



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

# What will happen on October 28?



MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

THE STREET VIEW

Mohammad Al-Masum Molla is chief reporter at The Daily Star.

The most frequently asked questions right now in Bangladesh are all regarding BNP's scheduled rally on October 28, which is slated to be a major showdown. What will happen on October 28? Will BNP occupy the streets? Will the government allow BNP activists to travel to Dhaka? Will Dhaka become an isolated island, disconnected from the rest of the country as it was on December 10 last year and July 28 this year?

To be honest, no one has the answers. But there are some clues in the comments of ruling party leaders and police officials—any person who is familiar with the country's political situation is bound to fear that the situation will be dreadful. It is the task of the law enforcers to maintain law and order if anyone tries to violate them. But when law enforcers make loud pronouncements, one cannot help but wonder whether they themselves might become over-enthusiastic in their duties. The ruling party must keep in mind that they have a greater role in maintaining peace and stability. As such, their comments must be all the more tempered with moderation. It is natural that the opposition will criticise the government and will threaten to oust it through a movement. But it does not behove the government to create a confrontational situation.

When the two arch-rivals are heating up the political field, the Islamist parties—generally BNP allies—have announced plans to hold rallies and stage demonstrations on the same day. It seems all the opposition forces are becoming active ahead of the national election. We know that, although the Islamist parties don't enjoy a significantly popular support base in Bangladesh, they do become active during elections, and the small percentage of votes that they command becomes a deciding factor in our first-past-the-post electoral maths. This time it is not an exception either.

BNP has been threatening ever stronger campaigns to topple the government for quite some time. The threat was made so frequently, with predictable caveats or delays, that it has become a laughing matter. A most common threat, with suspended execution, used to be "movement after Eid," to which many would retort, "But which Eid?" This time, the opposition threatened a movement after Durga Puja, which ended on October 24. But unlike other times, BNP was quick and is set to hold a rally on October 28. The party has already asked its leaders and activists to arrive at Dhaka by that date. So, it seems that the threat of BNP's movement may no longer be a laughing matter.

The ruling party may relate to October 28 well because, 17 years ago on the same day, then Prime Minister Khaleda Zia tendered her resignation, which led the president to form a caretaker government. Awami League had declared a rally at Paltan Maidan and told its activists to show up with poles and oars. On the same day, BNP had called for a rally in front of its party office in Nayapaltan, while Jamaat had called one at the north gate of Baitul Mukarram National Mosque. In such a situation, Dhaka police had deployed around 15,000 members of the police force in the capital on October 28, prohibiting any gatherings or rallies in and around Paltan. Leaders and activists of the Awami League-led 14-party alliance clashed with those of Jamaat-e-Islami near Baitul Mukarram. Four activists of Jamaat and one of Workers' Party were killed that day, while 11 people were killed nationwide.

This time, the situation is nearly the same as 17 years ago: BNP will hold a rally in front of its Nayapaltan headquarters, Awami League is set to gather at the north gate of Baitul Mukarram, and Jamaat will meet at Shapla Chattar. Back then,

a caretaker government system was in place. The point of conflict was who would be its chief. At that time, BNP was in power. This time, Awami League is in office. We don't know what will end up happening, but given the tone of the statements being made by the political leaders and law enforcers, there are enough reasons for us to be worried, even if BNP leaders are saying that the programme will be peaceful and that they don't have any plans to occupy the streets.

Reports from Awami League meetings indicate that the party intends to put on a show of force in numbers on October 28 as well. But it does not do much to quell a serious case of nerves when one also hears the call from the leadership to arrive with sticks to the procession, harkening back the same memories from 17 years ago. The stance is perhaps more to caution BNP and to send the opposition camp a signal that Awami League will simply not let them have the streets all to themselves.

So far, it seems that nothing big will happen if BNP is allowed to hold the rally. If they were not obstructed, the rally would very likely take on mammoth proportions and fresh programmes will be announced from there. But if the programme is obstructed, then violence may erupt.

Saturday's rally is important to BNP because if it fails to create any momentum centring the rally, it will fail to build a movement to compel the government to accept their demand. The Election Commission has hinted that the election schedule may be announced mid-November. So, BNP has very little time in hand and is desperate to make the programme successful. On the other hand, if the ruling Awami League can foil the rally, it will establish its upper hand and get a morale boost to hold the election as it wishes.

With the national election just over two months away, Awami League appears to have taken on a reactive role, responding to BNP's manoeuvres on the field. It is not the first time that the ruling party is playing a reactive role, but BNP has always managed to lose its momentum. One wonders if this time will be an exception. But, even if that happens, would it not be too little too late?

