

Australian PM says battle ahead to win election

AFP, Sydney

Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese says he has a “mountain to climb” in elections today, despite leading the opinion polls, in a contest swayed by living costs and Trump tariffs.

Surveys give Albanese’s left-leaning Labor Party a narrow lead over the conservative opposition on a two-party preferred basis.

If they are right, Albanese, 62, could lead his party to a majority in the 150-seat parliament.

“On polls there’s a lot of undecided voters. We have a mountain to climb,” Albanese said yesterday.

“My job is to maximise Labor’s vote in the next 48 hours. That’s what I’m intending to do.”

Albanese has promised to embrace renewable energy, tackle a worsening housing crisis and pour money into a creaking healthcare system.

He warned of “cuts and chaos” under a right-leaning coalition led by former police officer Peter Dutton, 54, who wants to slash immigration, crack down on crime and ditch a longstanding ban on nuclear power.

Dutton, leader of the Liberal Party, has predicted “a lot of surprises, seat by seat” on tonight.



Leaders and activists of the National Citizen Party gather at the south gate of Baitul Mukarram Mosque yesterday afternoon to participate in a protest rally, demanding the trial of the Awami League for committing mass killings during the July uprising and a ban on the party's activities. The rally was organised by NCP's Dhaka metropolitan unit.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

Khaleda to return home from London on Monday

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On Monday morning. As far as we know, her two daughters-in-law, Tarique Rahman's wife Zubaida Rahman and Arafat Rahman's wife Syeda Shamila Rahman, are also expected to accompany her.”

Zubaida has been in London since 2008, when she travelled there with her husband, Tarique, and their daughter, Zaima Rahman. She has not visited Bangladesh since. She will stay here for a few months before returning to London.

The BNP has written to the inspector general of police, requesting security measures, including a police escort, for Zubaida.

According to the letter, “There is a security threat to her life as a member of the Zia family and the wife of Tarique Rahman.”

On January 8, Khaleda was flown to London on a special air ambulance sent by the Emir of Qatar for advanced treatment.

The 79-year-old former prime minister was admitted to the London Clinic, where she underwent 17 days of treatment.

Since January 25, she has been under continued care at Tarique's residence.

BNP sources said eight individuals will accompany her on her return journey from London. Apart from her daughters-in-law, her entourage includes personal physician AZM Zahid Hossain and advisers Aminul Haque Chowdhury and Masudur Rahman.

When asked about Khaleda's current condition, Fakhrul said, “Alhamdulillah, she is definitely better than before.”

“The air ambulance provided by the Emir of Qatar is facing some technical delays. Therefore, Madam has decided that if the air ambulance is not available at the last moment, she will return on a Biman Bangladesh Airlines flight instead,” he added.

“All arrangements have been made for her return. If she departs on Sunday [tomorrow], InshaAllah, she will arrive in the country around 11:00am on Monday morning,” Fakhrul said.

Khaleda was imprisoned in 2018 under the then Sheikh Hasina-led government following a conviction in a corruption case filed by the Anti-Corruption Commission.

In March 2020, amid the pandemic, the government temporarily released her on an executive order, suspending her sentence on the condition that she remain at her Gulshan residence and not leave the country.

On August 6, 2023, Khaleda was fully freed by an order from President Mohammed Shahabuddin following the fall of the Awami League government.

266 journalists face criminal cases so far

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Nearly 50 media organisations, from top national newspapers and television stations to local publications, have been impacted by these cases.

The Daily Star also attempted to find overt political links that the journalists might have had with the Awami League, which could suggest that they may have been targeted with cases for reasons other than journalism.

There were a few clear-cut cases. For example, in Narayanjanj, two district correspondents were spotted in videos accompanying deposed lawmaker Shamim Osman during a rally where his followers fired on student protesters. One of the journalists was seen in a video carrying a firearm in each hand as the violence ensued.

But overall, only 18 percent of the journalists prosecuted – about 50 – had overt political stripes or benefitted from the AL regime.

The majority were the victims of retaliatory cases.

For example, in Sylhet, Monwar Jahan Chowdhury, a UK expatriate and UK correspondent of Daily Shomoyer Alo, was accused in a case even though he moved to the UK a couple of years ago, reports our correspondent.

Also in Sylhet, Khalilur Rahman, a fellow journalist and former general secretary of Bangladesh Khelafat Majlish, filed a case with Kotwali Police Station on August 27 last year, naming nine journalists. The case is now under investigation by the Police Bureau of Investigation.

In Brahmanbaria, retaliatory cases were not only filed regarding incidents of the July-August movement but also the protests and clashes surrounding Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Bangladesh on March 26, 2021. A total of 16 journalists face cases in this district, and at least two journalists, working for two national newspapers, have lost their jobs for being accused in the cases.

On November 24, a murder case was filed at the International Crimes Tribunal against 14 journalists, including Dhaka Tribune's Khulna Correspondent Md Hedait Hossain, on allegations that they had electrocuted a boy to death.

