

A participatory commentary, at least

With the 12th national election of Bangladesh only days away, The Daily Star spoke to representatives of various political parties about their thoughts on an election that is already steeped in controversy.



Maulana Gazi Ataur Rahman is senior joint secretary of Islami Andolan Bangladesh (IAB)

'All that matters to AL is acquiring power.'

The present government has made all arrangements to hold a one-sided election, while completely ignoring public opinion. The Election Commission (EC) is also working at the instruction of the government and assisting it in staging the election. In any election, there must be opponents. But there will be no competing candidates at the January 7 election. Instead, Awami League is pitting dummy candidates against party candidates. As such, there will be no election on January 7. Rather, a drama will be staged. By wasting thousands of crores of taka, the ruling party's only plan is to return to power and to plunder.

This election will push the whole country towards further uncertainty and close the door to constructive politics in Bangladesh. To the ruling party, neither the country and its people nor the economy matters. All that matters to AL is acquiring power. After all, in the last 15 years, all it did was loot, deliver injustice, harass and torture the leaders and activists of opposition parties, and more. The ruling party has committed so many wrongs that it is now afraid to hold a free and fair election, knowing very well that if a proper election is held, the people will reject it and hold AL accountable for its misdeeds.

We have been trying to gather public opinion against the misuse and undemocratic practices of the current government. But the government is not even allowing us to hold an organised protest. If the government cared about public opinion or had respect for it, or if it could understand the language of the public, it would have moved away from the path it has been on.

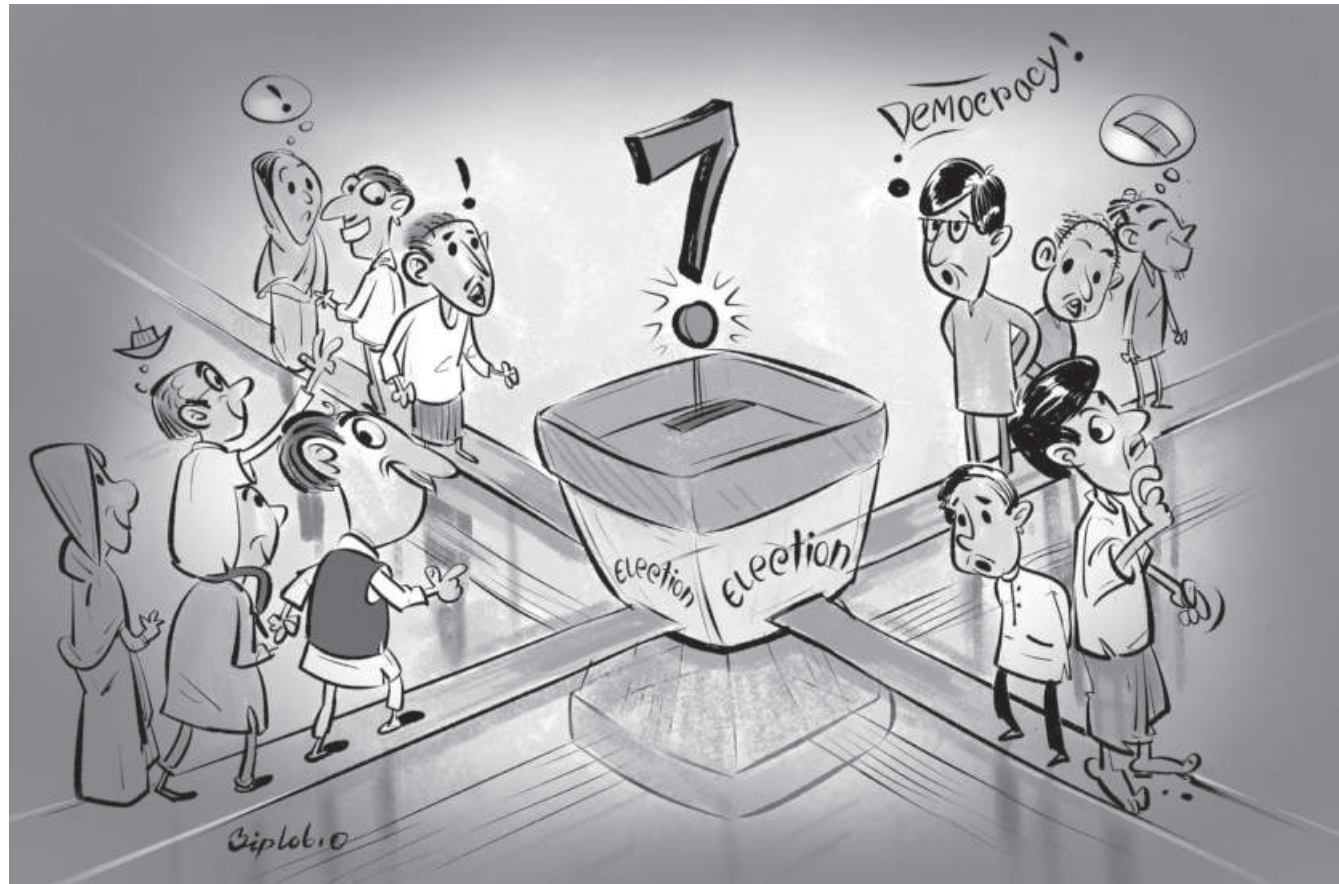


ILLUSTRATION: BIPOLOB CHAKROBORTY

A 'dummy-cratic' election in democratic Bangladesh?

