State parties: Bangladesh*.

### 3.2 Recommendations

#### *Civilian use-of-force framework*

- Develop a new Civilian Use-of-Force Code rooted in constitutional rights and civilian policing principles
- Establish a clear graduated force continuum from presence and dialogue to last-resort force
- Require mandatory scenario-based training and certification in de-escalation and crowd psychology
- Require strict tests of necessity and proportionality at every stage of force

#### *Weapons, tactics, and equipment*

- Ban the routine deployment of military-grade weapons for crowd control
- Restrict lethal weapons to exceptional circumstances involving imminent threat to life
- Introduce clear operational limits on riot-control equipment and ammunition

#### *Transparency and evidence protection*

- Introduce compulsory body-worn cameras for frontline officers
- Establish independent oversight of data storage and access
- Create legal protections against tampering, deletion, or misuse of footage

## 4. Independent Oversight and Accountability

### 4.1 Analysis

Internal disciplinary systems fail because they are designed to protect the institution rather than the public. When investigations are conducted by the same hierarchy that authorised, tolerated, or ignored abuses, accountability becomes impossible. Senior officers have strong incentives to shield subordinates, especially when violations occur under their command or with their knowledge.

True accountability therefore requires external civilian oversight that is independent of both political authorities and security elites. This protects not only citizens, but also professional officers from unlawful orders and political coercion. In Bangladesh, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), currently being restructured under the interim government, has the potential to play a central role as such an oversight body. However, this is only possible if the NHRC is led by genuinely non-partisan and credible individuals who are protected from political pressure.

At present, both the NHRC and the Police Commission risk becoming decorative institutions rather than real counterweights to abuse. If appointments are controlled by the executive, and if budgets and staffing remain dependent on ministries they are meant to oversee, these bodies cannot function independently.

An independent NHRC should have a formal supervisory and review mandate over the Police Commission's investigative functions. It should be able to audit investigations involving serious human rights violations, review case outcomes for compliance with due process and rights standards, and receive complaints about investigative bias, inaction, or abuse of discretion. Requiring the Police Commission to submit regular public reports to the NHRC would introduce an external civilian layer of accountability and reduce the risk of organisational capture.

At the same time, the Police Commission Ordinance should establish an independent investigation department staffed by civilian investigators. This body should be empowered to receive complaints directly from the public, collect evidence independently of the police chain of command, and refer cases directly to prosecutors or courts.

South Africa's Independent Police Investigative Directorate (IPID) offers a useful comparative model. Formed as part of post-apartheid reforms, IPID investigates alleged criminal offences by members of the South African Police Service and Metro Police.<sup>5</sup> It operates alongside the police but is structurally separate and civilian-led. However, recent legislative proposals in South Africa have sought to centralise the appointment of IPID's Executive Director under the control of the police minister and cabinet, weakening parliamentary oversight.<sup>6</sup> This demonstrates the central lesson: without parliamentary protection, even well-designed oversight bodies can be captured by the executive.

## **4.2 Surveillance, Technology and Citizen Rights**

Modern policing increasingly relies on surveillance technologies: CCTV, digital data collection, and intelligence databases. If properly used, these tools can improve public safety, enable rapid investigation, and deter crime. However, without clear legal frameworks, transparency, and citizen awareness, surveillance risks becoming a tool of abuse, privacy violations, and political manipulation.

## **4.2 Recommendations**

### *Strengthening the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC)*

- Appoint NHRC commissioners through a transparent parliamentary process, not executive discretion
- Ensure security of tenure for commissioners to protect them from political retaliation
- Guarantee financial independence through a protected, parliament-approved budget
- Give the NHRC authority to audit investigations into serious human rights violations
- Authorise the NHRC to receive complaints about investigative bias, inaction, or abuse of discretion

### *Independent investigations of police abuse*

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<sup>5</sup> For more information, see: [www.ipid.gov.za](http://www.ipid.gov.za)

<sup>6</sup> Bruce, D. 2023. *South Africa's new police watchdog bill weakens rule of law*. Institute for Security Studies.

- Mandate independent investigation of all deaths in custody, police shootings and serious injuries caused by police
- Ensure findings are publicly reported and referred to prosecutors where warranted
- Establish an Independent Police Investigations Directorate under the Police Commission staffed with civilian investigators, not serving police officers
- Authorise the Directorate to receive complaints directly from the public, to collect evidence independently of police command structures and to refer cases directly to prosecutors and courts

*Public reporting and parliamentary accountability*

- Require the Commission to publish annual public reports, appear before parliamentary committees and to be subject to independent audits
- Mandate annual reporting on the number, type, and outcomes of investigations

*Surveillance, technology and citizen rights*

- Develop a national surveillance policy grounded in privacy, necessity, proportionality, and public accountability
- Ensure all surveillance initiatives operate under civilian oversight and parliamentary review
- Fund public education campaigns to inform citizens of their rights, responsibilities, and safe use of digital and surveillance systems
- Create accessible channels for citizens to report misuse or abuse of surveillance technologies
- Require periodic independent audits of surveillance programs to ensure compliance with rights-based standards

## **5. Community Policing: Restoring Trust and Social Order**

### **5.1 Analysis**

Security does not come from fear, but from trust. In traditional societies, public order is sustained through relationships, shared norms, and moral authority. Community policing reflects this principle: police as part of society, not supervisors over it.

Community policing has long been introduced in Bangladesh with the objective of adopting a more people-centred and proactive approach to law enforcement. Beyond promoting trust, it offers a way to move away from harmful, punitive policing toward more preventative and restorative approaches to crime and social disorder.

Bangladesh already has a foundation in this area. Community policing was first piloted in the 1990s and then formalised in 2008 through the national Community Policing Strategy. More recently, the Bangladesh Police have been working with UNODC and UNDP to review the national community policing framework and develop communication strategies for beat

policing, countering terrorism, and preventing violent extremism.<sup>7</sup> These initiatives demonstrate feasibility, but they remain under-resourced and overshadowed by coercive models of policing. Without sustained funding, training, and institutional priority, community policing risks becoming symbolic rather than transformative.

The United Nations' community-oriented policing approach is built on four core principles: consultation with communities, responsiveness to local concerns, mobilisation of community resources, and problem-solving for recurring issues.<sup>8</sup> These principles allow police to understand crime and disorder patterns through local knowledge and to co-produce safety with residents rather than impose control from above.

For Bangladesh, the key is to root community policing in local social structures: elders, imams, teachers, youth leaders, and neighbourhood associations. Community policing committees can also serve as platforms for public education on citizens' rights, police procedures, and complaint mechanisms, empowering people and strengthening accountability.

## 5.2 Recommendations

### *Community policing forums and participation*

- Establish Community Policing Forums at ward, union, and village levels
- Ensure membership includes elders, imams and religious leaders, women, youth, civil society members, and representatives of marginalised groups
- Use forums to organise public awareness campaigns on citizens' rights and police procedures
- Create safe channels for communities to raise concerns and complaints

### *Community policing units and daily practice*

- Establish dedicated community policing units within each police station
- Assign designated officers for consistent foot patrols to build familiarity and trust
- Require regular meetings between officers and community leaders
- Integrate collaborative problem-solving using the SARA model (Scanning, Analysis, Response, Assessment)<sup>9</sup>

### *Linking community policing to accountability*

- Link community policing units to formal complaint mechanisms
- Ensure community forums can refer serious cases to independent oversight bodies
- Require community policing officers to submit regular activity and impact reports

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<sup>7</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (February 2025). *Bangladesh: Strengthening community policing to extremism and promote peace and security*.

<sup>8</sup> United Nations Police. 2018. *Manual on Community-Oriented Policing in United Nations Peace Operations*.

<sup>9</sup> Oliver, W. M. 1992. Community Policing Defined. *Law and Order*, 40 (8), pp. 46, 56-58.

*Scaling and resourcing community policing nationally*

- Scale up the national Community Policing Strategy across all districts
- Provide dedicated budget lines for community policing activities
- Include community engagement performance in officer evaluations

## 6. Phasing Reform

### First 100 Days

- Announce a zero-tolerance policy on political interference in policing and security agencies
- Publicly commit to civilian, rights-based policing and restraint in the use of force
- Suspend from operational duty all officers credibly accused of serious abuse pending independent investigation
- Launch an independent public inquiry into the July 2024 use of lethal force
- Table amendments to the Police Commission Ordinance to reduce executive control and introduce parliamentary confirmation
- Begin restructuring the NHRC appointment process through parliament

### First Two Years

- Establish the Independent Police Investigations Directorate with civilian investigators
- Pass the Civilian Use-of-Force Code grounded in necessity, proportionality, and de-escalation
- Reform recruitment, promotion, and transfer systems to make them merit-based and ethics-driven
- Introduce new police pay and welfare standards to reduce vulnerability to corruption
- Roll out the national Community Policing Strategy across all districts
- Launch compulsory body-worn camera programmes with independent data oversight

### First Five Years

- Complete the restructuring of the Police Commission and NHRC as fully independent institutions
- Achieve full financial autonomy for oversight bodies through protected parliamentary budgets
- Institutionalise public trust and safety surveys to guide policy and accountability
- Embed ethics, restraint, and service to the community as core elements of police culture
- Replace colonial-era policing provisions with modern civilian policing legislation

## 7. Conclusion

The legitimacy of the state rests not on fear, but on justice. Likewise, the authority of law enforcement does not come from weapons, but from public trust. At their best, Bangladesh's civilian security forces are among the nation's greatest assets: capable of protecting the vulnerable, upholding the rule of law, and safeguarding constitutional order. When properly governed, they are pillars of stability and development.

Yet in recent years, these institutions were drawn into political control rather than public service. This damaged their moral authority, weakened professionalism, and eroded citizens' confidence. People do not want a powerful state for its own sake; they want a just one. They do not want to be dominated; they want to be safe.

Reforming the security sector is therefore not merely a technical task. It is a moral and political responsibility. It means restoring the rightful relationship between the state and the citizen: one grounded in restraint, accountability, and service. A police force that protects dignity will earn loyalty. A state that limits its own power will preserve stability. A government that places justice above control will secure both order and peace.

The reforms outlined in this paper are realistic, rooted in Bangladesh's experience, and guided by clear principles: integrity over loyalty, service over domination, and trust over fear. If pursued with seriousness and courage, they can help rebuild public safety, restore confidence in institutions, and ensure that the people of Bangladesh can once again live without anxiety, and sleep in peace.



## **PART TWO**

# **STRATEGIES FOR NATIONAL GROWTH**

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# Economic Policy

## Poverty Eradication, Shared Prosperity and Ethical Economy: A Systems-Driven Macroeconomic Reform Blueprint for 2026–2031

### Summary

- Bangladesh stands at a historic inflection point. The collapse of entrenched elite capture and rising public demand for accountability have created space for systemic reform. The country faces urgent macroeconomic challenges rooted in structural and governance weaknesses: persistent inflation, rising debt, weak banking, narrow tax mobilisation, and fragile FX reserves.
- Good governance is the foundation of all reform. Strengthening institutions, enforcing transparency, and insulating policy from discretionary interference, particularly through greater autonomy for Bangladesh Bank, is central to stabilising inflation, enforcing a unified exchange rate, protecting FX reserves, and maintaining remittance confidence.
- Fiscal reform must confront elite capture and ensure fairness. Prioritising a targeted compliance drive and rigorous enforcement of existing laws builds credibility before broader tax-base measures. Modernised public financial management, disciplined SOE reform, and transparent e-procurement can reduce inefficiency, leakages, and fiscal stress.
- Repairing the financial sector and deepening capital markets unlock productive investment. Governance-linked recapitalisation of state banks, independent boards, strict NPL resolution timelines, and expansion of capital markets, including Shariah-compliant sukuk, channel finance toward industrial upgrading, infrastructure, and high-value sectors.
- External resilience and competitiveness require targeted interventions. Diversifying exports beyond garments, promoting high-value FDI, rationalising non-strategic imports, and maintaining FX reserves at four to six months of import coverage improve Bangladesh's ability to weather shocks, strengthen competitiveness, and secure long-term growth.
- Inclusive social protection and human capital development turn demographic potential into sustainable growth. We propose conditional cash transfers of Tk 10,000 per month for households below the poverty line, as well as vocational and skills programme described in our education and ICT policies.
- With disciplined, rules-based economic governance, these measures can transform Bangladesh into a resilient, productive, and globally competitive economy. Anchored in integrity, transparency, and institutional rigor, reforms can deliver inclusive benefits and strengthen national resilience.

### **Data, Projections and Targets Disclaimer**

The data, projections, and quantitative targets presented in this report are based primarily on secondary published sources, including official statistics of the Government of Bangladesh and internationally recognised databases such as the World Bank and the IMF. While these sources generally align in broad trends, concerns have been raised in academic, policy, and public discourse regarding the reliability, consistency, and transparency of certain official data series. Accordingly, the projections and targets in this roadmap should be interpreted as indicative and directional, rather than precise forecasts, and are intended to inform policy priorities, sequencing, and strategic choices under conditions of data uncertainty.

## 1. Introduction: A Nation Standing on the Edge of Renewal

Bangladesh stands at a pivotal moment in its economic trajectory. In recent decades, economic governance in Bangladesh had been shaped not by rational policy design, but by a complex web of abusive and predatory discretionary power, patronage networks, and weak accountability. Substantial growth and poverty reduction have taken place, but not nearly as much as claimed during the Awami League regime, and not nearly as much as what could have been. Deep structural weaknesses persist, constraining the country's ability to translate potential into sustained, broad-based economic strength. Understanding these constraints is essential for designing effective reforms.

The challenge for the incoming government is primarily twofold. First, it must stabilise a fragile macroeconomic landscape characterised by inflationary pressure, deteriorating reserves, rising debt obligations, and a weakened financial sector. Second, and more importantly, it must design a systemic transformation rooted in good governance, i.e., in institutional integrity, evidence-based policymaking, and the dismantling of economic capture and corruption. This transformation requires more than policy tweaks. It demands a systemic reform through a fundamental re-engineering of incentives, enforcement mechanisms, and economic governance structures.

### 1.1 The Case for a Systems-Thinking Approach

A conventional policy analysis focused on isolated issues such as taxation, inflation, or banking cannot adequately explain Bangladesh's macroeconomic challenges. Its underlying problems are deeply interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Inflation is not simply a monetary phenomenon but also reflects supply-chain cartels, and systemic regulatory capture. Low investment is not just driven by interest rates but also by bureaucratic rents, judicial inefficiency, and policy unpredictability, and weak contract enforcement. Fiscal deficits are not merely the result of accounting failures but are also caused by weak governance, procurement corruption, and an over-politicised development agenda.

Viewed through a systems lens, these dysfunctions form a closely interconnected and self-reinforcing cycle:

- **Weak rule-following and systemic corruption** reduces ability of the state to function effectively. They undermine enforcement, predictability, and institutional credibility and result in **dysfunctional economic management**.
- **Dysfunctional management**, characterised by discretionary decision-making, weak supervision, and selective enforcement, creates economic distortions and opportunities for rent extraction. This facilitates **elite capture** of policy, finance, and regulation.
- **Elite capture**:
  - Concentrates economic gains among insiders, suppresses competition, and produces **narrow, exclusionary growth** which benefits some but fails to deliver broad-based improvements for all.

- Generates **fiscal stress**, where public resources are drained through leakage, bank losses, inefficient procurement, and rising debt-service obligations, and where the government responds with inflationary financing and new taxes, **increasing the burden on ordinary citizens**.
- **Exclusionary growth and higher economic burdens** on ordinary citizens create a pervasive sense of unfairness and the belief that rule-following behaviour does not pay, entrenching **systemic corruption and weak compliance, completing the cycle**.

Therefore, breaking this cycle requires changes at the foundational level, not superficial adjustments. A systems-thinking approach shows that governance reform is not merely desirable – it is economically essential. No macroeconomic stabilisation effort can succeed without institutional cleanup at its core. Bangladesh's economic future hinges on designing reforms that realign incentives, strengthen rule-based processes, and embed transparency into the functioning of the state. For this reason, an economic roadmap cannot be purely "economic" in a narrow sense; it must be firmly grounded in the realities of political economy and ethics.

### 3. The Current Macroeconomic Landscape: A Candid Diagnostic

#### 3.1 Persistent Inflation and the Breakdown of Price Stability

Inflation remains one of Bangladesh's most visible symptoms of deeper structural weakness. While headline inflation has fluctuated, core inflation has remained stubbornly high (11.66% in July 2024, 9.35% in March 2025, and 8.2-8.3% in November 2025). This reflects systemic problems beyond monetary policy. Essential commodities often experience price volatility due not only to supply shocks but also due to the dominance of powerful market intermediaries, regulatory complacency, and opportunities for manipulation created by discretionary as well as syndicated import policies. These distortions amplify the effects of global prices and exchange-rate movements on domestic inflation.

The exchange-rate regime further complicates the picture. By mid-2025, Bangladesh's foreign exchange reserves stood at US\$31.8 billion, with BPM6-compliant reserves (i.e. those actually available for use in international payments) around US\$26.7 billion. This is insufficient for an economy highly vulnerable to external shocks in export prices. Weak reserve buffers, multiple FX rates operational in Bangladesh, politically driven decision-making and inconsistent policy communication and undermine the credibility of Bangladesh Bank and limit its ability to anchor expectations. Imported inflation intensifies when the taka weakens, as foreign goods and raw materials become more expensive in Bangladesh. while sudden delayed adjustments in energy prices compound domestic inflation further.

This inflationary environment harms the poor, erodes real incomes, and undermines public confidence in the state's ability to manage the economy. Persistent price volatility also discourages long-term investment: businesses struggle to plan for costs, returns, and hiring,

while variable financing costs make borrowing more uncertain. Macroeconomic instability reduces the predictability needed for households and firms to make long-term decisions, and it can create hidden economic burdens, for example, when stagnant tax thresholds combine with inflation to create stealth taxes. Price stability, in contrast, provides a foundation for sustained economic growth, supporting investment, employment, and fairer government policy.

### 3.2 A Fiscal Structure Under Strain

Bangladesh's fiscal system exhibits chronic weaknesses characterised by a narrow revenue base, widespread exemptions, and persistently weak compliance. The tax-to-GDP ratio consistently below 9% (approximately 7.2–7.4% in FY2023–24 and about 6.6% in FY2024–25) is relatively low (compare to 19.6% in India or 16.8% in Vietnam). This signals not merely low revenue mobilisation, but a fiscal architecture marked by uneven burden-sharing, limited transparency, and weak enforcement. In an economy with where nearly 85% of employment is informal, the underdeveloped tax administration and inconsistent application of tax laws leave revenue outcomes remain volatile and unpredictable, undermining effective budgeting and medium-term fiscal planning.

These structural constraints are substantially intensified by governance failures and the predatory nature of Bangladesh's political economy. Tax exemption regimes are frequently shaped by political influence rather than coherent policy objectives, creating durable loopholes that shield powerful groups from contributing their fair share and discourage competition. For example, many conglomerates have historically received tax exemptions through statutory regulatory orders (SROs) influenced by political connections under the previous Awami League regime.<sup>10</sup> Even incentives which were initially introduced to promote industrial development have gradually evolved into entrenched privileges. This distorts competition and reinforces rent-seeking behaviour.

On the expenditure side, fiscal strain is compounded by systematic inefficiencies in public spending. Development projects frequently suffer from inflated cost structures, chronic delays, and limited oversight, often reflecting collusive procurement practices rather than technical shortcomings. Major infrastructure initiatives are regularly approved without rigorous feasibility analysis, leading to misallocation of capital and diminished economic returns, and budgets being exceeded by an average of 45% (the Dhaka-Chattogram Highway widening project, for example, cost more than double its initial estimate). At the same time, subsidy programs, particularly in energy (which was allocated Tk 40,000 crore in subsidies for FY2024–25) and agriculture, absorb significant fiscal resources while remaining poorly targeted, limiting their usefulness to vulnerable populations or for productivity.

The interaction of weak revenue mobilisation and inefficient expenditure management has translated into persistent fiscal deficits and a rising public debt burden, currently around 40% of GDP, with interest payments at 28% of revenue. From a systems perspective, these are the predictable outcomes of governance failures in revenue design and enforcement, spending

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<sup>10</sup> Government of Bangladesh. *White Paper on State of the Bangladesh Economy: Dissection of a Development Narrative*. November 2024.

discipline, and accountability, rather than anything that can be blamed on external forces. These dynamics increase reliance on domestic and external borrowing and heighten vulnerability to macroeconomic shocks. As debt servicing pressures grow, they crowd out investment in growth-enhancing areas such as human capital, innovation, logistics, and climate resilience, reinforcing the cycle of low productivity and fiscal fragility.

Taken together, Bangladesh's fiscal challenges reflect a failure of fiscal governance rather than an insufficiently large state. A narrow and unpredictable revenue base, combined with distorted spending priorities, undermines the state's capacity to plan, invest, and respond to shocks effectively. Without structural reforms that enhance transparency, broaden compliance, and strengthen expenditure discipline, fiscal policy will remain a source of systemic vulnerability rather than a lever for stabilisation and long-term competitiveness.

### 3.3 A Banking Sector at a Critical Point

Bangladesh's banking sector represents one of the most critical risk points in the macroeconomic system. The core problem is not merely the presence of non-performing loans (NPLs), but the entrenched institutional culture that produces them: connected lending, political interference, weak supervisory enforcement, and an underdeveloped risk-management ecosystem. These weaknesses have accumulated over many years, systematically eroding credit discipline and balance-sheet integrity.

By September 2025, officially reported NPLs reached a historic level of approximately Tk 6.44 lakh crore, equivalent to 35.7% of total outstanding loans (Tk 18.04 lakh crore), up sharply from around 16.9% one year earlier. Many banks now report default rates above 50%.<sup>11</sup> This historic high reflects both stricter classification rules and the exposure of previously concealed distressed assets, rather than a sudden deterioration in loan quality. Even these figures likely underestimate stress in the system, as classification anomalies and repeated restructuring continue to mask significant vulnerabilities within bank portfolios and deep structural weaknesses in governance, supervision, and credit discipline within the banking system.

The implications are economy-wide. According to Bangladesh Bank's own reporting, rising NPLs have constrained new credit growth and limited the capacity of banks to lend to productive firms, particularly SMEs and new entrants. Meanwhile borrowers with political connections retain preferential access to finance, often with limited scrutiny and weak repayment enforcement. Persistent capital shortfalls in state-owned banks have required repeated public recapitalisations, transferring private losses onto taxpayers and draining fiscal resources that could otherwise support priority investments in human capital, infrastructure, or climate resilience.

These vulnerabilities are compounded by the absence of deep capital markets. With limited access to long-term equity or bond financing, firms remain overly dependent on bank credit, constraining industrial diversification and discouraging innovation. At the same time, the

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<sup>11</sup> The Business Standard. *How loan fraud, fund diversion cronyism push NPLs to 36%*. November 2025.

government's reliance on domestic banks to finance deficits further concentrates systemic risk within an already fragile financial system.

If the next government does not act decisively through governance reforms, strengthened supervision, credible NPL resolution mechanisms, and a clear strategy for recapitalisation and consolidation, Bangladesh risks a slow-moving financial crisis that could undermine credit allocation, fiscal sustainability, macroeconomic stability and the country's overall long-term trajectory. For this reason, governance reform is not a supporting condition for economic reform; it is the primary binding constraint that determines whether all other reforms succeed or fail.

### **3.4 External Vulnerabilities and an Economy Exposed**

Bangladesh's external position is underpinned by foreign-exchange earnings which are narrowly concentrated in two sources: ready-made garment (RMG) exports and migrant remittances. This concentration exposes the external sector to sector-specific and cyclical shocks, even when headline export and remittance figures appear strong.

Despite overall export growth earlier in the fiscal year, merchandise export earnings came under renewed pressure in late 2025. Total exports declined by approximately 4.6% year-on-year in September 2025, driven largely by weaker RMG shipments. This episode underscored the vulnerability created by heavy reliance on a single export category, where even modest slowdowns can translate into economy-wide FX and employment pressures.

In FY2024–25, remittance inflows reached a record level of approximately USD \$30 billion, accounting for about 6.6% of GDP and financing nearly 47% of import payments. While this highlights the central role of remittances in maintaining external balance, the sharp rise in officially recorded inflows reflected not only migrant earnings but also a shift in remittance channelisation. Exchange-rate depreciation, a narrowing gap between formal and informal market rates, and policy incentives reduced the attractiveness of informal channels such as hundi, redirecting flows toward the banking system rather than generating a proportional increase in total remittance income.

This distinction is macroeconomically important. Informal remittances support household consumption but do not enter official foreign-exchange reserves. The recent shift toward formal channels therefore strengthened reserve accumulation and short-term external liquidity, even if its impact on aggregate income growth was more limited. As a result, near-term external indicators improved while underlying structural dependence remained unchanged.

Together, RMG exports and remittances dominate Bangladesh's foreign-exchange inflows, leaving the external sector exposed to demand fluctuations in global apparel markets, policy shifts in labour-importing countries, and disruptions to overseas employment. Without meaningful export diversification and the development of additional FX-generating sectors, external stability will remain structurally fragile, regardless of short-term gains in headline indicators.

While the RMG sector has generated substantial export revenues for decades, it cannot alone support Bangladesh's transition to a higher-income, more diversified, and knowledge-based economy. Diversification efforts have been constrained by regulatory burdens, infrastructure gaps, inconsistent trade policies, and limited support for emerging sectors such as pharmaceuticals, IT-enabled services, agro-processing, and light engineering. At the same time, Bangladesh faces rising external financing needs amid shrinking fiscal space, complex geopolitical conditions, and higher global interest rates. As LDC graduation approaches and preferential market access gradually erodes, competitive pressures will intensify. Without a forward-looking strategy encompassing trade agreements, logistics modernisation, and targeted FDI frameworks, headline external stability risks giving way to renewed fragility.

## 4. Governance Failure as the Central Constraint

Across all macroeconomic indicators, including taxation, inflation, debt, banking and exports, the common denominator is governance. The pre-2024 system did not fail due to a lack of technical expertise, but because incentives were misaligned, institutions were compromised, and political interference systematically distorted economic decisions.

Elite capture produced three predictable consequences:

- (1) distorted markets,
- (2) misallocation of public resources, and
- (3) erosion of trust in institutions.

Therefore, the most important economic reforms for Bangladesh are not primarily financial or technological, but institutional. The country now finds itself in a rare moment where governance reform is politically feasible, economically unavoidable, and popularly demanded. If the government institutionalises transparency, competition, rule of law, and public accountability and sustains these reforms over time, Bangladesh can gradually unlock a substantial and compounding good-governance dividend.<sup>12</sup> Unlike one-off policy interventions, this dividend is sustained: each improvement in institutional quality reinforces economic efficiency, investment confidence, social cohesion, and further improvements.

### 4.1 The Good-Governance Dividend: Unlocking Bangladesh's Hidden Growth Potential

Empirical research using the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) consistently finds a strong association between improvements in governance (particularly control of corruption, regulatory quality, and government effectiveness) and higher growth rates in developing countries. Cross-country panel studies suggest that countries starting from weak institutional baselines tend to experience especially large growth dividends when governance improves. Drawing on this literature and evidence from reforming emerging economies, sustained governance reform in Bangladesh could plausibly be associated with

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<sup>12</sup> Farooq, Mohammad O. (2026). *Unlocking and Capturing Bangladesh's Good Governance Dividend: Systems Thinking Approach Post-July 2024*. Paper presented at International Islamic Finance and Banking Conference, University of Dhaka, Dhaka, Bangladesh, January 9-10, 2026.

medium-term GDP growth gains of 2–3 percentage points annually, conditional on credible implementation and effective use of the resulting fiscal space.<sup>13</sup>

Improvements in governance can deliver material macroeconomic gains through multiple channels:

- Reduced procurement corruption could plausibly save the government 1–2% or more of GDP annually, based on experience from comparable emerging economies.
- Stronger competition in essential goods markets can reduce price volatility and ease inflationary pressures.
- Fair, transparent, and predictable tax enforcement can raise compliance while minimising economic distortions.
- Judicial and regulatory reform can unlock private investment.
- Greater central bank independence can strengthen currency stability and anchor inflation expectations.

Taken together, carefully designed and effectively implemented governance reforms have the potential to raise Bangladesh’s growth trajectory not through a temporary boost, but through a durable correction of distortions and incentives. In this sense, good governance is not merely an ethical imperative. It is the country’s most powerful economic instrument for unlocking its hidden potential.

## 5. Strategic Reform Priorities for Macroeconomic Stabilisation and Long-Term Growth

We now turn from diagnosis to solutions. Macroeconomic stabilisation and long-term growth cannot be engineered through isolated projects or ad hoc fixes; they require restoring the state’s core economic credibility, which has been undermined by years of fiscal stress, weak revenue mobilisation, inefficient spending, and erosion of trust in public institutions. This section therefore focuses on strategic reforms that anchor stability while creating space for inclusive growth, beginning with the most foundational task of all: reconstructing a credible fiscal framework that realigns taxation, public spending, and public financial management with national development priorities.

Implementation capacity is the binding constraint across most reform areas. The success of this roadmap depends not only on policy design, but on selective prioritisation, institutional sequencing, and realistic assessments of administrative capability. Early reforms must therefore focus on simplifying rules, reducing discretion, and strengthening a small number of core institutions (particularly the Ministry of Finance, the National Board of Revenue,

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<sup>13</sup> Kaufmann, D., Kraay, A., & Zoido-Lobatón, P. (1999). *Governance matters* (Policy Research Working Paper No. 2196). The World Bank.

<https://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/665731468739470954/governance-matters>; Kaufmann, D., & Kraay, A. (2024). *The Worldwide Governance Indicators: Methodology and 2024 update* (Policy Research Working Paper No. 10952). The World Bank. <https://doi.org/10.1596/1813-9450-10952>.

Bangladesh Bank, the public procurement system, and selected judicial and regulatory functions) before scaling complexity.

## **5.1 Building a Credible Fiscal Foundation: Rebalancing Taxation, Spending, and Public Financial Management**

### *5.1.1 Tax Reform: Broadening the Base, Modernising Enforcement and Financing Essential Public Goods*

Broad-based taxation has historically overburdened salaried professionals and SMEs while high-income, politically connected individuals evade taxes through exemptions and regulatory loopholes. To restore fairness and credibility, the immediate focus should be on a compliance drive targeted at elites:

1. Conduct forensic audits of historical exemptions, targeting the top 1% of potential taxpayers.
2. Introduce rigorous lifestyle audits for public officials with unexplained wealth.
3. Enforce existing laws before expanding the base to SMEs or formal salaried workers.
4. After demonstrating tangible results in closing elite loopholes, consider phased base broadening.

*Targets (conditional on phased, enforceable reform and sound macroeconomic management):*

- Increase tax-to-GDP ratio from around 8% to 10% within two years, 12–13% within five, and a sustainable 14–17% long term.
- Reduce tax expenditures from 3% of GDP to 1.5% within three years and below 1% within five.
- Prioritise enforcement for large informal or semi-formal enterprises; exempt subsistence and micro-enterprises.
- Link business licensing, utility connections, and procurement eligibility to basic tax registration and filing.
- Digitise administration: 90% of taxpayers e-filing by year three; 80% of VAT-registered businesses adopting e-invoicing; 70% of audits using automated risk scoring.
- Capture high-value consumption (private education, hospitality, construction, professional services) without raising headline VAT rates.
- Modernise urban property taxation, exempting low-value residences, generating 0.6–0.8% of GDP within three years, rising to 1% within five.

### *5.1.2 Expenditure Discipline: Efficiency and Transparency*

Revenue mobilisation must be paired with rigorous spending oversight. Analyses show over 75% of large infrastructure projects exceed budgets, with average cost increases around 45%.<sup>14</sup> Reforms should include:

- Mandatory cost-benefit analysis and independent project appraisal.

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<sup>14</sup> The Business Standard. *Rethinking public project execution in Bangladesh*. May 2025.

- Full e-procurement within two years to enhance transparency.
- Reduce cost overruns to 15-20% within three years and reduce project delays under one year by year four.

#### *5.1.3 State-Owned Enterprises (SOE) Reform and Rationalisation*

All SOEs should produce audited financial statements. Aggregate losses should be reduced by 50% within three years, with at least 30% of enterprises moving toward operational profitability or credible restructuring. Further, reducing transfers, subsidies, and implicit guarantees could free 0.5–0.7% of GDP for more productive uses.

#### *5.1.4 Legislation*

Targeted amendments to existing laws (e.g. Income Tax Act, VAT and Supplementary Duty Act, Public Money and Budget Management Act, SOE-related statutes) will enable action on immediate priorities, such as broadening the tax base, strengthening enforcement powers, and improving public financial management. A comprehensive Fiscal Responsibility Act, setting a financial management framework, fiscal rules and transparency mechanisms, should follow, helping to institutionalise discipline and protect reforms from reversal.

#### *5.1.5 Macroeconomic Implications*

Taken together, these reforms could:

- Stabilise the debt-to-GDP ratio from 30–40% to a safer 20–30% range (reflecting comparators for emerging economies) to keep fiscal space to withstand shocks (export slowdowns, FX volatility, banking-sector stress).
- Reduce the interest-to-revenue ratio from the relatively high 20-30% range towards a more prudent 15-20% range, creating fiscal space for priority investments in education, health, innovation, and climate resilience.

These outcomes depend on disciplined expenditure, phased tax reform, and coordination with broader macroeconomic policy. Revenue increases alone cannot ensure stability or trust.

#### *5.1.6 Embedded Risks and Mitigation*

The proposed fiscal reforms face two central implementation risks that must be addressed explicitly to preserve credibility and political sustainability.

- **Political and administrative resistance:** Entrenched interests may oppose exemption removal, digitalisation, or audits.
  - Mitigation: Phase reforms, starting with transparency-enhancing and compliance-neutral steps. Use stakeholder engagement, independent audits, and public reporting to reinforce credibility.
- **Inefficient or captured spending:** Without safeguards, higher revenue may entrench distortions.

- Mitigation: Prioritise expenditure for high-return sectors (skills, health, infrastructure, climate), enforce value-for-money audits, and link budget allocations to performance indicators.

## 5.2 Reclaiming Monetary Stability: Exchange Rate Reform, Credible Inflation Targeting, and Central Bank Autonomy

### 5.2.1 Transitional Inflation Management

Inflation in Bangladesh is not purely monetary: supply-side bottlenecks, food price volatility, and collusive practices contribute materially. Accordingly, “inflation-targeting lite” is proposed as a **nominal anchor** for the medium term, complemented by targeted non-monetary interventions:

- **Supply-side interventions:** Strengthen procurement and distribution of key foodstuffs, fertilizers, and energy inputs; break cartels in critical goods markets through enforcement and anti-collusion measures.
- **Financial-sector discipline:** Withdraw preferential refinancing facilities, enforce existing loan classification standards aligned with Basel II/III, tighten directed lending, and strengthen credit-risk monitoring.
- **Monetary operations:** Align reserve-money growth with liquidity needs, use sterilisation tools to absorb excess reserves, and guide policy-rate adjustments via macro forecasts rather than political pressure.
- **Indicative medium-term inflation path:** Target 7–8% in year one, 5–6% by year two, and 3–5% over five years, contingent on supply-side reforms and banking-sector discipline.

### 5.2.2 Strengthening Central Bank Autonomy

International experience shows the risks of subordinating monetary policy to short-term political objectives. Türkiye, for instance, experienced inflation exceeding 60% under prolonged political pressure to maintain low interest rates, illustrating that growth objectives are not protected when policy credibility collapses. However, full immediate central bank independence in Bangladesh may be politically infeasible. An initial phase of reforms are suggested:

- Government sets strategic objectives including target inflation range, external stability goals, and broad growth priorities.
- Bangladesh Bank operational autonomy: The central bank implements these objectives using transparent instruments and rules, with a formal Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) and quarterly inflation forecasts.
- Accountability mechanisms include annual reporting to Parliament, public dashboards, and legally codified procedures to reduce discretionary political interference.

Success in this phase creates conditions for long-term, rule-based independence.

#### *5.2.3 Exchange-Rate Reform and Reserve Management*

Reserve adequacy should be measured in import coverage rather than nominal dollars. Further, reserves cannot be sustainably rebuilt through administrative accumulation alone. Structural import dependency is the core vulnerability. Recommended actions:

- Eliminate preferential FX windows, enforce a single interbank rate for current-account transactions, and allow  $\pm 2\%$  volatility bands initially to reduce speculative pressure.
- Strategic reserve accumulation: Focus on flows from remittances, export competitiveness, and efficiency gains rather than short-term borrowing. Concessional financing should support structural adjustment, not defend unsustainable import patterns.

This approach respects the monetary policy trilemma: Bangladesh must balance exchange-rate flexibility, reserve adequacy, and domestic policy objectives carefully. Complete FX rigidity is not recommended; phased, predictable adjustments enhance credibility without triggering speculative pressure.

#### *5.2.4 Restoring Financial Discipline*

Monetary policy is ineffective without a disciplined financial sector which fully implements Basel standards:

- Full Basel II-compliant loan classification within two years.
- Semi-annual, bank stress tests to identify vulnerabilities.
- Increase variable-rate loans to  $\geq 40\%$  of system within five years to strengthen policy pass-through.

Failure to enforce financial discipline undermines policy transmission, prolonging inflation and reducing macroeconomic resilience.

#### *5.2.5 Macro Implications*

Credible monetary policy stabilises Inflation and household purchasing power, export pricing and remittance flows, and investor confidence and capital allocation. Coordination with fiscal reforms and banking-sector restructuring is critical; without it, monetary policy alone cannot stabilize macroeconomic conditions.

#### *5.2.6 Risks and Mitigation*

The primary risks to achieving monetary stability in Bangladesh stem from political interference, exchange-rate volatility, and unanchored inflation expectations. Political interference remains the most immediate threat, as discretionary pressure on Bangladesh Bank could undermine both policy credibility and macroeconomic outcomes. This risk can be mitigated by legally anchoring the central bank's mandate, mandating the operations of a formally constituted Monetary Policy Committee, and requiring regular reporting to Parliament to ensure transparency and accountability.

Exchange-rate liberalisation carries the potential for short-term volatility, which could disrupt trade, investment, and inflation expectations. A phased approach, with temporary volatility bands and clear forward guidance, can allow the exchange rate to adjust gradually toward market equilibrium while containing speculative pressures.

Finally, inflation expectations may become unanchored if households and firms doubt the authorities' commitment or capacity to maintain price stability. This can be mitigated through consistent forward guidance, credible intermediate targets, and close coordination with fiscal policy to reinforce the signals from monetary authorities.

### **5.3 Repairing the Banking and Financial System: Governance, NPL Resolution, and the Development of Capital Markets**

Bangladesh's financial system sits at the epicentre of the country's structural economic weaknesses. Years of connected lending, politically influenced credit decisions, and weak supervisory enforcement have eroded borrower discipline and the integrity of financial institutions. Non-performing loans (NPLs) have surged, loan-loss provisioning lagged, and capital shortfalls widened, forcing repeated government recapitalisation of state-owned banks at the expense of development spending. The resulting moral hazard has weakened trust in the financial sector and diminished its ability to serve as an engine of growth.

Financial-sector repair must therefore be treated as a national economic priority, not a technocratic adjustment. Reform must begin with *governance*:

- State-owned banks should transition to fully professional and independent boards within 18 months, eliminating political appointments and requiring directors to meet clearly defined standards in banking, risk management, and corporate governance.
- Uniform, internationally aligned loan-classification and provisioning standards must be applied to all banks (state-owned and private) within two years, with meaningful penalties for non-compliance.
- Insider and related-party lending should be confronted directly through mandatory disclosure of exposures, personal liability for directors approving loans without documented due diligence, and automatic disqualification for repeated governance breaches.

#### *5.3.1 Resolving Non-Performing Loans*

A credible and time-bound NPL resolution strategy is indispensable. Official NPLs already exceed 20% of total loans, while the true level (once rescheduled, evergreened, or cosmetically reclassified loans are accounted for) is likely substantially higher. The objective is not cosmetic improvement but balance-sheet repair:

- Within 12 months, the government should establish a professionally managed Asset Management Company (AMC), empowered to purchase, restructure, or liquidate impaired assets under strict transparency rules and independent audit.
- Clear targets should guide the cleanup: reducing system-wide NPLs below 15% within three years and below 10% within five.

- At the same time, provisioning gaps must be closed, eliminating at least 75% of the current shortfall within three years and achieving full compliance within five.
- Recapitalisation should be conditional on governance reform and viability; chronically insolvent institutions should be merged, resolved, or wound down in an orderly manner.

### *5.3.2 Capital Adequacy and Supervision*

Strengthening bank balance sheets must be combined with reforms in capital adequacy and risk management.

- The sector's overall capital-to-risk-weighted asset ratio should rise to at least 12.5% within three years, with state-owned banks required to meet a minimum of 10% by year two and private banks transitioning toward Basel-compliant buffers over a longer horizon.
- Bangladesh Bank should ensure full implementation of Basel standards and implement risk-based supervision, semiannual stress tests for all banks, and publish an annual systemic risk assessment to enhance transparency and market discipline.

### *5.3.3 Moving Beyond Bank-Dominated Finance*

However, Bangladesh cannot rely exclusively on banks to finance growth. The absence of deep capital markets has perpetuated an unhealthy dependence on bank lending, limiting long-term financing for infrastructure, manufacturing, technology, and emerging industries. Over the next five years, financial reform must deliberately rebalance the system.

Key objectives should include:

- expanding the corporate bond market so that non-bank instruments account for at least 15% of total private-sector financing within five years;
- modernising the stock exchange to improve liquidity and governance, with a target of doubling annual trading volume within four years and increasing the number of quality listings by at least 30%. This should be supported by enforcing disclosure and accounting standards across listed companies.

### *5.3.4 The Strategic Role of Sukuk and Islamic Capital Markets*

The development of sovereign and corporate sukuk markets offers a particularly important opportunity, both for diversification and for financial inclusion for those reluctant to participate in interest-based instruments for religious reasons. Recent progress provides a foundation: multiple government investment sukuk issuances totalling over 20,000 crores, approval of secondary market trading, and proposals for tax incentives on sukuk earnings. Plans for a National Sukuk Policy Framework are reportedly under discussion, including potential digital and fintech-enabled issuance platforms.

Building on this momentum, outstanding Islamic capital-market instruments could realistically reach Tk 50,000–70,000 crore over the medium term. To achieve this, the government should:

- finalise a National Sukuk Policy Framework,
- rationalise tax treatment to broaden the investor base,
- promote secondary market liquidity, and
- harmonise disclosure and accounting standards across conventional and Islamic instruments.

However, this expansion will only be effective if Islamic finance shifts toward financing productive investment rather than predominantly consumer and trade credit. Moreover, the broader Islamic finance sector needs to actively support the expansion of the capital market. At present, much of the sukuk market, even globally, is primarily asset-based (effectively equivalent to unsecured bonds). To be more impactful, sukuk instruments should be predominantly asset-backed and strategically used for the allocation of resources toward productive and high-growth sectors.

#### *5.3.5 Risks and Mitigation*

The most significant risk to financial-sector reform is the persistence of high NPLs and inadequate recapitalisation, which could stall cleanup efforts and undermine confidence. This risk can be mitigated through time-bound AMC operations, governance-linked recapitalisation, and strict resolution of non-viable institutions.

Another risk is limited liquidity and investor confidence in capital and sukuk markets. Addressing this requires credible disclosure standards, asset-backed issuance, and the development of institutional investors and Shariah-compliant investment vehicles.

Finally, slow adoption of modern risk-management practices could weaken supervision; this can be mitigated through regulatory incentives, capacity-building programs, and independent oversight.

#### *5.3.6 Expected Outcomes*

If implemented decisively, these reforms would deliver a cleaner, better-capitalised, and more transparent financial system. Stronger banks, credible NPL resolution, and deeper capital markets would restore credit discipline, mobilize long-term finance, and support entrepreneurship, industrial upgrading, and inclusive growth. Repairing the financial system is therefore not simply a banking reform. It is a foundational requirement for Bangladesh's next stage of economic development.

### **5.4 Restoring External Balance and Boosting Competitiveness: Trade, FDI, and Export Diversification**

The private sector is not monolithic. Large conglomerates, export-oriented manufacturers, SMEs, informal enterprises, and startups face distinct constraints and respond differently to

policy incentives. Effective reform therefore requires differentiated instruments rather than uniform policy treatment.

Bangladesh's external sector remains structurally fragile despite periods of strong headline performance. Significant trade deficits, a narrow export base, heavy reliance on a few products and markets, and dependence on remittances expose the economy to global demand shocks, commodity-price volatility, and policy shifts in partner countries. At the same time, foreign direct investment (FDI) remains modest relative to peers and concentrated in low-value-added activities, limiting technology transfer, productivity growth, and durable employment creation. Addressing these weaknesses is essential not only for external stability, but also for sustaining growth in a post-LDC graduation, more competitive global environment.

#### *5.4.1 Export Diversification*

Bangladesh's export success has been overwhelmingly driven by RMGs, which still account for over 80% of merchandise exports. While the sector remains a critical economic engine, overconcentration heightens vulnerability to demand shocks, trade-policy changes, and rising competitive pressures from lower-cost or more technologically advanced producers.

Priority actions include:

- Expanding higher-value manufacturing (e.g., electronics assembly, pharmaceuticals, machinery) and knowledge-intensive services (e.g. ICT, software exports) within five years, leveraging Bangladesh's growing skills base and regional market access.
- Broadening regional and global market penetration, particularly in emerging Asian and African markets, leveraging preferential trade agreements.
- Developing export-focused industrial and service clusters with streamlined customs, bonded logistics, port access, and reliable utilities to reduce lead times and transaction costs.

The objective is not to replace garments, but to reduce systemic risk by building complementary export engines.

#### *5.4.2 Trade Policy and Competitiveness*

External balance depends as much on cost competitiveness and trade efficiency as on export volumes. Bangladesh's complex tariff structure, para-tariffs, and non-tariff barriers raise input costs and weaken export competitiveness, while logistical inefficiencies increase delivery times and uncertainty. Improving competitiveness through efficiency is more durable and less distortionary than reliance on subsidies or exchange-rate repression.

Key reforms include:

- Gradual rationalisation of import tariffs and non-tariff barriers to improve competitiveness while providing time-bound protection for genuinely nascent strategic industries.

- Targeted import substitution in intermediate inputs critical to high-value exports, reducing vulnerability to global supply shocks.
- Customs, port, and logistics modernisation, including risk-based inspections, digital clearance, and port productivity upgrades, to reduce delays and costs across the trade chain.

#### *5.4.3 Foreign Direct Investment (FDI)*

A more dynamic FDI landscape can complement domestic investment and facilitate technology transfer. FDI can play a catalytic role in export diversification, technology diffusion, and skills upgrading. However, Bangladesh's FDI inflows have historically been low relative to GDP and skewed toward extractive, real estate, or protected domestic-market activities.

A reoriented FDI strategy should:

- Offer targeted incentives for greenfield investments in high-tech and export-oriented sectors, explicitly conditional on domestic employment, skills transfer, and productive capacity creation.
- Simplify investor entry and operation, including licensing, land access, utilities, and profit repatriation, through time-bound, transparent one-stop facilitation.
- Encourage joint ventures and supplier linkages, enhancing managerial capacity and integrating domestic firms into regional and global value chains rather than isolating FDI in enclaves.

The goal is not merely higher inflows, but higher-quality capital that raises productivity economy-wide.

#### *5.4.4 Enabling Role of Financial and Macroeconomic Stability*

Successful external-sector reform depends on macroeconomic and financial stability. Credible monetary policy and financial sector repair (see relevant sections above) are prerequisites for trade competitiveness and investor confidence. In particular:

- A credible exchange-rate and inflation framework lowers hedging costs and uncertainty for exporters and investors.
- A repaired banking system and deeper capital markets facilitate financing for export-oriented production and infrastructure development.
- Islamic finance and sukuk instruments, if well governed and liquid, can complement conventional finance by mobilizing long-term, Shariah-compliant capital for trade-related infrastructure and productive investment.

#### *5.4.5 Strategic Targets for External Competitiveness*

To anchor reforms in measurable outcomes, indicative medium-term targets include:

- Increasing the share of non-garment, higher-value exports from roughly 15–20% to at least 35% within five years.

- Raising FDI inflows to 4–5% of GDP annually, with at least 50% directed toward export-oriented and technologically intensive sectors.
- Maintaining the trade deficit at levels that can be sustainably financed without persistent reserve depletion, exchange-rate repression, or import compression (indicatively in the range of 2–3% of GDP under current structural conditions) through a combination of export growth, import rationalisation, and enhanced remittance channels.
- Diversifying export markets and pursuing trade agreements with new regional partners, such that no single destination accounts for more than 25% of total exports.

Again, these targets are achievable only if supported by credible macroeconomic management and institutional reform.

#### 5.4.6 Risks and Mitigation

External-sector reforms face identifiable risks. Global demand downturns and commodity-price volatility can be mitigated through market diversification and regional trade integration, including via trade agreements. The risk of FDI remaining concentrated in low-value activities can be addressed through value- or performance-linked incentives and transparent monitoring. Infrastructure and logistics bottlenecks require sustained investment and governance reform in ports, customs, and trade facilitation agencies.

## 6. Human Capital, Green and Digital Transitions, and the Foundations of a Modern, Inclusive Economy

Bangladesh's long-term growth depends on transforming its people, technologies, and natural resources into productive assets. The next decade presents a critical window: a large, youthful population, rising digital adoption, and pressing climate challenges offer opportunity and risk. Realising this potential requires investment in human capital, alignment of green and digital transitions with jobs, and policies that convert demographic scale into sustained economic strength.

### 6.1 Benefiting from the Demographic Dividend

A young population is an asset only if equipped with skills that drive productivity and enterprise. Current gaps in education and training limit economic upgrading; many graduates struggle to convert qualifications into productive employment. Human capital reform must focus on capability over credentials, industry-aligned technical training, vocational pathways, and clear routes from education into work or self-employment.

Health outcomes also matter. Bangladesh should double nurses, expand midwives from 3,000 to 20,000, raise physician density to 1:1,500, and train 25,000 health technicians annually. Primary care facilities must implement a nationwide Minimum Essential Service Package with functional referral systems and digital monitoring. Public–private partnerships can modernise infrastructure, expand diagnostics, and ensure medicine quality, aiming for universal coverage.

For detailed education reforms, see our education policy, including:

- Capability-focused schooling, TVET, and universities
- Applied, vocational, and work-based pathways aligned with the economy
- Enterprise-relevant skills alongside wage-employment preparation
- Institutional reforms to improve teaching, labour-market feedback, and resources

## **6.2 Capturing the Digital Transformation**

Digital adoption offers a national force multiplier for governance, competitiveness, and social mobility. Internet penetration exceeds 80% and mobile money accounts over 120 million, yet potential remains vast. Expanding e-procurement, digitising land records and courts, and linking social registries to national IDs could improve efficiency, reduce leakage, and curb rent-seeking.

The digital economy can drive exports, IT services, e-commerce, and freelancing, but regulatory gaps and payment constraints remain. Measures such as reducing cross-border payment friction by 50%, training 1 million youth in advanced digital skills, expanding broadband to 95%, and creating 10 innovation zones can accelerate growth. Stronger cybersecurity, data governance, IP protection, and regulatory support for fintech, digital health, AI, and cloud services are needed. Further detail can be found in our information and communication technology policy.

## **6.3 Greening the Economy**

Bangladesh faces floods, cyclones, salinity, and heat stress, costing 1.5–2% of GDP annually and threatening growth. Adaptation and mitigation investments (embankments, climate-smart agriculture, and resilient infrastructure) could halve flood exposure and cut crop losses by 30–40%. Expanding climate-smart farming to 2 million hectares strengthens food security.

The energy transition is vital. Renewables should rise from 5% to 20% of the grid by 2030, including 2 GW rooftop solar and 1 GW utility-scale capacity annually. Reducing transmission losses and improving industrial efficiency could save \$1–1.5 billion annually. Raising \$5 billion via green bonds and applying sustainability standards to 80–90% of export industries would attract investment. Green manufacturing in garments could cut water and energy use by 20–30%, preserving market access and creating up to 500,000 jobs.

## **6.4 Targeted Social Protection and Inclusive Transition**

Reforms often impose short-term costs on vulnerable households. Durable and legitimate reform requires social protection to shield the poor:

- Direct Cash Transfers via digital IDs and mobile payments can replace poorly targeted subsidies while protecting households.
- Interest-free microfinance or low-cost productive loans can support small-scale entrepreneurship.

