

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

## An election more in form than in substance

### Serious challenges lie ahead

In an election the outcome of which was known long before a single ballot was cast, it is difficult to say anything uplifting except perhaps to express our relief that it is finally over. The long-known has eventuated without any surprise, and without much disturbance or violence. Awami League is set to get a fourth consecutive term in office, as per early reports. Normally, congratulations would be in order. If election consisted only of the act of voting, and the voting day, it was far from being the worst that could have happened. But such is the irony of our time that even a well choreographed election cannot be held without some egregious incidents getting in the way.

Even though the election was basically between AL-nominated candidates and AL-enabled rivals—with the reins fully in the hands of the ruling camp—the voting process was not entirely free of disruptions or irregularities, with attempts of fraudulent voting reported in various areas. In Narsingdi, the son of the minister of industries was caught in casting fake votes. In Chattogram's Nasirabad area, a journalist was beaten for taking pictures of vote rigging. There have been also reports of clashes in various areas, with a local Awami League leader in Munshiganj found dead with stab wounds earlier in the day. That being said, over all, it must be acknowledged that compared to the previous two elections held under the Awami League government in 2014 and 2018, this one was generally much more peaceful and nonviolent, and for that, the Election Commission and the security personnel on duty deserve credit.

But with the outcome of the election never in doubt, the ruling camp's focus was more on whether there would be enough voters to legitimise it, a plan that has suffered a setback, as we rightly have anticipated. As per an early estimate by Chief Election Commissioner Kazi Habibur Awal, around 40 percent of votes were cast in the 12th parliamentary election. Even we if consider this to be an accurate representation of the reality, it is still far from the 50 percent turnout target that Awami League had reportedly set to make the election look "participatory" and acceptable to the international community. The 60 percent of voters who have stayed away are not absentees. They are the face of disenfranchisement in Bangladesh.

The truth is, it doesn't really matter how many voters ended up in the polling centres, willingly or under threat from ruling party men, when they were deprived of any real options to choose from. Whatever credibility their presence could have lent to this far-from-ideal democratic exercise was severely affected by the absence of BNP and other opposition parties, who never really got a chance to play an effective part in it. This is, however, not to say that the opposition's role over the last few months in the run up to the election was always judicious or in the best interest of the nation. The resultant lack of hope or enthusiasm as witnessed among the voters or people in general is perhaps the biggest tragedy of this time. This may cast a long shadow over our future.

As we now prepare for a life post-election, we can only hope that the protracted political tension will be resolved through peaceful means, and the national focus can once again shift to the more pertinent issues at hand, such as our economic crisis. Those who have been elected to parliament have a duty to the people, and regardless of the party they belong to or the electoral process they have emerged from, they will be held to their commitments and pledges in the coming days. For too long, this nation has been stuck in a state of limbo. We must find a way back to the path of progress, both politically, socially and economically.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Future potential of plastic chips

Although the plastic industry in Bangladesh is not very large, it offers a lot of promise. The most important component in this industry is plastic chips. They can be used to make polyester staple fibres (PSF), which are used in electronics, clothing, and packaging. The primary source for plastic chips is recycled plastic. There is a huge amount of discarded plastic bottles in our surroundings. We can gather and recycle them to create these plastic chips. This can create a lot of job opportunities in the country, and exports could bring in foreign currency. Therefore, to capitalise on the plastic chip market's potential, we need government initiatives as well as more investment.

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### Rehabilitating beggars

After the pandemic, the number of beggars has increased in Dhaka city. There was a time when beggars used to hang around specific points on the roads. But now, the situation is such that once we take our wallet out—whether in markets, shops, tea stalls, or while paying the rickshaw fare—beggars appear instantly, and almost obstruct our way until we give them alms. Although the government took a number of steps to rehabilitate the city's beggars in the past, those have not been effective. So, the city corporations should look into the matter and rehabilitate them urgently so they have better life opportunities.

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# Election formality is over. What's next?