# 'China never exerts pressure on any other country'

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) celebrates its 10th anniversary this year. Bangladesh was one of the first signatories to the initiative. In his conversation with Porimol Palma during a recent visit to The Daily Star, Chinese Ambassador Yao Wen shared his views on the China-Bangladesh Belt and Road cooperation and other bilateral and regional issues.

How has the journey of BRI been so far and what's its future direction?

During Chinese President Xi Jinping's historic visit to Bangladesh in 2016, the two sides signed an MoU on Strengthening Investment and Production Capacity Cooperation. Over the last seven years, China has built 12 highways, 21 bridges, and 27 power and energy projects in Bangladesh. This year, so far, the Dasherbandu Sewage Treatment Plant has been completed and put into use, and the first sections of the Dhaka Elevated Expressway and the Padma Bridge rail link were opened to traffic. In a few days, the Bangabandhu Tunnel under the Karnaphuli River will be opened as well.

At the Third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation (BRF2023) last week, President Xi Jinping announced eight major steps to boost the high-quality development of Belt and Road cooperation. The China Development Bank and the Export-Import Bank of China will each set up a RMB 350 billion (or \$50 billion) financing window. An additional RMB 80 billion (around \$12 billion) will be injected into the Silk Road Fund. Together, they will support BRI projects on the basis of market and business operations. The Forum yielded 458 outcomes in total. Several "Beijing Initiatives" were announced focusing on connectivity, green development and financing, digital economy as well as integrity building. The Entrepreneurs' Conference also resulted in \$97.2 billion in commercial contracts that will help create jobs and growth for all countries, including Bangladesh.

There are allegations that the BRI projects lack transparency, accountability, and environmental sustainability. What measures have you undertaken to address these concerns?

Integrity building has always been a focus of the BRI. During the BRF2023, China, together with its cooperation partners, released several documents on BRI integrity. A sub-forum on "Clean Silk Road" was also held. China has reiterated its willingness to work with other countries to build political consensus, uphold the principles of integrity, further improve business environment, deepen practical anti corruption cooperation, jointly maintain zero-tolerance against corruption, and ensure high quality development of the BRI. In future, we will also work with international organisations to carry out research and training on promoting integrity in Belt and Road cooperation. In Bangladesh, I spared no efforts in promoting clean Belt and Road cooperation. This August, I witnessed the opening of the Compliance & Self-Regulation Office of the Chinese Enterprises Association in Bangladesh (CEAB). With increasing awareness and substantive measures, the Belt and Road cooperation is expected to keep away from any corruption. As for the environmental aspect, the BRI is also devoted to green development and green financing. Two weeks ago, the Cox's Bazar Wind Power Project started its operation, which will play a significant role in increasing the renewable energy usage in Bangladesh.

How do you see the bilateral relationship between Bangladesh and China being in the future?

China and Bangladesh are time-tested friends and close partners. After Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Bangladesh in 2016 and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to China three years later, our bilateral relations have grown rapidly. During the summit meeting in August in South Africa, the two leaders reiterated the commitment of mutual support on issues of respective core interests. China supports Bangladesh in safeguarding national sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity, and upholds Bangladesh's efforts to oppose

external interference and maintain domestic unity and stability, so as to ensure development and revitalisation. Embarking on the new journey of BRI in the next decade, China is committed to working with Bangladesh to further integrate development strategies and realise together the Chinese dream of great rejuvenation and the Vision 2041 of Bangladesh.

The bilateral trade between Bangladesh and China reached \$27.79 billion in 2022. However, Bangladesh's export to China is less than \$1 billion. How to reduce this huge trade gap?

China has been Bangladesh's single-largest trading partner since 2010. China is committed to opening up and translating its immense market into profitable opportunities for the world, including for Bangladesh. China never deliberately pursues trade surplus. The trade gap between us is determined by the bilateral trade structure. Bangladesh imports key materials, machines, and parts from China, which equip the RMG industry of Bangladesh with higher productivity and assists Bangladesh in expanding overseas markets with increasing competitiveness. In the future, China will work with Bangladesh to make good use of trade promotion platforms like the China International Import Expo (CIIE), accelerate the process of bilateral FTA, and actively promote import of high-quality agricultural products from Bangladesh, such as mangoes. With the upgrading of Bangladesh's industrial system, the bilateral trade structure will continue to improve

public health. China stands ready to carry out dialogues and cooperation with Bangladesh in the fields of common interests. It is not a set menu, but à la carte. Bangladesh could choose the areas that it feels comfortable starting with.

Despite China's support and mediation between Bangladesh and Myanmar, why has Rohingya repatriation still not taken place?