Support should focus on households below or just above the national upper poverty line and link to skills acquisition, apprenticeships, or micro-enterprise development. Benefits should

be time-bound, with fixed-duration windows and exit assessments, avoiding dependency. A programme averaging Tk 10,000 per eligible household per month would cost around 0.5% of GDP annually and can be phased and scalable.

#### 6.4.1 Zakat and Islamic Social Finance

Bangladesh could mobilise zakat as a complementary social protection pillar. Immediate focus should be on governance and stabilisation, preparing infrastructure and trials rather than sweeping tax integration. Key steps:

- Create a commission for a nationally coordinated zakat platform linked to digital poverty registries and IDs.
- Trial interest-free, asset-linked productive financing for farmers and micro-enterprises.
- Establish governance safeguards, including independent management, disclosure, audits, and public dashboards.

The goal is a social compact where the state protects citizens during transition while promoting integrity and self-reliance.

## 7. Implementation Architecture, Sequencing, and the Political-Economy Realities of Reform

### 7.1 High-Performance Implementation Architecture

Strong policies require capable institutions. Past reform failures stemmed from weak execution and coordination. Bangladesh needs a redesigned governance structure:

- **National Economic Commission (NEC)** to align decisions, monitor progress, and resolve conflicts.
- **Prime Minister's Delivery Unit** to track KPIs and enforce timelines.
- **Independent Fiscal Council** to strengthen fiscal oversight.
- **Strengthened Bangladesh Bank** with autonomy and technical capacity.
- **Public Appointments Commission** for transparent selection and fixed tenures in civil service and SOEs.

These reforms shift governance from ad hoc decision-making to a rules-based, accountable system. See our civil service reform policy for further recommendations.

### 7.2 Sequencing and Phasing: A Roadmap for the First 100 Days, 12 Months, and 5 Years

#### *The First 100 Days: Establishing Credibility and Anchoring Expectations*

The immediate priority is to restore confidence among citizens, investors, development partners, and global markets. The first 100 days should focus on actions that are fast, visible, and symbolically powerful, signalling that the old system is truly gone.

Key priorities in this phase include:

- stabilising exchange-rate expectations and clarifying the transition path toward a unified market rate;
- enforcing transparency in public procurement through immediate disclosure and compliance audits;
- freezing discretionary and politically driven tax exemptions;
- initiating legal and administrative actions targeting large-scale elite capture and connected rent-seeking;
- announcing a formal inflation compact between the government and Bangladesh Bank and setting a clear target range, coordination framework, and public reporting mechanism can quickly anchor expectations;
- publishing a comprehensive, independently verified assessment of foreign-exchange reserves, public debt, contingent liabilities, and fiscal risks. Radical transparency at this stage establishes credibility and resets expectations around honesty in economic management.

These early measures do not resolve systemic problems, but they create the psychological, institutional, and reputational foundation on which deeper reforms can be credibly built.

#### *The First 12 Months: Implementing Foundational Reforms*

With initial credibility established, the next phase must focus on reforms that are institutionally demanding but economically decisive. This period requires sustained political commitment and disciplined execution.

Priority actions include:

- unifying the exchange rate and eliminating preferential foreign-exchange windows;
- implementing mandatory e-procurement across all government entities;
- operationalising targeted cash-transfer systems while beginning the phased removal of inefficient blanket subsidies;
- and launching core tax-administration reforms, including e-invoicing, expanded audits, and enforcement against large-scale corporate evasion.

Financial-sector repair must begin in earnest during this phase to restore credit discipline and financial stability, including:

- establishing a professionally governed Asset Management Company, tightening loan-classification standards,
- conducting forensic audits of major defaulters, and
- imposing penalties for connected lending.

This 12-month period is the most critical for locking in the direction of the country's economic transformation. A disciplined, well-communicated approach can maintain reform momentum while assuring citizens that pain will be minimized and benefits will be broadly shared.

#### *Years 2 to 3: Structural Transformation and Growth Reorientation*

Once macroeconomic stability is largely restored and foundational reforms are underway, the government can move into the most transformative stage of the reform cycle. This phase focuses on reshaping the economy's productive base and establishing new engines of growth.

Key priorities in this phase include:

- accelerating export diversification and implementing FDI facilitation reforms;
- modernising logistics, ports, and transport networks to reduce trade costs;
- and finalising trade and market-access arrangements essential for post-LDC graduation competitiveness.

Sector-focused strategies, particularly in pharmaceuticals, agro-processing, ICT services, aviation and shipping logistics, leather, and medical technologies, should be deployed to catalyse private investment in higher-value activities.

Energy-sector reform must also accelerate. Investment in renewables, primary-fuel exploration, grid reliability, and regional power trade will help ensure stable and affordable energy for industry. Clear tariff policies and regulatory predictability are essential to crowd in private capital.

By the end of Year 3, Bangladesh should begin to see measurable gains in export composition, investment flows, and industrial competitiveness, marking the transition from stabilisation to sustained growth.

#### *Years 4 and 5: Consolidation, Institutionalisation, and Resilience*

The final phase focuses on embedding reforms so they become durable and difficult to reverse. By this stage, Bangladesh should have established a credible record in fiscal discipline, inflation management, financial-sector repair, and governance reform.

Key institutional consolidations should include:

- Enacting a Fiscal Responsibility and Debt Sustainability Act. This will codify budget discipline, debt anchors, and expenditure accountability to protect macroeconomic stability across political cycles.
- Formalising central-bank autonomy. This will embed rules-based monetary policy and inflation targeting within a strengthened institutional framework.
- Implementing a modern Competition Law with active enforcement. This will sustain market efficiency and preventing the re-emergence of cartelization and rent extraction.
- Rolling out a digital cadastre and nationwide property-tax system: This will support transparent revenue mobilization, asset registration, and financial inclusion.
- Deepening capital markets, including sukuk and conventional instruments. This will expand long-term financing options for productive investment.

- Piloting municipal finance reforms. This will strengthen local fiscal capacity, infrastructure delivery, and accountability.
- Consolidating cross-cutting investments in climate resilience, advanced technologies, and human capital. This will ensure that growth is both sustainable and inclusive.

By the end of Year 5, Bangladesh should be positioned not merely for recovery, but for a sustained rise in productivity, competitiveness, and institutional quality, with reforms embedded deeply enough to withstand political and external shocks.

## **8. Conclusion: A New Social Contract for a New Bangladesh**

Bangladesh stands at the threshold of historic transformation. Past failures of elite capture, governance breakdown, and institutional decay are widely recognised, and public demand for change is strong. The 2024–2026 window presents a rare alignment of political will, societal expectation, and economic necessity, but it must be seized with clarity, courage, and disciplined execution.

The path to a modern, resilient, inclusive, and competitive Bangladesh rests on a new social contract. The state commits to transparency, fairness, and competence, while citizens commit to compliance, participation, and accountability. Economic reform is not merely policy; it is a redefinition of the relationship between government, institutions, markets, and society.

Through disciplined action, Bangladesh can achieve stable inflation, diversified exports, sustained investment, strong institutions, reduced vulnerability, and greater capacity to compete and thrive in a challenging global environment. Decisions can become evidence-based rather than patronage-driven, opportunities merit-based rather than connection-dependent, and growth can strengthen the nation's economic resilience rather than just benefiting a politically connected elite.

The good-governance dividend is real, substantial, and attainable, but it will only materialise if Bangladesh builds an economy rooted in rules, integrity, innovation, and the collective strength of its people.

This is the promise of Bangladesh 2.0.

## Appendix: Political-Economy Realities – Managing Resistance, Coalitions, and Public Expectations

Economic reform does not take place in a political vacuum. It unfolds within a dense political economy shaped by vested interests, entrenched patronage networks, bureaucratic inertia, and external geopolitical pressures that may seek to influence, slow, or distort the reform agenda in ways that undermine national interests. Any serious reform program in Bangladesh must therefore anticipate resistance, manage coalitions, and shape public expectations as deliberately as it designs policy. The table below maps major reform areas to likely sources of resistance, the logic behind that resistance, and the corresponding mitigation approach.

Linking Resistance to Policy Areas			
Reform Area	Likely Sources of Resistance	Why Resistance Will Arise	Core Mitigation Logic
<b>Fiscal reform (tax base broadening, exemption removal, property taxation)</b>	High-income professionals, asset-rich households, large corporates, politically connected taxpayers	Loss of preferential treatment, higher effective tax burdens, exposure of hidden income and assets	Phased implementation, legal codification, digital enforcement to reduce discretion, visible fairness to build public legitimacy
<b>Public spending and procurement reform</b>	Procurement cartels, contractors, segments of the bureaucracy	Reduced rent extraction, tighter oversight, loss of discretionary power	Universal e-procurement, independent audits, public disclosure of contracts, early enforcement to break cartels
<b>Monetary and exchange-rate reform</b>	Political actors seeking short-term growth or FX control, import-dependent firms, FX arbitrage beneficiaries	Loss of policy discretion, end of preferential FX access	Greater central bank autonomy, transparent rules, phased adjustment, clear communication to anchor expectations
<b>Banking reform and NPL resolution</b>	Connected borrowers, politicised bank boards, poorly governed SOEs	End of loan evergreening, stricter classification, personal liability	Independent AMC, governance-linked recapitalisation, public disclosure, selective early prosecutions

Linking Resistance to Policy Areas			
Reform Area	Likely Sources of Resistance	Why Resistance Will Arise	Core Mitigation Logic
<b>SOE reform</b>	SOE management, unions, political patrons	Threat to jobs, privileges, and political leverage	Sequenced reform, focusing protection on workers (rather than managerial rents), performance contracts, transparency over fiscal costs
<b>Capital market and sukuk development</b>	Short-term financiers, banks reliant on consumer and trade finance	Shift toward long-term, asset-backed financing reduces quick margins	Regulatory incentives, sovereign sukuk benchmarks, investor education, gradual deepening
<b>Trade, export diversification, and FDI reform</b>	Import-dependent businesses, export cartels, protected industries	Increased competition, erosion of monopoly rents	Transitional support, productivity-linked export incentives, predictable trade policy
<b>Anti-corruption and governance reform</b>	Political-business-bureaucratic networks	Direct threat to rents, immunity, and informal power	Independent prosecution, legal autonomy, transparency, strong public signalling

# Population and Demography

## Treating population as an asset, not a liability

### Summary

- Bangladesh has reached a demographic crossroads. Its still-growing population masks a huge structural shift which has occurred in recent years. Fertility has fallen to replacement level, and the global trend is for such declines to drop much further. The implications – rarely discussed in Bangladesh – are immense: if this continues, then future cohorts will shrink, the workforce will contract, and the population will age, creating economic, social, and strategic risks.
- Population decline is increasingly seen as an outdated, mistaken solution to development challenges. China and India are grappling with lower fertility rates than Bangladesh, and are attempting to reverse course. Common claims that Bangladesh is “overpopulated” misdiagnose the problem of overcrowdedness in Dhaka and other large cities. That problem is caused by huge levels of rapid rural-to-urban migration which have outpaced infrastructure development – not birth rates.
- Bangladesh’s actual experience has been one of large-scale poverty reduction working hand in hand with population growth. A larger workforce paired with productivity gains drives industrialisation, broad-based economic improvement, and resilience. Shrinking cohorts, on the other hand, threaten labour-intensive industries, slow economic growth, constrain public finances, and reduce capacity for climate adaptation and defence.
- Once low-birth norms are embedded, many countries have seen that subsidies or incentives alone cannot reverse them. This is because the challenge is not primarily financial. Fertility decline is driven by a change in social norms – supported by state family planning and gender equality policies – which increasingly prioritise careers and more individualist lifestyles.
- Policy must shift from population control to population sustainability. The goal is a balanced age structure, supporting marriage and parenthood as respected life choices, and removing structural barriers to family formation, all without coercion or expensive programmes. Family planning should ensure choice, not suppress fertility. Education, labour, and social systems must value and accommodate family life. This will not solve the problem, but should at least mean the state is mitigating, not accelerating, the speed of decline.
- Population strategy is national strategy. Demographic sustainability underpins economic growth, social cohesion, climate resilience, and security. By treating people as a resource to cultivate rather than a problem to manage, Bangladesh can secure long-term prosperity, stability, and sovereignty.



## 1. Introduction: A Global Demographic Turning Point

The world is undergoing a demographic transformation without historical precedent. For the first time in human history, the majority of the global population now lives in countries where birth rates have fallen below the level required to sustain population size. This level – termed the replacement fertility rate – is approximately 2.1 children per woman. Today, roughly two-thirds of humanity lives in countries with fertility below that threshold. In many of them, population decline is no longer a future risk but a present reality.

This shift is not confined to the wealthy West. While low birth rates first appeared in Europe, Japan, and North America, the same pattern is now spreading across East Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, and South Asia. Fertility is falling much faster than demographers expected. The pace of global fertility decline doubled between the 2000s and 2010s, and has doubled again in the 2020s, now sinking on average by almost 2% per year. Levels once thought unimaginable are becoming routine. South Korea has sustained a fertility rate below 1.0 for seven consecutive years. Türkiye's total fertility rate has fallen to 1.48. Bogotá's is just 0.91. India's national fertility rate is now below replacement, and China's population is already shrinking. Countries that only recently worried about overpopulation now face the opposite problem: too few children, too few future workers, and too few future parents.<sup>15</sup>

What begins as a gentle slowdown in births soon becomes a structural problem, because demographic change is not linear. Fewer babies today means fewer adults tomorrow, which in turn means even fewer babies in the next generation. Once fertility falls below replacement and stays there, decline tends to accelerate. This is the mirror image of the population explosion of the past two centuries, but in reverse. If a country sustains fertility around 1.0, its population can shrink by more than half within a single lifetime.

Bangladesh now stands at a critical demographic pivot point. After decades of rapid population growth, its total fertility rate has fallen to around the replacement level of 2.1 children per woman. At present, Bangladesh's population is still increasing in absolute numbers. This is due to demographic momentum: large cohorts born in previous decades are now in their child-bearing years, and rising life expectancy means fewer deaths each year. However, this momentum masks an underlying structural shift. Once fertility remains at or falls below replacement for a sustained period, population growth slows, stops, and eventually reverses. When that happens, decline tends to gather speed, not slow down.

All countries more or less fit within a widely accepted demographic transition model. For most of human history, societies existed in a high-birth, high-death equilibrium (Stage 1), in which large numbers of children were born but many died young. With the onset of modern development (improved sanitation, nutrition, and medical care), death rates began to fall sharply while birth rates remained high, producing rapid population growth (Stage 2). Over time, as survival became more secure and social, cultural and economic structures changed, birth rates also began to decline (Stage 3). Once both death and birth rates are low, population growth slows markedly (Stage 4), which is where Bangladesh now stands. What is

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<sup>15</sup> The Economist. *Briefing: Population implosion*. 11 September 2025.

new in the 21st century is Stage 5: birth rates fall not just to low levels, but below replacement, causing populations to age and eventually shrink in absolute terms. This final stage did not exist at a global scale before the modern era. It represents a structural break in human demographic history that is difficult to reverse once entrenched.

UN population projections assume a Stage 6: that fertility will eventually rebound on its own. Yet there is little evidence for such optimism. In every country where fertility has fallen deeply below replacement, governments have struggled (and failed) to restore it to replacement level. Long-running financial incentives, childcare subsidies, parental leave schemes, and tax benefits have not solved the problem in Japan, South Korea, Italy, or much of Europe. This suggests that the drivers of fertility decline are not primarily economic calculations about the marginal financial costs of children, but a broader mix of cultural and socio-economic changes: changing lifestyles, values, aspirations, and perceptions of what constitutes a successful life. Once this shift takes hold, it is extremely difficult for governments to reverse.

For Bangladesh, the stakes are exceptionally high. Demography is not just a matter of numbers; it shapes the economy, the labour force, public finances, national security, social cohesion, and long-term development capacity. A large, young, and growing population can be a source of strength. A shrinking and ageing one can become a source of fragility. The question is not whether Bangladesh should "control" its population, but whether it can preserve the human capital needed to sustain prosperity, stability, and sovereignty in a rapidly changing world.

Much current policy thinking focuses on adapting to ageing: pensions, elder care, and health systems. Those are necessary. But without mitigation of fertility decline, adaptation becomes an ever-more expensive holding action. This policy is therefore concerned primarily with mitigation: slowing and stabilising demographic decline before it becomes structurally irreversible.

This paper argues that population decline is not a solution to poverty, environmental stress, or development challenges. On the contrary, for a country like Bangladesh it would create a cascade of economic, geopolitical, and social risks. It further argues that once fertility decline is driven by deep cultural change, it is extremely difficult to reverse through policy alone. The most realistic and responsible strategy is therefore not to attempt to engineer higher birth rates through spending programmes, but to remove policies and messages that accelerate fertility decline, and to restore a cultural environment in which marriage, family, and parenthood are once again seen as central, valuable, and worthy of social respect.

## 2. Bangladesh's Demographic Trajectory: Calm Before the Storm

Bangladesh has undergone one of the fastest fertility transitions in history. From one of the world's highest fertility rates in the early 1970s, when women on average had nearly seven children, the country has seen a dramatic decline in family size alongside improvements in health, education, and living standards. The UN's World Population Prospects estimates

Bangladesh's total fertility rate is around 2.1 births per woman, at or very near the replacement level needed to sustain the population long-term. Estimates vary; according to the latest UNICEF and Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics survey in late 2025, the average number of children per woman is slightly higher at 2.4.

The country's population now stands at an estimated 175.7 million, with women forming roughly half and two-thirds in the working-age group (15–64). This age structure, a legacy of higher fertility rates in the past and increases to life expectancy, has given Bangladesh a "demographic dividend": a period in which a relatively large workforce supports economic growth and productivity gains. A youthful age structure, with a large cohort of adults at or entering reproductive age, means that even a low fertility rate can produce a significant number of births. For this reason, absolute population numbers continue to rise for now, with a growth rate of around 1%.

On the surface, Bangladesh's population size might seem stable and demographic profile might seem advantageous. However, this is a temporary phase. Bangladesh's population growth will slow sharply in the coming decades and begin to fall. The rate of decline is very hard to model, as it will depend on whether the total fertility rate continues to fall in Bangladesh, and how far. 2025 UNICEF/BBS data suggests that fertility has stabilised in recent years, whereas the UN's World Population Prospects 2024 estimates suggest continued steady decline. There are good reasons to assume the latter. The first is the global trajectory of sustained fertility declines stabilising well under replacement rate, with neighbouring India further down this path with a fertility rate of 1.9 and dropping. Further, as smaller cohorts replace larger ones, the number of women entering child-bearing ages will shrink. When that happens, the total number of births will fall even if fertility rates remain unchanged. If fertility continues to decline, the fall in births will be steeper still. This is the structural mechanism by which demographic momentum eventually runs out and reverses. Finally, it is observable in Bangladesh that rates in rural areas remain much higher than large urban centres, yet are falling even faster. Even if rates stabilise in richer parts of the country, the national average will continue to fall as poorer areas track the same trajectory a decade or so behind.

Current demographic data also point to early signs of ageing. Although the share of elderly people in Bangladesh is still lower than in many developed countries, the number of people aged 65+ has been rising from the current level of around 6–7 % of the population. And because the youngest cohorts aged 0–14 are already shrinking as a share of the population, the base of future labour supply begins to narrow over time. The age structure is slowly shifting from a "pyramid" to a "column", which is the classic pattern of late-stage demographic transition.

Another dynamic shaping the trajectory is emigration, particularly of young working-age adults. Bangladesh has experienced substantial labour out-migration for decades, with hundreds of thousands leaving each year for work abroad in the Gulf, Southeast Asia, Europe and North America. While remittances contribute significantly to household income and the economy, emigration also removes a portion of the cohort that would otherwise contribute to domestic fertility and the labour force.

Together, these trends suggest that Bangladesh is approaching a crucial inflection point: the end of sustained population growth. Even without fertility falling sharply below replacement, the combination of low fertility, rising life expectancy, and emigration means that population growth will slow and eventually reverse. If fertility declines below replacement in the decades ahead, as it has in most countries that complete the demographic transition, Bangladesh's population could begin to stagnate or decline by the mid-21st century.

### 3. Potential Impact of Population Change on Bangladesh

Bangladesh's demographic transition from historically high fertility to fertility near replacement level to further projected falls sets the stage for profound economic, social, and strategic shifts in the coming decades. These changes arise not only from the number of people, but from how the population is distributed by age, and how demographic momentum interacts with labour markets, public finances, and family structures.

#### 3.1 The Overpopulation Misconception

A common assumption in demographic debates is that fewer people automatically mean less pressure on land, food, water, and public services. This view draws on a classical Malthusian logic: more people lead to more consumption, which inevitably outstrips finite resources and produces scarcity. While intuitive, this framework is too simple to explain how real economies and societies actually function.

Claims that "Bangladesh is overpopulated" usually reflect daily life in Dhaka (where policymakers live), where congestion and overcrowding are visible everywhere. But this is not a national population problem to be solved by fewer births. It is an urbanisation, centralisation and infrastructure problem. Bangladesh's urban population share rose from under 8% in 1970 to over 39% today, far faster than housing, transport, sanitation, and public services could expand. None of Bangladesh's other cities make it into the world's 100 most populous cities. When congestion is driven by migration into one centre, the real solutions are decentralising jobs and education, investing in secondary cities, and upgrading urban infrastructure.

In practice, resource availability is not determined by population size alone, but by technology, institutions, trade, and human capital. Historically, many countries have increased food production, reduced poverty, and improved living standards while their populations were growing rapidly. The global decline in extreme poverty since the 1980s occurred alongside the fastest population growth in human history. Productivity gains, improved irrigation, better seed varieties, market integration, and global trade allowed food output to rise faster than population across much of Asia.

Bangladesh itself is a clear case in point. Since independence, its population has more than doubled, yet famine has disappeared, poverty has fallen sharply, and life expectancy has risen. These gains did not occur because there were fewer people, but because agriculture,

health systems, institutions, and markets improved. Population size became a development asset when paired with rising productivity and economic integration.

This is because people are not only consumers; they are also producers. A larger population usually means a larger labour force, more entrepreneurs and innovators, and stronger economies of scale. Dense labour markets reduce unit costs in labour-intensive industries, which is precisely how Bangladesh built its export-oriented garment sector. Large populations also support more specialised services, more competitive markets, and more efficient infrastructure provision. Public goods also rely on critical mass: schools, hospitals, transport routes, and utilities become more expensive per user as populations shrink. When the user base contracts, unit costs rise and services are often withdrawn altogether, especially from rural areas and small towns.

Age structure matters even more than size. An older population costs more per person than a younger one. Healthcare, chronic disease management, long-term care, and pensions absorb a much larger share of national resources when the elderly population grows relative to the working-age population. A society can therefore have fewer people overall but face greater fiscal pressure per capita if most of them are old.

Finally, a shrinking population usually means a shrinking or stagnating economy. That matters because the capacity to address collective challenges depends on economic scale. For Bangladesh, this is particularly important for climate change. Adapting to sea-level rise, maintaining embankments, strengthening disaster resilience, and relocating vulnerable communities all require investment and manpower. A smaller, older, fiscally constrained economy will have far less capacity to fund these efforts. International aid cannot substitute for domestic economic strength.

The core misconception, then, is the idea that “fewer people = less strain.” In reality, the resource impact of population depends on how productive people are, how old they are, and how well institutions function. Bangladesh’s own history shows that population growth does not inherently cause scarcity. When human capital, markets, and productivity improve, more people can mean more output, more resilience, and more development capacity, not less.

### **3.2 Economic Stress**

As mentioned earlier, Bangladesh currently benefits from a significant demographic dividend, but it is temporary. A falling fertility rate means that smaller cohorts will enter the labour force 15–25 years from now, while rising life expectancy means more people will remain alive into old age. The mechanical result is a rising dependency ratio: fewer workers supporting more non-working people. This shift has three direct economic consequences.

First, labour supply tightens. With fewer workers available, firms face hiring difficulties and upward pressure on wages relative to productivity. Unless productivity rises rapidly, this constrains output and investment. For a country like Bangladesh, whose development model has relied heavily on abundant, low-cost labour, this is a structural challenge. Many industries (garments, food processing, construction, logistics, and basic manufacturing) depend on large pools of semi-skilled workers. As labour becomes scarcer and more

expensive, firms will have to automate, relocate, or shut down sooner than they otherwise would have done.

This creates a risk of deindustrialisation. Factory closures or relocation reduce employment opportunities for low- and mid-skill workers, weaken export earnings, and erode the broader industrial ecosystem of suppliers, transport firms, service providers, and urban communities built around manufacturing clusters. Bangladesh's export base, particularly the RMG sector, is highly labour-intensive. A shrinking workforce therefore threatens not just jobs, but foreign exchange earnings and balance-of-payments stability.

Second, ageing increases fiscal pressure. Older populations consume far more healthcare and social support per person than younger ones. As the share of elderly rises, public spending must expand for chronic disease treatment, disability care, and income support. At the same time, tax revenues come under pressure because the ratio of workers to dependents declines. Fewer people are earning wages, paying income tax, or contributing to VAT and payroll systems.

Bangladesh's formal social-protection systems are limited, and much of elderly care still relies on extended family networks and intergenerational co-residence. That is currently a strength. But demographic and social change is weakening this safety net. As fertility falls, there are fewer adult children per elderly person. At the same time, large numbers of young Bangladeshis migrate abroad for work, often long-term. Remittances help household incomes, but migration removes potential caregivers from the domestic social ecosystem. Finally, rising female labour-force participation reduces the availability of family members to provide unpaid care. The combined effect is greater elderly vulnerability, rising social isolation, and growing demand for externally provided care, which is costly and already a crisis area in many ageing societies in East Asia and Europe.

Third, economic growth slows unless productivity rises dramatically. Fewer workers mean fewer entrepreneurs, fewer new firms, and less dynamism. GDP growth becomes harder to sustain. Slower growth then feeds back into fiscal stress: weaker revenue, higher debt burdens, and reduced capacity to invest in education, infrastructure, and climate adaptation.

Some argue that technology, especially automation and artificial intelligence, will solve labour shortages. There is no doubt that technology can raise productivity and cushion some workforce losses. Many essential activities (farming, construction, logistics, healthcare, and elderly care) are labour-intensive but could be made more efficient through automation. But it cannot fully substitute for human capital in several crucial ways. Consumer demand is driven by people; fewer people means smaller domestic markets. Care sectors such as elder care, education, childcare, and social services still require human presence and emotional labour that machines cannot replace. And countries that benefit most from automation are those at the technological frontier. Bangladesh, still developing its innovation ecosystem, is unlikely to offset population decline through technology alone in the short to medium term.

In short, falling fertility leads (with a lag) to a shrinking workforce, rising dependency, fiscal strain, and slower growth. For Bangladesh, this threatens the foundations of its development model: labour-intensive industrialisation, export growth, and family-based social support.

Unless productivity rises exceptionally fast and social institutions adapt smoothly, population decline will not relieve economic pressure. It will intensify it.

### 3.3 Strategic and Geopolitical Implications

A country's population size and age structure are not just social variables; they are strategic assets. Large and youthful populations support bigger labour markets, faster innovation, deeper domestic markets, and greater economic weight. These, in turn, translate into influence in diplomacy, trade negotiations, security partnerships, and multilateral institutions. Bangladesh's current demographic profile, with a large working-age cohort, enhances its attractiveness to investors, trading partners, and international organisations. It strengthens Bangladesh's bargaining position simply by making it a large market, a large workforce, and a significant regional actor.

However, this advantage depends on momentum. As fertility falls and demographic momentum dissipates, the workforce will eventually shrink. That leads first to slower economic growth, and then, crucially, to weaker strategic capacity. Demography is a relative factor: what matters is not just Bangladesh's population size, but how it compares with that of other states.

There is a missed opportunity here. Low fertility is also becoming a problem for regional powers such as China and, increasingly, India. If Bangladesh were to maintain a young, growing workforce while others age, it could gradually narrow power asymmetries and increase its strategic autonomy. If instead Bangladesh follows the same trajectory into low fertility and ageing, it forfeits that potential advantage and locks in long-term relative weakness.

On a global level too, competition for capital is intensifying. Countries in Africa with large, fast-growing populations are increasingly attractive to investors seeking future markets and labour forces. If Bangladesh's population stagnates or shrinks, it becomes a less compelling long-term partner for foreign direct investment, regional supply-chain anchoring, technology transfer, and industrial upgrading.

The link between demography and military power is especially important. Armed forces rely on two foundations: manpower and money. A shrinking youth cohort reduces the pool of healthy, working-age adults available for recruitment, constraining force size and sustained deployments. At the same time, economic slowdown caused by a shrinking workforce weakens the state's ability to finance defence. Military effectiveness depends not only on soldiers, but on training, equipment, logistics, intelligence, cyber capabilities, and sustained investment. When GDP growth slows and fiscal pressure rises, defence budgets come under strain.

In other words, population decline weakens military capacity twice over: through fewer potential recruits; and through reduced economic capacity to fund a modern, technologically capable force. While technology matters in contemporary warfare, manpower still matters for border security, disaster response, peacekeeping, internal stability operations, and strategic

depth. Countries with shrinking youth populations face rising personnel costs, recruitment shortfalls, and growing difficulty maintaining readiness over time.

Economic power also underpins soft power and diplomatic influence. As workforce growth slows and GDP growth weakens, Bangladesh's ability to finance diplomacy, regional development projects, humanitarian assistance, and cultural exchange diminishes. Influence in international organisations depends not only on moral standing but on economic relevance. Market size, consumer base, and workforce scale are major reasons investors, multinationals, and partners prioritise one country over another.

In strategic terms, population decline is not neutral. It reduces Bangladesh's economic weight, diplomatic leverage, and military flexibility over time. While technological progress can soften some effects, it cannot replace the geopolitical value of scale. For a country situated between major powers and in a climate-vulnerable region, maintaining demographic vitality is therefore not just a social issue. It is a core national-security and sovereignty issue.

### 3.4 Social Upheaval and Demographic Disruption

Population decline reshapes society not only through economics and geopolitics, but through the everyday fabric of community life. When fertility falls and young cohorts shrink, the effects unfold unevenly across space, generations, and social institutions. What begins as a demographic shift becomes a pattern of social disruption.

The first impact is **spatial depopulation**. Young adults concentrate in major cities or leave the country altogether, draining villages and small towns of their most economically active residents. As rural populations age and shrink, local markets lose customers, schools close for lack of children, and agricultural labour becomes harder to find. Villages that once sustained vibrant social and economic life risk sliding into long-term stagnation. Over time, this process does not stop at the countryside. If population decline persists, even secondary cities begin to contract. Housing sits vacant, public transport becomes underused, and municipal finances weaken as tax bases shrink. Land-use patterns also change: abandoned agricultural land may revert to unmanaged landscapes, and local governance structures lose capacity and relevance.

The second impact is **weakened family networks**. Bangladesh has traditionally relied on extended family networks as its primary social safety net. Elderly parents lived with or near adult children; care was provided informally within households. Demographic decline undermines this system. With fewer children per family, there are fewer adult caregivers available for each elderly person. Migration accelerates the strain: when sons and daughters leave for cities or abroad, physical distance weakens daily support. Rising female labour-force participation further reduces the pool of family members able to provide unpaid care. The result is greater elderly vulnerability, increased social isolation, and rising demand for formal care systems (nursing, home health services, and pensions) all of which carry heavy fiscal and institutional costs.

These weakened family networks also reduce social resilience. Communities with fewer intergenerational ties are less able to cope with shocks such as floods, cyclones, or economic downturns. Loneliness, mental health problems, and loss of community cohesion become more common, eroding the informal support structures that have historically helped Bangladeshi society absorb crises.

A third dynamic unfolds through migration cycles, with a **brain and labour drain** projected to hit just when Bangladesh needs its workers. In a world where populations are falling almost everywhere, wealthy ageing countries actively recruit young workers from abroad. Bangladesh is likely to face growing demand for its nurses, construction workers, technicians, and caregivers. This creates a fiscal paradox: remittances support consumption, but fewer workers remain to generate domestic production, tax revenue, and innovation. Bangladesh thus becomes hollowed out, and even more dependent on money from abroad. Over time, this loss of young people accelerates population ageing, with all of the effects mentioned above.

Taken together, these dynamics show that population decline is not a gentle adjustment. It is a process of social reorganisation, altering where people live, how families function, how communities survive, and how nations relate to the world. For Bangladesh, the risk is not just fewer people, but weaker communities, thinner social ties, and a more fragile social structure in the face of economic and environmental shocks.

## 4. Bangladesh's Population Policy in Context

Bangladesh's dramatic fall in fertility – from nearly seven children per woman in 1971 to around 3.3 in the early 1990s and just 2.1 today – did not occur by accident. It was the outcome of decades of state-led family planning efforts, supported by international development agencies and shaped by the dominant demographic ideology of the late twentieth century: that rapid population growth was a barrier to economic development and social progress.

### 4.1 Historical Context: Population Control and Donor-Driven Programmes

Beginning in the mid-1970s, the Government of Bangladesh prioritised population reduction as a national development goal. In 1976, rapid population growth was officially declared the country's number one problem, and a modern institutional framework for "family planning" (a euphemism for fertility reduction) was established. The Directorate General of Family Planning was created under the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare to coordinate nationwide birth-spacing and fertility reduction initiatives.

These programmes were strongly influenced by global "neo-Malthusian" thinking: the belief that unchecked population growth would outstrip resources and impede economic progress. That ideology had become powerful by the 1960s and 1970s, backed by agencies such as the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), USAID, and the International Planned Parenthood Federation, who promoted contraception and fertility reduction as essential for

development. They spent millions of dollars setting up clinics in Bangladesh in the 1970s and 1980s, and trialled various methods of reducing births which were unsafe, illegal in the US, and used coercive strategies – including forced sterilisations – to change customs in a traditional, religious, agrarian society where large families had always been the norm (Shehabuddin, 2021; Murphy, 2017; Connelly, 2010; Mookherjee, 2007; Akhter, 1992).

The Bangladeshi government – highly dependent on foreign aid – received payments from such agencies conditioned with targets for sterilisation numbers, and sterilisation cards in many cases were required for individuals to receive food. This was combined by numerous public campaigns encouraging having fewer children. Rural field workers (including Family Welfare Assistants and Visitors) were trained to deliver contraceptives and counsel couples; contraceptive prevalence rose dramatically over the 1980s and 1990s. By the mid-1990s, contraceptive use had risen from under 10 % of married women in the 1970s to over 50 % by the late 1990s, and fertility declined in parallel. Use of modern contraception methods rocketed from 8% in the 1970s to 64% today, achieved through the government's efforts to train female Family Welfare Assistants (FWAs) who provide door-to-door family planning services. The 2012 population policy aimed to push fertility decline further, with goals of reducing the rate to 2.1 by 2015 and raising contraceptive use to 75%.

These programmes were at the time widely regarded as a success in terms of fertility reduction. However, they were conducted in a global policy environment that explicitly framed population growth as a problem to be controlled. Even more extreme measures were being taken nearby: India conducted a widespread campaign of forced sterilisation in the 1970s, and China in the 1980s. Family planning was often couched in language of reducing population growth rather than expanding reproductive choice, and donor programmes were incentivised to show rapid declines in births as a marker of success.

#### **4.2 From Population Control to Promoting Contraceptive Use**

In recent years, official population policy in Bangladesh has shifted away from explicit "population control" language toward a more rights-oriented framing. In 2025, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, with technical support from UNFPA, published the *Bangladesh National Family Planning Strategy 2025–2030*. The strategy presents family planning as part of a broader agenda of sexual and reproductive health and rights, emphasising empowerment, informed choice, and alignment with goals such as gender equality and the Sustainable Development Goals.

Under this framework, family planning is promoted primarily as a means for individuals and couples to decide how many children to have, when to have them, and how to avoid unintended pregnancies.

The strategy highlights several public-health benefits of expanded contraceptive access: reductions in unintended pregnancy and abortion, lower health risks associated with very early or late childbearing, reduced transmission of sexually transmitted infections, and greater scope for women to pursue education and employment. Contraception, including long-acting methods and sterilisation, is defined as a core component of reproductive health services.

This rights-based language is an improvement over the population control rhetoric of the past. However, it also risks obscuring the need for analytical clarity. Describing contraception as a “human right” may be useful in political advocacy, but it does not substitute for evaluating the full social and demographic consequences of fertility-shaping policy. It is therefore important to distinguish clearly between two different objectives:

1. Enabling choice over reproduction, in contrast to
2. Managing national fertility levels as a demographic outcome.

Access to contraception unquestionably serves the first objective. Repeated and unwanted pregnancies can be deeply distressing for families, and can result in rising abortion rates.

Where current policy becomes less analytically sound is in retaining elements of a fertility-reduction logic. The 2025–2030 strategy occasionally still references slowing population growth as a benefit. As argued elsewhere in this paper, continued emphasis on reducing fertility in a country that has already reached near-replacement level risks reinforcing a trajectory of future labour scarcity, ageing, and economic strain.

This tension is most visible in the continued inclusion and promotion of sterilisation within routine family-planning services. In a context where effective, reversible contraceptive options are widely available, sterilisation represents a far more radical and permanent intervention. A policy orientation that actively encourages or normalises sterilisation is difficult to reconcile with a genuinely choice-based framework.

A more consistent approach would be to maintain access to reversible contraception as a matter of personal autonomy and public health, while gradually removing sterilisation from the core family-planning agenda through counselling, stricter eligibility criteria, and the withdrawal of institutional promotion.

Similarly, public health guidance for adolescents and older women should focus on providing factual, non-ideological information about medical risks, not on discouraging childbearing as a social objective. Clinical staff should inform, not judge, personal life choices. The linkage between contraception and gender equality requires careful framing. The central benefit of contraception for women is not that it enables them to avoid family life in favour of schooling or employment, but that it allows women and men together to exercise meaningful choice about if and when to have children. Gender equality should not be presented as a frame in which schooling and careers are treated as morally superior to marriage and parenthood.

In short, Bangladesh’s family-planning policy has moved away from the coercive population control of the past, but it has not fully shed its underlying demographic management logic. A genuinely modern framework would avoid undermining access to contraception as a tool of personal autonomy and health, while disengaging it from the strategic objective of suppressing fertility in a country that increasingly needs, rather than lacks, demographic vitality.

#### 4.3 Beyond Population Policy: Social Change and Women's Roles

Bangladesh's sustained fertility decline cannot be explained primarily by family-planning policy. While state programmes and donor-supported contraception accelerated the early stages of the demographic transition, today's low fertility is increasingly driven by broader social and economic change, especially rising female schooling, later marriage, and expanded participation in paid work.

Since the 1990s, girls' secondary-school enrolment has risen sharply, and early marriage has fallen. In 1984, the Child Marriage Restraint Act was amended to ban marriage for women under 18 and men under 21. (In recognition of the law's conflict with local custom leading to widespread non-compliance, an exception clause was added in 2017 to allow earlier marriage when it is in the relevant party's "best interest"). More women have also entered university and wage employment, particularly in manufacturing and services, with female labour force participation increasing from 4% in 1974 to over 36% today. These shifts have raised the perceived opportunity cost of childbearing and reshaped what success now means.

From an economic perspective, as women spend more years in school, university and work, time devoted to pregnancy and child-rearing carries higher personal and professional costs. From a social perspective, success and status increasingly become associated with diploma attainment and career progression rather than early marriage and large families. Across many countries, this combination consistently leads to later marriage, later first births, and smaller family size.

Bangladesh's own data reflect this pattern. An analysis of the 2014 Bangladesh DHS published in *Fertility Research and Practice* finds a clear inverse relationship between education and fertility: women with no schooling had substantially higher numbers of children ever born than women who attended secondary school or university, even after controlling for residence, wealth, and access to contraception. A 2023 systematic review of women's empowerment and reproductive outcomes in Bangladesh published in *BMC Public Health* shows that women with jobs and degrees are more likely to use contraception consistently, to space births, and to express lower desired family size. These behaviours translate into lower fertility over time.

Crucially, once these patterns become culturally embedded, fertility behaviour is driven less by service availability and more by preferences, identities, and life expectations. In early stages of demographic transition, policy and health systems matter most. In later stages, culture dominates policy. By the time a society reaches near-replacement fertility, decisions about childbearing reflect how adulthood, success, and gender roles are understood – not just access to contraception or financial incentives.

This helps explain why governments in many low-fertility countries have struggled to raise birth rates through subsidies, childcare, or tax benefits. Such measures ease financial constraints but do not change the underlying value systems shaping family formation. Where the dominant life script has shifted from family-centred to career-centred, births tend to be postponed, reduced, or forgone regardless of policy nudges.

For Bangladesh, this means today's fertility level is not simply the outcome of health policy. It reflects a deeper transformation in socio-economic structure and aspiration. The country's demographic future will therefore depend less on clinic-based interventions and more on whether its social and cultural environment continues to increasingly signal that small families and career-first lifestyles are the default ideal, or whether marriage, parenthood, and larger families remain socially respected and supported choices within a modern economy.

## 5. Towards a New Demographic Strategy

### 5.1 A different approach to pro-natalism

Bangladesh's demographic transition has entered a new and more delicate phase. After decades of reducing fertility, the country has reached near-replacement level and now faces the risks of labour shortages, population ageing, and slower long-term growth. The strategic question is no longer how to suppress births, but how to sustain demographic vitality, economic dynamism, and social cohesion in a changing cultural and global environment.

Yet current policy language still implicitly treats lower fertility as an unqualified success. Even when framed in the language of rights and choice, the system continues to signal that smaller families and delayed parenthood are the preferred outcomes. This made sense in an earlier era, but it is increasingly misaligned with Bangladesh's future needs. The country now requires a shift from a population control paradigm to a population sustainability paradigm.

Financial pro-natalist policies alone rarely restore fertility once low-birth norms are embedded. A substantial body of evidence indicates that in countries where fertility has fallen deeply below the replacement level, long-running pro-natalist policies have so far produced only modest or temporary effects on fertility behaviour, and no sustained return to replacement fertility. In Japan, for example, empirical modelling of cash benefit schemes (one of the most common forms of pro-natalist policy) suggests that current policies have only a limited probability of reversing the fertility decline over the next decade without very substantial scaling up; even generous cash incentives are unlikely to bring the total fertility rate back to replacement levels by the 2030s.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, in parts of Eastern Europe such as Hungary (which spends as much as 6% of GDP on pro-natalist policies), Russia, and Poland – all of which have implemented long-standing family support programmes including tax breaks, child allowances, and parental leave – fertility rates have remained at or below sub-replacement levels, and where marginal increases have occurred they often reflect a one-off bump based on the timing of births rather than larger completed family sizes and lasting fertility increases.<sup>17</sup> These patterns suggest that once low-birth norms become socially

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<sup>16</sup> Rahman MM, Sakamoto H, Sultana S, Sassa M, Alam MA, Shibuya K. *Reversing fertility decline in Japan with foreign pro-natalist policies, 1990-2035: a systematic review and secondary data analysis*. The Lancet Regional Health - Western Pacific. June 2025.

<sup>17</sup> Cook, Linda J., Elena R. Iarskaia-Smirnova, and Vladimir A. Kozlov. *Trying to Reverse Demographic Decline: Pro-Natalist and Family Policies in Russia, Poland and Hungary*. Social Policy and Society 22, no. 2 (2023): 355–75.

embedded, non-coercive pro-natalist measures rarely produce a sustained reversal to high fertility without accompanying changes in broader cultural and socio-economic structures.

At this stage of demographic transition, fertility behaviour is driven less by clinics and subsidies and more by culture, identity, and socio-economic structures. People postpone or avoid family formation because modern social norms have made parenthood feel in conflict with modern success. What matters is whether the social environment signals that family life is respected, feasible, and compatible with contemporary life. A sustainable demographic strategy therefore does not mean large spending programmes. It certainly should not mean coercion either. It means removing structural and cultural biases that penalise family formation and restoring balance between education, work, and intergenerational continuity.

We do not claim that governments can “engineer” a return to high fertility. In societies that have undergone deep cultural transition, the non-coercive tools available to the state are limited. The realistic objective is therefore to stop using the state to normalise low fertility, remove structural biases against family formation, and to align education, labour, health and cultural policy with long-term population sustainability rather than population suppression. This is not reversal, but damage limitation. However, this is only the beginning of this conversation in Bangladesh, and our hope is that as this issue receives more attention, more effective solutions can be found.

## 5.2 Recommendations

### *Embedding fertility as a strategic policy goal*

- Scrap the Bangladesh National Family Planning Strategy 2025–2030, which retains the outdated assumption that suppressed national fertility levels are a desirable outcome and conflates it with public health benefits of contraception.
- Develop a new Population Sustainability Strategy which explicitly replaces fertility-reduction targets with goals focused on boosting fertility and maintaining a balanced age structure.
- Remove anti-natalist assumptions across policy documents, including references to slowing population growth, low fertility as a development and empowerment success, and measuring progress in terms of delayed marriage and reduced births. Replace them with language about demographic sustainability and long-term national capacity.
- Create a Demographic Sustainability Unit within the Planning Commission to monitor age structure, dependency ratios, and workforce projections across all ministries.
- Integrate population projections into defence planning, workforce strategy, and climate adaptation as an economic and national security variable.

### *Family planning reform*

- Maintain access levels to contraception with the objectives of supporting public health and the ability to plan.

- Revise counselling protocols so health workers present contraception as a choice, not as a civic duty to limit family size.
- End state promotion of sterilisation except in cases of clear medical necessity, phasing out incentives, quotas, or procedural fast-tracking for sterilisation.
- Ensure adolescent and older mothers receive neutral, factual medical information rather than discouragement framed in moral or developmental terms.
- Amend the Child Marriage Restraint Act to set the minimum age of marriage at 16.

*Education and labour policy reform*

- Design education systems which can easily accommodate students who are having children or caring for family members.
- Shift education-to-work pathways so young adults are not locked into a decade-long postponement of adulthood (e.g. encourage earlier labour market entry with vocational tracks).
- End official targeting of metrics which strongly correlate with reduced fertility, including increased female labour workforce participation and female enrolment into full-time university study.

*Revise social framing and messaging*

- Revise school curricula and public messaging so success is not framed solely in terms of career and income, but also in terms of family responsibility and intergenerational contribution.
- Reframe gender discourse to include caregiving, marriage, and parenthood as socially valuable life paths, not as inferior to formal labour.
- Support men's role in family life by promoting fatherhood, family responsibility, and marriage stability as masculine norms.

## 6. Conclusion

Bangladesh stands at a demographic crossroads. After half a century of rapid population growth and successful poverty reduction, the country has entered a new phase in which fertility has fallen to replacement level and social norms around family formation are changing quickly. What once appeared as a triumph of development policy now carries a different risk: not excess population, but demographic fragility. This paper has argued that population is not a liability to be managed down, but a strategic asset to be sustained. Bangladesh's own history demonstrates that development and population growth are not mutually exclusive.

The deeper drivers of low fertility today are no longer primarily driven by family planning policy. Nor are they driven by the marginal financial costs of raising a child. They are cultural and socio-economic: delayed adulthood, insecure housing, work structures hostile to family life, and a social narrative that treats marriage and parenthood as secondary to individual

career success. Once embedded, these norms are extremely difficult to reverse through policy spending alone. This is why so many rich countries are now trapped in demographic stagnation despite often large pro-natalist financial incentives.

The task ahead is therefore not to “engineer” births, but to restore balance. To stop discouraging family formation. To stop measuring progress in terms of university and labour force participation. And to rebuild an environment in which marriage, parenthood, and intergenerational continuity are once again normal, respected, and feasible life choices within a modern economy.

Demography is destiny only if it is ignored. If Bangladesh treats its people not as a problem to be solved, but as a resource to be cultivated, protected, and renewed, it can avoid the population crisis now gripping much of the developed world and secure not only growth, but stability, dignity, and sovereignty for generations to come.

# Information and Communication Technology

## A Strategic Path for Digital Transformation

### Summary

- Bangladesh's digital potential is real but uneven. Mobile connectivity is widespread, yet high-speed broadband and reliable networks remain limited outside urban centres. SMEs, start-ups, and key sectors face constrained digital adoption, early-stage financing gaps, and fragmented public platforms. Skills mismatches, cybersecurity weaknesses, and unclear regulation further limit productivity and inclusion.
- Digital infrastructure must be purposeful. Schools, clinics, courts, markets, farms, and SMEs should be connected first, supported by interoperable, privacy-preserving platforms. Energy-efficient, climate-resilient, and redundant networks ensure services are reliable, cost-effective, and sustainable.
- SMEs and start-ups require targeted support. Blended finance, regulatory sandboxes, incubators, and market-access programmes can drive innovation and scaling without fostering dependency, while anti-oligopoly measures safeguard competition.
- Human capital and employability must align with real economic needs. Education and vocational programmes should prioritise applied skills, workplace experience, digital literacy, and entrepreneurship, supported by apprenticeships and Recognition of Prior Learning.
- Cybersecurity, accountable governance, and sovereign global engagement are essential. Data protection, CERTs, judicial oversight, e-procurement, and strategic international partnerships build trust, resilience, and domestic capability while enabling knowledge and market access.
- Together, these reforms aim to move Bangladesh from digital potential to digital power, expanding opportunity, deepening productivity, and reinforcing sovereignty, resilience, and inclusive growth.



## 1. Introduction

Bangladesh stands at an inflection point in its technological development. High mobile penetration, stronger broadband infrastructure, and a large, entrepreneurial youth population provide a solid foundation for accelerated digital growth. Recent legislative initiatives in cybersecurity and increasing budget attention to ICT have created a policy window in which carefully designed reforms can translate digital potential into national strength.

At the same time, important gaps remain. Digital access is still uneven between urban and rural areas. Many graduates lack the applied skills that employers require. Cybersecurity capacity is still nascent. Regulation for digital services is often unclear or slow. Early-stage capital for startups and SMEs remains limited. These constraints mean that digital transformation in Bangladesh has so far been broad but shallow – extensive in access, but uneven in productivity and impact.

For Bangladesh, technology policy must be about expansion with purpose and responsibility. Digital growth matters because it can be used to strengthen and improve both everyday life and national capacity in areas such as defence, economic growth, education, health, justice, enterprise and employment. It has the potential to improve the efficiency and transparency of the state. But at the same time, it should be managed responsibly: in a way that respects personal dignity, basic freedoms and the social and moral foundations of the country.

The task now is not only to expand digital systems, but to direct and deepen them. Connectivity must reach the institutions and sectors that matter most for development: schools, clinics, courts, markets, farms, factories and small businesses. Digital tools must raise productivity in the real economy, not just create new channels for consumption. Skills policy must produce employable graduates, not only certificates. And governance reform must use technology to reduce corruption and delay, not to concentrate power.

This document sets out a national technology programme built around five pillars: purposeful connectivity and public platforms; a productive digital economy rooted in SMEs and real sectors; human capital for dignified work; cybersecurity and accountable digital governance; and sustainable, sovereign partnerships. These are intended to move Bangladesh from digital potential to digital power, and to expand opportunity while strengthening sovereignty, integrity and social cohesion.

## 2. Current Landscape and Strategic Challenges

Bangladesh enters this period of technological change with real strengths but also clear structural constraints. Before setting out the policy pillars, it is important to understand the present digital landscape and the challenges that must be addressed if technology is to serve national development rather than distort it. The following conditions define the starting point for reform:

**1. Digital inclusion has expanded, but unevenly.**

Bangladesh has made significant progress in digital access over the past decade, with over 98% of households owning at least one mobile phone and internet penetration reaching approximately 56% of the population. Mobile internet and financial services are widely used, and e-government platforms are increasingly integrated into daily state–citizen interactions. However, computer access remains below 10%, and a pronounced urban–rural digital divide persists. Only 36% of rural residents use the internet compared to 71% in urban areas, reflecting disparities in broadband infrastructure, affordability, digital literacy, and service quality.<sup>18</sup> Limited access to reliable, high-speed connectivity in rural regions continues to constrain digital inclusion and participation in the digital economy.

**2. Technology is not yet driving productivity in the real economy.**

Agriculture, garments, construction, logistics and small manufacturing employ the majority of the workforce, yet digital tools are still used only sporadically in these sectors. As a result, productivity gains from technology have been modest. ICT is contributing 2.6% of the GDP.<sup>19</sup> Only 7% of the local farms are using cloud technology while only 34% Bangladeshi companies have a website.<sup>20</sup> Too much digital activity remains concentrated in consumption, communication and informal freelancing rather than in upgrading production systems and domestic value chains.

**3. The startup and tech ecosystem is maturing, but capital is thin at the early stage.**

Bangladesh has seen notable funding events, the emergence of local scale-ups, and growing interest from regional and diaspora investors. At the same time, domestic venture capital and angel networks remain limited, and many startups lack structured support in their formative years. The startup scene is currently valued at \$1.45B. This creates a risk that promising enterprises fail early or become dependent on foreign platforms and investors as less than 10% VC funds are locally raised. The strategic challenge is to support innovation without creating subsidy-driven or speculative ecosystems..

