

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, Innovation, 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 IAF-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

question to single responses for simplicity.

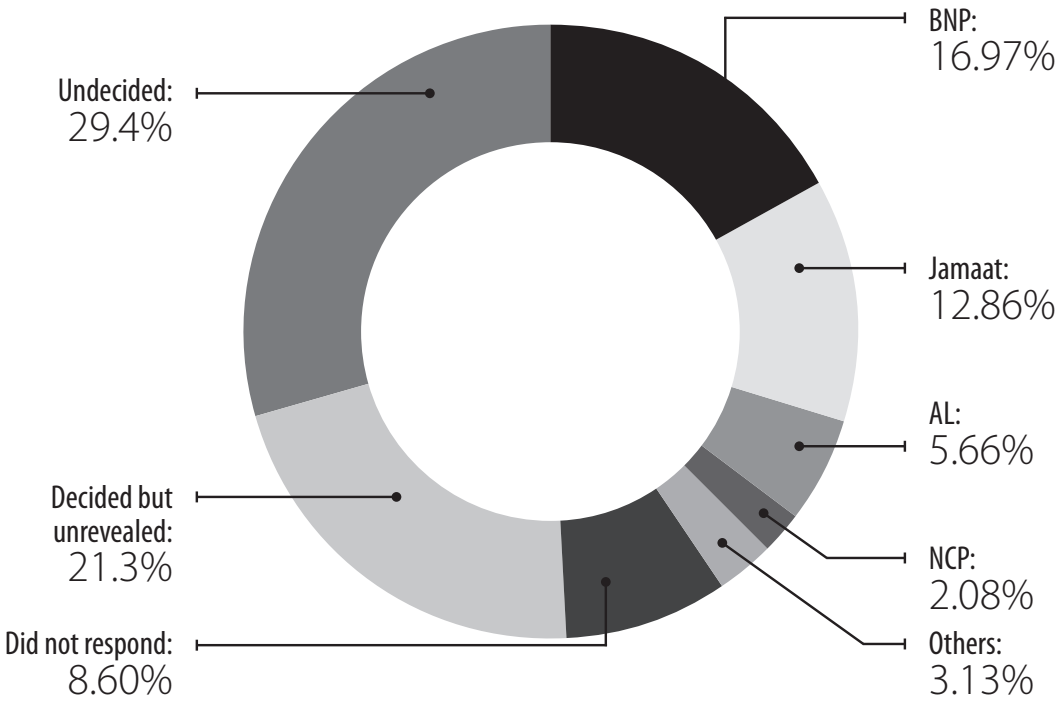
The first group encompasses personal and community influences, including family members (28.6 percent), neighbours (12.1 percent), friends (5.5 percent), colleagues (2.1 percent), and religious and community leaders (2.4 percent). The second group consists of influence by various media sources such as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

(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

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 eroding. Second, such breakdown of the duopolistic control can be, perhaps, attributed to the rise of Jamaat and the resurfacing of smaller

to wait for a few months to see what shape it takes. Third, the formation of voters' preferences seems to be predominantly influenced by family traditions, community norms, as well as history of voting. Such primordial, collective, and sticky norms 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. “Sir, for ordinary people like us, nothing really changes. We remain unnoticed, unheard. People only think of us when they need us. I don't know how old you were during the Liberation War, but we fought for a Bangladesh free from discrimination and oppression—just as we did in the July-August movement. Yet, since independence, governments have come and gone, but our lives remain the same.”

He paused for a moment, then continued, his voice tinged with resignation. “We keep hearing about economic growth and development. The city expands before our eyes—new flyovers, high-rise buildings, shopping malls—but none of it benefits us. We are not part of this progress. We still struggle for the basics: housing, education, healthcare, even daily essentials.”

His words carried the weight of a lifetime of disappointment. “Sir, since you asked, let me be frank with you. Common people don't ask for much. Our demands are simple: we want a fair and safe environment to live and work in, free from the fear of bribery and extortion. We hope for fair prices for essentials, uninterrupted electricity, clean water, and a reliable gas supply. We don't seek luxury, just a life of dignity. But tell me, in the past 54 years, has any ruling party truly cared about us? They have ruled us, but they never wanted us to prosper. Their own prosperity was their only concern.”

He set down his scissors momentarily, his eyes meeting mine

in the mirror. “The ruling class—no matter which party is in power—has captured the state. They use bureaucrats, the judiciary, and the police to tighten their grip. And so, nothing changes for people like us.”

Then, after a brief silence, he asked me, “Sir, have you ever seen where we live?”

“No, I haven't,” I admitted.

He nodded knowingly. “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 syphon 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.”

I then asked, “Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus is now in charge of the country. Do you think he can bring real change?”

“Sir, that's a tough question. Dr Yunus is our pride, recognised globally. He definitely has vision, an international network, and leadership qualities, but he alone cannot change anything unless he receives full support from all of us—including political parties, the administration, the police, and the judiciary. Didn't you notice that since he took charge, barely a day has passed without protests? He has been under tremendous pressure from day one. Of course, some protests are genuine, but many are orchestrated to destabilise the interim government. And let's not forget that there are still many in the administration loyal to the previous regime who don't want this government to succeed.”

I asked, “What's your take on the election?”

He sighed. “Sir, an elected government must run the country, so an election is necessary. But not before fixing the mess that has destroyed our institutions. Even after 54 years of independence, we remain divided, unable to work collectively. If we don't fix this, our expectations will remain unfulfilled.”

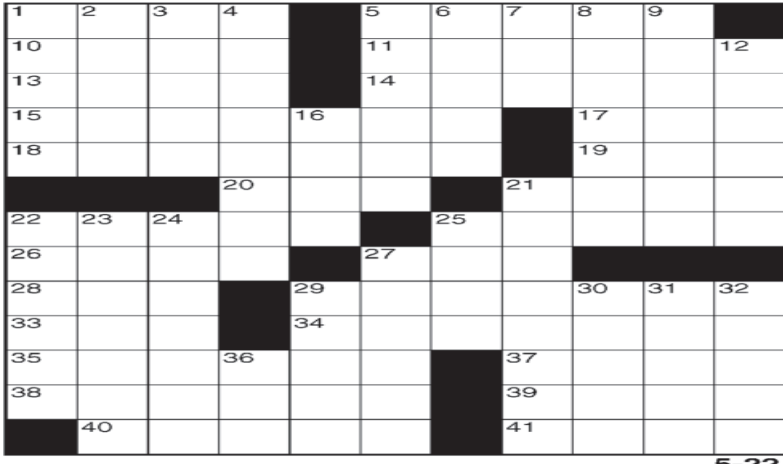
He sighed again, placing the final touches on my haircut. “Sir, we are simple people. We don't dream of riches, just a dignified life. But in this country, dignity is a privilege of the few. When will that change?”

As I stepped out of the barbershop, his words weighed heavily on my mind. His lament was not just personal grief—it was the unspoken agony of millions who toil in silence, their hopes battered by decades of political deception. 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. It must be built on justice, accountability, and a system that prioritises people over power. The barber's question lingered in my mind, “When will dignity cease to be a privilege of the few?” That, perhaps, is the question all Bangladeshis must ask—and demand an answer to.

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



MONDAY'S ANSWERS

S	T	R	O	P	S		S	P	U	D
T	E	A	P	O	T		A	R	N	O
A	R	T	E	R	Y		T	O	L	L
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R	O	E	S			T	E	S	T	E

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