

# Who will the citizens vote for in the next election?

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Thanks to consecutive rigged elections after 2008, voters' preference structure has become almost like a black box to us. Now that the July uprising has created an opportunity to restore the democratic system in Bangladesh, surveys are being conducted to understand the evolving voters' preferences. Recently, Innovision, a research and consulting organisation, conducted a survey on this. It released the results of the survey on March 8, focusing on capturing citizens' election-related perceptions through a set of sharp and well-designed questions. The survey covered a total sample of 10,696 respondents across eight divisions and 64 districts.

The most discussed aspect of the survey—circulating widely on social media and in mainstream media—was the findings of voting preferences. According to the survey results, of those who expressed a party preference in the upcoming election, 41.7 percent expressed support for Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), 31.6 percent for Jamaat-e-Islami, 13.9 percent for Awami League (AL), and 5.1 percent for the youth-led political party. The remaining 7.6 percent opted for other parties. While some of the political parties and their supporters were excited about the result, some were quite upset about the findings and discarded them outright.

While the survey was accurate, the presentation of the statistics was not. This particular question, "Whom would you vote for if the election was held now?" was part of a broader set comprising three distinct questions. The first question—whether they decided whom to vote for—was asked to the entire sample of 10,696 households, among which 6,632 responded yes. The next question was asked to those 6,632 respondents. It was if they were willing to reveal their decisions, to which 4,356 agreed. The final question was asked only to these 4,356 respondents who had decided on their vote and agreed to disclose it. So, the percentage that is circulating in the public domain is not based on the entire sample; rather, it represents a fraction of the total sample. If we use a different representation of the data based on the full sample, then we would get a preference landscape, as shown in the figure. The figure indicates that out of the total sampled population, we only know the preferences of around 41 percent, and as of now, we don't know whom the remaining 59 percent will vote.

Based on the survey result, it gets difficult to predict the electoral outcome. However, we may get some idea if we analyse the background information available on these 59 percent voters. The survey shows that a higher percentage of urban, Gen Z (18-28 years), and female voters are mostly undecided, and there is a possibility that these groups will play an important role in

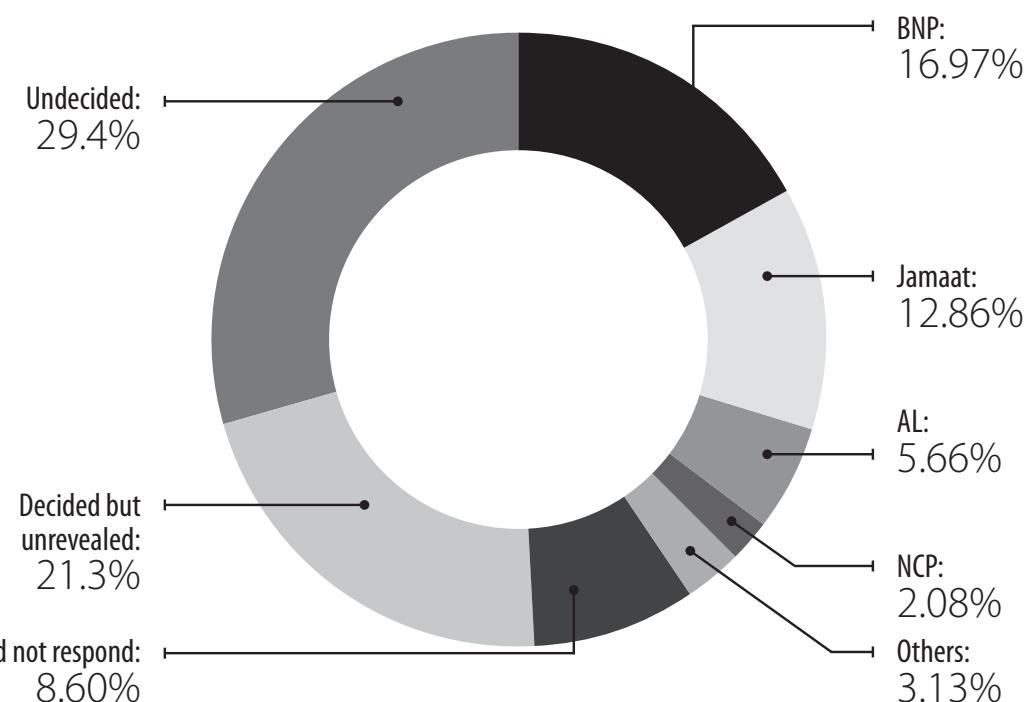
determining the electoral outcome.