**4. Human capital is misaligned with labour market needs.**

Universities and colleges produce large numbers of graduates each year, including in ICT-related fields, but employers consistently report gaps in applied skills, work readiness and familiarity with current tools.<sup>21</sup> According to World Bank's human capital index, Bangladesh scores only 0.46 which is below the average of South Asia. Vocational and technical education remains fragmented and undervalued, and

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<sup>18</sup> The Daily Star. *Internet shows stark rural-urban divide*. January 2025.

<sup>19</sup> Bhuiyan, Mohammad Rakibul Islam, K. M. Salah Uddin, and Md Noor Uddin Milon. 2023.

"Prospective Areas of Digital Economy in the Context of ICT Usages: An Empirical Study in Bangladesh" *FinTech* 2, no. 3: 641-656.

<sup>20</sup> The Daily Star. *Bangladesh lags behind peers in digital adoption for business*. April 2024.

<sup>21</sup> LightCastle Partners. *Bangladesh Startup Investments Report 2024 – A Decade In Review*. November 2024.

pathways from education into stable employment are weak. This contributes to graduate underemployment and youth frustration despite rising levels of formal education.

**5. Cybersecurity and data governance capacity remains underdeveloped.**

As more services move online, vulnerabilities increase. Incident response capacity, professional staffing, and inter-agency coordination are still developing. Bangladesh ranks 56th in ITU Global Cyber Security Index.<sup>22</sup> Unclear or overbroad regulation of digital services can discourage investment, limit innovation, and raise concerns about privacy and freedom of expression.

**6. Fiscal space and institutional capacity are constrained.**

The national budget rightly prioritises essential public services, and although attention to digital transformation is increasing, fiscal space remains limited. Large-scale digital ambitions must therefore be pursued through sequencing, re-prioritisation, and disciplined use of blended finance rather than open-ended public spending. Institutional capacity also varies widely across ministries and agencies, affecting the pace and quality of implementation.

Taken together, these conditions mean that Bangladesh's digital transformation is real but incomplete: broad in access, uneven in productivity, and constrained by skills, finance, governance and fiscal realities. The policy pillars that follow respond to these challenges with a programme designed to expand digital capacity, deepen its economic and social impact, and govern it in a way that strengthens national resilience and public trust.

### 3. Pillar 1: Connectivity and Public Digital Platforms

#### 3.1 Analysis

Bangladesh has achieved above 98% mobile connectivity, yet reliable high-speed broadband remains uneven. Bangladesh ranks 91st and 100th in mobile and fixed broadband speed respectively. In many rural areas, bandwidth is limited, service quality is unstable, and prices are high (\$0.32/GB) relative to incomes. This constrains digital use in education, healthcare, justice and enterprise. At the same time, critical public systems such as land records, business registration, identity services, procurement and social protection remain fragmented, partially digitised, or built on non-interoperable platforms. According to World Bank's GovTech Maturity Index (GTMI), Bangladesh scored only 0.71 compared to India's 0.91 in Public Service Delivery Index.<sup>23</sup>

For Bangladesh, the strategic question is not simply how many people are online, but whether digital infrastructure is serving the institutions and sectors that matter most for

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<sup>22</sup> National Cyber Security Index. Bangladesh. Accessed 3 February 2026:

<https://ncsi.egea.ee/country/bd/?allData=1>

<sup>23</sup> World Bank Group. *Global Program on GovTech & Public Sector Innovation*. Accessed on 3 February 2026: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/programs/govtech>

national development. Well-designed digital public platforms can dramatically reduce transaction costs, corruption and delay. When identity, payments, records and authentication systems are interoperable, both citizens and businesses can interact with the state more efficiently and transparently.

Much of existing internet use is oriented toward entertainment and social media rather than education, public services, or productive economic activity. International experience shows that connectivity raises productivity only when it is paired with institutional reform and sector-specific adoption. Schools, clinics, courts, markets, farms, factories, and SMEs should be prioritised to ensure connectivity translates into productive outcomes, rather than focusing on expanding household access.

Furthermore, poorly designed digital public infrastructure carries serious risks. Centralised data systems can enable surveillance and erode public trust. Unfiltered public networks expose children and youth to harmful content. Digital expansion must therefore be selective, decentralised and governed by law and clear accountability mechanisms.

Finally, sustainable and resilient connectivity is essential for long-term impact. Data centres, fibre networks, and mobile infrastructure consume significant energy, and Bangladesh's rapid digital expansion could increase carbon intensity if unmanaged. Infrastructure is also vulnerable to climate risks. Floods, cyclones, and power disruptions can interrupt critical public services. Planning connectivity and platforms with energy efficiency, renewable sources, and redundancy in mind ensures that digital services remain reliable, cost-effective, and environmentally sustainable, while strengthening resilience for emergencies and national security.

The strategic aim is a balanced, interoperable and privacy-preserving digital state: one that uses technology to limit discretionary power rather than expand it, to strengthen sovereignty rather than dependency, and to deepen productivity rather than distraction.

### **3.2 Recommendations**

#### *Expanding Connectivity*

- Prioritise broadband for public institutions (schools, madrasas, clinics, courts, local government offices, markets, and SME hubs) before general consumer expansion via municipal Wi-Fi.
- Ensure near-universal institutional coverage and reliable broadband within two years, measured by % of institutions connected and network uptime.
- Focus last-mile investment on underserved areas through the National Last-Mile Connectivity Fund: competitive, time-bound co-financing with private operators and community networks rather than open-ended state build-out. Measure success by coverage of rural/underserved areas and network redundancy metrics.
- Include commercial partnerships for satellite or backup connectivity to strengthen emergency resilience.

- Expand fibre and backup connectivity along ports, highways and export zones to improve network resilience, logistics-sector digital adoption, and connection reliability. Measure success by % of SMEs using digital services and transaction time reductions.

#### *Digital Public Platforms and Services*

- Develop interoperable national digital platforms: digital identity authentication, payments, e-signatures, registries for land, businesses, social protection, and one-stop digital services for SMEs. Platforms must follow open standards and data-minimisation by design.
- Measure success by the share of key services delivered digitally and reductions in business registration time.
- Require interoperability between government systems so citizens and firms do not repeatedly submit the same information; reduce average business registration and licensing time by at least half within three years.

#### *Land, Property and Credit Access*

- Digitise land and property records in pilot districts with strong legal safeguards and public access to prevent elite capture and improve credit access for small farmers and entrepreneurs.
- Measure success by land records digitised, number of new small-business loans enabled.

#### *Safety, Access and Inclusion*

- Apply child-protection and content-safety standards on all publicly funded or municipal networks, with independent audits and public reporting of compliance.
- Mandate that all new government digital systems be mobile-first, low-bandwidth compatible, and accessible in Bangla to avoid excluding rural and low-income users.

#### *Sustainability*

- Prioritise energy efficiency in all new data centres, mobile towers, and fibre infrastructure; encourage adoption of renewable-powered operations via fiscal incentives or co-financing mechanisms.
- Build redundancy and backup power into critical networks, including disaster-resilient routing for fibre and satellite or backup connectivity for high-risk regions.
- Include sustainability and resilience criteria in all public procurement for digital infrastructure, ensuring networks can maintain critical services during climate events or emergencies.
- Measure success by the share of data centres and major network nodes using renewable energy, network uptime during extreme weather, and availability of backup connectivity in priority public institutions.

## 4. Pillar 2: Digital Productivity, SMEs and Start-Ups

### 4.1 Analysis

Bangladesh has a growing digital economy, including IT services, software development, e-commerce, and freelancing, generating significant export revenue. Yet much of the activity is concentrated in urban centres, with small firms and rural enterprises often excluded from digital tools that could improve productivity, market access, and financial inclusion.

The start-up ecosystem has matured in recent years, with notable funding events and active scale-ups. However, early-stage capital is limited, and private investment tends to cluster around a few cities and sectors. Evidence from comparable countries shows that digital entrepreneurship thrives when supported by market access, skills, mentoring, and infrastructure, rather than open-ended government grants. Well-targeted fiscal incentives, simplified licensing, and market-support programs can significantly increase startup survival, innovation, and export revenues. At the same time, anti-competitive practices among dominant platforms can reduce choice and innovation, which signals the need for careful regulation.

The strategic goal is not just to foster new start-ups, but to support the growth and scaling of firms with proven potential, so they can create jobs, generate export revenue, and strengthen the local digital economy. Regulatory gaps, fragmented support services, and skill mismatches constrain SMEs from fully adopting digital technologies. Improving productivity in the real economy (e.g. agriculture, manufacturing, logistics, health, and services) depends on digitally-enabled SMEs and scaling start-ups, not only on headline tech ventures.

Digital tools can also reduce transaction costs, improve traceability, and formalise previously informal businesses. When coupled with interoperable public platforms, SMEs can access credit, comply with regulations more easily, and reach new markets. This approach maximises impact without creating dependency on ongoing government subsidies.

### 4.2 Recommendations

#### *SME Digital Adoption and Productivity*

- Support SMEs in adopting digital tools for payments, inventory, supply-chain management, e-commerce, and customer engagement through time-bound, performance-linked co-financing or voucher programmes with private partners. Measure success by number of SMEs using digital tools, increases in revenue, and reductions in transaction times.
- Integrate SMEs into interoperable public platforms for identity, payments, and registries to simplify compliance and access to government services. Measure success via reduced time for licensing, tax filing, and other regulatory processes.

#### *Start-up and SME Financing*

- Establish a public-private co-investment fund to support seed-stage startups, matched at 1:2 by private capital. Measure success by survival rate of supported startups, number of follow-on funding rounds, and jobs created.
- Encourage diaspora and impact investment funds to mobilise additional early-stage capital, targeting USD 200–400 million over 5 years.

*Innovation Ecosystem*

- Facilitate regulatory sandboxes for fintech, health-tech, agri-tech, and education technology, with clear sunset clauses. Measure success by number of sandbox projects successfully launched in the market.
- Establish incubators and accelerators in Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities, with sectoral focus on high-development-impact areas such as agri-tech, climate-tech, and digital finance. Measure success by number of incubated firms, jobs created, and local economic contribution.

*Skills and Entrepreneurship Support*

- Provide modular, practical training and micro-credentials for digital skills relevant to SMEs and start-ups, including cloud tools, AI adoption, e-commerce, and digital marketing. KPI: number of certified participants employed or starting businesses within 12 months.
- Offer mentorship and market-access support, connecting start-ups and SMEs with larger firms, export markets, and diaspora networks. Measure success by increase in trade or export revenues and adoption of digital solutions by SMEs.

*Regulatory and Market Facilitation*

- Simplify tax incentives for R&D and startup investments with clear performance reporting and sunset clauses. Measure success by uptake of incentives and FDI in digital services.
- Fast-track licensing for data centres and cloud operations to reduce administrative delays; measure success by average time-to-licence and new licensed infrastructure projects.
- Provide export-oriented benefits for digital services (e.g., reduced export compliance friction, trade mission support); measure success by digital exports, cross-border payments completed, and market-entry outcomes.
- Reduce regulatory and payment friction for SMEs and digital exporters, including cross-border e-payments, e-invoicing, and simplified compliance processes. KPIs: time and cost to export, volume of digital exports, number of SMEs entering new markets.

- Implement anti-oligopoly safeguards and interoperability mandates for dominant digital platforms. Track the number of competitive entrants in key sectors and adherence to interoperability standards.
- Encourage adoption of digital marketplaces and e-commerce platforms, particularly for rural producers and micro-enterprises, to integrate them into formal supply chains. Measure success by number of sellers onboarded, total sales volume, and market penetration in previously underserved areas.

## 5. Pillar 3: Human Capital, Education and Employability

### 5.1 Analysis

Bangladesh's demographic strength will only translate into national prosperity if young people enter the labour market with capabilities that match real economic needs. Our separate education policy documents significant gaps in general and vocational education in detail. At present, the education-to-work pipeline is misaligned. Tertiary education has expanded rapidly, yet graduate unemployment is significantly higher than overall unemployment. At the same time, firms report persistent shortages of workers with skills they need. The implication for technology and skills policy is clear: Bangladesh must shift from a credentials-based model toward a capability-based system focused on applied reasoning, technical competence, digital fluency for work, and economic literacy. For more on this, please see our education policy.

Digital transformation intensifies this need. AI, cloud tools, cybersecurity, and data systems are not niche specialisations; they are becoming general-purpose workplace technologies. Skills programmes should therefore integrate technology with workplace practice, vocational training, and entrepreneurial capability, enabling youth to participate meaningfully in the economy while strengthening national productivity.

### 5.2 Recommendations

#### *Work-Integrated Education and Applied Skills*

- Incentivise applied curriculum updates in higher education and vocational programmes, linking public support to verified industry-aligned internships and workplace learning.
- Embed AI, cloud, cybersecurity, and data management as practical workplace tools in vocational and applied programmes.
- Measure success by % of graduates with verified workplace experience and certified digital competencies.

#### *Enterprise and SME Capability*

- Integrate business skills (accounting, procurement, compliance, logistics, risk management) into upper-secondary and applied degree programmes.

- Facilitate pathways for graduates to start or work in SMEs through partnerships with private foundations, chambers, and cooperatives.
- Measure success by number of graduates engaged in enterprise or formal SME employment, and their survival/impact metrics.

*Apprenticeships and Modular Learning*

- Establish structured, paid apprenticeships and micro-credential pathways for TVET learners and SME workers.
- Implement Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) mechanisms so informal-sector experience can be formally certified.
- Measure success by apprenticeship placements, RPL certifications issued, and employment progression.

*Teacher and Trainer Capacity*

- Address instructor shortages and upskill trainers for applied, industry-aligned teaching in both TVET and higher education.
- Measure success by filled teaching posts and instructor certification levels.

## 6. Pillar 4: Cybersecurity and Accountable Digital Governance

### 6.1 Analysis

As Bangladesh deepens its digital footprint, cybersecurity and trustworthy governance are critical enablers. The current landscape shows growing threats to critical infrastructure, private data, and public systems, while regulatory frameworks are still evolving. Capacity for incident detection, response, and threat intelligence remains limited, particularly in SMEs and local government units.

At the same time, digital systems present an opportunity to strengthen transparency, reduce corruption, and improve service delivery. However, poorly governed systems can enable surveillance, abuse, or arbitrary enforcement, undermining public trust and social cohesion.

International experience demonstrates that effective digital governance requires a balanced approach: robust cybersecurity measures, clear privacy rules, judicial oversight, and accountability mechanisms, alongside capacity-building for public and private actors. This allows digital expansion to deliver benefits while mitigating risks to freedoms, economic activity, and national resilience.

## 6.2 Recommendations

### *Cybersecurity Capacity & Resilience*

- Establish and strengthen national and regional Computer Emergency Response Teams (CERTs) with clearly defined operational protocols and public-private threat-sharing networks.
- Expand cybersecurity training for public servants, SMEs, and critical infrastructure operators.
- Implement a national cyber incident response fund and affordable cyber insurance for SMEs.
- Measure success by mean-time-to-detect incidents, % of critical infrastructure with audited security, and number of trained professionals per 100,000 population.

### *Privacy, Data Governance, and Legal Frameworks*

- Adopt a data protection law aligned with global best practices, clearly limiting collection and use of personal information.
- Establish clear legal boundaries on data use in public platforms so information collected for service delivery cannot be repurposed for political control, profiling or arbitrary enforcement.
- Establish independent oversight bodies to monitor compliance, enforce standards, and audit data handling practices.
- Ensure public digital systems implement privacy-by-design and data-minimisation principles, with transparent reporting.
- Measure success by adoption of privacy standards across government systems and compliance audit results.

### *Responsible Digital Oversight*

- Clearly delineate lawful surveillance authorities and judicial oversight to prevent arbitrary monitoring or profiling.
- Embed safeguards in government platforms to ensure that collected data is used solely for service delivery.
- Measure success by documented cases of compliance and reductions in complaints or legal violations.

### *Transparency and Anti-Corruption Measures*

- Move to full e-procurement coverage for central government tenders, with transparent reporting and audit-verified reductions in leakage. Measure success by % of tenders delivered digitally, measured reduction in leakage.
- Expand digital service delivery and audit-ready public reporting to reduce leakage and improve efficiency.

- Require independent evaluation of digital governance initiatives to track outcomes and identify gaps.
- Measure success by % of tenders conducted digitally, reductions in procedural delays, and verified reduction in corruption indicators.

## 7. Pillar 5: Sovereign Partnerships and International Engagement

### 7.1 Analysis

Global cooperation is essential for Bangladesh to access knowledge, innovation, and markets. Participation in international standards bodies, joint research initiatives, and regional collaborations can accelerate technological adoption while ensuring alignment with national development priorities and sovereign control.

Experience from comparable countries shows that international partnerships can:

- Expand access to knowledge, technology, and markets without creating dependency.
- Foster research and development in applied sectors such as AI for development, digital health, logistics, and climate adaptation.
- Strengthen domestic technological capabilities while safeguarding national interests.

The strategic goal is therefore digital expansion that is internationally connected, knowledge-driven, and firmly under Bangladeshi control.

### 7.2 Recommendations

#### *Research and Innovation Partnerships*

- Establish regional research hubs and joint R&D calls with universities in partner countries, focusing on applied technologies for national priorities. Measure success via number of international collaborations, patents filed, and locally adopted solutions.
- Encourage knowledge-transfer agreements that build domestic capabilities and reduce reliance on foreign technology.

#### *Digital Diplomacy and Standards*

- Use digital diplomacy to secure favorable cross-border data flows, participate in global standard-setting bodies, and ensure compliance with international digital trade norms. Measure success via Bangladesh's representation in key standards organizations, adoption of interoperable standards, and alignment with international digital trade agreements.

## 8. Budgetary Implications and Phasing Implementation

Bangladesh's national technology programme is designed to maximise impact while avoiding speculative or open-ended public spending. Most initiatives rely on blended

finance, combining modest government seed contributions with private investment and concessional support from donors and international financial institutions (IFIs). This approach ensures that public resources are catalytic, targeting areas where market forces alone would under-invest, while leveraging much larger flows of capital from other actors.

The programme is phased over five years, concentrating on immediate, high-leverage interventions in the first year, followed by medium- and long-term scaling of infrastructure, SME support, and skills development.

### **8.1 Year 1: Preparation and Pilots (0–12 months)**

The initial year focuses on foundation-building and piloting key initiatives. An ICT Manifesto Delivery Unit will be established within the Prime Minister's Office, supported by an inter-ministerial coordination team and a public-private advisory council. Clear, measurable KPIs will guide performance.

Pilot initiatives will include:

- The Last-Mile Connectivity Fund, seeded with approximately BDT 5–10 billion (USD 50–100 million), to expand institutional connectivity in underserved areas.
- A National Start-Up Matching Facility, with catalytic government capital of USD 20–50 million, matched by private investors.
- Modular skilling vouchers and micro-credential pilots, subsidising 30–50% of costs in partnership with private providers.
- Initial regulatory sandbox trials for fintech, health-tech, ed-tech, and agri-tech.

These pilots are designed to generate rapid, measurable results and test approaches for wider adoption, ensuring that public spending is focused and evidence-based.

### **8.2 Years 2–3: Scale and Legislate**

Successful pilots will be scaled across the country, extending connectivity, SME adoption, start-up support, and skills development. Legislative priorities in this phase include passing comprehensive data protection and privacy laws, and finalising satellite resilience contracts to secure emergency connectivity. Incubation networks and digital public platforms will be expanded to cover more regions and sectors, strengthening both enterprise growth and public service delivery.

During this period, blended finance will mobilise the bulk of investment, with USD 200–400 million in combined public, private, and donor support allocated to scaling infrastructure, digital platforms, and start-up ecosystems. Performance-linked disbursements will ensure funds are used efficiently, while sunset clauses prevent open-ended commitments.

### **8.3 Years 4–5: Consolidate and Entrench**

The final phase consolidates gains. Digital public goods, including interoperable platforms, identity and payment systems, and SME portals, will be fully operational and widely adopted. Funding vehicles such as the Start-Up Matching Facility and sectoral incubation programmes

will mature, supporting sustainable growth without reliance on recurring government subsidies.

Key outcomes in this period include:

- Measuring the contribution of digital transformation to GDP, SME productivity, and employment.
- Ensuring cybersecurity, data protection, and public accountability mechanisms are fully embedded and independently verified.
- Entrenching institutional capacity for ongoing management and innovation.

### **Aggregate Public Commitment**

Across the five-year programme, total public expenditure is expected to range between BDT 35–65 billion (USD 350–650 million), roughly 0.1–0.15% of GDP, with the majority of finance catalysed by private and donor contributions. This sequencing ensures rapid, targeted impact while maintaining fiscal discipline, sovereignty, and long-term sustainability.

### **Institutional Roles**

Effective implementation relies on clear responsibilities across government and stakeholders:

- The Prime Minister's Office provides overall oversight and political leadership.
- The Ministry of ICT leads policy formulation, coordination, and implementation of digital infrastructure and platforms.
- The Ministry of Finance manages funding, blended finance structures, and fiscal incentives.
- The Ministry of Education aligns skilling initiatives with national workforce needs.
- Investment facilitation is supported by BIDA and BEPZA, while Bangladesh Bank oversees digital finance inclusion.
- Civil society and industry associations provide independent monitoring, transparency, and feedback loops to ensure accountability and public trust.

## **9. Conclusion**

Bangladesh has a unique opportunity to turn digital potential into national strength. Success will require technology policy that is purposeful, productive, and responsibly governed. This programme focuses on catalytic public investment, blended finance, and strategic partnerships to ensure that connectivity, skills, enterprise, and governance reforms deliver significant impact while minimising risks to privacy and security.

The challenge is urgent, but the approach is clear: technology should serve people, enterprises, and the state efficiently, equitably, and sustainably. With careful implementation, Bangladesh can emerge as a digitally capable, resilient, and globally engaged nation, ready to harness technology for inclusive growth and long-term prosperity.



## **PART THREE**

# **STRENGTHENING SOVEREIGNTY THROUGH DIPLOMACY AND DEFENCE**



# Foreign Policy

## Securing sovereignty through strategic neutrality and diversification

### Summary

- Bangladesh's foreign policy environment is becoming more competitive and fragmented. Great-power rivalry, regional instability, and shifting trade and investment patterns place new pressure on sovereignty and decision-making autonomy.
- The guiding objective should be strategic autonomy, not alignment: Bangladesh must position itself as an "*Equal Friend to All*", engaging with all major powers and regions while avoiding subordination to larger actors or zero-sum rivalries that harm the regional balance. Economic diplomacy should lead external engagement, with trade diversification, investment attraction, labour mobility, energy security, and technology access as the primary diplomatic narratives.
- Stable relations with India and China are vital, but must be complemented by deeper institutional engagement with other multilateral frameworks to reduce over-dependence, increase integration with other economies, and embed Bangladesh in wider value chains and standards systems. Despite the efforts of the Bangladeshi interim government, ASEAN membership is not a viable route, but deeper integration is a way to achieve some of these outcomes.
- The Muslim world and Middle East offer underused strategic depth, large markets and an opportunity to cooperate on defence capability without wider geopolitical alignment. Platforms such as the OIC and D-8 based on Muslim solidarity can support economic diversification, energy cooperation, labour protection, and diplomatic backing.
- Engagement with the West should be trade-centric and pragmatic. The United States and Europe remain vital export markets and sources of finance and technology, but cooperation must avoid ideological alignment or security dependence that undermines neutrality.
- Together, these principles define a sovereignty-first foreign policy: balanced, economically grounded, non-aligned, and development-driven, and designed to secure Bangladesh's independence, resilience, and long-term prosperity in a competitive world.



## 1. Securing sovereignty through foreign policy

Bangladesh's foreign policy operates within a constrained geopolitical environment. Situated between two major Asian powers, India and China, and adjacent to the politically unstable state of Myanmar, Bangladesh's external relations have a direct and often immediate impact on its internal stability, economy, and sovereignty. In particular, an asymmetrical relationship with India, which surrounds Bangladesh on three sides, leaves it dually exposed. On one hand, Bangladesh is vulnerable to punitive measures when relations are strained, and on the other, it is susceptible to undue influence when relations are close.

Foreign policy must therefore be understood primarily as a tool for strengthening Bangladesh's sovereignty and independence. Sovereignty is multidimensional, encompassing many aspects including politics, territory, security, culture, education, society, economics, food, natural resources and cybersecurity. These dimensions provide a useful lens for assessing Bangladesh's external engagement, and are described in further detail in our introduction.

As such, Bangladesh's foreign policy should be guided by the following underlying aims:

- Preventing external interference in political decision-making, governance or ideology.
- Ensuring territorial integrity and protection of borders, coastal areas, maritime zones, and airspace, while maintaining the capacity to act independently in all matters pertaining to domestic security.
- Safeguarding domestic culture, media, religious and social values, and key institutions from undue foreign influence.
- Pursuing economic growth through trade relations, which strengthens Bangladesh's foreign policy overall by increasing its international weight, independence and financial ability to maintain security.
- Ensuring diversified, resilient trade and investment relationships. Deepening trade relations should not come at the cost of Bangladesh's sovereignty by developing unhealthy or coercive dependencies on any single country.
- Maintaining secure and stable food supplies free from external manipulation or supply shocks.
- Maintaining external relationships which facilitate controlling and sustainably managing rivers, fisheries, energy, and mineral resources, especially those which cross or straddle borders.
- Ensuring independent digital infrastructure, data governance, and cyber capabilities secure from external espionage or attack.

### 1.1 Equal Friend to All

To achieve these goals, Bangladesh must maintain friendly relations with all countries on the basis of mutual sovereignty and dignity, and hostility with none. In a region characterised by rivalries – between India and China, between India and Pakistan and between China and the US – it must avoid perceptions of alignment, and put an end to sharp pendulum swings in its relationships with larger powers.

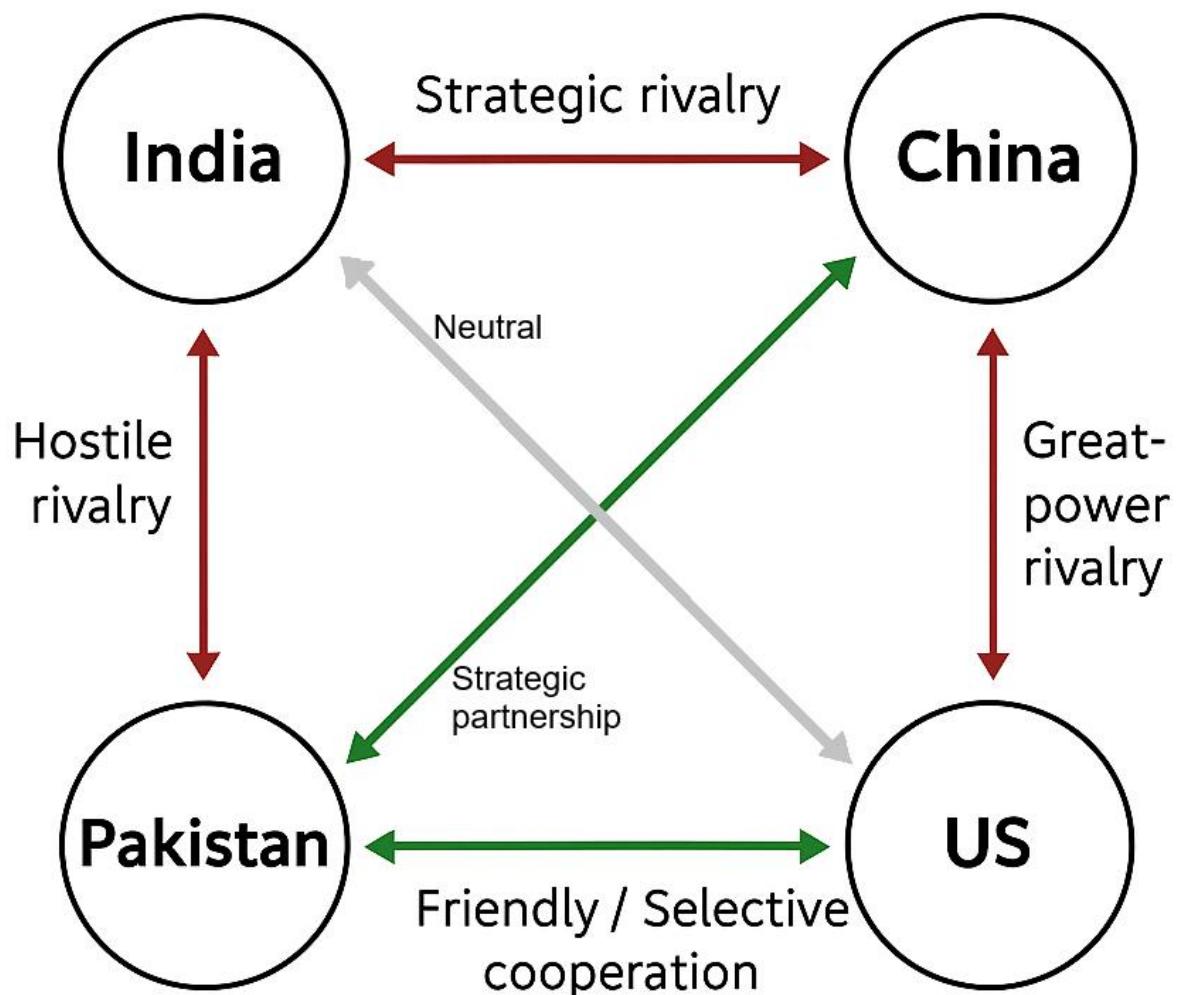
Occasional tensions in foreign relationships are nevertheless inevitable. To safeguard against such tensions quickly descending into suspension of cooperation or tit-for-tat measures designed to cause disruption, Bangladesh should institutionalise mutually beneficial arrangements wherever possible, whether through multilateral or bilateral mechanisms. For example, on the delicate topic of managing shared rivers with India, it should promote formal cooperation at a technical level while attempting to negotiate formal agreements which lock in Bangladesh's sovereignty.

This paper sets out guiding principles for Bangladesh's foreign policy and proposes a strategy grounded in strategic neutrality, diversification of partnerships, and the institutionalisation of cooperation. It analyses Bangladesh's relationships with major and regional actors – India, China, Pakistan, the United States and Europe, the Muslim world including the Middle East – as well as groupings such as the OIC and D8, ASEAN and Myanmar. Together, these components form a coherent foreign policy agenda that supports national sovereignty, economic independence, and long-term security.

## **2. Strategic neutrality amid geopolitical rivalry**

Bangladesh occupies a critical geographic corridor bridging South Asia and Southeast Asia. Its position between India and China gives it significant strategic value, yet the intensity of rivalry between these two major powers makes Bangladesh's foreign policy environment highly sensitive. Given geographic proximity and asymmetric leverage, India poses the greatest risk of dominating Bangladesh economically, politically, and on various issues of tension such as water, borders, fisheries and food. As such, Bangladesh's relationship with China, although primarily economic, has come to be seen as a counterweight against dependence on India.

Looking at wider dynamics, hostile relations between India and Pakistan shapes South Asia's political and security landscape, limiting regional cooperation mechanisms such as SAARC and driving Pakistan towards China. At a global level, China's challenge to US hegemony increasingly influences the entire Indo-Pacific, creating pressures on smaller states to align with one bloc or another.



Given this context, it is imperative for Bangladesh to navigate these overlapping rivalries without risking entanglement by becoming a proxy or satellite of any power.

Bangladesh's foreign policy should be structured around three guiding principles:

1. **Strategic neutrality:** Avoid geopolitical alignment – whether formal or informal, real or perceived – with India, China, US or any bloc which is aligned to them or against them.
2. **Diversification of partnerships:** Avoid dependence on any single country, especially for food, energy, or strategically important trade.
3. **Institutionalised cooperation through multilateralism and international agreements:** Asymmetrical relationships, such as with India, can be dealt with on a more equitable basis when acting in concert with other nations through multilateral fora, as well as when settlements are negotiated, institutionalised and fixed through international mechanisms and agreements.

With this approach, Bangladesh can aspire to secure sovereignty, reduce vulnerability, and hold more weight on the international stage.

### 3. India

#### 3.1 Strategic Context: Large Structural Asymmetry

Bangladesh's most complex foreign policy relationship is with its neighbour India, which has in recent years become one of the world's most powerful countries in terms of economic and military strength. India surrounds Bangladesh on three sides, controls the upstream portions of most shared rivers, is a major supplier of food and electricity to Bangladesh, and holds the capacity to disrupt transit, trade, or energy flows. India has a population and economy over 8 times larger than Bangladesh. Even more starkly, India's military spending, at over USD 85 billion annually, is over 20 times higher than Bangladesh's. These factors creates a large structural asymmetry that Bangladesh must manage carefully.

Under the Awami League, this was managed through deep ties where Bangladesh generally aligned itself with India's strategic priorities. The interim government has, in contrast, adopted a non-aligned stance and kept more of a distance from India. At the same time, the relationship has had tensions due to popular resentment against India's dominance, its close relationship with the unpopular Awami League, a stream of misinformation from Indian media and politicians portraying Bangladesh as a lawless country where Hindus are persecuted, and India's lack of cooperation with extradition requests for the former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who has received a death sentence in absentia.

#### 3.2 A Strategy for Constructive, Peaceful and Balanced Relations

Bangladesh's aim should be to maintain constructive, peaceful, and balanced relations with India while reducing strategic vulnerabilities and preventing India from exerting undue influence.

##### 1. Maintain firm but non-confrontational public diplomacy

Bangladesh should defend its sovereignty and national interests clearly, but avoid inflammatory or hostile rhetoric toward India. While popular currently in domestic political discourse, there is little to be gained diplomatically in bombastically presenting Bangladesh's relationship with its larger neighbour as one of unmitigated hostility and exploitation. Such rhetoric is self-fulfilling, strengthening India's foreign policy hawks and encouraging them to act unilaterally against Bangladesh's interests. Instead, a moderate approach in public statements entails being firm in defending Bangladesh's sovereignty and criticising injustices and rights violations, while expressing a willingness to work with India to overcome bilateral issues.

##### 2. Control the narrative around engagement with India's rivals

Public engagement with India's rivals China and Pakistan should be carefully presented to avoid encouraging India to treat Bangladesh as an aspiring member of a rival bloc. Bangladesh's interim government has shown signs of following this approach. For example, following a ministerial meeting in Kunming with China and

Pakistan in July, it released a relatively muted statement which characterised the meeting as “informal” and avoided mentioning China and Pakistan’s proposal to establish a joint working group to institutionalise trilateral cooperation. This was well calibrated to avoid stoking India’s fears of a rival bloc emerging, which were made explicit by Indian Chief of Defence Staff Anil Chauhan shortly after the Kunming meeting took place.

### **3. Balance asymmetry through diversified partnerships, not alignment**

Bangladesh should quietly reduce over-dependence on India by deepening economic ties with China, strengthening relations with the Middle East and the wider Muslim world, drawing closer to ASEAN and maintaining strong trade links with the US and Europe. For diplomatic purposes, this should be framed as economic cooperation rather than strategic balancing, even if it does in fact serve the latter purpose. With some tact, it should also be possible to leverage this relationship tactically to obtain better terms from India (e.g. moving slightly closer to China when India behaves uncooperatively). Seeking non-aligned allies for security cooperation as well as strong, diversified trade relations with the US and Europe will help Bangladesh become too integrated with other partners for India to easily act unilaterally with impunity.

### **4. Use multilateral platforms to dilute bilateral power imbalance**

Where possible, Bangladesh should also attempt to engage India through international conventions (such as the UN’s 1992 Water Convention, which it joined in June 2025) and regional platforms such as BBIN, BIMSTEC, and aim for a revived SAARC. Such fora facilitate the two countries to engage on a more equal basis than bilateral negotiation, and they raise the costs of acting in bad faith. As such, Bangladesh should also work to strengthen such platforms and promote regional norms such as data sharing, joint environmental assessments, and dispute resolution.

### **5. Institutionalise cooperation to make relations predictable**

Institutionalising cooperation with India formally through formal mechanisms and balanced agreements, as well as deep ties at a diplomatic and technical level, serves to make the relationship more predictable and restrains India against unwanted unilateralism. Bangladesh should prioritise treaties and agreements on shared rivers (see below), border management, security cooperation on Northeast Indian insurgency, and trade.

## 6. Protect domestic resilience against political and economic coercion

No diplomatic strategy is fail-safe and there are many ways in which any bilateral relationship may sour. Bangladesh must also take the additional step of protecting its own national resilience domestically by safeguarding against Indian export bans (e.g. of food or electricity). This can be achieved through import diversification, food reserves, tariffs, and strategic stocks, as well as pursuing membership of multilateral mechanisms such as the ASEAN Plus Three Emergency Rice Reserve (APTERR). A strong military is also key to protecting Bangladesh in the event of a sudden deterioration in relations; further detail on this can be found in our policy on defence and military policy.

### 3.3 Negotiating a New Framework on Water

Among all bilateral issues with India, none is more structurally important, or more sensitive, than the management of shared rivers. Bangladesh shares 54 rivers with India, making it one of the largest transboundary river systems in the world. Upstream Indian water management, especially on the Teesta, directly affects Bangladeshi agriculture, fisheries, ecology, and food security.

Despite a Joint River Commission being established in 1972 for cooperation on shared rivers, the 1996 Ganges Water Sharing Treaty is the only significant water-sharing agreement ratified between Bangladesh and India, and is due to expire in December 2026. In January 2026, officials from both sides started joint measurements of water levels as part of preparations to renew the 1996 agreement, and will continue until the end of May. According to Joint River Commission sources, both India and Bangladesh have agreed in principle to renew the treaty, with formal negotiations ready to take place once the new government assumes office.

The 1996 treaty is very limited in scope. It only covers one point on one river: the Farakka Barrage on the Ganges. This is acknowledged in the treaty, which in Article IX commits both sides “to conclude water sharing Treaties/Agreements with regard to other common rivers”. However, no such agreement has been concluded for these 53 other common rivers, with West Bengal’s Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee opposed to both an agreement on the Teesta River and even renewal of the 1996 treaty.

The dispute over the Teesta River has re-emerged as one of the most sensitive and strategically significant issues shaping contemporary India–Bangladesh relations. The river flows from the Himalayas through India and into northern Bangladesh. Both countries depend heavily on it for drinking water, agriculture, and electricity. The Indian states of West Bengal and Sikkim rely on the river for their own farmers and hydropower projects. However, dams and other upstream modifications to the river mean that Bangladesh has been receiving much less water during the dry season, harming crops and livelihoods. In addition, sudden releases of water during monsoon seasons cause flooding, damaging homes and farmlands.

Although the two countries negotiated a draft water-sharing agreement in 2011, the accord was never signed due to political opposition from West Bengal (as mentioned above). As a result, the Teesta remains governed not by a binding treaty but by ad hoc arrangements that fail to address the critical dry-season shortages and sudden monsoon-season releases affecting millions of people downstream in Bangladesh.

The fall of Sheikh Hasina's government and the emergence of a new interim administration in Dhaka have opened space for a reassessment of long-standing bilateral arrangements with New Delhi. However, it has also seen a significant cooling in bilateral relations which may make this harder to achieve. Meanwhile, public pressure in Bangladesh for a more equitable water-sharing framework has intensified, while India remains constrained by competing demands from its own riparian states. At the same time, the prospect of Chinese involvement in a large-scale Teesta river management project in Bangladesh introduces a major geopolitical dimension. While Bangladesh views external investment as essential for addressing its water security needs, India perceives a potential expansion of Chinese strategic presence near its borders. These overlapping pressures are transforming what was once a bilateral technical problem into a multidimensional regional challenge.

#### *Recommendations*

##### **1. Immediate extension and upgrading of the 1996 Ganges Treaty**

The renewal of the 1996 Ganges Water Sharing Treaty in 2026 should be treated as a strategic entry point for wider cooperation rather than a narrow technical exercise. Bangladesh should seek not only extension but institutional strengthening, including permanent joint monitoring stations, real-time data exchange, and a standing dispute-prevention mechanism. This process should be used to demonstrate Bangladesh's commitment to predictability, stability, and partnership in river governance.

##### **2. Negotiate a comprehensive Bangladesh–India Rivers Treaty**

Rather than seeking a single sweeping agreement immediately, Bangladesh should pursue a phased, modular treaty framework that is politically manageable for India and its federal system.

###### **Phase I – Confidence-building and technical cooperation**

- Binding agreement on data transparency, joint hydrological modelling, and flood forecasting.
- Shared telemetry systems and joint disaster early-warning mechanisms.
- Establishment of permanent technical working groups at state–state and state–central levels (e.g., West Bengal–Bangladesh, Sikkim–Bangladesh).

###### **Phase II – Seasonal coordination and minimum flow guarantees**

- Agreement on minimum dry-season ecological flows.

- Coordinated release schedules during monsoon seasons to reduce flood damage.
- Pilot arrangements on Teesta and one or two additional rivers to demonstrate proof of concept.

### **Phase III – Legally binding allocation and dispute resolution**

- A formal treaty covering the Ganges, Teesta, Brahmaputra tributaries, and Meghna system.
- Arbitration and compliance mechanisms.
- Clear rules on infrastructure development, environmental protection, and climate adaptation.

Although India is not a party, Bangladesh should use the 1992 UN Water Convention as a technical and normative reference point in negotiations. Its principles of equitable use, no-harm, data sharing, and sustainable management can help structure bilateral agreements while reinforcing Bangladesh's image as a responsible and cooperative stakeholder.

#### **3. Engage Indian state governments directly**

No rivers treaty will succeed without buy-in from key Indian states, especially West Bengal and Sikkim. Bangladesh should pursue structured subnational diplomacy, including direct dialogue, joint development projects, and economic cooperation that benefit Indian riparian communities. The aim is to transform river sharing from a zero-sum political issue into a shared development agenda.

#### **4. Embed water negotiations in a broader strategic partnership**

India is more likely to sign a rivers treaty if it is part of a larger package of strategic cooperation. Bangladesh should integrate water diplomacy with wider bilateral cooperation in energy, trade, transport, and connectivity. This reframes water sharing as a pillar of bilateral stability, not an isolated concession.

#### **5. Manage the China Factor**

While Bangladesh has every right to seek external investment, India's security concerns must be managed diplomatically. Bangladesh should emphasise that river cooperation is about human security and climate adaptation, not geopolitical alignment. At the same time, Bangladesh should signal clearly that it is open to hearing and understanding India's perspectives on China's upstream projects on the Brahmaputra and related river systems. Creating space for dialogue on these concerns can help build strategic trust and reduce misperceptions, while reinforcing Bangladesh's role as a transparent and responsible partner rather than a theatre for great-power rivalry.

## 6. Promote basin-wide governance

Bangladesh should continue to advocate for a Ganges–Brahmaputra–Meghna (GBM) Basin Framework through BBIN and BIMSTEC, including Nepal and Bhutan as upstream partners and China as a technical observer. This encourages sustainable basin management while keeping India closely involved in the process.

## 4. China

### 4.1 Economic Engagement, Infrastructure, and Growth

China has become one of Bangladesh's most consequential external partners, not primarily as a security ally, but as a source of large-scale infrastructure financing, investment, technology transfer, and economic integration.

As Bangladesh approaches graduation from Least Developed Country status (2026), China's funding and project commitments are seen by Dhaka as important for maintaining momentum in infrastructure and economic growth. China is Bangladesh's largest source of imports and one of its top export destinations. In 2024, bilateral trade was estimated at over USD 40 billion, with Bangladesh exporting textiles, leather, and frozen food, and importing machinery, electronics, and raw materials. Chinese firms have also contributed significantly to Bangladesh's energy and manufacturing sectors. For example, China has financed or co-financed power generation and transmission projects that collectively account for a substantial share of new electricity capacity. Further, Chinese companies participate in projects that involve technical collaboration, training of engineers and workers, and adoption of advanced manufacturing techniques. These contributions strengthen Bangladesh's industrial capacity and can help diversify its economy beyond the garment sector.

As such, this relationship provides opportunities to accelerate economic growth and reduce dependence on India. Bangladesh can use its engagement with China to diversify its sources of investment, financing, and industrial partnerships, which in turn increases its leverage in bilateral and regional negotiations.

### 4.2 Avoiding Dependence and Geopolitical Entanglement

Despite these opportunities, the China relationship carries risks that Bangladesh must manage carefully.

Rapid growth in trade and imports has created a situation where China is a dominant supplier of goods, raw materials and capital machinery, accounting for a substantial share of Bangladesh's import needs. Around 80% of the woven fabrics and up to 80% of the chemicals and accessories used in garment manufacturing are imported from China, as well as around a quarter of food imports – more than India. Such dependence can limit Bangladesh's bargaining power and create vulnerabilities if China's policies shift.

While Bangladesh's external debt to China, at 6-7%, is not in the category of most concerning cases such as Sri Lanka, concerns remain about the terms, transparency, and long-term repayment obligations associated with Chinese loans. This is especially the case for projects financed on commercial terms rather than outright grants or concessional loans. Ongoing transparency, competitive bidding, and rigorous feasibility assessments are essential to avoid future fiscal strain.

Experts have also highlighted potential gaps in environmental, social and governance (ESG) safeguards in some Chinese-financed projects. Ensuring that infrastructure meets international standards in labour rights, community consultation and environmental impact is crucial for sustainable long-term outcomes.

Finally, engaging with China, especially on defence technology and high-profile projects like major ports, tunnels or water-management infrastructure, can be interpreted by other powers (notably India and the United States) as strategic alignment or geopolitical balancing, even when Bangladesh's intent is economic. This can lead to an unwanted deterioration in other important relationships, and so makes careful diplomatic framing essential.

#### **4.3 Recommendations: Economic Engagement Without Strategic Alignment**

To navigate both opportunities and risks, Bangladesh's engagement with China should follow several pragmatic principles:

##### **1. Maintain an Economic and Trade-Focused Relationship**

Bangladesh should prioritise economic cooperation, market access, infrastructure investment, and technology partnerships, not military or security alignments. This preserves Bangladesh's strategic neutrality while unlocking development benefits.

##### **2. Guard Against Debt Dependence**

Ensuring that Chinese projects are subject to transparent agreements, competitive project evaluation, diversified financing sources, and prudent debt management helps prevent overreliance on any single creditor. Bangladesh can achieve this by involving multilateral institutions (e.g., World Bank, ADB, AIIB) in co-financing and risk sharing, and by strengthening domestic project appraisal capacity.

Bangladesh's debt to China remains a relatively moderate share of external debt, but sound fiscal practices, including limits on commercial loan exposure, are essential to avoid future liquidity strain.

##### **3. Use China Tactically as a Counterweight**

Bangladesh can engage China in ways that enhance its negotiating position with other partners, including India, the US and multilateral financiers. For example, highlight China's investment interest to motivate other partners to increase their engagement. This balancing act must be conducted discreetly, focusing on economic factors rather than overtly geopolitical narratives, to avoid misinterpretation by e.g. India or the United States.

## 5. The Muslim World

### 5.1 Strategic Context

The Muslim world, including in particular the Middle East, South Asian and Southeast Asian Muslim-majority states, is a strategically important arena for Bangladesh's foreign policy. It offers great opportunities for economic diversification, labour mobility, energy cooperation, diplomatic support, and partnerships that align with Bangladesh's principles of neutrality and sovereignty. Unlike relationships defined by great-power rivalry, engagement with many such states can be structured around a shared Muslim identity as a global community (the *Ummah*) and religious, cultural and historical ties. While the Middle East and Asian Muslim-majority countries remain Bangladesh's core focus, the wider Muslim world also provides the multilateral, economic, and identity-based framework through which Bangladesh can pursue South–South cooperation without great-power alignment.

The Middle East in particular represents an important and underutilised dimension of Bangladesh's external security environment. Several states in this region, particularly Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Egypt, have built large, professionalised armed forces, developed indigenous defence industries, and accumulated operational experience in maritime security, counter-terrorism, peacekeeping, and expeditionary logistics. Malaysia and Indonesia occupy a unique position within Bangladesh's Muslim-world strategy. They are large, economically dynamic, politically influential, and geographically close. Both maintain reputations for geopolitical neutrality, non-alignment, and pragmatic diplomacy. These states increasingly act as autonomous regional players rather than as members of rigid security alliances, which gives them flexibility in security partnerships.

For Bangladesh, this creates space for cooperation aimed at capability development and closer ties to deter potential external aggression. This is especially important given Bangladesh's strategic environment and geographic proximity to much larger regional militaries. Areas such as officer education, military training, logistics management, naval coordination in the Indian Ocean and Bay of Bengal, defence industrial cooperation, and support for UN peacekeeping operations are all fields where Muslim partners possess experience Bangladesh can use.

With regards to economic relations, the Gulf is particularly important for Bangladesh. The Gulf is a cornerstone of Bangladesh's remittance-dependent economy. Labour migration to Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Oman, and Kuwait has sustained remittance inflows that support households, foreign reserves, and the balance of payments. Despite recent volatility, the region continues to host large numbers of Bangladeshi workers. Around 30% of remittances come from the nearly 7 million Bangladeshis estimated to be working in Saudi Arabia and the UAE alone, illustrating the demographic weight of Bangladeshi labour in the Gulf. More recent reports indicate potential visa restrictions for Bangladeshi workers in the UAE beginning in 2026, with sharp declines already observed in monthly remittance figures, and similar challenges in Oman and Qatar. These developments

underscore the need for balanced diplomacy with host states and proactive labour agreements to stabilise Bangladesh's remittance base and protect its workers abroad.

In addition to remittances, Gulf partners are important for energy cooperation. They are major producers of oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG), and existing ties can be leveraged to secure long-term energy contracts, investment in energy infrastructure, and cooperation on renewable energy projects. Countries such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Oman have also stepped up sovereign investment programs, providing opportunities for Bangladesh to attract capital for infrastructure, industrial parks, and logistics. Careful negotiation is required to align these investments with Bangladesh's development goals without creating dependencies that compromise sovereignty.

Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-majority country, is a leading voice in the Global South and an experienced diplomatic actor with credibility in mediation, multilateralism, and peacekeeping. Malaysia, a major trading and investment partner for Bangladesh, combines industrial capacity, Islamic finance expertise, and long-standing labour links.

## 5.2 Utilising "Ummatic" multilateral frameworks

Broadly, Bangladesh's engagement with the Muslim world should be grounded in mutual respect, cultural solidarity, and shared economic interests, while avoiding entanglement in regional rivalries. Two multilateral frameworks are especially relevant to this strategy: the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Developing-8 (D-8) Organization for Economic Cooperation.

The OIC, comprising 57 member states, provides a long-standing platform for cooperation on political, cultural, and development issues among Muslim-majority countries. Its charter emphasises collaboration in areas such as education, science, technology, and social development. Bangladesh has been an active participant in OIC activities, and the organisation has served as a forum for humanitarian coordination and collective political advocacy on issues affecting Muslim communities worldwide. Within this framework, Bangladesh can advance priorities such as climate vulnerability, refugee protection, and economic cooperation. On the Rohingya issue in particular, the OIC (represented by the Gambia) is pursuing legal action against Myanmar at the International Court of Justice, allowing for accountability to be achieved through multilateral channels rather than direct bilateral confrontation between Bangladesh and Myanmar.

The D-8 Organization for Economic Cooperation complements this political and humanitarian role with a focused economic mandate. Founded in 1997 on the initiative of Türkiye and other Muslim-majority states, D-8 aims to strengthen members' positions in the global economy, diversify trade, and expand South-South cooperation. Its members, Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Türkiye, and Azerbaijan, together represent over 1.2 billion people and a combined GDP of roughly USD 5 trillion. Inspired by the vision of former Turkish Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan, D-8 was conceived as a Global South counterpart to the G-8, rooted in economic cooperation among developing Muslim-majority countries. For Bangladesh, D-8 offers a platform to pursue trade

facilitation, industrial collaboration, technology exchange, and business-to-business networks without compromising its non-aligned foreign policy stance.

There is also a growing interest in independent Muslim-world security cooperation. Pakistan and Saudi Arabia signed a security coordination deal in September 2025 which stipulated that any aggression against either country is considered an attack on both, allowing Saudi Arabia to benefit from Pakistan's nuclear deterrence. The Turkish government has also been reported to be in talks to join this arrangement, sparking discussion about the possibility of a "Muslim NATO" forming. This reflects interests converging on the need for a more reliable security guarantor than the US, similar positions on live regional issues such as Iran, Syria and Palestinian statehood, and a growing sense that the US, Israel, UAE and India are increasingly cooperating in ways which destabilise the Middle East. Bangladesh should engage constructively but cautiously, encouraging deeper security ties between a wider group of like-minded Muslim countries. Participation in functional security dialogue and cooperation could strengthen capabilities and one day embed Bangladesh in Muslim-world defence networks. However, the geopolitical context does not yet allow Bangladesh to formally participate in a binding alliance including Pakistan, which could be explosive for relations with India.