The issue of displaced Myanmar residents is by nature bilateral between Myanmar and Bangladesh. China mediates as a common friend to both. China never exerts pressure on any other country, but believes in diplomacy and dialogue. Right after the cross-border flux in 2017, China made the three-step proposition regarding the situation in Rakhine State, namely to stop violence, start repatriation, and focus on development. Over the years, China has urged Myanmar to improve the security situation in Rakhine, facilitated talks between Bangladesh and Myanmar, and promoted conditions of repatriation and resettlement facilities. Now, Bangladesh and Myanmar are in close communication to start repatriation. Mutual visits and direct talks by officials of both countries, under mediation by China, and reinstating visa exemption for diplomatic and official passport holders are seen as joint achievements in this regard.

What are China's thoughts about the Rohingyas' argument that there is no guarantee of security and citizenship back in Rakhine State?



Chinese Ambassador Yao Wen.

PHOTO: STAR

and gradually strike a balance.

You have proposed for Bangladesh to join the China-led Global Development Initiative (GDI) and Global Security Initiative (GSI). How can Bangladesh benefit by joining these initiatives?

The GDI aims to support the timely achievement of all 17 Goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It promotes international cooperation in eight priority areas: poverty alleviation, food security, pandemic response and vaccines, financing for development, climate change and green development, industrialisation, digital economy and connectivity in the digital era. These are also the focus for Bangladesh in its Vision 2041 perspective plan. Bangladesh can make good use of China's aid, preferential loans, and the Global Development and South-South Cooperation Fund to actively carry out policy dialogue, experience sharing, capacity building, and practical cooperation.

Security issues are related to the well-being of all peoples. China put forward the GSI and called on all countries to unite and collaborate to build a human security community and join hands to build a world that is free from fear. However, some people misunderstand the GSI as a military concern only. In fact, the GSI pays more attention to non-traditional security issues like climate change, food, energy, AI regulation, and

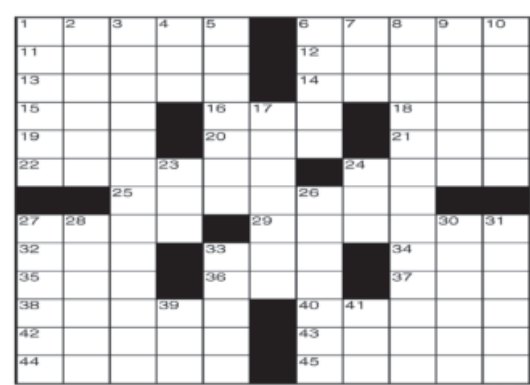
The attitude of the displaced people matters. They have been away from home for years. Lack of firsthand information leads to a lack of confidence. What's worse, some obstructing factors are spreading rumours in the camps. That's why China is encouraging and facilitating more "go and see" visits and "come and talk" missions. We have to break the information cocoons against repatriation with concerted efforts.

This year, so far, Myanmar has demonstrated its strong will to take back some displaced residents. As mediator and facilitator, China has conveyed time and again the key concerns of displaced people to Myanmar. The latter has responded positively to allow the repatriated people to return to their villages of origin if the conditions there so permit. They may also choose to stay in the resettlement villages, or seek shelter from their family members and friends in Rakhine.

The Myanmar mission has also elaborated to the displaced people the pathway towards citizenship in accordance with existing laws and regulations. The gesture of Myanmar to take back the displaced people is, by itself, a manifestation of sincerity and assurance of security to the returnees. We call on the other parties concerned, particularly the militant groups, to maintain the current truce, so as to sustain a favourable environment for the repatriated people to resettle in Rakhine.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Part player
  - 6 Goya subjects
  - 11 On that spot
  - 12 Action setting
  - 13 Studio stand
  - 14 Swell
  - 15 Solution: Abbr.
  - 16 Slalom shape
  - 18 Tina of "30 Rock"
  - 19 Mermaid's home
  - 20 Headly brew
  - 21 Deplore
  - 22 Matador's foe
  - 24 Livens (up)
  - 25 Budapest's nation
  - 27 Glasgow native
  - 29 Threatening sounds
- DOWN**
- 1 Relaxed
  - 2 Designer Coco
  - 3 "West-world" co-star
  - 4 Mine material
  - 5 Master anew
  - 6 Parson's house
  - 7 Onassis nickname
  - 8 "West-world" co-star
  - 9 Pay to play
  - 10 Be agreeable
  - 17 Moved through mud
  - 23 Ump's call
  - 24 Old hand
  - 26 Goddess of the hunt
  - 27 Humiliates
  - 28 Phone feature
  - 30 Scottish singer Donegan
  - 31 Workout wear
  - 33 Exodus figure
  - 39 Throw in
  - 41 Dr.'s gp.



WEDNESDAY'S ANSWERS

