

Is there any hope left for a credible election?

With Bangladesh's political situation still stuck in a limbo—with the Awami League and BNP at loggerheads—the Election Commission recently announced the schedule for the 12th parliamentary election. We could not be farther away from a political consensus that would ensure a free, fair, participatory and competitive general election on January 7, 2024. **The Daily Star** speaks to civil society members about their anxieties and expectations in the days leading up to the election.



We are currently in a precarious situation as both major political parties appear to be on a confrontational course. Their actions amount to criminal offences. Who has granted them the authority to jeopardise our lives? Does their political power provide

them with impunity? They must acknowledge their liability. In the case of an ordinary person putting another in danger, they would be detained under criminal law.

If the main opposition parties had demonstrated political wisdom, they would have recognised that the ruling party would not accept their stance. Moreover, BNP lacks the strength to challenge the Awami League's position through a movement. The potential for a solution existed if the opposition had heeded the appeal to engage in dialogue without conditions. Unfortunately, they acted stubbornly. The undeniable fact remains that the Awami League still possesses the political power to reject such proposals, as evidenced by their response to the call from US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Donald Lu.

Presently, we find ourselves in a situation without a visible resolution. Nevertheless, I maintain hope that a conducive environment for a participatory election can be established, benefiting the nation as a whole.

If a fair election cannot be guaranteed, it would be a shortfall for the country, with much of the responsibility resting on Awami League's shoulders. It is high time for the Awami League to substantiate its claim of being pro democracy and uphold the spirit of our struggle for freedom through a free and fair election.

As a citizen, I aim to refrain from participating in the blame game. I expect both parties to exhibit conscience and actively support a fair election. The Awami League and BNP could mutually agree to a code of conduct, pledging to ensure a free and fair election. This commitment can be articulated as follows, "The Election Commission will direct the Awami League, and the Awami League will not direct the Election Commission."

Sultana Kamal
Human rights activist

The announcement of the election schedule by the Election Commission, ignoring calls from various political parties for a negotiated solution to the issue of election-time government before the declaration, is not only deplorable but also an act of adding fuel to the fire. Its action has already contributed to the deterioration of the political situation, and it will continue to reverberate in the coming days.

Since October 28, the country has descended into a violent situation. There are various aspects to it; excessive use of force by police resulting in death and mysterious incidents of arson are obvious, but equally violent is the clampdown on opposition activists, resulting in arrests of more than 10,000 people and hounding of the relatives of activists in contravention to law and fundamental

human rights. Another kind of violence is the alleged pressure on political actors by state agencies to participate or face the music.

Besides the EC's obliviousness

to these factors, the announcement disregarded the letter of the US Assistant Secretary of State Donald Lu, who called for a dialogue. The EC did not give time to the political parties to respond to it; instead, it shut the door with a bang. It belies the EC's assessment of the situation as CEC Kazi Habibul Awal told the media on October 25 that the conducive environment for an election was yet to be there. In 2022, the EC, in its road map, promised to work to build trust in the commission, and ensure neutrality of administration. None of that has been achieved, but the EC seems to not care.

Considering the opaque process of the EC's appointment, and its decision to give up its own power as a marker of its willingness to fulfil the ruling party's wishes, there was not much to expect; yet, its activities remind me of a dialogue in Act 3, Scene 4, of the *Twelfth Night* by William Shakespeare: "If this were play'd upon a stage now, I could condemn it as an improbable fiction."

Ali Riaz
Distinguished professor of political science at Illinois State University in the US, non-resident senior fellow of the Atlantic Council, and president of the American Institute of Bangladesh Studies (AIBS).

The democratic process hinges on the fundamental principle that an elected government will uphold the integrity of power transfer through credible elections. The current government asserts its legitimacy as an "elected body," thereby pre-emptively invalidating concerns about the credibility of the upcoming national election. This stance is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, the legitimacy of this government is questionable in the first place. While it secured a landslide victory in the 2008 election, its subsequent victories in 2014 and 2018 are widely regarded as lacking credibility. Therefore, the government's term effectively expired in 2014. Secondly, there is no historical precedent for a ruling political party conducting a universally accepted free and fair election in Bangladesh. Attempts by HM Ershad in 1988, BNP in 1996, and the Awami League in 2014 and 2018 all failed to meet the minimum standards of electoral integrity. Consequently, the assumption that the current ruling party can conduct a credible election is unsubstantiated.