In 1988, we saw how Ershad held the election even though there was a movement against him by multiple alliances. On February 15, 1996, BNP held the election despite strong opposition from Awami League and left-leaning parties. And, in 2014, Awami League held the election even though BNP put up a strong resistance and leftist parties also did not participate. So, Ershad's regime, Awami League, and BNP have all held elections with the help of the police and administration while ignoring public opinion. Thus, if history is any indication, it can be said that Awami League will also hold the 12th parliamentary election using the police, the administration, its political power, and aggression.

But we also believe the kind of election that is about to take place will be unprecedented and unheard of in Bangladesh. Unprecedented because never in our history has a party split into two as a strategy to hold the national election. It is unheard of because we have yet to see any party placing dummy candidates to make the election look competitive. We have witnessed 11 national elections in the last 52 years, but never have we seen an election where the contest is between *ami* (me) and the "dummy." One quip making the rounds is that the one of January 7 will be a "dummy-cratic" election. When do people resort to satire? When can they neither accept the reality, nor resist or change it. So, for the common people, this

election has become a satirical election. There are two sides of an election: a legal side and a moral side. Our Election Commission (EC) has said that even if one percent of the votes are cast, the election will be deemed legitimate. The stance of the EC is clear: it cares little about whether democratic values are upheld in this election.



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What will be the consequences of such a farcical election? It will definitely have a long-term impact on our political culture as well as on our economic life. After the election is over, the meaning of democracy will change to mean coercion. People will know for sure that everything can be given legitimacy by abusing power and using force. Plus, how will the government

address the impending economic crisis? One way would be to burden the people with increasing levels of tax, which will also raise inflation and make people's lives even more difficult. Since the people will be dissatisfied, the government will have to resort to new repressive measures to contain the discontent. So, it will not be as easy for Awami League to run the country during the upcoming five years.

This election, 571 candidates have movable or liquid assets of over Tk 1 crore. And 18 of them have property worth Tk 100 crore. The parliament has now turned into a club of businessmen. It is shocking that our ministers, members of the parliament, and the ruling party candidates have amassed such huge amounts of wealth when people's lives have been miserable of late due to rising inflation and cost of living. All this time, these politicians blamed the global recession, Covid-induced economic uncertainties, and the economic fallout of the Russia-Ukraine war. Strangely, these could not stop them from amassing wealth. But will these financial irregularities ever be addressed?

On the one hand, rising cost of living and the gradually shrinking democratic space are making people's lives unbearable. On the other hand, the wealth of those in power is increasing, alongside their misrule. This signals that we may see strong resistance of unexpected scale from the people in future.



Rumeen Farhana is barrister at law and assistant secretary for international affairs for Bangladesh Nationalist Party

'I see no reason to call this an election.'

Firstly, I find it impossible to call what's happening on January 7 an election in any way. People already know who will occupy government positions, who will sit in opposition, and even who will win which seats. An election without uncertainty, where people lack the power to determine their representatives through voting, is a mere facade of an election.

Secondly, the voters do not have any real choice. Whether you pick candidates from Awami League, independent candidates (who are really representing AL in disguise), AL ally Jatiya Party, or candidates from any of AL's partner factions, it all leads to the same outcome: an Awami League dominance. Without options for voter representation, the January 7 event cannot be termed an election.

Thirdly, the escalating violence leading up to election day within Awami League factions in about every constituency paints a terrifying picture. I wonder, if this trend of violence continues, whether the drama staged to take place on the 7th will even be possible to conduct.

We already know that only a small group of experts will observe the election and that most major countries will not send their observers. International media outlets have already labelled this election as a "one-woman show" and a "one-horse electoral race."

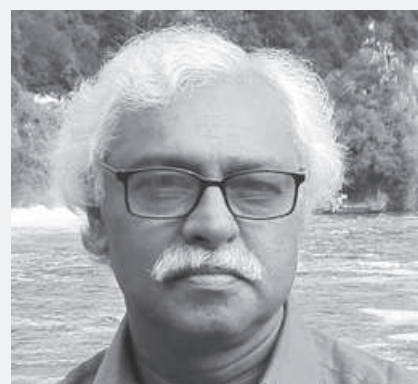
Considering everything, I see no reason to call this an election. It's a pre-written affair, and the public will bear the brunt of its outcome. Bangladesh's economic crisis will worsen, and the suffering we are already enduring will only be amplified in the future.

