

# Reading Donald Lu’s letter, intently



**BLACK, WHITE AND GREY**  
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ALI RIAZ

US Assistant Secretary of State Donald Lu’s letter, calling on Bangladesh’s three main political parties to have a dialogue, is not as simple as it sounds. It demands our attention for two reasons: the timing of the letter and the possibility of the request coming to fruition.

As for the timing, the letter was issued after a meeting of foreign and defence ministers of the US and India in New Delhi. In the meeting, India raised the issue of Bangladesh’s election and conveyed its position “clearly.” According to media reports, the US has not responded. Usually, in bilateral diplomatic meetings, many issues are discussed between the two sides. The issues on which the parties agree are made public through a readout or a joint statement, while both sides remain silent on unresolved issues. This is the usual, unwritten diplomatic practice; one

has been insisting on an inclusive election and has adopted various measures to “lend... support to all those seeking to advance democracy in Bangladesh.” The timing of Donald Lu’s letter conveys the message that the US has remained active in pursuing its policy. As such, one can wonder: is this a message for India, too? Is there a connection between India’s clarification of its policy and Lu’s letter?

Let’s look at the content of the letter. It urges, as US Ambassador to Bangladesh Peter Haas said a few days ago, to hold unconditional dialogue and find a solution to the impasse. Somehow, the letter was sent to BNP, and BNP acknowledged its receipt. I say “somehow” because, evidently, it was not delivered to the party’s central office. It may be recalled that a letter sent by the Election Commission to BNP, inviting the party to a dialogue,

then the decision to do so will have to be made by its top leaders through discussions among themselves and by securing the nod of the acting chair of the party. As we are aware, those who can make such decisions—that is, top-ranking BNP leaders, including the secretary general of the party, Mirza Fakhru Islam Alamgir—

is necessity of dialogue to keep the democratic journey uninterrupted, we will do that.” These are empty talks, vocal callisthenics of some kind. The ruling party knows, as does the entire country, that Donald Lu is not the first person to suggest that the way out is a dialogue. However, with the weight of the US behind

The United States insists on “unconditional dialogue.” Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, as a response to Ambassador Haas’ suggestion, has already offered a condition: she will sit with the opposition only if President Joe Biden sits with Donald Trump; otherwise, she won’t negotiate. Supporters of the ruling party would

agenda. Is the ruling party willing to go for a dialogue to address this? In large measure, their behaviour will determine what kind of role the United States will play in the future.

While all these are up in the air, and uncertainty looms, the Election Commission has announced that the 12th parliamentary election will be held on January 7, 2024. Their moves seem to be consistent with the wishes of the government. When opposition parties are facing severe persecution, the election commissioners seem to be living in a make-believe world. The statement of the EC secretary that “the country’s environment is favourable for announcing the schedule for the 12th parliamentary election” is testimony to their obliviousness to reality. The comment that the letter won’t affect the election schedule is mind-boggling. Perhaps the EC should try to understand the essence of the letter as much as heed the calls of political parties that an agreement has to be reached before declaring the election schedule. Perhaps, the letter has a message for the EC, too.

Having learnt of the content of Donald Lu’s letter, we must ask the US administration: if the parties flout the suggestion and the government does not take the initiative, what measures is the US willing to take to extend “support to all those seeking to advance democracy in Bangladesh”? The US measures—for example, the sanctions on Rab and its officers in December 2021 and the visa policy in May 2023—have impacted but evidently have not deterred the government from a full-scale clampdown, as it heads on full steam to hold an election without any consensus on who would be in charge of it. The US’ visa policy has been “potentially punitive,” but hoping that these actions from the US will be enough to steer the ruling party towards an inclusive election does not seem too realistic. Neither the visa policy nor the call to hold a dialogue will ensure a free election—which is the first step to saving the country from turning into a one-party state. Expectedly, the US policymakers have thought about this, and perhaps there are other tools in their kit. Which ones are to be used, if any, is a question that Bangladeshis and observers of Bangladeshi politics are pondering.

**The ruling party knows, as does the entire country, that Donald Lu is not the first person to suggest that the way out is a dialogue. However, with the weight of the US behind the letter, it should give pause to the ruling party and the government. AL needs to prove that the rhetoric has substance. Otherwise, it will strengthen the argument that AL is not willing to have a fair election.**

can term this a diplomatic norm.