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ANU MUHAMMAD

If we look at our history of elections, we will find that they have always been a cause for celebration in Bangladesh. Election day used to be the one day when ordinary citizens, who on usual days would feel powerless, would hold some form of power as they exercised their right to vote. Elections used to be occasions for celebrating individual empowerment within the conscious mass, fostering increased communication among diverse groups. The vibrant atmosphere, shaped by electoral campaigns and candidates from different parties seeking votes, truly created a festive ambience.

This doesn't necessarily mean that the past elections were perfect by any means—money, criminal activities, intimidation, etc were always issues that took the spotlight during the polls. Regardless of such flaws, whenever there was a participatory election, it was an event that evoked enthusiasm within every voting citizen in the country.

However, in recent elections—starting from 2014, then 2018, and now 2024—that excitement and enthusiasm have seen a notable decline. Those who became voters during these elections have not experienced the festive atmosphere that should accompany national elections. Presently, in many parts of the country, a curfew-like state prevails, resembling a strike or blockade. While small groups of the Awami League supporters gather at certain centres, the expected level of participation and enthusiasm is notably absent everywhere. The understanding that the current ruling party will remain in power is widespread. By holding such elections, they have effectively undermined the idea of elections as a system, the Election Commission as an organisation, and democracy as an ideology.

Through the January 7 election, the Awami League is all set to assume power again, but will they be true representatives of the public? Instead, they may become a coercive entity, signalling a renewal of authoritarian governance. Alternatively, this can be perceived as an attempt to solidify the party's grip on power into a more permanent settlement. What do ordinary citizens gain from this, and what can they expect?

Through this contrived election, the prevailing situation will further



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intensify. Existing institutions, which are already not functioning as they should, will cease to operate in the true sense. Looking ahead, this trend may take an even more extreme turn. Notably, institutions such as the Election Commission, the National Human Rights Commission, the judiciary, and the universities, which hold substantial influence on society, operate through invisible directives. This election will exacerbate this process. The current centralised system, predominantly controlled by the one percent, will solidify into an absolute state, leading to increased inequality and the centralisation of wealth. The root cause of heightened inequality in Bangladesh lies in the absence of accountability and transparency.

The influential and powerful people have been grabbing lands, rivers and hills. They have been undertaking highly expensive projects through the government. You cannot charge \$100 million for a project that's supposed to cost \$1 million only, when there is a democratic process in place, when there is accountability and

transparency in place. Because there is no such oversight, this country has seen a multifold increase in overpriced projects. The beneficiaries of these projects are some small percentage of business groups. This group of businessmen drew up different kinds of contracts and agreements that afforded them benefits, enabling them to become extremely wealthy within a

significantly diminish. Students in public universities find themselves in a state of helplessness, enduring regular torture and humiliation by Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL). The lack of intervention by university administrators, who themselves are often blind supporters of the government, implies that the situation in these universities, especially in residential halls, is poised to worsen.

Some megaprojects in Bangladesh, which are more aptly described as mega-disasters—such as Rampal Power Plant or Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant—have only thrived because of the lack of accountability. As the ruling party successfully ensures the renewal of its authoritarian rule, these anti-climate, anti-people projects are expected to proliferate. They may heighten climate disasters, exacerbate people's sufferings, escalate inequality and discrimination even more, and push Bangladesh to rely more on international loans. The country will be held hostage for the benefit of a few.

In recent years, major global powers like the US, China, India and Russia have displayed heightened interest in Bangladesh's politics. Despite their public discourse on democracy and human rights in our country, their internal motivations for their own benefits remain paramount. The current government is unlikely to leave any of these countries' agendas unfulfilled—except for the democratic and human rights agenda. Consequently, Bangladesh may find itself compelled to meet these countries' demands, making sacrifices in the process.

The only escape from this dire situation lies within ourselves, particularly the youth. It is our responsibility to reintroduce the lost vision of a democratic, secular, and humane nation. We must actively bring this vision to the forefront, fostering belief in the possibility of a socially inclusive and tolerant nation, thereby potentially reversing our country's downward spiral.

