

GLOBAL POLITICS AND OUR ELECTION

With the 12th parliamentary election over and the Awami League having won for the fourth consecutive term, The Daily Star speaks with three experts about the international implications of the election results and the road ahead.

The implications for China, the West and India



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Let us start with the "election" that was held on January 7. A one-sided show has been enacted where all of the 299 parliamentary seats were won by either official Awami League candidates, or "dummy" Awami League candidates (independents, albeit with AL party chief's approval) or others, notably Jatiya Party, who were granted easy sailing by Awami League as a gift. The unofficial tally looks like this: Awami League and allies won 226 seats, independents 62,

and Jatiya Party 11. The independents are basically Awami League members. In a few days, the incumbent government will be sworn in for the fourth consecutive term.

The run-up to the polls witnessed an unusual phenomenon. Powerful countries, far and near, have shown active interest in Bangladesh's election and have been polarised in a rather peculiar fashion. China and Russia wanted continuity, and supported the arrangement made by the ruling government

that left no place for their defeat. India, a strategic partner of the US in containing Chinese ambitions, joined this process. A free and fair election risked an ouster of trusted incumbents, and India did not trust the opposition BNP.

On the other hand, the Department of State of the US said Washington was concerned by reports of vote irregularities, adding that the election was not free and fair. As we all know, they have been vocal about a free, fair and participatory election, and threatened to impose visa restrictions on those connected to a possible rigging of the polls. Besides, they also indicated a possibility of trade and economic embargo on the issue of labour rights. The US wants a strong foothold in Bangladesh in its global quest to contain China, and they thought that a government elected in free and fair polls would be a better option for them. The US position is shared by the Western nations.

India's ties with the incumbent government remains paramount. However, Bangladesh's economy is struggling and will require an infusion of external funds, which India will be unable to provide. Therefore, a further tilt of the government towards China is a distinct possibility.

The election that has taken place is clearly not what the West in general and the US in particular wanted. The question now is what its ramifications on regional geopolitics would be. India's ties with the incumbent government remains paramount. However, Bangladesh's

economy is struggling and will require an infusion of external funds, which India will be unable to provide. Therefore, a further tilt of the government towards China is a distinct possibility. India, in that case, will have to look on grudgingly, and remain satisfied with Bangladesh's assurance in containing the Indian insurgent groups (IIGs) in its northeastern states. Now that the election is over and a most predictable outcome has been recorded, what would the West do in the evolving situation?

There are basically two options before the West. One is, they can swallow their pride and continue business as usual with the Awami League government, as they did after the elections in 2014 and 2018. Even with some visa restrictions here and there, the Awami League might be able to weather that situation. India would be happy with that, since however much it may want to contain China, overwhelming

US presence in its own backwater is anathema for the country. The problem for the US in this scenario would be creating a credibility gap in this region and beyond. That credibility has already taken a beating following their sudden withdrawal from Afghanistan.

The second option for the West is to impose widespread visa restrictions and some trade restrictions based on labour rights issues. This possibility seems unlikely with the geopolitical situation in the Middle East. But in any case, if that does happen, Bangladesh's already distressed economy will see disastrous consequences with substantial loss of jobs.

The best, most practical option for Bangladesh is, therefore, to interface with the West and establish normalcy in relations with them. For Bangladesh, there is no viable scope for a full-blown confrontation with the West.



ILLUSTRATION: BIPOB CHAKROBORTY

Post-election challenges for Bangladesh



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In the international fora, this election, firstly, impacts the reputation of Bangladesh. Even preceding the election results, over the last two to three weeks, the international media has not been branding Bangladesh in a positive way. Many nations have reiterated for a while that Bangladesh must hold free and fair elections. The United Nations echoed that a free and fair election was the desirable option for Bangladesh, and now they have stated that it has not been free and fair. It will, therefore, be a challenge to persuade international observers to somehow accept whatever we have done. Providing them with appropriate answers is perhaps the only option to recover our reputation. Bangladesh's reputation as a democratic country has come under a big

question, and that question will continue to vibrate and challenge us in the coming months, and years also.

The kind of relationship that we have with the international community is multi-dimensional and layered. The economic and social development that Bangladesh has achieved so far is closely related to our partnership with development partners. Our export earnings are also linked to our external partners and trade ties. Currently, our exports are slowing down, there is a dollar crisis, and imports are also under pressure.

To add to that, Bangladesh is planning to go into the LDC graduation process in 2026—which means we have to create our own space in the international community as many

of the unilateral concessions that the country has been enjoying over the decades will go away. We will soon have to renegotiate many agreements for trade, loans and development assistance. Implementing reforms within our internal structure to align it with external expectations will prove to be quite a challenge.