### **5.3 A balanced, diplomatic approach to Pakistan**

Historically, Bangladesh–Pakistan relations have been shaped by the legacy of 1971 and long periods of diplomatic coolness. In recent years, however, both sides have taken modest steps toward pragmatic normalisation, including the exchange of high-level visits, limited trade engagement, and cooperation in multilateral forums.

Pakistan does not offer Bangladesh the same economic or strategic weight as India or China, but it does carry symbolic, diplomatic, and tactical value within South Asian politics. Pakistan is not a major source of investment, technology, or energy for Bangladesh. Bilateral trade has expanded, but remains dwarfed by Bangladesh's larger neighbours: trade volume with Pakistan was about USD 865 million in FY2025, in contrast to Bangladesh's trade with India and China, which exceeds USD 10 billion and USD 20 billion annually respectively.

As such, Pakistan cannot function as a central economic partner for Bangladesh in the same way as India or China. The relationship is most useful at the symbolic and regional level, without becoming central to Bangladesh's economic or security strategy. With its growing international credibility as a neutral, stable, and economically advancing country, Bangladesh is also better placed than before to encourage dialogue between India and Pakistan. One priority is to revive regional mechanisms such as SAARC, which has been largely paralysed by mutual hostility.

### **5.3 Recommended Approach**

Engagement with the Muslim world should explicitly serve Bangladesh's broader foreign policy objective of reducing structural dependence on any single great power. Strong partnerships with Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Egypt, Malaysia, Indonesia and others help

Bangladesh widen its diplomatic and economic options while staying consistent with its principle of strategic neutrality.

### **1. Expand capability-focused defence and security cooperation**

Bangladesh must pursue deeper, structured defence cooperation with selected Muslim partners (particularly Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Egypt, Malaysia and Indonesia) focused on capability development and building a stronger deterrence to potential aggression. Priority areas should include military education and training, officer exchange programs, defence logistics and maintenance systems, maritime security in the Bay of Bengal and northern Indian Ocean, joint exercises in disaster response and counter-piracy, and cooperation in defence technology and procurement.

Rather than relying on any single major power, Bangladesh should diversify its sources of training, equipment, and doctrinal exposure. This strengthens deterrence, professionalism, and strategic autonomy without tying Bangladesh into any geopolitical bloc. Defence cooperation should explicitly avoid participation in Middle Eastern conflicts, but it should actively support Bangladesh's long-term goal of building a modern, credible, and self-reliant military force.

### **2. Institutionalise engagement through OIC and D-8 platforms**

Bangladesh should elevate its use of multilateral Muslim-majority forums, particularly the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the D-8 Organization for Economic Cooperation, as core pillars of its Muslim world diplomacy. Rather than treating these as symbolic bodies, Dhaka should actively push for concrete economic, climate, education, and migration cooperation projects under their frameworks. Within the OIC, Bangladesh should link its climate vulnerability and Rohingya burden to collective Muslim-world responsibility. Within D-8, it should promote trade facilitation, industrial cooperation, and technology exchange among member states. Revitalising D-8 in particular aligns with Bangladesh's interest in South-South cooperation without bloc alignment.

### **3. Shift from labour-focused ties to broader economic partnerships**

While labour migration and remittances remain vital, Bangladesh must rebalance its Middle East and Asian relationships toward investment, industrial cooperation, logistics, and energy partnerships. This includes negotiating long-term LNG and energy supply agreements, attracting sovereign wealth fund investment into infrastructure and industrial zones, and encouraging joint ventures in agribusiness, textiles, pharmaceuticals, and digital services. The aim is to ensure Middle Eastern ties contribute to structural economic transformation, not just remittance inflows.

Engagement should explicitly integrate energy security and climate resilience. The government should pursue long-term LNG contracts, renewable energy partnerships, and joint climate adaptation projects with Gulf states. This aligns with Bangladesh's

climate diplomacy goals while leveraging the region's capital and technological capacity. Energy cooperation should be framed as economic and developmental, not geopolitical.

#### **4. Protect migrant workers through binding bilateral frameworks**

Bangladesh should prioritise legally enforceable labour agreements with Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian states to stabilise migration channels and protect worker rights. This includes standardised contracts, digital recruitment systems, transparent visa processes, and joint monitoring bodies. Migration diplomacy should be treated as a strategic policy area tied directly to foreign reserves, domestic stability, and long-term development.

#### **5. Expand people-to-people and cultural diplomacy**

Bangladesh should deepen cultural, educational, and tourism links with Muslim societies through visa facilitation, student exchanges, joint research programs, media cooperation, and religious tourism initiatives. These efforts reinforce trust, reduce over-reliance on labour migration as the main social link, and support Bangladesh's broader identity-based diplomacy in the Muslim world.

#### **6. Use diplomatic ties with Pakistan to signal strategic autonomy and broker SAARC revival.**

Maintaining cordial relations with Pakistan and seeking to restore regional cooperation through SAARC demonstrates that Bangladesh conducts an independent foreign policy and does not define its external relations through any single neighbour's preferences. However, Bangladesh should avoid deep defence or intelligence cooperation with Pakistan that could be perceived as hostile by India. Such cooperation would bring limited security benefit while carrying high geopolitical risk. However, selective and clearly interest-based transactions that deliver concrete capability gains such as defence procurement can remain under consideration, provided they do not signal formal alignment.

## **6. Southeast Asia**

### **6.1 Strategic Context**

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), with 11 member states, is one of Asia's most economically and diplomatically significant regional blocs. Its population exceeds 680 million, and its combined nominal GDP is projected at over USD 4 trillion in 2025, reflecting substantial economic scale and growth potential.

ASEAN drives regional trade, investment, and connectivity. In 2023, total trade reached USD 3.7 trillion. Member states pursue multiple free-trade and cooperation frameworks, including

the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which reduce trade barriers and attract investment.

For Bangladesh, ASEAN's value lies less in formal membership than functional integration by aligning standards, participating in institutions, and engaging Southeast Asia's economic systems. This reduces dependence on large partners like India or China and opens diversified markets. ASEAN is a global manufacturing and logistics hub in electronics, garments, agribusiness, and automotive components. Closer engagement allows Bangladesh to supply intermediate goods and services within regional production networks.

ASEAN is also a leading destination for foreign direct investment, often surpassing China, reflecting confidence in its regulatory frameworks and industrial ecosystems. Aligning standards with ASEAN can attract investors active across Southeast Asia in industrial parks, logistics, renewable energy, and digital services.

Through RCEP, ASEAN connects to China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand, providing Bangladesh indirect access to a wider economic architecture shaping Asia's trade, digital, and investment rules. Engagement enables standard harmonisation, potential preferential trade terms, and integration into regional supply chains, increasing resilience and export opportunities.

On food security, the ASEAN Plus Three Emergency Rice Reserve (APTERR), operational since 2013, coordinates rice stockpiles from ASEAN and the Plus Three (China, Japan, South Korea) to respond to shortages. It has supplied emergency rice to Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, and the Philippines. Even observer participation could help Bangladesh manage future supply shocks.

Diplomatically, ASEAN maintains neutrality with major powers, institutionalised through the ASEAN Regional Forum and East Asia Summit. This aligns with Bangladesh's aim to avoid major power alignment while engaging on mutual interests, enhancing its role as a bridge between South and Southeast Asia.

ASEAN also provides structured multilateral cooperation in investment, digital economy, education, disaster management, and climate resilience through frameworks such as the ASEAN Digital Integration Framework and sectoral work programmes. Bangladesh's engagement can complement participation in BIMSTEC, RCEP, and the Indian Ocean Rim Association, supporting trade liberalisation, regional connectivity, and climate adaptation.

Engagement with ASEAN therefore offers Bangladesh economic integration, diplomatic neutrality, multilateral cooperation, and connectivity, without requiring alignment with a single major power.

## 6.2 Geographic Barrier to Full Membership

Bangladesh applied for ASEAN Sectoral Dialogue Partner (SDP) status in 2020, renewed in 2025. The ASEAN Charter requires members to be within Southeast Asia, recognised by all members, agree to the Charter, and meet membership obligations. Final accession requires consensus.

Timor-Leste's accession in 2025, after applying in 2011, illustrates the lengthy institutional preparation even for geographically Southeast Asian states. Papua New Guinea, sharing an island with Indonesia but culturally and economically Pacific-oriented, illustrates the limits of accession for non-Southeast Asian states.

Bangladesh is clearly South Asian in geography, culture, history, and institutions. ASEAN's founding as a Southeast Asian project creates a core barrier to full membership. Former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and current Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim emphasise that dialogue or observer arrangements are more appropriate than full accession. Thus, full membership is unlikely, though close strategic cooperation remains feasible.

### **6.3 Recommendations: Deepening Engagement Without Full Membership**

1. **Pursue closer institutional status:** Secure SDP status to engage on trade, standards, climate resilience, digital economy, education, labour mobility, and people-to-people exchange. Subsequently, aim for Dialogue Partner or Observer arrangements to maximise functional integration.
2. **Strengthen bilateral ties:** Cultivate relationships with all ASEAN members through high-level visits, trade agreements, education, and technology cooperation.
3. **Mitigate tensions with Myanmar:** Frame engagement as constructive, focusing on humanitarian assistance, supply chains, and border stability to facilitate consensus.
4. **Link to broader regional frameworks:** Use RCEP, BIMSTEC, and APTERR to deepen trade, align regulations, integrate value chains, and enhance resilience to supply shocks.

## **7. Myanmar and the Rohingya Crisis**

### **7.1 Background**

The Rohingya crisis is both a humanitarian emergency and a core national security issue for Bangladesh. Since 2017, over one million Rohingya refugees have fled to Bangladesh following a campaign of violence in Myanmar's Rakhine State. The humanitarian burden on Bangladesh is enormous. The World Bank estimates that hosting the Rohingya cost Bangladesh more than an average of USD 100 million annually from 2017 to 2023 in direct and indirect expenses related to shelter, security, health, environment, and infrastructure. Prolonged conflict risks radicalisation, cross-border insurgency, and long-term instability in Cox's Bazar. Repatriation efforts have failed repeatedly because refugees refuse to return without guarantees of citizenship, safety, and rights, and because Myanmar's post-2021 military coup has further destabilised Rakhine State.

### **7.2 Recommended Approach**

The guiding principle must be to keep the crisis internationalised, avoid bilateral escalation, and sustain pressure for safe, voluntary, and dignified repatriation. Bangladesh's strategy

should rest on three pillars: international pressure and burden-sharing; regional diplomacy through ASEAN and the OIC; and domestic security and social stability in Cox's Bazar.

**1. Firm but non-confrontational diplomacy**

Bangladesh should continue to engage Myanmar through measured, professional, and non-provocative diplomacy, while consistently asserting its legal and moral position. Its objectives must remain the recognition of the Rohingya as lawful residents of Rakhine State, the restoration of citizenship and freedom of movement, and the facilitation of safe and voluntary return under international monitoring. Escalatory rhetoric from Bangladesh would only harden Myanmar's resistance to cooperation.

**2. Multilateral coordination and burden-sharing**

Bangladesh must prevent the Rohingya issue from becoming a purely bilateral dispute and ensure that it remains an international responsibility. This requires sustained coordination through ASEAN (particularly with Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand) alongside the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, the United Nations system, and Western partners such as the US and EU. Legal accountability efforts at the International Court of Justice, donor engagement, and diplomatic pressure on Myanmar's junta must remain active, visible, and coordinated so that Bangladesh is not left to carry the burden alone.

**3. Cooperate on border security to prevent insurgency**

Bangladesh has a legitimate interest in preventing Cox's Bazar from becoming a base for militant recruitment or criminal networks. It should pursue practical cooperation with Myanmar on preventing cross-border movement of armed actors, while maintaining firm internal security that respects humanitarian protections for refugees. The presence of armed groups such as the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) risks giving Myanmar justification to frame the crisis as a counter-terrorism issue, which would further entrench repression and obstruct repatriation.

**4. Broaden bilateral cooperation**

Bangladesh should seek to dilute political tension by expanding non-political cooperation with Myanmar where feasible, including border trade and logistics, public health and disease control, disaster response coordination and maritime cooperation in the Bay of Bengal. Creating limited areas of pragmatic cooperation gives Myanmar incentives to remain engaged and reduces the likelihood of total diplomatic freeze.

**5. Maintain neutrality on Myanmar's internal politics**

Bangladesh should avoid backing any political or military faction inside Myanmar. Its sole priorities must be: regional stability, refugee repatriation and border security. Public alignment with opposition groups or ethnic armed organisations risks

provoking Myanmar's junta and increasing regional polarisation. Bangladesh's strength lies in principled neutrality combined with legal and humanitarian advocacy.

### 7.3 Conclusion

The Rohingya crisis is not only a humanitarian tragedy but a long-term sovereignty and security challenge for Bangladesh. With a million refugees and no near-term solution in sight, Bangladesh must continue to internationalise the issue, prevent security spillovers, and pursue repatriation through firm but non-confrontational diplomacy. Only through sustained multilateral engagement can Bangladesh avoid being left to shoulder alone one of the largest refugee crises of the 21st century.

## 8. The US and the West

### 8.1 Strategic Context

The strategic focus of the United States and its Western partners in South Asia has declined relative to their priorities in East Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. Washington's main concerns today are managing competition with China in the Indo-Pacific, increasing its influence over the Americas, ending Russia's war on Ukraine, and stabilising the Middle East.

However, this does not mean the West is irrelevant to Bangladesh. The West remains central to Bangladesh's economic trajectory despite its reduced strategic focus on South Asia. In trade terms, the United States and the European Union together account for the majority of Bangladesh's export earnings, particularly in the ready-made garments sector. The EU is Bangladesh's single largest export destination, benefiting from duty-free access under the Everything But Arms (EBA) scheme, while the United States remains the largest national market for Bangladeshi apparel and home textiles. This access underpins millions of jobs and provides the foreign exchange needed to sustain growth and macroeconomic stability.

Beyond trade, Western countries are among the most important sources of foreign direct investment and technology transfer for Bangladesh. US and European firms play a leading role in Bangladesh's energy, finance, telecommunications, pharmaceuticals, and digital services sectors.

The West is also indispensable in the context of climate finance and the energy transition. Bangladesh is one of the world's most climate-vulnerable countries, and Western-backed institutions such as the World Bank, IMF, European Investment Bank, and Green Climate Fund are among the largest providers of concessional finance for coastal protection, flood control, urban resilience, renewable energy, and disaster preparedness. These funding streams are not only financially significant but also provide access to global best practices in project design, monitoring, and environmental standards.

Taken together, Western markets, investors and climate finance mechanisms form a critical pillar of Bangladesh's economic modernisation and resilience strategy. Engagement with the West therefore remains indispensable to Bangladesh's development, even in the absence of deep strategic alignment.

## 8.2 Constraints and Risks

Despite these opportunities, Bangladesh's engagement with the West also carries political and strategic constraints. One risk arises from the broader geopolitical environment. The United States and its allies increasingly frame their global engagement through the lens of strategic competition with China. Deeper political or security alignment with the West could therefore be interpreted in Beijing as a hostile move, potentially complicating Bangladesh's economic and infrastructure cooperation with China. Given China's role as a major trading partner, lender, and construction provider, Bangladesh cannot afford to be drawn into great-power rivalry.

Secondly, excessive dependence on Western aid, preferences, or market access without diversification could weaken Bangladesh's bargaining position over time. Western markets like the EU and U.S. account for large shares of Bangladesh's export earnings. However, recent tariff pressures from the U.S. and evolving post-LDC trade conditions underline how Bangladesh's export model is exposed to shifts in Western policy. Overdependence on Western preferences, donor funding, or single sectors weakens resilience and leaves Bangladesh vulnerable to shifting political winds or external policy priorities.

For example, the US initially proposed very high reciprocal tariffs of 35% on Bangladeshi exports in 2025. Negotiations succeeded in bringing this down to 20%, aligning Bangladesh closer to key competitor rates and averting the most damaging scenario. However, there was a decline in garment exports and export earnings in the second half of 2025, according to the Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA), with many buyers refrained from placing new orders. Tariff policy remains a diplomatic negotiation point as Bangladesh continues talks with the US over possible further reductions, reflecting ongoing uncertainty in trade terms.

A different, yet important concern is that Western development cooperation and trade preferences are often linked to governance, labour standards, civil society protections, and social norms. This is particularly the case with the EU, which applies its own version of human rights conditionality in its trade and cooperation agreements without regard for other worldviews or value systems. While many of these standards overlap with Bangladesh's own reform goals, some are also loaded with external cultural or ideological expectations that are in tension with domestic values, particularly in the domain of family, gender, and sexual norms. If not carefully managed, permitting such conditions can result in external interference in Bangladesh's internal affairs and culture.

## 8.3 Recommended Approach

### 1. Keep the relationship trade-centric and set clear boundaries

Bangladesh should focus its engagement with Western partners on mutually beneficial, development-oriented objectives such as exports, investment, education, climate finance, and technology partnerships, while making clear that cooperation will not extend to values-based alignment, political engineering, or cultural advocacy. Engagement should remain interest-driven, practical, and sustainable. While

Bangladesh can and should meet technical requirements, including financial transparency, regulatory compliance, and labour safety standards, it must resist conditionality that encroaches on domestic social norms or policy autonomy. By combining a trade-centric approach with clearly defined boundaries, Bangladesh can maximise economic benefits while protecting sovereignty and avoiding political or ideological entanglement.

## 2. **Leverage strategic autonomy**

Bangladesh's growing economic and diplomatic engagement with China and India provides leverage in negotiations with the United States and Europe. Dhaka should use access to Asian markets, infrastructure partnerships, and regional trade integration to strengthen its bargaining position and secure more favourable trade and investment terms.

## 3. **Avoid security alignment**

Bangladesh should maintain a strictly non-aligned posture in military affairs with the West and NATO. It should not host foreign military bases, join military coalitions, or participate in power-projection strategies. Security cooperation should remain limited to humanitarian and international-public-good functions, including peacekeeping operations, disaster response, counter-piracy, and other forms of humanitarian engagement. This approach reduces the risk of entanglement in great-power rivalry, particularly with China and India, while preserving Bangladesh's operational autonomy and international credibility.

## 9. Conclusion

Bangladesh's foreign policy must be anchored in sovereignty, strategic autonomy, and economic diversification. In a fragmented international system marked by great-power rivalry, regional instability, and shifting trade and investment patterns, Bangladesh's core interest is not alignment but resilience.

Across different regions as well as multilateral platforms, the objective should be consistent: maximise economic opportunity, preserve political independence, and avoid entanglement in ideological or military blocs. Bangladesh should engage all major partners, but subordinate itself to none. Economic diplomacy must lead, with security cooperation limited, non-aligned, and focused on sovereignty and stability rather than power projection.

Bangladesh's strategy should therefore rest on three pillars: diversified economic partnerships, disciplined neutrality in security affairs, and active leadership in regional and Global South institutions to amplify its voice and protect its interests. A confident, balanced, and sovereignty-first diplomacy is the most effective path for navigating a competitive world while securing Bangladesh's development, security, and independence.



# Defence

## A blueprint for smart, credible deterrence

### Summary

- Bangladesh's security environment is becoming more competitive and coercive. Great-power rivalry, regional strategic pressure, and rapid technological change are increasing the risks faced by small and medium states like Bangladesh.
- Defence policy must therefore shift from symbolic strength to credible resilience. The objective is not a larger military, but a smarter one: professional, politically neutral, technologically agile, and designed to deny easy gains to any actor seeking to pressure or intimidate Bangladesh.
- The armed forces should be reformed as a disciplined national institution, free from political and commercial entanglement, supported by fair pay, modern education, and strong accountability. A clear legal framework for neutrality and civilian oversight is essential to protect both democracy and deterrence.
- National defence must be embedded in society through a trained reserve. One year of military training for men, with voluntary participation for women, creates mobilisation capacity, civic discipline, and resilience without the cost of a massive standing army.
- Innovation and industry are central to sovereignty. Bangladesh should invest in low-cost, high-impact capabilities such as drones, cyber systems, surveillance networks, and coastal denial platforms, supported by domestic research, shipbuilding, and defence manufacturing aligned with strategic needs.
- Defence diplomacy should strengthen capability without compromising autonomy. Diversified partnerships with middle-power states, maritime cooperation in the Bay of Bengal, and selective training and technology exchange can expand Bangladesh's strategic space without formal alignment.
- Defence modernisation must be fiscally disciplined and development-compatible. A gradual increase in defence spending toward around 2% of GDP over a decade, funded through broader tax reform and spending efficiency, supports security without undermining social investment.
- Together, these reforms reposition defence as sovereignty insurance rather than militarisation: a system designed to protect Bangladesh's independence, support its development, and allow it to navigate an increasingly realist world with confidence and strategic autonomy.



## 1. Introduction: Bangladesh's Strategic Environment

### 1.1 The Strategic Setting

Bangladesh's defence policy must be grounded in a realistic understanding of the strategic environment in which the country operates. The global order is moving away from a rules-based, institution-heavy system toward one defined increasingly by power, competition, and coercion. In such a world, smaller and medium-sized states face rising pressure to conform to the strategic agendas of larger actors or accept constraints on their sovereignty. For Bangladesh, which we believe should retain a foreign policy objective of strategic autonomy rather than alignment (see foreign policy for more detail), this creates both risk and urgency.

The Bay of Bengal has re-emerged as a major strategic theatre. It lies at the intersection of South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the wider Indo-Pacific, making it central to maritime trade, energy routes, and strategic connectivity. Bangladesh sits at the geographic heart of this space. Its ports, sea lanes, and coastal infrastructure are essential not only for economic development but also for national survival. As competition over access, influence, and infrastructure intensifies, Bangladesh's maritime environment becomes inseparable from its national security.

Geography intensifies Bangladesh's exposure. Almost all of its 4,097 km land border is with its much larger neighbour, India, with only 271 km bordering Myanmar. Its terrain is flat and densely populated, with limited natural defensive barriers. Key economic and population centres lie close to borders and coastlines. Its ports, especially Chittagong and Mongla, are essential not only for trade but for national survival. This combination of geographic openness, demographic density, and economic concentration makes Bangladesh structurally vulnerable to pressure, intimidation, or disruption even without formal conflict.

Bangladesh's predominantly deltaic terrain with extensive river networks, floodplains, and low-lying coastal regions shapes both vulnerabilities and opportunities for defence. While the flat, densely populated landscape limits the effectiveness of large conventional armies and complicates static fortification, it also allows for mobile, flexible, and decentralized defence strategies. In conflict scenarios, riverine and swampy terrain can be leveraged for asymmetric resistance, delaying or denying access to adversaries and complementing a smaller, high-readiness force. By contrast, neighbouring India and Myanmar maintain larger, manpower-heavy forces with extensive armoured and mechanised units. Bangladesh's limited fiscal and geographic capacity makes a similar approach inefficient; instead, a smart, technologically agile, and multi-domain force maximizes strategic resilience without the cost and rigidity of a larger standing army.

At the same time, Bangladesh faces the fiscal constraints typical of a developing economy. Defence resources must be used with discipline, with maximum strategic effect per taka spent. This favours a small, smart armed force: highly trained, technologically agile, politically neutral, and capable of operating across land, sea, air, cyber, and information domains. The

strategic objective is not to match larger powers in size, spending or visibility, but to preserve freedom of decision-making by raising the costs of coercion.

### 1.2 Bangladesh's Armed Forces

According to official figures, the Bangladesh Armed Forces comprise roughly 204,596 active military personnel across the Army (162,125), Navy (25,081), and Air Force (17,390). The Bangladesh Army is the largest branch and includes two infantry regiments: the East Bengal Regiment (approximately 47 battalions) and the Bangladesh Infantry Regiment (approximately 46 battalions). The Army also fields armoured and mechanised formations as part of its divisional structure. The Bangladesh Navy operates an expanding fleet of surface combatants and patrol vessels (with sources reporting around 66 active hulls), including frigates, corvettes, and submarines suited to coastal and littoral defence. The Bangladesh Air Force fields a mix of combat and support aircraft estimated at well over 180 platforms, including fighter jets, transport aircraft and helicopters. Bangladesh also maintains paramilitary, auxiliary and internal security forces including the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), Coast Guard, Ansar, and Village Defence units, which extend defence capacity and border security beyond the regular military.

### 1.3 Security Risks: Present and Future

Bangladesh's security risks today are not confined to the possibility of conventional military confrontation. Instead, they arise from a mix of external pressure, technological change, and structural vulnerabilities.

In the present environment, the most salient risks include:

- **External coercion and intimidation:** More powerful states increasingly use diplomatic pressure, economic leverage, infrastructure dependence, and military signalling to influence smaller countries' choices. For Bangladesh, this can affect decisions over trade, transit, energy, ports, and strategic alignment.
- **Domestic security risks** include trafficking, insurgent activity in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, tensions in the north-eastern border regions near India, and the long-term humanitarian and security management of Rohingya refugee settlements.
- **Maritime and airspace vulnerability:** The Bay of Bengal is becoming more crowded with naval activity, surveillance platforms, and strategic infrastructure. Bangladesh's limited maritime and air defence depth increases the risk of encroachment, miscalculation, or loss of control over key sea lanes and approaches.
- **Technological exposure:** Advances in drones, cyber operations, and precision systems allow coercion and disruption below the threshold of war, including surveillance of territory, interference with communications, and pressure through signalling rather than direct attack.

Over the next 30–50 years, these pressures are likely to intensify:

- **Great-power rivalry in the Indo-Pacific** will continue to shape regional politics and infrastructure investment, placing sustained pressure on smaller states to align strategically.
- **Hybrid and grey-zone strategies** will become more prevalent, combining economic leverage, cyber operations, information influence, and military posturing to weaken states without triggering open conflict.
- **Technological acceleration** will make power projection cheaper and more precise, allowing even limited platforms to generate significant strategic effect.
- **Climate stress and demographic pressure** will reshape coastlines, migration patterns, and resource use, indirectly affecting security planning and defence posture.

Taken together, these trends suggest that Bangladesh's defence challenge is not primarily about fighting wars, but about deterring pressure, preserving autonomy, and managing risk in a competitive environment. Defence policy must therefore focus less on symbolic strength and more on credible resilience: the ability to absorb pressure, deny easy gains to adversaries, and maintain national freedom of action.

The rest of this paper sets out how Bangladesh can reform its armed forces, reserve system, innovation base, industrial strategy, and defence diplomacy to meet these challenges in a way that supports its broader national development goals.

## 2. Creating a Professional, Neutral, and Accountable Armed Forces

Bangladesh's armed forces must be designed first and foremost as an instrument of national defence, not as a political actor, economic stakeholder, or prestige institution. In a security environment defined by coercion, competition, and hybrid pressure, deterrence depends not only on hardware but on the credibility, unity, and professionalism of the force. A fragmented, politicised, or commercially entangled military signals vulnerability to external actors and weakens the state's ability to protect its autonomy.

### 2.1 Professionalism and Political Neutrality

A professional military is one that is politically neutral, legally disciplined, and focused exclusively on its constitutional role. When armed forces become involved in domestic politics or business activities, their organisational coherence erodes. Officers and units begin to align with factions, interests, or networks rather than the state. This not only undermines democratic legitimacy but also creates openings for foreign influence, leverage, and manipulation.

For Bangladesh, maintaining a strict separation between the armed forces and partisan politics is essential. Political neutrality enhances deterrence by signalling unity and institutional discipline. It also ensures that defence policy is driven by national interest rather than domestic power struggles.

Equally important is removing the military from commercial activity. When armed forces or individual officers profit from business ventures, procurement, or quasi-state enterprises, strategic priorities are distorted. Resources shift from readiness and capability toward revenue generation. Over time, this creates parallel power structures and reduces transparency.

Professionalism also depends on pay, career incentives, and education. If officers and soldiers are underpaid or face uncertain career prospects, they are more likely to seek external income or patronage. A credible reform agenda must therefore combine ethical restrictions with positive incentives: fair pay, predictable promotion pathways, and modern professional military education.

#### *Recommendations*

- Enact a Military Neutrality Act explicitly prohibiting active-duty personnel from engaging in party politics, public political commentary, campaigning, or holding political office
- Require all officers to submit annual conflict-of-interest and asset declarations, audited by an independent Defence Ethics and Integrity Commission
- Mandate full divestment of military-owned commercial enterprises within a defined transition period (e.g. 3–5 years), with independent audits of all defence-linked business activity
- Introduce a merit-based promotion and posting system, overseen by a joint civilian–military review board to prevent patronage
- Link military pay scales to senior civil service grades and index them to inflation to reduce incentives for off-duty commercial activity
- Expand professional military education in strategy, technology, ethics, and civil–military relations for mid- and senior-rank officers

## **2.2 Force Structure and Multi-Domain Readiness**

Reforming the armed forces is not only about behaviour and norms; it is also about structure. Bangladesh's military must shift from a primarily manpower-heavy, platform-centric force toward one that is modular, mobile, and multi-domain.

Modern defence operates across land, sea, air, cyber, and information environments simultaneously. Deterrence no longer depends only on tanks and ships, but on the ability to see, communicate, disrupt, and respond quickly. For Bangladesh, this means prioritising:

- High-readiness, mobile units rather than large static formations
- Integration of air, naval, and ground operations
- Strong intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capacity
- Cyber and electronic warfare capabilities to protect communications and deny adversaries easy access

Rather than attempting to mirror the force structures of larger states, Bangladesh should design its military around denial and resilience: making it difficult for any adversary to achieve quick, cheap, or decisive results.

*Recommendations*

- Reorganise the armed forces into high-readiness, brigade-sized modular units capable of rapid deployment across land, maritime, air, and cyber domains
- Establish a permanent Joint Operations Command to integrate Army, Navy, and Air Force planning and execution
- Create a dedicated Joint Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) Command integrating drones, radar, satellites, and cyber intelligence
- Invest in mobile air-defence and coastal denial systems to protect ports, airspace, and key infrastructure
- Prioritise procurement of networked communications systems for real-time coordination across services
- Develop specialised cyber and electronic warfare units within the armed forces

### **2.3 Accountability and Civil–Military Balance**

Deterrence also depends on legitimacy. A military that is trusted by its own population and respected internationally is harder to undermine through pressure, propaganda, or coercion. Accountability is therefore not a constraint on defence; it is a strategic asset.

Bangladesh should strengthen both internal and external oversight. Internally, officers and soldiers must be able to report corruption, abuse, or malpractice without fear of retaliation. Externally, civilian institutions must be capable of auditing procurement, monitoring readiness, and enforcing ethical standards.

A key element of this balance is the legal framework governing military personnel. International democratic norms favour civilian court jurisdiction for crimes unrelated to operational military duty. This does not weaken discipline; rather, it reinforces the principle that the armed forces serve the law and the state, not the other way around. Clear civil–military boundaries also ensure that the armed forces remain focused on defence, not internal political competition or governance roles.

*Recommendations*

- Establish a legally protected Whistleblower Office within the Ministry of Defence with confidential reporting channels and mandatory response timelines
- Create a standing Parliamentary Defence Oversight Committee with audit authority over procurement and readiness
- Amend military justice legislation to transfer non-operational criminal cases involving service personnel to civilian courts
- Introduce independent Inspector-General units within each service branch to investigate misconduct

- Require annual public reporting on defence governance, ethics compliance, and procurement transparency

### **3. Establishing a National Reserve Army Through Universal Military Training**

Bangladesh's long-term defence posture cannot rely solely on a relatively small standing force. In a strategic environment defined by coercion, uncertainty, and asymmetric threats, the ability to mobilise society quickly and credibly is itself a form of deterrence. Many countries facing similar constraints and exposure, such as Switzerland, Finland, and Singapore, combine small professional cores with large, well-trained reserves. These models demonstrate that preparedness, not just firepower, raises the cost of coercion.

A Bangladeshi national reserve system would significantly expand defence capacity without the unaffordable fiscal burden of a massive permanent army. Training would be concentrated in defined periods, and reservists return to civilian life with skills that also support economic productivity, logistics, disaster response, and infrastructure resilience. It also would build a shared civic understanding of national defence, strengthening unity and deterrence simultaneously. Finally, a reserve army would strengthen Bangladesh's national resilience while supporting its sovereignty-first, non-aligned foreign policy by reducing reliance on external security guarantees.

#### **3.1 Structure, Training Design, and Education Integration**

The credibility of a reserve force depends on the quality and universality of training. Bangladesh should introduce one year of military training for all male citizens upon reaching adulthood, with voluntary participation for women. Implementation should begin with pilot programmes and expand in phases.

Training must be modern, practical, and aligned with Bangladesh's defence needs. It should include: basic soldiering and discipline; weapons handling and fieldcraft; civil defence, logistics, and infrastructure protection; cyber awareness and information security and maritime and disaster response components.

To minimise disruption to education and careers, training should be integrated into schools, colleges, and universities where possible. Military officers can be seconded as instructors, and training should be formally accredited. This approach turns military training into a form of national service compatible with development rather than a barrier to it.

#### *Recommendations*

- Formally establish a National Reserve Army (NRA) as a core pillar of defence policy, linked to the broader goal of strategic autonomy and deterrence through preparedness

- Introduce one-year universal military training for males, with voluntary service for women
- Launch a 5-year pilot phase starting with universities and technical colleges
- Integrate training into secondary and tertiary education curricula
- Accredit training toward diplomas, degrees, and vocational certification
- Establish a National Reserve Army Training Authority to standardise curricula and quality

### 3.3 Mobilisation, Obligations, and Civil Integration

After completing training, individuals should enter the National Reserve for a defined period (e.g. 8–10 years). During this time they would remain in civilian life, but would also participate in periodic refresher training and would remain subject to mobilisation in emergencies through a formal call-out system.

Mobilisation must be legally clear, procedurally fair, and socially legitimate. Call-outs should be used only for national emergencies, defence contingencies, or major disasters.

To ensure fairness and sustainability:

- Strategic opt-outs should exist for citizens in essential sectors (healthcare, energy, transport, ICT, education, food systems).
- Employers should be legally required to protect reservists' jobs and seniority.
- Mobilised reservists should be remunerated in accordance with national army frameworks, commensurate to their ranks and skills.

#### *Recommendations*

- Place trained citizens into the National Reserve for 8–10 years after completion
- Establish a legally defined call-out and mobilisation framework
- Require employers to guarantee job protection for reservists
- Create strategic opt-out criteria for critical national professions

## 4. Building a Smart Army: Defence Innovation, Research and Asymmetric Capability

Bangladesh cannot match larger powers in defence spending, platform numbers, or global reach. Its strategic advantage must therefore come from innovation, adaptability, and asymmetric capability (the ability to impose high costs on any attempt at coercion or military pressure using technologies that are relatively low-cost, resilient, and domestically supportable).

Modern deterrence increasingly depends not on mass, but on precision, intelligence, and denial. Drones, cyber capabilities, electronic warfare, and networked surveillance systems now allow smaller states to complicate the operations of far larger militaries. For Bangladesh,

investment in innovation is not a luxury; it is a necessity for preserving sovereignty in a realist and technologically accelerating world.

#### **4.1 Building a National Defence Innovation and Research Institute (NDIRI)**

Bangladesh should establish a dedicated National Defence Innovation and Research Institute (NDIRI) to serve as the central hub for military technology development, testing, and strategic foresight. This institute would link the armed forces, universities, engineers, and private industry into a single innovation ecosystem focused on Bangladesh's specific defence needs.

NDIRI should prioritise technologies that are:

- Relatively inexpensive
- Capable of mass domestic production
- Suited to Bangladesh's terrain and maritime environment
- Effective in denying access and complicating aggressive external action

Priority research areas should include:

- Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and loitering munitions
- Counter-drone systems
- Cyber and electronic warfare tools
- Low-cost precision-guided munitions
- Lightweight armoured and amphibious platforms
- Coastal anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) technologies

The institute should also have a strategic technology foresight unit to monitor global trends in AI, autonomy, robotics, nanotechnology, space systems, and cyber operations, ensuring that Bangladesh's defence planning is future-oriented rather than reactive.

##### *Recommendations*

- Establish a National Defence Innovation and Research Institute (NDIRI) under the Ministry of Defence
- Allocate a dedicated Defence Innovation Fund for prototype development and testing
- Link NDIRI formally to leading universities, engineering institutes, and ICT firms
- Prioritise research into UAVs, counter-drone systems, cyber tools, and A2/AD technologies
- Create a Strategic Technology Foresight Unit within NDIRI to track emerging global military technologies

#### **4.2 Reviving and Modernising Defence Manufacturing and Shipbuilding**

Bangladesh has a historically strong shipbuilding and engineering base, particularly in small- and medium-sized vessels. This industrial capability can be modernised and repurposed for

defence needs, especially in the maritime domain where Bangladesh's vulnerability and strategic importance are highest.

Rather than pursuing expensive blue-water naval platforms, Bangladesh should focus on:

- Coastal patrol vessels
- Fast-attack craft
- Small frigates and corvettes
- Unmanned surface and subsurface vehicles

These platforms, when combined with drones, sensors, and shore-based missile systems, create a layered maritime defence posture that is both affordable and credible.

Defence manufacturing should also extend to:

- Small arms and ammunition
- UAV components
- Electronics and sensors
- Secure communications equipment

Domestic production reduces vulnerability to supply chain pressure and allows Bangladesh to maintain readiness even under diplomatic or economic strain.

Bangladesh can also leverage locally available materials to support cost-effective defence production. The "graveyard of abandoned ships" in Chittagong represents a significant source of reusable steel and components, which can be processed for use in naval and unmanned vessel construction. By incorporating recycled materials into shipbuilding, Bangladesh reduces dependence on imported steel, lowers costs, and accelerates domestic production, supporting both sustainability and strategic autonomy.

#### *Recommendations*

- Modernise public and private shipyards to support naval and unmanned vessel production
- Prioritise production of coastal patrol vessels, fast-attack craft, and unmanned platforms
- Establish joint ventures for small arms, UAVs, and electronics manufacturing
- Establish a programme to recover and recycle steel and components from abandoned ships in Chittagong and similar locations for use in naval and defence manufacturing, integrating local materials into shipyard production pipelines
- Introduce government procurement guarantees for domestically produced defence equipment
- Develop a Defence Industrial Certification System to ensure quality and interoperability

#### 4.3 Asymmetric Capability for Denial and Deterrence

Asymmetric capability means designing the force not to dominate, but to deny easy success to any adversary. For Bangladesh, this includes:

- Distributed sensors and surveillance
- Mobile missile and air-defence units
- Swarm-capable drones
- Cyber and information warfare tools

These systems are relatively low-cost but impose disproportionate planning, financial, and political costs on any actor considering coercion or military signalling.

A denial-based posture also aligns with Bangladesh's foreign policy: it supports sovereignty without provoking arms races or appearing expansionist.

##### *Recommendations*

- Develop a national drone force for surveillance, maritime monitoring, and strike denial
- Deploy mobile coastal missile and air-defence batteries to protect ports and approaches
- Integrate cyber and electronic warfare into all major operational planning
- Invest in distributed sensor networks along borders and coastlines
- Shift procurement toward denial-oriented, low-cost, high-impact systems

### 5. Industrial Policy Aligned with Strategic Defence Needs

Defence capability does not rest only on armed forces; it rests on the industrial and technological foundations that sustain them. For a country like Bangladesh, whose strategic objective is autonomy rather than alignment, dependence on foreign suppliers for critical defence inputs creates long-term vulnerability. In a world where economic leverage is increasingly used as a tool of coercion, supply chains have become instruments of power.

Modern warfare depends on materials and technologies that sit deep inside civilian industries: steel, electronics, software, composites, energy systems, and logistics infrastructure. If these sectors are exposed to external pressure or political conditionality, defence readiness is indirectly weakened. Strategic resilience therefore requires that Bangladesh treat parts of its industrial policy as components of national defence.

There is strong international evidence for this link. Countries that have sustained defence autonomy over time, including South Korea and Türkiye, did not rely solely on arms imports. They invested in domestic engineering, dual-use manufacturing, and protected supply chains for critical inputs. This did not require self-sufficiency in everything, but it did require deliberate identification of vulnerabilities and targeted industrial development.

Bangladesh already has a substantial manufacturing base in garments, shipbuilding, pharmaceuticals, light engineering, and ICT. These sectors provide a foundation for defence-relevant production if guided by strategic priorities. For example:

- Shipbuilding capacity can support naval and unmanned vessel construction
- Electronics and ICT firms can contribute to sensors, communications, and cyber systems
- Light engineering can support vehicle maintenance, components, and logistics platforms

Without strategic direction, however, industrial development remains disconnected from defence needs. The result is continued reliance on foreign suppliers for even basic military components, exposing Bangladesh to price shocks, diplomatic pressure, and supply disruption in crises.

A defence-aligned industrial policy would therefore aim to:

- Identify critical materials and technologies
- Reduce exposure to single-country suppliers
- Encourage domestic and joint production
- Link civilian growth sectors to defence capability

This is not about militarising the economy. It is about ensuring that economic development supports sovereignty and resilience.

#### *Recommendations*

- Conduct a national audit of defence-critical supply chains, identifying vulnerabilities in steel, electronics, propulsion systems, explosives, and secure communications
- Designate a list of strategic defence industries eligible for tax incentives, credit access, and state-backed investment
- Establish a Defence-Industry Coordination Unit within the Ministry of Industries to align economic policy with defence planning
- Require major defence procurement contracts to include technology transfer and local production components
- Create a Defence Dual-Use Innovation Grant Programme to support civilian firms developing products with military applications
- Build strategic stockpiles of key materials needed for defence production and sustainment
- Diversify import sources for defence inputs to avoid dependence on any single non-allied supplier
- Link defence manufacturing standards to civilian export certification systems to improve quality and competitiveness

## 6. Strategic Defence Diplomacy and Regional Positioning

Bangladesh's defence policy cannot be separated from its diplomacy. Military capability and foreign policy operate as a single system: defence provides credibility to diplomacy, while diplomacy shapes the strategic environment in which defence operates. For a country committed to sovereignty-first, non-aligned engagement, the challenge is not to choose sides in great-power rivalries but to build a networked form of security that reduces dependence, limits vulnerability, and expands strategic space.

Traditional alliance structures are ill-suited to Bangladesh's context. Formal military alliances with major powers tend to bring obligations that constrain decision-making autonomy and risk entanglement in conflicts not of national choosing. At the same time, strategic isolation is neither realistic nor desirable. Bangladesh must therefore pursue a middle path: diversified defence relationships that strengthen capability without undermining neutrality.

This logic mirrors the broader foreign policy framework set out in the accompanying paper on strategic autonomy. Defence diplomacy should support that framework by:

- Expanding Bangladesh's access to training, technology, and doctrine
- Reducing over-dependence on any single partner
- Embedding Bangladesh in multiple security and cooperation networks
- Enhancing deterrence through visible international connectivity rather than alignment

In practice, this points toward deeper engagement with middle-income, technologically capable states that are ambitious but not hegemonic. The D-8 Organization for Economic Cooperation is a grouping of a number of such states in the Muslim world, and could facilitate such diplomacy. Countries such as Türkiye, Malaysia, Indonesia and Saudi Arabia combine defence-industrial capacity with a willingness to cooperate on technology, training, and co-production without demanding formal alignment. Pakistan and Saudi Arabia signed a mutual defence pact in September 2025, which Türkiye has also indicated interest in, sparking discussion about the possibility of a "Muslim NATO" forming. Bangladesh should engage constructively but cautiously, encouraging deeper security ties between a wider group of like-minded Muslim countries while not seeking a fully-fledged defence alliance which includes Pakistan in order to maintain regional balance at home.

Defence diplomacy should also be maritime-focused. The Bay of Bengal is Bangladesh's most exposed strategic space. It is where trade routes, energy corridors, undersea cables, and naval movements converge. Engagement here should emphasise information-sharing, search and rescue, maritime domain awareness, and capacity-building rather than power projection.

Another instrument of defence diplomacy is selective hosting. Carefully designed joint facilities, training hubs, or rotational presences can bring technology, investment, and interoperability benefits. But such arrangements must be tightly controlled, transparent, and framed as defensive and cooperative, not as steps toward alignment or base politics.

The strategic purpose of defence diplomacy is therefore not to replace self-reliance, but to amplify it: to use relationships to strengthen national capacity while preserving freedom of action.

*Recommendations*

- Develop a Defence Diplomacy Strategy aligned with the principles of strategic autonomy and non-alignment set out in the foreign policy paper
- Prioritise defence cooperation with middle-power and D-8 states offering training, co-production, and technology transfer without formal alliance obligations
- Expand military-to-military exchanges, joint exercises, and officer education programmes with partners in the Middle East and Southeast Asia
- Focus maritime defence diplomacy on the Bay of Bengal, including information-sharing, joint patrol frameworks, and maritime domain awareness cooperation
- Establish clear guidelines for any foreign military presence on Bangladeshi soil, limiting it to training, research, and rotational activities
- Require all defence cooperation agreements to include clauses on technology transfer, local capacity-building, and respect for Bangladesh's strategic neutrality
- Use defence diplomacy to support economic and industrial objectives, linking security cooperation to investment in domestic defence manufacturing

## 7. Defence Budget and Resource Strategy

Any credible defence reform must be matched by credible financing. Bangladesh faces rising strategic pressure in a more competitive regional order, but it is also a developing economy with urgent social and infrastructure needs. Defence spending therefore has to be sufficient, disciplined, and economically compatible.

### 7.1 Current Spending and Target Level

Bangladesh currently spends around 1.2–1.4 percent of GDP on defence, well below the level of states with comparable exposure to strategic risk. This constrains readiness, modernisation, and innovation. A reformed defence posture based on professionalism, reserves, and technology cannot be sustained at this level.

A realistic target is to raise defence spending gradually to around 2 percent of GDP over 10–12 years, in line with many non-aligned middle-income states. This would be phased:

- Years 1–4: 1.6% of GDP
- Years 5–8: 1.8%
- Years 9–12: 2.0%

At current GDP levels, this implies moving from roughly USD 5–6 billion to USD 8–9 billion annually in real terms over a decade, assuming continued growth.

This is not an arms race. It is a correction to ensure that Bangladesh can deter pressure and preserve autonomy at reasonable cost.

The additional resources would be focused on:

- Pay and professionalisation, to support political neutrality and reduce corruption risk
- The National Reserve Army, including training infrastructure and mobilisation systems
- Defence innovation, research, and domestic manufacturing
- ISR, cyber, drones, and coastal denial systems

The strategy is not “more of everything,” but more of what raises the cost of coercion per taka spent.

## 7.2 Funding

Defence reform is fiscally viable only if it is embedded in a broader revenue and public finance reform agenda. Our economy policy proposes raising the tax-to-GDP ratio from under 8% toward 14–17% over time, while strengthening spending discipline and reducing leakages. Defence modernisation fits within this approach.

Funding would come from:

- Expansion of the fiscal base through growth and revenue increase
- Reallocation within the defence budget away from legacy overhead and prestige assets
- Domestic defence manufacturing and co-production reducing import costs
- Cost-sharing and technology transfer through defence diplomacy

## 8. Phasing Defence Reforms

Ambitious defence reform cannot be delivered all at once. Attempting to transform institutions, force structure, industry, and diplomacy simultaneously would overwhelm administrative capacity, strain public trust, and risk incoherent outcomes. Effective reform therefore requires sequencing, prioritisation, and institutional coordination.

This strategy proposes a three-phase implementation framework over roughly 12 years. Each phase builds on the previous one, allowing learning, adjustment, and political consolidation.

### 8.1 Phase I (Years 1–4): Institutional Foundations and Pilot Programmes

The first phase focuses on governance, professionalism, and proof-of-concept.

Core priorities in this phase include:

- Passing the Military Neutrality Act and related ethics and oversight legislation
- Establishing the Defence Ethics and Integrity Commission and Parliamentary Defence Oversight Committee
- Creating the National Defence Innovation and Research Institute (NDIRI)

- Launching pilot programmes for the National Reserve Army in universities and technical colleges
- Setting up the Joint Operations Command and Joint ISR Command
- Beginning pay reform and professional military education expansion

This phase is about **credibility and control**: demonstrating that reform is serious, disciplined, and focused on capability rather than symbolism. It also allows the government to test reserve training models, innovation funding mechanisms, and oversight systems before scaling them nationally.

## **8.2 Phase II (Years 5–8): Capability Expansion and Industrial Integration**

Once institutional foundations are in place, the second phase shifts toward scaling and integration.

Priorities include:

- Expanding the National Reserve Army to national coverage
- Rolling out accredited military training across secondary and tertiary education
- Scaling up NDIRI research programmes and prototype-to-production pipelines
- Modernising shipyards and defence manufacturing facilities
- Introducing major ISR, cyber, and coastal denial systems
- Embedding defence diplomacy partnerships into co-production and training pipelines

This is the phase where defence reform becomes visible in capability terms: not through parade-ground expansion, but through technology, readiness, and industrial depth.

## **8.3 Phase III (Years 9–12): Consolidation and Strategic Maturity**

The final phase focuses on sustainability and strategic coherence.

Priorities include:

- Stabilising defence spending around the 2% of GDP level
- Fully institutionalising the reserve mobilisation framework
- Integrating defence manufacturing into export and innovation strategies
- Embedding defence foresight into national security planning
- Evaluating and refining force structure based on operational lessons

By this stage, Bangladesh's defence system should function as an integrated whole: professional armed forces, a trained reserve, an innovation ecosystem, an aligned industrial base, and diversified defence diplomacy.

## 9. Conclusion

Bangladesh stands at a strategic crossroads. Its geographic position, economic trajectory, and foreign policy ambitions place it at the centre of an increasingly competitive regional order. In such an environment, security cannot be treated as a narrow military issue. It is a condition of national autonomy, economic resilience, and political independence. A credible defence policy is therefore not a departure from development priorities, but one of their foundations.

This paper has argued that Bangladesh does not need a larger military in traditional terms. It needs a smarter, more disciplined, and more resilient defence system. One that is professional and politically neutral, embedded in society through a trained reserve, powered by innovation rather than mass, supported by an aligned industrial base, and reinforced through diversified defence diplomacy. Such a system does not seek confrontation, but it ensures that Bangladesh cannot be cheaply coerced or easily pressured.

The reforms proposed here are ambitious but realistic. They are grounded in fiscal discipline, phased implementation, and institutional accountability. They are also aligned with Bangladesh's broader foreign policy objective of strategic autonomy: engaging widely, aligning with none, and preserving the freedom to choose its own path. Defence modernisation, in this sense, is not about militarisation, but about sovereignty insurance in a world where power increasingly shapes outcomes.

Ultimately, Bangladesh's security will depend not on the size of its forces, but on the coherence of its strategy, the integrity of its institutions, and the unity of its society. If these reforms are pursued steadily and consistently, Bangladesh can build a defence posture that protects its independence, supports its development, and allows it to navigate a competitive world with confidence rather than fear.

## **PART FOUR**

# **DEVELOPING INFRASTRUCTURE FOR A RESILIENT SOCIETY**

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# Health

## A Moral Reset for Bangladesh's Health System

### Summary

- Bangladesh's health system can be transformed through a moral, evidence-based agenda. Protecting households from catastrophic costs, rationalising service delivery, empowering nurses, midwives, and allied health professionals, strengthening primary care, regulating the private sector, and ensuring medicine quality are mutually reinforcing objectives that create a resilient system.
- Challenges are ethical and technical. The largely unregulated, profit-driven system exposes households to catastrophic costs for care that is fragmented, urban-centred, and over-medicalised. Access is shaped more by income and power than by need.
- Reform requires a shift in purpose. The goal is not more hospitals or spending, but a people-centred system that protects households from financial ruin and delivers essential services close to where they live.
- Primary care must be the backbone. A nationwide Minimum Essential Service Package (MESP), enforced referral pathways, and upgraded union- and upazila-level facilities can replace today's hospital-centred, episodic model with continuous, community-based care, reducing unnecessary hospitalisation and improving equity.
- Workforce rebalancing is critical. Expanding nurses, midwives, and allied health professionals, embedding task-sharing, and strengthening rural deployment improves access, quality, and value for money. Service, not status, should guide professional roles.
- Financial protection should target catastrophic risk. A tiered Catastrophic Health Protection Fund guarantees access to life-saving, high-cost care while preserving prudent use of routine services.
- Governance and regulation must reinforce reform. Drug certification, anti-corruption audits, hospital ethics oversight, and accountable public-private engagement are essential to curb overpricing, substandard care, informal payments, and over-medicalisation.
- Over-medicalisation and resource misuse must be addressed. Rationalisation of diagnostics, procedures, and admissions, combined with team-based care, midwife-led deliveries, and standard treatment guidelines, ensures scarce resources are used efficiently and ethically.
- Together, these reforms redefine health as a moral commitment. A system that protects households from financial ruin, delivers essential care equitably, and uses resources responsibly is both feasible and necessary for social justice, human welfare, and national development.