The current situation in Bangladesh is fraught with danger. When a government seeks to retain power without the consent of the people and circumvent the electoral process, it resorts to measures that bring devastating costs for the nation. One such consequence is the emasculation of essential institutions, such as the Election Commission, the Human Rights Commission, the Anti-Corruption

Commission, and universities, rendering them subservient to party interests. To keep its grip on power, the government gives special favours to certain groups, like the police, the civil-military bureaucracy, big businesses, and powerful foreign countries. The detrimental effects of these actions have been evident since 2014, and their continuation poses a grave threat to Bangladesh's present and future.

The government, through its subservient and spineless Election Commission, has unveiled the schedule for the upcoming election. This announcement exposes the government's deep-seated fear of facing a free and fair election, a fear that stems from its inability to garner people's support. In an attempt to mask this fear, the government has resorted to tactics such as employing state forces, spreading fear, and promoting dubious development projects. While the government may cling to power and maintain its autocratic rule by suppressing people's will, this strategy will ultimately have dire consequences for the nation's economy, political institutions, and overall social cohesion.

A fair election is the cornerstone of democracy, and it is disheartening that none of the country's ruling party leaders have so far demonstrated the courage to face the people with a credible electoral process.

Anu Muhammad
Former professor of economics at Jahangirnagar University



PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

BGB troops guard the Election Commission ahead of the announcement of polls schedule on November 15, 2023.



There is a broad indication that three powers (India, China, and Russia) are supporting the government's stance on how they are approaching the election. Not interfering with a state is an eyewash; when needed, powerful countries often do it. India has given its support to the government; Awami League leaders have echoed

it previously. Now, India has clarified its position. China and Russia will support the current regime, considering their own government systems, and they don't bother about democracy in other countries as well. The United States has been vocal. The European Union is not as vocal, but it doesn't mean they are not concerned about the democratic process in Bangladesh.

Our problem is that our economy is very frail. Whenever we export any product, we remain obedient to our importers. Surprisingly, whenever we import, we stay servile to the exporters; no other country does the same thing. Our market is the US, EU and Canada, but we are now just ignoring their considerations. I have doubts as to whether it would be wise in the long run the way we are ignoring their calls. But politicians never think for the long run; instead, they think about how they can remain in power or come to power. So, for the Awami League, it is important for them to remain in power, and they will go for that by any means.

It seems the election will be held on time, as planned. The ruling party has the police and administration, and a section of voters—especially Awami League leaders and their supporters—will cast their votes, but a free and fair election will not happen. The EC also knows that it cannot conduct what is supposed to be a free and fair election. Violence may not occur if law enforcers remain active, but the turnout may be insignificant. Although how the EC and the government will showcase numbers, that would be their concern. I still have a hunch that we will have problems mostly with the economy, and the people of the country will suffer from the outcome.

M Touhid Hossain
Former foreign secretary



An election is certain, but the key question is its outcome. Unlike 2014, the BNP is not in isolation this time. They are joined by left-wing parties and religion-based groups like Islami Shashon Tontro, with Jamaat also lending its support. Despite being unregistered, Jamaat holds significant sway on the ground, making a large-scale protest appear unavoidable. On

the opposing side stands the Awami League, backed by its allies. New parties have surfaced as well; their acceptance, as witnessed in recent elections, remains uncertain. My assessment suggests a division, with 50-60 percent of voters on one side and the rest on the other, resulting in a conflicted situation.

While the Election Commission asserts its constitutional obligation to conduct the election on time, concerns arise due to the early announcement of the schedule, raising doubts about its motivations. Presently, they must maintain peace on the ground for the next 53-54 days. The chain of command is also uncertain, as instructions usually accompanying the schedule, such as the announcement of the electoral code of conduct, are conspicuously absent. The chief election commissioner's call for dialogue further implies a recognition of the problematic situation. The country's internal dynamics, compounded by international and economic pressures, have pushed all stakeholders, including the ruling party, opposition parties and the EC, to a point of no return. This holds true for countries pressuring the government to ensure a free and fair election.

