

## Are we listening to the young voices?

### Lack of interest among young voters serves as a wake-up call

Historically, at moments of national crises, our youth has been our saviours, leading movements and fighting for our fundamental rights. So when we see young citizens getting disengaged from the country's political process, it does make us worry about the future awaiting us. As predictable as its outcome was, the reluctance and confusion among young voters regarding the just-concluded 12th parliamentary election reveals a grim picture that needs urgent attention.

According to a report by this daily, there was a notable lack of interest among young voters in exercising their franchise on January 7. For those who became first-time voters in the 2014 election, which was boycotted by the main opposition, and the 2018 election, which was marred by massive voting irregularities, the 2024 election was more of the same, what with the absence of the main opposition (again) and with "dummy" candidates being fielded to create a semblance of competitiveness. "What does it matter if I vote or not?"—this seemed to be the common theme of argument among many of these voters.

This disengagement has been happening for a long time, however. Repressive laws and practices by the government have constricted the space for expressing opinions freely, so much so that, according to a recent survey, around 72 percent of the country's youth feel unsafe to freely voice their opinions on social media platforms like Facebook. There is no space for our youth to participate in healthy political debates and activities, especially in public universities where student politics has been replaced by party politics, allowing the ruling party's student front to virtually control everything. Other parties too contributed to this situation in their own way, leaving general students without any space for intellectual and political engagement safely.

This being the situation, is it really surprising that young voters have mostly lost faith in our political, electoral and governance systems? "The youth is the hope of our future"—this saying is frequently used in Bangladesh, but seldom do we see initiatives to ensure their proper development to fulfil that potential.

Now that the election is over, it is time for some serious introspection for those in seats of power. Our young voters have sent a resounding message to the political authorities, and the latter will do well to pay heed. If they truly want to achieve the growth they have promised us, they must earn back the faith of the young population. And the first step towards doing that is ensuring a healthy political environment for young people. The authorities must get rid of dirty political practices and make sure that people can freely exchange views and opinions, without fear of harassment or persecution. All political entities in the country must also play their part in restoring hope among disaffected young citizens so that the next parliamentary election sees higher, more enthusiastic and more organic participation of young voters.

## Explore catkin farming potential in chars

### Marginal farmers deserve better support amid changing realities

While Bangladesh has shown tremendous growth in food grain production over the past decades with proper policy and financial support from the government, when it comes to producing less known non-food items, not much enthusiasm has been seen among the farmers and the authorities. However, we have seen how producing items such as elephant grass (*hogla pata*) and catkins (locally known as *kashia*) have emerged as a reliable source of income for marginal farmers in some districts. The success of the farmers of Kurigram and Lalmonirhat in producing and selling catkins is a case in point.

According to the local Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE) sources, catkin is grown naturally on around 10,000 hectares of land in nearly 300 villages along the Brahmaputra and Dharla river basin areas under the two districts. At present, several thousand farmers are engaged in this seasonal business worth Tk 500 crore. Since farmers usually do not need to invest for producing the item as it is grown on char lands naturally—they only need to bear the transport and labour costs—it has become a great source of income for many in the char areas. Not many traditional crops can be cultivated on the sandy soil of chars, so this also played a part in popularising the crop.

Over the years, we have seen how marginal farmers across the country have tried to improve their economic situation by producing different locally grown items. While catkins have brought smiles to those in Kurigram and Lalmonirhat, we have seen how elephant grass farming has improved the fate of poverty-stricken people in Barishal. Dried catkins are used to weave thatch roofs and sheds to protect crops such as betel leaf from excessive sunlight or rain. So there is a huge demand for this item among betel leaf growers and others. Therefore, the authorities can consider investing in farming this item in more char lands.

Over the past five decades, the country has reached many milestones in the farm sector, improving people's livelihood, creating employment opportunities, and contributing 13.47 percent to the national GDP. We think with proper support from the government, more employment opportunities can be created from farming catkins, elephant grass and such non-traditional items, particularly at a time when high inflation has affected marginal farmers badly.

# A review of the 2024 electoral drama



Kallol Mustafa  
is an engineer and writer  
who focuses on power,  
energy, environment and  
development economics.

KALLOL MUSTAFA

Bangladesh has just witnessed yet another one-sided election, marked by low voter turnout, violence, and claims of rigged voting, after which the ruling Awami League (AL) is set to form a government for the fourth consecutive time with an absolute majority. The election was not at all participatory or competitive as AL's main political opposition party boycotted it, demanding election under a neutral, non-partisan government.

In this non-competitive election, AL-nominated candidates won 222 out of 298 seats while the independent candidates of AL won 62 seats. That is, the ruling AL alone got 284 seats—95 percent of the total seats. On the other hand, the main opposition in the current parliament, Jatiya Party (also known as the "domesticated opposition" party), won only 11 seats.

Although it was certain long before the election which party would form the government after the election, there was uncertainty about who would be the main opposition party. With Jatiya Party winning only 11 seats and AL independents winning 62 seats, there is talk that these independents could be made the main opposition party in parliament. In that case, it would mean one-party rule being established in the country.

When the outcome of a game is already decided, spectators are usually not interested in going to the stadium. Similarly, people were not interested in voting as they already knew the result of the staged election. So, the main challenge for the ruling party was to bring voters to the polling stations. For this end, AL took many initiatives which included encouraging voters to go to the polling centres by providing free rickshaw services, and even threatening to discontinue the social security benefits if people did not vote. But judging by the voter turnout rate, it cannot be said that these initiatives have been entirely successful.