However, after the New Delhi meeting, Indian Foreign Secretary Vinay Kwatra told reporters that the issue was discussed in detail and India had conveyed its position. The absence of Bangladesh in the published readout means that there has not been an agreement—or in other words, the US did not agree with the Indian position. This raises the question of what the United States would do, considering that it

was left at the door of the BNP office as it was locked and under complete control of law enforcement agencies. Although BNP has always said that it is ready to hold talks, it has also said that the talks will only take place after the Sheikh Hasina government resigns. This is viewed as a condition, but it can also be called the agenda of a dialogue.

As a new situation has emerged, hypothetically speaking, if BNP wants to hold talks unconditionally,

have remained arrested since October 28 on various charges, some of which are outrageous and fictitious at best. They have been denied bail and are languishing in jail. Who then will make this decision? Who will represent BNP?

If the ruling party says it is ready to talk, as Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen indicated on Tuesday, the question is—to borrow his words—“with whom?” This question arises not because there is nobody to be represented, but because the government has arrested these leaders and clamped down on all opposition activists. If the government is true to its word, or at least tries to be seen as interested, the first thing it has to do is to release the detained BNP leaders immediately and to end the detentions and persecution that are taking place across the country. Donald Lu’s letter puts this responsibility on the government, fairly and squarely. It is not enough for the Awami League to say “we want dialogue,” or “if there

the letter, it should give pause to the ruling party and the government. AL needs to prove that the rhetoric has substance. Otherwise, it will strengthen the argument that AL is not willing to have a fair election.

The behaviour of the ruling party in recent months—especially the desperate moves to split BNP, flip disgruntled BNP leaders, pressure local and national leaders using state apparatuses to join the election, and create several King’s parties—indicate that AL is more inclined to have an engineered show than an election, as it did in 2014 and 2018. The clampdown, the belligerent rhetoric, the aggressive posture of the party leaders along with the dispensation of largesse to those who would conduct the election show that the AL is far from agreeable to a solution. This is what “undermining the democratic election process” looks like. The reminder of the US visa policy (commonly referred to as 3Cs) in Donald Lu’s letter should not simply be ignored.

say that BNP has already put forward a condition that they will not sit for talks without the resignation of the prime minister. Putting aside these conditions—which Lu’s letter decided to ignore—there are no objections to the suggestion that a dialogue needs to have an agenda. In fact, no dialogue can be held without a clear agenda.

Bangladesh’s history is replete with instances of such dialogues ending with no results. What can be the agenda in the current situation? Since the current system does not allow for an inclusive, acceptable election, and as a level playing field is not only absent but deliberately being tilted over the years through constitutional and extra-constitutional measures, the agenda of any dialogue must be to find out what new arrangements can be made so that everyone can participate. This means the participation of not only political parties, but of the key stakeholders: the voters. How a guaranteed mechanism can be created for this end should be the

## Crackdown, groupthink, and the dialogue that didn’t happen



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Recently, US Assistant Secretary of State Donald Lu sent letters to all major political parties reiterating the importance of a dialogue. Free, fair and inclusive elections and a dialogue without conditions are the terms on the table. This effort from the US to bring the political parties of Bangladesh to the table may seem strange to the uninitiated. But desperate times call for desperate actions. And the rapidly declining political situation in Bangladesh has resulted in desperate times, indeed.

One of the most deplorable things to have occurred in Bangladeshi politics recently was the violence that took place surrounding BNP’s October 28 rally. The day Constable Amirul Parvez was brutally beaten to death on the street was the day all channels of political dialogue died, too. In response, the Awami League government seems to have chosen a path of retribution. Unfortunately, Bangladesh has for quite some time been classified as a “hybrid regime” on the world stage.



PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

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**In a democracy, laws are meant to be enforced without discrimination. When the police force, internet services, public transport, and many other institutions are clearly being used to target and deprive those who are in opposition to the government, what message does that send to the people? What precedent does it set for political norms in the country?**

One can never achieve democracy without dialogue—a fact that the top leaders seem too eager to overlook. They are saying that Awami League will only hold talks with BNP if US President Joe Biden (of the Democratic Party) sits with Donald Trump, the de facto leader of the Republican Party in the US. Perhaps the implication of the comparison was that asking for a dialogue with a party that doesn’t have seats in parliament is not a reasonable consideration. However, the point that AL is missing is that it isn’t being asked to come to dialogue with just BNP or any other political party. The government is being asked to come to a dialogue with its people. And the people certainly want a free and fair election.

no mistake, this kind of ballot stuffing is neither new nor a one-off event—it has been the norm at the sub-national level for a very long time. As per media reports, the person in the video has been expelled by Chhatra League “for breaching party discipline.” But why is there no news of his arrest? If there are laws that protect the integrity of the election, why aren’t they being exercised to bring this perpetrator to justice? How can those who actively destroy Bangladesh’s democracy be let go with a slap on the wrist, while those who protest for democracy are attacked by police? In what world is this situation just or fair?