## 1. Introduction

Bangladesh's health system stands at a contradiction. By headline indicators it has improved: people live longer, fewer children die young, and basic public-health coverage has expanded. Yet for most households, illness still means uncertainty, fear, and financial risk. Access to timely, effective care is shaped less by medical need than by wealth, location, and power. This is the central failure the system must confront.

Each year, millions of families face health costs they cannot absorb. Illness pushes households into debt, asset sales, delayed treatment, or no treatment at all. In 2022 alone, over six million people were pushed below the poverty line by out-of-pocket health spending. For many others, care is technically available but practically unreachable: too far away, too expensive, too unreliable, or too poorly regulated to trust. This is not just a service-delivery problem; it is a moral one. A system that allows financial ruin to determine survival is misaligned with any serious notion of social responsibility.

Behind this exposure to risk lie three structural distortions:

1. Care is **over-medicalised and hospital-centred**. Patients are pushed toward tests, drugs, and procedures that add cost without commensurate benefit. Hospitals absorb cases that should have been managed earlier and closer to home, while primary care remains weak, under-equipped, and bypassed.
2. The system is **physician-centred and workforce-imbalanced**. Doctors dominate service delivery even in areas where nurses, midwives, and allied health professionals could provide safer, more affordable, and more appropriate care. This inflates costs, reduces access, and entrenches status hierarchies rather than service efficiency.
3. The health economy is **commercialised faster than it is governed**. The private sector now delivers most secondary and tertiary care, but regulation of prices, quality, and ethical conduct has not kept pace. Pharmaceutical markets operate with weak quality certification and distorted incentives. Informal payments and patronage persist because accountability mechanisms are thin and unevenly enforced.

These are not isolated technical failures. Together they produce a system that is expensive, inequitable, and ethically incoherent: one that treats illness as a market opportunity rather than a social obligation.

In 2025, the Health Sector Reform Commission restated many of these problems and proposed ambitious institutional and financing reforms. But aspiration alone will not correct structural distortions. Without clear mechanisms to protect households from catastrophic risk, rebalance care models, regulate markets, and enforce accountability, reform risks remaining rhetorical rather than transformative.

This paper argues that Bangladesh needs not just more spending or more facilities, but a moral reorientation of the health system's purpose. Health policy must be grounded in the duty to protect the vulnerable, restrain wasteful and harmful care, and steward scarce resources toward the greatest social good. That does not mean an ever-expanding service-

delivery state. It means strong public stewardship: setting the rules, financing protection against ruin, regulating markets, and ensuring that care is delivered ethically, efficiently, and close to where people live.

What follows sets out a reform agenda built on that foundation. It focuses on:

- Protection against catastrophic financial risk
- Primary care as the system's backbone
- Workforce rebalancing toward nurses, midwives, and allied professionals
- Rationalised, team-based clinical practice
- Stronger regulation of private and pharmaceutical markets
- Transparent, enforceable governance

The aim is not a larger system for its own sake, but a fairer, more reliable, and more humane one, capable of serving citizens not as consumers of medical services, but as members of a shared moral community.

## 2. A Moral Approach to Health Policy

### 2.1 Why Health Policy Must Be Morally Grounded

Health is not just another service market. It concerns life, dignity, and vulnerability. A health system that treats illness primarily as a commercial transaction will, almost inevitably, prioritise those who can pay over those who most need care. For a country like Bangladesh, where illness can still mean financial ruin, this is not simply inefficient. It is wrong.

This paper adopts a moral approach to health policy rooted in three core commitments:

1. **Protection of the vulnerable** – no one should be denied life-preserving care because of poverty, status, or geography.
2. **Prudent use of scarce resources** – limited funds must be directed toward services that do the most good for the most people.
3. **Public accountability** – health institutions must serve citizens, not entrenched interests or purely commercial incentives.

In an Islamic social context, these commitments resonate strongly. Principles such as *maslaha* (public welfare), *darura* (necessity in hardship), and *qana'ah* (restraint in the use of limited means) all point toward a system that prioritises essential care, protects against catastrophic risk, and discourages wasteful or status-driven medicine. Healthcare, in this sense, is a collective obligation (*fard kifaya*): society as a whole bears responsibility for ensuring access to basic, life-preserving treatment.

This does not require eliminating private provision – far from it – but it does require strong public stewardship: rules, financing, and regulation that prevent human survival from being subordinated to market logic alone.

International experience supports this orientation. Systems built around pooled funding, primary care, and active public regulation achieve better equity and efficiency than those dominated by fee-for-service incentives and weak oversight. Where markets operate without moral and institutional constraint, over-medicalisation, inequality, and unnecessary intervention follow. Simply spending more does not fix this. Ethical clarity and governance do.

For Bangladesh, this moral framing leads to a clear policy direction: prioritise primary care and high-impact services, protect households from catastrophic financial risk, and regulate markets to ensure quality, restraint, and fairness.

## 2.2 What a Moral Approach Means for System Design

A moral health system is not defined by who owns hospitals. It is defined by how priorities are set and enforced.

At the system level, this means:

- Public financing should be focused on services with the highest social return: primary care, maternal and child health, and prevention.
- High-cost, life-saving care should be pooled and protected through collective risk-sharing, not left to individual households.
- Markets should operate under rules that reward value and quality, not volume and status.

In Bangladesh today, these conditions are not met. Care is hospital-centred, physician-dominated, and weakly regulated. This encourages excessive intervention and cost inflation, while leaving basic services underfunded and unreliable. A moral approach therefore implies a rebalancing of the system: away from episodic, specialist-heavy medicine and toward continuous, community-based care with strong public oversight.

The role of the state is not to deliver everything directly, but to set the architecture: financing protection, defining essential services, regulating prices and quality, and enforcing accountability across public and private providers alike.

## 2.3 Translating Moral Commitments into Policy Rules

Moral principles only matter if they shape real decisions. In practice, this requires explicit policy mechanisms, not just aspirations.

A morally grounded health system should include:

- **Priority-setting rules** for public spending, based on disease burden and cost-effectiveness (e.g. focusing resources where each taka saves the most lives or years of healthy life).
- **An Essential Service Package**, guaranteed nationwide, covering primary, maternal, child, and high-impact interventions.

- **Clinical guidelines** that discourage unnecessary tests, procedures, and medications, especially in maternity and elective care.
- **Collective risk-protection mechanisms** for catastrophic illness, so households are not bankrupted by rare but severe events.
- **Regulatory enforcement** to prevent elite capture, informal payments, and low-quality medicines from undermining public trust.

These institutional choices determine whether the system protects people or profits, need or status, dignity or exclusion.

Embedding these commitments into financing, workforce deployment, service delivery, and regulation allows Bangladesh to move beyond a fragmented, market-driven model toward healthcare that is humane, efficient, and resilient. Moral clarity is not an alternative to technical reform. It is what gives reform its direction.

### 3. Health Financing and Financial Risk Protection

#### 3.1 The Nature of Financial Risk in Bangladesh's Health System

The central financing failure in Bangladesh's health system is not routine out-of-pocket spending. It is exposure to sudden, unaffordable medical shocks.

Most households can manage predictable costs such as basic consultations or common medicines. What they cannot absorb are hospitalisation, emergency surgery, intensive care, or complications from chronic disease. These events often impose costs equivalent to several months of income, forcing families into debt, asset sales, or delayed treatment.

For a household earning Tk 15,000–20,000 per month, a single hospital episode costing Tk 50,000–65,000 can wipe out savings and destabilise livelihoods. In practice, illness frequently becomes a trigger for long-term poverty.

This is not just a social problem; it is a systems problem. When care is financially dangerous, people delay seeking treatment, arrive late and sicker, and ultimately require more expensive interventions. Weak financial protection therefore **raises costs while worsening outcomes**.

Expanding facilities alone will not fix this. Without explicit protection against catastrophic risk, improved service availability simply exposes more families to financial harm.

#### 3.2 A Catastrophic Health Protection Fund

Bangladesh does not need to eliminate all out-of-pocket spending to fix this problem. It needs to pool risk for the events that destroy households.

We therefore propose a Catastrophic Health Protection Fund focused exclusively on high-cost, life-preserving care. This aligns moral responsibility with fiscal realism: protect people from ruin, not from every minor expense.

The Fund would:

- Cover emergency, surgical, intensive, and selected life-saving treatments.
- Exclude routine outpatient visits and low-cost medicines.
- Prioritise households with low and middle incomes.
- Activate only when costs exceed a clearly defined “catastrophic” threshold.

This approach preserves incentives for prudent use of routine care, while guaranteeing that no family is bankrupted by severe illness.

Rather than complex tiering and documentation, the Fund should follow three simple principles:

1. Automatic protection for the poor through linkage with existing social safety net registries.
2. Targeted protection for the vulnerable middle based on income and asset proxies.
3. Exclusion of the wealthy, who retain responsibility to self-finance or insure.

The objective is not to build a large bureaucracy, but to create a credible national backstop against medical ruin.

### **3.3 What Matters for Implementation**

The success of the Fund depends less on technical design than on three core capacities:

- Clear eligibility and triggers: Simple thresholds that activate support for genuinely catastrophic events.
- Reliable financing: Stable earmarked revenue sources to prevent ad hoc rationing.
- Strong oversight: To prevent leakage, corruption, and elite capture.

Most importantly, this instrument only works if it is paired with serious investment in primary care. Catastrophic protection handles the tail risk. Primary care prevents people from reaching catastrophe in the first place.

Together, these two pillars – primary care plus financial backstop – form the financial and moral core of a humane health system.

## **4. Service Delivery and Health System Strengthening**

### **4.1 Primary and Upazila-Level Care: The Foundation of a Humane Health System**

A credible health system must start from the ground up. In Bangladesh, primary and upazila-level facilities remain chronically under-resourced, even though they are the first (and often only) point of contact for most citizens. Weak infrastructure, unreliable electricity, poor water and sanitation, and shortages of essential medicines and diagnostics drive patients prematurely to hospitals, raising costs, overcrowding tertiary facilities, and deepening inequities.

A 2022 WHO Service Availability and Readiness Assessment found that primary care facilities scored far below minimum readiness thresholds for managing common non-communicable

diseases. Regular electricity was available at only 53% of union-level facilities, and nearly 20% lacked improved water sources. These gaps undermine preventive care, early diagnosis, and routine management, allowing manageable conditions to escalate into emergencies.

Weak primary care is also a major driver of financial hardship. When patients bypass local facilities due to quality concerns, they face higher-cost private clinics or hospitals, eroding the effectiveness of any financial protection mechanism. Strengthening primary care is therefore both a clinical and moral imperative, ensuring that ethical commitments such as access, equity, and dignity translate into real-world outcomes.

Key reforms for primary care:

- **Minimum Essential Service Package (MESP):** All union and upazila facilities must provide essential medicines, basic diagnostics (e.g., blood glucose, haemoglobin, pregnancy tests, blood pressure), routine maternal and child health services, safe deliveries, and emergency stabilisation.
- **Infrastructure standards:** Reliable electricity, clean water, sanitation, cold-chain capacity for medicines, and basic digital connectivity are mandatory prerequisites, with annual inspections and public reporting.
- **Digital referral and patient tracking:** Mandatory referral documentation for non-emergency hospital admissions, linked to facility-level performance incentives.
- **Workforce deployment:** Structured rural staffing, supervision, and task-sharing with nurses, midwives, and allied health professionals to ensure accessible, competent care.

#### Targets:

- ≥80% of union and upazila facilities meeting full MESP availability by 2028.
- 100% electricity and improved water coverage, cold-chain, and basic internet by 2027.
- Most hospital admissions via referral within five years.

## 4.2 Hospital-Level Care: Rationalisation, Governance, and Risk Protection

Hospitals remain essential for high-risk and complex conditions, but overcrowding reflects weaknesses in primary care and referral management. Bangladesh has approximately one hospital bed per 990 people, far below the WHO benchmark of 3.5 beds per 1,000. Corridor care is common, with about 15,000 patients treated daily on floors.

Hospital expansion must therefore be phased, targeted, and ethically governed, linked to both system capacity and the financial protection of households:

- **Capacity expansion:** Add 30,000 inpatient beds nationwide, including 5,000–6,000 ICU/high-dependency beds. Develop specialty wings and step-down units in secondary hospitals to reduce tertiary burden.
- **Infrastructure upgrades:** Oxygen, sanitation, waste management, infection control, and digital bed management systems.

- **Governance and performance:** Public reporting of KPIs (clinical outcomes, length of stay, referral appropriateness, patient satisfaction); standardised staffing and skill mix; recruitment, promotion, and training tied to demonstrated service delivery rather than seniority.
- **Ethical allocation:** Transparent criteria for high-cost or scarce resources, with clear guidance on end-of-life and catastrophic interventions.

Expansion prioritises care for severe conditions covered under the Catastrophic Health Protection Fund, ensuring that public investment is aligned with moral and financial protection goals rather than blanket capacity increases.

#### 4.3 Pharmaceutical Policy and Supply Chain Oversight

Access to essential medicines is inconsistent, particularly in rural and primary care settings. Only 40% of selected essential generics are reliably available in public facilities, and gaps are pronounced for chronic disease medicines such as insulin and antihypertensives.

Bangladesh's pharmaceutical sector is large and increasingly capable, but regulatory oversight by the DGDA is limited by inspection capacity and post-marketing enforcement. Rather than treating regulation as the only lever, pharmaceutical policy can be a tool to strengthen primary care, financial protection, and ethical delivery:

- **Regulatory enforcement:** Achieve 100% GMP compliance among local manufacturers within 3 years, with annual inspections and transparent public reporting.
- **Supply chain monitoring:** Digital stock management for essential medicines across public facilities, with dashboards for real-time oversight. Reduce stock-outs in primary care from 30% to <5% within 5 years.
- **Local production and affordability:** Incentivise domestic production to meet ≥50% of essential medicine demand, lowering prices and reducing dependence on imports.

By strengthening both supply and regulation, medications become a tool for ethical service delivery: reliable access reduces unnecessary hospital visits, supports primary care utilisation, and enhances financial protection, while creating a sustainable environment for trained pharmacists and allied professionals to provide frontline services.

### 5. Workforce: Quantity, Distribution, and Quality

#### 5.1 Workforce Numbers and Distribution

Bangladesh faces a severe shortage and maldistribution of health professionals, with profound consequences for equity, efficiency, and moral accountability. The combined density of doctors, nurses, and midwives is only 9.9 per 10,000 population, well below international norms. The nurse-to-doctor ratio remains low (0.75:1), far from the WHO benchmark of 3:1, and only 3,000 midwives are currently appointed, compared to an

estimated need of 20,000. Meanwhile, 75% of doctors and nurses are concentrated in urban areas, leaving rural populations underserved.

Expanding workforce numbers alone is insufficient. Without strategic deployment, team-based care, and task redistribution, new hires risk reinforcing physician-centric, over-medicalised care rather than delivering accessible, community-oriented services.

A moral, financially realistic workforce strategy requires:

- **Redistribution first:** Prioritise rural, primary, and community-based care for nurses, midwives, and primary care physicians. Urban deployment should be tightly regulated via licensure, scholarships, and service requirements.
- **Private and public sector collaboration:** Public scholarships, employer-supported training, and regulated private sector programs should collectively fund expansion, avoiding unsustainable reliance on the Ministry alone.
- **Team-based care:** Redesign staffing norms to shift routine and preventive care from physicians to nurses, midwives, and allied health professionals, freeing doctors to manage complex cases.

## Recommendations

- Double nurse numbers to 4 per 10,000 population.
- Increase midwives from 3,000 to 20,000, supported by rural recruitment incentives and scholarships.
- Expand physicians from 1:6,000 to 1:1,500 population, prioritising rural deployment.
- Train 25,000 health technicians annually to support diagnostics, surgical assistance, and community health roles.
- Structured rural service as a condition of scholarships, internships, and early-career promotions, with state-provided housing, supervision, and defined scopes of practice.
- Achieve a 3:1 nurse-to-doctor ratio within 10 years, reflecting deliberate task-shifting and production of new cadres aligned with primary care needs.

## 5.2 Training, Ethics, and Clinical Competence

The quality of health professional education is uneven, directly affecting care quality, ethical practice, and efficiency. Rapid expansion of medical, nursing, and allied health schools has outpaced regulatory oversight. Curricula remain heavily didactic, with limited focus on clinical reasoning, supervised practice, team-based care, and ethical decision-making. Faculty shortages, dual clinical and teaching responsibilities, and lack of structured supervision exacerbate these gaps, particularly in nursing and midwifery.

In response to these challenges, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, supported by the WHO, began work on a National Medical Education Strategy in 2024, but this work appears to have fallen by the wayside since then. Without systemic improvements, increases in workforce numbers risk reproducing physician-centric, over-investigation-driven care, undermining both financial protection and equitable access.

## Recommendations

### *Curriculum and Competency Reform*

- Restart work with the WHO on developing a National Medical Education Strategy aligned with regional and global frameworks to address the gaps and challenges in medical education, such as curriculum, accreditation, faculty development, and digital transformation.
- The strategy should guide curriculum, accreditation, faculty development, and digital learning, ensuring new graduates are trained for the roles actually needed in rural and underserved areas.
- Revise curricula to emphasise clinical reasoning, appropriate use of diagnostics, community health, preventative care, ethical decision-making, and practical skills needed for team-based, primary care-focused service.
- Implement structured competency-based training (CBT), while ensuring it supports redistribution and role alignment.
- Align CBT with clearly defined scopes of practice and team-based care models, ensuring graduates are prepared for the roles they will perform in real service settings.

### *Ethics and Professional Accountability*

- Establish Ethics & Compassion Committees in all training institutions, responsible for curriculum oversight, professional conduct, and grievance resolution.
- Integrate resource stewardship and professional obligations into core curricula via case-based learning.

### *Faculty Development and Teaching Quality*

- Invest in faculty development, including formal training in education methodology, protected teaching time for clinical instructors, and incentives linked to teaching quality and learner outcomes.
- Promote use of blended and digital learning to supplement faculty shortages, especially for remote and rural training sites where qualified supervisors are scarce.

### *Continuing Professional Development*

- Make CME/CPD mandatory for license renewal, audited by professional councils.
- Align CPD with service in underserved and rural areas, emphasizing skills required for primary and community care rather than advanced tertiary procedures.
- Define tiered CPD requirements across cadres, with evaluation based on practical service outcomes, not just classroom hours.

## 6. Rationalising Care and Regulating the Private Sector

### 6.1 Over-Medicalisation and Care Model Reform

Bangladesh's health system suffers from widespread over-medicalisation, which undermines both equity and moral responsibility in care delivery. Excessive use of diagnostics, prescriptions, and procedures – especially in private facilities – diverts resources from essential services and exposes households to unnecessary financial burden. For example, a simulated-patient study found 82% of patients received more than two medicines, and over 70% were prescribed antibiotics when not indicated (Islam, 2017). And in maternity, national caesarean section rates stand at around 56%, far above WHO guidance, with most births attended by physicians rather than midwives, despite evidence that midwife-led care improves safety, outcomes, and satisfaction.

Over-medicalisation is not only a technical failure; it is a moral issue. Under Islamic principles of *maslaha* (public welfare) and *qana'ah* (prudence in resource use), unnecessary interventions constitute misuse of communal resources and violate ethical obligations to protect the vulnerable. A moral health system prioritises essential, evidence-based care, avoids harm, and ensures that interventions are provided based on need rather than profit.

Reforming care models requires:

- Embedding team-based, primary care-oriented service, where nurses, midwives, and allied health professionals deliver routine and preventive care within clearly defined scopes of practice.
- Strengthening midwife-led normal delivery units integrated with referral networks to reduce unnecessary interventions.
- Applying standard treatment guidelines (STGs) and clinical governance to ensure care is rational, ethical, and needs-based.

### Recommendations

#### *Standardisation and Governance*

- Develop and enforce STGs for childbirth, chronic diseases, and common acute conditions.
- Implement facility-level monitoring of procedure utilisation, referral patterns, and clinical outcomes, with routine audit and feedback.
- Align physician and facility incentives with quality, outcomes, and adherence to guidelines rather than volume of services. Target measurable reductions: 20% reduction in unnecessary diagnostic tests and prescriptions within 3 years, based on periodic audit data.
- Enforce rational prescription guidelines, targeting at least 80% compliance with STGs for antibiotics and chronic disease medications within 3 years.

#### *Task-Sharing and Workforce Utilisation*

- Implement task-sharing models that formally empower nurses and midwives to deliver routine and preventive care within clearly defined scopes of practice.
- Establish and scale midwife-led normal delivery units at community and union levels, integrated with referral networks for complications.

#### *Accountability and Continuous Improvement*

- Monitor outcomes, procedure utilisation, and patient satisfaction across all care models to ensure accountability and guide continuous quality improvement.

### **6.2 Regulating the Private Sector and Public–Private Engagement**

The private sector dominates secondary and tertiary care, but oversight is weak. By April 2025, only around 5% of private hospitals and diagnostic centers had renewed licenses, leaving much of the sector unmonitored. Services are urban-centred, expensive, and often poorly coordinated, exacerbating inequities and undermining public trust.

Unchecked private growth encourages over-medicalisation, diverts public resources, and threatens the integrity of financial protection schemes. While public-private partnerships (PPPs) can expand access, they are only effective if paired with enforceable standards, transparent accountability, and alignment with moral health objectives by prioritising essential care, protecting households, and supporting redistribution of services to underserved populations.

#### *Accountability and Licensing*

- Introduce a Social Accountability Index for private facilities, linked to licensing and annual renewal; target 100% assessment within 3 years.
- Mandate public display of patient rights charters, fee schedules, and grievance mechanisms, with annual audits.

#### *Quality and Reporting Standards*

- Require private providers participating in public financing (e.g., Catastrophic Health Protection Fund) to meet defined quality standards: adherence to STGs, infection control, and minimum staffing ratios; target 90% compliance within 3 years.
- Require regular reporting of clinical outcomes, procedure volumes, and patient satisfaction, with non-compliant facilities subject to suspension or fines.

#### *Public–Private Partnerships (PPPs)*

- Ensure PPP hospitals and diagnostics comply with national protocols and STGs; target independent quality accreditation for all PPP facilities within 5 years.
- Incentivise PPP providers to expand services outside urban centers, aiming for  $\geq 30\%$  of new PPP facilities in underserved districts within 5 years.

## 7. Tackling Corruption

### 7.1 Corruption and Weak Governance

Corruption in Bangladesh's health system is less a matter of individual moral failure than a symptom of overextended institutional scope and weak capacity. Surveys and studies highlight persistent challenges:

- **Household experience:** Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB, 2023) reports that roughly **50% of households** accessing public health services made unauthorized payments or faced other forms of corruption.
- **Absenteeism and weak supervision:** Sanctioned posts are often filled only on paper, particularly in rural facilities. Absenteeism reflects **structural constraints** such as unsafe work environments, excessive workload, weak community support rather than enforcement failure alone (Angell et al., 2021).
- **Pharmaceutical governance:** Many medicines are overpriced, substandard, or promoted through informal incentives due to weak enforcement by the Directorate General of Drug Administration (DGDA) (Khan et al., 2024).
- **Informal payments and patronage:** Political or bureaucratic protection allows unofficial fees and preferential access to persist, eroding trust and discouraging timely care-seeking (Abdallah et al., 2015).

Traditional "anti-corruption" mechanisms such as commissions, additional reporting requirements, or audits have often failed because they increase administrative burden without addressing root causes. Expanding scope or adding parallel oversight can overwhelm an already capacity-limited system, reducing effectiveness.

### 7.2 Recommendations

Reform should focus on simplifying system responsibilities, reducing opportunities for misuse, and embedding learning mechanisms rather than layering additional controls:

#### *Right-sizing institutional responsibilities*

- Limit public sector involvement to areas where the Ministry can exercise credible oversight and deliver core services reliably.
- Delegate manageable functions to regulated private actors, NGOs, and community organizations, reducing the burden on overstretched officials.

#### *Focused accountability and learning*

- Implement operational feedback loops to identify and address systemic failures, rather than pursuing exhaustive punitive mechanisms.
- Collect data on service delivery, absenteeism, and resource gaps to inform adaptive management and evidence-based policy adjustments.

#### *Targeted incentives and support*

- Address absenteeism with non-financial supports first: safe working conditions and opt-out mechanisms for relocation for women, clear scopes of work, community engagement, and professional recognition.
- Apply selective financial incentives only where non-financial mechanisms are insufficient, avoiding blanket bonus systems that can be captured or create perverse incentives.

*Practical pharmaceutical governance*

- Require mandatory DGDA certification of efficacy and safety, visibly displayed, focusing enforcement on high-impact drugs and manufacturers with capacity to comply.
- Support self-interested compliance through public recognition, market incentives, and civil society participation, creating a sustainable quality assurance ecosystem.

*Transparency and citizen engagement*

- Maintain simple, accessible complaint and grievance channels at district and union facilities, prioritising rapid response over complex bureaucratic processes.
- Publish key facility-level performance indicators to promote learning and accountability rather than attempting comprehensive monitoring of all processes

## 8. Budgetary Implications

### 8.1 Rationale: Efficiency before Expansion

The reforms proposed in this paper do not rely primarily on a large increase in public spending. Instead, they emphasise better use of existing resources, targeted prioritisation, and structural efficiency gains.

Bangladesh currently spends roughly 2.3% of GDP on public health, which is modest but not inherently inadequate if resources are allocated effectively. Current challenges such as overcrowded hospitals, weak primary care, over-medicalisation, fragmented service delivery, and insufficient financial protection reflect structural inefficiencies and misaligned priorities rather than absolute fiscal scarcity.

The key objective of budgeting reform is therefore to realign spending with moral and operational priorities: protecting households from catastrophic risk, strengthening primary and upazila-level care, improving hospital governance, and ensuring ethical and accountable use of funds. Only once these reforms are embedded, policymakers should then assess whether increasing expenditure is necessary to achieve national healthcare goals.

### 8.2 Prioritisation and Phased Reallocation

Rather than seeking open-ended expansion, the Ministry can reallocate existing resources toward high-impact interventions:

Reform Area	Priority Focus	Illustrative Actions
<b>Primary and Upazila Care</b>	Guarantee Minimum Essential Service Package, infrastructure standards, essential medicines	Shift operating budgets from underutilised programs or centrally controlled tertiary investments to local facilities; strengthen referral links
<b>Workforce</b>	Rural deployment, task-sharing, midwife-led services	Incentivise rural service through structured deployment, housing, supervision, and defined scopes of practice; invest in training aligned with local health needs rather than expanding sheer numbers
<b>Hospital Governance</b>	Ethical and rational use of procedures	Reallocate discretionary spending toward audit systems, referral compliance, and facility-level KPIs rather than simply expanding beds
<b>Pharmaceutical Supply</b>	Reduce stock-outs, improve regulation	Use existing procurement funds more strategically, centralising purchasing and improving digital stock monitoring to prevent wastage
<b>Financial Protection</b>	Focused coverage for catastrophic events	Target subsidies at truly high-cost care rather than broad, untargeted schemes; leverage savings from reduced over-medicalisation and improved referral discipline

### 8.3 Efficiency Gains and Cost Containment

Several reforms directly **reduce cost growth without requiring additional funding**:

- Standard treatment guidelines and clinical audit reduce unnecessary diagnostics, prescriptions, and procedures.
- Task-sharing and team-based care lower unit costs by deploying nurses, midwives, and allied health professionals more effectively.
- Improved referral discipline prevents expensive, avoidable tertiary care.
- Centralised procurement, stock monitoring, and rationalisation of drug supply reduce overpricing and wastage.

Evidence from international systems shows that targeted interventions in clinical governance, primary care, and procurement can free 10–20% of recurrent expenditure, which can then be redirected toward service expansion and financial protection.

### 8.4 Implementation Principles

To make existing resources work harder, the Ministry should:

1. **Prioritise spending by moral and operational impact:** Protect the most vulnerable, strengthen primary care, regulate high-cost care, and improve system integrity.
2. **Align budgets with outputs, not line-items:** Track measurable outputs (referral compliance, stock-out rates, utilisation of essential services) and tie facility-level budgets to performance.
3. **Phase reforms to match capacity:** Focus first on interventions the Ministry can credibly oversee such as primary care, workforce deployment, and essential drug supply, before attempting large-scale tertiary expansion.
4. **Embed learning and adaptive budgeting:** Regularly monitor outcomes, identify bottlenecks, and redirect resources dynamically rather than relying on static budget allocations.

## 9. Phasing Reform

### First 100 Days

- Establish the legal and operational framework for the Catastrophic Health Protection Fund, including eligibility criteria and activation thresholds.
- Appoint ethics- and accountability-focused leadership at ministry, divisional, and district levels.
- Launch pilot catastrophic coverage in selected districts alongside targeted primary care upgrades, including MESP implementation, essential medicines, and basic infrastructure improvements.
- Initiate diagnostic governance reviews in hospitals, procurement units, and training institutions to identify bottlenecks and inefficiencies.
- Begin curriculum reform pilots in medical, nursing, and midwifery institutions, prioritising team-based and community-focused care.
- Start DGDA capacity strengthening, including pilot drug testing, certification, and stock monitoring in selected districts.

### First 2 Years

- Complete eligibility verification and enrolment systems for the catastrophic fund in pilot districts.
- Expand nurse and midwife training programs, admit the first cohorts under structured rural service requirements, and begin task-sharing deployments.
- Implement MESP in at least 50% of union- and upazila-level facilities, ensuring basic infrastructure and referral links.
- Pilot digital referral and monitoring systems, including facility-level KPIs on patient satisfaction, procedure utilisation, and bed occupancy.
- Begin phased enforcement of DGDA drug certification and digital stock monitoring for essential medicines in priority districts.

- Roll out targeted rural workforce incentives, combining non-financial support, selective financial incentives, and supervision systems, linked to facility-level performance.

### **First 5 Years**

- Achieve nationwide coverage under the tiered Catastrophic Health Protection Fund, with operational mechanisms refined from pilot learnings.
- Reach workforce targets: double nurses, expand midwives to 20,000, increase physician density, and train 25,000 health technicians annually, aligned to primary care and rural deployment priorities.
- Fully implement MESP and referral systems across all union- and upazila-level facilities, with monitored performance and integrated team-based care models.
- Ensure hospitals operate with institutionalised KPIs, ethical governance measures, and performance-linked management, reducing over-medicalisation and inappropriate procedures.
- Achieve nationwide DGDA drug certification compliance, reduce stock-outs, and mitigate overpricing through enforcement and market-aligned incentives.
- Observe measurable improvements in service utilisation, reductions in catastrophic spending, and public trust in primary and secondary care.

## **10. Conclusion**

Bangladesh has the opportunity to move from a fragmented, inequitable, and resource-constrained health system toward one that is both ethical and effective. The proposed reform agenda links moral principles (protecting the vulnerable, discouraging over-medicalisation, and promoting communal responsibility) with practical strategies in financing, workforce, service delivery, and governance.

By prioritising primary care, embedding task-sharing and midwife-led models, regulating private provision, and strengthening oversight of medicines and hospitals, the plan addresses both immediate risks, such as catastrophic household expenditures, and structural weaknesses that have long undermined quality and equity. Phased implementation, pilot testing, and active engagement of civil society and self-interested stakeholders create mechanisms for accountability and continuous learning, reducing opportunities for inefficiency and corruption.

Sustained adoption of this integrated approach can deliver measurable improvements in access, quality, and financial protection, establishing a health system that is humane, resilient, and just. Ultimately, it offers a roadmap for Bangladesh to fulfil the social, moral, and economic obligations of health as a public good, ensuring safe and dignified care for all citizens.

# Education

## Restoring Purpose and Skills for Life

### Summary

- Bangladesh's education system has expanded, but lost clarity of purpose. Examination-driven credentialism dominates schools and universities, producing rising graduate unemployment, weak workplace readiness, excessive pressure on children, and a widening gap between education and real economic and social needs.
- Reform must shift education from credentials to capability in a unified educational system. The goal is not more schooling, but better preparation for life: functional literacy and numeracy, communication, digital competence, applied reasoning, work discipline, and ethical responsibility, supporting multiple pathways rather than a single academic ladder.
- Technical, vocational, and applied education must become first-class options. TVET should expand across secondary, post-secondary, and degree levels, with strong industry linkages, accredited work-based learning, and clear progression routes into skilled employment and enterprise in sectors central to Bangladesh's economy.
- Teacher quality is the system's binding constraint. Recruitment, training, evaluation, and incentives must prioritise pedagogical competence and classroom effectiveness, supported by mandatory pre-service training and continuous professional development.
- Universities must be refocused, not simply expanded. Public funding should prioritise applied and professional programmes with clear labour-market or service value, while slowing low-return academic expansion and recognising work-based learning.
- Together, these reforms reposition education as a foundation for livelihoods, social cohesion, and character formation.



## 1. Introduction: Bringing Purpose Back Into Education

Bangladesh's education system has expanded rapidly, achieving notable gains in enrolment and basic literacy. Yet persistent concerns remain about quality, relevance, equity, and social cohesion. Multiple parallel streams – general education, Aliya and Qawmi madrasas, English-medium schools, and technical and vocational education and training (TVET) – operate with limited coordination, unequal resources, and weak mobility. These structural features contribute to skills mismatch, graduate underemployment, social stratification, and public dissatisfaction.

Policy debates have focused on inputs such as enrolment, infrastructure, examination performance, and spending rather than the fundamental question of purpose. Reforms have often been incremental, technocratic, and reactive. With a narrowing demographic window, rising labour-market pressures, and heightened public demand for accountability and cultural confidence following political upheavals, Bangladesh must reassess education from first principles. Many challenges are not merely delivery or governance issues but arise from system design. The inherited education model was not developed for Bangladesh's social structure, economic needs, or values, and continued investment without rethinking purpose risks diminishing returns.

### 1.1 Structural Origins and Systemic Mismatch

Modern schooling in Bangladesh largely inherits Western institutional models transmitted through colonial administration and reinforced in post-colonial development frameworks. These systems were designed in contexts very different from contemporary Bangladesh. Mass schooling in Europe emphasized discipline, uniformity, and obedience, while British elite schools focused on producing administrators rather than vocational skills. Universities evolved as cultural and research institutions with limited alignment to labour-market needs. These design assumptions embed expectations about time use, social roles, and economic participation. In Bangladesh, constrained fiscal resources and labour markets amplify the inefficiencies of prolonged academic instruction.

The colonial system displaced a pre-existing indigenous educational ecology of maktabs, madrasas, tols, gurukuls, and apprenticeships. These institutions were flexible, integrated with work and community life, and aligned with local moral frameworks. Colonial policies marginalized these institutions and promoted English-medium schooling and formal credentialing, creating a narrow definition of education centered on classroom instruction and examinations. This design mismatch persists: employers report graduates lack practical skills, workplace readiness, and problem-solving capacity. Labour-market surveys and analyses by the World Bank and Asian Development Bank highlight weak links between education and employment, overreliance on rote learning, and assessment systems that reward memorization over application.

### 1.2 Fragmentation and Social Costs

The system is further weakened by fragmentation into multiple streams with unequal prestige, governance, and resources. Qawmi madrasas enroll millions of students, and TVET

institutions are expanding, yet pathways into universities, regulated professions, or civil service remain constrained. Public spending per student varies widely: general secondary schools and universities receive higher budgets and infrastructure, while madrasa and TVET institutions operate with fewer facilities and higher student-teacher ratios. For example, only 0.81 percent of the educated population holds a technical qualification, compared with 89.26 percent in general education and 7.19 percent in madrasa education. Geographic disparities further limit access to quality TVET, which remains concentrated in urban areas.

Social divisions are reinforced early, as different streams correlate with socio-economic, cultural, and linguistic groups. English-medium education is associated with urban elites, general education with aspirational middle classes, madrasa education with rural communities, and TVET with academically perceived weaker students. Limited interaction across streams fosters social sorting rather than pluralism, and education pathways become proxies for class, culture, and opportunity.

Prolonged schooling entails significant opportunity costs. A 2025 government task force found that most degrees offer minimal labour-market relevance. Years spent on knowledge that is neither retained nor applied represent lost opportunities for skill development, family formation, community participation, and productive work. The public bears the fiscal cost, while society suffers from delayed adulthood, dependence, and weaker social cohesion. High graduate unemployment and reliance on informal or low-skill work illustrate the lack of payoff from the current system. Fragmentation, inefficiency, and social sorting are outcomes of design rather than incidental failures.

### 1.3 Redefining the Purposes of Education

Effective reform requires clarity about the purpose of education. In Bangladesh, three interrelated goals are central: livelihood preparation, moral and character formation, and social sustainability.

1. **Livelihood Preparation:** Education should equip learners with skills aligned to labour-market needs. Currently, degrees are often pursued for social status, creating frustration, underemployment, and wasted potential. Structured workplace learning, apprenticeships, and targeted technical training should complement or replace long academic programs where appropriate.
2. **Moral and Civic Formation:** Education shapes ethical reasoning, responsibility, and social participation. Formal schooling has expanded at the expense of family, community, and religious channels that historically fostered character development. Gaps in moral guidance contribute to corruption, erosion of trust, and weakened civic engagement. Moral education should focus on shared norms such as honesty, accountability, respect, and service, reinforced through curricula, school culture, and daily practice.
3. **Social Sustainability:** Education interacts with broader demographic and family dynamics. Extended schooling can strain family life, alter fertility patterns, and affect social cohesion if imported models are applied without adaptation. Flexible

attendance and community-based education options help balance learning with family and social responsibilities.

Together, these purposes imply that education reform cannot focus solely on access, inputs, or administrative efficiency. Livelihood preparation, moral formation, and social sustainability require different institutional priorities than those embedded in the current system. Reform must translate these purposes into concrete changes across curriculum, institutional structure, vocational pathways, and governance while preserving flexibility and social cohesion.

## 2. Toward a Unified Education System: Overcoming Fragmentation Without Uniformity

### 2.1 Analysis

One of the most persistent weaknesses of Bangladesh's education system is its fragmentation into parallel streams that operate with limited coordination, unequal prestige, and restricted learner mobility. General education, Aliya madrasas (under the authority of the Bangladesh Madrasah Education Board (BMEB), Qawmi madrasas (independent), English-medium schools, and TVET institutions each serve distinct populations and purposes, but the absence of a shared foundational framework has produced social division rather than constructive pluralism.

Against this backdrop, per-student funding disparities between streams are stark and unjustified. A recent study titled 'Expenditure review of TVET institutions in Bangladesh' by the Dhaka University Bureau of Economic Research found that public universities spend roughly BDT 166,859 per student annually, while equivalent TVET institutions spend about BDT 40,855 per student: a four-fold difference. This gap cannot be explained solely by pedagogical cost differences, and it deepens inequity in access to quality facilities, laboratories, teacher training, and student support.

This fragmentation is often defended as inevitable or culturally necessary. In practice, however, it has reinforced hierarchies of status, constrained opportunity, and undermined social cohesion. Learners from madrasa backgrounds frequently face barriers to higher education and formal employment, while general education students often lack moral formation and religious literacy. The result is a divided system in which no pathway fully meets the needs of individuals or society.

Recent developments suggest that this divide is neither natural nor insurmountable. The growing success of madrasa students in universities demonstrate that intellectual capability is not confined to any one stream. The formal recognition of the Dawra-e-Hadith madrasa certification as equivalent to a Master's degree in 2017 arose out of heavy lobbying, but did not create momentum for more ambitious change. What is lacking is a coherent policy framework that recognises shared needs while respecting institutional autonomy.

A unified education system does not require uniformity. Rather, it requires agreement on a common foundation. All citizens, regardless of educational pathway, require basic competencies: literacy, numeracy, basic health knowledge, first aid, digital literacy, and civic understanding. All also benefit from moral and character education rooted in ethical and religious principles, with appropriate opt-outs for non-Muslims. Beyond this foundation, learners should be able to specialise, whether in academic, vocational, or religious fields, without stigma or structural disadvantage.

This approach also avoids the false binary between “religious” and “modern” education. Moral formation and practical skills are not competing priorities; they are complementary. A system that treats them as mutually exclusive produces graduates who are either technically unprepared or morally unanchored.

## 2.2 Recommendations

### *A National Foundational Curriculum*

- Establish a common national foundational curriculum for primary and lower secondary schooling (up to grade 8) applicable across all education streams, covering core competencies necessary for personal, economic, and civic life.
- Core components should include literacy, numeracy, basic science, digital competence for work, financial literacy, first aid and basic health education, civic understanding, character development and Islamic education, with opt-outs of the latter available for non-Muslims.
- This foundation should be supplemented by the availability of further specialisation in academic, vocational, or religious pathways, both alongside and subsequent to foundational study.
- Preserve flexibility on operational procedure and pedagogical method for independent and Qawmi institutions, focusing instead on outcomes, safeguarding, and accreditation.

### *A National Equivalency Framework and Bridging Programmes*

- Develop a legally recognised national equivalency framework that enables movement between general, Aliya, Qawmi, English-medium, and vocational pathways without requiring dilution of existing religious curricula.
- Establish a scholar-led Qawmi Education Commission with a narrow mandate to negotiate accreditation processes, define quality indicators and map madrasa qualifications against general education levels.
- Introduce certified bridging programmes (including e.g. English, mathematics, ICT, communication skills) for those switching between streams (in practice, usually from madrasa to conventional/TVET institutions).
- Allow bridging programmes to be delivered flexibly through public colleges, Islamic Foundation centres, universities, and approved partner institutions, including part-time and modular formats to accommodate working learners.

- Where appropriate to the target stream, recognise supervised work, teaching, or religious service as accredited learning, reducing the need for prolonged classroom-based study.

*Equal Treatment For All Education Streams*

- Per-student public spending parity goal: within three years, narrow per-student expenditure disparities so that no stream has less than 80% of the per-student investment of the national average across all basic and secondary education levels (excluding justified differences for highly specialised tertiary or technical programmes).
- Provide targeted grants for madrasa and vocational institutions to reduce disparities, focused on teacher training, infrastructure upgrades, digital access.
- Actively promote the equal dignity of all educational pathways through public communication, career guidance, and admissions policies, reducing stigma attached to vocational and religious education.
- Decouple access to higher education and public-sector employment from narrow academic credentialism where study or job requirements do not justify it.

### **3. From Credentialism to Capability: Reforming Schools, TVET, and Universities**

#### **3.1 Broadening Education Beyond Academic Credentialing**

Bangladesh's education system remains heavily focused on academic credentialing, often detached from work and adult life. Success is measured by high-stakes exams that reward memorisation over understanding, problem-solving, or application. At secondary and tertiary levels, degrees function as social signals shaping employment, status, and marriage prospects as much as demonstrating capability.

Labour Force Survey data show tertiary-educated youth face unemployment several times higher than less-educated peers, with many graduates in roles that do not require a degree. Employers report deficits in communication, punctuality, initiative, and task competence. Households bear rising private costs through tuition, coaching, and exam fees. International research confirms that rapid higher-education expansion beyond labour-market demand lowers efficiency and returns. In Bangladesh, tertiary unemployment reached 13.5% in 2024 versus an overall rate of 4.6%. A 2025 government task force found graduate unemployment to be a structural education failure, noting that youth (ages 15–29) accounted for 78.8% of the unemployed while representing 36% of workers.

Over 60% of graduates come from National University-affiliated colleges, dominated by Arts (31%) and Social Sciences (32%), with minimal Science (9.7%) or Commerce (22.7%) enrolment and no technical subjects. This generates an oversupply of graduates without industry-relevant skills, contributing to urban labour-market pressures and declining returns to higher education. Previous policies, including the 2010 National Education Policy and

2011 National Skills Development Policy, have not effectively addressed these gaps due to weak skills forecasting, limited workplace learning, misaligned funding, and faculty recruitment systems that prioritise formal credentials over applied relevance.

A capability-oriented system should prioritise:

- **Foundational skills:** literacy, numeracy, communication in Bangla and English, basic digital competence, personal finance, and health.
- **Applied reasoning:** problem-solving and real-world application of knowledge.
- **Economic competence:** understanding income generation, business operations, and entrepreneurship.
- **Personal and social formation:** discipline, cooperation, resilience, ethical judgment, and civic responsibility, developed through practice and service rather than exams alone.

Schools and universities should reduce unnecessary legacy content and focus on application, supervised practice, and demonstrable competence.

## 5.2 Teachers as the Bottleneck in Capability Formation

Teacher quality shapes classroom practice more than curriculum or exams. Current recruitment emphasises formal credentials and memorisation rather than pedagogical skill, resulting in rote teaching and minimal focus on problem-solving. World Bank assessments note persistent lecture-based instruction with limited applied learning.

Memorisation remains appropriate in contexts such as early madrasa education, but general, scientific, and professional education requires understanding, synthesis, and judgment. Effective reform requires teachers to be recruited, trained, evaluated, and supported for capability-based instruction.

### *Recommendations*

- Use competency-based assessment including teaching demonstrations, lesson planning, and communication skills; introduce probationary periods and digitalised processes for transparency.
- Require accredited pedagogical training covering child development, assessment, inclusive education, and ethics; expand teacher-training infrastructure and recognise equivalent pathways for Qawmi madrasa teachers.
- Implement national CPD with annual credit requirements tied to promotion, peer learning communities, and modular delivery.
- Adjust salaries to reduce reliance on private tuition, standardise teaching loads, improve facilities, and provide administrative support.

## 5.3 Reducing Excessive Study Pressure

Heavy homework, frequent exams, and reliance on private tuition reward endurance over curiosity, undermine psychological well-being, limit social development, and exacerbate inequality.

### *Recommendations*

- Gradually reduce exam frequency and stakes, lighten curriculum overload, and focus on meaningful learning.
- Promote project-based, inquiry-based, and experiential learning.
- Strengthen classroom instruction through teacher training and support.

These pressures are intensified by a weak vocational pathway, which is addressed next.

### **5.4 Technical and Vocational Education (TVET) as a First-Class Path**

TVET remains under-resourced, undervalued, and socially perceived as a second-choice route. Only 0.81% of the educated population holds a TVET qualification (2022), with three-quarters of government TVET teacher posts vacant. Industries report a 30% skills gap, while 2.2 million new labour-market entrants need employable skills annually.

#### **Recommendations:**

- Increase TVET enrolment from 2 million to 3 million by 2030; ensure each upazila has at least one accredited institution.
- Align programmes with the National Technical and Vocational Qualification Framework; require at least 40% of post-secondary credits as supervised work-based learning.
- Create sector councils to co-design curricula, certify competencies, and report placement and enterprise outcomes. Establish a national apprenticeship framework targeting 100,000 trainees annually.
- Launch media campaigns to improve TVET's image; integrate vocational modules and career guidance in general and madrasa schools.
- Embed business and entrepreneurship modules; support graduate enterprise pathways through partnerships with SMEs, chambers of commerce, cooperatives, and microfinance institutions.
- Fill vacancies and expand training with competitive recruitment and professional development.

### **5.5 Military Training as a Capability Pathway**

Universal military training can develop transferable skills such as fitness, teamwork, leadership, time discipline, resilience, and basic technical abilities, all cited as lacking among new labour-market entrants. Training should be integrated into educational pathways, credit-bearing, and aligned with national qualification frameworks to substitute for lower-return instruction. For more details, please see our defence policy.

### **5.6 Reforming Degrees and Universities**

Degrees should serve as structured pathways into specific economic or social roles rather than generic credentials. Fields requiring formal preparation, such as teaching, nursing, engineering, ICT, and logistics, should combine competency-based instruction with supervised practice and workplace exposure.

Shorter academic phases with extended workplace learning can achieve outcomes efficiently without lowering standards. International recognition should be retained selectively for professions like medicine and engineering, while domestic relevance and labour-market fit should guide the majority of programmes.

### **Recommendations:**

- Require 30–40% of credit in vocational and professional degrees as workplace learning; include clear employment or service pathways. Pilot shorter applied degrees with progression routes for high performers.
- Reduce public funding for low-demand general degrees; redirect resources to TVET, applied professional education, and teacher training.
- Implement Recognition of Prior Learning to convert work experience into qualifications.
- Base at least 40% of faculty evaluation on teaching quality, student outcomes, and curriculum relevance; ensure transparent recruitment with external oversight.
- Publish graduate employment and earnings outcomes; review programmes if fewer than 60% of male graduates enter relevant employment or training within 18 months.

## **6. Curriculum and Textbook Reform: Restoring Cultural Coherence and Confidence**

### **6.1 Ideological Bias in Curriculum Content**

Curriculum reflects the values and priorities of an education system. In Bangladesh, development and textbook production are highly centralised under the National Education Policy 2010 and the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB). While central coordination ensures standards and coverage, it also concentrates influence, amplifying errors, bias, and politicisation. History textbooks have elevated controversial political figures, while factual mistakes and plagiarism in revisions have caused public embarrassment.

Controversies highlight deeper concerns about cultural alignment. First, Indian and Hindu nationalist narratives persist in history, literature, and language content, a legacy of early reliance on Indian texts after independence, marginalising Islamic societal norms. Second, secular assumptions are embedded in humanities and science subjects without acknowledgement, framing ethics as individual preference and science as the sole explanation of reality. These implicit biases shape worldviews, moral intuitions, and social norms more than explicit statements.

Textbook-centred classrooms, large class sizes, and limited teacher training amplify these effects. Research by the World Bank and UNICEF confirms that curriculum content strongly shapes values, identity, and civic attitudes in highly exam-oriented systems. Ideological overlays should therefore be reviewed, and content should reflect Bangladesh's civilisational heritage, including Islamic intellectual traditions, alongside global knowledge and scientific advancement.

## 6.2 Autonomy, Safeguarding, and Political Non-Interference

The state must define foundational competencies, ensure safeguarding, and prevent incitement to violence or hatred. However, direct political intervention in religious curricula carries risks. In 2017, the Home Ministry directed the Aliya madrasa board to remove content on jihad, citing concern over "slow radicalisation." While well-intentioned, this approach weakens access to authoritative instruction, as classical Islamic education distinguishes moral struggle from unlawful violence. Removing material entirely can push students to unregulated online sources where misinterpretation is easily exploited.

Curriculum governance should ensure contested concepts are taught responsibly, with scholarly oversight, protecting institutional autonomy in madrasas while maintaining standards, equivalency, and safeguarding. Transparent, expert-led review supports cultural alignment without politicisation.

## 6.3 Recommendations

### Curriculum audit and governance

- Establish a nonpartisan National Curriculum and Textbook Reform Commission to audit NCTB operations and conduct a comprehensive national curriculum review within three years.
- Form multidisciplinary review panels with educators, historians, Islamic scholars, psychologists, linguists, and representatives across political perspectives.
- Publish audit criteria and findings for transparency and public trust.

### Foundational coherence

- Reanchor curricula in Bangladesh's civilisational, cultural, and religious foundations while maintaining scientific rigour and global knowledge.
- Integrate moral reasoning, ethics, and civic responsibility across subjects rather than confining them to standalone religious courses.

### Review cycle and limits on politicisation

- Conduct regular curriculum reviews every 5–7 years.
- Restrict substantive revisions to scheduled cycles, except in emergencies, to reduce ad hoc changes.
- Limit state authority over Aliya madrasas to general education and institutional standards, excluding theological content.

## 7. Informal, Community, and Mosque-Based Education

Formal schooling alone cannot meet the educational needs of all children and adolescents in Bangladesh. Despite significant increases in enrolment, several million children of primary and lower-secondary age are either out of school or attend irregularly, with dropout rates highest among urban poor, migrant families, and children engaged in informal work. For

these populations, rigid attendance requirements and age-graded progression act as barriers rather than supports.

Bangladesh has a long tradition of informal and community-based education, delivered through mosques, temples, community centres, and voluntary organisations. These institutions already function as trusted centres of moral instruction, social support, and collective life. With appropriate coordination and safeguards, they can also provide basic literacy, numeracy, digital awareness, health education, and life skills, particularly for street-connected children, working adolescents, and adults who have missed formal schooling.

Large non-formal education programmes such as BRAC's have historically demonstrated that community-based provision can deliver basic literacy and numeracy at a fraction of the per-student cost of formal schooling, while achieving comparable learning outcomes at the primary level. Such models, which are delivered through existing social infrastructure, are also more culturally legitimate and easier to scale rapidly through volunteer networks, reducing dependence on new physical infrastructure.