The complaint says that Rakibul Hasan, a resident of Paikgachha upazila in Khulna who was involved in the Anti-Discrimination Student Movement, was electrocuted while hoisting a flag tied to a bamboo pole during a protest on August 5.

The first information report alleges that the accused intentionally connected live electric wires to bamboo and electric poles on the protest route, which led to Rakibul's electrocution and immediate death.

The journalist, Hedait, had previously been arrested under the Digital Security Act for his reporting during the December 30, 2018,

national election and battled the case for two years.

“In both regimes, I have become the victim of the abuse of political powers. I was named because I belong to the Federal Union of Journalists. I had contacted the father of Rakibul, and he said that he does not even know about the case. He said that three people came to his house and took his NID, claiming that they would get financial assistance from the government. He told me that he gave his signature to the men on a white paper,” said Hedait.

He was also named in another ICT complaint filed over a death in Ashulia that happened at the same time as Rakibul's death, even though Hedait is from Khulna. “Strikingly, both complaints cited the same witness. How can one witness be both at Ashulia and Paikgachha at the same time?” he questioned.

At least 14 journalists have been arrested at various times, with 13 of them still in jail.

One of them, Monirul Islam, the Kuakata correspondent of GTV, was later released on bail. He explained how the case against him was fabricated.

“I was named in a case filed under the Explosives Act. The incident happened on August 4, when a few local boys allegedly threw cocktails at a shop in Kuakata. I was not even in that location, and I had all the proof. I was in Dhaka. I was so sure that it was a mistake that I went to the court and surrendered, but instead of taking my proof into cognisance, they threw me into jail,” said Monirul. He spent 16 days behind bars.

Monirul is afraid of being too vocal about the case, fearing further persecution. “I need to stay in my district, because if I cannot, I will lose my job,” he said.

Former reform commission chief Kamal said one of the reasons that journalists at the local level are being targeted is because many of them have side gigs like businesses. “Many have multiple identities, and these fake murder charges are a way of score-settling or a result of political rivalry,” he said.

“These cases need to be independently investigated to find out the underlying reasons behind them, and the police cannot be the ones to do it. But for sure, these reasons are not linked with the offences they are actually being prosecuted for,” he said.

When asked why murder cases were being filed against journalists, Dhaka Metropolitan Public Prosecutor Omar Faruq Faruqi told The Daily Star, “They [journalists] might not be directly involved, but they aided and abetted through their speeches.”

The question arises: how many of the prosecuted journalists, especially out of the capital, wielded the clout necessary to incite Awami League cadres or law enforcers to commit

murder?

Kamal Ahmed said these cases were unequivocally made on trumped-up charges and that the murder charges were all false.

“There is no specific law in Bangladesh that can prosecute a journalist for incitement of murder through journalism. There are laws that can be used against journalists for breaking down social harmony,” he said.

In a report in January, Human Rights Watch called the wholesale prosecution of journalists a replication of the “familiar patterns of abuses from the Hasina administration.”

“While it is critical that those who were involved in commanding, aiding, and abetting the grave crimes committed during the uprising are held to account, mass cases against journalists for not backing the protesters sends a dangerous message for freedom of expression under the interim government,” the report said.

Beyond judicial harassment, all the journalists The Daily Star spoke to said they were afraid of mob attacks that would “invariably go unchecked”.

At least 28 journalists were attacked in seven separate instances across Natore, Barishal, Patuakhali, Shariatpur and Dhaka.

Omar Faruk, who had formerly worked at Independent Television, was attacked while covering the demolition of the house of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on Dhanmondi 32.

“I went live and was explaining to my audience that the authoritarian rule of Sheikh Hasina had led to intense public outrage. I used the word ‘Bangabandhu’ to refer to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. After all, even the museum located here was called the Bangabandhu Museum. A mob gathered around me because I said that word, and they beat me up,” said Faruk.

Faruk said he filed a general diary with the local police station, but there was no update on the investigation.

“I have no hope for justice. Mobs know that they can attack journalists with impunity,” he said.

Celia Mercier, head of the RSF South Asia Desk, said in a report on February 14 that there was a worrying surge in violence against the media.

She said, “While the interim government's takeover in August 2024 raised hopes for improvement, journalists' safety remains unprotected. They are being assaulted while reporting, subjected to physical retaliation for their articles, and their newsrooms are being stormed by protesters.

“RSF calls on the authorities to prosecute all those responsible for these attacks, to put an end to this intolerable cycle of violence, and to ensure the safety of media professionals.”

[Our district correspondents contributed to this report.]

‘Efforts on to criminalise call for polls’

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people, he added.

“If a parliament and the government accountable to people are formed through the people's vote, the country's independence and sovereignty will remain strong.

“Although every political party supports reforms, questions are slowly growing in the people's mind about why the interim government is wasting so much time on reforms.”

He added that if de-politicisation is encouraged by ignoring political parties and the people's verdict, it will ultimately put democracy at risk.