At the same time, it is important to note that the undecided voters (29.4 percent) are most likely to be swing voters (who could go either way) because their choices are not determined by rigid party loyalty. We have converted the multiple response question to a single response for simplifying. The responses of 40 percent indicate that they are likely to consider the qualifications of the candidates to determine their preferences, while 27 percent of them would make their decisions based on the political situation before the election. It is likely that among the undecided voters, there is a percentage of "shy" AL voters, especially the five percent who are concerned that their preferred party may not participate in the next election. About eight percent of the undecided voters mentioned that they are undecided because they don't trust any mainstream political parties, and three percent of them are not satisfied with the options available. Therefore, there is a possibility that this 11 percent (8+3) of the undecided voters may opt for a new political party if the party succeeds in playing its card right. This is not surprising because, over the years, different surveys have shown that people in Bangladesh are getting frustrated with the mainstream political parties and are looking for alternatives. For instance, in the TAF-BIGD surveys in 2018 and 2022, more than 60 percent of respondents said they would affiliate with a new party if its ideology matched theirs.

The survey also sheds light on how citizens make their voting decisions. Family voting history and community political norms appear to play a disproportionately significant role in shaping individual choices. When we categorise the responses

to the question asking participants to identify the three most influential factors in their electoral decisions, two broad groups emerge. Again, we convert the multiple-response

(2.6 percent), and talk shows (1.3 percent). Combining the responses of the first group, it appears that the majority (51 percent) of responses pointed to the influence of family, religion-based groups, and the entry of a new challenger—the youth-led political party. However, such emerging voters' choice structure is in a fluid state, and we will have



question to single responses for simplicity.

The first group encompasses personal and community influences, including family members (28.6 percent), neighbours (12.1 percent), friends (5.5 percent), colleagues (2.1 percent), and religious and community leaders (2.4 percent). The second group consists of influence by various media sources such as social media news (11.1 percent), television news (9.2 percent), social media content (three percent), newspapers

friends, and community, while only about 27 percent indicated that media sources played a role in shaping voting decisions.

The first of the key trends that we can observe from the most recent survey is that the old and predictable electoral scenario of AL and BNP's duopolistic and hegemonic control over voters' choices seem to be casting a long shadow over current voters' preferences, and this will, perhaps, hugely benefit BNP and, to a limited extent, Jamaat. The youth-led new party—NCP—will need to embark on a Herculean task to deal with this.

## A barber's lament

### The harsh reality of Bangladesh's common people



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#### ABU AFSARUL HAIDER

Sitting in the familiar chair of my local barbershop, I decided to strike up a conversation with the man holding the scissors. As he worked with steady hands, I asked, "Now that we have managed to bring down the authoritarian government, how do you feel? What changes are you expecting in this new Bangladesh?"

He let out a weary sigh, his face reflecting years of silent struggle. "It's not just me—most people like us live in small, one room tin-shed houses in slums. Overcrowded, with no clean water, no proper sanitation. In the summer, our homes are unbearably hot; during the monsoon, our streets flood because of poor drainage. Every year, the authorities promise that things will improve, but that never comes. We are left wading through knee-deep water, watching our homes get inundated, year after year."

Picking up his comb, his voice now edged with frustration, he continued, "Sir, tell me, they spend so much on roads, flyovers, and luxury buildings—can't they build low-cost housing for us? Small, 200-300 sq ft affordable flats in the same slum areas? We are not asking for charity. We will buy them in monthly instalments. Wouldn't that be real development?"

I nodded, realising how little policymakers consider the everyday struggles of people like him.

"Many politicians claim their politics serves the people and upholds democracy. Do you believe them?" I asked.