Importantly, recognising informal education does not undermine formal schooling. Rather, it complements it by:

- re-engaging learners who would otherwise be excluded,
- reducing pressure on overcrowded schools,
- and enabling gradual reintegration into formal or vocational pathways where appropriate.

In an education system oriented toward capability rather than credentials, informal learning should be recognised as a legitimate component of the national ecosystem.

## 7.1 Recommendations

- Support mosque-, temple-, and community-based literacy and life-skills programmes for out-of-school children and disadvantaged youth, with clear safeguarding standards.
- Provide short, standardised training for volunteers and religious leaders in basic pedagogy, child protection, and referral mechanisms.
- Coordinate informal education provision with government and NGO databases to prevent duplication and enable progression into formal or vocational pathways.
- Introduce basic competency recognition for informal learners, aligned with entry levels of the National Qualifications Framework, to enable transition into primary equivalency, TVET, or apprenticeships.
- Preserve flexibility in attendance and progression for disadvantaged households, recognising that rigid compliance can increase exclusion.

## 8. Phasing Reform

Transforming Bangladesh's education system from credentialism to capability requires sequenced reform that builds credibility, manages institutional capacity, and avoids fatigue.

The objective is durable changes to incentives, governance, and practice, implemented in three phases: early direction-setting (first 100 days), piloting and adjustment (Years 1–2), and system-wide scaling (Years 3–5).

### **8.1 First 100 Days: Direction and Credibility**

- Issue an Education Reform Policy Statement committing to a unified foundational curriculum, capability-based learning, parity across academic, vocational, and religious streams, and limits on politicised interference.
- Establish a National Education Reform Taskforce with representation from general education, madrasas, TVET, higher education, and labour-market stakeholders.
- Conduct rapid audits of per-student funding, graduate outcomes, teacher recruitment and training, and TVET capacity.
- Approve regulatory authority for pilot programmes: shortened applied degrees, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), and competency-based teacher recruitment.
- Begin digitalisation and transparency in teacher and university recruitment.
- Signal phased per-student funding parity across streams.

### **8.2 Years 1–2: Piloting and Adjustment**

- Introduce National Foundational Curriculum modules across all streams.
- Pilot applied and sector-linked degree programmes in high-demand fields.
- Integrate workplace-based learning in selected universities and TVET institutions.
- Implement competency-based teacher recruitment and probation in pilot districts.
- Establish sector-based industry councils and a national apprenticeship framework placing 100,000 youth annually.
- Publish programme-level graduate employment and earnings data.
- Evaluate pilots using learning outcomes, employment, and employer feedback to adjust policies.

### **8.3 Years 3–5: Scaling and Consolidation**

- Scale applied degrees, TVET pathways, and work-integrated learning requirements.
- Expand TVET enrolment, geographic coverage, and progression routes.
- Institutionalise professional development and competency-based evaluation for teachers and faculty.
- Review and restructure programmes with weak graduate outcomes.
- Implement differentiated funding across vocational, professional, and non-vocational disciplines.
- Embed regular curriculum review, skills forecasting, and labour-market feedback.
- Track high-skilled overseas employment, targeting a 20% increase within five years.

## 9. Budgetary Implications

### 9.1 Principles

The reforms in this paper do not rely on large or permanent increases in education spending. They are guided by four principles: reallocate before expanding; shorten and apply education through work-based learning; fund outcomes rather than enrolment volume; and stabilise spending after a transition period. The aim is to improve value for money, not to pursue headline spending targets.

### 9.2 Current Spending

Bangladesh currently spends approximately BDT 1.0–1.2 trillion per year on education (2.0–2.3% of GDP). While this is below international benchmarks, targets such as UNESCO's 4–6% of GDP are a poor guide to effective policy. The key issue is alignment: whether existing spending produces capability, employability, and social value.

In terms of allocation, the existing education budget is heavily skewed toward infrastructure and capital projects, while comparatively less funding is directed toward quality-enhancing inputs such as teacher training, instructional materials, assessment reform, and educational technology (Asian Development Bank, 2020). Although infrastructure investment remains necessary, evidence suggests that such spending yields limited learning gains in the absence of parallel investments in teaching quality and learning resources.

Furthermore, education budgets are formulated on an annual basis, with limited use of medium- or long-term expenditure frameworks. This constrains strategic planning and reduces predictability for sustained investments in teacher development, curriculum reform, and system-wide quality improvement (World Bank, 2018).

The reforms proposed here mostly operate within the current spending range on a multiannual basis, creating fiscal space through efficiencies in unit costs in general and higher education spend while increasing investment where in vocational learning and teacher quality, where returns are highest.

### 9.3 New Costs

Expanding accredited TVET to around 3 million learners by 2030 requires additional spending of roughly BDT 150–160 billion per year (0.3% of GDP) for instructors, equipment, and apprenticeships, replacing more expensive academic pathways. Achieving per-student parity in non-religious components for Aliya madrasas and accredited vocational institutions requires about BDT 50–55 billion (0.1% of GDP), largely through reallocation.

Improving teacher quality through pre-service training and continuous professional development requires around BDT 100–105 billion (0.2% of GDP). Support for informal, mosque-, temple-, and community-based education can be delivered at low cost, requiring no more than BDT 25–26 billion (0.05% of GDP).

### 9.4 New Savings

Curriculum rationalisation, reduced examination intensity, slower expansion of general secondary education, and greater uptake of vocational pathways allow savings of approximately BDT 100–155 billion (0.2–0.3% of GDP) over five years.

Higher education reform in the form of shorter and more applied degrees, accreditation of work-based learning, caps on low-demand disciplines, and slower enrolment growth can generate savings of BDT 150–210 billion (0.3–0.4% of GDP) over the same period. Administrative reforms such as career services and labour-market tracking are low-cost by comparison.

### 9.5 Net Impact

Efficiency gains of BDT 250–365 billion (0.5–0.7% of GDP) largely offset new investments of BDT 300–365 billion (0.6–0.7% of GDP). The net fiscal effect is therefore close to neutral, with at most a temporary increase of BDT 50–100 billion (0.1–0.2% of GDP) during transition.

Total education spending would stabilise at roughly BDT 1.05–1.35 trillion per year (2.1–2.5% of GDP).

### 9.6 Governance

Governance and transparency mechanisms within education financing also remain weak. While standard public audit procedures apply, education-specific expenditure tracking, performance-based budgeting, and public disclosure of sectoral audits are not institutionalised (Transparency International Bangladesh, 2020). We therefore recommend:

- Annual education budget audits with published reports.
- Performance-based budgeting, linking resource allocation to learning outcomes and school performance.
- A central Education Financing Dashboard to monitor spending patterns in real time.

## 10. Conclusion: Reform with a Purpose

Bangladesh stands at a critical juncture. Education reform is no longer a technical matter of enrolment targets or infrastructure expansion, but a strategic question of policy purpose. A system shaped by different historical and cultural contexts cannot be assumed to meet Bangladesh's present social, economic, or moral needs.

This paper has argued for a reorientation of education around capability, livelihood preparation, moral formation, and social sustainability. The aim is not disruption or control, but realignment away from credential accumulation and toward learning that equips individuals for work, family life, and civic responsibility. Such reform requires confidence in Bangladesh's own priorities and values, rather than reflexive imitation of international models that are themselves under strain.

If pursued with clarity and restraint, education reform can once again become a unifying project that expands opportunity, restores dignity to practical skill, and prepares future generations not merely to pass examinations, but to contribute meaningfully to society.



# **Agriculture and Food Security**

## **From Dependence to Resilience**

### **Summary**

- Bangladesh's agriculture sector remains the backbone of its economy, rural livelihoods, and food security, yet faces persistent gaps in production, storage, and market efficiency. Heavy import reliance for rice, wheat, lentils, edible oils, sugar, and spices exposes the country to price shocks, foreign exchange pressure, and social instability.
- Reform must shift agriculture from dependency to self-reliance. The goal is not simply higher production, but stable, sustainable, and resilient food systems: secure staples, diversified crops, productive households, efficient markets, and value-added processing.
- Smallholder farmers, backyard cultivation, and community-level initiatives must be prioritised. Supporting high-yield seeds, training, post-harvest infrastructure, and direct market linkages increases productivity, reduces intermediaries, and boosts rural incomes.
- Strategic investments in storage, cold chains, research institutes, and mill modernisation enable Bangladesh to reduce import dependence while maximizing domestic output. Effective use of by-products in sugar, oil, and pulses adds economic value and promotes environmental sustainability.
- Together, these reforms position agriculture as a foundation for livelihoods, national self-sufficiency, and social stability.



## 1. Introduction

Agriculture remains the foundation of Bangladesh's economy, society, and political stability. It is not only the principal source of food and rural livelihoods, but also a central pillar of employment, income generation, and social cohesion. A large share of Bangladeshis still depend directly or indirectly on farming, processing, trading, and transporting agricultural products. In 2017, agriculture accounted for 14.2 percent of GDP and employed approximately 42.7 percent of the workforce. Even in FY 2022–23, as the economy diversified, the sector continued to contribute more than 12 percent of GDP. No other sector combines such economic, social, and political weight.

Because agriculture supplies the nation's food, its performance directly shapes public welfare and political legitimacy. Price spikes in staples, hoarding, production shortfalls, or failures in distribution quickly translate into hardship for households and can generate social unrest. Food shortages and unaffordable prices are not only economic problems; they are governance problems. They affect confidence in institutions, social order, and national resilience. For this reason, food security must be treated as a core element of national security.

Bangladesh's agricultural sector also underpins broader macroeconomic objectives. It plays a decisive role in employment generation, poverty reduction, human capital development, and the stability of the rural economy. It supplies raw materials to agro-based industries and supports economic diversification. At the same time, growing dependence on imports of essential food items and inputs exposes the country to external shocks, foreign exchange pressure, and geopolitical vulnerability. A nation that cannot reliably feed itself is strategically weak.

This policy starts from three guiding realities:

1. A strong and resilient agriculture sector must be built around farmers, households, and local communities, not excessive bureaucracy. The role of the state is to enable: to provide infrastructure, information, fair rules, and strategic reserves, not to replace individual initiative or re-engineer society from above.
2. Food self-sufficiency in key staples and nutrition crops is essential for political stability, economic resilience, and independence of action.
3. Agricultural growth must be sustainable: productivity gains should not come at the expense of long-term soil health, water security, or the viability of rural livelihoods.

Bangladesh has made notable progress in increasing production of some major crops, especially rice, yet persistent problems remain: rising consumer prices despite near-balanced supply, weak storage capacity, market distortions caused by layers of intermediaries, declining soil quality from intensive methods, and heavy reliance on imports for wheat, lentils, edible oils, sugar, spices, and onions. These gaps cost the country billions of dollars in foreign exchange each year and expose ordinary people to volatility they cannot control.

The next government will inherit both opportunity and risk. With better planning, smarter use of land and water, improved seed systems, farmer-led organization, and strategic public investment in storage and information, Bangladesh can move steadily toward greater self-reliance in food while raising rural incomes. This paper sets out a practical, evidence-based programme to strengthen agricultural production, stabilise prices, reduce import dependency, and empower farmers and households to take greater responsibility for feeding themselves and the nation.

## 2. Staple Food Security: Rice and Wheat

### 2.1 Rice

Rice is the backbone of Bangladesh's food system and the single most politically sensitive commodity in the country. Bangladesh is the world's third-largest producer of rice. In FY 2022–23, domestic production reached approximately 39.1 million tonnes, while imports stood at about 1.05 million tonnes. According to the Bangladesh Rice Research Institute, annual national requirements are around 35 million tonnes, meaning that in aggregate Bangladesh is close to self-sufficiency.

Rice supplies two-thirds of total calorie intake and roughly half of national protein consumption. Crops and horticulture account for around 10 percent of GDP, and rice alone contributes nearly half of that. In rural areas, 48 percent of all occupations are linked directly to rice production, and when trading, milling, transport, and processing are included, rice supports a far larger share of livelihoods.

Despite near-balanced supply and demand, rice prices at the consumer level continue to rise. Inflation and input costs alone cannot fully explain this. The main structural causes include:

- Inadequate storage at the farm level, forcing farmers to sell immediately after harvest at low prices.
- Insufficient public storage capacity (currently about 2.4 million tonnes, against an estimated minimum need of 5 million tonnes).
- Hoarding and speculative stockpiling by vested interests.
- Multiple layers of intermediaries between farmer and consumer (typically traders, millers, wholesalers, and retailers), each adding mark-ups.

These distortions weaken farmer incomes while keeping consumer prices high. At the same time, pressure from urbanisation and industrial land use, alongside climate risks such as floods and water scarcity, threatens long-term production. While modern high-yield varieties have raised output, intensive methods without adequate soil care risk degrading the productive base on which food security depends.

Rice shortages and price instability quickly become issues of governance. When supply tightens or prices spike, public resentment rises and social stability is tested. For the next

government, rice policy must therefore be treated not only as an agricultural matter, but as a core issue of political legitimacy and national resilience.

## 2.2 Wheat

Wheat is Bangladesh's second major staple, meeting approximately 13.6 percent of national cereal demand, yet the country remains heavily dependent on imports. Domestic production is only about 1.1–1.2 million tonnes per year, while annual demand is estimated at 7.0–7.5 million tonnes. In the 2023–24 season, production was 1.19 million tonnes, covering just 15.9 percent of national requirements.

This gap is filled through imports that cost Bangladesh roughly USD 2.21 billion annually, placing a major burden on foreign exchange reserves and exposing the country to external supply disruptions and global price volatility.

Low domestic production reflects limited acreage, competition with rice for land, and under-utilisation of suitable environments. Yet Bangladesh has significant untapped potential in coastal zones, char lands, and island areas, where modern wheat varieties and improved agronomic techniques could substantially raise output.

Reducing wheat import dependence is not only an economic objective; it is a strategic one. A country that relies so heavily on external sources for a major staple is vulnerable to shocks beyond its control. Increasing domestic wheat production would strengthen food security, reduce foreign exchange pressure, and enhance national autonomy in basic provisioning.

## 2.3 Recommendations

### *Strategic Storage & Market Stability*

- Expand public rice storage capacity from the current 2.4 million tonnes to at least 5 million tonnes.
- Maintain real-time, transparent stock reporting for both public and large private holdings.
- Use strategic reserves to operate OMS, VGF, and Food-for-Work programmes to stabilise prices during shortages.
- Establish early-warning triggers for timely imports or controlled exports based on stock levels.

### *Farmer Income, Credit & Organisation*

- Ensure farmers have access to post-harvest credit so they are not forced to sell immediately at low prices.
- Promote farmer cooperatives and producer organisations to reduce dependence on middlemen.
- Expand direct procurement from farmers at fair prices.

### *Productivity with Soil & Water Protection*

- Increase yields through improved seed varieties and mechanisation without degrading soil health.
- Promote crop rotation, balanced fertiliser use, and water-efficient practices to preserve long-term productivity.
- Invest in extension services that prioritise sustainability alongside output.

#### *Land Use & Strategic Expansion*

- Protect prime agricultural land from unplanned urban and industrial encroachment.
- Expand wheat cultivation in coastal, char, and island areas using climate-resilient varieties.
- Support farmers in these regions with infrastructure, seed access, and technical assistance.

#### *Governance & Market Integrity*

- Impose strict penalties for hoarding, cartel behaviour, and market manipulation.
- Strengthen monitoring of supply, prices, and stock movements across the value chain.

## **3. Lentils and Pulses**

### **3.1 Analysis**

Lentils (Masur Dal) are the most important pulse crop in Bangladesh and a major source of affordable protein for lower- and middle-income households. Demand for pulses in Bangladesh is estimated at 4.0–4.5 million tonnes annually, with lentils accounting for the largest share at around 2.0–2.5 million tonnes. However, domestic lentil production is far below national requirements.

Farmers currently produce about 175,000 tonnes of lentils per year. In FY 2023–24, production fell to 166,300 tonnes, down sharply from 258,500 tonnes in FY 2020–21. Lentil cultivation covers approximately 142,510 hectares, making it the most widely grown pulse crop, yet output still meets only a small fraction of demand. As a result, Bangladesh imports large quantities of lentils every year, primarily from Australia, Canada, and Nepal.

The production gap is driven by several structural factors. Farmers increasingly shift away from lentils toward more immediately profitable crops. Limited land availability and competition with rice reduce acreage. Climate stress from droughts and floods further constrains yields. At the same time, population growth and rising awareness of plant-based protein increase demand.

Beyond food security, lentils have strong public health importance. They are rich in fibre, folic acid, and potassium, which support heart health and help reduce levels of LDL ("bad") cholesterol. Lentils also contribute to preventing neural tube defects in newborns, improving

digestive health, and reducing fatigue. For poorer households, lentils are often the most accessible source of protein.

Persistent shortages and high prices of lentils and other pulses therefore pose both nutritional and political risks. If the country fails to close the production gap, pulses could become another source of public discontent driven by import dependence and price volatility.

### **3.2 Recommendations**

#### *Expand Pulse Acreage & Farmer Incentives*

- Promote lentil and pulse cultivation through price incentives and guaranteed procurement.
- Encourage crop rotation systems that integrate pulses with rice to improve soil fertility and farm income.
- Bring fallow and char lands under pulse cultivation using climate-adapted varieties.

#### *Seed Systems & Yield Improvement*

- Strengthen development and distribution of high-yield, climate-resilient lentil varieties.
- Ensure timely availability of quality seed at the local level.
- Expand extension services to improve agronomic practices.

#### *Nutrition & Public Procurement*

- Prioritise domestic lentils in school, hospital, and safety net programmes.
- Use government demand to stabilise farmer income while improving national nutrition.

#### *Reduce Import Dependency*

- Set medium-term targets to reduce lentil imports through acreage expansion and yield gains.
- Monitor global supply risks and diversify sourcing while domestic production scales up.

#### *Climate Resilience*

- Support drought- and flood-tolerant pulse varieties.
- Integrate pulses into climate-smart agriculture strategies.

## 4. Edible Oils and Strategic Import Reduction

### 4.1 Analysis

Bangladesh faces a persistent and growing deficit in edible oil production, making the country highly dependent on imports. Annual domestic demand is estimated at 2.4–2.9 million tonnes, while local production covers only around 200,000 tonnes. The shortfall is met primarily through imports of soybean and palm oil, with annual expenditure on edible oil imports reaching approximately USD 2 billion.

Domestic oilseed production is minimal. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (2019–20), production stands at less than 500,000 tonnes: mustard 360,000 tonnes, soybean 100,000 tonnes, and other oils including sunflower, sesame, and groundnut roughly 100,000 tonnes. Current soybean cultivation relies heavily on an old variety, Shohag, released in 1990, although new varieties such as BARI Soybean-5 and BARI Soybean-6 exist. Coverage of these improved varieties remains low, at about 30 percent, due to limited availability of pure seed.

Land competition restricts expansion of oilseed crops. Over 70 percent of arable land is devoted to staple rice, leaving barely 3 percent for oilseeds, primarily mustard. Other crops such as maize, sunflower, and soybean must compete for the remaining land. Without targeted interventions, edible oil self-sufficiency remains out of reach.

Palm oil imports, which make up a significant portion of the market, come mainly from Indonesia (80 percent) and Malaysia (20 percent). Soybean oil imports are dominated by Argentina and Brazil. This heavy reliance on non-domestic sources exposes Bangladesh to price shocks, supply disruptions, and foreign exchange volatility.

Despite these challenges, opportunities exist to reduce import dependence. Mustard can be grown in short-duration sequences between rice crops. Maize grown for animal feed or human consumption could also be processed into high-quality edible oil. Coastal and char lands are suitable for palm oil farming, which can be integrated into mixed cropping systems with annual or perennial food crops. A coordinated strategy in research, seed distribution, and processing infrastructure could significantly enhance domestic production of edible oils.

### 4.2 Recommendations

#### *Domestic Oilseed Expansion*

- Promote cultivation of mustard through short-duration varieties that can be grown between Aman and Boro rice seasons.
- Expand soybean and sunflower cultivation on char and underutilized lands.
- Support palm tree farming in coastal, northern, and hill tract regions using mixed cropping systems.

#### *Seed Development & Distribution*

- Strengthen production and dissemination of high-yield, climate-resilient soybean and mustard varieties.

- Ensure timely access to pure seeds for farmers.

#### *Processing & Value Addition*

- Invest in maize oil extraction plants to convert existing maize production into edible oil.
- Encourage small- and medium-scale oil extraction mills to enhance local processing capacity.

#### *Research & Institutional Support*

- Establish the Bangladesh Edible Oil Research Council and Bangladesh Palm Oil Research Institute to coordinate research, breeding, and extension.
- Support technology transfer and knowledge sharing for oilseed and palm cultivation practices.

#### *Strategic Import Management*

- Set medium-term targets to reduce dependency on imported soybean and palm oil.
- Diversify import sources while domestic production scales up to ensure resilience.

## 5. Sugar and Agro-Industrial Crops

### 5.1 Analysis

Bangladesh faces a significant gap between sugar demand and domestic production. Annual demand is estimated at 2.0–2.2 million tonnes, while local production meets only about 5 percent of this requirement. The Bangladesh Sugar & Food Industries Corporation (BSFIC), a state-owned enterprise, has a production capacity of 210,000 tonnes annually, contributing only a small fraction of national demand. The remaining sugar is primarily imported, with private refiners dominating the market.

Key points:

- Bangladesh is heavily reliant on sugar imports, which makes the country vulnerable to global price fluctuations and foreign exchange pressures.
- The sugar industry is transitioning from state-dominated production toward private enterprise dominance.
- The Ministry of Commerce has set targets to increase domestic sugar production by 10 percent, but broader measures are needed to ensure sustainable output and competitiveness.

Sugarcane is a versatile crop. Beyond sugar production, its by-products offer multiple economic opportunities:

- Bagasse, the fibrous residue after juice extraction, can be used for pulp production, paper manufacturing, and electricity generation.

- Molasses can be processed into ethanol, alcohol, baker's yeast, vinegar, sanitizer, and varnish.
- Press mud and other residuals can be converted into organic fertilizers, supporting soil health and reducing chemical fertilizer dependence.

International experience shows the potential for sugarcane to support industrial diversification. In countries like Brazil and Japan, sugarcane derivatives are used in specialized medicines, bio-based products, and energy generation. Expanding sugarcane cultivation around existing mills not only increases supply but also generates rural employment and supports agro-industrial development. Modernization of mill infrastructure and adoption of high-yielding varieties can significantly improve extraction rates and overall competitiveness.

## **5.2 Recommendations**

### *Revival and Modernisation of Mills*

- Reopen all 15 closed sugar mills, ensuring management by skilled, efficient, and transparent personnel.
- Upgrade existing mills with modern technology to increase extraction rates and operational efficiency.
- Introduce high-yielding sugarcane varieties, drawing lessons from global leaders like Brazil.

### *Value Addition and By-Products*

- Maximise industrial use of bagasse, molasses, and press mud for energy, ethanol, paper, fertiliser, and other products.
- Explore new applications of sugarcane derivatives, including medicines and specialty industrial products.

### *Expansion of Cultivation Areas*

- Gradually expand sugarcane cultivation around existing mills to improve supply, generate employment, and reduce import dependency.
- Encourage private sector participation in sugarcane cultivation to complement state-owned production.

### *Refinery Development*

- Establish additional refineries to process imported raw sugar, producing refined sugar and value-added by-products.
- Coordinate refinery placement with local cultivation zones for logistical efficiency.

### *Strategic Planning for the Next Government*

- Ensure that decisions on mill restoration and expansion are thoughtful, balancing profitability, sustainability, and employment benefits.

- Integrate by-product utilisation and modernisation strategies into the overall plan to guarantee long-term viability for farmers, workers, and the broader economy.

## 5. Spices, Fruits and Vegetables: Household and Community Self-Provision

### 6.1 Analysis

Spices and horticultural crops are critical for both nutrition and rural income in Bangladesh. Current production levels fall short of demand for several key commodities, requiring imports and exposing the country to external supply risks.

- **Ginger:** A 2023 report from the Department of Agricultural Marketing indicates that annual national demand for ginger exceeds 300,000 tonnes. In FY 2022–23, domestic production reached approximately 192,000 tonnes, leaving a shortfall of around **100,000 tonnes**, which is met through imports.
- **Turmeric:** Bangladesh is the fifth-largest turmeric producer in the world, supplying over **3 percent** of global output. Domestic consumption remains substantial, and the country also relies on imports to meet local demand while aiming to expand export markets. Major producing regions include Khulna, Rajshahi, Dhaka, and Chattogram. Production is influenced by climate, farming methods, and market trends.
- **Onion:** Local onion production is estimated at 2.5–3.4 million tonnes, while annual demand ranges from 3.5–3.6 million tonnes, creating a gap of roughly 1 million tonnes, typically imported from India. Onion cultivation is concentrated in the winter season, with key producing regions including Faridpur, Kushtia, Jessore, Pabna, and Rajshahi. In 2023, the total production reached around 3.4 million tonnes, with an annual cultivation target of 3.673 million tonnes. Domestic production meets 65–70 percent of demand.
- **Chillies:** In 2022, green chili production reached 624,000 tonnes (496,000 tonnes in winter, 128,000 tonnes in summer). However, daily demand is estimated at 1,200–1,500 tonnes, while availability is less than 300 tonnes per day, creating a significant supply gap.
- **Fruits and Vegetables:** Despite abundant local production potential, overall fruit and vegetable output is insufficient for domestic consumption and export. Lack of post-harvest infrastructure, insufficient skill development, and reliance on middlemen reduce producer incomes and limit market efficiency.

The persistent shortfalls in spices and horticultural crops highlight both nutritional and economic vulnerabilities. Strengthening domestic production, encouraging household-level cultivation, and improving storage, processing, and marketing are key to achieving self-reliance and enhancing rural livelihoods.

## 6.2 Recommendations

### *Backyard & Homestead Cultivation*

- Encourage households and villages to cultivate ginger, turmeric, and other high-demand spices in backyard plots.
- Promote home-based production of onions, garlic, and chilies to reduce import dependence and increase rural self-sufficiency.
- Implement extension services and training to optimize yields and post-harvest handling at the household level.

### *Fruits and Trees in Public Spaces*

- Plant fruit-bearing trees in schools, government offices, residential areas, and along roadsides to increase local availability, improve the environment, and provide community benefits.
- Ensure maintenance through local authorities and social mobilization led by community organizations and local leaders.

### *Post-Harvest Infrastructure & Market Access*

- Establish cold storage facilities in major vegetable- and fruit-growing areas under grower associations.
- Provide bank financing to support infrastructure development without heavy direct government subsidies.
- Reduce reliance on intermediaries by linking producers directly to local and regional markets, improving income for farmers.

### *Skill Development & Capacity Building*

- Offer training in production, packaging, preservation, and marketing through local Agriculture and Horticulture departments.
- Introduce programs to improve quality standards and post-harvest handling, enabling producers to compete in export markets.

### *Export & Surplus Management*

- Develop strategies to export surplus vegetables and fruits, increasing farmer incomes and generating foreign exchange.
- Coordinate production planning to align with domestic and international market demand, ensuring efficiency and profitability.

### *Medium- and Long-Term Policy Framework*

- Formulate comprehensive policies to achieve self-sufficiency in spices, fruits, and vegetables within the next five years.
- Integrate household cultivation, post-harvest infrastructure, skill development, and export strategies into a coordinated national plan.

## 7. Budgetary Implications

This section estimates current public expenditure related to the agriculture sector and the fiscal impact of the proposed reforms. The reform package is designed to remain largely within the existing budget envelope by reallocating funds from inefficient subsidies or underused infrastructure toward productivity enhancement, strategic storage, and rural household support. Some reforms, such as cold storage, post-harvest infrastructure, and research institutions, would require incremental spending.

### 7.1 Estimated Current Public Expenditure

The total allocation for FY 2025–26 for the broader agriculture sector, including the Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock, and Ministry of Food, is Tk 39,620 crore, a 3.6% increase from the previous year. Of this, fertiliser subsidies alone account for Tk 20,000 crore.

### 7.2 Fiscal Impact of the Reform Programme

#### New Annual Reform Costs

Reform Area	Estimated Cost (Tk bn/year)
Expansion of strategic rice and wheat storage facilities	3 – 4
Cold storage facilities for fruits, vegetables, and pulses	2 – 3
Seed system improvement & high-yield variety distribution	1 – 2
Farmer cooperatives, training, and extension services	1 – 1.5
Edible oil research institutes (BEORC, BPORI)	0.5 – 1
Sugarcane mill modernization & by-product programs	2 – 3
Backyard/homestead horticulture programs	0.5 – 1
<b>Total New Costs</b>	<b>10 – 15</b>

#### Annual Savings from Reform

Reform Area	Estimated Savings (Tk bn/year)
Reduction in import dependency (rice, wheat, lentils, oil, sugar)	8 – 12
Rationalisation of inefficient storage/subsidy programs	2 – 3
Streamlined post-harvest and marketing support reducing losses	1 – 2
<b>Total Savings</b>	<b>11 – 17</b>

## 7.3 Net Budget Effect

- New Costs: Tk 10–15 bn/year
- Savings: Tk 11–17 bn/year
- **Net Fiscal Impact: Tk -4bn to +7bn of additional spend per year (= -0.01% to +0.02% of current agricultural spending)**

This demonstrates that, with modest reallocations and targeted investments, the proposed reforms are fiscally feasible and can largely be funded within existing allocations.

## 8. Phasing Reform

### 8.1 First 100 Days

*Priority: Stabilise core food security and lay groundwork for reforms*

- Conduct stock audits of rice, wheat, and lentil reserves, including both government and private storage, to ensure transparency and enable timely import or distribution decisions.
- Begin procurement and storage expansion for rice and wheat to reach minimum strategic reserve targets (e.g., 5 million tonnes for rice).
- Launch high-visibility backyard/homestead cultivation programs for ginger, turmeric, chilies, and other spices to encourage self-reliance.
- Reopen the most viable sugar mills with immediate managerial interventions and high-yielding seed distribution.
- Initiate seed distribution programs for high-yield rice, wheat, pulses, and oilseeds in priority districts.
- Issue government directives to rationalize fertilizer subsidies, focusing support on smallholder farmers and efficiency rather than blanket subsidies.

### 8.2 First 2 Years

*Priority: Expand production, improve infrastructure, and strengthen market efficiency*

- Establish cold storage facilities for fruits, vegetables, and pulses under grower associations with government-backed financing.
- Roll out edible oil research institutes (BEORC and BPORI) and begin pilot projects for mustard, soybean, and palm oil cultivation.
- Implement farmer cooperatives and market-linkage programs to reduce dependence on intermediaries and increase producer incomes.
- Modernize sugar mills, upgrade extraction technology, and begin industrial by-product utilization (bagasse, molasses, press mud).
- Expand high-yield pulse and wheat cultivation using climate-adapted varieties, focusing on charlands and coastal regions.

- Strengthen training programs and extension services for production, post-harvest handling, preservation, and marketing.
- Start targeted import substitution programs for edible oil, sugar, pulses, and select spices.

### 8.3 First 5 Years

*Priority: Achieve structural self-reliance and fiscal efficiency*

- Attain self-sufficiency in key staples and spices, including rice, lentils, turmeric, ginger, chilies, and onions, through domestic production and household cultivation.
- Expand and fully operationalize cold storage, processing, and value-addition infrastructure nationwide.
- Establish national supply chains for edible oil, sugar, and horticultural crops to reduce import dependence and stabilize prices.
- Scale up edible oil production, including mustard, soybean, sunflower, and palm, aiming for strategic self-reliance.
- Develop export-oriented surplus strategies for fruits, vegetables, and spices, generating additional foreign exchange.
- Integrate climate-resilient agriculture practices across all major crops to maintain productivity under changing environmental conditions.
- Ensure continuous policy evaluation and adjustment to respond to market signals, price fluctuations, and farmer needs.

## 9. Conclusion

Agriculture is the backbone of Bangladesh's economy, rural livelihoods, and food security. The sector directly affects employment, nutrition, and social stability, making it a priority for the next government.

This reform package focuses on self-reliance, efficiency, and strategic investment rather than speculative or politically driven spending. By strengthening production of staples, pulses, edible oils, sugar, spices, fruits, and vegetables, and by supporting household and community cultivation, Bangladesh can reduce import dependency, stabilise prices, and enhance rural incomes.

With careful implementation, this approach will strengthen Bangladesh's agricultural foundation, safeguard livelihoods, and provide the next government with a politically and economically prudent path to sustainable growth and national self-sufficiency.



# Environment and Climate Change

## Future directions for environmental policy in Bangladesh

### Summary

- Bangladesh's climate emergency stems from its position within the low-lying, sediment-rich Bengal Delta, where rising seas, cyclones, salinity intrusion, and flooding intersect with high population density and dependence on agriculture and fisheries. These overlapping pressures have already displaced millions and threaten to uproot many more by 2050, making climate change an urgent human and economic challenge.
- Since the 1990s, Bangladesh has produced numerous environmental and climate policies, from foundational conservation laws to globally recognized plans like NAPA, BCCSAP, the Delta Plan 2100, the Mujib Climate Prosperity Plan, and the National Adaptation Plan. However, widespread implementation failures, political interference, corruption, and weak oversight mean that many of these strategies remain largely rhetorical. Key funding mechanisms have been opaque, while development projects have frequently neglected required environmental assessments.
- In many cases, climate and development interventions have worsened vulnerability. Embankments have disrupted natural sedimentation and caused waterlogging, shrimp aquaculture has accelerated salinity intrusion, and unplanned urbanization has intensified pollution and public health risks. These problems reflect deeper structural issues: donor-driven agendas; oversimplified "climate reductionist" narratives; and a tendency to repackage old development models as climate solutions.



## 1. Introduction: Defining the climate emergency in the Bengal Delta

Bangladesh is defined by its unique geographical position on the world's largest delta (land built by sediments deposited by a river before it empties into the sea), the Bengal delta. An active delta, it sits at the confluence of three major rivers: the Padma (a distributary or lower stream of the Ganges); Jamuna (a distributary of the Brahmaputra); and Meghna. These drain into the Bay of Bengal, forming a coastline that stretches 710km. Typically for a delta, its terrain is flat and low-lying, with approximately 13% of its territory lying within two meters above the mean sea level. The country experiences significant hydrological variation, ranging from the low-lying *haor* wetland plain in the north-east to the drought-prone and the higher Barind areas in the north-west, and the heavily exposed coastal belt subject to sea level rise, increased salinity, and recurrent cyclones.

This geographic location, combined with its high population density and reliance on climate-sensitive sectors such as agriculture and fisheries, makes Bangladesh one of the most vulnerable countries to climate change-induced risks. The country was ranked 7th on the Global Climate Risk Index, based on losses and damages experienced between 2000 and 2019. The increasing frequency and intensity of climate change-induced disasters, including tropical cyclones, flash floods, heat waves, and salinity intrusion, pose an existential threat. Nearly 26 million people are currently exposed to very high salinity in shallow groundwater in coastal Bangladesh. Around 6 million people are currently internally displaced and 30 million at risk of displacement due to increased frequency of climate-related flash floods and flooding events. The number of displaced people is projected to rise to 19.9 million by 2050, accounting for approximately half of the equivalent number for the entire South Asian region. Economic projections indicate annual GDP losses could range from 1.1% to 2% by 2050.

The Bangladeshi government has actively engaged in formulating a host of climate-related policies (summarised below). However, this paper argues that the existing policy framework for dealing with climactic and environmental challenges is fundamentally compromised by both an extractive political culture as well as deeply entrenched development narratives which tend to gloss over complex, localised socio-environmental problems and encourage the repackaging of old development ideas and capital-intensive infrastructure projects as climate solutions. Furthermore, to date the implementation of climate-related initiatives has been undermined by significant systemic and procedural challenges, which have been made worse by a general lack of transparency and rampant corruption.

## 2. Brief history: Evolution of climate and environmental policies

Historical infrastructure in Bangladesh, such as permanent flood-protection embankments dating back to the colonial era, had already created deep-seated environmental problems like exacerbated siltation and waterlogging (*jalabaddho*) by the time it had caught the attention of Bangladeshi administrators in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Foundational domestic efforts to institutionalise environmental stewardship included the formulation of the National Environment Policy in 1992, followed by the key regulatory instruments: the Environment Conservation Act of 1995 and the Environment Conservation Rules of 1997. The latter established the mandatory requirement for Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) and the annual renewal of Environmental Clearance Certificates (ECCs). Furthermore, the Bangladesh Conservation Act 2002 imposed an official ban on the production and use of polythene bags.

Between 2005 and 2014, Bangladesh garnered global recognition for its pioneering role in climate adaptation planning. This era saw the formulation of the National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA) in 2005 and the comprehensive Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan (BCCSAP) in 2008 (updated 2009), which prioritised adaptation and disaster risk reduction through eleven key pillars. Crucially, the government sought to demonstrate self-reliance by establishing its own funding mechanisms, legislating the creation of the Bangladesh Climate Change Trust Fund (BCCTF) financed by national revenue and donors in 2010. This domestic effort was paralleled by the establishment of the multi-donor Bangladesh Climate Resilience Fund (BCCRF) to be used for raising dedicated international climate finance. In 2011, the Bangladeshi government amended its constitution to insert a commitment to protect and improve the environment.

The latest phase of policy development, from 2015 to the present, has centred on long-term, strategic alignment with international agreements. Bangladesh submitted its Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDC) in 2015, subsequently upgrading them to the NDCs submitted in 2021. Recognising the need for a sustained, generational approach, the Bangladesh Delta Plan (BDP) 2100 was adopted in 2018, providing a 100-year framework for adaptive water management. This led to the launch of politically significant, ambitious documents in 2022 like the Mujib Climate Prosperity Plan (MCPP) 2022–2041, which sought to shift the national narrative from vulnerability toward "prosperity" through green growth and investment, and the National Adaptation Plan (NAP) 2023–2050, which detailed 113 interventions to reduce climate risks across eleven stress areas, establishing a roadmap for resilience over the coming decades.

### **3. Assessment of recent climate and environmental policies and core challenges**

Despite the prolific output of policy documents as noted in the previous section, the implementation and governance of these initiatives have been subject to significant criticism by both civil society organisations as well as by the interim government which succeeded the Awami League administration in 2024.

One overarching theme of the criticism is a lack of implementation. The interim government's 2024 white paper *State of the Bangladesh Economy: Dissection of a Development Narrative* noted that many trailblazing plans, including NAPA and BCCSAP, have largely remained as "unfulfilled sweet dreams" due to the past regime's inability to match policies with firm actions, lacking inter-agency coordination, and institutional preparedness, and that this profound misalignment between policy rhetoric and deficient

action is widely regarded as "greenwashing". Certain newer strategies, like the MCPP, primarily served as election propaganda rather than as a policy to serve the interests of the public.

These policies were also developed with sparse consultation and an absence of mechanisms to ensure accountability, and so became mired in inefficiency and corruption. The BCCTF has been widely criticised for being opaque, with funding decisions arbitrary and influenced by the "choices of dominant political and policy actors", according to the Center for Participatory Research and Development (CPRD), a Dhaka-based think tank. The Climate Change Trust Fund Act itself was also censured by the CJA-B for creating a favourable environment for "unabated corruption".

The policies themselves were often reliant on accruing debt, setting up further problems down the line. The Climate Justice Alliance-Bangladesh (CJA-B), a coalition of dozens of civil society organisations, called these plans merely "a bunch of projects to source foreign finance".

Finally, weak environmental oversight has meant that the relatively few projects which have been implemented have often caused environmental damage. The government's 2024 white paper found that major infrastructure projects, such as the relocation of the tannery estate to Savar or the construction of roads in the *haor* region, proceeded without required Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) or even preliminary Initial Environmental Examinations (IEEs). This led to the worsening of local environmental issues like flooding and drainage obstruction.

Bangladesh is unique in the context of exploring climate change solutions because of the complex dynamic between its hydrologically active delta and the long history of development-minded intervention, which has often exacerbated vulnerability. The river system in Bangladesh carries approximately 40 billion cubic feet of silt annually. In a natural state, this silt provides the delta with an innate ability to adapt to a certain amount of sea-level rise because the flooding of silted river water raises land levels each year. But a misreading of the Bengal delta by the development industry, which has employed "climate reductive translations" to secure donor funding by simplifying complex local problems (e.g., blaming all floods solely on sea-level rise), has led to adverse outcomes. Infrastructural developments projects such as bridges, railways, and along with them permanent flood-protection embankments, have interrupted the siltation process, leading to the silt clogging up canals and rivers and in turn raising riverbed levels, lowering land levels and increasing the severity of floods. This procedural failure in development policies has also led to injustice in climate finance distribution. The most vulnerable communities are often glossed over in the implementation of climate-related projects, and grand ambitious plans, like the Mujib Climate Prosperity Plan (MCPP), were little more than veiled attempts at serving narrow political interests at the cost of increasing the country's dependence on debt.

A more detailed exposition in this regard can be done as follows,

## A. Environmental and Socio-Ecological Issues

1. Water Management and Flooding: The dominant narrative that floods are caused solely by rising sea levels (a climate reductive translation) has resulted in the widespread application of permanent flood-protection embankments, as part of the leading solutions for climate adaptation, throughout the southern part of the delta. However, such measures have actually obstructed the natural deposition of sediment (siltation) during monsoon floods, raising riverbeds and trapping rainwater, leading to widespread *jolaboddhota* (waterlogging or drainage congestion).
2. Salinity and Livelihoods: The developmental framing of export-oriented brackish tiger-prawn cultivation as "climate adaptation" has resulted in widespread salinity intrusion. In fact, shrimp cultivators purposefully breach embankments to draw in saltwater, which furthers destroys soil fertility and is irreversible, affecting shallow groundwater supply for 26 million people in coastal Bangladesh.
3. Land Degradation and Agriculture: Intensive high-yield agriculture reliant on agrochemicals, a continuation of earlier "Green Revolution" policies repackaged as "climate-smart agriculture," leads to soil acidification and reduces long-term food production capacity, resulting in the loss of soil fertility/strength, as well as food contaminated with such agrochemicals.
4. Pollution and Urbanization: Bangladesh is a rapidly urbanising country expected to host 56% of its population living in urban areas by 2050. Urbanisation and industrialisation have accelerated the growth of GDP. However, the fast and unplanned urban transformation process has brought forward pressing urban challenges that have seriously disrupted the balance among social, economic and built environment aspects. Dhaka, as the capital city of the country, is a microcosm of this reality – while cost of living in Dhaka is ranked close to cities like Toronto, Calgary, Montreal and Lisbon, it is the seventh most unliveable city in the world (166 out of 173 according to Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) 2023 survey) due to factors such as pollution from industrial discharge, vehicle emissions, and brick kilns. Major rivers are critically polluted by untreated industrial effluent (60,000 m<sup>3</sup> daily). Waste management efforts are insufficient, with vast amounts of untreated waste and plastic polluting land and water bodies.
5. Climate Migration and Public Health: Climate change and the purported rise of sea level is a threat multiplier exacerbating upcoming humanitarian crises. While up to 30 million people are at risk of displacement from coastal areas by 2050, rising heat increases the incidence of vector-borne diseases like dengue, highlighting a failure in public health preparedness. The latest Lancet Countdown report highlights that in 2024 alone, Bangladesh lost \$24 billion in potential income due to heat-related labour productivity losses. Meanwhile, climate suitability for dengue transmission has surged by 90% compared to 1951–1960, increasing the risk of urban outbreaks in Dhaka and Chittagong.

## B. Governance and Policy Implementation Challenges

1. Planning problems, Corruption and Lack of Accountability: Major policy documents like the MCPP were formulated by the previous regime to serve narrow crony interests, sometimes exclusively by foreign consultants, and designed to advance political ambitions or secure foreign finance, disregarding the interests and well-being of the common people who end up being the victims. There are no specific directives ensuring good governance or combating corruption in project spending. Decisions regarding climate finance (e.g., BCCTF projects) are often arbitrary, poorly coordinated, lack transparency, and are influenced by mal-intentioned political actors, leading to distributive injustice (e.g., inadequate funding in drought-prone areas).
2. Flawed Environmental Assessment, Donor Dependence and "Climate Reductionism": Bangladeshi development brokers often use climate change as a "spice" to attract donor funding. This results in "climate reductive translations" that simplify complex local environmental problems (e.g., blaming all flooding solely on sea-level rise) to fit project mandates, which may ultimately worsen vulnerability. Moreover, in many cases, past government projects have often suffered from flawed environmental assessments while implementing developmental-cum-environmentally sensitive projects. In particular, for large government projects (e.g., the new tannery estate in Savar or roads constructed in *haor* floodplains), Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) has often been overlooked, resulting in severe environmental damage.

## 4. Strategies Forward

The need of the hour lies in the necessity of shifting focus from short-term, donor-driven projects toward long-term structural reform. But that is easier said than done. Doing so would entail a paradigm shift – not just in terms of providing innovative and creative solutions, but also through a creation of awareness of the magnitude of the crisis at hand amongst individuals and communities in a way that both empowers them and enables them to come forward with plausible solutions in their capacity as not just inhabitants, but trustees of the land and its resources. Ideally speaking, the role of the Bangladeshi state, and related institutions, should not be as global North-sanctioned enforcers armed with a carrot and stick, but as understanding intermediaries for the community-based local with the institutional global. Given the long history of unfettered neoliberal expansion in the name of development in Bangladesh since its very inception, more often than not at the expense of interests of local populations, it is of supreme importance to realize one cannot continue on the same path as before, i.e. one cannot continue to peddle earlier ideas of neoliberal developmental expansionism by fitting them into a new "green" and "prosperity" garb, so to speak.

Bringing back the focus onto environmental policy, one can think of strategies forward in terms of short term (within 1-2 years), medium term (2-5 years) and long term (10-15 years)

in various aspects of policy and practice. Some examples of concrete, equitable, and long-term policy and investment strategies that can be applied moving forward are as follows:

**A. Short-term**

1. Plans and policies such as Mujib Climate Prosperity Plan (MCPP) 2022-2041, National Adaptation Plan (NAP) 2023-2050, Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC), up to 2030, which are a bunch of projects to source foreign finance, if not immediately cancelled, require revision in accordance with long term national and community interests.
  - a) The national adaptation plans (NAPs) must be localised and local adaptation plans (LAPs) must be based on location-specific vulnerability assessments, ensuring genuinely local determination and implementation. This planning must review the differentiated vulnerabilities of various occupational communities and marginalized groups, whose specific adaptation needs are currently excluded.
  - b) The next Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC-3) must be determined through a participatory and transparent process. This reform must include setting a benchmark value for carbon emissions and establishing adequate monitoring and reporting mechanisms, as these elements are currently weak or absent.
  - c) The Bangladesh Climate Change Trust Fund (BCCTF) and the corresponding Climate Change Trust Fund Act, which currently overlook avenues of corruption in implementation, must be systematically and radically reformed to remove undue influence from dominant political actors and set outcome-focused financing criteria.
2. Setting up of a literacy and education initiative, on both the national and local community level, to educate the public on environmental challenges and climate changes. Moreover, regular educational workshops and view exchange sessions with local communities and leadership can go a long way in both obtaining a bottom to top feedback, as well as help smoothen and where necessary, help modify the implementation of top-to-bottom initiatives with local goodwill.
3. Innovative Financing: Explore and implement modern financial instruments, such as resilience bonds and blended finance, to attract large-scale public and private investment into adaptive infrastructure and social protection. Establish a National Carbon Finance Coordination Hub to harness voluntary carbon markets and Article 6 of the Paris Agreement to generate new revenue for adaptation.
4. Implement administrative changes related to enhancing transparency as well as reduction of processing times for various administrative processes; digitization and e-services that increase accountability and transparency and reduce chances of corruption for processes such as EIA (Environmental Impact Assessment).

**B. Medium-term**

1. Water Management and Sedimentation: There must be a shift from perpetual investment in large-scale water infrastructure development (e.g., higher embankments, which worsen siltation/waterlogging) toward Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM). In coastal areas, Tidal River Management (TRM) can be implemented as a hybrid solution to resolve siltation and raise land levels naturally. This includes institutionalized, regular monitoring of siltation and routine canal/pond excavation.
2. Ecological Restoration: Mandate the regular re-excavation of canals and ponds (khals) and the restoration of river systems as crucial physical adaptation, linking this activity to rural employment schemes.
3. Cooling and Health Infrastructure: Authorities must recognize the immediate, existential threat of extreme heat and rising temperatures. They must implement a comprehensive, immediate cooling program, including air conditioning for workplaces like RMG factories, and enhance public health preparedness for vector-borne diseases like dengue.
4. Immediate undertaking of efficient sewage treatment practices and waste management infrastructure in major urban centres which will also enhance drainage networks.

**C. Long-term**

1. Diversification and Resilience in agricultural practices:
  - Future policy makers should move away from the sole focus on high-yield monoculture to promoting research on stress-tolerant crop varieties, including saline, drought, and heat-tolerant crop varieties to diversify risk.
  - The authorities should promote sustainable, eco-friendly agriculture focusing on reducing water wastage and water conservation practices, recognizing the importance of regenerative soil fertility and ecosystem health over short-term high yields.
  - Create a market and consumption system that prioritizes quality and food safety over quantity and yield - ensure that farmers get fair prices for their crop yields; create and manage a fair distribution system that minimizes food wastage.
2. Implementation of a host of projects which focus on reclaiming lost wetlands and increasing river navigability; focusing on the increased use of riverways for transportation.
3. Planned Urbanization/Migration: In the long run, a national strategy must focus on dealing with internal population migrations towards urban centers, and deal with providing housing, healthcare, and livelihood support for internally displaced climate migrants. More importantly, the authorities should shift away from unplanned

urbanization as in the case of Dhaka, focusing instead on making it a liveable city. This should go hand in hand with a national policy making urban centres more affordable and liveable for local populations.

## **5. Conclusion**

Bangladesh's climate challenge cannot be solved through more policy documents or politically motivated mega-projects; it requires a fundamental shift in development thinking. Effective climate action must prioritize ecological realities, strengthen environmental governance, ensure transparent financing, and adopt community-driven approaches that reflect the diverse vulnerabilities of the delta.

A just and resilient future demands empowering local communities, rebuilding public trust, and repositioning the state as a facilitator of locally grounded, environmentally coherent solutions. Only through such a paradigm shift can Bangladesh confront intensifying climate risks while protecting its ecosystems and the long-term well-being of its people.

# Transport

## A Reform Agenda for Bangladesh's Transport System

### Summary

- Bangladesh's transport system has expanded, but not coherently. Decades of project-driven investment have produced new roads, bridges, and rail lines, yet the overall system remains congested, unsafe, fragmented, and inefficient. Assets deteriorate prematurely, rail and waterways are under-used, cities struggle to move people, and logistics costs remain high relative to regional peers.
- Reform must shift transport from expansion to performance. The goal is not more infrastructure, but better use of what already exists: systematic maintenance, multimodal integration, land-efficient planning, and reliable operations. Transport policy should focus on moving people and goods efficiently, safely, and affordably, not simply building more.
- Inland waterways must be treated as a strategic national asset. Bangladesh's river network offers the lowest-cost and lowest-emission mode for bulk freight and mass passenger movement, yet its role has declined. A national waterway strategy, predictable dredging, modern terminals, and container-on-barge services can rebalance the system away from over-reliance on roads.
- Rail should become the energy-efficient backbone of long-distance travel and freight. Modernisation of track, signalling, rolling stock, and terminals, combined with intermodal freight hubs and commuter rail in major corridors, can restore rail's competitiveness and reduce pressure on highways.
- Cities must be organised around high-capacity public transport, walking, and cycling. Urban mobility should prioritise moving people, not vehicles: integrated bus, BRT, MRT, and commuter rail systems with unified ticketing; safe sidewalks and cycle networks; and gender-sensitive design to ensure access and security for women and vulnerable users.
- Ports and logistics must function as a single national system. Seaports, dry ports, inland container depots, rail terminals, and river ports should be linked through multimodal corridors, digital customs, and harmonised standards, reducing trade costs and strengthening Bangladesh's role as a regional logistics hub.
- Together, these reforms reposition transport as a platform for productivity, inclusion, and resilience, rooted in Bangladesh's geography and constraints, fiscally realistic, and guided by clear principles: use assets better, integrate modes, prioritise people, and invest for long-term performance rather than short-term expansion.



## 1. Introduction

Transport systems are foundational to economic growth, social inclusion, and resilience. In Bangladesh, they determine how people access jobs, education, healthcare and markets, and how goods move between factories, ports, and consumers. Effective transport policy must therefore connect strategic investment with operational efficiency, better use of existing assets, and measurable outcomes, rather than rely on isolated project decisions or single-mode expansion.

