

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.

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.

Residents ordered to stockpile food amid tensions

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gunfire for eight consecutive nights along the militarised Line of Control (LoC), the de facto border, according to the Indian army, and the uneasy neighbours have issued a raft of tit-for-tat punitive diplomatic measures, reports AFP.

"Instructions have been issued to stock food supplies for two months in the 13 constituencies along the Line of Control (LoC)," the prime minister of Pakistan-administered Kashmir, Chaudhry Anwar ul Haq, told the local assembly yesterday.

The regional government has also created an emergency fund of one billion rupees (\$3.5 million) to ensure



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

266 journalists face criminal cases so far

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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 Hedaia.

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 Hedaia 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 send 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 "inevitably 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 Dhamondi 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 used 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.

Célia 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

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,

Trump signs order to cut NPR, PBS public funding

AFP, Washington

US President Donald Trump signed an executive order on Thursday to cut public funding for NPR and PBS, accusing the news outlets of being biased in his latest attack on traditional media.

Trump has long had an antagonistic relationship with most mainstream news media, previously describing them as the "enemy of the people."

A notable exception is the powerful conservative broadcaster Fox News, some of whose hosts have taken on major roles in his administration.

National Public Radio (NPR) and the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) are only partly funded by US taxpayers through the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) and rely heavily on private donations.

Trump in his executive order instructed the CPB Board of Directors and all executive departments and agencies "to cease Federal funding" for NPR and PBS.

He added that "neither entity presents a fair, accurate, or unbiased portrayal of current events to taxpaying citizens."

The CPB budget has already been approved by Congress through 2027, which raises questions about the scope of Trump's order.

Politico magazine described the order as "the White House's biggest escalation yet in its assault on the media" and said it would likely be challenged in court.

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."

there can be no free press. When news media are financially strained, they are drawn into a race to attract audiences at the expense of quality reporting, and can fall prey to the oligarchs and public authorities who seek to exploit them."

"When journalists are impoverished, they no longer have the means to resist the enemies of the press -- those who champion disinformation and propaganda," said Bocandé.

The report said, "For the first time in the history of the Index, the conditions for practicing journalism are poor in half of the world's countries and satisfactory in fewer than one in four."

The Index is based on a score ranging from 0 to 100 that is assigned to each country or territory, with 100 being the best possible score (the highest possible level of press freedom) and 0 the worst.

This score is calculated on the basis of a tally of abuses against media and journalists in connection with their work and a qualitative analysis of the situation in each country.

Bangladesh's score increased to 33.71 from last year's 27.64, while top-ranking Norway has scored 92.31 this year.