He gave a bitter smile. "Sir, all political parties sell democracy before elections. But isn't it funny that most of them lack democracy within their own parties? If they don't practise democratic values internally, how can they establish democracy in the country? It's all a one-man show. Real democracy means ordinary people have a say, leaders are accountable, and policies benefit everyone—not just

a handful of elites. Tell me, sir, in all these years, have we ever had a leader who truly worked for the common people? They promise, they lie, they win elections, and then they forget us."

He continued, "If they cared about us, they would invest in education and healthcare. Our children don't receive quality education. There's a vast gap between city schools and rural schools. Since their children study in expensive English medium schools or abroad; they have no interest in improving public education. Tell me, sir, if our children don't get a decent education, how can they compete in the job market?"

"Public hospitals are the same. The prime minister, ministers, MPs, and the rich never use them. Even for a routine check-up, they go abroad. They don't trust their own healthcare system, so how can we expect public hospitals to improve? The entire system is broken. It serves the elite, not us."

**Bangladesh has seen leaders come and go, each promising change, yet leaving the common people trapped in the same cycle of hardship. Real change will not come from slogans or grand speeches.**

I asked, "Corruption has been a long standing issue in Bangladesh. What's your take on it?"

"Sir, a fish rots from the head down. If leaders are corrupt, corruption spreads at all levels. Common people don't loot banks or siphon money abroad; it is the politicians, corrupt businessmen, police, and government officials who do so. Unless change starts at the top, nothing will improve. Look at countries like Singapore, Malaysia and even Vietnam. They took strict action against corruption, and their leaders prioritised national progress over personal gain. But in Bangladesh, no high-profile politicians, businessmen or government officials have ever faced real punishment for corruption—only a few petty ones."

### CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

#### ACROSS

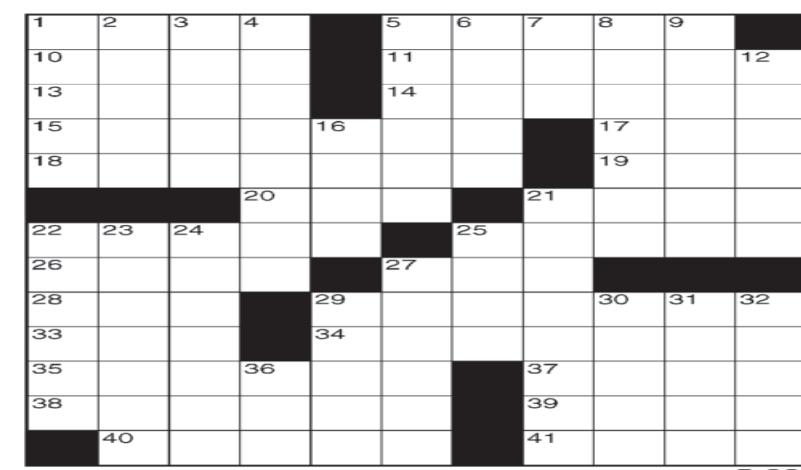
- 1 Gift-wrapping need
- 5 Lesser-played half of a 45
- 10 Beige
- 11 Indivisible numbers
- 13 Fleet member
- 14 Tuba sound
- 15 Hardy hen
- 17 Poem of praise
- 18 Classifies
- 19 Cath. or Prot.
- 20 Beam of light
- 21 Lab bottle
- 22 Delicate
- 25 Deceitful people
- 26 Maggie and Bart's sister
- 27 Singer Damone
- 28 Play division
- 29 Furniture wheels
- 33 Question of identity
- 34 Coin-op eatery
- 35 Bit of gossip
- 37 Singer McEntire
- 38 Least moist
- 39 "What's \_\_\_ for me?"

40 Copenhagen natives

41 Totals

#### DOWN

- 1 Inventor Nikola
- 2 Massage targets
- 3 Puritanical ones
- 4 Bliss
- 5 Stylish
- 6 Some golf clubs
- 7 Poorly lit
- 8 Stores
- 9 "Come on, help me out"
- 12 Beachcombing finds
- 16 Vaccine type
- 21 Long-reigning queen
- 22 Imperfect
- 23 Explorer Byrd
- 24 Oregon city
- 25 Shopping aid
- 27 Bank fixtures
- 29 Lead to
- 30 Correct, as text
- 31 Zealous
- 32 ERA and RBI
- 36 Marsh



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