Bangladesh has made substantial transport investments over the past two decades, including major bridges, road networks, ports and emerging metro rail lines. Yet these efforts have not resolved core mobility challenges. While main highways have improved, many secondary regional roads are narrow and poorly maintained, slowing movement and reducing supply-chain reliability across the country. Dhaka's daily gridlock also illustrates the limits of spot infrastructure fixes in the absence of systemic integration: average traffic speeds in the city have fallen below 7 km/h, barely faster than walking pace.

This indicates a broader structural challenge: the transport system remains heavily dependent on roads, which account for a large majority of both passenger and freight movement, while potentially cost-effective modes such as rail and inland waterways are under-utilised. Transport by road dominates freight and passenger shares with rail and waterways playing much smaller roles than their capacity and geographic suitability would suggest.

Bangladesh's unique physical geography – a dense population living within a vast riverine delta with over 24,000 km of waterways – presents both challenges and opportunities. Inland waterways historically carried significant cargo and passenger volumes and remain comparatively low-cost and low-emission transport channels. However, the modal share of inland water transport has declined sharply over recent decades even as shipping volumes have grown. Navigational challenges, shallow drafts in dry seasons, and neglect of maintenance infrastructure have limited their effectiveness.

Beyond mode share, institutional fragmentation impedes coherent planning and implementation. Roads, rail, shipping and urban mobility are managed by different agencies with varying priorities, often without shared data, common performance metrics or joint planning frameworks. This de-coupled approach increases costs, fosters duplication, and reduces accountability.

Women's safety and dignity remain central challenges in Bangladesh's transport system. Many women continue to face harassment, overcrowding, and inadequate station and vehicle design, which limits their mobility, constrains access to work and education, and undermines public trust in transport services.

The incoming government faces a pivotal opportunity to reposition national transport policy toward a multimodal, integrated, and evidence-based framework that is affordable, safe, and responsive to citizen needs. This policy agenda emphasises:

- **People-centred access and mobility**, which prioritises the efficient movement of people and goods over infrastructure expansion for its own sake.
- **Affordability and equity**, ensuring that transport systems are accessible to low-income and peripheral communities, and that women, the elderly, and people with disabilities are served safely and with dignity.
- **Safety and reliability**, with measurable outcomes for road, rail, and waterway operations.
- **System integration**, prioritising connections between waterways, rail, urban transit and road networks.
- **Fiscal discipline**, ensuring value for money in public investment and lifecycle cost management.
- **Evidence and outcomes**, with decisions grounded in data, benchmarks, and regular evaluation.

This policy framework engages with ongoing national strategy processes, including the draft Integrated Multimodal Transport Master Plan and the Revised Strategic Transport Plan (RSTP) for Dhaka, while sharpening priorities around integration, performance, safety, and inclusion. It shifts the focus away from isolated infrastructure projects toward a coherent system that enhances connectivity, reduces congestion, improves safety, and leverages existing natural and built assets for equitable and sustainable mobility.

## 2. Using Existing Assets Better: Maintenance, Integration & Land Efficiency

### 2.1 Analysis

Bangladesh's transport strategy over recent decades has prioritised project delivery over system performance. Large flagship investments such as bridges, flyovers, expressways, tunnels, and rail lines have often been implemented as stand-alone projects, without adequate integration with land use, logistics flows, or other modes of transport. As a result, infrastructure frequently fails to realise its full economic, social, or mobility potential.

Several major projects illustrate these structural planning shortcomings:

- **Padma Bridge** was delivered without integrated land-use or economic development planning at either end. Coordinated zoning for industry, housing, logistics hubs, and services was absent, limiting the bridge's ability to catalyse corridor-based development. Its river navigation clearance of only 18.2 m constrains traffic of wide-bodied container vessels and multi-deck passenger ships; a minimum clearance of 30 m with longer spans would have protected inland waterways as a strategic freight corridor.
- **Padma Bridge railway component** was built as a single track, repeating the earlier Jamuna Bridge mistake. Jamuna subsequently required a separate double-track rail

bridge at a cost exceeding USD 2 billion. Padma is likely to face a similar future expense.

- **Dhaka–Mawa Expressway** was constructed without a functioning Dhaka ring road. This increased traffic inflows into the already-congested urban core, intensifying gridlock rather than relieving it.
- **Karnaphuli Tunnel** suffers from poor multimodal and spatial integration with Chattogram's Twin-Town Master Plan. Its limited headroom restricts heavy cargo and hazardous goods, while the twin-tube design constrains future capacity. Construction costs were roughly 1.5× those of Padma Bridge, maintenance costs about 3.5× higher, and tolls remain disproportionately high.
- **Flyovers such as Jatrabari–Gulistan and Mouchak–Maghbazar** were built without alignment to the Strategic Transport Plan (STP). They failed to integrate with MRT/BRT networks, marginalised pedestrians and non-motorised users, and in some cases reduced road capacity due to piers and ramps in critical corridors.
- **MRT-6 and MRT-1** were designed without strong feeder networks or Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) planning. Design flaws include sharp reverse curves, non-standard headroom, and elevated catenary heights, which have already constrained future flyovers and rail expansions.

Across the system, similar patterns emerge: infrastructure is delivered without multimodal logic, land around stations, bridges, and terminals is not planned for productive use, and lifecycle costing or operational integration is frequently overlooked.

Maintenance backlogs are visible across all modes. Despite substantial investment in road construction, over 70% of national highways lack essential features, and many tertiary routes are structurally deficient, contributing to breakdowns, safety risks, and slower freight movement. Regional and rural roads, often built with weak pavements, are left without consistent upkeep, leading to rapid deterioration and higher long-term costs. Rail infrastructure suffers from ageing tracks, signalling, and rolling stock, reducing speeds and reliability; more than 90 of 281 locomotives are inactive, sharply limiting container train frequency and pushing freight back onto roads. Inland waterways, one of Bangladesh's natural competitive advantages, face navigation constraints due to siltation, inadequate dredging, and under-equipped terminals.

Transport planning also remains fragmented. Roads, railways, ports, and urban transit are developed by separate agencies with limited coordination on land use, logistics flows, or investment sequencing. The consequences include:

- Poorly located terminals with weak road–rail–river connectivity;
- Freight facilities not designed for seamless transfer between modes;
- Loss of valuable urban and peri-urban land to unplanned roadside development.

This fragmented approach results in inefficient use of scarce land and public capital. Instead of extracting more value from existing assets, the system repeatedly expands outward, often at higher cost, greater environmental impact, and lower economic return.

Bangladesh therefore requires a fundamental shift from “build more” to “use better”: systematically maintaining assets, integrating modes, and aligning transport investment with land-use and logistics realities.

## **2.2 Recommendations**

### *Maintenance and Asset Management*

- Establish ring-fenced maintenance funds for roads, railways and inland waterways, protected from being diverted to new construction projects.
- Require lifecycle cost analysis for all major transport investments, including long-term maintenance, operations, and rehabilitation costs, not just upfront construction.
- Prioritise rehabilitation and performance upgrades over greenfield expansion where economic returns are marginal.
- Introduce national asset management systems using digital condition monitoring, traffic data, and maintenance scheduling to target spending where it delivers the highest return.

### *Multimodal Integration*

- Require major projects to demonstrate how they connect to at least two other modes, and how land use around it will generate economic and social value.
- Develop intermodal logistics and passenger hubs linking waterways, rail and roads at key nodes including: Dhaka / Keraniganj / Narayanganj, Chandpur, Barisal, Khulna / Mongla, Chattogram.
- Standardise freight handling, terminal design and digital documentation to reduce delays and transhipment costs.
- Improve last-mile connectivity to ports, river terminals, ICDs and SEZs through coordinated road and rail access planning.
- Require all major transport projects to demonstrate how they connect to at least one other mode.

### *Land-Use and Planning Alignment*

- Promote Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) around major stations, terminals and river ports, encouraging mixed-use, higher-density development close to transport access.
- Protect future transport corridors and terminal zones from incompatible development through statutory planning controls.
- Align national transport investment with urban master plans, logistics strategies, and industrial zoning, especially around EPZs and SEZs.

- Use public land around transport nodes for revenue-generating development, helping fund maintenance and service upgrades.

### 3. Waterways as a Strategic National Asset

#### 3.1 Analysis

Bangladesh's deltaic geography, shaped by major rivers and tributaries, makes inland waterways a natural transport asset that have long played a significant role in moving people and goods. The network spans roughly 24,000 km, with 6,000 km navigable in the monsoon and 3,900–4,800 km in the dry season.

Despite this potential, the modal share of inland water transport (IWT) has declined sharply in the past half-century. Roads now dominate freight and passenger movement, leaving waterways under-utilised. However, IWT remains cost-efficient and land-sparing, particularly for bulk freight and rural connectivity. Freight costs are roughly Tk 1 per kg-km by water, versus Tk 2 by rail and Tk 4.5 by road; moving a TEU container from Dhaka to Chattogram costs around Tk 600 by IWT, compared with Tk 1,200 by rail and Tk 6,000 by road.<sup>24</sup>

IWT has historically received less funding than roads or rail, with underdeveloped terminals, dredging capacity, safety standards, and digital systems. This has constrained freight and passenger volumes and shifted traffic onto roads, increasing congestion and transport costs.

Navigation challenges remain a core constraint: the navigable network shrinks outside the monsoon season, and sedimentation reduces effective depth. Seasonal siltation and hydrological variability limit reliability. Establishing scheduled maintenance and navigability benchmarks will reduce operational uncertainty for operators and planners.

#### 3.2 Recommendations

##### *National Waterway Strategy*

- Define a river corridor hierarchy (primary, secondary, feeder) to prioritise investment and maintenance for the most economically significant waterways.
- Set navigability standards that aim to preserve sufficient depth and width year-round, and ensure predictable funding for dredging and channel maintenance.

##### *Freight on Water*

- Scale up container-on-barge services linking river terminals with seaports such as Chattogram, Mongla and Payra to reduce reliance on road haulage.
- Integrate inland container depots with river terminals to facilitate seamless modal transfers and reduce handling delays.

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<sup>24</sup> UNESCAP. *Mainstreaming inland waterways into national logistics network: national experience of Bangladesh*. Working Paper, December 2021.

### *Passenger Water Transport*

- Upgrade river terminals with safer boarding, waiting and information facilities, including amenities that support women's safety and accessibility.
- Promote scheduled ferry services on high-demand corridors to offer reliable alternatives to congested road and rail routes, especially for rural and peri-urban populations.

### *Governance & Safety*

- Implement vessel safety standards and require mandatory crew licensing to ensure consistent operating practices and reduce accidents.
- Adopt digital manifests and cargo tracking systems across waterways to improve logistics visibility, reduce delays, and facilitate integration with rail and road systems.

## **4. Road and Rail**

### **4.1 Analysis**

Since 1975, Bangladesh has pursued a strongly road-centric development path. The result has been a sharp modal imbalance:

	Freight Share (% of total)		
	Road	Rail	IWT
<b>1975</b>	35%	28%	37%
<b>2019</b>	77%	16%	7%

Rail accounts for less than 5% of passenger trips today, reflecting historic underinvestment, limited connectivity outside Dhaka–Chattogram, and fragmented management.

This shift has increased national logistics costs, congestion, emissions, and land consumption. It has also left the country's most cost-effective and energy-efficient modes, rail and waterways, structurally underutilised.

Secondary and regional roads face reliability challenges: narrow widths, poor pavement, and at-grade intersections increase travel times, reduce logistics efficiency, and limit access for rural communities. While elevated expressways and bypasses improve corridor connectivity, they cannot substitute for efficient freight and passenger rail services or the cost advantages of inland waterways.

Rail corridors offer energy-efficient alternatives for both freight and intercity passenger travel, but capacity constraints, fragmented management, and lack of last-mile connectivity limit their use. Freight rail is constrained by single-track lines, inadequate terminals, and low-speed corridors. Integration between road and rail, including intermodal terminals and freight consolidation points, remains insufficient. The Dhaka–Akaura 3rd and 4th dual-

gauge line is being constructed largely at-grade, intersecting over 15 level crossings in central Dhaka, worsening congestion and safety risks instead of resolving them.

Safety is a persistent concern: road traffic deaths are among the highest globally, with the World Health Organization estimating around 32,000 fatalities in 2021 (1 % of total deaths in Bangladesh) (WHO, 2022). Vulnerable users, including pedestrians and cyclists, face disproportionate risk. Unsafe vehicle operations, overcrowding, and inadequate boarding facilities also reduce public transport uptake, particularly affecting women's experiences. Rail safety challenges include level crossings, outdated signalling, and gaps in maintenance, which reduce reliability and public confidence.

Efficient use of existing assets, systematic maintenance, multimodal integration, and adherence to international design and operational standards are essential to reduce costs, improve safety, and optimise capacity across road and rail networks.

## **4.2 Recommendations**

### *Road Access and Safety*

- Adopt "complete streets" design standards that balance safety, accessibility, and traffic flow.
- Implement demand-management measures such as parking reforms and priority lanes for high-capacity vehicles.
- Implement black-spot elimination programs and automated enforcement for speed limits, vehicle standards, and traffic rules.
- Align road design with international safe-system standards to reduce fatalities and injuries.
- Strengthen enforcement and data collection systems to guide evidence-based investment and operational improvements, focusing on speed control, pedestrian infrastructure, and vehicle standards.

### *Rail Modernisation and Integration*

- Modernise and rehabilitate existing rail infrastructure, including signalling, bridges, tracks, and rolling stock, to enable higher-speed and higher-capacity intercity services.
- Expand intercity passenger services and commuter rail in major urban corridors.
- Promote cross-border technical harmonisation for regional interoperability.
- Upgrade stations, terminals, and boarding facilities to improve accessibility and safety, particularly for women and vulnerable groups.

### *Multimodal Efficiency and Freight Management*

- Implement integrated scheduling and ticketing for rail–bus–waterway connections.
- Expand intermodal freight terminals at strategic nodes (Dhaka, Chattogram, Narayanganj) to facilitate container-on-rail services and reduce road congestion.

- Designate freight corridors and manage time windows to reduce peak-hour road use and infrastructure wear.

## 5. Urban Transport

### 5.1 Analysis

Urban centres in Bangladesh, particularly Dhaka, Chattogram, Khulna, and Rajshahi, face escalating mobility challenges. Chronic congestion severely reduces travel speeds; in Dhaka, average vehicle speeds on arterial roads can drop below 7 km/h during peak hours, barely faster than walking pace. This results in lost productive hours, higher fuel consumption, and elevated air pollution. Secondary streets and peri-urban areas are often underserved by public transport, increasing reliance on private vehicles and informal services.

Public transport is fragmented, overcrowded, and unreliable. Bus fleets are ageing, terminals are insufficiently equipped, and coordination across operators is minimal, reducing passenger confidence. Urban flyovers and expressways (e.g., Hanif, Mouchak–Maghbazar, DEEP, DAEEP) were often constructed without alignment to the Strategic Transport Plan, Mass Rapid Transit/Bus Rapid Transit (MRT/BRT) corridors, or pedestrian needs. Many now conflict with MRT extensions, railway third/fourth track projects, and BRT-3 corridors. MRT-6 and MRT-1 lack robust feeder systems and transit-oriented development (TOD) planning. The absence of integrated land-use and transport planning has limited ridership potential, constrained economic returns, and contributed to inefficient spatial development.

Pedestrian and cycling facilities are generally inadequate: footpaths are discontinuous, crossings unsafe, and cycle tracks absent or poorly maintained. Vulnerable groups, particularly women, children, older people, and persons with disabilities, face barriers to safe and accessible mobility. Harassment, poor lighting, and limited staff oversight at stops and terminals further reduce public confidence and women's ability to use transport safely.

Traffic congestion is particularly acute at major Dhaka intersections and circulars, including Mahakhali-Rangs Circle-Shahbag Circle-Press Club Circle-Paltan Circle, GPO Circle, Kakrail Circle-Fakirapool Circle, and Mirpur Circles. This reflects unplanned infrastructure, mixed traffic, informal parking, and a lack of uninterrupted arterial road planning. Urban roads are also poorly designed to accommodate emergency vehicles, leaving ambulances and other services often blocked during peak hours, undermining disaster response and healthcare delivery.

Flooding, monsoon waterlogging, and other emergencies expose a lack of resilient corridor planning. Roads, bridges, and terminals are rarely evaluated for their ability to function under flood or disaster conditions. Noise pollution is another critical urban challenge, particularly along congested arteries, adversely affecting health and quality of life for city residents.

## 5.2 Recommendations

### *Urban Public Transport Backbone*

- Integrate bus, BRT, MRT, and commuter rail systems with unified ticketing and service standards.
- Coordinate schedules and connections across modes to minimise wait times and enable seamless transfers.
- Encourage development of transit-oriented development (TOD) zones around major stations to optimise land use and reduce car dependency.

### *Passenger Bus System Overhaul*

- Overhaul the urban passenger bus system to ensure vehicles are road-worthy, comfortable, and accessible.
- Introduce strict vehicle fitness standards, regular inspections, and operator accountability for safety and service quality.
- Restructure urban bus systems through franchising and service clusters to improve reliability and reduce route duplication.
- Implement passenger-friendly practices, including clearly marked stops, shelters, real-time schedule information, and grievance/feedback mechanisms to enhance reliability, comfort, and inclusivity.
- Introduce fleet renewal or retrofitting programmes, prioritising low-emission, quiet, and safe buses to improve air quality, reduce noise pollution, and enhance the urban environment.

### *Walking and Cycling Infrastructure*

- Develop continuous, protected pedestrian paths and cycle tracks along major corridors.
- Implement "safe routes to school" programmes and similar initiatives for children and vulnerable users.
- Ensure last-mile connectivity between transport terminals, residential areas, and employment hubs.
- Upgrade crossings, ramps, and sidewalks to meet universal accessibility standards.

### *Congestion Management and Intersection Efficiency*

- Identify all major bottleneck intersections in Dhaka and its suburbs, including key circles and junctions in North-South and East-West corridors.
- Introduce overpasses, underpasses, and U-turn facilities to allow continuous traffic flow, minimise reliance on traffic signals, and reduce intersection delays.
- Deploy intelligent traffic management systems to optimise signal timing and reduce arterial bottlenecks.
- Implement a phased, zone-by-zone approach for infrastructure improvements, aiming for completion within 18 months, with prioritisation in high-congestion areas.

### *Women's Safety and Inclusion*

- Design stations, stops, and terminals with adequate lighting, visibility, and security features.
- Monitor and enforce codes of conduct for operators and staff.
- Integrate gender-sensitive design standards into urban transport planning, including separate waiting and passenger areas, emergency communication points, and staff presence during operating hours.
- Provide awareness campaigns and feedback mechanisms for women and vulnerable users to report safety issues.

### *Institutional Strengthening*

- Establish dedicated urban transport authorities in major cities to coordinate planning, investment, and enforcement.
- Strengthen data collection and monitoring systems to track ridership, safety incidents, and accessibility compliance.
- Integrate urban transport planning with broader regional and multimodal strategies to ensure alignment with rail, waterways, and national logistics networks.

### *Emergency and Disaster Resilience*

- Design arterial and feeder roads with dedicated emergency vehicle lanes where possible, or ensure uninterrupted passage via traffic signal priority and physical clearance.
- Integrate flood-resilient infrastructure in road, BRT, and MRT planning, including elevated corridors and water-resistant drainage systems.
- Include emergency access and evacuation considerations in the planning of all major urban transport projects, including TOD and multimodal hubs.
- Incorporate noise mitigation measures (low-noise pavements, vehicle standards, restricted horn zones) into fleet and infrastructure planning to improve urban environmental quality.

## **6. Ports, Logistics and Regional Connectivity**

### **6.1 Analysis**

Efficient ports, logistics, and hinterland connections are critical for Bangladesh's economic growth and export competitiveness. Seaports such as Chattogram, Mongla, and Payra have expanded rapidly in throughput, yet bottlenecks in hinterland access, procedural inefficiencies, and fragmented logistics networks continue to raise costs and reduce reliability. Terminal productivity, customs clearance, and last-mile connectivity remain below regional benchmarks, constraining trade efficiency and industrial competitiveness. Export Processing Zones (EPZs) and Special Economic Zones (SEZs) are often poorly connected to

rail networks or Inland Container Depots (ICDs), limiting productivity and increasing reliance on road transport.

Payra Port illustrates the risks of inadequate planning and site selection. Located on the sediment-heavy Ramnabad Channel, it requires constant dredging and restricts access for large vessels. Its economic role overlaps with Mongla, Chattogram, and Matarbari ports, raising concerns about redundancy and cost-effectiveness.

Bangladesh's inland waterways and coastal shipping networks remain under-utilised despite their clear cost, energy, and environmental advantages. The national waterway system, spanning roughly 24,000 km, offers low-cost bulk freight movement and mass passenger transport, particularly well suited to a land-scarce, densely populated delta. Coastal shipping can provide domestic alternatives to congested highways, but vessel safety standards, port infrastructure, and digital cargo-tracking systems are often inadequate, limiting uptake.

Freight logistics are highly fragmented. Dry ports, ICDs, and intermodal terminals are limited, reducing opportunities for container-on-barge, rail, or coordinated road transfers. Cold-chain and consolidation infrastructure is insufficient, particularly for agricultural and perishable goods. Urban and industrial freight movements face additional inefficiencies due to multiple handling points, inconsistent documentation, and weak regulatory oversight.

At the regional level, Bangladesh has opportunities to strengthen connectivity with India, Nepal, Bhutan, and Myanmar through rail, road, and water links. Harmonising technical standards, customs procedures, and logistics practices can reduce delays, facilitate cross-border trade, and reinforce Bangladesh's role as a regional transport hub. Initiatives under the BBIN and BIMSTEC frameworks provide platforms for multimodal integration and regional cooperation.

## **6.2 Recommendations**

### *Ports and Hinterland Links*

- Implement digital single-window systems and optimise customs processes to reduce clearance times.
- Improve rail and inland waterway connections to major seaports, including dedicated freight corridors and container-on-barge links.
- Expand port terminal capacity and productivity benchmarks, with service-level agreements for efficient operations.
- Develop green port initiatives, including shore power, emissions monitoring, and waste reception facilities.

### *National Logistics Network*

- Prioritise Mongla, Chattogram and Matarbari for deep-sea and multimodal integration.
- Establish inland container depots, dry ports, and logistics hubs within economic zones to consolidate freight flows.

- Strengthen cold-chain infrastructure and agro-logistics parks to improve storage and reduce post-harvest losses.
- Promote multimodal freight movement integrating road, rail, and waterways for cost efficiency and reduced road congestion.
- Implement urban freight management zones to streamline last-mile deliveries and reduce urban traffic pressures.
- Connect EPZs/SEZs to rail, river and ICDs as standard policy.

*Regional Connectivity*

- Harmonise technical standards for cross-border rail, road, and water freight, including track gauge, signalling, and safety protocols.
- Strengthen BBIN and BIMSTEC corridor linkages with joint border terminals, riverine transit agreements, and digital customs processing.
- Promote container-on-barge, coastal shipping, and feeder services for regional trade, enhancing Bangladesh's position as a logistics hub.
- Ensure environmental safeguards, sovereign control, and decarbonisation measures in regional freight and passenger operations.

## 7. Budgetary Implications and Phasing Reform

### 7.1 Indicative Fiscal Envelope

The programme has two cost components: (i) asset maintenance and (ii) time-bound capital investment. Peak fiscal exposure in Years 3–5 is estimated at Tk 72–138 bn per year, equivalent to 0.3–0.5 % of GDP.

*Maintenance and Asset Management*

<b>Area</b>	<b>Est. Annual Spending (Tk bn)</b>
Inland waterway dredging and basic maintenance	4-5
Roads maintenance and rehabilitation	5-10
Rail and rolling stock maintenance and signalling	6-16
<b>Total Estimated Costs</b>	<b>17-30</b> <b>(=0.03-0.06% of GDP)</b>

*Capital Investment (during peak phase)*

<b>Area</b>	<b>Est. Peak Annual Spending (Tk bn)</b>
Urban public transport expansion (BRT/MRT/bus integration)	40-80
Logistics hubs and intermodal freight facilities	15-25
<b>Total Estimated Costs</b>	<b>55-105</b> <b>(=0.06-0.11% of GDP)</b>

## 7.2 Implementation Phasing

### Phase 1: Institutional and financing groundwork – First 100 Days

- Establish National Transport Council
- Approve National Waterway Strategy
- Activate maintenance funds (roads, rail, waterways)
- Start urban public transport integration planning

Estimated budget: Tk 5–10 bn early maintenance allocations.

### Phase 2: Pilots and early capital activation – First 2 Years

- Pilot container-on-barge services
- Implement bus priority lanes, congestion and parking reforms
- Initiate rail freight corridor upgrades
- Start logistics hub design and pre-construction

Estimated budget: Tk 30–50 bn/year.

### Phase 3: Scale-up capital works – First 5 Years

- Delivery of multimodal logistics network
- Expanded commuter rail & public transport roll-out
- Fully operational urban transport authorities
- National asset management systems live

Estimated budget: Tk 55–105 bn/year. As major capital programmes complete, this will reduce and shift back toward mainly maintenance.

### Phase 4: Steady-State Optimisation – Year 6 onward

- Capital spending tapers off as major network investments conclude.
- Budget focus shifts to maintenance, operations, and performance upgrades.
- User charges, port fees, and land-value capture increasingly support upkeep.

**Estimated budget:** Tk 20–35 bn/year.

### 7.3 Fiscal Strategy

Maintenance will be funded through ring-fenced asset-management funds, protected from diversion to new construction. Capital investment will combine public funding, concessional finance, and PPPs with standardised risk allocation and transparent procurement. User charges (ports, freight access, congestion pricing) and land-value capture around transit and logistics hubs will provide supplementary, performance-linked revenue.

Capital costs are front-loaded, while most fiscal efficiencies (lower rehabilitation costs, better asset life-cycle performance, and new user-charge revenues) materialise over time. The objective is to stabilise long-term transport spending and prevent higher future liabilities, rather than to cut short-term expenditure.

## 8. Conclusion

Bangladesh's transport system stands at a strategic turning point. Decades of expansion-driven investment have delivered new infrastructure, but have not produced a system that is reliable, safe, integrated, or fiscally sustainable. Roads are congested and deteriorating, rail and waterways are under-utilised, cities are struggling to move people efficiently, and logistics costs remain high. The result is a transport sector that constrains productivity, competitiveness, and social inclusion.

This paper sets out a shift in direction: from building more to using existing assets better. The core reforms focus on maintenance, multimodal integration, and land-efficient planning. Inland waterways are repositioned as a strategic national asset. Rail is modernised as an energy-efficient backbone. Urban transport is reorganised around high-capacity public systems, walking and cycling, and gender-safe access. Ports and logistics are treated as a unified national network rather than isolated facilities.

Implementation will require strong political coordination, capable institutions, and transparent financing. But the payoff is substantial: faster and safer mobility, lower logistics costs, better use of land and infrastructure, and a transport system that supports growth while improving daily life for citizens, especially women, low-income households, and vulnerable users.

The choice is not whether to invest, but how. By shifting from expansion to optimisation, from fragmentation to integration, and from short-term projects to long-term systems, Bangladesh can build a transport sector that is economically competitive, socially inclusive, and fiscally sustainable.

## **PART FIVE**

# **CULTURE, INCLUSION AND MEDIA**

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# Cultural Policy

## Rebuilding Cultural Confidence

### Summary

- Bangladesh's cultural and intellectual life is rich in heritage but fragmented, politicised, and underconfident. Public institutions, education, and media often fail to transmit the ethical, literary, and artistic traditions of Bengali Muslim civilisation, leaving society vulnerable to external influence and moral incoherence. Reform must restore historical continuity, institutional autonomy, and cultural confidence.
- Public cultural institutions have expanded financially but lost credibility. Leadership and programming are often shaped by partisan priorities rather than civilisational purpose. Merit-based appointments, independent boards, and transparent governance are needed to ensure culture serves the public, not politics.
- Historical and intellectual coherence is weak. Imported frameworks dominate universities, textbooks, and public memory, while Islamic and Bengali Muslim thought is marginalised in serious scholarship. Integrating indigenous intellectual traditions with modern disciplines and strengthening public history and translation initiatives can rebuild moral and scholarly confidence.
- Children's exposure to digital platforms threatens moral and psychological development. Algorithm-driven ecosystems such as TikTok and YouTube foster addiction, early sexualisation, and attention fragmentation. Age-based restrictions, child-safe platforms, parental support, and digital moral education are essential to safeguard children.
- International engagement remains limited and imitation-driven. Bangladesh participates in global culture but rarely shapes it. Strategic cultural diplomacy, translation programs, and partnerships with Muslim and Global South societies can project Bangladesh's identity with dignity.



## 1. Introduction: Culture as Civilisational Infrastructure

Culture is not merely a matter of personal taste, entertainment, or lifestyle. It is the shared framework through which a society understands itself, orders its moral life, and transmits meaning across generations. Faith, language, memory, ritual, ethics, art, and education together form a civilisational infrastructure: they shape how people reason, what they value, how they belong, and what they imagine to be possible. In this sense, culture is not peripheral to governance. It is foundational.

Every state, whether consciously or not, influences the cultural environment in which its citizens live. Through schools and curricula, public institutions, media regulation, law, and symbolic language, governments help set the terms under which culture is formed and reproduced. The question, therefore, is not whether the state affects culture, but whether it does so responsibly, transparently, and in accordance with the society's own historical and moral foundations.

Bangladesh today faces not only the task of political and institutional reform, but also the deeper task of cultural reconstruction. Decades of centralisation, politicisation, and ideological drift have weakened public trust in cultural institutions and distorted the relationship between inherited tradition and contemporary life. Historical memory has often been shaped by partisan narratives rather than scholarly integrity. Education has too frequently transmitted fragmented or externally derived frameworks without adequate anchoring in Bangladesh's own civilisational experience. At the same time, rapid technological change and global media have introduced powerful new forces shaping identity, desire, and social norms, particularly among the young.

This policy proceeds from the conviction that a stable, just, and confident Bangladesh requires cultural coherence and sovereignty as well as political order. This does not mean uniformity, nor does it mean repression. It means that a society understands its own moral reference points, takes responsibility for how its knowledge and values are transmitted, and is not dependent on external powers or inherited distortions to define its identity.

Bangladesh is a Muslim-majority country whose language, history, and social life reflect a distinctive Bengali Muslim civilisational synthesis. That inheritance provides the ethical and historical reference point of the nation. At the same time, Bangladesh belongs equally to all its citizens, including Hindus, Christians and Buddhists. Cultural confidence must therefore go hand in hand with justice (*insaf*), plural belonging, and equal citizenship. A rooted culture and a plural society are not opposites; they are mutually sustaining.

This cultural policy sets out a framework for rebuilding Bangladesh's cultural life on that basis. It does not seek to engineer people's beliefs or private lives. Rather, it defines the legitimate role of the state as shaping the conditions under which culture is formed: through education, public institutions, law, and the safeguarding of children's development. It emphasises institutional autonomy, depoliticisation, and long-term credibility over short-term control.

The aim is neither nostalgia nor cultural isolation. It is continuity: reconnecting inherited wisdom with contemporary realities, restoring confidence without coercion, and ensuring that Bangladesh's cultural future is shaped by its own moral and intellectual resources. A society that knows who it is can engage the world openly, contribute meaningfully, and face change without losing itself. This policy is offered in that spirit.

## 2. Equal Citizenship and the Role of the State

The Constitution affirms that all citizens belong equally to the nation, regardless of religion, belief, ethnicity, or gender. At the same time, the moral language, historical experience, and social norms of its predominantly Bengali Muslim population necessarily have the biggest role in shaping public culture. Acknowledging this reality is not an act of exclusion; it is a recognition of social fact. This policy therefore rests on two non-negotiable commitments: a genuinely Bangladeshi cultural foundation as the normative reference point of public life, and the full cultural, religious, and civic rights of minorities as requirements of justice (*insaf*).

These two principles are not in tension. A majority culture that is secure and institutionally restrained does not need to suppress difference. On the contrary, plural belonging depends on the stability of a shared moral framework within which diversity can be expressed without fear or marginalisation. Cultural sovereignty, in this sense, is not the imposition of sameness, but the right of a society to shape its cultural future without external domination or internal erasure.

Within this framework, the role of the state must be carefully delimited. Culture cannot be engineered, and belief cannot be commanded. Families, communities, scholars, and artists remain the primary agents of cultural life. The state's responsibility is not to manage people's personal lives, but to finesse how its policies affect the conditions under which culture is formed: through education policy, public institutions, law, and the protection of children's moral and psychological development.

Accordingly, this policy defines the state's role as enabling, safeguarding, and institutionalising, not micromanaging cultural life. Public authority should operate through transparent frameworks and independent institutions rather than discretionary control. Institutional autonomy, scholarly integrity, and long-term credibility must take precedence over short-term political advantage.

A limited state, however, is not a morally indifferent one. No public order is value-neutral. The question is not whether public institutions will reflect norms, but which norms they will reflect and how responsibly they will do so. This policy affirms that public culture in Bangladesh should be anchored in dignity, restraint, justice, service, and respect for faith and family life, while upholding freedom of conscience, expression, and equal protection under the law.

Finally, we must establish a governing boundary: cultural policy must never become an instrument of partisan rule. The use of history, education, media, or cultural institutions for political mobilisation undermines trust, weakens legitimacy, and corrodes cultural life itself. Cultural reform must therefore be insulated from party political interference and grounded in law, scholarship, and ethical consistency.

### 3. Reclaiming Institutions and Public Cultural Life

#### 3.1 Current Landscape

Bangladesh has a rich civilisational heritage rooted in the Bengali and Muslim experience. Its literature, songs, and visual arts reflect centuries of ethical, social, and intellectual development and embed communal and ethical values in public life, with institutions such as the Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy (BSA) and Bangla Academy serving as official custodians of this heritage. Literary traditions from figures like Alaol, Kazi Nazrul Islam, Mir Mosharraf Hossain, Jasimuddin, Farrukh Ahmad, and Al Mahmud demonstrate a continuous engagement with faith, morality, and social critique.

Bangladesh maintains a robust infrastructure of cultural institutions and programming. BSA and Bangla Academy continue to play central roles in fostering arts and literature. Over the past decade, the BSA budget increased tenfold, allowing widespread programming and the establishment of over 480 Upazila Shilpakala Academies, expanding access to theatre, music, and visual arts. High-profile events like the Dhaka Art Summit demonstrate Bangladesh's potential as a regional cultural hub. Its literary tradition also remains lively. Research journals such as *Shahitto Potrika* have published over a thousand articles on literature, linguistics, and cultural topics over nearly six decades, indicating sustained scholarly engagement. Annual events such as the Amar Ekushey Book Fair and literary festivals like Dhaka Lit Fest bring writers together and encourage public participation.

#### 3.2 Politicised Leadership and Cultural Dissonance

Despite these foundations, the cultural sphere exhibits significant structural and institutional challenges that impair public cultural engagement and weaken the promotion of authentically Bangladeshi culture. The central problem is not a lack of infrastructure or funding, but a crisis of cultural misalignment and leadership illegitimacy.

Recent investigative reports have described long-standing mismanagement, bureaucratic stagnation, and political influence at the BSA. These include allegations of corruption and administrative disorder, particularly under longstanding former Director General Liaquat Ali Lucky. Many of the hundreds of Upazila Shilpakala Academies lack sustained programme offerings beyond national days. Leadership appointments have reflected political affiliation more than cultural expertise. During the July Revolution, a number of senior figures and entertainers expressed support for the Awami League regime's repression of protesters in a political WhatsApp group named "Alo Ashbei" whose membership included then Information and Broadcasting Minister Mohammad Ali Arafat, DG Liaquat Ali Lucky, and two members of

the executive of the professional organisation Actors Equity Bangladesh. This politicisation has led to a loss of institutional cohesion and credibility.

While BSA has expanded financially, criticism persists that programming echoes global contemporary art priorities or Indian-influenced Bengali traditions intentionally shorn of Islamic influence while insufficiently foregrounding Bangladeshi traditions and ethics. Public discourse at the BSA has sparked concern among cultural commentators about the ideological orientation of programming, with criticism of longstanding social norms such as modesty in dress codes commonplace, illustrating a misalignment between leadership priorities and the values of the Bangladeshi people. Such trends risk narrowing institutional independence and discouraging culturally rooted artistic voices.

This dissonance is reflected more widely in Bangladeshi cultural output. Mainstream media and cultural programming are disproportionately shaped by urban, secular and politically partisan elite networks, rather than by the moral and cultural sensibilities of the general population. Indian film and music output is widely broadcast at the expense of home grown talent. Book festival programming prioritises globally oriented literature over the Bengali Muslim canon, and translation programs frequently focus on Western works, which can inadvertently marginalise local literary heritage. Studies of publishing at the Amar Ekushey Book Fair show that the vast majority of translated books at domestic fairs are from foreign languages into Bengali, and relatively few Bengali titles are being translated outward. State-supported festivals, theatre productions, and media programming frequently emphasise aesthetics derived from Kolkata/Bengali Renaissance or Western trends, rather than locally evolved forms. This includes the marginalisation of traditional modest dress (hijab, veils, caps) and everyday garments historically common in Bengali Muslim society, reinforcing cultural narratives that exclude significant aspects of national heritage. Finally, content ecosystems on social media have increasingly become vectors for polarised discourse, and cultural fragmentation, which can further dilute engagement with ethically grounded local cultural content.

### **3.2 Recommendations**

Policy should support artistic and literary expression rooted in Bangladeshi civilisational heritage while ensuring institutional autonomy, broad public participation, and ethical grounding in cultural programming. The state's role is not to dictate artistic content, but to facilitate, safeguard, and create opportunities for artists, writers, and scholars to flourish independently.

#### *Institutional Reform*

- Establish transparent, merit-based, fixed term leadership appointments in BSA, Bangla Academy, and other state cultural bodies, insulated from short-term political influence.
- Revise the Bangladesh Shilpkala Academy Act (1989) and Service Rules (1992) to modernise administrative, budgetary, and accountability frameworks, including clear financial reporting and ethical oversight mechanisms.

- Create independent advisory councils for major cultural institutions, comprising scholars, artists, and historians, to review programming priorities and develop new guidelines for promoting cultural activities according to Bangladeshi and Bengali Muslim history and norms.
- Mandate regular institutional audits of public programming and events to ensure alignment with ethical and cultural guidelines.

*Cultural Production and Artistic Expression*

- Prioritise grants, fellowships, and competitions for local artists, writers, and performers whose work reflects Bangladeshi historical, literary, aesthetic or ethical traditions.
- Support district-level creative hubs that provide rehearsal space, training, and performance venues outside Dhaka, reducing urban–rural disparities in cultural access.
- Encourage collaborative projects between institutions and universities to document, preserve, and teach traditional arts.

*Literature, Language, and Publishing*

- Provide targeted funding for translation of classical and modern Bangladeshi literary works.
- Expand literary festivals and public events centred on national heritage, ensuring the Bengali Muslim canon is prominently represented.
- Strengthen research journals and publication programs that analyse and interpret Bengali Muslim literary and intellectual traditions.

*Media and Public Cultural Discourse*

- Encourage media outlets to adopt codes of conduct that reflect national moral and civilisational norms.
- Require publicly funded television and radio channels to maintain a minimum level of locally produced programming and artists.
- Support civil society programs to improve online media literacy and promote discussion of authentic cultural values.
- Incentivise content creation in line with national literary and artistic heritage through competitions, grants, and awards.

*Public Cultural Life*

- Promote festivals, rituals, and exhibitions rooted in Bengali Muslim heritage as sites for shared identity, ethical reflection, and public education.
- Ensure public spaces for cultural expression are accessible and inclusive, while reinforcing the transmission of historical and moral knowledge.

## 4. Restoring Historical and Intellectual Coherence

### 4.1 Current Landscape

A society's capacity to act with confidence in the present depends on how clearly it understands its past and how coherently it transmits knowledge to future generations. In Bangladesh, questions of history, memory, and intellectual orientation are therefore not academic concerns alone; they are central to national identity, civic responsibility, and cultural sovereignty. Likewise, history and culture are not separate policy domains. They are produced by the same institutions: archives, libraries, curriculum authorities, universities, museums, and cultural bodies. Reforming these structures is the most effective way to support both.

Bangladesh inherits a layered civilisational history: the Islamisation of Bengal, the Sultani and Mughal periods, colonial rule, the anti-colonial and Pakistan movements, and the 1971 Liberation War. Each of these periods contributed to the formation of a Bengali society imbued with its own Islamic moral language, social norms, and intellectual traditions. Bangladesh's intellectual and cultural history was shaped not only in Bangla, but also through Persian, Urdu, Arabic, and regional vernaculars such as Sylheti and Chittagonian. Yet the way this inheritance is narrated in public institutions, education, and scholarship has often been fragmented, politicised, or filtered through ideological frameworks.

Since independence, historical narration has been repeatedly reshaped by changing political regimes. Textbooks, museums, and public memorials have at times reflected partisan priorities rather than scholarly consensus. This has been most visible in the elevation of controversial political figures into near-sacred national icons and the marginalisation of other strands of Bangladesh's intellectual and social history. As a result, history is often experienced not as a shared national inheritance, but as a contested political resource.

At the same time, Bangladesh's knowledge ecosystem of universities, research institutes, curriculum authorities, and cultural bodies has remained heavily dependent on intellectual paradigms inherited from colonial and post-colonial Bengal. In most public universities, core humanities and social science curricula rely heavily on Western canonical theorists and Brahmanical traditions, with little or no structured engagement with Islamic intellectual traditions as sources of ethical, legal, philosophical, or social reasoning. Islamic Studies departments exist, but they are typically isolated from mainstream history, sociology, political science, and philosophy faculties without interdisciplinary integration. Bangladesh Studies as field reaches back to the colonial period, but it treats the pre-colonial and Islamic centuries of Bengal as peripheral.

In schools, this disjunction is reinforced through curriculum design. Although Islam is taught as a subject, broader moral reasoning, historical interpretation, and civic identity are frequently framed in value-neutral or secular terms, detached from transcendence or tradition. In an exam-oriented system where textbooks and set curricula dominate classroom practice, this framing exerts strong influence over how young people understand truth, history and identity.

Public history and memory also reflect this incoherence. National museums and archives remain underdeveloped, unevenly curated, and vulnerable to political direction. There is no major national museum or permanent public exhibition devoted to the Bengal Sultanate or the Mughal period in Bengal, despite these eras spanning nearly five centuries of civilisational development. Translation and research funding disproportionately prioritise Western theoretical texts rather than recovering, editing, and analysing Bangladesh's own intellectual heritage, including classical and modern Bengali Muslim thinkers.

Together, these conditions have produced a knowledge environment in which Bangladesh often interprets itself through borrowed categories and short-term political narratives. This weakens historical continuity, moral confidence, and intellectual sovereignty, and leaves society vulnerable to both external influence and internal fragmentation.

## 4.2 Why Reform Is Necessary

When a society loses coherence in how it understands its past and transmits knowledge, it also loses clarity about its future. In Bangladesh, the fragmentation of historical narrative and the marginalisation of indigenous intellectual traditions have direct consequences for identity, citizenship, and governance:

- **Politicised history erodes trust.** When citizens see textbooks and public memory shift with every new political diktat, they learn to treat national narratives as instruments of power rather than shared truth. This weakens civic solidarity and encourages cynicism rather than responsibility.
- **Epistemic narrowing marginalises religion from serious public reasoning.** Islam becomes confined to ritual and identity, while ethics, law, and social theory are treated as purely secular domains. This separation contradicts Bangladesh's lived civilisational experience and leaves young people without an integrated moral worldview.
- **Dependence on external intellectual frameworks weakens cultural sovereignty.** When Bangladesh's universities and research institutions reproduce Western categories without adaptation, they fail to generate original, locally grounded knowledge capable of addressing Bangladesh's own social realities.
- **Incoherent knowledge transmission weakens moral formation.** Without coherence in how society understands its past and its moral foundations, civic virtue cannot be cultivated in depth.

Restoring historical and intellectual coherence is therefore not about control or nostalgia. It is about enabling Bangladesh to think with its own categories, teach with confidence, and remember with integrity.

## 4.3 Recommendations

The purpose of reform is to align scholarship, curriculum, and public memory with Bangladesh's civilisational reality while maintaining academic rigor and plural citizenship.

*Historical Narrative and Public Memory*

- Establish an independent National History Commission composed of historians, archivists, and scholars to review public history standards, museums, and memorials.
- Modernise national archives and digitise historical records, prioritising access to neglected materials on the Muslim heritage of Bengal.
- Fund public history projects including documentaries, exhibitions and translations, rooted in scholarly research rather than political symbolism.

*Curriculum and Knowledge Governance (Detailed reforms are set out in our education policy; this section summarises the cultural elements.)*

- Insulate curriculum authorities from political directives through fixed review cycles and independent scholarly panels.
- Ensure history and humanities curricula integrate Islamic intellectual perspectives alongside modern disciplines.
- Introduce interdisciplinary ethics and civilisation modules across secondary and tertiary education.

*Universities and Research Institutes*

- Establish research institutes – potentially named after leading figures of Bengali Muslim culture – within major public universities, with emphasis on Bangladeshi civilisational heritage.
- Fund research programs that integrate Islamic thought with history, sociology, philosophy, and political theory.
- Support translation of classical and culturally significant texts from the proximate Muslim world – Persian, Urdu and Arabic – into Bengali.

*Intellectual Pluralism and Scholarship*

- Reform grant criteria to prioritise original, locally grounded research.
- Support academic journals and conferences focused on civilisational questions.
- Encourage collaboration between madrasas and universities on historical and ethical scholarship.

*Public Knowledge and Civic Formation*

- Align public education, museums, and cultural media with long-term moral and historical coherence.
- Conduct a public integrity campaign to ensure civic values are reinforced through education and public memory, not only through enforcement (*for more information, please see our anti-corruption policy*).

## 5. Childhood, Technology, and Safeguarding

Children today are growing up in a radically different moral and psychological environment from any previous generation. Smartphones, social media platforms, and online video ecosystems now mediate large parts of childhood experience, shaping attention, identity, language, relationships, and values long before young people are developmentally ready to process them.

In Bangladesh, access to digital devices has expanded rapidly. Low-cost smartphones and widespread mobile internet mean that even primary-school children are now active users of platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram. Yet this expansion has not been matched by serious safeguards. An estimated 35–40 percent of young Bangladeshis aged 8–16 show some level of social media addiction, while 10–15 percent suffer from serious addiction. Children are routinely exposed to algorithm-driven content streams optimised for engagement rather than wellbeing. These systems reward sensationalism, exhibitionism, outrage, and emotional stimulation, as opposed to moral formation, restraint, or truthfulness.

Research globally shows strong links between excessive screen use and problems such as attention fragmentation, anxiety, depression, sleep disruption, social withdrawal, and distorted self-image among children and adolescents. Educators, parents, and clinicians increasingly report similar patterns: reduced concentration, early sexualisation, online bullying, and emotional volatility tied to digital overexposure.

The issue is not simply “bad content.” It is the structure of the platforms themselves. Algorithms are designed to maximise time-on-screen and emotional reaction, not moral development. In this way, children are placed inside a system that is psychologically powerful, commercially exploitative, and ethically indifferent.

Growing concerns have prompted a wave of international policy responses. Australia has passed national legislation requiring platforms to prevent children under 16 from accessing social media websites such as YouTube and TikTok, with heavy fines for companies that fail to implement age-assurance systems. France and the UK are also moving towards similar age-based restriction. Other countries, including the Netherlands, Spain, and Denmark, have issued advisories or draft laws recommending restrictions on children’s access to TikTok, Instagram, and other online services.

Bangladesh, in contrast, still treats children online largely as miniature adults. Online regulatory frameworks have not clearly distinguished between the status of prepubescent children and that of mature citizens with full rights. This is a category error. Children do not yet possess full moral agency, impulse control, or identity stability. Before that point, the duty of society is safeguarding, not exposure. Parents remain the primary guardians of children’s moral development, but they are increasingly outmatched by powerful technologies they did not grow up with themselves. Many lack the tools, knowledge, or institutional support to regulate digital environments effectively.

A society that claims to value children cannot treat them as market commodities for global tech companies. Just as children are restricted from alcohol, gambling, and driving, they must also be protected from psychologically predatory digital environments.

## 5.1 Recommendations

### *Legal and Regulatory Safeguards*

- Introduce a national ban on algorithm-driven social media and video platforms for children under 12, with strict age-verification requirements.
- Monitor outcomes of the ban and consult with the public, civil society and safeguarding experts on a potential future extension to older categories (e.g. under 14s).
- Require platforms to implement robust child-age authentication systems for Bangladeshi users.
- Establish legal standards for child-safe content environments distinct from adult platforms.

### *Technology and Platform Governance*

- Mandate default “child mode” digital environments for users under puberty age, with no algorithmic feeds, autoplay or personalised recommendation engines.
- Require local content moderation and child-safety compliance for any platform operating in Bangladesh.

### *Digital Literacy and Moral Formation*

- Introduce digital moral education in primary schools focused on attention, truth, modesty, and self-control.
- Train teachers to address screen addiction and online harm as part of child wellbeing.
- Develop national guidance on healthy screen habits rooted in psychological and ethical principles.
- Support public broadcasters and independent creators to produce high-quality, ethically grounded children’s content.

### *Parents as Safeguarding Partners*

- Create a National Parental Support Program on digital guardianship.
- Provide tools and training for parents to monitor, limit, and guide children’s technology use.
- Encourage family-based screen-free routines.

## 6. International Engagement and Cultural Confidence

### 6.1 Current Landscape

In an interconnected world, culture is no longer only a domestic matter. Nations are increasingly known and judged not only by their economic or military power, but by the stories they tell about themselves, the ideas they contribute, and the moral and intellectual confidence they project abroad. Cultural confidence is a form of sovereignty: a nation that

cannot narrate itself to the world will always be narrated by others. As such, cultural diplomacy has become a central instrument of soft power.

Bangladesh, despite its deep civilisational heritage and rich literary, artistic, and ethical traditions, remains underrepresented in the global cultural and intellectual sphere. Internationally, Bangladesh is often perceived through narrow frames: poverty, climate vulnerability, labour migration, and political instability. These realities exist, but they do not define the nation's identity. The deeper traditions of Bengali Muslim thought, literature, architecture, ethics, and social life are largely invisible beyond the region.

This absence is not due to a lack of cultural substance, but to a lack of strategic projection. Translation of Bangladeshi literature, philosophy, and historical scholarship into global languages remains limited. Cultural exchange programs are small in scale and often donor-driven rather than vision-led. Bangladeshi authors remain largely absent from global university syllabi outside South Asia. Bangladeshi participation in major international cultural festivals, book fairs, academic networks, and arts platforms is ad hoc and rarely coordinated as part of a national strategy. By contrast, countries such as Türkiye, Indonesia, and Iran have invested heavily in state-supported translation and cultural diplomacy programs (e.g. TEDA, LTI Korea, etc.), which Bangladesh currently lacks at comparable scale.

At the same time, Bangladesh has often approached international cultural engagement through imitation rather than confidence. Elite cultural institutions have tended to mirror Western or Indian trends in art, theory, and public discourse instead of presenting Bangladesh's own civilisational voice. This has resulted in a form of cultural dependency: Bangladesh participates in global culture, but rarely shapes it.

Moreover, engagement with Muslim and other Global South societies – natural partners given Bangladesh's history and identity – remains underdeveloped. While economic and political relations exist, cultural and intellectual cooperation with countries across the Muslim world, Africa, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia has not been systematically pursued. As a result, Bangladesh remains isolated from wider conversations about post-colonial identity, Islam and modernity, ethical governance, and civilisational renewal.

Cultural diplomacy should not be about propaganda or image management. It should be about *exchange with dignity*: offering Bangladesh's ideas, art, and moral traditions to the world, and engaging others without losing oneself.

## 6.2 Recommendations

The purpose of reform is to build a coherent, confident, and principled international cultural presence for Bangladesh.

### *Cultural Diplomacy and Exchange*

- Reform the External Publicity Wing into a Bangladesh Cultural Diplomacy Program within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with a mandate to coordinate arts, literature, heritage, and intellectual exchange.

- Expand cultural attaché positions in key embassies, especially in Muslim-majority and non-Western countries.
- Develop long-term exchange programs for artists, writers, scholars, and students with countries across the Muslim world, Africa, Southeast Asia, and Central Asia.

*Translation and Intellectual Presence*

- Create a national translation initiative to translate major works of Bangladeshi literature, history, Islamic scholarship and thought into English, Arabic, Turkish, Malay, and other global languages.
- Support Bangladeshi academic journals and publishers to engage internationally.