“But if political parties' demand for elections is ignored for the sake of ongoing reforms, then what is the significance of reforms? This is a question many people are asking today.”

Tarique said that an ousted and fugitive autocrat who violated the constitution is trying to raise its ugly head again.

“But by violating the constitution, this fugitive autocrat illegally formed governments three times. The democratic people of Bangladesh now want to know what steps the interim government has taken or will take to make those accused of constitutional violations irrelevant in politics in the future.

“There is no way to evade responsibility through a blame game.”

Tarique said that if this government fails to take action, he firmly believes that an elected government will ensure legal measures against those accused of violating the constitution.

He said, “Without taking action against the fugitive autocrat, those who have spoken for local government polls before the national election should know this – I want to tell them that the accomplices of the fugitive autocrat will get the scope of rehabilitation.

“A local government election would be a golden opportunity for the fugitive autocrat to be rehabilitated. Perhaps those who have advocated for it have not considered this aspect. I urge them to reconsider it.”

In another development, Sramik Dal, the BNP's labour wing, on Thursday held a large rally in front of the party's Nayapaltan central office

to mark May Day.

Speaking as the chief guest, Tarique said, “... if the roadmap in the interim government's action plan is clear to the democracy-loving public, their doubts and suspicions will be dispelled.

“Our call to the interim government is to be cautious. A section of the interim government appears to be systematically trying to create a division among anti-fascist political parties by pitting reforms against elections...”

Opposing the government's move to provide a “humanitarian passage” for Myanmar's Rakhine state, the acting BNP chairman said only an elected parliament can make such a sensitive decision.

“The freedom-loving people of the country believe that the decision on whether to grant a corridor must come from the people themselves, specifically, through their directly elected parliament.

“Our position is clear: the interim government must prioritise the interests of the people of Bangladesh above everything – not act to safeguard the interests of foreign powers.”

Addressing the gathering, BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir said, “I would like to ask the government: please do not sign any agreements, ignoring political parties and the people, that go against the interests of Bangladesh.”

In a Facebook post last night, Tarique said, “On this World Press Freedom Day, let us unite to champion the independence of the press and the protection of journalists who report on the truth, with ethical integrity.

“Journalists serve as a vital pillar of democracy; their work must be protected and embraced, not attacked or censored. Yet in Bangladesh, we witnessed the systematic erosion of press freedom under state-sponsored repression by the recently deposed authoritarian regime.

“Let us set aside all differences to build a Bangladesh where elected, accountable governments ensure the freedom of expression, human rights, and the rule of law for all, including that of the press.”

Bangladesh up 16 notches

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absent or allocated in an opaque manner,” it added.

“The economic indicator on the RSF World Press Freedom Index now stands at an unprecedented, critical low as its decline continued in 2025. As a result, the global state of press freedom is now classified as a ‘difficult situation’ for the first time in the history of the Index,” it continued.

Bangladesh's ranking is better than those of Pakistan and India, both of whom are several notches below, at 158 and 151 respectively.

The Index's survey shows that editorial interference is compounding the problem, with respondents reporting that media owners either “always” or “often” limited their outlet's editorial independence.

In the Asia Pacific region, the concentration of media ownership in the hands of political magnates threatens media plurality, said the report.

The report quoted Anne Bocandé, RSF editorial director, as saying, “Guaranteeing freedom, independence and plurality in today's media landscape requires stable and transparent financial conditions. Without economic independence,

the supply of “food, medicines and all other basic necessities” to the 13 constituencies, he said.

Government and privately owned machinery was also being deployed to maintain roads in the areas along the LoC, he said.

Meanwhile, Pakistan also announced yesterday that it would continue to allow the use of the Wagah border crossing for its citizens stranded in India, following New Delhi's decision to revoke visas in the aftermath of the Pahalgam terror incident.

As many as 70 Pakistani nationals were reportedly stranded at the border on Thursday, as the deadline for leaving India expired a day earlier, reports The

Hindu online.

US Vice President JD Vance said on Thursday Washington hoped Pakistan would cooperate with India to hunt down Pakistan-based militants, and that India's response to the recent militant attack in India-administered Kashmir does not lead to a broader regional conflict.

“Our hope here is that India responds to this terrorist attack in a way that doesn't lead to a broader regional conflict,” Vance said in an interview on Fox News' “Special Report with Bret Baier” show.

“And we hope, frankly, that Pakistan, to the extent that they're responsible, cooperates with India to make sure

that the terrorists sometimes operating in their territory are hunted down and dealt with,” Vance added.

Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif on Thursday thanked China's envoy for endorsing his offer to conduct a neutral probe into the Pahalgam attack, reports Dawn online.

He also conveyed that India's “belligerent actions could distract Pakistan from its ongoing counterterrorism efforts” against the Islamic State Khorasan Province (IS-K), Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (ITP) and the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), who were “operating from inside Afghanistan”.