'Even before the election, there is no question as to who the elected will be.'

By now, it is clear that the election this time around will be a one-sided affair. Not only the ruling party candidates, but those from the official opposition and other parties, and even the independents, are all AL-approved.

In Bangladesh, candidates are elected to the parliament for the purposes of formulating legislation and maintaining the state apparatus. Our constitution mandates competitive elections. The various political parties can present their ideologies and the people can elect their favourite. However, if the election does take place on January 7 with things going as they are, the one-party mindset of the ruling party will be out in the open for all to see. Right now, the question being asked at home and abroad is: who will be the opposition? But even before the election, there is no question as to who the elected will be. In fact, everyone believes that wondering about this is foolish.

The event that we will be calling an election may be legally legitimate if at least one percent of voters cast their say, as the Election Commission—which seems to do as the government says—has said. However, such an election will not be morally valid, and this will be the first crisis we'll encounter once it's over. The second post-election crisis will be the clashes between local factions of the same



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party. Thirdly—and even the government hasn't denied this—an economic crisis is coming our way. In any country, collective efforts are needed to encounter an economic crisis. But this cannot happen when political conflicts of the scale we are seeing are allowed to fester.

I predict that, while conflicts within the country will only intensify in the near future, this will also result in more interference from foreign powers in the forms of conditionalities and sanctions.

At this moment, not only can we assume that political instability will worsen, but we know that if the ruling

party wins the upcoming election, it will feel more empowered to employ authoritarian and undemocratic ways of holding on to the throne. The control over politics in the country is in the hands of those who will only do ill.

The situation that the country is facing is an unfortunate one. But there is still time. As our experts have said, the solution could be found in our own constitution: by cancelling the election schedule, dissolving the parliament, and then holding a participatory election. One has to agree that there cannot be a fair election under the ruling party. As such, a system should be put in place where an election-time government oversees the polls and hands over power to the winning party. This would also eliminate the apprehension some hold regarding a caretaker government refusing to give up power. If we had a democratic party at the front, perhaps such ideas could reach fruition. Still, we have to urge the ruling party to go for such a system. And if it still keeps fending off this idea, it would make sense for the people to not visit the polling centres on election day. This would be a silent protest, conveying that the people do not approve of the ruling party's behaviour nor of the immense conflicts that will ensue following such an election.

Why would Awami League need to resort to rigging in this scenario?

The criticism of the election lacking participation and being potentially rigged are not logical. Conducting the election is a constitutional obligation, not a choice. Participating, however, is a choice each party makes freely. Awami League and 27 other parties are contesting, but BNP chose to boycott. It's true that without BNP participating, the election will not seem complete, and there will be questions about it. But can you hold Awami League responsible for this? BNP claims that if they participate, the election will not be free and fair, and that they will lose. Let's agree to that allegation for argument's sake—does their boycott benefit them? Without BNP, Awami League is likely to win the election anyway. Participating could've allowed them to highlight any irregularities and secure parliamentary representation. Therefore, BNP should have participated, no matter what. Boycotting is not a solution. Their abstinence might have been understandable if their movements had succeeded, but their failure on both fronts renders it illogical. Hence, the responsibility for the election's limitations lies solely with BNP.

Conversely, to mitigate their non-cooperation, we've allowed our party members to contest independently, offering voters a wider selection despite the possibility of internal conflict. In South Asian politics, intense competition can lead to conflict and even violence. So, by deciding to allow independent candidates, we are now at risk of facing internal conflicts. Yet, Awami League prioritised a competitive election and democracy, even if it creates discord within the party.

The claim that we will rig the election is equally unreasonable. Why would Awami League need to resort to rigging in this scenario? Had BNP participated, concerns about manipulating the outcome to defeat them might have had some logic behind it. But in their absence, and if Awami League doesn't give seat concessions to any of its allies—or to Jatiya Party—we are poised for a landslide victory. Awami League has no incentive to rig the election, and doubting this suggests a lack of rationality. The entire election will be proper, fair, and free from any misconduct. What will BNP do then? Will their unfounded accusations continue?



Mohammad A Arafat is member of the central executive committee of Bangladesh Awami League

CORRIGENDUM On January 3, 2024 we ran an article on this page titled "Why our balance of payments won't balance out post-election." In it, one sentence read, "While Bangladesh has influence on foreigners' income growth or their preference for our goods, a devaluation of the taka will promote exports, slow the pace of import growth, and invite higher remittances through the official channels." The correct statement should be, "While Bangladesh has no influence on foreigners' income growth or their preference for our goods, a devaluation of the taka will promote exports, slow the pace of import growth, and invite higher remittances through the official channels." We sincerely apologise for this editing error made on our end.