The practice of democracy in a nation is, in many ways, an issue of decorum.

Democracies are run based on unwritten rules and unspoken codes of conduct. In a democracy, the opposition of the government is meant to serve as the voice of the people. In a democracy, laws are meant to be enforced without discrimination. When the police force, internet services, public transport, and many other institutions are clearly being used to target and deprive those who are in opposition to the government, what message does that send to the people? What precedent does it set for political norms in the country?

I do not believe that the people I know and respect in the government want to push our nation towards becoming a one-party state. BNP has historical and contemporary reasons to claim that Awami League follows an authoritarian ideology. Similarly, Awami League has sufficient cause to assume BNP as criminals and terrorists. But what about the people? All those people who attended the BNP rally on October 28—were they all criminals and terrorists, too? Do their voices not matter?

The government had the option to listen to these people. But the top leadership is stuck in a political bubble of its own making. There seems to be no more room for civility or discourse. All opposition are now criminals in the ruling party’s eyes. Perhaps the only thing they care about now is holding the election. Perhaps, they think that if they just hold on and conduct the election, all the complexities facing Bangladesh will untangle. Or perhaps they are procrastinating, believing that tomorrow’s issues can be handled tomorrow.

In any case, the AL is trying hard to ignore the elephant in the room—the need for a dialogue. The need for a dialogue is a sentiment not only of the wider population, but one that is palpably present among our most important development partners. Ultimately, no one will win if Bangladesh continues to sink into unrest and turmoil. And unless the people’s queries and concerns are answered, no win on paper will make up for the goodwill that the government has already lost.

### CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**

  - 1 Baptized boy
  - 7 Singer Tori
  - 11 One-of-a-kind
  - 12 Rancor
  - 13 Snake-haired Gorgon
  - 14 Baseball’s Rodriguez
  - 15 Set upon
  - 17 Accord
  - 20 Some statuary
  - 23 Drop the ball
  - 24 Refresh one’s memory
  - 26 Course need
  - 27 Unconscious
  - 28 Brewpub product
  - 29 Counterparts
  - 31 Family
  - 32 Debussy work
  - 33 Shed tears
- 34 Tahini base

37 Cat call

39 Manatee

43 Emmy winner Alan

44 Holiday event

45 Join the game

46 Designed
- DOWN**

  - 1 Tooth surrounder
  - 2 Early hour
  - 3 Pulled off
  - 4 Hunker down
  - 5 Eject
  - 6 Orderly
  - 7 Early calculator
  - 8 Fast food order
  - 9 Flamenco cheer
- 10 Kinsey topic

16 Borders

17 Rose part

18 Concert site

19 Sweet soft drink

21 Colorful flower

22 Wasn’t thrifty

24 Churlish ones

25 Floor cover

30 Latitude

33 Tired

35 Nile reptiles

36 Ham or lamb

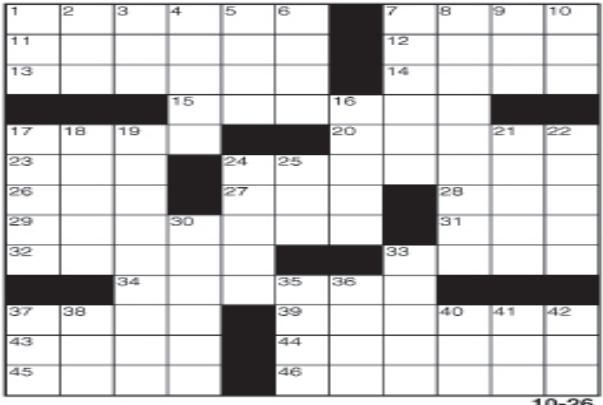
37 Travel aid

38 Annex

40 “East of Eden” son

41 Lyric work

42 Tie the knot



### YESTERDAY’S ANSWERS

F	E	R	N	S		R	O	B	O	T
A	R	I	E	L		A	R	U	B	A
S	I	T	T	I	N	G	R	O	O	M
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