*Global Cultural Participation*

- Ensure systematic Bangladeshi participation in major international book fairs, film festivals, art biennales, and cultural expos.
- Support curated national pavilions that present Bangladesh's civilisational narrative with coherence and dignity.
- Encourage Bangladeshi filmmakers, writers, and artists to engage global platforms without abandoning their cultural grounding.

*Cooperation with Muslim and Global South Societies*

- Establish partnerships with cultural and research institutions in Türkiye, Malaysia, Indonesia, Morocco, Egypt, Uzbekistan, and other civilisationally connected regions.
- Promote joint research on Islamic modernity, ethics, governance, and post-colonial identity.
- Facilitate youth and scholar exchanges that build long-term intellectual networks.

*Institutional Confidence and Avoiding Imitation*

- Train cultural officials and diplomats in civilisational literacy: the ability to articulate Bangladesh's identity in historical and cultural terms.
- Ensure that international cultural programming reflects Bangladesh's own traditions rather than imported elite fashions.
- Promote confidence in indigenous aesthetics, ethics, and intellectual contributions.

## **7. Legal Safeguards, Institutional Autonomy, and Depoliticisation**

### **7.1 Current Landscape and the Case for Reform**

For cultural life to flourish with integrity, it must be protected both from state overreach and from political capture. In Bangladesh, however, cultural institutions, media bodies, and educational authorities have often been treated as extensions of ruling-party power rather than as public trusts. This has weakened credibility, narrowed plural participation, and turned culture into a contested political instrument instead of a shared national resource.

Over the past decades, leadership appointments in bodies such as the Bangladesh Shilpkala Academy, Bangla Academy, public broadcasters, and curriculum authorities have frequently followed political loyalty rather than scholarly or professional merit. Changes in government have often been followed by purges, renamings, ideological realignments, and selective historical emphasis. This pattern has produced three systemic problems:

- **Erosion of institutional independence** – Cultural bodies lose their ability to serve long-term civilisational purposes.
- **Loss of public trust** – Citizens come to see history, culture, and education as propaganda tools.
- **Suppression of plural confidence** – Artists, scholars, and minorities feel pressure to conform to prevailing political narratives.

Although the Constitution affirms equality before law (Article 27) and freedom of expression (Article 39), there are few clear statutory safeguards ensuring that cultural institutions cannot be politically directed, captured, or weaponised. Judicial oversight over cultural governance has also been limited in practice, with the absence of challenge to politically motivated appointments or programming decisions. Reform, therefore, is not about simply limiting the state. It is about disciplining it through law, institutions, and transparent governance so that culture belongs to society rather than the government. This is essential not only for artistic freedom, but for the security and dignity of minority voices within a plural nation.

## 7.2 Recommendations

### *Legal and Constitutional Safeguards*

- Codify legal protections for the independence of cultural, educational, and media institutions, clearly limiting ministerial or executive interference.
- Enact statutory guarantees for freedom of artistic, scholarly, cultural and religious expression within the bounds of public order and dignity.
- Strengthen judicial review mechanisms so that politically motivated interference in cultural bodies can be challenged in court.

### *Institutional Autonomy and Governance*

- Establish independent governing boards for major cultural institutions (e.g. Shilpkala Academy, Bangla Academy, public broadcasters), with fixed terms and transparent appointment criteria based on expertise, not party affiliation.
- Require leadership selection panels to include scholars, cultural practitioners, and civil society representatives.
- Introduce term limits and performance review systems for senior institutional roles.

### *Depoliticisation and Transparency*

- Prohibit political party office-holders from simultaneously holding executive or advisory roles in national cultural institutions.

- Mandate public disclosure of budgets, programming decisions, and appointment processes.

## 8. Phasing Reform

### 8.1 Phase I: First 100 Days – Direction and Credibility

- Establish a National Cultural & Civilisational Reform Taskforce and announce core principles on depoliticisation, safeguarding, and historical integrity.
- Begin leadership reviews at Shilpakala Academy, Bangla Academy, and curriculum bodies; freeze partisan appointments pending new rules.
- Initiate drafting of laws on institutional autonomy and child digital protection; launch public integrity and values campaign (*see anti-corruption policy*).
- Open structured consultations with scholars, parents, artists, educators, and civil society.

### 9.2 Phase II: First 2 Years – Law and Institutions

- Enact law on cultural institution autonomy and a Child Digital Safeguarding Act; establish independent boards and a National History Commission.
- Roll out digital literacy and moral formation modules; reform research funding toward civilisational and local scholarship.
- Launch the national translation, exchange, and cultural diplomacy programs with Muslim and Global South partners.
- Introduce performance audits, transparency portals, and judicial review pathways for cultural governance.

### 8.3 Phase III: First 5 Years – Cultural Renewal

- Consolidate depoliticised governance and safeguarding systems across culture, media, and education.
- Expand international cultural presence, translation output, and global festival participation.
- Institutionalise periodic civilisational reviews of history, curriculum, and public memory.
- Evaluate impact on public trust, youth wellbeing, and cultural participation; refine policy accordingly.

## 9. Conclusion

Bangladesh stands at a decisive moment. Its civilisational heritage, moral traditions, and intellectual legacy provide a foundation for a confident, cohesive, and ethically grounded society. Yet decades of political interference, fragmented historical narrative, and exposure to unmoderated digital influence have weakened public trust, cultural continuity, and moral formation.

This policy demonstrates that reform is not about nostalgia or control; it is about restoring coherence, integrity, and confidence across the nation's cultural, educational, and digital life. From protecting children online to depoliticising institutions, from revitalising Bengali Muslim literature to asserting Bangladesh's identity on the global stage, the proposed measures work together to rebuild public faith, nurture ethical citizens, and project a civilisational presence with dignity.

Success will be measured not only in institutional compliance but in the lived experience of citizens: children growing up with moral and intellectual guidance, artists and scholars thriving without political interference, and the nation's history, literature, and ethics celebrated at home and abroad.

By committing to these reforms, Bangladesh can transform its cultural and intellectual landscape into a source of pride, cohesion, and influence, ensuring that its rich heritage continues to illuminate public life for generations to come.



# Women and Disadvantaged Communities

## Securing justice and protection for women and minorities

### Summary

- Violence, dispossession, lack of enforcement and administrative neglect – not lack of laws on paper – are the core drivers of exclusion in Bangladesh. Women face widespread violence and harassment with low conviction rates; religious minorities suffer from weak protection and land insecurity; and ethnic minority regions experience legal invisibility and weak state presence.  
Inclusion must be built on protection and justice. The priority is to make law enforceable: fast investigations, reliable prosecution, functioning courts, and clear administrative responsibility for follow-through.
- For women, reform must focus on safety and enforcement. This includes legal aid targeted at violence and inheritance cases, fast-track court dockets for sexual offences, mandatory First Information Report (FIR) registration audits, forensic reform in hospitals and visible public-space policing.
- For religious minorities, the core failures are slow response, weak investigation, and land-administration corruption. Policy should centre on rapid response protocols, dedicated investigation teams, public communication standards, and accelerated land dispute resolution, without framing minority issues in communal terms.
- For ethnic minorities, exclusion is driven by administrative absence and legal invisibility. The solution is documentation, land security, and service delivery: mobile registration units, digitised land records, district-level land adjudication teams, and strengthened local administrations.
- The Ministry of Social Welfare must be refocused from fragmented welfare delivery to coordination and protection. Its role should centre on identifying vulnerable populations, linking them to justice and protection systems, and monitoring real outcomes, not just spending and coverage.



## 1. Introduction

Bangladesh has made important gains in social stability and human development over the past decades, yet serious gaps remain in how protection, justice, and public services are delivered to some of the most vulnerable groups in society. Women continue to face widespread violence and harassment, religious minorities can feel vulnerable to targeted attacks and land disputes, and ethnic minority communities do not always have access to effective administration and legal protection. These are not marginal issues. They affect social trust, national cohesion, and the legitimacy of public institutions.

This paper starts from a simple diagnosis: Bangladesh does not primarily suffer from a lack of laws or policy declarations, but from weak enforcement, delayed response, administrative corruption, and fragmented institutional responsibility. In many areas, the legal framework already exists. What is missing is consistent application, clear accountability, and practical systems that turn law into protection and rights into outcomes.

The approach taken here is deliberately restrained and pragmatic. Rather than proposing large new spending programmes, expansive regulatory regimes, or abstract rights frameworks, this paper focuses on strengthening the application of existing laws, improving institutional coordination, and restoring public confidence in the state's capacity to protect its citizens.

The framework is anchored in a vision of social harmony rooted in strong families, mutual responsibility, and community life. Women are understood as central contributors to social wellbeing, particularly through family and community roles, while retaining agency to pursue education or economic activity where they choose to do so. Religious and ethnic minorities are treated as equal citizens entitled to security, justice, and protection from harm, without pressure toward cultural assimilation or symbolic categorisation.

The analysis draws on evidence from Bangladeshi government data, audit reports, law enforcement records, and civil society research. It also engages critically with recent reform proposals, including those of the Women's Affairs Reform Commission, where the emphasis on legal redesign is not consistently supported by enforcement evidence.

The sections that follow examine failures in women's protection, minority security, and administrative inclusion, and set out detailed, phased reforms aimed at translating law into outcomes and rebuilding trust between citizens and public institutions.

## 2. Social Transformation and the Meaning of Inclusion in Bangladesh

### 2.1 Social Transformation and Strain

Bangladesh has undergone rapid social and economic transformation over the past three decades. Urbanisation, labour mobility, and changing family structures have reshaped everyday life in ways that bring both opportunity and strain. While access to education and healthcare has expanded and poverty has declined (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, HIES 2022; NIPORT, Demographic and Health Survey 2017–18), these changes have also placed new pressures on families, public order, and governance institutions.

Police data and civil society monitoring consistently show high levels of sexual harassment, domestic violence, and assault against women, alongside low prosecution and conviction rates (Ain o Salish Kendra, Human Rights Reports 2019–2023; Bangladesh Police Crime Statistics). At the same time, urban migration and economic restructuring have weakened extended family networks and informal dispute-resolution mechanisms. Formal institutions such as police, courts, and social services have not fully compensated for this erosion.

The result is a widening gap between legal prohibition and lived protection. This demonstrates a central policy lesson: material development without corresponding reinforcement of justice, public order, and moral accountability generates new forms of vulnerability.

### 2.2 Conceptualising Inclusion in Bangladesh's Context

In this context, inclusion policy must be rooted in Bangladesh's social structure, moral intuitions, and institutional capacity. In recent years, global development frameworks – most notably the Millennium Development Goals and Sustainable Development Goals – have strongly influenced domestic policy discourse. While such frameworks offer useful indicators, they also embed normative assumptions that do not always translate well into Bangladesh's social and cultural context. They often prioritise participation, autonomy, and numerical targets over protection, enforcement, and social legitimacy. This paper therefore treats international frameworks as informational references, not as governing principles.

In contrast, this paper defines inclusion in operational terms as:

- Protection from violence, coercion, and dispossession
- Equal standing before criminal and civil law
- Reliable access to remedies when harm occurs
- Administrative inclusion through documentation and service access

This approach allows policy success to be measured through enforcement outcomes – case resolution, safety improvements, reduction in abuse – rather than abstract participation metrics.

### 3. Women's Affairs: Evidence-Based Diagnosis and Policy Design

#### 3.1 Widespread Violence Against Women

Violence against women remains widespread and structurally embedded. According to Ain o Salish Kendra, over 3,000 cases of rape were reported between 2020 and 2022 alone, with conviction rates remaining in the single digits. BRAC's Human Rights and Legal Aid Services reports indicate that domestic violence is significantly underreported, particularly in rural areas (ASK 2023; BRAC HRLS Annual Reports).

The persistence of violence is not primarily due to gaps in criminal law, but to failures in enforcement and institutional practice. Police discretion at the point of complaint registration, weak forensic capacity, and prolonged judicial timelines create a system in which offenders expect impunity. At the same time, social pressure on victims to compromise, reconcile, or withdraw complaints further undermines accountability. These factors interact to produce a low-risk environment for perpetrators and a high-cost environment for victims. If violence persists because institutions fail to convert complaints into consequences, then reform must focus on speed, certainty, and visibility of enforcement.

#### *Recommendations*

- **Fast-track sexual offence dockets:** Rather than creating new courts, district courts should designate fixed weekly dockets for sexual and domestic violence cases. Judges assigned to these dockets should receive specialised training through the Judicial Administration Training Institute. Performance indicators such as average case duration and disposal rates should be reported quarterly to the Ministry of Law.
- **Mandatory First Information Reports (FIR) registration and oversight:** All complaints relating to sexual violence or harassment must be registered. Divisional police headquarters should conduct random audits of police station records to identify patterns of non-registration, as recommended by past Police Reform Programme evaluations (UNDP-Bangladesh, PRP Phase II Review).
- **Forensic and medical evidence reform:** Government hospitals should be required to follow standardised medico-legal protocols for sexual assault examinations. Regional forensic hubs, rather than new facilities, should be strengthened, with digital transmission of reports to courts to reduce delays (Law Commission of Bangladesh, Criminal Justice Reform Papers).
- **Public space policing:** Dedicated patrol units should be deployed in transport hubs, markets, and educational zones during peak hours. Evidence from Dhaka Metropolitan Police pilot initiatives shows visible policing reduces harassment complaints and increases reporting.

### 3.2 Access to Justice: Removing Structural Barriers

The National Legal Aid Services Organization (NLASO) reports persistent underutilisation of legal aid by women, despite high demand for protection and redress. Qualitative studies identify cost, procedural complexity, fear of retaliation, and lack of information as the main barriers (NLASO Annual Report 2021).

The problem is not only availability, but usability. Many women encounter legal institutions as slow, intimidating, and socially risky. Without clear protection mechanisms, pursuing justice can expose victims to further harm, whether financial, reputational, or physical. As a result, formal rights remain largely theoretical for those most in need. If justice is inaccessible because it is risky, complex, and costly, then reform must reduce procedural burden and increase institutional protection.

#### *Recommendations*

- Earmark at least 50% of legal aid funding for violence and family-law cases
- Introduce standardised complaint templates in police stations and courts
- Enable remote filing and hearing options where feasible
- Establish witness protection measures administered through district administrations, including confidentiality safeguards and temporary relocation assistance

### 3.3 Inheritance Justice and Responding to the Women's Affairs Reform Commission (WARC)

The WARC report usefully documents patterns of violence and institutional weakness. However, its emphasis on legal redesign, particularly proposals to rewrite inheritance rules to depart from Quranic injunctions, has not only proven divisive, but it does not in fact align with the empirical evidence on how deprivation actually occurs.

Research consistently shows that women are denied lawful inheritance primarily through coercion, forged documents, and corruption within land administration – not because the law is unclear (Barkat et al., Deprivation of Inheritance Rights of Women in Bangladesh; Transparency International Bangladesh, Land Sector Diagnostics).

The core problem is therefore enforcement failure, not legal ambiguity. Rewriting inheritance law risks creating further confusion while leaving the real mechanisms of deprivation intact. At the same time, it acts to undermine the legitimacy of the legal framework in the eyes of the public, resulting in even less power to enforce. If women lose inheritance through administrative abuse and criminal practices, reform must respond by targeting land governance, documentation, and prosecution. This approach is far more likely to garner broad-based political support than doctrinal change.

#### *Recommendations*

- Introduce criminal penalties for denial of lawful inheritance

- Mandate digital registration of inheritance transfers
- Establish specialised benches within family courts for inheritance disputes
- Link public legal awareness directly to dispute resolution and litigation pathways

### **3.4 Women and Economic Activity: A Protective Framework**

Labour Force Survey data show that safety concerns and harassment are major reasons women exit employment (BBS Labour Force Survey 2016–17). Women do not leave work because of lack of motivation, but because workplaces and transport environments expose them to risk.

Policy should therefore focus on protection above participation expansion. The goal is not to engineer labour force outcomes, but to ensure that women who choose to engage in economic activity can do so without intimidation, exploitation, or harm. If women cannot work due to insecurity, reform must prioritise safety, accountability, and regulatory simplicity.

#### *Recommendations*

- Enforce mandatory workplace harassment committees under Labour Rules 2015 with external reporting obligations
- Conduct Safety audits of transport routes serving industrial zones, coordinated by local government authorities
- Simplify licensing and tax compliance for home-based enterprises through single-window registration

### **3.5 Media, Digital Harm, and Public Ethics**

Media monitoring organisations report widespread online harassment and sexualised content targeting women (Media Watch Bangladesh; TIB Digital Safety Reports). Enforcement of existing laws remains inconsistent.

#### *Recommendations*

- Assign specialised prosecutors within cybercrime tribunals to handle online harassment, blackmail, and image-based abuse, ensuring faster case processing.
- Require major social media platforms operating in Bangladesh to:
  - Establish local compliance points of contact
  - Respond to law enforcement requests within fixed timelines
  - Maintain transparent reporting mechanisms for abuse
- Issue prosecutorial guidelines clarifying thresholds for enforcement of obscenity and defamation laws to avoid arbitrariness while ensuring deterrence.
- Strengthen existing broadcast regulatory bodies to enforce standards on objectification of women, with penalties for repeated violations.

## 4. Religious Minorities: Equal Citizenship, Security, and Social Trust

Religious minorities in Bangladesh, including Hindus, Buddhists and Christians, are an integral part of the nation's social and historical fabric. Their inclusion is not a concession or special accommodation, but a matter of equal citizenship and public trust. Ensuring their security and dignity is a moral obligation, as well as being essential to social cohesion and confidence in public institutions.

### 4.1 Understanding Violence Among Religious Minorities in Bangladesh

Incidents involving religious minorities in Bangladesh are frequently portrayed abroad as evidence of a general culture persecution. However, analysis of police records, Home Ministry briefings, and independent reporting suggests a more complex reality. The majority of violent incidents involving minorities are localised and opportunistic, and linked to land disputes, electoral tensions, or criminal activity. They are often triggered during periods of political instability or social unrest.

This does not diminish the seriousness of such incidents. Even isolated attacks have profound psychological and symbolic effects, particularly when state response is delayed or unclear. However, mischaracterisation of these incidents as uniformly sectarian can obscure effective policy responses and inflame tensions.

Religious minorities are not systematically subject to attacks in Bangladesh, but when violence occurs, they are more vulnerable because they have fewer informal protection networks, are more easily targeted through rumours, and are more easily subject to collective punishment. The core problem facing Bangladeshi minorities is thus not sectarian hate, but vulnerability and the lack of speed, clarity, and credibility in the state's response.

### 4.2 Law Enforcement and Communication

The primary weaknesses in minority protection lie in:

- Delayed law enforcement response, allowing rumours and retaliation to spread
- Weak investigation and prosecution, leading to low conviction rates
- Administrative inertia in property disputes, particularly involving minority landholders
- Poor public communication, creating space for misinformation

Studies by Transparency International Bangladesh and the Centre for Governance Studies have repeatedly highlighted the role of land administration corruption and political patronage in disputes affecting minority communities.

#### *Recommendations*

An effective minority protection strategy should prioritise certainty, speed, and neutrality.

- **Rapid Response and Investigation:** Every district should maintain a standing rapid response protocol for incidents affecting religious minorities. This should include

immediate police deployment, magistrate oversight, and preservation of evidence within the first 24 hours.

- **Dedicated Investigation Teams:** Where attacks involve religious sites or appear targeted, investigation should be assigned to designated officers trained in handling sensitive cases. This improves quality of evidence and signals seriousness.
- **Public Communication Protocols:** District administrations should issue verified public statements promptly, clearly distinguishing criminal acts from communal conflict. This reduces panic and prevents escalation.
- **Protection of Religious Sites:** Local administrations should maintain updated registers of vulnerable religious sites and provide temporary security during festivals or periods of heightened tension, based on risk assessment rather than permanent militarisation.

#### 4.3 Public Order Failures and Mob Violence

Sporadic incidents, including a rare mob lynching of a Hindu man in Mymensingh District in December 2025 following unverified allegations of blasphemy, highlight failures in crowd control and police response. While such cases are not common, they are deeply destabilising and must be prevented.

Policy must clearly establish that only courts determine guilt, and that vigilante justice is a serious criminal offence. Allegations of blasphemy or insult must trigger police protection of the accused, not punishment. If an attack takes place despite police efforts to prevent it, the state must focus not only on arrests but also on restoring confidence.

##### *Recommendations*

- Issue national police directives on handling blasphemy allegations
- Rapid deployment crowd-control units for rumour-triggered unrest
- Immediate arrests for mob violence organisers
- Public messaging campaigns on due process and rule of law

#### 4.4 Property Rights and Land Disputes

Land dispossession remains one of the most persistent grievances among religious minorities, particularly Hindu communities, who often lack the power networks to resist encroachment. Research shows that disputes often arise from forged records, old undocumented landholdings, exploitation of legal complexity in inheritance histories, weak administrative protection and political interference in land offices.

##### *Recommendations*

- Accelerate processing of restitution claims under existing laws
- Implement digitisation and verification of land records in minority-concentrated areas
- Create dedicated land dispute resolution cells with time-bound decisions
- Take disciplinary action against officials found complicit in illegal transfers

## 5. Ethnic Minorities and Region-Specific Inclusion

Ethnic minority communities in Bangladesh, prominently including those in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) face historical socio-economic and land rights challenges. Their vulnerability is driven primarily by administrative absence, legal invisibility, and unresolved land governance failures which are exploited by more powerful groups.

In many minority-inhabited regions, the state is physically present but institutionally weak. Government and civil society sources report that institutional mechanisms such as the CHT Land Dispute Resolution Commission have been largely inactive or ineffective, with CHT Peace Accord remains unimplemented in many respects including land dispute resolution and rehabilitation.

This produces a situation where ethnic minority communities are neither fully protected nor meaningfully governed. Prolonged administrative neglect does not preserve autonomy; instead, it exposes communities to land loss, exploitation by intermediaries, informal power brokers, and unresolved conflict. These failures compound historical grievances and create conditions where disputes persist for decades without resolution.

The objective of inclusion is equal access to protection, justice, and public services, not cultural homogenisation or symbolic recognition. Effective governance must respect local identity while ensuring that every citizen can rely on the same legal and administrative protections. This requires institutional presence, legal clarity, and service delivery, not parallel systems or excessive securitisation.

### 5.1 Land and Legal Insecurity

Land dispossession remains the single most persistent source of grievance among ethnic minorities. In the Chittagong Hill Tracts, overlapping authority between the Ministry of Land, Hill District Councils, the CHT Land Dispute Resolution Commission, and traditional institutions has produced legal paralysis. According to the CHT Commission, fewer than 10% of the more than 22,000 land disputes submitted to the Land Commission had been resolved as of 2022.<sup>25</sup>

Studies on social inclusion indicate that remote ethnic minority communities often face lower access to civil registration and formal documentation relative to national averages. Without legal identity, access to justice and services remains largely illusory.<sup>26</sup>

#### *Recommendations*

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<sup>25</sup> Nur Ahmed. "The Recurrence Of Security Challenges In Chittagong Hill Tracts (Cht): Exploring Root Causes." BIISS Journal. Vol. 46, No. 1. 2025. 11-31.

<sup>26</sup> European Union Agency for Asylum, '8.2.1. General information' in *COI Report - Bangladesh: Country Focus*, August 2025.

- Establish time-bound land adjudication teams in CHT and minority-concentrated districts with a mandate to resolve cases within 6–12 months
- Require all land decisions to be publicly posted
- Digitise land records in minority areas within 3 years
- Mandate disciplinary action for officials involved in illegal land transfers
- Deploy mobile civil registration units quarterly in minority regions
- Create a “one-visit registration model” where families can complete all documentation in a single interaction

## 5.2 Administrative Capacity in Minority Areas

Many minority villages are hours from courts, police stations, and health centres. Sub-district offices are understaffed, under-trained, and lack continuity. Language barriers reduce effective communication with officials.

### *Recommendations*

- Rather than creating new authorities, focus investment on strengthening district and sub-district administrations in minority areas, including staffing, interpreters, training, and infrastructure.
- Create minority-area staffing incentives for experienced officers
- Require minimum service tenure in CHT, tea-garden, and northern regions
- Upgrade courts, police posts, and health centres in priority zones

## 5.3 Community Consultation

Minority communities lack structured channels to raise concerns. Ethnic minorities are under-represented in local administrations. Informal brokers often mediate disputes, reducing trust in the state. Both over-securitisation or neglect undermines confidence in institutions.

### *Recommendations*

- Establish structured consultation forums to allow community representatives to raise concerns directly with local administrations, reducing reliance on informal or politicised channels.
- Require written follow-up from administrations on issues raised, integrating community feedback into performance evaluations
- Train police in conflict de-escalation and local context, assigning long-term officers to build trust
- Deploy rapid mediation teams during land or political disputes

## 6. Ministry of Social Welfare Reform

### 6.1 Strategic Role and Programme Alignment

The Ministry of Social Welfare has a wide statutory mandate covering social assistance, disability services, rehabilitation, and support for marginalised populations. In practice, this breadth has produced diffuse priorities, overlapping programmes, and weak alignment with the institutions responsible for protection and justice.

Public expenditure reviews and audit findings show that many Ministry schemes operate in parallel with – rather than in coordination with – police, courts, and legal aid systems. As a result, social protection spending has limited impact on violence prevention, dispute resolution, or the restoration of trust among vulnerable populations.

The Ministry's comparative advantage is not in running a large number of disconnected welfare schemes, but in serving as the institutional connector between vulnerable communities and the justice, health, and protection systems. Instead of reinforcing enforcement and accountability, many current programmes duplicate functions or deliver symbolic assistance without addressing root causes of harm.

Victims of violence, dispossession, or displacement often encounter a fragmented system in which no single agency ensures follow-through. The absence of a coordinating authority leads to dropped cases, repeated trauma, and loss of confidence in public institutions. The Ministry is therefore best positioned to play a central coordination role rather than a dispersed delivery role.

#### *Recommendations*

- Refocus the Ministry's role around three core functions:
  - Identifying populations at heightened risk of violence, dispossession, or exclusion
  - Coordinating services across police, courts, health, and legal aid systems
  - Monitoring outcomes related to safety, justice access, and reintegration
- Conduct a full consolidation review of all Ministry programmes within 12 months, with authority to:
  - Merge overlapping programmes
  - Discontinue low-impact initiatives
  - Redirect savings toward high-impact protection functions
- Prioritise funding toward:
  - Legal aid
  - Shelter and victim support services
  - Rehabilitation linked to justice outcomes
  - Community mediation and ADR in land and family disputes

- Establish District Social Protection Coordination Cells linking social welfare officers, police, legal aid committees, and health services.
- Issue standard referral, tracking, and follow-up protocols so no case ends without resolution or handover.

#### **6.4 Accountability, Monitoring, and Partnership Reform**

The Ministry lacks a consistent framework for measuring whether its interventions improve safety, justice access, or reintegration outcomes. This weakens both internal management and public accountability. At the same time, partnerships with NGOs and development partners are often project-driven and input-oriented, limiting their contribution to systemic protection.

Without outcome measurement, the Ministry cannot distinguish between programmes that reduce harm and those that merely consume resources.

##### *Recommendations*

- Shift programme evaluation from spending and coverage, to protection and resolution outcomes.
- Track outcomes at district level and reviewed quarterly at national level using indicators such as.
  - Number of cases successfully linked to police protection, courts, or legal aid
  - Time from referral to service delivery
  - Victim safety and reintegration outcomes
  - Beneficiary satisfaction and trust
- Shift to performance-based contracts with NGOs which are audited for impact and whose outcomes are reported publicly.
- Focus partnerships on community legal aid, mediation and ADR, rehabilitation and reintegration, and awareness linked to enforcement.

## **7. Phasing Reform**

### **7.1 First 100 Days**

- Issue prosecutorial directives making sexual violence, child abuse, and mob violence priority offences with strict timelines for charge filing and trial scheduling
- Designate fast-track dockets in all district courts for sexual and domestic violence cases
- Establish minority incident rapid-response protocols in every district, with 24-hour deployment rules
- Reallocate legal aid funding toward violence, inheritance, and land-dispute cases
- Mandate FIR registration audits by divisional police headquarters

- Issue hospital directives enforcing standard medico-legal protocols for sexual assault cases

### **7.2 First 2 Years**

- Implement police and judicial training programmes focused on sexual offences, land disputes, and minority-sensitive investigations
- Roll out national digital case-tracking systems linking police, prosecutors, courts, and legal aid
- Establish District Social Protection Coordination Cells under the Ministry of Social Welfare
- Complete Ministry of Social Welfare programme consolidation and mandate refocusing
- Launch mobile civil registration and land documentation units in minority regions
- Digitise land records in CHT, tea-garden, and erosion-prone northern districts
- Introduce outcome-based monitoring for social protection and NGO partnerships

### **7.3 First 5 Years**

- Achieve full integration of protection, justice, and social services through interoperable data systems
- Reduce average case duration for sexual violence and land disputes by at least 50% from baseline
- Establish permanent land adjudication mechanisms in minority regions with time-bound resolution
- Institutionalise community consultation forums at district and upazila levels
- Embed performance-based contracts and audits across all Ministry of Social Welfare partnerships

## **Conclusion**

This paper has argued that inclusion is a matter of protection, justice, and trust. For women, religious minorities, and ethnic minority communities, the central challenge in Bangladesh is not the absence of legislation or policy declarations, but the uneven application of law, weak or culturally sensitive administration, and failures of enforcement that leave individuals exposed to harm.

The reforms proposed here prioritise enforcement over symbolism, coordination over fragmentation, and outcomes over inputs. They aim to strengthen families and communities, restore confidence in public authority, and ensure that no citizen is left exposed to violence, dispossession, or administrative exclusion. By focusing on effective institutions, clear authority, and accountable governance, Bangladesh can support inclusion in a manner that reinforces social harmony, respects diversity, and supports a stable and confident future.

# Media

## Supporting Media Independence and Integrity

### Summary

- Bangladesh's media sector is large and diverse, but structurally vulnerable. Political capture, financial dependence, legal threats, and selective enforcement create incentives for self-censorship. Independent and digital-first journalists face disproportionate risks, while public broadcasting, government advertising, and content regulation are prone to misuse or overreach.
- Reform must focus on structural safeguards, not content management. The goal is not to control media output, but to protect the conditions under which independent, credible, and plural reporting can flourish.
- Journalist protection is central. Legal and procedural reforms should remove criminal liability for lawful reporting, restrict frivolous prosecutions, introduce judicial oversight of enforcement, and provide emergency legal, financial, and security support for journalists and media personnel.
- While protecting journalists from political and financial pressure, the policy also addresses the structural problem of irresponsible reporting by some journalists and media owners, which undermines trust and amplifies false narratives.
- Government influence through advertising and public broadcasting must be limited. Transparent, rule-based allocation of government advertising, consolidation and narrowing of public broadcasting mandates, and clear disclosure of media ownership and interests will reduce incentives for loyalty-driven reporting.
- Content regulation and digital media oversight must be proportionate. Criminal defamation and broadly defined cyber offences should be repealed, replaced with civil remedies, right-of-reply mechanisms, and judicial oversight for digital takedowns, while safeguarding lawful political speech.



## 1. Introduction

A free and independent media is essential to any functioning political system. It enables citizens to access information, hold power to account, and participate meaningfully in public life. In Bangladesh, as in many young and contested democracies, the media has played this role unevenly. Periods of pluralism and vibrancy have often been followed by phases of pressure, capture, and fear. The result is a media sector that remains energetic and diverse, but also vulnerable to political power and, in some cases, to the actions of journalists or media owners themselves.

This paper begins from a simple but demanding premise: media policy should be designed for bad governments, not good ones. In other words, institutions and laws must be robust against abuse even when those in power act in bad faith. Good intentions are not enough. Any power granted to the Bangladeshi state over media, whether through licensing, regulation, funding, or law enforcement, may eventually be tested by a government that seeks to control criticism and reward loyalty. At the same time, policy must recognise that irresponsible journalism, commercial incentives, and editorial failure can also undermine public trust and distort reporting. A serious media policy must therefore focus both on restraining state power and promoting accountability within the media sector itself.

We propose a national media policy framework that reduces the risk of political capture, strengthens protection for journalists and media actors, and encourages accountability for professional conduct. These are the three most urgent challenges facing the sector. Capture occurs when media outlets, consciously or unconsciously, align their reporting with the interests of the governing party due to legal threats, financial dependence, or informal pressure. Retaliation occurs when journalists are targeted through lawsuits, arrests, surveillance, economic exclusion, or violence for doing their work. Irresponsible reporting occurs when journalists or media owners amplify unverified information, prioritise vested interests, or fail to maintain ethical standards. All three dynamics undermine public trust and weaken democratic accountability.

The policy approach advanced here is guided by four principles:

1. **Restraint:** the state should exercise the minimum necessary control over media.
2. **Transparency:** where the state does interact with media, especially through funding and advertising, those interactions must be open, rule-based, and visible to the public.
3. **Procedure:** decisions that affect speech and press freedom must pass through clear, judicially reviewable processes rather than discretionary or administrative fiat.
4. **Decentralisation:** media freedom is more resilient when power is dispersed across many actors rather than concentrated in a few institutions.

This framework also recognises that the media environment has changed. While legacy newspapers and broadcasters still matter, digital platforms, online news sites, and individual

creators now shape much of public debate. Policy must therefore move beyond narrow definitions of “journalist” and avoid regulatory models designed for a past era. At the same time, the rise of digital media does not remove the risk of capture or misconduct; it changes its form. Financial leverage, legal intimidation, control over infrastructure, and irresponsible reporting remain powerful challenges.

The sections that follow examine the current media landscape in Bangladesh, drawing on available data and public opinion evidence. They then address, in turn, the main areas where reform is needed: preventing political capture, protecting journalists, improving accountability, limiting regulatory overreach, defining a narrow and defensible role for public broadcasting, and approaching digital platforms with caution and respect for free expression.

The goal is to create a resilient system: a media order that can survive political pressure, bad faith, and changing technology without collapsing into fear, bias, or recklessness. In a country where power has too often flowed in one direction, the task of media policy is not to manage speech, but to protect it and ensure it serves the public interest.

## 2. The Media Landscape in Bangladesh

Bangladesh’s media ecosystem is large, diverse, and rapidly changing. It includes legacy print newspapers, private television and radio broadcasters, state-owned outlets, online news portals, social media platforms, and a growing class of independent digital creators. While traditional outlets still play an agenda-setting role, much of everyday political communication now takes place online, especially among younger and urban audiences.

Print media continues to have influence among political elites and opinion leaders, but circulation has declined steadily. Television remains the most widely consumed source of news nationwide, especially outside major cities. At the same time, Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, and independent news websites have become primary gateways to information for millions of citizens. These platforms are not simply distribution channels; they increasingly shape what news is seen, shared, and trusted.

Ownership in the legacy media sector is highly concentrated and often linked to large business groups with political ties. Cross-ownership between media, construction, banking, and industrial firms creates structural conflicts of interest. Editorial lines are frequently shaped not only by ideology but by business incentives and regulatory exposure. This makes the sector particularly vulnerable to indirect political control through licensing, taxation, legal action, and advertising pressure.

Public trust in media is fragile and uneven. The National Media Opinion Survey 2025 shows deep public scepticism about media independence: 79.5% of respondents identified political

interference as a major obstacle to press freedom, 71.5% pointed to government control, and 50.1% to the influence of powerful individuals and business interests. Only 17.3% of respondents believe the media enjoys complete freedom, while nearly half say journalists cannot report freely. Trust tends to be higher in small independent outlets and individual journalists than in large television networks or state-affiliated media, which are widely seen as aligned with those in power.

State-owned media remain widely accessible but are perceived as closely aligned with the government of the day. This creates a paradox: the state has strong communication tools, but weak persuasion power. Audiences consume public media for information, but rarely trust it for independent judgment.

Digital media has partly filled the credibility gap. Independent news portals, YouTube channels, and social media journalists often break stories that legacy outlets avoid. However, these actors operate in a legally precarious environment. Many lack formal protection, institutional backing, or financial stability. They are more exposed to legal harassment, takedown requests, demonetisation, and physical threats. At the same time, the speed and scale of digital communication also increase the risk of misinformation, reputational harm, and mob pressure.

The overall picture is a media system that is plural in form but constrained in practice. There are many outlets, but limited independence. There is wide reach, but low trust. There is vibrant digital activity, but weak protection. These conditions make the sector highly sensitive to political shifts. A government that wishes to dominate the information space does not need to shut down media; it only needs to redirect money, apply selective law enforcement, and create fear.

Any serious media policy must start from this reality. The problem is not simply a lack of regulation or a lack of institutions. It is the interaction between political power, economic dependence, and legal vulnerability. The sections that follow focus on how to reduce these structural weaknesses rather than manage content or police opinion.

### 3. Preventing Political Capture of the Media

#### 3.1 Analysis and Argument

Political capture occurs when media institutions, though formally independent, align in practice with the interests of the governing party, undermining press freedom and public trust. This rarely requires outright censorship; instead, it emerges from legal pressure, financial dependence, regulatory discretion, and fear. Selective reporting, softened stories, or delays are often sufficient to achieve compliance.

In Bangladesh, capture has operated through several overlapping channels:

- **Regulatory leverage.** Licensing, renewals, and permissions are often discretionary and slow. When approval depends on administrative goodwill, editors and owners learn to anticipate political reactions before publishing sensitive material.
- **Financial patronage.** Government advertising is one of the largest single sources of revenue for many outlets. When this spending is discretionary and opaque, it becomes a powerful tool of reward and punishment. Outlets that support the government are favoured; critical ones are excluded. This encourages compliance without the need for formal bans. Corporate partnerships tied to political loyalty further reinforce dependence.
- **Ownership concentration:** Cross-ownership between media, industrial, and commercial groups creates structural conflicts of interest. Editorial lines are shaped by business incentives and regulatory exposure.

Public opinion data confirms that political capture is not an abstract concern but a lived reality. When nearly four in five citizens identify political interference as the main barrier to press freedom, and fewer than one in five believe the media is truly free, the issue is not misperception but institutional design. These figures reflect a system in which journalists and editors operate under constant legal, financial, and regulatory pressure. In such an environment, self-censorship becomes rational. Capture does not require formal censorship; it emerges when the incentives of survival reward loyalty and punish independence.

Capture no longer requires owning every outlet. In a digital environment, shaping incentives through fear of legal retaliation, advertising cuts, or regulatory harassment is often enough to discipline the system.

A resilient policy must therefore aim to reduce discretion, increase transparency, shift enforcement from administrative power to judicial process, and break the link between political loyalty and financial survival. The goal is not to make governments behave well, but to make it hard for them to behave badly.

### 3.2 Recommendations

#### *Licensing Powers*

- Replace open-ended licensing and renewal authority with automatic, rule-based systems.
- Set clear, objective criteria and time limits for all media-related approvals.
- Make silence by the regulator within a fixed period count as approval.

#### *Patronage through Government Advertising*

- Mandate quarterly public disclosure of:
  - Total government advertising spend
  - Which outlets received funds
  - Amounts paid

- Campaign purposes
- Audience metrics used
- Allocate government advertising based on transparent, published audience data and reach, not political loyalty.
- Prohibit ministers, MPs, or political offices from influencing ad placement decisions.
- Establish a single public advertising portal; audit spending annually via the Comptroller & Auditor-General.
- Set legal limits on total government advertising as a share of the national communications budget, with parliamentary approval required for any exceptional increases.

#### *Ownership and Interest Disclosure*

- Mandate full public disclosure of beneficial ownership, political positions, and major commercial interests of media owners, updated and published annually.

## 4. Protecting Media Personnel

### 4.1 Analysis

Protecting journalists from physical threats, harassment, and intimidation is essential to maintain a free and independent media. Without protection, reporters, especially independent and digital-first journalists, face constraints that limit public accountability.

Survey data confirm the scale of these threats. Ain o Salish Kendra reported that at least 381 journalists faced abuse or harassment nationwide in 2025, including physical attacks and legal cases. According to a 2025 survey of 201 journalists by Digitally Right, 89% expect physical threats, 76% expect verbal harassment, 71% fear intimidation, and more than 90% identify political actors as the main source of that threat.

Social media creators and independent online reporters lack institutional backing. They face risks including account suspension, content takedowns, and harassment campaigns, while operating under unclear or overbroad legal frameworks.

These risks are structural, creating incentives for self-censorship and constraining independent reporting.

### 4.2 Recommendations

- Establish a dedicated fund to provide immediate and confidential legal, financial, and security assistance to journalists under threat.
- Support professional associations to deliver safety, ethics, and digital security workshops, especially for those working outside major newsrooms.
- Create independent channels for journalists to report harassment, intimidation, or threats without fear of retaliation.

- Protect individuals engaged in journalistic activity regardless of formal accreditation or institutional affiliation.

## 5. Content Regulation and Digital Platforms

### 5.1 Analysis

Content regulation is one of the most easily abused levers of political control. Broad criminal provisions under the Digital Security Act (2018) and Cyber Security Act (2023), along with frivolous defamation suits, create legal uncertainty and encourage self-censorship. Current laws intended to prevent misinformation, hate speech, or defamation are often broad, vague, or inconsistently applied, giving regulators and governments discretionary power that can chill legitimate reporting while failing to address real misinformation. Frivolous defamation suits and selective prosecution create uncertainty and encourage self-censorship.

Digital platforms such as social media networks, messaging apps, and independent online news sites have become central to public debate in Bangladesh. They provide new avenues for political communication, investigative reporting, and citizen engagement, especially for younger and urban populations. However, they also present unique risks:

- **Gatekeeping and algorithmic bias:** Platforms' proprietary algorithms determine what content is seen or promoted, shaping attention and influencing public opinion.
- **Misinformation and harmful content:** Rapid spread of false or misleading content can have real-world consequences; a 2024 Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) survey found that roughly 64% of Bangladeshis are acutely aware of fake news on social media and messaging apps.
- **Platform-level enforcement:** Account suspensions, takedowns, and demonetisation often occur without clear procedures or judicial oversight, creating uncertainty and exposing creators to political or commercial pressure.

In short, current legal frameworks create more incentives for self-censorship than they solve misinformation problems. Effective reform must protect journalists while creating limited, transparent, and enforceable remedies for harm.

### 5.2 Recommendations

#### *From Administrative to Judicial Enforcement*

- Remove the power of regulators and ministries to initiate criminal proceedings against media actors.
- Require all enforcement actions affecting speech to go through courts with written reasons and appeal rights.

#### *Defamation: From Criminalisation to Civil Remedies*

- Repeal criminal defamation provisions and replace them with civil remedies, allowing individuals or entities to sue media outlets for damages in civil court.

- Introduce a mandatory right-of-reply and correction mechanism to address factual errors without criminalising speech.
- Impose limits on civil defamation damages to prevent financially crippling claims.
- Require fast-track dismissal for strategic litigation against public participation (SLAPP) cases to protect legitimate reporting.

#### *Legal and Procedural Protections*

- Remove criminal liability for reporting that is lawful and in the public interest.
- Require a judicial warrant before any media-related arrest; senior prosecutor approval must precede charges.
- Introduce sanctions for government or private actors who file retaliatory or frivolous defamation suits.
- Shift most media-related complaints to civil courts to avoid criminalisation of reporting.

#### *Digital Content Oversight*

- Narrowly define digital takedown procedures and require judicial approval where takedowns affect public debate or news reporting.
- Encourage voluntary transparency reports from online platforms while protecting lawful political speech.
- Protect independent creators from arbitrary platform enforcement, suspension, or demonetisation.

#### *Education and Training*

- Provide training for journalists on avoiding defamation, verifying sources, and mitigating misinformation risks.
- Educate judges and prosecutors on media law to ensure consistent, fair application.
- Promote public campaigns to improve digital literacy and critical evaluation of online content.

#### *International Cooperation*

- Engage with global platforms and regulators to share best practices, enforce transparency standards, and ensure consistent protections for digital media actors.

## **6. Journalistic Standards and Accountability**

### **6.1 Analysis**

While much of this policy focuses on protecting journalists from political or economic pressure, there is also a structural problem arising from the conduct of some journalists and media owners themselves. The National Media Opinion Survey 2025 indicates that:

- 26.4% of respondents perceive journalists as serving vested interests rather than the public.

- 59.9% emphasise the need for impartial and unbiased reporting.
- 47.2% report that structural and operational constraints limit the accuracy and objectivity of news.

In practice, this manifests in several ways:

- **Financial incentive-driven reporting:** Some outlets or journalists prioritise revenue, political patronage, or exclusive access over factual accuracy. Stories are shaped by domestic or foreign interests, sometimes amplifying misinformation.
- **Unverified sources:** Reliance on secretive or anonymous sources – often from government, intelligence, or overseas actors – creates a false sense of authority, encouraging speculative or misleading reporting.
- **Editorial failure:** Leadership at certain media organisations often fails to enforce ethical or professional standards, leaving sensationalism, bias, or errors unchecked.
- **False narratives and self-aggrandisement:** Journalists may see themselves as gatekeepers of national interest, leading to overconfidence and underestimation of errors' consequences.

While by no means universal, but it is a serious structural flaw that undermines public trust and amplifies misinformation. Effective reform must therefore support journalists' independence while promoting accountability and ethical reporting.

## 6.2 Recommendations

### *Professional Standards and Ethics*

- Require media organisations to adopt publicly available codes of ethics and editorial guidelines.
- Encourage independent editorial boards or ombudsmen to review complaints about bias or inaccuracies.
- Recognise and reward outlets that demonstrate consistent, verifiable, and impartial reporting through accreditation or public commendations.

### *Verification and Source Management*

- Establish voluntary source verification protocols for investigative reporting.
- Train journalists on fact-checking, verification, and risk assessment for using confidential or unverified sources.
- Promote transparency in reporting: clearly label anonymous or unverified sources in published content.

### *Accountability Mechanisms*

- Introduce internal complaint procedures at media organisations allowing readers to challenge inaccurate or misleading reporting.
- Encourage industry-led peer review and audits of reporting quality, with published results.

### *Public Awareness and Media Literacy*

- Support campaigns and training that help citizens recognise responsible journalism and differentiate it from biased, incentivised reporting.
- Encourage independent research on media quality, ethics, and the prevalence of interest-driven reporting to inform ongoing reforms.

## 7. Redefining Public Broadcasting

### 7.1 Analysis

State-run media – Bangladesh Television (BTV), Bangladesh Betar, and Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha (BSS) – reach wide audiences, especially in rural areas. However, they are structurally vulnerable to political capture. Even with an independent charter, state ownership and budgetary dependence make them susceptible to influence from the ruling party, often shaping editorial lines to reflect government priorities rather than independent public-interest journalism.

Private media now cover most general news and commercial content, reducing the need for public broadcasters to compete with private outlets. The key question is not whether public broadcasting should provide all types of content, but where markets underprovide. This includes:

- Local democracy coverage and civic reporting in regions underserved by private media.
- Election coverage with impartial reporting and procedural transparency.
- Minority language programming to ensure inclusion of underrepresented groups.
- International-facing English news to support Bangladesh's soft power and provide authoritative information abroad.

Funding is a central concern. Public broadcasters financed through annual discretionary budget allocations are highly exposed to political pressure. Multi-year statutory funding and protections from ministerial control are essential to ensure operational independence. At the same time, commercial competition with private outlets should be limited to prevent crowding out independent media and introducing new vectors of financial capture.

International experience shows that narrowly defined mandates, insulated budgets, and transparent governance can reduce risks of capture. Broad mandates or profit-oriented missions, by contrast, make public broadcasters political tools rather than public services.

### 6.2 Recommendations

#### *Mandate and Scope*

- Limit public broadcasting to:
  - Local democracy and civic reporting
  - Election coverage

- Minority language programming
- International-facing English-language news

*Funding and Budgetary Protection*

- Provide multi-year statutory budget allocations.
- Insulate funding from ministerial discretion; transfers should require parliamentary approval.
- Prohibit public broadcasters from competing commercially with private media for advertising or subscription revenue.

*Governance and Oversight*

- Establish an independent board with members drawn from civil society, academia, and professional journalism, appointed through a transparent process.
- Require annual reporting to Parliament on performance, audience reach, and editorial independence metrics.
- Implement a clear, written charter defining editorial independence, accountability, and operational procedures.

*Capacity and Outreach*

- Invest in rural and minority language programming to reach under-served populations.
- Support training programs to ensure high-quality, impartial reporting.

## 8. Budgetary Implications

This section estimates current public expenditure related to the media sector and the fiscal impact of the proposed reforms. The reform package is designed to remain within the existing budget envelope by reallocating spending from inefficient or politically driven uses toward transparency, protection, and institutional resilience.

### 8.1 Estimated Current Public Expenditure on Media-Related Functions

Category	Components	Est. Annual Spending (Tk bn)
State Broadcasting and News Agencies	BTV (3.2), Betar (2.0), BSS (0.4)	<b>5.6</b>
Government Advertising and Public Communication	Approx. 70% of Tk 20 bn industry	<b>14.0</b>
Ministry of Information and Broadcasting	Policy, administration, public comms, media-related functions	<b>11.0</b>
<b>Total Estimated Media-Related Public Spending</b>		<b>30.6</b> <b>(=0.06% of GDP)</b>

*Note: There is no consolidated budget line for media spending. These figures are derived from published agency allocations, ministry budgets, and sector estimates.*

## 8.2 Fiscal Impact of the Reform Programme

### New Annual Reform Costs

Reform Area	Estimated Cost (Tk bn/year)
Journalist Protection and Legal Support	0.3 – 0.5
Transparency and Oversight Infrastructure	0.2 – 0.3
Streamlined Media Oversight Unit	0.2 – 0.3
<b>Total New Costs</b>	<b>0.7 – 1.1</b>

### Annual Savings from Reform

Reform Area	Estimated Savings (Tk bn/year)
Public Broadcasting Streamlining	1.2 – 2.4
Government Advertising Rationalisation	2.5 – 3.5
Reduced Enforcement & Litigation	0.3 – 0.6
<b>Total Savings</b>	<b>4.0 – 6.5</b>

## 8.3 Net Budget Effect

- New Costs: Tk 0.7–1.1 bn/year
- Savings: Tk 4.0–6.5 bn/year
- **Net Fiscal Space Created: Tk 3.0–5.4 bn per year** (=0.01% of GDP / 10-15% of current media-related public spending)

## 9. Phasing Reform

Reforms should be implemented in stages to balance urgency with feasibility, delivering immediate impact while building long-term institutional resilience.

### 9.1 First 100 Days

- Launch the public advertising portal and ownership registry; begin quarterly publication of government-media financial flows.
- Introduce judicial warrant requirements for media-related arrests and senior prosecutor approval for charges; shift routine cases from criminal to civil courts.
- Establish emergency reporting channels and support mechanisms for at-risk journalists; initiate legal and digital safety training programs.

## 9.2 First 2 Years

- Consolidate BTV, Betar, and BSS; narrow remit to core functions (local democracy, elections, minority languages, international-facing English news); implement multi-year budget allocations.
- Create the streamlined media oversight unit with rule-based enforcement powers and minimal discretionary authority.
- Scale up journalist training on defamation, fact-checking, and digital safety; provide ongoing judicial and prosecutor education on media law.
- Establish a voluntary code of conduct for media organisations; incentivize compliance through recognition, professional accreditation, and access to institutional support.

## 9.3 First 5 Years

- Conduct periodic assessments of media independence, government advertising efficiency, and journalist safety; adjust policies based on evidence and emerging risks.
- Introduce transparency reporting requirements for major online platforms and review civil dispute mechanisms for emerging technologies.
- Codify transparency, procedural safeguards, and oversight standards into law to protect reforms from political reversal.

## 10. Conclusion

Bangladesh's media sector is vibrant but structurally vulnerable. Political capture, financial dependence, legal threats, and occasional lapses in journalistic ethics have created an environment where self-censorship is often rational, and journalists, especially independent and digital-first actors, face significant risks. At the same time, content regulation and public broadcasting are prone to misuse, while government advertising can incentivise compliance rather than quality reporting. Irresponsible reporting, amplified by unverified sources, commercial incentives, and editorial failures, further undermines public trust and the quality of public debate.

The reforms outlined in this paper focus on limiting discretion, increasing transparency, protecting journalists, improving accountability, rationalising public broadcasting, and strengthening oversight of digital platforms. Measures to encourage responsible journalism, enforce professional standards, and hold media actors accountable are integrated alongside protections for independent reporting.

The goal is not to micromanage media content, but to safeguard the conditions under which independent, ethical, and credible reporting can flourish. A resilient media sector strengthens public trust, supports accountability, and underpins the democratic process. By focusing on structural safeguards, professional standards, and ethical conduct, rather than political convenience, Bangladesh can create a media environment that protects speech, encourages professionalism, and withstands the pressures of political and commercial influence.