Although this election was conducted in the name of constitutional continuity, its dramatised and predicted nature has fortified the ruling class and the superrich. Public insecurity and helplessness have surged in tandem. Despite the ruling party's rhetoric about the spirit of the Liberation War, its actions contradict this narrative. Inequality, concentration of power, continuous repression, and the erosion of democracy are all antithetical to that spirit. I believe that a clearer vision among the public, emphasising the true spirit of liberation, will generate resistance from within us and the youth.

As told to Monorom Polok of  
The Daily Star.

## The guilt that comes with voting at a farcical election

### A first-time voter's dilemma



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AFIA JAHIN

"Eighteen percent of votes were cast till 12pm"—my colleague says to me, reading out a headline.

A sense of self-reproach washes over me. "That's 17 percent more than what the Election Commission had said would legitimise this election," I think to myself. "And I contributed to this."

The 12th parliamentary election marked the first time I cast my vote in a national election. And this is largely due to my being in the profession of journalism.

I grew up in an upper-middle-class family where the practice is to not engage in anything political. Our norm is to keep our heads down and ensure that our loved ones (and ourselves) are fed, educated, and safe. What people fail to realise is that the so-called "I hate politics" generation comes from an older generation of parents who have very little faith in the political culture of this country. Still, having always wanted

to be a journalist, I wanted to be more involved in political discourse.

Back during the 2018 election, I was a university student. And while it was the first election at which I was eligible to vote, it was also only a few months after the Road Safety Movement had begun—and no one from my generation should ever forgive this regime's actions in response to the students' movement. So, five years ago, I was in no mood to even acknowledge an election that I knew would see the victory of a government that had no qualms intimidating and physically attacking children for peacefully demanding safer roads.

However, my entire career so far (three years of it) has led to January 7, 2024. I still harbour the anger of 2018 in me, but now I allow it to drive my zeal for work. I have to do my part to highlight what really is happening in Bangladesh's politics, because I have

the extreme privilege of being able to reach thousands of people. Whatever my views are regarding our politics and politicians, I feel a sense of duty to stay informed about the truth so I can convey the same to the readers. The same zeal drove my decision to go to the polling centre this election.

Reaching my polling centre venue, I saw a small crowd around a foreign observer, a camera pointed at him. In front of the gate to the centre, one person was getting 20-30 women to line up. Polling agents for the "boat" were the only polling agents the eye could see. My voter's slip in hand, I made my way inside the centre, where Ansar members directed me towards the correct room. Walking towards it, I heard one woman joking to another, "Do make sure you don't vote a second time!" In a matter of three minutes, I cast my vote and walked out of the venue. The foreign observer was gone now, and the women queued up before were now sitting and standing around on the footpath.

Afterwards, once I reached the office—and my own reality—the guilt set in. My desire to fulfil a rite of passage as an adult citizen of this country aside, the fact remains that I have lent my tiny share of legitimacy to this one-sided sham of an election. Unfortunately,

for the next few years, until the 13th parliamentary election, I will carry this guilt with me. It's shameful, really, that any citizen of a supposedly democratic country should have to feel this way. In a truly democratic nation, the average citizen's dilemma should have been about not knowing which candidate to choose from, out of multiple worthy ones.

Still, for those wanting a participatory affair come the next election, all we can do is advocate for the democratic elements that can help us be a people's nation. Whenever I think too hard about the future of politics and human rights in the country, my privilege tells me, "Just leave the country. Never come back and never worry about what happens here." But that's not a route my sense of patriotism—which is somehow still alive, albeit battered—will ever allow me to take. In true millennial fashion, I will go against my family's wishes and keep investing my time, efforts, and emotions in the politics of Bangladesh. If only to appease my 22-year-old self, who'd cried herself to a fever and felt utterly helpless seeing the photos of her peers (and those much, much younger) being struck by helmet-wearing, stick-wielding goons—all for wanting our roads to not be deadly.