The Chief Election Commissioner claimed that around 40 percent votes were cast, but the credibility of this statistic has been questioned. Even if the information given by the Election Commission (EC) is considered correct, the fact that 13 percent votes were cast in the last one hour is not consistent with the voting trend that was seen throughout the day. According to the EC, the percentage of votes cast till 12:10pm was 18.5 percent. That is, the voting rate during the first four hours was 4.62 percent per hour. And



It was supposedly in the last hour that the trend seen throughout the entire day was broken and the voter turnout rate became a staggering 13 percent.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

the voter turnout till 3pm was 27.15 percent, according to EC secretary Jahangir Alam. This implied a voting rate of 3.87 per hour during the first seven hours. If this trend continued, then three to four percent of votes would have been cast in the last hour of January 7. But it was supposedly in the last hour that the trend seen throughout the entire day was broken and the voter turnout rate became a staggering 13 percent.

The daily *New Age* reported that, in many places, the activists for AL candidates massively stuffed ballots in the final hours of voting. For example, Bangladesh University of Textiles, a polling venue which accommodated five polling centres in Dhaka 12, was swarmed by some youths after 3pm. Police and Ansar members were sitting idle while the 20-something young men cast votes as they wished.

In order to create an illusion of large voter presence, fake lines of voters were formed by activists of the ruling party at various polling centres across the country, including in Dhaka. It has been reported that long queues were formed when television cameras, foreign observers,

candidates. There was no chance of AL losing power in an election which was nothing but a constitutional formality. Even then, there were allegations that Awami League leaders and activists occupied the polling centres of their respective constituencies, drove out agents of other candidates, and cast fake votes—all while the local administration and police collaborated with them in rigging the election. There were also allegations of getting signatures of polling agents on the result sheet even before voting ended at some polling centres. In protest of these irregularities, 45 candidates boycotted the election, many of whom were leaders of the ruling party who'd contested as independent candidates, and some were even MPs in the current parliament. For example, Zafar Alam, an AL independent candidate of Cox's Bazar-1 constituency, who is the current MP of this constituency, quit the election alleging vote rigging led by "BGB and an intelligence agency." In Jessore-1 (Sharsha) constituency, Ashraful Alam Liton, the joint general secretary of Jessore district Awami League and former mayor of Benapole Municipal Council, announced his

Awami League-nominated candidate Abul Kalam Azad cast fake votes by occupying 91 of the 139 centres in the constituency.

In one centre of Narsingdi-4 constituency, 12 ballot books were found sealed in favour of the boat even before the election began at 8am. In Mymensingh-10 (Gafargaon) constituency, three persons (including the presiding officer of the centre) were arrested for stuffing ballots in favour of the boat. A number of votes in Cumilla's Chandina Upazila were cancelled after videos of already stamped ballot papers emerged from the Chandina and Debidar polling centres. These videos were widely circulated on social media.

The fact that a fair and impartial election is not possible under the ruling party's government has become clear once again due to the irregularities which took place even in an election lacking real competition. If the AL independents and allies themselves have become victims of such irregularities and vote fraud, it should not be difficult to gauge what actual opposition rivals would have to deal with in a truly competitive election.

## What will happen to multi-party democracy in Bangladesh?



Dr Amena Mohsin  
is political analyst and professor  
of international relations at  
Dhaka University.

AMENA MOHSIN

The January 7 election was essentially a contest amongst the members/supporters of Awami League itself. The "independents" either were members of AL or were backed by it. The Jatiya Party had lost its credibility much earlier given its political positions.

Within this arithmetic of politics, the notions of "free" and "fair" elections hold little meaning. The big question that emerges is who will constitute the "opposition" now, and more critically, if the country is moving towards a one-party system.

Now, Awami League itself will have to take care of the factions that have emerged within the party. Many of the party's core supporters had to vote against their own party candidates, and one would have to wait to see how it works out in the future for the party cohesion itself.

One of the fundamental principles of our constitution is democracy, and Awami League had a rich tradition of fighting for the nation's democratic rights. It raised several movements for



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

democracy in the past. But the way the election has been held this time has made us worried about the future of democracy in Bangladesh.

Having said that, I think BNP is also to blame for the situation we are in today. They should have been more

creative and taken more risks. Politics is about power, and no party will give up power voluntarily. A party has to compete in the election to go to power. If BNP participated in the election and lost, at least it could have said that it had done its part. All this time, we heard the BNP leadership saying that it would not go to the polls under the Awami League government and all they demanded was

that has grown up without seeing it as a major political party. So, I think they should have participated in the election, whatever the situation may be. Moreover, the BNP leadership has disappointed its own party members in the mid- and lower-tiers by not participating in the election. Personally, I would have been very happy if BNP and all other major political parties participated in this election. Sadly, they have failed us.

So, what's next? We regularly listen to the Awami League government's development narratives. But what concerns me is whether the fruit of development is reaching the micro levels. I hope steps will be taken to address the concerns of the general public and the rising inflation will be reigned in.

In terms of governance, I have heard the prime minister saying quite a few times that the government will correct the mistakes that were made. Although I do not know what mistakes she was referring to, we did hear such statements. So, I hope that would be taken into cognisance post election. But even if the governance issues such as corruption and irregularities are addressed, the question will still remain: what will happen to the multi-party democracy in Bangladesh? That is my biggest concern at the moment.

As told to Naznin Tithi of The Daily Star.