The US has persistently underscored its visa sanction measure, leaving room for speculation on the possibility of even harsher actions. The UN, too, has expressed apprehensions about the precarious situation in Bangladesh. The outlook for Bangladesh appears grim as the nation once again grapples with a resurgence of violence, finding itself entangled in the complexities of a burgeoning geopolitical storm.

Brig Gen (retd) Dr M Sakhawat Hussain
Former election commissioner of Bangladesh, and senior fellow at the South Asian Institute of Policy and Governance (SIPG), North South University (NSU)



The nation was eagerly anticipating the possibility of a dialogue, an agreement, a minimum understanding, where all parties would collaborate to ensure an acceptable election process. Unfortunately, no one is willing to budge on their demand. If the dialogue is based on the premise that each party's condition must be agreed

upon, then it ceases to be a dialogue. Thus, a dialogue seems to be out of the question. This was a major concern before the announcement, and it still remains unresolved.

The Election Commission has not yet proven itself to be one that all are able to have full confidence and trust in, that it can hold a free and fair election. The recent by-elections showed anomalies that led to the closure of several polling centres due to irregularities. On the one hand, large-scale arrests of the leaders and activists of BNP and other opposition parties, both at national and local levels, continue. This does not signal willingness for a dialogue. On the other hand, the ongoing strikes and blockades, marked by acts of vandalism, continue, raising questions about the existence of a healthy environment for a fair election.

What will happen this election still remains uncertain, with the fear of a repeat of the 2014 or 2018 scenarios. BNP's reluctance to participate in this condition has further fuelled these concerns. A low voter turnout is highly likely, and one is not sure how the EC will claim the election to be credible if that's the case.

You cannot have a democracy without a vibrant, active and responsible opposition. If a single party comes to power repeatedly, without any competition, then how meaningful are elections? The current situation is very bleak indeed. The election will be conducted, but how credible it will be is the question. Only if the EC can guarantee a reasonable voter turnout and not falsify the number of votes cast or the counting of votes, if they can prevent illegal ballot stuffing and establish an election environment free from fear and violence for all participants—all of which it has yet to demonstrate its ability to achieve—can the election be considered credible. A reasonable voter turnout can be as little as even 30 percent.

Since the political parties have failed to prove their responsibility to and concern for the people they claim they represent or are meant to serve, it is now up to the EC to show their independence, their autonomy, their seriousness and their responsibility to the nation. That is, in my view, the only way that the current situation can be resolved. It may not be ideal or what the nation deserves, but it is at least a way forward.

Khushib Kabin
Rights activist and coordinator of Nijera Kori

Our economy is already under stress, struggling with macroeconomic crises such as high inflation, balance of payment issues, which is putting pressure on the foreign exchange reserves, inconsistent export and remittance earnings, etc. In the coming months—the rest of the fiscal year or even the next calendar year—there are no substantive predictions that our economy will bounce back. In such circumstances, the ongoing political conflicts/uncertainty will definitely affect our economy. Over the past few days, we have seen how the political programmes—e.g., blockades—are already restricting people's mobility, which I'm quite sure is affecting economic activities. And we don't know how things will go in the next two or three months, especially around the general election. We now know that the election is going

to take place, as the Election Commission announced on Wednesday. There are concerns that there may be more incidents of political violence in the time leading up to the election, as well as afterwards. We are already seeing arson attacks on public vehicles, and we fear

this situation may escalate further.

If you look at our economic indicators over the last six months, investment has slowed down drastically; borrowing from banks has gone down, and opening LCs to import raw materials and capital machinery has significantly fallen too. This means investors are currently quite wary about investment. Of course, there are other factors at play, like the dollar crisis. Overall, this situation is definitely not conducive for economic recovery. Right now, we should be focused on getting back on track for economic recovery, but I fear these incidents [of political violence] may derail us further. It will certainly put more stress on our economy; the inflation may rise further, and the overall macroeconomic situation may get worse.

We are seeing added pressure from external forces, too, like the US and European Union, regarding the election. The US, for example, has imposed visa restrictions. We don't know if they will expand the scope for such restrictions, or if other countries will follow its footsteps and impose new conditions. Seeing as the US and EU are our two largest export destinations, we need to be concerned about our future exports. I have spoken to a number of businesspeople, who are equally worried. These are very big concerns given the possibility of the political tension permeating our economic domain.

Dr Selim Raihan
Professor, Dhaka University, and executive director, Sanem