The European Union has indicated that the democratic credentials of Bangladesh will be an important factor for sustaining and furthering the existing trade. The lingering issues in Bangladesh, such as human rights, curbing press freedom and civic activism and so forth, will vibrate while we try to negotiate with our partners, particularly the EU, the United States, and the International Labour Organization (ILO).

Bangladesh will also face challenges with the geopolitical tension that is rising in the Indo-Pacific region, specifically with India and China. The US and China are also great powers involved in Bangladesh. Seemingly, all of them want to sustain Bangladesh on their side now. However, there have been speculations that we are getting closer to China for obvious reasons, because we need their support for our infrastructure

development and economic development.

Now, we are going into a kind of zero-sum approach, and how we are going to handle that in the coming months and years remains to be seen. The fact of the matter is, we need all of our partners. Our remittance from the Middle East and the US is an important pillar for our economy. For the last few months, we have been seeing that the money has not been sent through the formal channel. Trading is also another example of our interdependence on our partners. We import from both China and India, and send it to Europe and the US. If one of these pillars is affected negatively, then the whole structure would be affected as well.

Bangladesh has to maintain a balanced relationship with all five major centres: China, India, the US, EU and Japan, from a trade point of view. If confidence in the economic and democratic institutions is not rebuilt in the next few months and years, then maintaining Bangladesh's non-aligned geopolitical standing in the tug of war between the great powers with diverging interests will become increasingly difficult.

The Great Game will continue



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The pressing questions after the January 7 election are how the result and the electoral process will be considered by the international community and what impact it will have, if any, on the relationship with Bangladesh's external partners, especially the West. These questions have become important because of the series of events leading up to polling day and the low voter turnout.

The series of events since October 28 sent out the message that the ruling party had planned the election to ensure a victory. The absence of democratic behaviour is no longer hidden under the carpet. The persecution of leaders and activists of the opposition parties, especially the BNP, drew international attention and criticism. It was matched with other kinds of intrigue and machinations, such as fielding "dummy" candidates and using state apparatuses to ensure victory of the preferred candidates.

It was highlighted before the polling day that the goal of the incumbent Awami League was to draw a large number of voters to the polling stations. The party hoped that its supporters and supporters of the "independent" candidates would make up more than 50 percent of the voters. But January 7 showed how voters shied away from the polling

never any doubt about the victory of Sheikh Hasina and the AL, but the entire process has added further questions to her victory and the strength of her mandate.

As for the reactions of the international community, there was the predictable part; those who had already supported the incumbent have already sent congratulatory messages. These are India, China and Russia, along with a few other nations. The "unknown unknown" part of the equation was the reactions of Western nations. These countries insisted on a free, fair and inclusive election, but have remained remarkably silent since October 28. The US reaction, expectedly, stated that the January 7 election was not free or fair. In a similar fashion, the UK said that the standards of credible and fair competitions were not consistently met during the 12th parliamentary election. The West will continue to consider not only the stray incidents of ballot stuffing and violence on January 7, but also how the entire process unfolded contrary to its efforts.

The US faces a dilemma: whether to reassess its relationship with Bangladesh and act robustly, or sidestep for a foreseeable picture. A robust action will demonstrate that it is returning to its divergence with India. Will Western countries go about a business as usual engagement with the "new" government? Notwithstanding the political aspect of it—an abandonment of its policy of democracy and human rights promotion—there is an institutional aspect to it too. For a long time, there have been security-related cooperation between the two countries, but leading to the election, evidently some of these institutions' integrity have been eroded as these have been blatantly used as political tools. If the US and the West adopt direct or indirect measures, there will be serious adverse impacts on Bangladesh's economy.

The predictable reactions of the trio—India, China and Russia—do not mean that the relationship between Bangladesh and these countries will continue as before. A contest between these nations, especially between China and India, will intensify to expand their sphere of influence. That will not be a matter of the distant future, but within a short period of time. Due to the ongoing economic crisis, Bangladesh will need to rely more on external support. This will bring Bangladesh and China closer, but how much closeness is acceptable for India is the question for the coming days. As such, whether the Western countries "act" or not, the country will continue to be the theatre of the Great Game.

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booths. Then came events casting serious doubts about the turnout data. The Election Commission (EC) said around midday that the turnout was 18.5 percent, and around 3pm it was around 26 percent. But an hour later, as the polls closed, the official estimate was claimed to be 40 percent. That, too, was announced in a bizarre way. Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Kazi Habibur Awal, in a press briefing, said the turnout was about 28 percent, only to retract at the prodding of his colleagues and offered a new, higher number. However these numbers are presented in the future, their veracity will continue to dog the EC. Considering that the election was essentially uncontested, there was